

Deep in the bowels of an ancient catacombs, a voice echoes through the winding tunnels that make up its maze-like structure.

“You can’t be serious!”

A group of five stand together in a small room, but three of them stand off to the side while the other two face each other. The one who shouted, a draconic paladin named Aaldric, looms over the other, a cleric rabbit named Ulrik.

Aaldric is donned in his shining sterling armor as usual, with only his horns and thick, red scaled tail exposed. He’s naturally tall and muscular, and his armor only further amplifies that size. It let him tower over the teammate he’s currently arguing with.

Ulrik sighs and crosses his arms. By contrast to his teammate, the snow white rabbit is of average height and rather lithe. He wears a white cloak with a hood that obscures his eyes, leaving on his muzzle showing while his long ears poke out from holes in the hood. “I am very serious. Between casting spells for the team and being the best defense against the undead teeming in this place, my mana is draining quickly. If we’re to defeat the lich, I need to be at top performance.”

“And what about the rest of us?!” Aaldric shouts. He sweeps an arm out to gesture to the other three--a chubby owl ranger, a bulky polar bear barbarian, and a scrawny rat thief--while keeping his attention on the cleric before him. “How many of us are you going to burn through before the costs outweigh the benefits?!”

“You knew the risks when you agreed to take this job.” Ulrik jabs Aaldric in the chest with the tip of his staff. “I told you all exactly what to expect and everyone agreed to it. I’m the only hope any of us have of actually defeating the lich.”

Seeing that he wasn’t getting through to Ulrik, Aaldric instead turns to the others. “You can’t all be in agreement with this still! Say something!”

“...Ulrik is the only reason most of us have been able to handle all the thralls and other undead around here,” the ranger, Ashton, admits uneasily. He looks away and rubs the back of his head. “We can’t all enchant our weapons with prayer like you can...”

“There were *nine* of us at the start of this!” Aaldric says. “Four people have died--by *his* hands!” He points an accusing finger at Ulrik, who doesn’t react. “And now he’s insisting upon another!”

“Less people to split the profits with,” the thief, Bastion, chitters with a glint in his eye. “We’re all here for the money. No job at the guild has even come close to this payout.”

“What good is money going to do you all when you’re dead?!” Aaldric is only getting louder as he’s met with more resistance. “Why believe Ulrik won’t be the only one leaving this place alive?!”

“He needs some of us to help him fight the lich,” the barbarian, Bjorn, rumbles. “If he could do it on his own, he would have by now...”

“This’ll likely be the last top off I need,” Ulrik adds. “I’m sure I’m not the only one who has felt the air getting heavier as we moved deeper. He must be close.”

Aaldric spins on his heels to face Ulrik again and draws his sword. He points it at the cleric’s throat, his grip tight on the hilt. “You may as well be as much of a danger as the lich! What kind of cleric relies on life force to fuel their mana pool?!”

“That best cleric in the guild, that’s who.” Ulrik pushes the sword away with his staff. Through all of Aaldric’s shouting and arguing, he’s remained calm and composed, barely reacting to anything that’s happened. “You weren’t this insistent the other times I did this.”

Aaldric tenses up with a soft growl at Ulrik’s words because even he knows there’s no denying it. The first of them had been a monk, a well-built lemur, and they’d been ambushed by several undead at once. There’d been no warning from them...or from Ulrik. He had turned on their companion mid-combat and devoured him with animalistic greed. A few loud gulps, a yelp, a second of struggling...and it was over. The monk was sealed up tight in the cleric’s stomach, just a writhing bulge sloshing back and forth.

And then he was just...gone. In the blink of an eye, Ulrik’s stomach had flattened out again. It was loud and messy, the squelches and groans drowned out the sounds of battle around them. As if that hadn’t been enough to draw everyone’s attention, the cleric had let out a monstrous belch into the air. Even the undead had been stunned by that. And then they had been swiftly cleared out, Ulrik’s mana refilled and used to practically disintegrate the unholy creatures.

They hadn’t talked about it. Everyone was tired and still on edge from the ambush and were just thankful that the threat was over. One of their group was gone, but they had walked in knowing something like that could happen and so the group had simply moved on. Then...it happened again.

The second was a fighter, a muscular alligator whose jaws were his main weapon. Aaldric didn’t see it happen that time. They’d split into two groups to explore a split in the path, and when they’d met up together, only Ulrik, Bastion, and Ashton had returned from their excursion. Ulrik’s stomach was still round and burbling, the devouring having not required the urgency it needed with the first. No one asked questions.

