Mizuki was feeling great. The curse, such as it was, had been lifted, they had more lutes than they would ever need, an awesome sword had bound itself to her, and Alfric was in such a good mood that it made her realize just how stressed and anxious and down he'd been. The morning after the Endless Dungeon they had all celebrated with a huge brunch spread, and Mizuki hadn't even had to do any of the cooking, which was a bit of a relief. Instead, Alfric had arranged something special ahead of time, prepared by Marta, who did things like that occasionally when she wasn't busy selling meat at the market or helping her husband with the butchery. They ate at her house, at a table in her solarium.

"So what would have happened if we'd failed?" asked Mizuki. "I mean, hypothetically?"

"Failure brunch!" said Alfric with a smile. "One half commiseration, one half congratulating ourselves for trying."

"You make that sound so much less grim that it would be," said Verity with a laugh. "I can very much imagine us sitting around a brunch table, with the full spread, as glum as blobfish."

"Badgers are actually the saddest animals," said Isra. She gave Verity a grin.

"Glum as badgers then, sorry," Verity smiled.

They had apparently patched things up, which was good, and they were sitting next to each other, which was as things should be. For a week or two it had seemed like they were just never going to talk to each other again, but the dungeon and some time seemed to have helped them.

Mizuki did wonder whether they were flirting though. She tried to put herself in their shoes and couldn't, and then tried to imagine that one of them was a boy, and if one of them *was* a boy, then it all seemed like flirting to her, but she was probably mixed up about how that worked. Laughing and joking with someone was different than flirting, she thought, though the more she thought about it she realized that she just had no idea what flirting actually *was*. It was an easy thing to get twisted up in your own head.

She had never dated someone twice, or had an on-again off-again thing. Some people would return to the same boyfriend a half dozen times, always trying to make it work out, as though something could be had from the failures. Maybe that was right, because Thomma and Clarc had gotten married after the sixth time, and they were still together four years later, with two children.

She wondered what it was like. She thought that maybe it could be boring, because you would know how things would go with them, their quirks and their moves. Rolaj had a way of placing his hand on her, with his fingers on her back and his thumb against the bottom of her rib cage. He'd done that three times, and she had come to expect it when they had a date, or when she would see him at his shop. She liked the assertiveness and familiarity of it. She wondered, on a second attempt of making it work, whether she would find it familiar and good, or boring and bad, or something else. It was hard to know.

Brunch was an entire spread. There were three kinds of meats, some of them slow-cooked, others grilled, and there were all kinds of sides as well, and different kinds of breads with jams and jellies that they didn't have at home. It was all at Marta's place, but there must have been other helpers, and Mizuki found herself looking at the kitchen more than once, wanting to see who it was. There was smoked pork belly and fatty venison, eggs that had been mixed with goat cheese and fluffed up, with caramelized onions in them. Potatoes had been done two ways, roasted with herbs and as something that was basically a crispy mashed potato cake. She was going to have to get the recipe for that one, because it seemed as though you'd need too much binder for it to taste good, except it did. There were a few token vegetables that seemed to mostly exist to add some green to the color palette. Mizuki approved of that. There were fruits as well, mostly the seasonal favorites like strawberries and raspberries. It was so much that they would say that they couldn't possibly eat it all, but then would almost certainly clear the table.

"We have the world's longest entad testing session ahead of us," said Mizuki between bites. "Also, I have *no idea* what we're doing with a hundred lutes."

"Selling them," said Alfric.

"Not all, surely?" asked Verity.

"First order of business," Alfric began.

"Are we talkin' shop at the table then?" asked Hannah. "We're *celebratin'*, that's not a time to discuss all the work we've managed to make for ourselves."

"Working is how Alfric celebrates," said Mizuki. She gave him a wide grin. "Look at him salivating over the thought of how we're going to get those metal things out of the chest."

"I actually think that's going to be pretty easy," said Alfric. "But yes, we can hold off on talking shop, I do think we can just bask in the victory and the absurd amount of winnings."

Verity looked at Isra. "Do you *want* me to write a song about it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Isra. "Yes, of course, I really do, but I don't want you to hate doing it, if you think that you will."

"I felt there was something there last night," said Verity. "No music or lyrics, but something compelled me."

"I'm actually not sure people will believe it," said Hannah. "When I try to figure out how I'll describe it to people, it *sounds* like dungeon fabulism."

