

6

KUMO KAGYU

ILLUSTRATION BY
NOBORU KANNATUKI



GOBLIN SLAYER



©Noboru Kannatuki

6

GOBLIN SLAYER

“It’s easy to get distracted by girls. Believe me, I know. But if you don’t focus, next thing you know, you’ll be dead.”

“Uh, that’s not what I was doing.”

“Yeah, and I don’t really have the same problems you do, Spearman...”

One grumbled as the other chuckled to himself. “Listen, you two,” Spearman started with a frown. “I don’t know what you think of me, but you don’t sound like you’re ready to learn anything.”

“Yeah, but,” Rookie Warrior said like it was the most obvious thing in the world, “you’re always getting shot down by that receptionist, right?”

“I only just got here, and even I know about it,” the wizard added.

A vein in Spearman’s temple made a visible twitch, but it’s possible neither of the boys noticed.

“Oh, I see,” he said with a stiff yet endlessly kind smile. “Aren’t you kids clever? Well, you’re not the only ones who can play that game.”

“?”

The two of them looked at him questioningly, whereupon Spearman stuck up his pointer finger as straight as a spear and continued, “On *your* recent adventure, you went rushing in, used up your magic, and ended up not being able to do jack.”

“Erk...”

“And *you’ve* always spent all your time hunting giant rats, so you didn’t have the endurance for a longer battle and drank your entire reward in Stamina potions.”

“Guh?!”

These things were both true. Embarrassing secrets the boys would rather not have broadcast too widely. Nobody knew except their party members, and...

“Th-the receptionist? She told you...?”

“Darn straight. She asked me to look out for you guys, make sure you had the physical strength you needed.” Spearman chuckled quietly then rose as easily

as a ghost and took up a fighting stance. Rookie Warrior and the wizard boy both settled into deep stances, looking as terrified as if they were preparing to battle a warrior back from the dead.

“Let’s play hide-and-seek. I’ll be the hunter and you’ll be the hunted.”

It was only as Spearman spun his weapon with a flourish and resumed his stance that the boys realized how angry he was.

“Yikes, let’s get outta here!”

“Y-yeah, gotta go!”

Rather than apologize or reflect on what they had done, they elected to speed off like hares at the sight of a hound. It was undoubtedly the right decision.

“Hey! You’re not getting away that easy!”

The boys set off running around the training area so fast that they left their equipment (including the wizard’s staff) lying on the ground. Spearman went storming after them.

Construction workers, along with adventurers on break, watched the commotion wearily. Of course, everyone knew that Spearman was not serious. He was maintaining a speed that would allow him to catch the boys if they flagged even slightly—but judging such a thing was impressive in itself.

All those watching privately agreed that despite his appearance, Spearman was good at looking out for others.

Instruction at this place would generally be handled by retired, high-ranking adventurers. But there was nothing to stop active adventurers from providing a little mentorship of their own. Maybe just to pass the time, or even to supplement their own training.

The training ground wasn’t even finished yet, and already adventurers happily used it as a place to congregate and talk.

“...”

Goblin Slayer watched all this without a word, his hand moving restlessly. He was sitting in an open field, neither part of the completed training area nor the

part still under construction.

Birds went singing through the blue sky, and the breeze sent gentle ripples through the grass.

If one were to look in his direction, one would have seen two young women waiting anxiously for him to finish what he was doing.

One was the rhea druid, the other the apprentice cleric who served the Supreme God.

“This is how you do it,” he said, at last showing the girls the product of his labors. They blinked at it.

It was a simple sling, a strip of leather tied to a small stone so that it could be thrown.

“Huh? Is that all there is to it?”

“It is surprisingly straightforward.”

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer said with a nod. “Shepherds sometimes carry them to discourage wolves.”

“It looks like something you could make in a hurry if you needed to.”

“All you need is some string. Ammunition is easy enough to come by. There’s nothing to lose by learning how to do it.”

This had all started when they had seen him pitch a stone at a certain festival. It had seemed to them like the perfect skill for two people who stood on the back row and needed a way to defend themselves.

When Guild Girl mentioned that there were two young adventurers who wanted to learn to use a sling, Goblin Slayer surprised himself with how readily he replied, “Is that so?” and agreed to help them.

Now Goblin Slayer got to his feet. “Swords are often proclaimed to be the best weapon for humans, but slings are better,” he said, slowly starting to twirl the device. He made sure he went gradually enough that the two beginners could follow his every move. Given that in battle, heft, spin, and strike were usually a single motion for him, this was a display of considerable care.

“Humans are unsurpassed in throwing, whether stones or spears. Our bodies are built for it.”

He raised the sling higher, slowly increasing the rate of rotation, picking a target. Mindful of the possibility of an accident, he aimed directly away from the training ground.

Over in the weeds, a dummy had been dressed in armor and helmet—castoffs from the Guild workshop. It was not very tall—to represent a goblin’s height, needless to say.

“This is the result.”

As he spoke, Goblin Slayer let the stone fly; it whistled through the air and *whacked* into the dummy’s helmet. The headgear rolled into the grass, where Goblin Slayer walked over and collected it, casually tossing it to the two girls.

“Wow!”

“Eek!”

The girls couldn’t help but cry out. It was only natural: the stone had punched clear through the helmet’s metal exterior and leather lining and was rolling around inside the bowl. What would have happened to the skull of anyone wearing this particular helmet when it was hit by that stone didn’t bear thinking about.

“In this way, even someone as relatively weak as a rhea should be able to deal with at least one encroaching enemy.”

“In any event, my own teacher was a rhea.” This near whisper brought a series of blinks from Druid Girl.

Goblin Slayer approached them with his bold stride, collecting the stone from inside the helmet. It was sharpened, like an arrowhead. Something he had picked specifically for throwing like this, focusing on power over midair stability. He added softly that such preparations were sometimes effective.

“If you can keep away that first enemy, it’s possible that your party members will come and help you.”

“Only...possible?” Apprentice Cleric asked doubtfully.

“Yes.” Goblin Slayer’s tone was utterly serious. “It simply represents one more card you can play at your moment of need. If that’s enough for you then practice with it.”

“Mr. Goblin Slayer, I really think you have a harsh way of saying things,” Druid Girl said reprovably. *No wonder that sweet priestess of yours always seems so stressed.*

“Is that so?” Goblin Slayer asked, genuinely perplexed. The two girls let the matter drop, picking up slings. They wound up the strings with a great deal of “Is this right?” and “How about this?” before lobbing their own stones at the dummy.

Some of their shots landed, and others missed. Some didn’t even go the right direction. But Goblin Slayer made no move to say anything about any of their efforts. If they had questions, they would ask him. Otherwise, it was best to let them focus on their practice. That was how Goblin Slayer had been taught, and he felt he should do the same.

Those who don’t try will never be able to do.

Now, at last, he thought perhaps he understood what his master—Burglar—had meant.

And was he, finally, able to do it?

He had no answer. He had no way to answer.

Goblin Slayer let out a breath, sitting down where he was almost as if in resignation.

At that moment, however, a voice interrupted his thoughts. “Heh-heh-heh! Don’t you all look very dedicated.” A shadow fell over him.

“Oh...” Goblin Slayer turned to see Guild Girl, holding an umbrella and smiling.

“...So you came.”

“Of course. Just to observe, or maybe...well, not inspect. But yes, I’m here.”

She plopped herself down next to him, arms around her knees. She was in her usual work clothes. Maybe they were a little bit warm for the start of summer, because a trickle of sweat ran down her forehead.

It was clear enough that bureaucratic work such as hers could not be done in just any old clothing. She may also have been a bit shy, but in any case, she wasn't about to open her collar or lie back on the grass.

"...Aren't you hot, Goblin Slayer?"

"No," he said with a shake of his head. "Not especially."

"Really?"

"What would I gain by lying about it?"

The answer didn't seem to make Guild Girl remotely happy; she sniffed and muttered, "Forget it." After a moment, she asked, "What do you think of our Obsidian and Porcelain adventurers?"

"Hmm," Goblin Slayer said, watching the girls practice their slinging.

They were certainly enthusiastic. And serious. They were good girls.

But that was no guarantee that they would survive.

"I don't know."

"Oh, you..." Guild Girl puffed out her cheeks and raised her pointer finger, shaking it slowly, reproachfully. "You're supposed to answer a question like that with something banal and inoffensive!"

"Is that so?"

"It is. Especially when your answer's going to be written down."

"I will remember that," Goblin Slayer said and rose. He could feel Guild Girl looking up at him.

It was time.

"Hey, everyone! How about some lunch?"

"Fresh from the farm!"

The clattering of a cart could be heard, accompanied by women's voices: Priestess and Cow Girl.

There had been no specific decision about this. It wasn't a formal arrangement. They had no obligation to bring lunch.

This was a simple act of good-heartedness.

Goblin Slayer was profoundly grateful that Cow Girl's uncle would do something like this for the adventurers. The conceited thought that it might all be for him never once crossed his mind.

"Oops, I better go and help," Guild Girl said. She brushed grass and dirt off her skirt as she stood up. She yawned a little, folding up the sun umbrella and clasping it to her side. Then she pattered off through the grass like a small bird.

"Oh, that's right," she said, turning back with a smile. The wind played with her braids. "Should we classify this under 'visiting men on duty'?"

Goblin Slayer didn't answer. Instead, he turned to the girls, hard at work on their slinging and said, "Take a break."

Both of the young women were red in the face from exertion. They nodded eagerly and headed over to the cart. He watched them go then turned his back on the growing crowd of adventurers gathered around the food and began walking away.

He felt a slight twinge of regret for having been asked to help with training like this and for having accepted.

"Hey, Goblin Slayer!"

It was Spearman who stopped him. He hadn't noticed the adventurer come up alongside him.

Spearman watched Guild Girl go, her braids bouncing, then he exhaled and looked square at Goblin Slayer's helmet.

"Where's the big guy at?" he asked, meaning Heavy Warrior. "Where'd he go?"

"He took the other children to a cave today."

Half-Elf Fighter and the rather quick-witted Scout Boy had gone with him. No adventure was ever totally without risk, but nothing was likely to happen on an expedition like that.

Goblin Slayer was quiet for a moment then asked softly, "What do you think of that boy?"

“Ahh, the wizard brat?” Spearman smiled ferociously.

The boy was just then over at the cart, getting a bottle of lemon water that had been cooled in the well. The fervor with which he drank it down suggested how hard Spearman had run him.

“He’s got guts. Can’t speak to his magical abilities, though.”

“Is that so?”

“What’s gotten into you, though?” Spearman said with a sharp sidelong glance at the grimy steel helmet. “Mentoring at the training grounds? I thought you were focused on that cleric of yours.”

“That is not necessarily the case,” Goblin Slayer said brusquely, and then he began to stride off.

He seemed intent on leaving the area as quickly as possible. That left Spearman to look up at the sky, unsure quite what to do.

“Sigh...”

The sun was dispiritingly high. It looked like it would be another hot summer.

“...Hey, you free tonight?” Spearman asked.

“Hrm...” Goblin Slayer grunted. He glanced in Cow Girl’s direction; she was looking back at him. She smiled, waving a hand she held at her hip. The two of them seemed to be talking, somehow.

Then Goblin Slayer nodded. “...Yes. I think it’s all right.”

“Let’s go get a drink, then.”

“...You mean alcohol?”

“Does a man drink anything else?”

Goblin Slayer had some trouble grasping what Spearman meant, or perhaps what he intended. What possible benefit was there in inviting him for a drink?

“You’re inviting me?”

“You see anyone else around here? Let’s grab the big guy, too. Three men. No holding back.”

“...I see.”

“Come on, humor me.”

Goblin Slayer gazed silently up at the sky. The sun was past its zenith, shining down on the gentle slope. In this place, it was easy enough for him to read the passing time, no matter the season.

It was his older sister who had taught him to do this.

He could never forget.

“...Very well.”

“Great,” Spearman said, smacking Goblin Slayer on the shoulder with his fist. “It’s settled, then.”

§

The clear blue sky seemed to extend forever.

The boy lay panting in the grass; he could feel the little green blades pressing into his sweat-covered back and cheeks.

He lay on his back, spreading his arms and legs wide, gulping oxygen into his lungs. It was lack of oxygen that made one short of breath. If you breathed, you would get oxygen. That was why the breath became ragged.

The early summer breeze blew sweetly across his face as one thought circled around and around in his mind: he was most certainly not pathetic.

Spells depleted the user’s strength, and adventures frequently included a lot of tromping through fields and mountains.

Why? Well, horses were expensive. Horses had to have feed, stables. They needed shoes and equipment.

If you were only going from town to town, post to post, maybe it wouldn’t matter so much. But adventures commonly took people to remote underground labyrinths, or supernatural lands untrod by human feet.

It would be hard enough with a horse or a personal carriage, and in some ways, renting one would be worse. Brave adventurers with long experience said that adventure was a walking trade, and it was absolutely true. Hence, a wizard

needed stamina as much as any warrior. He knew that.

Yes, of course he did—and yet... And yet...

“It just doesn’t...”

“...S-sooooo tired...”

Yes, their opponent had held back. But there was a difference between Porcelain and Silver. Between the tenth rank and the third.

The second voice, joining in the boy’s complaint, came from Rhea Fighter, splayed out beside him on the grass. She was a mess, having been worked to the bone by Female Knight until a few minutes prior. She had tossed aside her armor, shield, and sword, perhaps unable to bear the heat, and now lay spread-eagled in the grass. Her chest (not that large, but pretty big for a rhea) heaved up and down.

The boy glanced over, but when he caught sight of her sweat-soaked shirt, he forced himself to look back at the sky. He felt a little embarrassed, and a little bit as if he had done something wrong.

His head throbbed with the heat and the pace of his breath, but he managed to move it just a little. When she was done, it would be his turn with Female Knight.

“S-so... Did you...get the hang of it...?”

“...I dunno.”

In other words, it had been nothing more than a session of being smacked around and falling down.

Wizard Boy grimaced and let out a groan, but Female Knight didn’t seem to think she had been especially mean to the young adventurer. At the very least, it could be considered training in how to keep your defenses up even when confronted with an overwhelmingly strong opponent—so it was all fair game.

Spearman would no doubt feel the same way if anyone asked his opinion. Strength and endurance were even more important than quick thinking, when it came down to it. Adventurers who seriously hunted dragons and ogres would naturally outclass a couple of Porcelains.

So yes, the mentors held back. But...

“...Aren’t they hot like that?” the rhea girl said.

“No clue.”

A short distance away, Rookie Warrior rested his head on Apprentice Cleric’s knees. Everyone looked absolutely exhausted. Maybe Druid Girl had gone with Scout Boy, because they didn’t see her anywhere.

Rhea Fighter grumbled that she should have practiced slinging, too, but the wizarding boy gave a click of his tongue.

“There’s nothin’ to learn from a guy like *that*.”

“You think so? He is Silver-ranked, after all.”

“But he never fights anything but goblins.”

“And he’s obsessed, and stubborn, and you never know what he’s thinking,” the boy added in a pouty mutter. “Goblins? An adventurer should be able to kill a goblin in one hit.”

“Even I wouldn’t lose to a goblin in a one-on-one fight,” the rhea agreed.

“Right? ‘Goblin Slayer,’ my ass!”

“They call him that because he kills goblins, don’t they?” This rebuttal came not from Rhea Fighter but from Apprentice Cleric. “Look, I’m not saying I don’t have my doubts about him.” She ran a hand through Rookie Warrior’s hair as she spoke, and he made contented little noises in response. “But I don’t think someone who’s done nothing should go around criticizing someone who’s actually done something.”

“...”

“I heard you didn’t even manage goblin slaying.”

“You can just shut up!” The boy spat at the sky. “I hear you never hunt anything but giant rats, yourself.”

“I mean...that’s all we’re capable of right now,” Rookie Warrior said, almost in a whine. Unlike the rhea fighter, he was still wearing his armor, sword, and club. He had simply loosened the fasteners of his equipment ever so slightly to allow

his body to relax.

“We’ve finally gotten to where we understand how to attack and defend against giant rats. But if there’s even three of them at once, we’re pretty much done for.”

“But rats are poisonous, right?” the rhea girl said. “Isn’t fighting them all the time dangerous?”

“Well, that’s why antidotes and potions keep draining our wallets...”

“The next time my level as a cleric increases, I plan to ask the deity for the Cure miracle.”

Then, she said, the two of them might be able to save a little money and get better equipment. Change his sword for something with a broader blade, maybe get some mail for better protection. Helmets were hard to see out of, but maybe they could at least get a sturdy cap of some kind...

“...Pfft.” The boy seemed to find none of this remotely interesting. He clicked his tongue dismissively, at which Rhea Fighter shot him a look. “Whatever,” he muttered, looking away so she couldn’t see his eyes.

“Hello, everyone! How about some lemon water?” Priestess appeared, strolling up the hill, smiling widely. She was carrying a huge basket filled with small bottles and packages of food. “I have some snacks here, too...”

She was not eagerly received. Maybe nobody felt like eating after dashing around or swinging their weapon all over. Rookie Warrior just groaned, “Urrrgh,” and Rhea Fighter said, “I think I might just throw up anything I eat...”

Apprentice Cleric just shook her head silently, perhaps unwilling to be the only one to eat.

“Er, but... If you don’t eat, you’ll never make it through the afternoon,” Priestess said, knitting her brow. Obviously, though, she couldn’t force them to take the food.

Wizard Boy certainly had no specific intention of helping Priestess, who stood there looking quite at a loss, but nonetheless, he raised his hand and said, “I’ll eat.”

“What, seriously?” Rhea Fighter asked.

“Yeah,” the red-haired boy replied, lurching upright out of the grass. “I learned once that...if you don’t eat after you work out...you’ll never gain any muscle.”

“Crap, really? I better eat, then.”

“...Okay... Me too...”

“I guess I’ll have some, too, then. Thanks.”

Lunch consisted of simple sandwiches: bacon, ham, vegetables, and some cheese squeezed between a couple pieces of bread. All the same, the salty flavor was very agreeable to their sweaty, enervated bodies.

At first, the group intended to have something to drink with their food, but soon, they were ravenously wolfing down the provisions.

She really does understand, doesn’t she? Priestess found herself thinking with some admiration.

That farm girl had been helping Goblin Slayer out for years now. She knew exactly what adventurers would need after a hard morning of training.

What they needed...

“My sis was amazing! If those goblins hadn’t used poison, she woulda beaten ‘em!”

“Right,” Priestess said quietly, strengthening her resolve. Then she sat down next to the boy.

“How are things? I mean...how are you feeling?”

She was simultaneously asking everyone there and him alone.

“Sooo tired!” Rhea Fighter answered immediately.

“Yeah!” Rookie Warrior added, audibly exhausted.

“I’m managing, somehow,” Apprentice Cleric said with a touch of pride.

“...”

The red-haired boy, however, didn’t say a word; he merely snorted.

“Um...” Priestess said.

He brushed me off.

Her brow furrowed awkwardly, and she decided to just change the subject. Rather than standing frozen, waiting for inspiration to strike, it was better to act immediately. That was something she had learned from Goblin Slayer.

“Hey,” Priestess said, fixing in on Rhea Fighter. “I don’t seem to see the rest of your party around...”

“Oh, that. Our leader was the second or third son of some noble house somewhere,” Rhea Fighter said, taking a big bite of her sandwich and chewing noisily. “But then his big brother went and got himself killed, so suddenly there was no heir, and the family wanted our leader back. And that was the end of our party.”

“Ah...”

Well, such things certainly did happen. Second or third children—anyone but an eldest son, really—could find themselves in a socially unpleasant position. If they wanted any role besides standby in case anything happened to the oldest child, they had to go out and get it themselves. They might be able to get their parents to grant them a bit of land, but otherwise, establishing themselves through martial deeds was an option or, perhaps, marrying into another house...

Knights’ families were especially severe this way. Knighthood was, in general, a single-generation title. Parents couldn’t pass it down to their children. An eldest son might be granted opportunities for service and training, a chance to make his name, but any children who came after him were unlikely to be so lucky.

Hence a good number of adventurers came from families of such standing. There was no distinction between men and women here. Second and third daughters of noble houses were a copper a dozen among adventurers.

And the survival rate of these self-proclaimed knights-errant was remarkably high. They had equipment, they had know-how, and sometimes they were even versed in swordsmanship, all of which contributed to their durability.

But once in a while, something would happen to the eldest son, and then these adventurers would be called back to the families they had left. For the party leader in question... Well, the path to become the family patriarch had opened to him, and he hadn't even been injured in the meantime, so he could count himself lucky.

For whether or not one had family connections, quality equipment, knowledge, experience, or skills, inevitable death still always waited in the wings.

