
The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash
NOVEL 9
WRITTEN BY Honobonoru500
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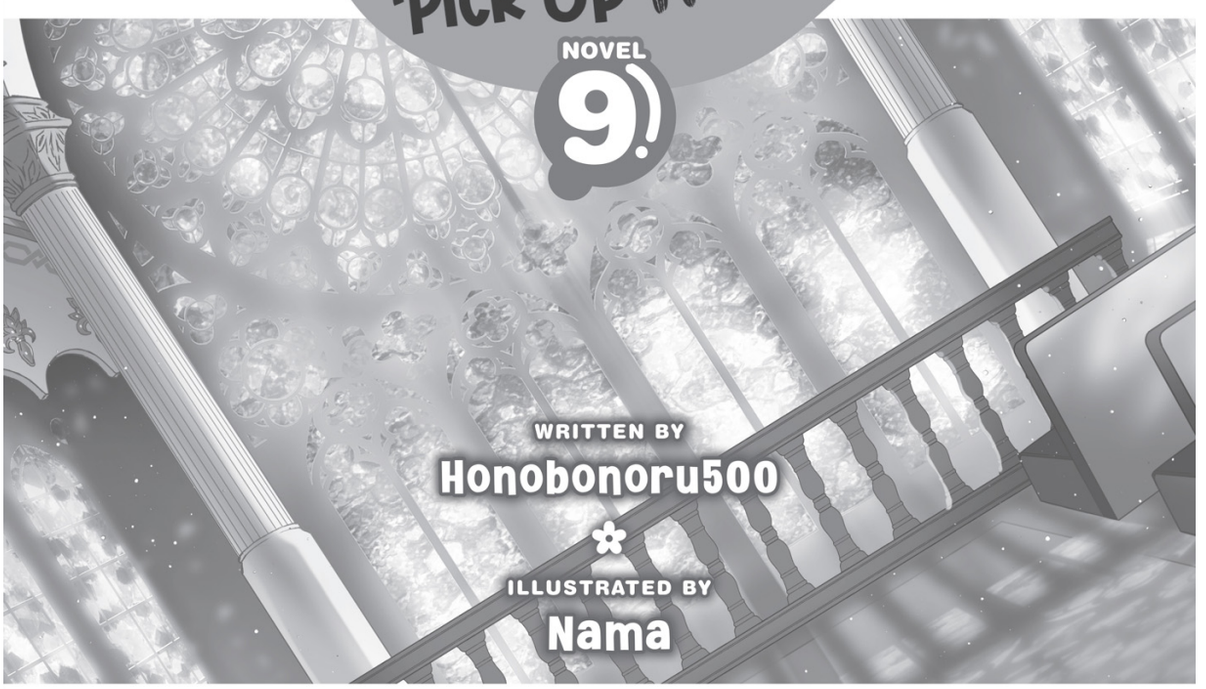






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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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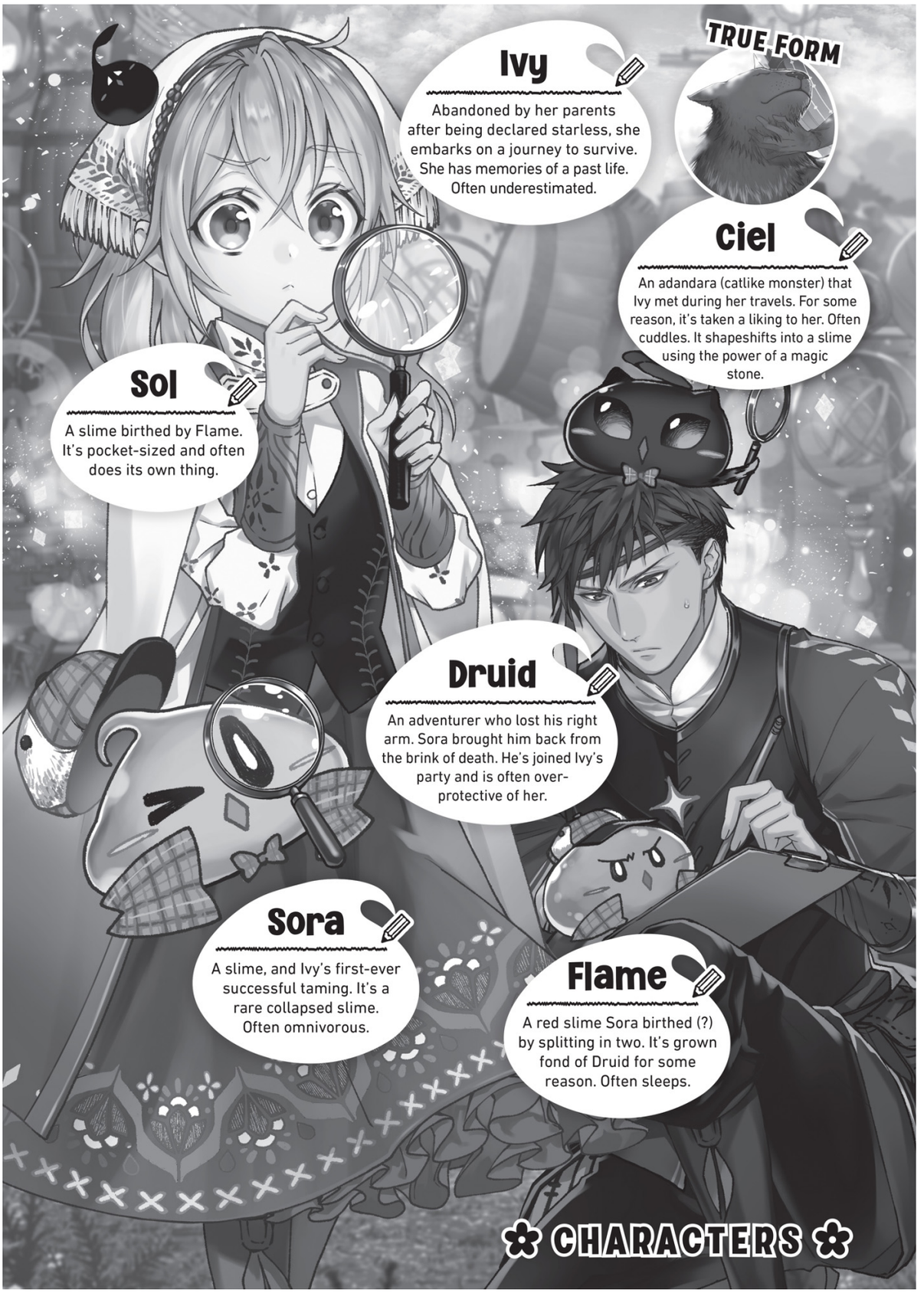
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✿ Afterword


IVY'S JOURNEY THUS FAR:
START!
Hataka-bound. We finally...arrive?
We made it to the next village, but we feel kinda anxious...
We meet a new party of adventurers: Zephyr!
Rest 1 turn
Is it just me, or are these adventurers kind of strange? At least they seem strong...
We overhear some gossip!
Go forward 2 squares
Hataka has an endless supply of gossip—why is that? Ack! It's about us! (sweats)
We get new magic bags!
Go forward 1 square
After much deliberation with my father, we settled on these two bags!
I knew it—something *is* wrong with this village!!
Go back 2 squares
We've all been brainwashed ever since we arrived in this village... If Sol hadn't been there to save us... (shudder)
First, we need more allies!
Roll the dice and go forward whatever number you get.
We'll have Zinal's party help us, too! Sorry our methods are a bit extreme...
Who brainwashed everyone...? The rumors all say different things...but we'll crack this case!
To be continued.....


Ivy
Abandoned by her parents after being declared starless, she embarks on a journey to survive. She has memories of a past life. Often underestimated.
TRUE FORM
Ciel
An adandara (catlike monster) that Ivy met during her travels. For some reason, it's taken a liking to her. Often cuddles. It shapeshifts into a slime using the power of a magic stone.
Sol
A slime birthed by Flame. It's pocket-sized and often does its own thing.
Druid
An adventurer who lost his right arm. Sora brought him back from the brink of death. He's joined Ivy's party and is often over-protective of her.
Sora
A slime, and Ivy's first-ever successful taming. It's a rare collapsed slime. Often omnivorous.
Flame
A red slime Sora birthed (?) by splitting in two. It's grown fond of Druid for some reason. Often sleeps.
CHARACTERS

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Illustrations by Nama
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PART 8 ✲ The Monsters in Hataka Village
(SUMMONING CIRCLE ARC)

THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

Chapter 409:
I Refuse!

AT THE CAPTAIN'S REQUEST, Zinal and his party left to secure the guild master and his assistant. If that didn't work out, they would check over the current conditions in the area. Nalgath and his party were assigned to bring back the sub-vice-captain of the watch. They assumed this would be an easy task, since the captain said that the sub-vice-captain could be somewhat gullible. Nalgath and his party smiled when he said that—apparently they agreed. Meanwhile, Melisa and Eche got everything ready to "welcome" the guild master and everyone else who was secured. I was a little scared as to what this "welcoming" might involve, so I didn't ask. I did, however, catch them giggling and saying, "Let's go ahead and get some extra drugs ready—they can take it."

Terrifying.

"First, I'll get in touch with an expert on summoning circles," the captain said. "While we're waiting, could I have you write your faax to the honorable Lord Foronda?"

"Yes, sir."

Wait a minute... We don't know where Lord Foronda is right now, so would an emergency fax reach him right away? It would still take some time, wouldn't it? Unless there's some way of finding out where he is...

"Excuse me, sir, but I don't know where Lord Foronda is right now. Will that be a problem?"

"Don't worry about it. I've got a special way of reaching him."

I was surprised to learn that people considered important to the royal family were given a special magic item whose most amazing feature was the ability to contact a person no matter where they were.

"It's a secret, though."

"Er..." *Then why did you tell a nobody like me?*

“I’ll tell you a little more…”

“No thanks, sir, I don’t want to hear it! Isn’t it actually *wrong* for me to hear?”

“Oh, I figured you were an exception, Miss Ivy.”

“No, sir, you’re not making sense! Please, don’t say any more about it—I have a very bad feeling.”

“For a guy who was in a coma, the captain sure keeps a man on his toes…” My father stood firmly beside me, glared at the captain, and took on a threatening tone. “Captain, don’t say or do anything uncalled for.”

“You sure are protective.”

“Of course I am. She’s my precious daughter.”

My father’s surly tone was seriously scaring me. I stole a soft glance at him and saw that he still had a death glare locked on the captain.

“C’mon, Captain. Hand over the paper.”

Now he’s being downright rude.

“I respect your sense of principle…” the captain said with a smirk. He handed my father the fax paper and walked out the door into the next room over.

We sat at the table and wrote our fax to Lord Foronda. First, we said our hellos, then we apologized for the sudden fax and explained the situation in Hataka…and then we introduced the captain to him. We read over it and realized the whole thing sounded a little unfriendly. It was just “Hello,” followed by a list of the news.

“This fax came out looking kind of suspicious. I want to tell him about the wonderful things my creatures have been doing lately. Think that’ll be okay, Dad?”

It should be okay, since Lord Foronda knows about my creatures. He found out about my skill, too. He probably thinks it has something to do with my real father, but he hasn’t asked me for details.

“It should be okay… Just remember there’s no telling who might see this faax.”

“Right, got it.”

Okay, I’ll just write, “The secret magic melted into the sky, and the dark kid did a wonderful job as well.” Since I coded the summoning circle as “the secret magic,” it should be okay… And as for Flame… I think I’ll say, “The captain was dyed bright red and now he’s all healthy.” For Ciel, I’ll say, “The strong one is going to rampage outside the house now.” Yeah…that should do it. The dyed bright red part sounds scary, but I can’t think of a better way of wording it…so I guess it’ll have to do.

“Hey, Dad, does this look good to you?”

“Yeah… I think it’ll be okay. You made it sound like the captain *died*, though.”

Aha, just as I feared… Maybe instead of saying he was “dyed” in red, I should say he was “hugged” in red?

While we were going over our fax, the captain opened the door and stepped inside. “Everything’s ready on our end. How’s it going?”

“Sir, are you sure you’re well enough to walk?!” I gasped. My father looked just as startled next to me.

The captain slowly made his way over to us, a proud smile on his face. “I know, isn’t it amazing? I felt incredibly weak just thirty minutes ago, but when I felt something was wrong, I just jumped to my feet.”

Wow. Is that the captain’s special power?

“Do you have a special skill, Captain?” I asked.

He shook his head no. “I’m sure your slimes made this miracle happen, Miss Ivy. Thank you, truly.”

My slimes did this? The captain took a few chipper steps around the room, only to wobble a little. My father jumped to his side and sat him down in a chair.

“Please don’t scare us, Captain. Everyone will be sad if you hurt yourself.”

“Ha ha ha! Sorry about that. I was just so happy to be on my feet again that I couldn’t stop myself from trying to walk.”

He’s giddy like a little kid, isn’t he? That’s right, Eche did say that it would take a few months for him to be able to walk again, so I

don't blame him for getting excited when it only took thirty minutes. Eche and Melisa are gonna be shocked when they see.

"You just woke up—please, take it easy," my father said. "So, did you hear back from your summoning circle expert?"

The captain nodded. "They were quite surprised when I told them our summoning circle could make people sick and control their minds. They're going to send some people over here to help right away."

"But isn't it too soon for that? We still don't know what the monsters in the forest are."

"Yes, I told them about that, too. That's why they're sending the seasoned elite adventurers."

"I see..." My father fell deep into thought.

"Sorry for the way I acted earlier. But don't worry, I'll do as the contract says," the captain said.

My father stole a meaningful glance at him.

"Truth be told, I would love to have you stay longer and help out around here, but we do have the contract to think about. Even if Hataka's problem isn't taken care of by then, I want you two to leave this village before these adventurers get here. I'll help you do that. And I promise I'll get you out of here in a way that they can't pick up on."

"Dad?"

"Got it... We'll take you up on that."

Are we going to run away from Hataka at night, then? It's seriously dangerous for us to be near that summoning circle. I looked at my creatures. Tired from their playing, they were all asleep on the sofa. *Running away would be the safest thing to do, to make sure my family doesn't get hurt. I would hate to have my creatures used against their will. But I also feel kind of icky, just picking up and running away...*

"Miss Ivy?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I heard a little about you, and about Sora and Sol's powers, too. I don't think your noble friend, the honorable Lord Foronda, is any danger to you, but there are all sorts of people in the

nobility. Some fools would stoop to any lengths to get ahold of your creatures if they found out about them. So please, don't worry about us. Just leave Hataka before the adventurers get here. Your family is precious, and their safety comes first."

"I understand, sir... We'll all do our best to help solve the problem before then."

That's right. My top priority is the safety of my family, so we'll have to run away.

"And I appreciate that greatly, since I have a lot of faith in you. The adventurers will get here in ten days at the earliest. Please make sure you're ready to leave at a moment's notice."

"We will, sir."

"Thank you for your help."

My father and I both bowed to the captain.

"Now, is your faax ready to send?" he asked us.

"Yes, sir."

I handed the captain the paper, and he slowly rose from his chair and walked out of the room. We followed him to the room next to the one where he'd been convalescing. I assumed it was his study since there were all sorts of books and documents strewn about. I looked at the stack of papers on his desk and saw drawings of summoning circles.

