It was more or less exactly what Alfric had feared. If Verity and Isra had not actually broken up, they were, at least, on the rocks. After their return from Dondrian, the feeling of it had infested the household, and the two of them weren't talking to each other except in brief sentences. It wasn't *angry*, or even really curt, just like they had mutually decided to only exchange a handful of words each day. There wasn't an extra bedroom in the house, so by some kind of twisted agreement between the two of them, Verity was living in the woods and Isra was in the bedroom they'd been sharing. Alfric wasn't entirely sure how or why this arrangement had been made, and it seemed insane to him, because of all the things that could be said about Verity, no one would have said that she was suited to the woods.

Verity did come by the house, where she still nominally lived, in part because she didn't know how to cook for herself. She would show up for lunch famished, then spend time reading in the living room, or tending to the garden, or playing her lute, then after dinner, retreat back to her forest home.

Isra was hardly any better. She was trying too hard to be sociable, and Alfric worried that it wasn't healthy. Isra joined practically every club there was in Pucklechurch, all over the course of a week, and volunteered her time helping out at the school to pick up the slack for a teacher that had just gone into labor. After her first day helping with the six-year-olds, she had declared that she didn't understand what all the fuss was about, not seeming to realize that her magical powers were helping her along. She could watch the kids using bird helpers, and of course the children were fantastically entertained by the coterie of animals that came out of the woods. There was a frantic energy to the way that Isra was filling up her life with other things, and Alfric thought that sooner or later it was all going to come crumbling down.

"Okay," said Mizuki. "What are we going to do about the girl situation?" asked Mizuki. She was sitting on his bed as he worked on composing a message to his guild. He wanted advice, and was trying to get it without divulging too much in the way of personal information. It was difficult work, made somewhat more difficult by the fact that Mizuki was there and trying to talk to him.

"Nothing," said Alfric. "It's not our place."

"But I mean, they're all broken up now, right?" asked Mizuki. "So are you thinking that we just let it blow over?"

"I don't know if they *are* broken up," said Alfric. "I asked Isra and her mood plummeted like a stone. She just said that they hadn't really talked about it."

"That's so *dumb*," said Mizuki. "It makes sense to not know if you've started dating someone, but to not know whether you've stopped?"

That gave Alfric pause. "Does it make sense to not know whether you're dating someone?"

"Sure, happens all the time," said Mizuki. "To lots of people."

"Well, the longer it goes on, the more likely it is to be permanent," said Alfric.

"Do we, like, want them to be together?" asked Mizuki.

“I don’t think what we want is really relevant,” said Alfric. “I think, as their friends, what we want is for them to be happy, and *hopefully* they can find a way of being happy where we all stay friends.”

“I mean, that’s not a risk, is it?” asked Mizuki.

“I don’t know,” said Alfric. “I have experienced exactly one breakup, which lost me all my friends.”

“Well, I guess I have a lot of experience,” said Mizuki. “And yeah, not being friends anymore seems like something that happens.” She was swinging her feet, which didn’t quite touch the floor. “But I don’t know how we’d make that work, as a dungeoneering party.”

“We likely wouldn’t,” said Alfric.

Mizuki stared at him for a moment. “But what would that mean?”

“It would mean we’d have to find a new fifth,” said Alfric with a sigh. It had been almost a week since the falling out, and it seemed like Mizuki was just now coming to realize that this spelled trouble for their collective future.

“Well how would that even work?” asked Mizuki. “I mean — it wouldn’t, right? It took Vertex a couple of weeks to find someone, and I feel like they got pretty lucky to have Kell.”

“We’re definitely not at that point,” said Alfric. “And it *is* possible for people to work together without them being friends. I have an uncle whose party can’t stand each other, but they’re professionals when they’re in a dungeon. Outside it, they don’t really talk, and they’re certainly not friends.”

“That sounds *awful*,” said Mizuki. “Stuck in a dungeon for weeks at a time with people you don’t care for?”

Alfric had no reply to that. Vertex had gone fifty dungeons or so together while not being quite friends, and with Lola there. It *did* sound awful, and he had a much better understanding of the awfulness now than he’d had when he’d set out for Pucklechurch. It was the sort of thing you learned along the way, he supposed, but it was also the sort of thing that could get you stuck on in the process of learning.