"I guess it's not like he's going to have it easy, exactly."

Nobles have their own problems and all, Rhea Fighter thought to herself. She spoke so knowingly that it was comical, and Priestess couldn't help but giggle.

At the same time, she was a little worried. This meant that this young woman was going to embark upon a dangerous path all alone. As she recalled, rheas reached adulthood at around thirty, so strictly speaking, Rhea Fighter was probably older than Priestess.

"Isn't soloing difficult?" Priestess asked.

"It's not easy, but hey—I have my dreams!" Rhea Fighter answered, puffing out her chest proudly. "I'm gonna be big! So big, no one will care that I'm little!"

"Man, I hear that," Rookie Warrior said, shoving the last piece of his sandwich into his mouth. "When I said I was going to become the strongest guy around, they laughed at me. Said I was too rustic for that!"

"Yeah, exactly!" the rhea girl said, clapping her hands.

"Of course they laughed," Apprentice Cleric said. "If *you* turn out to be the strongest, think how much worse the other country rubes will look!" She smiled with a hint of pride; in some ways, it was seeing him excited like this that made her proudest of all. "Heh-heh! Bet now you're glad you decided to come with me on my training!"

"I'm glad I didn't leave you all by yourself. It would've been dangerous."

"I'm sorry, *who* didn't leave *who*?"

"Guh?"

“What, don’t want to admit it?”

And on and on they went, arguing.

Priestess squinted happily; she felt like she was seeing something rather joyful. The two arguing children reminded her of her own party members.

“What good friends you are,” she said.

Absolutely not!—was something they could hardly say in response.

The two of them looked at each other; each muttered something then shut their mouths.

The conversation broke off there.

A gust of wind caressed cheeks gone red from exertion.

“.....I just don’t get it,” the boy growled. “But anyway, I gotta focus on killing some goblins, and killing them right. That’s my priority.”

That’ll show the punks who laughed at my older sister.

Priestess wasn’t quite sure what to say to this display of vitriol. She had been an adventurer for less than a year. She hardly had enough experience to go offering unsolicited advice. Especially, she felt, when it came to this young man’s feelings.

That was why—

“I knew—”

That was why she bit her lip as she spoke.

“I knew a wizard, once.”

Her throat constricted, and her voice trembled. She had to get ahold of herself.

“She said that...she wanted to fight a dragon one day.”

“...A dragon?”

Dragons—true dragons—were utterly terrifying foes. They weren’t like the creatures that sometimes skulked around fields and mountains. They overflowed with power. They had strength and stamina, intelligence and

magical power, authority and wealth.

That was precisely why dragon slayers were so much praised and held in awe.

“That’s... It might as well be a dream. It’s impossible.”

“Of course it was a dream,” Priestess said with a smile, no edge in her voice.
“It doesn’t have to be anything more than that.”

Yes—yes, she was sure of it.

That time, the moment they visited that first cave, was still there.

Just because the party was immediately shattered...

...doesn’t mean the value of what everyone said just disappears.

Now Priestess thought she could understand that, at least a little bit.

It was a precious thing—not something to mock or ridicule.

No matter how unrealistic, no matter how out of reach, no matter how likely to fail.

Dreams were dreams.

It wasn’t a matter of whether they could be realized.

They were absolutely not something for goblins to trample on.

“...”

The boy found there was nothing more he could say. Or perhaps he intended to say something, but before he could open his mouth again:

“Hello, all my cute little newbies! Looks like you’re working hard!”

A high, clear voice, pleasing to the ear, came rolling over the grassy plain.

They looked toward town to discover three unusual but familiar figures coming toward them.

“In the afternoon, your favorite elf will take you on a tour of some caves!”

“Who’s anyone’s favorite elf, Long-Ears?” From beside the ranger, Dwarf Shaman gave her a pointed elbow to the ribs. “I grant it’s our day off, but I happen to know you were asleep until practically noon.”

“You know what they call the time before noon? *Morning*. At least among elves.”

“I guarantee that’s not true.”

The friendly banter continued as they got closer. Priestess glanced at Rookie Warrior and Apprentice Cleric as if to say, *See?* Neither of them would quite meet her gaze. But never mind them.

“Caves? Does that mean...goblins?” Priestess asked.

“Oh, please. Are you *trying* to sound like Orcbolg?” High Elf Archer waved a hand as if she were shooing away a bug.

“I’m talking about a bear’s den—well, former bear’s den. Hibernation season is over and he’s out and about for the spring, so it should be a good way to get used to spelunking.”

Priestess nodded in understanding. Unlike sewers or fields, there was a knack to moving and using weapons in caves. If the kids could practice doing those things in a cave with no monsters, it could only benefit them.

“Er, let it be said that we have yet to take our lunch,” Lizard Priest said, bringing his hands together in a strange gesture. His breath came out the nostrils situated on his huge jaws. “And it appears you have prepared meals. With your indulgence, perhaps we may partake...?”

“Oh, sure. It’s sandwiches,” Priestess said. She dug through her basket and produced several wrapped lunches. “They have ham and bacon, vegetables... Oh, and cheese.”

“Ah! Truly a gift from heaven! Nectar! What a fine and wonderful thing this is!”

“We have some that are just cucumber and cheese, if you like. And there’s wine, too.”

“All right!”

“Ho-ho-ho! Aren’t you the thoughtful one. Thank you, don’t mind if I do!”

Priestess set down the basket, and her three friends dove for it, each eager to be the first to get their food. She gave a wry smile at the sight. Even as she

watched them, the early-summer breeze came up again.

Priestess clutched her hat so it wouldn't fly away, closing her eyes to appreciate the wind sprites as they brushed her cheeks.

"Oh, what about Goblin Slayer—?"

Is he going to have lunch?

Before she could finish her question, Priestess looked around: she didn't see him anywhere.

Huh?

Then she spotted him—in the distance, talking to two other adventurers, Spearman and Heavy Warrior.

"Hrm," Priestess breathed, almost as if imitating him. She was a little bit lonely—but a little bit glad.

"...Heh-heh."

Yes, there was no question: this was a good thing.

§

"I'm going, then," Goblin Slayer said to Cow Girl. He was in his room performing a quick check of his equipment. "I'll be late tonight. I won't need dinner."

He put his sword at his hip and affixed his shield to his arm, put on leg protection and hung his item bag from his belt, then finally put on his helmet.

He was dressed and ready to go out on an adventure, but Cow Girl was used to all this. "Okay, sure," was all she said in response.

He had been off helping to train some novice adventurers, and yet this was what he did the moment he got home. The fact that he came home at all—was it his way of trying to be considerate?

"Uncle said he had some errands to run, so he'll be late, too. I guess I'll just stay here alllll alone, all by myself..."

"Don't forget to bar the door. Keep the fence gate shut, and close the shutters on the windows."

“I know about all that. You’re such a worrywart.” She chuckled, and Goblin Slayer fell silent. She took the opportunity to brush some dust off his armor.

He went “Hrm”—did this displease him?—and then turned his head from side to side, checking his helmet’s mobility.

“So I know I’m ready,” Cow Girl said. “But what about you? Do you have your purse? That’s the most important thing, you know.”

“Erm...”

He obediently rifled through his item pouch. The little bag of coins was there.

“I have it.”

“Good, then!” Cow Girl took him by the shoulder and made him turn around. She adjusted the frayed tassel on his helmet. “I can come get you if you get falling down drunk,” she said, “but just try not to cause too much trouble for your friends, okay?”

The word *friends* caused Goblin Slayer to cock his head slightly, but after a moment, he responded, “Okay,” and nodded. “I don’t intend to.”

Goblin Slayer carried no light as he walked the road from the farm to the town, then through the town to the tavern. Traversing night-dark fields was very much part of his training, and once he reached town, he didn’t need a light anyway.

The special confusion of a bustling town at twilight greeted him; it was a situation he was not familiar with, and he proceeded silently through it.

People pushed and jostled. Not just adventurers, but travelers, as well as the workers building the training facility, were everywhere.

Goblin Slayer made his way along, glancing this way and that, until he saw the sign he had been told to look for.

“...Hmph,” he grunted as he pushed his way toward it, finally extricating himself from the crowd. At the same time, he reached a hand into his item pouch, making sure he hadn’t been the victim of any kind of pickpocketing. All was well.

The sign bore the inscription THE FRIENDLY AX and was itself in the shape of a

hatchet.

Goblin Slayer pushed through the swinging door and was instantly enveloped in an ear-shattering cacophony. The cavernous interior was illuminated by the reddish glow of lamps, and all the many round tables were full.

The building itself was smaller than the Guild branch office, but then again, that was a multipurpose structure. From the perspective of the old system, under which places like this had a tavern on the first floor and an inn on the second, the Ax was fairly large.

It used to be that adventurers' lodgings doubled as places to find work—but now that was part of history. The Guild system had been widely adopted, and adventurers, who had previously been little more than a bunch of street toughs, had acquired a certain kind of public status.

Even today, there were a few shops that worked with the Guild to offer quests, but for the most part, adventurers' inns had fallen into decline.

Then again, it was said that the legendary tavern The Golden Knight never assigned so much as a single quest, but still...

"Hey, Goblin Slayer! You made it!"

As the armored adventurer lingered just inside the door, a powerful voice called out to him. His helmet turned, scanning the inside of the bar as if taking stock of a cave he had just entered. There—there was the source of the voice.

In one corner of the tavern, in a seat from which he could see the entire room, sat a handsome and tough-looking man, currently waving his arm.

"Over here, over here!"

"You're late, man! We've already got started!"

"Sorry," Goblin Slayer grunted.

The cup one of the men raised was already almost half-empty, and some of the snacks were clearly missing. But the biggest hint was that both adventurers' faces were already flushed.

Goblin Slayer seated himself somewhat awkwardly at the circular table.

The other two men were dressed in civilian clothing; Goblin Slayer alone was wearing his armor. It was impossible not to find it slightly humorous. Unlike the way so many young people envisioned things, adventurers didn't normally go around town in full gear.

Yes, Spearman and Heavy Warrior were both canny enough that even now they each carried a short sword at their hips, but it was probably overkill. The little glances that came their way were probably from travelers who were unaccustomed to adventurers.

These three men were of some renown: The Frontier's Baddest, Spearman. The Frontier's Kindest, Goblin Slayer. And the leader of The Frontier's Coolest Party, Heavy Warrior. (The reason they couldn't be called "famous *faces*" was because of one of them in particular...)

"Why did we not go to the Guild tavern?" Goblin Slayer asked.

"Because I don't want rumors spreading that I was having a rowdy party with some guy who won't even take off his armor," Spearman shot at him.

"He's just saying that," Heavy Warrior said immediately. "He's embarrassed to be seen drinking with you."

"Is that so?"

"*Epecially* by Miss Receptionist, if ya know what I mean."

"Aw, shut yer trap!" Spearman growled. Then he jerked his thumb at the menu on the wall. "Anyway, hurry up and order something."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said, studying the menu. There were at least a dozen kinds of alcohol alone, from ale to fire wine to grape wine.

".....Hmmm," Goblin Slayer muttered.

"Listen up," Spearman said with an exasperated sigh. "Times like these, you don't think about it. Just go with an ale!"

"An ale, then."

"Good! Hey, Miss! Three ales!"

"Taking charge, huh?"

Heavy Warrior couldn't suppress a smile and a quiet chuckle.

"What?" Spearman demanded with a glare, but the warrior calmly replied, "Nothing."

The server placed three brimming mugs of ale on the table with a practiced hand. "Here you go, three ales! Enjoy!"

The waitress was a centaur, still young. One would have to be careful not, in a drunken lapse, to call her a Padfoot. Centaurs were quite a proud people and had no such soft thing as pads on their feet.

It was probably the same with minotaurs, some of whom became Pray-ers. Not that minotaurs as a group usually worried about such details...

But to get back to our story.

The waitress set the cups down, her generous bosom bouncing, then walked away (on all four of her feet), her tail swishing. It was impressive how readily she could weave through the crowded tavern with such a large build.

Watching her muscular behind closely, Heavy Warrior breathed, "I know boobs are good, but a butt is *good*."

"Huh, so that explains why you're so into that knight friend of yours—she rides a horse!"

"She has nothing to do with this." Heavy Warrior paused a moment then said, "Guess we couldn't have a chat like this at the Guild tavern, huh?"

There, you never knew when a woman might be watching—or listening. Heavy Warrior sighed and picked up his ale, sending a ripple through it.

"How about a toast, then?"

"To what?" Goblin Slayer asked quietly. He had also picked up his mug.

"Er... Ah, hell. Too much trouble to think of something. Let's just go with the usual."

Spearman nodded, following the others' lead in raising his drink.

"To our town!"

"To the gods' dice!"

“To adventurers.”

“*Cheers!*” they exclaimed and then drained their mugs.

§

Someone—none of them could have said which one—suggested going outside to walk off the drinks a bit.

The streets were packed with people who had enjoyed some wine and were now out on the town. The three adventurers worked their way through the crowds, eventually winding up on the banks of a river.

The river burbled beside them and the stars shone above. The two moons shone down on them.

The evening breeze was pleasant on their alcohol-warmed bodies. It would have been impossible to be in a bad mood on a night like this.

It was only natural to hum a song or two.

Let the earth turn sour and the wind grow ill

And the world fall dark for all time

There won't be a moment when this shimmering jewel

With four bright lights doesn't shine

For I'll walk the path that seekers will

As I've sworn, with these friends of mine.

To the ends of the earth and the home of the wind,

Though all's a dream, I'll go

Those four bright lights in that gem never end

Or gutter or burn down low

And as for us, we'll never forget

Our friends as we walk the road.

It was a half-forgotten song of military valor from long, long ago. A bard with his lute could make it sound beautiful and brave, but three drunken

adventurers were lucky even to qualify as out of tune.

“The hell?” Spearman seemed to have had his fill of singing after a couple of verses, because he broke off in the same register as the tune.

His glare settled on Goblin Slayer. Something was bothering him.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean!”

Ahh, he’s gone, Heavy Warrior thought, looking up at the stars.

Should they have brought along that witch? Bah. She would probably just be staring off into the distance. Maybe smiling ambiguously. No, you couldn’t count on her at a moment like this.

“I mean the receptionist, dumbass! Plus you’ve got that elf and your farm girl and that priestess! You’re crawling with ladies!”

“...”

Goblin Slayer didn’t speak for a moment. Finally, he said quietly, “I don’t think anything will be possible until all the goblins are gone.” He paused another moment. “I...”

Then he fell silent. Spearman gave him a sidelong glare.

That was understandable enough.

It wasn’t too difficult to guess what kind of a past a man named Goblin Slayer must have.

Hence, Spearman gave a dramatic sigh then shrugged his shoulders with exaggerated annoyance.

“There it is.”

“A goblin?”

“No, you nut.” Spearman snorted. Heavy Warrior laughed out loud.

Then the muscular fighter nodded and said, “Hey, it’s not like I don’t get it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s like...” Heavy Warrior made a broad gesture at the sky, as if searching for something invisible. “It’s like, a man wants to be free, right? King of his own domain.”

“A king, huh!” Spearman smirked as they walked along. He wasn’t making fun; it was a grin of understanding. “Sounds good to me. There’s that old story about the mercenary who became a king.”

“Too bad I ain’t got any smarts,” Heavy Warrior said, giving himself a tap on the side of the head.

“If you study, you will gain some,” Goblin Slayer said. “You have money as well. You must have a certain intelligence.”

“Problem is, I don’t have the time.” Heavy Warrior shrugged, and the sword on his belt, which he diligently wore even when drunk, rattled. “And you can’t start studying *after* you become a king. That would just mean you were a stupid king, and nothing’s worse for the people than a ruler with no brain.”

“Yes.”

“But if I start studying *now*, I won’t be able to go on adventures, and that’ll put the rest of my party through hell.”

“I see,” Goblin Slayer said. He crossed his arms and mumbled thoughtfully. Finally, he produced his conclusion: “It’s difficult.”

“You got that right,” Heavy Warrior said soberly. *Hard enough to make you give up your weapons and equipment and everything.* His voice, however, was light and cheerful. The way the edges of his lips turned up was proof of a smile.

“Not that things are boring the way they are.”

“Plus, you’ve got your lady knight, huh?” Spearman interjected.

“Shaddup!” Heavy Warrior gave him a kick.

“Ow!” Spearman exclaimed. The muscles of a trained warrior practically qualified as weapons themselves.

Heavy Warrior ignored the shouting, leaning on the railing of the bridge they were on. Goblin Slayer stood just beside him.

“I doubt it’s such a bad thing.”

“...”

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

“Guess not,” Heavy Warrior said, meeting Goblin Slayer’s somber words with a sly smile. “...Yeah. I guess I wouldn’t mind having her along, either.”

“Feh! You unattached guys have all the luck!” Spearman said with a click of his tongue. He leaned back against the railing and looked up at the stars. He squinted to see a light, at a height just past their reach, beyond the far side of the sky.

“You’re just greedy,” Heavy Warrior teased him.

“You idiot,” Spearman shot back. “As a man, you’re born wanting two things: beautiful women and the utmost strength. What else could you aim for in life?”

“You’re sounding like one of our kids again...”

Did he mean Scout Boy or Rookie Warrior? To seek to be known as the strongest of all adventurers was a privilege granted to youth.

“Yeah, the strongest, that’s right,” Spearman said, almost pouting. “Because I believe that when I am the strongest, I’ll be able to do anything.” He spat up at the heavens—not that it would change the rolls of the gods’ dice. “Women will love me, people will thank me, and I’ll be able to do the world some good. Nothing wrong with that, right?”

“Love you? Actual women?” Heavy Warrior snorted. Maybe it was some gentle payback for earlier.

“You better believe they will!”

“Hmm,” Goblin Slayer muttered. “I cannot picture it.”

“Aw, you be quiet!” Spearman glanced at Goblin Slayer while keeping his face skyward. As usual, the adventurer was wearing his metal mask. His grimy steel helmet. There was no way to know what expression lay behind it.



I'll bet our dear receptionist would know.

It was just proof of how much and how often they had talked together. Spearman wondered: if *he* put on a helmet, would she know what his expression was?

He sucked in a deep breath then let it out. "And what about you, Goblin Slayer?" he asked. "What did you dream of when you were a kid?"

"Me?"

"Think there's anyone else around here who kills enough goblins to go by that name?"

"...I suppose you're right."

Goblin Slayer lapsed into silence, staring into the river. Even in the light of the twin moons, it looked dark and black, like spilled ink.

Where did the river come from, and where did it go? He remembered asking his older sister once.

She had told him that it came from the mountains and went to the sea. He had once thought that he would follow it back to its source, just to see it. But he seemed unlikely to get the chance now.

"...I wanted to be an adventurer."

"Huh!" Spearman said, giving Goblin Slayer a jab with his elbow. "Well, that's one lifelong dream checked off the list, isn't it?!"

"No," Goblin Slayer said with a slight shake of his head. "It is difficult."

"It is, huh?"

"Yes," Goblin Slayer nodded. "It is not so easily done."

That right? Heavy Warrior added to himself. He let out a long breath. "What you wanna do, what you gotta do, and what you can do don't always line up, do they?"

"It's enough to make a guy nuts," Spearman agreed.

The three men went quiet then, looking up at the moons. The wind blew

across the river, pregnant with the promise of summer.

What we wanted.

To be renowned warriors. Great heroes or kings; part of history and legend.

To find some item from the Age of the Gods, rescue princesses, fight dragons, and save the world.

They'd wanted to explore hidden ruins, discover the secrets of the world and bring their truths to light.

They had wanted to be surrounded by gorgeous women, loved and admired—and just as smart as anyone they might meet.

They longed to wield weapons they had well and truly mastered, performing feats of strength that would be spoken of for generations to come. Someone who people would point to, no matter what the task, and say, *Him. He can do it.*

Most likely, they realized, at this point, that such stories were not to be theirs.

They were Silver, the third rank, the highest rank of adventurer to be out in the field. And that meant something to them. They never dismissed that achievement or felt it was so much trouble to be Silver that they would have been better off staying at Bronze or even Steel rank.

And yet.

And yet, truly...

"So, well..."