"Were you researching summoning circles?" my dad asked, holding up one of the drawings.

"Yes. We took down a crime organization that was pushing illegal drugs. This circle was drawn where they had their headquarters. People who were broken by the spell were there, too."

"So that's how you met your summoning circle expert," my dad said.

"That's right. Little did I know we'd be in the middle of another summoning circle crisis..." The captain gave the drawing a sour look and exhaled sharply. "I hoped I'd never have to deal with one of these again... Okay, the faax is this way."

Chapter 410:
Magic Cores

AFTER WE SENT OUR FAX, we went back to the other room and waited for Zinal's party to return.

"Captain, I'd like to ask you a few questions about summoning circles," my father said.

The captain nodded. "Since a summoning circle is what's causing this crisis, I'll tell you everything I know. Ask away."

"What's the difference between the magic from magic spells and the kind from summoning circles? I know there's some kind of difference, but I can't put my finger on it."

"I'm not sure how to best explain it... With magic spells, type and intensity depend on the magic energy levels of the caster. But the magic energy levels of a summoning circle are completely unrelated: Anybody can cast any kind of spell, and they can do it with much more intensity."

So does this mean that even somebody with low magic energy like me can use magic? That sounds kind of nice, actually...

"The only catch is that magic will devour people in time if they draw it from a summoning circle."

Huh?! Devour? Er, what exactly does he mean by that?

"A caster needs a magic core to use magic."

A magic core? I've never heard of that. If people need it to use magic, why don't I know about it?

"*An individual's magic energy cannot be affected by outsiders, and not even that individual can tamper with it*—I'm sure you've heard the saying?"

"Yeah, everyone hears that when they first learn how to use magic."

"Exactly, but it's not quite technically true. What *cannot be affected by outsiders or tampered with by the individual themselves* is the magic core. Sometimes, outsiders *can* affect a person's magic, you see. Some scholars believe that the magic stones dropped by monsters are those monsters' magic cores."

“Magic stones? But aren’t there monsters that *don’t* have magic stones?”

“Fair point…but many scholars still believe the theory.”

“So are you saying people have magic stones, too?”

“Not as far as I know. Either it’s a difference between humans and monsters, or magic stones aren’t exactly magic cores after all—everything’s still being researched.”

I guess that means there’s still a lot about the world we don’t know.

“The number of magic spells a person uses cannot affect their core. However, using the magic from a summoning circle *can* affect their core. If the makeup of a caster’s magic core metamorphoses, then that caster themselves is also affected.”

Could it be that the thing Sora heals is actually a person’s magic core?

“The casters are *affected*? As in, they become empty shells?”

“That, yes, but the people the summoning circle is cast on suffer the same fate, just in a different way from the caster. The caster becomes mad and feral, to the point where they must be put down. If a person’s core undergoes a metamorphosis, they lose their mind—rather, their very persona changes.”

Is this like how monsters go berserk under the influence of magic energy?

“Who came up with summoning circles in the first place?” my dad said. “Why do people call them cursed relics? Also, Zinal said summoning circle research was cut off, but from the way you’re talking, it sounds like it’s still going on.”

“So, to answer your second question, the uptick in incidents involving summoning circles prompted the research to resume. However, when people were attacked and slaughtered at the hands of the scientists, it was put to a stop again. But then there was yet another crime involving a summoning circle. It’s an incident that involved me, in fact, and the tragedy could have been avoided if only we’d known more about summoning circles…hence the reopening of the research. They’re going about it with extreme caution, of course.”

“Now I see.”

It must be scary to research summoning circles when you might end up losing your sense of self—even more so if you had loved ones.

“Summoning circles are believed to have been created by some people who lived back when this world was divided into many different kingdoms.”

This world was divided into many different kingdoms? I’ve never heard about that.

“I’d wager not even you know about that, Druid? It really is ancient history.”

My father looked stunned. *So he really didn’t know about it.*

“Long ago, the kingdoms fought each other over the land, which led to the birth of summoning circle magic. You can find records of it left behind from the scientists of the era. When you first use a summoning circle, you’re filled with euphoria—an inexplicable bliss. But the more you use that magic, the more the hunger for it consumes you, until the lust for murder is eventually born within you.”

The captain’s account is so detailed… And is it just me, or does he look sad?

“Was one of those scientists a member of your family, Captain?”

Huh?! I looked at my father, then at the captain.

“Yeah… My grandfather was a scientist. It was terrifying watching the metamorphosis take him. In his final days, he killed more than half of his own family. My father and uncle somehow managed to stop him, but…it was a tragedy. In the documents he left behind, my grandfather theorized that summoning circles were originally developed to win the wars. People turn into demons—that’s what summoning circles do.”

My father and I kept a respectful silence.

“As a young boy, I vowed then and there that I would never get involved with summoning circles. But then that circle popped up many years ago and I got caught in the middle of it…and here we are again. I really must be cursed.”

I had no idea what to tell him. *So this is what it means to be at a loss for words.*

"You have been very unlucky, Captain, I won't argue with that… But this village is very lucky."

"Lucky? What in the world do you mean?"

"Since you're one of the leaders of this village, Hataka was able to contact a summoning circle expert in the capital right away. That's incredibly lucky for this village. Without you, the worst-case scenario could have happened here."

My father was right: The captain's presence did shine a ray of light on our situation.

Yeah, I'm glad he's the captain.

"Lucky, eh…?" The captain looked surprised for a moment, then he smiled softly.

Knock, knock.

"Come in."

"Excuse me, Captain, but they're all back—Nalgath's party with the sub-vice-captain and Zinal's party with the guild master. I take it you'd be all right with us having a nice chat over dinner?"

Huh? Why isn't the guild master's assistant with them…?

"Sure, go ahead."

"Don't worry, Captain, Eche has really outdone herself tonight… Hee hee hee hee!"

Yikes. What is that scary look in Melisa's eyes…?

"Well, that's her true profession, after all. Just tell her to go easy on them."

"Er… Yes, Captain."

Why did she hesitate? I'm dying to know, but I'd better drop it. Just look at how uncomfortable Dad seems.

"What *is* Eche's true profession, if I may ask?" I said to the captain after Melisa left the room.

"Eche is an a…well, let's just say her work involves all sorts of medicinal herbs."

"Really, sir?"

What was he about to call her? A—what? Somebody who works with medicinal herbs would be an apothecary, right? But then he would just say so… A…assassin? Well…everybody has their skeletons in their closets.

"When do you think they'll need my slimes to get started, sir?"

"Yes, well, they know we're in a hurry, so they'll probably get to work as soon as they can risk it… That means they'll be needed right away."

Will the guild master and sub-vice-captain be okay? If this is Melisa's true profession, they must be in good hands, but still…

"I think it's about time now."

"Huh?! Already?"

I barely had time to gasp in surprise before I heard screaming in the hallway. It really was time.

"Er, Sora, Sol, are you guys…?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

I looked over at the sound of the two slimes' voices to see them merrily bouncing toward the door. I was shocked to see they were even awake.

"Hi, guys, are you ready to work?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

Sora and Sol's eagerness was surreal. Was breaking spells and healing magic cores really that much fun to them? Or did it give them an energy boost?

Knock, knock.

"Excuse me, but are we ready to break the spell?" Melisa asked as she opened the door and Nalgath and Arly carried in one of the men.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

“They’re all ready, ma’am,” I answered. “Just lay him down in bed.”

At my signal, the man was tossed onto the bed. Sol gleefully jumped over to him.

“He’s all yours, Sol,” Arly said.

With a little jiggle back at him, Sol quickly swallowed the man’s head. It was cute, but it still looked like the poor man’s head was being eaten.

Chapter 411:
What's a Faax?

THERE WERE TWO BEDS side by side with a man in each: the guild master and the sub-vice-captain. The spells had already been broken, and their magic cores were healed as well.

"I think I gave them a little too much."

"Yeah—I assumed they were stronger than that."

Melisa and Eche poked the men's faces as they talked. Eche's hand held a piece of paper with something written on it. Did they think these men were lab rats?

"I'm so sorry, Captain, but I think I overdosed them. They probably won't wake up until tomorrow," Eche apologized, sounding a bit angry with herself.

The captain smiled. "Too bad. Let's just let them rest for today. After all, there's going to be a lot of running around tomorrow."

At the captain's signal, Zinal's and Nalgath's parties got ready to leave. I looked out the window to see it was already dark outside.

"Ivy, let's head back to the plaza," my father said.

I nodded and stood up. When I took my slime bag off my shoulder, my creatures jumped into my arms one by one and I lowered each into the bag in turn.

"You're a pro at that," Zinal said.

"Well, I do it every day."

Zinal petted Ciel's head as it jumped into my arms. Then he gave it a hard stare. "That's an adandara, all right... I just can't believe it."

I didn't blame him. Ciel looked exactly like a slime, though its skin still had adandara markings. After we were all ready to go, we said goodbye to everyone.

"Good night. We'll see you tomorrow."

“Thanks for all your help today,” the captain answered. “Please, don’t rush back here tomorrow—you must be tired. We’ll take care of explaining everything to the guild master and sub-vice-captain, too. Oh, and when you get back, we’ll have everyone sign a contract! Bring your pens.”

A tired grin spread across my face. We really had gathered quite a contract collection in Hataka.

“All right, see you tomorrow.”

My father and I left the captain’s house and headed back to the plaza. As we began to walk, a sigh escaped my chest. I really was much more tired than I’d thought.

“That was way too much stuff happening for just one day,” my father said.

“Yeah, but at least we’re moving in the right direction now.”

There were still plenty of challenges ahead, but at least we knew a little more about our summoning circle.

“There was so much I wanted to ask about but didn’t have a chance to…”

My father’s hand rested gently on my head. “Same here. Listening to the captain gave me all sorts of ideas—I couldn’t ask even half the questions that came to mind.”

It’s not like my father to feel overwhelmed… Well, there are just way too many things to think about when it comes to summoning circles. If we have time tomorrow, we should ask to hear more.

We returned to the plaza and got back in our tent.

“Ahhh, home sweet home.”

I took my creatures out of their bag and lined up potions for their dinner. Flame eagerly got to work devouring the potions as usual, but Sol and Sora wouldn’t eat.

“What’s wrong, Sora, Sol? Not hungry?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

Why don’t they want any? Did all that spell-breaking and core-healing tire them out?

“Are you too tired to eat?”

I got no reaction from Sora or Sol, meaning I was wrong.

“Are you not hungry?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

They’re not hungry? They did eat some potions at the captain’s house earlier today, but they haven’t had anything since then—oh, unless…

“Was the spell-breaking and core-healing your way of having dinner?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

So it did feed them. I put their potions and magic items back in the bag.

“Okay, then let’s just go to bed.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

I looked over at Flame to see it had already finished eating. The little slime sure had become a fast eater lately.

“Whoa, are they already done eating?” My dad, back at the tent after briefly looking around outside, gave us all a curious look.

“Yes, Sol and Sora got full from all the spell-breaking and core-healing they did today.”

“Wow…so that was their dinner, eh? Maybe that’s why they were acting so happy?”

Aha, so the unconscious men were like a feast to them. I wonder if they were especially tasty?

“Sora, Sol, Flame, did those men taste good?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

So they did taste good.

"Ivy, that's not the best choice of words... Ha ha ha!"

"Huh? Um... *Ohh!* Right. Yeah, it sounded like I was saying they *ate* the guild master and sub-vice-captain."

I mean, it looked exactly like they were eating them, though... My father's laughter dragged a smile out of me, and then I just couldn't stop giggling. *I must be really tired.*

"Okay, let's get to bed." Finally free from his laughing fit, my father rolled out his bed and lay down.

"Right. Let's try to get this problem solved as fast as we can, okay?"

As I lay in bed, I thought back to my father's conversation with the captain. I understood that we would eventually need to run away to keep my creatures safe, but I also knew I would have regrets if we left with unfinished business, so I wanted to do everything we could to help Hataka before we had to leave.

"Of course. I don't feel right leaving things half-finished, either. But, Ivy, your monsters' safety comes first. Don't let anyone make you think otherwise."

"I know, thanks. I'll make sure to keep you safe, too, Dad."

"Ha ha! Thanks. G'night."

"Good night."

The guild master should be back on his feet tomorrow...Maybe we'll learn something new from him. Right, I never asked what happened to his assistant...

I can't sleep... Maybe I'm too excited with everything that's been going on? But if I don't sleep, I'll be so sluggish tomorrow.

Huh?

From the brightness in the room, I could tell it was morning. The last thing I remembered was worrying that I wouldn't be able to fall asleep, but I must have been exhausted because my memory cut off abruptly right there. I sat up in bed and looked around the room. My creatures hopped over to me and jiggled when they saw I was awake.

“Good morning. Do you know where Dad is?”

When I got up to get dressed, I found a piece of paper. I picked it up and read in my father’s handwriting: “The captain says I got a faax from my mentor, so I went to get it. I was worried about leaving you behind alone, so I left Arly in front of the tent to stand guard. I’ll be back right away.”

A faax from his mentor, huh… Huh? A faax*? What’s with the extra A? According to Past Me’s memory, it’s spelled “fax,” but it says “faax” on this paper.*

“I try not to obsess over it too much, but I really do wonder sometimes…”

Some of the things I remembered from my past life had slightly different names in this world. Whenever new things replaced the old, I knew no amount of thinking would clear things up, so I just ignored it. But now there was yet another curiosity in my brain: Why did problems seem to pop up wherever I went? That sort of thing didn’t usually happen to most people. I felt almost like somebody was controlling me.

“Argh…”

“Puuu?”

I looked up at the sound of Sora’s voice to see everybody gazing at me with worry.

“I’m okay, thanks. Just overthinking a few things.”

If somebody was controlling me, that somebody couldn’t be human. Was it a god? But wasn’t I forsaken by God?

“Okay, *that’s* definitely not worth thinking about.”

Come on, Ivy, moping isn’t your style! Okay, if somebody’s controlling me, let them! Bring it on! You think I’ll let them win?! Kiss my ass… Wait, that’s not quite what I was going for.

“Teryuuu!”

“Hee hee hee! Seriously, guys, I’m okay. Let’s do more good work today, all right?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu!”

When Dad gets back, I’ll have to ask him what his mentor said in the fax. Oh, right! I should start thinking of faxes as faaxes from

now on. If somebody sees me spelling them differently, they'll think it's strange. Okay, there.

Then I'll also need to ask how the guild master and sub-vice-captain are doing, and ask the captain what our schedule for today is. There's just so much stuff to do—but first, I'm hungry. We managed to eat dinner on time last night, but it wasn't much. Uh-oh…now I'm so hungry I'm starting to feel sick.

"Ivy, you awake? I bought us some breakfast. Think you can have some?"

"*Yes!* Let's eat!"

Oh, Dad, what perfect timing!

Chapter 412:
Moving Forward…

AFTER BREAKFAST, I put my slimes in their bag and we headed to the captain's house. The guild master and sub-vice-captain were already awake and filled in on everything. The captain had been pacing in the garden all morning, which earned him an earful from Melisa. Arly remarked with a sheepish grin that the captain did look awfully frail and he didn't blame her for worrying.

