GOBLIN SLAYER

Volume 2

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YEN ON
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Once upon a time, in the days when the stars shone far fewer in the sky than they do now…

The gods of light and order and destiny vied with the gods of darkness and chaos and chance to see who would control the world. This struggle took place, not in battle, but with a roll of the dice.

Or rather, many, many rolls. Again and again and again they rolled the dice.

And there were victories, and there were defeats, but there was no resolution.

At long last, the gods tired of dice. Thereupon they created many creatures to be their playing pieces and a world in which to play. Humans and elves and dwarves and lizardmen, goblins and ogres and trolls and demons.

At times they adventure, sometimes gaining victory, other times suffering defeat. They find treasure, become happy, and in the end, they die.

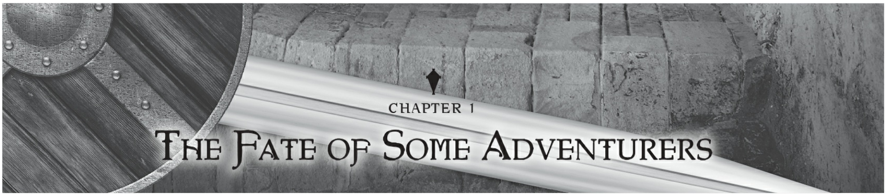
Into this world, there appeared one particular adventurer.

He will *not* save the world.

He will not even change *anything*.

After all, he is just another pawn, such as you might find anywhere…

汚い海賊



CHAPTER 1

THE FATE OF SOME ADVENTURERS

The brutal fight over, he ground his boot into slain goblin’s cadaver.

He was stained crimson with the monster’s blood, from his grimy steel helm and leather armor to the mail made of chain-linked metal rings that covered his entire body.

A small, battered shield was fastened to his left arm, and in one hand, he held a brightly burning torch.

Heel braced against the creature’s corpse, he reached down with his free hand and casually withdrew his sword from its skull. It was a cheap-looking blade, its length poorly conceived, and now it was drenched in the goblin’s brains.

Lying on the ground, an arrow in her shoulder, the young girl’s thin frame shook with fear. Her sweet, classically lovely face framed by long hair almost a translucent gold was scrunched up into a mess of tears and sweat.

Her slim arms, her feet—her whole gorgeous body was clad in the vestments of a priestess. The sounding staff she clutched jangled, the rings hanging on it striking one another in time with the quaking of her hands.

Who was this man before her?

So strange was his appearance, the aura that cloaked him, that she imagined he might be a goblin himself—or perhaps something far worse, something she had no knowledge of yet.

ñWh-who are youé?ò she asked, pushing down her terror and pain.

After a pause, the man answered, ñGoblin Slayer.ò

A killer. Not of dragons or vampires, but the lowliest of monsters: goblins.

Normally, the name might have seemed comically simple. But to Priestess, at that moment, it was anything but funny.

§

Youôve heard this one before.

The day an orphan raised in the Temple turns fifteen, they become an adult and must choose their path: Will they remain in the Temple as a servant of the goddess, or will they leave and try to make their way in the greater world?

Priestess had chosen the latter, and a visit to the Adventurers Guild was how she had chosen to do it.

The Adventurers Guildð created to support those courageous questing soulsð was first formed, so it was said, by a handful of people who met one another in a bar. Unlike other workersô associations, the Adventurers Guild was less a labor union than an employment agency. In the ongoing war between the monsters and ñthose who have language,ò adventurers were like mercenaries. No one would tolerate the existence of armed toughs if they were not managed carefully.

Priestess stopped in her tracks as the vast branch office that stood directly inside the town gates took her breath away. When she entered the lobby, she was taken aback to find it bustling with adventurers, even though it was still morning.

These buildings boasted large inns and tavernsð usually togetherð as well as a business office, all in one. Really, this kind of clamor was the natural result of providing these three services in one place.

For every ordinary human in plate armor, there was an elven mage with staff and mantle. Here there was a bearded, ax-wielding dwarf; there, one of the little meadow-dwelling folk known as rheas. Priestess wound her way through the crowd, past males and females of every race and age imaginable carrying every possible type of weapon, toward Guild Girl. The line snaked on and on, full of people who had come to take on or lodge a quest or to file a report.

A spear-wielding adventurer was chatting with one covered in heavy armor.

ñAnd? How was the manticore in the pass?ò

ñIt wasnôt much. If you want a big one, I think youôd better try the ruins or something.ò

ñFair enough, but youôre never gonna put food on the table that way.ò

ñHey, Iôve heard thereôs an evil spirit making trouble up near the Capital. Whoever goes over there might be in for a nice payday, hey?ò

ñMaybe I could handle it, if itôs just some low-level demonéò

Priestess was brought up short no less than three times listening to their casual conversation, and each time she pulled her sounding staff close to herself to steel her resolve.

ñé Soon I will alsoé!ò

She had no illusions that an adventurerôs lot was an easy one. Priestess had seen firsthand the wounded return from the dungeon, coming to the Temple, begging for a healing miracle. And healing such people was precisely the creed of the Earth Mother.

How could she shrink away, then, from putting herself in danger to do as she had been taught? She was an orphan, and the Temple had saved her. And now it was her turn to repay that debté

ñYes, what brings you here today?ò

The line had steadily moved along while Priestess stood lost in thought, and now it was her turn.

Wearing a gentle expression, Guild Girl attending her was a girl, still young, but older than Priestess. Her immaculate outfit was impeccably kept, her light brown hair woven into braids. A quick glance around the hall left no doubt the guild front desk would be a demanding place to work. That the receptionist showed none of the strained demeanor all too common among professional young women was perhaps a sign of how well she knew her job.

Priestess felt a bit of her nervousness ebb. She swallowed and spoke up.

ñUh, Ié I want to be ané an adventurer.ò

ñIs thaté right?ò Guild Girl asked, her sweet expression momentarily slipping as she hesitated briefly, seemingly at a loss for words. Priestess felt the receptionistôs eyes moving from her face down her body, and strangely embarrassed, she nodded.

The feeling faded as Guild Girl reassumed a smile and said, ñI see. Can you read and write?ò

ñUm, yes, a little. I learned at the Templeé ò ñThen fill this out, please. If thereôs anything you donôt understand, just ask.ò

It was an Adventure Sheet. Gold letters paraded across the light brown vellum.

Name, sex, age, class, hair color, eye color, body type, skills, spells, miraclesé Such simple information. So simple it almost didnôt seem right.

ñOh,ò Guild Girl broke in, ñyou can leave the óAbilitiesô and óAdventure Historyô spots blank. The guild will fill those in later.ò

ñY-yes, maôam.ò Priestess nodded, and then with a quivering hand, she picked up a pen, dipped it in an inkpot, and began writing in precise letters.

She handed the finished sheet to Guild Girl, who looked it over with a nod, then took a silver stylus and carved a series of flowing letters into a white porcelain tile. She passed the tile to Priestess, who discovered it bore the same information as her Adventure Sheet in closely spaced letters.

ñThis will serve as your identification. We call it your óStatus.ô Although,ò she added teasingly, ñit doesnôt say anything we canôt figure out by looking at you.ò Then she calmly told the blinking Priestess, ñIt will be used to corroborate your identity if anything happens to you, so try not to lose it.ò

If anything happens?

For a second, Priestess was caught off guard by Guild Girlôs businesslike tone, but it didnôt take her long to connect the dots. The only time they might need to ñcorroborate your identityò was when youôd been murdered so horrifically no one could tell who you were.

ñYes, maôam,ò Priestess said, and she wished her voice would stop shaking. ñBut is it really this easy to become an adventureré?ò

ñTo *become* one, yes.ò

The other girlôs expression was unreadable. Was she worried or perhaps resigned? Priestess couldnôt tell.

ñItôs harder to move up the ranks. Thatôs based on kills, how much good youôve done, and personality tests.ò

ñPersonality tests?ò

ñSometimes you get the Iôm-strong-enough-to-do-it-all-by-myself types.ò

Then, under her breath, she added, ñBut there are all kinds of eccentrics out there.ò And when she said it, for an instant her demeanor changed. Softened into a warm, wistful smile.

Oh, Priestess thought, *I didnôt realize she could smile like that*.

Guild Girl noticed Priestess watching her and hastily cleared her throat. ñQuests are posted over there.ò She indicated a corkboard that covered almost an entire wall. ñChoose ones that are appropriate to your level, of course.ò

Pickings were slim, since the huge crowd of adventurers had been going over the board all morning. But the Guild wouldnôt have a board that size if they didnôt need it.

ñPersonally,ò the receptionist said, ñIôd recommend getting your feet wet by cleaning the sewers. No pun intended.ò

ñCleaning the sewers? I thought adventurers fought monstersé?ò

ñThereôs honor in hunting giant rats, too. And youôll be doing some real good in the world.ò She added under her breath, ñNewcomers with a little experience could move on to goblins, I guess,ò and there was that wordless look again.

ñWell, thatôs it for registration. Happy hunting!ò

ñOh, th-thank you.ò Priestess ducked her head in gratitude and left the front desk. She hung the porcelain tablet around her neck and let out a breath she had been holding. She was a registered adventurer. It was just that simple.

But what am I supposed to do now?

Priestess carried only her staff (the symbol of her office), a bag with a change of clothes, and a few coins.

She had heard the second floor of the Guild building was aimed at low-level adventurers. Maybe she should start by reserving a room, then see what kinds of quests were availableé

ñHey, wanna go adventuring with us?ò

ñWuuuh?ò

The unexpected invitation came from a young man with a sword at his hip and a shiny breastplate tied to his chest. Like Priestess, he had a brand-new porcelain tablet around his neck.

The tablets came in ten varieties indicating the rank of the wearer, from platinum at the top to the porcelain of newly minted adventurers at the very bottom.

ñYouôre a priestess, right?ò

ñUm, yes. Yesé I am.ò

ñPerfect! Exactly what my party needs.ò

Just past the young swordsman, she could now see two other girls. One wore a martial artistôs uniform, her hair in a bundle and a confident look in her eye, while the other had a staff and glasses, wearing a cool gaze.

A fighter and a wizard, she guessed.

Warrior followed her glance and repeated, “My party,” with a nod. “We’re on an urgent quest, but I’d like at least one more person. How about you?”