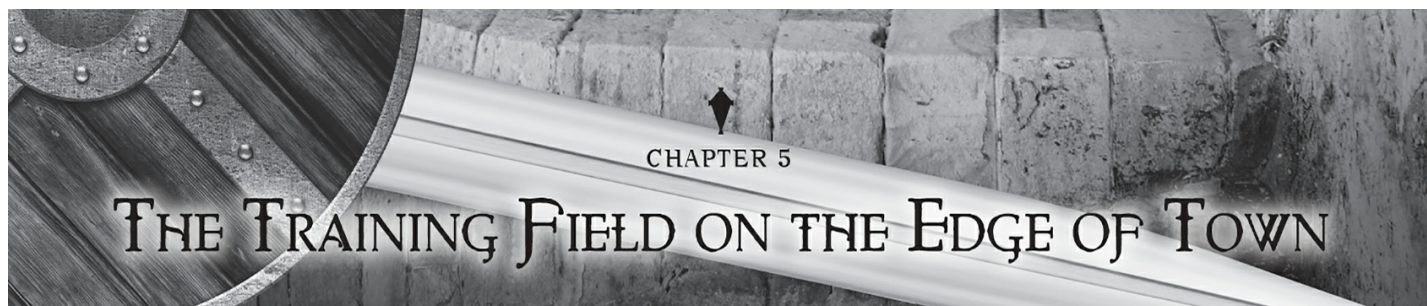
He was Goblin Slayer.

He was not the red-haired boy.

That was reason enough.

"...At the very least, I want to let her do what she wants to do."

The men all nodded.



“...Come again?”

Dwarf Shaman was in the Guild tavern, stuffing hot mashed potato into his face. It was a bit too early for lunch—the meal in question might be considered a late breakfast. “Y’want me?”

“Yes.”

Across from him was a man in grimy leather armor and a cheap-looking steel helmet: Goblin Slayer. There was no sign that he had eaten or was eating anything.

Goblin Slayer put a hand to his helmet as if he had a headache and drank some water through the slats of his visor.

“Will you do it?”

“Sure, I don’t mind, but...”

Dwarf Shaman ate another spoonful of mashed potato. Dwarves were known as gourmands who would try anything, and as such were greatly welcomed in any dining establishment. The food just had to taste halfway decent and be in plentiful supply. If the flavor happened to be especially exquisite, that was a bonus.

High Elf Archer, if asked her opinion, might have characterized this as a lack of restraint, but Dwarf Shaman would probably have replied that elves simply had no imagination.

Regardless, the spell caster was quite happy to eat a mountain of mashed potatoes with only a bit of salt for flavor.

“Potato?”

“Mmf, mrf... Yes! I was in a potato mood today,” he replied, coughing indelicately as he took another mouthful. “Not going to have any, yourself?”

“I have goblin slaying to do.”

“That so?” Dwarf Shaman took Goblin Slayer’s cup, filled it to the brim with wine, and pushed it back at him. “Well, drink up. You can spare a few minutes with me, can’t you?”

“Mm.” Goblin Slayer gulped down the contents of the cup. Dwarf Shaman watched him with a smile.

“I get the impression that me and our brash friend practice slightly different kinds of magic,” Dwarf Shaman said.

“I don’t know the specifics, but I suspected as much,” Goblin Slayer replied.

“And I think you might be better off asking someone other than me for this.”

“That will not do,” Goblin Slayer slowly shook his head. “You are the most capable spell slinger I know.”

“...”

Dwarf Shaman’s hand froze as he reached for another helping of potatoes. He swirled his spoon (which had previously been making ceaseless trips into his mouth) in the pile of food, rather tactlessly.

After a while, he sighed.

“Well, no sayin’ no t’that, is there?” he said. He shot Goblin Slayer a resentful glance. “I’ll bet y’could say the same thing to that witch lady.”

“I certainly could not,” Goblin Slayer said softly. Even Dwarf Shaman could guess what he meant by that.

“Sorry. That was a poor thing to say, even in jest.”

“If it’s too much, feel free to refuse.”

“A foolish thought. I only ever turn down work from people who don’t like dwarves.”

Then Dwarf Shaman set to eating ravenously again. He didn’t even bother to clean off his beard but veritably poured mashed potato into his mouth, like wine into a barrel.

When he had at last made a dent in the quantity of food, he tossed aside his

spoon.

“But, Beard-cutter, I want you to tell me one thing.”

“What?”

“Whatever brought this idea on?”

Goblin Slayer went silent.

It wasn't such an unusual story. He was a warrior; he had little aptitude for magic. When he needed someone talented in such arts, why not turn to a shaman?

But that was not what the dwarf was asking. Even Goblin Slayer understood that much, as he looked over Dwarf Shaman's beard to meet his eyes.

“I am Goblin Slayer.” He took a swallow of wine as if to wet his lips. “And he is an adventurer.”

“Fair enough.” Dwarf Shaman gave a snort and leaned his small frame against the back of the chair. It creaked under the weight of his heavy girth. “When our long-eared friend gets wind of this, I don't think you're likely to hear the end of it anytime soon.”

“Is that so?”

“I should think.”

“I see.”

Dwarf Shaman pushed his empty plate toward Goblin Slayer and waved his hand.

There was now a collection of five or six empty plates, and the waitress—this one padfoot—appeared and ferried them away to be washed.

“Anyway, I accept. But I might...need you to wait for a little while.”

“I don't mind. I told him to come this afternoon.”

Goblin Slayer poured some water as he spoke. He swirled it around, watching the tiny waves run along the edges of the cup.

“...Do you think he'll be there?”

“Heh! We could bet on it, if you like.” Dwarf Shaman smirked and rubbed his hands together. It was a dramatic gesture, like a magician preparing to show off his next trick. “Now, then. I think I need a few more drinks before I go. And then a nice, easy walk.” He pounded himself happily on the belly. “I’ve eaten just enough, after all. Not too hungry, not too full!”

Goblin Slayer didn’t say anything but set his empty cup on the table.

§

“.....”

The boy was standing in the training grounds; they were still under construction, so a good portion of the area looked like little more than a grassy field.

He was the very picture of being forced to do something involuntarily. His cheeks were puffed out, he looked pouty, and he had his chin in his hands as he looked up at the man who had called him.

“...What, not off killing goblins?”

“No.” The man in the grimy leather armor and steel helmet shook his head. “I intend to go once I’ve collected you.”

“I don’t recall anyone asking you to look after me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah!”

“Sorry.”

The nonchalant attitude got under the boy’s skin and angered him.

What a guy to be in a party with!

If it had been he who wound up in that group—well, he couldn’t have categorically refused, but it would have been awfully unpleasant. How could that priestess do it? Or that elf, or that lizardman? Or—

“Ah, there y’are. Excellent, that’s a sign of promise.”

Or the dwarf, who was now trundling across the grass.

He was grinning, though the boy couldn't imagine what was so funny, and taking swigs from a jar of wine that he kept at his belt.

Yes, he was Silver-ranked. No doubt he was a very capable magic user.

But still, that didn't mean the boy wanted to have to learn at his feet.

It didn't, and yet...

"..."

The boy came back to himself at the sound of his own gnashing teeth.

"Good. May I trust you to handle this, then?" Goblin Slayer asked Dwarf Shaman.

"I'm sure you may. And don't you go getting yourself worked over just because you don't have a spell caster along."

"Of course not."

"And treat me to some wine sometime."

"Very well."

As the boy watched, the two men conducted their conversation in short bursts, almost as if they could read each other's thoughts. He fixed them with a glare, indignant at being unable to join the talk.

Goblin Slayer turned toward him. "Listen to what you are told, don't cause trouble, and get serious."

He practically sounded like an older sibling giving instructions to their kid brother. The boy just snorted. Goblin Slayer seemed to take this for acceptance, because he turned around. Then he set off at his usual bold, nonchalant stride.

"Hey, wait—!"

"Eyes on me, boy, I'm the one you ought to be worried about."

The boy couldn't shake the sense that he was being left behind, but Dwarf Shaman grasped his shoulder. His small but rough hand was strong enough that his grip almost hurt.

"Have a seat, boyo. It makes a difference whether you try to learn sitting or

standing. You don't use your head the same way."

"...Fine," he responded, adding to himself petulantly, *I just have to sit, huh?* and setting himself down in the grass.

From a distance away came enthusiastic voices and the clanging of weaponry. Added to that were laborers carrying materials and working their tools.

The sky was blue, the sunlight warm enough to make one sweat. The boy let out a bit of a sigh.

Dwarf Shaman noticed it; he slowly sat in the lotus position and grinned.

"Right, then. I'm no expert, but... How many spells can you use and how often?"

That was the one question the boy least wanted to answer.

"Fireball. And...just once." He spoke quietly, sticking out his lip. "...But you know that already, right?"

"Y'blamed idiot." A fist came down on the boy.

"Gah?!"

"I'm tellin' you, you're dead wrong."

The boy groaned, holding his throbbing head where he had received the blow. Weren't spell casters supposed to be physically weak?

No, wait, this one was a dwarf. Dammit. The boy grunted. Differences in race couldn't be taken lightly.

"Er... Ergggh. That frickin' hurt... You coulda split my head open!"

"A spell caster's head shouldn't be so hard to begin with! You might be better off if it split open."

"...I thought dwarves were normally warriors anyway."

"We're monks, too, if you didn't know. And why not? We have wits to spare, and spirit, too."

"I—I guess I have heard about the Dwarven Sages..."

"They're just a story," Dwarf Shaman said, sighing deeply. "Listen," he said,

whispering as if to impart a secret. “Fireball is not the only spell you have.”

“Huh?”

The boy spontaneously forgot the ache in his head, his face a mask of surprise. Three fingers appeared in front of his eyes.

“*Carbunculus*—fiery stone. *Crescunt*—arise or become. *lacta*—shoot or release. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Uh.”

“You bring together three words of true power and they become Fireball. See what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, I know that, but...”

He swallowed the rest of what he had been about to say.

It was so obvious.

The spell he had learned consisted of three words of true power, woven together to create a single spell.

That meant power resided in each of the words individually, as well. How much simpler could it be?

Each word might contain far less power than the complete incantation. But still, anyone who reacted to an obvious but new teaching by saying “Yeah, whatever...”

...would just be an idiot.

Dwarf Shaman observed the boy’s face stiffen, whereupon he smiled broadly. “Excellent! Looks like the first cracks have appeared in that skull of yours. Now, what are the implications? Tell me what you think.”

“...Create fire. Expand. Throw.”

“See! Now you’ve got four options.”

“Four?”

“You can cast your Fireball, or you can set something on fire, or cause something to swell, or shoot something.”

Though I suppose shooting a swelling ball of fire is still the main thing.

The boy stared at his palms. He cocked his fingers, counting.

Four...

He had been under the belief that a Fireball was all he was capable of—and yet all this time he'd had *four* spells?

"Hey..."

"Hrm?"

"Is it really supposed to be this simple?"

"Changing the way you look at the world isn't— Well, I suppose that's not quite what we're doing. We're just making sure how many cards we have in our hand."

With that, Dwarf Shaman pulled a deck of playing cards seemingly out of thin air.

What was this—a sleight of hand? The thick fingers moved so fast they were almost invisible as he cut the deck and fanned out the cards.

"Low cards are still cards, no?"

"I guess..."

"No need to guess! They are."

He reformed the deck and then, like magic, it disappeared.

He didn't pause for a moment to call attention to this act of prestidigitation but instead whispered conspiratorially, "Say, boy, do you remember a certain very lovely magic user? A witch?"

"...Yeah," the boy said, blushing as he pictured the buxom spell caster. "I know her."

"She uses *inflammarae* to light her smoking pipe."

"...Wait, seriously?"

It was the first completely honest reaction the boy had shown all day, and no wonder. If anyone had done something like that at the Academy, the professors

would've had their head.

Magical spells were composed of words of true power, able to alter the logic of the world and manipulate the very way things *were*. They were not to be used lightly—weren't experienced adventurers always saying things like that?

Don't let down your guard. Don't hesitate to kill. Don't use up your spells. And stay away from dragons...

"Anyhow, I think you understand that it isn't best to just pop off spells left and right like that. But think about it." Dwarf Shaman crossed his arms and made a thoughtful noise; the boy still didn't quite follow him. "Say you're out in the rain, you don't have any flint, and all your fuel is wet, but you just *have* to build a campfire. That's when you'd use it."

"...Well, yeah, I guess."

"But if you're really clever, you could build a fire another way in that situation and save a spell."

If you combine branches and bark you can sometimes get a fire going, and often branches you dig up out of the ground will be dry. And depending on how carefully you pile up your firewood, sometimes a wet branch can dry out as the fire burns, making it useful fuel.

Having more than your share of brains is the best way to look after your spells. Any sufficiently advanced skill is indistinguishable from magic.

"The only difference is the method," said Dwarf Shaman.

Each method is an alternative, and alternatives mean, in turn—

"More cards in your deck."

"..."

"And another thing..." Dwarf Shaman ignored Wizard Boy, who had his arms folded and was grumbling. He then pulled the cork from the jar at his hip. An expansive smell of alcohol, the unique aroma of Dwarven fire wine, drifted out. "A spell caster's job isn't to chant spells."

This caused the boy to blink in confusion.

“It’s to *use* them.”

“...? And those are different how?”

“If you can’t figure that out, you won’t get anywhere.”

Riddles like this were at the heart of what it meant to be a wizard.

What weight was there really in the words of those who always went around proclaiming that they had the truth?

And what value was there really to the truth that one had?

Thus, a wizard would laugh. Laugh and say, *Maybe, maybe not.*

“Only a know-nothing amateur would think that a wizard is doing nothing more than lobbing a ball of fire or some lightning at his enemies.”

And then Dwarf Shaman grinned like a shark.

§

Goblin Slayer struck a flint, lighting his torch on the sparks. The smell of burning pine resin mingled with those of damp and mold, as well as less wholesome odors wafting around the cave.

This seemed like it would be as good as alerting the goblins that adventurers had arrived, but strangely, goblins frequently failed to react to the smell of a torch. The smell of women, or children, or elves was much more likely to draw their attention and provoke an attack.

Goblin Slayer’s hypothesis was that goblins couldn’t distinguish the torch from the rest of the rotten stench in their home. At the same time, he believed there was nothing better to minimize the smell of metal from armor.

“Ugh... This is just soooo unfair...”

And one must not forget to cover the aroma of elf.

High Elf Archer’s face was daubed with muck, and she wept and simpered. She looked vastly less than pleased as she rubbed mud all over her ranger’s garments. Her long ears drooped pitifully, trembling.

“Why am I the only one who has to get covered in this stuff?”

“Because you will agitate the goblins.”

The answer was curt. High Elf Archer hugged herself and shivered. Since she had joined up with this obsessed adventurer, she had seen more than a few victims of “agitated goblins.” She even recalled once when she herself had nearly been killed by them, a position she didn’t want to imagine being in again.

If she wanted to avoid that fate, she had to take the appropriate measures.

And so, looking thoroughly pathetic, she continued to paint herself with the vile effluent at the entrance to the cave.

“What happened to the sachet of herbs you used last time?”

“...I ran out.” High Elf Archer’s expression was vague, and she looked away evasively. “...Of money.”

Apparently even High Elves, with bloodlines that reached back to the Age of the Gods, were subject to such ordinary problems. Maybe that was part of the reason she had joined a party where she was going to do nothing but goblin slaying, a job she detested.

It didn’t particularly cross her mind to be grateful to Goblin Slayer.

“Just as with your arrows,” he said softly, “it’s important to manage all your resources.”

“I told you, I hate money!”

“Is that so?”

“You use it, then it’s gone!”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“But then it never grows back!”

“Right.”

“I just don’t get it...!”

“I see.”

Her ears bobbed up and down in anger; Goblin Slayer listened impassively.

What mattered to him were the drawings the goblins had left on the cave

walls. The crude, cartoonish forms of unidentifiable animals were painted in a dark crimson.

He looked at them, confirming that he saw no relation between these drawings and the brand that had been used by the goblin paladin.

“Simple totems.” Goblin Slayer rubbed at one of the symbols, which had been painted in the blood of a living creature. Dried blood flaked off the wall, leaving reddish grime on the palm of his gauntlet. “There is a shaman here.”

“Hmm.” High Elf Archer didn’t sound especially interested. She pulled the bow off her back and readied an arrow. “How many?”

“Fewer than twenty, I suspect,” Goblin Slayer said, guessing based on the amount of pollution outside the cave. “Are you in?”

“Let’s do it,” High Elf Archer replied, puffing out her scrawny chest. “If they think they can take us lightly just because there’s only two of us, they’ve got another think coming.”

Only two.

Yes, this time it was just a pair of adventurers who were going to challenge the goblin nest: Goblin Slayer and High Elf Archer.

Dwarf Shaman was helping the boy, while Lizard Priest and Priestess apparently had some sort of business to attend to together.

When it came to facing down twenty goblins, a warrior and a ranger did not make the best pair.

But nonetheless, goblins had appeared.

And he was Goblin Slayer.

The quest was exceedingly simple—practically off a template. Some goblins had shown up on the fringes of a village. The villagers had sought to simply leave them alone, but that had only allowed them to multiply.

Crops had been stolen. Livestock made off with. A girl who went to pick herbs was attacked, kidnapped.

Please, please help her. The reward was a pouch of grimy, rusty coins from at

least two generations ago.

But there was no reason to ignore them.

A stereotypical case. A pitiful reward. But so what?

The enemies were goblins. What more reason could he need?

Goblin Slayer certainly couldn't answer that question.

"You're conscientious if nothing else, Orcbolg," High Elf Archer said, glancing back at him with a smile. "I notice how when there's a chance of rescuing someone, you never use poison gas or water or fire."

Although when it was too late, or after they had helped the person, he was merciless. High Elf Archer gave a little chuckle.

"Here, take this. A little something for your belly."

She tossed him something: some of the elves' secret food, small fried treats.

High Elf Archer herself was already nibbling on some of the stuff like a squirrel or some other small animal. Goblin Slayer's helmet turned toward her.

"With you around..."

"What?"

"With you around, it is always lively."

"...Is that a compliment?" She glared at Goblin Slayer suspiciously, scuttling up to him like a little bird. She looked deep past the visor, her ears drooping in time with her eyebrows for a moment. "That's not your way of saying I need to shut up, is it?"

"I meant only what I said."

"...Well." She spun on her heel, leaving the noncommittal word hanging in the air. Her hair fluttered along behind her like a tail.

She darted deeper into the cave, free as the wind, but still...

"Heh-heh!"

Her ears bobbed happily, something that could clearly be seen even from behind her.

Of course, the two were not in as easy a mood as their banter suggested. Anyone who wasn't a complete beginner would know that they were on enemy ground in a place like this.

Goblin Slayer shoved the baked treat through his visor, drawing his sword even as he chewed.

High Elf Archer's superlative senses caused her ears to flick each time she heard a noise.

The lighthearted chatter—even if it was High Elf Archer doing all the chattering—was a way of preserving their sanity.

The proof came a moment later, when High Elf Archer suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"They're quick."

"Yeah. But I didn't get the feeling they were watching us."

They needed no words. Goblin Slayer already had his weapon at the ready, and High Elf Archer was as taut as a drawn bow.

"If you kidnap a young girl, it's only to be expected that adventurers will come."

The battle between goblins and adventurers had been going on since time immemorial. Over a dizzying accumulation of ages, even the goblins had managed to learn something: *adventurers will come*.

They always came. They came and killed and took what belonged to the goblins. Therefore, the goblins would kill them.

It was a total failure to reflect on their own actions or to take any kind of caution that made goblins what they were.

"Which direction?"

"Right." High Elf Archer closed her eyes, her ears fluttering. "Five or six of them, maybe. I hear some weapons, too."

"What about in front?"

"Nothing for now."

In other words, there would be no attempt to catch them in a pincer movement. Goblin Slayer snorted, then took his sword in a reverse grip, holding it by the blade and taking up a stance.

“They always think ambush is a skill that belongs to them alone.”

The next second, Goblin Slayer took his sword and slammed it into the earthen wall as if he were chopping firewood.

“GROOOORB?!”

The earth, shallow now from being dug out, collapsed inward, raining into the side tunnel. The goblin at the head of the digging party opened his eyes wide, completely flummoxed.

They were supposed to surround the stupid adventurers, beat them, humiliate the woman, make her bear their—

Goblin Slayer landed another blow to the creature’s head, putting an end to his plans—and his life.

“One. We’ll hit them from this direction. Let’s go.”

“It’s awfully tight. Hard to shoot in.” Of course, even as she complained, High Elf Archer fired off three arrows simultaneously over Goblin Slayer’s shoulder, piercing three goblins.

“GROR?!”

“GOOBBR?!”

One took the arrow to the throat; the monsters to either side were caught in the eye, one left, one right. They collapsed, and Goblin Slayer struck their corpses.

“Four...”

A sword covered in brains up to the hilt wasn’t going to be much use. He kicked over a goblin that now had a blade sprouting from his forehead, taking up the spade the monster had been using as a weapon.

“...Five.”

The fifth goblin attacked him. He blocked the blow from the monster’s pickax

and, in the same motion, took the torch, which he held on the same side as his shield, and brought it down into the goblin's face.