"I'm glad to see him looking well."

"Yeah… I wouldn't exactly say he *looks* well. He's way too thin—it's a bit scary."

"I'll admit, he does look a little ill…"

It looked like the flesh had vanished from his body and his face. He was so frail that I'd thought for a moment that he was dead when I saw him unconscious in bed. He looked so dreadful that it was almost awe-inspiring that he'd managed to survive in that condition.

"Captain! How many times must I tell you to take it easy?!" Melisa barked at him as soon as we stepped into his house. Apparently, the rumors of him pacing around all morning had been true. It looked almost like Eche had pumped him full of medicine, though I certainly hoped she hadn't.

"Good morning, Captain," I said.

"Ah, hullo there."

Wow… I didn't think she'd actually tie him to a chair. What in the world was he trying to do? I looked around the room to see everyone was trying not to laugh.

"You're looking well—ridiculously well," my father said.

The captain laughed awkwardly in reply. He seemed much more carefree today—or was it just my imagination? We were offered some chairs, so we sat. Then the guild master and sub-vice-captain, whom we hadn't had a chance to talk to yesterday, entered the room.

“We were briefed on everything. I cannot thank you enough. I’m Uliga, the guild master.”

“They got me caught up, too. Thank you for everything you’ve done. I’m Gigina, temporary vice-captain of the watch.”

“Glad to see you’re doing well. I’m Druid, and this is my daughter Ivy.”

“Nice to meet you, gentlemen. Please, you don’t need to bow to me. Are you feeling all right?”

As far as I could tell, they looked okay. But when I recalled the terrors of summoning circles I’d learned about the day before, fear overcame me.

“We’re doing well. We’ve lost some of our memory, but that’s happened to everyone.”

That’s right, their memories were tampered with, too. Summoning circles really are menaces, aren’t they?

“May we have a word?”

I looked over at the captain…and, tied up in that chair, he failed to have any sense of authority. What’s more, Melisa had planted herself behind him at some point…and there was a terrifying gleam in her eye.

“Sure, we don’t mind. But you’re forbidden to set foot outside of your house without Melisa’s express permission, Captain. Please, just focus on getting yourself back in good health first. Otherwise, I’m scared to see what might happen.” Zinal stole a glance at Melisa, then he quickly looked away.

“Ha ha ha! Oh well, if I must. So, for today’s schedule, I’ll need your help with all sorts of things, Ivy. Oh, but before that, the new folks need to sign some contracts.”

The guild master and sub-vice-captain presented their contracts to the captain, who read them over before signing them. Once the contracts were all finished, I took my slimes out of their bag. I caught a little twinkle in the guild master’s eye. Was he another sucker for rare creatures?

“Ivy…”

“Yes? What is it?” I drew my lips into a tight line when I heard the captain’s voice.

“I want to add more people to our team; we really could use more help. So I need a hand from your slimes—Sora and Sol, was it?—to break some more summoning circle spells and heal some more magic cores. Will that be doable?”

I shifted my gaze from the captain to Sora and Sol, who were playing on my father’s and Arly’s laps.

“Sora, Sol, can you help?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

“That’s a yes.”

I looked back to see the guild master had scooted up next to Arly.

“Thanks. Now, about the monsters in the forest. We found traces of them slamming against the front gate, but the gatekeepers acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. Then, there’s your adandara—may I call you Ciel? We need you to help us buy some time. I don’t think you’d be able to make it deep into the forest, but we would like you to go on a rampage, to keep the monsters away from the village. Would that be okay?”

Mrrrow.

Ciel was visibly excited. Come to think of it, the poor creature hadn’t been to the forest for several days and was probably dying to have a good romp.

“Don’t worry, sir, Ciel is very eager to please.”

“Really? Well, thanks,” the captain said. “Oh, and the people we want you to bring back to normal are a few elite adventurers and watchmen. We want to drug them and take care of everything while they’re asleep so they don’t have to find out about your slimes. We think it’s best that we keep the number of people who know about you small, Ivy. The circle is already big enough as it is…”

I nodded in agreement. I was really relieved to hear it.

“I appreciate the offer, but just how are we going to fool them?” My father shot a stern look at the captain. “Many elite adventurers have sharp minds. It’ll be a real hassle if they get suspicious.”

“I know. I received a faax from the honorable Lord Foronda this morning, and it turns out he’s one of the nobles funding research into summoning circles.”

Really?

“Besides funding, he’s in a position to offer guidance as well. And he’s been asking that the research be directed toward one aim: finding a way to save people who have been possessed by summoning circles.”

The captain handed us the faax from Lord Foronda. He wrote of how worried he was about me and my father. He wrote that he was funding summoning circle research. He wrote about why he ended up doing so. And he wrote about the specific research that he was personally funding.

After my father finished reading the faax, he gave the captain a long, hard stare. “Does this mean they’ve found a way to save people?”

“It’s not perfected yet, but it has a seventy percent success rate. As for the method itself, I’m sorry, but I’m not at liberty to tell you.”

“I understand. I’d rather not know anyway.”

Seventy percent… It feels a bit small, but I guess it’s good that we at least have a way to save people.

“Are you going to tell the elite adventurers that you used that method to revive them?”

“Yeah…” The captain’s eyes darkened for just a moment. Could it be that it was dangerous? But my slimes wouldn’t be able to save every single adventurer and watchman in Hataka, so I was glad there was some other way to help them.

“Got it. That should cover us okay.”

“And Ivy, there’s something I wanted you to clarify for me.”

“Yes, sir?”

“How many more people can you bring back to normal with your magic energy?”

“Huh?!”

Bring people back to normal with *my* magic energy? I hadn't the foggiest idea what he was talking about.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

I looked up at the sound of Sora's voice. *Wait a minute, most tamed monsters get their magic energy from their tamers. Does everyone think Sora and Sol are using my energy to heal everyone? No, wait! Sora is the only one with the taming symbol, so it must be just Sora.*

"I'm sorry, sir, um…there seems to be a misunderstanding. I don't share my magic energy with Sora. That means my magic energy isn't involved with this at all, so I have no idea how many people we can return to normal. The only thing I am sure of is that Sora and Sol don't seem to get worn down at all from breaking the spells and healing people's magic cores." They'd seemed extra energized yesterday, and they were both in high spirits this morning.

"Is it, um, because you're…a rare tamer? Er, I have heard something about that before… Maybe it's not related…" The captain was muttering something into his hand, but I couldn't hear him very well. After a while, he sighed and said, "Got it. If it's what I think it is, that would make sense."

Huh?

"There's fifteen adventurers and watchmen total—would that be all right?"

"Sora, Sol, there's fifteen people to heal. Can you handle it? It's okay to say no if you can't."

It felt like a little too much, even to me.

"Pu! Pu, *puuu*!"

"Pefu!"

Sora's and Sol's eyes were sparkling. It took me a little aback.

"I think it's okay, sir."

"It is? Well, thanks. You've really saved our hides," the captain said.

Sora and Sol bowed at him a little. Seeing this gesture from them confirmed it: Those two slimes didn't realize why they were

being thanked. The thought on their mind wasn't "Time to help!" It was "Time to eat!" *Well, maybe they'd better keep misunderstanding the situation*... I glanced at my father to see he had a hand clamped over his mouth, trying not to laugh. *Yeah, he lives with my slimes. I'm sure he knows exactly what's on their minds right now...*

Chapter 413:
Be Patient!

SORA AND SOL were in extremely good moods. And they had been fidgety ever since Zinal's party left to get the people to break free from the spell—clearly they were waiting impatiently for their dinner. Judging by how much they usually ate at the dump, I knew I didn't give them as many potions to eat for their meals. After all, there was only so much I could fit in my magic bag. *Maybe I should get another magic bag just for potions?* As I watched the two excitedly doing their vertical stretches, I couldn't help but think about it. Flame and Ciel, excited by Sol and Sora's enthusiasm, had also been cheerfully bouncing off the walls of the room all morning.

"Looks like they can't wait for their lunch," my father said.

I nodded in reply, and Sora jiggled wildly when it heard the word "lunch."

"Sora, no. I know it's your lunch, but we shouldn't make a big deal out of it. You, too, Dad."

I hope they understood me.

"Pu! Pu, puu?"

Argh, guess they didn't.

"Ha ha ha ha!"

Now Dad's laughing it off. Oh, I give up.

I heard voices from the first floor; it sounded like everyone had arrived. At the sound of the captain's voice, the first floor became lively in a flash. The plan was that Melisa would help the captain into a chair and serve everyone tea, but Eche informed us with a gleeful grin that she would drug it. The way she held the medicinal herbs in her hands was a little...er, *very* terrifying. After a little while, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Knock, knock.

"We're ready downstairs. You guys good?" Arly asked, sounding a bit worried.

“Pu! Pu, puuu!”

“Pefu! Pefu!”

Before I could reply, Sora and Sol answered boisterously. *They aren’t drooling, I hope?* I stole a worried glance at their faces. *Thank goodness. No drool*. I picked up the two slimes, walked them downstairs, and entered the room with four beds in it. My father followed after me. I looked up to see Flame was sitting on top of his head and Ciel was in his arms.

“Sorry there’s so many people, Sora and Sol. If it’s too much, you can stop anytime you want.”

Hmmm… Maybe I should tell him the truth. But can they really handle fifteen people? I hope they don’t stuff themselves…

“Don’t worry, Miss Ivy, we won’t work them too hard.” Juggy gave my head a pat as I entered the next room.

“Er, thanks, sir.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him I was worried they’d overeat… With an awkward smile, I set Sora and Sol on the first bed. Sol eagerly jumped onto the sleeping man’s head and swallowed it whole. If I had to guess, I’d say it was thinking, “Yahoo! Lunchtime!” Meanwhile, Sora was bouncing up and down next to Sol. I was worried Sol would get indigestion if I rushed it.

“Sora, be patient, okay?”

“Puuu.”

“Please, Sora.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Good, I think that calmed it down.

“Does everything look okay?” Juggy asked, checking on Sol. The slime’s eyes were closed and it wasn’t moving. Since nothing was different from the day before, everything was probably fine.

“It’s all right, sir.”

As I watched Sol work for a while, there was a knock at the door. Arly went to open it and let the sub-vice-captain and Nalgath in. They were back from their quick survey of the forest.

“Sorry to bother you, but is Ciel ready to come out right now?”

Mew? Ciel chirped back with great interest from my father's arms.

"To the forest, sir?"

"Yes, the monsters are at the village border. We don't know how many there are, but there's quite a lot of them. Will Ciel be all right?" The sub-vice-captain gave the adandara a concerned look. No matter how much we explained about Ciel's true form, it looked identical to a slime right now. Of course he would worry. Sending it out alone into the forest to deal with who knows what kind of monster made me worried, too, even though I knew it was an adandara. But from the look of it, Ciel was excited about the whole thing. They do say adandaras are powerful creatures with battle mania.

"Will you be okay, Ciel?"

Mrrrow.

From the happy crack in its voice, it was clear Ciel would be all right.

"Ciel will be fine, sir."

There was relief mixed with the sub-vice-captain's worry now. Ciel's outward appearance seemed to be making him utterly perplexed.

"What will we do about the guards?" my father asked the sub-vice-captain.

"Nalgath's party, Cobalt, will take Ciel out into the forest. Then, once they're out of view of the gatekeepers, Ciel will dispose of the monsters."

Won't that be really dangerous for Nalgath's party? I looked at Nalgath, and he only smiled back at me.

"Don't worry. We may not look like it, but we're elite adventurers. We'll manage somehow."

"Are you sure, sir?"

Will they truly be okay, though? This kind of monster can extinguish its aura. I looked at Piarre, Arly, and Juggy, and none of them seemed worried. They had the eyes of heroes committed to their jobs.

Nalgath said nothing, but I understood him anyway. “I get it, sir. I’ll leave Ciel in your care. Could I come with you to the gate?” I said.

I was still worried about Ciel.

“Sure, we don’t mind…”

“Don’t worry, I’m coming, too,” my dad said. “Sora and Sol should be okay here with Melisa and the captain looking after them.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Sora was puffing out its chest a little. I assumed it was trying to say it would be fine.

“So therapeutic…” somebody murmured.

Nalgath and his party nodded, while my father tried not to laugh.

“Well, we’ll just get our things ready and then head out to the front gate. Should we meet you there?”

“Yes, sir. My father and I will take Ciel there.”

Nalgath and his party would return to their shared house first to get ready for their expedition to the forest, so my father and I took our time taking Ciel to the gate. I left Sora and Sol in the captain and Melisa’s care. After the first four people were cured, the captain and Melisa would check on Sora and Sol’s condition before sending in the next batch. They would make sure the slimes were well enough between each healing session, so they assured me I didn’t need to worry.



“Thanks for taking care of them. We’ll be back soon.”

“See you later,” my father echoed.

“Be careful out there! Druid, if you sense anything strange, ditch Nalgath’s party if you have to.”

“Understood.” I clenched my jaw and suppressed the urge to object. It would be wrong of me to interfere with the adventurers in the line of duty.

“Let’s go,” my father said.

“Okay.”

As I took my first steps, my father gently patted my head. That alone was enough to make me feel safe. I softly tapped the bag containing Ciel and Flame, who had decided to tag along for some reason.

“Just don’t push yourself too hard out there, okay?”

The bag jiggled faintly in reply. I knew Ciel would be all right.

“Good morning,” my father greeted the gatekeepers, who welcomed us with a smile. “We’d like to go check on the forest, if we may.”

“Of course, sir. Nothing much has changed.”

We took the gatekeeper’s cue to have a look at the forest from the gate. Just as the sub-vice-captain had said, we could sense something right on the outskirts of the village. That was unsettling, since only elite adventurers had been able to feel it up until then.

“How creepy…” The mysterious something out there made me shiver all over.

“You can say that again.”

Since even I could sense whatever it was, it was clear just how close the danger had homed in on us. We looked at the gatekeepers. They were peering out into the forest as well, but they didn’t seem to sense anything at all. In fact, they were laughing and chatting while the forest’s alien aura surrounded us all.

Something icy cold ran down my spine. I felt sick.

“Sorry we’re late.”

As Nalgath greeted us, Arly called the gatekeepers aside to talk, corralling them away from us. Meanwhile, I took Ciel out of my bag and handed it to Nalgath.

“Okay, Ciel, today is your day to shine,” Nalgath said.

Ciel jiggled in reply. It couldn’t speak since the gatekeepers were still quite close by. I pulled three sparkling blue potions Sora had made out of my bag and put them in Nalgath’s arms.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thanks.”

When the gatekeeper’s auras returned, Nalgath stashed Ciel in his bag and put the potions in another container.

“We’re finished talking. Let’s go,” Arly said.

The faces of Nalgath and the rest of his party got more serious.

“Good luck out there.”

“Please come back soon,” I said, meaning it with all my heart as I waved goodbye. *I know they’ll be okay. If the worst happens, those potions will serve them well.*

Chapter 414:
Sharmy?

A WHILE AFTER NALGATH'S PARTY walked through the gate, the gatekeepers wandered away to tend to their tasks. We stayed put and kept watch as Cobalt disappeared into the forest. After a while, we noticed a rustling in the trees. Something was moving out there, but we couldn't sense its aura. In his faax, my father's mentor had said that he knew nothing about monsters that could mask their auras. He did tell us he would ask around, however, which gave us some hope.