“What do you mean, ‘urgent’?”

“We’re gonna get rid of some goblins!”

Goblins. Goblins had been living in the caves near town since time immemorial, or so it was said. They were the weakest of the monsters, and sheer numbers were the only thing acting in their favor.

They stood about as tall as a child, with strength and wits to match. All that distinguished them from a small human was their ability to see in the dark. They did all the usual monster things—threaten people, terrorize villages, kidnap maidens.

They were weak, yes, but it was better to let sleeping goblins lie.

The villagers had ignored the goblins at first… but then things changed. First, the crops they had stored up for winter disappeared, down to the last seed. The enraged townspeople mended the fences, then set patrols outside with torches in hand.

The goblins promptly slipped past them.

They stole the sheep, along with the shepherd’s daughter and some womenfolk who came out to see what all the fuss was about.

The villagers were quickly running out of options. They marshaled their meager resources and went to the Guild—the Adventurers Guild, where the adventurers gathered. Surely, posting a quest would bring someone to help.

Um, andé

Priestess stood with a finger to her lips, lost in thought as Warrior reeled off his explanation.

A good old-fashioned goblin hunt for her first adventure. Lots of people had done that. And she hadnôt even needed to find the adventureð the adventure had found her. It had to be fate.

She had never imagined she could do it all herself, anyway. Soloing as a cleric was suicide. She was going to need a party eventually. She was very worried about joining up with total strangersð but someone who had extended an invitation to her wasnôt quite a *total* stranger, was he? True, no boy had ever invited her to anything before, but there were two other girls there.

So it would be fineé right?

ñAll right, then. If youôll have me.ò

She replied with a firm nod, and Warrior gave a whoop.

ñReally?! Awesome! Now, whoôs ready to go on an adventure?!ò

ñWhat, just the four of you?ò Guild Girl broke in. ñIôm sure if you wait a while, some other adventurers will show upé ò

It didnôt seem to bother Warrior that Guild Girl herself had felt the need to comment. ñItôs just some goblins. Iôm sure four people is plenty.ò He turned to his companions. ñRight?ò He sounded so sure, a cheerful smile on his face. Then he turned back to Guild Girl. ñThose captured maidens are waiting to be rescued. Thereôs no time to lose!ò

Seeing this, the young workerôs face settled back into that unreadable expression while a profound and strange unease took hold deep in Priestess's heart.

§

The torch flickered dishearteningly in the putrid breeze.

The midday sun was blotted out by the darkness that filled the cave. At the opening, it was hard to see, and farther in, it was almost black.

The shadows of the jutting rough-hewn rocks danced in time with the bobbing flame, sliding along the walls like monsters in a fresco.

Three girls and one boy, covered in whatever poor pieces of armor they could find. In spotty formation, they picked their way nervously through the thick darkness. Warrior went on point, holding the torch. Their Fighter was behind him. Wizard held the rear guard. And sandwiched in between the martial artist and the magician, third in line, was the young woman in priestess's robes, clutching her sounding staff anxiously as she walked.

It was Wizard who had suggested they travel in a line. So long as there were no branching paths, they wouldn't have to worry about an attack from behind. And if the adventurers in front held fast, those behind would be safe, able to provide support from the back ranks. That was the plan, anyway.

"I-is this really a good idea? Jumping right in?" Priestess's murmur hardly sounded confident. If anything, she sounded considerably more concerned than she had before they'd entered the cave. "I mean, we don't know anything about these goblins."

"Sheesh, what a worrywart. I guess that's just what you can expect from a priestess." Warrior's voice, a bit too bold in the emptiness of the cave, echoed until it disappeared. ñEven kids arenõt afraid of goblins. Heck, I helped drive some out of my village once.ò

ñOh, stop,ò Fighter said. ñKilling a few goblins is nothing special. Youõre embarrassing yourself. And,ò she added in a disagreeable but low voice, ñyou didnõt even *kill* them.ò

ñI didnõt say I did,ò Warrior responded with a pout.

Fighter gave an annoyed but somehow affectionate sigh. ñThey might chop this loser into lunch meat, but Iõll send õem flying. So donõt worry.ò

ñLoser? That hurts!ò The torchlight shone on Warriorõs dejected face, but the next moment, he was gleefully hoisting his sword. ñHey, the four of us, we could handle a dragon if we had to!ò

ñMy, arenõt we eager?ò Wizard muttered, causing Fighter to giggle. The groupõs echoing voices mingled in the cavern.

Priestess kept silent, as if afraid talking would attract something from the darkness.

ñBut I do hope to hunt a dragon someday,ò Wizard said. ñDonõt you?ò Priestessõs wordless smile seemed to agree with Wizard and the nodding Warrior. But the darkness hid an expression as ambiguous as Guild Girlõs.

Do we really? she asked herself, but she dared not voice her doubts, even as the unease built to a storm within her.

ñ*The four of us couldé*,ò heõd said, but how could he so completely trust people heõd hardly known two whole days? Priestess knew these werenõt bad people, buté

ñAre you sure we shouldnõt have prepared a little more?ò she pressed. ñWe donôt even have any p-pé potions.ò

ñWe donôt have any money, either. Or time to shop, for that matter,ò Warrior answered with bravado, paying no heed to the tremble in Priestessôs voice. ñIôm worried about those kidnapped girlsé And anyway, if one of us gets hurt, you can just heal us, right?ò

ñItôs true I have the miracles of healing and lighté butéò

ñThen weôll be fine!ò

No one could have heard Priestess say thickly, ñBut I can only use them three timeséò

ñItôs great youôre so confident and all,ò Fighter said, ñbut are you sure we wonôt get lost?ò

ñItôs one long tunnel. How could we possibly get lost?ò

ñI donôt know about that. You get so carried away. I canôt take my eyes off you for two seconds!ò

ñLook whoôs talkingéò

Fighter and Warrior, who came from the same hometown, slipped into one of the friendly arguments they had shared since the start of the journey.

Priestess, trailing behind them, clung to her staff with both hands and repeated the name of the Earth Mother under her breath.

ñPlease, see us safely through thiséò

She prayed so softly her words didnôt even echo, only dropping into the darkness and disappearing.

Perhaps the Earth Mother heard her prayer, or perhaps Priestess had simply been exceptionally attentive as she said the words.

ñCome on, hurry up. Keep up the line,ò Wizard chided her.

ñOh, right, sorryéò

It was Priestess who noticed it first.

She was just walking by Wizard, who had overtaken her while she was praying, when she heard it. A scuttling sound, like a rolling pebble.

Priestess gave a start.

ñAgain? What is it this time?ò Wizard asked in annoyance as she once more overtook Priestess, who stood quivering in place.

Wizard had graduated at the top of her class from the academy in the Capital where she had learned her spells, and she was not very fond of priestesses. The skittish little girl in their party had made an abysmal first impression, and since entering the cave, Wizardôs estimation of her had only gotten worse.

ñJ-just now, I thought I heard something c-crumblingé ò

ñWhere? In front of us?ò

ñN-no, behind usé ò

Oh, please.

This wasnôt caution; it was cowardice. This priestess didnôt have the guts to take her life in her hands the way an adventurer needed to. Warrior and Fighter kept getting farther ahead as she stood there. Caught up in their banter, the two of them never looked back.

An ever more distant light behind them and only deepening darkness before, Wizard heaved a sigh.

ñLook. Weôve been going straight as an arrow since we entered this cave, right? What could possibly be behiðò And then her cool, exasperated toneð ñGoblins!!ò

ð became a scream.

It wasnôt crumbling Priestess had heard, but digging.

Hideous creatures jumped out of a tunnel and flocked toward Wizard, who had the misfortune of being last in line.

Every hand held a crude weapon, every face a repulsive look. These were the child-sized cave dwellers.

Goblins.

ñG-g-ggggéò

Suddenly unable to find her voice, Wizard raised the garnet-tipped staff she had received at graduation.

It was a miracle her twisted tongue was able to form the words of the spell.

ñ*Sagittaé inflammaraeé radius!*ò Arrow of flame, emerge!

As she pulled each piece of the spell from where it had been carved deep into her memory, the words began welling upð words with the power to mold reality itself.

A glowing, arrow-shaped Firebolt flew from the fist-sized garnet on her staff and struck a goblin in the face. There was a stomach-turning sizzle and the stench of searing flesh.

Thatôs one down!

The victory brought a rush of exhilaration that left an incongruous smile on her face. It filled Wizard with the confidence that what worked once would work again.

ñ*Sagittaé inflammaraeé radi*aaaghhh!!ò

But there were many goblins and only four party members. Before she could finish the spell, one of the little foes grabbed her arm. She didn’t even have time to respond before the goblin slammed her to the coarse stone floor.

“Argh! Uh…!”

Her glasses were thrown from her face and shattered on the ground, leaving her vision blurry. A goblin quickly plucked her staff from her hand.

“H-hey! Give that back! That’s not for the likes of y-you!”

A magical conduit such as a staff or a ring was a spellcaster’s lifeline, but more than that, it was her pride.

As if in answer to Wizard’s half-mad shout, the goblin held the staff in front of her eyes and broke it with a *crack*.

Wizard’s face twisted in rage, her mask of detachment gone.

“Why, you…!”

She writhed on the ground, struggling against her captor with her weak arms, her ample chest bouncing. It was not a wise choice. The irritated goblin took his dagger and drove it hard into her stomach.

“Hrrrghh?!” She gave an agonized cry as the blade pierced her innards.

Of course, Wizard’s companions were not idle, not even Priestess.

“H-hey, all of you! Get away from her! Stop…!” She waved her staff about with her delicate arms, trying to chase the goblins away.

There are those clerics who are skilled in the martial arts.

Some, having adventured for a long time, might even boast a good deal of physical strength.

Priestess was not one of them.

The way she was frantically swinging her staff, she wouldnôt have hit anything, anyway.

Each time her sounding staff struck a wall or the ground, it made a rattling noise. And for better or for worse, the goblins took a step back.

Perhaps they took her for a warrior priestess, or maybe they were just afraid she might hit one of them through sheer luck.

Whatever the reason, Priestess took advantage of the momentary opening to pull Wizard away from them.

ñBe strong!ò Priestess shouted, almost shaking Wizard. ñHang onð!ò

But there was no answer. Priestessôs hand came away soaked with blood.