“Most parties are very long term,” said Alfric. “You find your group and then you stick together, for better or worse, tied together by all kinds of things. You divvy up the entads that are won by blood, you have business interests together, community funds, you’ve hit all the same dungeons … it’s a lot to walk away from. And the people who *do* walk away are either damaged goods or painted with the same large brush. From what I’ve heard, it’s horrible.”

“It *sounds* horrible,” said Mizuki. “And I don’t think that’s a good way to talk about people. ‘Damaged goods’.”

“You know what I mean,” said Alfric. “A lot of people who got kicked out of a group got kicked out for a reason.”

“Like you got kicked out of a group?” asked Mizuki.

“No,” said Alfric. “But I spent a *long* time trying to find a group, and I found the skepticism understandable. They would ask me questions about why I got kicked out, and I would explain things to them, and … it was exactly the kind of story that I would expect to hear someone tell. There’s always another side to the story, and when your side is weighed so heavily in your own favor, people wonder. I knew that. It was frustrating, but I knew it. All I needed was for someone to give me a chance, but I really, really understand why they didn’t.”

“I hope we don’t have to deal with a new person,” said Mizuki. “I like Verity *and* Isra.”

“Yeah,” said Alfric. “It would hurt to lose either, and hurt double to lose both.”

“We should get them back together,” said Mizuki.

“That’s a *terrible* idea, but it’s so terrible that I want to hear your thoughts on how to do that,” said Alfric. He grinned at her, and she flashed a smile back.

“Alright,” she said. She stood up and put her hands in front of her, which she was presumably using to represent the two girls. “Idea one, we lock them in a room together. Now, I know what you’re thinking, we probably don’t need anymore ideas after that one, why has this amazing girl made a numbered list if we’re fine to stop at one? But this is something that I’ve learned from you: contingency planning.”

Alfric laughed. “You know, locking them in a room together might just end in disaster.”

“Yeah, but at least they’d talk,” said Mizuki. “How long could they realistically go without talking about their feelings? Five days?”

“We’re talking about two people who didn’t talk to each other when it was just a bit of mutual attraction,” said Alfric. “They could go until they both die of old age.” There was a brief moment when Alfric realized that what he’d said about mutual attraction could, in theory, apply to him and Mizuki, and he was worried that they would have to talk about it, but she moved on quickly. The same thought had obviously occurred to her though.

“Option two, we do a dungeon,” said Mizuki. “See, I think you’ll like this one, because we’re a dungeoneering party.”

“Ostensibly,” said Alfric.

“Well, we get them in a dungeon together, that’s kind of like locking them in a room,” said Mizuki. “And then they save each others’ lives, and they fall back in love.”

“I’m not sure that’s even the issue,” said Alfric. “I mean, I think they might still love each other, if it ever got that deep. There are certainly enough looks passing between them. But if the nature

of their fight — their break — isn't clear, then I don't know if we could come up with any plan that would work."

"Nah," said Mizuki. "We just come up with enough plans, then do them all."

"That's not a *terrible* strategy," said Alfric. "I mean, in the abstract, as it relates to the set of all plans. For this particular thing, yes, it's a terrible idea."

"Three," said Mizuki, apparently not deterred. "We plan another trip. Right now, they're apart, right, free to do their own things? But if we all went somewhere together, they would have to spend some time together."

"I feel like these first three are all variations on trapping them in a room," said Alfric. He grinned. "Trap them in a room, or trap them in a dungeon, or trap them in a foreign land."

"Okay, so if you're so smart, why don't you come up with something?" asked Mizuki.

"I mean, it's a bad idea all around," said Alfric. "I'm criticizing the execution, but it's the whole concept that's bad. What we should *really* be doing is making ourselves available to talk with them, one on one, so we can figure out what happened, and so they can process it. Maybe Hannah is already doing that."

"Alright, new plan," said Mizuki. "What we do is we trap *ourselves* with them so they have to talk to *us*, and maybe that will help them work things out."

"I do think that's a legitimately good idea," said Alfric. "Find time to be with them one on one, and hope that they start talking? Except Isra has busied herself, and Verity is off in the woods."

"Alright, but what's the trap going to be?" asked Mizuki. "No matter which way we go, we need a trap."

It was increasingly clear that Mizuki was in a silly mood, and had come up to Alfric's room because she wanted someone to be silly with. Alfric hesitated for a moment, then mentally set the guild message aside.