"Which is?" asked Mizuki.

"Dungeon stories, ay?" asked Hannah, raising an eyebrow.

Alfric nodded. "Five people go into a dungeon," said Alfric. "They're the only ones that ever experience it. The only way to ever confirm what they've seen is through their personal accounts, entad recordings, or what they bring out. Sometimes it grows in the telling."

“So it’s like fishing,” said Mizuki. “People talking about the one that got away.”

“The one that got away?” asked Isra.

“You know,” said Mizuki, though she thought it very likely that Isra *didn’t* know. “People tell stories about fishing, about how the line snapped, or the hook came out, or whatever, and because they’re the only one to have ever *seen* the fish, they can make it as big as they want. And even sometimes if they *do* catch the fish.”

“The … line?” asked Isra.

It took some time to explain fishing to Isra. She had only ever done fishing using traps, which was how she’d learned from her father, and she talked about a weir she’d made when she was fifteen, which was apparently just a bunch of relatively flat stones laid across a river so that all the water was channeled through one specific spot. She’d set it up so that the fish and eels of the river would get caught there, and it had been a lot of work, but she had felt a lot of pride when it had actually worked.

“Hooks seem barbaric,” said Isra when she’d finished.

“Is there a reason that you don’t just … command the fish onto shore?” asked Mizuki.

“I don’t know,” said Isra. “It always felt cruel to tell a creature to die for me. And they would rebel. There are deep animal instincts. I’ve done it, but,” she shook her head. “It feels better to acknowledge them, to have an understanding that they don’t want to be killed. It’s like they’re dying on their own terms. And if a piece of me is in them, when they die, maybe that’s why it feels so …” She shook her head again, and ate a muffin to fill her mouth and not have to talk.

Mizuki wanted to ask about the mice that had died in the dungeon, but it was obviously a sore spot, and it felt like it was a sore spot between Alfric and Isra.

“So you think that people won’t believe us?” asked Mizuki. “We *do* have a hundred lutes.”

“We can’t show off the lutes to people every time we tell the story,” said Alfric. “And there are other elements that, yes, I think people might raise an eyebrow at. When you hear a dungeon story, you think to yourself ‘how much is this embellished, how much does it fit in with what I know about dungeons’, and all kinds of other things, and I think that maybe people will dismiss some of it. But we’re not really in it for the accolades or the acknowledgement, so I’m not sure it matters.”

“*You’re* not in it for the accolades,” said Hannah. “Myself, I’m tryin’ to write a book on dungeons, and I *do* think a long, unusual dungeon like that, with the Overguard Maneuver to end it, might make it seem like I’m aimin’ to entertain more than to dissect.”

“So entertain!” said Mizuki with a laugh. “Would it be so awful if people read a book about the symmetry of dungeons or whatever and had fun with it?”

“It’s not what I’m goin’ for,” said Hannah. “Not a lot of laughs in it either, ay?”

“See, but why not?” asked Mizuki. “Crack a joke every now and then, I know I’d read loads of clerical texts if they had jokes in them.” She worried, sometimes, that she didn’t really understand Hannah, and after how swimmingly her date with Verity had gone, decided to set something up.

“Clergy jokes are *awful*,” said Hannah with a smile. Mizuki also worried that the lack of understanding didn’t go both ways.

“Example, please,” said Verity.

“I’d tell you a Xuphin joke, but we’d be here all day,” said Hannah. She was grinning. “I’d tell you a Bixzotl joke, but I’d hate to have to repeat it. I’d tell you a Qymmos joke, but there are a lot of different sorts. I’d tell you an Oeyr joke, but those are better if they come up organically. I’d tell you a Kesbin joke, but none are coming to mind.”

This got some chuckles. Mizuki wouldn’t have said that any of them were funny, per se, but there was something a little humorous in them.

“Wait,” said Isra. “What about Garos?”

“I’d tell you a joke about Garos, but then you’d have to tell one back to me,” said Hannah. “That’s the usual anyway.” She waved her hand. “It’s not funny.”

“Well none of them were funny,” said Mizuki.

“Ay, that’s what I’m sayin’,” said Hannah. “The Garos jokes are the worst, honestly. I heard a lot of them in seminary, and more once I got out. There’s somethin’ so *corny* about it all that it practically feels like blasphemy.”