The rusty blade was still buried in Wizardôs abdomen, the cruel tear revealing her ravaged entrails.

Priestess felt her throat close at the awful sight, her breath coming in a strained squeak.

ñAhé Aghéò

But Wizard was alive. Twitching and convulsing, but alive.

There was still time. There had to be. Priestess bit hard on her lip.

Clasping her staff close to her chest, Priestess placed her hand on Wizardôs spilling viscera as if to push them back into place and recited the words of the miracle.

ñO Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, lay your revered hand upon this childé ò

Magic spells can affect the rational workings of the world, but Minor Heal is genuine divine intervention.

As the prayer took hold, Priestessôs palm began glowing with a soft light that floated over to Wizard. As the light began to bubble away, Wizardôs ruined stomach gradually stitched itself back together.

Of course, the goblins were not the kind to stand by and just let this happen.

ñDamn you! You filthy goblins! How dare you do this to everyone!!ò

Warrior had finally noticed what was going on behind him and came flying through to cover his companions, cutting off their would-be attackers.

He had thrown away the torch and now gripped his sword firmly in both hands. He gave a thrust, piercing a goblinôs throat.

ñGUIA?!ò

ñWhoôs next?ò

He wrenched the sword from his first victim, catching a second as he turned. He sliced the goblin clean from shoulder to hip.

Through a geyser of goblin blood, Warrior gave a great shout, drunk with bloodlust.

ñWell, whatôs wrong?! Come and get me!ò

Warrior was the second son of a farmer, and since his youth, he had dreamed of becoming a knight. How one might go about becoming a knight, he did not know, but he was certain strength was a prerequisite. The knights in the bedtime stories heõd heard were always vanquishing monsters, thwarting evil, and saving the world. Here in this caveð striking down these goblins, saving helpless maidens, and protecting his friendsð he saw himself a knight at last.

The thought brought a smile to his face.

Power coursed through his hands, his blood pounded in his ears, everything narrowed until he could see only the enemy before him.

ñWait! You canõt handle them alone!ò

He was not yet a real knight.

Even as Fighterõs voice reached him, Warrior found one of the goblinsô worn swords buried in his thigh.

ñNgah! Why, youð!ò

It was the goblin he had cut across the chest. Warriorõs blood-dulled blade had not been enough to make a killing blow.

Thrown out of his fighting posture, Warrior dealt a second blow to the goblin, and this time it died without so much as a gurgle.

But a moment later, another monster was leaping up behind himé

ñTake *this*!ò He made to counter with his sword, but it struck the cave wall with a blunt thud.

It was the last move he would ever make.

The torch he had dropped on the ground sputtered and died, and in the darkness that pressed in suddenly around him, he was amazed how loudly his scream echoed.

With no pedigree and no money, Warrior had been unable to afford a shield or helm; he had only his thin chest plate to protect him. He had no way to save himself from the goblinsô vicious blows.

ñNoé it canõt be!ò

Fighter had failed to reach the enemy in time. As she watched the young man she thought of so fondly die, she went pale and stood stock-still.

It was all she could do to form her two trembling hands into fists and take a fighting stance.

ñYou two, run.ò

ñB-buté!ò Priestess protested weakly, but she knew it was useless. Despite the ministrations of Minor Heal, Wizard in her arms was barely responsive, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps.

The horde of goblins was creeping closer, fixed on its remaining prey. They were still cautious of Fighter, but they would be upon her before long.

Priestess looked at Wizard and Fighter, and then she stared in horror at the goblins still abusing the body of the fallen Warrior.

Seeing that her companions still hadnõt moved, Fighter gave a click of her tongue. Then she let out a loud, clear yell, charging into the crowd of monsters.

ñHi-yaaaaah!ò

Her fists and feet were limber and quick. Her own father had trained her before he died, and now she showed the very essence of his art.

She would not die here. Her fatherôs art could not lose to such pitiful foes.

So long as I live, I will never forgive them for killing that boy!

Heart and mind bore out her training as she drove her fist into a goblinôs solar plexus.

She pushed her enemy to the side as he fell vomiting to the floor, then caught him with a single knifehand strike to the neck as she spun.

Critical hit.

The immense blow to the neck left the goblinôs head leaning at an impossible angle as it collapsed.

At the same moment, she stepped into the space left by his body and used the momentum to throw an arcing kick into the air in front of her. Her tightly controlled roundhouse caught two more goblins, killing them before they hit the groundð

ñWhað?!ò

But a third goblin easily caught her leg and trapped her ankle.

Fighterôs face paled as he began to squeeze.

Goblins were supposed to be the size of childrené werenôt they?

ñHUURRRRGH!ò

The creature, whose rancid breath washed over her as it strained itself, was giant.

She was not a small girl, and even she had to raise her head to look this enemy in the eye. The pain in her foot grew worse and worse until it wrenched a cry from her lips.

ñAhhé a-arrrrghé leté meé go-aaah!!ò

Fighterôs leg still in his grip, the goblin casually rammed her up against the wall. There was a distant, dry sound of something cracking.

Fighter passed out without so much as a whimper, so she was unaware as the goblin whipped her around and slammed her against the opposite wall.

ñHrr, guhhhé?!ò

She came to with a sound that was barely human, her vomit tinged with blood as she was thrown to the ground. Then the rest of the horde fell on her.

ñAgh! Urrgh! Yaé yaaah! Ugh!ò

The goblins beat Fighter with their clubs, deaf to her cries, until her clothes ripped and fell away with the relentless flailing.

The goblins showed as much mercy to the invading adventurers as the party had intended to show to them.

Racked by her horrific ordeal, Fighter gave a high, piercing scream, but within it, Priestess was sure she could make out words.

ñRun! Hurry!ò

ñIð Iôm sorryé!ò

Closing her ears to the echoes in the cavern of the goblins violating her companion, Priestess hefted Wizard and began a stumbling retreat.

Run. Run. Run. Trip, then catch yourself, and run even harder.

Through the dark she went, slipping on every stone but never stopping.

ñIôm sorryé! Iôm é sorry! Please foé forgive meé!ò The words fell out of her in ragged gasps.

There was no light anymore. She knew they were being chased deeper and deeper into the cave, but what could she do?

ñAhhé ahéò

The footsteps of the goblins, drawing nearer with every echo, were what terrified her most.

Stopping now would be foolish, and she couldnôt head back the way she came. Even if she could, she wouldnôt have seen anything for the gloom.

Now she understood the Guild receptionistôs ambiguous expression.

Yes, goblins were weak. Their party of eager adventurersð their Warrior, their Wizard, their Fighterð had known that. Goblins were about as large and smart and strong as a human child. Just as theyôd heard.

But what happened when children took up weapons, plotted evil, sought to kill, and traveled in packs ten strong?

They hadnôt even considered it.

Their party was weak, inexperienced, unfamiliar with combat, had no money nor luck, and most importantly, they were overwhelmingly outnumbered.

It was a common mistake, the kind you hear about all the time.

ñOh!ò

Priestessôs long sleeves finally got tangled up in her legs, and she fell gracelessly to the ground. Her face and hands received liberal scrapes, but much worse, she lost her grip on Wizard.

Priestess rushed to pull her back upð a girl she hadnôt even known a few days before.

ñI-Iôm sorry! Are you all right?!ò

ñUr, hrrgé ò

Instead of an answer, blood-flecked spittle bubbled from Wizardôs mouth.

Priestess had been so focused on running that she hadnôt noticed Wizard beginning to tremble violently. It felt as if Wizardôs entire body were on fire, sweat soaking her thick cape.

ñWh-whyé ?ò

Priestess aimed the question directly at herself. Had her prayer not reached the goddess?

Beset by that worry, Priestess used precious time to work off Wizardôs outer garments and check the wound.

But the miracle had worked as intended. Wizardôs abdomen was blood soaked but smooth. The wound was gone.

ñU-uh, i-in times likeð In times like this, what should Ié ?ò

Her mind was blank.

She knew a bit of emergency first aid. And she could still use her miracles.

But would another healing miracle really help? Was there something else she should try? For that matter, in her wretched state, could she even focus enough to make an effective petition to the goddess?

ñAhh? Aaahh!ò

The moment sheôd wasted had been the one that counted. Priestess grew faint as a sudden pain overwhelmed her.

She heard a whistleð something running?ð and then her left shoulder lit up with a burning pain. She glanced at it and found an arrow buried deep in her flesh. Blood seeped up and stained her vestments.

Priestess was not wearing any armor. The arrow had ripped savagely through her clothes and into the lovely shoulder beneath. The Precepts forbade excessive armor, and she had no money in any case. Now every tiny movement seemed amplified a hundred times and provoked a heat and pain as though she had been stuck with burning tongs.

ñAaaaghhé!ò

All she could do was clench her teeth, keep the tears from her eyes, and stare down the goblins.

Two armed monsters approached. Leering grins split their faces; threads of drool hung from the edges of their mouths.

It would be best if she could bite off her tongue and die. But her goddess did not allow suicide, and she seemed destined to suffer the same fate as her friends.

Would they slice her open? Or rape her? Or both?

ñOhhé noé ò

She trembled; her teeth started chattering helplessly.

Priestess pulled Wizard close, using her own body to shield her companion, but suddenly she felt something warm and wet on her legs. The goblins seemed to pick up the scent, and their faces twisted in disgust.

Priestess desperately repeated the name of the Earth Mother, trying to avoid seeing what was in front of her.

There was no hope.

But thené

ñWhaé?ò

Deep within the darkness, there was a light.

It was like the evening star shining proudly against the encroaching twilight.

A single, ever-so-small but vividly shining point of light, and it steadily came closer.

The light was accompanied by the calm, determined footsteps of someone who held no doubts about where they were going.

The goblins looked back in confusion. Had their friends let some prey slip past?

And then, just behind the goblins, she saw him.

He was not very impressive.

He wore dirty leather armor and a filthy steel helm. On his left arm, a shield was fastened, and in his hand was a torch. His right hand grasped a sword that seemed a strange length. Priestess couldnôt help thinking that her own woefully unprepared party had seemed better prepared than this.

No, she wanted to shout, *stay away!* But terror froze her tongue, and she could not call out. She was deeply humiliated that she lacked Fighterôs courage.

The two goblins turned toward the newcomer, demonstrating no reluctance to show their backs to the powerless Priestess. They would deal with her later. One nocked an arrow to his bowstring, drew, and fired.

