

They held off on entad testing for a day, in part because of Mizuki's bracers, which she felt was an overreaction.

"They weren't *cursed* or anything," she said. "They just had a drawback that wasn't obvious fast enough."

"I think this is the third time we've had entad testing go awry," said Alfric. "The ring that turned me to stone, the sword that cut through weapons, and now the bracers that chilled you to the bone."

"All those turned out fine," said Hannah. "We lost nothin' from doin' it ourselves."

"Right," said Alfric. "*But* if someone were to, say, die while we were testing entads, then I would have to reset the day and do that dungeon over, which would include a fair amount of boring physical labor that I just don't want to do."

"Once again it comes down to Alfric's laziness," said Isra. She grinned at him. "Pity." She was sitting on the couch, entwined with Verity, and it didn't seem like they were taking entad testing all that seriously, not that Mizuki was exactly serious about it.

"Yes, we all wish that Alfric had a better work ethic," said Hannah. She smiled at him, and he reached over and gave her a light punch on the shoulder. "That's the one thing I always say when introducing him."

"*Hilarious*," said Alfric.

"And you didn't redo the day already?" asked Mizuki. "You aren't going to spoil any of this?"

"I didn't redo the day, no," said Alfric. "You know I tell you in the morning every time anyway, especially since we hang out on the undone days."

"He's a dishonest sort, Alfric," said Isra. "A shifty character." She smiled at him, but he was stone-faced.

"That one I don't find funny," he said.

"Aw," said Isra. She had a glass of wine, which she swirled around. "You know I don't mean anything by it. It's only funny because you're the most honest person I know, even when no one is asking you to be."

"He's had one too many people think that he was a scoundrel," said Mizuki. "Because of the chrononaut stuff."

"I guess I knew that," said Isra. "Sorry." She did seem contrite about the whole thing, but drank more of her wine and settled back in with Verity.

"No, it's fine, I just ... don't enjoy that kind of ribbing." He shrugged, brushing it off, as was his way. Mizuki thought it would probably bother him for longer than he'd want to admit.

"If you need tips on ribbing, let me know," said Mizuki. "I'm kind of an expert."

Alfric had turned to the table where their goodies had been set out. "Armor will take a bit to get on," said Alfric. "Mizuki, you wanted to test that?"

"I did," she said. "And I'll be in my room, thank you very much, I know you were hoping for a peep."

"I wasn't —" Alfric began.

Mizuki turned to Isra. "See? Like that."

"Alfric doesn't want to have sex with me though," said Isra. "So it wouldn't be as funny."

"Er," said Mizuki, suddenly feeling flustered. She glanced at Alfric. "I mean that's not —"

"Go get the armor on," said Alfric. "And I'll ensure these clowns don't drink too much wine while you're away. We mostly do this for your sake anyway."

"I love entad testing," said Isra. She drank deep from her glass of wine. "So long as the wine keeps flowing."

Mizuki picked the armor up, and Emperor, who was still staying with them, hopped up from the couch to follow her.

The armor was heavy, and there was a lot of it, mostly with a motif of skulls, especially as caps on the joints, and taking up most of the breastplate. There were also skulls in miniature along the gauntlets and greaves, and in other places, almost like they were hidden for someone to find. It was a large, clunky thing, but as soon as she'd put on the first piece, the rest resized for her, which helped with the clunkiness. It wasn't full plate, not really, but if it ended up being hers, she would have far, far better protection. Unfortunately, if it was good, there was a decent chance that it would go to Alfric, since he was the one on the front lines most of the time, and Hannah was already sorted away with shifting armor that was bound to her.

The Chilling Bracers of Strength had been removed the day prior after a consultation with Filera, though Hannah had scoffed and said that if they *really* needed to remove them, all it would take is a quick amputation of Mizuki's hands, followed by a quick and easy reattachment. It turned out that all you needed to do was run a finger along a specific line to make the hinge reappear, and Hannah seemed mildly disappointed that her amputation plan wasn't going to be brought to fruition.

With the armor in place, Mizuki looked in the mirror. She was less fearsome than she thought, but that was mostly because it didn't come with a helmet, and her head ruined the whole skull and death look that the armor seemed to be almost desperately projecting. Mizuki was not a fearsome woman, she knew that, though she did command fearsome powers. She spent some time looking in the mirror, turning this way and that, but it wasn't until she smiled at herself that she discovered a piece of the armor's nature: the skulls smiled with her, their mouths moving in sync with her own.

