

TOKYOPOP

THE ADVENTURES OF DARTH SVARK



MISATO FUKAZAWA

THE TWO-HEADED WIZARD

デュアンサーク

D U A N S U R K 3

双頭の魔術師〈上〉

深沢美潮

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電撃文庫

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D U A N S U R K 4

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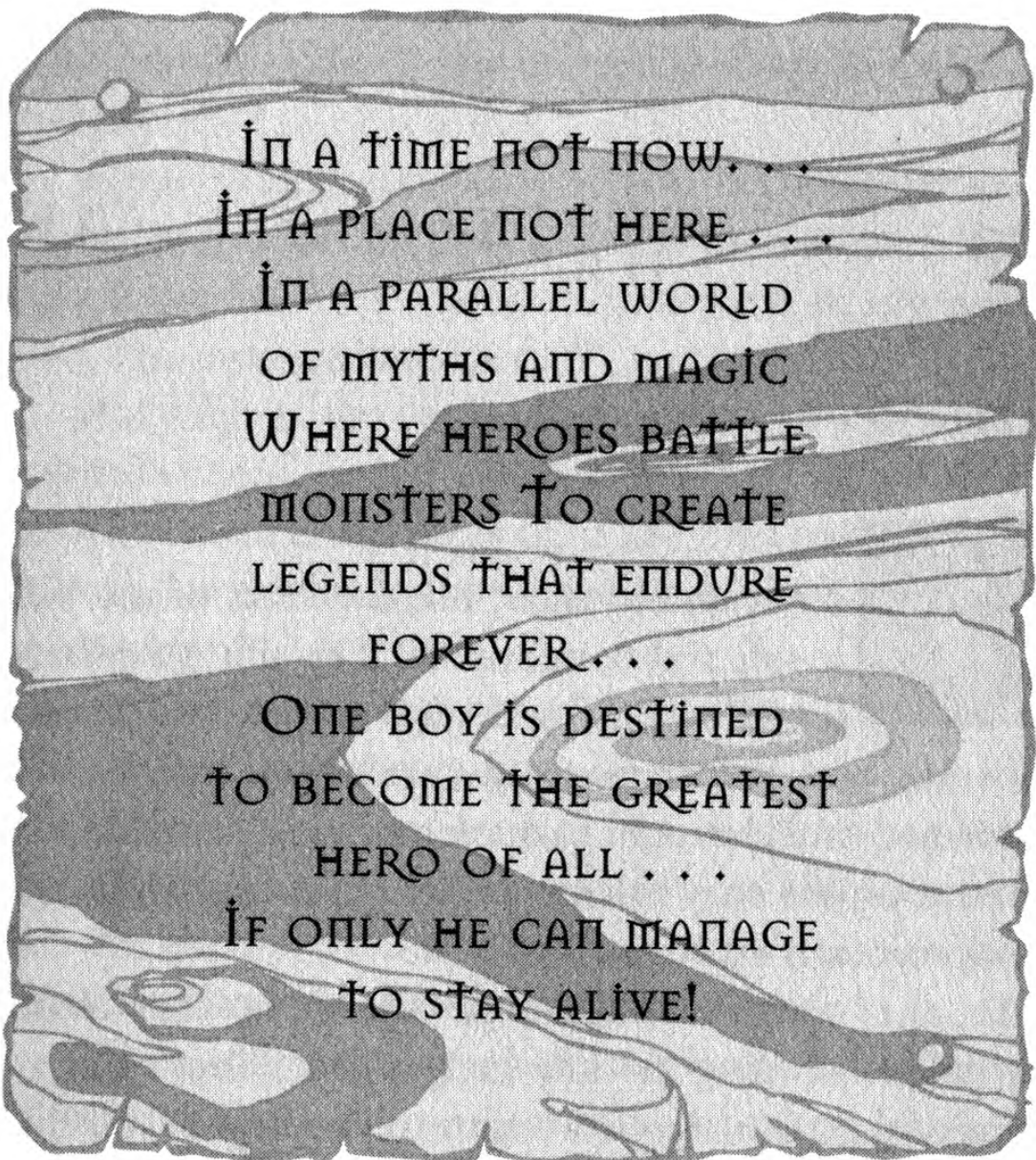
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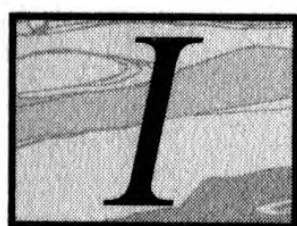
IN A TIME NOT NOW . . .
IN A PLACE NOT HERE . . .
IN A PARALLEL WORLD
OF MYTHS AND MAGIC
WHERE HEROES BATTLE
MONSTERS TO CREATE
LEGENDS THAT ENDURE
FOREVER . . .

ONE BOY IS DESTINED
TO BECOME THE GREATEST
HERO OF ALL . . .

IF ONLY HE CAN MANAGE
TO STAY ALIVE!

CHAPTER I:

HAPPILY EVER AFTER



It was an old chair, but the years of use had made it soft and comfortable. The silk upholstery, with its faded blue and gray stripes, was familiar and comforting, and as Princess Agnis sank back into the chair, its sun-warmed smell brought back memories of her childhood. She was home, on the cozy balcony of her old room, overlooking the summer mansion's garden.

In the warm sunlight, gardeners moved among the flowerbeds, trimming the low hedges. But though she gazed at the beautiful garden, Agnis wasn't really seeing it. Her mind was elsewhere. A vague feeling of discontent stirred in her heart.

"What are you doing, Agnis—daydreaming again? It's time for tea."

Agnis jumped in surprise at the unexpected voice. Then, collecting herself, she glanced back over one shoulder.

Behind her, a woman was leaning through the balcony doors. She looked a lot like Agnis, with the same pale skin

and delicate features. Her hair, the color of flames, was swept back from her face in an elegant, decorous style. She had a slender figure and was dressed in a pale beige dress with a lace border. A shawl of the same color hung over her shoulders.

“Mother!” Agnis jumped up from the chair and hurried to the woman’s side. “How are you feeling? Are you sure you should be up?”

Agnis’ mother, Rubis, waved off her daughter’s concern, a warm look reflecting in her orange-brown eyes. “Oh, don’t worry about me,” she chided. “I used to be an adventurer, you know. I’m stronger than I look.”

But even as she spoke, Rubis placed a soft hand on her daughter’s shoulder and allowed herself to be led over to the silk-upholstered chair. After all, it had only been a month since she had recovered from the witches’ curse that had transformed her into a bird.

Rubis was the consort of King Palea the Fourth, who ruled the small country of Fiana. Palea was madly in love with the beautiful Rubis—more so, in fact, than he was with his real wife, Queen Ramua. Rubis was also an Elementaller, gifted with the spirit of fire, and before she met the king, she had indeed been trained as an adventurer.

While Agnis wasn’t a true Elementaller herself, she had inherited a strong portion of her mother’s skills and had followed her footsteps to become an adventurer. At sixteen years old, she was already a Level 4 sorceress with a special knack for Fire Magic. She had a strong sense of justice and a fiery spirit that shone in her amethyst eyes.

Sitting side by side on the terrace, the two women looked as though they had stepped into a painting.

A maid appeared and announced the king’s arrival.

“Oh, not again!” Agnis groaned. “Father was just here yesterday! Doesn’t he understand that all these visits are going to upset Queen Ramua?”

Agnis had blurted out her feelings thoughtlessly, but when she saw the confusion on her mother’s face, she wished she could take back her words. Her parents had such a close relationship that even Agnis sometimes felt jealous. When Rubis had been magically transformed into a bird and it looked as if nothing could save her, the grief-stricken Palea had fallen ill himself.

But it was precisely because of their strong bond that her parents, at Agnis’ request, had agreed to live apart from one another. It was that bond which had inspired the furious jealousy of Queen Ramua. It was Ramua who had asked the twin witches, Ogma and Samra, to place the curse on Rubis—a result of all the queen’s pent-up bitterness.

Agnis herself had gone to the Witches’ Forest and persuaded the witches to give up the golden chain that would lift her mother’s curse. But in the course of her quest, Agnis had also come to understand the deep sadness and pain that Queen Ramua had suffered.

Once she had lifted her mother’s curse, Agnis sat down with both her parents to discuss the situation. She persuaded her mother that the best thing to do would be to remove the source of the queen’s jealousy. The two of them would leave the palace immediately, and Agnis would renounce all claim to the throne.

Her mother immediately understood and accepted Agnis’ plan. Rubis had a sympathetic heart and no designs on the throne of Fiana—she didn’t want to cause anyone pain, even Queen Ramua. The king, however, balked at first. But the two people he loved more than life itself were Rubis and Agnis, and he knew how stubborn they were. So, finally, Palea relented.

But, being the king, he was used to having his way, and even after installing Rubis and the princess in his summer palace, he continued to visit on a regular basis. The situation was worrying Agnis more and more. It was strange, but after the incident with the witches, she empathized deeply with Ramua and hated to think that she and her mother were at all responsible for the queen's suffering.

Rubis, meanwhile, patted her daughter's hand and smiled kindly. "I know, dear. But we can't just leave him standing in the hall, can we?"

With that, Rubis stood up and, primping her hair, made her way to the door to welcome the king. Agnis watched her mother's face light up at the prospect of seeing Palea again, and her heart sank.

"Mother . . ."

"Yes?" Rubis stopped and turned to look at her daughter.

"I've been thinking . . . Maybe it would be better if I went away."

Agnis was trying to be delicate because she expected her mother to react badly to the suggestion. But Rubis just stood there, looking at her daughter with mild curiosity, as if Agnis had suggested they take a walk around the garden.

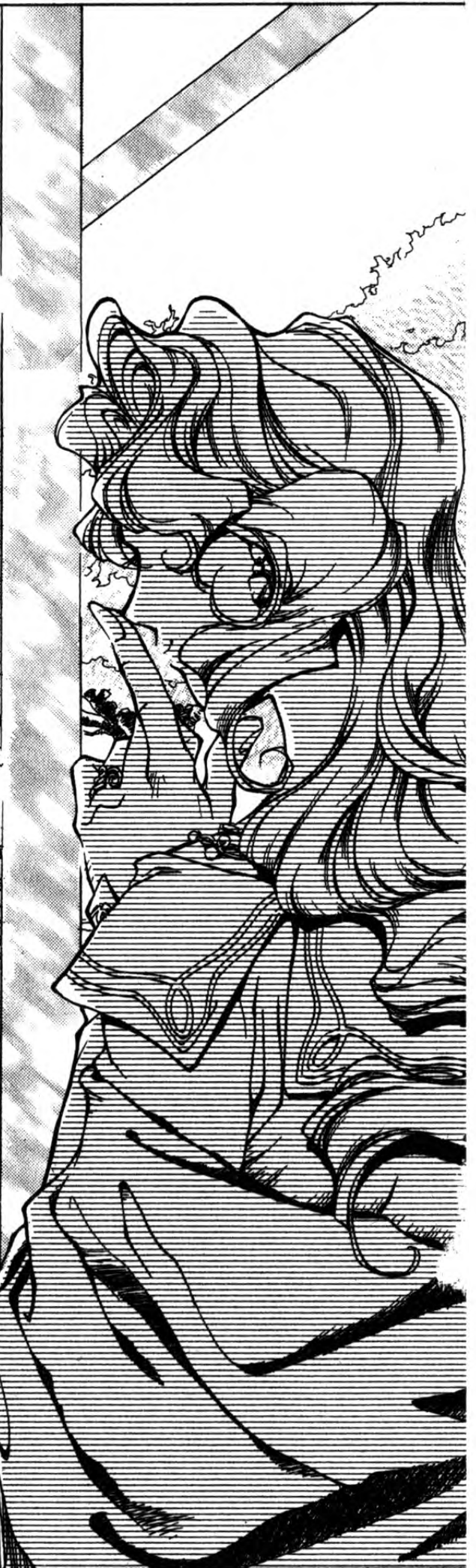
At last Rubis spoke. "Went away? But where to?"

"Well, just . . . somewhere, I don't know. I think it would be better if I wasn't around. I mean, *you* should stay," Agnis hastened to add. "Otherwise, Father will fall ill again. But it would be better if I went off by myself. My presence here is only aggravating things."

Agnis watched as a knowing smile spread across her mother's lips.

"You want to go back to adventuring," Rubis stated.

Surprised, Agnis began to blush and stammer. "What? No, it's just that—"



Rubis laughed lightly. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed. I grew up in a house full of adventurers . . . My parents and all my brothers and sisters were adventurers, and me too, when the time came. So I know the signs. I can see the look in your eyes. Admit it, child. You’ve been bitten by the adventuring bug, haven’t you?”

The words brought Agnis up short, confused for a moment. She hadn’t thought of it herself, but her mother was right. Her life now was plain compared to what she had experienced on her journey to the witches’ mansion. Those life-and-death moments in battle, when she realized the extent of her own power; the shock she suffered when she realized her limits; the camaraderie she had felt with her companions . . . The adventure had only lasted a short time, but those few brief days had been the most exciting and fulfilling of her whole life.

“You’re right,” she said. She looked down at the garden with new understanding. “All this rest and relaxation, this peace and tranquility—ugh, it’s awful! I can’t stand it anymore! It’s so boring!”

Rubis looked at her sympathetically. “You miss your friends, don’t you?”

Again, Agnis was surprised by her mother’s insight. She couldn’t think of a reply. Olba and Duan . . . could she even call them friends? She had only hired them for help when she went to battle the witches . . .

A month had passed since they’d parted. She figured that they had probably gone to the nearest town, Kovenia, to sell the valuable ring she’d given them as their fee. After that, knowing Olba, they had probably stopped at the local Adventurers Guild. By now, they must be off on another adventure. Probably miles and miles away.

Agnis sighed. Gazing down at the garden of the summer palace, she wondered if she would ever see them again.

CHAPTER 2:

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD



As it turned out, Agnis' assumption was completely wrong.

Well, not completely. She'd guessed half right. Duan and Olba had indeed headed for Kovenia, hoping to sell the ring that she had given them and use the proceeds to buy new armor and equipment.

What she didn't know was that the pair had only just arrived at the outskirts of town.

"I'm taking a break."

A single large tree stood on a hill. Two figures stood beside the tree, gazing down at Kovenia. One of them, a large man who looked every inch a seasoned warrior, lowered himself with a *thud* onto the roots of this tree. He took out his hip flask, put it to his lips, and drank deeply. It was he who had spoken a moment before.

"You've gotta be kidding!"

A young boy with short-cropped blond hair, loaded down with baggage, shook his head with an expression of disbelief. On his shoulder sat a monster, a baby grinia with pale green wings. It shook its head in the same way.

The large man raised his suntanned face and looked at the boy. "Don't panic. The town ain't goin' anywhere." He took another swig of his drink.

This was Olba October. Though only twenty-four years old, Olba was already at Level 14. Every inch of his broad shoulders and tall frame was scored with scars that spoke of past battles. His long, black hair was tied back from his head with a dirty red cloth.

"But . . . but we've come so far," said the young boy in an angry voice. "Why do you want to rest now? You can take all the time you want to relax and drink your booze once we get to Kovenia."

Sixteen years old and five and a half feet tall, the slender boy looked completely useless as a fighter. In fact, he had only reached an Adventurer Level of 2. Looking at him, no one would have ever guessed this boy would go on to appear in legends as the hero, Duan Surk. He and Olba had just met in the Witches' Forest, where they had teamed up with Agnis to defeat the twin witches Ogma and Samra.

The reason it had taken them a month to complete a journey that, at best, should

CHARACTER FILE

Olba October

A lone wolf through and through, Olba had always traveled alone, until he met Duan in the Witches' Forest. He couldn't abandon the defenseless boy, and now they travel together.

At 6'6" and 180 lbs., Olba is a skilled fighter. He has black eyes, and black hair that he ties at the back in a ponytail. He is 24 years old and has been adventuring for 13 years. He uses a long sword and a dagger. For his defensive gear, he has black chain mail and iron-piece armor.

ADVENTURER LEVEL

I 4

Rewards and Punishments: None in particular

Valid until:

8th August Sigress
Year 384



Name: Olba October

Date of Birth:

8th August Sigress Year 359

Residence & Citizenship:

Nirgir 677-1-2, Varl

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Fighter

Issue date:

8th August Sigress Year 383

Skill Points:

Strength 115

Intelligence 50

Karma 0

Magic 0

EXPERIENCE POINTS:

4612

(LEVEL-UP POSSIBLE AT 5000)

have only taken two or three days is a long story in itself and would probably fill another whole volume in the saga of Duan and Olba's adventures. Basically, what happened was this:

As they were making their way to Kovenia, Duan and Olba had come across an aspiring bard who needed an escort on his pilgrimage to visit the god of Song. Thinking they could pick up a little extra cash, Duan and Olba offered to take the young bard where he wanted to go and provide protection for the journey, which had zigged and zagged all over the map. By the time they'd arrived at their destination, Duan and Olba had ended up far, far away from Kovenia. They had made their way back by carriage, and then on foot. It was an arduous journey, and by the end of it, Duan often felt as if his legs had turned to lifeless twigs. So when they topped the last hill and caught a glimpse of Kovenia at last, deep happiness had bubbled up from the bottom of his soul.

Check, the baby grinia who served as Duan's constant companion, was excited too. The little winged lizard could

CHARACTER FILE

Duan Surk:

One year ago, Duan decided to become a fighter and join the army, following in the footsteps of his older brother Gaeley. He was abandoned by his battalion in the Witches' Forest, where he met Olba. Since then, the two of them have traveled together.

At 5'7" and 125 lbs., Duan is slender, with pale skin and blond hair. He often gets mistaken for a girl, which has become a sore point for him. He is 16 years and 11 months old. His eyes are green. Duan carries a short sword and wears tattered leather armor.

Check:

Check is a baby grinia, a monster from the winged lizard family. Check was adopted by Duan, but is more of a companion than a pet. He is highly intelligent and has a curious nature which leads him to go about checking things; this is how he earned his name. Check is six inches tall and has a body of clear, emerald green. His head and the end of his tail are covered in fluffy golden hair. He can also fly using his transparent wings. He can understand and use simple human speech, and is able to cast simple spells like Heal and Cure. He's a cute monster, but he's developing a fondness for alcohol.

understand human speech and could even cast some low-level defensive magic. He was a curious monster and was never satisfied until he had *checked* everything. And that was why Duan had named him Check.

"Giiis!" the grinia screeched now. "Giiis, Duan! There, Kovenia? Giis!"

"Yup, that's Kovenia, all right," Duan confirmed, already walking down the hill. "C'mon, we're practically there."

A pleasant sea breeze came blowing through. Duan could see a large channel in the distance, a channel blessed with a flow of warm currents. White sails of ships dotted the sea. The streets were lined with open stores and houses. A thin waterway stretched around the city as though it were a blue vein.

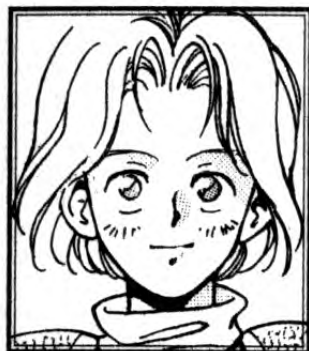
Duan had never seen houses packed so tightly together before. Even from a distance, he could feel the energy of the city. Glancing back, he saw Olba lifting himself up with a look of resignation. Behind him, the perfectly clear October sky expanded all the way to the horizon.

ADVENTURER LEVEL

2

Valid until:

16th November Sigress
Year 383



Name: Duan Surk

Date of Birth:

16th November Sigress Year 366

Residence & Citizenship:

Kashibar 22-A, Froll

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Fighter

Issue date:

16th November Sigress Year 382

Skill Points:

Strength	28
Intelligence62
Karma	+4
Magic10

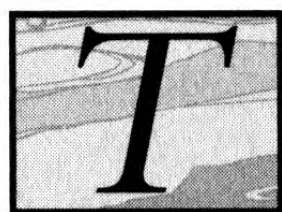
EXPERIENCE POINTS:

221

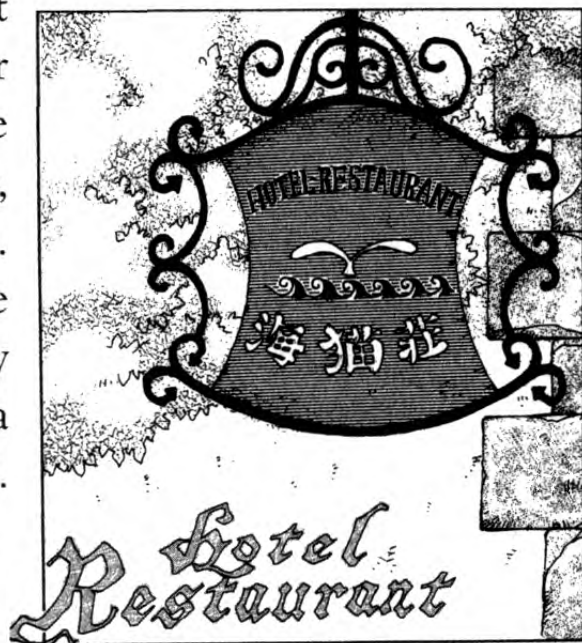
(LEVEL-UP POSSIBLE AT 300)

CHAPTER 3:

AT THE INN OF THE BLACK-TAILED GULL



That was the name of the inn where they were going to stay. Because Duan was in charge of finances—and because he was, generally, in charge of any task that Olba didn't want to deal with—he was also in charge of booking the inn. As soon as he saw the Black-Tailed Gull Inn, he knew that was the place they'd be spending the night. It was an old stone building, clean and tidy, with a narrow canal running right in front of it, and they gave a discount for Adventurers Club members. On the ground floor was a cafeteria, a bar, and a tea lounge, among other things. The salty name sounded appropriate for a port town, and Duan secretly speculated that an inn with such a name would serve excellent seafood. He was really looking forward to it.



It was probably because it was a good season for travel, but the inn was almost full. There were adventurers like Duan and Olba, but there were others as well. There were people who came to this port city for business, and also tourists—in fact, the majority of the guests were tourists.

They had decided that they would stay at the inn for two or three days, so Duan handed over two days' payment.

"Okay, thank you very much. Here is your receipt. Will you be having dinner here?"

Duan was speaking to a pretty, blond lady at reception. She was Dorothy Evans, the owner of the inn.

"Olba, what shall we do for dinner?" Duan asked Olba, who was already relaxing on one of the old sofas in the tea lounge.

"We can eat out," the big fighter growled, rolling himself a thin cigar and sticking it in his mouth.

Seeing this, Dorothy's thin eyebrows knitted together in a scowl.

"Sir, this is not a smoking area," she scolded. "If you are going to smoke, please go to the bar."

"But I—"

"Cigarettes only!" Dorothy barked. "We have a strict policy against cigar smoking anywhere in the building. That includes your room!"

Olba's mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Oh—heh heh. Don't mind him," Duan said quickly. "He doesn't really smoke. He quit, actually. He just likes to roll the cigar and hold it in his mouth. It helps calm his nerves, like a baby's pacifier!"

"Oh! Okay." The sunny smile returned to Dorothy's face. It occurred to Duan that she was a warm, uncomplicated soul—a bit blunt, perhaps, but practical and reliable. Which he supposed wasn't much of a compliment to a woman, but . . .

Oh well, he thought with a giggle. Good thing she can't hear what goes on in my head.

He smiled at her as she handed him the keys.

"Here you go. Room B202, up the stairs to your left. It's the room at the end of the corridor. We're a little short on staff, so you'll have to take up your own luggage . . ." Dorothy glanced at Check, who was busy inspecting the guest register from his perch on Duan's shoulder. "Will your . . . pet . . . be staying as well?"

"Oh, he's not a pet, really!" Duan squeaked in a panic, afraid that Dorothy wouldn't allow Check to stay at the inn. "More like a companion. He's a—well, he's a monster. But don't worry," Duan continued, seeing the look on Dorothy's face. "He's very tame! He won't get up to any naughtiness."

"Is he . . . toilet trained?" Dorothy asked delicately.

"Check go to toilet, giis!" Leaping onto the reception desk, Check looked up at Dorothy and nodded his head proudly, blinking his large black eyes.

"Awww! You can *talk*? How cute!" Dorothy stroked the silky fringe on Check's head, smiling. "What do you call this little guy?"

"His name is Check," Duan replied. "He's a grinia—a type of winged lizard."

"Pleased to meet you, Check."

"Giii . . ." Check was swooning with pleasure as Dorothy stroked his head and scratched under his chin. But when Duan hoisted up Olba's heavy luggage and started walking away, the baby grinia shook off his daze and scurried up the stairs after Duan.

Olba, still lounging on the sofa with the thin cigar between his lips, opened his eyes long enough to glance toward the stairs, then shut them again.

Hmm, he thought to himself, which bar should I visit first? Maybe Marilyn's . . . Yeah, that's the ticket. She's a pretty girl; it'll give me something to look at while I'm drinking!

I've got to ditch the kid first, though. Send him home. I can't have him tagging along with the grownups. Besides, walking around with him gives people the wrong idea.

"Excuse me." A sharp voice interrupted his thoughts. "Would you mind taking your muddy boots off the coffee table?"

Olba opened one eye a slight crack. Dorothy was standing over him with her hands on her hips.



CHAPTER 4:

A BIT OF A COMPLEX



ey, Duan—about that inn . . .”

“Yeah, isn’t it great?”

They were walking along the cobblestone path beside the canal: the big fighter, his smaller companion, and the baby grinia who flitted around their heads.

“Er . . .” Olba cleared his throat. “Actually, I think we should find someplace else to stay.”

“What?” Duan stopped in his tracks. “Why?”

“It’s that woman—Dorothy. She nags about every teensy weensy little thing. Can’t we just find another inn? I don’t mind if it’s dirtier, as long as it’s more relaxed.”

Duan let out a sigh of vexation. “Look, we’ve paid up for two days, and I’ve already unpacked so we could do the laundry. Can’t you suck it up, for now?”

“I just—”

“Jeez, what a baby!” Duan’s temper exploded. “I can’t believe how much you’re whining. It’s clean, the beds are nice—

and for that price, with breakfast included? We'll never find a better deal!"

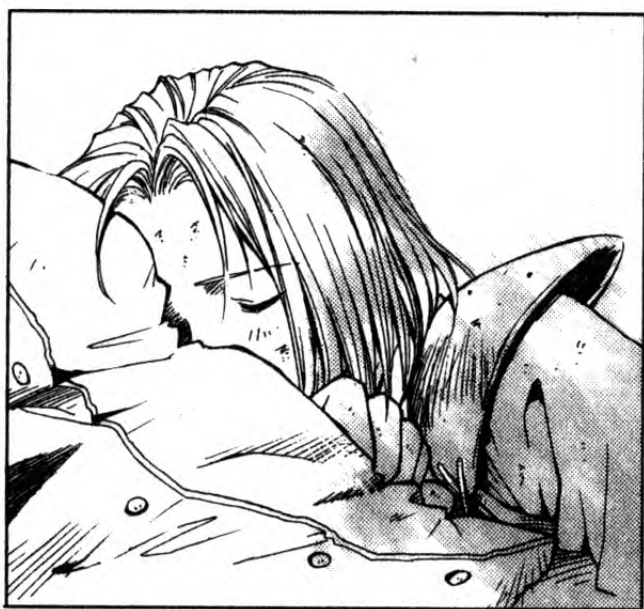
Instead of replying, Olba turned sulkily away.

Duan hoped that was the end of it. Maybe Olba didn't like the inn or its proprietress, but Duan wanted to stay.

When he'd opened the door to their room—a door that creaked slightly, because the inn was old, even though it had been remodeled—he hadn't known what to expect. The room wasn't big or opulently furnished. There were two simple beds, a small desk, and a chest of drawers. That was it. But the sheets on the bed were clean, and a large window overlooked the canal, providing a nice view of the city as well as an entry point for a pleasant breeze.

What more could anyone want? Duan had dropped the bags and thrown himself down on the bed. The pillows were still warm from the sun, and they smelled like fresh laundry. He felt like he could almost cry. Even if it was only for two days, he wanted to sleep in a real bed for a change. Once they got on the boat, who knew whether they'd get any sleep at all?

Yes, their next quest would take them on a voyage across the sea. Once they cashed in the ring that they'd gotten from Agnis and outfitted themselves with new weapons and armor, they were going to take a boat to the island of Luca.



Luca was a small island notable for one thing: apparently, a huge Red Dragon lived there, and this monster had hoarded up a lot of treasure over the years. Olba and Duan had no intention of

trying to kill the dragon, but they were confident they could steal a piece or two of the treasure.

First the witches, now a dragon . . . Duan couldn't believe it. Before he'd met Olba, he could only dream about adventures like these. Now his dreams were coming true. He was filled with excitement.

Evening was settling on the port town, and lights began to appear here and there along the canals. In Duan's hometown, this would have been the hour at which all the shops began closing up. But here, it was as though business was just starting. Down the narrow alleyways, he could see bars and restaurants opening.

"Hey Olba, where do you want to go for dinner?" Duan looked around, but his companion was nowhere to be seen. "Olba?"

Finally he spotted the tall fighter talking to a pretty woman who was selling accessories from a stall along the side of the street.

"Hmph," Duan snorted. *He's picking up girls again . . .*

"Hey Olba, come on!" Duan called. "I'm getting hungry!"

"Oh, I see how it is," the girl said and gave Olba a slap on the shoulder. "Don't think you can mess with me!"

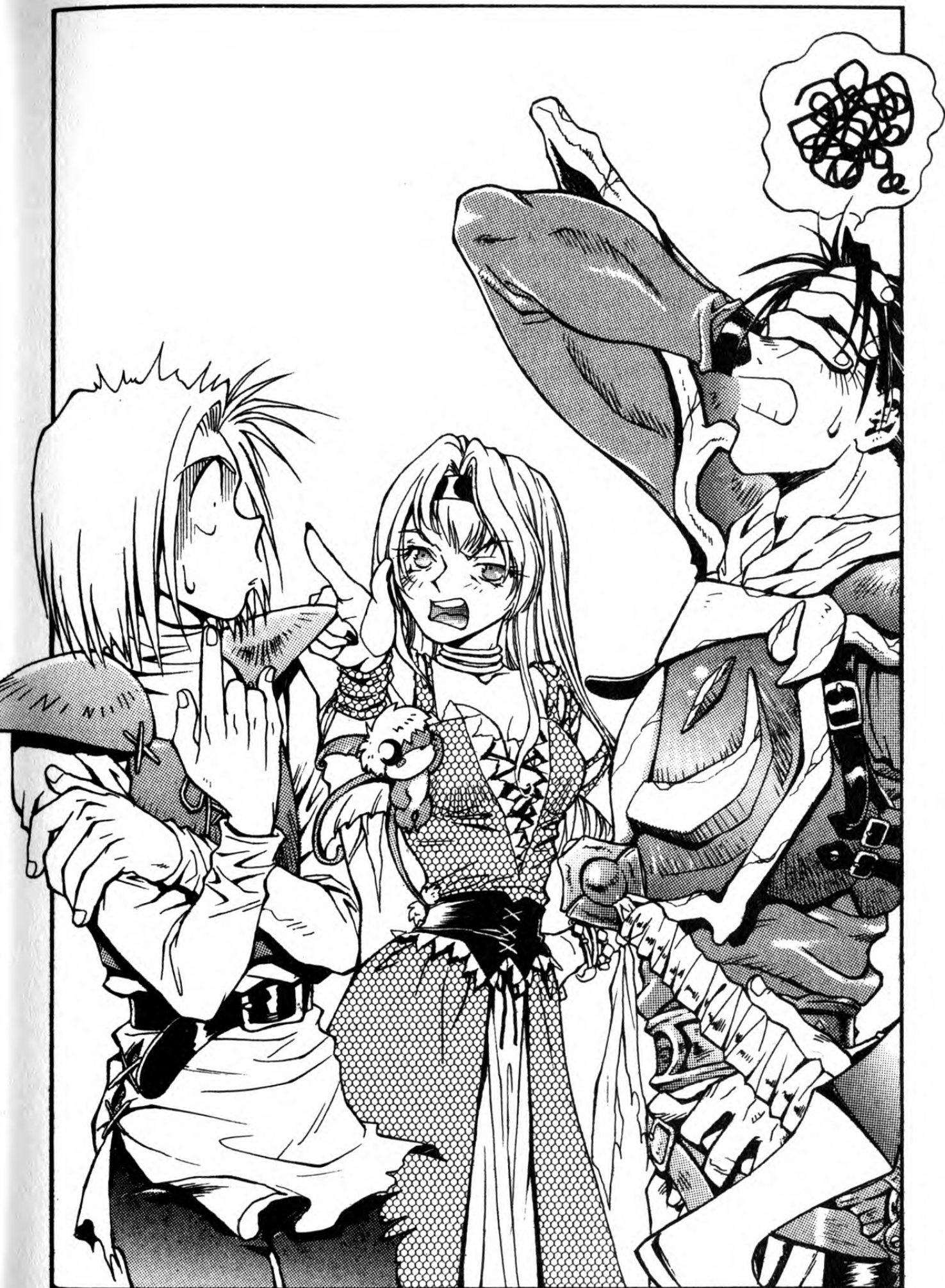
"What? Does she want to come with us?" Duan interrupted.

"Look," said the girl angrily. "I'm not into that kind of thing, understand?"

Without another word, she began to pack up her shop.

Duan started blushing furiously as he realized what was wrong. *She thinks we're a couple!*

"Wait! It's not what you think. We go on adventures together, and . . . and . . ."



Olba was already halfway down the street. He turned around and shouted to Duan. "C'mon, kid! I'll leave you behind if you don't hurry up."

Duan, still bright red, gave the girl a sharp look.

"A-anyway," he stammered. "It's not what you think!" Then he turned and ran after Olba.

Duan's biggest sore point was his looks. With his long, silky hair and fine features, he was, in fact, a lot more beautiful than the average pretty girl—and it had given him a bit of a complex. He had once cut his hair really short in the hopes that it would make him look more manly, but it only made him look like a girl with a bad haircut. So in the end, he decided to just grin and bear it. He told himself that what counted was not a person's external appearance but how he was on the inside.

But now he was traveling with Olba, who fairly reeked of testosterone—among other things. Standing side by side with the tall, hard-drinking fighter, the contrast only made Duan look more delicate than ever.

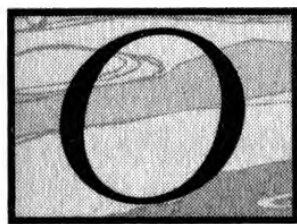
"Duan okay?" asked Check from his perch on Duan's shoulder.

"It's nothing, Check," Duan said. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving! Let's go!"

Yeah, he thought. *There's no point getting upset about someone who judges you by your looks.* Cheering himself up with this reflection, he broke into a sprint to catch up with Olba.

CHAPTER 5:

A DIFFERENT WORLD



Oops. There's a place I need to visit before dinner." Olba did a U-turn out of a narrow alleyway and headed back out onto the main street. He entered a store with a grand gate. The sign hanging above the door proclaimed it to be a jeweler's shop.

"Hey. What you doing? You comin' inside?" called Olba to Duan, who was standing outside the door, feeling a little nervous.

"Y-yeah . . ."

Check and Duan looked around the store nervously. The floors were so polished, they shone. Olba was standing in front of a magnificent marble counter. There was no jewelry on display, but hanging in picture frames on the walls were certificates of authenticity and letters of thanks. Duan walked up to examine them more closely.

A stern cough from behind made him jump. Turning quickly, he found himself facing a huge man, even brawnier than Olba.

“Yipes!” Duan stepped back when he got a look at the weapon that hung from the man’s belt. It was an enormous battle-axe. The brawny man crossed his arms and gazed down at Duan with a grim look on his face.

Duan realized that he must be the shop’s guard. The battle-axe was probably just to make him look more threatening. There wasn’t really enough room in the shop to swing it.

“Hey, man,” said Duan, trying to act calm and collected. “I’ve got a ring to trade.”

The battle-axe man didn’t change his expression, but gave a silent nod and went into the back of the shop.

After a while, the bodyguard returned with a plump man who wore an apron and held a magnifying glass in his hand.

This must be the jewel evaluator, Duan thought.

“You have a jewel?” the plump man said. “If you need an evaluation, I must tell you: you will be charged an appraisal fee regardless of whether you trade here or not. The fee is based on how many jewels you want appraised. All right?”

“Oh . . . uh, yeah. About the fee . . .” Olba reached into the breastplate of his leather armor and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. “I have a coupon.”

“Let’s see it.”

The evaluator took the coupon in a businesslike manner and spread it out on the counter. He seemed to be *evaluating* it.

“I don’t think it had an expiration date,” Olba said, breaking the silence.

“Nope, no expiration date.” The evaluator lifted his face and gave Olba a smile. “This coupon’s good at any Raymond Jeweler shop. It can be used for one jewel, free of charge.”

Olba looked visibly relieved. Duan didn’t know it, but in a big shop like this one, appraisal fees could run very steep.

The fighter now brought out another crumpled thing from his pocket—a dirty handkerchief of indeterminate color, wadded up into a ball. He placed it on the counter. The evaluator eyed the cloth dubiously, but when Olba opened it, a single ray of the setting sun from the window caught what was inside and refracted across the store. Dazzling spots of red light were sent dancing along the walls and the ceiling, so bright that Duan had to squint. But it only lasted a moment, and the shop interior quickly returned to a quiet-afternoon color.

The evaluator laughed. “Well! That was unexpected . . . Now then, let’s take a proper look, shall we?”

The evaluator carefully lifted out the contents of the dirty handkerchief: the ruby ring that Agnis had given to Olba and Duan as their fee, which she herself had received as a gift from her mother.

Using his magnifying glass, the evaluator examined the ring closely, first holding it near the glass, then farther away, then drawing it close again. All the while, he mumbled under his breath, “Hmm . . . Oh. I see . . .”

Finally the tension was too much to bear. Olba cleared his throat. “So, what d’ya reckon, old man? How much can I get for it?”

The evaluator glanced up from the ring. “This is one magnificent piece of work,” he stated.

Olba smiled in relief as the evaluator continued. “A ruby of such clarity is extremely rare. The cut . . . the detail of the workmanship . . . I’ve never seen anything like it. In short, it’s of the highest quality. I’ll give you ten thousand Guilderns for it.”

Wow, ten thousand! Duan was awestruck.

Meanwhile, Olba retrieved the ring out from the evaluator’s outstretched hand. He wrapped it up in the handkerchief and slipped it back into his pocket.

“Is there a problem?” asked the evaluator.

“Not at all,” said Olba. “I just wanted to know how much it was worth. Thanks a lot! Bye, then.”

Olba and Duan were guided out of the shop by the guard and the evaluator.

“That’s amazing—ten thousand. Now we’ll have our equipment all sorted!” said an excited Duan, but Olba sneered in response.

“Pah! All sorted? Do you realize that my last armor cost double that?”

“No way—twenty thousand G?”

“Yeah. Not including the magic spell I put on it, which cost a whole lot more. You can’t cheap out on your armor, kid. Not when your life is on the line.”

“I guess.”

Wow, Duan thought. That’s a lot of money. I guess once your levels start going up, you start going on higher-level quests, and that means you need better, more expensive equipment.

It was logical, but it was hard for Duan to wrap his brain around the cost. It seemed like a different world from the one he knew.



CHAPTER 6:

THE LADY, THE SNAKE, AND THE SPAGHETTI



Here you go—one butter-fried maki maki, one hama dinner set, and two Popple sodas.” The suntanned waiter set the plates on the table in front of them, his arms as thick as Duan’s waist, then slammed down two mugs.

“This one’s got less alcohol, so it’s yours, boy,” the waiter said, “and this one’s got enough booze to kill a horse, which makes it yours, Olba.” It seemed as though everyone in the place knew Olba. When they’d walked in the door, many people had welcomed him, shouting out such disturbing greetings as “Hey October—you’re still alive?” and “You still owe me money!”

Duan sighed. “It’s so unfair,” he muttered under his breath.

“What?” Olba looked at him sharply. “What’s with the miserable face?”

“Nothing.” Duan picked up a fork and toyed with his fried hama.

I can’t say that it’s unfair that I get treated like a kid when I’m around Olba. If I say that, he’ll tell me to scram, good riddance, who needs

the hassle? If it weren't for Olba, I wouldn't be living an adventurer's life. Heck, I wouldn't even be alive! So instead of whining, I should be grateful for what I've got and keep my mouth shut.

Still . . . how is it that we were both born as men, yet we turned out so different?

Duan was thinking about his older brother, Gaeley. Gaeley, like Olba, was Duan's opposite in every way: big, brawny, extremely strong, and brave. As a child, Duan had been very frail, and because they'd had no parents, it had been up to Gaeley to look after his sickly little brother. Gaeley was with the army now, working as a soldier.

"Ha ha ha! The look on your face!"

"And yours too!"

"Ha ha ha!"

The sounds of laughter from the next table snapped Duan out of his reverie. The restaurant, called Ryle's, was packed with adventurers and seafarers, and it seemed that the evening's revelry was just beginning. In one corner, a marine was playing popular tunes on an old piano, singing loudly and off-key. A bunch of hard-looking sailors surrounded him, cheering him on, as did several high-spirited women who were talking and laughing loudly. Some of the guests weren't even human.

Duan peered around the room curiously as he sipped his Popple soda.

"Hey, watch it, little guy!" Olba picked Check up by the scruff of his neck and dropped him on Duan's side of the table. It seemed that while they weren't looking, Check had climbed up on Olba's mug and taken several large gulps of his drink.

"Check, didn't we tell you? Stop drinking so much. You know you can't handle it!" Duan scolded the grinia, putting one finger down on Check's tail to keep him from running back over toward Olba's mug.

The little grinia's face was flushed, and now he was huffing and puffing, still trying to get back to Olba's drink.

They had discovered recently that Check couldn't hold his liquor—he was so small that even a few swigs from Olba's flask would make him so drunk that he couldn't fly. Worse, the baby grinia would become quarrelsome and pick fights with anyone. He would go on and on, fussing and sputtering, and the fact that he didn't have a thorough grasp of human speech made it that much more comical.

"Here, little guy . . . have some of this instead." Olba pushed the bowl full of butter-fried maki maki toward the grinia. Check had never seen anything like it before. His curiosity got the better of his intoxication.

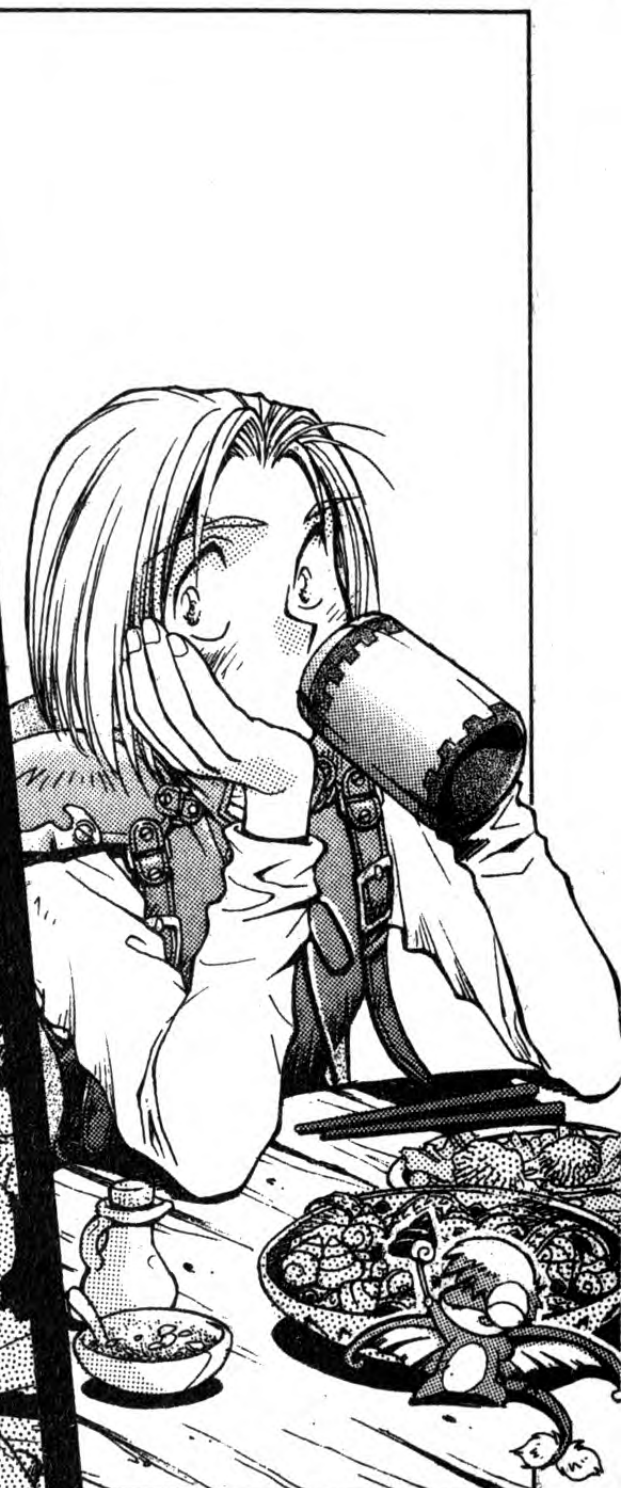
"Chaa!" Check's eyes got round, and he seemed to slump a bit, reaching out one tiny claw to poke at the steaming dish of scallops.

Duan laughed. "Hey, don't do that; you'll burn yourself. Here, watch me." He took a toothpick that had come with the meal and demonstrated its use.

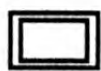
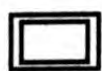
They succeeded in getting some food into Check, and everyone was happily tucking into their meals when a mysterious man drifted into the bar. He wore a loose robe of some coarsely woven fabric, with a hood that covered his eyes. Olba looked up and spotted the man. He put down his fork. "Wait here a sec," said Olba, standing up from the table. "I gotta go talk to this guy." Before Duan could say a word, Olba was striding across the room. Duan watched as he and the stranger talked. After a moment, Olba returned to the table.

"Who was that guy?" Duan asked impatiently. "What were you talking about?"

Olba leaned toward Duan and spoke in a low voice. "You know the princess' ring?" He struck his breast pocket lightly;



DUAN'S RECIPES



From Ryle's

The hama dinner set:

Fried fish (A salty fried fish that's supposed to be good for you when you are tired.)

Seafood soup (A stew of vegetables and seafood. The soup was nice, but you couldn't tell exactly what was in the soup, so it was a little frightening to eat.)

Bread (A black bread that was dry and light. You were supposed to soak it in the soup.)

Butter-fried maki maki (Scallops called maki maki, fried in butter. Simple but very tasty. They brought out a bowlful—very generous!)

Poisonous-looking spaghetti that the snake and the lady were eating. The real name of this dish is unknown, but it was a fluorescent orange color—perhaps it was made of matomas? It shimmered and looked incredibly spicy. I didn't eat it, so I don't know what it tastes like, but I don't really care to know either.)

Duan could hear the *clink* of coins inside the tunic. "I sold it to him."

"What? *That* guy? But why didn't you sell it at the—mmph!" Duan was about to say "jeweler's" when Olba quickly muzzled his mouth with one hand.

"Will you be quiet? You shouldn't shout about that stuff in a place like this!"

"Well if that's the case," Duan hissed back, lowering his voice, "should we really be *doing business* in a place like this?"

"W-well, okay, maybe you've got a point," Olba admitted. "But that's the way he likes it done."

"So who is he?" Duan asked again. The hooded man was sitting in one corner as though nothing had happened, laughing eerily. "He seems a bit . . . strange."

"I don't know much about him either," Olba said.

"But he's supposed to have an impeccable eye for quality. And if he likes something, he'll buy it, no questions asked. Even if it's risky."

“But the ring wasn’t risky or cursed. Why did you need to sell it to him?”

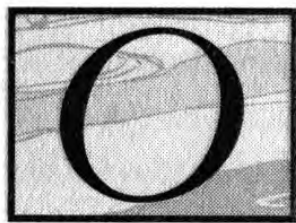
“Oh, did I mention? He gives the best price in the city too. He just gave us a hundred and fifty percent more than that jeweler offered.”

“Wow!” Duan was stunned. He turned to look at the hooded man again—but he was gone. In his place sat a small lady with a snake wrapped around her neck. The two of them were being served the most poisonous-looking plate of spaghetti that Duan had ever seen. Duan watched in amazement as the woman and the snake both put their heads down and started slurping up spaghetti from the same plate.

Duan wondered to himself, briefly, whether this was perhaps the weirdest thing he had ever seen. It seemed to him that there wasn’t a single normal person in the whole restaurant.

CHAPTER 7:

DIRTY LAUNDRY



h, good morning, Mister Surk! You're up early." A voice behind Duan startled him, and he looked up. It was Dorothy, the innkeeper, sticking her head out the glass double doors that led inside to the kitchen.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Dorothy! Please, call me Duan. I was just doing some laundry . . . I hope you don't mind me using the well."

"No, no; it's fine." Dorothy came out into the courtyard, smiling. In her white blouse and stylish floral skirt, she looked fresh and well rested. She peered into the pan of water that Duan was doing the washing in, and crinkled up her nose. "Wow, those clothes are really filthy, aren't they?"

Duan blushed a bit. Dorothy's reaction wasn't much of a surprise, really. Duan was in the midst of washing Olba's clothes, and no matter how many times he rinsed them, the laundry water always turned completely black.



"Your friend was up early, too," she mentioned. "I just saw him out by the gate."

"Who? Olba?" Duan was surprised. "He's up early?"

"Yes, but he looked very tired. I said good morning to him, and he just kind of waved me off, grumbled, and went upstairs. Is he feeling all right?"

"Um . . . he probably was just coming in from his evening out. I bet he's upstairs right now, sleeping it off."

"Ah! I see," said Dorothy. "And what about your other friend, the little grinia?"

"Oh, Check? He's sleeping too."

"Ha! Oh, that's so cute!"

"Actually he's got a hangover."

"He's got a . . . what?"

It was true. Check had really tied one on the night before, and now he could barely get his tiny, plumed head off the pillow. Apparently, the bartender had egged the baby grinia on, serving him free drinks, until Check got very quarrelsome and ended up passing out in the bar.

Dorothy gave a laugh and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, Duan, when you're done here, come on back to the dining room. We'll have breakfast out for you—it's included with the room."

"Thanks, Miss Dorothy. I'll be right in!"

Dorothy turned back to him with amusement. "Please, just call me Dorothy. I know you're only here for a short time, but . . . I'd like us to be friends."

Duan wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and smiled. "Okay, Dorothy," he said. "I'll just hang this up to dry, and then I'll be right in."

"Great. I'm looking forward to hearing about your adventures." Dorothy smiled warmly at him and turned back to go into the house.



Watching her go, Duan observed Dorothy's slender, straight back and was suddenly reminded of someone he knew from his hometown: his friend Mileyu Dal, the girl next door. Well, they weren't good friends, exactly; Mileyu was a few years older than Duan and, truth be told, she had been a lot friendlier with

Duan's brother, Gaeley. In fact, she might have had a little bit of a crush on Gaeley. When Mileyu used to come around to the house with leftovers from her own family's table—which she did as often as she could, since Duan and Gaeley had no parents, and they needed the food—she would help Duan with his chores. In fact, it was Mileyu who had taught him how to do the laundry properly. She had a warm smile and long, curly black hair that she used to tie back with a scarf. When she leaned over to show him something, he could smell her hair, and it smelled like sunshine. Mileyu walked in the same way that Dorothy did: with her back straight, taking long strides.

Thinking of her now, Duan felt a pang in his chest . . . the sadness of thinking about something he'd lost. He shook his head, taking a few deep breaths.

I don't know why I'm feeling so sentimental, he thought. I've been feeling this way since yesterday!

I never think about Froll. Maybe . . .

Maybe it's homesickness?

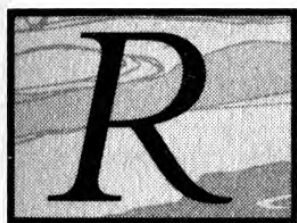
Duan shrugged and returned to scrubbing the laundry. He picked up a shirt from the pile of dirty laundry and started to sniff it, then immediately held it out at arm's length.

"Ugh!" he sputtered, making a face. Even holding it away from his nose, he could tell this was the shirt Olba had worn the night before. It stank! Besides the sweat and grime that was rubbed into it, he could smell the reek of cigar smoke and booze coming off it from a few feet away. Not to mention the cheap perfume . . . Duan could guess what sort of bar Olba had been to, and he shook his head disapprovingly at the thought. He then covered the shirt in detergent and continued washing.

A fresh wind breezed through—a perfect day for drying laundry.

CHAPTER 8:

PARTNERS



-really, Olba, I'm j-just fine with the old one," Duan stammered in a flustered voice.

But Olba was obstinate. "Why?" The fighter spun Duan in a circle, examining the armor he was wearing, and continued, "This one's got higher defense powers; it's light; it looks comfortable. And it suits you!"

"Hmm, well . . ."

"What then? What don't you like about it?"

"I do like it."

"Then what's the problem?"

"It's too expensive!" Duan pulled at the tag on the leather armor he was wearing and showed it to Olba.

Check and Olba had finally rolled out of bed sometime in the afternoon, and the three of them had then decided to take a walk around town and get some lunch. As they walked past a little armor shop on one of the side streets, Olba had stopped Duan and pointed to a set of leather armor in the window. It looked like a

perfect fit for Duan, and before Duan could stop him, Olba had bounded inside the shop and demanded that the shopkeeper let them try it on. It was similar to the armor he already had: a brown leather breastplate with shoulder protectors. But the similarity between the two suits of armor ended there. This one was of a different class entirely. It was lighter and softer than his old armor, and it moved when he moved; the cut seemed to have been tailor-made for him. Its rich, cocoa-colored leather was elegantly finished with a cool design across the breastplate. And, as the shopkeeper had informed them, it had a spell on it to protect against both regular attacks and Fire Magic.

“Right,” Olba continued without missing a beat. “Eight thousand Gs—a real bargain.”

“But, Olba, we don’t even have twenty thousand after selling that ring yesterday. I mean, after expenses, we’re looking at closer to seventeen thousand Gs. That’s what we’ve got total.”

“That’s still plenty. What are you worried about?”

“Olba!” Duan waved the price tag at him helplessly. “This is almost half of our money!”

“And is that a problem?” Olba blinked at Duan.

Duan was getting more and more cross. *Is he crazy?* he thought. *How can he be so irresponsible?*

“The whole point of getting this money was so *you* could buy yourself some armor,” Duan reminded Olba irritably. “If we spend half the money on my armor, what are we going to do about yours, huh? Have you thought of that?”

Olba waved Duan off and walked away. “Whatever.”

Duan sighed. He started taking off the armor.

“Look,” said Duan, “I just can’t let you buy me something so expensive. I mean it’s nice and all, but we have to start living within our means. We can’t spend all of our money before we even get out of town. I’ll just get something normal, you know?”

Something that's, like, two thousand. That'll be just fine for me. Okay, Olba? . . . Olba?"

Duan turned around, but Olba was already at the counter talking to the shopkeeper. "Yes, that's right. We'll take it," Olba was saying. "Can you put it on hold in the back? We'll bring the money later this afternoon."

"What are you doing?!" Duan shouted, running across the store. Without even thinking about it, he started tugging on Olba's sleeve. The shopkeeper looked at them both dubiously.

"Olba, please don't buy it," Duan whined. "Really. It's a waste to spend all that money on me."

"It's fine. Let's go!" Olba pulled Duan roughly out of the store. As he turned to shut the door behind them, the fighter called to the shopkeeper, "We'll be back later with the money, okay?"

Olba shook Duan off his arm and continued down the street, striding ahead with long steps. Duan and Check chased after him in a hurry.

"Olba, listen to me," Duan pleaded. "If we buy that armor, there won't be enough money left for you to buy new armor. I mean, the armor you're wearing now . . . it's borrowed, isn't it? You have to give it back at some point. So, please—"

Olba stopped dead in his tracks and turned around to face Duan. "Look," he growled. "You and I are pretty much partners now. Right?"

"Uh . . . I—a-are we?" Duan stuttered.

"Yes, we are." Olba scowled down at Duan. "Unless you're just hanging around for no reason like a piece of gum that got stuck to my shoe."

"Well—no! I mean . . . of course not."