It was a crude, stone-headed arrow. And the goblin was frankly a terrible archer.

But darkness is the goblinôs ally.

No one could dodge an arrow that flew suddenly out of the blacknessé

ñHmph.ò

Even as he offered a derisive snort, the man cut the projectile out of the air with one swift swipe of his sword.

Incapable of comprehending the implication of what had just happened, the second goblin leaped at the man. The creature wielded the only weapon he carried, another of the monstersô rusty daggers. His blade found a chink at the manôs shoulder and drove deep.

ñNooo!ò

Priestess gave a scream ð but there was no other sound. The goblinôs blow made only a quiet scrape of metal on metal.

The blade had been stopped by the mail beneath the manôs leather armor.

The bewildered goblin pushed harder with his blade. The newcomer made the most of it.

ñGAYOU?!ò The goblin cried out as the manôs shield bashed into him with a thud and pressed him against the stone.

ñYou firsté,ò the man said coldly.

His meaning became clear when he took his torch and drove it dispassionately into the goblinôs face.

An unbearable muffled screech. The stench of burning flesh filled the cave.

The goblin struggled, half mad with pain, but pinned by the shield, he couldnôt even claw at his own face.

At last, he stopped moving, his limbs flopping lifelessly to the ground. The man made sure the monster was still, then slowly pulled his shield away.

There was a heavy *whumph* as the goblin tumbled to the ground, its face scorched.

The man gave the monster a casual kick, rolling him over, and then stepped deeper into the cave.

ñNext.ò

It was a bizarre spectacle. Priestess was no longer the only one who was terrified.

The goblin with the bow unconsciously took a step back, understandably looking ready to abandon his companion and flee. *Courage*, after all, is the last word anyone associates with goblins.

But now Priestess was behind it.

She exhaled sharply. And this time, she was able to move. She may have had an arrow in her shoulder, a goblin in front of her, her legs giving out beneath her, and her unconscious companion weighing her down, but she moved.

With her free arm, Priestess thrust her sounding staff at the goblin.

It was a meaningless gesture. She hadnôt even really meant to do it, acting on instinct.

But it was more than enough to make the goblin pause for an instant.

In that instant, the creature thought harder about what to do than he ever had in his entire life. But before he could reach a decision, his half-formed answer was slammed into the stone wall, propelled by the sword the armored warrior had thrown through him.

Half of the goblinôs head remained on the wall. The other half, with the rest of him, collapsed to the ground.

ñThatôs two.ò

The brutal fight over, he ground his boot into the slain goblinôs cadaver.

He was stained crimson with the monsterôs blood, from his grimy steel helm and leather armor to the mail made of chain-linked metal rings that covered his entire body.

A small, battered shield was fastened to his left arm, and in one hand, he held a brightly burning torch.

Heel braced against the creatureôs corpse, he reached down with his free hand and casually withdrew his sword from its skull. It was a cheap-looking blade, its length poorly conceived, and now it was drenched in the goblinôs brains.

Lying on the ground, an arrow in her shoulder, the young girlôs thin frame shook with fear. Her sweet, classically lovely face framed by long hair almost a translucent gold was scrunched up into a mess of tears and sweat.

Her slim arms, her feetð her whole gorgeous body was clad in the vestments of a priestess. The sounding staff she clutched jangled, the rings hanging on it striking one another in time with the quaking of her hands.

Who was this man before her?

So strange was his appearance, the aura that cloaked him, that she imagined he might be a goblin himselfð or perhaps something far worse, something she had no knowledge of yet.

ñWh-who are youé?ò she asked, pushing down her terror and pain.

After a pause, the man answered, ñGoblin Slayer.ò

A killer. Not of dragons or vampires, but the lowliest of monsters: goblins.

Normally, the name might have seemed comically simple. But to Priestess, at that moment, it was anything but funny.

§

How must she have looked to the manð Goblin Slayerð as she sat dumbly, forgetting even the pain in her shoulder? He strode closer until he loomed over her, frightening Priestess and making her tremble.

Even now, up close and with the torch illuminating him, his visor hid his face, and she couldnôt see his eyes. It was as if the armor was filled with the same darkness as the cave.

ñYou just registered?ò Goblin Slayer asked quietly, noticing the rank tag hanging around her neck. He had one, too. It swayed gently in the light of the torch, which he had set on the floor. The color reflected dimly in that little bubble of lightð it was unmistakably silver.

Priestess let out a small ñohé ò She knew what that color meant. It was the third-highest rank in the Guildôs ten-level system.

Only a few people in history had achieved Platinum rank, and those of Gold rank usually worked for the national government, but after those came Silver, indicating some of the most-skilled unaffiliated adventurers plying their trade independently.

ñYouôreé Silver rank.ò He was a hardened veteran who could hardly have been further removed from the Porcelain-ranked Priestess.

ñIôm sure if you wait a while, some other adventurers will show upé ò

Could this have been the adventurer about whom Guild Girl had been speaking?

ñSo you *can* talk.ò

ñHuh?ò

ñYouôre lucky.ò

Goblin Slayerôs hands moved so easily, she didnôt have time to react.

ñWhað? Ahh!ò

The arrowôs hooks tore her flesh as he pulled it out, the sudden wave of pain leaving her breathless. Blood flowed from the wound as her eyes welled up with tears.

With the same casual manner, Goblin Slayer reached for a bag on his belt and took out a small bottle.

ñDrink this.ò

Through the clear glass, she saw a green liquid that emitted gentle phosphorescenceð a healing potion.

Just what Priestess and her party had wanted but had had neither money nor time to buy.

She could have simply taken it but instead glanced back and forth between the bottle and the wounded Wizard.

ñS-sir!ò To her surprise, when she managed to make her voice work once, the words came pouring out of her. ñC-couldnôt we give it to her? My miracle couldnôtðò

ñWhere is she hurt? What happened?ò

ñI-it was a daggeré in her stomachéò

ñA daggeréò

Goblin Slayer felt Wizardôs abdomen in that same assured way. When he jabbed it with a finger, she coughed up more blood. Throughout his brisk examination, he didnôt so much as glance at Priestess, who huddled protectively over Wizard. Then he said flatly, ñGive up.ò

Shocked, Priestess turned pale and swallowed heavily. She hugged Wizard tighter.

ñLook.ò Goblin Slayer pulled out the dagger still lodged in the mail under his shoulder. A dark, viscous liquid she couldnôt identify was slathered all along the blade.

ñPoison.ò

ñP-poisoné?ò

ñThey make it from a mixture of their own spittle and excrement, along with herbs they find in the wild.ò *ñYouôre lucky.ò*

Priestess gulped again as the full meaning of Goblin Slayerôs words dawned on her.

Lucky the arrowhead hadnôt been dipped in poison, so she was still here. Lucky the goblin with the dagger hadnôt been the first to attack heré

ñWhen this poison gets in your system, first you have trouble breathing. Your tongue starts to spasm, then your whole body. Soon, you develop a fever, lose consciousness, then you die.ò

He wiped the chipped blade with the goblinôs loincloth and stashed it on his belt, then murmured inside his helmet, ñTheyôre such dirty creatures.ò

ñI-if sheôs been poisoned, all we need is to cure it, righté?ò

ñIf you mean an antidote, then I have one, but the poisonôs been in her for too long. Itôs too late.ò

ñOhé!ò

Just then, Wizardôs rolling eyes focused ever so briefly. She gurgled from the blood in her throat, and with trembling lips, she formed words without a sound, without voice. ñé illé eé ò

ñUnderstood.ò

No sooner had he said it than Goblin Slayer cut Wizardôs throat.

Wizard jumped, gave a low moan, then coughed up one more mouthful of bloody foam and died.

Inspecting the blade, Goblin Slayer clicked his tongue when he saw it had been blunted by fat.

ñDonôt be upset,ò he said.

ñHow can you say that?!ò Priestess exclaimed. ñMaybeé maybe we still could haveé helped hereé ò She clutched Wizardôs body, gone limp and lifelessly heavy.

Butð

She couldnôt get the rest of the words out. Had Wizard really been beyond saving? And if so, was killing her a kindness? Priestess did not know.

She only knew she had not yet been given the miracle cure, which neutralized poison. There was an antidote here, but it belonged to the man in front of her. It wasnôt hers to give. Priestess sat on the ground shaking, unable to drink the potion or even to stand.

ñListen,ò Goblin Slayer said brusquely. ñThese monsters arenôt bright, but theyôre not fools. They were at least smart enough to take out your spell caster first.ò He paused, then pointed. ñLook there.ò

Hanging from the wall were a dead rat and a crowôs feather. ñThose are goblin totems. Thereôs a shaman here.ò

ñA shamané ?ò

ñYou donôt know about shamans?ò

Priestess shook her head uneasily.

ñTheyôre spell casters. Better than your friend here.ò

Goblin spell casters? Priestess had never heard of such a thing. If she had, maybe her party would still be aliveé

No.

She resigned herself to the thought in her heart. Even if they had known, they wouldnôt have considered these shamans something to be afraid of. Goblins were weak prey, a way for new adventurers to cut their teeth.

Or so she had believed until earlier that day.

ñDid you see any big ones?ò Goblin Slayer studied her face again as she knelt on the ground.

This timeð just barelyð she could see his eyes. A cold, almost mechanical light shone from within that dirty helmet.

Priestess stirred and then stiffened, disturbed by the unflinching gaze that watched her from inside the helm. She suddenly remembered the warm moisture on her legs.

She had been attacked by goblins, watched her friends die in moments, saw her party all but annihilated, and she alone had survived.

It seemed unreal.

The throbbing pain in her shoulder and the humiliation of wetting herself, on the other hand, were undeniable.

ñY-yes, there was oneé I thinké Just running away, took everything I hadé ò She shook her head weakly, trying to call up the dim memory.

ñThat was a hobgoblin. Maybe they took on a wanderer as a guard.ò

ñA hobé You mean a hearth fairy?ò

ñDistant relative.ò

Goblin Slayer checked his weapons and armor, then stood. ñIôll follow their tunnel. I have to deal with them here.ò

Priestess looked up at him. He was already looking away from her, staring into the blackness ahead.

“Can you make it back on your own, or will you wait here?”