“A little blasphemy never killed anyone,” said Mizuki. “Did it?”

“Used to be that it would get you arrested, but no, it was always people bein’ people, never the gods themselves,” said Hannah. “There are some things I think I’d like about the old days, but that’s not one of them.”

They ate for a bit, then ate some more, and just when Mizuki had thought that maybe she’d had a bit too much food, Marta had come out with hot tea cakes to cap off the meal. Mizuki had three of them.

“Question,” said Mizuki. “Is there a way that we can do this every week? Or after every dungeon?”

“Yes,” said Alfric. His reply was mild. “It’s an extravagance, but money’s not really a concern, and if this were coming from the party budget, we wouldn’t really feel it.”

“Is it *not* coming from the party budget?” asked Verity, frowning a bit.

“Er, no,” said Alfric. He looked around at them. “I paid for it all, just to do something nice.”

“Which means that we all need to do something nice?” asked Isra.

“No, no,” said Alfric. “I had just felt a bit — like the dungeons were going to keep rolling us. I wanted to be able to have something nice.”

“I’m already thinking of my nice thing,” said Isra, folding her arms across her chest. “I understand these games now.”

“I think this was lovely, and I can’t wait to see how Isra outdoes it,” said Hannah. She pushed her chair out and slapped her thighs. “We’re meetin’ at the house for entad testin’ later in the day?”

“Well, no,” said Alfric. “The lutes are stuck beneath the metal pieces, and *those* we need to move. There’s also a lot of work to do removing everything from the chest, especially all the goods we picked up along the way. I think it’s probably a lot of work. The lutes won’t be until tomorrow, at the earliest.”

“Ah,” said Hannah, looking less eager. “And you want this done today?”

Alfric shrugged, which surprised Mizuki. “Doesn’t have to be. It’ll all keep. Taking a day off when we’ve had so many of those in a row seems a bit odd, but we’re not in any rush to get back into another dungeon, which is a conversation we should save for later, maybe after the post mortem — which will *also* keep.”

“It’s a relief to hear you say so,” said Hannah with a nod.

“I wanted to test entads though,” said Mizuki, pouting at Alfric.

“If Hannah is alright with it, we can do some minor work without her,” said Alfric. “We have all the junk in the chest that’s above what we’ll need to remove, we can take that out, sort it, then do a brief bout of entad testing with what we grabbed in the second half of the dungeon. I think there are six in total.”

“I was actually thinkin’ that I might be with Marsh today,” said Hannah. “As in, the whole day?”

“He could come do entad testing?” asked Mizuki.

“I might just bow out, if it can be done without me,” said Hannah. “We’ll have a hundred lutes to get through.” She looked contrite. “Sorry.”

“You’ve got it that bad for him?” asked Mizuki.

She’d thought that Hannah would roll her eyes, but instead she just bit her lip. “I fear I do.”

“Interesting,” said Verity. “I think this is the first time I’ve heard you say that you actually like him.”

Hannah *did* roll her eyes at that. “I’ve said I like him plenty, don’t get it twisted up. I’ve said, in fact, that it’s serious.” A blush had spread beneath her symmetrical freckles.

“You know, if *I* had a cute boyfriend, I would never shut up about it,” said Mizuki. “*Especially* if it were serious. You can talk to us about boy stuff! I like talking about boys!”

“Yes,” said Alfric. “Please, talk to us about boy stuff.” He could do a good stone face, when he wanted to, and Mizuki found it hilarious.

“But I actually *do* want to know,” said Mizuki. She pointed an accusatory finger at Hannah. “You do this cleric thing where you pry a lot and then don’t want to share.”

“I share plenty,” said Hannah with a wave of her hand. “But there’s also nothin’ *to* share. It’s goin’ well.” Her blush betrayed her. Mizuki thought that it was going quite a bit better than just ‘well’. It made her happy, but also a little sad, because Hannah was two years younger and finding love when she hadn’t expected it. Mizuki was practically old and still floundering through a dry spell.

“I was going to help with the kids for the second half of the day,” said Isra. ‘The kids’ were a class who was down a teacher. They were five or six, and seemed to adore Isra.

“Yes, we should get going,” said Alfric. “I’ll talk to Marta and we’ll head out. Mizuki and I can clean out the chest.”

“Tell her it was lovely,” said Verity, smoothing her skirt. “I assume you need more hands for emptying the chest?”