"Looks like there's quite a few of them," my father said.

"How can you tell?"

"I can't sense their aura, but I just know *something* is out there. And there are a lot more of the *something* I'm sensing than the last time."

A lot more... Will Cobalt be okay?

"A monster without an aura..." I mused.

What did it look like? Elite adventurers had been searching for it, but I didn't think anybody had seen it yet. Was it because our monster could move fast? But was that even possible? No matter how fast a monster was, you should be able to see it running away. *I have this nagging feeling. A monster...without any witnesses...in the forest... The forest...*

"I just don't get it," I shrugged.

Wait a minute, I think I heard a rumor about the forest. What was it again? Let's see... There's this animal that usually shows up in the springtime, but it's not here this year. Was that it? Well, what with all the rampaging monsters out there, of course it would stay hidden. I wonder what kind of animal it is...

"They're on the move."

My father's voice brought my focus back to the trees. Ciel's aura was moving now, and I sensed distorted magic energy. But the monster that Ciel was supposedly chasing had no apparent aura whatsoever.

“From the movement in the trees, I can tell something’s going on…but I just can’t get a read on an aura,” I said.

Based on the way the trees were moving, I could tell it was quite the violent scuffle. Yet I still couldn’t sense any aura… In the past, I had been attacked many times by monsters whose auras or magic energies couldn’t be sensed unless they were close, but those attacks had greatly sharpened my aura-detection skills. The last time I was attacked by such a monster, I was at least able to faintly sense its aura as it approached. And yet I couldn’t sense any auras now, even though auras and distortions in magic energy were easy to spot when their owners moved around. It was almost as if the aura of the forest was hiding these monsters.

Wait, can forests do that?

“Hey, Dad, does the aura of the forest ever hide monster auras? Like, if there’s a monster who possesses a similar aura to the forest?”

“Monsters with forest auras? Never heard of that. Now, on the other hand, small and mid-sized animals do have auras like the forest.”

Animals… That’s right, animal auras evolved to blend in with the forest to ensure their survival.

Meowww!

Ciel’s voice boomed through the forest again, but I sensed no panic in it. If anything, it sounded like…

“Is Ciel having fun?”

“Yeah, sounds like it. Had the poor thing gotten restless all these days indoors?”

“Well, it was a slime for a long time, and it didn’t get a chance to show off while Sora, Flame, and Sol had plenty to do.”

A chance to show off?

“I hope Ciel doesn’t get so excited it goes overboard…”

What did I tell Ciel when I sent it off? I didn’t say anything that would provoke it, did I? Oh no, now I’ve got a whole different thing to worry about…

“Don’t worry, Ciel knows when to show restraint…I hope.”

“That wasn’t very convincing, Dad.”

“Well, Ciel disappeared while I was saying that.”

Fair point. The trees were rustling wildly, as if a hurricane had touched down. Shortly after, I saw something running away—probably our monster. As I watched it flee, I felt like something was wrong…

Wait a minute, am I finally seeing the monster nobody’s been able to see yet? Oops—now it’s gone.

Mewww! Mewww!

“Is Nalgath’s party okay?” Had Ciel’s antics scared them?

“Agh, we should have asked Ciel to bring us back a monster!”

That’s right, then we could have found out what it was! But we’d had no idea the whole hunt would be so one-sided. I caught glimpses of Ciel climbing up the trees, its tail swishing merrily to and fro.

“Excuse me, what was that voice?” A handful of gatekeepers popped up beside me and stared into the forest. Thankfully, the trees were hiding Ciel.

“I dunno, but I think there’s a high-level monster out there,” my dad said.

The gatekeepers looked a little startled. But the very next moment, they were casually saying that it would be cool to see what kind of monster it was.

“I guess everything’s under control. We’ll just leave you to it,” a gatekeeper said as they all wandered away, having lost interest in the monster now that they figured they wouldn’t see it. As I watched them walk off, anger and sadness welled up inside of me. I was at a vantage point on higher ground, from which I could get a panoramic view of the forest. The walls of the building were plastered with papers, detailing the different types of monsters, how powerful they were, and how to deal with them. The handwriting varied, so it was clear that the people had worked together to create those documents. But now, all of them were idle. They were merely standing at the gate, doing the bare minimum to fulfill their duties as gatekeepers.

I clenched my fists, terrified by the summoning circle's power.

"I'm scared..." I said.

"Me, too."

We looked into the forest, which had gotten a bit quieter. Cobalt hadn't even been in there for an hour yet.

"That was quick," my father remarked.

"I know, Ciel sure is strong." I had heard how powerful adandaras were, and I had seen Ciel fighting before, but in my day-to-day life, it was just adorable and cute. For me, that cuteness greatly overshadowed any physical power the creature had.

"They're back, Ivy. Are they hurt?"

I held my breath as I watched Nalgath's party emerge from the trees. Nalgath's and Piarre's clothes were stained bright red.

"Looks like the potions worked."

"Oh, thank goodness."

Though their clothes were red, the way they both were walking toward us made it clear there was nothing to worry about. It was a relief to see they were okay, but the red-stained clothes still made me shiver with worry.

"Hey, there!" Arly spotted us and waved. Then he gave us a big thumbs-up: mission accomplished.

I breathed a sigh of relief, though I'd known for sure that our mission would be successful as soon as I saw how violently Ciel was rampaging. We headed to the village entrance to meet Cobalt. When the gate opened, the gatekeepers were quite alarmed by how red the party's clothes were.

"We're okay," Nalgath said stiffly as he greeted the gatekeepers. Then he promptly walked away from them. Had something happened?

"We need to give you our report as quickly as possible. Let's go somewhere else," Arly said.

We said goodbye to the gatekeepers and hurried on after Cobalt.

“Where are we headed?”

“Our house. Juggy, tell the captain,” Nalgath commanded.

“On it. See you later.” Juggy trotted along another path. I felt a disturbance in the air around us.

“Come on in.”

When we got to Cobalt’s headquarters, Nalgath and Piarre excused themselves to wash the blood off their clothes. I took the bag from Arly, opened the lid, and out jumped Ciel. I was relieved to see it alive and well.

“Good job, Ciel. Did you make it out okay?”

Mrrrow.

“Uh, I don’t think you need to worry even a little bit about that. Ciel was a wonder—truly a wonder,” Arly repeated, his face stiff with awe.

I wonder what Ciel did out there? Maybe I’d better not ask…

“I’m glad Ciel could help, sir.”

“Oh, Ciel *really* helped. Now we know what our little mystery friend in the forest is.”

“Really? Good job, Ciel!”

Mrrrow! Ciel trilled proudly.

My father gave the adandara’s head a pat.

“So we know what the it is…but…” There was a catch in Arly’s voice as he pulled out a creature somewhere between small and medium in size. When he set it on the table, I sensed there was something unusual about this “monster.”

“Why don’t I sense any magic energy?”

“Because it isn’t a monster. It’s an animal called ‘sharmy.’ It lives on the outskirts of Hataka Village. Except it looks a bit different than usual…”

“It’s an *animal*?!”

I never would have guessed it was an animal… And didn’t we hear villagers gossiping about the sharmy? They said they’ve been missing this spring… Wow…I never would have thought it was an animal.

Chapter 415:
The Reason Behind That Judgment

"WAIT, THAT DOESN'T make sense. Everyone thought it was a monster; there must've been a reason why they believed that."

My dad had a point. Monsters weren't the only creatures that rampaged in the forest—animals did that, too. The village leaders wouldn't just decide it was a monster unless they had proof. Or maybe magic had warped their sense of judgment...

"The anomaly in the forest popped up last winter. It was a very small disturbance, so not many adventurers were worried about it. Then again, a lot of adventurers were trapped under the spell, so that might be the reason why..."

"What was this anomaly?" my father asked.

"I'm told it was noises and the sound of something crying out. I didn't hear it myself, though. People did say it was a voice they'd never heard in the winter, though."

Noises and a crying voice?

Arly patted the head of the sharmy on the desk. "I guess it was about when the snow started to melt that adventurers kept getting attacked in the forest, day after day. And all their testimonies were similar: 'I couldn't see it. I couldn't sense its aura. But when it attacked me, I did sense *something*.'"

"Wasn't there an investigation?" my father asked.

"Well, when the snow started melting, we... Ah? Wait a minute, I'm sure I remember we formed a scouting party. How weird, I know I was in that party...or was I? Huh, not sure why, but I can't really remember."

"It must be the summoning circle's magic. Better let it go," my father said.

Arly nodded. "We did investigate. From what I can remember, they didn't find anything out of the ordinary... I think our usual scouting party would've been on the case. I'll check later. Wait, what were we talking about again? It was...oh, why

we decided it was a monster, right? Well…it was because of the scars."

From the way Arly spoke, he clearly wasn't confident in his memories. When that dawned on him, there was a look of bewilderment on his face.

"You okay?" my father asked.

Arly gave him a pitiful look. "They did tell me there would be strange gaps in my memory, but I think it's even more messed up than I thought."

"Can I give you some advice as someone who's gone through it?"

"Yes, please."

"You've just gotta give up and accept it. My lost memories never came back, and I never recovered the ones that were tampered with, either. So you have to make the effort to re-remember everything."

"Got it… Oh dear, I've gone off topic again. What was I saying?"

"You were just telling us that they decided it was a monster because of the scars."

Arly took a deep breath in and out. Then a look of peace came over him and he smiled at us. "Sorry about that. I'm okay now. So, the people who saw the wounds on the attacked adventurers said they contained some magic energy that didn't belong to the adventurers themselves."

Meaning that whoever attacked the adventurers must have used magic. It would have been only natural for people to think it was a monster.

"Hey, Dad, do animals ever use magic?"

He shook his head. "Not that I've heard of. Ciel, were there any other monsters or animals out there besides the sharmy? If there were, say something."

Ciel just stared at my father, saying nothing. In other words, the sharmy was behind everything.

"Oh, and you mentioned this sharmy looks different than it's supposed to. In what way?"

“Its fur. Sharmy typically have longer fur, but all the ones who attacked us had short fur. Also, the claws aren’t usually this long. They’re normally quite adorable.”

I looked at the sharmy sitting on the desk. Its fur was short and the three claws on each of its feet were long and sharp. It would be quite scary to be attacked by them.

“Their personalities are also completely different. Sharmy are friendly creatures. Although they sometimes pull pranks on the adventurers, they’ve never come close to attacking anyone until now. But as soon as we spotted these sharmy, they attacked us. It’s never happened before. And I’m ashamed to admit it happened so suddenly that we got badly wounded.”

A change in personality and appearance… Just like the monsters who got driven berserk by the magic energy at the dump. When Sol sucked the magic energy out of the berserk monster, I was surprised by how different it looked afterward. And from what I was hearing, it sounded like these sharmy were berserk.

“Do you think the magic energy at the dump caused it?” I asked my father. “It makes friendly monsters go berserk, after all. Some of the monsters even looked different, too, remember?”

My father thought for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, they did change. But animals don’t have a core to store magic energy, so they shouldn’t be able to be influenced by the magic energy at dumps.”

Oh, right. From what the captain said, it sounds like you can’t store up magic energy without a magic core. But maybe animals actually do *have magic cores? Oh, wait, if that were true, they’d just naturally store up magic energy and turn into monsters.*

“Knock, knock, coming in…”

Nalgath and Piarre entered the room, and their faces twisted when they saw the sharmy sitting on the desk.

“Did you tell them?”

“Yeah.”

Nalgath walked over to Arly and looked at the sharmy. “What do you think?” he asked my father.

My father shook his head. “I have a lot of ideas, but they’re all just theories with no proof to back them up. All we do know is that the animals who attacked you were sharmy.”

“To Hataka, the sharmy are cute little spring mascots. We’ve always been friendly with them, so it’s hard to believe.”

I realized it would be a shocking truth for Nalgath’s party and everyone else raised in this village to accept. All three adventurers looked quite gloomy.

I stood up. “I’ll just go make us some tea. May I use your kitchen?” I’d decided everyone needed some time to calm their nerves and turn the mood around. They told me where the kitchen was, and I walked out of the room.

“I’ll come with you,” Piarre called, running after me. As we walked to the kitchen together, I stole a glance at him. He looked like he was going to be sick.

I got out the tea leaves while I put the kettle on to boil. They also had a magic pot that would produce hot water instantly, but sometimes you needed to take things slow, and this was one of those times. I only hoped everyone would be calmer by the time the tea was ready.

“Should I get some snacks?” Arly asked.

“Yes, please. Something sweet always hits the spot when you’re tired.”

“Agreed. Oh, that reminds me—have you tried Hataka’s sweetest confectionary yet?”

The sweetest confectionary? “No, sir. What’s it like?”

“Well…let’s just say it does a real number on your mouth. One bite was more than I could handle.”

Wow, does such an incredible sweet really exist? You know, I think I did hear about one that did a number on your mouth after one bite… Where did I hear that?

“Something wrong?”

“No, sir, I think I remember hearing something like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Another confectionary that’s terribly sweet.”

“Ohh, neat. Yeah, the one I’m talking about is called *danzu*.”

“That’s the one!”

Ahh, that’s right! Now I remember, that was the sweet they had at that shop where we caught Mira and her party. I never ended up eating anything there, so even now I don’t know what danzu is like. But since they have the same name, it’s probably the same thing? Rattloore did say it was “sweet enough to kill.” Now I kinda want to try it…

“Unless you’ve got a mighty sweet tooth, I advise you not to try it. Juggy’s face turned green just from one bite.”

Uh-oh. Now I really want to try it.

“Ivy… Can I call you Ivy?”

“Sure, we’re all friends now.”

“Thanks. You know, talking about it has really made me want to eat it. I think if we split one between all of us, it shouldn’t be too much to handle. But not right now, okay? It’s just too much.”

There was a mischievous twinkle in Piarre’s eyes. *Thank goodness his gloom is gone now.*

“Thanks, Ivy.”

“No problem, sir. Well, the tea’s ready, so let’s go back.”

“All right.”

“Oh, and once all of this is over, do treat me to some of that danzu.”

Piarre’s face crumpled into a smile and he rubbed my head. “I’ll buy you as many as you’d like.”

“Oh, no, sir, one is plenty. I’ll share it with my father.”

Chapter 416:
Dad’s on the Case!

WE WENT BACK to the room where my father was. Arly was there, but Nalgath wasn’t. Sharmy wasn’t on the table, either.

“Where did Mr. Nalgath go?” I asked.

Piarre wiped the table clean for me, which I appreciated, since a sharmy had been on it just a few minutes ago.

“He went to dissect the sharmy. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Oh, okay. Um, here’s some tea and snacks.” I set everything on the table in a neat little row.

“Thanks.” My father took a sip of tea, and Arly followed suit.

“I hope he finds something…” Piarre said. Arly nodded.

“I’m back… Oh, you’re having tea?” Juggy entered the room while we were sipping tea and waiting for Nalgath to come back.

“Hey, buddy,” Arly greeted Juggy with a wave of his hand. “What’d the captain say?”

“Easy, man, I want some tea first.”

Even though it wasn’t all that warm out, Juggy’s forehead was dripping with sweat.

“Did you run here?”