She clung to her sounding staff with exhausted hands, forcing her trembling legs to push her up as tears beaded in her eyes.

“I’m… going… with you!”

It was her only choice. She couldn’t bear either going back by herself or being left there all alone.

Goblin Slayer nodded. “Then drink the potion.”

As Priestess gulped down the bitter medicine, the heat in her shoulder began to fade. The potion contained at least ten different herbs and wouldn’t do anything dramatic, but it would stop the pain.

Priestess gave a relieved sigh. It was the first time she had ever drunk a potion.

Goblin Slayer watched her down the last of it. “All right,” he said, and he set off into the murk. There was no hesitation in his stride; he never paused to look back at her. She scurried to keep up with him, afraid of being left behind.

As they went, she cast a glance back. Back at the still, silent Wizard.

There was nothing Priestess could say. Biting her lip, she bowed her head deeper and vowed to come back for her friend.

§

Somehow they didnôt encounter any goblins on the short trek to the tunnel. They did, however, find awful chunks of meat scattered about. Perhaps it had once been human. There was no way to know. There was enough blood in the small cavern to choke on, and its smell mixed with the thick odor of scattered viscera.

ñErr, eurrgghéò

Priestess spotted the body of Warrior and reflexively fell to her knees and vomited.

It seemed like her last meal of bread and wine had happened years ago. For that matter, it might have been an eon since Warrior had invited her on this adventure.

ñNineéò Goblin Slayer nodded. He had been counting the goblin corpses, unperturbed by the scene around them.

ñJudging from the scale of the nest, thereôs probably less than half left.ò

He took a sword and dagger from Warriorôs body and hung them from his own belt. He checked the goblinsô other victims as well but apparently found nothing that satisfied him.

Priestess, wiping her mouth, gave him a reproving look, but he didnôt pause.

ñHow many of you were there?ò

ñWhat?ò

ñGuild Girl only said some amateurs had gone goblin hunting.ò

ñThere were four ofð Oh!ò she accidentally shouted, wiping furiously at her mouth with both hands. ñM-my other party memberé!ò How could she have forgotten?

She didnôt see Fighterôs body. Fighter, who had sacrificed herself, suffering unspeakable things to save the others, was nowhere to be found.

ñA girl?ò

ñYesé ò

Goblin Slayer held the torch close and carefully searched the floor of the cave. There were fresh footprints, blood, a dirty liquid, and a track like something had been dragged along the ground.

ñIt looks like they took her deeper in. I canôt say if sheôs alive or not,ò he said, fingering several long strands of hair to which scraps of skin still clung.

Priestess nearly jumped up. ñThen we have to save herð ò

But Goblin Slayer didnôt answer. He lit a new torch, then tossed the old one into a side tunnel. ñGoblins have excellent night vision. Keep it lit. The dark is our enemyé Listen.ò

She obeyed, straining her ears for any sound.

From the blackness beyond the flame of the torch, there were footsteps, *slap-slap-slap*.

A goblin! Probably coming to investigate the light from the torch.

Goblin Slayer took one of the daggers from his belt and flung it into the darkness.

There was a harsh sound as it pierced something. The body of a goblin rolled into the dim torchlight. The moment he saw it, Goblin Slayer leaped forward and drove his sword through the creatureôs heart. The goblin died without a sound, for the dagger had run through its throat. The whole thing happened almost too quickly to track.

ñTen.ò

As Goblin Slayer added to his count, Priestess peered into the tunnel and asked timidly, ñCan you see in the dark, too?ò

ñHardly.ò

Goblin Slayer didnôt bother retrieving the fat-dulled blade from the body. Instead, he took up the sword Warrior had carried, clicking his tongue as he saw it was too long for the narrow tunnels.

Next he picked up a spear from the goblin he had just killed. It was roughly hewn from animal bone, but a spear for a goblin is only a bit longer than a knife for a full-grown man.

ñItôs just practice. I know exactly where their necks are.ò

ñPractice? How much practiceé?ò

ñA lot.ò

ñA lot?ò

ñYouôre just full of questions, arenôt you?ò

Priestess was silent. She hung her head in embarrassment.

ñWhat can you use?ò

ñIôm sorry?ò She hurriedly raised her head again, not understanding what he meant.

Goblin Slayer never let his attention waver from the tunnel as he spoke. ñWhich miracles?ò

ñI have Minor Heal and Holy Light, sir.ò

ñHow many uses?ò

ñThree in all. Ié I have two left.ò It was nothing extraordinary, but Priestess was one of the more accomplished beginners. It was an achievement simply to be able to pray to the goddess, make a petition, and be granted a miracle in the first place. And then, not many people could bear to join their soul with the goddess repeatedly. That took experience.

ñThatôs considerably more than I expected,ò he said. This was praise, she supposed, but she had trouble feeling like it. His tone was dutiful and cool, hardly revealing any emotion.

ñHoly Light, then. Minor Heal wonôt do us any good here. Donôt waste your miracles on it.ò

ñY-yes, siré ò

ñThat was a scout we killed. Weôve got the right tunnel.ò

With the tip of the spear, he pointed deeper into the hole from which the goblin had come. ñBut their scout wonôt return. Neither will the ones who killed your party. I finished them off.ò

Priestess was silent.

ñWhat would you do?ò

ñWhat?ò

ñIf you were a goblin. What would you do?ò

At the unexpected question, Priestess tapped a slender finger against her chin, thinking furiously. What would she do if she were a goblin?

Her hand, which had once assisted with services at the Temple, seemed too white to be an adventurerôs.

ñé Set an ambush?ò

ñExactly,ò Goblin Slayer said in his calm voice. ñAnd weôre going to walk right into it. Get ready.ò

Priestess paled but nodded.

Goblin Slayer took out a coil of rope and some wooden stakes and laid them at his feet.

ñI have a mantra for you,ò he said, not taking his eyes off his work. ñRemember it. The words are *tunnel entrance*. You forget them, you die.ò

ñY-yes, sir!ò Priestess clasped her sounding staff with both hands.

Tunnel entrance, tunnel entrance, she repeated desperately to herself.

The only thing she could rely on was this mysterious man who called himself Goblin Slayer. If he abandoned her, then she and Fighter and the kidnapped village girls were all lost.

A moment later, Goblin Slayer finished his preparations. ñLetôs go.ò

Priestess followed him as quickly as she could, past the rope and into the tunnel.

The tunnel was remarkably sturdy, not something that seemed to have been built just for mounting surprise attacks. With every step, dirt fell from tree roots that had pushed through the ceiling, but there didnôt seem to be any danger of collapse. The gradual downward slope made Priestess uneasy, however. Humans didnôt belong here.

She should have seen it from the start, and now that she had realized, it was too late: *Goblins spend their whole lives underground.* True, they were nothing like dwarves, but why had she and the others underestimated the goblins so badly just because they werenôt physically strong?

Well, itôs too late for regretsé

Priestess stepped carefully by the faint light of the torch. She glanced up at Goblin Slayerôs back. His movements betrayed neither hesitation nor fear. Did he know what lay ahead?

ñWeôre almost there.ò He stopped so suddenly, Priestess nearly ran into him. She straightened up quicker than he could turn to look back with his mechanical movements.

ñNow, Holy Light.ò

ñY-yes, sir. Iôm readyé when you are.ò

She took a deep breath and let it out. Then she held her staff firmly in place. Goblin Slayer likewise adjusted his grip on his torch and spear.

ñDo it.ò

ñO Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darknessé ò

Goblin Slayer leaped forward as Priestess raised her staff toward the blackness. Its tip began shining with an illumination that became as brilliant as the sun. A miracle of the Earth Mother.

With the light at his back, Goblin Slayer flew headlong into the monstersô hall.

Perhaps they had simply appropriated the largest cavern in the cave complex. The goblins waiting in the shoddily constructed room came into view.

ñGAUI?ò

ñGORRR?ò

There were six goblins there, as well as one big one and one seated on a chair wearing a skull on his head. The monsters squinted against the sudden, pure light and howled in confusion.

Also there, lying motionless, were several young women.

Some bleak thing had no doubt been happening in that room.

ñSix goblins, one hob, one shaman, eight total.ò Goblin Slayer counted his opponents without so much as a tremor in his voice.

Of course, not all the goblins were clenching their eyes shut and keening.

ñOGAGO, GAROAé ò The shaman seated on the throne waved his staff and recited an unintelligible spell.

ñGUAI?ò He was interrupted by Goblin Slayerôs spear skewering him through the torso. He gave a death rattle and tumbled backward off his chair.

The goblins stood transfixed by this tragedy, and Goblin Slayer seized the moment. Warriorôs sword rang as Goblin Slayer freed it from its scabbard.

ñAll right, letôs get out of here.ò

ñWhat?! Y-yes, sir!ò

Even as he spoke, Goblin Slayer was already turning and dashing off. Shocked at his speed and at a loss about what to do, Priestess followed him. The goblins recovered their wits as the light receded and soon gave chase.

In the space of a breath, Goblin Slayer was far ahead of Priestess as she ran up the slope. Was he used to taking the role of vanguard and rear guard, or was this the result of sheer training and experience? Whatever the case, it was incredible to her that he could be so nimble while clad in leather armor and mail, his vision limited by his helmet.

It was when she saw him jump lightly at the mouth of the tunnel that the words of his mantra came rushing back to her. ñOh noð!ò She barely missed the trip wire on the ground. Goblin Slayer was already pressed up against the wall, and Priestess hurried to do the same against the opposite side.

ñGUIII!!ò

ñGYAA!!ò

They could hear the enraged voices and pounding footfalls of the goblins coming up the slope. Priestess took a furtive peek and saw a hulking shape at the front of the packðthe hobgoblin.

ñNow! Do it again!ò Goblin Slayer flung the words at her.

Priestess gave a nod and thrust her staff with its symbols of her priesthood toward the tunnel. She spoke the words of the prayer without a stutter.

ñO Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darknessé ò

Merciful the Earth Motherôs light was to them, but not to the eyes of the goblins, which burned at its brilliance.

ñGAAU?!ò

The blinded hobgoblin stumbled on the trip wire and took an ungainly fall.

ñEleven.ò Goblin Slayer vaulted in and ruthlessly thrust his sword into the creatureôs brain. It gurgled once, twice, then spasmed and died.