Alfric glanced at Mizuki.

“I think we’re good,” said Mizuki. “There’s nothing heavy at the top, I don’t think. You’re *welcome*, obviously, if you’ve got nothing else going on, but … you know. We’re fine.”

Verity nodded. “Then Isra, is it alright if I come with you to the school? I thought that the children might want to hear a performance.”

“Oh,” said Isra, who seemed surprised. “That … would be very nice, yes. Do you like children?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” said Verity with a smile.

That meant that it was going to be Mizuki and Alfric together for the rest of the day, and while there would be, yes, work, the brunch meant she’d already gotten out of making breakfast *and* lunch. Having nothing better to do, she followed Alfric, feeling a bit like she was glomming onto him. He had kind words for Marta, and she had kind words for him.

“I’m so glad that Mizuki has fallen in with the *right* crowd this time,” said Marta, with a wink in Mizuki’s direction.

“Thank you again for the brunch, we might do it some other time, though I’ll give you plenty of notice,” said Alfric.

“Oh, not at all, it’s good to make a big meal every now and then,” she said. She gripped him on the arm, smiling. “And we’ve got to support the young people when they go on their adventures.”

When they left, Alfric was smiling.

“Mood lifted?” she asked. “I mean, with the dungeon done, the curse gone?”

“I don’t know,” said Alfric. “Yeah.”

They were walking down the street together, back to her house. The chest was following behind them, since they’d been the last ones to go. It would stay put, if you told it to, but there hadn’t been much reason to do that. Alfric was walking slowly, which Mizuki appreciated, because she’d mentioned that she sometimes had a hard time keeping up with him. In fact, she had mentioned it two weeks ago, and it had never been a problem since. That was one of the great things about Alfric. He adapted to other people, and didn’t let something be a problem twice.

“Of course it’s *not* actually gone, the ‘curse’,” said Alfric. “If we have to do that again … I don’t want to do it again.”

“Because it was horrible, or because you don’t think we would win?” asked Mizuki.

“The latter,” said Alfric. “And I’m pretty sure it will be different, so whatever preparation we do probably won’t help much.”

“I was thinking we leave the dagger by the door,” said Mizuki.

“Yeah,” said Alfric. “Getting back to the entrance is, as it turns out, actually very important if you don’t know where the entrance even is. It means more of a trip back, and a long lag time before we get medical attention if the worst happens, but I think in general it’s a good idea.”

“You already had that thought?” asked Mizuki. “You didn’t seem impressed.”

“Yeah, I’d considered it,” said Alfric. He gave her a shy smile. “I think if someone comes to you with an idea it’s sort of rude to say ‘actually I already thought of that’.”

“I assume you’ve already thought of everything,” said Mizuki. “At least, when it comes to dungeons.”

“Nah,” he said. “You were the one who suggested the Overguard Maneuver.”

“And you *didn’t* think of that?” asked Mizuki.

Alfric laughed. “I think you don’t understand the sheer disdain I feel for the Overguard Maneuver, even the modifications of it.” He looked up in thought for a moment. “Less now, though.”

“And *was* mom proud?” asked Mizuki.

“How would she know?” asked Alfric.

“I don’t know, guild message, chrononaut stuff?” asked Mizuki.

“I haven’t sent the dungeon report yet,” said Alfric. “I might not, honestly, it’s not expected that you put out one for every single dungeon, and they take some time to write. I’ll let them know it wasn’t a fourth failure, at least.”

“I think they’d want to know about this one,” said Mizuki. “But I guess you can just have a wortier copy your official dungeon report and send it that way?”

“I’m not sure there will be an official report either,” said Alfric.

“What?” she asked. “Why not?”

“It’s just so *different*,” said Alfric. “How would it help anyone to read it?”

“I mean, most people don’t read dungeon reports anyway, right?” asked Mizuki.

“That’s not a great argument for me to write one,” said Alfric.

“Yeah, but you always *used* to,” said Mizuki. “It seemed like half your time you spent at that little desk up in your room, or at the dining room table.” She looked him up and down. “I liked it.”

“You did?” he asked.