The third had been a bard, a rather fat toad, who had been badly injured by a trap. It wasn’t the first one they’d accidentally tripped, and Ulrik had been handling the healing on top of being the

main defense against the undead. By the time the bard had been injured, the mana from the fighter was used up...or at least, that's what everyone assumed as Ulrik devoured the bard on the spot. When asked about it, Ulrik had only said "It's for the best."

The fourth had been a druid, a proud lion of little words. He had been the most aware of his imminent demise, and he was quite vocal about it. Lots of roaring and yelling and denial...but everyone had heard the way he moaned as he sank in. It still didn't phase Ulrik, even when the druid had shot a load down his throat. The lion's moaning continued until Ulrik's belly had shrunk back down...

Aaldric would not be going down so easily. His nerves are creeping in more, overpowering his anger, and he has to force himself to remain calm. "There was just...never a good time to get into it. But there are too many casualties now, the risks have outweighed the benefits!"

"He just didn't think he'd be the one getting eaten," Basion says with a wry grin. "We all drew straws and knew the order. Bet he felt real safe sitting in the middle."

Aaldric stiffens a bit, shooting a glare back at the rest of the party. Another truth he can't deny. Ulrik had made them draw straws to decide the order they'd be eaten before entering the dungeon. That was the true reason they were arguing now...Aaldric was next.

Aaldric looks at Ulrik again, the facade of calmness further fading as he tries to steady his shaky body. "You need me to face the lich," he attempts to reason.

"You're correct," Ulrik agrees. He steps forward and his stomach lets out a low rumble. "I need your life essence for my mana. You'll be more than enough."

"That's enough!" Aaldric shoves Ulrik aside roughly and tries to storm past him. "I am not going to die for this mission! If the rest of you have such a death wish, so be it! Don't say I didn't warn--gah!" As he tries to walk away from the party, something pulls sharply on Aaldric's tail, jerking him back slightly. He looks over his shoulder, ready to shout and even attack, but his voice dies in his throat.

Ulrik had the dragon's tail firmly gripped in one paw, the tip of it already being slurped past his lips. He still showed no change in emotion as he calmly began to slurp in more of that thick tail, dragging Aaldric back as it was pulled in.

"N-No! No, no, no!" Aaldric enters a full-blow panic, his sword clattering to the floor as he begins to flail wildly. His arms swing in the air, desperately trying to grab onto anything around him to act as an anchor. Ulrik's gullet was tight and inescapable, however, so even if he could latch onto something, Aaldric already knew that this desperate final act was pointless.

It happens just as quickly as it did with the others as well. Aaldric's tail was gone in a moment, and he was lifted awkwardly into the air ass-first as the base of it was sucked in. Ulrik had no

issue hefting the larger, heavier paladin up into the air as his jaws opened wide to accept him. Aldric screams and pleads, arms still flailing and legs kicking as his mighty body, armor and all, begins its journey down Ulrik's tight gullet...

The other three are quiet, just waiting for it to end. It barely takes a full minute. Several loud, rapid gulps sound out in quick succession as Aldric's body is sucked down the hatch. His screams are cut off and muffled when Ulrik finally swallows his head, the bulge of his screaming face sinking down the rabbit's gullet for a moment before disappearing past his chest. The same thought passes through all of their minds, just as it did the last four times: *Thank the Gods that isn't me.*

Ulrik's stomach bounces and sloshes as it rapidly swells, his cloak stretched taut over Aldric's form. The paladin wastes no time screaming and thrashing the best he can, making the rabbit's gut sway heavily back and forth. Ulrik leans on his staff, using it as support as the heavy weight tries to knock him around. His whole body tenses and his stomach groans deeply as something comes back up.

"BWWWWWWWWEEEEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUURRRRRRRRRRRPPPPPP!!!!"

A massive belch roars out of Ulrik, echoing through the labyrinthian halls of the dungeon. It drowns out Aldric's screams entirely as the stomach roughly shrinks around him. The cleric's gut rounds out steadily, effortlessly reducing the mighty paladin into little more than a thick slurry for Ulrik to further process.

As the belch tapers off into an echo, Ulrik lets out a soft sigh and softly rubs along his gut with one paw. "...there. I feel much better. I'm sure the lich is well aware of our presence, so let's stop wasting time." He turns to venture deeper, his belly sloshing back and forth as he does.

"...you think some revive spells will be able to fix that?" Ashton asks the other two as they begin following behind the cleric.

"No," Bjorn rumbles. "Their life energy is what gives him his magic...there is nothing left to revive."

"Good, I prefer the four way split anyway," Bastion comments flippantly. "Though, I did get the longest straw...so if I'm lucky, it'll become 50/50 by the end~" He grins and snickers, while the other two tense at the echoing gurgles from in front of them.

They can only hope that Ulrik was correct and he needed no more mana for this mission...