"Then have some confidence!" Olba barked at him. "And take some responsibility. You need to learn to protect

yourself. And that means good armor. You're a low-level fighter, so what would be the best thing for you to get first, to protect yourself? Huh? Come on, you're a smart guy; use your common sense. What will you need in a fight?"

"Good armor," Duan murmured, looking at the ground.

"That's right. You can't depend on me to protect you all the time. If you are going to be any use to me at all, you're gonna have to start pulling your own weight."

"But . . . what about you?"

"Me?" Olba snorted.

He glanced around. "Trust me, kid, this kind of pocket money won't get me any armor worth mentioning. The armor I'm wearing is pretty good, and even though it's borrowed, I can use it for as long as I want. It's more important that we get you suited up as soon as possible."

Finished with his lecture, Olba broke out into a smile and gave Duan a friendly punch on the shoulder.

"Come on, cheer up," he said. "This is great, eh? We're lucky we found you something so good, so quickly. I know you probably wanted chain mail or plate armor or something, but I'm not sure you could take the weight of it. This will be perfect for you. You're on your way to becoming a real fighter now." Olba peered down and tried to see Duan's down-turned face. "Unless there's something else you want to complain about?"

Duan kept looking at his feet. He shook his head silently.

"Great. Then it's settled. We'll move on to weapons next. And we'll have to train for a while before you're ready. You're gonna have to at least be able to kill the smaller monsters for me."

Duan stayed silent. He continued to stare at the ground, but nodded his assent. Olba looked at him and started laughing.



“What is up with you? You weirdo!” Still laughing, Olba turned and strode across the cobblestones.

As Olba walked away, Duan finally raised his head. When he was sure Olba couldn't see him, he quickly raised his sleeve to his eyes and wiped away some tears.

His partner . . . wow. I had no idea Olba thought of me that way. He believes in me. He actually believes I can do it!

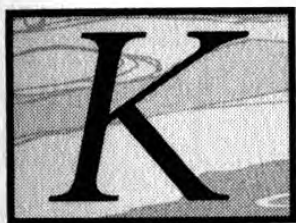
“Giis? Duan okay?” Check swooped down near Duan's head worriedly.

“I'm fine, Check. C'mon, let's go!”

Wiping his nose with his sleeve, Duan set out after Olba's large figure.

CHAPTER 9:

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT



Keep the sword up. Up!”

“I am keeping it—”

“And don’t forget about your legs.”

“Huh?”

“*Legs!*” Olba shouted. In the blink of an eye, the fighter bent down and swept Duan’s legs with the flat of his sword. The move caught Duan by surprise; he promptly toppled over on the spot.

“How many times do I have to tell you?!” Olba shouted impatiently. “Don’t keep staring at the tip of your sword—you need to be aware of your whole body, including your legs. How you managed to pass the adventurer’s test, I’ll never know.”

After they’d purchased the armor, Olba had taken Duan to a small weapons shop where they outfitted him with a new short sword. Its attacking power wasn’t great, but it was still a vast improvement over the dull thing he’d been carrying previously.

Once he had the new sword, Duan had only one more thing to do: learn how to use it properly. Olba and Duan had gone out

to the courtyard of the hotel to train—the same courtyard that Duan had been doing the laundry in earlier.

As they practiced, Dorothy passed by.

“Look at that! You’re practicing fighting techniques?” She smiled at them.

Duan, hearing Dorothy’s voice, raised his head. “Oh hey, Dorothy! Yes, Olba’s teaching me—*oof!*”

The flat of Olba’s blade hit Duan in the back, sending him sprawling into the dust by the well.

“Good timing,” Dorothy chirped. “Tea is ready, if the two of you would like to come in!” Smiling and humming to herself, Dorothy vanished in the direction of the living room.

“Pah!” Olba spat in the dust of the courtyard. “She totally screwed up my rhythm. That woman is a menace.”

“Oh come on, Olba,” said Duan, standing up and patting the dirt off his clothes. “She’s a good person. Let’s rest a little. Tea sounds good, doesn’t it?”

“Ooooh, fancy some *tea*, do you?” Olba mocked, waving him off disdainfully. “Go ahead. I won’t be joining you.”

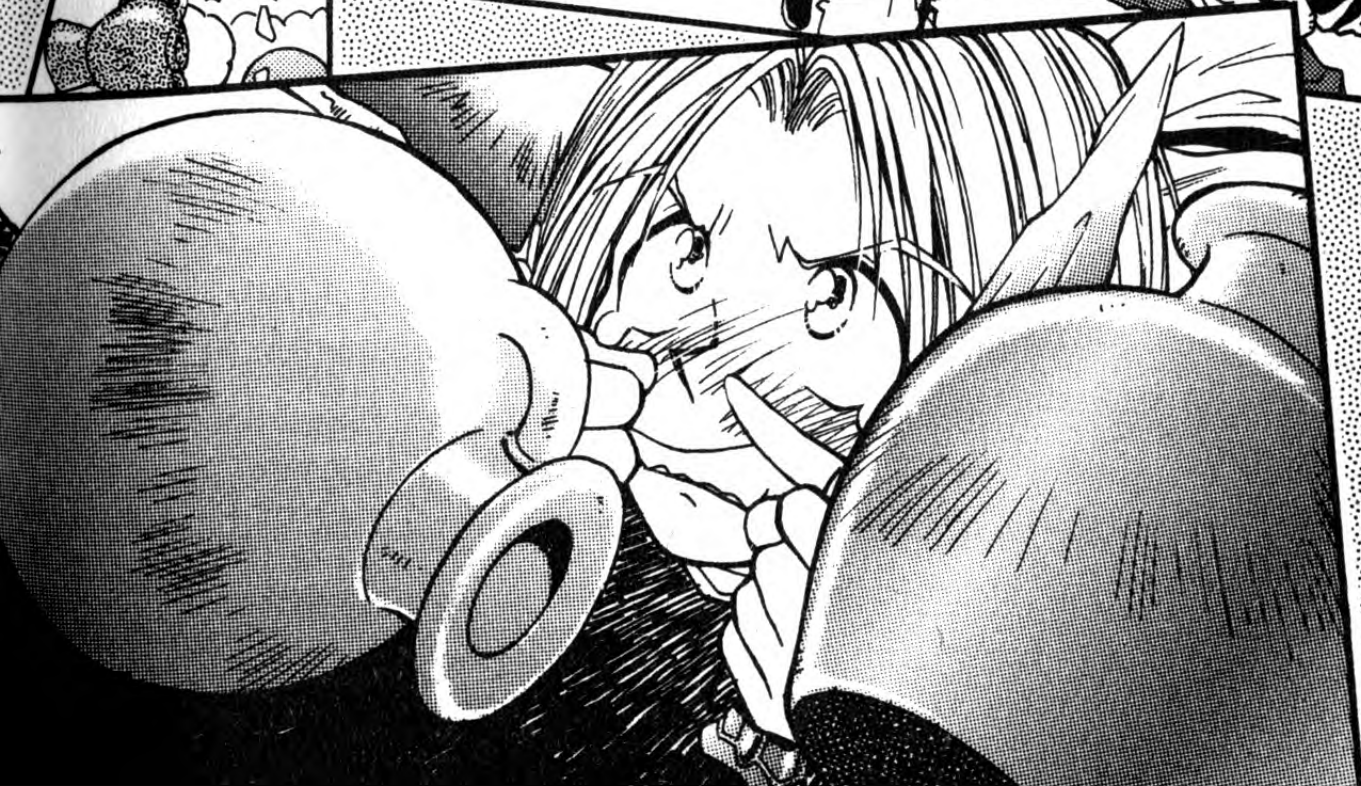
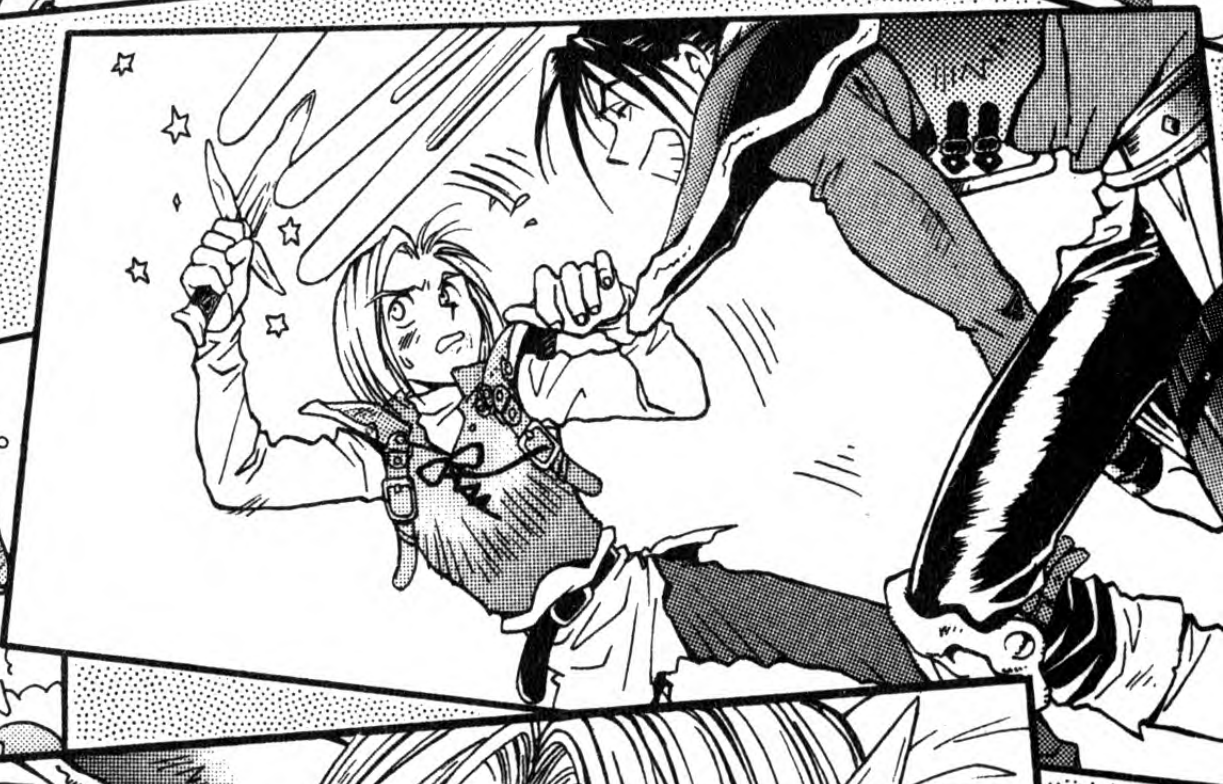
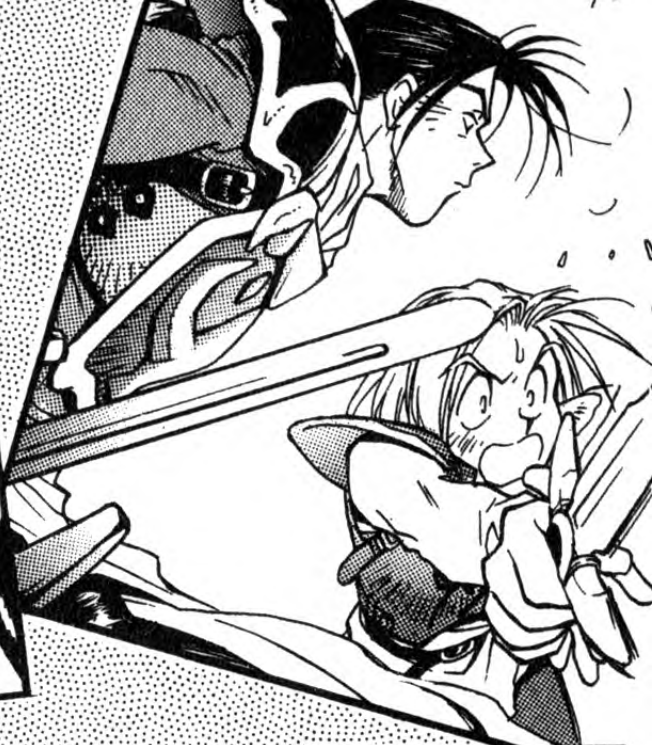
As Olba stalked off in the direction of the backyard gate, the flustered Duan called after him. “B-but . . . where are you going?”

“Out.”

“Wait, Olba! Don’t be like that. I’ll come too. If you don’t want tea, that’s okay. We’ll go somewhere together—”

Olba turned around quickly and pointed his index finger in Duan’s face. “Shut up,” he snapped. “What are you anyway, a piece of *dumb* stuck to my shoe?”

“Huh?” For a moment, Duan was confused, not understanding the insult that had just been thrown at him. They just stared at each other until Olba, realizing his mistake, began to blush. Duan suddenly realized it too.



“Wait,” said Duan. “Did you mean to say ‘gum’?”

Olba didn’t answer. His suntanned face turned bright red with embarrassment.

“Ha ha!” Duan snorted with laughter. “You meant ‘piece of gum’! But you said ‘Piece of dumb.’ Ha ha ha! Who’s the dumb one now, huh? Ha ha ha!”

Leaving the laughing Duan behind, Olba flung open the gate and stomped away.

“Ha ha—hey Olba, wait! What are we going to do about dinner . . . ?”

Duan followed him out the gate, but when he looked up and down the narrow alleyway behind the hotel, Olba was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh well,” he said. “I suppose I can practice on my own for a while. And I don’t really have time for a leisurely tea break. I hope I didn’t hurt his feelings. What do you think, Check?”

Duan looked around, but the little grinia seemed to have disappeared from the courtyard as well.

“Check . . . ? Check!”

Sure enough, when Duan came into the living room, there was Check, sitting in Dorothy’s lap and eating a delicious-looking cookie. When Dorothy scratched the little grinia on the back of his head, Check made delighted little squealing noises.

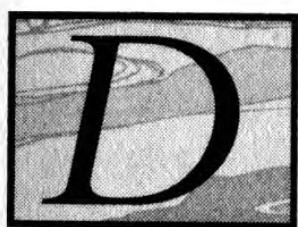
“Oh, there you are!” said Dorothy, smiling up at Duan as he came into the room. “Here, have one of these cookies—I just baked them. And there are blueberry muffins as well . . .”

The sweet scent of the baked goods reached Duan’s nostrils, and his belly began rumbling. All his determination to keep fighting vanished into thin air.

Well . . . I can’t do good work if I’m hungry. I’ll just have a little something to fortify myself before I go back to practice. Yup, that’s what I’ll do!

CHAPTER 10:

AN INVITATION FROM OLBA



Duan kicked at the dust of the courtyard listlessly and sat down on a sun-warmed rock. He dropped the short sword beside him. For three days now, the routine had been the same. Each afternoon, Olba would disappear out the back entrance of the inn. He would stumble back at dawn and collapse into bed, reeking of booze, smoke, and perfume . . . Then he would sleep until the afternoon, at which point he would head back out into the city again.

Well, Olba's free to do as he likes, Duan thought. He's a big boy; he can party all night if he wants to. And I'm just tagging along, really . . . so I'm not in a position to start complaining.

But . . . but . . .

There was a nagging thought in the back of Duan's mind. *What about the quest? What about the solitary island floating on rough seas? And the evil dragon that lives there, guarding his treasure?* The story had chilled his bones just hearing about it. Would they ever get started?

We've been hanging around here for days. Just sitting around while Olba drinks. God knows what he's doing every night. At the rate we're going, he's going to drink up all our money . . .

"No way . . ." Duan breathed to himself. But he seriously started to worry about it.

When push came to shove, what did he really know about Olba? He didn't think Olba was a bad person, but on reflection, he couldn't say he was the most honest person, either.

Duan glanced apprehensively up to the window of their room on the second floor and was startled to see Olba there. As if on cue, the fighter had stuck his shaggy head out the window and was looking down at him, yawning and scratching his belly. It was pretty clear that Olba had just woken up; his hair was sticking up and his eyes were puffy. Olba rubbed his eyes and waved at Duan.

"Yo!" he shouted. "What's with the long face?"

"Nuthin' . . ." Duan hadn't had a proper conversation with Olba for days, and to suddenly be confronted when he was lost in such dark thoughts about his companion was disconcerting. He quickly turned his head away and pretended to be practicing his downward sword thrusts.

He heard Olba laugh over his head. "What's up?" the fighter called. "That time of the month?"

"That time of the—what . . . ?!" Before Duan could finish responding, the window slammed shut and Olba was gone. Duan stared up at the closed window, red-faced.

He's probably getting ready for another night on the town . . .

Duan stuck his sword back into its sheath and ran up to the room.

Duan flung open the door, and there was Olba, a towel wrapped around his waist. He stood in front of a mirror,

whipping up some shaving cream in a cup and lathering his face. The fighter paused and raised an eyebrow slightly when he saw Duan at the door.

Just as I thought. He's getting ready to go out again.

Duan drew himself up and caught his breath. "Olba, there's something I want to ask you."

Olba didn't answer. He just kept slapping lather on his face, then started shaving. "I-I just wanted to check on . . . you know, the quest?" Duan stammered. "When do you think we'll be starting? Because, you know, the money . . . it's slowly going, right? I mean, it's yours, I know, and you should use it however you want, but . . . well, you shouldn't just use it willy-nilly. We have our payments here to worry about, and seeing as I'm in charge of the money, I just wanted to, er, make that . . . clear."

Duan just spurted out all of his worries to Olba in one go. But the fighter didn't change his expression one bit. He went on calmly shaving throughout Duan's speech.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of silence, Olba finished shaving and tapped the razor against the sink, rinsing it in water.

"How much have we paid here?" Olba asked.

"Two days," answered Duan. "And we're on the sixth day now, today."

"And how much is it per night?"

"Umm . . . it's sixty G per night, for the two of us."

"So . . . what, five nights . . . so that's three more nights to pay for, at sixty G . . . that's one hundred and eighty G. We have a hundred eighty left, don't we?"

"Of course we have!"

"Well, then?" Olba picked up a hand towel and began drying his face. "What's the worry? How much have we got left?"

"Er . . . six thousand Gs and a bit."

“That’s loads! Why are you being so tightfisted?”

“That’s not the point, Olba!” Duan was getting really angry now. “We can’t just sit here until we run out of money . . . and anyway, that’s not what I’m trying to say.”

Olba finally stopped grooming himself and looked Duan straight in the eye. “Well then, spit it out, dammit! What *are* you trying to say?”

Duan took a deep breath and tried again, willing his nerves to be steady. “What I’m asking is: when are we going on the next quest? Or do you plan to go at all? I mean, I know I’m like an extra bit of luggage to you, but we need to plan ahead. How much longer are we going to sit around? Are we going to be here for a while? Should we move somewhere cheaper? Should I think about getting a job? We need to sit down and figure out what we’re doing next. Anyway, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. But . . . all you do is go out drinking every night.”

At this, Olba burst into laughter. “Is *that* what this is about?”

“What’s so funny?” Duan demanded, red-faced.

“Ha ha . . . I get it now. You just want to come out *with* me, right? Is that it?”

“Well . . . no! That’s not what I—”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Olba continued boisterously. “Actually, I was thinking of taking you along tonight. It’s about time you stopped hanging around drinking tea with Dorothy. You need a little action. It’s something every man should experience.”

Duan, flustered, didn’t know how to respond.

“There’s a real hottie I’ve got in mind for you. She’s got a body to die for, and a totally sexy voice. She could teach you a trick or two.”

“What . . . ?” Duan blushed furiously.

“Well, there’s younger girls too, if that’s what you prefer. But if you say you aren’t interested, I can’t force you to come. Too bad. It would have been so much fun . . .”

The fighter was interrupted when Duan grabbed his arm and looked up at him with shining eyes full of anticipation.

“No, no—please!” Duan squealed. “Take me with you!”

CHAPTER II:

DUAN TAKES CHARGE



However . . .

The next morning, as he held his head in both his hands and moaned, Duan tried to remember what had sounded so good about the idea in the first place.

He couldn't remember much, except the vomiting. There was definitely vomiting involved. He had been down on his hands and knees on the cobblestones, vomiting until all that came up were his stomach juices. Tears had been trickling down his face. That's how painful it had been.

How did I get home?

Duan tried to remember, but couldn't. Whole parts of the evening seemed to have disappeared from his memory. He was pretty sure there hadn't been any pretty girls. But there had definitely been drinking . . . and vomiting . . . and more vomiting.

Benny's Bar. He was pretty sure that was the name of the place Olba had taken him to, though he would never have been able to find it again, even if he wanted to. They had walked

through Kovenia's dodgiest neighborhood, down a maze of narrow, smelly alleyways that were so dirty, the soles of their shoes were sticking to the pavement. The shops around them looked as though they were pasted together out of cardboard, leaning up against one another like a house of cards. They finally found the small, noisy bar at the end of an alley.

The crowd at Benny's hailed Olba's entrance with a big cheer—as Duan was beginning to understand, it didn't seem to matter which bar they went into; everybody knew Olba. Duan was quickly pressed between two fat women, and before he knew it, he was served weird types of booze. On the tabletops, glasses of half-drunk liquor and melted ice began piling up



next to him, crowded between small bowls of greasy snacks and stale fruit. The men at the bar were scarfing down the mystery snacks as if they were going out of style. Half of them were adventurers. The other half were seamen. In both cases, they obviously had strong stomachs.

When he looked around for Olba, he glimpsed the fighter on his way up a flight of stairs with a pretty woman in tow.

Remembering the night before, Duan rolled over in bed to look sulkily at Olba, and immediately regretted it, as his brain sloshed around in his head again.

Ow . . . ow . . . ow . . . Oh, never mind. It doesn't matter anymore.

He glared at Olba, who was snoring loudly on the other side of the room with his mouth open, fast asleep. A sudden, clear thought blew away the cobwebs of Duan's hangover.

That's it, he thought. We have to go. NOW. We have to get out of this town before it kills us.

Duan lifted himself out of bed, determined, feeling suddenly energized by his new resolve. *Yes, that's it.* Everything fell into place; his course was clear. They had to get moving before they ran out of money. And it was up to Duan to do something about it.

Duan pulled on his boots excitedly; his mind raced through the things they would need to buy for the journey. *Oil for the Port-o-Lant, ointment, some bandages, provisions . . . What else?*

Oh yeah . . . the tickets for the journey to the island. The island where the dragon lives . . .

"Olba. Olba!" Duan shook the sleeping man roughly by the shoulders. "Olba, I'm gonna go buy tickets for the ship to the island. Okay?"

Olba woke slowly; he opened his eyes and glared at Duan grumpily. "Umph . . . What? What's the big hurry?"

“Well, we’re going on the quest to Luca Island, right?”

“Yeah. That’s the plan.”

“Well then, we’ll need tickets, won’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“So, I was asking if I could go buy them.”

“Fine—whatever!” Olba sighed with irritation. “Not that there’s a rush,” he added sulkily. “Nobody else will be traveling to that island. We can just buy them the day before we leave.”

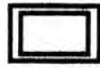
“Okay. Then let’s leave tomorrow.”

Olba finally lost his temper and exploded. “Look, the ship only leaves once a week! Okay?”

“Well, when’s the next departure?”

“The day after tomorrow.” Olba fell back into the pillow, face-first. “Can I get some sleep now?”

“Sure,” Duan responded. *If he knew when the ship left, why didn’t he just say so to begin with?*

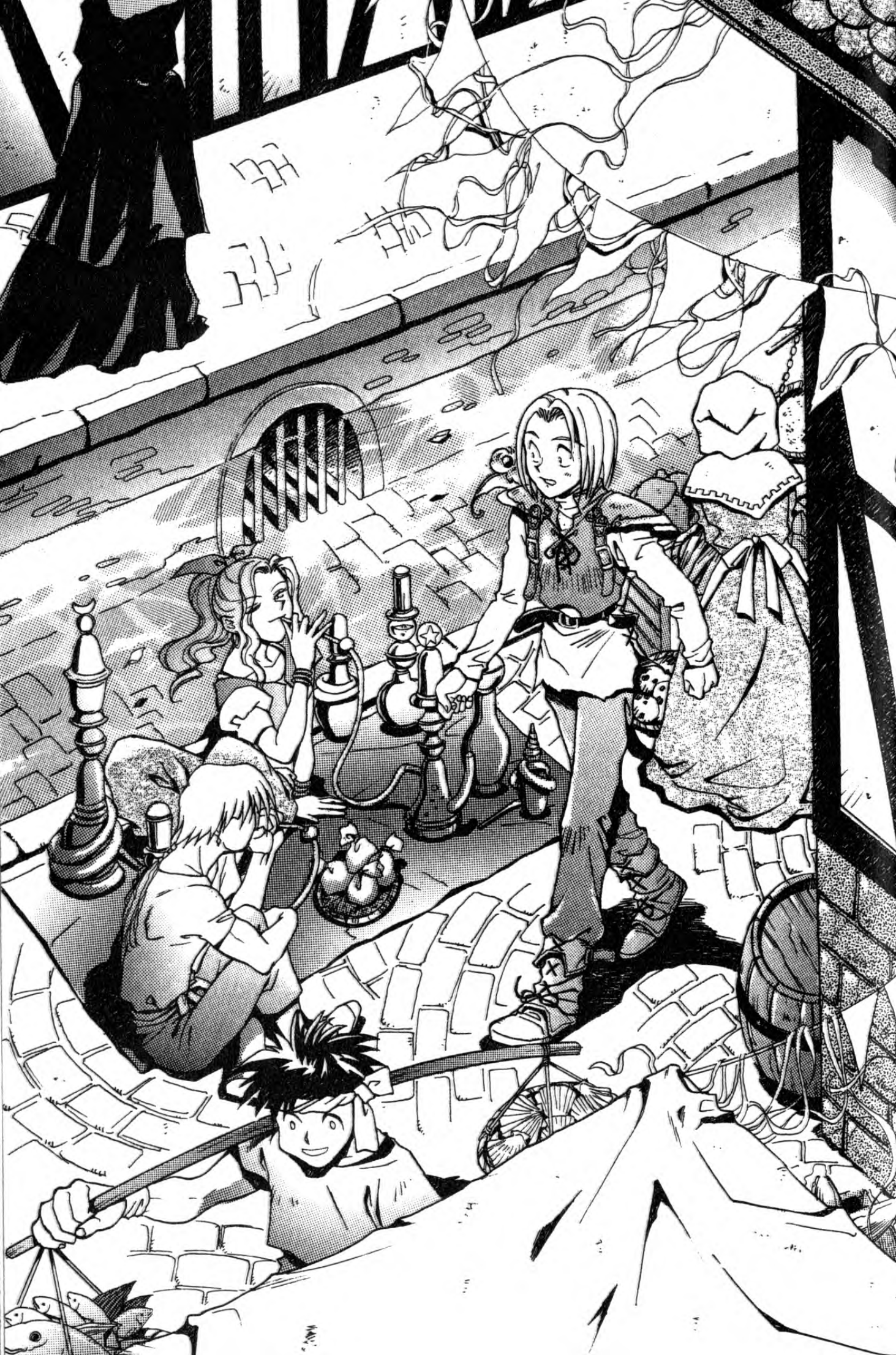


By the time Duan left the hotel, it was almost noon. The sun was directly overhead, and seagulls, wheeling in the cloudless sky, filled the air with high-pitched cries.

“Duan, giis, where go?” asked Check from his perch on Duan’s shoulder. The grinia was unusually clear-eyed. For the first time since their arrival in Kovenia, Check hadn’t gone out drinking the night before. In fact, after his last bender, Check had sworn off booze completely.

“Well, I heard there was a travel agent in the back of the local Adventurers Guild . . .”

Since Kovenia was a port town, there were plenty of places to get boat tickets. The nearest one to the inn was across the canal at the Adventurers Guild. Around the entrance, Duan saw several adventurers standing around in showy pieces of



armor. Most were men, a few were women, and some weren't even human. He saw elves, lizard-men, and even a couple of giants. Duan tried to look casual even though he felt very nervous. He was apprehensive about the amount of money he was carrying in his wallet. Because he didn't know how much the tickets would cost, he'd brought quite a bit with him. He tried not to break into a sweat as he stepped past the adventurers and through the door of the guild.

Check, on the other hand, was very curious about the adventurers around him and excitedly began giving Duan a blow-by-blow report of everything that he could see.

"Giis! Duan, see elf girl? She very tall! Cha!"

"Yes, Check. I see her."

The Adventurers Guild's hall was quite large, with an information desk, a money exchange booth, and a shop in front selling various items. Toward the back, Duan could see a cafeteria and even a small bar. However, he couldn't see the ticket sales desk, so he decided to ask at the information desk. Several people were lined up there with quest maps, so it seemed like a good place to start.

"Next!" A redheaded man with eyes like a fox sat atop a tall stool behind the information desk. He motioned Duan to step forward.

"Yes. Luca Island? There's supposed to be a ship departing for Luca Island tomorrow?"

"Luca Island?"

"Yeah. I'm trying to buy a ticket?"

The fox-eyed man gave Duan a dubious look. Duan wasn't quite sure to make of his expression. *Not a very impressive destination, I guess . . . This must be a pretty minor quest.*

"Boat ticket sales are toward the back of the cafeteria. You'll it see it on the left. Next!"

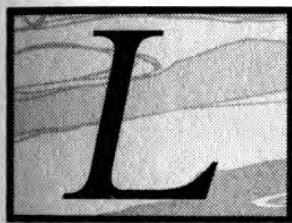
Duan headed to the back of the cafeteria right away. The travel sales desk was right where the fox-eyed man had said it would be. There was a list of destinations and prices out front, but Duan couldn't find Luca Island on it anywhere.

“Hello? I want to go to Luca Island . . .”

The man behind the desk had the face of a badger. As soon as Duan mentioned Luca Island, his face froze. He looked at Duan in disbelief.

CHAPTER 12:

DAINGER AT THE ADVENTURERS GUILD



uca Island?”

“Yes. I heard there was a ship leaving the day after tomorrow . . .”

“Y-yeah. But you aren’t from the island, are ya?”

“No. This is my first time.”

“You aren’t going there on a quest, are ya?”

“W-well . . .” Duan glanced around hesitantly, wondering how much he should share about the quest. As a rule, quest information wasn’t something to yap about with strangers; info was valuable, and anyone could be listening. Duan didn’t think the badger-man would snatch the quest out from under them, but some nearby adventurer could overhear their conversation.

“Look, kid.” The badger-man leaned in close to him and whispered confidentially. “I don’t know what level you’re at, but if I were you, I wouldn’t go. It’ll only lead to disaster. Even the journey there is dangerous. You have to travel through a narrow gorge with rough tides. The ship gets rocked from side to side,

and several passengers are always thrown overboard, never to be seen again. Plus, there's the sea monsters."

Duan imagined a small ship being rocked like a leaf in the midst of a vast ocean. He added a sea monster to the picture. He'd never actually seen a real, live sea monster, but he'd heard they were a lot worse than most land monsters. It was true—at Duan's level, even the voyage itself would be a challenge. *But*, he thought to himself, *what's an adventure without danger?*

And he had Olba on his side.

"Did ya hear me, kid?" asked the badger-man.

"Yes, I heard you. It'll be fine." Duan forced a smile. "Two tickets, please."

The badger-man let out a weary sigh. "No, you don't understand. Even if you get to the island, you'll probably be chucked off before you have a chance to do anything."

"Chucked off? Why?"

"It's the Red Dragon treasure quest, isn't it?"

"Umm . . ."

"C'mon, kid. It's a famous quest. Everyone knows about it."

"Oh. Of course . . ." Duan could feel his ears blushing as the badger-man continued.

"There hasn't been a single person who has successfully completed the quest. The people who go . . . how do I put this politely?"

Duan's mouth dropped open. "They don't come back?"

"Well, also . . . because the cost performance is so low, a lot of people quit before they even get started." The badger-man shrugged. "And really, if you ask me? That's the smarter decision."

"Wow. Is it really that difficult?"

"Yes, it's really that difficult."



“But . . . why? What makes it so difficult?”

One of the key skills of a good adventurer is to gather information, and this man seemed to be knowledgeable about Luca Island. *This guy could be really helpful*, Duan thought eagerly.

“What makes it so difficult . . . is . . .” The man looked thoughtful for a moment then finally shrugged. “Well, I don’t know the specifics, really. But I do know it’s really, really difficult.”

Duan’s shoulders drooped in disappointment. Seeing how discouraged he was, the badger-man gave Duan a sympathetic look.

“Sorry, kid. Maybe you can find something else, talk to the guys at the bar . . . I’m sure there’s something easier for you to start with.”

Even the mention of the word *bar* made Duan slightly nauseous. *No, no . . . I can’t give up now!* With renewed resolve, he pulled out his wallet and looked the man in the eye as he said, “No, I’m going. I’ll take two tickets on the next boat to Luca Island, please.”

The badger-man was taken aback. “So you’re going, eh? And after I tried to do you a favor, too . . . Fine. It’s your funeral.” He glared at Duan irritably and produced two tickets.

“You’re okay with one-way, right? You can buy the return fare on the island. After you slay the dragon, I’m sure you’ll be *swimming* in treasure.”

“Fine,” Duan replied, trying not to react to the man’s sarcasm. “How much is it?”

“That’ll be twelve hundred Gs, please.”

“What?” Duan couldn’t believe his ears. “It’s six hundred Gs for one person, one way? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“See, I told you not to bother. It’s a dangerous journey; nobody goes on it. That’s why they charge so much.

Otherwise, they can't break even." The badger-man smirked, as if to say *I told you so*. "Of course, if you don't want to go, the tickets are non-refundable, so now would be the time to say so."

"N-no, it's fine, just fine!" Duan brought the money out of his wallet, but his hands were shaking. Paying twelve hundred Gs for a boat ride—that was more than he'd expected to pay in his wildest dreams; it was ten times a regular fare. But he was glad he'd brought so much money with him, just in case. Duan willed himself to be calm as he counted out the money on the counter.

"Okay, let's see . . . six hundred Gs . . . seven . . . eight . . . ten . . . twelve . . ."

"Hey, what's taking so friggin' long?" interrupted a gruff voice from behind him.

The next thing Duan knew, he was being grabbed violently by the shoulder and forced down to the ground.

Check's squawking echoed around the room. "Gii-iis! Danger! Danger!"



“Ugh . . .” Duan couldn’t figure out what had happened. The elbow he had landed on was numb. He opened his eyes and saw a huge shadow looming over him. It was a man with a black beard and black sideburns, whose face was completely red and rough. He stuck his red face into Duan’s, and the smell of booze on the man’s breath nearly made Duan pass out.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” A woman passerby stepped up to the big man. “Making a scene in a place like this.”

The woman may have intended to make the man calm down, but her intervention had the opposite effect. The bearded man got even more riled up and lunged after her. “Mind your own business . . . The kid fell on his own. You got a problem wi’ that? Hey, lemme go! Lemme go!”

The badger-faced clerk had come out from behind the desk and tried to hold the drunk back, but the big man threw him off easily. The booze seemed to have given him super strength, and he was feeling no pain. He wheeled around drunkenly and, just when Duan thought things couldn’t get any worse, the man drew a six-inch-long, gleaming knife.

The woman who had scolded the man earlier screamed and ran away. “Help! Someone, help! He’s got a knife!”

Usually, there would have been security guards or at least a few other adventurers around to help break up the fight, but it was lunchtime and everyone was busy. *I can’t just sit here and wait for help*, Duan thought. *I’m an adventurer. I should do something!*

Duan stood up and gritted his teeth. “You shouldn’t have that out in a place like this,” he said, nodding toward the knife.

The man’s red eyes slowly moved to look at Duan. Without saying a word, he stuck out his tongue and licked the blade of his knife.

Eeek!

Duan was desperately holding back an impulse to run away. Suddenly he heard Check's shrill voice overhead.

"Danger, Duan! Danger!"

Idiot . . . don't say that now! I'm trying to act tough!

Yes, Duan was in danger. The knife tip glittered for one chilling moment before it struck downward—straight at Duan's head. Duan frantically dodged the attack.

A small ball of fire shot across the room and struck the palm of the drunk's hand. The big man howled in pain, and the knife fell to the floor with a *clang*.

Duan stepped on the knife hastily and looked around. Behind him, he saw a man . . . a huge man, at least six feet tall, wearing a black cape. At first, Duan thought that there were two similar-looking men standing next to each other, or that he was seeing double. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. No, there were two heads, similar to one another . . . but they shared the same broad shoulders.

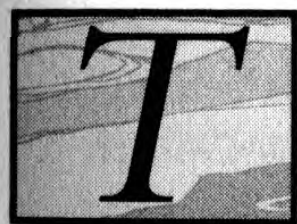
One man . . . with two heads?

Dumbfounded by this extraordinary sight, even the drunk fell silent.



CHAPTER 13:

GOLDEN EYE AND SILVER EYE



he one on the right had blond hair and golden eyes, and parted his hair to the right. The one on the left had silver hair and blue eyes. His side parting was on the left. Both of them had straight, silky hair that was cut off at the shoulder. The two heads resting on the enormous shoulders looked down at the drunk coolly.

“Wh-what’dya . . .” Unable to form a sentence, the drunk thrust out his hand, waving it indignantly. “You burnt my hand!” he bellowed.

Sure enough, the man had suffered a nasty burn; the palm of his hand was completely blackened. The head on the left, the one with the silver hair and blue eyes, raised an eyebrow and whispered something quietly. Then he raised his left hand. A white ball shot out of his hand and struck the drunk’s outstretched palm.

“Owww!” The drunk hadn’t been expecting that; from his reaction, it looked as though it had hurt a lot. He fell to the floor, rolling around and clutching his hand.

"You freak!" the drunk shouted. "What have you done to me?"

"Freak?" The head on the right—the one with the blond hair and the golden eyes—raised his chin disdainfully, looking down at the drunk. "Perhaps I didn't hear right. Tell him what you did, Silver Eye."

"Well," said the one on the left, "he was kicking up such a fuss about the fireball you threw at him, Golden Eye, that I thought I'd cool off his hand with a cold spell. Was there a problem?"

"Apparently so. I think I heard him use the word 'freak.' "

"Did he? How amusing."

"I assume we can take that as a challenge."

"Well, after some consideration, I think that's the only way we *can* take it, Golden Eye."

"In that case, we won't go easy on you like before," said the head on the right, the one addressed as Golden Eye. "We'll make you regret you ever angered us." He lifted his right hand up high and began to chant the words of his spell in a loud voice: "Naishino, Tahabiki . . . Tabikita, Sekutsuki, Ya . . ."

"Wh-what are you going to do? Please, stop! Somebody . . . somebody help me . . ." The drunk had turned completely timid. In fact, he had sobered up now and had lost all the oomph of the booze. In this broken-down state, he tried to run away from the two-headed man. However, both Golden Eye and Silver Eye continued to laugh eerily and torment him.

It was so pitiful, even Duan had to feel a bit sorry for him. *I guess the golden-eyed man is a Fire wizard, and the silver-eyed one is an Ice wizard. If that's the case . . . If they release their full power on him . . . they'll kill him!*

“Wait—stop! That’s . . . that’s enough for now.” Duan leapt in front of the two-headed man, clenching his fists. He felt as though he were jumping off a cliff.

Suddenly . . .

“Is this the guy?” Hearing the commotion, the security guards had finally made it and had surrounded the drunken man. The golden-eyed wizard lowered his hand at the same time.

“Pah! You’re in luck.”

“Indeed,” the silver-eyed one agreed. The breathtaking tension melted away, and the atmosphere returned to its normal hubbub again. Duan thought that the two-headed wizard would speak to him, but instead he seemed to have lost interest and was now heading toward the boat ticket desk.

Hey, those guys are getting on a boat somewhere too . . .

Duan stared at them in a daze. Then suddenly he had a bad feeling and quickly checked his trouser pockets.

Oh shoot!

N-no way . . .

The blood drained from Duan’s head. If he lost those super expensive tickets, how could he ever face Olba? He checked every pocket he had—though he only had four. He even checked the secret pocket under his armor, where he stored his emergency money and other things.

Of course, I couldn’t have put the tickets there . . . I didn’t have time to do anything like that before the drunk attacked me!

“Oh no!” Screaming hysterically, Duan ran back toward the ticket sales desk.

The badger-faced man was now serving the two-headed wizard, but when he saw Duan, he smiled complacently.

“Ah, you finally noticed. Here.” The man produced two tickets and pushed them across the desk. “You forgot to

take them before. Ha ha ha. Expensive tickets like these, you better not lose them! It's funny," said the man, indicating the two-headed giant, who was walking away from the desk. "That gentleman there is also going to Luca Island. Isn't that strange? There wasn't anybody who wanted to go to Luca Island before."

CHAPTER 14:

PACKING UP AND MOVING OUT



Duan carefully placed his tickets inside his breast pocket and hurried back to the inn. He was eager to tell Olba about the two-headed man. When he was collecting his tickets from the badger-faced man, he—or was it they?—had glanced back at him in surprise at hearing that he, too, was going to Luca Island. But then they left quickly, taking large strides.

Duan regretted not having gone after them and asked why they were going to the island, but he thought they were probably going for the same reason as he and Olba: to steal the treasure of the Red Dragon.

“Olba! It’s terrible!”

Duan flung open the door to their room with a bang, but Olba was nowhere to be found.

“Olba out drinking again. Giis!” Check nodded knowingly, proud of himself for figuring it out.

“Darn it . . .” Duan felt the energy drain from his body.

Oh well, I guess the story about the two-headed man can wait. There are plenty of things to do—after all, we’re leaving the day after tomorrow! I better start getting everything ready . . .

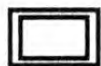
Duan, knowing that he couldn’t trust Olba with the preparations, started to jot down all the things that he needed to buy.

Most importantly, I need to replenish all the consumable goods. A rope, Port-o-Lant oil, ointments, bandages . . . We also need tummy medicines. And antidotes . . . And I should get metal wedges as well. And, oh yeah, some soap; it’s good for a lot of things.

Oh, and I better get some clothes. Something that’s light and not bulky. I heard there’s some you can buy that you can roll up and tie with a band. I wonder where they sell those. Oh, and a jacket would be nice. Olba needs one, too—he’ll get cold like he is. Oh well, I guess I can ask him when he gets back.

And all that’s left now is food supplies. Dried bread—three days worth; drinking water—one flask for each of us; dried meat; dried beans; raisins . . . Salt and pepper and other seasonings . . . Is that it? Oh, and some cooking oil. That’s good to have. Only a little though—I’m the one who’s gonna carry it anyway.

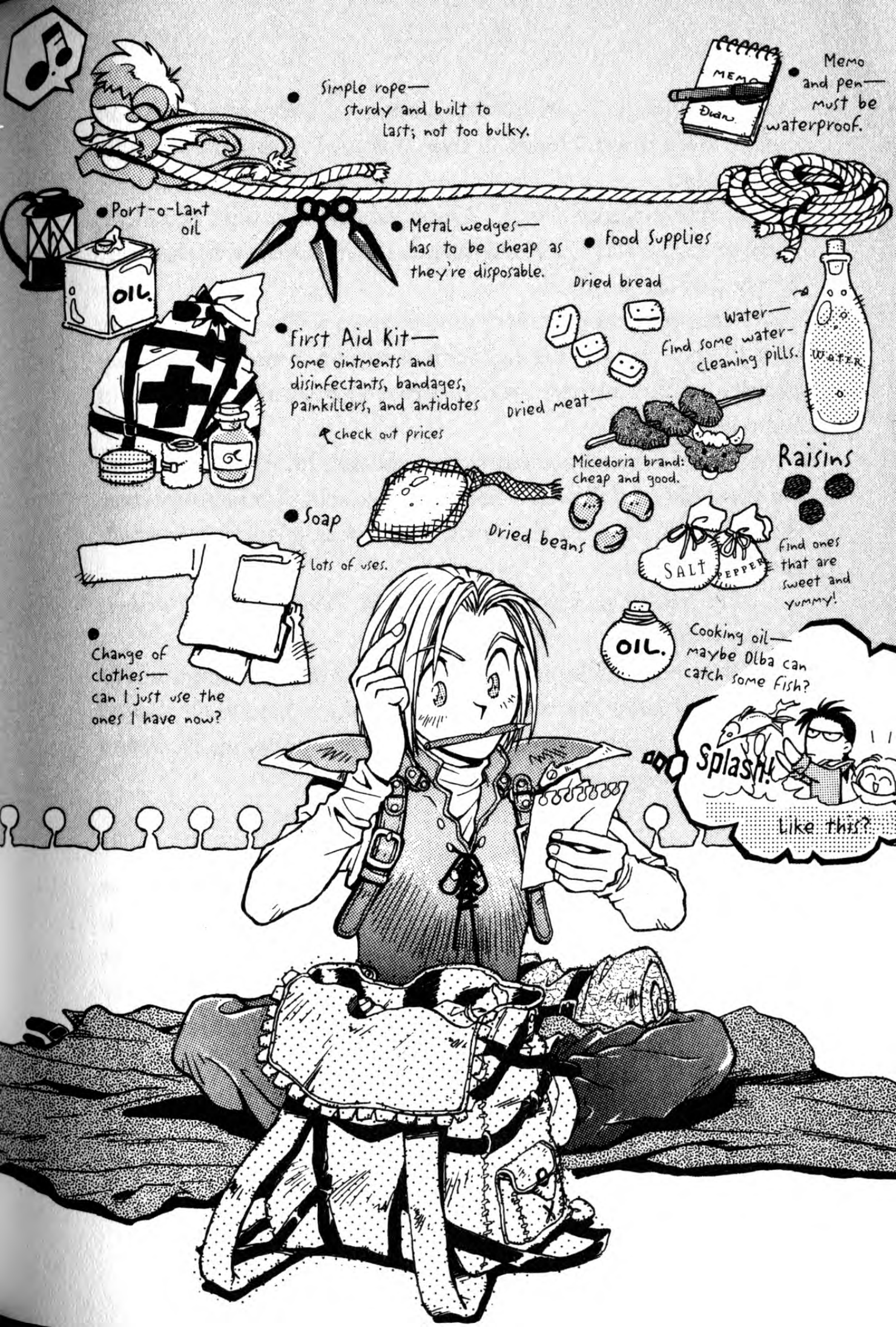
Duan mumbled to himself while he wrote down the things they needed to buy. Check sat beside him, making sounds of approval. The afternoon sun shone through the window and lit the sides of their faces.



Finally, the day of departure arrived. Duan collected all his new supplies and packed them into his rucksack. He lifted it onto his back, over his new cloak.

“Whoa!” Duan nearly toppled over face-forward.

“Are you all right?” Dorothy was standing in the doorway, looking at him worriedly.

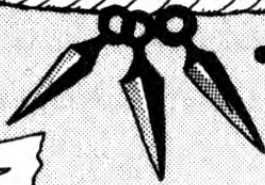


- Simple rope—
sturdy and built to
last; not too bulky.



Memo
and pen—
must be
waterproof.

- Port-o-Lant
oil



- Metal wedges—
has to be cheap as
they're disposable.

- Food Supplies

Dried bread



Water—
Find some water-
cleaning pills.



- First Aid Kit—
Some ointments and
disinfectants, bandages,
painkillers, and antidotes

↗ check out prices

Dried meat—

Micedoria brand:
cheap and good.



Raisins

Find ones
that are
sweet and
yummy!

- Soap

lots of uses.

Dried beans



Cooking oil—
maybe Olba can
catch some fish?

Change of
clothes—
can I just use the
ones I have now?

Splash!

Like this?

“Oh! Ha ha . . .” Duan regained his footing and let out an embarrassed laugh. “No, I’m fine, thanks. I’m actually stronger than I look.”

“That’s a nice cloak,” Dorothy said. “It suits you. Oh, and your armor! That’s new too, isn’t it?” Duan was sincerely happy that she’d noticed.

Yes, yesterday he had proposed to Olba that they buy new jackets, and the big fighter had agreed immediately. They decided to buy proper cloaks so that they could use them in the winter too.

The cloaks were actually secondhand, but they were more comfortable and lighter than they looked. There were two slits on both sides for the arms, and it was possible to carry a rucksack with it.

I’ve finished packing, Duan thought. Now all I’ve got to do is wait for Olba . . .

Well, at least I know that he’s not still at the bar. That would be awful! No, I know that he’s not, because I sat in front of the door all night long. And anyway, after a few nights of heavy drinking, he seemed a bit tired last night and went to bed quietly for once.

Olba was in the bathroom at the moment.

“What’s taking him so long?” Duan wondered aloud.

Dorothy cocked her head to one side, then looked at Duan with her elegant gaze. “Duan, make sure you come back safe, okay? You remind me so much of my little brother. Not that you even look like him, really . . . It’s more your personality . . . I feel like we’re family.” Her gaze saddened for an instant, and her eyes turned moist.

Seeing this, Duan suddenly felt a great weight on his heart. “Your brother . . . What is it?”

Dorothy didn’t answer; she just shook her head quietly. Silence filled the room for a while . . .

Duan smiled and put out his hand. "Dorothy, we'll definitely come back. I'll even bring you a present! What would you like?"

She raised her head and took Duan's hand in both of hers. They were warm. "You know . . . I don't think I even asked you where you're going?"

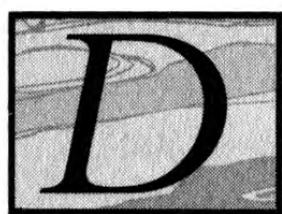
"A place called Luca Island . . . though it seems like a royal pain to get there."

Dorothy's blue eyes widened in surprise. "Wow, what a coincidence!"

She gripped Duan's hands and shook her head in disbelief as he looked on in bewilderment. "Luca Island—why, it's my home town!"

CHAPTER 15:

THE DRAGON GOD



Duan's mouth dropped open in surprise, but Dorothy quickly said, "You needn't look so shocked—there are quite a lot of Luca islanders in Kovenia. The young kids who grow up on the island don't think it's cool to stay, so they come here."

Dorothy sat down on the sofa and looked up at Duan. He put down his backpack and sat down beside her, his heart beating fast. The foundation of a good adventure was collecting information, and here he had stumbled across a goldmine!

"My brother was the same. He left home the summer he turned fifteen, looking for freedom. He wanted to be an adventurer. My parents went half-crazy looking for him, but in the end, they didn't find him in time. I left the island to search for him . . ."

Dorothy let out a sad little laugh. "Who am I kidding? I wanted to leave that place behind . . . that desolate island, hidebound in its old customs, its ridiculous traditions. Maybe that was all an excuse for me to run away, too."

"The man at the ticket desk . . . he told me that we'd be thrown off the island before we could do anything." Duan looked at her intently. "What did he mean?"

Dorothy rolled her eyes as if to say, *Oh, not this question again.*

"Right," she said. "You bought the quest for the Red Dragon's treasure, didn't you?"

"W-well . . . yeah. My partner bought it, actually."

"To make a long story short, the people on the island believe the Red Dragon is the island's guardian god. That's why they kick adventurers out—anything that poses a threat to the dragon: *boom*, out it goes."

Duan nodded. "I see." He'd heard stories about people worshipping dragons in various places. Sometimes, deep fear will lead people to deify the very thing they are afraid of. In time, they end up revering it. It didn't seem to Duan that the two impulses were that far apart. Dragons were the most powerful of the monsters, the most famous, and even the most advanced adventurer would consider it reckless to go into battle against one.

Dorothy laughed at how calmly Duan seemed to have taken the news. "The dragon did once



save the island from destruction, so the Luca Island natives have good reason to believe the Red Dragon is their savior. In any case, if you are determined to complete this quest, I recommend that you don't let the Luca islanders know that you are adventurers."

"But . . . how is that possible?" asked Duan. "I mean, one look at Olba, and they'll be able to tell we're adventurers the minute we land on the island. So what should we do?"

Dorothy thought about it for a moment, then, nodding at Duan, she grabbed a pen and piece of paper from his notebook.

Duan watched as she scribbled something on a piece of paper. "There's a family called Evans living on the outskirts of the village. I'll write their address down on this envelope." She tucked the piece of paper into an envelope and sealed it. "You can say you are there to deliver this letter to them from me."

"How do you know the Evans family?"

Dorothy took a deep breath and looked at Duan seriously as she handed him the letter. "They're my parents."

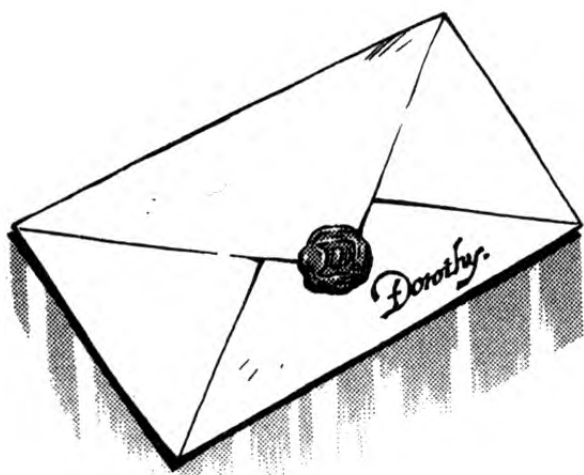
At that moment, heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway, and then Olba appeared.

"Olba, what were you doing? I was afraid you'd warped out of the toilet or something." Duan joked.

Olba grunted back moodily. "Look, let's forget about leaving today. We'll go next week."

"Next—what?!" Duan screamed, jumping up.

Olba, clutching his stomach, collapsed onto a sofa nearby. "I can't go," he groaned. "I've got the runs."



"Is that all? You wanna cancel the quest because of an upset stomach. You'll be fine. Here, I've got some tummy medicine—I bought plenty. Here, drink it. Come on, Olba. Those tickets are nonrefundable. If we don't use them today, they're worthless."

"No, you don't understand . . . If I get seasick on top of this . . . it'll be the worst!"

"Look, we're going, and that's that. Here's your luggage. Come on, we're leaving!"

Olba continued to protest, but Duan handed him his luggage, then hoisted his own rucksack onto his back. He folded Dorothy's letter and placed it in his breast pocket.

"I'll make sure we deliver the letter, Dorothy." He clasped Dorothy's hand and smiled warmly. "Thanks for everything."

"You too, Duan. I'm glad I could be of help . . . and I'm sure my parents will be happy to help you, too. But be careful. They say that the Red Dragon's Fire Breath can scorch even the sky."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Duan, nodding. "Oh, I forgot!"

"Yes?"

"What's the weather like on Luca Island? We bought capes, but . . . will they be enough?"

"Of course. It's quite warm there. Though I don't know what it's like inside the dragon's dungeon."

"Right. Well, thanks again for everything."

Olba was making his way to the door without saying anything when Dorothy called out to him. He turned around grumpily.

"Olba, be careful. Take care of yourself." She said the words carefully as she spoke to him.

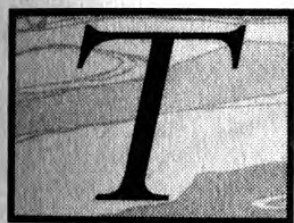
Olba, surprised by her sudden intensity, just stared at her for a moment without saying anything. Then he recovered with a laugh and a quick nod. "You, too," he said.

Then they left the inn—Duan, Olba, and Check.

By the time they boarded the ship, it was three hours later. The weather was beautiful. The sky was a deep blue, and they could hear the shrill cries of the seagulls near and far.

CHAPTER 16:

ALL ABOARD!



There were boats of all sizes and colors bobbing in the harbor. The ship that they were boarded, the *Marchin*, was one of the shabbiest. Looking at the deck the crew was busily working on, Olba had resigned expression.

“Looks like it’s going to be a shaky ride,” he said glumly.