“Yeah, studious Alfric wanting to tell people all about dungeons,” she said. She giggled. “It’s just so … I don’t know. I see you in combat sometimes and it’s almost scary the way you move, like the thing you’ve trained your entire life for is killing, and you do it without thought or hesitation, natural as breathing. And then you get all excited about these different elements of the dungeon, and how we’re going to deal with logistical problems. You light up with this energy. I watch you writing up dungeon reports and you’re deep in concentration, and you smile to yourself sometimes when you finish a section.”

That was too much. She knew that. It made it feel like she was in awe of him, which she wasn’t, or like she had been spending all her time watching him, which she hadn’t. She probably could have said the same sort of stuff about any of the others, since she was around them so much, and felt like she picked up on things better than other people, though was maybe a bit worse at talking about it, or actually doing anything with it.

“You do that same thing,” said Alfric after a moment. “When you’re cooking.”

“What thing?” asked Mizuki, momentarily confused.

“The whole energy thing,” said Alfric. “A look of concentration, a smile when something is going right, like that.”

“Ah,” said Mizuki. She had never once thought about how she looked when she was cooking.

“When you’re cooking chicken in a pan and flip it over,” said Alfric. “There’s a golden crust on it, which gets revealed, and you smile to yourself, this ‘I have done good!’ kind of smile.” He shrugged. “I’m in the kitchen with you a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess you are,” said Mizuki. She was quiet for a moment. She wondered whether *this* was flirting, but it seemed more likely that it was just friends saying what they liked about each other. “Same thing when I’m using sorcery?”

Alfric laughed, a giggling, unbidden laugh of the sort that he didn’t make often. “No, not at all, you look like a crazy person. I don’t think I’ve ever once seen you throw a fireball and not look like you were absolutely *thrilled* at the prospect of exploding something. Even when you’re concentrating, or when you’re afraid, or whatever else you’re feeling, there’s this scary sense that you really do think that the explosion is the ultimate solution to all problems and you would happily employ it at every given chance.”

“Explosions are neat,” said Mizuki, crossing her arms. “Admit that, please.”

“Explosions *are* neat,” said Alfric.

“I need to get better at all the other stuff,” said Mizuki. “Like, *all* of it, so I’m not so miserable when the aether doesn’t work out. That dungeon was *all fireballs*, just a matter of shaping it. I don’t think I can lean on it.”

“And you’re still planning on doing the wizard thing?” asked Alfric.

“One week from now, yeah,” said Mizuki. “I’m *hoping* that we have a lute that helps with the commute.” She paused for a moment. “A commute lute. Commlute.”

“I think commlute will be what we call the one that communicates, right?” asked Alfric.

Mizuki laughed. “We’re going to have to run those lute jokes into the ground.”

“Mostly I’m hoping that they’re good,” said Alfric.

“That they have some utility,” said Mizuki. “Some lutility, you might say.”

“This is going to be awful,” said Alfric. “Do you think it’s against the spirit of the thing to prepare?”

“Prepare?” asked Mizuki.

“I mean … write out a list of options,” said Alfric. “Jokes.”

Mizuki cackled. “That is *so* you. A *list* of jokes?”

“We already have the commute lute,” said Alfric. “The way I see it, we have a hundred lutes, we can make some guesses about what at least a few of them will do, and we can have a whole avalanche of jokes ready to go.”

“That is *so* lame!” said Mizuki. They came up on the house, moved into one after the other, and there was something she loved about the familiar way he came into the house, like it was his house too — which it was, since he’d been living there for months.

“Look, the way I see it, we’re just leveling the playing field, right?” asked Alfric. “Verity is a nationally recognized lyricist, if you squint. She’s going to bowl us over, given half the chance.”

“So we kneecap her,” laughed Mizuki. “With our glorious list of puns.”

“A lute that makes you stronger? The brute lute,” said Alfric. He had moved into the living room, and was opening the chest to look inside. “A lute that deadens sound? The mute lute.”

“A lute that moves you?” asked Mizuki. “You might be thinking that’s a commute lute, but you’d be wrong, it’s actually a route lute.”

“We *do* need to be writing these down,” said Alfric. “We’ll forget otherwise.” He had grabbed pencil and paper from the inside lid and was actually, literally jotting down what they’d said, as though it wasn’t a joke.

“Wow,” said Mizuki. “Every day I’m a little bit more impressed with the famed adventurer Alfric Overguard.”

“You joke, but I think we *are* on our way to fame, if only because we’ve had a few absurdly weird dungeons,” said Alfric. He set the pencil and paper to the side. “Alright, ready to go through all this stuff?”