"What do you think?" Mizuki asked Emperor. She turned and showed off for him, striking a pose, mouth open so the skulls looked like they were going to shout.

Emperor barked once in response, then kept laying on her bed as though waiting for her to do a better trick.

She spent some time playing with the teeth, making them chomp, then leaned forward so the huge skull set in the breastplate had its teeth around a corner of her dresser drawer. She chomped down, and wood splintered, which was very gratifying but would need to be fixed by Hannah.

Before she went downstairs, she used the sword to make her hair and eyes glow, and that was a *much* better look, properly intimidating, as much as her head still didn't quite match the skull armor.

She came downstairs, with Emperor following after her.

"Very nice," said Alfric. "And I see you did the hair as well. Looks like it *does* change size to fit, which isn't guaranteed."

"You were up there a bit," said Hannah. "We're already almost through a bottle of wine."

"There's a reason we waited until after dinner," said Verity. "It was so we could do this with wine and not feel like we're total lushes."

"You said you had practice," said Alfric.

"Yes, but also the wine thing," said Verity, as Mizuki moved to the center of the room.

"So what have you tried already?" asked Alfric, turning to Mizuki.

"Everything!" Mizuki threw her head back and gave her most evil laugh. The mouths of all the skulls moved with her, clacking as the metal slid back and forth.

"Huh," said Hannah. "Well *that's* terrifying. Can they actually bite things?"

"I've got a drawer in dire need of repair that says yes," said Mizuki.

"Is that it though?" asked Alfric. He was looking the armor up and down. He was the only one standing, and he moved around her, seeing how it fit in a way that made her feel slightly warm.

"It's all I have so far," said Mizuki. She was watching him as he did his inspection. She wore clothes beneath the armor, and would probably have some kind of gambeson if she took it into the field. Still, the attention on her felt good, even if it was platonic. "Isn't that enough that it can bite monsters when they get close?"

"It's not enough, no," said Alfric. "The thimble armor covers more, so I wouldn't prefer this to that, and for anyone else ... I just don't see it. Eating monsters is a niche ability."

"What happens when you eat things?" asked Verity.

"What?" asked Mizuki.

"The thing Alfric was talking about earlier," said Verity. "Where sometimes there's a second step. And 'form suggests function'. So ... you eat the thing, then you get some kind of, I don't know," she waved her wine glass. "Some bonus."

"I'd like to test its strength," said Alfric. He picked up a sword and held it out toward Mizuki. She backed up, instinctually. "I'm not going to run you through," he said. "I'm going to tap you and see what happens."

"Seems like a good way to die," said Hannah.

"If it does kill me, then yes, it probably *would* be a good way to die, because it would likely be pretty fast." He paused, thinking about that. Mizuki didn't think it was true. There were lots of slow ways an entad could kill a person. "It's *very* unlikely though."

"Here, let me try biting the tip of the sword," said Mizuki. She stepped forward until the tip of the sword was inside the mouth of the breastplate's skull, then bit down. The tip of the sword snapped off, and Mizuki looked down on the ground, searching for it.

"Open up," said Alfric.

Mizuki opened her mouth, and Alfric looked inside the center skull. "Nope," he said. "Huh. Where did the tip go?"

"Eaten," said Verity. "I have correctly predicted the entad."

"Huzzah!" said Isra. They clinked their glasses together.

"Did it eat the drawer you ruined?" asked Hannah.

"Um, not sure," said Mizuki.

"Was there a piece of wood left on the ground?" asked Hannah.

"Here, we can test it again," said Alfric. He prodded the sword toward Mizuki, she stepped into it, doing her best to chomp the remaining tip off of it. They all heard the snap of metal, and Mizuki heard the snap of her teeth. This time Alfric was looking closely, and it was clear that the tip of the sword had completely disappeared. "Huh," he said. "We'll probably have to take it to Filera."

"Aw," said Mizuki. "I'm sure we can figure it out."

"Well, there are limits to what we can test," said Alfric. "I guess I'd just be careful about what you chomp with it."