“GROORRORBRO?!”

There was a crackling sound and the hideous stench of cooking flesh. Goblin Slayer watched the monster with the fried face cry out. The counterattack's failure would soon be discovered, he assumed. A scream would make scant difference now.

Goblin Slayer was utterly without mercy: he thrust the spade into the goblin's neck.

“GROORB!!”

The final goblin howled even though nothing had happened to him yet. He threw away the hatchet he had been holding and tossed his arms over his head. Slobbering and sniveling, he prostrated himself before the adventurers.

A creature we missed at the mausoleum?

Goblin Slayer cast aside the broken torch and picked up the crimson-stained hatchet. He put it into his belt, pulled out a new torch, and lit it from the old one.

“Now, then.”

“GOR?!”

Goblin Slayer gave the creature a kick; it shrieked and tumbled on its behind. But it quickly resumed its pathetic groveling, scraping its head against the ground.

He was begging for his life. Did he have a modicum of intelligence? Was he calculating what would be in his best interests? Did he have a notion of surrender?

Given that he had been at the back of the group, maybe he had a certain status even among goblins.

Then again, he was physically the smallest. A child, perhaps...?

“Orcbolg...”

“Yes.”

High Elf Archer’s voice was shaking. Goblin Slayer nodded silently.

That young goblin was trying to draw a poisoned dagger from his belt.

Around his neck was a necklace.

A necklace he had gotten by stealing.

The objects on the necklace had been pierced by an awl, sewn together. They had been chopped off by a hatchet. Ten freshly cut fingers of a young woman.

To this goblin who cowered and simpered, all the while hiding a dagger at his back, Goblin Slayer had one simple thing to say.

“We kill them all.”

§

“Come to think of it...”

“Hmm?”

“This may be the first time it’s been just the two of us.”

“Ah, indeed, I think you are right about that,” Lizard Priest said, his tail swinging gently.

It was afternoon at the training grounds. Although the facilities were nearly half-finished, the place was still open to the elements.

Novice adventurers, as well as laborers, lounged here and there on the grass, eating their lunches.

It wasn’t guaranteed that food would be provided, and even if it was, physical activity made a body hungry.

“Even the gods and spirits cannot cure an empty stomach,” Lizard Priest mused.

“You’re forgetting about the Create Water and Create Food miracles,” Priestess said.

Not that I have them yet.

“Ho-ho,” Lizard Priest laughed appreciatively. “If I changed religions, the

available blessings would change as well, I see.”

“That’s true. Although I don’t think I can do any more praying today...”

Why had the two of them come to the practice grounds? The answer was training, combined with performing some healing.

It wasn’t just inexperienced adventurers who were at risk while practicing. If anything, the people working on the construction of the facility were probably in greater danger.

Bumps and scrapes, of course, could be treated with simple first-aid, but broken bones could affect so much more than just the construction. Calling on the gods for a Minor Heal miracle could make all the difference.

At length, the two clerics settled on the outskirts of the field to have their food.

Priestess sat with her knees drawn together and undid the parcel that held her lunch. It was bread and cheese, along with watered-down wine and several pieces of dried fruit.

“My,” said Lizard Priest, peeking at her provisions from where he sat cross-legged. “Will that be enough for you?”

“Yes,” Priestess answered. It wasn’t so much about a balanced diet; she just tended not to eat that much. “I’ve, ahem—” She looked away from him, her cheeks turning a little bit red. “I seem to have put on a few pounds since becoming an adventurer.”

Lizard Priest opened his great jaws and cackled. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Never fear! Surely that is from building muscle.”

“I think it might be because there are so many good things to eat in this town...”

“I should think, child, that a little meat on your bones would be for the best. You’re rather too thin.”

“The Chief Priestess told me the same thing...”

At a certain age, perhaps even cleric girls worried about these things. It probably didn’t help that there were so many attractive women around her, like

Cow Girl, Guild Girl, and Witch.

Priestess let out a small sigh then quickly offered a prayer of thanks to the Earth Mother for her food.

Lizard Priest, for his part, made one of his strange palms-together gestures and opened a pouch made from an animal skin.

“Oh,” Priestess said. Her eyes widened a bit, and then she smiled gently. “A sandwich, huh?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.”

Lizard Priest made an expression that was perhaps a full-faced grin then rolled his eyes and held up the sandwich triumphantly. It consisted of thick bread slathered in butter, surrounding slices of seared beef.

What really drew the eye, however, was the cheese, so much of it that it threatened to be more than the bread could contain. It practically buried the beef; the cheese was obviously the star here. It was the exact opposite of a normal sandwich, in which the beef would be the main component and the cheese just an addition.

“One’s favorite ingredients, arranged just as one pleases. This is true freedom.” He sounded as happy as a clam, and Priestess couldn’t resist a smile.

“I can’t say I don’t understand...”

“Mm. If food is indeed culture, one would need a truly enlightened civilization to produce this.” As he spoke, Lizard Priest gobbled the sandwich down. Half of it was gone in one bite; two chomps later, it had vanished.

“Ahh, nectar! Delicious!”

“Heh-heh. You really do like cheese, don’t you?”

“Indeed. It makes me grateful to have ventured into the human world.”

Smack, smack. His tail slapped the ground in a display of high spirit. Priestess followed its movement.

She opened her own mouth, much less wide than Lizard Priest, and began putting torn-off pieces of bread into it. As she chewed, a nutty flavor filled her

mouth. She accompanied it with a swallow of grape wine.

“What kind of food did you eat back at your home?” Priestess asked.

“We were warriors and hunters, you see. We ate birds or animals that we caught.” Having finished his first sandwich, Lizard Priest was reaching for his second. “The young warriors ate with the young warriors, the more experienced with their own cohort. And the superiors ate with the superiors.” Holding his sandwich in one hand, he smacked the grass with the other. “We ate on the ground or on the floor, just like this.”

“You didn’t all eat together?”

“If a king or a general were to come among the common soldiers, how could they relax?”

“I see.”

“Banquets, now those were different. When we would achieve a victory in battle, fires would be lit in the public square, and everyone would sit down together.”

In her mind’s eye, Priestess found she could picture a scene from a land she had never been to. A great crowd of lizardmen gathered at the foot of a huge tree in the rain forest, raising their cups and drinking their wine, celebrating together.

In the midst of it all, a great beast roasted on a spit, brave warriors cutting off hunks of meat and raising their voices. For some reason, one of them in particular was joyfully taking mouthfuls of cheese... But that was probably just an imaginative detail on her part.

If nothing else, though...

“It seems very festive.”

“I should say so,” Lizard Priest said confidently. “At times, we would also go in search of corn or potatoes...”

“Ooh. Potatoes go well with cheese, you know.”

“Oh-ho!” Lizard Priest leaned forward suddenly, his eyes gleaming and his jaws open. It was no wonder Priestess drew back a little with a frightened yelp.

“I should like to hear more on that topic!”

“Er, well, I—back at the Temple, I used to cook them together...”

Cut the potatoes, mix them with a sauce of milk, flour, and butter, then sprinkle cheese over them and bake them in the oven. The result was a rich meal for winter festival days or any kind of celebration.

“Everyone gathered in the Great Hall, offered up our prayers, and then ate together.”

“That is most excellent...!”

Both the recipe and the meal, he meant.

“To share a meal with one’s fellows,” Lizard Priest proclaimed, “is to deepen one’s ties to them.”

“Yes,” Priestess nodded, smiling. Then she thought of something and cocked her head at him. “Oh, if you want, we can cook it together when we have a chance.”

“I should like that,” Lizard Priest replied.

That was when a bright, cheerful voice reached their ears: “Hey, looks like you’ve got something good to eat there!”

Priestess looked in the direction of the voice. The first thing she saw was a pair of bare feet. Small but muscular, they led up to legs covered in short pants, and then a light shirt. She was hot and sweating, fanning at her collar to get the air moving. It was Rhea Fighter.

“A sandwich? Lucky you! Can I have a bite?”

With a grunt, Lizard Priest flung the rest of the food into his mouth, waving his tail in an intimidating manner as he chewed.

“Among the teachings I received, there was no such thing as the sharing of food.”

“Aww...”

She didn’t actually look that disappointed, though, and soon Lizard Priest rolled his eyes in his head.

“Well, not like I didn’t bring my own lunch!” she said. “Can I join you?” She laughed openly and held up a parcel in her hand. It was wrapped neatly in a red handkerchief and was startlingly large.

Priestess, who had been chewing on some dried sweet beans, swallowed her mouthful and made an affirmative noise, nodding. “Oh, yes. I don’t mind.”

“Nor am I bothered.”

“Don’t mind if I do, then!” The rhea girl flung herself down in the grass next to them, busily unwrapping her lunch. It was a pile of fluffy pancakes, cooked to a golden brown color not unlike that of a fox pelt. Each one was as big as a person’s face, and there were one, two, three, four—five!—of them.

Considering a rhea’s physical size, this was equivalent to enough food to feed a dwarf.

She took out a bottle and popped the cork, pouring thick, rich honey over the pancakes, then she dug in.

Priestess found herself blinking. “You’ve got quite an appetite, haven’t you?”

“We eat five or six times a day!” *Can’t always get all your meals during an adventure, though...* The girl licked clean a honey-sticky finger. “So I have to make sure I eat enough at once that I don’t starve between meals!”

“Ha-ha-ha...” Priestess laughed noncommittally. She had the distinct sense that the rhea would have eaten just as much even if she were getting all her meals.

“By the way,” Priestess said, “you’re solo right now, aren’t you?”

“Sure am. So I was thinking maybe I’ll hunt some rats next or something.”

Cleaning the giant rats out of the sewers was a basic task for beginning adventurers. That didn’t mean it was an especially popular job—people felt it wasn’t adventure-y enough. No one became an adventurer just to fight overgrown rodents. They wanted to do battle with terrifying monsters, delve dungeons, and get loot from treasure chests. That’s what adventuring was all about.

But it wasn’t easy to do any of that solo.

“Plus, this place is crawling with fledgling warriors.” *No party for me.* She laughed.

As great as it was to join forces with some people you got along with and go adventuring, by the same token, it could be painful when you were left on your own.

If it weren't for Goblin Slayer...

What would have happened to her?

That was what was in Priestess's mind.

It was such a strange thing. If those three people hadn't called out to her on that day, where would she be now?

If she hadn't gone on an adventure with them, she wouldn't be here at this moment.

It was all because of that adventure, and all the fighting that had come after, day upon day piling up. The tiny decisions she had made, one second at a time, had produced this exact instant.

“Um...” The thought caused the words to come out of her mouth almost of their own accord. “If you like, why don't you...try adventuring with us?”

“Adventuring?” The rhea looked at them, a bit baffled. “What about your armored buddy, Goblin Slayer or whoever? Don't think I've seen him around today...”

“Oh, umm...”

“As it so happens,” Lizard Priest said, leaning forward and picking up the thread from the momentarily inarticulate Priestess, “in order to advance in rank, she must demonstrate her abilities and, as such, is seeking temporary adventuring partners.” As he spoke, he chewed and swallowed another sandwich noisily.

“Most likely, we'd only be together for one quest...” Priestess said apologetically.

“Hmm.” Rhea Fighter crossed her arms and looked into the distance.

Beginning adventurers were sometimes called “the mob,” and in that group, human and dwarf warriors were plentiful. A great many of them were solid and strong, either because they had trained hard or because they were born that way.

“I’m just warning you, I’m really nothing special,” Rhea Fighter said with a faint smile. Yes, she had trained, but she lifted one of her arms to demonstrate that it was still smaller than that of a human or dwarf. “I mean, I’m a rhea. I don’t have really good equipment. And I’m just a warrior.”

Then leather armor. A sword and shield. Decent equipment, but definitely on the small side.

In light of her skills and strength and equipment, there were probably lots of warriors better than her.

“Are you sure about me?”

“Ah, but,” Lizard Priest said, nodding somberly, “you have luck.”

“Luck...?”

“Call it a convivial relationship with fate. No?”

“Absolutely!” Priestess immediately agreed with Lizard Priest. She puffed out her little chest as best she could. “Like how you asked us about our potions? That’s why...!”

That’s why I asked you.

“Huh, so you remember that?” Rhea Fighter said and nodded. “...Well, fine then, all right. But I have to say, I think it’s gonna be a liiiittle difficult for just you and me.” So—she clenched both fists and raised them high. “Let’s invite some others, too! Just leave it to me—I’ve got some great ideas!”

“Oh, I’ll come, too!”

Once the idea was in her head, Rhea Fighter moved startlingly quickly. She was off like a hare; Priestess belatedly rose to go after her.

As she went scurrying away, Priestess spun around and bowed deeply to Lizard Priest.

She fully understood that the naga cleric had engineered this on her behalf.

It had been a full year since the four of them had become a party.

Lizard Priest gave her an encouraging wave, as if to say, *Don't worry about it*, and she nodded at him again.

"Heeey, let's move! Everyone will start training again once they're done eating!"

"Right! Sure! Sorry, and thank you...!"

"Yaaah!" Well ahead of Priestess, Rhea Fighter was giving the red-haired boy a kick.

When Priestess caught up, she bowed repeatedly and explained what was going on. Dwarf Shaman laughed uproariously. In that interval, Rhea Fighter spotted her next targets and went barreling off toward Rookie Warrior and Apprentice Cleric.

The latter was objecting that they were right in the middle of lunch, when Priestess came up with Wizard Boy in tow, once again bowing and apologizing.

"Ahh, luck is a virtue, and virtue is luck," Lizard Priest said happily as he ate and observed the goings-on.

They had been together for a whole year, after all. He was well acquainted with the girl's personality, with her goodness of heart.

Well, then.

His mind worked as he finished off his final sandwich.

What about the virtue of milord Goblin Slayer, the strange fanatic at the heart of our party?

§

Chirp, chirp. Chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp.

Cow Girl was roused from the depths of sleep by the canary's tweeting.

"Hrn... Hmm? Hmm?"

She rubbed her eyes and blinked several times. She gave a big stretch and

realized she was sitting in a chair in the dining area. She must have stretched out on the table and then fallen asleep at some point.

The sun was already well and truly set, leaving the interior of the room dim; the only light was the faint shimmer of the twin moons.

On the tabletop was a cup of black tea, which had gone completely cold.

She must have fallen asleep waiting for him.

“Hmm... At least I don’t have pillow marks,” she said, massaging her stiff cheeks. As she did so, a blanket fell from her shoulders.

Her uncle must have put it there. Although it was early spring, the nights were still cold. Cow Girl picked it up and folded it.

“I’ll have to thank him...”

As she did this, the canary continued to chirp noisily, flapping around its cage. Cow Girl quickly lit a candle, placing it in a candleholder and making her way over to the cage.

“What’s up? Are you chilly? Or maybe hungry?”

The tone she adopted, as if she were speaking to a small child, was probably only natural. She leaned forward, peering into the cage; the canary cocked its head and peered back.

She could just make out the silhouette of herself in her nightclothes wavering in the window’s reflection.

Maybe I ought to go sleep in bed.

The thought made good sense, yet she just didn’t feel like it.

Maybe I should start going with him...

She went over to the window, put her chin in her hand, and sighed.

No, impossible. A fantasy that faltered at every point.

True, she was rather muscular—as much as she hated to admit it, her body was better built than most girls her age. But even so, that didn’t mean she would be able to use a weapon or face down monsters.

Most of all, though, was that if she were to start going places as well, perhaps he just wouldn't come home anymore...

"...Whoa, don't get a big head, now." Cow Girl couldn't resist a chuckle.

That was when it happened: with a rattle and a clatter, the door opened. The night air came drifting in, along with a strange smell. An odor of iron. Mud and sweat and dust, along with blood.

Even without looking, Cow Girl knew immediately: it was *his* smell.

"Welcome home!"

"...I'm back."

The response to her gentle voice was quiet, dispassionate, and blunt.

He closed the door behind himself as he came in, trying as hard as he could to be quiet, but the noise was still just a little bit loud. Cow Girl turned, smiling softly, and his helmet shook doubtfully.

"You've been awake all this time?"

"Nah. I just woke up."

"Did I wake you?"

"No, no. Don't worry about it. Somebody got me up at just the right moment." She pointed at the birdcage and added, "Huh, little buddy?" to which the canary responded, *Chirp!*

"This bird's really something. It knew you were home before you came in."

"Hmm," he grunted softly, pulling out a chair and sitting down heavily. Cow Girl thought he could at least afford to take off his weapons and armor, but she didn't say anything. She pulled herself away from the window, grabbing an apron that hung in the kitchen and tossing it on over her nightwear.

"Dinner?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at him as she tied the apron string behind her.

"Let me see," he replied, and then, "Yes, please." Finally, he added quietly, "Anything is fine."

"I've got stew ready to go."

After a moment's pause, "...Is that so?" he replied with a predictable nod.

It took time to relight the oven fire and warm up the stew.

"Oh, you may want to wipe down your armor a bit."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. There's a hand towel over there you can use."

"Ah."

He obediently began to wipe the grime from his helmet and armor, although his movements were rather rough. Of course, these were not stains that were going to come off with a little rubbing, but it was enough to satisfy Cow Girl.

When she set the stew down in front of him, he began shoving it through his visor like a starving man.

It was already spring, and there was no longer a need for such warm foods, yet she still made stew. Yes, very unsophisticated.

"It's all the time these days, isn't it?"

She sat across from him, supporting her head by putting her hands against both cheeks.

"What is?"

"That you go out." Cow Girl grabbed a napkin and leaned over the table, mopping a stray bit of stew off his helmet. "It's all those goblins—or, well, I guess you've got that training area now, too."

"Yes."

"Are you busy?"

"...No," Goblin Slayer replied after a moment's thought. The helmet tilted as if he wasn't quite sure. "...I wonder."

Hmmm. Cow Girl sat back in her seat, chin in her hand, and observed him. Obviously, she couldn't see the color of his eyes, which were hidden behind his visor.

"I knew it," Cow Girl said, giggling a little in the back of her throat. "You don't

want them building something there, do you?"

Bull's-eye. His spoon stopped halfway to his mouth. "It is not...exactly that I don't want them to."

Hrrrm. He tried to act as if he was thinking.

His body language hadn't changed a bit from when they were younger. He had always struggled to hide when he was upset.

"It's a lonely feeling, isn't it?"

"..."

"And you're worried about that girl, aren't you?"

"....."

"You're worried, but you can't think of a good way to help her out."

"....."

"And in the meantime, goblins will be up to their tricks..."

"....."

"You get anxious when you're not doing anything."

He tossed down the spoon in his hand, still silent. Then he sighed deeply and finally spoke. "...You know me well."

"I ought to. We've been together for years." Finally, she couldn't restrain the laughter, and she winked at him.

From inside the helmet, his gaze was fixed on her. It made Cow Girl sit up straight in her chair.

"Do you not think anything of it?"

The question was brief, but she was probably the only one who could understand what he was thinking when he asked it. In fact, she wasn't completely sure that even she understood.

Her uncle, however, was not a resident of that little village. The only two remaining were him—and her.

"I'm not...saying it never bothers me."

“ ...”

“I remember...splashing in the lake and lots of other things.”

She remembered.

The voices of her parents, with their little brick house.

The friendly warmth of the stone wall when it had been sitting all day in the sun.

The wind on her face as she ran along the little path through the village. The sound of the adults’ hoes and plows as they worked the fields.

The creaking of the poorly wrought bucket as it came up from the well full of cold water.

That little tree that stood on top of the hill, and how her heart pounded when she hid some treasure in its hollow.

Those feelings she had when the two of them watched the bright red sunset spread from the far side of the horizon out over the entire world.

How the grass tickled her back when she lay out on the plains, staring up at the two moons until late into the night.

The pain of the slap her father gave her, angry at her for coming home so late. The loneliness of the attic where she had shut herself up in anger.

How her mother’s home-cooked breakfasts smelled, the scent wafting up to her after she had dozed off upstairs.

She remembered it all.

It was a world that no longer existed anywhere, except in her heart, and his.

“But I’ve started to think, maybe it just is what it is.” Cow Girl smiled weakly. “That’s how everything goes, right? The world keeps turning, we keep living. The wind keeps blowing and the sun keeps rising and setting.”

Fwip, fwip. She made circles in the air with her pointer finger.

It had been so long since that day and yet not long at all.

Ten years, eleven. Enough time for a child to grow up. For the look of a place

to change. And towns, too, and people, and everything else.

Everything in the world continued on, changing, never resting. Even thoughts and memories.

Was there anything that didn't change? Perhaps change itself was the only thing that didn't change.

I'm not even sure if change is bad or good.

"All that means we need to accept change."

"...Is that so?"

"Yes, it is." Cow Girl nodded as if to emphasize her own point. "I'm sure of it."