“Yeah, I figured I should give you the news as quickly as possible.”

“Okay, here’s your tea.” Piarre handed Juggy the tea, which he chugged down.

“I told the captain the sharmy were the source of the ruckus in the forest. He was baffled, since he knows a lot about them. He’d also never heard of animals using magic energy before, so we have no idea how it happened. He’s gonna ask a friend of his by faax.”

So it really was unusual for animals to use magic energy, then.

“By the way, Miss Ivy, Mr. Zinal thought it was strange how your slimes seem to get more and more energized each time they heal somebody.”

They were probably thrilled with the joy of having a full belly.

“I’m glad they’re doing well, sir,” I replied.

“We were afraid healing so many people would exhaust them, but now we feel much better,” Piarre said.

I nodded. Overeating made me more worried than exhaustion…

“What did he say our next move should be?” Arly asked.

Juggy frowned a little. Had the captain given them an order that would be tough to follow? “He said we should *stand by*.”

“Stand by?” Piarre looked conflicted.

“But isn’t this a race against time?” Arly asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” Juggy answered, an irritated furrow in his brow.

“They probably don’t know what’s the best thing to do, either,” my dad answered Arly. Everyone’s eyes turned to him. “Even for the most experienced adventurer out there, we’re just dealing with too many unknowns here, and the village leaders must be at a loss for what to do. You have to remember, they’re also missing parts of their memories.”

“It’s a weird feeling… The guild master and the captain always seemed perfect to us.” Juggy looked perplexed, and his two companions were listless, too.

“They’re only human—there are some things they can’t do. Just like us.”

“Yes, sir. You’re quite right.” Arly nodded and sipped his tea.

Confused by everyone’s expressions, I raised an eyebrow at my father, who shrugged in reply. He was his usual self. *Oh, I get it! I’m so calm because my dad’s his usual self, but Arly and his friends are overwhelmed because their captain and guild master are stressed out. When those at the top falter, so do those beneath them. I wonder if Hataka Village can recover from this…*

“Everything will be okay,” my father whispered in my ear.

He startled me a little, but I smiled back at him. “Hee hee! I’m not worried, but it sure is tough at the top.”

My father nodded.

With an odd atmosphere still hanging over the room, Nalgath returned. Sensing the mood, he gave his companions a questioning stare. “Something wrong?”

“No, we’re okay. Did you find out anything about the sharmy?”

Nalgath was confused by the desperation in Piarre’s vice. The poor guy must have just wanted a breakthrough.

“No, I didn’t find anything. There was no magic energy in the body and no magic stone, either. Well, that tracks, since it’s an animal.” When Nalgath said this, Juggy hung his head. “What’s wrong?”

“The captain and guild master aren’t doing so well… Their minds are jumbled.”

My father handed Nalgath some tea, and he gave Juggy a troubled look. “The captain isn’t doing well? What makes you say that?” he asked. Juggy answered that the captain had commanded everyone to stand by. “Ah. So that’s what he wants us to do.” Now even Nalgath was giving off that indescribable sense of gloom.

Well, they haven’t been elite-level adventurers for very long. I guess it’s only natural for them to despair? I looked at my father, who was staring hard at each of the men of Cobalt in turn. Something about his gaze looked different. I looked at him curiously, and our eyes met.

“Elite adventurers need somebody to guide them at all times. They start to lose their nerve if they’re forced to sit and wait for orders. That’s why they’re recklessly asking a third party for advice,” my father whispered to me.

I stole a glance at Nalgath’s party. *Aha… So that’s why they’re talking themselves into an anxiety spiral. I mean, my father doesn’t know if the captain or guild master really are overwhelmed. Actually, from the limited interactions I’ve had with them, they didn’t seem like*

the kind of people who would crack under pressure. Did Juggy misunderstand the captain's mood when he spoke to him?

"It's tough to be a top adventurer, too," I observed.

"That's what it means to be at the top."

From the way Dad's talking, he seems to think they lack the commitment and bravery needed for the job. But they've gotta wait, huh... Is there anything that can be done right now? The captain is handling the summoning circle, so I guess there's nothing for me to work on. We didn't learn anything from dissecting the sharmy, either. Seems like there just isn't any other way we can look into it...or is there? Come to think of it, I don't know anything about sharmy. Maybe if I learned more about them, I could make some connections...

"May I ask a question, sir?" I asked Nalgath and his party.

They hesitantly nodded. *Oh dear, were they thinking about what their next move should be? I feel bad interrupting them, then. I'll just ask and get it over with.* "Can you tell me more about the sharmy? What do they eat? And you said they came to the outskirts of Hataka in the springtime, but where are they during the other times of the year?"

"What do sharmy eat? Well, mostly little insects, flower nectar, and tree fruit. Sharmy give birth in the spring, so they come to Hataka's outskirts to eat the fruit and flowers. In the summertime, they usually stay cool in a cave nearby. They're really busy in the autumn, getting ready for the winter. Unlike the springtime, they're on edge in the fall. They're in heat then, and they also have to store enough food for the winter. They spend the wintertime in a near-hibernation state deep inside their cave."

Piarre's explanation made me curious. What was a near-hibernation state like? I'd never heard of it before, but I supposed it didn't matter right now. But maybe the cave was significant...

"Do people ever go in the sharmy's cave, sir?"

"No, never. The people and adventurers of this village alike love the sharmy. Leave them be—that's the rule here."

A cave where nobody goes… Did that mean they were in a place where people wouldn't disturb them even when they went to dump their trash? The sharmy's mutation was still a mystery. If you assumed they were a monster and not an animal, the theory about them sucking magic energy from the trash at the dump made sense. You would need to check their cave to make sure, though.

"Whereabouts is that cave, sir?"

"It's about a thirty-minute walk out of the village."

Thirty minutes? With the sharmy on the loose, it would be tough to get there. I shot my father a glance, and he was smiling right back at me. I instantly knew he was reading my mind.

"Dad, can we?"

"Hmm… Hey, Ciel? Would you like to go on another rampage in the forest for us?"

Ciel jumped up from its sleeping position on my father's lap and jiggled eagerly. *Mrrrow!*

The squeak in its voice told me that was a yes.

Chapter 417:
Courage

"UM, SORRY, but what are you doing?" Nalgath looked back and forth between my father and me in confusion. The other three men were also staring at us.

"What else? We're going to the forest to look for the sharmy's home. Do you know where it is, by the way?"

"I do, but we were instructed to stand by," Nalgath answered.

My father sighed. "You boys are elite adventurers. You know what that means?" Cobalt's members exuded a sour atmosphere, but my father smiled. "You are elite adventurers. You aren't allowed to just sit idle and wait for orders from the top. Get it? You boys took what I said as gospel—and that was also wrong. While we're at it, don't use me as a scapegoat." The quartet's faces tensed up. "I do feel sorry for you boys, going through a horrible ordeal just after you became elite adventurers, but didn't you consent to

that the moment you reached that rank? Then it's about damn time you own it. Hunkering down won't solve anything," my father snapped.

Cobalt's members nodded bitterly. "I'm sorry, sir... You're absolutely right." Nalgath took a deep breath in and out, then looked right up at my father. I could see the fire of strength returning to his eyes. "Before the captain fell ill, a gang selling illegal drugs passed through this village. A lot of orders flew back and forth while we were trying to find proof to arrest them and figure out who they victimized. It took everything we had just to keep up with all the orders. But looking back now, those times were easy—all we needed to do was follow orders."

Nalgath's three companions nodded in agreement. I could see where they were coming from: It would be easiest to just sit back and follow orders, though you would have to worry about getting hurt if you messed up.

“Whenever there was a problem, our orders never stopped…until today. For the first time, our captain told us to stand by…”

Did that mean the command *stand by* held a significant meaning to them?

“Sometimes the captain gives the stand by command when he wants to give his subordinates time to think, so it scared us…”

Oh, so that’s what it really means! Then it was a command that only the adventurers of Hataka would understand. Interesting.

“I really am a failure,” Nalgath said. “And here I thought I had enough courage to be an elite adventurer when he offered me the job.”

Well, they are still in their twenties, and this is a horrible problem to have as their first assignment… I agree with Dad; I feel sorry for them.

“But I’m okay now. You guys are, too, aren’t you?” Nalgath asked confidently. The three nodded with a look of closure in their eyes.

Wow, elite adventurers sure are brave. If I were in their shoes, I’d skip town.

“So, Nalgath, Juggy, Piarre, Arly, what’s your next move?” my father asked, his tone firmer.

I could just see the tension melt from Arly’s body. Had he really been that nervous? His eyes met mine, but he quickly looked away in embarrassment.

“Please, let us help you in any way we can,” Nalgath said. “But first, I must ask why Miss Ivy thinks we need to go to the sharmy’s home. It seems to me like the summoning circle should be our top priority now, since Ciel bought the village some time before it’s attacked.”

I shook my head. Time was running out for Hataka, and yet it faced two big problems. The first was the summoning circle. Adventurers were still held captive under its spell. Their magic cores were damaged more with each passing day, and they might turn into empty shells of themselves at any time… But the captain had already found a way to solve that problem. It didn’t look like we would be able to save everybody that way, but the

light of hope was reassuring. Still, it would not solve the root of the summoning circle problem. According to the captain and other experts, anyone who used a summoning circle was also affected by it. Worst case scenario, this village might have a psychopathic mass murderer on its hands. That would mean more victims in Hataka.

But there was more to it than that. We still didn't know where the summoning circle had been cast. If we just left it alone, its magic would keep producing more victims. Besides, the people released from the spell might fall under it again. The problem was that we needed more helpers so we could catch whoever drew the summoning circle and to find the summoning circle itself. Since the captain and guild master were securing those helpers as we spoke, there really wasn't anything for us to do about that.

Then the other problem was the rampaging animals in the forest. We knew they were sharmy now, but that revelation only gave us a new problem. Sharmy were supposed to be friendly animals, yet they had mutated into violent creatures. Until we found the reason why and did something to counter it, it was only a matter of time before the sharmy attacked the village. Ciel had bought us a few days of safety from a sharmy attack, but this was no time to relax. Besides, there might be too many sharmy for us to simply dispose of them. For the time being, they were afraid of Ciel, and *that* was why this was the perfect time for us to try to find their home. We couldn't let this chance slip through our fingers. The higher-ups had their hands full with the summoning circle, but my father, the members of Cobalt, and I were all free to act. Maybe that was what the captain wanted us to realize…

"There is nothing I can do about the summoning circle, sir. We should let the higher-ups handle it. I thought we should go look for the sharmy's home since they almost certainly aren't about to attack us right now—we have Ciel's heroics to thank for that. We need to take this moment to find out what happened to the sharmy."

If safety was our top concern, now was unmistakably our best bet to move. I'd forgotten to ask about the sharmy's way of thinking, but maybe Ciel wouldn't scare them next time they

met. If that was the case, we would be in grave danger of an attack on our way to their caves. But now, when they had freshly retreated in fear, we had our best chance to safely go there.

"You know, she does have a point." With a look of surprise on his face, Piarre nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, this probably is our best chance for success. Let's ask the captain. The clock is ticking, right?" Juggy stood up and got ready to leave, and everyone else followed suit. My father gently patted my head and put Ciel and Flame in the bag.

Um, guys? Aren't we moving a little too quickly now?

"Wait a little bit when you get to the captain's house. We'll let you in the back way," Arly said.

I gave him a funny look. Why did we need to go in through the back?

"How many people have been freed from the spell so far, I wonder?"

Oh, that's right. The captain's house is kind of hectic right now. Hopefully Sora and Sol are still doing okay. I just hope they haven't eaten so much they can't move.

When we arrived at the captain's house, there was a watchman I'd never seen before standing guard at the door.

"The rear entrance is that way," Nalgath said.

We followed his directions, and Arly waved us into the house's back entrance. Inside, we heard lively voices. It sounded like everyone was happy to see the captain was out of bed. We waited to talk to him in a room where we wouldn't be found, and Melisa brought us some tea.

"Your Sora and Sol really are incredible little sweeties! Just another four to go and everyone will be freed. And get this: Each time they break the spell, they get faster and faster. The guild master and captain are in a tizzy, trying to get the next patients in on time. *Hee hee hee!* Oh, Miss Ivy, thank you so much."

I was a little taken aback by Melisa's constant gabbing the instant she set foot in the room, but I was happy to hear everything was going well. And there were only four people left to go? We were ahead of schedule. *Sora and Sol, you're amazing!*

Chapter 418:
Retreat—the Obvious Choice

AFTER A WHILE, the captain stepped into the room. “Sorry I took so long. Sora and Sol sure are incredible. There’s only four people to go! And they don’t look at all tired—they could do this all day.”

“Ha ha ha! I’m glad to hear it, sir.”

It didn’t sound like they were too full to move, at least. The captain sat in a chair, and Nalgath’s party began talking with him. He quietly listened and nodded.

“Miss Ivy says now is our best opportunity—and we agree, sir.”

When my name came up, the captain glanced my way. *Yup, this guy definitely is the captain*. For just a moment, I felt chills running down my spine. I warded off the fear by taking deep breaths. Village and town leaders have this power to see right through you, and it’s just a little terrifying to be on the receiving end of their x-ray vision.

“You’re right—now is the best time. So who’s going?”

“Us, Mr. Druid, and Miss Ivy.”

“You’re really taking a kid along?”

“Oh!” Nalgath’s eyes shot over to me.

Er, did you forget I’m a kid? It’s pretty obvious by looking at me.

“Huh, that’s so strange. Based on the way you talk, you just don’t seem like a child to me,” Piarre said. The other three nodded.

The way I talk… I’m so sorry, everyone.

“Miss Ivy, um, you should stay in the—”

“I’m coming with you,” I announced before Nalgath could command me to stay in the village. I would do my best not to get in their way.

“Er, but that would be a little hard…” There was reluctance in the captain’s face.

Is he going to say no? Maybe I really should wait here; having me along might distract everyone.

"Ivy should come with us—she'll inspire Ciel to work harder," my father explained. "Besides, Nalgath's party is going to be taking the lead on this operation. Ivy and I are like... Well, think of us as little tagalongs."

The captain was dumbstruck for a moment, but his face quickly melted into a smile. "Little tagalongs, eh? I don't know if I feel right putting the guild's Secret Weapon in that kind of role."

My father's face soured at those words. He must have thought the captain didn't know about his alias. Who had told him? Was it Zinal and his men?

"Just so you know, I don't like being called that," my father sighed.

"Sorry about that. Oh, and I got word from the honorable Lord Foronda that someone he knows in the capital will help us. Also, one of Ivy's acquaintances knows a lot about summoning circles, so I'm having them faax her directly. Their name is redacted, though. Ivy, do you know who it might be?"

Somebody I know who knows a lot about summoning circles? I've never talked about summoning circles with anyone. Who could it be? I guess it would have to be someone in the Sword of Flames or the Lightning Royals... Or maybe Captain Ogh?

"I'm sorry, sir, I have no idea who it is."

"Well, it's not your fault for not knowing. Summoning circles are top secret. Listen, Ivy..."

"Yes, sir?"

The captain's smile disappeared behind somber eyes. He looked right at me and gently rested his hand on my head. "If things go south, put your own life first. If you promise me that, I'll give you permission to go into the forest."