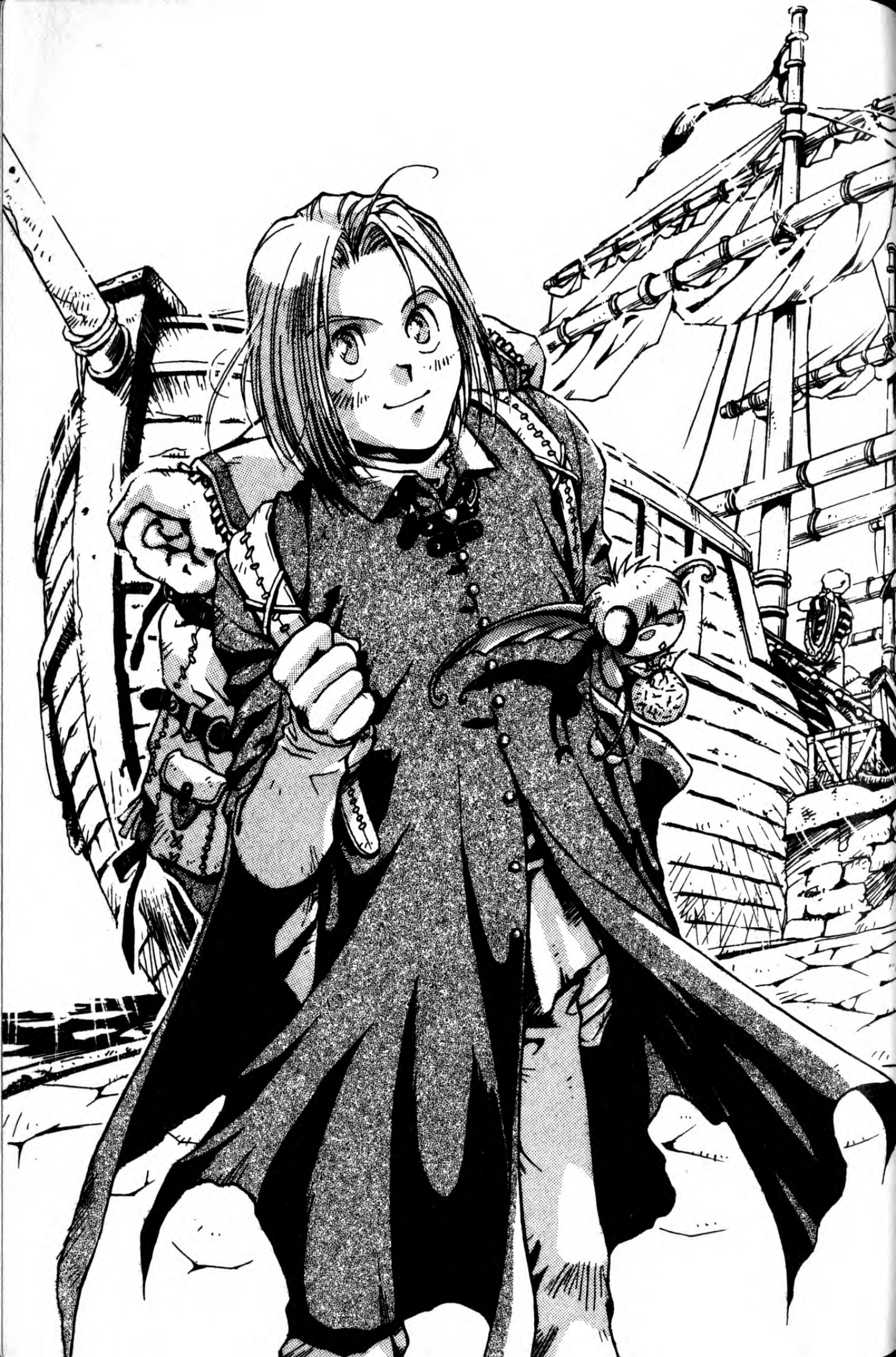
“Wow . . . It’s big, isn’t it?” In contrast to Olba, Duan’s eyes sparkled as he inspected the ship. “I guess you’ve been to lots of places by ship, huh, Olba?”

“Yeah . . . I guess.”

“Have you ever been over toward Ronza? I heard there was a bustling town there, at the edge of the desert.”

“What, the Zulu-Makalan desert? You must be talking about Evelin.”

“Yes, Evelin!” Duan’s eyes widened at the mention of the fabled town. “I read about it at school . . . There’s an Adventurers Guild there too, right? And a branch of the Adventurers Support Group?”



“Yeah,” said Olba. “It’s bigger than Kovenia.”

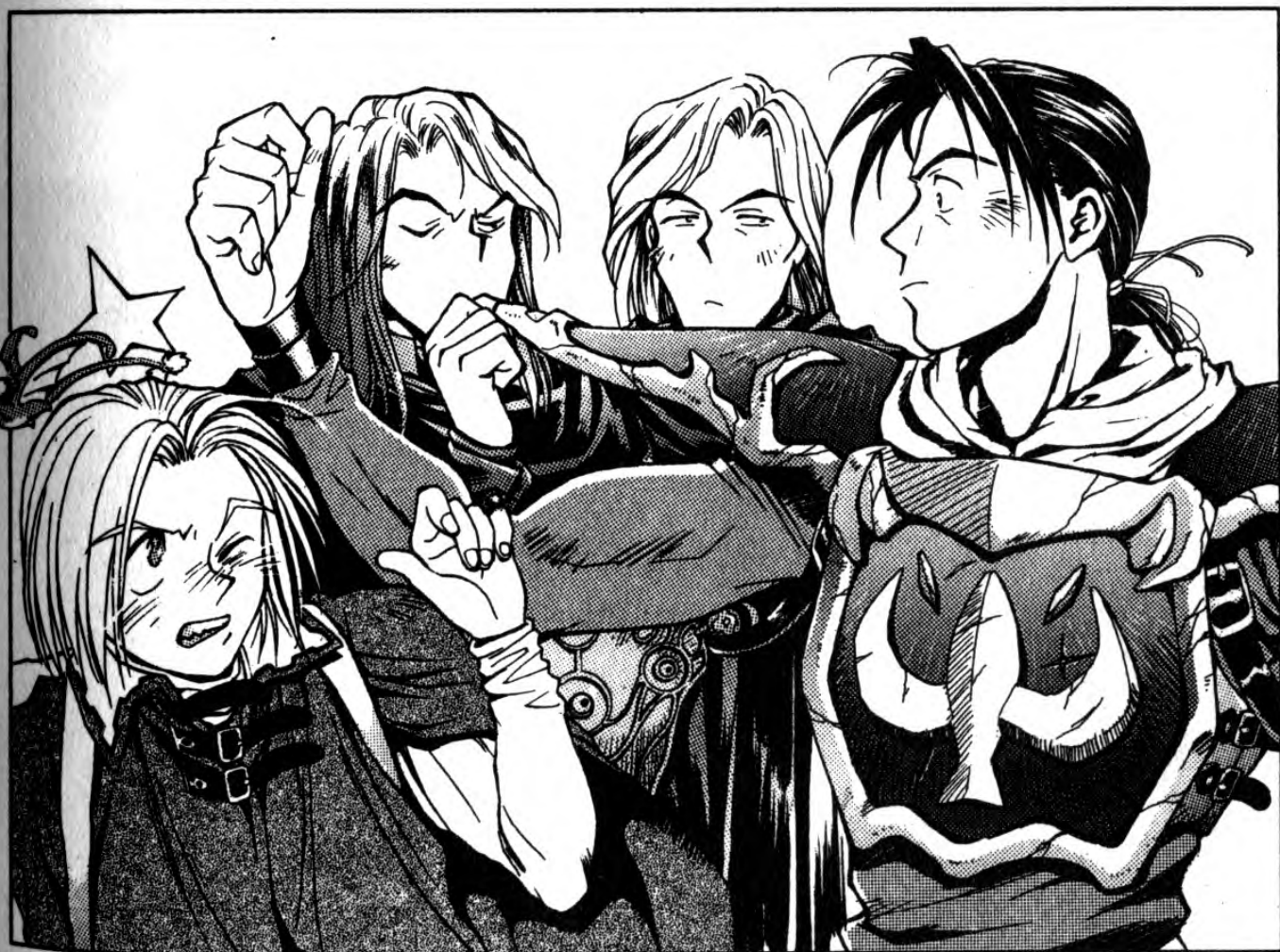
“Wow. I hope I can go there someday.” Duan stared dreamily at the white sails and the glittering blue ocean.

Olba patted Duan on the head. “Hey, I don’t see your friend with the two heads. You think he’s gonna show?”

“I dunno—maybe they’ve boarded already.” The moment Duan answered, he heard a cough from behind.

Olba and Duan jumped and wheeled around.

The two-headed wizard—for that was who it was—stood looking down at Duan bemusedly. At that moment, a gust of wind blew across the dock and caught the wizard’s black cape, making it billow silently. The effect was very ominous, and as Duan stood there, fixed in the gaze of those golden and pale blue eyes, he felt as if a giant vulture had landed on the dock behind them.



The one called Golden Eye spoke. "Oh, I don't suppose you are talking about us, are you? Look, Silver Eye, it's the boy from the ticket desk."

Silver Eye, instead of responding to the comment, narrowed his pale blue eyes.

I've seen them before . . . thought Olba. But he couldn't remember where or when. He figured that he probably didn't have a direct connection with them but had heard rumors of their existence. In any case, judging from their extraordinary appearance, stories of them probably spread quite quickly.

"I don't think I ever got a chance to thank you properly for helping me back at the ticket desk," Duan said.

Golden Eye raised his eyebrows. "It was nothing; hardly worth troubling yourself over. By the way, boy, what's your name?"

Silver Eye, meanwhile, appeared to be entirely disinterested in the conversation. He narrowed his pale blue

GOLDEN EYE

His real name is Guri Morg, but because of his blond hair and golden eyes, he is called Golden Eye. He is able to cast Fire Magic and can also use lower-level defensive magic. He's a lot more talkative than Silver Eye and is the one mostly in charge of any negotiations and discussions. They are heading to Luca Island on the same quest as Duan. Their true identities are still not clear.

SILVER EYE

His real name is Gura Morg, but he's called Silver Eye because of his silver hair and blue eyes. He is able to cast Ice Magic and has a more silent and cooler nature than Golden Eye. As can be seen, they are two-headed and are just over six and a half feet tall. They don't carry any weapons, and they wear a black cape.

eyes toward the horizon, watching the gulls that were diving for fish beyond the boats.

“Oh, excuse me,” said Duan. “My name is Duan Surk, and I’m a novice adventurer and fighter. This is my partner Olba October, but he has much higher levels and is a veteran fighter.”

Golden Eye’s eyes sparkled, and he looked at Olba. But then he turned his attention back to Duan. “I am Golden Eye, and this is Silver Eye,” he said. “That is what we are called, and that is what you should call us. We are adventurers too. We are also wizards. As you no doubt observed back in the Guild Hall, I cast Fire Magic, while Silver Eye uses Ice Magic. It appears that we’re on the same quest. That being the case, please do your best to stay out of our way. Good day.”

With a swirl of the black cape, the two-headed wizard turned and boarded the ship.

“It’s a bit difficult to tell if they are being friendly or not, isn’t it?” whispered Duan to Olba.

ADVENTURER LEVEL

I 4

Rewards and Punishments: None in particular

Valid until:
8th August Sigress
Year 384



Name: Guri Morg; Gura Morg

Date of Birth:
20th May Sigress Year 356

Residence & Citizenship:
Locana 30, Balhalm,
Ronza Commonwealth

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Sorcerer

Issue date:
20th May Sigress Year 383

Skill Points:

Strength 73
Intelligence 71
Karma 0
Magic 107

EXPERIENCE POINTS:

4658

(LEVEL-UP POSSIBLE AT 5000)

“Eh, maybe they’re just testing us out.” Olba heaved his luggage onto his shoulder and indicated the ramp that led up to the deck of the *Marchin*. “C’mon, kid. Let’s get on the ship too.”

“All aboard for Luca Island!” shouted a man with a white beard at the top of the ramp. From the way he was dressed, Duan surmised that he was the captain. The white-bearded man looked at the tickets, then at Olba, then at the tickets again. He seemed suspicious. Finally, grudgingly, he nudged his chin toward the ship.

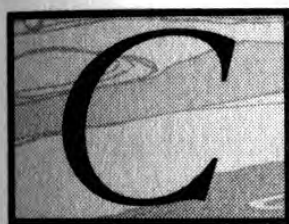
An island that doesn’t welcome adventurers . . . Duan remembered Dorothy’s words, and his hand went instinctively to his breast pocket.

Well, we have that letter Dorothy gave us. Thank goodness!

Duan was pretty pleased with himself for being prepared. However, he had actually forgotten one important thing . . .

CHAPTER 17:

THE MARCHION UNDER SAIL



heck was swinging his head from side to side as he inspected their new surroundings excitedly.

“Check, make sure you don’t stick your head into strange places,” said Duan. “I don’t want you bothering the other passengers.”

“Gii-iis!” Check replied with a single nod, his wide eyes darting everywhere.

I wonder if he even understands me at all, Duan thought apprehensively. I hope he doesn’t get into any trouble . . .

“Raise anchor!” the captain shouted, and the crew started to draw up the anchor.

The rattling of the chain could be heard, and the ship began to drift away from the dock. After it reached open waters, the sail was let out. A wonderful wind blew, and the white sail became taut.

The ship made a sudden swerve, and, with increasing speed, it raced toward the open sea.

“Gii-iiis! Wind strong!” The stiff breeze was pushing the grinia’s bowl-cut, silky hair in all directions; his head looked like a dandelion.

Duan could barely keep his eyes open. He’d planned to stay above deck and watch until Kovenia disappeared on the horizon, but now he decided to visit the cabins. Olba and the two-headed wizard had already gone below.

The midsection of the ship was roughly separated into two levels: an upper deck and a lower deck. Bunks for the crew lined the walls of the lower deck; that was also where drinking water and food for the voyage were stored. The cabins for the captain and the passengers were on the upper deck, toward the stern. But they were small, claustrophobic, musty rooms—hardly luxury liner accommodations.

When Duan entered the cabin, Olba was already lying on one of the beds with his feet up and his eyes closed. “It looks as though there aren’t any other guests here. Just us, and the two-headed wizard,” Duan commented.

Olba didn’t respond; he’d seemed unwell even before they’d boarded the ship, and Duan didn’t really expect an answer from him now. Shrugging, Duan dropped his rucksack and joined Check, who was inspecting the room.

There wasn’t much in the way of furniture: just two curtained bunk beds and a tiny, square window with shutters on either side of it. A small bedstand with a built-in chest of drawers stood in one corner; it was more an apologetic gesture than a functional piece of furniture, really. The drawers would hardly hold anything substantial.

Duan opened the double panes of the window and leaned out. He could see the sea far below. The wind gushed in noisily, making Olba groan, so Duan quickly shut the window and closed the shutters. They blocked the light so completely, that if

the oil lamp hanging on the wall between the beds hadn't been lit, the room would have been plunged into utter darkness.

Once Duan had gotten his and Olba's luggage in order, he sat down on the lower bunk opposite Olba. The ship swayed from side to side quite powerfully; even sitting was really tiring.

"Urgh . . ." Olba moaned and rolled over on his side.

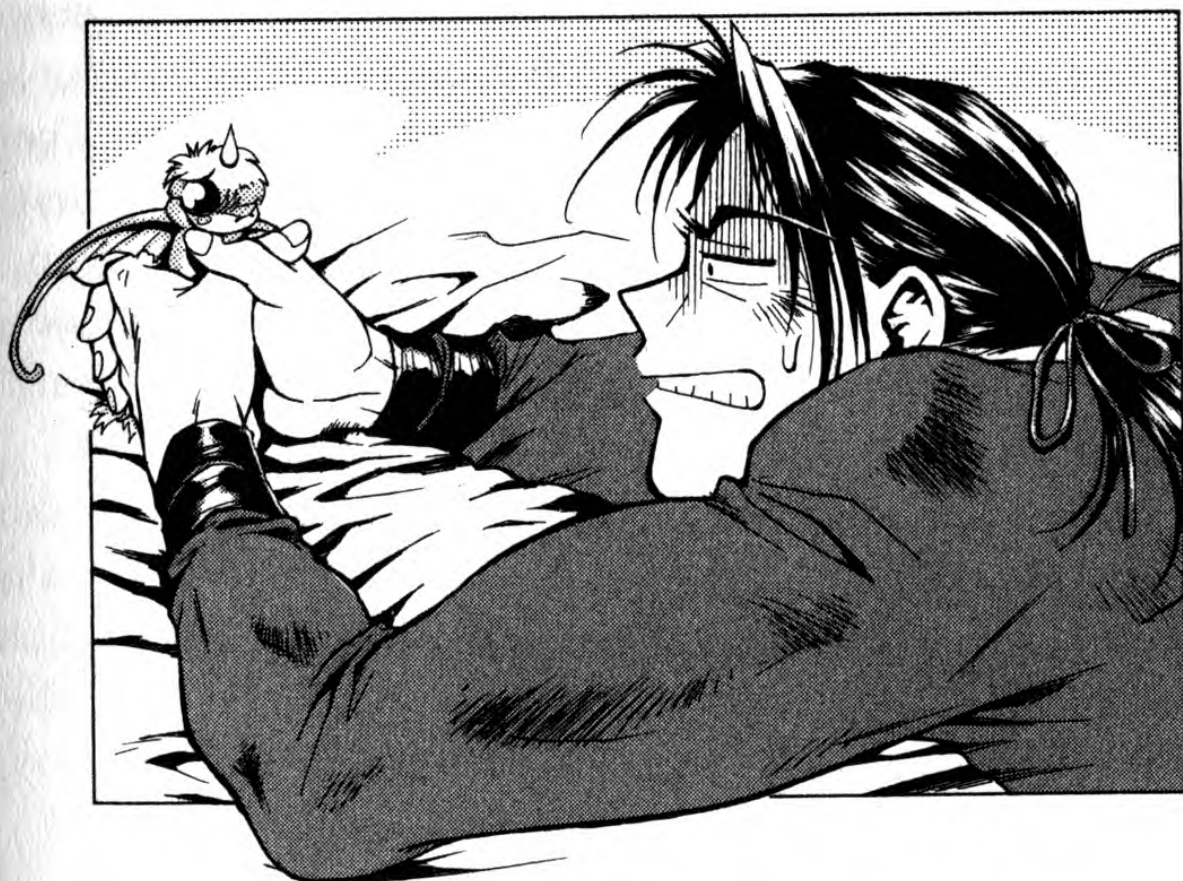
"What's wrong? Are you okay?" Duan looked over at his sick companion, and Check flew to Olba in a hurry, hovering over the fighter's prone form.

"Gi-iis! Olba sick?"

"Shut up. Leave me alone . . . I—wait!" Olba was in the midst of waving Check away when he changed his mind and grabbed the grinia in one big hand.

"Urk!" Check flapped his insect wings frantically as Olba raised his head from the pillow, addressing him.

"You cast low-level spells. Do you think you can cast Heal on me? Or something? C'mon, I feel awful. You can do something, can't you?"



Check shook his head *no*.

"Sorry, Olba," Duan explained. "That only really works for treating wounds, not for illnesses. If he casts Heal, all it will do is alleviate the pain a little bit, and it would only last for a moment. Then he'd run out of magic and you'd be just as sick as before." Duan looked on sympathetically. "I'm sorry."

Olba sighed in resignation and fell back on the pillow. He tossed the grinia gently toward Duan, who caught Check with both hands.

"Gii-iis . . ." Check made an apologetic noise, and scratched his head. "Check sorry . . ."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

"This is really boring. C'mon, Check. Let's go up on deck. I feel like if we hang around here, we'll end up catching Olba's seasickness."

"Gii-iis! Let's go!"

Duan and Check spent the rest of the afternoon investigating various parts of the ship, from the deck to the cabins, going slowly as they had plenty of time to kill before dinner. Since it was really the only thing to look forward to, they were both excited when the dinner hour rolled around at last.

But when the food came, it looked barely edible. The menu included: dumplings made out of mashed potatoes, meat and vegetable stew, and a little drop of wine. That was it. Duan, who enjoyed cooking, thought it was a criminal waste of food. With exactly the same ingredients, using different cooking techniques or spices, the meal could have been much better.

CHAPTER 18:

TABLE MANNERS, OR TWO FRIENDS ARE BETTER THAN ONE



uan, isn't it? Tell me, Duan." Golden Eye leaned across the table, a wry smile on his face. "Is it very interesting to watch us eat?"

The two-headed wizard was eating dinner—each forkful went to alternate mouths. Duan had unintentionally been watching this scene in a daze. He jerked his head up at the comment. "Huh? Oh, sorry . . . I didn't mean to be rude," he said shakily.

Golden Eye grinned. "We have a rule to each eat whatever we like. It's been that way since we were children, so it's no problem."

"I see . . ."

"You're probably thinking, 'Why don't they just each hold a fork and eat separately?' But you see, that would never do." As if to demonstrate, the two-headed wizard picked up a fork in each hand and started stuffing food into both mouths simultaneously. Golden Eye was right; it was definitely less attractive to watch. They returned to their more elegant table manners, where they

sat up straight and used a knife and a fork to cut up small portions of their meat and place it in their alternate mouths.

“So, you two . . .” Golden Eye took a sip of red wine, and looked from Duan to Olba. “Where did you get the Luca Island Quest? At the scenario store?”

“Well . . .” Duan glanced at Olba, unsure whether he should answer. Olba had been silent for a while, barely aware of the hubbub going on around him in the dining room. But with great effort, the fighter nodded at Golden Eye.

“That’s right,” he said and fell silent again.

Olba was still feeling sick, and hadn’t really felt up to dinner. But one of the basic adventurer’s tenets is to always eat properly at regular intervals to keep strength up. So Olba had decided to force himself to eat. One look at the steaming plate of potatoes and meat, though, and he felt sick to his core.

Golden Eye nodded. “Thought so. We bought it there, too. Of course we bought ours at the Scenario Shop in Dakota . . . but it’s the same thing, really, isn’t it?”

Scenario Shops could be found not only in big cities but smaller villages as well. There, one could buy a quest scenario from an adventurer who had experienced the details for themselves or who had just heard about them from someone else. These quest scenarios would include maps and various other kinds of helpful information. Some scenarios were duds, but occasionally there were good, detailed quest scenarios that were cheap—those were the ones with the highest cost performance. Telling the difference was another skill of a good adventurer, and a veteran like Olba would usually be able to distinguish a good scenario from a dud very quickly.

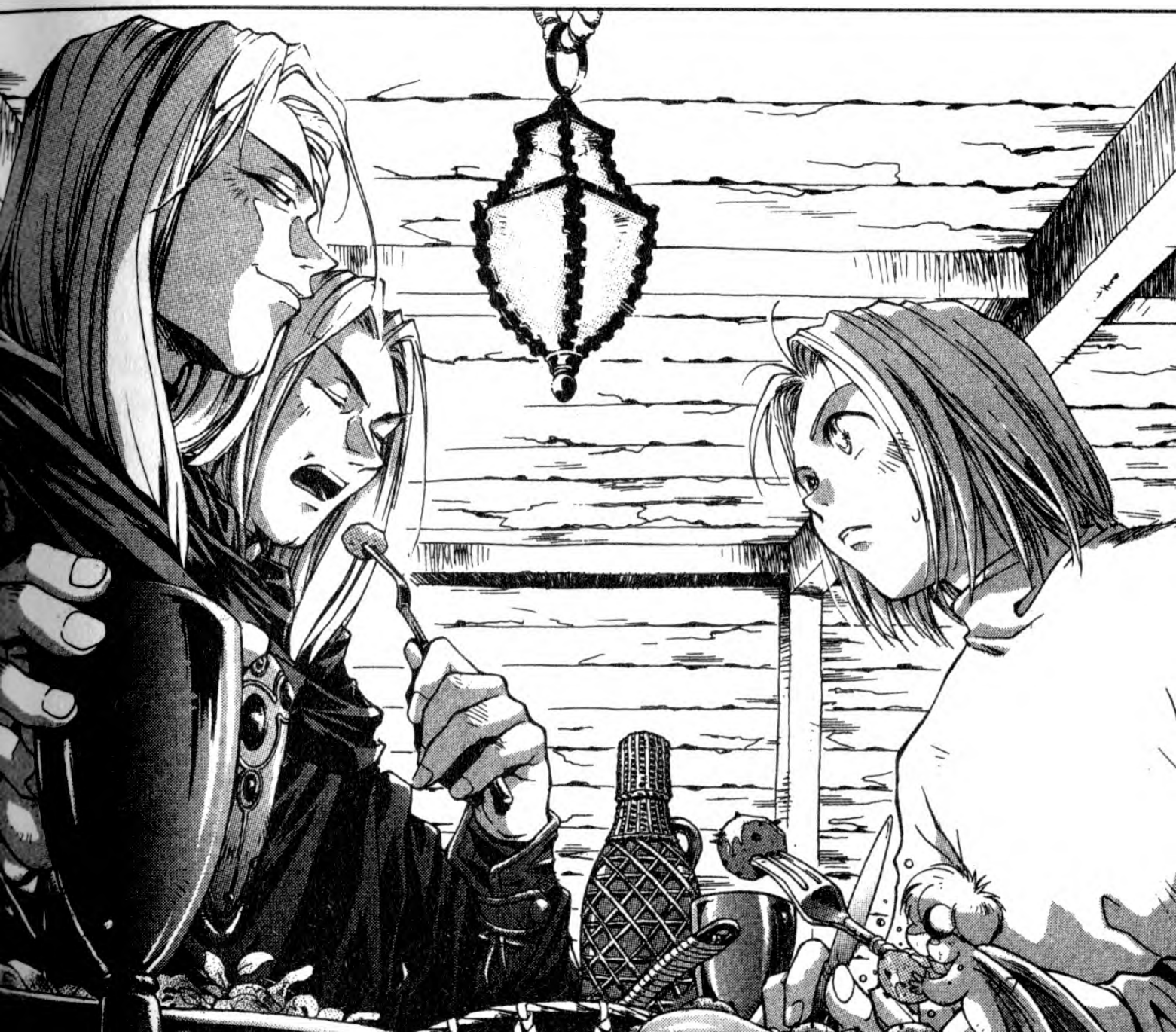
But as he sat there, fighting back his queasiness, Olba couldn’t help but feel that maybe, just maybe, this quest might be a dud. He had a really bad feeling about it.

"If you like, why don't we compare our scenarios?" Golden Eye turned to Olba excitedly. "If they are the same, then that's fine. If they're different, well . . . it could be quite beneficial to exchange information."

But instead of responding, Olba held his hand to his mouth and, jumping up from the table, ran off toward his cabin.

"Oh, dear." Golden Eye raised an eyebrow, watching him go. "A big guy like that, and he still gets seasick?"

Yes—it was always Golden Eye who spoke and never Silver Eye. Silver Eye just continued eating. It seemed as though the rule of alternating mouths did not apply when Golden Eye was talking.



But it seems like it's only Silver Eye who's eating . . .
thought Duan.

He reached over to stick his fork into the last potato dumpling, and at the same time, the two-headed wizard stuck his fork into it as well. Silver Eye looked up; their eyes met briefly across the table. In that moment, it seemed that Golden Eye had not even noticed the dispute over the potato dumpling.

I get it . . . So Silver Eye is the one controlling the fork. Although they use the same body, they both have their own wills that they use moment to moment.

Golden Eye, seeing what had happened, laughed nervously.

"Silver Eye, you've had plenty already, haven't you? I'm feeling full. Go on, Duan, please. You take it. Don't hold back." As Golden Eye said this, the hand with the fork in it drew back. Silver Eye looked displeased, but he only wiped his mouth with his napkin and coughed. He seemed to have given up.

"So, what do you say about comparing scenarios?" Golden Eye asked Duan. "I don't think it's a bad deal."

Duan responded with a smile. "Sure. I'll ask Olba about it later."

Golden Eye smiled back at him contentedly. "Duan, I think I could get along with you. I know it's a short time, but . . . let's be friends. Shall we?"

Golden Eye thrust out his right hand. Duan placed the dumpling onto his plate, and shook the hand offered to him.

"I'd like that," said Duan. "And . . . if you ever have time, I would love to hear about your adventures. You must have so many stories!"

"Oh, yes, I can tell you stories!" Golden Eye chuckled. "Ship voyages can be so boring and tedious . . ."

Golden Eye seemed to have a sudden thought. "Say, what level are you at, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Only Level 2," Duan admitted, looking away. He felt slightly ashamed.

"Hmm." A look of concern crossed Golden Eye's face. "Going to that island, at Level 2? That's quite reckless, isn't it?"

"Oh, sure—it would be. But my companion has quite a high level; he's at Level 14."

"Level 14, at his age?" Golden Eye raised one of his eyebrows, impressed.

"Wh-what level are you guys at?" Duan asked timidly.

Golden Eye raised his napkin to his mouth. There was an awkward silence. Silver Eye looked at Duan with an irritated expression. Duan thought that perhaps he had asked an impolite question, but Golden Eye soon answered with a smile.

"Level 14."

"Really? Wow!" Now Duan was impressed. "It's supposed to be very hard to raise your levels as a sorcerer, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. We originally wanted to have two separate cards, but the Adventurer's Support Group wouldn't allow it. They would only let us have one. So perhaps we had a bit of an unfair advantage."

"Still, that's very impressive," Duan replied sincerely.

Golden Eye sniffed and touched the edge of his lips with his napkin. "I hope you raise your levels soon, too," he said, and stood up from the table. "Excuse us." With that, they returned to their cabin.

That was very abrupt, Duan thought. Perhaps it was something they didn't want to be asked about after all . . .

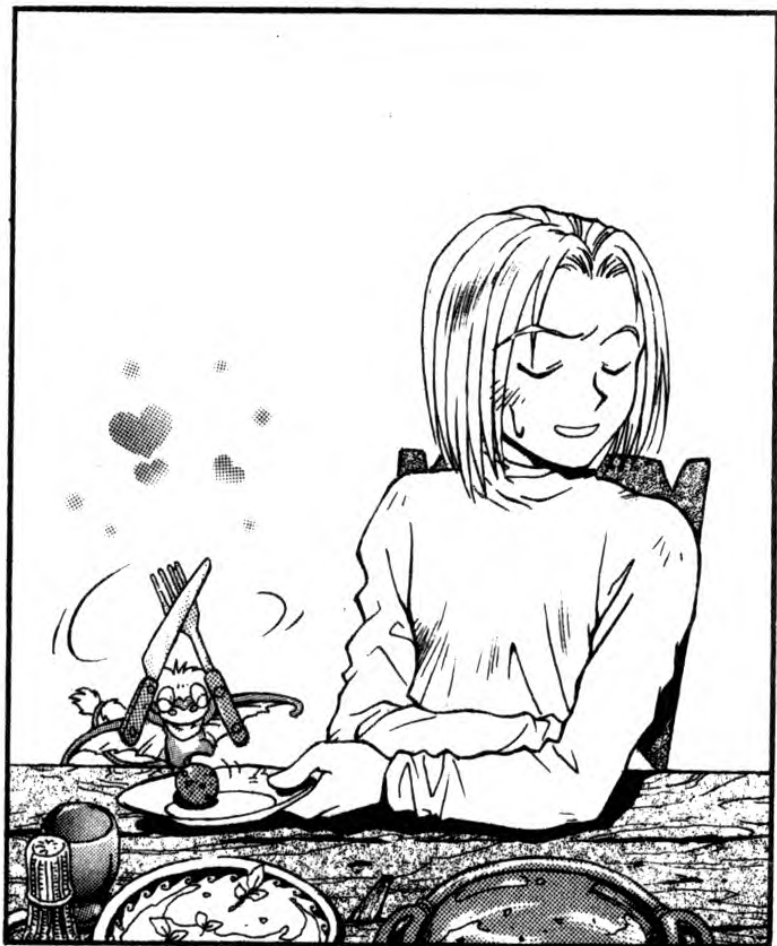
Duan and Check were the only ones remaining at the table. Duan had hoped to take some food back to the room for Olba, but however much they had bad-mouthed the

meal, there wasn't any of it left. Aside from the lone potato dumpling, it seemed that the two-headed wizard had eaten up everything at the table.

"Here, Check, you can have this." Duan took the last potato dumpling, cut it in half, and placed it onto Check's plate. The little grinia grabbed a knife and fork—he had to spread his wings to keep the weight of the utensils from toppling him off the table—and dug in with gusto. Meanwhile, Duan wondered if he should wrap Olba's plate up for him, but the cold, congealed stew looked even less appetizing than it had when it was still warm.

He didn't touch a thing . . . He must be sicker than I thought. Thinking back, Duan realized that Olba hadn't eaten anything all day . . . or even spoken that much.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. Anxiety spread through Duan. *Maybe it would have been better to depart next week, no matter what the tickets cost . . .*



CHAPTER 19:

AG!



fter dinner, there was nothing left to do but sleep. Duan realized that ship journeys were far more boring and endlessly tedious than he had imagined. Although he had tried to sleep, it didn't come to him easily. It was still early, and in any case the ship swayed too much.

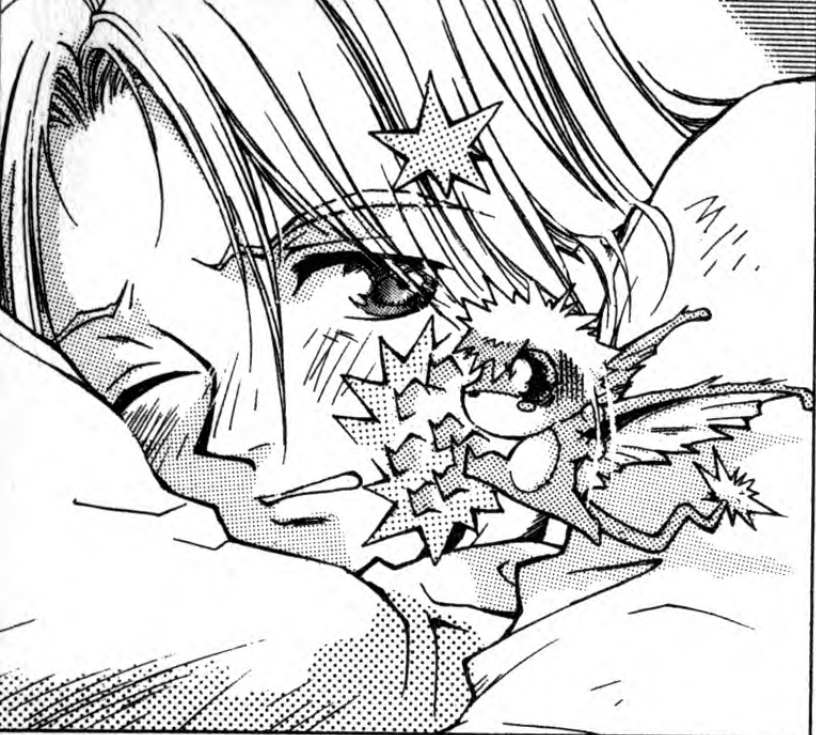
"Guuu . . . Piiis. Guuuu . . . Piiis." Little, high-pitched snores emanated from the curled-up grinia beside him on the pillow. Unlike Duan, Check had passed out the moment he closed his eyes and was now sleeping like a baby.

"You're so lucky . . ." sighed Duan just as the ship started to lean again. He rolled toward the edge of the bed.

BANG. There was a huge crash, followed by a moan. It was Olba.

"Olba . . . ?" Duan called out, concerned. "Are you okay?"





The big fighter didn't answer. The only sound was the faraway splash of the waves against the hull.

I hope he's all right . . . Is he sleeping? Oh . . . Please let it be morning soon.

Rolling over, Duan clutched the thin, rough blanket around his shoulders and squeezed his eyes shut. Finally, he drifted into a fitful sleep.

"O-oww. Oww . . ." All of a sudden there were small feet kicking at Duan's face. "Wh-what are you doing, Check?!"

Duan opened his eyes and saw a hysterical Check pointing at the window.

"Danger! Danger! Giiis!"

"Danger? What?"

Duan opened the shutters, thinking that Check was probably only fussing about a small spider. But then, something the size of a fist jumped in, whizzing past at an amazing speed. Caught by surprise, Duan fell backward, landing on his rump on the floor.

"Danger! Danger! Weird thing! Giis!" Shrieking, Check flapped around the room in a panic, then landed on Duan's head. "Danger, Giiis!"

"Check, get off me! Hang on, I have to—" Trying to move the grinia's little clinging hands from his eyes, Duan jumped up and quickly shut the window. Just as he did, there was a heavy *thud* against the shutters, as if something else had rammed it from the outside. Then, a rain of punches rattled the shutters. Duan paled.

If we hadn't shut the window in time . . .

"Aaaahhh!"

"Aargh!" Screams from down the hall let them know that the disturbance had spread to other rooms, and even toward the deck. The hull sounded like it was being pounded by a million fists.

"So . . . where is it? That thing . . ."

Duan turned around apprehensively, trying to see what had just gotten into the cabin. When he and Check saw it, they froze.

Something they'd never seen before was wriggling about on the floor. It looked like a meaty starfish. Rolled up, it was about the size of a fist. Its back was yellow and glistening, with pulsing blue veins. It slowly extended its feelers and began crawling straight toward Duan. Duan could briefly see its underside—it was the color of blood.

"Urgh . . . Don't come over here. O-Olba! Olba! Wake up!"

Duan and Check backed away from the creature. The strange starfish-like object crawled toward the retreating Duan and Check as though it could sense their presence. Finally, Duan and Check were backed up against the wall of the small room. There was nowhere left to go! The starfish stopped about two feet away from them and flattened itself against the floor, wriggling.

Suddenly, the thing pounced, launching itself from the floor without warning. Duan found himself staring at the thing's underside—it was coming right for his face. Between its outstretched, five-pointed arms, Duan glimpsed a gaping red mouth and several rows of long, razor-sharp teeth . . .

"Aaaahhh!"

"Giiiiiiiss!"

Screaming hysterically, Duan ran one way and Check flew the other as the muscular thing barely missed them and slammed into the wall.

“Olbaaa! Olba!”

But however much they called, Olba would not wake up.

“A-argh . . .”

The second attack came, and the monster launched itself onto Duan’s left shoulder!

“Urgh . . .” A sharp pain ran through his shoulder. Because Duan had just woken up, he wasn’t wearing his armor. And because his shirt was thin, he received quite lot of damage.

After the thing had bitten Duan, it separated from him and landed back onto the floor. It looked like it was positioning itself for another attack.

“Dammit!” Duan grit his teeth, trying to steel himself against the pain.



I have to calm down . . . There has to be something . . .

His eyes darted rapidly around the room, searching for a weapon. His small short sword lay next to his pillow. It was the one they had just bought in Kovenia.

Secondhand, but still—it's better than my old one.

"Duan grabbed the short sword and, before the monster could attack again, swung down with all his strength. He swung at it a second and third time. It made a rough noise as he hacked it up.

Panting for breath, Duan looked at his enemy, now convulsing on the floor.

Y-yes, he thought. I did it!

In that moment of relief, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his shoulder.

Oh no. A sudden thought gave Duan pause. It couldn't be . . . poison? No, it's probably just a wound. I can't feel any numbness.

Watching Duan check himself, Check chirped at him worriedly. "Duan, Cure? Giiis!"

"Yes! Thank you, Check." Duan pulled open the neckline of his shirt as Check happily fluttered over and took a seat in his lap.

There was a large, star-shaped ring of deep tooth marks on Duan's shoulder, and blood was welling from the wound. Check closed his large eyes, brought his hands together, and prayed. Then the grinia leaned forward and blew gently on Duan's shoulder. Duan watched as the wound began to heal before his eyes, the pain vanishing along with it.

"Oh, that's much better. Thanks, Check."

There wasn't any time to lose. The racket outside the door was getting worse. Duan could still hear the constant pummeling of the monsters against the ship's hull.

How can Olba sleep in this racket? The big fighter showed no sign of waking up. I guess he was pretty sick. But how could anyone sleep through this?

Duan paused in putting on his armor. *Unless . . .* He roughly pulled at the curtain that hung on the bed and peeked in at Olba's face.

"Olba . . . ? Are you okay?"

Olba looked terrible: grey faced and drenched in sweat, he was curled up and shivering uncontrollably. But thankfully, it wasn't the worst Duan had imagined. Olba was breathing, even if he wasn't talking or moving much, aside from the occasional spasms.

The truth was, Olba had been aware that there was a fight going on around him in the cabin; he just wasn't able to



get out of bed. The stomach pains had subsided a bit, but were replaced by a raging fever and cold chills. His whole body was wracked with violent muscle aches, and he was as weak as a kitten. He wanted to vomit, but there was nothing left in his stomach. He wanted to sleep, but he couldn't, no matter how hard he tried.

With great effort, Olba raised his sweaty head and looked at Duan as if he was seeing the young man from a very great distance. To Duan, he looked like the loneliest guy in the world at that moment.

"Wow, you look terrible." Duan placed his hand on Olba's forehead. "And you're burning up with fever."

Check also placed his hand on Olba's forehead. "Olba hot! Ghaa!"

"It-it was . . . probably . . ." Olba started to speak.

"Hmm? What?" demanded Duan.

"It's . . . umm . . . food poisoning."

"Food poisoning?! Olba, what the hell did you eat?"

"The night before last, in the usual bar, I ate gerutomi . . . raw . . ."

"Raw gerutomi?!" Duan's mouth dropped open in astonishment.

Gerutomi was a shellfish usually eaten in the summer. Autumn gerutomi, although they were a delicacy, were known to have a high probability of food poisoning.

Man, like you'd really eat that before going out on an adventure. Not if you were normal, you wouldn't!

"Of course you're gonna get ill, eating raw gerutomi out of season! But you have nothing to worry about. I hear that the poisoning is caused by a parasite called muna that lives in gerutomi. If I'm right, muna usually die after two or three days. You just have to bear it until then," said Duan calmly.

Olba sank his face into his pillow with a groan.

“But . . . uh . . . we have another problem,” Duan continued. “There’s these monsters that are, like, attacking the ship right now. And, uh . . . well, I’m not sure what to do. I just killed one of them, but—”

“That’s great.” Olba’s answer was muffled, his face was still pressed down into the pillow. “Wow.”

“Well, luckily there was only one of them. I don’t know how many more there are outside!”

But it didn’t look like Olba could do anything about it in his current condition.

Duan sighed. “Okay . . . Then I’ll go.”

He finished putting on his armor and left. Check remained on his shoulder and looked about with curiosity.

One of the crew saw Duan and called for assistance. “Hey, you. Can you help out a bit? And that friend of yours, the big fighter?”

“Well, he’s sick, so he’s sleeping.”

“What? Is he seasick?”

“Well, that too.”

This was no time for idle chitchat. Duan quickly asked about the current situation. “So, what sort of monster is it? We just had one in our cabin.”

“It’s called an Ag,” answered the crewmen.

“Ag?”

“Yeah, because that’s the sound you make when you see one. ‘Aaag!’” The sailor threw his arms up and waved them around theatrically.

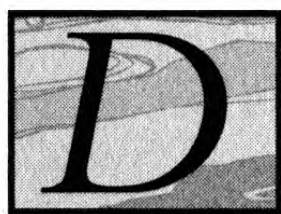
Duan wondered if it was appropriate to laugh in such a dire situation, when suddenly a more dramatic interpretation of the creature’s name echoed down the hallway.

“Aaaaaagggghh!”

It was another crewman, stumbling around the corner, clawing the air desperately. There were Aps biting his throat, his shoulder, and his left knee.

CHAPTER 20:

FIRE AND ICE



on't move!" Bounding down the corridor, Duan put out his gloved hand and used it to grab the Ags off the man, kicking them away. Luckily, the man's injuries didn't appear to be too bad.

"Look out!" shouted the other sailor behind him.

Duan realized that the Ags he had just pulled off their victim were getting ready to pounce again. Everyone hit the deck. Meanwhile, even more Ags were pouring through the windows. They jumped on Duan's back and bit into him. "O-owww!"

"Argh!"

Fortunately, Duan's armor protected him. He got up to help the crew. But as he did so, the next wave of attack came . . .

"Take that!"

"You little monsters!"

The crew, their faces twisted with fear, cut at the Ags with knives.

"N-no!" Duan cried. "Everyone—put away your knives. When the Ags are on the ground, stamp on them, and I'll cut

them with my sword. It's too dangerous in a small space like this for everyone to be waving knives around!"

But the Ags were tougher than they looked. It took several strong blows to kill even one of them, and as fast as Duan and the crew could work together, they were simply outnumbered. Within a few minutes, they were so overwhelmed that they were once again only frantically protecting themselves.

"Ahhh!" One of the creatures landed on Duan's arm and fastened its teeth into his wrist, right above the glove. Duan shook it off, but he had been bitten straight to the bone. The pain was so great, it shot right through his body to his head. He grimaced, dropping his short sword.

"Duan, giiis!" Check flew right into Duan's face, knocking Duan to the floor. At the same instant, an Ag landed on the edge of Duan's face!

All seemed to be lost, when a loud voice rang out behind Duan, echoing down the hallway.

"Move," the voice boomed. Duan looked up, and there, standing at the end of the hall, was the two-headed wizard. Silver Eye, his face grim, fixed his cold eyes on Duan and raised his index finger. From the extended finger, a thin blast of white smoke arced across the room and struck an Ag that was wriggling on the floor.



Then it was Golden Eye's turn. He raised his index finger as Silver Eye had done, only instead of white smoke what emerged was a volley of small fireballs that landed on the Aps before they could jump.

"Way to go!" Duan shouted excitedly.

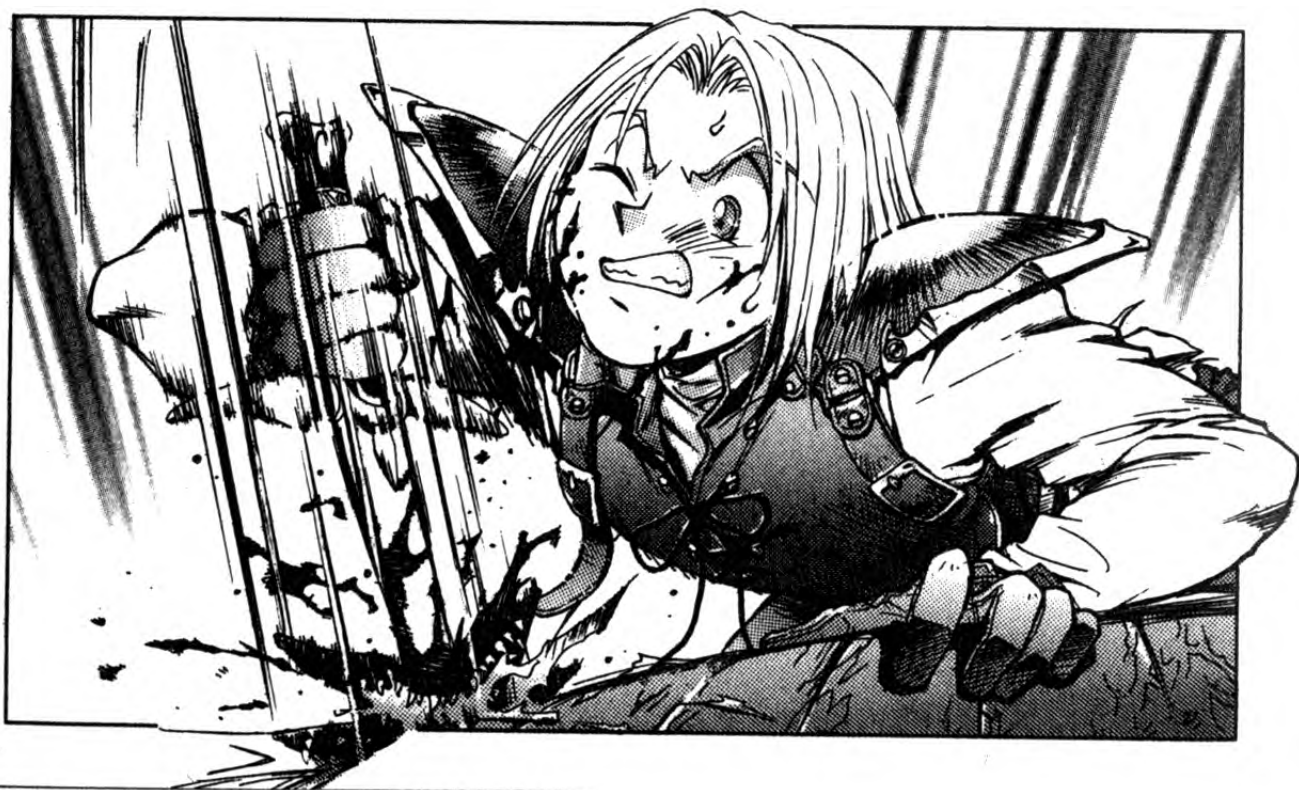
"There's no time to waste, Duan." Golden Eye's voice was firm. "Quick, finish them off!"

"Huh? Oh . . . oh, right!" Duan looked down and realized the burnt Aps, though injured, were alive and squirming. Finding his short sword on the floor, Duan grasped it firmly and started slashing at the injured Aps. They were half dead already, so he was able to make short work of them with the blade.

"Good. Now to take care of the ones on deck!"

"I'm right behind you!" cried Duan.

"You might be lucky," called Golden Eye to Duan as they made their way to the deck. "If you keep going at this rate, you'll soon raise your level!"



“Really?” Duan brought out his Adventurer Card quickly. His experience was indeed slightly higher than it was before—between the monsters he’d killed just then and the one back in his room, he’d picked up a few points. He was elated for a moment, then suddenly felt slightly ashamed.

These guys are so powerful, they could kill all of these small monsters easily. They’re just giving me the kills so I can gain a few points.

“L-look,” said Duan. “It’s nice of you to think of me, but really . . . do whatever you need to do. You don’t have to take it easy on these monsters for my sake. I’ll do the best I can to help.”

Golden Eye narrowed his eyes and looked down at Duan.

“It’s a mistake if you think this is about you,” Golden Eye said sharply. “To win a battle, you must think strategically. The first consideration is: what will kill the largest numbers of your opponents, and how quickly? Of course, there are other considerations, too. If we cast some powerful Fire or Ice Spell, we would put the ship at risk.”

Of course, Duan thought. If they let loose a big fireball, like the ones Agnis used to cast, the whole ship would be burning.

Golden Eye looked toward the top of the deck.

“Aaaagh! Someone, help!”

Various crewmen were screaming for help. Seeing them, the two-headed wizard waved his cape and charged forward. Duan followed quickly.

Golden Eye continued speaking all the while. “That’s why it’s better to rely on some of the less powerful Fire and Ice Spells in this situation. But even those spells take time to cast and target accurately. In a situation like this, where we need to attack large numbers, and time is of the essence, it’s best to use something even smaller . . . magic of the lowest level. But that kind of magic isn’t strong enough to kill these creatures.”

Without missing a beat, the wizard continued to attack the Ags along the way, while Silver Eye silently attacked the ones on the mast.

“That’s why it’s up to you to finish them off.” Golden Eye turned to Duan. “Okay?”

Whether what Golden Eye was saying was true, or whether he was being kind, Duan decided not to question him and to do as he was told. He started to attack the Ags. The reason Golden Eye did not get angry about it was because he was an adult.

Duan felt as though they’d shown him how much of an immature kid he was. He felt so ashamed that he flushed bright red to the tip of his ears.

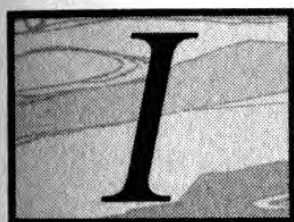
“Danger, Duan! Giiis!”

“Huh?” Duan turned around to heed Check’s warning just as another Ag grazed his ear. More Ags were coming in from the sea.

“Come on, Check! Let’s do it!” Taking a deep breath, Duan started to attack the Ags that the two-headed wizard had injured.

CHAPTER 21:

LEVEL 3!



wonder how many I've slaughtered . . .

The sword and the gloved hand that gripped it were both sticky with blood and the juices of the Ags. Even if he was only finishing them off, it had taken quite a lot of energy.

I wonder when it will end.

Even the two-headed wizard was looking more and more fatigued. Golden Eye and Silver Eye worked on with the same grim determination, but every now and then, they would drop their hands to their sides and stand still for a moment to roll their shoulders before continuing on. The sun was already high up above their heads in a cloudless sky.

It's so bright . . .

When Duan had finished killing all the Ags near him, he paused momentarily and looked up at the sky. He thought he could hear a metallic pinging sound.

Where is that noise coming from? What is it? It's really annoying.



He looked around, his face a mask of exhaustion. The remains of the Ags were scattered on the deck.

“I think that’s all of them,” a sailor called out. “They’re gone now!”

“Really?” asked Duan.

The sailor gave Duan a strange look. “Hey, uh . . . fighter. What’s that sound you’re making?”

“Huh?” Duan was confused for a moment, then gasped and clasped a hand on his chest. The irritating pinging noise was coming from him! “N-no way . . .”

His heart beat loudly. With numb fingers, he reached under his armor and pulled out the Adventurer Card that hung from a string around his neck. It was indeed flashing and beeping.

I was expecting it, but I didn’t think it would happen so soon . . . !

Duan looked at the card with shaking hands. In the Witches’ Forest, he hadn’t gotten one point of experience—he’d stayed at 221 the whole time. When he and Olba had escorted the bard, Leroy, he’d earned 9 points, which brought him up to 230.

Well, now the Adventurer Card is just over 300—the next level—at 302.

So that means that killing those Ags earned me . . . about 72 points? Wow! I don’t know how many of them I killed . . . Probably more than fifty, but . . .

“Duan level up? Giis!” said Check as he looked curiously at the Adventurer Card.

“Yup, I’m Level 3!” Duan replied.

Suddenly, happiness infused his whole body and he couldn’t help smiling. He high-fived Check and proceeded to dance around the deck.

“Level up, hooray! Level up, hooray! Level up, hooray!” Check lisped a made-up song to the tempo of the dance, and Duan laughed until he thought he might cry from sheer joy.



“What are you so happy about?” The two-headed wizard appeared, wiping the hair off each of his sweaty foreheads.

Suddenly shy in front of the wizard, Duan thrust out his Adventurer Card.

“Leveled up, did you?”

“Yes, and it’s all thanks to you. Thank you, Golden Eye. And you, Silver Eye.” Duan nodded to them, his eyes welling with gratitude. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

But Golden Eye just laughed. “You still don’t get it, do you?” And with that, the two of them turned and headed toward their cabin.

As Duan watched them go, he had a sudden thought. “I have to go tell Olba!” he shouted, and ran back to his own cabin.

“Olba!” Duan called as he opened the door. He expected to see Olba in much the same state as before, but the fighter lay comfortably with both hands resting on his stomach. He grinned at Duan.

“That was a total racket,” he said. “I could hear you all the way down here. Well? Have you finished them all off already?”

“Yeah, we got ’em all! Finally. Oh yeah, and this armor really helped, too. And more importantly, take a look at this.”

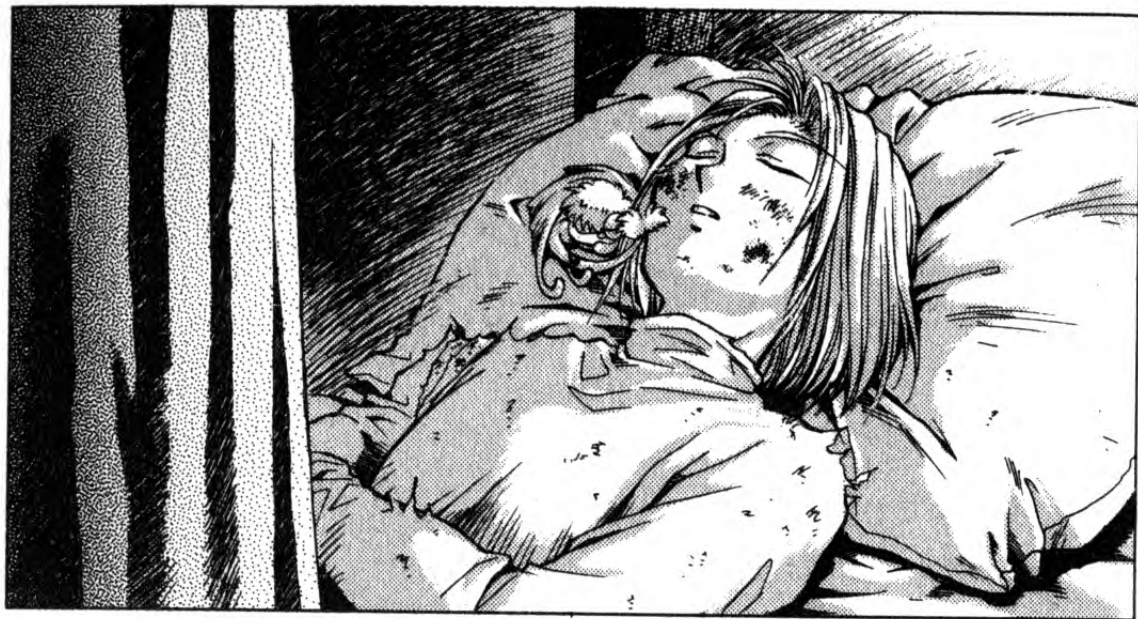
Duan sat down on the bed next to Olba and took the Adventurers Club Card from around his neck.

Olba’s eyes widened in surprise as he gazed at the card. “I guess anyone can make it if they try hard enough,” he said.

