

The travelling quartet of intrepid adventurers arrived at their destination.

The cave entrance was right where they expected it to be. The barkeep had proven himself to be uncharacteristically reliable, and his directions were accurate enough to draw up a map that lead them right up to the rickety wooden door set into the cliff-side. It appeared unremarkable enough (even by door standards), but there was still the overwhelming sense that something earth-shatteringly important was hidden away in the uncharted depths behind it.

Less expected was the lit torch set within a bracket to the left of the door, shielded from the elements by the face of the cliff and its natural overhang above. Although they didn't expect the cave to completely devoid of inhabitants (because poking around in dark underground lairs for loot is just never that easy), the monsters that would typically inhabit such a place were hardly the type to appreciate light, heat or the attention that such a burning beacon would bring. The small flame cast a much-needed warm light into the gloom of the shadows, although something about its colour seemed somehow unnatural and "off." Also, with the foul weather pushed into the background by the torch's surroundings, the soft crackling of the fire should have been readily apparent, but instead there was nothing but conspicuous silence to accompany the distant and muffled sound of howling wind.

Even more unexpected was the shadowy figure standing a short distance from the torch; so unexpected that it makes the mere mention of the torch seem unnecessary, although there is the distinct possibility that this individual might not have even been visible without the light provided by the flame. This unidentified entity appeared to be a regular human; although, being almost entirely concealed by a dark and bulky-looking coat, with a large hood pulled up over the top of its head and some kind of scarf covering the majority of its face, it was entirely possible that some kind of nasty surprise could be hidden away out of sight. The figure also wore an enormous backpack, causing it to hunch forward under the weight and contributing to the idea that this individual might not be entirely "normal." Still, there were no glowing red eyes peering out from underneath the hood, and the lack of any hostile action gave the indication that this "person" was not some kind of mindless monstrous threat, at least for the time being.

There was another clue to the lack of threat posed by this individual. The unmistakable smell of exotic perfume hung in the air, and most sinister, evil and vicious monsters are not exactly well-known for their impressive hygiene or for making themselves seem more appealing.

Rhino sneezed.

The mysterious stranger took this moment to give the biggest hint yet toward its lack of malicious intent. It reached a gloved hand (normal – four fingers, one thumb, no flesh-rending claws) to its head, pulling back the hood and letting a full head of long red hair (normal, except for the unusual colour) escape with a pronounced swish at a shake of the head, a set of strikingly blue eyes (normal – "a set" is taken to mean "two" in this instance) keenly surveying the scene before them.

"Well it's about time you turned up," the figure remarked in an exasperated

feminine voice. "I've been freezing my ass off for hours here!"

With that, she reached to pull the scarf down from the lower part of her face, uncovering her mouth (normal – no fangs) and finally revealing herself to be a fairly regular, albeit rather attractive, individual. The only particularly abnormal aspect of her appearance was the presence of a pair of oversized, pointed ears poking out from underneath her hair, providing an altogether blatant clue to her elven heritage. Regardless, she was definitely not some kind of monster.

There followed an awkward moment of silence, where both parties quietly sized each other up; the travellers wondering quite why there was some weird elf woman standing on the threshold of the cave they wanted to investigate, and the now-less-than-mysterious stranger wishing that the others would hurry up and get down to business. A few more seconds of equivalent discomfort passed, and the elf decided to take the initiative.

"I have some... goods here that might interest you!" she blurted out with some enthusiasm, reaching one hand across her body to firmly take hold of the lapel of her enormous coat and yank it open. Her other hand then reached for the remaining side of her coat, pulling it back to hold her coat open for all to see inside, the contents illuminated by the unusual light of the torch.

Delta blinked in surprise, and then struggled to hide his disappointment.

Vast quantities of miscellaneous merchandise were arrayed within the elf's attire; perhaps too much stuff to be entirely believable. There were rows upon rows of glassware potion bottles containing a variety of brightly coloured liquids, some of which glowed or fizzed ominously; a healthy selection of miscellaneous weaponry, including short- and long-bladed swords, various outlandish axe designs, unfathomable gun-like contraptions and their requisite ammunition; medical supplies including bandages, antiseptics and small first-aid kits; and a small selection of assorted foodstuffs, mostly either dried goods or candy, which seemed comically out-of-place given the items nearby. As if this wasn't enough, innumerable small knapsacks and pouches were strapped to her body via a confusing tangle of belts, buckles and knotted bits of thread.

"The reeeeeeally big stuff is in the back!" she explained with a kind of fervour that is reserved for desperate salesmen, gesturing vaguely to her backpack with a quick nod of the head since her hands were otherwise occupied.

Ria leaned forward to take a closer look at a couple of the less-substantial swords, then stood back up straight and placed her hands on her hips.

"Some of this stuff looks pretty good," she observed, watching with a little amusement as the elf's face brightened up considerably. "Shame we don't have any money with us." And with that, the brightness quickly faded away. The elf pulled her coat back shut, folding her arms to hold it tightly against her body as she scrunched her face up in displeasure.

"It's a nice idea," Yuko interjected nonchalantly, "it's just a bit flawed. We're not stupid enough to go off hunting treasure and fighting monsters while carrying a bunch of cash."

Delta shifted his weight to the other foot. His uncomfortable shuffling was accompanied by a quiet jingling noise, and this was followed by a metallic clunk

as Rhino slowly guided one of his hands against his forehead.

“Okay, *most* of us aren’t that stupid,” Yuko continued, correcting herself. “Regardless, next time you might want to try it at a better moment, like when we’ve got some coin on us.”

The elf nodded and looked disconsolate, her face still displaying the kind of expression that should only naturally occur when a person accidentally chews on a bumblebee. Thankfully, her face became less contorted (and more appealing) as an idea slowly dawned on her.

“There’s treasure in there, right?” she asked, a little unsure of herself. “And you’ll be coming back this way, right? So... I’ll just wait here, and if you need anything then you can come and get it.” She nodded to herself, then added one final little detail. “Just let me know if you leave, okay? I don’t want to get left behind waiting here for ages!”

The party nodded in unison, although Ria couldn’t help but smirk at the thought of such mischief, before catching herself and staring off to one side in the hope that the elf didn’t notice. It didn’t work.

“I can hurt you,” the elf added quietly, catching Ria’s eye. Something about the look she gave indicated that she wasn’t bluffing, which made it seem strange that she cut such a hapless figure as a wandering merchant.

With their distinctly unexpected encounter now resolved, the adventurers moved toward the door and readied themselves for the unknown dangers that lurked within.