"Don't worry, Captain. If anything happens, I'll put my own safety first."

"Er—really? Wow, Ivy, I guess you understand everything very well."

If anything were to happen to me, that would greatly limit what my father and Ciel could do. So if something bad happened—even if I got hurt—I would have to retreat. That was the biggest help I could offer, and I would never get that wrong. I gave the captain a firm thumbs-up with both hands.

A smile filled his face. “Druid, you’ve got yourself a wonderful daughter.”

“I couldn’t be prouder, Captain.”

My father had said he was proud of me before, but it was still a little embarrassing to hear. It was also flattering, though…

“If you start training her now—”

“You can’t have her,” my dad snapped back. Then his eyes narrowed into a glare without even the slightest hint of a smile in them. Nalgath and his men flinched at the sight.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Yikes, now that’s a death glare. Oh well, I give up. All right, Cobalt! Come with me, we need to talk. Druid, hang out just a bit longer, okay? I’ll be done soon.” With a long chuckle, the captain dragged Nalgath and his party out of the room.

“That captain is pretty clever,” I remarked.



Whenever his sharp, observant gaze was directed at me, I felt like he could see all my secrets. But I also sensed a protective acceptance from him.

"Yeah, the fact that he fell for our mastermind's spell proves we're dealing with quite the formidable foe. I'll bet he hates himself for that."

I didn't blame him. The enemy had gotten through the chink in his defenses.

"It sure is incredible, to break the defenses of people who are always on guard. What do you think our mastermind is like?"

I'd seen the summoning circle that trapped Snakey, and that was quite an extensive spell. For our summoning circle to have the power to control so many people, I'd just assumed it would have to be quite large...but maybe it wasn't? And what was our mastermind like? If they could slowly spread their magic undetected like that, surely it had to be more than just one person.

"Maybe it's someone who can move freely within the village watch and the adventurer guild."

Some*one*?

"Dad, do you think our mastermind is just one person?"

"Hm? Oh, I guess I phrased that badly. I definitely don't think it's just one person. At first, the scale of victims made me think it was a gang of sorts, but I got a bunch of dead ends investigating that angle. If it were a gang, there would at least be a trickle of intelligence leaked about them. Since there wasn't, I figured maybe it's a small group of people—like three or four. Surely not as many as ten."

He has a point: The more people you have in on your conspiracy, the more likely you'll have leaks. I guess he was looking for that kind of leak. Wow, I didn't know. But could there really be no more than four? Does that mean this much harm can be caused by just four people?

"I imagine there's some highly proficient adventurers and watchmen in the mix."

If they were highly proficient, that meant they were people the villagers of Hataka heavily relied on. But maybe my dad was right. People like that could move about freely at the village watch station or the adventurer guild without drawing suspicion. That was why part of this didn't make sense, though. The watch station and the adventurer guild were both high-traffic areas. You couldn't just draw a big summoning circle like the one I'd seen in the cave. Besides, no matter how natural it was to see those people in those areas, people would surely notice if they were behaving differently than usual. We'd thought the summoning circle was at either the adventurer guild or the village watch station, but maybe it wasn't? Then again, the adventurer guild was really the only place where all adventurers were sure to go…

"Sorry we took so long." Nalgath and his party returned to the room, all geared up.

My father gave them a questioning look. "You've changed clothes."

"Yes, the captain let us borrow them."

Their clothes did look much sturdier than what they'd been wearing before. Maybe the captain had loaned them out of concern?

"Ahh, good, I've caught you. Here, Miss Ivy, take this." As soon as she came into the room, Eche smiled at the sight of me and held up a tiny bag with fifteen items in it.

"Thanks. Um, what is it?"

Eche smiled gleefully. "Shock pouches."

She must have made these just for me when she heard I was going into the forest.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Don't throw them at people, okay? And be careful of the wind."

"Yes, ma'am."

I'll use these if I have to make a solo retreat. I'd rather that not happen, though.

“Even if your aim is a little off, they’ll be paralyzed if they inhale it.”

“Huh?!”

“The ones tied with red string are the numbing kind. They tend to scatter in a big radius, so be careful.”

Huh? But I thought shock pouches were filled with spicy powder. These are numbing?

“And the ones with blue strings will knock your victims unconscious in the end.”

“In the…end? What do they do before that…”

“Oh, they just make you wander around a bit. Don’t let it scare you. Well, any of these will give you a chance to flee, but I recommend the blue ones. They’re a new formula of mine. Hee hee hee hee! Let me know how they work for you.”

I kinda got the sense that shock pouches weren’t supposed to be that dangerous…but when I saw the gleeful smile on Eche’s face, I didn’t have the heart to tell her that.

Chapter 419:
The Sharmy Cave, Part 1

"NOW, LET'S GET GOING."

Once we were in the forest, Nalgath took the lead as we made our way to the cave that the sharmy called home. There was a bit of a slope, but it wasn't too steep. Not that a little slope or a rocky hill was a problem for me anyway. I looked beside me to see Ciel walking along merrily. It looked back at me and purred, rubbing its face against me. It seemed to be even needier than usual.

"Ciel must be happy to finally be back in its true form after all this time."

"Yeah, it has been a while, hasn't it? Oh, gosh, you're just too stinking *cute*!"

I petted Ciel's face and gave its jaw scritches as we walked, and it only purred louder to ask for more. The purring made me pet its head even more, so we kept going just like that. I looked ahead and noticed that the gentlemen of Cobalt seemed a bit preoccupied with me and my adandara.

"I'm sorry, are we being too loud?"

"Oh, no, I'm just impressed by how friendly you two are," Juggy said with a little awestruck sigh as he looked from Ciel to me.

"Well, Ciel's part of my family and I love it."

"I've thought this for a while, but you really have great bonds with your monsters," Arly spoke up from behind me. "Have you always been that close with them?"

"Yes, sir, we've always been best friends. Oh, but then again, I was a little scared when I first met Ciel." Ciel body-slammed me gently when I said that. *Oh, Ciel, ever since Sora healed your wounds, I've never once been scared of you.*

"Do you think…maybe a bond like that could be forged later in the relationship?"

“Huh? Oh, do you know a tamer who doesn’t have a strong bond with their monsters?”

“That’s right. It’s an old friend of mine—everyone has high hopes for them because their grandmother was a famous tamer, but they’re having a hard time using their monsters to the best of their ability.”

“Using…” Aha.

“Well, I don’t really use Sora or Sol, either, sir.”

“Huh?!”

“If I need anything, I’ll ask them for help. But if they don’t want to help, I respect that. I can’t *use* my family members—that’s just *weird*, isn’t it? Unless *your* family is like that, Mr. Arly?”

“Er, I’m sorry. I guess I phrased that badly…” a flustered Arly apologized. But somebody must have planted that thought in his head, or else he wouldn’t have said what he did.

“The word you’re looking for is *cooperation*,” my father said.

“Cooperation?” Arly gave him a strange look.

“Most families cooperate and help each other out, right? There are plenty of exceptions, though…”

Arly and Nalgath smiled sheepishly at that side remark.

“Cooperation, huh…? You know, Marsha said something like that to describe what she did.”

Marsha? I’ve heard that name before somewhere… Where was it? Hmm, I can’t remember.

“Thanks, Ivy. I’ll tell my friend what you said.”

“No problem, sir. And I do think relationships can be mended. It will probably just take time.”

It also depended on his friend’s level of commitment. I could give a person advice, but it was up to them whether they followed it or not. *I hope things work out for Arly’s friend*…

“We sure got out here really easily, didn’t we?” my father remarked.

Everyone looked conflicted. In emergencies, nobody was allowed to venture into the forest without clearance from the guild master or the captain of the watch. Nalgath and his party

did get an official permit from the captain, but the gatekeepers had just let us through without even asking to see it.

"Yeah, the village authorities are in the danger zone."

The danger zone?

"I guess they've just about lost their sense of judgment. Probably an effect of the summoning circle's spell."

So that's what they meant. The captain said they were getting things ready to break the spell, but they would need a little more time. I hope we make it on time…

"That's funny…"

"Yeah…"

Juggy and Piarre stopped in their tracks and looked around the forest. Nalgath and Arly had also taken up defensive stances. *Uh-oh, was my prediction wrong?*

"Is it the sharmy, sir?"

"No, not them. There's a different monster that's usually found in this area, but we don't sense a single one of them," Arly said.

"This is their territory and I can see their nest up there," Nalgath said. I looked where he was pointing, and sure enough, there was a clump of twigs in the tree above us. Was that their nest?

"They should be rearing their young this time of year, but I don't see them. Absolutely none—that's odd."

I searched for monster auras but sensed none in this area. Maybe this was the sharmy's doing.

"Let's hurry on ahead," my father said. "We don't have time to waste looking for this monster."

Nalgath nodded, and then Piarre told us that we were almost at the cave the sharmy called home. "Over there."

A little away from the place where the monsters were missing, the mouth of a giant cave came into view.

"We're going to go look inside. Wait out here," Nalgath and Juggy said, crouching low and walking toward the cave. My heart raced as I watched the two, until I saw that they had safely

approached the entrance. A little while later, I could no longer see them. That made my heart jump, but I had no choice but to wait for them.

"We really didn't run into a single sharmy on the way here, huh?" Piarre said.

I agreed that that was odd. Even if the sharmy were scared of Ciel, it was strange that we hadn't come across even one. *First the missing monsters, then the strangely behaving sharmy. What's going on? I'm starting to feel sick...*

"They're back," Arly said.

I turned my eyes back to the cave to see Nalgath and Juggy running back to us with their heads held low.

"How was it?"

"Well..."

"What's wrong? Weren't they there?" Piarre asked.

Juggy shook his head. "We did find some sharmy in the cave, but we also found a giant pile of trash with them."

Trash! I knew it... So this is where it was. This means the sharmy almost certainly mutated off the magic energy from trash.

"How much trash was there?" Arly asked.

Nalgath frowned. "A huge sea of it. It was spilling back so deep into the cave that we had no idea how much there was."

"Oh, wow."

"And there were sharmy in that cave? It's awfully quiet, considering," my father said.

Nalgath nodded. So there were sharmy in the cave, but it was unusually quiet inside. Animals who lived in the forest were sensitive to auras and had impeccable hearing, so why didn't they budge when the men went into their cave?

"They were all curled up asleep. I accidentally kicked a rock and made a noise, but they didn't react at all."

Were they asleep? But they wouldn't sleep through a noise like that... Something's off.

"Let's investigate the cave some more," my dad said.

The men of Cobalt looked at me.

“I’d like to come with you, if I can.”

“Ivy will be okay. Ciel, if anything happens, put her on your back and carry her to safety.”

Ciel gave my father a big, clear nod of understanding.

“Let’s go.” My father, who was supposed to stay behind and look after me, now took the lead. *Is this really okay?* I looked back at Nalgath and his party, but none of them seemed bothered by it. *Er…yeah, they’re doing the wrong thing. Oh well, my dad will probably scold them later for that.*

“Ivy, you stay behind me,” my dad said.

“Okay.” I moved right behind him, and Ciel swooped to my side.

“They may be asleep, but there’s no telling when they’ll wake up. Don’t let your guard down.”

“I won’t. You be careful, too, Dad.”

“I will…” He looked behind us at Nalgath and his party, then stifled a chuckle as he headed deep into the cave.

Chapter 420:
The Sharmy Cave, Part 2

THE MOMENT I ARRIVED at the mouth of the cave, I spotted the sea of trash. There was obviously quite a lot of it.

"How horrible..." my dad whispered.

And it *was* horrible. How dare they dump their trash in the sharmy's home!

Nalgath walked up to my side and gave my father's shoulder a light tap. My father turned around, and Nalgath pointed upward. We both looked up to see a series of platforms along the cave walls, all filled with sharmy. Each and every one of them was round as a ball. Perhaps that was how they slept.

With a nod to Nalgath, my father started pointing around and giving orders. Nalgath's party left Arly behind and quietly moved over to the walls on the opposite side. The mouth and interior of this cave were both quite large, so we were going to split in two to explore it.

My father turned to Ciel, who was a few paces away. He lowered his fist and pumped it twice as a signal to stand by, and Ciel lay down on the spot. *When did Ciel learn that signal?* My father was staring at me meaningfully, so I took a quiet breath in and out to steady my nerves. Then I gave him an earnest nod to show I was okay, prompting him to quietly walk into the cave. I followed, and Arly brought up the rear.

We crept along the cave wall. There was so much trash that we couldn't see Nalgath and his group on the other side. Just how much trash *was* there, anyway? The further into the cave we walked, the darker it got. Since we couldn't light a lantern, we stopped in the darkness. I sensed my father looking up, so I followed his gaze to see the sharmy in the gloom. All of them were motionless, so they were clearly still asleep. That was a relief to see, but it also felt wrong. It definitely wasn't normal behavior. The sharmy should have woken up when people intruded this far into their home, and yet they were asleep. Maybe they *couldn't* wake up?

I looked at my father in front of me and saw he was pulling something out of his bag. *If he lights a lantern, that will certainly wake up the sharmy…so what is he getting out? Did he get something ready in advance? Boy, there sure is a lot of trash*. We were walking against the walls so the sharmy wouldn't notice us, but the trash was crammed all the way to the side of the cave. I took a cautious look at it and noticed an unusually large number of magic items. I nudged a large magic item with my foot. *What's this?*

A symbol I'd seen somewhere before was on the ground under the trash. The moment I saw it, I felt chilling sweat shoot down my spine. I could only see half of the symbol, so I nudged the magic item a little more with my foot. Just as I was trying to move it without making a sound, my father tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up with a start to see him giving me the signal he'd given Ciel earlier. In other words, he wanted me to stand by. I understood him, but I shook my head no. My father gave me an astonished look, but I ignored it and pointed at the ground.

Arly, noticing the exchange, moved a little closer and looked at the ground by my feet along with my father. Immediately after, I felt my father tense up with fear. Sensing it all the while, I carefully nudged the magic item off the symbol until the once half-covered design was completely exposed. *I knew it… Of course I've seen this before. It's the same symbol from the summoning circle that trapped Snakey.*

My father, noticing it too, creeped closer to the wall. He gave Arly a firm signal to come with him. Arly seemed a bit confused, but he obeyed and pressed himself against the wall. I looked at my father, who looked back at me, nodded reassuringly, and then pointed outside. This time, Arly took the lead as we slowly made our way out of the cave. It was hard to move without waking up the sharmy, but we had to get away from that summoning circle—and fast. We had no idea what might happen otherwise. I wondered how Nalgath's group was doing.

Once we were out of the cave at a safe distance away, Arly pulled out a tiny magic item and switched it on. "This'll let Nalgath's group know that something's gone wrong. They should be out within seconds."

We walked Ciel a little away from the cave, and Nalgath's group emerged in less than a minute.

"What happened? Is something wrong?" Piarre asked us worriedly. Juggy and Nalgath looked equally anxious.

"Boys, you're elite adventurers. Learn to mask your emotions," my father said.

Nalgath's group frowned uncomfortably.

"It's okay, just remember that moving forward. We're cutting the cave investigation short because of the summoning circle."

"A summoning circle, sir?" Nalgath looked bewildered.

"Ivy found a huge summoning circle under all that trash," my father said.

Nalgath's group fell silent.