"I see."

That was all he said; then he fell silent.

A great many things had happened, he thought.

A year—it had been a year since he went on that adventure to save that priestess girl or, more accurately, to kill goblins.

He had met High Elf Archer, Dwarf Shaman, and Lizard Priest. He had fought that monster whose name he could never remember.

He'd done battle with a goblin army that attacked the farm. Spearman, Heavy Warrior, and many others had helped him emerge victorious.

Then there were the goblins who had appeared in the sewers beneath the water town. The fight with the champion. Sword Maiden.

The autumn festival was another occasion that showed him how many friends he had made.

And in winter, they had gone to the snowy mountain and fought the goblin paladin.

There was an unmistakable difference between his previous self and the way he was now. Otherwise, would he ever have considered looking after that boy?

The path of life was full of crossroads and forks. He could choose any direction he wanted now.

“...”

Still.

Still, yet...

And I'd still have her, if she hadn't died after a goblin stabbed her with a poisoned blade!!

“...It isn't yet possible,” he—Goblin Slayer—murmured quietly.

“...Mm,” Cow Girl said. She nodded, somehow sadly. “...I see.”

“I have no proof, but I think the goblins are on the move again.”

Goblin Slayer picked his words carefully, thinking hard as he spoke.

Goblins had stolen construction tools. They were appearing with impunity near the training grounds.

Were they simply interested in the unusual spectacle of the training area being constructed?

Not possible.

It was a warning, a sign.

The thought might seem alarmist, but in his mind, these things were connected.

It was not clear whether this was the doing of fate or of chance.

The one thing he was certain of was that he would have to fight the goblins.

“That's why I believe I have to do this.”

“Yeah. Yeah... I know.”

Their eyes met. Cow Girl's gaze wavered with anxiety. His, from deep inside the helmet, never flinched.

Her throat tightened. What should she say, and how should she say it? Several times, she opened her mouth then closed it again.

“I'll be...waiting for you, okay?”

“Yes.”

Then Goblin Slayer rose from his chair. He left his empty bowl on the table.

She heard the door shut, and then she was alone in the kitchen again.

Cow Girl turned her face away from the unsteady candlelight, clutching her head as if she wanted to curl into herself, but instead, she lay out on the table again.

The soft twittering of the canary was no comfort to her.

§

For the next three days, nothing happened.

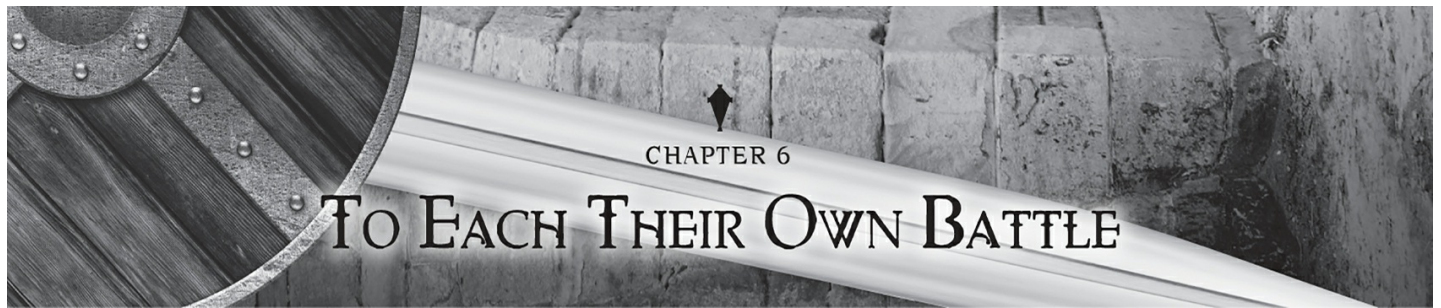
Adventurers spent their time on adventures, or training, or deepening friendships.

It was certainly a meaningful time, no question.

The flow of time can no more be reversed than the current of a river. Even the gods themselves cannot take back a roll of the dice.

That was why it was certain that goblins would appear. Fate? Or chance?

It happened three days later—at twilight.



It was one of the laborers who noticed it first.

“Hrmph, and just when I thought I was done for the day.”

With a shovel on his shoulder and a long look at the setting sun, he heaved a sigh.

He was a worthless layabout of a man; he had no desire to enter the service of some merchant household, nor did he have the money to live a life of luxury. Thus, he found himself working with his spade in hand and only the sweat of his brow for company, but even so, he was ill content.

Damn, but I do like me them lady adventurers.

They may not have been dressed in the most beautiful clothes, but they moved around so freely. And then there were the girls in loose robes, the wizards and clerics. They were completely different from the prostitutes who went about in their makeup and perfume.

Of course, the really high-class courtesans were a breed apart, but they were also out of reach for man like him.

And then there were the other adventurers, the ones who shared their food and their beds with those women.

How easy their lives must be. Living just as they pleased, dying just as they pleased. It was enough to make a man jealous.

“They’ve got a good thing going. A li’l hack and slash, monster slaying, and treasure-chest plundering, and bam, you’re rich.”

Granted, even this man understood that things were not really so simple. But everyone wants to think they are somehow special, that they will uniquely succeed. And everyone wants to look at things in the way that most benefits them.

This man, who sat there playing with the idea of being an adventurer, was no different.

He didn't have to be a huge success. He didn't care if he never became a renowned warrior. All he needed was a bit of decent equipment, the chance to save a village or two, and maybe earn the thanks of the local girls...

Ah, or perhaps he could buy some noble girl who had fallen into slavery and look after her. That might be good. He could find a beautiful wizard woman to be his party member and slowly gain more and more companions. All gorgeous women, of course.

He would find secret caves no one else knew about (not that he knew about them at the moment, either), and that was where he would make his fortune. And finally, he would set up house with his favorite woman, coming home from his travails and asking her out on an adventure.

"...Heh-heh!"

The man didn't particularly care that his vision of "modest success" lacked something in the way of realism. He was just enjoying an indulgent fantasy.

No one would point and laugh at him for it. As a way of passing the time, it didn't hurt anyone.

Work, drink wine, eat food, enjoy women and friends, complain about the unfairness of it all, and occasionally dream a little. Live. That was enough.

"...Hmm?"

And again, he was the first to notice it.

He looked toward a corner of the training ground, which by now was mostly fenced in and nearing completion.

He saw a pile of dirt he had no memory of.

Dirt was a resource in and of itself, so anytime they dug up the earth, they had to deposit it in a designated location.

"Damn it all, who's been slacking off on the job?"

It wasn't that he didn't understand how annoying the requirement could be.

He himself had been known, on occasion, to put the dirt in some convenient location instead of the specified one.

But since he had noticed the problem, it was his responsibility to fix it, and that was annoying.

He entertained the possibility of just pretending he hadn't seen the pile, but unfortunately for him, he had a shovel right there in his hand.

"...Nothin' for it, then," he muttered. What was the big deal? It was just a little dirt. Rather than have a guilty conscience tomorrow, why not do the job and sleep well tonight?

As the man approached the pile of dirt, he thought he caught a glimpse of a humanoid figure on the other side. It was about the size of a child—and the fading light of the sun wasn't enough to obscure the cruel details of its face as it gibbered and grunted.

A goblin?!

The fact that he didn't simply start screaming at that moment was praiseworthy. The actions he took next were also above reproach.

He grasped the shovel in both hands, crept toward the creature as quietly as he could, and raised his spade.

"GROB?!"

The point of the shovel, polished by contact with the earth until it was as sharp as an ax, shattered the goblin's skull. Dark blood and brains sprayed out as the creature collapsed, and the man trampled gleefully on the corpse.

"Ha-ha! How ya like that, you—!"

When he finally pulled the spade back and saw the thread of blood dangling from it, the man frowned. Rational thought reminded him that this was a tool he was going to need the next day. He'd better wash it.

Along with the wave of revulsion, however, came a profound gratitude to his tool: when the moment had called for it, the shovel had served brilliantly to smash that goblin's head in.

"...Where the hell'd it come from anyway? Did it dig this hole or somethin'?"

Flicking the blood off his shovel, the man smirked down into the tunnel. It was a crude but solid passageway. The goblin must have dug it.

The man couldn't see the bottom of the hole. Not just because it was dark down there—the sun was setting even as he stood in place.

“...”

The man shivered. A nameless fear ran along his spine.

“No way. Forget it. I don't need to go down there. This calls for an adventurer.”

Let them handle it. It wasn't his job. Still, he would have to report it.

But at that moment...

“Ow...!”

He felt a piercing pain run through his right foot, and suddenly, his vision upended as he tumbled to the ground.

The hell? He forced himself to bend so he could see his foot, where he discovered blood oozing from his ankle.

“GROB! GROORB!!”

Then he saw a goblin holding a dagger slathered in some unidentifiable liquid.

No... Not just one goblin. Ten, twenty of them, snickering under their breath as they emerged from the night shadows.

“...———...”

The worker opened his mouth as if to cry for help, but his tongue seemed to be stuck; he could not make a sound.

A numbing pain came up from his stabbed foot. His throat was dry. There was some kind of liquid in his mouth; he tasted blood. He couldn't breathe. His vision began to go dark.

Why hadn't he noticed there was more than one goblin there?

If he hadn't even seen that, then of course he hadn't spotted the poisoned dagger one of the monsters held.

The man died shortly thereafter.

But of course, he was not the first to die that night, nor would he be the last.

§

“The topic of tonight’s lesson is ‘Eight Ways to Kill Goblins Silently.’ Now...”

That was as far as Goblin Slayer got in his lecture to the novice adventurers when there was a scream.

Adventurers had to deal with the darkness at many times, not just when coming home in the evening.

There was no guarantee, for example, that an adventure might not take place at night. And even during the day, ruins, labyrinths, and caves were often dim.

It was certainly worthwhile to train in the dark hours, with only the light of the moons and the stars.

At the very least, so thought the adventurers gathered there—the red-haired boy, the rhea girl, Rookie Warrior, and Apprentice Cleric. They and about ten others had gathered at the training grounds even after a long day of adventuring.

“Wh-what was that?!”

“That was a scream... Right?”

The young adventurers whispered urgently to one another, their faces tense.

“...”

Goblin Slayer, however, drew the sword at his hip.

He acted quickly.

Ignoring the chattering students, he swept his gaze around the area, looking for the source of the scream.

It turned out it wasn’t just *a* scream. After a moment, a second came, then a third.

“H-hey! Just what the heck’s goin’ on out there—?!” the red-haired boy asked in bewilderment, but Goblin Slayer replied, “Don’t panic. Get up against the

wall. Form a half-circle surrounding the spell casters. Front row, have your weapons ready.”

“Right,” Rookie Warrior said, his face a mask of anxiety as he moved to protect Apprentice Cleric. “...Hey,” he added, “this isn’t some kind of...drill or something, is it?”

“Even if it were,” Goblin Slayer said shortly, “we would have nothing to gain by treating it lightly.”

“Ooh... I hate this! I don’t even know if I’m scared or not!”

Then with a bout of dry laughter, Rhea Fighter picked up her diminutive sword and shield and assumed a fighting stance. Her face was stiff; even in the night darkness, it was obvious how pale she was. Fear, nervousness—clearly a combination of the two. Her pointy ears, not as long as an elf’s, trembled slightly.

“Tsk...” This click of the tongue came from the red-haired boy. He raised his staff and turned to face the other novices, who had yet to fully grasp the situation at hand. “Hey, didn’t you hear him? Don’t just stand around! Form up!”

“R-right...!”

“Yeah, got it...!”

Maybe the fact that the words were coming from one of their peers helped them. Even those who had been frozen, unable to think or absorb the situation, finally lurched into movement. Each picked up their weapon and helped form the half circle against the wall, although it wasn’t very pretty.

“You there, get that shield up! Protect the people beside and behind you!” Apprentice Cleric shouted, whipping into action a group unaccustomed to such maneuvers.

It was surprising, when she thought about it: although she and Rookie Warrior had only really fought giant rats, they were experienced adventurers in their own way. Rhea Fighter and the red-haired boy were the same. They had taken a definite step forward from being pure beginners. After that would come the next step, and the next...

“...”

Goblin Slayer observed them but groaned so quietly no one could hear him. Should he leave the newbies to go check out the situation, or should he stay here and protect them?

Partly, he was unsure... And partly, he found he didn't want to leave them alone.

A foolish thought.

It mystified even him. To neglect to gather information in these circumstances was the same as simply waiting for their collective annihilation. After a certain point, even thinking would become a waste of time. There were some things that shouldn't have to be thought about.

Having reached this conclusion, Goblin Slayer said, “Hold here.” He looked around at the young adventurers then said, “If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, you will have to act on your own.”

“On our own...?”

“Because it will mean I am dead, or at least heavily wounded.” His voice was dispassionate. He forced himself to ignore the chatter this provoked among the students. “Returning to town would probably be the best course of action, but if it appears impossible, stick around here until morning.”

Then run. As fast as you can, without looking back.

Several more screams sounded. War cries, bellows of rage. The sound of weapons colliding and swords crossing.

Suddenly, the noise seemed to come from everywhere at once, crashing in on him from every direction. He found that on this spring night, still crisp with the breath of ice sprites, he could not tell what was going on.

The shadow of the half-built building was eerily large. Goblin Slayer let out a breath.

No...

“...One.”

Dashing as fast as he could, he nonchalantly raised his right hand and flung his sword.

It flew into the shadows of the materials piled by the building, evoking a strangled death rattle. Goblin Slayer followed it quickly into the gloom, where he braced his foot against the goblin his blade had run through and pulled his weapon back out.

A bloody shovel tumbled from the hand of the dead goblin, clattering as it fell to the ground.

“Goblins. I knew it.”

How pregnant with meaning were those brief words.

Goblins hidden in the night, two more of them. Although he couldn't see clearly, their burning eyes were obvious.

Then there was a thick, sticky feeling on the bottom of his foot, and the rising odor of iron.

It was a novice adventurer, collapsed on the ground. He couldn't tell what class, or how old, or what race.

The adventurer had no face.

Something sharp had torn mercilessly through the adventurer's head from the crown all the way down through the face, but the slight swell of the chest and the build of the still-twitching limbs suggested a woman.

“GOROROB!!”

“GROOOORORB!!”

The goblins jumped at him, yammering. Without a word, Goblin Slayer struck at them with his sword.

There was a sound of metal on metal. The goblins were carrying pickaxes. Stolen tools, no doubt.

Without hesitation Goblin Slayer moved in, pressed back the pickax with one hand. But...

“GROB!!”

There was another. He had a pickax, too, and he was bringing it swiftly down.

“Hrg...”

The steel pick of the ax bit through his upraised shield. Such weapons were always strong against armor.

But this was perfect.

Goblin Slayer bent his left arm forcefully, pulling the pickax from the goblin’s hands. At the same time, he brought his leg up toward the goblin on his right, slamming a kick as hard as he could between the creature’s legs.

“GROOOROROROB?!!?”

“Two.”

There was a disgusting feeling of something being crushed beneath his foot, but he didn’t care about the muffled scream.

He stomped on the writhing goblin’s head, his sword humming at the same moment. Just to his left, the now pickax-less goblin was trying to run; he flung the blade into its back.

“GOROORB?!”

“And that makes...”

The creature might not die instantly, but with its spine severed, it wouldn’t be able to move.

Goblin Slayer placed the heel of his boot against the back of the struggling goblin’s skull and pushed down mercilessly.

The feeling was like stepping on a ripe fruit. He wiped off the blood and brains and continued forward.

He pulled the blade out of the twitching monster, slicing as he went, sending it to its final rest.

“...Three.”

He forcefully pulled out the pickax that was still buried in his shield.

There was fresh earth on the pick. The goblins must have dug a tunnel from

somewhere in order to attack the training grounds.

Were they so eager to assault this place? To kill the people here?

Goblins.

Goblins.

Goblins.

He didn't like it.

He didn't like any of it.

Heaven and earth spun.

There were four corpses. Three goblins, one adventurer.

Just like that night ten years ago.

He could no longer run from it. Hadn't he known that already?

He was Goblin Slayer.

"...Is there anybody there...?!"

That was when somebody shouted a question and came into the shadows—an adventurer.

Well, it made sense: what else would an adventurer do when faced with someone standing with a weapon in the darkness, the smell of blood drifting all around?

It took the adventurer, who carried a sounding staff, a moment to make out exactly what she was seeing, but when she did—

"Goblin Slayer, sir!"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes!" Priestess gripped her staff firmly with both hands and nodded happily. "I was on healing duty again today. I used up my miracles, so I was resting in my room, but..."

Her gaze took in the fallen goblins...and then the corpse of the adventurer. Her lovely eyebrows knit her face into a frown.

Priestess knelt, unconcerned about the blood that stained her white vestments, and reached out to the body, which continued to twitch reflexively.

“Was it goblins?”

“Yes.” Goblin Slayer didn’t look at her but only shook the blood from his sword. “Do you have any miracles left?”

“Thanks to that rest, I can ask for three, just like usual.”

“Are our other...”—Goblin Slayer almost stumbled over the word—“...friends coming?”

“Probably...”

“Good.”

Goblin Slayer finally turned toward Priestess. She looked up at him, her blue eyes visible in the pale moonlight. It occurred to Goblin Slayer how clear her eyes were, like glass beads.

“Can you join me?”

“...Yes, I will.” Priestess bit her lip, her voice trembling. She didn’t rub at her eyes, because she wasn’t crying. “Let’s go...!”

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer nodded. “We’re going to kill all the goblins.”

§

Not long after, the two of them arrived at the building that would serve as the training ground’s administrative center when it was complete.

Although it was to be the central building, it was not yet finished and felt very much abandoned. There were many gaps in the walls and roof, and the forms of many adventurers who had gathered with equipment in hand could be seen.

Thankfully, it seemed more than a few adventurers had made it through the crucible to arrive here.

“Hey, look! If it isn’t Goblin Slayer! Everything okay?”

The first person to greet them was the adventurer who stood guard by the doorway—Spearman. Given how he always seemed ready to jump directly into action, it was actually somewhat surprising to see him standing there.

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer said with a nod. He correctly parsed the intent of the question. “The ones I was looking after are all safe.”

“Yeah? Most of the kids went back home anyway, it being so late and all.”

“Before...it, gets dark...yes?”

There was one other person. A voluptuous witch appeared at Spearman’s side, sidling up like a shadow; a pale sphere of light floated in the air near her. A will-o’-the-wisp? No, this was no spirit. Perhaps the Light spell.

No one wanted to risk using fire, even magical fire, in this area. The wind this spring night was strong. If the fire were to catch on anything here, it would be a catastrophe.

“You’re both safe...” Priestess, perhaps relieved to see a couple of familiar faces, let out a soft breath.

She finally put a stop to the shaking of her knees, gripping her sounding staff with both hands and managing to look suitably resolute.

“We’re here, too!” The clear voice was like an encouraging pat on the back, and it brought a smile to blossom on Priestess’s face.

“You’re all here!”

“Ahh, and so are you. Though this be ever a place of practice battles, I didn’t expect it to become the grounds for a real one.”

“Those little bastards made me miss dinner!”

Up came Lizard Priest, who looked the same as always, along with Dwarf Shaman, who was leisurely rubbing his belly.

Priestess was running toward them before she knew what she was doing, when High Elf Archer held her back.

“You really okay? You’re not hurt? Those goblins didn’t do anything to you, did they?”

“It’s fine, I’m okay. Thank goodness you’re all safe...”

Thank goodness it didn’t turn out like that time.

Surrounded by her friends, Priestess found that her eyes were brimming. No

one said anything about it. Who in the world could bear to lose their friends twice, or even three times?

“...”

Goblin Slayer watched his comrades for several seconds then slowly turned his steel helmet.

The key was to always be thinking—about what one should, and could, do.

This building was yet incomplete and fragile. They would not be able to barricade themselves in it for very long.

That being the case, they needed firepower. They were not a bunch of novices cowering in a corner. At that moment—

“Hey. Made it here in one piece, huh, Goblin Slayer?”

His eyes met those of a well-built warrior.

Heavy Warrior appeared to have been through a battle already; the faint reek of blood hung about him.

Presumably, of course, it was goblins that he had killed. What else could it have been?

Goblin Slayer glanced around the building to see whether he recognized anyone else.

“You’re alone today?”

“She may be a knight, but she’s still a woman. There are times when she’s indisposed. The brats are keeping her company at the inn.” Heavy Warrior’s expression contained indescribable depths. He shrugged, causing his armor to rattle. “A party leader has to think about his people’s health.”

It had been a stroke of luck, really. Feeling indisposed had kept his party at home and, thus, out of this trouble.