“I leveled up.”

“That’s great. Congratulations.”

Duan sat down on his own bed and looked at his Adventurer Card one more time. “Well, I got a lot of help from Golden Eye and Silver Eye, really. They would drop them with a minor Fire or Ice Spell, and then I’d finish them



off . . .” Duan told Olba about how they had helped him earn experience points by using weaker magic spells.

“Ahh . . . I thought as much. Even if they are small, it’s hard to kill such a big bunch of ’em. I figured you must’ve had help,” Olba commented obnoxiously.

Duan sat silently. He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t really argue. Olba was right. And in a way, he was relieved that Olba was being obnoxious again. It was a sign that the fighter was feeling better. But he felt as if all the wind had been taken out of his sails. His high spirits shriveled up.

I’m tired . . . I’m just so tired. He felt like he should eat something—he hadn’t had a meal since dinner the night before. But he was so tired, he didn’t even have an appetite.



“Ah, well.” Olba added more gently, “Everyone goes through a phase like that. I got a lot of help from my elders, too. Did I ever tell you about the time I got two level-ups in one go? I gave the killing stroke to this huge monster, and . . . Duan? You listening?”

He looked over at Duan; the kid had his eyes closed and was lying on his side.

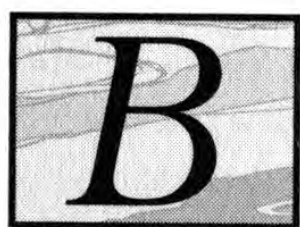
“Well, you don’t have to sulk about it,” Olba said, chagrined. But then he realized that Duan truly had fallen asleep. He gave a bitter smile.

Check yawned and curled up next to Duan. Soon his snores could be heard.

Olba stared at them for a while. “Anyway, I’m starving.” He gave his belly a smack and yawned.

CHAPTER 22:

APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION



y dinnertime, Olba seemed to have completely recovered. In fact, he was shoveling down his dinner so fast, it seemed as though he and Silver Eye were in a race to see who could grab the most food before the platters were taken away.

Duan had expected Golden Eye to ask Olba about his proposal of the night before to exchange information about Luca Island. But neither Golden Eye nor Silver Eye had spoken a word.

In fact, there was something strange about them. They barely looked at one another, much less anyone else. Their demeanor at dinner was a far cry from how they'd behaved that morning, conquering the Ags.

Perhaps they had a fight, Duan thought. But it wasn't as though he was going ask about it, so he concentrated on eating his own portion of food. If he didn't pay attention, Olba and Silver Eye would snatch up everything.

“Well, excuse us,” said Golden Eye after he had finished drinking an entire glass of water in one chug after finishing his meal. The two-headed wizard then returned to their own room.

“Hey Olba,” commented Duan in a small voice after the door had closed behind them. “I thought they seemed a little weird.”

“Yeah?” Olba didn’t sound like he cared one bit.

A crewman came up with a large pot of tea. “How about a cup of tea?”

“*Tea?*” Olba pronounced the word with distaste. “Do you have anything stronger? You know, something to warm me up.” He had finished his meal and had both elbows resting on the back of the chair.

The crewman instantly understood what Olba meant and gave a knowing laugh. “Ha ha . . .”

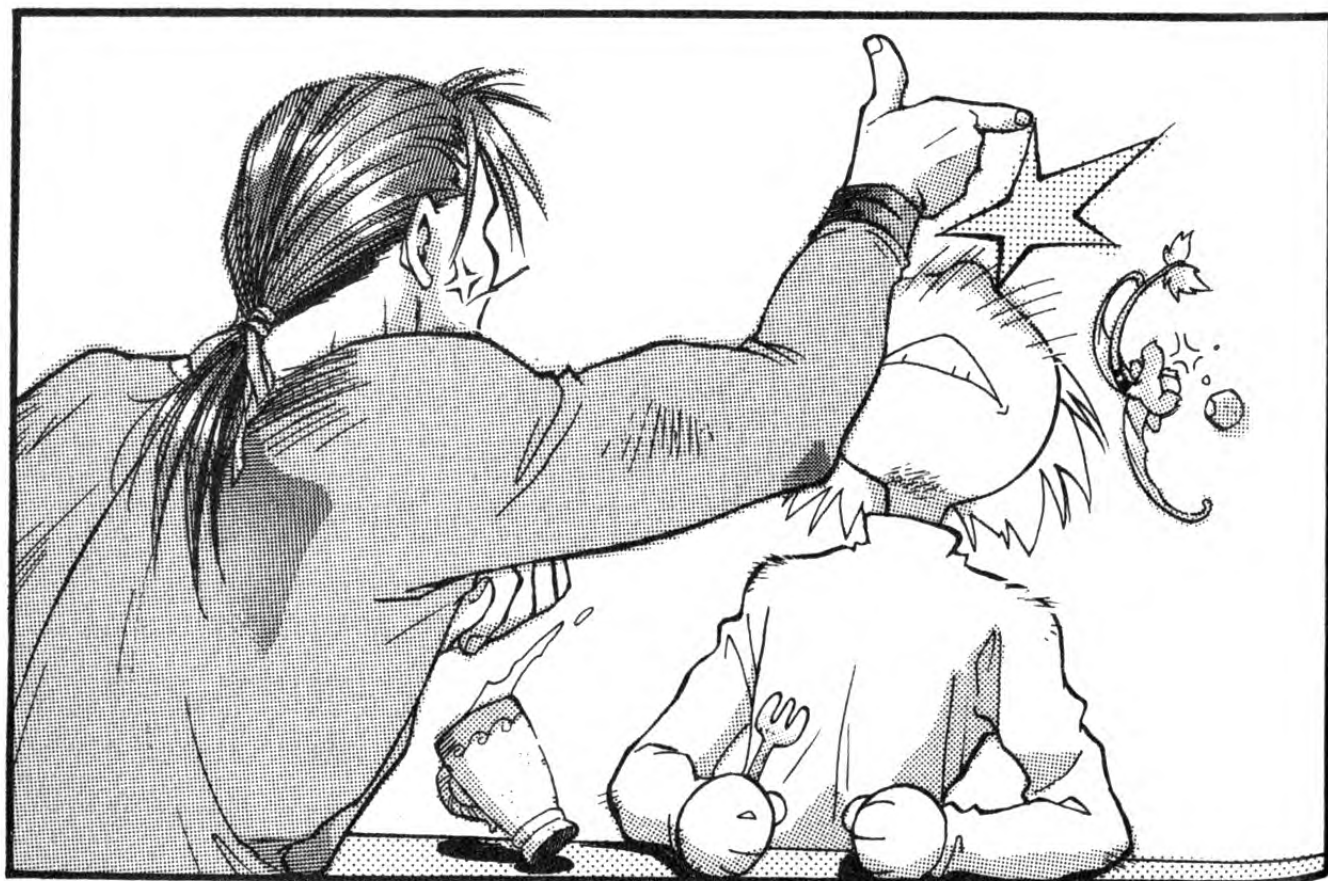
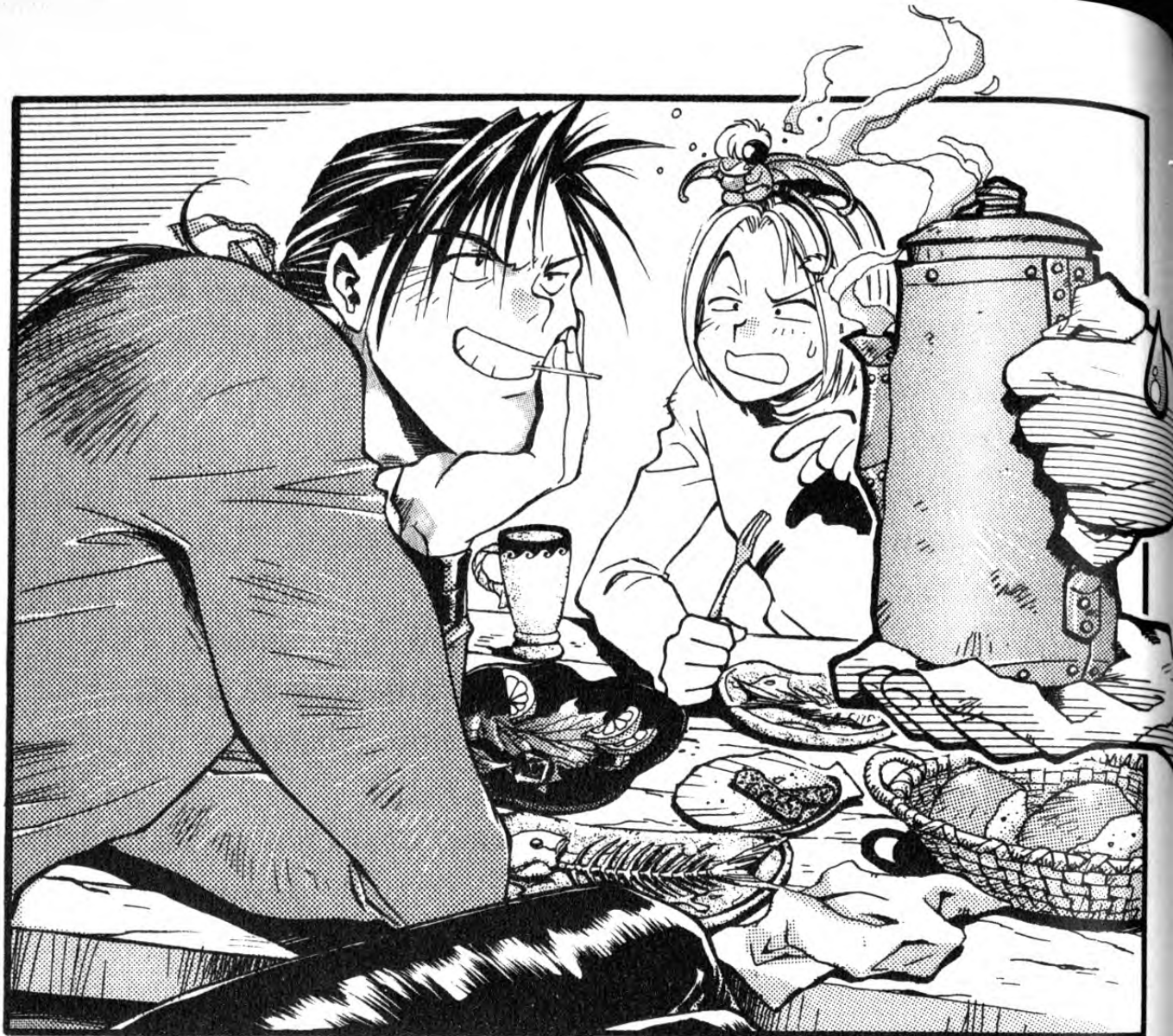
Duan couldn’t believe his ears. “But Olba, you were sick until this morning with food poisoning, absolutely drenched in sweat. Maybe you should lay off the booze for a while. And we don’t know if we’ll be attacked again. Isn’t it supposed to be worse at night?” He looked at the crewmen for confirmation.

The man nodded seriously. “I don’t know if it’s because of the warm currents or what, but a lot of big monsters have been coming out, especially at night.”

“See?” Duan smiled smugly at Olba.

Olba reached out and flicked a finger under Duan’s chin. Though it had been meant playfully, Duan felt as if he’d been socked in the jaw. Even Check, who had been perched on Duan’s shoulder, tumbled off with a cry.

“Idiot,” Olba said meanwhile. “You’re always worried about nothing. Come on, if something like that happens, we’ll deal with it! What, do you think I’ll be so dead drunk that I’ll lose consciousness?”



“Yup,” said Duan sharply.

Olba raised his hand to give Duan another flick then decided not to. “Jeez,” he said. “Having you around is like being married to a nagging wife.”

“A wife?” Duan was stung. “Olba, stop treating me like a woman! I’m not your wife . . . Like you’ve ever been married anyway!”

As Duan shouted, Olba’s face suddenly turned very serious. Without saying a word, he took a gulp of the tea that the crewman had just given him.

Duan looked at him, shocked. “N-no way. You’re . . . Olba, are you *married*?”

Olba just stared at the table for a moment but soon looked back up at Duan. He grinned. “Yeah,” he said. “There was a time.”

“A time? Well, what about now? Are you divorced?”

Olba choked on the tea he was drinking, spitting it across the table. He started coughing violently.

Duan and Check watched Olba with agonizing curiosity. The fighter waved them off, trying to get them to go away, but Duan and Check would have none of it.

“Oh, come on, Olba. I wanna know. Go on. Tell me!”

They kept pestering him, when suddenly they heard a violent noise from the room next door. It was as though furniture was being knocked around . . . And someone was stomping around violently.

Duan and Olba looked at each other and, at the same moment, stood up. The room next door . . . was the two-headed wizard’s room.

“Do you think I don’t know what you’re thinking?”

“I-I hate the way you act as though you’ve figured everything out in this world!”

When Duan and Olba flung open the door, they saw the two-headed wizard having a fight . . . with himself.

There was a chair flung into one corner of the room. Although it was a fight, because it was a fight between the two of them in one body, it was essentially a one-man fight. They both struggled to control their limbs, trying to snatch the power away from one another. When one would momentarily lose concentration, the other would gain the arm and it would go flying into his brother's face.

“Argh!”

Golden Eye and Silver Eye may have been wizards, but the body they shared was strong and fit. There was a lot of power in their limbs. Every punch sent them flying backward.

CHAPTER 23:

OF TWO MINDS



-wait. Wait!"

Olba had been dumbfounded for a moment by the scene, but he finally stepped forward and intervened. Since it was a one-man fight, all he had to do was hold down the single body of the wizard.

"Let us go! Don't interfere!"

"This is between me and him!"

Olba was amazed at their vehemence as they struggled. The large-set body was shaking with rage. They were both red in the face and breathing heavily. On top of that, they'd both received quite a bit of damage: one of Golden Eye's eyes was badly swollen, and Silver Eye had a cut on his lip. "Hey, settle down, you guys." Olba spoke to them calmly. "You think if someone as big as you decides to start wrestling on a dinky ship like this, the rest of us will be able to enjoy our teatime peacefully?"

"Tea . . . teatime?" Golden Eye looked up at Olba, open-mouthed. Silver Eye had the same expression. Duan thought it



was interesting how, at just that moment, they shared the same response. The two-headed wizard, the both of them, breathed out deeply and sat down on the bed with a *thump*.

“Why are you two fighting?” asked Duan.

Golden Eye and Silver Eye looked up with vacant eyes and shook their heads.

I guess it's not that simple . . . “Those wounds look nasty,” said Duan. “If you like, Check can . . .”

He was about to offer Check's healing services but stopped short when he remembered that Check had already been busy all morning, healing people who had gotten hurt in the Ag attack. Check wasn't able to use his magic very often during the day, and he was all out of power.

Check, realizing the same thing, tilted his head apologetically. “Magic gone,” he chirped ruefully.

“No, it's all right; we can deal with this . . . It appears that we troubled you. My apologies.” A little embarrassed, Golden Eye turned his head away.

It seemed that both heads had calmed down. “It's okay . . . And I'm glad you can manage.” A thought came to Duan. “Oh! Does that mean you can cast defensive magic as well?”

Golden Eye closed one eye. “We can only cast low-level healing and defensive spells.” He faltered and cast a sidelong glance at Silver Eye. “It's like we're carrying a little first aid kit with us.”

Silver Eye only glared at the ground. He seemed to still be very agitated.

“Right, we'll leave you to it.” Olba strode toward the door then turned around to call to Duan. “Come on, Duan. Let's go.”

Duan hesitated, but finally turned to follow Olba. It felt wrong to leave without knowing the cause of the fight, but

it seemed as though Golden Eye and Silver Eye didn't want a stranger involved in their troubles. As the door closed, Duan glimpsed them sitting on the edge of the bed, both heads hanging as though they had no energy left at all.

I wonder what happened to them . . . Duan couldn't help but worry. He was also surprised to discover that there were fights between the two members of the two-headed party. When they disagreed and they couldn't compromise, they had to choose one single path. It wasn't like an ordinary human being, where you could have a different opinion and choose your own way—that wasn't allowed when you were a two-headed being. And on top of that, those two . . . it seemed like they were fighting about something really important.

"Hey, Duan!" Olba called from down the hall, startling Duan out of his thoughts.

"Yeah?"

The fighter looked back at Duan with an expressionless face.

"Sorry, I was just worried about them. Right, Check?"

On Duan's shoulder, the curious grinia nodded in agreement. He peeked into the room through a gap in the door and grunted heavily through his nose.

"C'mon, Check . . . Olba's right. We should go."

Check followed Duan, looking back at the door repeatedly, a little disappointedly.

When Duan got back to the room, Olba was already sprawled across the bunk. Duan shut the door behind him and sat down on his bed. "I wonder what's up with them," he commented.

Olba glanced at Duan for a moment and then closed his eyes. He shrugged.

Duan hadn't really expected an answer. He lay down and stretched out his body. He sighed. "I'm so bored of being on this ship. It's better for a floor not to sway."

"No kidding," Olba replied angrily.

"You sound like you're feeling better," he said. "What happened to your seasickness?"

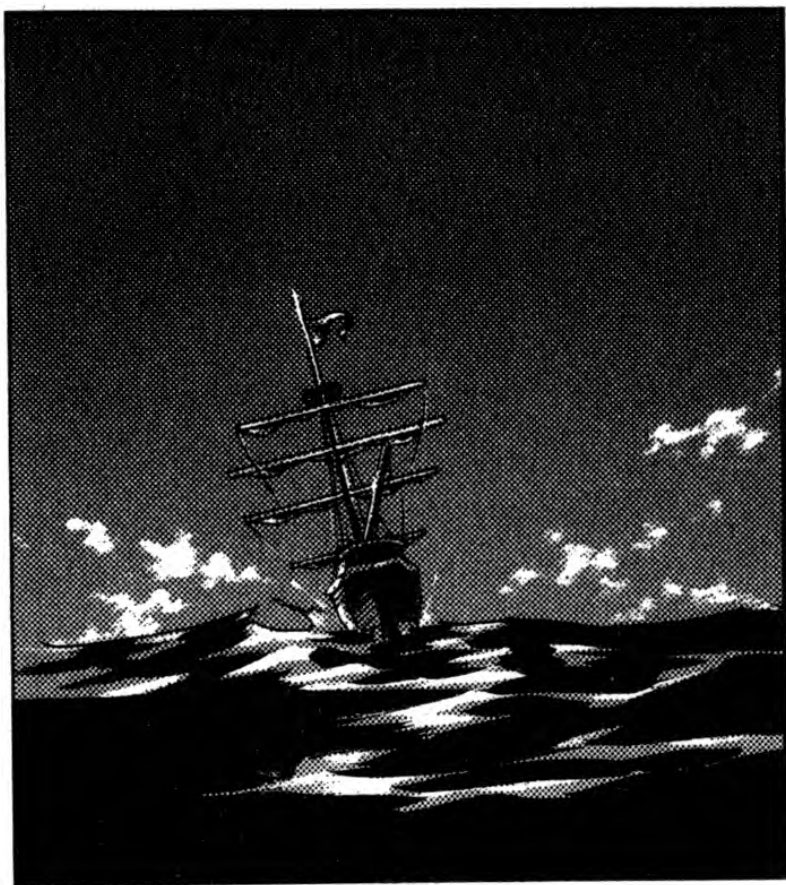
"Don't remind me. It's okay for now. It's disappeared along with the stomachache."

"That's good."

Silence for a while. All they could hear was the sound of the waves.

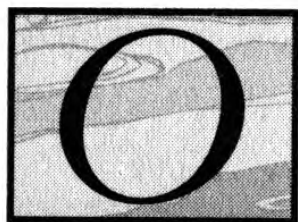
Who would have imagined how lonesome this could be—a small ship, floating on a dark sea at night? What would happen if the weather turned bad? And what about . . . ?

"He said there might be monsters," Duan murmured, thinking out loud. "I wonder what kind?"



CHAPTER 24:

AN UNFORTUNATE ENCOUNTER



Olba cracked his knuckles. “Around this area? Probably giant octopuses or giant squids. I don’t think we’ll see any sea serpents in these parts.”

“Octopuses and squids? What, you mean like Kraukens and Ketlers?”

Duan was proud of himself for knowing the names. In books, he’d seen pictures of these famous monsters wrapping their tentacles around ships, raising their enormous heads—three times the size of most ships—and staring vacantly at the sailors running about on deck who were trying vainly to escape.

“By the way, isn’t this area called the Maddy Straits?”

“No, we’ve passed Maddy already.”

“Oh, right. So Luca Island is farther east of the Maddy Straits?”

“Yeah, more like southeast. It’s nearer Ronza. This area is where the warm currents and the cold currents cross, so there’s plenty of food. Lots of small monsters come looking for it. And then the larger monsters follow, preying on the smaller ones. And

then reckless adventurers come looking for those monsters. And that's how it all works." Olba kept his eyes closed as he indulged Duan.

"I wonder what we'd do if a Krauken or Ketler actually appeared?"

As if in reply, the ship took a huge lunge backward. Then it bounded forward again, hitting the surface of the sea, and returned to its normal position.

"Ooof!"

Duan and Olba were pitched out of their bunks. They rolled across the floor, slamming onto their backs.

"What is it?" asked Duan.

Everything was still, but somehow, something felt wrong.

Olba jumped up without a word and grabbed his sword and defensive gear. Duan also quickly got into his armor. Just as he was reaching for his short sword, another heavy blow rocked the ship.

"Ahhhh!"

This time they fell to the window side, and everything in the room tumbled next to them. Except Check, of course, who quickly took to the air.

"Have the monsters really come out?" Duan asked Olba, who had managed to stand upright.

"How would I know?" Olba retorted and left the cabin.

"Hey, wait for me!" Grasping the short sword, Duan ran after him. Then something struck the ship from underneath. Duan fell back down, landing on his rear.

"Aaagh!"

As soon as the room stopped tilting, Duan staggered toward the door, and then ran onto the deck with Check in hot pursuit.



Serapham

Froll

Ponza

Fiana

Witches' Forest

Abysses Sea

Kovenia

Maddy Straits

Ronza

Pantoria

Luca

Map of
Duan
Surk

Crewmen were running about to and fro on the deck in the dark night, holding lanterns in their hands. Duan saw Olba standing near the railing, keeping very still and looking out over the dark ocean. With Check clinging to his shoulder, Duan ran up to him.

“Olba, what was that?”

Olba continued to squint out at the dark sea. He shook his head slightly. “Dunno,” he said.

Standing at Olba’s side, Duan scanned the waves as well. There was only a small amount of moonlight peeking through a crack in the clouds above. He felt like his eyes were playing tricks on him. Sometimes Duan would think he’d see something, but it would turn out to be only a dull glint of moonlight reflecting off the crest of a wave.

“In any case, we’ve bumped into something huge.” The voice from behind made them turn in surprise.

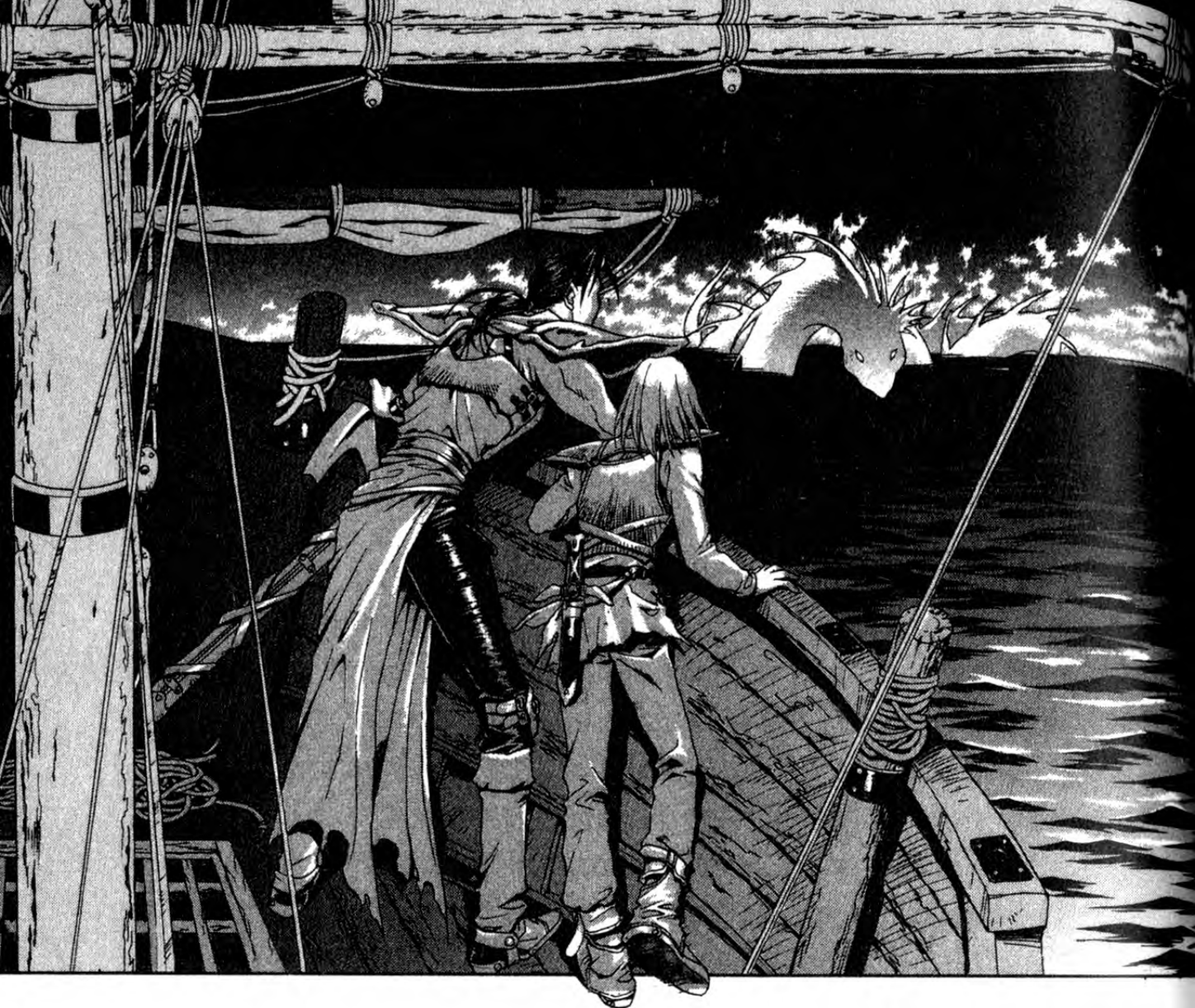
There was the two-headed wizard, looking a bit better than before. Golden Eye’s eye was still slightly swollen, and Silver Eye’s lip was still cut, but the bleeding had stopped and it seemed as though they had healed pretty quickly after the fight.

“Captain! Look over there—ten degrees off the starboard bow!”

The piercing cry came from above their heads; glancing up, Duan could see a sailor standing lookout in the crow’s nest on the mainmast. He was pointing off to the right. “Over there! Look!”

Everyone on board turned to look. At first, it only looked like the back of a large snake, but then . . .

The gargantuan sea snake glided smoothly along the slippery surface of the dark sea . . . The next moment was completely different however; in contrast to its delicate gliding,



its head penetrated the surface of the sea and revealed a rough and violent face.

As the head rose from the surface of the water, Duan could see tentacles dangling from its grey head—or perhaps they were long ropes of wet hair; it was hard to say which. Everyone was so taken aback that the entire crew on deck was motionless with amazement.

All of a sudden it opened its mouth and let out a deafening roar that chilled their souls.

CHAPTER 25:

THE DRY SHOUT



uuughh!”

“Guuuh-ahhhh!”

Most of the crew who were standing on the starboard side of the ship collapsed on the deck, clutching their throats. They’d only heard its voice, but they seemed to be writhing in agony at the sound.

Golden Eye’s eyebrows raised. “O-oh no! That thing is a kind of sea serpent; the most difficult of them all—the Loudness June.” Then he called to the crew in a loud voice, “Don’t listen to it! Close your ears, everyone! Close your ears!”

“The . . . Loudness June?” Duan rasped dryly at Olba between fits of coughing.

“It’s like the wizard dude said. Even within the serpent family, that monster is one of the toughest. Who would have thought we would meet one here?” Olba was coughing as well, and he too clasped his throat.

“That voice . . . What is it?”

"The Dry Shout," Olba replied grimly. "The only other way it attacks is by crashing against the ship. But that scream is really something." Even in the darkness, Duan knew Olba's strained expression wasn't just caused by the pain in his throat; it was fear.

"What does the Dry Shout do?" Duan asked as calmly as he was able.

"Just hearing that sound, although it's gradual, causes the water in your body to evaporate. In the end, you become completely dehydrated."

"That's . . . Isn't that really bad?" Duan coughed. His throat was stinging toward the back—it seemed like it would be completely parched in a moment.

"Yeah, you turn into a mummy," said Olba.

"So . . . we just have to stop listening to that voice, right?"

Duan rummaged around in his pocket and found a handkerchief. Tearing it into strips, he rolled up the pieces and stuffed them in his ears.

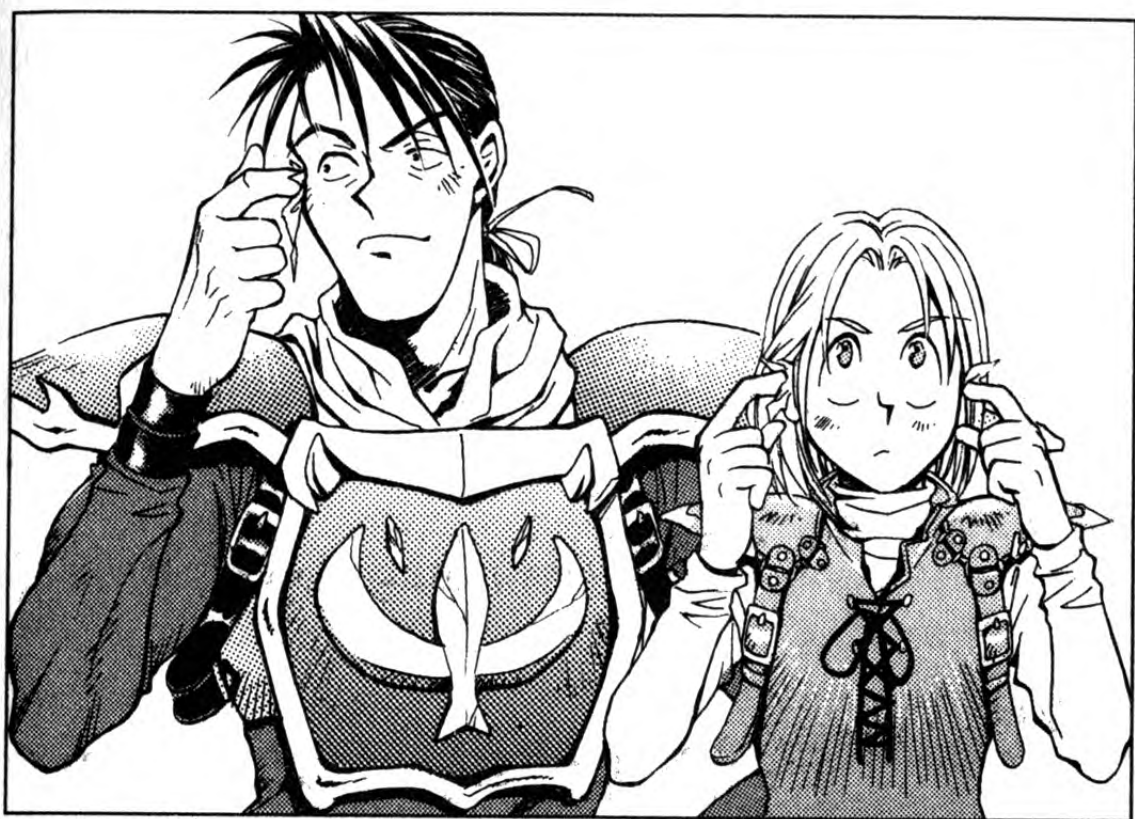
Olba watched him curiously. "Yeah, like that's really gonna work . . . Actually, give me some of that." Olba held out his hand and Duan handed him some pieces of cloth. As he stuffed the cloth in his ears, Olba was laughing.

"For peace of mind," Olba joked.

Duan didn't understand how Olba could possibly be laughing in the middle of an emergency. Especially since, just a moment ago, he was clearly stricken with fear. *How can he possibly make jokes at a time like this?*

He shouted out to the suffering crew on deck, handing out as much of the ripped-up handkerchief as he could. "Everybody! Find some earplugs. Stuff something in your ears. Don't listen to that sea serpent!"

Soon, everyone was frantically plugging up their ears, covering them with their hands as well.



During this time, the Loudness June was just eerily floating, its head popping out from the waves, far away in the dark sea. But it wasn't staying still—it was actually keeping up with the ship, traveling at the same speed. However, it was about time for another attack.

“So, uh, wizard dudes. What are we going to do?” Olba turned to the two-headed wizard, who gazed out at the Loudness June apprehensively. Silver Eye continued to keep an eye on the monster as Golden Eye answered Olba.

“That thing has a million strong points. It would be reckless to think we could fight it and win using our regular moves. Although we would kill it, we'd use up all our magic in the effort. That would leave us drained for a while. I don't think it's likely that we'll get attacked by another serpent—”

“They're territorial.” Olba nodded. “So we're not likely to meet another one.”

“Yes, exactly.” Golden Eye peered back out at the monster. “But if we meet another other monsters, before we

reach Luca Island, we'd be dead in the water. Using up all our magic now would be suicide."

"What do you suggest?" Olba responded gruffly.

"Basically, I think we should just try to drive the Loudness June away."

"I understand," said Olba. "And I agree with your plan."

Golden Eye nodded. "There's information on the Loudness June in here," he said, producing a small book from the inside pocket of his coat.

"Wow! The Mini-Pocket Monster Encyclopedia!" Duan exclaimed. "When did *that* come out?"

"Limited Edition." Golden Eye shrugged and looked at Duan and Olba with a smug expression. "According to this, its weakness is the dimples on the side of its face. If we paralyze those, we won't have to listen to that screaming for a while."

"But if we do that, it'll get angry," Olba reflected.

"Yeah," said Duan. "It sounds like asking for more trouble."

"We need a plan to keep that monster away from us," Golden Eye said.

"Yes, but what?"

Golden Eye shrugged and closed the book. "I haven't thought of one yet."

"Hey, that's the most important part!" Olba protested.

"Losing your temper won't solve anything," Golden Eye responded coolly. "We can still withstand another two or three attacks before everyone dries up. We'll think of something that works by then."

"Hey, you two don't seem to be hurt from the previous attack," Duan observed. "What's up with that?"

It was true. Compared to everyone else on the ship who was clasping their throats and crying for water, the wizard

seemed to be completely fine. Golden Eye quirked the corner of his pale lips.

“We cast a little protection on ourselves.”

Only on yourselves?! Duan desperately swallowed his words and kept quiet. But Olba didn’t show as much restraint.

“Yourselves? Oh, I get it. No wonder you’re so casual!” Olba shouted at them furiously. “ ‘A little protection’ . . . Cowards!”

Golden Eye laughed lightly. “Ha ha . . . I’m sorry, but we can’t help it. Our specialty is attack magic. As I mentioned before, our defensive magic isn’t much better than a small first aid kit. So we can’t do more than cast protection on ourselves. Sorry.” He shrugged. “Nothing to be done about it.”

While they were arguing, the serpent let out another terrifying roar.

CHAPTER 26:

AND THEREBY HANGS A TAIL



urghh!"

"Agggh!"

They frantically pressed down on their ears, but it was too late.

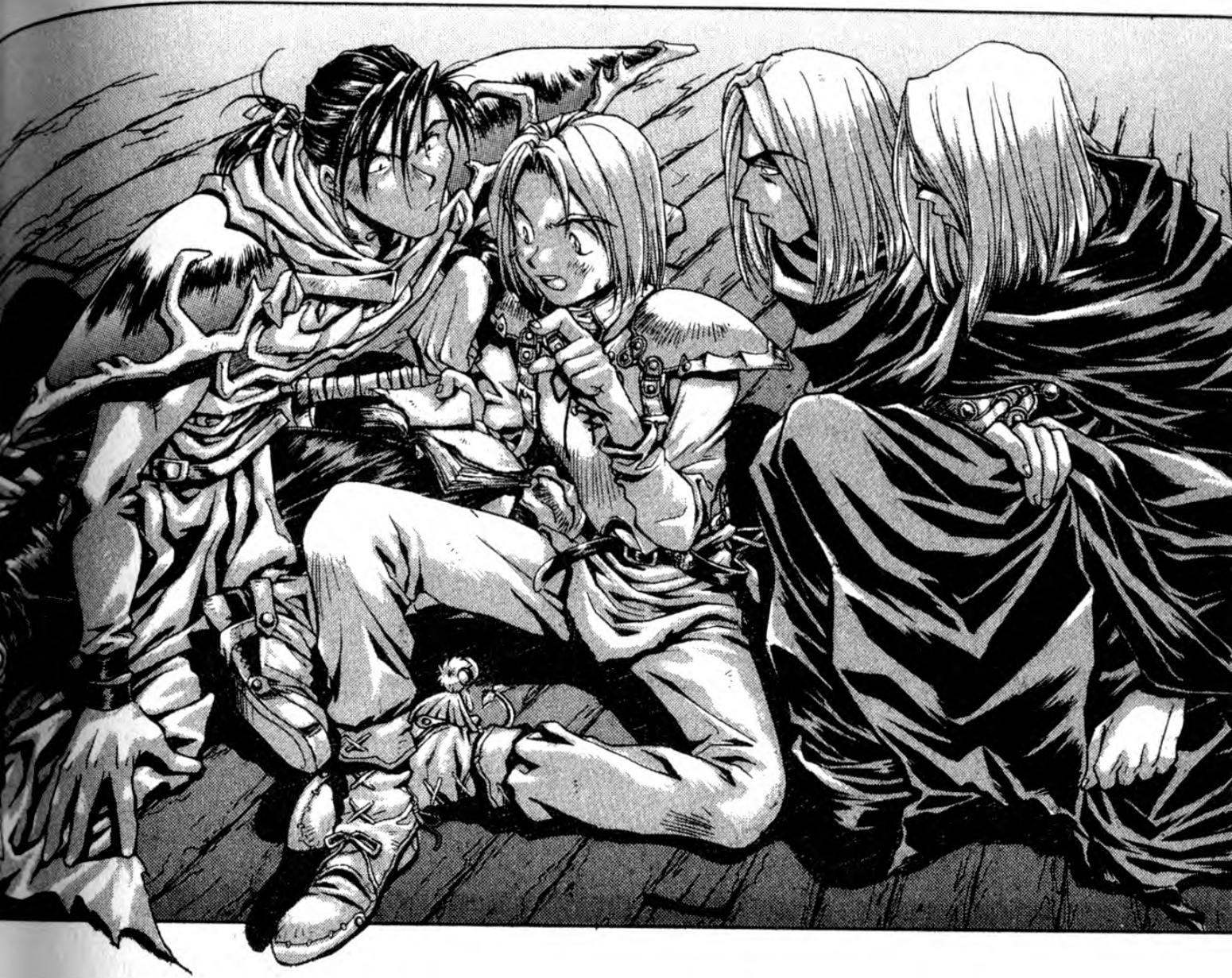
Excruciating pain ran down to the back of their necks. Everyone crawled around on the deck and grasped their throats, including Duan and Olba. They were coughing so hard that tears welled out of their eyes.

"Ugh . . . dammit, these earplugs don't do . . . anything!" Angrily, Olba plucked the rags out of his ears and threw them on the deck. "S-so . . . any brainstorm yet, Golden Eye?"

The wizard gave a slight shrug.

"C-can I . . . borrow the encyclopedia for a bit?" Duan asked.

"Yes, of course." Keeping his finger on the page with the Loudness June on it, the wizard handed Duan the encyclopedia. Duan took the book and sat down on the deck.



The rest of them paid no attention to Duan and continued to discuss the best ways to tackle the monster. The best plan they had was . . . to outrun it. But in order to do that, they needed strong winds. And unfortunately, it was only blowing normally at that moment. And they didn't have any means of making strong winds.

Olba glanced over at Duan. "Hey, Duan, anything in there about what the monster doesn't like?"

Duan just shook his head as he continued to read. Olba sighed deeply.

"Okay," said Olba. "Maybe the best way is to fight this thing directly. You two can use your attack magic, and get it angry. It'll come toward the boat. Then, when it's close, I'll

strike up close and personal.” Olba made a jabbing motion upward with his broadsword to illustrate his point.

Golden Eye shook his head. “No, that’s too dangerous. If you think about its extraordinary toughness and defense powers, you’ll see that it’s not a clever idea.”

“Well then maybe you can think of a cleverer one!”

“Hmm. Well, it would be best if the monster lost interest in us. Maybe if we wait a while, it’ll just get bored.”

“Friggin’ hell. That’s it? After all that, that’s the best you can do?”

Feeling suddenly helpless, Olba slumped down next to Duan.

Duan, who had been examining the encyclopedia until now, lifted his face from the book.

“We might . . . we might be able to use this.”

Olba perked up and looked at the book for the first time. “What? Did you find a weakness or something?”

“No, it’s not that—there’s a description about the sea serpent family over here.” Duan began to read aloud from the book. “ ‘When fighting over territories, sea serpents will compete by displaying the length of their bodies. The one who is greater in length will win the right to the territory.’ ”

Olba blinked and stared blankly at Duan for a moment. Then his expression changed as he got the point. “So . . . we have to show him that we’re longer!”

“And then it will give up its territory . . .” Golden Eye chimed in.

“It’s worth a go, right?” Duan looked up at both of them with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Yeah. And it’s better than sitting here doing nothing.” Olba stood up, full of new determination and energy. “Come on, guys, let’s go show that monster who’s in charge here.”

“But how will we show him that we’re longer?” asked Golden Eye.

“Ah, that’s easy,” said Duan. “It can be anything. Preferably a white cloth; we can attach it to the stern . . . Not the sails, obviously, because we need to pick up the wind so it will trail out behind us. But something as long as we can find.”

Duan ran off toward the captain. He explained the strategy, and the captain’s eyes lit up with excitement. “We have spare tarps in the hold,” he said. “As many as you need. Come on, boys! Let’s put a tail on this ship!”

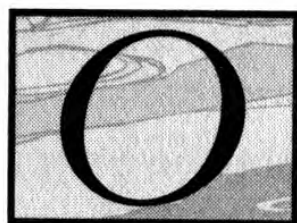
Working together, the crew pulled every scrap of cloth they could find out of the hold and pitched in, constructing the tail, tying it together with strong sailors’ knots. In a short time, they let the long tail of tarps over the edge of the boat and attached it to the stern, continuing to work as they fanned it out.

Duan looked toward the sea serpent as though in prayer. “Okay. C’mon, look over here. We’re longer than you!”

But at that very moment, the wind stopped dead. Naturally, the cloth that was tied to the ship went slack and fell toward the surface of the sea.

CHAPTER 27:

DUAN SAVES THE DAY!



h no, why now!" Duan closed his fists tightly and hit the ship's railing, willing the wind to fill the sails. "Come on, come on, blow!"

But the wind did not blow. Golden Eye turned to Silver Eye. "It's for times like these," he hissed, "that we should have learned some Elementaller techniques!"

Without looking at him, Silver Eye whispered back, "Pah. It's not like we should dabble in a bit of everything. That's why we can't decide on our path. You're so fickle."

Hearing that, Golden Eye exploded. "What?! Why, you . . . how many times do you think my 'dabbling' has saved your hide?!" he shrieked.

"We used it because we had it—that's all! But there were alternatives. If we'd concentrated on attack magic, we'd have such powerful high-level spells, we wouldn't need defensive magic at all!"

"It's case-by-case!"

Duan watched in amazement as Golden Eye and Silver Eye continued to bicker. It was as if they had completely forgotten about the sea monster; their faces were bright red and they looked as if they were about to launch into a full-fledged fist fight again.

I have to stop them!

Duan took a step toward the two-headed wizard and had opened his mouth to say something, but Olba got there before he did.

He strode quickly in front of Golden Eye and Silver Eye and gave them both a light slap. Shocked, the two heads stopped arguing and looked in surprise at Olba.

“Idiots! This is not the time or the place!” Olba barked.

Duan thought that the two would start complaining again, but instead they both apologized sincerely.

“Sorry . . .” said Golden Eye.

Although Silver Eye looked as though he might say something else, he just frowned and went back to being silent.

At that moment, a gust of fresh wind blew across the deck and filled the limp sails, snapping them taut. The boat lurched forward, sailing at a fast clip through the water. The entire crew cheered, watching with joy as the long tail stretched out and, lifted by the speed of the boat, started fluttering behind them. “Hmm, but this is the important part. Whether that monster will have the reaction we hope for or not . . .” Olba, his hair catching in the wind, continued to glare at the monster. Everyone else—Duan, the two-headed wizard, the crew—waited anxiously.

The Loudness June—the monster known throughout the world, whose evaporating roar, “The Dry Shout,” was spoken of with terror—had, in fact, seen the tail. He had seen the tail before the wind even began. He just hadn’t been that impressed by it.

As a matter of fact, the tail had irked him a bit. His enemy looked much like the other small things that passed through the strait nearby. Usually, the Loudness June didn't care much about them; they didn't look like anything that was going to threaten his territory. But that night, they had strayed beyond the strait, and he just happened to be in a contrary mood. He decided to try out the Dry Shout, just to see how they would respond. The appearance of the white cloth had rubbed him the wrong way. But it was fair to say that, even before the white cloth, he'd had a bad attitude. Tail or no, he felt like testing out whatever came through his territory that night. So when he saw the white cloth, he decided that he would continue to attack until his enemy admitted defeat and showed its weak belly.

This was what he had decided, and that was his intention, when he suddenly realized that his enemy was unusually long.

The Loudness June's eyes weren't very good. He could see in the dark—his eyes were accustomed to dark waters—but he wasn't able to see details. He could only make out the contours and the brightness of his enemy.

Straining his small eyes, he looked again at his enemy—the enemy that he had assumed was small. He looked carefully. And as he looked, he saw the contour of a long white tail suddenly emerging from the water! No, wait; it wasn't just a tail. Four or five large white triangles suddenly expanded on its back. Were they arms? Spines? Whatever they were, the long thing was now moving through the sea with great speed.

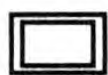
The Loudness June blinked its small eyes in disbelief. It was momentarily dumbfounded.

There's a common misconception about sea serpents, brought about by their fearsome appearance; it's supposed that they are quite formidable and devious opponents. In reality,

sea serpents are actually very weak-minded creatures, especially when things catch them off guard.

His heart beat like a giant drum. He decided the best thing to do would be to dive to the bottom and collect his thoughts, figure everything out. Then, perhaps, that white-tailed, white-armed thing would lose interest in him and leave. But . . . what if it didn't? He would lose this area of the ocean to it! What would he do if that happened?

The Loudness June dove as deep as he could to the ocean bottom, and shut his eyes. He stayed very still, as quiet as a shellfish. Maybe if he were to just lie low for a while, this thing would pass over and go away.



Even after the Loudness June dove deep, Duan and the others held their breath, watching the dark ocean apprehensively. One minute, two minutes, three minutes went by. Sea serpents were known for their extraordinary strength and stamina, and there was no telling whether the thing had taken a dive only to launch an underwater attack at the bottom of the ship. But after five minutes, the surface of the water was as still as ever.

Duan, Olba, the two-headed wizard, and the crew stared at the surface of the sea, not taking a single breath. But slowly, everyone's faces relaxed, joyous. Without saying a word, they looked at each other.

Is it okay?

It won't come up again, will it?

Finally, one of the sailors couldn't repress his joy any longer, and raised a cry of delight. This set off the others, who began leaping into the air, whooping, shouting, laughing, crying, and hugging one another. Everyone was drunk on the victory.



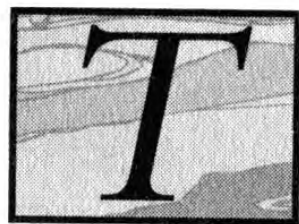
Because he had suggested the strategy, Duan had felt an immense responsibility. Due to the tension, his stomach was in agony. In this moment of relief, he could only barely stand on his feet. It was at this point that the captain came over to shake his hand. Although he had only looked at Duan and the others with suspicion and not spoken a word to them until now, he approached them with gratitude.

“That was spectacular. No wonder you guys are adventurers! When I saw the Loudness June, I thought that was it!”

“I’m glad it went okay too. I was terrified when the wind stopped blowing.” Duan’s face reddened as he shook the captain’s hand.

CHAPTER 28:

SILVER EYE SPEAKS



he next morning, Duan woke up at an unearthly hour. He thought that everyone else would probably still be asleep. He didn't know why he had awakened so early, but he left Check (who was in a deep sleep) on his bed and went up to the deck. The wind had died down a bit, and the sea and the sky were calm.

It was slightly cloudy, and the deck was shrouded in white mist. Duan breathed in deeply, and stretched his body. Perhaps because of the currents, there was a warm, humid breeze.

As Duan stretched, he saw someone out of the corner of his eye. It was a largish man, dressed in a black cape, standing at the far side of the deck, alone. It was the two-headed wizard.

"Well, good morning! I thought I was the only one up." As Duan approached, one head swiveled around to look at him. Impressive silver hair . . . It was Silver Eye. He looked at Duan for a moment with eyes the color of the cloudy sky. Then he turned away.

"Is there something wrong?" Since he usually only talked to Golden Eye, Duan wasn't sure what to say. After a moment's uncomfortable silence, Duan backed away.

"Sorry . . . I guess I disturbed you. Don't mind me. I'll go back to my room . . ."

Just as he was about to leave, Silver Eye spoke. "Ack! I'm sorry. I'm just no good at making conversation like Golden Eye. Please, stay. In fact . . . it would be great if you could give me some advice."

"O-of course. If I can help."

"Well, it's not exactly advice I need, just . . . you know. Talking about it to another person. Maybe it will help me sort out my own feelings. You know?"

Duan nodded. "Sure! That happens a lot. In fact, most people discuss their problems just for that reason. Then all that's left for you is to find out whether your feelings are right."

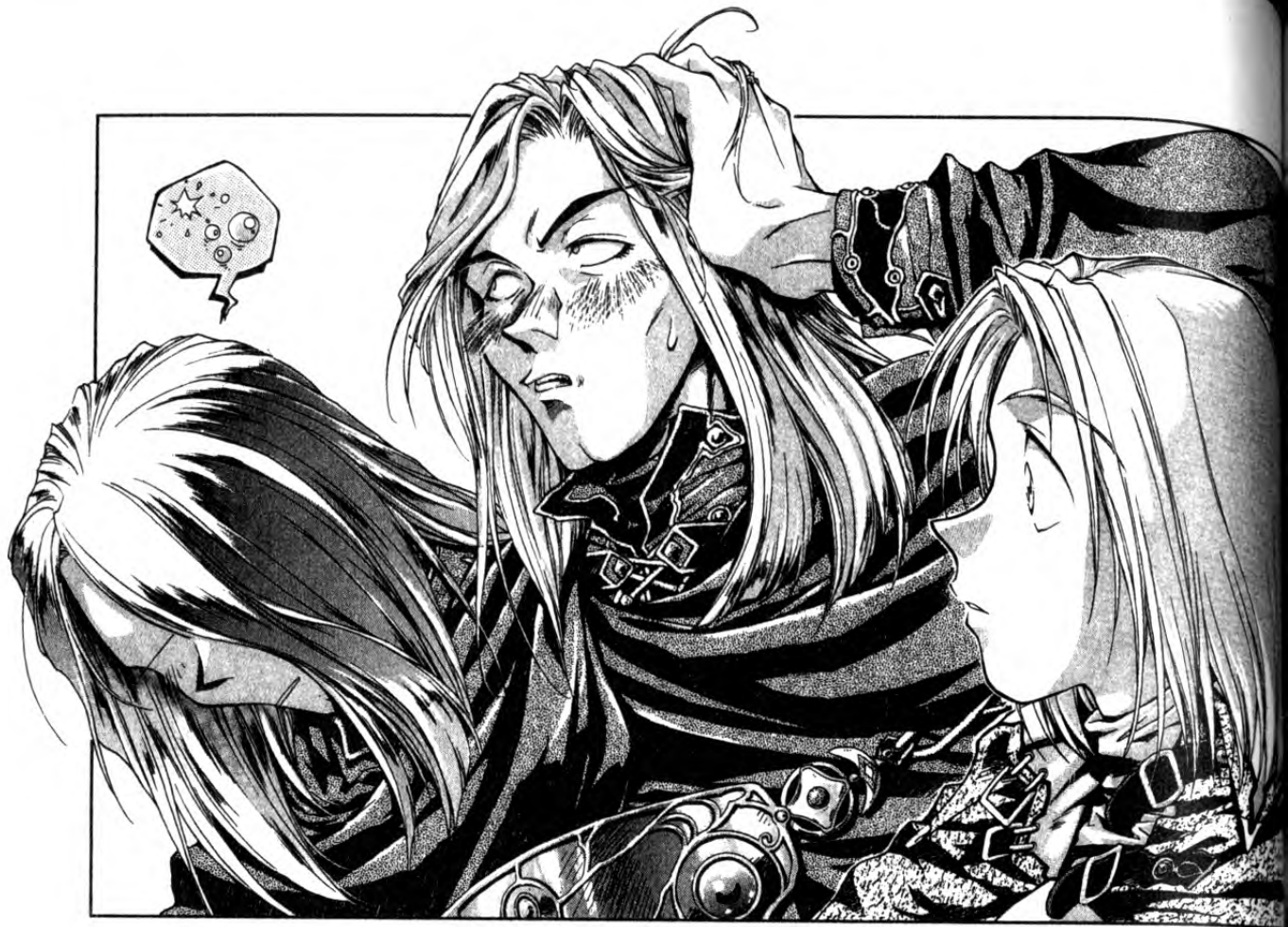
"Yes. You know, Duan . . . I have a feeling things will be all right if I talk them out with you."

As Silver Eye spoke, he turned toward Duan and smiled faintly. At that moment, Duan could see Golden Eye's face as well. Golden Eye was fast asleep; his head was hanging, sometimes swaying with the movement of the ship.

So Silver Eye is in control of the body now, while Golden Eye sleeps. Interesting . . . Duan tried not to stare in fascination as Silver Eye continued to talk.

"To tell you the truth, Golden Eye and I have different views on . . . How do I put this? Our goals as a wizard, and how to reach them. You know. How to live. We just have different personalities. It's just . . . well, it's probably difficult to understand . . ."

Silver Eye scratched his head. "Shoot, if only my mouth would blab as fast as Golden Eye's!"



"No, I think I get it," Duan responded. "It's what you guys were talking about earlier, right? When we were trying to decide how to attack the Loudness June, and you two started to argue . . ."

"Yes! That's it, exactly." Silver Eye's face lit up and he nodded, smiling. "He's the kind of guy who likes to dabble in a little bit of everything: attack magic, defense magic, even magic you can't categorize . . . He likes to learn it all. You could call him . . . I dunno, a magic geek."

"A magic geek?"

"Yeah. If there's a magic book that's even a little rare, he'll buy it without discussing it. Even if there is only a one percent chance that it'll ever be useful, or even if it requires special characteristics that we don't have . . . he'll still try and acquire it."

"And you don't feel the same way."

"Me? Um . . . well, no. I don't like doing things that way. If we're going to do attack magic, then I want to stick with it

and become an authority on it. I don't want to fritter away my time picking up odd tricks here and there. I want to be the best that I can be, not a wizard without a specialty."

"But attack magic is your strong suit, right?"

Silver Eye nodded. "Yes. And we're at a high level, considering our age. But if we hadn't used up all the money and time and effort we spent on other magic . . . we'd be at least another level up by now, I think."

"I see." Duan reflected. "Um . . . this may be a rude question, but . . ."

"Shoot." Silver Eye gave Duan an earnest smile. His straight hair caught the sea breeze, revealing his wide forehead. Looking at him, and talking to him so frankly, Duan suddenly realized that Silver Eye had a very different personality from Golden Eye. Silver Eye was completely unpretentious. Unlike Golden Eye, whose speech was a little haughty and flowery, Silver Eye was informal and straightforward. Although, when he thought about it, Duan remembered that when Silver Eye spoke with Golden Eye, he fell into Golden Eye's flowery speech patterns. But talking to him one-on-one like this, a completely different personality emerged.