"Here's what I'm thinking," he said. "We dig a big hole."

"Yes," said Mizuki. There was a particular way her smiles always reached her eyes. "Love it."

"Step two, we get stuck in the hole with them, one on one," said Alfric. "Or stick them in together."

"At which point they warp out," said Mizuki.

"Ah, see, that's step three," said Alfric. "We're waiting for them *at the warp*, where we've used my woodworking skill to build a room. They'll have warped into the second trap. It's genius."

"We'll have to do it away from Pucklechurch then," said Mizuki, trying and failing to give him a serious frown.

“Nah, once we explain things to the mayor, he’ll surely agree,” said Alfric. “Small price to pay, giving up the hex’s warp for the certainty that we could get our two girls back together.”

Mizuki grinned. “Alright, you start drawing up plans for the enclosure, I’ll start digging the pit. Do you think Verity will get suspicious when I use her shovel?”

Alfric snapped his fingers and pointed at Mizuki. “Nonchalant whistle. She falls for it every time.”

Mizuki giggled. It was incredibly gratifying. “Alright, I’m going to go work on my plans, I’ll leave you to it. Thanks for, ah, you know.”

“We’ll get through it,” said Alfric.

“Yeah, I know,” said Mizuki. She turned and left, and Alfric watched her go.

It took a moment for him to get his bearings back and return to the guild message he’d set aside. He looked at what he’d written there, then deleted it all and started over.

The intraparty romance I’ve mentioned before has led to what looks like a breakup. We currently have one member living outside the shared house, though she comes in for meals and is here for much of the day. We haven’t done a dungeon since this rough patch, and I was hoping that someone might have some advice on how to navigate the situation. How does a team move on from something like that? What’s the best approach to keep things professional when we’re doing dungeons?

He read it over a few times, as he always did with guild messages, and then sent it off. It wouldn’t reach anyone until the next day, and then he wouldn’t get responses back until the day after that, but there was a chance someone would have some actionable insight. In the meantime, he would be as much of a friend to both of them as he could be.

When he came downstairs, he found that Verity had made her way over to the house, and he didn’t think it was a coincidence that Isra had already left for parts unknown. The party channel hadn’t seen much use for either of them, and that meant that no one else really wanted to use it either, since it risked disturbing calm waters.

“I *am* keeping it clean,” Verity was saying. She was at the table, putting together a sandwich. The rest of them had an early lunch, but Mizuki had left things out.

“Well, can I come with you?” asked Mizuki. “I’ve never seen the place, and if you’re going to be staying there long-term, I want to see it.”

“You think that I’m not keeping it clean?” asked Verity.

“Puh-leez,” said Mizuki. “I saw your room at the Fig and Gristle, and I’ve *definitely* seen your room here. Cleaning is the last thing you like to do.”

“I actually agree with Mizuki on this one,” said Alfric.

“I’m doing *fine* out in the woods,” said Verity. “Isra needs the socialization more than I do, it makes sense. And I’m keeping the place clean, because I’m not under any delusion that I live there.”

“Well, can I see it?” asked Mizuki. “Not to double-check your cleanliness, obviously, I just want to see the place. And you’re voluntarily living there, so …”

“It’s Isra’s house,” said Verity. “I’m only living there because … we agreed that it would be better if we didn’t sleep in the same room anymore.”

“You don’t owe us an explanation about that,” said Mizuki. “Though it wouldn’t hurt, obviously.”

“We’re just … working things out, I think,” said Verity. She looked down at her food. “And it might be that when we’ve worked them out, there won’t be an ‘us’ anymore.” She looked hollow, or if not hollow, then like she might fill with tears.

“There better be an ‘us’ though,” said Mizuki, gesturing at the three of them, and probably meaning the whole party. “Alfric would be gutted if we needed to find a new fifth.”

“We’re not at that point,” said Alfric, stepping forward slightly.

“Isra and I are fine to go into a dungeon together,” said Verity. Her voice was somewhat lacking in warmth, as if it shouldn’t have been in question. Alfric considered that for a moment, and realized that Verity prided herself on professionalism, canceled concerts aside. The concert hadn’t been entirely canceled, at least from what Alfric had heard from Dondrian: instead, a different esteemed musician was taking her place at the last minute with a different program, all of which was less likely to be successful, and had probably cost Verity’s family a lot.