"So is that the cause of the sharmy's weird behavior?"

"I assume it is. The summoning circle and the magic energy in the trash probably messed them up somehow."

How horrible... Well, now we know what's wrong with them, but is there a way to break the spell?

"Hey, Dad, do you think the spell can be broken?"

"It'll be tough. They've also gone berserk from the magic energy in the trash."

That's right. They may have been peaceful before, but now they lash out at any human who approaches them.

"Oh, but they're asleep right now! Could we help them now?"

"You're right, this might be a chance for us to do something to help them..." But from the look on my father's face, I got the feeling it wouldn't work.

"Miss Ivy, let's go back to the village and ask the captain if there's a way to break the spell."

"Good idea, Mr. Piarre. Thanks." I gave him a little smile and he was obviously relieved. *Oh dear, I hope I didn't look depressed. I need to pull myself together.*

“What should we do, Mr. Druid? Could we just go back to the village? Leave them like this, I mean? I assume it’s too dangerous to investigate this cave any further.”

“Correct. We don’t know what kind of summoning circle this is, so we should stay away. Let’s just go straight back to the village.”

Nalgath and his men looked around, then pointed toward Hataka. Piarre nodded and took the lead, while we followed behind. Ciel darted straight to my side, and we silently walked away from the cave for a while.

Once we were a bit away from the cave, I heard Juggy sigh quietly behind me. “Phew... Boy, that was scary. Good job spotting that summoning circle, Ivy!”

“Well, it had the same symbols as the summoning circle I saw before.”

“You’ve seen a summoning circle before? What was it like?” Arly asked, looking between me and my father.

“It was designed to control monsters,” I said. “We happened upon it just as it was activating, so our memories were erased and tampered with.”

“How terrifying! But I’m glad you both knew about it already. If it had just been us out here, we might not have made it out.”

“Yeah, and I’ve already had my memory tampered with more than enough for one lifetime,” Juggy said. Piarre agreed.

We power walked all the way back to the village. When the gate came into view, I could just feel my muscles give out in relief.

Chapter 421:
R O U N D

WE GOT BACK to the captain's house early enough that he welcomed us with a startled look on his face.

"Why'd you come back so soon?"

"We ran into a problem we need to discuss, so we came back," Nalgath answered.

The captain sighed. "A problem, eh? You can tell me in my room. Oh, and Ivy, thanks for letting us borrow Sora and Sol! With their permission, we added two more people to the list."

"Did you, sir?"

"Yes, sorry we didn't check with you."

"Oh, it's okay, I'm glad the slimes could help. Where are they now?" The captain looked a bit troubled by my question, and I gave him a curious look. "Is something wrong, sir?"

The captain scratched his head, leading my father to glare at him.

"Druid, everything's fine. No problems. It's just…a little something…"

"Be honest with us—what happened?" My father's irritated voice echoed down the hallway. The captain smiled sheepishly and led us into a spacious room on the first floor.

"Well, see for yourselves."

Inside the room, I immediately spotted Sora and Sol playing on the sofa.

"Huh?!"

"Ahh!"

My father and I let out startled yelps when we saw the pair, and Nalgath's party reacted the same way when they came in behind us. *Aha, yes, it was definitely faster to just show us than to try to explain it. But boy…they are epically round.*

"Sora, Sol…you sure ate a lot, didn't you?"

On the sofa were Sora and Sol, now incredibly *round*.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”



From their energetic voices, it was clear there was nothing wrong with them. I smiled in relief and noticed Flame sound asleep on a sofa a few feet away.

“Sorry about that. They looked the same the whole time, so I figured it would be okay to add two more people—they even said it was fine when I asked. But after they’d finished with the last two people and I went to fetch them, they were like this… Again, I’m sorry. You know, I didn’t realize it, but this is all like *lunch* to them, isn’t it?” The captain slowly approached the slimes and gently petted their heads.

“Yes, sir. Sorry I didn’t tell you.” *I guess I really should have let him know.*

“Oh no, I don’t mind. Are they going to be okay, though?”

I followed his gaze toward the very rotund Sora and Sol.

“Looks like they’re gonna roll off the sofa,” my dad remarked.

“Pu! Pu!”

“Peh!”

The two chirped in protest, but they were so round that I was sure they really would roll off.

“Sora, Sol, did you get enough to eat?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

They were energetic and they could still bounce (albeit a bit sluggishly), so there was nothing to worry about.

“It’s okay, sir. Sora and Sol are both doing fine. I think they just overate a little,” I explained.

The captain looked relieved to hear it. Nalgath and his men walked over to pet and poke Sora and Sol—which the slimes gladly took as an invitation to play. It was obvious from the way

they were acting that they were in an amazing mood. *I understand, kiddos—it feels great to eat a big meal.*

"Hi there, I've brought you all some tea," Melisa said as she came in with tea and refreshments. She set them on the desk, seemingly undisturbed by Sora and Sol's appearance, which meant she probably already knew about the state they were in.

"Okay, now tell me what happened," the captain said.

Everyone sat down. I took Ciel out of my bag, and it jumped over to the floor beneath Sora and Sol…and froze when it saw the pair. *So cute… You're probably startled to see how different they look, huh?*

"I'll keep it as brief as possible. On the way to the sharmy cave, we noticed some monsters that should have been in the area were missing. We made it to the cave ahead of schedule and began our investigation then. The cave was packed with trash from the dump, so we knew searching through it would be rather tough."

Indeed, trying to do anything while dealing with that big ocean of trash was quite the task.

"Then, Miss Ivy and Mr. Druid found glyphs of a summoning circle drawn under the trash."

When Nalgath finished his report, the captain cradled his head in his hands. "A summoning circle? Do you know what the glyphs looked like?"

"The trash was covering most of it, so we couldn't see the whole thing. We only saw a part of it, sir."

"Only a part of it… Sorry, but could you draw the glyph for me?" the captain asked.

Nalgath got to work drawing it on a piece of paper. He showed it to my father, who nodded in approval, and then he handed it to the captain.

"Oh, my goodness…"

"I'm not allowed to give you the full story, but that glyph was used on a summoning circle to control a monster. If you touch it, you could lose your memory," my father explained.

A deep crease formed between the captain's eyebrows, his eyes narrowing to slits beneath them. It scared me.

"I've seen this glyph before, too. Remember how I told you I was involved in an incident with a summoning circle a while ago? Well, that's when I saw it."

"Oh dear. How did you deal with it?"

"We drew over the summoning circle…but eight adventurers died because of that."

Eight adventurers died?!

"We needed magic energy—and lots of it. Eight people sacrificed their lives to get rid of the evil summoning circle. Druid, how did you neutralize the one you found?"

"Our summoning circle was unstable, and Ciel managed to use its powers to neutralize it. But Ivy and I lost parts of our memories because we touched it…and they still haven't come back."

"You lost your memories? My summoning circle didn't do that. Maybe it's a different spell? But that symbol…"

"What's the plan?" my father asked.

Anguish washed over the captain's face. "I'll ask the adventurers and watchmen to help."

"But they're all under the spell right now. Are they even able to help?"

An uncomfortable silence filled the room.

"Could we maybe wait a while?"

"That's risky… We don't know what the summoning circle's command is. But what we *do* know is… Nalgath?"

Flustered by my father calling him out, Nalgath gave a quick explanation. "Yes! Er, we have animals with magic energy who attack humans. Aside from that, the increasing attacks on the village gate mean that they're probably being commanded to attack Hataka."

I didn't know that the attacks on the gate had increased. Maybe we really don't have time to wait around after all.

"Also, the gatekeepers are almost too far gone."

Probably because of the summoning circle's spell.

After a long pause, the captain said, "I see... Understood."

I stole a glance at him as he quietly closed his eyes in thought. We didn't have enough time for anything we needed to do.

Knock, knock.

"I heard Nalgath's party is back..." The door opened immediately after, and in came Zinal's party. Their eyes became stern the moment they sensed the gloom in the room. "What happened?"

The captain gave a quick recap to answer Zinal's question. Garitt sighed loudly in reply. "This is the worst-case scenario..."

"Yeah... Isn't there a way to solve this?" the captain said. "Only the bare minimum of people we need to solve the problem have been freed from the spell. Even if we use my method to break the summoning circle's spell, nobody will be strong enough to help us on time."

Zinal and his men fell deep into thought...but time just ticked away.

"Pefu!"

I turned to look at Sol, who was rolling along the floor. It had probably fallen off the sofa while trying to jump.

"Sol! You okay?" I ran over to Sol and picked it up...and it felt a little heavy. I giggled softly. *So you don't just look bigger, you weigh more, too.*

"Pefu, pefu! Pefu, pefu!"

I looked at Sol, who just stared intently back at me. What was it? "Are you trying to say something?"

"Pefu!"

"Ivy, what's going on?" my father asked.

I carried Sol back to my chair and sat down. Then the slime turned to my father beside me and cried out:

"Pefu, pefu! Pefu, pefu!"

"It's trying to tell us something."

What's it trying to say right now? We were just talking about the summoning circle in the cave and how we can neutralize it. I looked at Sol. Its eyes were sparkling at me, eager with anticipation.

"Sol…do you know how to break the spell?"

I felt the eyes of everyone in the room land on us.

"Pefu!"

So Sol does *know a way… How in the world can I help Sol tell us what it is?*

Chapter 422:
I Guess It's Edible!

"E R...*BREAK THE SPELL?* Can you explain what's going on?" the captain asked, bewildered.

"Sol knows how to break the summoning circle's spell, Captain," I announced confidently. I knew it was possible—Sol said so. I wondered if we were right and the circle needed to be neutralized. "Sol, do you know how to cut off the magic of the summoning circle in the cave?"

"Pefu!"

I was right. But how do we do it...? Not Sol's usual method, I hope. I don't want Sol to try that now, considering the state it's in.

"Are you gonna neutralize it, Sol?" my father asked.

"Pefu!" Sol answered cheerfully.

"Same way as you always do?"

"Pefu!"

So Sol really is going to shut off the summoning circle by eating its magic energy. But... I looked at the slime.

"Sol, sweetie...if you eat any more, you'll get an upset tummy."

Blank. Stares.

"Er, Ivy... Wrong takeaway."

"Huh?" I looked at my father. *Wait a minute...is it just me, or is everybody looking at me like I just arrived from outer space?*

"Well, that's our Ivy."

Um, Dad, what got you to understand so quickly?

"Sol can do it, Captain," he said.

"Right... Our little friend was listening in on our conversation. But I'm not following—that's a *slime*. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Sol is indeed a slime. And if Sol says it can be done, it can be done," my father said.

I nodded. *If Sol says it's possible, it's possible. So this means I just need to take Sol to the cave. Yeah. That's definitely something I can do. But…you're so round. I just know you'll gorge yourself. Maybe I should make you start exercising?*

"Er, I know Sol says it's possible, but are you really sure about that?" The captain turned his bewildered eyes from my father to me. "This is a *summoning circle* we're dealing with."

"Don't worry, Captain. I know we can neutralize it because Sol says we can."

"Wow… Well, okay. You both put me in my place." With a sheepish smile, the captain looked at Zinal, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't you ever doubt Sol?" the captain asked.

"Never, sir," I declared. I would never doubt Sol. Looking back on everything that had happened, I could *never*.

"Hm. Okay. Uhh…I guess our only choice is to take Sol to the cave."

"Yeah… That's our only hope. Sorry…it's just difficult to believe it when I haven't seen it myself," the captain stammered.

A smile crept onto my face. I knew from experience that his feelings were only natural, so I wasn't bothered by them. My companions were unusual, and I knew it. The only thing that *did* concern me was Sol's body shape. I was sure it had gorged itself too much. If it ate anything else, it was sure to hurt its stomach.

"Okay, Sol, let's get some exercise! I'm scared of what'll happen if you eat more when you're like this."

"Pehhh," Sol complained.

But Sol had eaten so much that its body shape had changed. If it tried to eat even more…I just knew it was too risky!

"If you eat too much, you won't be able to move anymore."

"Pehhh."

"Mrrrgh."

"Ivy, I don't think having a grumbling contest with Sol is helpful."

Thanks! I'm aware of that!

“Peh! Peh!”

Huh? Sol’s acting strange… Is it in pain?

“Sol, are you okay? Does your tummy hurt?”

Did you eat too much after all? We need medicinal herbs… No, you wouldn’t eat those.

“Pong! Pong! Pong!”

“Whoa! Sol does it, too? That’s a surprise.”

“Wow, you’re right. And three at once, to boot!”

Blank. Stares.

As Sol doubled over in pain, magic stones came flying out of it. Since we’d had similar experiences with Flame, we weren’t quite as shocked as the first time, but we were still startled by it. I was also surprised to see the magic stones were jet black.

“Pefu!”

“Was that payback for you commenting on its body shape?” my father asked.

Sure enough, after creating the three magic stones, Sol’s body was a bit more like its normal shape. It was still a little round, though.

“Hm? You’re making more? Just don’t hurt yourself, okay?” my father said.

“Pefu! Pehhh—*Pong! Pong! Pong!*”

Sol made three more magic stones, and its body got a little closer to normal. Did that mean my worries were over?

“Druid…can we have a word? Are these really magic stones?” Zinal asked, pointing at the stones in my father’s hand.

“They’re magic stones, all right. Your slime makes these?” the captain asked, looking at Sol. “Just to clarify, you knew about this, right?”

“This is the first time *Sol’s* made magic stones, but Flame makes them all the time,” my father answered. Everyone’s eyes darted over to the sleeping Flame.

“Holy crap! I’m in the presence of greatness right now…” Nalgath whispered. His companions nodded eagerly.

The presence of greatness?

"I don't blame you for feeling overwhelmed…" my dad said. "This all has just become another day in the life for me, but seeing your reactions really takes me back. I used to be just as shocked as all of you." There was a sentimentality in his voice as he looked over the captain and his men…which I thought was kind of odd, since it wasn't *that* long ago.

The captain sighed. "We were supposed to be tearing our hair out over the summoning circle right now…"

There was a burst of laughter. I wasn't sure how, but the tension in the air from earlier had smoothed out.

"Well, we should be happy: We've found a way to neutralize the summoning circle," Fische said as he petted Sora's head. Sora was eagerly wriggling its head against his hand in turn. It was sure enjoying itself.

"Sure, but ever since we met Druid, it's hard to have a serious moment for long…" Zinal said.

Everyone smiled with suppressed laughter.

"Hey, it's not *my* fault," my father grumbled, which made the laughter get louder.

"Okay, let's go! Time is short." The captain rose from his chair.

Zinal shot him a tired glance. "Come on, Captain, you know you can't go. Think you can just waltz through the streets looking like that?"

"Oh, come on, let a guy have some fun!"

But despite all the captain's protests, I had to agree with Zinal. He'd lost so much weight that he was a fright to look at, even though he was otherwise healthy.

"We'll think about it if you get Melisa and Eche's permission—does that sound good?" Garitt asked.

The captain scowled in reply. He probably thought Melisa and Eche would never allow it. (And I thought so, too.)

"I could just slip out for a bit."

"You should get their permission first," Nalgath said.

With everyone now against him, the captain slumped back into his chair and sighed. “Do I really look that hideous?”

