Fran watched them go with a hard stare.

Holly didn't really blame the dear, being a boss monster and basically having to give them all a free pass would rankle her something fierce too. The door lead to a long tunnel with the stairs at the end of it.

There was a touch of nostalgia at the sight. The number of times that Holly had traversed a dungeon, with various friends and faces, risking life and limb with a boss monster. The sweet taste of victory only made sweeter when seeing the stairs of progression. They came in all sorts of shapes and design but each one stated the same thing.

You made it.

It was the mark of a successful adventurer, prestige could often be counted by how many stairs they had traversed in their career. It was the physical manifestation of progress.

Holly moved closer and looked down at the darkness that enticed the curious little girl she had once been when she had first set off to explore the world. She stroked the carved stone wall and felt that the stone was a little warm. Above the stairway entrance was a carving of a tree. It could have just been a deformation in the stone but Holly knew that dungeons made things precise.

A little trick was that every stairway down gave a little hint of what was to come. One time, the stairs to another floor were slick with slime and a noxious gas floated up. Holly could either guess slimes or a swamp themed floor.

With the tree alone, it would difficult to imagine exactly what was waiting. Vague was always better for Delta.

"There you are," Quiss called down the tunnel. Holly turned with a smile at Isanella's form. The smile only grew once she saw the state the woman was in. Messy hair with clothes damp from sweat.

The wide smile only completed the image.

"HEY MUM! DID YOU HAVE FUN?" Deo greeted, running towards her with a large grin. The boy was a sweetheart; if only her own children were always so happy to see her. Then again, Holly usually came towards them with a chore list...

Isanella braced herself as Deo crashed into her and without even wincing stroked the boy's hair.

"Yes, I made a good friend today. And I won a singing contest," she mused and that was when Holly noticed the object strapped to her back. She had been too distracted by Isanella's vibrancy to see that she was carrying an odd-looking lute.

Isanella pulled it free and held it out for everyone to see.

“Maestro didn’t know he had a reward if you beat him in a contest. It appeared in a golden light from the ceiling, just dropped into my hands,” Isanella explained. The instrument was made from some sort of organic material, dried mycelium if Holly were to guess, grown in a variety of hues and clamped together with thin iron bands but the strings almost glowed silver. Holly moved closer as Noland began to ask Isanella questions.

“How did it atta- I mean... How did this ‘Maestro’ do battle? Could he be dangerous if provoked? Any weakness you noticed?” he inquired. Holly pursed her lips as she tried to block the man out. The strings were made of almost ghostly spiderweb, such fine quality!

“I think we can all be dangerous if provoked,” Quiss cut in. Isanella merely shrugged.

“He has the habit of preferring songs with a power chorus. If you can trap him in a long note sequence you can get in some quick jabs with good rhymes,” Isanella nodded. Noland gave her a long look.

“You’re suggesting people should sing at it?” he translated. The woman smiled.

“Sing *with* him, he isn’t one for just watching,” she corrected. Holly could see the pen faltering as Noland struggled to fit that into the review. Quiss rolled his eyes at her look.

“How does it play?” Holly asked politely. Isanella’s light fingers traced over a few of the strings and the sound that echoed out was haunting but beautiful. Isanella twisted some tiny knobs near the top of the instrument and played the strings again.

This time a harsh noise of energy and passion streamed out.

“I haven’t figured it out yet but I think I can make quite a few sounds on this little thing. It mimics Maestro perfectly. A thing that looks misleading but has the heart of an artist,” Isanella beamed, the similarity to Deo so striking that Holly had to blink between the two.

“If it helps, I assume Maestro still has his acid spit and those tentacles could flay a man alive if he was pushed to do so,” Quiss offered to Noland. The man actually gave Quiss a small smile as he wrote something down.

“Song based powers, acid, thorny vines, and a bunch of mushroom minions at his base... anything else? I still need to write about the pig knight,” Noland mumbled. Holly longed to burn the paper.

It was the beginning of it all. If Holly could just make it disappear... then Delta would be left alone a little bit longer. There was Noland himself but Holly had ways of making people get lost in the woods, for a long time.

But it wouldn’t slow everything down for long. Delta’s gift of mana was already catching the attention of the land. All those nosey wizards and scientists with nothing better to do than send lackeys to poke at any new dungeons to satisfy their own curiosity.

Holly would have to plant a few little dears between Delta and the open road. Nothing too dramatic, just enough to make crowding her a bad idea.