ñH-here come the others!ò Priestess called. She was out of miracles, and the repeated soul-effacing ritual had left her enervated, her face bloodless from exertion.

ñI know.ò Goblin Slayer whipped a bottle from his bag and threw it against the hobgoblinôs body. It shattered, releasing a thick black substance from inside. The cloying smell made Priestess think perhaps it was some unfamiliar poison.

ñSee you in hell.ò

Goblin Slayer kicked the drenched body into the tunnel. The oncoming goblins, caught off guard by the hunk of meat rolling toward them, slammed their swords into it.

It was an instinctive reaction. When they realized it was their guardian they had stabbed, they panicked. The goblins struggled to extract the weapons, buried deep in the hobgoblinôs flesh and now covered in the black substanceé

ñTwelve, thirteen.ò

They were too late.

Without a hint of remorse, Goblin Slayer threw the torch into the tunnel with them. There was a *whoosh* as the hobgoblinôs corpse went up in flames, taking their two pursuers with it.

ñGYUIAAAAAA!!ò The screeching goblins flailed on the ground, burning as they rolled all the way back to the bottom of the slope. Priestess choked on the smell of roasting meat that floated up to her.

ñWh-what was that?ò

ñSome call it Medeaôs Oil. Others, petroleum. Itôs gasoline.ò He had gotten it from an alchemist, he said nonchalantly, adding, ñAwfully expensive for such a simple effect.ò

“B-but inside— in there, the kidnapped girls—”

“The fire won’t spread far with just a few bodies to feed on. If those girls are still alive, this isn’t going to kill them.” He muttered, “And we’re not out of goblins yet,” causing Priestess to bite her lip again.

“A-are you going back in, then?”

“No. When they can’t breathe anymore, they’ll come out on their own.”

Goblin Slayer’s sword was lost now, stuck in a burning hobgoblin corpse at the bottom of a tunnel. He probably wasn’t eager to fight with a brain-soaked blade, anyway.

He picked up the weapon the hobgoblin had dropped, a stone ax. It was just a rock tied to a stick— rough in every sense of the word. But then, that made it easy to use, too.

Goblin Slayer swung the ax rapidly through the air, testing it, and found he could wield it easily with one hand.

Satisfied, he reached into his bag and pulled out another torch.

“Here,” Priestess said, offering a flint, but Goblin Slayer hardly looked at her.

“These beasts never think somebody might set an ambush for *them*,” he said.

She was silent.

“Don’t worry.” He swung the ax in carefully coordinated strokes, landing each blow on the flint. “It’ll be over soon.”

He was right.

He dealt with each of the goblins as they emerged from the flames and smoke. One tripped on the rope and found his head split open. The second hopped over the rope but was laid low by the waiting ax. The third was the same. The ax wouldnôt come out of the cheekbone of the fourth creature, so Goblin Slayer took the monsterôs club instead.

ñThatôs seventeen. Weôre going in.ò

ñY-yes, sir!ò Priestess rushed to keep up with Goblin Slayer as he dove into the roiling smoke.

The hall was a terrible sight. The hobgoblin was burned beyond recognition, its companions little better. The shaman lay with the spear still through its body. And the girls were lying in filth on the floor.

As Goblin Slayer had predicted, the smoke floated above them.

But to survive is not always a blessingð something Priestess realized when she picked out Fighterôs body among them.

ñUgghé euhrrrghé ò

Nothing was left in Priestessôs stomach. She brought up only bile, bitter and burning in her throat, and she felt tears welling in her eyes again.

ñWell, then.ò

While Priestess was vomiting, Goblin Slayer had stamped out the flames running along the gasoline on the floor.

He strode over to the speared shaman. The goblin looked surprised by its own death. It lay completely still. The image of Goblin Slayer standing over him was reflected in his glassy eyes.

ñI thought so,ò Goblin Slayer said, immediately raising his club.

ñGUI?!ò As the startled shaman jumped up, the club came down, and then he was dead for good.

Shaking the spattered brains off the club, Goblin Slayer muttered, ñEighteen. The high-level ones are tough.ò

Goblin Slayer began to kick violently at the throne, now vacant in every sense. Priestess heaved again as she saw it was made of human bones.

ñTypical goblin trick. Look.ò

ñWhé what?ò Priestess wiped her eyes and mouth as she raised her head. Behind the throne hung one of the rotten wooden boards the goblins used in place of doors.

A hidden storeð or was that all it was? Priestess gripped her staff at a clattering sound from within.

ñYou were lucky.ò

As Goblin Slayer pulled the board aside, there were several high-pitched screams. Along with a stash of plunder, four terrified goblin children crouched inside.

ñThese creatures multiply quickly. If your party had come any later, there wouldôve been fifty of them, and they would have attacked en masse.ò

At the thought of itð of what would have happened to her and everyoneð Priestess shivered. She imagined dozens of goblins taking her, bearing half-breed goblin childrené

Looking down at the cowering forms, Goblin Slayer adjusted his grip on the club.

ñYouôllé kill the children, too?ò she asked, but she already knew the answer. She quailed as she heard the flat tone of her own voice. Had her heart, her emotions, been numbed by the onslaught of reality? She wanted it to be true. Just this once.

ñOf course I will,ò he said with a calm nod.

He must have seen this before many, many times.

She knew he called himself ñGoblin Slayerò for a reason.

ñWeôve destroyed their nest. Theyôll never forget that, let alone forgive it. And the survivors of a nest learn, become smarter.ò As he spoke, he casually raised the club, still covered in the shamanôs brains. ñThere is no reason to let them live.ò

ñEven if there wasé a good goblin?ò

ñA good goblin?ò He exhaled in a way that suggested he was truly mystified by the idea.

ñThere might beé if we looked, butéò

He said nothing for a long moment. Then he spoke.

ñThe only good goblins are the ones that never come out of their holes.ò

He took a step.

ñThis will make twenty-two.ò

§

Itôs a common story, one heard all the time.

A village is attacked by goblins. Some maidens are kidnapped.

Some rookies decide they're going to get rid of these goblins for their first quest.

But the goblins are too much, and the whole party is slaughtered.

Or maybe just one makes it out and saves the girls, too.

During their captivity, the girls had been forced to serve as the goblins' playthings.

In despair, they take shelter at the Temple.

The lone survivor slowly slips away from the world and never leaves home again.

In this world, these sorts of things are an everyday occurrence, as common as the sunrise.

Or are they? Priestess wasn't sure. Do these life-shattering events really happen all the time?

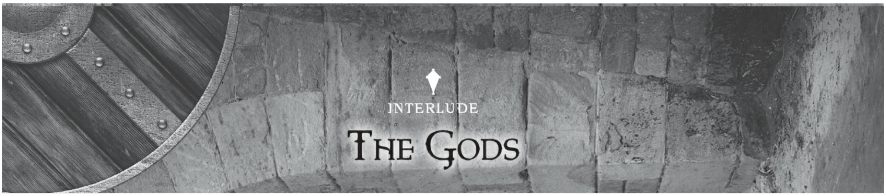
And if they do, could she, knowing them firsthand, go on believing in the Earth Mother?

In the end, there were only two things of which she was certain.

That she would continue as an adventurer.

And that Goblin Slayer had exterminated every goblin in that nest.

But then, that, too, is no more than another often-told tale.



INTERLUDE

THE GODS

Somewhere not here. In a place immensely far away yet incredibly close.

Rattle, rattle, a certain deity is rolling dice.

She looks like a sweet little girl, and her name is Illusion.

Again and again she rolls. She's had a pretty good day, and a smile plays on her lips.

But dice pay no heed to the will of the gods.

With a cute little gasp, Illusion hides her face.

Oh! What a terrible roll. She can't even look at it.

But however pretty or sweet she may be, not even Illusion can change numbers on dice.

No equipment and no strategy will help.

Call it chance or fate, these things will happen.

Illusion slumps in disappointment, and one god points and laughs at her.

His name is Truth. *I told you*, he says, so transported with mirth that he claps his hands.

Truth, after all, is without restraint. Cruel.

He tells her she was a fool to gamble on a quest so rich with risks.

Illusion grumbles to herself, but there is nothing she can do.

She herself does not hold back when she takes on fate-guided adventurers.

So how can she complain when her own adventurers happen to die?

It is simply how things work.

Hearing this, some would object to what seems like gods using humans as playthings.

Yet what path is not influenced by chance or fate?

When all your adventurers are dead, though, there is nothing left to do.

It is unfortunate, but this adventure is over.

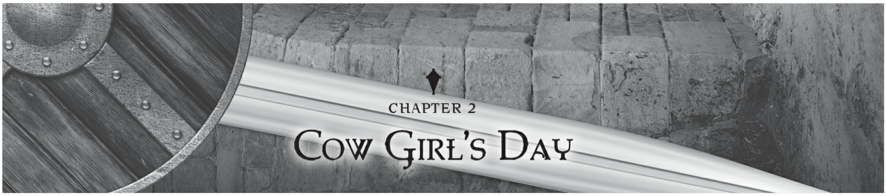
Ready some new adventurers and try again.

It'll be fine this time. Surely these new ones will… At that moment, the two deities notice a new adventurer has appeared upon the board.

Truth gives a disgusted grunt.

Illusion gives a delicate start.

He has come.



CHAPTER 2

COW GIRL'S DAY

She had a familiar dream.

She dreamed of a summer day when she was still small. Eight years old maybe. She had come by herself to her uncle's farm to help deliver a calf. At her tender age, she didn't realize it was just an excuse to let her play.

She was going to help with a birth. That was an important job.

And even better, she was going to get out of the village and go to the city—all by herself!

Of course, she bragged about it to him. She remembered the sulky look that came over his face. He was two years older than her, but he knew nothing of life outside the village. He could hardly imagine a city, let alone the Capital.

True, she was just like him in that respect, but still…

She could no longer remember what started it.

He got angry, they fought, and both ended up in tears. Looking back on it, she thought perhaps she had gone too far, believing she could say whatever she wanted because he was a boy.

Saying too much, hurting him enough that he got really angry. She hadn't considered that might happen. She was young, after all.

Eventually his older sister came to get him and took him home, leading him by the hand.

The truth was, she had wanted to invite him to go with her.

On the carriage to the next town, she looked back at her village out the windowôs curtain.

Her mother and father had come to see her off. *He* was nowhere to be seen as she waved good-bye to her parents.