“Absolutely,” said Mizuki. “Let’s sort some junk.”

It took them far, far more time than Mizuki had thought it would. They’d done a lot of rooms, and toward the end of it, they’d just been putting stuff into the chest, not even really thinking about it, just throwing in what they could in two or three minutes before moving on to the next door. Mizuki’s own criteria had been whether or not it could actually fit in the chest, and whether it was shiny. She’d felt like an exhausted magpie.

They disgorged as much as they could, pushing the seating and tables in the living room to the sides to give them more space. Piles formed, though they weren’t entirely consistent with each other, and Qymmos would have been angered if he was looking down at them. One pile was for clothes, another for implements, one for valuables, a place for furniture, and a special position in front of the fireplace for entads.

“So what happens to the stuff that no one wants?” asked Mizuki. “I guess I never thought that much about what happens with junk — real junk, that can’t be repurposed or whatever.”

“It goes back to the dungeon,” said Alfric. “If you’re an established party, they’ll pay you for it and give you an entad. When you’re done with the dungeon, you dump out all the collected trash. Vertex does it, actually. It doesn’t pay well, but it *is* a public service.”

“Huh,” said Mizuki. “Is that where the muck from the muck room ends up?” Mizuki hated the muck room. It was where all the water in the house drained to. Every now and then, it needed to be emptied, and she always paid for someone else to do it, even when she was short on money.

Alfric shook his head. “That stuff gets heat-treated and then used for fertilizer, usually,” he said. “Though I guess that’s how it’s done in Dondrian, it might be different here.”

“Gross,” said Mizuki.

When they were finished, Mizuki wasn’t sure that they’d done much more than make a mess. They had excavated from the chest until they got down to the metal struts, which was where they stopped, because Alfric was right, those *would* have to be removed in some other way. The piles felt enormous, though she supposed all they needed for the fabric was a giant bag to stuff it all in so it could be given away. Only one in three pieces would fit a human.

“I don’t understand why clothing comes out like it does,” said Mizuki. “Extra sleeves, or too few sleeves, or with incredibly long torsos, or torsos so short you’d be exposing your belly.”

“That’s a real style,” said Alfric. “Exposing the midriff? Common in Dondrian.”

“What, like …” Mizuki gestured on her body, one hand beneath her chest, the other a few inches below her belly button. “I don’t think I saw that.”

“Summers can get hot, especially outside the city proper,” said Alfric with a shrug. “Much more common at the beaches, or close to them, you hardly see it in the city.”

“And do you think this is like that?” asked Mizuki. “Or just dungeons being weird?”

“Definitely dungeons being weird,” said Alfric. “It’s one of those things where a lot of people think the Editors had tried to make the dungeons into places with a lot of useful things, and just failed. Some things come out fine most of the time, other things almost always come out a bit wonky and need some work to salvage.”

“Forks,” said Mizuki. “It’s always one too many tines, or one too few, or they’re too long, or too short, and it’s like one in ten that are just normal.”

“Yeah,” said Alfric. “I don’t think we’ve ever had a major miss on an entad, but they do happen, especially with armor. Less with weapons, I’m not sure why. You’d think that they’d end up poorly balanced, but,” he shrugged.

“Editors spent more time on it?” asked Mizuki.

“No one really knows,” said Alfric. “I think there have been some attempts at looking at a truly insane number of similar objects from dungeons to find a pattern, but given local conditions and the party itself will have an effect on what comes out, it’s really difficult.”

Mizuki looked at the entads they’d pulled out. They had six of them. For the number of rooms they’d gone through in the “back half” of the dungeon, after the octopus, it was an absolute pittance. There was a dagger with a weirdly forked tip, a single gauntlet without a match, a

bottle whose neck had a loop, a thin silver needle, a quill made from an oversized feather, and an oak door that had barely fit into the chest. The door hadn't been in its frame when they'd found it, it had been sitting up against a wall, as though someone had meant to install it and then never gotten around to it.

"So, technically they never said that we needed to wait on entad testing, right?" asked Mizuki.

"Technically, no," said Alfric. She looked at him, worried that she was going to see a disapproving look. "And we *are* going to be testing approximately a hundred lutes."

"Nice," said Mizuki. "*Nice*."