“Let us go on. The dungeon has been quite helpful. I’ll make sure to note that,” Noland mused.

“MR. NOLAND, WHAT ARE OTHER DUNGEONS LIKE?” Deo jogged up next to Noland as they all began to descend the stairs. The man paused in his writing.

“Wouldn’t know. This is my first dungeon. I find them almost too much of a hassle,” he explained. This surprised Holly. The man traveled all over the country and hadn’t been in the other dungeons?

“But Mr. Noland, some of the most amazing sights can only be found in dungeons. The famous silver waterfalls of the dungeon in the desert of Gimna. The Crystal forest in the far north, even the birds are made from crystal. I mean I’ve seen rooms where gravity doesn’t work and you had to fly between islands to advance. Why would you deprive yourself of such sights?” Holly asked aghast. Noland didn’t answer from some time.

“I can never quite forget that all these wonderful sights are paid for by the death of dozens and sometimes hundreds of people. I think it’s even worse that people’s lives are taken to make some pretty forest or some glittering waterfall that will draw even more into the grinder,” he spoke quietly.

Holly couldn’t sympathize. Nature outside the dungeons was no different. The wildflowers of the forest grew on the dead of the last year's bloom, the fresh kills of predators, the decaying of old life gave way to new life.

“No one forces them to go in,” Holly reminded him. Noland just shrugged.

“I don’t disagree, the idiocy of foolish people should be mocked but they shouldn’t die for it. I mean, the tunnels here, the rooms with minimal things in it. The pond room with its rocks and grass... the mushroom grove and the goblins... Maestro... I find them more beautiful than anything you mentioned because it was all born from hard work and not just death. I find it... charming,” Noland added, his steps loud as no one else spoke.

Noland seemed to get flustered for a moment.

“My feelings are irrelevant to the report. The dungeon will soon have enough fools knocking on her door to make up for lost time,” he stated. Quiss who was leading the way slowed as the stairs ended.

“Here we are, the second floor,” he said conversationally as if the talk of dungeons was not his cup of tea.

“WHOA, IT’S LIKE EVERYTHING IS MADE FROM TREES!” Deo pointed out and he wasn’t wrong. The room was lined with trees whose roots spread so thick that they formed the floor. The roots were firm and solid under Holly’s feet.

“Common trees found just outside but they’re all in great health. The roots are odd, they don’t usually grow into each other but Delta doesn’t play by the rules when it comes to ‘should and shan’t’,” Holly said. Cois snorted behind them. His form lingered on the stairs.

Everyone stared. Deo waved but Quiss cleared his throat.

“Cois... I wasn’t aware you could leave your floor,” he said in a way that didn’t suggest a question. Cois smiled a little deviously.

“The things you aren’t aware of is amusing. I don’t like lingering down here too long. Makes my nose itchy, your next guide will be along to see you to the key points,” Cois pointed to a closed set of wooden doors that lead to the second floor.

“Who is it?” Isanella asked politely. Cois merely sniggered.

“She’s a real treat. Just walk, she’ll find ya,” he promised and turned to climb back up.

“Oh, if you see a waterfall, I suggest a dip. Great for your skin,” he cackled as his voice began to fade.

“That goblin disturbs me,” Noland muttered. Holly had seen worse but Cois' words had been interesting.

A ‘her’. Another monster of Delta’s. This was going to be interesting.

Quiss waited until Noland made notes on the room before he pushed both doors open.

Holly saw paradise.

“WOW, MUM LOOK! IT’S DAYLIGHT!” he pointed. Holly looked up at the faux sky where a sun beat heat down on them.

Birds sang, trees swayed slightly. Insects could be heard in the distance. The sound of the promised waterfall roared to the west somewhere.

A slight trodden path curved out and into the trees. A guiding road or a trick, Holly could hardly wait to find out.

“It’s kinda... humid,” Quiss noted and his greenish shirt and cotton pants looked a little sweaty already.

“I thought you were a fire mage,” Isanella said with a small smile. Quiss shot her a look.

“I don’t burn but I drink water like everyone else,” he corrected. The second flask he put to his lips did not contain water. Holly could smell it from here.

“That isn’t professional,” Noland’s tone became slightly annoyed. Quiss merely smirked.

“No one else in the town will take the job, trust me, I’ve tried to give it back,” he sighed but merely began to walk down the path.

“Come on people, there’s a whole humid jungle to explore. Our ‘guide’ will be along shortly if the goblin wasn’t having a laugh,” he waved one hand as if this wasn’t a huge deal. Holly bent down and began to feel the leaves of the flora growing around them.