<Dungeon check!> Mizuki called into the party channel. <I personally, am in for a dungeon today, it’s just after lunch, that’s still enough time.>

<I’m in too,> said Alfric, almost immediately.

<Yes, I could do it,> said Isra.

<Sure,> said Verity.

They all waited for a beat, but there was no response from Hannah.

<Hannah?> asked Mizuki.

<Busy,> was Hannah’s one-word response, which came out slightly breathy.

“Welp,” said Mizuki. “I guess she’s with Marsh.”

“She might be moving something heavy,” said Alfric. Mizuki rolled her eyes at him. “What? She *could* be.”

“I think everyone knows that’s not what she’s doing,” said Mizuki.

“Well, we need to wait for her,” said Verity. She was eating her sandwich with her elbows on the table, being unladylike, even by the very loose standards of the house. Alfric wondered whether it was deliberate.

“If all four of us are up for it, I imagine that we’ll be going,” said Alfric. “I don’t think she would say no. We’ll wait until she gets back to us, but I’ll try to get everything prepped, and maybe change.”

“I need to think about dinner,” said Mizuki. “*Ideally* we’ll get home in time so it’s not a problem, but maybe I can do some prep work that sits in the chiller.”

“I can help,” said Verity. She set the sandwich down and stood up.

“No,” said Mizuki. “Appreciate it, but I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen you in the kitchen.”

Verity frowned. “I *can* help. I can chop something up for you?”

“Um,” said Mizuki. “I *guess*. With the new knife from Vertex, I guess you don’t even really need knife skills.” She looked mildly uncomfortable. “Sure. Finish your food first though.”

“Are you going to need anything from the cabin?” asked Alfric.

“No,” said Verity. “My dungeon gear is still here.”

“Then I’ll get things going,” said Alfric.

He didn’t like doing things this way. Dungeons weren’t meant to be a spur of the moment thing. You weren’t supposed to wake up in the morning and think ‘ah, feels like we should do a dungeon today’. Rather, you were supposed to schedule them in some way, ideally a week ahead of time in order to make sure that schedules were clear, and a true dungeoneering party would have a defined day of the week — ideally two or three days of the week — that everyone knew were going to be dungeon days. Of course, you needed to be flexible when it came to dungeons, because there were administrative things to deal with, and sometimes matters of recuperation, and a dungeon could take as long as a week if there were a lot of things you needed to get out. He decided that he would bring it up at the post mortem if the dungeon went well.

Preparation had become a bit more complicated. The chest meant that they didn’t need to bring in packs as such, though Alfric kept a small one that wouldn’t affect his combat ability too much, mostly filled with things that he might need at a moment’s notice without opening up the chest and having to dig for it. For the chest itself, which was parked in his room most of the time it wasn’t following someone around, they had made a number of modifications to it over time, the biggest being a foldable ladder to better allow people to climb into it. When the ladder was folded up, there was no cavity within the chest, just whatever was in there pushed near the top. A second addition had been a pack that Alfric had a seamstress make for him. This was largely just a set of straps hooked to a long sheet of thick fabric with a lot of pockets. It was hooked to the lid of the chest so that when the chest opened, there would be an array of easily grabbable things.

He checked everything over while they waited for word from Hannah. He had gotten a new set of armor while they were in Dondrian, and had been itching to try it out in actual combat. The thimble armor had gone to Isra, as Mizuki was now equipped with the skull armor. Of them all, Verity was the only one with only a breastplate and a helm, though she stayed back in most dungeons, and was the least in need of protection.

Alfric dressed himself in a gambeson, a thick quilted piece outfit that would sit below the armor. He put on heavy socks with a padded bottom that would cushion his feet as he moved around. When that was finished, he held his hands to the sides and watched as the plates of metal rose from where they were stacked and slotted themselves into place around him. They had an odd look to them, like iron that had spots of rust, but closer inspection had shown that they were small blooms of brown flowers, smooth and cold to the touch. They didn't fit together like plate armor did, instead feeling more like over-large scales. At his hips they flared out, almost like a skirt, and they sat heavily on his arms. When he'd shown Mizuki, she'd compared him to a fish, and the plates destroyed any semblance of a silhouette, obscuring the actual form of his body. At the head, in particular, was a pyramid-shape, and completely obscured his vision except for a small slit to see out of.