"Dibs on the door," said Alfric.

Mizuki opened her mouth to object, then looked at the other items. "Gauntlet," she finally said.

Alfric lifted the door up and moved it to a doorway, while Mizuki picked up the gauntlet. It was one of those entads that resized to the wearer: when they'd first picked it up in the dungeon, the gauntlet's fingers had shortened considerably and one of them had disappeared, leaving only the normal amount. She had felt a powerful urge to put it on, maybe over her armor, but she hadn't wanted to put more stress on Alfric, and slowing down a dungeon rush with entad testing would *definitely* have caused a fight.

Mizuki moved the gauntlet from hand to hand, and watched as it reformed itself. The fingers changed their lengths to suit the hand that was holding it, and the metal thumb disappeared while a *new* thumb emerged from the side of the hand. It seemed like a lot of magic, just for the sake of convenience. That kind of alteration was beyond the powers of sorcs *or* wizards, at least so far as she knew.

She put the gauntlet on her right hand. It fit better than any piece of clothing had ever fit her in her entire life. It was snug and tight like a second skin, and it didn't seem to matter that the interior was some variety of leather or that the scaled metal should have been inhibiting the movements of her fingers. There were perks that came with entads sometimes, little things that made them superior to anything else you could wear, though sadly not all entads had them, and not always to the same extent.

The gauntlet practically hummed with power. She could see the magic of it. It wanted to be used. It was practically *begging* her to spread her fingers wide and point it at something, or to make a fist and let out a big blast of … something. Sometimes entads just flat out told you what they did, offering guidance on the power inside them, but this one didn't go that far, and Mizuki was somewhat grateful, because then she'd have had to skip over the fun part.

"I'm going outside to blast something," Mizuki called. Alfric had gone somewhere, taking the door with him, but she thought she'd have heard something over the party channel if his disappearance had been magical. Sure enough, he was somewhere else in the house, and called back a distracted 'yeah'.

Mizuki got on her shoes and walked out past the garden, wondering what she should blast. She decided against one of the trees, which took ages to grow, and went looking for a likely rock. What she found was mostly a nice sort of moss-coated rock though, and she settled for a fallen branch, which she propped up. She took aim at it, holding her gauntleted right hand with her free left hand, then realized how close she was to it and backed up a bit.

The energy came out through the palm of the gauntlet, whose fingertips were glowing green. A beam of concentrated green light moved through the air with a thrum of awesome power, then stopped, with steam or mist or smoke coming up from the gauntlet's center.

Mizuki looked at the branch. It was entirely unharmed. She looked down at the gauntlet, which was still smoking slightly, and it *was* smoke. She could smell it. She looked at the branch again, and realized that it had turned green in one spot. On closer inspection, as Mizuki got near, it was a *bright* green, almost obnoxious.

Mizuki blasted the branch again, then a rock, then a patch of dirt, and finally her fingers, which she realized was probably a bad idea the moment after she'd done it. It turned all those things green, and yes, that included her pinky and ring fingers on her left hand. She tried shaping the energy that came from the gauntlet, tried altering it, tried all kinds of things, but it was always the beam of green light, and it always seemed to make things green. She tried different hand shapes too, fingers apart, in a fist, pointing, and it didn't seem to matter.

Mizuki was annoyed. She felt like there was a trick or a catch to it. It was so *cool* when it felt like it was charging up to something, and the wisp of acrid smoke afterward was what she'd always felt like a fireball should leave behind. The gauntlet really did seem like it just made things green though.

She tromped back to the house to see if Alfric was having equally bad luck, but he was in the living room, staring at the door with a frown.

"No luck?" she asked.

"Not yet," said Alfric. "If we didn't have Filera, my next step would be to build a door frame for it, because it doesn't quite fit in any of the frames in your house." He pointed to the side of it. "It came with its own hinges, and I pounded in some nails to put it in the closest frame that fit — which Hannah will have to fix — but it didn't do anything. It's got some kind of secret."

"Might be something not door related," said Mizuki. She took off the gauntlet and set it down with the others. "The gauntlet makes things green."

"Green?" asked Alfric. He finally looked at her, then pointed at her hand. "You used it on yourself."

"Yeah," said Mizuki. She held up her green fingers in a little salute. "The price we pay for entad testing."

Alfric laughed. "Well, we've got four left. Let's see if we've got better luck."