"Obviously," said Mizuki. She ran her index finger over her teeth. "Doesn't feel great to clack the teeth like that."

"Do you want to get changed, or continue as you are?" asked Alfrie.

"As I am, I think," said Mizuki.

"Try not to chomp up the furniture," said Verity. "The elbow skulls especially seem like they'd rip up a couch."

"It's *my* furniture," said Mizuki. She looked at the chair she'd been about to sit in, then the sharp teeth on the skulls at her elbows. "But you're right, actually, maybe I'll go change. Don't do testing without me, and don't drink too much wine."

Mizuki trekked back up the stairs, and Emperor followed after her, though he'd just gotten settled into his spot on the couch.

"You're just following me because I feed you, aren't you?" asked Mizuki.

According to Alfrie, Emperor ate 'whatever', which Mizuki had been a little skeptical of. She hadn't had dogs in the house when she was growing up, but from what she knew of them, many ate anything they could, then ralphed it up on the kitchen floor later. She had been slow to feed him exotic foods, but by the time he'd spent his third day with them, she was feeding him whatever scraps he was interested in, which seemed to all of them. He had carrot tops and pork trimmings, one of Hannah's rolls, a bowl of herbal tea that was meant for the dragons, a few pieces of pasta, a tomato ... among his other magical properties, like his extremely long age, he seemed to have a love of food and an iron stomach.

"I'm going to miss you when you're gone," said Mizuki. "But you've got another week, since we're not going to the concert." They were going to the one after the coming one, largely because of Bethany's wedding. At least a part of why Verity was downing wine was that she was seeing her mother the next day.

Emperor had hopped up on her bed and was sitting there staring at her with his forelegs crossed, the very picture of a highly engaged listener.

"I know that Verity could take you, but this is all a prelude to us dog-napping you," said Mizuki. "Or getting you to speak and having you say that you'd rather live with us."

Emperor let out a short bark.

"I'm only kidding," said Mizuki. She was back in her skivvies, and needed to decide on what to wear. Her wardrobe was feeling inadequate, of late, though it had swollen by half again with the addition of all her new dungeoneering clothes, and someday she was going to figure out wizardly fashion, which might necessitate the annexation of more drawer space. The room she slept in had once belonged to her parents, and it had taken her *years* to think of it as her room, but she still kept to one section of the dresser.

She had put on a dress, not her usual style, and looked at her eyes in the mirror, glowing pools of golden light that she rather liked, except that they caused a bit of a fuss. She would be back to normal in time for the wedding.

"Alright!" she said as she came back down. "I'm ready."

"We didn't listen about the wine," said Verity. She had a full glass in hand.

"I tried," said Hannah. "I think they decided that it was a wine night."

"I'm gone tomorrow," said Verity. "I'm hoping that if I get drunk now, I can forget about the concert."

"*Hopefully* that's a joke," said Hannah, who had been having quite a bit of wine herself.

"Alright," said Alfric. "It'll be nightfall before we're done at this rate, and I *do* want to get this done so I can prioritize with Filera tomorrow."

He had arranged the entads from the dungeon on the table, lining them up for perusal. There were six of them in total, since they more or less knew what the armor and the bracers did: a glass fish bowl, a scroll case, a leather-bound book, a necklace with brass and pearls, a ring with an aquamarine setting, and the oddly shaped pot.

"Give me the book," said Verity. She had somehow grown more entangled with Isra while Mizuki was upstairs.

"Here," said Alfric, tossing it to her.

In mid flight, the book arrested its motion, then sailed backward into Alfric's hand.

"That doesn't count for mine," said Verity.

"Wait," said Alfric. He had opened the book to look inside. "The writing is in Inter. Chapter One: The Returning Book. But there are more chapters here."

"Alright, alright, hand it over," said Verity. "Without tossing it."

"Seems like a boring entad, if it tells you all about itself," said Isra.

"Yes," agreed Verity. "But some of these *do* seem fun. Chapter Twenty-Three: The Book That Was on Fire." She turned the book over in her hands. It was very clearly not at all on fire.

"Well," said Hannah. "I s'pose it's the book that *was* on fire, not the book that *is* on fire."

"How many are there?" asked Mizuki, craning her neck to try to see as Verity went back to the table of contents.