Duan asked a question he'd been thinking about for some time. "You and Golden Eye . . . where do you come from, exactly?"

Silver Eye understood immediately the meaning of Duan's question. It was because everyone had the same curious nature and wondered why he and Golden Eye were two-headed . . . That was what it all came down to. Under normal circumstances, he would have probably been cross and glared, but he didn't feel that way with Duan for some reason. "You want to know why we're two-headed, right?"

"What? Well . . . yes, I do."

Silver Eye took an even greater shine to Duan as he straightforwardly, if a little sheepishly, admitted that that was what he was after.

“Our home country is . . . Ronza.”

“Oh, that huge one . . .”

Silver Eye nodded. “There are people who say lots of things about the king of Ronza, but I think he’s quite a guy. Not only did he respect the wishes of the original smaller countries, but he built a vast kingdom. And on top of that, he’s not only the founding father of our county; it’s amazing how he has kept it peaceful for so long. The countries that first objected slowly turned around. And of course they would—at a suitable price, they were guaranteed an appropriate freedom and an appropriate peace. Different countries slowly joined in, and this caused positive feedback so that many new countries fell under the reign of Ronza. Our country was one of those . . .”

CHAPTER 29:

A HISTORY LESSON



Golden Eye and Silver Eye came from Balhalm, a small country surrounded by mountains. Balhalm wasn't a particularly fertile land, and it lacked natural resources. The people were hardworking but poor, and it was so difficult to get there that few travelers even bothered to make the attempt. Yet Balhalm was rich in one thing: magic. For as long as anyone could remember, it had been the birthplace of powerful wizards and witches, sorcerers and sorceresses. In fact, so many strong magic users had come from Balhalm that no other country had tried to invade for hundreds of years. The last army that made the mistake of attacking was routed before it had climbed halfway up the mountains, sent fleeing by a bombardment of fireballs, lightning bolts, and hailstones the size of boulders. But that hadn't stopped the king of Ronza.

The kingdom of Ronza was as rich as Balhalm was poor. It had vast forests of valuable timber, mountains veined with metallic ore and gemstones, fertile soil in which almost any crop thrived,

sparkling lakes and rivers practically swarming with fish, and a shoreline whose bustling ports were filled with fishing boats and merchant ships. Yes, Ronza lacked for nothing—except magic.

People with magic abilities made good allies in battle, but they could also be fearsome enemies. For years, the king of Ronza had dreamed of gathering the best magic users in the world into a force that would stand alongside the fabled Knights of Ronza. Such an army of the best fighters and the best wizards would be invincible, a guarantee of long years of peace. But how to make that dream a reality?

The king knew that it would be suicidal to attack Balhalm. Besides, he hadn't built his empire through military conquest. His armies were for self-defense and the defense of allies, not to launch invasions against peaceful nations that weren't a threat. Instead, the king journeyed over the mountains with a small retinue of his knights and presented himself to Balhalm's ruling council like a humble petitioner.

Unlike Ronza, Balhalm was ruled by a council of wise men and women elected by the people. They received the king graciously and listened with interest as he set forth his proposal using all the considerable eloquence at his command, inviting them to join the Ronza as an autonomous province. He promised that the laws and customs of Balhalm would remain unchanged, and not a penny in taxes would go to Ronza. Not only that, but the new province of Balhalm would enjoy special trading privileges that would make the lives of all Balhalmians easier and more comfortable. Finally, if an emergency were ever to arise that the Balhalmians couldn't handle on their own, Knights of Ronza would be dispatched immediately to their aid. The Balhalmians had been threatened before; they were used to that. They had been ignored; they were used to that, too. But they had never been treated with dignity and respect.

After the king returned to Ronza, a referendum was held in Balhalm, with the Balhalmians voting overwhelmingly in favor of becoming the newest province in Ronza. That had been almost fifty years earlier, and ever since, it had been just as the king promised. The quality of life for Balhalmians had skyrocketed with the influx of inexpensive staples and luxury goods from Ronza, yet their cherished political institutions remained as strong and independent as ever.

What did Ronza get out of the deal?

Magic. The king's dream of an elite military unit composed of powerful magic users had become a reality at last. The most talented adepts in Balhalm flocked to Ronza to join the prestigious new force, ushering in an era of peace and prosperity such as Ronza and all its provinces had never known.

Now, this little history lesson was pretty much what Silver Eye imparted to Duan as they stood on the deck of the *Marchin* in the early morning mist, the lonely cries of seagulls circling overhead mixing with the snores of Golden Eye, whose head lay against Silver Eye's as if it were a soft, comfy pillow.

"But to get back to your question, Duan," Silver Eye went on, "two-headed people like Golden Eye and me are not exactly an everyday sight even in such a magical place as Balhalm. But there have been others. In our bloodline alone, there was another two-headed wizard, and three regular wizards, all born with exceptional magical abilities. Obviously, Golden Eye and I carry on the family tradition of two-headed sorcerers. The first time we used our powers was to light a fire in the fireplace one cold winter morning. We were only babies, still in our crib."

"You lit a fire in the fireplace?" Duan asked, impressed.

"Ha ha. Not that we remember it. Apparently, it was hell for our wet nurses, who had to make sure we didn't light things. At some point, we would fall asleep eventually."

“Wow. B-but, yeah, it must have been tough—looking after such dangerous babies!”

Duan’s sincere response was greeted with a happy laugh from Silver Eye. But soon, he went straight-faced.

“What’s wrong?” asked Duan without hesitation. Silver Eye looked down at Duan and then turned to look at the sea. “You’re right. It must have been weird trying to raise babies like us . . .”

“What?”

“I mean, in truth, it’s strange enough to have a baby with two heads, but on top of that, not knowing what we might get up to as well?”

Duan didn’t know what to say.

“Our mother too. She didn’t want to look at us; she rarely came to our room. Our wet nurses looked after us. Our father, on the other hand, was so proud to have a two-headed child with strong magic abilities. Sometimes, he’d bring guests to our room . . . but that was it really. It’s not like he’d play with us or anything.”

Silver Eye sighed and then glanced over at Golden Eye, who was sleeping right beside him. Silver Eye sighed again. “It was the same with everybody. Except for our nurses, everyone either hated us or feared us, or thought of us as freaks. Nobody took the trouble to get to know us. We never made any friends. We only had each other.”

After saying that, Silver Eye stared at the sea silently for a while.

Reflecting the white cloudy skies above, the wide colorless sea continued to undulate in smooth motion. Duan, also saying nothing, stared at the crests of the waves. He had no parents either.

He only had his brother, Gaeley. Duan had been a sickly kid, always coming down with something or other, but Gaeley



had cared for him as faithfully as any father could have done. It hadn't been easy, two kids doing their best to survive in a world that was often hostile and indifferent. And yet, despite all the hardships, the thing he remembered most right now was Gaeley's bright, encouraging smile.

I wonder what Gaeley is up to these days . . .

Unlike Duan, Gaeley had been gifted with a sturdy build, unusual strength, and fearless courage. He'd trained as a fighter ever since he was a boy. Two years ago, he'd finally achieved his lifelong ambition to join the army of their country, Froll, which was in the midst of a long war against the neighboring country of Ponzo. Looking up to his older brother as much as he did, it was little wonder that Duan had the same dream.

"Golden Eye . . . he . . ."

Silver Eye tried to choose his words carefully. He stared at the sea. "Golden Eye said that Father and Mother loved us despite the way they acted. He said they loved us and were proud of us deep down inside—so deep that maybe they weren't even aware of it themselves. But what's the use of that kind of love, so secret you never even know it exists? I wanted parents who played with me. Who nursed me when I was sick. I wanted a family that ate meals together and went places together. It's not like that's asking too much, is it? I mean, it's only normal, right?"

Duan quietly nodded. Silver Eye shook his head lightly.

"But it would be cruel saying this to Golden Eye. I'm sure he was the same. Golden Eye once said to me, 'Silver Eye, there is a definite reason why we were born like this. Let's go on a journey one day to find out what it is.' And he said that we had to train as adventurers for that purpose too."

CHAPTER 30:

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO SILVER EYE



Silver Eye was surprised by his own talkativeness. It seemed that once he started speaking to Duan, everything he had bottled up in the back of his mind began to flow out with no hesitation. *I don't even know him very well . . . this boy*, he thought to himself. But somehow he trusted Duan. And it was such a relief to unburden himself at last that he didn't want to stop.

"We trained and studied every spare moment," he told Duan now. "Just because you're a sorcerer doesn't mean you don't need strength, you know.

"Our magic abilities were already very advanced, but we knew that wouldn't be enough. What if we used up our magic in a tough battle or found ourselves in a place where we couldn't use magic at all? No, we needed a backup plan. So we also trained hard as fighters.

"Y'know, we can even use a sword and a bow and arrow. Even fist fighting—I'm sure we're better than most. And Golden

Eye, being the kind of guy he is, acquired every skill possible, even in terms of knowledge.

“At last the years of training were over and the day arrived—the day we would start our career as adventurers. Of course, Father was against it. He said there was no need to face dangerous situations. He wanted us to enroll in the king of Ronza’s sorcerer army and enjoy the comfortable life that went with it. But he couldn’t change our decision. There was nothing he could do other than accept it. It was ridiculous of him to imagine that we would follow his orders after the way he’d treated us!”

“Maybe he was worried about you,” Duan suggested.

“Worried? Bah—I’m sure he only wanted to show us off to the king of Ronza! Luckily, we were already at relatively high levels in our magic and skills, and physically we were very fit. So nobody, not even Father, had the courage to stand in our way.”

Silver Eye drew a deep breath before continuing, and as he did so, the memory came back to him of the morning that he and Golden Eye had left home. Many people had come to say goodbye, including their mother. Silver Eye had noticed that she was crying, and he had whispered this into Golden Eye’s ear. Golden Eye had walked straight up to her and said, “Mother, we’re leaving. Please look after yourself while we are gone.” Then he had bowed respectfully. But Silver Eye hadn’t been able to make a bow. One thing had left a deep impression in Silver Eye’s mind: later on, Golden Eye had whispered to him, “Remember, she is also suffering . . .”

Duan could tell that Silver Eye was lost in his own thoughts, so he kept quiet, gazing out to sea and trying to catch sight of the hazy shapes of islands in the morning mist. They were supposed to arrive at Luca Island tomorrow morning, but looking out now, there was nothing to be seen.

After a while, Silver Eye cleared his throat and continued his story. “We joined a powerful party and were diligent in raising our levels. Any party would let us join them just because we were sorcerers. And then, during our travels, we began to understand the difference in our, um, values.”

“Values?” prompted Duan.

“Golden Eye gets so enthusiastic. I mean, he gets downright fanatical about things. Like I said before, he’ll get hold of anything with magic in it. Attack magic, defensive magic, shape-shifting magic . . . It’s all the same to him. If an item has magic, regardless of what that magic is, or what it’s used for, he wants it, and he won’t rest until he gets it.

“At first I didn’t say anything. I told myself that the objects might come in handy sometime. Or that we could sell them and buy the sorts of magical items that we really *did* need. You know, items that fit in with our own powers. But gradually I realized that Golden Eye had no intention of selling any of the items, whether we used them or not. I realized that he was actually building this magic collection for his own pleasure. It was like an addiction! During one quest, he was even about to abandon our team members to go after a magic item. I stopped him, of course. But at that moment, when I saw his red, bloodshot eyes, I understood for the first time that even though we might share the same body, we are not the same.”

Seeing the tears and the slight redness in Silver Eye’s blue eyes, Duan felt his heart go out to the wizard.

Is he crying? Even though they are siblings, they aren’t normal. It’s not possible for them ever to lead separate lives. And not just from a life perspective—it must be difficult for them even on a smaller scale, like just finding a moment alone. And then to realize the difference between their existence and their values . . . how they want to live their lives. How painful that must be!

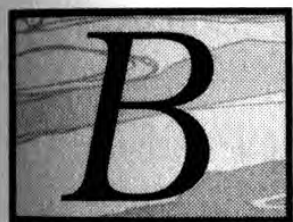
Duan knew that however hard he tried to imagine what their lives were like, he could never really know. All he could do was look Silver Eye straight in the eye.

Seeing this, Silver Eye softened his expression. "Don't get me wrong, Duan. I don't blame Golden Eye. In truth, he could have led a freer life, pursuing whatever he wanted . . . if only I wasn't here all the time, stuck to him, holding him back."

Silver Eye's expression saddened again. "So . . . we set off on a journey to find out why we were born two-headed, but if that leads us to the conclusion that . . . it would be better for us to lead two separate lives—well, that is the conclusion that we both fear the most."

CHAPTER 31:

AN ANCIENT INCANTATION



-but . . . ?!" Duan stopped and fell silent.

Silver Eye quickly interjected. "I know—you're wondering how, right? We thought it was impossible too. But it was there, written in one of the ancient scrolls that Golden Eye bought!"

"It was?!"

"Yeah. The scroll was mostly about magic to do with deep inside your mind, and in it we found mention of an ancient incantation that would restore two souls trapped in one unfortunate body to their rightful states."

"No!" screamed Duan, without thinking. He covered his mouth with his hands. "I-I'm sorry . . . It's just that it's so unbelievable."

"No, it's okay," said Silver Eye. "Duan, you're very honest, and I like you. It's normal that you'd think that. How can there be a spell that so perfectly matches our needs, right? It's not like we believe it one hundred percent either. Well, we're half convinced."

Even the hawker who sold it to us seemed a bit crooked. But there's something . . . I don't know what it is, but don't you think there must be some kind of connection?"

"Yeah, because it wouldn't have been written like that otherwise."

Hearing Duan's answer, Silver Eye laughed. "Yup. It's not like a journey where we have to go somewhere quickly. It's just a journey where we move on, getting pushed and pulled in different directions, whatever takes our fancy."

Duan raised his head and looked up at the tall Silver Eye. "Is that why you're journeying to Luca Island now?"

Silver Eye looked down at Duan in silence and then finally nodded. "Yes, it's that quest . . ." He paused, hardened his expression, and shut his mouth.

"What is it?" asked Duan, but he soon understood the reason.

Golden Eye started to moan. His brow wrinkled and he opened his eyes, blinking them several times as he slowly took in his surroundings. When he realized that he was on the deck of the ship, with Duan standing alongside, he turned his head toward his brother and said in a hectoring tone, "Silver Eye, I've told you many times before that neither one of us should go anywhere without the full knowledge and consent of the other. In the future, I'll thank you to do me the courtesy of not conversing with strangers behind my back . . . er, so to speak. What were you two talking about anyway?"

Silver Eye answered before Duan could reply. "Bah, it's not like I was sneaking around. I've only just come on deck myself. And you were sleeping so peacefully that I didn't want to wake you. Duan and I were simply talking about the voyage, the weather, things like that. Or was there something that you wouldn't want spoken about?"

Golden Eye, watching Silver Eye speak liberally and without hesitation, wrinkled his brow even more. "Silver Eye, there's something different about you this morning."

"Different? What do you mean?"

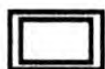
"You're being too talkative."

"What are you saying, Golden Eye—that I don't know how to talk properly?"

It seemed that the brothers were about to start fighting again. Knowing that he couldn't intervene, Duan decided to leave. "Well, I guess I'll head back to my room. It must be almost time for breakfast by now, and I have to wake up Olba," he said as he edged away from the two-headed wizard.

"Sure, Duan, old pal, see ya soon!" replied Silver Eye with a jaunty wave.

Duan waved back awkwardly. He had the distinct impression that Silver Eye was being extra friendly to him in order to needle his brother. And sure enough, Golden Eye looked on with a bored expression, covering a yawn with one hand even as Silver Eye waved with the other.



Ordinarily, Duan might have let Olba sleep, but he was eager to share what he had learned from Silver Eye. Though he'd promised the wizard not to tell anyone, he didn't feel that the promise extended to Olba. After all, he and Olba were partners, and partners didn't have secrets from each other. Besides, since they were all going to the same place, Olba was bound to find out sooner or later anyway.

It was never easy, even under the best of circumstances, to wake up Olba in the mornings. Finally, Duan gave up, plopping down on his own bunk, where Check was soundly sleeping. "Go on and sleep for all I care! But don't ask me to

explain what's going on when Silver Eye and his brother go after the Red Dragon's treasure horde!"

At that, Olba sat up immediately, blinking his eyes and rubbing the stubble on his chin. "Did someone say 'treasure horde'?"

Duan rolled his eyes.

"Well?" demanded Olba.

With a sigh, Duan related all that Silver Eye had told him. Olba listened closely. When Duan was finished, he



shook his head. "Huh. And I always heard that two heads were better than one."

"What do you mean?" asked Duan.

"If they think that incantation is going to be the answer to all their problems, they've got another think coming."

"Why do you say that?"

"Trust me, kid. That kind of powerful magic always has a catch to it."

"Like a curse or something?"

"Could be," said Olba. "All I know is that things are rarely so simple where magic is concerned."

"We have to warn them," Duan said anxiously.

Olba shook his head. "What, a couple of fighters teaching a two-headed wizard about magic? That oughta be good for a laugh. No, you're a smart kid, Duan, and you've got a good heart, but you've still got a lot to learn about people. Silver Eye and Golden Eye are Level 14—they're not gonna to listen to us. They're gonna think we're trying to scare them off so that we can have the whole treasure to ourselves!"

"I hadn't thought of that," said Duan.

"We haven't even reached the island yet," said Olba. "There's plenty of time to learn more about this magic spell."

Olba pushed himself up from the bed. "Right now I need a mug of strong coffee and a good, hot breakfast." He reached out and mussed the top of Duan's hair. "C'mon, kid. We better get moving before your friend Silver Eye eats everything. For a troubled man, he's sure got one hell of an appetite!"

"Yeah, I'm hungry too, now that you mention it." Duan got up, then looked at Check, still sound asleep on his pillow. "C'mon, Check." He gave the grinia a gentle tap with his finger, but the winged lizard only snored louder than ever.

“Let the little guy sleep,” said Olba, stepping out through the door into the corridor.

Duan lingered a minute to pull one corner of his bed sheet around the tiny green form. He didn’t want Check to catch cold.

Look at him snoring away, he thought fondly and somewhat enviously. Not a care in the world . . .

CHAPTER 32:

SHORT-TEMPERED AND LIVELY



Meanwhile, many miles away, far across the Maddy Straits, a determined young woman was making her way over the countryside to the port town of Kovenia. Now, ordinarily a young woman might think twice about traveling on her own to a place like Kovenia, but not when that young woman enjoyed the protection of a legendary snow leopard. Not when that young woman was gifted in the use of Fire Magic. Not when that headstrong young woman with fiery red hair was Agnis R. Link, Princess of Fiana, novice sorceress.

Yes, Agnis and her faithful snow leopard, K'nock, had left the summer palace in Fiana to look for Duan and Olba. Agnis needed their help to achieve a certain objective. Or so she told herself. But deep down inside, she knew that was only an excuse. The real reason she'd embarked on this journey was simple. She had, in the words of her mother, "been bitten by the adventuring bug." Those words had haunted Agnis for a long time.

Well, okay, not what any normal person would consider a long time, but a long time for an impatient girl like Agnis. Which in this case meant a single night.

The morning after her talk with Rubis on the palace balcony, before the sun had peeked above the horizon and even the earliest of early birds had gotten to their worms, Agnis wrote a hurried note to her parents, picked up her wizard's staff—a long, slender shaft of darkest ironwood topped with a silver, winged orb—and, carrying a pack filled with all the necessities required for a journey of uncertain duration, crept out of the summer palace. She wished she could say her goodbyes in person, but she didn't dare. She knew her father, King Palea the Fourth, would forbid her to go. And Rubis wouldn't be too happy about it, either. In truth, Agnis felt a bit guilty about leaving her mother. She was worried that all the time Rubis and Palea were spending together would trigger Queen Ramua's jealousy again, but she also knew that she couldn't be responsible for her parents. She had her own life to live. Besides, the queen seemed to have adjusted well

since Rubis and Agnis had publicly renounced any claim to the throne.

It's the same as before, Agnis thought as she held on to the soft, white fur of K'nock's back with one hand and silently passed through the garden. After the twin witches, Ogma and Samra, had turned her mother into a bird, Agnis had fled the castle with K'nock on a morning just like this one,

CHARACTER FILE

Agnis R. Link:

A young female sorcerer who traveled with Duan and Olba on the adventure to the Witches' Forest. Her sense of justice is particularly strong and sharp. Her father is the king of Fiana and her mother is his mistress. Because her mother is a Fire Elementaller, Agnis is half-Elementaller herself and able to use high-level Fire Magic. However, her magic power is low, so if she uses a high-level spell even once, she faints with exhaustion.

ADVENTURER LEVEL

4

Valid until:

2nd July,
Sigress Year 384



Name: Agnis R. Link

Date of Birth:

2nd June, Sigress Year 367

Residence & Citizenship:

Fiana

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Sorcerer

Issue date:

2nd July, Sigress Year 383

Skill Points:

Strength 21
Intelligence 44
Karma +9
Magic 33

EXPERIENCE POINTS:

582

(LEVEL-UP POSSIBLE AT 700)

heading for the Witches' Forest and a showdown with the two malicious and more-than-slightly insane sorceresses.

Outside at last, she paused to turn and take a last look at the palace where she had grownup. Agnis felt her chest tighten at the sight of a Rosaria tree. The tree was packed with pink buds on every branch, just coming into bloom. *I'm the same way*, she thought, feeling tears come to her eyes as she thought of leaving behind not just her parents and the only home she'd ever known, but her own childhood. *I'm not a kid anymore*, she told herself.

"C'mon, K'nock," she said with a sigh. "No use putting it off, right?"

The snow leopard rumbled in assent.

Taking a deep breath, Agnis turned to go . . . and saw a milky white shadow detach itself from the thick trees of the forest behind the palace and come gliding toward her like a hungry ghost.

With a gasp, Agnis lowered her staff and cried out, "Mother, what are you doing here?"

Rubis, looked at her with a resigned expression. "Waiting for you, of course."

Agnis was taken aback. "Y-you knew?"

Rubis smiled. "Of course I knew. You can't fool your mother, dear. I can tell what you are thinking. And you didn't get much sleep last night, did you? There seemed to be quite a lot of activity in your room."

Agnis felt herself blushing. She had thought that she had hidden her plans from everyone. "I'm sorry, Mother, but my mind is made up. I'm going, and there's nothing you can say to stop me."

"I'm not even going to try."

Once again, Agnis was taken aback. "Y-you're not?"

Rubis shook her head and smiled sadly. "I understand now that you are destined to be an adventurer. Of course, as a parent, I oppose the idea, but that would only tie you down. So I'm giving you my blessing. I was an adventurer myself, after all, though not a very good one!"

Agnis' heart was overwhelmed with emotion. She had never imagined that her mother could understand her so well. Impulsively, she threw herself into her mother's arms. "Thank you, Mother!"

"You know that I love you, don't you, Agnis?"

"I love you too, Mother."

After a moment, drying their eyes, the two women separated and gazed at each other fondly.

"Well," said Agnis awkwardly, "it's getting late . . ."

"Where will you go?" Rubis blurted out, her hands nervously twisting the front of the white cloak that covered her nightgown.

"Do you remember the prince of Orland?" Agnis asked in turn.



“Of course I do. Charles. A fine young man.”

“Well, you know that Charles and I have known each other since we were small. We’ve written to each other for ages.”

“Did he write to you about something?”

“In a way. You know that Orland has been in turmoil for quite a while now. Things are starting to get dodgy.”

“Dodgy?”

“Oh, sorry. It means, um, dangerous.” Agnis blushed again; she had accidentally used one of the slang expressions that she’d picked up from her time with Duan and Olba. Of course her mother would have no acquaintance with such low-class speech. Flustered, she pressed on. “A-anyway, when I got back from the Witches’ Forest, there were some letters from him that had been delivered in my absence. They didn’t leave me reassured about his safety. I replied right away, but he never wrote back. I haven’t heard from him since.”

"Please tell me you're not planning to go there on your own," begged Rubis.

"Don't worry, Mother. I know that would be too dangerous. Do you remember those adventurers I told you about, the ones who helped me fight the twin witches? I thought I'd find them first. One of them is a bit useless, but the other is quite skilled."

"How will you find them?"

"Well, that's the hard part. But I gave them your ruby ring in payment for their help. Kovenia is the nearest town where they could possibly sell it for a fair price. So I figure if I go there, I can pick up their trail. If I'm lucky, they'll still be there; after all, two people could live quite comfortably for a month or more on the proceeds of that ring."

"Yes, I know," said Rubis somewhat frostily. Now, seeing the sparkle in her daughter's eyes, Rubis sighed and let go of any lingering regrets over the loss of the ring. "Just promise me one thing," she said. "If you get to Kovenia and you can't find them, come home at once. Will you promise me that?"

"If they're not in Kovenia, and if I can't find any clues about where they've gone, I'll come home," said Agnis. "But that's the most I can promise."

Rubis sighed again, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief pulled from a pocket of her gown. "My little girl is growing up . . ."

"Oh, Mother," said Agnis, embarrassed.

"Have you got everything you need? Have you got enough money?"

"Yes. I've brought a little cash and also some of the jewels that Father's given me over the years. Don't worry—it's all carefully hidden."

"Please don't push yourself too hard, dear. You know, sometimes it takes the most courage of all to let yourself give up."

Agnis didn't think she'd ever understand that kind of courage, but she just nodded dutifully. "Yes, Mother. Please tell Father goodbye for me."

"Of course I will."

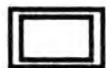
K'nock had been sitting patiently beside Agnis all this time. Now Rubis bent down and gently rubbed the snow leopard's head. "Please protect this short-tempered, lively daughter of mine, K'nock. I'm counting on you."

The big cat raised his head and looked at Rubis. His prismatic eyes swirled with colors that could hypnotize an enemy, but now served only to reassure the worried mother.

"I'm going to miss you, Agnis."

"Oh, Mother. Please take care of yourself."

They embraced a final time, and with that, Agnis jumped onto K'nock's back and the snow leopard bounded off into the forest.



There was a carriage that went to Kovenia, but naturally they wouldn't let K'nock on board. And anyway, it was much quicker to ride on K'nock's back than it was to travel in a carriage. But the road to Kovenia wasn't always flat. They had used highways that were said to be safe, but along the way they went gone over mountains and crossed over deep valleys. There were even times when they were almost attacked by monsters or targeted by highwaymen.

But this wasn't surprising, as Agnis was a young girl traveling on her own. And thankfully, most of their enemies retreated as soon as they saw K'nock's sharp eyes and heard one of his deep roars.

“We’ll arrive in Kovenia tomorrow!” said Agnis as she held tightly onto K’nock’s back. His beautiful white fur was now a pale black from dirt.

In response, K’nock increased his speed even more. And just around the time they arrived in Kovenia, Duan and the others arrived at Luca Island.

CHAPTER 33:

LUCA ISLAND



and ho!” called the lookout in the crow’s nest.

It was almost evening. But saying that, there was still some time until the sun would set. Hearing the lookout’s cry, Duan and Olba, who had been idling around in the dining room, dashed up onto the deck.

The wind was so strong that they were barely able to stand upright. Olba’s long ponytail streamed out behind him like a black ribbon. If Check hadn’t managed to grab hold of Duan’s head, the winged lizard would have been blown right over the side.

“Kiii-yiii!” he squawked in a panic.

Just as the lookout had said, an island could be seen on the white horizon ahead. And it was getting closer and closer. Birds by the hundreds circled above the island. It had been four days since they’d left Kovenia. Along the way, although they had encountered monsters, they hadn’t had any storms. The wind also helped them out, and now their relatively safe ship journey was

drawing to a close. "Thank you very much," said Duan to the captain, who was by this time quite open and approachable.

He replied, "No, no. Thank you very much. By the way, when will you be returning? We'll be departing for Kovenia again tomorrow noon."

"You're returning already? You must be busy."

"Well, we're the only ship that goes between Kovenia and Luca Island. We can't lounge around for too long."

"I see. Well, we'll probably . . . be getting the next ship."

"So, next week?"

"Yes. Best regards until then."

"You too . . . except . . ." The captain looked at Duan with a serious expression. "I think that you'll find that Luca Island may be a tough opponent for you, but I wish you the best of luck. But, if you can just make me one promise. Just don't anger the Red Dragon. Understood?"

But Duan and Olba were planning to steal the Dragon's treasure. How was it possible for them not to anger it in the process?

All Duan could do was to reply to the captain, "I'll remember your words."

"And remember this," the captain added, walking off. "Try not to rile the villagers, either."

"Hmm. I guess there are villages that don't like adventurers," Duan said as he gazed at the approaching island.

"That's not surprising," answered Olba. "Adventurers aren't all of good character. Some of these young guys get rowdy and hot-blooded. Some start fights and others go around drinking."

Duan, without a moment's delay, responded, "What, like you, Olba?"

Without looking up, Olba delivered a quick cuff to the back of Duan's neck.

More than half of the island's perimeter was taken up by high, forbidding cliffs. But fortunately there were two small fishing harbors, one on the north side of the island and the other on the south. The *Marchin* made for the southern harbor, the larger of the two. The name of this harbor, as Duan discovered from the map that had come with the quest information, was Southern Harbor.

The crew started to unload at once the many crates of daily necessities that had been packed at Kovenia. Weaving their way through the chaos, Duan and the others left the ship.

The afternoon sun stained the western skies red. Duan, Olba, Check, and the two-headed wizard stood for a while, faces half lit by the afternoon sun.

There was nothing there. Absolutely nothing. And that wasn't because it was only a rusty fishing harbor. There was only one footpath-like road that climbed into a forest, and they couldn't see a single house anywhere. If they were told that there was no one living on this island, they would have believed it.

The captain, seeing Duan and the others standing around as though at a complete loss, called to them, "If you climb that road there, you'll find the entrance to the village. There's at least one inn there, I think. Though I'm not sure they'll let you stay . . . We'll be going up there too, once we've finished unpacking. Would you like to go together?"

"Thanks," said Olba, "but we already have somewhere to go. We have a delivery to make, right, Duan?"

"Oh, yes. Um . . ." Duan promptly brought out a letter from his breast pocket. It was the letter that he had received from the innkeeper, Dorothy Evans, of the Black-Tailed Gull

Inn in Kovenia. "I don't suppose you know a Mister Evans?" he asked the captain.

"Ah, Evans, is it?" said the captain, widening his eyes. "Sure, I know him. Just follow the path like I told you, and when you get to the village, bear to the port side. After about ten minutes, you'll come to a well, with a house right next to it. That's where you'll find the Evanses."

"Thank you very much," said Duan to the captain.

"Okay, let's go." Olba had already started up the narrow hill road.

"Hey, wait!" Duan picked up the heavy load and teetered off after Olba. He hadn't gotten far when a hand suddenly clapped down on his shoulder.

"See here," said Golden Eye, "don't you think it's a bit unfair that you two have a nice place all lined up to stay while my brother and I have to fend for ourselves in this desolate and unfriendly place?"

"Huh?"

"We're fellow travelers. We've been together until now. Let us come with you."

"Um . . ."

While Duan was worrying about what to do, there was a yell from Olba.

"What are you waiting for, Duan? The sun is setting, and I'm hungry! Hurry up!"

"Golden Eye and Silver Eye say they want to come with us!" Duan shouted back.

Olba appeared at the edge of the woods, his arms folded together and his mouth pinched shut. Duan thought for sure that he was going to say no, but instead, after a moment, Olba nodded and called out, "Fine. You can come. But I'm the leader, get it? What I say goes."

“I don’t have any objections,” said Golden Eye. He turned to his brother. “Do you?”

Silver Eye shook his head.

With a triumphant toss of his silky, blond hair, Golden Eye turned back to Olba and called out, “We consent!”

The two-headed wizard adjusted their luggage on their back and then urged Duan to proceed.

“Lead on, Duan,” said Golden Eye. “To this village that hates adventurers.”

CHAPTER 34:

GETTING STOPPED ON LUCA ISLAND



ust when the two-headed wizard and Duan and caught up with Olba, they were suddenly struck by small stones coming from the forest on both sides of the road.

“Yow!”

“What the . . . ?!”

“Hey!”

Olba, Duan, Golden Eye, and Silver Eye covered their faces with their hands and shouted threats at their unseen assailants, but the missiles kept coming, forcing them to hunker down on the ground.

At last the shower of stones petered out, and red, angry faces peeped around the trunks of the trees, all shouting at once.

“Go home, go home!”

“Thieves!”

“Go before you anger Lord Alkyl!”

“Adventurers aren’t welcome here!”

“W-wait,” said Olba, getting cautiously to his feet. “You’ve got it all wrong. We’re not adventurers—we’re only here to deliver a letter!”

Meanwhile, the two-headed wizard was getting to his feet, dusting off the dirt from his knees, when a single rock struck him in the forehead. Blood came trickling down. Golden Eye turned in the direction the rock had come from, pointed the right hand of the body he shared with Silver Eye, and started chanting. “Naishino, Tahabiki . . . Tahabiki, Sekutsuki, Ya . . .”

“No!” Duan shouted. “Olba, we’ve gotta stop him!”

There would be no going back once Golden Eye had unleashed his magic.

In desperation, Duan clung to Golden Eye’s back, but it was too late. A sharp line of fire appeared from his fingertip.

“Aieee!”

“Aaagh!”

The villagers fled. In the midst of the pandemonium, one villager fell from a tree and rolled across the ground to stop right in front of Golden Eye. It was a young boy, no more than ten. This fact seemed to make no difference to Golden Eye.

“Naishino, Tahabiki . . . Tahabiki, Sekutsuki, Ya . . .” he chanted again, pointing at the boy, who cowered before him, shivering with terror.

“Idiot! Stop it . . .” Suddenly Olba was standing between the wizard and his victim. The big fighter clenched his teeth in pain but did not cry out as flames surged against his outstretched arm.

“Golden Eye!” Silver Eye shouted. “Come back to your senses!” When his voice echoed through the forest, Golden Eye’s bloodshot eyes returned to normal.

Duan ran to Olba’s side. The big fighter had fallen on the ground. “Olba, are you okay?”



Check, also concerned, came fluttering down from the branch where he had taken refuge and landed on Olba's head. "Olba hurt? Chaa!"

Olba groaned. "I'm f-fine, Check, so please get off my head." There was a moan from underneath Olba. He had fallen on the boy! Protecting his burned arm, Olba rolled away. "Sorry, kid. Didn't mean to crush you like that."

The boy nodded, staring at Olba, wide-eyed. "That arm of yours looks bad," said the boy. "We need to clean it as soon as possible. There's a well nearby . . ." He tugged impatiently at Olba's uninjured arm.

"Please take us there," Duan said.

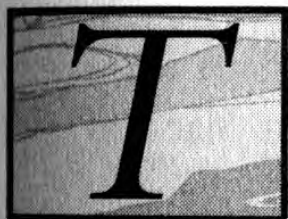
The boy gave a happy nod and tugged on Olba's arm once more.

Together, Duan and the boy supported Olba awkwardly and walked slowly up the path. Duan looked over his shoulder and called to the two-headed wizard, "Golden Eye, Silver Eye—you come too."

The two heads nodded awkwardly.

CHAPTER 35:

INTRODUCTIONS



he place where the boy had taken them was the well that the captain had told them about. So the house next door was the childhood home of the innkeeper of the Black-Tailed Gull Inn, Dorothy Evans.

Olba ripped apart the burnt part of his shirt and cooled his arm in the cold well water.

Check, ever curious, came fluttering down to observe from close up.

When the boy saw Check, his eyes sparkled.

“Ooooh, a flying lizard! That is so cool!” he exclaimed, kneeling down to bring himself eye to eye with the baby grinia.

“Too cute!”

“Check grinia,” Check explained helpfully.

The boy clapped his hands. “A *talking* flying lizard! Unbelievable!”

“Boy not believe?” Check turned his back, offended.

“Check not lie!”



"No, I didn't mean that," the boy said hurriedly. "I'm sorry, Check."

"Gii-is. Who boy?" Check asked now. "What name?"

"Me? Oh, I'm Ken," he said. Ken thrust his hand forward and shook Check's tiny hand. After the handshake, Check looked alternately at his own hands and Ken's face.

Ken was about the height of Duan's shoulder. He must have been around ten years old and still had a cherubic face. His thick black hair was cut short and his skin was dark from the sun. His thin arms and legs were clothed in a shirt that had faded from washing, and he wore trousers down to his calves.

"Ken, we're actually visiting this house here. Do you know the Evanses?" asked Duan.

Ken widened his eyes. "Of course! I live here."

"What? So, you're . . . Dorothy's brother?" asked Duan in amazement. *But I thought Dorothy's brother was missing. And I thought he was a lot older . . .*

Ken laughed. "No, we're not blood relatives. I'm adopted. You know how all the Evans kids left the island? Well, our house . . . I have a lot of brothers and sisters. So the Evanses take care of me in return for me doing work."

"Do you think you could introduce us? We're here to deliver a letter from their daughter, Dorothy."

Ken seemed surprised by Duan's words. "You mean you're really not adventurers?" he exclaimed.

“What? Well, yes . . .”

“A-and you’re not here to steal Lord Alkyl’s treasure?”

“Lord Alcohol?” Duan was still not quite following.

“No, *Alkyl*. Lord Alkyl, the Red Dragon of Kunoro Mountain.”

“Oh, so that’s its name. I didn’t know.”

At this, Ken shook his head in further amazement. “They said you were thieves, adventurers who had come to steal the treasure.”

“Er, well, you can’t always believe what you hear,” said Duan.

“I don’t care if you are,” said Ken, his face turning red. “Unlike everyone else around here, I don’t hate adventurers. I’m going to be one myself when I grow up! And I wasn’t throwing rocks or anything like the others. I was just watching, I swear!”

“Oh right . . . Oh, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Duan—Duan Surk.”

“Um, I’m Ken—Ken Evans.”

“Ken, I’m sorry, but do you think you can show us to the Evanses right away? I can tell you more later,” Duan said.

“Sure. Father and Mother should be working in the hills out back at this time of day. Just wait here!” He ran off without another word, disappearing around the side of the house.

Duan followed Ken with his eyes, then turned back to Olba. “Olba, are you okay?”

Fortunately, the wound wasn’t too bad. “What is it with these Fire sorcerers and their short tempers, eh?” Olba queried in a jocular tone. “First Agnis, now Golden Eye . . .”

At the mention of Agnis, Duan smiled broadly. *I wonder what that short-tempered defender of justice is up to . . .*

“Apologies,” said Golden Eye to Olba, hanging his head low.

"I'm sorry too," Silver Eye added. "I see your arm is still quite red. If you like, I can cool it with my magic . . ."

Olba shook his head quickly. "What, and give me a case of frostbite? No, thanks. Anyway, it's not so bad. If I could just do something about the pain . . ."

At this, Check came fluttering down to land on the edge of the well in front of Olba. "Check help," he stated, his chest puffing out with pride. "Help friend!"

Cupping his tiny hands together, the winged lizard bowed his head and breathed softly into the open space between them. Then, spreading his hands, he placed them above Olba's arm. The air seemed to shimmer, and the rawness of the burn faded almost to nothing.

"Wow," said Olba. "I feel much better now. You're really something, Check!"

"Check help?"

"You sure did! And to show how grateful I am, I'll treat you to a little booze tonight. How does that sound?"

"Kaa!" Check was so excited that he fell down the well. "Gii-yiiii . . ."

Olba burst out laughing, as did Duan, Golden Eye, and Silver Eye. It was such a relief to laugh after all they'd been through that they let themselves go, especially after the embarrassed Check climbed sheepishly out of the well.

"Are you the ones with our Dorothy's letter?"

Turning in the direction of the voice, they saw a man of medium build and height. He was dressed like a farm laborer, his muscular arms dark from the sun. He had an angular face and dark, bushy eyebrows. Half-hidden behind him was a woman resembling an older version of Dorothy. She had a kerchief over her hair, and her shoes were covered in mud.

“Er, yes, that’s us,” said Duan. “I’m Duan Surk. You must be Mister Evans.” He pulled the letter out of his pocket. “Dorothy asked us to bring this to you, sir.”

Mister Evans looked at the letter and then at Duan, his gaze shifting back and forth from one to the other as if he suspected a trick of some kind. But finally he took it, tore the envelope open, and read it straight away. Missus Evans peered over his shoulder.

Dorothy hadn’t shown Duan what she had written in the letter, but he had every expectation that she’d asked her parents to look after them. He waited confidently for the Evanses to finish reading it. When they did, he got a shock.

Mister Evans crumpled the letter up in his fist as though it was a piece of trash. “All right, I’ve read it. Thanks for your trouble. Now, if there isn’t anything else, please leave.”

Duan and the others stared open-mouthed at the Evanses. The first to break the awkward silence was Ken.

“Father, this man helped me! It’s not like you to send people away as soon as you’re done with them. They came all the way from Kovenia.”

“They didn’t come all this way just to deliver a letter. They’re after the treasure of Lord Alkyl—there’s no difference between this lot and any other adventurers.” Mister Evans almost spat out his words.

“B-but,” stammered Ken, “shouldn’t we at least serve them some tea before we send them on their way?”

Mister Evans shook his head. “What if the others found out? We’d be cast out of the village!”

But Missus Evans was not of the same opinion. “Dearest, Ken is right,” she said firmly. “Since when does the Evans family repay kindness with unfriendliness? These people have come a long way to see us, and I will not be rude

to our Dorothy's friends. I'll talk to the villagers. I'll make them understand that our guests are not after Lord Alkyl's treasure."

Mister Evans looked at his wife's face and heaved a deep sigh. "Okay, if you say so, Lorna. But only for one night. They leave on the ship that departs tomorrow."

Olba opened his mouth to protest, but before he could get a word out, Duan stopped him. "Shhh. Let's just go inside. Maybe we can sort something out, okay?"

Olba nodded reluctantly.

When they entered the Evans home, the sun had set, and the first star in the sky was shining down on the island.

CHAPTER 36:

THE LEGEND OF LORD ALKYL



don't think you'd understand even if we told you, but seeing that you're Dorothy's friends, I'll tell you why we drive out the adventurers from our island."

After this brief introduction, Mister Evans started his story.

The village, like the island, was called Luca. This was the name of the god the islanders used to worship.

However, this was a different god to one they revered now: the Red Dragon that lived in the central mountain of the island, a towering peak known as Kunoro Mountain. The people of Luca had been devoutly religious and lived quietly in this fishing village. However, being located on a sea route, there was no end to the countries that wanted to use the island as a base for their wars. These countries attacked many times and stole the territory from the villagers, who could do nothing to stop them. They went about with their warlike and rapacious ways as if they owned the place.

Time after time, different countries came in and seized the island. Although the people of Luca were peaceful, they had

experienced war many, many times. They loved their island too deeply to even think about abandoning it.

And then, about sixteen years ago, the Red Dragon came flying in. And perhaps he just liked the place, but he ended up settling in Kunoro Mountain. At first, the villagers ran around in fear, but they were relieved when they found that the Red Dragon didn't care to attack the villagers.

And furthermore, after hearing about the dragon, no other country ever invaded Luca again.

To the people of Luca, the dragon really was their savior. The villagers began referring to him as Lord Alkyl, and in time, they began to revere him. Alkyl was actually the name of the god of power in Luca legends.

But then a different kind of people began to come to the island: adventurers who had heard rumors about the Red Dragon. And these people couldn't sit still when they heard about this dragon. No matter how much the villagers tried to tell them that this dragon was not the same as other dragons and that he was a necessary protector of the island, they just wouldn't listen.

They came time and time again and climbed Kunoro Mountain. Fortunately, to get to the nest of the Red Dragon, they had to pass through winding dungeons. And—who knows when they got there—many other monsters obstructed the way. For that reason, many adventurers gave up or they lost their lives before they came face to face with the dragon.

“But even so,” said Mister Evans, “we can't just overlook these adventurers when they come to the island. You can understand that, can't you?”

The story that Mister Evans told them about the Red Dragon and the island moved Duan. Indeed, he saw now that it was a problem of life or death for the villagers. All of the adventurers were a burden to them, a danger. If by any chance

an adventurer angered the dragon and the dragon left . . . what then? Or—although this seemed more unlikely—what if someone killed the dragon?

Olba, Golden Eye, Silver Eye . . . Perhaps we should give this quest up? Duan thought.

There were many times that Duan had thought to speak these words. But he knew it wouldn't be that easy. He couldn't imagine that Olba would agree. And on top of that, Duan had heard the reasons for the two-headed wizard's visit from Silver Eye, and he didn't think that they'd consent to it either.

The fireplace was black with soot (although there was no fire lit), and handsewn cushions were placed upon the sofa. There was also a handmade table. The unbearable silence continued in the farmhouse's plain living. It was so unbearable that, had there been any chance to leave the room, anybody would have taken it.

Golden Eye and Silver Eye stared out of the window, and Olba continued to lie back on the sofa with his eyes closed.

Duan dropped his gaze to the floor, and Check, who was sitting on his lap, peered up into his face.

Just then, Lorna entered from the kitchen, carrying a tray that held a big plate piled with steaming muffins and a pot of tea. She had taken off her headscarf, and with her blonde hair shining in the light, she reminded Duan more than ever of Dorothy.

With a smile, she set the tray down gently on the dining room table. "It's nothing special, but here are some fresh-baked dot muffins for you to nibble on before dinner. They were always Dorothy's favorites. Please help yourselves."

The delicious aroma lifted the mood like magic.

"Oh, these are the same ones that Dorothy made for us!" cried Duan.



Missus Evans beamed with pleasure. “She always was a fine baker, our Dorothy. I’m so proud of her! I hear she’s running a hotel now . . .”

“That’s right,” said Duan. “It’s called the Black-Tailed Gull Inn, a small but charming hotel in Kovenia. It’s clean and very cozy, and the meals are delicious.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news,” Missus Evans enthused. “And would you say the business is doing well?”

“The place is packed,” Duan assured her. “And because it’s so comfortable, and she’s such a great hostess, a lot of guests end up staying even longer than they had planned.”

“Did you hear that, darling?” Missus Evans gushed. Mister Evans was about to break into a smile in response to Lorna’s question, but he soon went back to his sour expression. Seeing this, Lorna shrugged her shoulders and looked back at Duan.

MRS. EVANS' COOKERY COURSE



First, grind your wheat

RIGHT!
LET'S START
MAKING OUR
MUFFINS!

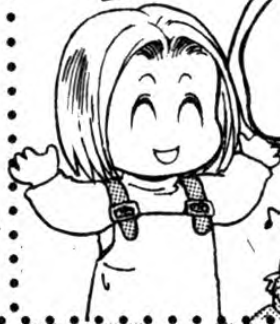
I LOVE
LEARNING NEW
RECIPES!

We're
short
on time
today,
so let's
use plain
flour!

MAKE
SURE
YOU
SIFT IT
PROPERLY!

I love
eating
them!

Arms
as big as
Olba's...



Add
butter
and
baking
soda...



And
add the flour
that you sifted.
Be careful it
doesn't clump!



Mix
the
eggs
and
the
sugar...

I BAKED
MINE WITH
BLUEBERRIES
AND BANANAS
...

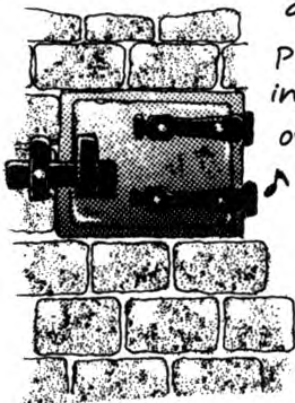
His heart?

And
his
heart
will be
yours!

Once it's
golden, serve
it to your loved
one...

If you
have faith,
I'm sure
it'll be
delicious!

Pour
it into
your
baking
tin
and
put it
in the
oven.



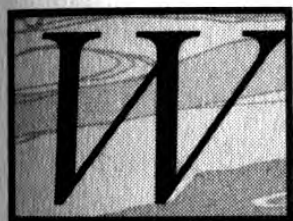
“Well, in her letters, she says that her hotel is doing well, but we always assumed she was saying that not to worry us. But hearing that she’s truly doing well—I’m so relieved. Come, you must all be so tired from your ship journey. Why don’t you take off your shoes and go wash your feet? That works best to take away your tiredness. They say that ‘fatigue sticks to your feet.’ ”

Mister Evans agreed, albeit in a slightly over-the-top way. “Yes. Lorna is right. And in any case, you’ll have to go back to the ship tomorrow. You might as well refresh yourself while you can.”

Hearing this, Olba and Golden Eye exchanged looks.

CHAPTER 37:

DRAGON TALES



e're just gonna have to go without their consent," said Olba as he sat down on a hard bed.

Olba, Duan, the two-headed wizard, and Check were all in the small guest room. "Yes—it's the only way." Golden Eye sat down onto the bed next to Olba's and nodded.

But Duan was desperately against the idea. "W-wait!" he broke in anxiously. "Didn't you listen to Mister Evans? If we anger the dragon and it flies off, Luca Island will turn into a battleground again. Innocent people will get hurt or even killed!"

"If you want to slink back to Kovenia with your tail between your legs, Duan, be my guest," Olba replied without looking up from his sword, which he was methodically oiling and honing in preparation for action. "As for me, I'm going. That's what I've done all my life and that's how I'll keep on living it. And it's no different this time." He glanced at Golden Eye. "What does that encyclopedia of yours have to say about the Red Dragon? Any weaknesses we can exploit?"

“No, there isn’t anything special. It only says regular attacks and some magic attacks will be damaging. But it’s a pretty tough opponent. It even outdoes that sea serpent.”

“Well, it is a dragon, after all. Luckily, our objective is not to kill it.”

“Yes, there’s no point pushing ourselves.”

At this Olba chuckled. He then took off his boots and rolled back onto the bed. He lifted himself up on one arm and looked at Golden Eye.

“Tell me, Golden Eye, is this the first time you and your brother have faced a dragon?”

“As part of a quest, yes . . . though we did see one once.”

“Really? What kind?”

“Copper dragon. We encountered it briefly, near Ronza.”

“Hmm. Coppers are mid-sized dragons, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Much smaller than the Red Dragon—not to mention Silvers or Golds. But it was still amazing. Watching the great beast soar through the sky, its scales blazing in the sun . . . I’ll never forget it. Not only were we deeply moved; we were completely overwhelmed. I mean, even a mid-sized dragon is an awe-inspiring sight, the stuff of legend.”

“Right.”

“What about you, Olba?”

“Me? Nope, I’ve never met one. Although I was close to one once—I saw its tail. It was a Green Dragon.”

“The kind that lives near water?”

“Yeah. He lived in a riverfront dungeon near the sea, where the entrance was blocked during high tide. We had to cut our trip short though, because of some complications, so I only saw it a bit.”

Duan was almost drawn into the conversation. It was every adventurer's dream to encounter a dragon, and Duan was no exception. Any adventurer would have found it impossible to abandon a quest and go home when they were facing a dungeon where a dragon lived. Yet at the same time, he didn't feel that that they could go to the dungeon without saying anything to Mister Evans.

Screwing up his courage, Duan interrupted. "Um, can I ask something?"

Olba and Golden Eye simultaneously turned to look at him. Silver Eye, on the other hand, looked down at the floor as though the topic held no interest.

Duan took a deep breath. "I really don't think it's right that we do this without the villagers' consent."

Olba shook his head. "Do you honestly believe there's anything we could say to change their minds, Duan? Face it, as far as they're concerned, we're thieves."

Golden Eye chimed in as if on cue. "Olba's right. There's no point in talking to the villagers. Of course I understand where they're coming from, and I even sympathize to a degree, but we have our own objectives. And we're not backing down."

Seeing that Duan had nothing else to say, Olba and Golden Eye continued talking about the quest.

"Any idea how smart this thing is?" asked Olba.

Golden Eye shook his head. "The encyclopedia isn't much help there either, I'm afraid. But my sense is that the dragon isn't very intelligent. There's more superstition than fact when it comes to these creatures.

"For instance, that legend about Lord Alkyl burning up the skies. I suspect the island folk made it up as a kind of propaganda, to make the dragon seem even more terrifying than it really is."

“You’re right about the lack of facts,” said Olba. Sheathing his sword, he pulled out the quest scenario from his pack. “According to my scenario, nobody’s ever made it all the way to the dragon.”

Golden Eye produced his own quest scenario. “Yes, it’s the same in mine. So it seems we have to plan carefully for the dungeon, because that’s clearly where most adventurers fail.”

“It’s easy to see why. Lots of tough monsters there.”

“My scenario shows six types, and there are probably more creeping about.”

“We can count on that, unfortunately. And look how complex the dungeon is.”

“Hmmm. No wonder the dragon took a liking to it. Luckily, we’ve got maps.”

“Unluckily, they only go about halfway. After that, we’re on our own.”

Suddenly Duan couldn’t take it anymore. He needed to stretch his legs and do some thinking. He stood up.

Check, who had been half asleep by the window, flew over and landed on his shoulder. Olba and Golden Eye didn’t so much as glance up as he opened the door to the guest room and slipped out into the empty hall.



CHAPTER 38:

A VERY UNPLEASANT SURPRISE



Duan headed back to the living room, hoping for a chance to talk with Mister or Missus Evans. However, only Ken was there.

“What’s up, Duan?”

Duan glanced around the room. “Umm, where are the Evanses?”

“Mother’s in the kitchen, making dinner. Father’s gone over to the mayor’s house.”

“The mayor’s?” Duan didn’t like the sound of that. “What’s he gone there for?”

Ken’s face turned a bright red. “Er, well, to tell him that you’ll be going back to Kovenia tomorrow.”

Duan sighed. “Right . . .”

Ken gave Duan a knowing wink. “Except you’re *not* going back, are you?” He paused to cast a quick glance toward the kitchen door, which remained closed. “You’re going after Lord Alkyl’s treasure, aren’t you?”

Duan lowered himself onto the sofa. "To tell the truth, Ken, I don't know what we're going to do. It's all so complicated . . ."

"Complicated?" Ken stroked Check's head; the grinia looked as if he were falling asleep. "What's complicated about it? Don't you want to face a dragon? I thought that was the goal of every adventurer!"

"It is. But this isn't how I imagined it would be. There's more involved than just the dragon."

Ken nodded sagely. "Ah, you mean the dungeon. Yes, it's very difficult. In fact, no adventurer has ever made it all the way through. They either turn back because of the monsters there—or they don't come back at all. But . . . can you keep a secret?"

"Sure."

Looking Duan in the eye, Ken whispered, "Don't tell my folks, but sometimes we go exploring in Lord Alkyl's dungeon!"

Duan couldn't hide his surprise. "What? Who's we?"

"Me and some friends of mine. There's five of us, all guys of course."

"What do you mean, 'of course'?"

"Well, adventuring isn't for girls. Everybody knows that, right?"

"Wrong," said Duan, thinking again of Agnis. "Where did you get a crazy idea like that?"

Ken shrugged. "Almost all the adventurers that come to the island are guys, so we just figured . . ."

"Hmm."

"Anyway, I'm going to be an adventurer when I grow up—we all are. We're going to train and get real strong. Then, even if Lord Alkyl goes away, we'll still be able to protect the island from invaders, right?"

“Er, right.” Because a more-or-less constant state of war had existed between his homeland, Froll, and neighboring Ponzo during the years that Duan was growing up, he knew all too well that Ken’s noble intent was little more than a childish dream. Ken had grownup protected by the Red Dragon; he didn’t know the first thing about the real terror and sadness of war. But when Duan looked into Ken’s sparkling eyes, he was reminded so strongly of himself as he’d been before joining the army and inadvertently beginning his career as an adventurer that he couldn’t bring himself to crush the boy’s illusions.

That was when they heard a noise like there was a large group of people coming. The front door opened and Mister Evans walked in. A crowd of village men pressed in behind him, glaring at Duan.

Mister Evans looked at Duan and Ken suspiciously. “Where are the others? Heck, have they left already?”

“They’re still in the guest room,” replied Duan, getting to his feet.

Mister Evans gave a sigh of relief. “Lock the door straightaway. I hope it has a lock. And what about the window? How’s the window?” asked a large man behind Mister Evans.

“You can lock the door from the outside, and there are iron bars on the window,” replied Mister Evans as he lifted his hand lightly.

“But one of them is a sorcerer? Surely they’ll be able to open up iron bars quite easily?” asked another man.

“And that fighter—I’m sure he could break it open swinging his large sword at it.”