So much life. There was a thud from behind her and Holly looked to set Deo holding up two apples from the tree that grew just nearby the entrance. Isanella took one and shot Holly a questioning look.

Taking the other apple, she closed her eyes. Her mana roamed the object, seeping into it. The mimicry of dungeon energy in the shape of organic material. It would have been perfect if not for the fact there was no basic life, the tiny bacteria and lifeforms found on everything. Instead, she felt an almost minuscule lattice of mana shaping the apple.

“It’s safe, just not too many at once!” Holly winked and reached for an apple for herself.

Taking a bite, the juice flowed into her mouth; by the trees, it was crisp.

Her mana perked up slightly as it ingested the apple’s mana. Dungeon mana converted to her own. A little nice boost and a healthy snack to boot.

Delta was a sweetie.

Holly eagerly wandered off the path to explore the trees and see the birds flying slowly about. So much thought put into everything. The life here, while not quite real, was growing. It must be some special thing about this floor.

Plants spread, the birds seemed to be laying eggs. The bees looked at her.

Holly paused but even when she focused on the bees, they didn’t do anything. Just watched her for a moment before they zoomed into a bush and out of sight. Red and colorful, the buzzing continued even when she could no longer see them.

Intelligent bees.

And where there were one or three bees, there was a queen.

Holly licked her lips at the thought of a giant queen with rivers of flowing honey around her. The pure feeling of the unknown of this floor was making her giddy.

She only hoped the guide would appear quickly, Holly may have to continue on without her if she didn’t show u-

Noland let out a screech as something appeared from the shadows behind the man and Holly closed her eyes with a smile.

This was paradise.

“Devina and Inchy *reporting* in!” squawked an orange bird. Noland looked up from the ground, clutching his reports as if the duo were about to take something precious from him.

The woman was a giant frog. Her calm expression and knowing smile made Holly want to scream at the top of her lungs with excitement.

“HELLO, MY NAME IS DEO! IT’S NICE TO MEET YOU AGAIN!” Deo walked right up to the amphibian woman and she nodded at him.

“I remember you, oh loud one.” she almost said fondly. The bird on her shoulder looked a little plump and had an almost simple quality to it.

“Our guide I would presume?” Quiss offered. Devina gave a little bow.

“I am Devina, daughter of the great mother Delta. I will guide you to our secret places as requested. I will trust Mother’s request for goodwill and will pray to the spirits that it is not betrayed. I would dislike having to seek vengeance for those who hurt her,” Devina stated with that same calm smile.

“No jokes here!” the bird agreed.

Holly liked this woman. She had an air of... nature about her.

“Don’t piss off Delta, got it. Now can we go? I’m not a fan of the heat,” Quiss grumbled. Devina reached into her pouch and pulled a damp cloth out. Her various pouches seemed to be stained or in various states of wetness from their contents.

“Please, use this to cool yourself,” she offered. Quiss took it gingerly but seemed to find it pleasantly cool. Pressing to his head, he gestured for Devina to take the lead but the frog had stopped to look at Isanella.

“The instrument... it must be a gift from Mother,” she smiled, her words a statement. Isanella nodded and held it out.

“Mother’s favorite thing is mushrooms, you should write her a song about them,” Devina nodded seriously. A twinkle in her eye.

There was a pause as Devina seemed to be listening to something.

“Me? Mother... I would never,” she laughed and began to walk away down the path.

“MAYBE I SHOULD BRING SOME MUSHROOMS NEXT TIME!” Deo pondered aloud.

Holly thought she heard something in the distance, something slightly more shrill than the waterfall but it faded quickly.

What an odd but wonderful place this dungeon of Delta was.

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“It’s a horrible place. The Second floor has these frog people who just jump at you from nowhere and they act all reasonable and tell you that all you need to do is meet Bob and you can get past,” Grim complained, his note taking long forgotten as he played a card on the table.

Ruli fanned her hand, the cards showing nothing but her grin all too telling. Grim narrowed his eyes as she laid them out.

“I got a Royal slush, my ice queen and full ice court beats your drunken tavern crew. So who's Bob?” Ruli asked as Grim threw his cards down with a growl. He jabbed at the second-floor map at the waterfall.

“Giant worm thing that lives in the water. Devina and the other frogs are friends with it or something...” he sighed. Ruli’s eyes went black as her pupils expanded.