"Twenty-eight," said Verity. "Huh." She had started reading it. "This actually has a proper story."

"In Inter?" asked Alfric as her eyes scanned the page.

"Yes, though there are a few missteps," said Verity.

"Well, I'll give you some time with it," said Alfric. "But we should move on, because I *do* want us all to get our rest in, and at the rate we're going, we're not going to be done until midnight."

"Necklace for me then," said Hannah. Alfric grabbed it from the table and handed it to her, and she immediately put it on. "Better vision," she said. She took a sip of wine. "Ah, heightened senses all around. Though ... I think my hearing has gone, come to think of it."

"Testing," said Mizuki. She moved from where she was sitting and got in front of Hannah. "Testing!"

"Just a moment, I think there's something else," said Hannah. "Say something?" She was staring off into the middle distance.

"Testing!" Mizuki shouted.

Hannah clapped her hands to her ears, scowling. "Well, the good news is that I changed it so I was blind instead of deaf, the bad news is that you screamed in my face when I had enhanced hearing."

"Sorry," said Mizuki. "Hey, does it work for the party channel?" <Testing.>

"Try again, I wasn't ready," said Hannah.

<Testing,> said Alfric.

"Party channel still works," said Hannah. "So it's a better form of hearing protection in the dungeon." She briefly touched the necklace. "We'll want to see how durable it is though. Scratch test, I s'pose."

"Sorry again for yelling," said Mizuki.

"Bah," said Hannah. "I'll scream at you later to make us even."

"I'll take the other jewelry," said Isra. She turned to Verity. "Put a ring around my finger, would you?"

Verity giggled and reached forward to swipe the ring from the table, which she was just barely able to reach, and only by growing another finger from her hand. She passed the ring over to Isra, who looked it over for a moment, examining the markings, which Mizuki had already done. The metal was something like white gold, shiny with zinc or nickel in it, and the stone in the center was a deep and vibrant blue.

Isra slipped it on her finger and turned into water, which immediately splashed down on the couch and got Verity soaking wet. Isra was gone, or possibly reduced to a puddle, and Verity stood up to shake the water off.

"See?" asked Alfric. "This is why entad testing is something you need to do in undone days."

"Calm down, she's reforming," said Verity.

Mizuki had felt pure, wordless panic at the disintegration — which was definitely not the right word, but the only proper word for someone turning into water was ‘hydration’, and that definitely wasn’t right either — and as the water started to gather back together, the panic went away in a rush of relief.

“It’s a complement to our ring that turns you into stone,” said Verity. “Maybe eventually we’ll collect one for each of the classical elements.”

Mizuki wanted to ask which ones those were, because the ones she was thinking of wouldn’t have included stone. All the attention was on Isra as she came back into shape, with the water on the floor pooling toward her. None of her clothes had stuck around, save for the ring, which was still on her finger. After thirty seconds or so, she was back in one piece, quite watery but recognizably human, if not recognizably Isra. There were even bubbles in the water where Mizuki suspected there were pockets of air within the human body. The lungs were quite visible.

The water form opened its mouth to speak, but nothing came out, so she stalked across the room and got a pencil and a piece of paper, where she wrote out a message.

“‘Testing in tub’,” Alfric read. “Shouldn’t you take the ring off to see whether you can go back to normal?”

Isra wrote more, then handed a sheet of paper to Alfric and went up the stairs, sloshing as she walked. She was, thankfully, not leaving any wet spots on the carpet or floor.

“‘Duration’,” Alfric read. “Valid point, I guess, it might only last for a limited time, or have a limited number of charges, or something like that.” He looked at the note again. “You know, I’m not sure that I’ve ever seen anything that Isra has written before.”

Verity snorted. “Her handwriting is about what you’d expect from someone who had a number of books but no formal education except what her father could provide, and not much access to pens, pencils, paper, *or* anything to write about aside from maybe a journal, which she didn’t have. Her handwriting is *remarkable* for where she comes from.” She took another sip. “I wouldn’t be doing half as well. And possibly don’t mention her handwriting to her.”

“I wasn’t going to,” said Alfric. He looked down at the paper. “I just ... had never seen it before.”

“I’m going upstairs to help out,” said Verity. She stretched out, then picked up Isra’s wine glass, so she was carrying two of them. “I don’t think either of us is *terribly* invested in entad testing tonight, so you can continue on without us, at least until we finish.”