As she drifted off in the rumbling carriage, she felt a twinge of regret. She didnôt get a chance to apologize.

When she got back, she would have to make up with himé

§

Cow Girlôs day started early.

That was because *he* woke up early, even before the rooster crowed dawn.

The first thing he did on waking was to make a lap of the farm. He never neglected this.

When she asked him about it once, he told her he was looking for footprints. ñGoblins move at night,ò heôd said. ñThey go back to their nests by first light, but they always reconnoiter before an attack.ò So, he told her, he was checking for footprints, to make sure he didnôt miss a sign of goblins.

When he had finished his first inspection, he made another. This time, he was looking for any damage to the fence. And if he found any, he would take it upon himself to get some stakes and planks and repair it.

Cow Girl woke to the sound of his footsteps going past her window. The cock finally began its morning call.

Hearing that casual, self-possessed walk, she slid her naked body off her straw bed, gave a great stretch and a yawn. Then she pulled some underwear over her voluptuous form before opening the window.

The cool, bracing morning wind blew in.

ñGood morning! Up early as always, I see!ò Cow Girl rested her vast bosom on the window frame and leaned out, calling to his back as he looked at the fence.

ñYeah,ò he said, turning.

He wore dirty armor, leather plate, and a steel helmet; a shield was fastened to his left arm and a sword hung at his waist.

Just like he always looked. Squinting toward the sun, Cow Girl said, ñGood weather today. Mr. Sun is so bright!ò

ñHe is.ò

ñIs Uncle up?ò

ñNo idea.ò

ñHmm. Well, Iôm sure heôll be awake soon.ò

ñThink so?ò

ñYou must be hungry. Letôs have breakfast. Iôll have it ready in a moment.ò

ñAll right.ò

He nodded slowly.

Heôs still a man of few words, Cow Girl thought with a smile.

He wasnôt like that when they were small. At least, he shouldnôt have been.

Only the details of the weather changing, they had the same conversation every morning.

But he was an adventurer, and going on adventures was a risky business. If she was talking to him in the morning, it meant he had survived another day, so she wouldnôt object no matter how few words they shared.

Still smiling, Cow Girl squeezed herself into her work clothes and headed lightly toward the kitchen.

They were supposed to take turns preparing meals, but it was Cow Girl who did the actual cooking. In all the years they had lived together, he had hardly ever cooked.

Twice, three times maybe? When I had that cold, Iôm sureé

She hadnôt told him the soup heôd made was thin and watery for fear he would get upset.

She did think sometimes that since he got up early anyway, maybe he could make breakfast once in a while. But adventurers led unpredictable lives. There was nothing he could do, so she didnôt nag him about it.

ñMorning, Uncle! Breakfast soon, okay?ò

ñYes, morning. Smells good today. My stomachôs rumbling.ò Her uncle, the farmôs owner, woke up just as *he* came in from his inspection.

ñGood morning, sir.ò

ñMm-hmé morning.ò Her uncle replied with a short word and a curt nod to his dutiful greeting.

On the table were cheese, bread, and a creamy soup, all made right there on the farm.

He pushed food into the opening of his visor. Cow Girl watched him delightedly.

ñHereôs for this month,ò he said, as if suddenly remembering something. He produced a leather pouch from the bag at his hip and placed it on the table. It made a heavy sound as he set it down, and through its open mouth, gold coins glittered.

ñé ò

Her uncle looked at it silently, as if reluctant to take it.

One could hardly blame him. The armored man didnôt need to be renting space in the stables on some Podunk farm. He could have been staying in the Royal Suite somewhere.

Finally, her uncle gave a small sigh of surrender and drew the pouch toward him.

ñAwfully profitable being an adventurer.ò

ñBusiness has been good lately.ò

ñIs that right? Say, youé Are youé?ò Her uncle was normally so good with people, but around this man, he always got tongue-tied. Cow Girl just couldnôt understand ité

With a mixture of fear and resignation, her uncle finally continued:

ñé Are you going again today?ò

ñYes, sir,ò he answered calmly. Always with that same slow nod. ñIôll go to the Guild. Too much work not to.ò

“I see.” Her uncle paused. “Don’t get carried away, now.”

“No, sir.”

Her uncle seemed nonplussed by the man’s even voice as he took a sip of warm milk from his glass.

Their morning chats always ended this way. Cow Girl tried to lighten the mood by saying, with forced cheerfulness, “Well, I’ve got to make some deliveries, so we can go together!”

“Fine.” He nodded, but at this, her uncle’s expression turned even sterner.

“…I mean, in that case, I can take out the cart,” the adventurer quickly amended.

“Oh, Uncle’s just a mother hen,” Cow Girl said. “I’ll be *fine*. I’m a lot stronger than I look, you know!” She rolled up a sleeve and flexed a bicep for his edification.

True enough, her arms were larger than a city girl’s her age, but she was not what you would call muscular.

“All right.” That was all he said as he finished his breakfast. He left the table without even thanking her for the meal.

“H-hey, wait a minute, slow down!” she said. “I have to get ready, too! Hold on!”

But that, too, was how things always went. Cow Girl wolfed down the rest of her breakfast in a most unladylike way.

She washed down the immense meal—which she needed because of all the work she did—with milk and then took all their dishes to the sink.

“All right, Uncle, we’re off!”

ñCome back soon. And safely. Please.ò

ñItôll be fine, Uncle. Weôll be together.ò

Still seated at the table, her uncle wore a despondent look, as if to say, *Thatôs what Iôm worried about.* Cow Girlôs uncle was a kind, good-hearted farmer, as she herself well knew. He just didnôt seem to get along with the adventurer. Or ratheré her uncle seemed scared of him. Even though there was nothing to be scared ofé

é She was pretty sure.

When she got outside, he was already walking down the road beyond the fence. She went to where the cart was kept behind the house, hurriedly but not rushing.

She had loaded the produce the day before, so she had only to pick up the handlebar and push off. As the wheels creaked along, the produce and wine rattled from atop the cart.

He strode along the tree-lined road to town, Cow Girl following behind him, pulling the cart. Each time the load jostled over the gravel, her chest bounced right along with it.

This work was nowhere near difficult enough to be exhausting, but as they went along, she began to sweat a little and breathe a bit harder.

ñé é ò

Suddenly, without a word, he slackened his pace. He didnôt stop, of course, but slowed. At the same time, Cow Girl, in a burst of energy, sped up until she was walking at his side.

ñThanks.ò

ñé Not at all.ò He shook his head as he spared the few words. Perhaps it was his helmet that made the gesture look strangely broad.

ñSwitch?ò

ñNah, Iôm all right.ò

ñI see.ò

The Adventurers Guild also housed an inn and tavern, and that was where Cow Girl would deliver the produceð that was her job. It was where he would go to get the dayôs questð that was his job.

She couldnôt assist him with his work, so she felt bad somehow getting his help with hers.

ñHowôs it been going?ò she asked over the rumble of the cart, glancing sideways at him.

Not that there was much to see. He wore his helmet from the moment he got up every day. Whatever expression he wore, she couldnôt see it.

ñMore goblins lately.ò

His answers were always short. Short and yet somehow enough. Cow Girl nodded brightly.

ñReally?ò

ñMore than usual.ò

ñSo youôre busy?ò

ñI am.ò

ñYeah, youôre out all the time these days.ò

ñI am.ò

ñItôs great to have plenty of work, huh?ò

ñNo,ò he said, quietly shaking his head. ñIt isnôt.ò

ñWhy not?ò she asked, and he replied:

ñI would rather have no goblins.ò

ñYeahé,ò she said, nodding.

Things would be better with no goblins at all.

§

The road gradually got better, and they could just make out the buildings on the horizon as the bustle of the city drifted to their ears. Here, as in most towns, the Guild Hall was immediately inside the gate. It was also the biggest building in town, towering over its surroundings, even larger than the Earth Mother Temple with its attached infirmary. Ostensibly, this was because so many people from out of town came for the Guild Hall and would need to find it easily.

Cow Girl, for one, was glad it was easy to find.

The Guild also claimed they wanted to be able to quickly apprehend any neôer-do-wells who were going around calling themselves adventurers.

Then again, it was hard to tell most adventurers from common thugs at a glance.

She took in all the varieties of outrageous armor worn by the people walking the streets and *him* with his steel helm, even though they were in the middle of town, and gave a wry smile.

“Hang on, okay? I’m just gonna drop off the delivery.”

“Sure.”

Cow Girl quickly left the produce at the service entrance in the back of the building, then exhaled as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. She rang the bell to summon the cook, showed him a tally sheet to confirm she had brought everything as requested, and took his signature. Now all she needed was Guild Girl’s signature, and her delivery would be finished.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Not at all.”

He was still there when she came out front again, as she’d known he would be.

As they passed through the swinging door of the Guild Hall together, the momentary relief from the sun was swept away by the collective body heat of all the people packed into the building. The Guild Hall was lively as ever.

“I’m gonna go get that signature.”

“Sure.”

Outside he had waited for her, but inside they would part ways.

He headed for a row of seats along the wall and settled down in one with authority, as though it was reserved for him. Cow Girl waved lightly to him, then headed for the front desk, where a line of visitors waited. There were adventurers, people filing quests, and hangers-on of every sort. Tradesmen from smiths to pawnbrokers, from merchants to medicine hawkers. It occurred to her that adventuring had more expenses than it seemed.

“So, hey. This troll comes at me, right? But I’m like, *Not* *today!* and I slip past him by *this* much!ò

ñOh my, that sounds very tiring. Maybe you should try a Stamina potion.ò

Cow Girl saw a spear-wielding adventurer eagerly relating his exploits to the girl at the front desk. His impressively slim body, which seemed composed of almost solid muscle, spoke of his strength. The tag around his neck showed he was a Silver-ranked adventurer.

Cow Girl knew this was the third-highest rank in the Guild hierarchy. She knew because it was *his* rank, too.

ñStamina potion? Who needs it? Babe, I just faced down a *troll* with nothing but my spear in my hands. What do you think of that?ò

ñOh, Iôve heard how fearsome trolls areéò As she began feeling troubled, reaching for words, Guild Girlôs eyes happened upon *him* sitting by the wall.

ñOh!ò Her face instantly brightened.