“But listen,” Heavy Warrior said, grinning like a hungry shark. “When the three most-whatevers on the frontier are all in one place, things are bound to be interesting.”

There was, of course, no room for error in this situation. The death rattles of

adventurers who had failed to make it to the impromptu base could be heard all around. Each time a goblin howl echoed through the night, the novices in the building looked at one another and shivered.

Adventurers were generally accustomed to being the attackers, not the attacked. Yes, they were occasionally ambushed, and sometimes they took on escort missions. But somehow, deep in their hearts, they continued to believe that they would never really be the hunted.

Priestess could be said to have been unlucky to have had this assumption so violently disproven, but then again, it was its own kind of good fortune.

In any event, if they didn't get out of there—or rather, slay the goblins—they would not live to see the sun again.

All present shared this understanding. Spearman was glancing outside with a sour look.

“Are we just gonna let them put us under siege? Boring. I don't wanna just hole up in here and die.”

“What...ever...the case, it might, be best...for everyone to link up, first.”

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer agreed. “My charges are stationed in the square.”

“Need a messenger, then,” Heavy Warrior said quickly. “*Situation assessed—goblins. Come join us.* That sort of thing. We have to let all the survivors know and get them here as soon as we can.”

“I'll go!” High Elf Archer piped up immediately, raising her hand. “I'm the fastest runner around!”

“Perfect, get on it.”

“You can count on me!”

And then she was off like the wind into the night.

Heavy Warrior watched her go then glanced around. Goblin Slayer and his party made five. Then there was Spearman and Witch. And himself.

Depending on how many among the novices could really be counted on in battle, they had about ten people to fight for them. He didn't count the ones

who were trying to curl up into little balls. Heavy Warrior made the decision: he wouldn't involve them.

"So, Goblin Slayer," he said. "We're dealing with goblins. Who do you think is leading them?"

"Probably another goblin," Goblin Slayer said without hesitation. "A higher one, I assume, but I doubt another lord has been born. Maybe a clever shaman..."

"Got any proof?"

"If someone other than a goblin were leading them, the goblins would be treated as foot soldiers, not the main force."

It was true. No one but a goblin would think to use other goblins to dig a tunnel to attack the training grounds.

Heavy Warrior nodded. "We have to deal with the small fry, but we also have to make sure we take out the bigger fish," he concluded. "And where would that bigger fish be...?"

"In my estimation, the little devils will have more than one hole," Lizard Priest said, his jaw set. He slapped his tail on the ground and raised one scaly finger. "Presumably there will be one in each direction. The quickest solution would be to follow one of them back to its source."

"About that," Spearman said, keeping a close watch outside as he spoke. "How do we know which one goes back to their headquarters?"

"I've the same question. More to the point, most likely they're all connected inside."

In matters subterranean, no one could match a dwarf.

Dwarf Shaman took a swig from the wine jug at his hip then let loose a very alcoholic-smelling burp.

"Chances are they only dug one tunnel then split it off just before the attack. That'd be easiest, after all."

"Sounds good, then. We go down the nearest hole. You good with that, Goblin Slayer?"

“I have no objection.”

“Then, the problem, is, those children.” Witch gestured meaningfully at the novices. “There are, others, aren’t there? What do we, do about...the little ones?”

“Leave ’em, bring ’em, or have ’em run away,” Heavy Warrior mused.

Spearman, however, gave him a grin and a poke on the shoulder. “I’ve gotta think a broadsword won’t do much good in a tunnel...”

“Aw, screw off!” The reminder of Heavy Warrior’s past failure struck a nerve. “But hell. I always liked being aboveground better than below it. I’ll take the kids. You handle the dirt.”

“Right,” said Spearman.

“No problem,” Goblin Slayer added.

The veterans had calculated all this in the blink of an eye. Although she was no longer exactly a beginner, Priestess found she couldn’t have gotten a word in edgewise. Unlike High Elf Archer, who might have chosen to refrain, Priestess couldn’t have spoken up if she wanted to. (Anyway, the elf seemed to see insouciant interjections as her role.)

It was a variety of opinions and perspectives that led to a sound conclusion. Objections and dialogue were not the same as denying what someone else was saying. But right now, perspective—something rooted in genuine experience—was what Priestess overwhelmingly lacked.

But...

What was it? This inarticulate anxiety?

Although she couldn’t put it into words, it may have been some sort of hint from the gods.

She thought of the alarm that had welled up in her when her party entered the cave on that first adventure. The mounting panic building in her little chest—the feeling that she had to do *something*.

Things would end badly if she just let them go on. She had to do something.

But what?

“Oh.”

The sound escaped her mouth the moment the possibility occurred to her.

The collective gaze of the other adventurers pierced her, prompting her to blush a little bit.

“What is it?” Goblin Slayer was the first to speak. “Goblins?”

“...Uh—um!” Her voice was shrill. The focus on her became even more intent. It was enough to make her want to run away. “The other new adventurers, they’ve already gone home, right?”

“Yeah,” Spearman nodded. “All but the ones who wanted to practice night fighting. Gone the moment the sun set.”

“Where do you...suppose they are now?”

“What’re you getting at?” Heavy Warrior said, eyeballing her. He certainly wasn’t intentionally trying to frighten her, but circumstances were what they were. His very seriousness, his intent not to overlook any idea or information whatsoever, was itself intimidating.

“Well, um...”

Priestess flinched back.

Was there actually any value in her giving her opinion?

What if it turned out to be nothing but a flight of fancy?

What business did she even have thinking she could—?

“Just tell us.” Goblin Slayer’s voice was soft, dispassionate. Absolutely the same as ever. Priestess gulped; she gripped her staff harder to hide the trembling of her hands.

She took a breath in then let it out.

“...The goblins... I think they must be after the novices on their way home, too.”

“*What?!*” Heavy Warrior exclaimed in spite of himself. His armor clattered,

causing Priestess to flinch for a second. But she didn't stop speaking. She mustn't.

"Isn't it strange? I know goblins are cowardly, scheming creatures."

Because somebody taught me as much.

Taught her to think like a goblin. How they lived. The fright of them.

"If I were a goblin, the last place I'd want to attack is a building full of strong adventurers."

And also, how they could use a large army as a diversion...

That was something he had said back when they fought the goblin lord—how long ago had that been?

She was still learning. She had experience yet to gain. But she did have *some* experience.

She herself just hadn't realized it.

"...I believe she's right," Goblin Slayer growled quietly. "I overlooked that."

"And I...I have an idea."

Once Priestess had started speaking, the rest was easy.

Not that it made it simple to express her ideas clearly and succinctly, but speech itself came readily to her, and she didn't hesitate.

"And so I'm—I'm going now."

With everyone around focused completely on her, Priestess outlined her plan.

"Our adventurer friends include, um, two warriors, a cleric, a wizard..."

She counted on her fingers. Rookie Warrior, Rhea Fighter. Apprentice Cleric and Wizard Boy.

"I think just having me, another cleric, there could turn the tide. So..."

I'm going to help them. I want to go.

These earnest words caused the Silver-ranked adventurers to look at one another.

“...Time, is short...is it, not?” Witch glanced outside and gave a single seductive laugh but spoke encouragingly.

“I’ve got no idea what this girl is or isn’t capable of. So I’ll abstain,” Spearman added quickly.

“...Makes sense,” Heavy Warrior said. Then he squinted at Priestess, looking her over, up and down her willowy frame. “There’s always a chance that divide and conquer is the whole idea. Think you can handle this?”

“As for me, I have faith in her,” Lizard Priest said with a thoughtful nod and a roll of his eyes. He winked at Priestess. “We must strike at the heart of the enemy, but we must by no means abandon our young adventurers to do so. I think this is a fine ploy.”

“Perfect for a promotion test, I’d say,” Dwarf Shaman chuckled, stroking his long white beard. “D’you agree, Beard-cutter? Gotta push ’em out of the nest some day, eh?”

Goblin Slayer, sir...

Priestess looked at the man in the grimy armor beseechingly.

Now that she thought about it, she realized that this would be almost the first time she had gone on an adventure without him since the very first adventure she had been on.

Could she do it? She herself?

Priestess would by no means be alone, but she would have to rely on her own strength.

Could she fight the goblins?

Everyone kindly told her they believed she could do it. Even High Elf Archer, who wasn’t there, surely would have agreed.

It made her very happy; what more could she wish for than that?

And yet...

If this person says I shouldn’t or can’t...

Then she would just have to quietly accept it. That would be best for

everyone, she was sure.

But what he said was not what she feared.

“Can you do it?”

“I...”

His question was so succinct, so simple. As he always was.

And yet...

It made her wish all the more to rise to the expectations implicit in it. She had to.

Priestess swallowed the half-spoken words, bit her lip, and then answered almost in a shout, “...I will!”

Goblin Slayer looked at her intently. Whatever was in his eyes was hidden behind his helmet; she couldn’t make out his expression, but still...

“Is that so?” He nodded slowly then rendered his verdict. “Then it’s decided.”

§

“Hraah!!”

“GROBR?!”

In the narrow confines of the cave, the mithril spear tip pierced through the goblin’s throat. The long, pole-shaped weapon in Spearman’s hands lashed out in time with the sounds of magic, flowers of death blossoming all around him.

One thrust, one kill. Four thrusts, four kills.

The goblins held up flimsy wood boards in place of shields, but they counted for little.

Only an amateur would imagine that the spear could not be used in a tight space like this; in fact, Spearman made it look like it was capable of anything.

Sweep, strike, block, stab. Stab, stab, draw back, and then stab again.

The repeating flurry of attacks was furious enough to control what was happening in front of them.

The buffed spear lashed out with the speed of a whirlwind, painting the walls

all around with goblin brains and blood.

The gentle downward slope of the ground did nothing to upset the footing of these experienced fighters.

“Don’t you think about getting behind me!”

“Inside! I see six—no, three!”

As Spearman struck an impressive pose, keeping the monsters at bay, High Elf Archer slipped up alongside him and fired a volley of arrows. Three bolts flew as quickly as magic, finding the eyeballs of three separate creatures lurking deeper in the hole.

“GORRB?!”

“GROB! GROORB!!”

There were not six, but three remaining. A simple calculation. If you had no confidence that you could hit, then you couldn’t shoot.

“One...!”

That was when Goblin Slayer made his entrance.

The sword was already flying from his hand even as he charged in, slamming it through a goblin’s throat.

“GRRRO?!”

The monster clawed at his throat as if he were drowning, but Goblin Slayer ignored him, grabbing a dagger from the corpse of one of the goblins with an arrow through his eye. Then he used it to slit the throat of a monster who had not yet gotten over the shock of seeing four of his companions murdered in an instant.

Blood spewed from the creature with a whistling sound; Goblin Slayer swept him aside with his shield and flung the dagger.

The throw may have been just a bit too strong; the knife missed its mark and lodged itself in a goblin’s shoulder.

“GORB!!”

“That’s three.”

Goblin Slayer, unperturbed, took a hand ax from the goblin drowning in a sea of blood. Then he buried it in the skull of the final goblin, and the random encounter was over.

A party of experienced adventurers needed only a single turn to kill ten goblins.

Spearman put up his weapon—he wasn't even breathing hard—and looked to Goblin Slayer in exasperation. "Hey, you," he said. "You have *got* to stop throwing away all your weapons. It's a waste!"

"They are consumables."

"Have a look around. You know they sell those magical throwing knives that come back to you after you throw them, right?"

"Goblins could use them as well," Goblin Slayer said. "What if they were stolen?"

"We don't have time for this!" High Elf Archer exclaimed. "Will you pipe down and help me collect my arrows?" Spearman was busy looking annoyed, and Goblin Slayer was searching the corpses for weapons.

The three of them seemed carefree enough, but they made not a single unnecessary movement. They scanned the area ceaselessly, checked their weapons, readied what they would need next.

Goblin Slayer groaned softly. The goblins had not treated their equipment politely; everything they had was in dismal repair. There were no good weapons here.

"Goodness gracious," Lizard Priest said with a somber nod when he saw the scene. "What a pleasant feeling of security one gets from having two front-row fighters."

"Says the lizard who's always up front."

"In...deed," Witch mumbled calmly. "One, warrior...for, each of us, no?"

They had left the novices at the training ground in Heavy Warrior's care and headed underground via one of the holes.

Unlike the parties' normal five-and-two split, this time they formed a single

group of six people. That meant a different formation from usual, too. Goblin Slayer and Spearman stood on the front row, with High Elf Archer behind them and the spell casters in the back.

Which was more important? High Elf Archer's arrows or Lizard Priest's spells? The answer was obvious.

"I got them," Goblin Slayer said, handing over the arrows.

High Elf Archer looked at them and gave a click of her tongue. "Oh, for— The heads are missing!" She tossed them angrily back in her quiver of bud-tipped bolts. There was nothing to be done about it. "What about you, Orcbolg? Find any good weapons?"

"Beggars cannot be choosers."

"Why'd you let the girl go without me anyway?"

"Are you upset?"

"Not really," the High Elf said, looking away. "But aren't you worried about her?"

"If my worrying would help things go well for her, then I would."

Yeesh...

But no sooner had High Elf Archer breathed a sigh than her ears pricked up, twitching.

"They're coming."

"Direction and number?" Goblin Slayer asked immediately, drawing a small leather pouch from his item bag as he did so.

It was his purse: the coins inside jangled. It carried an embroidered floral design and seemed to be quite old. He cinched the mouth of the purse tightly; it made a sharp noise as he did so.

"I dunno... The sounds are echoing everywhere...!"

"Well, we ain't got time to discuss it in committee!" Spearman said, shaking his weapon to get the grease off. "No matter what, we can't let them get up top."

“Not many choices left. Want me t’do it?”

As experienced adventurers, they were quick to respond to the situation. Even as Dwarf Shaman spoke, he was reaching into his bag of catalysts, readying his spell. Witch calmly brought her staff up and begin focusing herself to intone her magic. Lizard Priest brought his hands together.

“Gracious, goblin slaying does involve the worst of both the troublesome and the unexpected, does it not?” he said.

“You’re quite, right,” Witch said with a languid chuckle, and then her luscious lips were whispering words of true power. “*Sagitta...sinus...offero*. Gift a curve to arrows!”

A wizard’s spells were words that rewrote the very logic of the world.

As an invisible flow protected the party, High Elf Archer and Spearman were shouting.

“They’re coming! Both walls!”

“Fall back!”

Showers of stones and dirt came from both sides of the adventurers. At almost the exact same instant, they all jumped back.

“GRORB!! GROOROOBB!!”

“GROOBRR!”

Was this what the word *horde* truly meant?

The average adventurer might expect not to see ten or twenty goblins in his or her life.

But more goblins than that, far more, were now pouring in upon them. The goblins howled like animals, and it was easy to guess what their shouting meant.

Kill them. Steal from them. Get revenge. Revenge for our brothers. Die, adventurers, die!

The men they would slaughter immediately. The women they would rob of every last vestige of dignity before putting them both to the sword.

They would take the one woman's staff, bind her legs, and make her bear goblin young for them until she was too dead to be of any more use. Elf meat, they knew, was soft and kept a long time. They could chop off her arms and legs bit by bit and feast on them.

The women would weep; they would beg for forgiveness; but the goblins would ignore them.

Kill them, just as they would kill us!

"Drink deep, sing loud, let the spirits lead you! Sing loud, step quick, and when to sleep they see you, may a jar of fire wine be in your dreams to greet you!"

No doubt several of the little devils ended their lives never waking up from that dream. Caught up in the mist of wine Dwarf Shaman spat from his mouth, they found themselves under the influence of the Stupor spell.

Stumbling over their now-unconscious vanguard, the goblins began to topple like dominoes. Several were trampled to death as the goblins in the back tried to force their way to the front.

There was agonized screaming and shouting. It was pandemonium.

"Fools." Without hesitation, Goblin Slayer spun his purse, attacking the nearest monster. The speed and the centrifugal force of the coins in the little leather pouch was more than enough to split the skull of a goblin.

And thus the money all the villagers had saved so diligently, to pay for an adventurer to end their goblin troubles, was used to actually murder a goblin. Poetic justice at its finest.

"GRB?!"

"GRORB?!"

One monster found its eyeball popped like a bubble, found itself pierced to the brain, which was then further crushed in from the temple.

Stopping one or two goblins was easy enough.

Goblin Slayer kicked the first one aside, grabbing the sword at the creature's hip in the same movement.

“Hrgh...!”

Another goblin had seized this moment of inattention to jump at him with a poisoned dagger. He met the creature with his shield, sending it flying.

More arrows came raining down, but as they were turned aside by an invisible power, he ignored them. They were no concern of his.

“I’m sending some your way!”

“Aw, don’t make more work for me!”

Despite his complaints, Spearman was putting on a display of superb technique. In a single stroke, he stabbed several creatures in front of him, and as he pulled the weapon out again, he thrust the butt behind him. It slammed into the skull of the goblin who had been pushed aside by the shield, crushing in his head and killing him.

“We ain’t lettin’ even one goblin past us!”

“That has always been my intention.”

The two warriors stood back to back, goblins breaking upon them like a dark tide.

When it came to grandiosity and strength, Spearman obviously had Goblin Slayer outclassed. He threshed goblins like wheat with every swipe of his spear.

Goblin Slayer, naturally, restricted himself to making sure Spearman wasn’t taken from behind. He finished off anyone Spearman missed, dealt with those in front of him, and passed off to Spearman those he couldn’t personally finish.

They hardly thought about defense, leaving Deflect Missile to ward off incoming stones.

They simply focused single-mindedly on their weapons.

But of course, even for Goblin Slayer, things would never be so simple.

“Shaman!”

High Elf Archer’s shout cut through the melee. At the rear of the goblin formation stood one monster with a staff, uttering a spell.

Light swelled from his upraised staff then flew outward.

It was the most basic of all offensive spells, Magic Arrow.

It might not be very powerful, but if it hit, in some cases, it could still be enough to turn the tide of battle. What was more, because it was magical, Deflect Missile would provide no protection against it.

Surprisingly clever, for a goblin. But Spearman shouted eagerly, "Take it!"

"Magna...remora...restinguitur! An end to magic!"

Witch smiled indulgently and recited a spell almost in singsong. It was Counterspell, and it would resist the words of true power the goblin shaman had spoken.

The moment they encountered Witch's words, the majority of the incoming arrows vanished, only a scant few of them reaching Spearman and Goblin Slayer.

"Could I, trouble you not to, make more work for m...e?"

"That *is* your work!"

Banter for banter. Spearman waded into the host of goblins, even as blood dribbled from a wound on his cheek; it didn't seem to bother him in the least.

"They want arrows? I'll give 'em arrows," High Elf Archer growled, letting her spider-silk string bow do the rest of the talking.

One of the bolts went flying through the dust and the thick air, lodging itself, just as she had intended, in the shaman's neck.

"There!"

"Any injuries?" The question came from Lizard Priest, who was evidently growing bored in the back; he slapped his tail impatiently against the ground. Without Priestess there, he was the party's one cleric, the only one capable of healing miracles. He seemed rather displeased at having to remain so far to the rear, carefully conserving his spells.

"No problems," Goblin Slayer answered briefly, checking himself over. There were places where his poor leather armor and mail had been pierced through; blood oozed here and there, and he felt pain.

In other words, I am still alive.

He continued to work his sword against the goblins in front of him as he groped through his item pouch, relying on the knots to guide him. He pulled out a potion and gulped it down then lobbed the empty vial with his left hand.

“GROORB!!”

“Die.”

The goblin had stumbled back under the unexpected blow; Goblin Slayer cut his throat mercilessly. Blood frothed at the creature’s neck; Goblin Slayer kicked him away and pulled out his sword, shaking off the gore.

“You have spells left?” he asked, steadying his breath.

“Yes, thank...fully,” Witch replied with a smile.

“Us, too,” Dwarf Shaman said.

“Shall I produce a Dragontooth Warrior?”

“No,” Goblin Slayer said to his friend’s question, shaking his head thoughtfully. He grunted softly, looking up at the ceiling of the tunnel the goblins had dug.

“Orcbolg,” High Elf Archer said in a resigned tone. “You’re thinking of something unpleasant again, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer said with a nod. “Unpleasant for the goblins.”

§

The adventurers in the half-built office building began to relax as the sounds of battle grew more distant.

“...Think they went that way?”

“Seems like it.”

Maybe we’ll be rescued after all. Mom, Dad, maybe we’ll survive.

As they looked at one another and whispered, every word was one of fear or complaint.

This isn’t gonna help.

Heavy Warrior sighed to himself as he stood in the doorway, looking out. He was losing heart, and he hated it.

It wasn't that he didn't sympathize with the novices.

Anyone, when they failed, when they encountered something difficult or painful, could find themselves cowed. Might stamp their feet in frustration.