“Nuts,” said Mizuki once they were gone. She turned to Alfric. “So the question is, do I go upstairs to watch and see how she does in the tub, or stay down here with the shiny new entads?”

“Sounds like you’ve made up your mind,” said Hannah.

“True,” said Mizuki. She slid the glass fish bowl off the table and turned it over in her hands, then tentatively stuck the tips of her fingers inside it. She was thinking about that cauldron they’d

gotten, and the way it would absolutely destroy anything placed within it. When nothing seemed to happen, she plunged her hand in, and felt it get wet, though there was no water. She moved her hand around a bit, feeling the slowness of movement through water, then took her hand out and looked at it. "It's full of invisible or fake water or something," she said. "Lame."

"Let me see," said Alfric.

"Wait," said Mizuki. "This one is mine, and I'm worried you're going to figure out something cool."

"Then you're taking your turn out of order," said Alfric. "You did the armor, remember?"

Mizuki opened her mouth to object, then closed it and handed the fish bowl to Alfric. The worst part was that no one wanted to give her credit for being a mature adult and not arguing. While he was looking at the bowl, Mizuki picked the book up from the couch, where Verity had left it behind. She paid special attention to the table of contents, which seemed to list out all of the powers the book might possibly have, but there was no clear way to activate any of them. Chapter 6: The Bouncing Book, seemed like it might have some promise, but when Mizuki tried to bounce the book against the table, it just flopped down.

Alfric, meanwhile, was pouring a bit of wine into the bowl. It was behaving as though it was in water, diffusing and swirling around. He dipped his finger in and swirled it around, then extracted his finger and sucked the wine off.

"Wait, is that useful?" asked Mizuki. "Because I could totally have thought of that."

"I don't know that it's useful," said Alfric. He picked up the fish bowl and sloshed it around for a bit, then tipped it out into his wine glass, where the wine returned, undiluted. "It's *interesting* though. This is my favorite kind of entad, the kind with no clear-cut use but a lot of possibilities."

Mizuki stared at it for a moment. "So the wine was ... not diluted?"

"It was falsely diluted, I think," said Alfric. "Diluted by water within the context of the fish bowl, but you saw that when I poured the wine out the apparent water went nowhere."

"Huh," said Mizuki.

"I'm not sure I would agree that it's interesting," said Hannah. She had her own glass of wine, and had apparently been getting hot, since she'd unbuttoned the top few buttons of her shirt. "Might make a good art piece, if you like looking at things that look like they're floatin' in air."

Alfric looked up at Mizuki. "Can I borrow some oil from the kitchen?"

"Sure," she said. "Because oil floats on water?"

"Yes," he nodded. He was smiling, mostly to himself, in a way that Mizuki found fetching. "We can get to the bottom of this."

"I'll go grab it," she said, lifting herself up off the couch. Emperor followed her, and was rewarded with a treat once she was in the kitchen.

When she got back, Alfric was tipping the bowl upside down and then putting his fingers in, a process which apparently warranted quite a bit of repetition.

"Here's your oil," she said.

"I don't understand this," said Alfric. He set the bowl on the table, then dipped his fingers in, likely feeling the water and stirring it around. Then he dumped the bowl out — but it was empty, of course, so there was no effect — and set it on the table again, before dipping his fingers in. "It refills."

"With fake water," said Mizuki.

"Yes," said Alfric. "Except it can also pour, as we saw with the wine. It's going to have *enormous* edge cases, I can tell, and Filera hates those."

"We probably don't need to have her take a look at it," said Hannah. She was tying her hair back in a ponytail. "Not goin' to be much use, right?"

"Right," said Alfric. He took the bottle of oil from Mizuki, and slowly poured a few drops into the bowl. They floated on the surface, with the absent water buoying them. "Fascinating."

"Well, I might be out," said Hannah, standing up. "Marsh wanted to meet for drinks at the Fig and Gristle."

"Aw, you're out too?" asked Mizuki. "But this is *tradition*."

"It's a very *new* tradition, and it'll survive a disruption," said Hannah. "Besides, Verity is probably taking a bath in Isra as we speak, so if you want this to be culture buildin' for the party, you'll need to get those two in line."