Alfric hadn't gotten the armor because it assembled itself around him though. If that was all it could do, then it would only be slightly better than mundane full plate. No, the armor had something of a living quality to it, responding to his wishes as though it were trained. At a thought, the plates of armor could bloom open around his head, allowing him to see. If he wanted a shield, he had only to think it, putting up his forearm and having the plates rearrange themselves in an interlocking pattern. The maximum position of the plates, once they were active, was about two feet away from him. There were just about a hundred uses for the armor, including as a weapon, but it had been nearly a week, and there'd been no opportunity.

<Alright, alright, I'm fine for a dungeon today,> Hannah eventually said. <Be home in a bit.>

<So what were you busy with?> asked Mizuki.

<I'd be careful with what words you speak to your healer, little one,> said Hannah.

<Nah, I never get hit anyway,> said Mizuki.

<Oh, I think you could *easily* see your way to gettin' hit,> said Hannah. <*Quite* easily indeed.>

Mizuki giggled into voice chat.

By the time Alfric came back downstairs, Mizuki had packed up her armor and Isra had returned from wherever she'd been off to. There was a part of Alfric that still expected her to be the reserved girl in the headscarf, but she let her curly hair hang down these days, and wore light dresses that breathed in the summer heat. There were times he could still see echoes of awkwardness and uncertainty in her, moments when she held back, and times when she was clearly missing some big and obvious piece of the world, but all this was becoming more rare.

“Where are we going this time?” she asked as she stretched out. She hadn’t gotten dressed yet, and was eating from the plate of cut vegetables that had been left out from lunch.

“Latchet Point,” said Alfric. “Deep into the woods.”

“Can I fly?” asked Isra. “I was thinking it would be better.” She glanced toward the door.

“Sure,” said Alfric. “It’s not a long flight, minutes, maybe, and you’ll be able to find the dungeon entrance better than any of us would. I’ll mark it out on a map for you.”

“Great,” said Isra. “I need to go get my bow and start armoring up.” She turned and left.

“Is this going to, you know, work?” Mizuki asked Alfric. “I mean, with the two of them? Because it *feels* like Isra is flying so that she won’t have to hang out with Verity.”

“Yeah,” Alfric agreed. He let out a breath. “It’s a test of how we work as a dungeon party in these new circumstances.”

“I hate tests,” said Mizuki.

After another half hour had passed, everyone was ready to go. As had become tradition, they all stepped into the garden stone, save Isra, who was their transportation. The first time into the garden stone had been awkward, but now it was so routine that they hardly thought about it. Alfric was practically aching to get newer transportation for them, something they could all ride together without the hassle of the garden stone or the discomfort of the chest. Still, that was something for the future, as the current situation was perfectly adequate in strictly practical terms.

“Do you like practicing in the woods?” Mizuki asked Verity. “Is it better than at home?”

“A bit, yes,” said Verity. “It’s quiet in a way that I appreciate. When I’m at your house, there are often people moving around, making noise, talking as I play — all not what I want when practicing.” She shrugged. “I don’t need to practice much, now that there’s no looming concert.”

“I still think you should have done a dungeon songs concert,” said Mizuki. “I mean, people liked the knight song, and you have a whole bunch of those written, right?”

“I do,” Verity admitted. “But changing the concert series in midstream would be, ah … not the proper thing to do.”

“Not proper?” asked Mizuki. “I mean, you don’t care about that, right? And you already did that one song, replacing Berchew. Which people loved!”

“It was *novel*,” said Verity. “To make it into a full concert … it wouldn’t be novel. People would realize that it’s not a fusion of rural folk music and high-class conservatory training, it’s *just* rural folk music, whatever comes into my head, worked on with all the skill of a cat trying to open a door.”

“Aw, don’t make fun of Tabbins,” said Mizuki.

The trip wasn't long though, and the conversation didn't get too far before they arrived. They all came out into the towering woods of Latchet Point. The trees were tall, old growth, never harvested for wood for the simple reason that this particular variety of tree would dull the blades of the strongest axes four times before they could make it through. The human expansion into this particular region had always been fairly lackluster anyhow, but aside from the four roads that stretched out from the warp point, the entire hex was virtually abandoned. They hadn't landed at the warp though, instead Isra had flown them to the dungeon entrance, which sat in a gap in the trees that was too small to be called a clearing.

"So," asked Hannah, hands on her hips. "What fresh horrors do we expect in this one?"