Above all, these kids didn't want to be killed by goblins. No one did.

But what was an adventurer who never went on an adventure? Fumble though they might, a true adventurer never gave up until the moment they died.

Even if the next roll of the gods' dice might be critical.

Just then...

Fwump.

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, which caused the ground to rumble gently.

The beginners trembled, swallowing nervously; they shut their mouths and stopped talking.

A dark shadow.

It lumbered past clutching a massive club in its hand.

Heavy Warrior didn't have to plumb the depths of his monster knowledge to know what it was.

"Big, ugly visitor we've got. A hob."

A *hob*. A hobgoblin.

A higher form of goblin that appeared intermittently. They lacked intelligence and were not particularly elegant fighters, but they did have endless strength. In many nests, they served as the chief, or sometimes as hired muscle.

"Hey, kids. Wanna see something neat?" Heavy Warrior spat into his palm, smeared it on the hilt of his broadsword, then gripped the weapon tightly. "I don't know what the other guys taught you, but I've got just one lesson for you."

Then he casually flung himself out the door.

“HHOOOORRB!!”

One step, two, three. He advanced straight toward the gigantic goblin.

It was only a goblin. But a goblin nonetheless.

It was no comparison to the goblin champion he had fought before.

Still, a direct hit from those muscles wasn't likely to be a lot of fun. It might even be fatal, depending.

“No matter what overgrown lump you're facing, if you've got enough info on him—”

Who would believe that such a massive weapon could be swung in a circle?

He stepped in.

He let the momentum of his body carry him. If you were strong enough, it wasn't impossible.

His body began to bend.

The two-handed steel sword had cost vastly more than any of his other equipment. The price put it on a different level. And Heavy Warrior—

“—then, boys and girls, you can kill anything—even a god!”

—went in swinging.

§

Goblins only ever have mischief in mind.

Fairy tales tell us that much, but the chance to see it firsthand is rare.

“GROB! GROORB!!”

“GORROOR!!”

How had this happened?

His mind worked quickly as his leather armor, still new enough to be stiff, crunched and cracked. He was supposed to have a sword in his hand, but he must have dropped it somewhere while he was running. Every time he took a

step, the scabbard slapped against his leg, reminding him that his head was as empty as the sheath.

The night darkness seemed to be entirely filled with the cackling of goblins.

The shadows of the trees in the light of the twin moons loomed eerily, and a horde of eyes burned like stars in the blackness.

It was something most had seen only in nightmares. Perhaps the beginners—beginners who would not even have a chance to finish their training—had never even dreamed of it.

Not one of them.

Most of them, when they imagined themselves in a crisis, also imagined coolly extricating themselves from it. Deep in a cave, surrounded by goblins? They would think of a clever way to turn the tables.

But never had they imagined that they might be surrounded by goblins on an otherwise perfectly open night road.

“...D-dammit!”

“This way, quick!” someone shouted, and they made a beeline for the woods.

They thought it would give them an advantage over being trapped in the field.

There had been, perhaps, fifteen of them at first. They had been meandering along the road after training, heading back toward town.

There would be more training tomorrow. But they wanted to go on adventures sometime soon. Such had been the subject of their conversation.

And what of it?

A scream had come from the tail of their group. They turned to see a girl ensconced in a dark mass.

“Nooo! No, stop, st—ahh! Gghh... Hrrgh...?!”

They could still hear her screaming as her life ended, her voice thick as she wept and cried out for her mother.

When he dove in and somehow managed to drag her away, it was already over. She was all deep cuts and ripped cloth, bone sticking through torn flesh.

Of course she wasn't alive. How could she be?

...After that, all had been chaos.

"Goblins!"

Some people had shouted and run, attempting to flee; others had tried to face the monsters, but one disappeared, then another got separated...

Now only five or six of them were left.

"I thought goblins were supposed to stay in caves...!"

"Well, they're here now, so stop griping!" The warrior running alongside took off his helmet, which had grown too hot. "We just have to make it back to—"

He never got to finish.

A rock came down on his head from above, crushing in his skull.

"Wh-wha—?!"

Above us?!

Another adventurer desperately wiped away the bits of brain that splattered on his forehead then looked up into the trees, where he saw them: the fiery, gleaming eyes of goblins.

"I never heard they could climb *trees*!!" He could count himself lucky that he didn't just burst into tears right there.

He was still only fifteen years old. The strongest boy in his village. That alone had been enough to convince him to leave his hometown behind.

He knew how to swing a sword. Basic scouting, how to pitch a camp—and so on and so forth. He had thought that put him "in the know." He realized too late how wrong he was.

The five surviving adventurers gathered together, trying to keep their knees from shaking.

They held weapons in trembling hands, tried to chant spells with unresponsive tongues, attempted to pray through overpowering fear.

The howling laughter of the goblins came again.

“GOORORB!!”

“GROORB! GRORB!!”

They pointed at the terrified adventurers, closing in and jabbering loudly.

If the adventurers had been able to understand the goblin language, their fear would only have increased.

Two points for an arm. Three points for a leg. Ten for a head. And a torso, five.

No bonus for a man, but ten extra points for a woman.

A most awful way of deciding whom to target.

And all this despite the fact that slings and throwing spears made it impossible to say who had killed what, and they would no doubt simply end up arguing about who had how many points.

The goblins thought this was a wonderful game they had come up with. They hefted their weapons gleefully.

Was this the end?

The adventurers’ teeth chattered as they watched the goblins advance.

Up rose the rusty swords, the spear tips, the crude rocks, no hint of mercy—

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness!”

That was when a miracle happened.

A flash burst like the sun, assailing the goblins with its power.

“GROOROROB?!”

“GORRRB?!”

The goblins bellowed and stumbled back; then among them appeared a silhouette, and then another.

“Take—*this!!*”

“Yaaaaahhh!!”

Rhea Fighter wielded a one-handed blade, while Rookie Warrior swung his

club this way and that.

Their strength was inelegant but effective. *Bash, bash, bash.*

They were like a whirlwind descending upon the goblins.

“GORB?!”

“GOROORB?!”

They might not exactly be able to carve the goblins in two, but if you slice a creature from the shoulder down to the torso, rending bone and flesh along the way, your enemy will die.

They didn’t need critical hits against goblins.

“E-ergh, I’m really not used to the feel of this yet!” Rhea Fighter moaned as she pulled her sword out of one of the monsters.

“They’re still comin’!” Rookie Warrior shouted back, kicking aside a goblin corpse.

He was imitating Goblin Slayer. If *he* were fighting this fight, he would drop his sword and steal another weapon.

Then again, Spearman would have acted more decisively, picking vital points and stabbing them quickly before moving on to the next.

And Heavy Warrior? He would have swept all the goblins away with one great swipe of his broadsword.

But I guess I can’t do any of that, so...!

Thinking of the heights he had yet to reach emboldened Rookie Warrior’s fighting spirit.

“Okay, you monsters, bring it on...!”

“Oh, for—! If you lose another weapon, no allowance until we buy a new one!” Apprentice Cleric shouted at Rookie Warrior, then she hurried over to the adventurers, holding up the hem of her vestments so she could run. “Any injured? Speak up! Come over here, I’ll treat you! Miracles for the grievously wounded only!”

Several of the adventurers all but crawled over to her. She didn’t immediately

see anyone in need of emergency care. Nor did there appear to be anyone poisoned.

Still, this was hardly the moment for *Thank goodness we made it in time!*

Ten other young adventurers lay cruelly murdered in the street.

Apprentice Cleric bit her lip and pulled some bandages out of her item bag. She didn't have the leeway to cast Minor Heal on everyone.

"Y-you guys..."

"We've come to—to help you!"

This ringing voice came from the priestess who held up the staff from which Holy Light shone. Her slender face glistened with sweat, and she glared at the goblin horde; it was her unshakable faith that kept the miracle going.

"Everyone together!" she commanded. "We're going to get out into the field! In a confined space like this, we're at the goblins' mercy!"

"But... But if they surround us out there..."

"I'll keep us safe with Protection... Just go!" Priestess shouted, calmly considering how to use her miracles.

Most likely, she would have to overlap two miracles to stave off the goblin attacks as they retreated. She could still only use three miracles per day, so it would be a critical failure to waste even one of them.

No Minor Heal today, either, huh?

She felt a pang at the thought, but this was the best way for her to fight. If she stayed firm in that belief, the all-merciful Earth Mother would continue to grant her light.

"____"

Among the adventurers who had come to the rescue was a single boy with red hair, not saying a word.

The clamor of battle. The shouts of their two front-row fighters. The screams of goblins. The admonitions of the two clerics. The responses of the adventurers.

The boy took all this in, his mouth firmly shut, gripping his staff so hard his fingers turned white.

Why? Because in this five-person party, he had the most firepower of anyone.

I can't use my spell carelessly.

He wouldn't make the same mistake he had last time.

There were so many goblins. Including him, there were only three adventurers who could properly fight, yet the enemy was more than a dozen.

Could he take them all out with a single Fireball? No, impossible. The enemy was too spread out to catch several of them in a single blast.

But using up his spell to take out just one goblin didn't make sense.

He didn't have any time to mull it over, though. There were goblins everywhere, and standing still made you an easy target.

Just like that acolyte they had captured. What would happen to the girls here?

What had happened to his sister...?

Suddenly, Wizard Boy felt his vision grow hot as fire, yet he himself was utterly calm.

That weirdo of an adventurer, Goblin Slayer—much as Wizard Boy hated to admit it, he was always calm. If he let his anger dictate how he used his spell, this time he really would be a lesser man than *that* adventurer.

No—not that Goblin Slayer would say anything. But he would never be able to forgive himself.

So what do I do, then?

There was more to a wizard than flinging balls of fire and calling down bolts of thunder.

So what was there to do—?

At that moment, there was a flash like lightning in his brain.

“Everyone, cover your ears!”

“Wha?! We’re—a little busy—fighting, here—!”

“Hurry!”

“Aw, man!”

Rookie Warrior and Rhea Fighter weren’t happy about the sudden instructions, but they didn’t argue.

There was no time to waste.

The red-haired boy glanced at Priestess, who nodded solemnly at him.

“I’ll leave this to you!”

It was just as Goblin Slayer had done for her during the battle after the festival, and again on the snowy mountain.

The use of spells, like so many things, required both the orders and the trust of the party leader.

And the boy she had trusted—the red-haired wizard boy—nodded and raised his staff.

“You too! Do what he says and plug your ears!” Apprentice Cleric shouted at the adventurers in her care.

Rookie Warrior and Rhea Fighter quickly dealt with the goblins in front of them then hurried to make some distance.

I’ll only get one chance.

From the boy’s mouth boomed words of true power, his spell unleashed upon the world.

“Crescunt! Crescunt! Crescunt!”

It was only three words. An invisible power welled up, floating through the air, spilling out in front of the boy.

What followed was a single sound.

HRRR RRRRRRAAAA AAAAAAAAAAAAAA AAH HHHH!!!!

The air shook.

It was like killing every bird with a single stone. Cutting the Gordian knot.

Such was the single blow from Heavy Warrior's broadsword, along with the shout he gave.

In a tremendous blow, it cleaved through every inch of the hobgoblin—its club, flesh, and blood alike.

Black blood sprayed everywhere; the creature split clean down the middle before collapsing to the ground.

The astonished beginners could only stare as Heavy Warrior shook off his sword and stashed it once more on his back.

"Oh-ho."

The entire area was filled with a howl that threatened their eardrums.

Somebody's scream? Where was it coming from?

He looked up at the sky, not that he was going to find the answers there.

"Sounds like someone's having a little fun," Heavy Warrior said with a sharklike grin.

§

At that moment, bits of earth rained down from the ceiling, and the clinging moisture of them brought Goblin Slayer to a decision.

"Upward."

He lodged the hand spear in a goblin's throat then kicked the frothing corpse away, letting his weapon go with it. Instead, he grabbed the hatchet from the creature's belt.

Goblin Slayer knew that he was nowhere near Spearman when it came to the use of spears.

"Open a hole above us!"

As the shout came to the back row, Dwarf Shaman was already digging through his bag of catalysts. "Another one? Well, comin' right up!"

"A hole? Whaddaya want with a hole?" Spearman shouted as he worked his

weapon to hold back the encroaching tide of enraged goblins. His body was covered in small cuts, evidence that he was not invincible. Even with several experienced adventurers on the front row, numbers would eventually win out. Small pains or small fatigues, piled atop one another, still amounted to death when the moment came.

“I have a plan,” Goblin Slayer said shortly and slammed the sharpened edge of his shield into a goblin’s forehead. Seeing that the creature still refused to breathe his last, Goblin Slayer took the freshly stolen hatchet and pretended he was chopping wood.

There was a satisfying *splorch*, and brains went flying all over the walls of the cave.

“But first, I want to frighten them deeper into the cavern.”

“Casting Fear and Tunnel at the same time is going to be a little much even for me!”

“Milord Goblin Slayer, they need simply be sent deeper in, yes?”

Dwarf Shaman was standing on his bag of catalysts in order to reach the ceiling, on which he was inscribing a sigil. Lizard Priest had moved up to cover him; now he bared his fangs fearsomely.

The moment had come for him to let his spiritual prowess, which he had conserved until this exact point, show forth.

Lizard Priest brought his palms together in a strange gesture and took in a breath, filling his lungs with air. He looked like a dragon preparing to use a breath weapon.

“Bao Long, honored ancestor, Cretaceous ruler, I borrow now the terror of thee!”

The moment he finished chanting, Dragon’s Roar burst through the tunnel. The noise that Lizard Priest breathed out of his jaws shook the very air.

The goblins, hearing a great and terrible dragon right there in the tunnel, felt their courage shrink.

Goblins are never that brave to begin with. They are at their most violent only

when in a superior position or when taking revenge.

And when afraid, they have no concept of an orderly retreat.

“GORRRBB! GBROOB!!”

“GROB! GGROB!!”

Squawking and dropping their weapons this way and that, they began to dash away. Witch cast Light to pursue their fleeing forms.

Lizard Priest snorted at the pathetic spectacle. “They will soon be back,” he warned. “Even a dragon’s power cannot last forever.”

“I don’t care,” Goblin Slayer replied, but all the same he kept his low, guarded stance and stared into the distance.

High Elf Archer, beginning to look tired, patted him on the shoulder. “Orcbolg, are you planning to use another scroll?”

“I had only the one.”

“...That doesn’t make me feel better at all.”

Goblin Slayer nodded as he watched Dwarf Shaman continue to work a pattern into the dirt.

“There is a lake above us.”

§

The boy’s shout, amplified by magic, echoed through the air and off the trees of the forest.

It was just a very loud voice. Hardly remarkable for something supposedly produced by words that could alter the very logic of the world.

His professors at the Academy would never have let him hear the end of it—but he wasn’t at the Academy now.

It may have lacked the physical threat of Fireball, but his great voice was overpowering. Most important of all, the area of effect was far larger than Fireball’s. Goblins who were immediately nearby fell unconscious, while others froze in surprise, and still others forgot everything else and started running.

“GOOROB?!”

“GROOB?! GRRO?!”

The boy gripped his staff, biting his lip so hard that blood dribbled from it, and stared fixedly at the goblins’ backs.

He had wanted to kill them.

Such selfish creatures they were. Violent and murderous. Yet, now they ran. And he was letting them.

It wasn’t enough.

There was his older sister to think of. The adventurers they had killed. The acolyte he and his party had rescued.

Then there was the humiliation they had all been subjected to. The hopelessness. The sadness. The anger. All the things that burned inside him.

To let all those things come bubbling forth—what a pleasure that would be! How wonderful!

Yes, but...

“We’re getting out of here!”

It was Priestess’s shout that brought the boy back to himself. She held aloft her staff, which still shone with Holy Light, and used it to gesture in the direction they should go.

“Head straight out of the woods and make for town!”

“You got it!” Rookie Warrior shouted back. He buried a blade in the throat of the unconscious goblin beside him then started forward. “Here we go. Getting home is our top priority! Follow me!”

“Let him lead the way! I’ll keep an eye on this group—you watch our rear!”

“Sure thing!” Rhea Fighter replied to Apprentice Cleric. In spite of all that fighting, she didn’t appear fatigued. Was that a rhea trait, or was it just her?

Rhea Fighter passed by the boy as she headed for the back. “Nice work. That was really something.” She could only smile at him in passing, but it was heartfelt.

After a moment, the boy nodded. "...Thanks."

As the party surrounded the adventurers and began running, the boy stole a glance back over his shoulder.

The spell he had used was not intended to kill, just to give them an opening to escape.

It was true: his goal in this instance had not been to kill goblins.

It had been to help others. To get them out of there and safely back to town.

How satisfying it would have been had he been able to slaughter all the goblins.

But—yes, but.

I'm no Goblin Slayer.

The boy broke off from the battleground and faced forward, running with the others.

He didn't look back again.

§

The goblins had come like a tide, and now they were swept away by one.

The lake water that came spewing through the ceiling turned into a mudslide, pouring into the goblin tunnel.

Unfortunately for them, the nest was on a downward slope. The party of adventurers had scrambled uphill a bit, and it was enough to keep them safe, but as for the goblins who had fled back into the tunnel...

"GORRRBB?!"

"GBBOR?! GOBBG?!"

The goblins bobbed to the surface of the flood then sank again, drowning in the muddy water. It was an awful spectacle.

"I guess this feels good, as far as it goes," Spearman said, smacking a drowning goblin in the head with the butt of his spear and watching it sink once more. "But we can't pursue them like this. What if they just attack again when

the water goes down?”

“When Tunnel runs out, cast some kind of ice spell.” Goblin Slayer issued his next instruction to Witch, whose expression was ambiguous. “The ice will expand when it freezes, destroying this passageway. They won’t be able to use it anymore.”

“Good. I, under...stand.”

“We will have to search aboveground for the nest and destroy it.”

Goblin Slayer had already been making some mental calculations. The goblins had stolen only construction tools, no food. The earlier quest had been much the same: they had merely kidnapped prisoners to help them pass the time.

All this meant that the heart of their operation could not be too far away.

What had the goblins thought when they saw the building under construction and the adventurers gathering there? He had no way to know.

“...I think I’ll let you guys handle that. Me, I’m beat.” Spearman grasped his weapon wearily then sat down at the side of the tunnel. “Next time you wanna double-date...I hope it’s something other than goblins.”

“I understand.”

On reflection, none of them had rested for several hours. Everyone had been fighting through the night. They were all eager to sleep like logs.

High Elf Archer, physically the weakest of these six Silver-ranked adventurers, found her ears drooping. “I’m so tired...”

“Don’t treat the earth like that,” Dwarf Shaman scolded her as she leaned against a wall. “He just said we still have to find and destroy the nest.”

High Elf Archer pursed her lips. “Yeah, I know, but...!”

She wasn’t really that upset. She wiped her mud-stained cheeks and muttered, “This is why I hate goblin quests.”

Most adventurers probably would have agreed with her.

The water bubbled and coughed as it rose up and down. Was that the sound of goblins dying or just the flood rushing along?

“I’m quite impressed that you knew we were beneath this lake,” Lizard Priest said calmly as he watched the waters. “Has milord Goblin Slayer been to this area before?”

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer said dispassionately as he watched the monsters drown. “Long ago... Very long ago.”

Many goblins died that day, as did many adventurers.

But the adventurers won.

The training grounds were defended.

Yet, even so, there seemed to be just as many goblins in the world as before.



“Hyaaahhh!”

There was one tremendous shout.

Next was an explosion woven of the light of the sun, and then the ultimate weapon, the holy blade, slashed through the space between dimensions.

The nameless evil spirits caught up in the force of it were sundered at the minutest level imaginable.

This gave new meaning to the word *Disintegrate*.

With neither corpse nor soul left behind, they would not trouble the physical world again.

The hero let the momentum of the slash carry her into a four-dimensional somersault, and she jumped out of the rent in space.

“We’re here...!!”

She landed in a field that seemed vaguely familiar.

A breeze blew gently under an azure sky. The sun was bright, the clouds were white. The place smelled pleasantly of early summer.

“Sheesh... That took long enough.”

“...It just means interdimensional travel is something you have to take your time with.”

One by one, stalwart party members emerged from the Plane of Annihilation back to the real world.

“Man, that was tough. I’m spent.” The hero gave a big stretch then squinted up at a sun she had not seen in far too long.

Going to the place between planes of existence to deal with Hecatoncheir, then coming back here, had been quite the adventure.

It would have been simple enough—yes, simple enough to come straight home, had they so desired.

But there had been so many enemies there as to make them question whether the physical world functioned differently in that realm. So many people suffering abuse and torture.

As the knights who traversed the storms of the three thousand realms, this was something they could not overlook.