"Are you fine if we test the rest without you?" asked Alfric. "I *did* want to get it done today."

"That's fine, ay," said Hannah. "I do enjoy it, and it's a good tradition, but I also think the two of you take the most joy from it, though both for your own reasons."

"Have fun with Marsh," said Mizuki.

"Oh, I will," said Hannah. "There's a good chance we're comin' back here, though we won't be chattin', and there's also a chance that I go home with him instead, so don't wait up for me, or reset on my account."

Once Hannah had left, Mizuki and Alfric were left alone, with only Emperor for company.

"Alright," said Mizuki. "We've successfully cut the dead weight from this operation." She rubbed her hands together. "It's open season."

Alfric was peering at the fish bowl. He tapped his fingers against the side. "What secrets do you possess?"

"Is that your way of saying you're stuck on the fish bowl?" asked Mizuki.

"Yes," said Alfric. He was holding his gaze on the curve of glass. "I'm enraptured. Do you think we have a fish somewhere?"

"There used to be a pond out back, but grandpa took the fish when he left." said Mizuki.

"Shame," said Alfric. He looked around the living room, trying to find something he could dip into the bowl.

"Well, if you're doing that, then I'm doing something new," said Mizuki. She looked at the table, where the pile of entads was rapidly dwindling. It had been so much work for so little, in the end, especially since they hadn't found any good replacements, aside from *maybe* the skull armor. There was only a scroll case and a pot left, and Mizuki didn't have high hopes for either of them. She picked the scroll case, because the shape of the pot still offended her.

It was leather, though it had metal pieces to it, some which seemed to be for ornamentation, some which seemed like they were structural. It was a fine piece, as scroll cases went, though Mizuki only knew the first thing about scroll cases, which was that they were cases for scrolls. She wasn't even sure that she'd ever *seen* a scroll case before, or a scroll. The metal was something yellow and shiny, and looked like gold to her, though Alfric had said that dungeons were incapable of making 'true' gold.

When Mizuki opened up the case, she was mildly disappointed to see that there was nothing inside, though she wasn't sure what she had expected. She looked around for something to put inside, and absent-mindedly petted Emperor while she did so. Eventually she picked one of the few remaining grapes up off the snack plate and put it in the scroll case, then closed the scroll case and counted to ten. When she opened it back up, the grape was still there.

"Aw," she said. She tried other things, somewhat slowly, but she felt like what she really needed was a proper scroll to put inside.

Alfric, unfortunately, figured out the weirdly shaped pot all on his own, with no help from Mizuki. It could 'recompose' things that had been damaged to cut, and there was no reason whatsoever that it should be a pot. A cut up grape, placed inside, would reassemble itself into proper grape shape, and Alfric seemed excited about it, because it was a new and unique magic, as all entads were. Mizuki liked his unabashed and unashamed excitement about the entads, which was a side of him that she only rarely got to see. Alfric was a man who liked facts and figures, and relating concepts to other people in a somewhat dry way, but there was a light in his eyes when he was entad testing.

"It still doesn't make sense that it's a pot," said Mizuki, giving the pot a critical eye. "I've pretty much never put things in a pot and wanted them to come back together. And the *shape* is offensive."

"Yes," said Alfric. "I think we're going to need an entad storeroom, like the Vertex has, but once we have one, we can keep this out of your sight. Or under a cloth, maybe, would that work for you?" He grinned at her.

"Hmm, maybe it should have its own room, one with a lock," said Mizuki. She took another drink of wine. "Or we could dig a little burial pit for it in the backyard."

"Oh yes," said Alfric. "'We' could dig a pit. You're trying to rope me into more work, aren't you?" He came to sit down on the couch next to her, his various testing apparently done.

"I know you like to have something to do," said Mizuki. "Besides, I can think of worse things than you, in the backyard, shirtless, digging a hole for an ugly, worthless pot."

"You'd be at your customary spot in the window then?" asked Alfric. He gave her a nudge, and she nudged him back.

"I already apologized for that," said Mizuki. She'd felt awkward and creepy about it, but she'd talked about him being shirtless, and had invited the mention of it.

"It's fine," shrugged Alfric. He smiled at her again, in a way that more effectively communicated it was fine than any words could do. "Do we need to talk about the body merging thing?"