“Giant... worm thing in the water?” she repeated. Grim looked taken back as Ruli’s hair began to move on its own.

“No demonic energy in class,” Mr. Jones called from the spot where his blackboard seemed to be forming hellish symbols that burned as soon as Mr. Jones finished drawing them. Ruli gave him a flat look.

“I’m doing this for the education of my students, you’re just wasting energy,” the teacher said without looking at her. Grim snorted.

“Demon poetry is boring. It’s all about fighting, torturing souls, and the occasional times they die,” he complained. Ruli nodded furiously.

“I lived with my Dad, trust me the stuff he would read aloud made me homicidal. I don’t want to hear about the 5th stanza of some woman he once knew and her hundred eyes. It went on forever as he talked about each eye...” Ruli groaned into her hands. Mr. Jones laughed.

“Yes, your father was a rather romantic one. The things he did to impress your mother were legendary in the Abyss. The one time where she said she would marry him when the world depended on it. Needless to say...” Mr. Jones politely coughed to hide his laughter. Grim perked up at the idea of gossip.

Ruli’s face had turned to disgust.

“What happened?” Grim asked them. Ruli snorted.

“He got down on his knees and told her that his world did depend on it for if she said no then he would throw himself of the highest cliff in the Abyss. My Mum laughed and told him to take a flying leap. He did it and then came crawling back a few days later asking if she wanted anything else. The guy is just sad,” Ruli picked unseen dust off her sleeve.

Grim's face turned sullen.

"Sounds kinda boring," he stated. Mr. Jones cleared his throat.

"Her father landed in a ruin that held some sealed evil entity that almost swallowed the world. The demon king and the huntress of monsters took it down together and were wed a week later," he added as if was a small thing.

Grim's eyes lit up.

"He was a hero!"

Ruli choked and coughed.

"Well... yes. One could look at it that way!" Mr. Jones beamed.

"He just wanted to impress a girl!" Ruli argued. Grim shrugged.

"Saved the world, get the girl, have a bratty kid. Seems like a hero," he reshuffled the deck of cards. Ruli gave him a long look before she flicked his nose hard enough to top his chair back.

"You see any hero in this girl?" she asked sweetly.

"Just a heroic level pain in the ass," Grim grunted as he picked himself up. There was a crack as Mr. Jones chalk broke.

The room grew hot and cold at the same time.

"I meant... sass!" Grim scramble for cover. Ruli whistled as Mr. Jones pulled out a black cone from his desk. The cone swirled with magical energy as the word 'Dunce' lit up letter by letter.

"Mr. Pic, to the corner," Mr. Jones pleasant tone was sharper than any blade.

Grim merely nodded as Ruli innocently whistled.

She circled the waterfall on the map as Grim glared at her from across the room.

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"It's lovely," Isanella said as she walked around the pool the waterfall fed into. Devina nodded and gestured to the waterfall.

"Mother Delta is always making things interesting. Come, there is a room behind the waterfall. The water rises and falls so it's only dry enough to be accessible during some times of the day. Now is one of those periods," she explained.

The outsiders were interesting. Deo was like a butterfly that danced in the sunlight. Devina found herself not minding the loudness as the child seemed to only do it out of innocent joy. His mother, *another mother*, was like the moon to his song. Soft and gentle but ever basking in the light.

The man, Quiss, reminded Devina of Cois. There was a heat around him that Devina could almost feel. He moved lazily at times as if everything was only mildly interesting instead of exciting or dangerous but the sharp eyes hinted they saw far more than Devina might guess. Once they left the heavy trees and moved around the pond, the man actually relaxed.

If he was a fire mage, then being able to use his powers without causing a jungle firestorm would assure him. Devina hoped that Mother could find a way to make sure the jungle didn't burn.

Quiss may control himself but all it would take was one angry lost challenger to try burning it all down.

The other man smelled... of an animal and old paper. He was nervous looking but hid it behind a veil of mild annoyance. The paper in his hand looked to be the rock holding his confidence together. Devina would have to make sure not to spook him too much.

The last woman made Devina's interests peek the most.

Holly Dabberghast. Mother had said she was a good friend and helped the dungeon in the past. The jungle seemed to reach for the woman. The spirits of the jungle took notice of Holly. It was hard not to, even Devina could feel how the world of life around them was pulled to Holly like a vacuum.

The power the woman possessed could change everything in this jungle at a mere whim. Plants would be alive, trees would walk, and animals would be... more. There was almost a fearful tinge to it. There was a darkness to her nature. Thorns that dripped with old blood.