If there was something they could do to help, then they must give their all to do it. This was a principle she always clung to.

“But it was fun, huh?”

“I’m not sure *fun* is the word I would choose for it,” Sword Master said with a grin, giving her a playful smack on the head.

“Eeyowch!” she exclaimed, clutching her head but also giggling.

“...In any event, I worry about this world. We must ascertain the situation as soon as possible,” Sage said with a thin smile. The hero nodded her assent.

Well, with or without them, the evil cult would work in the shadows and monsters would run rampant. That was just the way of the world.

One simply could not do everything alone.

“I bet the king’s got problems, too. What say we pop by the castle?”

“Perhaps, but first we need to determine where we are. Somewhere along the western frontier, I think...”

At that, the hero looked away. In the distance, she could see a new village being built.

Boys and girls not so different in age from her worked and laughed together, sweat pouring down their brows.

She had never experienced anything like that herself.

She suddenly had a thought. What would her life have been like if she had been a normal village girl, or a typical adventurer?

It wouldn’t all be straightforward success. She would fail sometimes, too.

Perhaps even die.

'Course, I coulda been turned into interdimensional dust on this trip...

She would gather with her friends at the bar, go on journeys and adventures, experience joy and sadness as she saved her wages each day.

Maybe fate or chance would have brought her some incredible encounter.

The fantasy made her pulse pick up. But then she smiled and shook her head.

But if there's something only I can do, then I'd better be the one to do it.

"Welp, better ask at that village, then! Excuuuuse meee!!"

No sooner had she spoken than the hero ran off, waving for attention.

Her party members—her precious, precious friends—were left to chuckle, say "There she goes again," and follow after her.

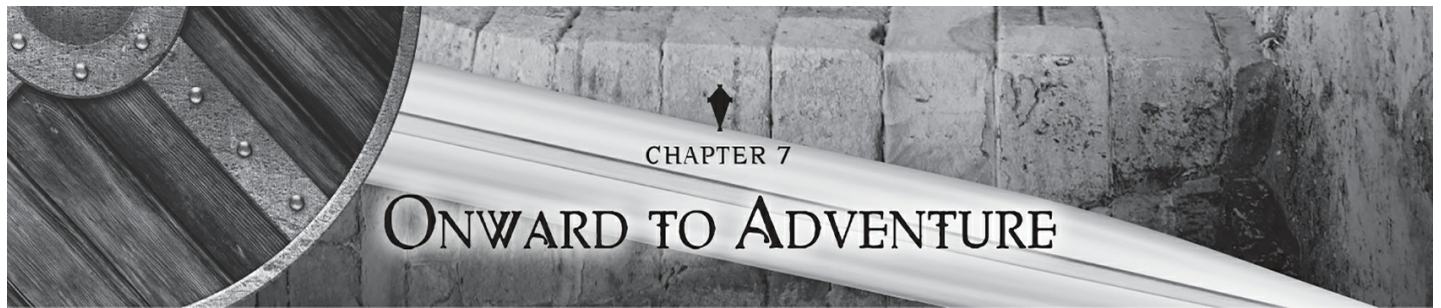
This much was true: she had encounters and adventures as well. In that, they were all the same.

No difference among them. That, at least, brought the hero contentment.

The young person who noticed her coming wiped the sweat from their face as they looked up.

On that face was, of course, a smile.

"Welcome! This is the adventurers' training ground!"



“There! Excellent work!”

The sound of Guild Girl stamping the paper echoed around the room. She smiled brightly and straightened the paper up, signaling the end of the interview.

Phew! Priestess’s little chest sank as she let out a well-earned breath.

Yes, she and Guild Girl knew each other, but it would have been almost impossible not to be nervous about one’s promotion interview. Especially not with Inspector, the servant of the Supreme God, using the Sense Lie miracle the entire time...

“Good job,” Inspector said. “Don’t worry, you’re fine. I know you weren’t lying about anything.”

“Y-yes, thanks. But it still makes my heart pound...”

“I think if it didn’t, you might not even have a pulse!” Inspector responded, waving away Priestess’s concern.

Beside her, Guild Girl relaxed her pasted-on smile and chuckled. “There are two things you should be a little afraid of if you want to survive in this world: enemy monsters and your bosses.”

It was best to be nervous and then to go ahead and act. One who behaved rashly, without knowing what they were dealing with, was foolish. Or anyway, so *he* had said.

“The only thing you had to get through was the solo performance. Hang on a second, please.” Guild Girl took a brand-new metal tag from a box. She took a quill pen and began to write on the blank face in flowing letters.

Name, age, class, skills, and so on...

An exact copy of Priestess’s Adventure Sheet, the proof of who she was.

One year.

It had been one year since she had gone on that first goblin-slaying quest, fallen into danger, and been rescued by that person.

She had made friends that she cherished, fought an ogre in some old ruins.

She had run through a field in the dark of night to set an ambush for a goblin lord who had come with his army.

In the sewers beneath the water town, there had been the horrific blow from that goblin champion.

Then the battle with the eyeball creature in the innermost chamber, and the rematch with the champion, in which a bold stroke had saved their lives.

She had put on the vestments for the autumn festival and danced a prayer to the gods.

And immediately after that, she had faced a dark elf in combat.

Come winter, they had turned north, fighting the goblins who had been attacking a village there from their fortress.

There she had met Noble Fencer, slain the goblin paladin, and greeted the new year with *him*.

And then... And then...

“...”

Priestess closed her eyes, the details of each memory, each event, each experience flashing through her mind.

All of it had happened after her promotion from Porcelain, the sign of a newly minted adventurer, to Obsidian.

And yet...

“Right...”

Even now, being promoted for a second time, it still didn't quite feel real to her.

Had she really reached the eighth rank?

Was she really strong enough for that?



She wouldn't say it had all been a mistake, but she feared that her true colors might come out sooner rather than later...

"You'll be fine," Guild Girl said, as if she could read Priestess's thoughts. Priestess realized she had been unconsciously clenching her fist. Guild Girl was still focusing on the tag, writing quickly with an experienced hand. "The evaluation suits your demonstrated abilities. Not that it's any guarantee of how things will go in the future."

The quill fluttered furiously as Guild Girl wrote, and then she breathed on the tag. Finally, she carefully put her tools away and picked up the tag politely, with both hands.

"You have skills, and people speak well of you. Even if it's all one big fluke, that would at least mean you're lucky, huh?"

Then she held out the level tag: a small piece of steel, the eighth rank. It was attached to a fine chain that could be hung about the neck. Priestess took it reverently.

"I guess...you're right."

The tag seemed too light for confidence.

Priestess held back her golden hair with one hand as she put on the necklace. Then she tucked it gently under her vestments and placed a hand to her chest.

"I don't know yet... But I'm going to do everything I can to find out."

"Yes! That's the spirit!"

Priestess nodded at Guild Girl's encouragement.

She didn't know yet whether she really had the ability. But she did have people who believed in her.

And that would be enough for now—she was sure of it.

§

Just one step beyond the Guild door revealed sunlight streaming through the blue sky that was almost blinding. The richness of the rays showed that spring was ending and summer was starting in earnest. Priestess squinted against the

bright sky.

Now then, what to do?

She probably ought to go to the Temple and make a report, but...

That was when her eyes met those of an elf girl sitting on the curb.

The elf's ears twitched in surprise; she stepped off the curb onto the walkway and stretched like a cat.

"Hey, you. All done? How'd it go?"

"Good. I got promoted this time."

Priestess pulled up the chain around her neck to show off the new level tag. It glinted in the sunlight. High Elf Archer looked very pleased.

"Well, good for you. This is, what, the eighth rank? You're a real priestess now." She took Priestess's hand and shook it vigorously, looking as happy as if it were she herself who had been promoted.

Priestess's head almost spun, but the elf's wiggling ears made her laugh.

"Yes. But—"

High Elf Archer leaned forward, detecting a shadow in Priestess's manner.

"What's up? Not happy about it?"

"Oh no, it's not that..." Priestess waved a hand to dismiss the notion. That wasn't it at all. "It's just... Those goblins, I..."

I let them get away.

That night, she had taken action to save the young adventurers from the danger that took hold of them.

It had been similar to a goblin-slaying quest, but not quite the same.

She knew what would come next. She had been taught about it, seen it for herself...

"Listen here."

"Eep?!!"

High Elf Archer broke into Priestess's gloomy ruminations by grabbing her by the nose.

"You're not Orcbolg, okay? So don't worry about it."

"Right..." Priestess pressed a hand to her stinging nose, her eyes reflexively tearing up. She focused on High Elf Archer.

The elf snorted and stuck out her modest chest then declared confidently, "He's a bit of a *weirdo* anyway!"

A weirdo, I tell ya, she repeated to herself, spinning her finger in a circle in the air.

"For example, you know why goblins don't use fire? He says it's because 'they haven't yet discovered fire as a military tactic'!"

And there were lots of other examples, too.

Fire, poison gas. Destroying ruins, digging holes, flooding places. *Yeesh!*

High Elf Archer was practically livid. *Honestly! I swear, Orcbolg isn't right in the head!*

Anyway...

"You can't compare yourself to someone who thinks like that all the time," she said. "Everyone thinks different things, in different ways. That's what makes the world an interesting place."

You're you, he's him. That's why we can have adventures.

In High Elf Archer's eyes, the world was exceedingly simple.

Priestess found herself gaping at the archer. A gentle breeze came through, and the elf's long ears wiggled slightly.

I see...

Over the past year, Priestess had tried in her own way to follow along with Goblin Slayer and the others. And now, she had been promoted.

It wasn't because she had killed the goblins. It was because she had managed to help the adventurers escape.

That was what people appreciated and valued.

Well, that works for me, then.

She felt something in her heart fall into place.

I'm sure I'll keep working with him.

And that's okay.

A gust of wind caught her hair, and she held it back with one hand.

Something about the sight prompted High Elf Archer to exclaim, "Right!" and nod sharply. "This calls for a celebration! Let me get you some lunch. What do you like?"

"Oh, uh, are you sure? Um, well then..."

What should she do? What should she choose? That decision by itself was enough to make her heart jump.

Maybe...since High Elf Archer was offering...maybe she'd pick something just a little bit fancy. The gods wouldn't mind, would they?

"Hey, what about Orcbolg?"

"Oh, that's right," Priestess said. Her smile, like a blossoming flower, communicated something that others wouldn't understand. "He treated me last year... So I think he'll pass today."

§

At the town entrance—just outside the gate next to the Guild, down the street a ways, an unlikely pair walked along purposefully.

One wore a cheap-looking steel helmet and grimy leather armor: Goblin Slayer.

The other was a red-haired boy, dressed in a robe and carrying a staff.

The boy had luggage slung over his shoulder; it was plain to see he was ready to travel.

"I think I'm gonna see a little more of the world, build up my skills."

"I see," Goblin Slayer replied, nodding just a little. "Are you not going back to

the Sorcerers' Academy?"

"Er... No... I wanna get even with the bastards who mocked my sister, I really do. But..." The red-haired boy scratched his cheek gently then shrugged. His shoulders looked light, as if they were free of some burden. "I kinda think they'd go on making fun of her no matter what I did. So...it's okay."

"..."

"Let 'em laugh. For as long as they live, if they want."

"Indeed."

Goblin Slayer's helmet moved emotionlessly. The boy stopped and looked up at him.

That helmet was filthy. And it made it impossible to tell what expression the face inside was wearing.

This man was kind of disturbing, pathetic, totally obsessed, and killed nothing but goblins. He hardly seemed to qualify as a real adventurer.

"Look, I still don't really like you."

"I see."

Even when confronted so directly, his answer remained dispassionate, and the boy smiled in spite of himself. One could be stubborn, or get annoyed, or act self-important. But this man never got angry.

So what did that make the red-haired boy? A child rebelling against an adult?

"But I've been thinking about lots of other things, too."

Like what comes after this.

Like what came before this.

About my older sister.

About all you guys, and all the help you gave me.

My own failures.

And my own successes.

Plus...what I want to be.

“I couldn’t stand to do what you do, so I’m gonna do something else. I—”

Yes, I.

The boy took in a breath, stuck out his chest, and announced proudly, “I’m gonna become Dragon Slayer!”

His remark would have made even a child laugh out loud. It was such a cheap dream, an all too common one. The sort of mundane fantasy that everyone, whether or not they seriously thought of becoming an adventurer, had entertained at one time or another. *Hunt dragons. Kill the strongest wyrm in the land.*

But Goblin Slayer, of course, nodded and replied, “I see.”

“Then I’m going with you!” a bright voice interjected from nearby. Someone new jumped up next to them, her movements light and fluid.

She was wearing light armor that allowed for good mobility, along with a sword and shield. A rhea girl, ready to travel herself.

The inconspicuous entrance was a rhea specialty, and indeed, the red-haired boy stared, agog at her sudden appearance.

“Wh-who said you could come with me?!”

“One Porcelain-ranked spell caster all by himself? You wouldn’t last five minutes!”

“...Says the other Porcelain-ranked warrior. The *girl* Porcelain-ranked warrior.”

“Exactly. It’s dangerous out there!”

“I told you, I’m traveling all on my own!”

“What luck! So am I.”

When he made a point, she rebutted. When she talked around him, he made a different point. But rare is the person who can out-talk a rhea.

“Argh! Man, this is why I hate rheas...” The boy pulled at his hair in frustration.

That was when something happened that caused them both to stop in their

tracks.

He and she both looked at the third member of their group as if they couldn't believe what was going on.

It was ever so faint and ever so slight, but they were sure they'd heard it...

"_____"

The softest muffled sound of laughter.

It creaked a bit, like an old door that hadn't been opened in years.

But Goblin Slayer was laughing.

He was actually laughing out loud.

"If you meet a rhea who goes by 'Burglar,' mention my name." *If that old curmudgeon even remembers the boy he once looked after...* "He may give you a little bit of help."

That caused the boy to scratch his cheek again. "I'll tell him, if I remember." He laughed; his expression was like a sharp sword kept carefully in its sheath.

Sigh. Okay, fine. A companion for the road and compassion for the world, *as they say.* The boy nodded at the rhea girl.

"Well, let's go, then... Together."

"Okay!" The girl nodded, beaming. Her face was bright, a flower turning toward the sun. "See ya next time, Goblin Slayer!"

"Yes."

The boy and the girl—no, the adventurers—waved as they walked happily away.

As they went down the road, luggage on their backs, they elbowed each other and laughed and chatted.

It wasn't, Goblin Slayer suspected, exactly because they were friends.

It had to do with what was beginning. Friendship, or trust, or perhaps something else. For better or for worse.



Goblin Slayer didn't know whether his words would be of help to them. He had no certainty. After all, he knew that cantankerous old rhea all too well.

But there was no such thing as too much help on a journey. Such was the way of things.

Goblin Slayer squinted slightly beneath his helmet then turned slowly on his heel before striding off at his usual bold pace.

This would not change what he did next.

Tomorrow, presumably, he would kill goblins.

And the day after that. And the day after that.

Every day.

His rest, his training, his purchases of equipment, were all in the service of killing goblins.

Why? Because he was Goblin Slayer.

"All done?"

He had stopped in the road, near the fork that led to the farm.

There was his old friend, lounging among the dappled shadows of a grove of young trees.

"Yes," he answered, and she bounced up from the root she was resting on to line up beside him.

Let's go home together. She didn't have to say it for them both to understand.

She set off eagerly, and he followed at a more measured pace. Careful neither to overtake her nor to fall behind.

"It seems they are going on a journey together."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes."

"...I heard the lake dried up."

"Yes," he said. Then he thought for a moment before eventually adding, "...

I'm sorry."

"...Mm."

That was as far as their discussion of the incident went.

She didn't say anything, nor did he.

Nothing about the fact that the training grounds had been built on the bones of their village nor that the area was becoming quite lively.

Not a word about how he had annihilated the goblins who had attacked those training grounds.

Not about how the ground was soft now, after he had emptied an entire lake into a tunnel beneath it.

Nor how it would now be difficult to build around that lake.

They didn't mention any of it—not a word.

The sky was blue, the trees' leaves bursting into a vibrant green. The wind rustled through the grass, and the sun was hot enough to make them sweat.

That road ran back to town, but they took the fork that would lead them to the farm.

It was too short a distance to communicate all that they thought yet too long for their hearts not to hear each other.

"Hey..." she said suddenly, pattering up in front of Goblin Slayer. Her hands were joined behind her, and she spun around. "You seem kind of...happy."

"...Hrm," he grunted deep in his throat. He hadn't considered it. "I do?"

"I can tell. You better believe it."

"I see..."

She chuckled triumphantly and puffed out her generous chest. "I understand you. I always do."

She sounded rather proud. But she looked like she was having fun, just as they always had since the days when they dashed around that open field together.

“Something good happen?” she asked.

“...Yes,” Goblin Slayer responded, nodding. Then he looked back.

The road stretched ever on and on under the blue sky, and far down along it, he could just make out two figures, growing smaller in the distance.

Perhaps someday—be it tomorrow, next year, a decade from now, a century—there would be talk of a red-haired wizard dragon buster.

Maybe the deeds of those two dragon slayers would become tomorrow’s legends.

It was so easy to call it impossible, a childish dream.

But what if?

If, someday, they truly did it, then that—

“That would be a very good thing.”

“*Oh yeah?*” Cow Girl murmured, smiling, and then the two of them set off walking together along the road home.

AFTERWORD

Hullo, Kumo Kagyu here!

So what did you think? Did you all enjoy *Goblin Slayer*, Vol. 6? It was a story in which goblins appeared, so Priestess tried hard to do something about them.

I really feel I put my all into writing it, so I hope you enjoyed it.

“An evil-woman executive, a killer for hire, a spy with a dark past, and a mountain ruler. What do you expect a high-schooler to do?!”

“Shoot your bow, Only-Good-at-Shooting-Arrows-Man!”

Incidentally, the dancing girl I mentioned in the last volume has achieved stardom as a performer of the Ultra-Purgatory Dance.

O Love of mine! You truly put the *-tory* in *Purgatory*! With your magic increasing her dancing skills fourfold, she can end at a mythological level!

...She was just supposed to be an ordinary fighter, but it turns out life follows art. Onward!

I also wish a long and prosperous life to Only-Good-at-Shooting-Arrows-Man.

As proof that you never know what’s going to happen in life, we’ve made it to *Goblin Slayer*, Vol. 6.

I could never have come this far without the help of everyone around me. You have my heartfelt gratitude.

Noboru Kannatuki-sensei, thank you for always providing such superb illustrations and character designs. Rhea Fighter looks exactly the way I imagined her: super cute!

Kosuke Kurose-sensei, I love reading your manga version each month. I think this book should be coming out about the time you’re reaching the climactic battle from Volume 1. Yah! Take that! Finish him!

To all my readers, and those who have supported me from my web days onward, you always have my thanks.

To the admins of the summary sites, I'm constantly indebted to you. Thank you, really.

To all my gaming buddies and the other creatives in my life, thanks for always making time for me...

To everyone on the editing team, my publishers and PR people, the distributors, and the translators (!), thank you so much!

I still can't really believe that my work has crossed the seas and is being enjoyed by people abroad.

Seriously, I'm pretty sure that any minute now, I'll wake up and find myself in bed.

The plan for next time: goblins appear in the elves' homeland and must be exterminated.

For fastest Light Novel Updates Join our Discord Group - <https://discord.gg/yRjDumJ>

I'll continue to pour my heart into my writing, so I hope you'll keep on reading.

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Insert](#)
3. [Title Page](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [Table of Contents](#)
6. [Chapter 1: An Ordinary Spring Day](#)
7. [Chapter 2: The Red-Haired Wizard Boy](#)
8. [Chapter 3: Magical Resources](#)
9. [Interlude: Of Two Women](#)
10. [Chapter 4: The Men with No Names](#)
11. [Chapter 5: The Training Field on the Edge of Town](#)
12. [Chapter 6: To Each Their Own Battle](#)
13. [Interlude: Of the Hero Who Went There and Back Again](#)
14. [Chapter 7: Onward to Adventure](#)
15. [Afterword](#)
16. [Yen Newsletter](#)

6

KUMO KAGYU

ILLUSTRATION BY
NOBORU KANNATUKI

GOBLIN SLAYER

A detailed illustration by Noboru Kannatuki. In the foreground, a young elf girl with long, flowing green hair and large green eyes is depicted. She has a determined expression, with her mouth slightly open as if shouting or cheering. She is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt with a gold braided collar, a green skirt, and black thigh-high stockings with gold garters. Her hands are raised, with her fingers spread. In the background, a knight in full plate armor is visible. The knight's helmet has a red plume, and he is holding a sword. The overall style is a classic anime/manga illustration.