"Oh," said Mizuki. She swirled the remaining wine in her glass. "Nope."

Alfric leaned back. "Alright, good. Or you could talk to Hannah."

"Nah," said Mizuki. "Hannah is great, but I hate the structured cleric stuff. It always feels so fake to me."

"*Real* emotional understanding should be spontaneous," said Alfric. "Is that it?"

"I guess," said Mizuki.

"Certainly preferable, I think," said Alfric. "But not always realistic."

"I thought it was interesting, the body merging thing," said Mizuki. "Absolutely no way would I have wanted to keep it, but for an hour or so, sure, and I do wish we'd gotten to play around a bit more."

"And when you say play around," said Alfric. "You mean ... ?"

"No, no," said Mizuki. "Just ... it was a new body, I wanted to run and jump and swing a sword. I wanted to fly through the air and taste different magic and all kinds of other things, which I didn't really get to do. I know you weren't a fan, but for me it was a new frontier, you know?"

"I guess I understand," said Alfric. He was frowning a bit.

“Like, I grew a full foot, I had so much more strength, it was *neat*,” said Mizuki. “It’s like if I could turn into a dragon, right? I would *love* to turn into a dragon, or a cat, or whatever, just for the *experience* of it.”

“Do you ... think that I’m two feet taller than you?” asked Alfric.

“What?” asked Mizuki. “Oh ... no, I don’t know, whatever the math is, I was taller, that’s all I’m saying. If I just had that, an entad that made me taller or shorter, I would be a different height every day.”

“Ah,” said Alfric. “I guess I do see.” He paused for a moment, then drank more of his wine. “Well, what do you want to do with the rest of the night? Seems like it’s just you and me.”

“One second,” said Isra. Mizuki turned and saw her coming down the stairs. Her hair was damp and she was wrapped in a robe, with the rest of her clothes apparently having been shed. She was no longer made of water, so that was something. “Verity and I will present our findings tomorrow, but it seems pretty useful for a fisherman, a sailor, or someone who does underwater dungeons.” She placed the ring back on the table. “It came off just fine. Verity and I will be retreating to our room for the evening, like the polite young ladies we are.”

“She’s going to have a difficult time tomorrow if she’s hung over,” said Alfric. “Tell her to drink some water.”

“I’ll take care of her,” said Isra. She left as quickly as she’d come, bare feet padding back up the stairs.

“Where were we?” asked Alfric.

“The rest of the night,” said Mizuki. She looked at the stairs again. It was nice for Isra and Verity that they had paired off, but it did make the house a bit more lonely sometimes. And with Hannah gone, it was just her and Alfric, which ... well, they decidedly *weren’t* paired off, as much as he was attractive and competent and charming, and as much as those thoughts seemed to go through her head, and for all that his jokes often felt like flirting. “I think I’m going to go get some reading in.”

“Yeah?” asked Alfric, raising an eyebrow. He looked at some of the debris on the table from the plate of snacks. “I guess I’ll clean up then.”

“No, we’ll clean up *together*,” said Mizuki.

“You know I love work,” said Alfric. He was in a good mood, perhaps because they’d done two dungeons that week, or maybe because of entad testing, or possibly just that he’d had enough wine to loosen him up.

“Well, I secretly hate you,” said Mizuki. She got to her feet and patted Emperor on the head. He raised up slightly, as though he was unsure whether they were going somewhere. “So I’ve made it my life’s mission to deprive you of work.” She looked at the table. “And here’s where I would

pick up a bunch of wine glasses in a hurry and abscond with them at full speed to the kitchen, but I actually do think that would be dangerous.”

“Safety talk,” said Alfric. “See, that’s how I know you don’t secretly hate me.”

Once the dishes were done, Mizuki went up to her room, and did *try* to get some reading done, from an introductory book on wizardry that Kell had loaned her, but it was hard to focus. She was feeling lonely, which she was perfectly well aware was a ridiculous thing to feel when you were in a house full of people you’d spent most of the day with.

Perhaps the wedding was weighing on her mind. Bethany was getting married to Jo Pedder in just a few days, and it was bringing back up some memories. For some stupid reason, maybe because they were friends, Mizuki had agreed to help Bethany with some of the things that needed to be done for the wedding.