“Well, we can deal with it when the time comes. Just get the door locked . . .” instructed the large man, at which point Mister Evans hurried off in the direction of the guest room.

Duan finally understood the situation. The villagers were going to lock them into that room and then bundle them onto the boat by force.

“So, what about this kid?” The large man suddenly came up behind Duan and bound his arms.

Ken grasped onto the large man’s thick arm. “Mayor, please stop. Duan’s different. He just said to me that he wasn’t going to go to the dungeon.”

The large man was called Munashiva Millstone. He was the mayor of Luca village.

“Ken, I’m sorry, but we’re going to tie him up until the ship departs tomorrow. It’s only one night.” And with that, Mayor Millstone grabbed Duan’s arm again and signaled to some of the other villagers.

One of the villagers was carrying a rope, and he used it to bind Duan tightly. Then they sat him down on the nearby sofa. At that moment, a loud banging noise arose from the guest room. Duan figured that the two-headed wizard and Olba must have realized that they had been locked in.

As Mister Evans returned, Mayor Millstone asked him, “How did it go?”

“Just as we expected,” replied Mister Evans as he pointed his chin toward the back of the house.

Olba’s angry voice rang out, “Open this door!”

CHAPTER 39:

THE BREATH OF FIRE



However, the next day, and the next, the ship could not depart. It had suffered more damage during the attack of the Loudness June than had been realized at the time, and it was going to take at least a couple of extra days before the *Marchin* would be seaworthy again.

“This is tough,” complained Olba as he lay back on his bed. “It would be easy to break this door down, but it’s not like we could really do that.”

Golden Eye laughed quietly. “You’ve been saying that all day. The truth is, you really do want to break the door down, don’t you?”

Olba leaned the top half of his body forward. “Well, yeah. Pushed into a small room like this . . . A guy can’t even go to the bathroom in peace!”

Olba and the two-headed wizard had been locked in the guest room since that evening. Of course, they were allowed to go out when they needed to use the toilet, but then there were

three guards for each of them, and one of those guards would actually enter the toilet with them.

Because Mister Evans' wife, Lorna, felt guilty about imprisoning Dorothy's friends, she made a point of bringing them homecooked meals. But that didn't calm the spirits of Olba and the two-headed wizard.

Meanwhile, Duan was actually allowed to roam around the house freely. The villagers figured that he probably couldn't do anything on his own, and Ken and Lorna had vouched for him as well.

Thanks to that, he was able to find out all the villagers' stories.

Of particular interest was the story of the mayor's father, Yum Millstone. Yum had been mayor until he gave up his seat to his son; since then, he had served as the village elder, giving advice on various matters relating to the welfare of the village.

The general story had already been related by Mister Evans, but Duan hadn't heard what the situation was like when the dragon actually arrived at the island, and he hadn't heard about the history of the village before it happened; it was definitely worth talking to someone who had actually been there at the time. Ken and Duan were especially excited when Yum talked about his encounter with the Red Dragon.

"Lord Alkyl's full height . . . Hmm, including the tail, it was about thirty-two feet. He was covered in shiny, orange, lumpy scales; down his spine, from head to tail, were what looked like sharp thorns. And he had a huge mouth—so huge that any man would take a gulp just looking at it. I remember seeing a red tongue flickering inside."

"What about the 'Breath of Fire'?" Duan asked.

The elder nodded dramatically. "I remember it as if it were yesterday," he said. "It was one night just about this time of year,

soon after Lord Alkyl arrived on the island. It was late. I couldn't sleep, so I went out for a walk. I heard a noise like a bird's wings flapping, only more immense than that. I turned toward the mountain, and there I saw the dark shadow of Lord Alkyl in the sky. His great wings were spread wide, and he was circling the top of the mountain. It was one hell of a sight . . . in the light of the moon—the beauty of it sent chills down my spine.”

“Was there an enemy nearby?” asked Duan.

“Perhaps—I don't know. Anyway, I stood transfixed, watching, and then suddenly Lord Alkyl soared up toward the moon. For an instant he was silhouetted against it, his body not just red but also orange, the way fire is both red and orange. He was magnificent. And then it happened. Lord Alkyl roared, and a jet of flame shot from his jaws into the night.”



The elder's story sounded like quite an exaggeration (or, rather, a total exaggeration), but, as they were listening, Duan could imagine himself standing there looking up into the night sky in wonder. It would have been a majestic sight: the dragon flying gently across the night sky. Duan thought that now that he was here, he would love to see it at least once. However, on the other hand, the more he listened to the villagers' stories, the more he felt that the reason he and the others had come here, to go to the lair of the dragon and steal his treasure, just wasn't a good idea.

It's not like a dragon is only strong or big. It also possesses a high intelligence, and it's said that it also has a keen sense of smell and hearing. In that case, however we go about it, it'll be able to tell when we've snuck in. Yeah. I'll tell Olba and the others about this. I'll tell them that this dragon is a couple of times—no, ten times more advanced than they think. And then I'll get them to give this quest up, whatever it takes.

But I wonder how they'll respond . . .

Unlike me, they're veteran fighters with years of experience. Even if I explain to them that this dragon is an overwhelming opponent, perhaps they'll just get all excited at the prospect of facing him—because it'll test their own skills to go up against such a worthy opponent. And that will have the opposite effect.

Having thought about this deeply, Duan finally caught on to the real objective of the mayor and the villagers.

The reason they had let Duan loose was because they thought that he would go back and convince the others to abandon the quest. So, in turns, they had preached about how important the dragon was to the village . . .

I suppose they want things to go as smoothly as possible too. Right—I don't know if Olba and the others will understand, but I will do my best to convince them. That's all I can do.

These were the thoughts running through Duan's mind when he was falling asleep on the third night after their arrival at the island. However, everything changed the next day, even before the sun had risen.

During the night, when there were only two guards on watch, Olba and the two-headed wizard had escaped. They had then left the village, taking the guards along as hostages. Due to the speed of the escape, and also because it had been such an aggressive tactic, by the time the villagers had realized what had happened, it was too late.

After a while, the two men who had been taken hostage returned.

"They promised not to anger the dragon," said one of the men.

"Unless we go after them," said the other. "In that case, all bets are off."

The mayor's shoulders drooped when he heard this. "Those idiots. As if we'd really follow them into those dangerous dungeons. Hell . . . we were slack just because it was nighttime."

Duan was shocked to learn that Olba had left him behind.

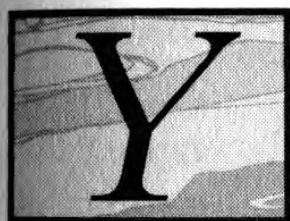
"Duan, what wrong? Gii-iis," called Check, who had noticed that he was standing there with his mouth hanging open.

At that, Duan returned to his senses. "I will go after them," he announced to Mister Evans and the others. "I will go and bring them back."

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CHAPTER 40:

DUAN TO THE RESCUE!



ou must be joking,” said Missus Evans, staring at Duan with a frighteningly serious expression. “I’ve seen full-grown men in peak condition leave for the dungeon, only to stumble back hours or days later, bleeding from a hundred horrible wounds or raving like madmen, out of their minds with fever and fear. If men like that—men who make Olba look like a ninety-eight-pound weakling—can’t survive the dungeon, what makes you think you’ll do any better? Why, just look at yourself! You *are* a ninety-eight-pound weakling! It would be tantamount to murder to let you go.” She turned to her husband with a look of fierce determination. “We simply won’t permit it, will we, dear?”

Mister Evans nodded firmly and spoke to Duan in a reasonable tone of voice. “Your bravery does you credit, Duan, but you must face the fact that there’s nothing you can do. Whether or not you go after them is irrelevant at this point. It’s possible your friends will realize the folly of their actions before

much longer and return to us safely of their own accord. Perhaps they're on their way back now. But perhaps not. And if they don't turn back, if they press on ever deeper into the dungeon, why, then they're as good as dead already. Throwing yourself onto the pyre isn't going to bring them back; it will only add another useless death to the tally."

But Mayor Millstone disagreed. "If the lad is offering to go after them, I think we should allow it. They threatened to anger Lord Alkyl if any of *us* followed them, but Duan isn't one of us—he's one of *them*!"

"Pah," said Mister Evans dismissively. "Even if by some miracle he actually managed to catch up to them without being killed, do you really think they would listen to anything he had to say?"

"We don't know," the major answered. "But we have to pick the best option for us . . ."

Duan panicked when he saw them arguing. He wanted to reach Olba and the others before they got too deep into the dungeon. He wanted to slip out quietly, but there was a bunch of villagers standing by the exit, and Missus Evans was near the back door. At this rate, he would find himself kept under lock and key.

Meanwhile, the discussion didn't seem to be progressing anywhere. In fact, the other villagers even started to agree with Mister Evans.

"I don't think this child would be able to catch up with them."

"Yeah, Evans is right. Even without the monsters, the dungeon is filled with traps and pitfalls. This boy wouldn't last five minutes."

"And look at his physique! It would be different if he could use magic."

“Which he can’t.”

“Then he might stand a chance.”

“Which he won’t.”

“I’ll give you five-to-one odds that he doesn’t even make it as far as the dungeon entrance, much less catch up to them!”

Ouch, thought Duan, wincing inwardly, *you don’t have to be so mean! But I suppose it’s the truth . . .*

Duan’s self-confidence was in tatters as he listened to the villagers trying to top each other in tearing him down. What made it even worse was that up until now he’d been feeling a lot better about himself. After all, during the voyage aboard the *Marchin*, he had killed a large number of Ags, increasing his level at last, and in the attack of the Loudness June, when even the captain had given up hope, it was he, Duan Surk, who had figured out how to drive the sea monster away, saving the ship and everyone aboard her. All these accomplishments had boosted his self-esteem. But now he felt like a total loser. He slumped down onto the sofa and stared vacantly at his fingertips when suddenly he heard a small voice calling his name.

“Duan.”

“Giiis?!” Check, who had been sitting on the armrest of the sofa, raised his face.

Duan covered Check’s mouth and looked around. Then he saw Ken’s face between the curtains; he was standing outside the window, on the terrace. Duan flashed him a questioning look. Ken widened his own eyes and signaled toward the window enthusiastically.

Luckily, the villagers were arguing more fiercely than ever. Nobody was looking in Duan’s direction. He quietly got up and went to the window.

He waited a moment, then swiftly hid behind the curtain. Then he opened the window and slipped outside. Check went with him, of course.

"Thanks, Ken."

"Never mind that now," Ken said. "C'mon." He led Duan and Check through a small gap between the forest trees in the back garden and then guided them to a small mountain path. He left Duan standing there for some time while he went to retrieve Duan's luggage and equipment.

At last he returned. "Here's your luggage. I think that's everything . . . I put in some food and water as well."

"Thanks, Ken. I owe you one." Duan quickly donned his armor and strapped on his sword.

Ken laughed happily. "Don't worry about it. Anyway, about the dungeon . . . Can you take me with you?"

"What?!" Duan couldn't believe his ears. "You can't!"

"Why not? I'm all prepared!"

And in fact, Duan now noticed that Ken had dressed in clothing suitable for adventuring. But that didn't change his mind about bringing the boy. "Look, Ken, your family would kill me if I let you tag along. By all reports, the dungeon is quite dangerous. If anything happened to you, I'd never forgive myself."

Ken was not in the least dissuaded. "It'll be better if you take me. I've been to the entrance lots of times. I reckon you'd get lost if you tried to find it on your own. Besides, if we hang around here any longer, Father will catch us."

"B-but . . ."

Ken was right. There was no time to be hanging around. But he felt that he shouldn't take Ken to a place there were certain dangers . . . Duan was at his wit's end when Ken threw in another shocker.

“Okay, guys,” he called suddenly. “You can come out now!”

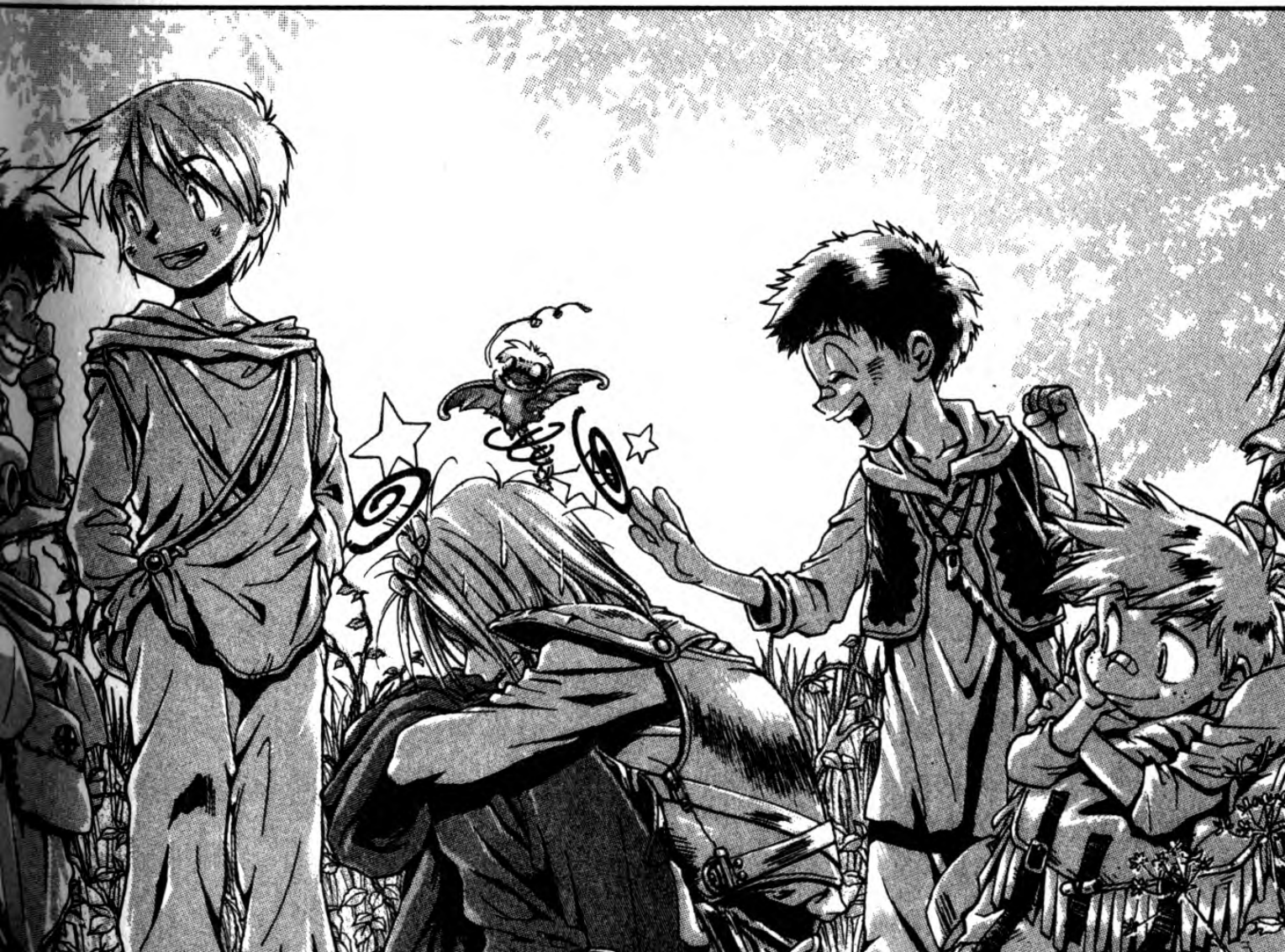
“W-wait,” said Duan. “G-guys . . . ?”

“Chaa!” cried Check. “Boys come!”

A group of young boys around the same age as Ken emerged from the forest, each wearing a backpack of his own. There were five in total. They stood around Duan, eager faces bronzed by the sun, and elbowed each other bashfully as they whispered back and forth excitedly.

Duan felt a sense of doom descending over him. It settled on his shoulders, heavy as a stone. He sank down slowly under its weight until he was squatting on his haunches, rubbing his head as if to dispel a sudden headache. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” he muttered to himself.

A boy with chubby cheeks stepped up and thrust out his hand boldly. “Hi. I’m Will Susan. I’ve heard about you from Ken. Nice to meet you, Duan!”



Duan stood and shook the boy's hand. "R-right; nice to meet you too."

At that, all the others surged forward, also wanting to shake Duan's hand. Ken started smacking them on the backs of their heads. "C'mon, guys, we can do introductions later!" Turning to Duan, he said, "We have to be quick; otherwise, Father will find us. Follow me. Let me at least take you to the entrance."

Then he quickly started climbing the mountain path himself. The other kids stared at Duan with hopeful faces.

Duan sighed. It was true; he didn't know the island that well, and Olba had taken all of the items from the quest scenario. Even though he could walk around the dungeon and map the area, it would really be better if he had someone to guide him at least to the entrance. In fact, maybe this way he could get there faster than Olba and the others.

"Okay," he said, giving in, "just until the entrance. What if one of you got hurt—how would I apologize to the villagers?"

Ken and the boys all raised a cry of joy.

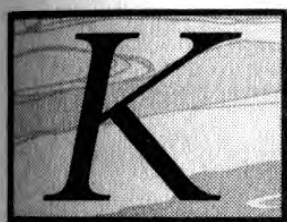
"Gii-is," squawked Check as he flapped around in the air. "Feels like picnic. Chaa!"

"Ha ha ha," laughed Duan weakly.

The sun, which had begun to rise at last, shone through the foliage of the trees to dapple their backs with light as they climbed the steep mountain path.

CHAPTER 41:

TOO LATE!



unoro Mountain stood at the center of Luca Island. The path they had started out following was long gone, and, at least as far as Duan could tell, nothing had replaced it. He was gasping for breath, drenched in sweat from every pore, his legs crying out in agony, while Ken and his friends were whistling and laughing as they climbed, frisking along like mountain goats, as if it were nothing more than a happy-go-lucky hike to a picnic. Either he hadn't recovered from his illness as fully as he'd thought, or the children of Luca Island were superhuman. They only had a faint lining of sweat on their foreheads; otherwise, they seemed completely fine. From ahead and behind, they cheered Duan on.

"Come on, Duan," encouraged one boy.

"Let me carry your pack for you!" offered another.

"You must be stifling in that heavy cape," observed a third.

"Want me to hold it?"

“Uh, no thanks, really, I’m fine . . .” Duan grinned weakly, wiping the sweat from his forehead before it could drip into his eyes. *Phew*, Duan thought. *Can this possibly get any more embarrassing?*

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Check came flying back and landed on his right shoulder. It seemed to Duan that the tiny winged lizard weighed at least fifty pounds, and he felt himself sagging noticeably under this added burden.

“Gii-is! Check heal?” asked the grinia, eyeing Duan with concern.

“Better . . . save it . . . Check,” he huffed in reply as he straightened himself out. “Might . . . need it . . . later.”

“Check wait. Go scout!” The grinia sprang aloft and zoomed back the way he’d come, his little legs churning furiously as if he were running on air.

Check’s energy and enthusiasm only left Duan feeling more drained than ever. “Ken,” he called out wearily. “How much farther?”

Ken stopped and looked back, resting one foot atop a moss-covered log. “I think we should be able to see it soon. Shall we take a break? You haven’t had breakfast yet, have you?”

“No,” said Duan. “Must . . . hurry . . .”

“It’ll be okay,” Ken assured him. “See, all the scenarios show one route up to the dungeon, but we know a secret way, right, guys?”

The others nodded proudly.

“This is a super shortcut,” Will boasted. “We’ll beat your friends to the entrance by a mile.”

“Good,” said Duan. He paused to raise his waterskin to his lips and take a sip of the cool, fresh water. Then, after wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, he added, “But let’s press on

to the entrance. We can have breakfast there while we wait for Olba and the two-headed wizard to arrive—unless . . .”

“Unless what?” asked Ken.

A thought had suddenly occurred to him. “Are you absolutely sure there’s only one entrance to the dungeon?”

A tall boy named Lezar answered him. “Actually, there is another entrance, but it’s at the very top of the mountain. Lord Alkyl uses it to go in and out of his lair. Your friends couldn’t possibly go that way.”

Duan breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay, then, let’s hurry.” Duan lifted his heavy feet and started to climb the uphill path again. The morning sunshine got stronger and stronger. Even though it was fall, the heat was almost choking. The smells of loamy earth, pollinating trees and grasses, and decaying vegetation were so strong that Duan began to feel drugged, almost like he was sleepwalking. And because by now it was so steep, they had to tug on the taller grasses and the branches of trees to climb the path. Worse, everything was covered in dew and felt slippery. And sure enough, when he was three steps into climbing a particularly large rock, Duan’s foot suddenly slipped.

“Argh!”

“Duan!”

The two boys behind him quickly got him back up.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay. This area is really slippery, so be careful.”

“Yeah . . . thanks.” *Urgh . . . this is humiliating! If this is the shortcut to the entrance, I’d hate to see the long way . . .* He patted off the dirt off his muddy hands and sighed again deeply—the same sigh he had made many times before.

Just then, Ken’s excited voice rang out from up ahead.

“Duan! We’re here!”

Check's cries mingled in. "Chaaa! Find cave!"

The news gave Duan a burst of fresh energy, and soon he was standing with Ken and the other boys in front of a dark hole in the side of the mountain. It was just large enough for one person to crawl into, the opening half covered by a tangled mass of hanging vines and tree roots.

"This is it?" he asked doubtfully. He'd been expecting something grander.

"It gets a lot bigger inside," Ken explained somewhat defensively. Duan's heart, which had only just begun to calm, started to throb again. He stuck his head inside the opening but couldn't see a thing.

"You need a light," said Ken.

"Right." Duan quickly produced his Port-o-Lant and lit it.

"Wow, that's called a Port-o-Lant, right? A fighter showed me one once," said a sharp-sighted boy with a square face.

Without replying, Duan checked that the Port-o-Lant was working properly and then poked his head into the dungeon again. He extended the hand that held the Port-o-Lant and shined the light as far as he could into the hole. As the boys had said, it was a completely natural dungeon, and he could see large outcroppings of rock here and there. The ground inside wasn't rocky, it seemed to be of red earth. And on that red earth, he could see lots of old footprints. Small ones and large ones . . . He guessed that the small ones were probably from Ken and the others. However, his eye caught a set of footprints that were especially large . . . And what's more, they were deep . . .

"Oh, no," he exclaimed. "We're too late!"

"What is it?" Ken came up beside him.

"They got here first." Duan indicated the footprints. "They're already inside!"

"Wow, your friends must've run the whole way," said Ken. "But look how fresh the footprints are. We can still catch them!"

"What do you mean, 'we'?" asked Duan, turning to the boy. "This is as far as you go, Ken. I'll go on alone from here."

But the boys all shook their heads.

"No way!"

"We're coming too!"

"That's right," added Ken. "You still need us, Duan—more than ever."

"What do you mean?"



"There are a lot of twists and turns to this dungeon. You'll be hopelessly lost in no time without a map. Luckily, me and the gang have done quite a bit of exploring in this area. We haven't gone in too far, but we can guide you for a while longer."

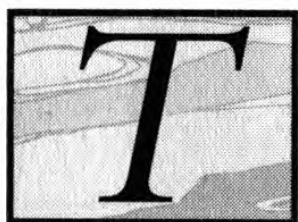
"Since we know the way, you won't have to map as you go," added Will. "It's your best chance to catch the others."

Duan sighed. It seemed he had no choice but to give in . . . again. "Okay, okay," he said. "I don't have time to argue with you. You can come along, but only as far as you've been before. Once we reach that point, whether we've caught up to the others or not, you guys have to promise to turn back and go home, okay?"

The boys raised a cry of joy that reverberated through the entire forest.

CHAPTER 42:

INTO THE DUNGEON



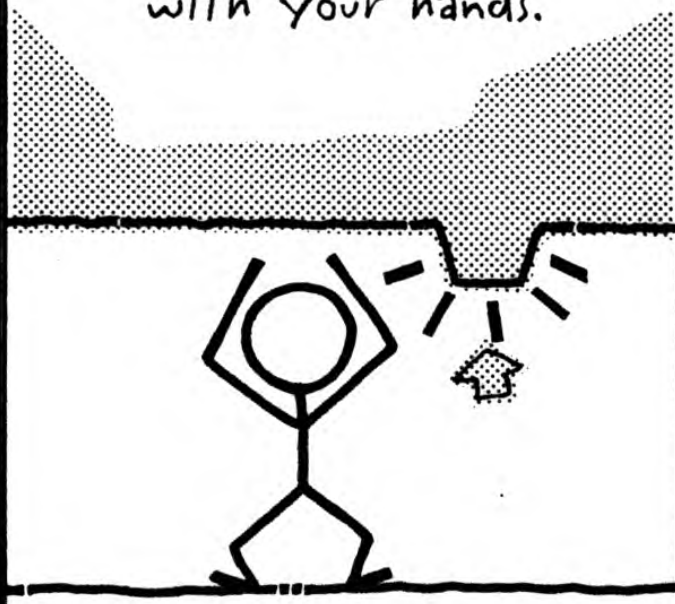
he narrow entrance soon opened out into a much wider cavern, enabling Duan and the boys to stand. The air was cooler, so much so that Duan shivered, as did Check, who burrowed into the folds of his cape, seeking warmth. And though the Port-o-Lant cast a steady, reassuring light, it did not vanquish the darkness, but only pushed it back. Who knew what horrible monsters were watching from the shadows beyond its reach, preparing to strike? And if the monsters didn't get them, the dungeon itself was deadly enough to do the job on its own. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like gigantic clubs ready to brain unwary adventurers, and for all Duan knew, the dirt- and stone-covered floor might conceal booby traps, pitfalls, and other nasty surprises.

Imagine if I got a concussion here and collapsed—it would be beyond pathetic. How stupid would that be? I would be an object of ridicule. I should just quit adventuring right now.

1. Navigate the dungeon by using your Trap-Detector to test the ground in front.



2. Look out for your head too. Try guarding it with your hands.



3. Don't forget to check behind you—a monster may attack at any time.



Do all these things if you want to have a prayer of surviving!



Smart dungeon adventurers made sure to carry an 11-Foot Stick at all times. The 11-Foot Stick was a special telescoping staff that adventurers used to probe the ground ahead of them. A stretch of seemingly solid earth could crumble like a thin crust of snow as soon as someone stepped on it, sending the unfortunate person and the rest of his or her party plummeting to a gruesome death. Or a mechanism cleverly buried in the ground, responding to a slight increase in pressure, could trigger a flight of poisoned arrows, or the release of an enraged monster, or something even worse. Using an 11-Foot Stick didn't guarantee safe passage out of a dungeon, but it sure improved the odds. No, it didn't pay to go wandering about in a dungeon without an 11-Foot Stick!

Time to whip out the 11-Foot Stick, Duan thought.

The good ol' trusty 11-Foot Stick!

Arrrgh! I forgot about the stupid 11-Foot Stick!

He'd purchased an 11-Foot Stick in Kovenia along with all the other supplies, but Olba had taken it with him. In a pinch, a long stick cut from a tree could be used, but Duan hadn't thought to cut one before entering the dungeon. He sighed. He wasn't exactly getting off to a good start.

"Sorry, guys," he said, turning to the boys. "We've got to go back outside for a minute. I have to find a stick . . ." Duan began explaining, but Will, who was standing behind Ken, stepped forward and interrupted him.

"You mean something like this?" He was holding a slender staff perfectly suited to dungeon exploration.

"Er, yeah. Exactly like that."

"Here, take this one. We've got plenty!"

"We always carry them when we're exploring," said Ken. "We just leave them here by the entrance when we're done. That way we can use them again and again."

"Hmm, good thinking," Duan said, taking the stick from Will. *Jeez, can I possibly be any more useless? These kids are better prepared than I am! They must think I'm a joke . . .*

"We got the idea from a catalog an adventurer left here," Ken told him. "From an item called the 11-Foot Stick."

"Yes," Duan answered ruefully. "Olba has ours, or else I'd be using it now."

Ken nodded. "I figured it had to be something like that, you being such an experienced adventurer and all."

Duan listened hard for sarcasm, but there simply wasn't any. Ken and the other kids really had confidence in him. They were depending on him as much as he depended on them. *No matter what*, Duan swore to himself, touched and encouraged by their faith, *I'm not going to let them down.*

The air was cool and damp. Wind blew in from time to time from the entrance, but deeper into the cave, the air was stagnant. Although usually he would be the first one to investigate, Check now clung to Duan's neck tightly. It was the little grinia's first time in a proper dungeon, so Duan could only imagine how frightened he must be.

I'm scared too, he thought. *It's okay now because the others are here, but my heart is pounding just from walking! What would I do if something jumped out at me? A-and what if it was a monster? Baring its teeth and wielding its sharp claws!*

As they moved deeper into the dungeon, Duan felt the presence of unseen eyes more and more keenly. He couldn't help feeling that there was something lurking in the shadows. Every time there was a small sound, he shined the Port-o-Lant immediately in that direction, but there was never anything. Then he would breathe a small sigh of relief . . . until the next time there was a sound.

Suddenly his arm was seized in a strong grip . . .

“Agggh!” He cried out, nearly dropping the Port-o-Lant. His heart felt like it had stopped beating.

“Oh, sorry, did I scare you?” It was Lezar. He looked at Duan a bit sheepishly. “I was afraid you were going to step in that hole. You can really hurt your ankle that way.”

Flustered, Duan shined the Port-o-Lant at the ground where Lezar was pointing. Sure enough, there was a hole there just large enough for his foot, and he’d been right on the verge of stepping into it. He’d been so intent on spying out monsters in the shadows that he’d forgotten to keep probing the ground with his staff.

“Uh, thanks,” he said, hoping the boy couldn’t see him blushing. *The scenario mentioned these holes—I remember now. There are quite a few; some are large enough to swallow a person without a trace! Dang, I should’ve memorized the scenario when I had the chance. We had so much time to kill aboard the Marchin—why didn’t I think of it then?*

Duan had just assumed that he could leave that sort of thing to Olba. It hadn’t occurred to him that he might find himself on his own, separated from the big fighter. He’d prided himself on anticipating every possible necessity and outcome when he’d stocked up on supplies and provisions, yet he’d completely neglected the most basic precaution of all. Instead of studying the scenario and maps thoroughly to familiarize himself with what lay ahead, he’d barely bothered to glance at them, and even the few details he remembered (or thought he remembered) were turning out to be dangerously inaccurate and incomplete. Duan felt like crawling into a hole. *I need to start thinking ahead more! I can’t keep blundering from one situation to the next.*

I guess I’ve still got a lot to learn about being an adventurer after all . . .

At last, they came to another fork in the path.

Ken turned to Duan and said, "We've only been to the right. We haven't explored the left path yet . . ."

"What happens when you go right?" asked Duan.

"It leads to a big cavern with three exits," Ken said.

"And where do they go?"

Ken and the other boys looked at each other. "We've never actually gone past the cavern," Ken admitted.

"So this is as far as you've come?"

"Yeah . . ."

Duan nodded. "Right. Then this is as far as you go." Seeing that the boys were about to protest, he quickly added, "Remember, you promised me that you would turn back without a fight. I appreciate all your help, but there's nothing more you can do. From here on, I go alone."

"Duan not alone!" squawked the grinnia indignantly, peeking out from Duan's cape. "Check come too!"

He thanked the boys again, shaking each of their hands. "Be careful on your way home," he said. Feeling tears come to his eyes, he abruptly turned away and started down the path. He wondered if he would ever see them again.

"Goodbye, boys!" called Check, waving his forepaw. "Goodbye!" Then, a moment later: "Kaa! Boys come!"

Duan sighed heavily and spun around. Sure enough, Ken and his friends were following them. They froze when Duan turned.

"What's the matter with you guys?" he demanded angrily. "Dungeon adventuring is serious ! Stop fooling around and go home like you promised."

But Ken shook his head. "Sorry, Duan. We won't abandon you and Check. You need our help, whether you realize it or not. Look how much we've helped you already!"

"Well, yeah . . . Of course, you guys have been great. I don't think I would have been able to get here so quickly if it weren't for you."

"Then let us—"

"No. There may be monsters farther on. I don't know what might happen. You guys know the stories too, right? Beefy adventurers returning barely alive?"

"But these monsters are a problem for the island," said one boy. "We wanna help too! We hate the way grownups just tell us we'll get in the way."

"Anyway," added another boy, "the grownups say there are monsters, but they've never even been here, so how do they know?"

"That's right. They pretend to know, but I think they're making it up."

Duan had already given in to the boys twice. He was tempted to do so again. He was terrified at the prospect of advancing into the dungeon with only Check for company. It would be a big comfort to have Ken and the others along, even if only for a little while. But he couldn't allow it. He didn't believe for a second that there were no monsters in the dungeon. Maybe they hadn't seen any yet, but he could sense them out there, watching and waiting. No, this time he had to be firm. He had to save the boys from their own stupidity.

"No," he said firmly. "You should go back now. I want you to go back."

Ken, looking like he was about to burst into tears, opened his mouth to protest, but before he could say anything, something black came flying out of the left side of the fork—the path that Ken and the others hadn't explored yet.

"Giiis!" screamed the grinia, springing into the air above Duan's head. "Danger! Danger!"

“Aaaah!”

“Wh-what is *that*?”

“Aaaargh!”

Pandemonium erupted as black forms swiftly swooped down onto the boys. The monsters appeared out of thin air—creatures of living shadow that had torn themselves free of the dark. They flew so quickly, flitting in and out of the light cast by the Port-o-Lant, that it was hard to get a good look at them or even tell how many there were. Ken and his friends, panicking, swung their staffs wildly to fend off the black-winged swarm. The boys succeeded in dealing out some vicious blows . . . but only to each other.

“Ow!”

“Watch where you’re swinging that thing!”

“Ooof!”

Duan shouted for them all to calm down, but his words went unheeded in the confusion.

Suddenly, a shrill scream rang out: “Aaagh! It’s on my neck!”

Sure enough, one of the batlike things had fastened itself to the neck of one of them. The boy, Lezar, dropped his staff and slapped at the hideous creature, but to no avail. His friends were too busy fending off attacks to go to his aid.

The suddenness of the attack had frozen him for a second, but now, seeing Lezar stagger back against one wall, his face gone unnaturally pale as the monster clung to his throat like some nightmarish black orchid, Duan’s paralysis lifted and he launched himself toward the terrified boy.

“I’m coming!” he called. “Try to stay still!”

What should I do? he asked himself as he ran. *What would Olba do? Hmm—I’ll bet he’d just whip out his sword and strike that thing from Lezar’s neck without blinking an eye! But I couldn’t manage that in a*

million years. My swordsmanship isn't good enough. If I tried, I'd probably hurt Lezar worse than the monster . . . Duan grabbed the monster with the flapping black wings and pulled its sharp chin open.

The monster, which looked like a bat, shrieked hysterically and shook its arms and legs. It was obvious that it wasn't a bat, however, because it had four arms and legs apart from its wings. It was also three times the size of a bat. Its hairy body and large wings were absolutely black. And so were its sharp-clawed hands and feet. Only its small, thin eyes were red.

"Aaah! Duan, help!"

"Aaargh!"

Other kids were getting attacked while he was helping this one.

"Take that!" Duan struck the monster he was holding with his sword.

After a while, a foggy white vapor began to leak from the wound. Accompanying this uncanny mist was a strange, sickly sweet aroma that would have been pleasant if only it hadn't been so strong.

Ugh, what is that smell?

The red glow of the monster's eyes dimmed, then went out all together.

Duan heaved a sigh of relief. *Whew—that's one down!*

Suddenly Check swooped close. "Danger! Thing come!"

He turned just in time to see another of the red-eyed monsters zooming toward him with its claws outstretched and its mouth open to reveal rows of fangs as sharp as needles. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Duan brought his sword up to fend the thing off. The monster was unable to swerve in time. It flew into the blade, impaling itself. Grimacing with revulsion, Duan used the heel of his boot to slide the limp carcass off his sword and onto the ground.

“Two down,” he said to no one in particular.

“Duan! Ken—he’s, he’s . . . !”

The others looked like they were about to cry.

Two of the monsters had attached themselves to Ken’s back.

Duan rushed over. He peeled one of the monsters from Ken’s back, hurled it forcefully to the ground, then ran it through with his sword before it could rise again. Without pausing, he did the same with the other one.

Once more the strange white mist issued forth like some ghostly exhalation from the dying monsters. Again, the sickly sweet smell permeated the cool dungeon air . . .

Duan spun around to face his next foe, only to realize that he’d finished off all the black-winged horrors. There had only been four, but they had moved so quickly and attacked so relentlessly that he’d thought he was facing many more.

But four was more than enough for the boys, who had reached the end of their tethers. They all started to cry at once and ran over to Duan.

“Duan, you saved us!”

“I was so scared!”

They sobbed and sniveled.

“Waaaaah . . . I want my mommy!”

Despite their injuries, none of the boys seemed to be in bad shape. “It’s okay,” Duan tried to reassure them. “The monsters are dead; they can’t hurt you anymore.”

Or can they?

Recalling Olba’s admonition to “expect the unexpected,” Duan decided to examine the things more closely. He picked up the Port-o-Lant and shined its light directly on the corpse of the first monster he’d killed.

To his shock and dismay, he saw that the white fog which had “bled” from the monster’s wound was seeping back into the corpse . . . Or no, not corpse, because it wasn’t dead anymore—the thing was twitching its limbs weakly. It was alive! As Duan looked on in horror, the red light suddenly reappeared in its eyes and, with a feral growl, the thing spread its wings and soared back into the air.

No way, he thought to himself, scarcely believing his own eyes. What kind of monster am I facing here? Don’t tell me these things are undead!

Another section of the quest scenario popped into Duan’s mind as he watched the resurrected monster. Yes, he remembered now: he’d read about these creatures!

This is a Vanilla Bat for sure—undead! It gets its name from that sweet smell it makes when it regenerates . . .

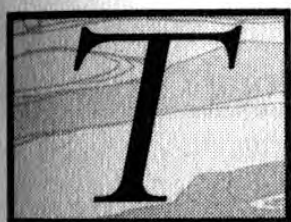
But what are its weaknesses? It’s got to have some!

Unfortunately, Duan couldn’t remember that part of the scenario. He cursed himself again for failing to memorize it when he had the chance. He stood there, wracking his brains, desperately trying to come up with something, anything.

The next thing he knew, the rest of the Vanilla Bats had returned to life. Now, ignoring the boys and the grinia, the hellish creatures attacked Duan.

CHAPTER 43:

VANILLA BATS



he monsters were tricky enough due to the fact that they flew. On top of that, there were four of them, so that whenever Duan was engaged with one, the other three zoomed in, drawing blood with their teeth and claws, then zoomed away before he could react. And though the creatures were easily killed, they returned to life as strong as ever. The same could not be said of Duan. He knew it was only a matter of time before he reached the limits of his strength. Already he bled from dozens of wounds. His arm ached as though he'd been swinging his sword for hours, and he was beginning to feel dizzy from the exertion and loss of blood.

I-I could lose this fight, he realized. It could all end right here . . . But then who would protect the boys? How would they get home safely?

With a burst of fresh energy, Duan tore off the Vanilla Bat that was chewing on his arm, slammed it into the ground, and stepped on it with all his might. The bat gave a piteous squeak as Duan squished the life out of it with his boot heel.

Then came the release of the milky fog and the too-sweet smell.

The remaining three Vanilla Bats attacked more fiercely than ever.

Duan decided that the boys' best chance was to make a run for it, while he still had enough energy to cover their retreat. "Ken! Everyone!" he called. "I'll keep these guys busy—you run!"

The boys didn't need to be told twice; without a word, they scampered back the way they'd come. Only Ken remained behind. "S-sorry, Duan," he said.

"Forget it, Ken. Just go."

Ken nodded solemnly, then followed his friends.

Now I'm all alone in the dungeon . . .

Only the area around Duan's Port-o-Lant, which had fallen to the floor, was lit.

Fortunately, the Vanilla Bats weren't very strong. They died as soon as he stepped on them or slashed at them.

A Vanilla Bat had landed on Duan's back and was biting into his shoulder. As he tried to pull it off, he lost his balance and fell onto the floor. Taking advantage, the bats swarmed all over him. There were four of them again. He barely had the strength to protect his face and eyes, much less fight them off and regain his footing.

N-no, I can't. I'm losing it . . .

"Giiis! Bad things hurt friend! Check hurt bad things, giiis!"

Check came hurtling into the fight, a green blur amid the attacking black forms. The little grinia was not strong enough to be a threat to the Vanilla Bats, but his sudden appearance had the effect of startling them. They drew back, screeching in anger.

Perhaps it was the brief respite that Check had won him. Perhaps it was the way the brave little grinia had thrown



himself heedlessly into danger. But whatever it was, Duan suddenly remembered something extremely important.

The weakness of the Vanilla Bats . . . If their wounds are closed, they can't reabsorb that white stuff . . . And if they can't reabsorb it, they can't come back to life!

At that, a strange calm descended over Duan. The Vanilla Bats, recovering from their surprise, were already attacking again, but he realized that the scratches and bites of the winged monsters, though painful, were not that serious. The damage looked worse than it really was. The only way these monsters could kill him was if he cooperated in his own demise. He'd nearly done just that by giving in to panic.

Still protecting his eyes, he got to his knees, crawled over to his backpack, and took out his first-aid kit. Opening it, he fished out some bandages.

Now things did not go so well for the Vanilla Bats. Methodically, one at a time, Duan stabbed them and waited for the release of the white fog and the distinctive odor that accompanied it. Then, before the fog could reenter and reanimate the monsters, he quickly bandaged their wounds. Unable to pierce the bandages, the fog drifted apart, dissipating like smoke from a cigar.

Check flew to Duan's shoulder. Perched there, he watched intently, taking evident pleasure in the fate of his enemies. "Bad things!"

"I wonder how Ken and the others did . . . I hope they got away okay."

"Boys there!" said Check, pointing back the way they had come. "Check find!" Duan paused to pick the Port-o-Lant that had fallen on the floor and then followed Check back to the entrance of the cave. There he found Ken and the others. As soon as they saw Duan, they burst into tears. But tears turned to cheers as he told them how he had finished off the Vanilla Bats.

"Wow, Duan, that's amazing!"

"Your levels may be low, but you're way ahead of us when it comes to adventuring!"

"Thanks," said Duan, a little embarrassed at their effusive praise. "I'm glad you guys are okay, but, er . . ." He paused, uncertain how to go on. He didn't want to start up the same old argument again, but there was no way he was going to bring the boys along now.

Ken removed the problem with his next words. Turning to the others, he said, "Guys, I think we'd just be in the way if we went with Duan. Let's go home."

The others nodded in agreement.

Their hangdog expressions made Duan feel sorry for them. "Hey, everyone. Before you go, why don't we eat

breakfast? Come to think of it, I haven't eaten in ages. And we have to tend to your wounds as well, and I need to build up energy."

Ken and the others were instantly happy again. "Yeah. Yeah! They say you can't start a war on an empty stomach."

"Yeah, I'm starved!"

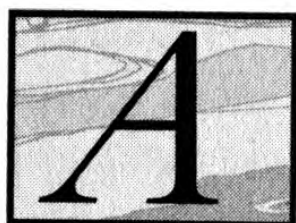
"Duan, here—this is a chicken sandwich that my mom made for me . . ."

"Here, here—eat these pickles too!"

The boys flocked around Duan.

CHAPTER 44:

SHINING SHROOMS



nd then . . . Duan was finally on his own. Well, Check was there too, so he wasn't completely alone . . .

The dungeon was pitch-black. It wouldn't have surprised Duan if the rocks beneath his feet suddenly crumbled away into a hole. It wouldn't have surprised him if the rocks over his head suddenly came falling down, or if something came from beyond the darkness to attack him . . . In fact, there was really nothing that could happen here that would come as a surprise. Especially not after the first monster he'd encountered was an undead creature with the ability to regenerate.

This time, when Duan reached the fork, he avoided the left-hand branch—from which a faint scent of vanilla still emanated—and entered the passage to his right.

Whoa—got to remember to map properly . . .

Setting down the Port-o-Lant, Duan pulled out a notebook and a pencil from his pack and quickly sketched a rough map showing the way from the entrance to his present location.

Man, I should've asked Ken for some chalk or something so that I could mark the walls. Dang, I was supposed to be thinking ahead! Oh well, it's too late now. I'll just have to remember it for next time. If there is a next time!

Wait, what am I saying? I've got to stay positive!

"Positive, kaa!" echoed Check.

Duan gave a start. Without realizing it, he'd spoken out loud.

Isn't that supposed to be the first sign of going crazy? I've got to calm down and get hold of myself. Ummm, where was I? Oh, yeah—marking the walls. Maybe I can use something besides chalk . . .

Rummaging through his pack, Duan found a bag of small metal wedges useful for anchoring ropes while rock climbing. He stuck one into a crack in the wall. It fit perfectly. He nodded, satisfied.

Yeah, that'll work. Good thing I bought a ton of these things! I guess the salesman was right—you can't have too many wedges.

He continued on. After a while, the passage opened out into the cavern that Ken had told him about, with three openings in the wall on the far side. The one on the left and the one in the middle were large enough for Duan to enter; he wasn't sure about the one on the right. He tried the opening on the left first, following the "left-hand rule."

It was a habit of his to always explore the leftmost passage first. This was due to something Olba had once told him. "If you're ever trapped in a maze, Duan, and need to get to the center or back out, just put your hand on the left wall and follow it no matter where it goes. Sooner or later you'll end up where you want to be." This was the so-called "left-hand rule." Of course, it only applied to mazes in which all the walls were joined together or connected to an outer boundary. In most dungeons, the walls didn't join up to each other, and entire

sections existed more or less independently, so the “left-hand rule” didn’t apply. But Duan liked to follow it anyway. It gave him a sense of security amid the uncertainty and randomness of dungeon exploration.

The passageway narrowed as he advanced. Duan couldn’t help thinking of what would happen if a monster attacked in such close quarters. If it came from the rear, he’d be helpless to fight, unable to turn around. Running would be the only option. And if it came from ahead, he would have no choice but to fight, no matter how tough it was. He prayed silently as he pushed forward.

Please let nothing happen . . . Please let me meet Olba soon . . .

Just when he thought he couldn’t go any farther, the passage opened into another cavern. He was about to enter when he noticed something on the ground in front of him. Lowering the Port-o-Lant, Duan saw a furry lump of mangled flesh and bone, obviously the remains of an animal or monster half devoured by some other animal or monster.

Uh-oh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this . . .

As if that weren’t disgusting enough, whatever had done the killing and eating hadn’t been too neat about it. The floor and walls were spattered with blood and jellied globs of yellow-brown goo that looked so vile he instinctively stepped away from it. As he did, the hand in which he held his staff brushed against the wall . . . and instead of encountering stone, he felt something cold, slimy, squishy, and wet—an unsettling combination even under the best of circumstances, which these most definitely were not.

“Ewww!”

Dropping his staff, Duan examined his hand in the light of the Port-o-Lant. As he’d feared, it was smeared with thick yellow-brown goo. The stuff covered the wall like half-

congealed fat, slowly oozing to the ground. A rotten, sour smell rose to his nostrils. He felt like he was going to be sick.

The goo was clearly some kind of bodily fluid. Bits of flesh were suspended in the glutinous goop. Desperately trying to not to vomit, Duan set the Port-o-Lant down and carefully, using his clean hand, took a towel from his pack. He wiped the foul goo away; unfortunately, the smell did not come off as easily.

He forced himself to study the remains on the ground, looking for a clue to what could have done this. In addition to the gnawed bones and flesh that he'd noticed earlier, he saw hunks of blackish hair, yellowish skin, and what might have been the leftovers of internal organs. One thing was abundantly clear: these remains did not belong to any regular animal.

It's a monster . . . But what could have killed it? An even worse monster?

Puzzled, Duan scratched his head . . . and suddenly gave a little shriek.

Oh my god, I touched my hair with the same hand that had the goop on it! Ugh—I feel contaminated . . .

Duan stared at his hand as though seriously considering cutting off the offending appendage. Then, taking a deep, shuddering breath, he picked up the Port-o-Lant and entered the cavern, careful to avoid stepping in any of the mess. Raising the lantern, he made a slow three-hundred-sixty-degree turn. There was no other way in or out, just solid rock walls. After hurriedly adding the details to his map, he stepped back into the passage, picked up his staff, and returned to the first cavern.

This time, Duan entered the middle passage. He was so flustered by what he'd discovered that he nearly plowed into a stalactite. If not for a squawk from Check, who had flown after him, Duan would have hurt himself badly.

I-I'm losing it, he realized. I've got to calm down, remember to check the ceiling as well as the floor. The last thing I need is to knock myself out in the middle of this dungeon!

Behind the stalactite, the passage continued on, stretching into a darkness broken in the distance by a faint bluish-white glow.

"Giii-is!" cried Check. "See light! Check scout! Scout light!"

"Be careful, Check. It could be some kind of weird monster!"

"Check not afraid! Check hero!" The grinia went zipping off.

Duan hurried after him. After no more than a minute or two, the passage opened up into the largest cavern that he had yet encountered. The high ceilings were vaulted so that he had the impression, as he stood looking about in awe, that he was standing in the midst of a vast, natural cathedral. The source of the light seemed to be just ahead. He went toward it, marveling at the weird beauty of his surroundings, like some fairyland of stone and shadow.

Wow, this is amazing!

A moment later, he was even more amazed as a huge underground lake came into view. It spread before him as far as he could see. The light he'd seen was emanating from thousands of small, round mushrooms clustered about the shores of the lake.

Wait—I know those things. I read about them years ago . . . Shining Shrooms! They're mushrooms that grow in natural dungeons like this one, especially near water. They're not poisonous, and their glow makes them a perfect light source!

Without delay, Duan started picking mushrooms, depositing them into a loosely woven bag that he'd taken



from his pack. When the bag was full, he tied it shut. The concentrated glow of the Shrooms in the bag was nearly equal to the light that the Port-o-Lant produced. By using the mushrooms instead, Duan could save the precious supply of lamp oil in case of an emergency. He shut off the Port-o-Lant and stowed it away in his pack.

“This is really something, isn’t it, Check?”

“Pretty,” chirped the grinia.

It certainly was. Duan had read about underground lakes in books and such, but now that he was actually standing in front of one, he was at a loss for words to describe its beauty. As he stood in mute admiration, the surface of the lake, lit by the bluish-white light of the Shining Shrooms, rippled like liquid silver, as if stirred by the movement of something below.

CHAPTER 45:

Lost!



standing at the edge of the underground lake, Duan held up the bag of Shining Shrooms and peered down into the water, trying to get an idea of how deep it might be. But because the surface threw back the light like a silvery mirror, he saw nothing there but his own wavering reflection. He extended his staff and cautiously probed directly in front of him. The water there was shallow, no more than six or seven inches deep, but that didn't tell him how much deeper it got farther out. Maybe it didn't get any deeper, and he could simply stroll across the lake, but the only method of finding out was to actually wade out there, and he wasn't about to try that.

Who knows what kind of monsters are lurking in there? Maybe a swarm of giant leeches, or a thing with tentacles . . .

The opposite shore of the lake was visible in the glow of the Shining Shrooms that grew there, but it was too far away for him to get more than a general impression of conditions very similar to his present surroundings.

Am I supposed to get over there somehow? Hmm . . . I can't swim across, but maybe I can walk around. Only one way to find out.

There was a path of sorts to the left, and he decided to see where it led. Soon it took him out of sight of the lake, twisting and turning as it went. For all its meandering, the path never split, so there was no chance of getting lost.

And even so, he was careful to keep updating his map as he went. Yet Duan couldn't shake the anxious feeling that he wouldn't be able to find his way back to the lake. A nameless dread began to saturate his mind and numb his senses. "It will be okay, right?"

He kept asking himself this question in a soft voice. And every time he did, Check, who was clinging to the front of Duan's neck, would look up at him with a puzzled face. At last they came to a fork in the path.

Three choices loomed, each identical to the others as far as Duan could see. After updating his map, he pushed a metal wedge into a crack in the wall to indicate the route back to the lake. Then he set off down the branching to the left. This time, the path came to a dead end after a few moments.

Duan sighed in disappointment. Then he laughed softly to himself and shook his head. If finding a dead end was the worst thing that happened to him in this dungeon, he would count himself lucky.

He returned to the starting point and set off down the second, central path. If this one came to a dead end like the first, it did so a long way off, because it seemed to go on forever, not only twisting and turning in a disorienting manner but also splitting off into a number of side paths. Duan walked and walked, careful to keep mapping and to mark the intersections with metal wedges. But his impatience grew with every step.

So did the grinia's. "Giii-is! Where path go?" demanded Check.

"I don't know, Check. That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Kaa! Check hungry. Eat now?"

"We just had breakfast. It's too soon to eat again."

"Want snack!"

"You'll just have to wait."

"Chaa!"

All too soon, Duan found himself running out of wedges.

Damn—I have to save some of these in case I really need them.

He stopped to search through his pack.

What else can I use to mark the trail? Hmm. Here's some bread I got from Ken. I guess I could leave a trail of crumbs . . . Yeah, that would work! He set off again, letting breadcrumbs trickle from his fingers. He hadn't gotten far when a huge burp broke the silence. Turning quickly, Duan saw Check staring up at him from the ground. The grinia had a guilty expression on his face and a breadcrumb clasped in one paw. All the other breadcrumbs were gone.

"Did you eat those crumbs, Check?"

"Not eat!"

"What's that in your hand then?"

"Giii-is!" The grinia tried a different tack. "Check help Duan!"

"By eating the trail markers?"

"Monsters find! Monsters follow, kaa! Eat Duan!"

Duan's jaw dropped, and his face turned bright red. *He's right! What the heck was I thinking? A trail of breadcrumbs? Ugh. I knew being in a dungeon could make you crazy, but I didn't know it made you stupid!*

"Th-thanks, Check," he managed.

The grinia popped the last breadcrumb into his mouth.

Duan, meanwhile, set down the bag of Shining Shrooms and began to look through his pack again. *There must be something else I can use to mark the trail . . .*

Check flew back to his shoulder. "Eat now?"

"No, Check," he replied rather testily. "I'm looking for something else to mark the trail."

"Kaa! Shroom Shine!"

"Yes, Check. I know the mushrooms shine. That's why I put them all into that bag."

"Shroom Shine!" the grinia repeated in a louder voice.

Duan sighed and rolled his eyes. "Yes, they're very bright, aren't they? Now will you please shut up?"

But rather than quieting, Check squawked as if enraged. "Giii-is! Shroom Shine! MAKE MARK!"

"Make . . ." Duan groaned. *Could it be?* He took one of the mushrooms out of the bag and rubbed it along the wall. It left behind a glowing mark.

"Shroom Shine," Check said in a tone of calm satisfaction.

"Very good, Check," Duan replied through gritted teeth. He marked the number 1 onto the wall; then, using his pencil, made the same notation on his map. This done, they set off again, with Duan marking the wall and the map in ascending numbers every time they came to a new intersection.

There was no sign of Olba and the two-headed wizard; not that they would have left footprints on the hard ground, but Duan thought it likely there would be other signs of their passage.

Where can they be? Maybe they've already got the dragon's treasure and are waiting for me back at the village!

No way. That's not possible, not even for Olba. But they have the scenario, so they could have taken all kinds of shortcuts. They could be way ahead of me by now.

What if Mister Evans was right, and I'll never catch up? I don't even know if I'm on the right path. Maybe they went to the right instead of down the middle . . .

Hmmm. Should I turn back?

These and other thoughts wandered through Duan's mind in much the same way that he was wandering through the dungeon: that is, pretty much at random and more or less in the dark.

I wonder how long I've been in here? I'm getting hungry too. But I can't exactly stop and eat lunch here . . . I should go back to the underground lake and eat there. But if I turn back now, does that mean I'm a coward? Hmmm. Maybe it also takes courage to turn back . . .

Finally, Duan decided to turn back. He retraced his steps, using his map and the signs he'd left behind. He walked for quite a while before he began to worry that it was taking too long to reach the lake.

He had left the numbers he'd marked on the walls with the Shining Shroom behind and was now relying on the wedges, but though they continued to appear at regular intervals, something was wrong, because they had stopped matching up to what he'd recorded on his map. He wished that he'd thought of scratching numbers or symbols onto the surface of the wedges. That way he could know how many more of them remained.

"Where lake?" Check asked worriedly.

Duan sighed. "I don't know, Check. I'm sorry, but I think we're lost."

"Check find way!" The grinia shot ahead before Duan could say another word.

Great. All I need is for Check to get lost now . . .

But the grinia's voice piped up almost at once: "Check find! Find way!"