Devina shivered slightly as her shamanistic powers gave a slight image of something behind Holly.

A woman in black. A thorny staff that had ended far more life than it saved.

The image was gone as Holly bent down to feel the soil. A soft smile made the woman's face flush with pride. Devina didn't feel evil from the woman but she had never known evil to be fair. She wanted to believe this Holly was like Mother.

But she would watch her. This was her jungle and with some effort. she forced the jungle to return back to itself. It no longer flowed towards Holly like a lost puppy. The woman looked up and met Devina's gaze.

There was a knowing smile. Holly almost looked pleased.

Devina turned and lead the curious group into the secret restroom. Deo sat on the bed and then stuffed his face into the pillow.

He yelled something but he was too muffled to make much sense of it. Isanella leaned down and lifted the boy's head with a small smile.

"You can't sleep here. People can't stay in dungeons without building up a tolerance. You'll get MP," Isanella obviously understood him. Devina gesture to the cozy room.

"You are the first here. Treat this knowledge wisely," she said.

"Don't lose any sleep over it!" Delbird assured them. Devina was going to strangle the bird soon if it kept ruining her appearance as a wise woman...

"Interesting, very welcoming of Delta. Do the beds have any magical power?" Noland inquired. Devina wasn't sure...

It was Mother after all... maybe the beds did do something?

"MAYBE IF YOU TAP THE BED IN THE RIGHT PLACE IT WILL TELEPORT YOU OUT OF THE DUNGEON?" Deo suggested and began tapping the metal bed knobs with a focused expression.

Devina actually paused to see if anything happened but when nothing did, she turned to see the laughing form of Mother in the corner. The floor had shaken earlier and Mother had looked rather... guilty but she seemed to be over it now.

Still hard to see and even hear, Mother seemed to be enjoying the sight.

"It's just a bed!" she promised Devina with a note of laughter.

"For now," Devina agreed with a smile that made Delta freeze.

Moving back outside. Devina halted the group by the pool.

"There are a few more things here that we can meet. One is my fellow Frogman. Rale is somewhat a guardian of the waters. If we wait a small while, you should be able to meet him," Devina promised. Her voice a little higher as she mentioned Rale's name.

Damn that frog. Spirits curse him for being so... HIM!

"RALE WAS THE ONE THAT RESCUED ME FROM THE RIVER RIGHT!" Deo asked with excitement. Devina was nodding when Noland interrupted.

"Describe Rale for me. What are his strengths, his powers?" he began to write before Devina had opened her mouth. The man's need for everything to be cut down and placed into rankings and boxes was becoming a little sad.

Perhaps he needed a moment in the hotspring and to just relax...

The questioned answered itself as Rale, moving fast, crashed into the area through a thick collection of trees and plants.

“I am here!” he yelled, flexing to the group before he even completely stopped moving. The motion carried him so far forward that Noland was sent flying into the pond with a splash. The clipboard he carried landed perfectly on a lone rock near the side without any damage.

How lucky.

Noland splashed and spluttered before letting out a shout.

Rale merely looked at the man struggling to swim and the other people present.

“... uh...I shall save him!” he promised and dove in with quick motion but he wasn’t even gone a second before Noland was lifted out the water by the helpful pincers of Bob.

Bob rose higher and higher, water pouring down his thick carapace. Noland was now screaming and Devina could feel Mother’s hard look at her back.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Devina stated with a calm tone. Rale began to scale Bob like a tree, screaming how he was on the job while Deo cheered him on. Quiss looked at the water as if he was considering drowning himself and Isanella began to unpack sandwiches from a small backpack. Her lute humming as she idly strummed it.

Holly was just laughing as if this was the best thing she had ever seen.

“Call the spirits to make a ladder and get him down!” Mother demanded in a panic. Devina gave her a dubious look.

“Spirits do not work that way and Rale... is working on it,” she said as Rale was arguing with Bob’s crabs as the worm happily swung Noland around like a small toy.

This was only the first stop on the tour... Devina could feel a migraine coming on.

She was pretty sure she didn’t actually have a brain but the feeling was there.

“Better hop to it!” Delbird added helpfully.

The pain was only getting worse now and Devina’s temper flared as she began to bark orders.

The next stop would be the Bees and the Circus...

Renny could have them, Devina wanted to go ask the goblins if they had anything stronger than water to drink. Maybe she would go visit the spiders and drink fake tea until the people left.

Yes... that sounded like a good idea.