ñUgh. Goblin Slayer.ò Spearman gave a cluck as he followed Guild Girlôs gaze.

Maybe he had spoken a bit too loudly. The hubbub in the Guild Hall rose as first one visitor, then another looked in *his* direction.

ñI canôt believe heôs Silver rank, too.ò An elegant knight was shaking her head in disgust. The scars on her platinum armor bespoke many battles and made her all the more striking. ñWho knows if he can even fight anything bigger than a goblin? A ôspecialistô? Heh! Theyôll give a Silver rank to anyone these days!ò

ñLet him be. He never has anything to do with the rest of us, anyway. Who cares what he does?ò

A great tank of a warrior gave Knight a dismissive wave of his hand. Was it foolishness or bravery that let him seem so comfortable in his villainous-looking armor? Both he and Knight wore silver tags, so they were no fresh-faced questers, either.

Two boys, though, stood talking in thin leather plate. Each had a dagger, a staff, and a robe.

ñLook at him!ò one said. ñIôve never seen armor that dirty!ò

ñYeah, the two of us have better stuff than himé ò

Their equipment was every bit as cheap as his, but ñbetterò in that there wasnôt a scratch on it.

ñStop it,ò a female paladin about the boysô age said reproachfully. ñWhat if he hears you? Iôm sure heôs a rookie just like us.ò The ridicule in their voices was tinged with relief at finding someone else as pathetic as they were. They showed no sign of noticing the silver tag around his neck.

ñHeh-heh-heh é ò A spellcaster in a pointy hat and a scandalous robe seemed to be enjoying the exchange. She was called a witch and was a Silver-ranked magic user. She hugged her staff seductively and hung back near the wall aloofly from the goings-on.

The whispering spread throughout the room. Those who knew him and those who didnôt, all murmuring together.

And in the middle of it all, *he* sat quietly in his seat as though oblivious.

He doesnôt care. Heôs not actingð he really doesnôt care. So I guess thereôs no point in getting angry for himé

Cow Girl held her tongue, but she wasn’t happy.

At that moment, a frown still fixed on her face, she happened to meet Guild Girl’s eyes. Behind her perpetual smile, she had the same look as Cow Girl.

Resignation. Anger. Disgust. And… the recognition that there was nothing she could do.

I know how you feel.

Guild Girl closed her eyes for a second and sighed.

“Excuse me, please. I’ll be right back.”

“Yes, er, ahem, please do… I’ll be waiting. I haven’t finished telling you about my brave exploits—er, making my report yet!”

“Yes, I understand.” Guild Girl disappeared into a back office.

A moment later, she poked her head into the hall. She held a heavy-looking stack of papers with both arms. With many a huff and puff, she brought them over to the corkboard on the wall.

“All right, everyone! It’s time to post the morning quests!” Guild Girl’s voice carried across the hall, silencing the murmurs in the room. Her braids bounced merrily as she waved to get the crowd’s attention.

“Finally!” Eyes sparkling, the adventurers thronged Guild Girl, knocking over chairs in their haste. After all, if they didn’t take on a quest, they wouldn’t eat today. Such was the life of an adventurer. The nature as well as the proffered reward of the quest would influence the adventurers’ reputations. And how much good they contributed to the world—a value common folk referred to simply as “experience points”—would determine their rank. And everyone wanted to move up in rank.

An adventurer’s rank would earn him trust, after all. No one would entrust an important quest to a Porcelain or Obsidian adventurer, no matter how skilled they were.

With Guild Girl looking on, the gathered adventurers squabbled as they pulled quests from the board.

ñPorcelain-ranked stuff is soé cheap. I donôt want to spend my whole life chasing rats out of the sewers.ò

ñWell, not much we can do. Hey, how about this one?ò

ñGoblin slaying? Nice. Indeed, sounds like a job for some beginners.ò

ñOooh, thatôs a good one. I want to kill some goblinsé ò

ñNo! You heard Guild Girlð we need to start with the sewers!ò

ñHow about dragons? Any dragons? Something martial!ò

ñOh, give it up, you havenôt got the gear for it. Stick to rounding up bandits. The payôs not bad.ò

ñHey, I was looking at that quest!ò

ñWell, I got it first. Guess youôll have to find another one.ò

Spearman from earlier was late to the fray, and he found himself pushed back by the crowd until he fell flat on his butt. He jumped up and flew back into the fracas with a roar.

ñOkay, everyone, thereôs no need to fight,ò Guild Girl said placatingly, the smile still pasted on her face.

ñHmph.ò At length, Cow Girl wandered away from Guild Girl. She didnôt want to get caught up in this, and it didnôt look like she would be able to get that signature anytime soon.

Bored, Cow Girl let her gaze drift toward the wall. *He* was still sitting there.

She had once said, ñWeôd better hurry or all the work will be gone,ò but he had replied, ñGoblin slaying isnôt popular.ò Farmers posted the jobs, so the rewards were meager, and as they were seen as low-level quests, the more experienced adventurers wouldnôt take them.

So he waited for the reception area to clear out. There was no hurry.

Andé he never said it, but Cow Girl thought he was waiting so new adventurers could have their pick of the quests first. Not that she would suggest this to him. He would just say, ñ*Is that so?*ò like he always did.

ñHmmé ò If she was going to be stuck here anyway, maybe she should go wait with him?

She shouldnôt have hesitated.

ñAhé ò Someone else approached him before she could.

A young female adventurer. She wore priestess vestments over her delicate frame, the symbol of the Earth Mother hanging from her sounding staff.

ñé Hi,ò she said shortly, standing in front of him. She looked uncomfortable as she gave a small bow.

ñYeah.ò That was all he said. Whatever he might be thinking was hidden inside that helmet. He didnôt seem to notice Priestess was even more flustered by her inability to elicit a proper response from him.

ñI bought some equipment. Just like you told me.ò She rolled up the sleeves of her vestments. A set of brand-new mail clung to her slender body, the chained links glimmering faintly.

ñNot bad.ò

Someone who didnôt know any better might take the scene the wrong way, but his words held no hint of innuendo.

He finally turned toward Priestess, looked her up and down, and nodded.

ñThe rings are a bit wide, but it will be enough to stop their blades.ò

ñMother Superior was very displeased with me. She wanted to know what servant of the Earth Mother would wear armor.ò

ñShe probably doesnôt know much about goblins.ò

ñItôs not that. Itôs a violation of the Preceptsé ò

ñIf it will interfere with your miracles, maybe you should switch faiths.ò

ñMy prayers will reach the Earth Mother!ò

ñThen thereôs no problem.ò

Priestess puffed out her cheeks angrily. Both of them were silent for a moment.

ñNot going to sit?ò

ñOh, I-I will! I will sit!ò

Blushing, she hurriedly lowered herself into the chair next to him. Her little behind made a cute *buhmp* as she sat down.

Priestess laid her staff across her knees and clasped her hands, as if trying to shrink into the seat. Apparently, she was quite nervous.

ñHmph.ò Cow Girl let out an unconscious grunt, but it wasnôt as though he had never mentioned this girl. She was an adventurer he had been partied with for about a month now. He didnôt actually say that he had found her on her first adventure and taken her under his wingð but Cow Girl had put this together from the bits and pieces she got out of him.

On the one hand, she had always been worried about him out there by himself, so she was glad there was someone with him now. On the other handé did she have to be so *young*?

Cow Girl came with him to the Guild Hall every day, but this was the first time she had seen Priestess in person. She was so slim she looked like a strong hug would break her in half. Cow Girl looked down at her own ample body and gave a little sigh.

Priestess never noticed Cow Girl watching her. Instead, still blushing furiously but seeming to have worked up her courage, she opened her mouth.

ñA-about the other dayé ò

The high pitch and quick pace of her words must have been due to nerves, surely.

ñI-I think destroying the whole cave with that fire mixture was tooé too much!ò

ñWhy is that?ò He continued to sound as if none of this surprised him. ñWe can hardly leave the goblins to themselves there.ò

ñY-yes, but whaté what about the consequences? What if the whole m-mountain came down?ò

ñIôm more worried about goblins.ò

ñI know! I-Iôm trying to tell you that shortsightedness is the problem!ò

ñé I see.ò

ñA-and another thing! I think the way you get rid ofé of the smell should be a littleé a little moreé!ò She started leaning off her seat as she talked.

His tone suggested he was growing annoyed. ñSo, have you learned the times to attack?ò Priestess swallowed, caught off guard by the sudden change of subject.

Cow Girl, innocently eavesdropping, giggled to herself.

He hasnôt changed a bit since we were young.

ñItôsé early in the morning or in the evening,ò Priestess answered, while trying to show with her face that she wasnôt letting him off that easily.

ñWhy?ò

ñB-because those are evening and morning for goblins, respectively.ò

ñCorrect. High noon is midnight for them. Their guard is tightest then. Next question: How do you attack a nest?ò

ñWellé if possible, you build a fire to smoke them out. Because itôsé itôs dangerousé inside the nest.ò

ñRight. Only enter when you have no time or no other choice. Or when you want to be sure youôve killed every last one of them.ò

He interrogated her as she struggled to come up with answers. ñItems?ò

ñM-mainly potions and torches.ò

ñIs that all?ò

ñA-and rope. Thereôs always a use for ropeé I guess.ò

ñDonôt forget it. Spells and miracles.ò

ñY-your items can often substitute for spells and miracles, so you should save your magic for when you need it.ò

ñWeapons.ò

ñUm, you should haveé ò

ñNo, you shouldnôt. Take them from the enemy. They have swords, spears, axes, clubs, bows. I donôt need any special tools. Iôm a warrior.ò

ñé Yes, sir.ò She nodded like a child who had been scolded by her teacher.

ñChange your weapons, change your tactics. Doing the same thing over and over is a good way to get yourself killed.ò

ñUm, may Ié write this down?ò

ñNo. If they took the notes from you, theyôd learn from them. You have to know everything by heart.ò He spoke calmly while Priestess labored to commit his words to memory. It truly seemed like the back-and-forth between teacher and pupil.

Did he ever talk this much? Cow Girl shifted uneasily as the question rose in her mind.

She couldnôt understand why it left her so restless. She wanted to get that signature as soon as she could and go home.

ñAll right,ò he said, standing suddenly. Looking around, she realized the crowd of adventurers was just shuffling off to their business. There was much to doð prepare equipment, stock up on