“I’m coming, Check!” Duan called, hastening forward. In another moment, he saw the grinia hovering beside a glowing mark on the wall. Duan approached with a sinking heart.

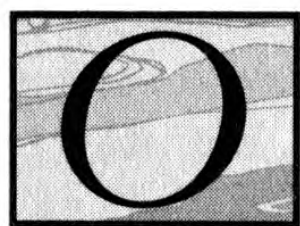
“Oh, no, it can’t be . . .”

But it was. The number 1. The same number he’d marked himself.

“Check, we’ve gone in a big circle!”

CHAPTER 46:

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE DUNGEON



Okay, let's do this one more time, thought Duan. I have to stay calm. If I go slowly and carefully, I'm sure I'll be able to get back. Yeah, I was mapping so carefully.

Duan, glaring at the map once more, started walking in the direction of the underground lake. However, just at that moment, he heard an indescribably horrible voice.

"Gee . . . guee . . . graaaa . . ."

"Er, what's that you said, Check?"

"Not talk!" The grinia clung almost painfully to Duan's neck. And then he began to shriek, "Danger, danger! Giiiis!"

"Quiet, Check!"

But the grinia kept on screeching, clutching tighter to Duan's neck. "Danger! Danger!"

Duan plucked Check off his neck and covered his mouth. Silence fell. The only sounds were their own breathing.

"Gee . . . gueee . . . hu, hu, hu . . ."

The voice again. Closer this time.

But from where? The weird acoustics of the dungeon made it impossible to identify the direction of the sound.

Is it in front? In back? It could be coming from anywhere . . .

Duan swung around wildly, holding up the bag of Shining Shrooms to gaze in all directions.

He suddenly smelled a foul odor.

Oh crap . . .

It was the same noxious smell that had clung to the gelatinous yellow-brown goo he'd encountered while exploring the other path!

Oh dear. It's not a good idea to stay still. I'm sure it's getting closer. It knows where we are!

Duan started to run down the path he had just come from. He knew he didn't have time to look around, but . . . he did. Yet however many times he looked, the light of the Shrooms revealed nothing. He couldn't even sense anything. He was about to swing his staff around but realized that he had lost it somewhere.

Where did I lose it?!

"Ha, ha. Guue. Guuue . . ."

He heard dirt falling and then a strange breathing.

Shoot! Where is it? What the heck is it?!

At last, Duan stood gasping for breath in front of another fork in the path. *Um, which way should I turn now? Right? Left?*

As usual, he opted for the left-hand rule. The path curved around what looked like the remains of an old cave-in. He ran past without slowing, only to slam into something on the other side.

"Ooof!"

The bag of Shining Shrooms flew from his hand. He fell backward, landing on his butt.

A hideous screeching filled the air directly before him.

"Aaaaaaah! Aaaaaaah! Aaaaaaah!"

It was loud enough to hurt his ears. *Oh my gosh, what gruesome monster could make such an awful racket?*

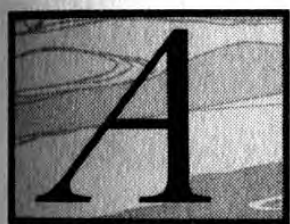
“Aaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaah!”

Duan picked up the bag of Shining Shrooms that had rolled onto the ground. And then, when he pointed it at the source of the continuing screaming, Duan was absolutely speechless.

The screaming creature crouched on the ground before him was not a monster at all. It was the determined young sorceress with fiery red hair . . . the princess of Fiana, Agnis R. Link.

CHAPTER 47:

A TEARFUL REUNION



gnis, is that really you?" Duan gasped, unable to believe his eyes.

But Agnis didn't register his words. Or even his presence. She just sat on the ground screaming, her eyes scrunched tightly closed. Her flame-colored hair was in wild disarray beneath a white, wide-winged cap, and her long, slender fingers were curled into fists and pressed rigidly to her sides. She wore a blue-green cape over a yellow and purple gown studded at the collar with what looked to Duan like real sapphires and emeralds, and her cap featured a red-diamond harlequin pattern that blazed against the starched-white background.

Duan thought this was probably Agnis' idea of traveling incognito.

He crawled over to her and shook her gently by the shoulders. "Agnis, it's me, Duan. Duan Surk!"

Agnis continued screaming without pause. At that moment, Duan remembered how Olba had calmed down Silver Eye and

Golden Eye aboard the *Marchin* by slapping their faces. He couldn't think of anything else to try, so he slapped Agnis right across her cheek. When she finally quit screaming, she stared at Duan with unfocused eyes.

"Agnis! It's me—Duan!" he cried as he placed his hands on her shoulders again.

"Duan?" The moment Agnis realized that it was Duan in front of her, she immediately started to cry her eyes out.

"Agnis, what are you doing here?" Duan demanded. "And where is K'nock?"

But she wouldn't respond and continued to hiccup between sobs. Duan sat down beside her and patiently waited for her to stop crying. After a while, when she was able to talk, she looked at Duan once again.

"I'm so glad . . . I found you. I didn't know . . . what I was going to do."

"So, tell me. Why are you here? Were you looking for us?"

"Yes. I . . . went to Kovenia, and I heard news of you there. At the Adventurers Guild, they said they were certain you'd gone to Luca Island. So—"

Duan was about to question Agnis further when Check suddenly started to panic on top of his head, "Danger, danger! Thing come!"

"Oh yeah! Oh no!"

He suddenly remembered that he was running away from something.

"Agnis, we'll have to talk later," Duan said. "I think there's something creepy near us. C'mon, get up."

Duan took Agnis' hand and helped her to her feet. Then he looked around, checking out the situation. He pointed the Shining Shrooms in the direction they had come from. A large white figure appeared out of nowhere.

AAAHHHHHH!!!



“Aaargh!”

“Aaaaaaah! Aaaaaaah! Aaaaaaah!” Agnis turned into a screaming machine again as she clung to Duan. But then she suddenly thrust him away.

“Aah!” Duan fell back onto his rear again.

“K’nock! K’nock! Where were you? I was so worried!” The white figure was the legendary snow leopard, K’nock. When she had gotten lost in the dungeon, Agnis had been separated from him. How lonely it must have been for Agnis to be without her trusty K’nock! Duan understood the situation immediately.

“K’nock, it’s been a long time,” he said. “Hey? What’s happened? You’re pretty dirty.”

K’nock’s snow-white fur, which was usually glossy, was quite dirty. And on top of that, he was soaked to the bone.

“He tried to carry me across the underground lake,” said Agnis, kneeling beside the snow leopard with her arms wrapped around his neck. “That’s why he’s so wet.”

“We found that lake too,” Duan told her, noticing that her clothes were also wet. “So you tried to swim across?”

Agnis seemed surprised at the question. “Why wouldn’t we? It’s a shortcut, after all. It says so on the map.”

“What? Agnis, you have a map?”

“Of course. I bought it from the scenario shop in Kovenia before I came here. You don’t suppose I’d try to explore a dungeon without a

CHARACTER FILE

K’nock

Beautiful white- and black-spotted fur and prismatic eyes mark K’nock as a snow leopard, a legendary monster able to use illusionary magic. Although incapable of human speech, snow leopards are highly intelligent and extremely loyal. They are fierce predators, able to instantly judge an opponent’s strengths and weaknesses and adjust their fighting skills accordingly. All of which makes K’nock the “purr-fect” bodyguard for Agnis, who is weak at face-to-face combat.

map, do you? Ha ha ha! Can you imagine anything so stupid, Duan? I mean, what kind of idiot would go into a dungeon without a map?"

"Er, never mind about that," he said hurriedly. "We should probably get back to the underground lake as quickly as possible. Actually, I heard a horrible voice earlier. I never would have thought it was you or K'nock."

"I heard that too! That strange, eerie voice and the weird groaning . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, can I borrow the map for a second?"

"What about your own map?"

"Yeah, well . . ." He thought desperately. "I want to see if yours is different."

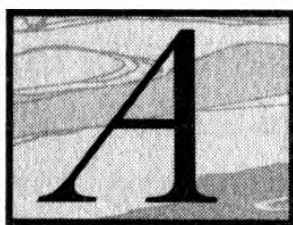
"Oh, okay. Here." Agnis drew a folded-up map from a pocket in her dress and passed it to him.

Duan opened the map and studied it by the light of the Shining Shrooms. "Wow! Your map is far more detailed than ours! It must be a newer edition. Look, here's that maze I got lost in . . . Let's see . . . This is the entrance, and here's where it splits into three paths . . . Okay, I see where we are. The lake is back this way." He looked up from the map. "C'mon, Agnis."

Taking her by the hand, Duan helped Agnis up and together they started walking.

CHAPTER 48:

THE ADVENTURING BUG



Although they almost got lost a couple of times, Agnis and Duan managed to return to the underground lake.

“It didn’t appear in the end, did it?” said Agnis with an expression of relief. “Whatever was making that weird noise.”

“Yup. I think it was pretty close, though. It would have been dangerous if we had gotten lost.”

The two old friends looked at each other afresh and smiled.

“Duaaan!”

“Agnis!”

They celebrated their reunion, hugging each other.

There had been no time to catch up while they were walking through the maze.

In the past, Agnis and Duan had fought side by side in desperate battles—to think that they had finally managed to be reunited here . . . It was no wonder they were both a bit emotional.

"It's been ages, Agnis, but you haven't changed a bit!"

"Really? But Duan, I think . . . you've changed a little."

"You think? How?"

"Umm, well, you look a little stronger . . ."

"Really?"

They talked about what had been happening in their lives while they shared a light lunch.

"So, you managed to solve that problem you had?" asked Duan.

He was referring to the problem between Agnis' mother and father and Queen Ramua.

Agnis nodded. "Yes. Although I should really say it's solved *for now*. Well, it's a problem that needs to be worked out between the grownups."

"Yeah . . . Hey, I'm surprised that you knew we were in Kovenia," said Duan.

Agnis tilted her head slightly. "Hmm? The way you're talking—you sound a little more masculine . . ."

"What? Umm . . . well, I'm not really thinking about it. But I guess maybe I used to talk a little more childishly."

"Yeah, you definitely sound more grownup. I knew there was something different. Maybe it's Olba's influence?"

"Yeah . . . whatever." Duan went bright red, right to the tip of his ears. *Why do girls notice small things like that?*

Agnis started to talk about something else, not taking any notice of Duan. "And anyway, I decided . . . to formally start training as an adventurer. I made up my mind, and I've already spoken about it to my mother."

"Oh, right. But I'm surprised they consented. You're actually a princess, after all."

"What do you mean, 'actually'? Yeah, I know I don't look like one!"

"No, that's not what I meant. It's just that you're so open-hearted. And you're chatting to the likes of me."

"Hmm. I suppose the princesses from other countries are a bit snooty."

"Right. Anyway, sorry, you were saying?"

"Yeah, well, the truth is that ever since I left you guys, I've been feeling really frustrated."

"Frustrated?"

"Yup. I just got so bored of my peaceful but monotonous life."

"But a peaceful life is a luxury."

"I know. But . . . how about you, Duan? Why did you decide to be an adventurer?"

"Me? Well, my brother went off to be an adventurer first. I guess it was his influence."

"Right. But you aren't really suited for it, are you?"

"Pah—I know I'm scrawny."

"No, that's not what I meant. Remember that time you showed me your card? I was quite surprised at your intelligence—it was sixty-one, right?"

"Sixty-two, actually," said Duan.

"Well, I'm only forty-one, and that's considered quite good for a magic user. What I'm saying is that with your high intelligence, you'd level up a lot faster if you switched from being a fighter to being a sorcerer."

"But I *have* leveled up," he informed her proudly. "I'm a Level 3 now!"

"Congratulations," she said. "But you'd be even higher by now as a sorcerer."

"I guess. They told me the same thing at the Adventurers Support Group back home."

"I'm not surprised to hear it."

“But you said yourself I’ve gotten stronger! And it’s true. I mean, you should have seen me when I was a kid! Compared to that, I’m a regular muscle man!”

“I’m sure you’ve improved quite a bit,” she said. “But I still think you’re making a mistake not to learn magic. It’s not one or the other, you know. There are Magic Fighters out there. Not too many people can manage two classes at once, but I have a feeling you might be one of them.”

“Wow, do you really think so?” *A Magic Fighter! Why didn’t I think of it before now?* And maybe it wasn’t really as rare as Agnis was suggesting—it struck him that Golden Eye and Silver Eye must be Magic Fighters themselves. *They can fall back on their fighting skills when their magic fails, and vice versa. Who wouldn’t want that kind of advantage?*

“And anyway, my mother pointed out to me . . .”

Duan was jolted out of his thoughts when he heard Agnis speaking again.

“She pointed out to me that I’ve been bitten by the adventuring bug.”

“The adventuring bug?”

“Yup. And once that was pointed out to me for the first time, I finally realized why I was feeling so frustrated. I realized that I wanted to go on another adventure with you and Olba. And I thought that if I didn’t manage to meet up with you quickly, I would join other adventurers to start training.”

“And your mother gave permission?”

“Yup . . . I mean, she’s really worried, of course. But she knew nothing she could say would stop me.”

Agnis stopped there and fell into silence.

Duan thought that she was probably thinking about her parents. After a while, he asked, “So, how did you get to the

island, Agnis? The *Marchin* is the only ship that makes the journey regularly, and it's still here, undergoing repairs."

"Yes, I heard there was some trouble. The ship hadn't returned to Kovenia on time. Since I was in a hurry and didn't want to wait, I asked around at the harbor and finally found a ship that would bring me here."

"Another ship was coming to Luca Island?"

"Well, I had to charter it first."

Duan was stunned. The idea of hiring a ship for one's own personal convenience seemed unbelievably luxurious to him. Not to mention proactive! No question about it, Agnis was one impressive woman. Royalty definitely had its advantages.

"I heard about the villagers on the island," she continued. "And how prejudiced they are against adventurers. So I pretended to be a rich tourist once I got here. I must say, you certainly made an impression."

"Who, me?"

"All of you. That's all the villagers could talk about!"

"Right . . . But anyway, I'm so glad to see you. And this map is really going to help," Duan said as he checked her map and scenario.

Agnis gave him a sour look. "I can be helpful too, you know! I can use magic, and there's also K'nock."

Duan gave a wry smile. "Yeah. You are helpful. And to be honest, I was really getting lost on my own."

"Yes! Two is better than one. And two people and one animal are better than two! Oh, and we have Check. That makes two people and two animals! What a magnificent party!"

Duan couldn't say it out loud when he saw Agnis' sparkling eyes, but he thought secretly that there probably wasn't another party as puny as this one.

Agnis may be a little scary when she starts screaming or throwing fireballs around, but most of the time she's a good companion, full of enthusiasm and ideas. Not to mention that she's gotten even cuter since the last time I saw her . . .

While the two of them chatted, Check raised his head, spread his wings, and leapt into the air. "Danger! Danger!"

Whatever it was, K'nock must have smelled it too, because the big cat lurched to his feet and stood in front of Duan and Agnis, fur bristling along his spine as he stared into the dark maw of the path from which they'd so recently emerged. A low growl came rumbling from the snow leopard's throat.

Agnis and Duan had also gotten to their feet and now stood peering anxiously about the cavern. Suddenly, Agnis cried out and pointed. "Aaaah! Duan, over there!"

Something was emerging from the shadows.

Initially, it looked like a living mass of black fur. It was shorter than Duan, close to Agnis' size. Its whole body was covered in thick fur as black as coal, and its arms hung limply in front of it, the hairy knuckles nearly grazing the ground.

Dripping from these fingers was something the color of blood.

In fact, it *was* blood.

"Danger, danger!" squawked Check as he held himself in the air above K'nock.

Seeing Duan and the others, the creature's small green eyes shined hungrily. It opened its toothy mouth, and out came something that sounded very much like: "Gee . . . gueee . . . hu, hu, hu . . ."

"Aaaaagh!" screamed Agnis, directly into Duan's ear. "It's him!"

At that same instant, the monster pounced.

“Aargh!”

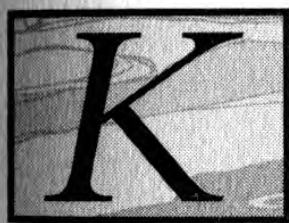
“Aaah!”

“Chaa!”

Duan, Agnis, and Check all drew back simultaneously. But K’nock didn’t budge an inch. In fact, the big cat leapt forward with an earsplitting roar to meet the monster’s attack.

CHAPTER 49:

HORROR FROM BELOW



'nock!" screamed Agnis, as K'nock and the monster collided in midair. The two of them bared their fangs and went for each other's necks. Claws flashed, blood splashed, and fur flew in the ethereal light of the Shining Shrooms.

"Agnis," called Duan urgently, "check your scenario—is there a description of this monster?"

"I-I-I don't know!" she wailed, looking completely lost. She pulled the scenario from her robe and began to look through the pages frantically. "Um, um, um . . . Darn, where *is* it?"

"Here, give it to me."

She passed him the scenario, and Duan quickly turned to the encyclopedia section at the back of the booklet.

"Hurry, Duan!" cried Agnis, sounding like she was about to burst into tears or screams.

"Shut up, already!" he said. Then he proceeded to summarize from the scenario. "This monster is called a Bolbobe.



It's very strong, but not too smart. It eats almost anything, though its favorite food is the soft flesh of children or young people."

"Ewww! Never mind what it eats," said Agnis, beside herself with worry. "How do we kill it?"

"Hmmm. It says that regular attacks or attack magic work best. Unfortunately, the Bolbobe doesn't have any particular weaknesses. It's a brutal and tenacious beast."

"S-so what are we going to do?! We can't let K'nock fight that horrible thing all by himself!"

"Help cat!" suggested Check.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," said Duan and drew his sword.

Agnis gripped her staff tightly, a look of determination on her face. "I'm fighting too."

Duan grabbed her arm before she could start chanting a spell. "N-no, Agnis. Bad idea! Enclosed space, remember? You just wait here with Check, okay? I'll take care of the Bolbobe."

She nodded. "O-okay."

"And don't use any magic until I tell you."

"Okay, okay! Just go help K'nock already!"

His face deathly pale, Duan advanced on the two combatants. It looked at first like K'nock might not need his help after all. The snow leopard was obviously more than the Bolbobe had bargained for. But K'nock had not escaped unscathed. The big cat and the monster were both covered in blood—each other's and their own. And as K'nock slowly forced the Bolbobe back toward the lake, the wounded creature grew increasingly desperate. In fact, it now seemed more intent on escape than anything else.

But just when it had taken one step into the water, a mass of reddish-brown tendrils came snaking out of the lake. In the blink of an eye, they had covered the Bolbobe's entire body.

“Grrraaaa, graa—!” The monster vanished in mid-scream, dragged into the lake. The water splashed and bubbled violently, blooming red with blood.

“Wh-what the heck was *that*?” whispered Agnis with round eyes.

“Bad thing!” said Check, who had landed on her shoulder and was now cowering under one wing of her cap.

Duan just shook his head, speechless with shock as he backed away from the water’s edge. Spitting and snarling, K’nock backed up beside him.

Suddenly, without warning, two long tentacles thrust out of the bloody water.

“Aaagh!” screamed Duan.

“Aaagh!” screamed Agnis.

“Kaa!” screamed Check.

“Rrrrow!” screamed K’nock.

At the end of each tentacle was a single, bulbous eye. The eyes stared at the party on shore, then began to glance around restlessly, moving independently of each other.

“Ugh—how hideous,” said Agnis in a whisper.

Duan, meanwhile, was paging through the scenario. “Got it,” he said. “It’s a Dory Ray Ropy, or Dropy for short. Dropies live in the water.”

“Gee, I never would have guessed,” said Agnis.

“Ahem.” Duan cleared his throat and began to recite: “‘Using its long tentacles, the Dory Ray Ropy drags its victims to the bottom of whatever body of water it inhabits, then rips them violently apart. The monster is very territorial, and you will rarely find more than one of them at a time, except in large lakes. The Dropy’s greatest weakness is its eyes. Cut off the eye stalk and the monster is rendered paralyzed and helpless. A word of warning, however: a severed eye stalk repairs itself in

mere minutes, and a new eye regenerates almost immediately thereafter, lifting the paralysis.' ”

As Duan read, the eyes of the Dropy were fixed on him as if the monster could understand every word.

“Man, that thing is freaking me out,” he complained.

“I know what you mean,” said Agnis.

“But at least we know how to kill it. We have to sever the eye stalks.”

“Riiiiight. But how are we supposed to do that?” Agnis demanded. “If we get near the water, it’ll just grab us like it grabbed the Bolbobe.” Duan sighed.

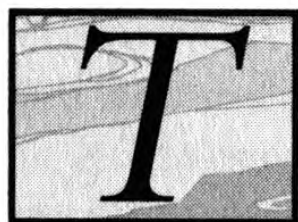
Agnis was right.

How do we get close enough to cut its eye stalks without it grabbing us? It would be better if we could cross the lake without getting close to it. But how?

After a while, the eyes made a small splash and then disappeared back into the lake.

CHAPTER 50:

A BIG STINK



ake that! And that!”

Duan sighed, shaking his head. “Agnis, why don’t you just give up?”

“No way,” she replied without turning and threw another rock.

Like its predecessors, the rock flew over the lake, zipping toward the eye stalks of the Dropy. The monster watched the missile approach, then, at the last second, ducked back down below the surface. The rock sailed by, splashing harmlessly into the water.

“Darn!” exclaimed Agnis. “Did you see that? I almost nailed it that time!”

The eye stalks reemerged from the water and resumed their silent scrutiny of the shore.

“I think it’s making fun of you,” said Duan.

“Ooooh, this is so annoying.” The short-tempered Agnis was getting really mad. “You throw one, Duan!”

Duan just shook his head. "What's the point? Even if by some miracle I managed to hit an eye, it still wouldn't sever the stalk, and that's what we need to do." As he spoke, he realized that he had changed a little. Before, he might have joined in with Agnis and thrown a few rocks with her. But now it just seemed a waste of time.

He shook his head lightly again and began to examine the scenario again. "Like you said, crossing the lake would be a definite shortcut," Duan said as she leaned over the map. "But the problem is getting across without being attacked by that Dropy."

"Right. Maybe we could go back through the passages and try to get around the lake that way?"

Duan shook his head and pointed to a section of the map. "No good. Even if we manage to find our way through that maze of passages, there's an underground river up ahead with violent rapids. It would be just as deadly to cross as this lake. And beyond the river, assuming we could get across somehow, we'd still have to deal with a nest of monsters here." He pointed to a different spot on the map and looked her in the eyes. "Bolbobes."

Agnis turned a bit pale at that. "Right, so we can't go that way . . . But we can't cross the lake, either. Not with that stupid Dropy watching and waiting. What are we supposed to do, turn back?"

"If Olba and the two-headed wizard came this way—and we have to assume they did, because they're following a scenario too; in fact, both Olba and the two-headed wizard have scenarios—then they must have crossed the lake somehow."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because if they hadn't, we would've caught up to them by now."

"Hmm. So you're saying there must be a way across that we're missing."

"Exactly," said Duan.

"But how do we know they didn't try to cross, only to be killed by the Dropy?"

"What, Olba and the two-headed wizard killed by a stupid Dropy?" Duan scoffed. "Come on, Agnis. Get serious. Those guys are Level 14! One Dropy isn't going to stop them."

"Well, then how come they didn't kill it?"

"Don't you see? They must have found a way across that completely avoids the Dropy!"

"Yeah, but what?" Agnis asked, frustration plain in her voice. "I hate this stupid dungeon! Look at this, Duan." She pointed to the map. "Even if we do get across the lake, there's a big landslide here that totally blocks the passage. How are we supposed to get past that?"

"I guess we'll have to worry about that when we get there," he said with a shrug.

"You mean, *if* we get there."

"Hey, we made it through the Witches' Forest, didn't we? We'll get through this dungeon too."

Agnis hugged herself and shivered.

"Brrrr. When I think of how close K'nock and I must have come to being dinner for that Dropy . . ."

"That's right," said Duan, remembering. "You two tried to swim across."

"Yeah, but we started to feel a powerful suction, like a whirlpool, so we gave up and turned back. And it's lucky we did, or else the Dropy would've gotten us for sure. It was probably just waiting for us to get in a little deeper before it struck!"

Duan thought it over.

"Maybe so . . . but it didn't wait for the Bolbobe. It came after him when he was at the water's edge, before he'd even gotten in the water."

"Maybe it's got a thing for Bolbobes."

Duan didn't reply. He was busy thinking. After a moment, he asked, "Where exactly did you and K'nock try to cross, Agnis?"

She pointed. "Over there, near that wall. Why?"

"Just a hunch." He walked over to the wall to investigate further.

As Duan approached the cavern wall, he smelled an odor like rotten eggs. Drawing his sword in case the Dropy attacked, Duan advanced cautiously to the edge of the lake. The awful smell got stronger. About three feet from shore, maybe four feet from the wall, small bubbles were floating to the surface. There was a line of them stretching all the way across the lake.

Oh my god . . . Could that be poison gas? But then he thought, *No, if it were poison, I'd be dead already—and so would Agnis and K'nock . . .*

"Find anything?"

He looked up to see Agnis walking toward them. The snow leopard padded silently at her side. "Only the most awful stink," he said.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that." She wrinkled her nose. "Wow."

"This is only a guess, but I'll bet the Dropy doesn't like that smell."

"What, you think it keeps the monster away?"

"Let's find out . . ." Duan plucked a nearby Shining Shroom and threw it into the lake. The eyes of the Dropy followed the flying mushroom with interest, but the monster

made no move in its direction. The Shroom landed with a splash to the right of the line of bubbles. It sank without a trace.

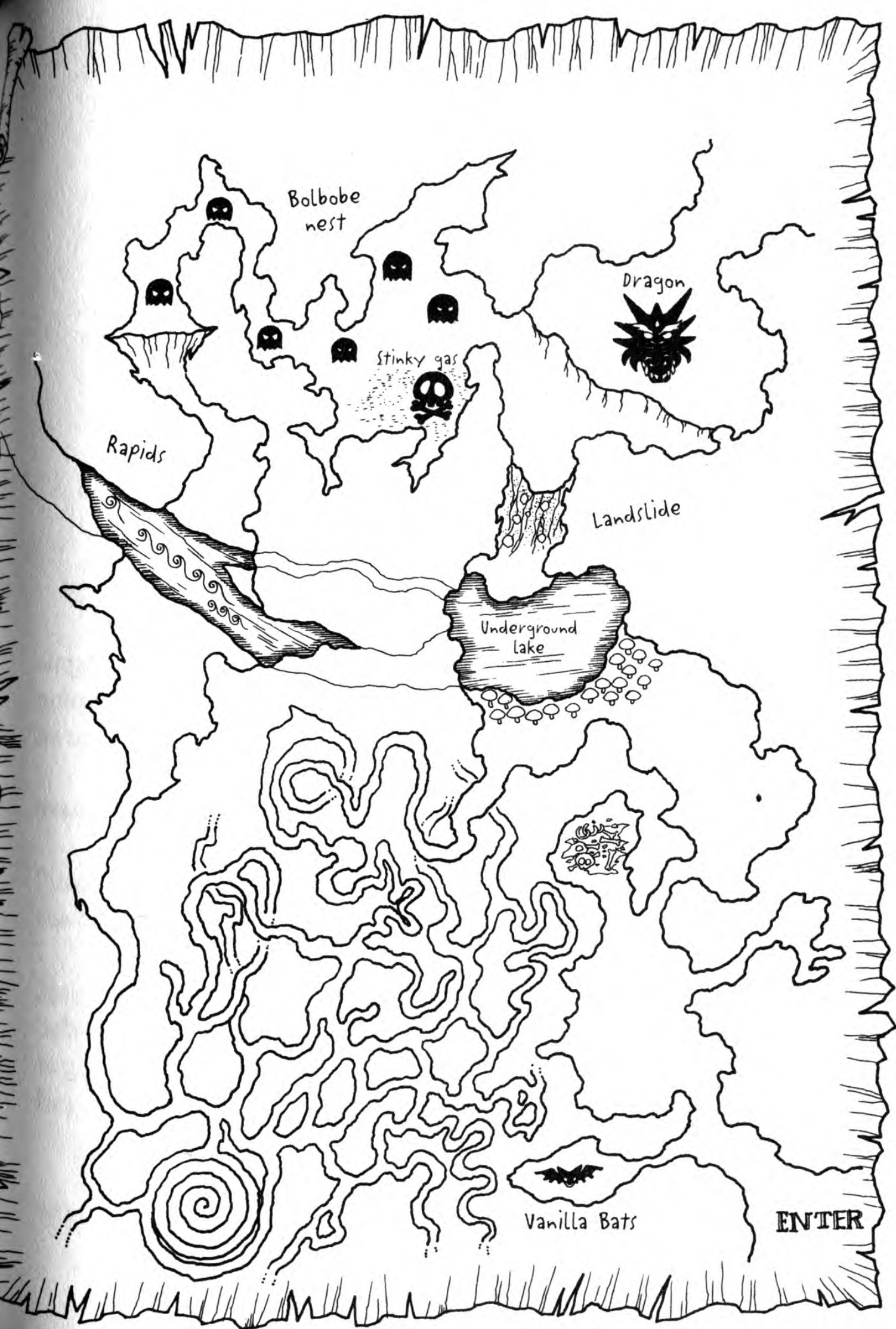
“Okay, what does that prove?” asked Agnis.

“Hold on,” he said and plucked another Shroom. This one he threw to the left of the bubbles. This time, just as the mushroom struck the surface of the lake with a small plashing sound, a reddish-brown tentacle whipped out with amazing accuracy, wrapped around the mushroom, and pulled it into the lake.

“Ah ha!” cried Duan in triumph. “See, the Dropy only attacks things on the left side of the bubbles. They act as a kind of barrier to keep it away from anything to the right!”

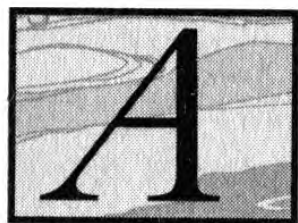
“Wow,” said Agnis, impressed. “It’s like a wall of stink. Good thinking, Duan!”

He nodded modestly. “Yes, well, it wasn’t really all that diff—” He broke off as something struck him in the forehead. It was the same Shining Shroom he had thrown into the lake. The Dropy had thrown it back at him!



CHAPTER 51:

THE CROSSING



After further examination, Duan and Agnis determined that there was a narrow ridge running alongside the cavern wall just below the surface of the water.

"I wish I'd noticed this before," said Agnis. "We didn't have to swim; we could have just walked across!"

"Well, we don't know for sure if it goes all the way across," Duan cautioned. "Still, it's our best chance. I think we should see how far it goes."

Taking off his cape so as not to get it wet in the crossing, Duan knelt by the edge of the water and tucked the folded garment into his pack. When he looked up, Agnis was gazing at him expectantly, her arms thrust out before her like a little girl begging to be lifted up.

"What?" he asked. "Did you want something?"

Agnis looked a little peeved. "Aren't you going to offer to carry me across?"

Duan's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

Agnis flushed red, but she continued speaking. "Back home in Fiana, the servants carry me over every stream and river so that I don't get wet."

"I've got news for you," Duan said as he got to his feet and shrugged his pack over his shoulders. "We're not in Fiana, and I'm not your servant."

At that, she blushed even more deeply. "But a real gentleman would carry a lady across."

Duan laughed. "Then it's a good thing I'm no gentleman either. Come on, Agnis. There isn't a single adventurer in the world that gets their companions to carry them in a dungeon, or anywhere else for that matter. Not unless they're wounded or passed out or something."

With her lips pressed tightly together as if to prevent herself from saying anything she might regret, Agnis took off her pack, then her cape. Then she began to fold the cape as Duan had done.

Watching, Duan wondered if he had spoken too harshly. *After all, he reasoned, Agnis came from a sheltered environment. Accustomed to the trappings of wealth and privilege, she doesn't know how to act around normal, ordinary people.*

It was slow going. The ridge was slippery, covered with silt and a strange, pale algae, so every step risked tumbling them into the lake. Luckily, the rough cavern wall provided plenty of handholds. As for Agnis, she was forced to hitch up her long gown as she walked, and this made it even more difficult for her to keep her balance, especially since she insisted on keeping hold of her wizard's staff. Every time she felt her feet sliding in the muck—in other words, every time she took a step—she gave a little shriek. Glancing back, Duan called, "Are you okay, Agnis?"

"I'm fine," she replied without looking up.

"You don't look fine. Here, put one hand on my shoulder to steady yourself."

"I said I was fine."

"Honestly, just hold on!" Duan insisted. "This is no time for stubbornness!"

"I'm not stubborn!"

Duan stopped . . . which of course caused Agnis to stop as well.

She glared at him. "What are you doing? Come on, go! Get moving before I pass out from the awful smell."

But instead of moving on, Duan reached out and grabbed Agnis by the hand that wasn't grasping her staff. She looked at him in wide-eyed wonder, totally nonplussed. Then he placed her hand firmly on his shoulder. "Agnis," he said, "I might not be much of an adventurer, but right now I'm the leader of this party and you have to listen to what I say, okay?"

Agnis seemed to swallow a sharp retort and instead only nodded.

"Good. Now keep your hand on my shoulder."

They resumed walking. Agnis didn't remove her hand, as Duan had feared she might, but she stopped talking. Completely. Not a word. Not even a sound. To hear nothing from Agnis was so unusual that it began to creep Duan out. It was like being followed by a zombie. Finally, he halted again and turned to her. "Look, if there's something bothering you, just tell me, okay?"

At first, he thought she wasn't going to reply. But then she opened her mouth. A wavering voice emerged, as if she were on the verge of tears. "I-I lied. I'm not fine! I'm almost at my limit. This smell is making me sick! It's sticking to my hair and clothes. How can you stand it?"

“You think *this* stinks, try sharing a room with Olba.”

But Agnis didn’t find this amusing. “How can you joke at a time like this?”

“Look, I know it stinks, but at least it’s keeping the Dropy away, right?”

“I’d almost rather it came and got us just to end the torture!”

Duan grimaced, but even so he was secretly relieved that Agnis still had enough energy to complain. *Complaining is normal for Agnis. As long as she can complain, she’s all right . . .*

They pressed on.

After a while, Duan noticed that the water to their left was growing more agitated. Agnis noticed too.

“This is close to where K’nock and I felt that suction and turned back. It almost dragged us under—my heart is pounding just thinking about it!” She gave Duan’s shoulder a squeeze.

“Let’s have a proper look,” Duan said. “Stay still a minute—we have to wait for all the silt we’ve churned up to settle.” After a moment, the water regained a measure of clarity. Duan saw that the ridge they were walking along came to an abrupt end just a few feet ahead. Beyond that point, for a distance of some three or four feet, water was flowing into the wall, or rather beneath it, at a prodigious rate. That was the source of the strong suction that Agnis had felt.

“It’s a good thing you turned back,” Duan told her now. “It looks like there’s a breach in the wall. If you’d been pulled in, that would have been the end.”

At that, she dropped her hand from his shoulder and sighed heavily. “This really sucks—literally. I guess that’s it, then. We can’t go on. We’ve got to turn back.”

But Duan wasn’t so sure. He thought it might be possible for them to jump the gap, assuming it was only a distance of four feet or so and the ridge was intact on the other side. But

it wasn't enough to judge by appearances. He needed to be absolutely certain. If only he had the stick that Ken and the boys had given him. Unfortunately, he'd lost it during the bat attack.

"You've got that look," said Agnis.

"Huh? What look?"

"That 'I've got a brilliant but super-dangerous idea' kind of look."

"Um, can I borrow your staff?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "What do you want it for?"

"Er, well, I was thinking I could use it to probe ahead of us and see if the ridge is intact on the other side of the gap."

"You must be joking! This is a *sacred* staff. It's *enchanted*. You can't just use it like an 11-Foot Stick or something!"

"Sorry, bad idea," he said hurriedly. "Damn! I wish Olba hadn't taken our 11-Foot Stick!"

Casually, Agnis said, "Why don't you use mine?"

Duan gaped at her. "Do you mean to tell me you've got an 11-Foot Stick?"

"Of course I do. A person would have to be either utterly crazy or incredibly stupid to explore a dungeon without one!"

CHAPTER 52:

A LEAP OF FAITH



Using Agnis' 11-Foot Stick, Duan determined that the gap was a bit wider than it had appeared to be. Even so, he thought they could jump it.

Duan began to psych himself up. He had told Agnis that he was leading the party, so that meant it was his responsibility to jump first, even if he was nervous.

Clenching his teeth, Duan jumped.

A thrill of exhilaration rushed through his body, dispelling all anxiety.

He landed on the other side with a loud splash. His feet slid across the slick, submerged surface of the ridge, but he managed to stop himself from falling into the lake by grabbing onto the rocky protuberances of the cavern wall.

He exhaled a huge sigh.

Suddenly, he was laughing. He turned to Agnis and held out his arms.

"Come on, Agnis—I promise I won't let you fall in!"

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Agnis' face was pale, but she wore a look of fierce determination. She gave a terse nod, and flung herself forward with a shriek. "Aaaaaaah!"

"Ooof!" She crashed into Duan's arms.

Then, with a roar, K'nock came leaping across. The snow leopard made the jump look effortless.

Finally, Check flew across.

They made it the rest of the way without incident and were soon stepping onto solid ground again . . . well, muddy ground, anyway. The shore they'd come from was covered in small pebbles and stones, but this one, although it too featured Shining Shrooms sprouting amid scattered rocks of all sizes, was covered in mud.

Duan and Agnis sighed in relief at the exact same

moment, and that was all it took to trigger a bout of giggles. Everything seemed hilarious all of a sudden, as the tension that had been building up between them was dispelled in laughter. Every time they tried to stop, they would look at each other and start up again. They noticed that the Dropy was looking over curiously, as if it found their

behavior puzzling, and of course this only made everything even funnier.

Looming up ahead, Duan could make out the landslide that had been indicated on the map. It looked a lot bigger in person. It was like an underground mountain. It rose for what had to be at least a hundred feet.

Agnis saw it too. Abruptly, her laughter vanished, and she let out a groan. "How are we ever going to get past *that*?"

"I don't know," said Duan. It was discouraging. The pile of rocks and mud was so tall and so steep that it seemed impossible to climb. And there was no way around it.

We haven't come this far only to be blocked now! It's not fair!

Agnis was thinking along the same lines. "We're so close! According to my map, there's a plateau on the top of that mountain. If we can just make it up there, we're practically home free!"

Suddenly, Check gave an excited cry. "Gi-iis! Men here!"

Duan hurried to where the grinia was jumping about in the mud. "What is it, Check?"

"Chaa! Men walk. Walk here!"

Sure enough, there were two sets of deep bootprints embedded in the mud. "It's Olba and the two-headed wizard!" exclaimed Duan. "They came this way—and judging by these prints, it looks like they were here just a little while ago!"

"Really?" Agnis came running over. "How can you tell?"

"See how the prints are slowly filling up with water? That shows they were made very recently."

"Wow, I never would have noticed that!"

They followed the two sets of prints to the mountain of mud and rocks. Then the prints abruptly stopped. It looked as though the pile of rubble extended all the way to the high ceiling of the dungeon. But there was no other sign of Olba and

the two-headed wizard. Incredible as it seemed, they must have climbed to the top.

"Maybe there's a hidden trail or something," Duan mused as he studied the seemingly impassable terrain. He turned to Agnis. "Hey, Agnis, do you see—?" He broke off in shock. "What are you doing?"

The fiery-haired sorceress seemed to be taking off her clothes!

"Kaa!" cried Check, looking on with interest. "What girl do? Take bath now?"

"Don't get your hopes up, either of you," she said, giving Duan that glare he had come to know so well. "I'm just getting rid of my long skirt so I can move about more easily. I should have done it before we crossed the lake, but I didn't think of it until now."

"B-but . . ." stammered a blushing Duan as he watched her shimmy out of the skirt. *Oh my god, I can't believe what I'm seeing . . . or what I'm about to see!* Then he realized that her top, which had been tucked into the skirt, was actually long enough to serve as a kind of skirt itself—albeit a short one.

"There," Agnis said with satisfaction as she tucked her long skirt into her pack. "That's better!"

"It sure is," said Duan, who couldn't help admiring Agnis' slender legs.

"What are you staring at?" she demanded now.

"Er, nothing," he said, averting his eyes. "You should have done that when we were crossing the lake earlier," he added bluntly to cover up his embarrassment.

Agnis stuck her tongue out in response. "Yeah, I should have. But don't you think that it's good that I'm vacant sometimes? I can't be perfect all the time."

"Um, would you say that about yourself? Normally?"

"Right, I guess you wouldn't. Normally."

Duan had had enough. Slinging his pack off, he began to sort out his supply of ropes and wedges, including the coiled rope that Agnis had given him. "I'll go up first," he began.

But Agnis interrupted him. "What? You went first last time. It's my turn."

"Okay, if that's what you want. But don't you think there might be a problem?"

She hit him with her glare again and demanded, "Why, you don't think I can do it just because I'm a girl? You think I'll fall or something?"

"Well, no. Anyway, even if you did fall, I could catch you."

"What's the problem then?"

"Er, it kind of depends on your point of view."

"Point of view? What kind of nonsense is that?" But Agnis suddenly turned bright red. "You *would* try to peek up my skirt, wouldn't you, Duan? You pervert!"

"W-wait a minute! I could have just *let* you go first. I'm the one who warned you! Don't get mad at me."

At this, Agnis grew subdued. "Sorry, Duan. You're right. You were only being thoughtful."

"Never mind," he said. "We haven't got time to bicker. Let's get going."

She nodded silently, looking very unhappy with herself.

Duan couldn't figure Agnis out. She was almost ridiculously short-tempered, and her sense of justice was so strong that she wound up taking a lot of things too seriously. But at the same time, she could be easily frightened and would burst into tears or get angry or even start laughing for no apparent reason. A lot of times she acted without thinking things through and made dangerous mistakes. But when she realized she had made a mistake, she was never too proud to

apologize. Her weak points and strong points were so different from his own that Duan sometimes felt she was not just a different gender but a different species altogether.

Which, in a way, she was: since her mother was an Elementaller, Agnis was really only half human. Yet despite everything, or because of it, Duan couldn't help finding the princess from Fiana fascinating. She annoyed the hell out of him, but he was also very fond of her.

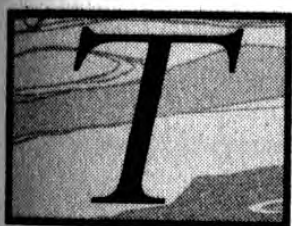
"Okay," said Duan, who had now assembled all his climbing equipment. "I'm going to make good footholds and handholds as I go. Don't follow until I give you the word, okay?"

"Okay!"

At the same time that Agnis gave her energetic response, Duan took the first step up.

CHAPTER 53:

BAT ATTACK



he base of the slope was where all the fallen debris had collected over the years, and as such, there were plenty of handholds and footholds, although some of these were not as sturdy as they appeared and shifted alarmingly at their weight, forcing Duan and Agnis to move with caution.

K'nock sprang up the slope with all the fleet-footed dexterity of a mountain goat. Duan watched in amazement as the big cat approached him and then went zipping by without slowing. Only on reaching an outcropping about twenty yards above him did K'nock halt. He lay on the edge of the rock and gazed down placidly, his tail slowly lashing from side to side.

"K'nock seems really at home," Duan called down to Agnis.

"Snow leopards come from mountain regions," she replied proudly. "K'nock can climb way steeper slopes than this."

What it took K'nock mere seconds to accomplish took Duan long moments of toil and anxiety. When he finally drew

near the outcropping, the big cat leapt up and shot even farther ahead. This pattern was repeated again and again as Duan and Agnis climbed. It was as if K'nock was leading them on.

And yet the top never seemed nearer.

At first, Duan and Agnis called encouragement and advice back and forth to each other, but soon they were too exhausted to waste their breath. The plentiful handholds and footholds grew less so the higher they went, and those remaining were difficult to reach and dangerous to trust, a circumstance that further slowed them. Every so often, Duan would glance questioningly over his shoulder, and Agnis would nod back at him weakly, haloed by the light from the Shining Shrooms.

After what seemed like hours, Duan lost sight of K'nock. He'd watched the big cat disappear over another outcropping, as he'd done before, but this time he failed to reappear. Duan paused, gripping a narrow ledge with his fingertips, and summoned enough strength from somewhere to shout, "K'nock! Can you hear me? Come back where we can see you!"

But the snow leopard did not come back.

Duan shifted his grip, then glanced down at Agnis, who was moving upward like a zombie. "Agnis!" he called. "K'nock went up ahead. I've lost sight of him!"

She didn't respond in any way.

It's like she's sleepwalking, he thought. Or should that be sleep-climbing? Whichever, it isn't good . . .

Duan knew they needed to take a break, but there was no place to do so until they reached the outcropping where he'd last seen K'nock.

But what if something's waiting for us up there? What if some monster has hurt or even killed K'nock? Anything that strong would make short work of Agnis and me!

"Cat gone?" It was Check, who had come flying up to check on him.

"Yes. Can you fly up there and find out if anything's happened to him?"

"Bad cat! Check go!" Raising his forepaw to make a thumbs-up sign that he'd learned in barroom adventures with Olba, the little grinia zoomed off toward the outcropping.

Duan looked back down at Agnis, who had climbed marginally closer. "Agnis," he called. "Agnis!"

Finally, she glanced up at him. Even from this distance, in the light of the Shining Shrooms, he could see the sweat glistening on her face.

"Agnis, do you think you can make it to the next outcropping? We can take a break there!"

Agnis nodded, then resumed her ascent.

Watching, Duan decided that he'd better wait for her to reach him before pressing on himself.

She's really reaching her limits . . .

Unfortunately, so was Duan. The strength in his arms and legs was almost gone. He closed his eyes, leaning his head against the hard, cold rock face in front of him as though it were a pillow.

If only I could just rest here for a minute . . .

A sudden scream jolted him out of his reverie.

Agnis . . . !

His eyes flew open . . . then closed again instinctively as something knocked into the back of his head hard enough to send his forehead smacking into the rock face he'd been resting against just seconds before.

Wh-what's going on?

A sharp pain ran up Duan's arm. He gasped when he saw the cause of it.

It was another Vanilla Bat. Or no, on closer examination he saw that the color was different. This one had purple wings and fur, along with the same sharp teeth and claws and beady, red eyes of the bats that had attacked him before. It had sunk its claws into his arm and was gnawing at him through the sleeve of his shirt, where his armor didn't protect him. The horrible sight paralyzed him for a second, until he heard Agnis scream again.

"Aaaaah!" cried Agnis. "Get it off me!"

Shifting his position without making an attempt to get the monster off his arm, Duan glanced down. Agnis was just a few feet below him now. One of the purple-winged monsters was attacking her.

"Don't panic, Agnis!" he called. "You'll fall!"

Her screams only increased.

Ignoring the pain inflicted by his own attacker, Duan quickly descended to Agnis, who was just barely managing to keep herself from falling as she flailed with one hand at the purple bat swooping about her head. She was screaming and crying frantically, her hair all disheveled. Duan grabbed her arm, steadying her. "Listen," he said firmly, trying to cut through her panic, "I've fought these monsters before. They're called Vanilla Bats, and they're not that tough."

His presence seemed to have frightened off the bat that attacked her, at least temporarily. But Agnis was staring at him in horror anyway. "Th-there's one on your arm!"

"See what I mean? I barely even felt it!"

Which was, of course, a lie. The thing's bite was actually quite painful. Now Duan ripped the creature away . . .

He ripped it away . . .

He ripped . . .

Why the heck won't it come loose? This thing . . . it's far stronger than a normal Vanilla Bat!

Finally, using all his strength, Duan managed to tear the thing loose. He groaned as blood streamed out of his arm.

This set Agnis off again.

Ignoring her screams, Duan struck the monster against the rock again and again. The bat shrieked as it struggled to get away, but at last it went limp. Purple vapor poured out of its mouth.

Just as I thought! This bat is like a Vanilla Bat—it regenerates! Only the smell isn't quite the same. It's not like vanilla; it's more like . . . raspberries?

The vapor was hovering above the thing's mouth; in another second, Duan knew, it would begin to seep back into the lifeless body, reanimating it. The bandages he'd used against the Vanilla Bats were tucked into his pack, unreachable now, so he had to think of something else, and fast.

What should I do?!

As Duan debated, Agnis shrieked, "More are coming!"

Duan saw three more of the monsters flying their way.

Ugh. Maybe there are nests all over this cliff. That would be just our luck!

There was no time to mess around with the bat in his hand. He flung it down, and as it fell, the purple cloud drifted after it. He knew that once the thing hit the bottom, the fog would find its way in and bring the monster back to life. But there were more pressing matters to worry about now.

"Right," he said calmly, trying to sound like everything was under control, "let's just climb up to that outcropping."

"B-but your *arm* . . ."

"What, this? I'm not gonna die from one measly little bite, Agnis. I'm a bit tougher than that!"

They made for the outcropping. It was slow going, with Agnis shaking so badly she could barely move. Duan talked to

her constantly, trying to keep her as calm as possible while urging her steadily forward. He kept glancing up, hoping to see K'nock or Check gazing from the outcropping, but even as they drew nearer, there was no sign of the two missing animals. What could have happened to them? It worried him that Check hadn't come back to report, although it was probably better this way, as the grinia wouldn't stand a chance against the purple bats.

Speaking of which, the bats were closing in fast. It wasn't long before they caught up and began to attack Duan's legs without mercy. It seemed they were staying clear of his arms. Also, all three monsters were focusing their attacks on Duan, as if reasoning that he was the tougher opponent.

Hmm. These things aren't as stupid as they look . . .

"Duan!" screamed Agnis in a heartrending voice.

"I-I'm fine," he told her. "Don't worry about me, Agnis. Just keep climbing—we're almost there!"

Agnis nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. But gritting her teeth, she pulled herself up and over the outcropping as Duan kicked at the purple bats that were clawing and biting his legs. He didn't even think to try and sneak a look up her skirt.

Then he heard her scream. Again.

But it was a different kind of scream this time. "Duan! The top! I can see the top! It's just a little farther!"

That filled him with fresh strength, and he scrambled the rest of the way to the outcropping and hauled himself over the edge. The bats were right behind him.

Ahead he saw a stretch of flat ground, then another rise, which seemed to be, in fact, the top toward which they'd been climbing all this time. But there was no sign of Check or K'nock.

Duan stood, drawing his sword. "I'll stop them here, Agnis. You go on up."

“B-but . . .”

“No buts—just go!”

“No,” she said forcefully. “I’m not going to leave you behind to face those things alone. We’ll climb together or not at all. I’m not going to die from a few bites either!”

These brave words filled Duan with admiration for Agnis’ strong character. It wasn’t easy to master fear and stand firm in the face of danger, especially against overwhelming odds. And these odds were exactly that, because it wasn’t just the three bats that were after them now. Gazing down, he saw what looked like hundreds of the purple monsters pouring out of the rock face below. He had been right—the bats had their nests in the cliff.

“Aaaaah!”

Suddenly, they were surrounded by a swarm of the vicious purple bats. It was like being attacked by a dark cloud filled with swirling, sharp knives.

Agnis screamed as her foot slipped. She began to fall.

“Agnis, no!”

Lunging out, Duan managed to grab her wrist. He grunted at the weight of her, but he held firm. She looked up at him in terror, dangling over a drop that would kill her. And even if it didn’t, the bats would soon finish the job.

Duan was clinging to the rock face with one hand and holding Agnis with the other. He tried to pull her up far enough so that she could get a foothold, but he didn’t have the strength. His arms felt like they were being pulled out of their sockets. His fingers were slipping. And of course the bats did not let up for even a second.

Meanwhile, Duan’s hand was losing its tenuous grip on the rock face. A purple bat now decided to sharpen its fangs on his wrist. He tried to block out the pain, but it was no use. He felt his fingers giving way.



“S-sorry, Agnis,” he gasped. “C-can’t hold on . . .”

Then he was falling.

Or was he?

Someone—or something—had grabbed Duan by the wrist and was holding him up, just as he was holding Agnis.

“Don’t worry, kid,” said a familiar voice. “I’ve got you.”

“O-Olba?”

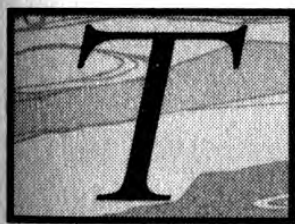
“You were expecting maybe Lord Alkyl?”

It was indeed Olba October. The big fighter was leaning over the top of the rise, ignoring the attacks of the purple bats as he hauled Duan to safety.



CHAPTER 54:

"WHAT THE HECK ARE
YOU DOING HERE?"



he next thing Duan knew, Olba knelt above him and gently slapped him in the face. Check was perched on his chest, gazing at him with concern while Agnis and K'nock looked on anxiously.

"Snap out of it, kid," said Olba. "You haven't got time to pass out!"

"Oh no! The Vanilla Bats!" Duan jumped up and looked down at the rocks. Just as he had expected, there were countless Vanilla Bats flying toward them, enough to make the whole area look purple.

"C'mon, over here," said Olba. "Leave the bats to the two-headed wizard, and we'll run ahead. By the way, they're called Raspberry Bats—they're far more powerful than Vanilla Bats."

Olba grabbed hold of Duan and Agnis and pulled them toward an open crack beyond the rocky area. As Duan ran along, he turned to look behind.



He was met with an amazing sight. Standing alone at the edge of the cliff, the two-headed wizard was battling single-handedly against the swarm of Raspberry Bats. Silver Eye and Golden Eye were chanting without pause, and the resulting spells were shooting from their fingertips: conjurations of fire from one hand and ice from the other.

As Duan watched, hypnotized by the eldritch spectacle, which generated an eerie light that eclipsed that of the Shining Shrooms, scores of purple bats burst into flame, screaming as they burned, while others froze solid and dropped like stones. Long hair streamed out behind the wizards as if they were facing a stiff wind. Blue and orange sparks of magical energy were pin wheeling off the ends as the long, silky strands whipped about like living things.

“Olba, Raspberry Bats regenerate just like the Vanillas,” Duan said urgently as the big fighter dragged him into the

fissure. “They’re going to keep coming back no matter what Golden Eye and Silver Eye throw at them.”

Olba shrugged dismissively. “Ordinarily that would be true. But the magic they’re using is an attack magic that doesn’t allow enemies to regenerate.”

“An attack magic that doesn’t allow enemies to regenerate?!” Agnis was awestruck. “That’s a very high-level ability!”

“Yes, I’m using the ‘Incinerate Spell,’ ” said a voice from behind them. “It uses twice the magic power that a regular one uses. So we can’t use it for continuous attacks.”

They all turned in surprise to see the two-headed wizard.

“Golden Eye! Silver Eye!” Without thinking, Duan grasped their hands.

“Good to see you, Duan,” said Golden Eye. “Congratulations on getting this far. And what’s more, you managed to bring this frail princess along with you.”

“Frail?” said Agnis. “That was unnecessary!”

K’nock padded over to Agnis’ side and glared at the two-headed wizard, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

Golden Eye gave his most charming smile. “Oh, no,” he said smoothly. “Don’t misunderstand. I didn’t mean it in a bad way. You see, I prefer women with a certain delicacy. I find it quite attractive. I’m sorry if I caused any offense.”

Before Agnis could respond, Silver Eye barked laughter. “Unlike my brother, I prefer women who aren’t weak and delicate. I like them strong-spirited.”

Agnis was clenching her wizard’s staff so tightly that Duan thought it might snap. “I’ll show you strong-spirited.”

Olba interrupted. “Women come into their own when they can attract interest from men. So what else is new? Now—

what the heck are you doing here, Agnis? There weren't any ships, were there?"

Agnis sulkily shut her mouth tight.

Duan spoke up. "Oh, umm . . . Apparently there was an express ship, and Agnis chartered it to get here. She wanted to discuss something with us, Olba."

Everyone's eyes widened when they heard that Agnis had chartered a ship.

"Wow," said Golden Eye. "I thought only royalty could afford to charter ships!"

Duan smiled to himself. He wondered what Golden Eye would think if he knew that Agnis really *was* royalty.

"The rich sure do things differently," said Olba, shaking his head.

"Oh yeah," said Duan. "Let me introduce you guys. Golden Eye, Silver Eye, this is Agnis Link, a princess of Fiana. She's an adventurer, and her specialty is Fire Magic . . ."

The two-headed wizard listened skeptically.

But it's the truth. She's a princess and an adventurer . . .

When introductions were finished, Duan remembered his true objective. "Olba, have you found the dragon yet?"

"Oh, yes," said Olba. "We found him, all right."

Duan gasped. So that was it. All his efforts were in vain. He had arrived too late . . . Or had he?

"Well, what happened? Did you get the treasure without angering Lord Alkyl?"

"We didn't anger him," Olba said. "As for the rest . . ." He glanced at the two-headed wizard.

Golden Eye and Silver Eye both sighed and shook their heads. Golden Eye said, "See for yourself."

Agnis and Duan exchanged confused looks. "Y-you mean the dragon's lair is that close?" asked Duan.

“Go have a look,” Olba invited . . . or was it more of a challenge?

Either way, they couldn’t resist. Hand in hand, Agnis and Duan set off down the passage. They followed it to its end, where it opened out into an immense space.

They both gasped at the same time.

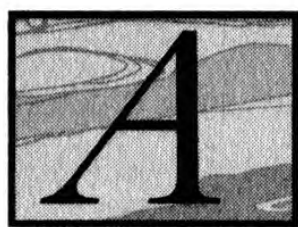
There it is!

There it is!

It really is there!

CHAPTER 55:

WHAT DUAN AND AGNIS SAW



At first, it looked like part of the rock. In reality, the cavern was so dark that Duan and Agnis couldn't see clearly. They could only tell that its surface was lumpy and was tinged red. But as they got used to the darkness, they could see that what they were looking at was actually the hard skin of a gigantic animal. They gradually noticed which parts were legs and arms; Duan felt his heart jump.

Gradually, Duan made out what he thought might be part of one huge leg, with claws like lengths of curved and sharpened iron. The dragon's lair wasn't as large as Duan had expected, although it did seem to go on deeper. He could see light shining from behind the dragon.

It may be an escape route, he thought. But what is that noise I've been hearing . . . ? It sounds like bellows.

Someone suddenly grabbed Duan's arm. It was Agnis. She was so filled with excitement looking at a dragon for the first time that her eyes shone.

“Wow! It’s a real dragon!” she mouthed silently.

After nodding, Duan pulled Agnis gently back the way they had come. He thought that it would be best to return to the others for now. He was afraid of disturbing the dragon and being treated to a demonstration of the Breath of Fire. Duan had often wondered what it would be like to see a dragon employ that spell. The prospect was no longer as fascinating when he was apt to be burned to a crisp in the course of it.

They started back, creeping slowly at first, taking even more care to avoid making noise than they had in their approach. But the excitement was too much, and after what seemed like an eternity of inching along at a snail’s pace, they both reached the breaking point at the same instant and began quite suddenly to run. Only when they reached Olba and the two-headed wizard did their giddiness subside. They skidded to a halt and gasped for breath. Olba, Golden Eye, and Silver Eye looked at them as if wondering whether the sight of Lord Alkyl had driven them insane.

“It was amazing,” Duan told them. “It was real. It was a real-life, genuine dragon!” He knew he was babbling, but he didn’t care.

Beside him, Agnis shook her head back and forth as if in a daze. “I can’t believe it! I just saw a dragon with my own two eyes! I can’t believe it! A dragon!”

Duan and Agnis turned to each other and gave each other high fives.

“A dragon!”

“Oh yeah!”

“Okay, okay,” said Olba at last. “You saw a dragon. We get the picture. I’m sure Golden Eye and Silver Eye are as thrilled as I am,”—this was said rather sarcastically, in Duan’s opinion—“but now we have to figure out what to do.”

"Do?" Duan blinked, confused. "Olba, you can't still be considering going after the treasure. I mean, you've seen Lord Alkyl. There's no way to get past him. Besides, we don't have the right to put the villagers at risk by angering the dragon. Let's just go back now, before it's too late!"

"What, slink back with our tails between our legs?" asked Olba sharply. "This is exactly why I didn't want to bring you along, Duan. If you don't want to help us get the treasure, fine, but don't try to impose your morality on the rest of us."

Golden Eye and Silver Eye nodded in agreement.

"We can't give up now, Duan," urged Agnis. "Not after we've come so far!"

And the thing was, a part of Duan agreed with her, and with Olba. Now that he'd seen the dragon for himself, he had to admit to feeling a powerful attraction, just like the mayor had described. It was as if Lord Alkyl was calling to him, calling to all of them. The dragon *wanted* them to come . . .

It must be some kind of dragon magic, Duan thought. Maybe it's how he traps his victims . . .

But he knew there was nothing he could say to make the others change their minds. The best he could hope for would be to set some conditions that might at least help to protect them and the villagers from the anger of Lord Alkyl.

"Okay," he said now. "I'm part of this team, and I'll go along with the majority. But I want everyone to promise that we're going to take every possible precaution to avoid aggravating the dragon."

"Well, obviously," said Olba. "We all want to get out of this alive, Duan. Nobody in their right mind wants to antagonize a dragon!"

"Certainly not," agreed Golden Eye. "Let me make a suggestion. There's no need for us to be greedy. If we make

it past the dragon and into his lair, our chances of getting out undetected will only increase if we limit ourselves to a single item each. What do you say?"

Olba nodded. "Good thinking, Golden Eye. Only . . . the thing about this spell that you and Silver Eye are searching for? That's not going to be so easy to find. You'll have to read every scroll, open every book. It could take some time—maybe too much time."

Golden Eye's expression turned sour as Olba spoke, and he looked angrily at his brother. "Silver Eye, you've been blabbing again, haven't you? Discussing our private matters! And something so important . . ." But Silver Eye was distracted. He looked like he was still half hypnotized by the sight of the dragon.

Golden Eye swallowed his words and took a deep breath. "Hmm, fine. I suppose they would have found out soon enough. But not a word to anyone else."

"Sure, you can trust us," said Olba, trying to make peace between the brothers. "Who would we tell anyway?"

Golden Eye looked a bit stunned, as if he hadn't considered any of this before. Then he laughed quietly. "Yeah, I guess that's right."

"So, what's the plan for getting past the dragon and into the treasure chamber?" asked Duan.

Olba shook his head. "Well, we've investigated this and that . . . What you and Agnis saw was the dragon's right arm and stomach. Could you see the back of its head too?"

Duan nodded. "Yes. It's where those sharp thorns jut out, right?"

"Yes," said Olba. "The left arm, part of its stomach, its feet, and tail are hidden toward the back of the cavern."

"Wow. It's huge."

"You got that right," said Olba. "I have a feeling that this place is a bit small for its den. If it starts to move around in there, things could get a little . . . busy."

"Well, at least that will make it difficult for it to swing its tail around to attack us," Duan commented.

Olba raised his forefinger and winked at Duan as if to say, "Well done, kid."

"Do you know where the treasure is?" asked Agnis, who had been sitting silently to the side.

"Not exactly," said Golden Eye. "But Olba and I think that the dragon itself is blocking the entrance to its treasure chamber, Your Highness."

"Don't call me that," said Agnis, annoyed. "Just because I'm a princess doesn't mean I expect to be treated like one. I don't want any special treatment from you. Just think of me as a low-level adventurer who's trying to level up the same as everybody else."

Golden Eye nodded. "Okay, Your High—er, that is, Agnis."

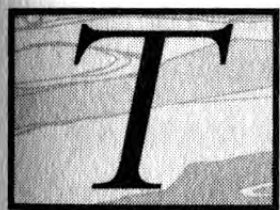
Agnis tried to look serious, but Duan could tell that she was fighting to keep her giggles under control. He was surprised and wondered if there was a shy side of Agnis that he hadn't noticed until now.

"Does the dragon suspect our presence?" Duan asked.

Olba, Golden Eye, and Silver Eye glanced at each other sharply.

CHAPTER 56:

THE BREATH OF FIRE



hen Olba said, “The dragon doesn’t suspect—he knows. In fact, he already treated us to a Breath of Fire.”

Duan was stunned. “R-really?”

“We didn’t notice him at first,” Golden Eye explained. “We thought he was just part of the rock. We didn’t expect to come upon him so quickly! And then, right out of the blue, it happened. Lord Alkyl suddenly turned toward us, cracked open his shining eyes, and breathed out a Breath of Fire!”

“Wow,” breathed Duan.

“Gi-iis!” hissed Check.

“H-how did you survive?” Agnis stammered.

“Luckily, the dragon wasn’t aiming directly at us. It was more of a warning than anything else.”

“But what about the Breath of Fire itself?” Agnis persisted. “What was it like? How wide was it? How long? And how powerful?”

Golden Eye took a deep breath before replying. "The length and the breadth of the flame wasn't so great. But the force . . ." He shook his head as though awestruck at the memory. "Even though it wasn't directed at us, we still felt the incredible heat. No human could survive a direct hit without some kind of magical protection. It would be like falling into a blast furnace! But like I said, it was just a warning. He could have killed us if he'd wanted to. Instead, as soon as we retreated, Lord Alkyl put his head down and went back to sleep!"

"I get it now," said Agnis. "That weird noise . . . that sounded like a bellows—that was the dragon breathing while it slept!"

Golden Eye winked at her.

"That's how concerned he is about our presence," Olba added. "It's a bit humbling, actually. But maybe we can use his overconfidence to our advantage."

Agnis looked thoughtful as she considered everything that Olba and Golden Eye had revealed. She was thinking about the blood that flowed through her veins—the blood of a Fire Elementaller, inherited from her mother, Rubis. Could her Elementaller heritage help them against the dragon? She felt as if the answer was already inside her, if only she could find it.

Oh, this is so annoying. Mother . . . Tell me!

She closed her eyes tightly and summoned up her mother's image.

Golden Eye, watching her, mistook Agnis' frustration for fear. He tried to set her mind at ease. "Don't worry, Agnis. We'll think of a way around it."

Duan had questions of his own. "Did the dragon speak to you? I've read that some dragons, the most intelligent ones, have the power of speech."

“Lord Alkyl didn’t say a word to us,” Olba said. “He let his Breath of Fire do the talking.”

“But that still doesn’t answer the question of how we’re going to get by the dragon and into the treasure chamber,” Duan pointed out.

“The dragon isn’t completely blocking the way to the chamber,” Olba explained. “If you look closely, there’s a small gap between his body and the wall. A person with a small build could squeeze through.”

Duan had a bad feeling about Olba’s words. “A small build, eh? I suppose that means me.”

Olba shrugged casually. “Well, we hadn’t actually thought that far ahead, Duan, but it’s great of you to volunteer.”

“V-volunteer?” he spluttered. “I n-never—”

But Silver Eye interrupted. “Well done, Duan.”

“Damn brave of you!” said Golden Eye, clapping him on the back.

Then Agnis was hugging him. “I’m the right size too, so I’ll come with you!”

“Agnis . . .” Duan was about to tell her that she had to stay behind, but when he saw the determined look on her face he clenched his mouth shut.

“Yesssss?” she asked him.

“Er, nothing.”

“Does anyone else have any objections to my going?” Clenching her staff tightly in both hands, she looked at Olba and the two-headed wizard with an intensity in her expression that seemed to warn them against interfering with her decision.

Nobody objected.

“When the dragon is about to breathe fire, he must make some kind of sign first,” Agnis said. “I want to find it.”

“Sign?”

“Maybe his mouth opens slightly, or his eyes widen, or he makes a certain noise. I don’t know. But if we can identify that sign, we can predict when he’s about to breathe. And if we can predict that, maybe we can figure out a way to avoid it. So the first step is to check how many seconds it takes after this sign for it to release the Breath of Fire.”

Hearing his name, the green-bodied grinia looked up.

“Do you want to come too, Check?” asked Duan.

“Check stay,” the grinia said, shaking his head.

“K’nock, you stay here too,” Agnis told the snow leopard.

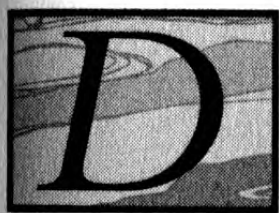
“I’m just going to have a look. I’ll be fine.”

K’nock retreated with resignation.

Duan and Agnis said goodbye to the others and made their way back down the passage to the sleeping dragon.

CHAPTER 57:

A PARROW ESCAPE



Duan and Agnis crept as close as they dared, careful to keep to the shadows, until sweat ran down their faces and the bellowing sound of the dragon's deep and steady breathing filled the air. Sure enough, just as Olba had described, there was a narrow gap between Lord Alkyl's side and the cavern wall.

"The others are too big, but we can make it through," Agnis whispered in his ear.

He nodded and whispered back, "Unless Lord Alkyl moves in his sleep. Then he'll squash us against the wall like bugs."

"Ugh. You always look on the bright side, don't you, Duan?" Agnis said sarcastically.

"I prefer to be realistic," he said, a little stung.

"Whatever," said Agnis. "Should we go for it?"

He shook his head. "Let's stick to the plan. We need to find out about the Breath of Fire."

"Right. So, how do we wake up the dragon?"

“Er, good question.” Duan hadn’t gotten that far in his planning. He studied the sleeping dragon intently. It was going to be crucial, he could see now, to wake Lord Alkyl as gently as possible. If they angered or startled him, the dragon might aim his Breath of Fire directly at them. *Hmmm. This is harder than I thought. Maybe if we—*

As he was thinking about how to wake the dragon, Agnis crouched down and picked up a rock from the ground. Then, without a word, she drew back her arm as if to throw it at the dragon.

Without thinking, Duan reached out and grabbed her wrist. “Wh-what’s the matter with you? Do you want to get us killed?”

“I’m just trying to wake up the dragon.”

“We can’t just hit him with a rock! That’s stupid!”

Agnis wrenched her wrist free of his grip. “Oh, so you think I’m stupid, is that it?”

“I didn’t say that. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Well, then what?”

“It’s just that you never stop to think before you act, Agnis. That’s your problem!”

“Shall I tell you your problem? You—”

He raised a hand to silence her. “Wait. Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Exactly. That bellows sound is gone.”

“Uh-oh,” Agnis said as she glanced over Duan’s shoulder. The color drained from her face, and her eyes opened as wide as saucers.

“Don’t tell me the dragon is awake,” whispered Duan.

Agnis’ mouth opened and closed, but no words emerged.

Slowly, Duan turned around and lifted his eyes . . . And found himself gazing up into the eyes of the dragon.

They glowed red, like hot coals, in a head that was as massive as a mountain, or so it seemed to Duan as he stood shivering, paralyzed with fear. He wondered dimly how such an immense monster could move so swiftly and silently. He felt about as significant as an ant.

Lord Alkyl's scales were different shades of red. Some were bright crimson, like fresh blood, while others were a dull, rusty color, like sandstone. Some looked as rough as raw rock, while others had a glossy appearance, as if they'd been polished over the course of centuries. Wickedly sharp spikes jutted out on all sides of the dragon, and from the sides and back of his head as well. Steam rose from his body, and the air around him shimmered with a palpable heat. Lord Alkyl wasn't just staring at Duan and Agnis—his fiery eyes seemed to be burning right through them, as if he could read their minds.

Suddenly the dragon moved with incredible speed. It turned its head directly toward them and opened its mouth wide.

Duan saw a red spark appear at the back of Lord Alkyl's throat, like a tiny red star shimmering far off in the night sky.

"It's c-coming," he told her. He was watching that red spark come closer. As it did, it grew bigger.

"What's coming?"

"What do you think?"

The spark was the size of a ball now. And it was coming faster than ever.

Duan grabbed Agnis and dragged her back to the passage that led to where Olba and the others were waiting. Seconds later, a powerful Fire Breath slammed into the place where they had just been standing.

The whole sequence had only lasted seconds . . .



The dragon, seeing that they had moved, turned its face toward them again.

Oh no—it's going to use the Breath of Fire again!

But how to escape it this time? They couldn't return to where they had been a moment ago. That place was still smoking from the dragon's last attack, and Duan could feel the immense heat that was radiating from the glowing rocks.

They would just have to return to where Olba and the others were. Once Duan had decided this, he tried to pull Agnis along, but she wouldn't move.

"Come on, Agnis!"

She pointed at the back of the dragon's throat. "Look at that. The back of the throat isn't lit yet. Just as I thought."

Duan understood immediately. "After Lord Alkyl uses the Breath of Fire, he has to wait a while before he can use it again. How long has it been now?"

Before Agnis could answer, a red spark appeared in the dark depths of the dragon's throat.

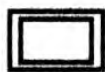
"Aagh!" cried Duan.

"Aaaah!" screamed Agnis.

They ran.

Then, from behind them, they heard the telltale roar of the Breath of Fire.

A powerful surge of heat struck Duan in the back, lifting him and Agnis off the ground and shooting them forward like a wave.



Duan could smell something burning. He had a bad feeling that it was *him*.

Olba was swatting at Duan's clothes and hair with both hands, beating out the hot cinders that had fallen on him, threatening to blaze up. Golden Eye and Silver Eye were doing the same thing to Agnis while K'nock paced restlessly nearby.

"Gi-iis! Duan okay? Check heal?" The grinia fluttered frantically around Duan and Olba.

"I-I'm fine, Check," he managed to say.

"Looks like you two took some very unfriendly fire," the big fighter said. "What happened in there?"

"We found out the timing of the Fire Breath," Agnis said.

"Yes," Duan echoed. "And we found out that it also needs to 'charge up' again. Can you remember how long it took, Agnis?"

"Of course. Exactly five seconds!"

"Yeah, I thought so too. Five seconds." And he began to count aloud: "One, two, three, four, five!"

Agnis joined in. When they reached "five," they both shouted with joy and clapped their hands. Check didn't really understand what was going on, but he joined in with their clapping as he sat on Duan's shoulder.

Olba sighed and shook his head. "Hey, I'm sorry to break up the party, but can you explain it a little clearer?"

Agnis quickly summarized all that had occurred. "So," she concluded, "before it expels a Breath of Fire, the back of its throat lights up. And then the time you have until the next breath is five seconds. It needs some time to recharge. It can't blow fire time after time. It's the same thing with Fire Magic. Right, Mister Golden Eye?"

Golden Eye looked at her in surprise. "Oh, of course. I forgot. You use Fire Magic too."

"I do. And my mother was an Elementaller too, gifted with the spirit power of Fire."

"I see. So you're a veteran when it comes to Fire Magic. Yes, I can't use my magic continuously, and if I cast a powerful spell, I need to rest for a while."

"Exactly. I think the same thing applies for the dragon as well."

Olba rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So the big guy needs time to charge up, eh?"

Duan heaved a sigh of frustration. "What are you getting at, Olba?"

"Just that we're going to have about five seconds to get past the dragon."

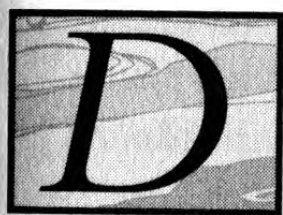
"Once it breathes," added Golden Eye.

"Yeah, obviously," said Olba. "Once it breathes. And you know what that means."

Duan abruptly realized that everybody was looking at him. "I just volunteered again, didn't I?" he asked in a small voice.

CHAPTER 58:

PARALYZED!



Duan stood once again in front of the dragon. This time he was completely alone. Well, not completely. The others were watching him from close behind. But that did not make him feel any less alone.

First he had to get the dragon to expel a Breath of Fire. And then, while the dragon was recharging its magic, he would slip past the monster and into the treasure room. After that, the plan was that Duan would decide what to do next depending on what happened and how the situation changed.

"You call that a plan?" Duan had objected when Olba had first told him what he must do. "After that it's up to me? That's irresponsible!"

"Well, we can't do anything—none of us has been into that treasure room," Olba pointed out. "Nobody's ever seen it."

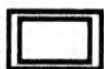
Olba has a point. He has a point, but . . .

Then Golden Eye spoke, making things worse. "The item we want . . . the incantation . . . To tell the truth, we don't know

exactly what it's going to look like. I mean, it will probably be in a scroll or maybe a book. But it could be something totally different . . ."

"What?! How am I gonna know?" protested Duan in shaky voice, feeling like he might burst into tears of frustration. And on top of that, he had just had a terrible thought. What if the dragon's treasure chamber was really narrow? What if he couldn't find a place to hide?

But if the dragon can go in and out, then it can't be that narrow. I can't sit here sniveling. I'll just have to go.



Now the dragon was awake. It wasn't facing Duan, but it had opened its red eyes when he had entered the cavern. It opened its mouth, revealing sharp fangs, and, at the back of its throat, a red flame.

"Here it comes!" he cried out. Then he jumped aside.

"Well done!" came Olba's voice.

But then he was drowned out in the roar of the Breath of Fire. And as loud as it was, it was even hotter. It felt as though the entire room was burning. The brightness blinded Duan.

No, I can't just stand still. I only have five seconds while he charges. I have to slip into the treasure room now!

Duan could feel his heart beating powerfully. *I have to stay calm . . . I have to stay calm . . .*

"Go, Duan!" shouted Olba.

Duan tried to dart forward, but his legs were rooted to the ground. *What's happening? What's wrong with me? I-I can't move!*

Duan struggled to move his legs, but it was no use. *Did the dragon put a spell on me? Or is it just my own fear?*

The dragon opened his mouth wide, preparing to breathe again.

Shoot! I have to move! This is pathetic! But Duan simply couldn't. He had no control over his legs. And it wasn't just his legs. He couldn't move at all—his entire body was frozen, paralyzed . . .

Then, as though in a dream, Duan suddenly heard laughter—self-confident laughter that he recognized at once. The laughter of his long-lost brother, Gaeley.

Gaeley? Here? Can it be? Before him, he seemed to see a familiar, suntanned face glancing over one broad shoulder.

Gaeley! It is you! Or is this only a dream . . . ? Gaeley looked forward again as if he hadn't seen Duan. Duan called out to him, but for some reason Gaeley didn't seem to hear him either. He cocked his head and looked as though he was straining his ears, then shrugged.

Gaeley! I'm here. It's me! But no sound emerged from Duan's mouth. *Why? Why isn't my body working? Gaeley . . . I wish I had seen you one last time . . .*

"What's he doing?" shouted Olba in frustration. "Why's he just standing there? Duan! *Duan!*"

But Duan didn't respond.

"Maybe his legs have turned to jelly because the dragon glared at him," said Agnis.

Olba, after clicking his tongue, ran toward Duan's side. When he saw that the dragon's throat was already lit with a bundle of flames, he faltered for a moment. But only for a moment. Then he leapt in front of Duan, shielding him with his own body.

Duan and Olba shut their eyes tightly and waited for the Breath of Fire.

But it didn't come.

Am I still alive? Olba opened his eyes slightly.

Duan opened his at the same time.

In front of them was the gigantic face of Lord Alkyl. His mouth was no longer open. He blinked his red eyes a few times and tilted his head slightly. And then, he opened his mouth again.

It's definitely coming this time!

But the reason the dragon had opened his mouth was not to expel another Breath of Fire.

“So you’ve come again . . . foolish, persistent adventurers.”

The dragon spoke!

CHAPTER 59:

IN THE LAIR OF LORD ALKYL



It was an extraordinary voice, deep, low, and powerful. Duan felt its vibrations in his stomach, his bones. Rushing underneath it was a sound that reminded him of a rough wind blowing through a valley.

“Tell me, humans,” demanded the dragon meanwhile, **“have you come to steal my treasure like so many adventurers before you?”**

Olba swallowed audibly before answering. “Er, Lord Alkyl, that is, you see, heh, we—”

The dragon interrupted, **“Because I kill those who attempt to steal what belongs to me.”**

“L-like I was saying, Your Lordship,” resumed Olba, sweat glistening on his brow, “we wandered into the dungeon by mistake and have been looking for a way out ever since!”

“That smells like a lie,” said the dragon after taking a huge sniff. **“I don’t like the smell of lies. Or of liars. They**

taste pretty good, though . . .” At that, Lord Alkyl’s laughter boomed, sending a hot wind over them. **“Bru ha ha ha!”**

“G-good one, Your Lordship,” croaked Olba. Then, out of the side of his mouth: “Say something, kid—I’m dying here!”

“It’s true, Lord Alkyl,” Duan said, thinking as quickly as he had ever done in his life, “we didn’t get lost. We came on purpose . . . in search of help!”

The dragon sniffed again, then narrowed his eyes. **“That smells mostly true. What help do you seek? Eternal life? Everlasting wealth? Staggering talent? Endless good fortune?”**

“No, none of those things. It’s not an ordinary wish at all. You see, I have a friend with two heads. Instead of sharing one body the way they do now, each head wants a body of his own.”

“And you think I can help?”

“Yes, Your Lordship. At least, we hope so.”

“Hmm. Perhaps I can. But why should I?”

“All have heard of the beneficent Lord Alkyl, the savior and protector of Luca Island.”

“They have?”

“You’re famous, Your Lordship, for your generosity and kindness.”

The dragon’s laughter belched forth. **“Bru ha ha ha! You mean for my treasure and my Breath of Fire! But you amuse me, human. Why aren’t you cowering in terror before me like the others?”**

“I resent that,” Olba interjected. “Olba October cowers before nobody!”

“Silence!” roared the dragon.

“Eep!” So forceful was the dragon’s command that it knocked Olba to the ground.

Lord Alkyl gave a satisfied snort as Olba sheepishly got to his feet.

“Look, it’s not that I’m not scared,” Duan told the dragon. “In fact, I’m terrified. I know you could squash me like a bug anytime you wanted. But I think you’ve got a good heart, Lord Alkyl. Besides,” he added, “we had to go through a lot to get this far. A dangerous and expensive voyage, unfriendly villagers, and then all kinds of monsters. After so much trouble, it would be a shame to turn back without at least asking for help.”

“You are funny. Bru ha ha ha!”

Duan flinched against the hot breeze of the dragon’s mirth.

“What is your name, human?”

“I’m Duan Surk, Your Lordship.”

“Very well, Duan Surk, I will listen to your request.”

“Thank you, Your Lordship.” Duan turned to Olba. “Olba, can you get Golden Eye and Silver Eye? I think it would be better if they asked Lord Alkyl themselves.”

“R-right, yeah.” Ordinarily, Olba would have protested being given an order by Duan, but now he hastened off to carry it out.

Wow, the dragon’s really shaken him up! But despite everything, he still tried to protect me from the Breath of Fire. That’s real bravery and friendship!

Olba returned quickly, accompanied by the two-headed wizard and Agnis, with K’nock at her side. They stood very close together, as if drawing comfort from the proximity, and gazed up at the dragon with a mix of fear, awe, and curiosity.

“Lord Alkyl, I’d like to present the two-headed wizard, Golden Eye and Silver Eye.”

“Ah, the duo cephalic! A pleasure to meet you both,” said the dragon.

“The p-pleasure is ours,” said Golden Eye. Silver Eye merely nodded.

“And this is Agnis and her snow leopard, K’nock. Agnis is a princess from Fiana.”

“And a Fire Elementaller, isn’t that right?”

Agnis curtsied politely. “Half-Elementaller, Your Lordship.”

“Indeed? Most interesting. It would appear there is both less and more to you than meets the eye, little one.”

Duan was sure that Agnis would object to being called “little one,” but to his surprise, she said nothing.

“Go ahead, Golden Eye, Silver Eye,” he urged. “Ask Lord Alkyl. I really think he’s an understanding kind of person . . .”

“Except I’m not exactly a person, am I?”

“Sorry, Your Lordship. No offense!”

“None taken!”

The others were truly astonished to see Duan and Lord Alkyl chuckling like old friends over his mistake. But finally Golden Eye pulled himself together and told the dragon about their history and their long search for the incantation that would separate him and Silver Eye into two separate bodies. It was more or less the same story that Duan had heard from Silver Eye aboard the *Marchin*. Except for one small detail.

A girl.

Yes, it seemed that the desire of the two brothers to split into separate people, each with his own body, began with a girl, as so many things do.

The girl that Golden Eye was talking about—actually a young woman—was a person they had gotten to know at an inn where they had stopped during a quest some years earlier, when they were



just starting out as adventurers. They had been badly mauled by some monsters and had barely escaped with their lives. If they hadn't stumbled across the inn, they might well have died. They almost died anyway. But luckily the innkeeper's daughter was a skilled and compassionate nurse, and she had saved their lives.

As he returned to health, Silver Eye fell in love with the girl, and she with him. He arranged secret meetings with her when Golden Eye was asleep. This continued for some time, until one day Golden Eye discovered their secret.

Their fight that day was awful. It made the dustup that Duan and Olba had witnessed on the *Marchin* look like a harmless game of patty-cake. In this fight, neither of them had held back, and they had used all their powers against each other. It was so violent that it could have killed them both. Golden Eye was disgusted by the fact that Silver Eye had been taking advantage of his slumber to exchange tender feelings with their nurse. For his part, Silver Eye was surprised and offended by Golden Eye's rage. What business was it of his?

The only thing that had saved them was that they were wrecking the inn, and the innkeeper had summoned the police. The cops had broken up the fight and kicked them out

of the town. Afterward, Silver Eye vowed never to get close to another human being again.

No wonder he was so quiet and cool! thought Duan, listening.

As for Golden Eye, he had begun to regret his reaction and to feel sorry for Silver Eye. *If only each of them could have his own body, he'd thought, how easy it would be to avoid such problems!*

Then one day, when Golden Eye was browsing through some ancient magic documents, he learned of a spell that could separate two souls trapped in a single body.

But the document only touched on the subject. After that day, Golden Eye decided to devote himself to searching for that spell. When he told Silver Eye of his discovery and his determination to track down the spell for their own use, his brother had agreed without hesitation.

Over the years, there were times when they became distracted, caught up in the quest to accumulate all the magic and magical items they possibly could. But sooner or later, they always returned to their main objective.

And at last they found it.

Not the spell itself, but clear instructions about where to look. The information had come in the scenario for the Luca Island quest. It said that the last remaining copy of the spell was in the possession of the Red Dragon.

"That's why we're here," Golden Eye concluded. "We thought that even if you didn't actually have the spell itself, you might be able to give us some advice, maybe point us in the right direction. At least, that's what we were hoping."

"Hmmm." The dragon sniffed the air, blew out one hot breath, then glanced at Silver Eye. **"Your brother hasn't told the whole truth, has he?"**

"You can say that again," said Silver Eye angrily. He turned to Golden Eye. "What was all that nonsense about the inn and the girl? That was ages ago! I don't even remember her name!"

Golden Eye regarded him in amazement. "What? Her name was Rilda! How could you possibly forget that?"

Silver Eye tilted his head. "Rilda-Schmilda. Whatever. It doesn't matter what she was called."

"Doesn't matter?" repeated Golden Eye incredulously. "Do you know how sorry I felt for you all these years? How bad I felt because I was keeping you from marrying the girl of your dreams?"

"Who said anything about marriage? I fooled around with Gilda or whatever her name was, but I wasn't in love with her.



I've fooled around with lots of girls, all for fun. You become friends and you play around a little . . . That's all there is to it!"

"Then why did you agree to look for the spell?"

"Because I thought you wanted to be separate. I thought that maybe if I wasn't around, then you'd be free to go around collecting your magic or doing whatever *you* wanted to do."

"Why didn't you mention any of this sooner?"

"Why didn't you?"

"So you don't want to be separate?"

"If I didn't before, I do now!"

"That goes double for me!"

"Whoa, whoa," said Olba, trying to calm the brothers before another full-blown fight erupted. "Have you forgotten where we are?"

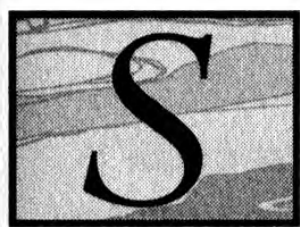
Golden Eye and Silver Eye both turned pale as they registered the presence of Lord Alkyl.

The dragon chuckled, releasing bursts of steam through his nostrils. "**Don't mind me,**" he rumbled. "**I was bored. I could use a little excitement. Please, go on.**"

But they couldn't continue squabbling after that. Golden Eye and Silver Eye sighed and hung their heads, ashamed.

CHAPTER 60:

THE PRICE OF MAGIC



Since Golden Eye and Silver Eye weren't saying anything, Duan addressed Lord Alkyl in their place, gazing straight into the dragon's glowing red eyes. "Do you know anything about the spell, your lordship?"

The dragon answered slowly. **"Hmm. I seem to remember hearing something about it a long time ago. What was it? Oh, yes. It's a spell to help unfortunate people who have two souls."**

Golden Eye and Silver Eye nodded. They didn't exactly look eager. In fact, their expressions were rather glum, like two kids resigned to taking medicine they knew was going to taste bad. Duan tried to imagine what they were feeling. They'd spent so long looking for the spell . . . all because of a misunderstanding. A failure to communicate. Each of the two had thought he was a burden to the other; each had been pursuing the spell less for himself than for the sake of his brother. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so tragic.

Now that the misunderstanding had been revealed, did they really want separate bodies anymore? All of a sudden Golden Eye and Silver Eye didn't look so sure. Nor could Duan blame them. After all, they had shared a body since the day they were born. It was the only life they had ever known. It had its inconveniences, there was no denying that, but didn't it have advantages too? Not to mention the possibility that their magic could vanish altogether if they were separated.

So it was little wonder if they felt ambivalent now.

Meanwhile, the dragon continued: **"However, your problem is two heads, not two souls."**

Golden Eye and Silver Eye exchanged a glance, then sighed.

"Two souls?" asked Duan. "What do you mean, like split personalities or something?"

"Perhaps. Or spirit possession."

"In other words," said Duan, "it won't work on them."

"On the contrary," said Lord Alkyl, **"it might very well work."**

Golden Eye and Silver Eye glanced up sharply.

The dragon's eyes thinned to crimson slits. **"But there will be a price to pay. In order that one may live, the other must die."**

"Wh-what?" gasped Duan.

"All magic carries a price, Duan Surk. The spell they seek can't create a new body out of nothing. All it can do is give one of them sole possession of the body they now share. That is the choice they must make."

"No! It's not fair!" cried Duan.

The dragon only laughed. **"Bru ha ha ha!"**

"It's okay, Duan," said Golden Eye. "We have no intention of using such an evil spell, do we, Silver Eye?"

"Not if one of us has to sacrifice the other. It's not worth it. You're my brother," he said. "I . . . I'm kind of used to you by now."

"I feel the same way."

It seemed to Duan that both brothers were secretly relieved not to have to make the more difficult choice of separating into two bodies. *They're happier this way*, he realized. *They never really wanted to change at all . . .*

Olba, who had been watching intently, suddenly addressed the dragon. "Excuse me, Your Lordship, sir, but as Duan said, we have come a long way and gone to quite a bit of trouble to find you. I don't suppose you have anything of value you might be willing to part with . . . some souvenirs, so to speak, heh heh, so that we can, er, *treasure* the memory of our meeting . . ."

Duan couldn't believe his ears. He glanced nervously at the dragon, certain that Lord Alkyl would react angrily to Olba's proposal. But to his surprise, the dragon readily agreed.

"Be my guest," he said, shifting his huge body to provide a clear path to the treasure chamber. **"But on one condition—don't be greedy. Each of you can take a single item. That's all."**

"No problem," said Olba happily. "That's all we were going to take anyway!" He grew pale, realizing a second too late that he had just confessed to having come to steal the dragon's treasure. "Er, I mean, that's all we were going to ask for."

Lord Alkyl snorted, as if he recognized Olba's lie but was merely amused by it.

Olba, Duan, Agnis, and the two-headed wizard filed into the treasure chamber, followed by K'nock. Check was still perched on Duan's shoulder.

The chamber was quite large, with a big opening toward the back. Duan figured that it must be the exit the dragon normally used.

A huge nest of multicolored feathers was situated at the front of the chamber, and piled there was Lord Alkyl's treasure.

It was nothing like what Duan had expected. He saw everything from antique war medals, armor, and swords, to bejeweled boxes and ancient books and scrolls. Bracelets of gold lay alongside women's hats in a variety of outdated styles. Glass jars were filled with old buttons, nails, seashells, diamonds, and rubies. There were things that looked tremendously valuable and things that looked like utter rubbish, all jumbled together without rhyme or reason.

Hmm. This dragon has strange taste . . .

Agnis must have been thinking the same thing, because when she glanced at Duan out of the corner of her eye, she giggled. That set him off. And even Olba and the two-headed wizard smiled.

"Great," said Olba. "We finally make it into the dragon's treasure chamber, and what do we find? A flea market!"

Still, Lord Alkyl had invited them each to take one item, and this they set out to do. It was hard to choose. For Olba, Duan, and Agnis, the difficulty came in trying to distinguish between what was valuable and what was worthless.

Check had a different problem. He sat atop the mountain of treasure, dazzled by all the shiny things around him, making no distinction between real gems and paste jewelry, gold, and fool's gold. He wanted it all.

"Gi-iis! Bright things! Pretty things!"

As for K'nock, the snow leopard sniffed at the pile once, then lay down for a nap. Golden Eye and Silver Eye seemed almost equally disinterested.

“Aren’t you going to choose something?” Duan asked them.

Silver Eye shook his head, and Golden Eye shrugged. “Just not in the mood,” he said.

Olba picked up a large chest with a big blue sapphire on top of it. The chest was full of coins, but he maintained that it was still just one item. He chuckled to himself, thinking that he was going to put one over on the dragon.

Duan chose a tiny short sword of solid gold. It was an ornament that appeared to have once been worn on a necklace; the hilt of the sword bore an elaborate design, an embossed relief of a fighter on the back of a Wyvern.

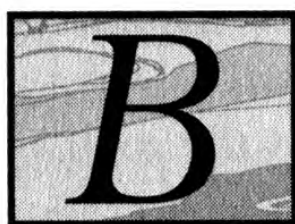
After much agonizing, Agnis finally selected an antique purple velvet hat that was decorated with bright red feathers.

“What do you think, Duan? Doesn’t it go well with my hair and eyes?”

“It’s beautiful,” he said, then blushed to the roots of his hair.

CHAPTER 61:

JUST A LITTLE BIT MAD



ut all their careful selection went for naught. In the end, Lord Alkyl couldn't bear to part with any of his treasures. He was that kind of a collector. Even seemingly worthless trash was valuable to him. Once something was in his possession, he kept it forever.

"Can't I even take this old hat?" cried Agnis unhappily.

"I'd like to say yes, young lady, but that hat belonged to a woman of exquisite . . . taste." Here Lord Alkyl burped loudly, then continued, **"It has sentimental value; I couldn't possibly give it away."**

"Uh, since you put it that way . . ." Agnis hastily handed back the hat. Somehow she had the feeling the dragon was being all too literal when he referred to the "taste" of the hat's previous owner.

"But I promised you something, and I am a dragon of my word. Here, take this instead." He passed Agnis one of his scales.

The pale, red scale was about the size of the palm of her hand. It felt like a shard of rough stone.

“Wow, thank you, Your Lordship,” said Agnis, dipping him a curtsy. “It’s beautiful.”

“**You’re welcome,**” said the dragon. He gave everyone else scales as well.

“Scales,” Olba whispered scornfully to Duan. He was still annoyed at not being allowed to take the chest with its contents of gold coins. “What a cheapskate!”

But Duan shook his head. “Are you kidding? Genuine dragon scales are super valuable, Olba.”

“Yeah, I know. They’re good for curing all kinds of diseases. Whoop-de-do. That isn’t going to buy me that new set of armor!”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Golden Eye, who had overheard. “Dragon scales are the key ingredient in a potion for perpetual youth. I heard about a king who paid out a million Guilderns for one of these.”

“A million Gs?” Olba’s eyes shone.

Lord Alkyl, who had also overheard, burst into laughter. “**Bru ha ha ha!**”

It occurred to Duan that the dragon might be just a little bit . . . mad.

Man, whoever heard of a dragon laughing so much? And all the weird stuff he collects . . . I’ll be glad to get out of here before he decides to add us to his collection!

As if the dragon had read his mind—and Duan was by no means certain that Lord Alkyl did not possess that ability—he said, “**Before you go, you must swear to keep secret all that has passed between us. If any of this became public knowledge, my reputation would be ruined. And on top of that, I would be plagued by tons of adventurers.**”

Although Lord Alkyl didn't mention it, Duan had the feeling that the dragon was concerned he would be a less efficient protector of the villagers of Luca Island if he was viewed as anything other than a fearsome monster.

"We'll tell everyone that we barely escaped with our lives, and that only fools or madmen would dare to challenge the might of Lord Alkyl."

"Bru ha ha ha! You did barely escape with your lives, Duan Surk! If I did not think I could trust you, I would have burned you all to cinders!"

Which wasn't exactly the most reassuring thing Duan had ever heard. All the same, they had gained the trust of a dragon. Was there a greater honor than that?

So what if he's a bit loony . . .

Olba spoke out as the team leader. "We'll never forget you, Lord Alkyl. You were generous and gracious beyond anything we could have hoped for. It was an honor and a privilege to speak with you. I only hope that we didn't trouble you too much."

As the dragon rumbled with pleasure, Duan blinked at Olba in surprise. He wouldn't have guessed that Olba was capable of such a diplomatic speech. But then, it wasn't the first time the big fighter had surprised him. Olba liked to present himself as a gruff adventurer, caring for nothing beyond the accumulation of loot and experience points, but Duan reminded himself there was much more to the man than that.

After they had said their goodbyes to Lord Alkyl, they began to file out, heading down a narrow passage that led, according to the dragon, straight to the outside world.

"Not so fast!"

Duan froze. Was the dragon going to incinerate them after all? Had he just been playing a cruel game with them all this time?

“What is that behind your back, little cousin?”

“Gi-iis?”

The dragon was talking to Check! The grinia was riding on K’nock. Sure enough, he seemed to be trying to conceal something behind his back.

“Check, show us what you’ve got,” said Duan sternly.

The grinia shook his head in defiance. But Olba, who had crept up behind him, snatched away a large, emerald-studded brooch.

“Chaa! What that? How get there?” The grinia blinked in apparent bafflement.

Lord Alkyl opened his mouth wide, revealing his huge fangs, and drew a deep breath.

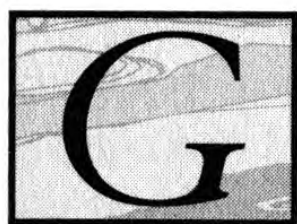
Duan flinched, waiting for the Breath of Fire. Then a hot wind rushed over him.

“Bru ha ha ha!”



CHAPTER 62:

A PERFECT DAY



oodbye, Duan!”

“Thanks for everything!”

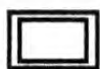
“Bye, Check!”

Ken and his friends stood on the edge of the beach and waved as the *Marchin* pulled out into the harbor. Standing on the deck, his hair ruffled by the wind, Duan waved back. “Take care of yourself, Ken!”

“Goodbye, boys!” cried Check from his perch on Duan’s shoulder. Olba, Agnis, and the two-headed wizard stood nearby, also waving.

It was early in the morning, one day after their return from the lair of Lord Alkyl. If not for the feel of the rough scale tucked inside his shirt rubbing against his skin, Duan could almost have believed that the whole thing had been a dream.

This has been the most amazing adventure yet, he thought. Not only did I go up a level, I talked to a dragon and earned his trust! How cool is that?



Whether they had actually earned Lord Alkyl's trust or not had been a matter of some dispute among the adventurers as they'd descended the steep and narrow path the dragon had pointed out. Although they hadn't run into any monsters, the path went on and on, as if it led all the way to the center of the earth.

"That dragon's tricked us," said Olba after a while in the front of the line.

"No way," said Duan. "We've got to keep going!"

At last, quite suddenly, they emerged into the outdoors. Or, more accurately, they *fell* into the outdoors.

The exit was about three feet off the ground, and although they were carrying Shining Shrooms for light, they hadn't realized they'd come to the end of the passage because it was pitch-black outside—the very dead of a night so cloudy that neither moon nor stars could be seen overhead. One after another, they tumbled out with a cry and fell on top of each other. Only then did they smell the fresh sea air and feel the tall weeds where'd they'd fallen.

It took a moment for them to get oriented, but when they did, they realized they must be on the far side of the island, on the opposite flank of the volcano from the village where Mister and Missus Evans lived. They set off for it, arriving just as the sun rose.

Duan would never forget that sunrise. First, a mystical red line was drawn across the dark horizon. Then, over time, the contours of the clouds appeared as though etched in silver, and then, finally, the sun emerged, reminding Duan of the ball of flames that he'd seen kindled at the back of Lord Alkyl's throat.

At last, the party arrived at Ken's house. To their surprise, the Evanses were waiting up for them.

When she saw Duan, Missus Evans burst into tears and embraced him. "I'm so glad you made it back," she said, hugging him so hard that he thought he might suffocate. She let him go before he lost consciousness, however, and drew back to gaze at the whole party, wiping her eyes. "I'm so glad to see you all!"

Even Mister Evans was happy to see them. "You'll have to tell us all about it," he said. "Come on in!"

"Yes, come in," Missus Evans invited, beckoning them into the house. "You must be starving! I've been cooking all night."

And indeed she had been. As the hungry adventurers seated themselves around the dinner table, she served them bowls of fresh fish and vegetable stew. It was the best meal Duan had ever tasted.

Golden Eye thought so too. "Missus Evans, you're not a cook—you're a goddess!"

"Oh, Golden Eye," she said, blushing deeply.

Mister Evans scowled a bit at that. "So, what happened in the dungeon? Did you encounter Lord Alkyl? Did you anger him?"

"We barely escaped with our lives!" Duan blurted out as they'd agreed. "The dragon was just too fierce and powerful for us."

"Hmm." Mister Evans nodded. "Told you so, didn't I? A big waste of time."

"Yes," agreed Olba between mouthfuls of stew. "We won't be trying anything as foolhardy as that any time soon. And we'll be warning others against it too."

Soon after that, the adventurers went to bed and slept straight through until late afternoon. When they woke, the

whole village had gathered to hear their story, including Ken and his friends. Duan had been a little worried that Mayor Millstone might hold a grudge against them for having escaped and run off to the dungeon, but he, too, seemed glad to see them. It was almost as though the town was celebrating a holiday.

After they had once again related how the dragon had driven them off, Ken came up to Duan and said suspiciously, "For someone who failed in their quest for the dragon's treasure, you don't seem very sad. In fact, you seem happy!"

"What? Well, um, it's not that. I'm happy because I managed to see you guys one more time," replied Duan in desperation.

"Yeah, me and the guys are happy too," Ken said. "Y'know, when we grow up, we're going to investigate every nook and cranny of that dungeon. And we're definitely gonna meet that dragon! We're gonna get all the treasure and use the money to reinforce the security of the island. We can't rely on Lord Alkyl forever."

"Really?" Agnis, who had been standing nearby, came over to Ken and Duan. "Then you might as well take this scenario. It comes with a dungeon map included!"

Ken accepted it eagerly. "Hurray! Thanks, Agnis!"

"Er, do you think that was wise?" Duan whispered to Agnis.

Overhearing, Ken burst into laughter. "Duan, it's okay. We're far too scared to go back into the dungeon until we're much bigger and have trained a lot more. Those Vanilla Bats were tough enough for us, and from everything you said, they were the weakest monsters in the whole place!"

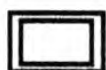
Duan nodded, smiling. "That's right, Ken. But I've got a feeling that you and your friends are going to make this island something really special. As soon as we get back to Kovenia,

I'm going to tell Dorothy all about your plans. I think she'll be impressed."

"Wow, really?"

"Who knows? Perhaps she'll decide to come back herself."

Yes, Duan thought now as the *Marchin* pulled farther away from land, *I think Dorothy will be very interested to hear about all our adventures.*



Everyone remained on deck, chatting easily, until the island had grown small with distance. But eventually the party of adventurers began to break up. Olba was the first to make his way below deck to the cabins. Agnis and K'nock were the next to go. Duan was about to follow them when he noticed the two-headed wizard standing at the front of the ship and gazing out to sea.

Duan approached, but before he could say a word, the two heads began to argue.

"The bottom line is that you jumped to the wrong conclusion," Golden Eye said angrily. "As usual!"

"What? You did the exact same thing! The girl of my dreams, indeed! I can't even remember what she looked like! You know what I think? You had the hots for her yourself!"

"What, me?"

"Yes, that's why you got so angry."

"Don't be an idiot!"

"Don't call me an idiot, you imbecile!"

"What?! How dare you?!"

The two brothers each raised a hand, but instead of pummeling each other as they had in the past, they both dropped their hands without striking a blow.



“Pah,” said Golden Eye. “I have no idea, even though we are so close together year after year, how we always manage to get our wires crossed so badly!”

“Yeah, me too,” said Silver Eye. “I guess we need to talk more.”

“I agree. From now on, let’s not hide anything important.”

“Total honesty.”

“That’s the key.”

The brothers shook hands.

“I’ve got an idea about our body,” said Silver Eye. “How about if each of us is allowed to take full control for a certain number of hours every month? For that time, whoever is in control can do whatever he wants. Maybe that way we won’t get so stressed out.”

“Hmm. That’s a great idea!”

Silver Eye and Golden Eye were completely ignoring Duan. He shrugged his shoulders and quietly started to leave, but Silver Eye called out to him.

“Duan, sorry. We just got a bit engrossed. I guess in the end, the two of us can’t live separately. And in that case, we have to think about how we can live together in peace.”

Duan nodded. “That’s good, Silver Eye. I’m glad for you both.”

“We’ve troubled you quite a bit, I know,” Silver Eye went on. “But we want you to know that we’re really grateful for all your help. This is a new beginning for us.” He extended his hand. “Thank you.” Duan shook Silver Eye’s hand as Golden Eye looked on, smiling.

Silver Eye continued. “Um, the story of why we were born two-headed?”

“Yes?”

"Well, I think, to put it simply, two people with different personalities were born to live in one body. And I think that's just it."

"Huh?"

"Basically, I guess it might be a cliché, but I think it's destiny."

"Destiny?"

"Yeah. But you can't give up just because something is your destiny. You have to accept it and take it in . . . I feel like just by admitting it, I can start on a new beginning. They say you have to accept your destiny with courage, right, Golden Eye?"

Golden Eye just nodded.

It struck Duan that the loquacious Golden Eye and the reticent Silver Eye had exchanged a few personality traits.

"Where are you two heading now?" he asked.

Silver Eye answered, "I thought we might head home, to Balhalm."

"I think it's time we visited Balhalm again," Golden Eye said simultaneously.

The brothers looked at each other in surprise and started laughing. Duan joined in.

After a moment, Golden Eye asked, "How about you guys? Are you going to sell one of your scales and upgrade your equipment? Or maybe just live comfortably for a while?"

"No way," said Duan. "I don't think I'd part with that scale unless it was an emergency."

"Yes, we feel the same way."

"We probably won't stay in Kovenia more than a day or two. Agnis mentioned that she needed a favor. Apparently some prince she knows has gotten himself into trouble or something and needs our help."

“Well, good luck, Duan,” said Silver Eye.

“The same to you. I’ve learned a lot thanks to you—both of you.”

“You know, Duan,” said Silver Eye, “your level may be low, but you’ve got a quick mind and a brave heart. I predict you’re going to be a great adventurer.”

“You really think so?”

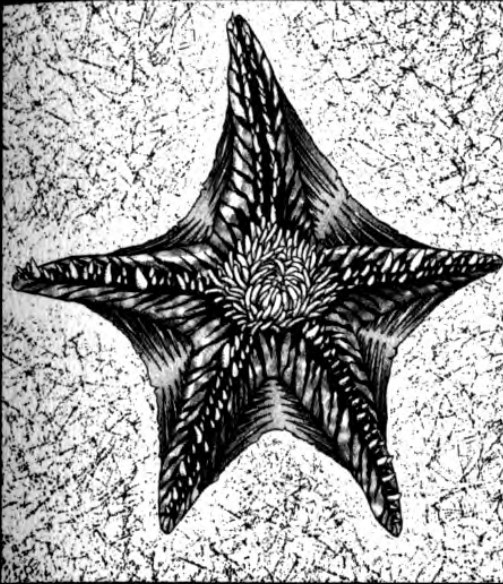
“No doubt about it.”

“You’re already on your way,” Golden Eye said.

After that, conversation flagged. They stood at the guardrail in quiet companionship, watching the prow of the ship cut through the blue water. Looking up, between the taut sails filled with the strong wind that was carrying them swiftly across the sea, Duan saw a boundless blue sky.

It was, he thought, a perfect day for an adventure.

AG:



A troublesome monster that lives in various points of the open and inland seas. Because it attacks in groups, sometimes even large fish and monsters are defeated. It looks like a meaty starfish and is about the size of a human fist. The color of its back is yellow with vivid blue veins that look almost radioactive. Its color is similar to that of a sea urchin, but it looks poisonous so it doesn't do much to whet your appetite. And don't get fooled by its small size . . . just flip it over to find out why. Its mouth makes up the entire underside and it is jam-packed with many, many sharp teeth. Further into the mouth, the flesh has a color that reminds you of fresh blood. There

probably isn't a single person who doesn't recoil at this sight. Although a single Ag can't do much damage, they attack in large numbers and keep coming and coming. Magic attack with a wide range is probably the best strategy.

LOUDNESS JUNE:



In the sea there are many large monsters, and sea serpents are especially famous among them. The Loudness June is a kind of sea serpent. Like other serpents, it has extraordinary veracity. There is no chance of defeating this enemy using normal fighting techniques, unless you also have strength equal to that of a dinosaur. Having said that, it does have its weaknesses. Try aiming for the dimples on the side of its face—it doesn't matter if it's a direct weapon attack or a magic attack. If you manage to produce enough damage there, it will probably flee. However, whether you will be able to attack its weak spot is a different matter altogether. The

most difficult thing about this monster is not its attacking power or its toughness—it's the shrill scream it unleashes without warning. Its scream feels like it will tear your eardrums, and it has the same effect as the attack magic Dry Spell—it dries up anyone that hears it. Although your chances of meeting it are rare, if you are unlucky enough to do so, the best thing to do is to run.

VANILLA BATS:



Often mistaken for normal bats at first glance, Vanilla Bats are far more deadly due to being three times bigger and more vicious. Their wings grow out of their backs and are not attached to their arms and legs at all. This allows them to grab their prey with their claws. Their intelligence is low, however, so they can't use any implements as weapons. They have tough skulls, sharp fangs, and powerful jaws that won't let go once they bite their victims. Their most dangerous feature is unquestionably their ability to regenerate. After they die, a white cloud with a sweet vanilla smell is expelled either from their mouths or wounds. When the cloud seeps back into the body, the Vanilla Bats return to life. Once you have

killed a Vanilla Bat, you must bind up its wounds and mouth before it can regenerate. As long as you remain calm, you can beat them quite easily.

BOLBOBE:



A monster smothered in black hair. It has little intelligence and a big appetite. A Bolbobe will assume that any living thing in front of it is food and attack accordingly, but its favorite meal is the soft, fleshy meat of children or young people. It has no outstanding weakness; regular, direct attacks and attack magic work best. It is quite persistent, so be sure to finish it off completely or it will keep coming after you.

DORY RAY ROPY:



This water-dwelling monster is also known as a "Dropy." Using its long tentacles, the Dory Ray Ropy drags its victims to the bottom of whatever body of water it inhabits, then rips them violently apart. The monster is very territorial, and you will rarely find more than one of them unless in a large lake. The dropy's greatest weakness is its eyes. Cut off the eye stalk and the monster is rendered paralyzed and helpless. A word of warning, however: a severed eye stalk repairs itself in mere minutes, and a new eye regenerates almost immediately thereafter, lifting the paralysis.

RASPBERRY BATS:



A different-colored version of the Vanilla Bats. They are, however, far stronger and have more power and stamina. The best thing to do is run. You may be able to fight one or two of the things, but they are most often encountered in flocks of up to a hundred or even two hundred. Regular, direct attacks and attack magic work best against Raspberry Bats, but, like Vanilla Bats, they regenerate. When you have killed one, remember to bind its wounds and cover its mouth so that it cannot come back to life.

RED DRAGON:



One of the most aggressive of the dragon family is the Red Dragon. Its hard scales are seen in a variety of red shades, from the orange-red of scorching flames, to the bright crimson of fresh blood, to the dull red of rusty metal. Different sizes have been spotted, from gargantuan, to titanic, to merely huge. Its attack is the terrifying Breath of Fire, which will burn just about anything to a cinder. There are two types of fire-breathing attacks: the first is a fireball, the second a stream of flames. It is a matter of debate whether Red Dragons are intelligent. Some people claim they are, while others deny it. Some even believe they are able to speak.

But there is no proof one way or another, because no one has ever encountered a Red Dragon and survived long enough to make a report. Legend has it that the scales of a Red Dragon will cure all kinds of sicknesses. The scales are also said to be used in potions of eternal youth and longevity, but again, there is no proof of this.