“Yeah, you sure do. Especially right around here,” Zinal pointed at his face and nodded. That made sense—the captain could hide his frail body with clothes but not his face.

“If you were lying down, I’d assume you were dead,” Fische said. Everyone else nodded. And no wonder: Even I’d thought that when I first saw him lying down.

“Isn’t his complexion too good for him to be a corpse?” Arly asked.

I looked at the captain and realized that Arly had a point. As disturbingly thin as he was, his complexion was rosy. But in a way, that made him look even more ghoulish… It just made his bizarre appearance even worse.

“Anyway, time’s running out. Who’s going to the forest?” my father asked.

“We’ll go. We know the forest here best,” Nalgath said, raising his hand. Indeed, if things did go south, it would be best to have locals on the case.

“Got it,” the captain said. “Be careful out there. Put Ivy’s safety first above all else—even more than last time.”

“Of course we will,” Nalgath said with a firm nod. I was a little confused about why I was the top priority, though.

“Okay, let’s go. Everything okay with you, Ivy?”

“Yes, Mr. Arly. You’re not too tired, I hope?”

“I’ll be fine, thanks.”

Ciel and Sol came over to me to get packed up. Ciel would be joining us again this time.

“Thanks for coming, Ciel. And thanks for helping, Sol.”

Mrrrow.

“Pefu!”

“Captain, Mr. Zinal, take good care of Sora and Flame for me.”

The men gave me a serious look and said they would.

Okay...back to the forest!

SIDE:
Zephyr's Actions in the Shadows

APPAS'S PERSPECTIVE

"GUILD MASTER, please, it wouldn't hurt you to get angry! I've told him no again and again, but he just keeps pushing himself!"

"Fine, I get it."

I could hear Eche's enraged voice booming out in the hallway. *Uh-oh… I think I made her mad for real this time. I'd better test the tea she brings me from now on. Maybe the food, too? No, first, I'd better apologize. I don't think she'll ever let me win this argument.*

"So I hear you fainted?" Guild Master Uliga entered my room without knocking. I raised my arm from my position in bed and waved. I had gotten cocky and tried to move too much too soon, hence the fainting spell.

"Yeah, but I should be fine if I stay in bed for a while."

"Okay… Just make sure Eche doesn't poison you."

Poison… It's not poison I have to worry about with her. Then again, she'd have no qualms about drugging me so badly I couldn't get out of bed for a few days.

"How'd it go?"

"In the village, you mean?"

"Yeah. I think we got a fair amount of intel, but I want to know how things look from the guild master's seat."

"In a word: Things look *wrong*. There's this creepy blanket of apathy covering the whole village—it's like nobody's scared. If I didn't know a summoning circle was responsible, I'd have run away from this village already."

The summoning circles… I had never wanted to deal with those evil things again.

"And from the capital?" Uliga asked. "Surely you've heard from the crown."

“I did.”

“I take it you didn’t tell them about our little friends?”

I sat up in bed and looked at Uliga. From the sharpness in his eyes, I could tell he was asking me the question not as a friend but as the guild master.

“Heh! Why’d you even ask? You know I can’t talk about it.”

Most people who get involved with summoning circles are placed under heavy surveillance out of fear that the circle’s powers would lure them into mischief. To be honest, anyone who would try to use something so terrifyingly evil was a fool. But there once was an adventurer who was bewitched by a summoning circle into causing great harm to a town, so I didn’t blame the crown for wanting to keep track of such people.

“Fair point… So you can’t get out of the contract, can you?”

“No. Whenever you sign that kind of paper, you get cursed if you break the contract without both parties’ consent.”

I glanced over at the desk by my bed. Uliga picked up one of the pieces of paper, which had Druid’s and Ivy’s signatures on it—as well as mine.

“It was cunning of them to use this paper, though,” Uliga marveled.

It was magic paper. It looked just like the paper people normally used when they signed contracts, but it had an unusual quality to it. It was often used when signing contracts with royalty because it was imbued with a special kind of magic. To be honest, I faltered for a moment when I saw what kind of paper that contract was on. I realized just how bleak the situation was once I knew we had to use *that* kind of paper. But in hindsight, Zinal and his men had made the right call to use it.

“What did the crown say?”

“They gave us more detailed information about the summoning circle as well as about the victims and the plan moving forward.”

“Ah. Did you manage to fool them?”

I looked at Uliga and met his gaze. It looked like he was preoccupied with Druid—or rather, with Ivy.

“Are you curious about the girl?”

“A little. I haven’t spoken with her much yet, but I sense *something* special in her.”

So Uliga had that feeling, too. When I first met her, I sensed something that I couldn’t put my finger on. It was hard to put into words.

“I couldn’t fool them. I told them about our helpers, but that only made them more suspicious. They assumed there were more people I wasn’t telling them about.”

Our current king was very shrewd. Rumor had it that he possessed quite a lot of magic energy, so surely he’d sensed something.

“So what did you do about it?”

“I told him I couldn’t say anything because I’d signed a contract.”

“Didn’t he order you to just break it?”

Even magic paper’s effects could be nullified if the royal family’s inner circle got involved. Then again, there were severe side effects, so this tyrannical method wasn’t used unless there were special circumstances. But we were dealing with a summoning circle this time, meaning the crown would be so desperate for intel that the king would resort to tyranny to get it. In fact, he *did* demand that I name names. I was only able to nip that in the bud by telling him I’d signed a contract on magic paper.

“He did try to do that, but he backed down when I told him it was written on cursed paper.”

He’d sounded quite bitter about it, but nobody liked the idea of being cursed to death.

“Can’t the curse on the contract be broken?” Uliga asked.

I shook my head. “No, not even those in the crown’s employ can do that. And if you stick your nose in where it doesn’t belong, you’ll get cursed, have your memory erased, your magic energy devoured—you might even die. Even if you survive, you’ll be sick or an empty shell for life. Anyway, keeping your nose out of it’s the best choice.”

I'd seen it happen just once and it was simply wild. The cloud of poisonous magic energy spilling out of the cursed paper...the screams of the person it swallowed up... To make matters worse, the poor victim had been acting under orders, so there was no escaping it.

"Is it really that horrible?"

"Er—what?"

"Don't you know, Appas? Your face looks incredibly ghastly."

My face looks ghastly? He could at least say my expression *looks ghastly. Sounds like he's calling me ugly.*

"I've seen the curse take someone's life before—I was just remembering it."

It was a memory that haunted my dreams for the following weeks, after all.

"Oh. Well, do the gentlemen of Zephyr know what will happen to them if they breach this contract?"

"Yeah, I made sure of it. That's why they used the paper—they knew how necessary it was."

I frowned as I thought back to my discussion with Zinal a little while ago. He had such an angelic smile on his face when he handed me the paper and said, *"Surely you know what this is. You aren't going to object, are you?"* What's more, he'd said, *"You honestly think we'd make a contract on normal paper, given the position you used to have? No way in Hell."* He obviously knew the crown had me on retainer. It was over twenty years in the past now—and I'd only actually worked for the crown for three years at the most—but...as it turned out, I was still a mole for the king about the nobles who opposed him.

"You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah... Zinal and his lot are shrewd. They're some scary sons of bitches."

How had they gotten their hands on such classified intelligence? They were truly terrifying. What's more, they had a good enough read on how the king would act that they'd made those contracts, and that was even more terrifying.

I reached for the contract Uliga was holding and took it from him. It had the provision *I will help the undersigned escape this village safely by any means necessary*. The crown was sure to send in people to investigate my collaborators, as well as to dispose of the monsters and neutralize the summoning circle. They did say in their faax that they were sending more summoning circle experts than I'd originally anticipated. The king would never give up so easily; he was probably thinking of sending investigators to get the intel so I wouldn't have to break the contract. Zinal had been several steps ahead of him when he made up this contract. I had a hunch the gentlemen of Zephyr knew a thing or two about summoning circles, but I didn't think they'd told Druid and Ivy about it. Maybe they too were bound by a contract…

No, even if that were true, they were way too defenseless when it came to summoning circles. If they were bound by a contract, they could have at least said more by choosing their words wisely, but I didn't get that impression from them when we talked. Besides, there's something about them I just can't put my finger on. It was like what they let me see was a facade. It's a strange turn of phrase, but it seemed odd that nothing felt odd about them… It's no use. Now I'm just confusing myself.

"By the way, has Nalgath's party returned from the forest with Druid and Ivy yet?"

Hm? Come to think of it, I haven't told him yet. He'll probably get quite a shock when I do. I'm still having a hard time believing it all myself.

"They found a summoning circle drawn on the floor of the sharmy cave, so they went back with Sol to neutralize it."

"What?! *Sol?! Neutralize* a summoning circle???"

Oooh, now that's a great derp-face. Yeah, I suppose that wasn't enough of an explanation. Okay, I guess I'll tell him in more detail. Talking about it with someone else will help me sort out my thoughts, anyway. Then again, no matter how much I tell him it's true, I doubt he'd ever believe a slime could neutralize a summoning circle unless he saw it with his own eyes.

SIDE:
The Guild Master and the Captain

ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

APPAS, CAPTAIN OF THE WATCH, told me about the sharmy cave in detail. Then he told me how Ivy's tamed slime Sol was headed back to neutralize the summoning circle as we spoke.

"Appas…don't tell me you actually believe all that?"

"Druid and Ivy accepted it as if it were nothing out of the ordinary."

What's that supposed to mean?

I tilted my head and raised an eyebrow at him. Appas sighed and said, "Uliga, don't you think that spell damaged your brain a little?"

"Oh, shut up. I'm just confused—you just told me something that shouldn't be possible."

He said a *slime* was going to neutralize a *summoning circle*. How exactly was I supposed to believe such drivel?

"So do you actually think it's true?"

"To be honest, I don't think I can fully believe it unless I see it. But watching Druid and Ivy, I feel like a fool for doubting them—that's how natural they acted about it."

I stared at Appas's gaunt face. I was a little surprised to see him falter. This was a guy who never let anything faze him, and now he was stunned?

"Appas, maybe the summoning circle gave *you* brain damage."

"That's quite the accusation."

"But you know I'm right to make it. How could someone as diabolically clever as *you* be so uncertain?"

I didn't know the guy's history. Supposedly the former captain of the watch picked him up somewhere, but that was clearly a lie. Make no mistake—this guy was sent here by the

crown or someone in their inner circle, but I couldn't care less about any of that. The most important question was this: Would he benefit Hataka or not? From working alongside him, I noticed he could be quite cunning at times, and he never faltered. I couldn't exactly complain about that, since those qualities of his had saved my ass quite a lot. If he was a benefit to Hataka, I didn't care about his past. I also thought we had a good relationship as guild master and captain of the watch. Above all else, nothing good could come from getting involved with the crown.

"What kind of man do you think I am?" he sighed. "Wait, don't answer that. I get the feeling it's nothing good."

Damn. I was so ready to insult him.

"Let's get back on topic. To be honest, I don't know what to believe. One part of me thinks this is all impossible, but another part feels like I can trust Druid and Ivy... You're right, maybe the spell changed me."

"I take it you're being serious?"

"Come on...no need for the death glare. Believe me, I'm surprising even myself right now."

"Okay."

Did this mean that the *something* Appas sensed in Ivy was significant enough to make him a believer? But how could a slime neutralize a summoning circle? If such a slime did exist, some people couldn't keep their mouths shut about it... *Aha, that's why we signed contracts.*

"By the way, did Druid know the contracts were on cursed paper?"

"I didn't ask, but he probably knows. He didn't seem to mind it, though."

Druid was no ordinary man, either. He seemed to put people at a distance... Then there was that sword. I could tell it was something no ordinary adventurer would have, especially that magic stone. It had to be extremely powerful.

"Say, what kind of guy is this Druid?"

“Druid… He’s got to be a weathered adventurer. He never lets his guard down. But at the same time, he’s a loving family man. If somebody told me he was a guild master or captain of the watch, I’d believe them.”

So Druid had Appas’s respect, then, but I still had no idea what kind of person he was. When I first met him, I was freshly freed from the spell and in a daze. All I could remember from that moment was the other people in the room with us—I barely remembered what anyone said. I must have spoken with Druid at some point, but my memory was awfully vague.

“But Uliga, did you see the sword Druid’s carrying? It’s one hell of a thing.” There was a mirthful look on Appas’s face as he talked about Druid’s sword. So he’d also noticed. “I caught a glimpse of the magic stone on it—and I could *not* take my eyes off it.”

“Yeah, it’s quite a beauty,” I agreed.

“Think he’d let me have a look at it?” Appas sounded genuinely anxious about it.

Er, I think this conversation’s getting off track… But that’s right, this is the kind of guy Appas is. Wow, I’ve really missed things like this. It’s been two years. Two years since he fell ill and I lost my mind. And during that time, all the adventurers and watchmen of this village fell under the summoning circle’s spell.

“It’s been so long.”

“Hm? What did you say?”

“I was just thinking that two years is an awfully long time,” I said.

Appas’s smile vanished as he stared at me. “Yes, it is. No matter who or what Ivy and Druid are, they’re our saviors. Even if they turn out to be criminals, that’s a fact that will never change.”

I nodded in agreement. That would certainly never change.

“If they run into trouble, I want to help them out, even if someone from the capital comes for them. If any of my old buddies try to leak intel on them, I’ll do whatever it takes to stop it.”

I stared at Appas. He stared right back at me with a daring smile and said, “I know. I figured you’d picked up on it at some point—how much do you know?”

“Not sure… I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about. All I meant was that I’m here to serve and protect.”

To protect this village and the people who helped save it.

“Bloody liar. You know the royal family and I—”

“No I don’t! What did you say just now?”

I can’t hear youuu, so I can’t get any ideas about it. I didn’t hear anything, okay? I absolutely did not *just hear Appas mention the royal family.*

“Heh! Well, you and I do go back a long way.”

“Never mind that. What’s our next move? We don’t have any time left, do we?”

“Yeah… Nalgath said the gatekeepers were just about too far gone. Think the people who got freed from the spell will be able to do anything tomorrow?”

“They will. I already checked in on them, and I’m sure they’ll be up and about.”

Sol and Sora…the slimes who could give us our lives back, without leaving any negative aftereffects from the summoning circle. *Now I get it… I didn’t think those slimes could neutralize the summoning circle at first, but they freed me from its spell, so they just might be able to do it. No—they can definitely do it.*

“Oh, by the way, Sol gave us some magic stones. Well, technically, Ivy was the one who let us keep them.”

Magic stones? I looked at Appas and saw jet-black magic stones in his hand.

“Are those things *really* magic stones?” *Wait a minute—didn’t I just hear him say something strange? Sol…gave us magic stones?* “What do you mean Sol *gave* us these magic stones?”

“I mean what I said. Sol spat them out of its mouth.”

I just stared at him.

“Oh, and Flame can regenerate spent magic stones. Ivy told me about it.”

I just kept staring.

“You okay, buddy?”

“Somehow, yeah.” I slowly mulled Appas’s words over and over in my brain. “Okay… Wow… Well, Sol *is* a slime who can release people from a summoning circle’s spell. Yeah. I guess it would make sense that it can do something like that…”

I wasn’t sure why, but the more I thought about it, the sillier everything seemed. In fact, I felt it was pointless musing over things beyond my comprehension.

“Argh… In just three days, everything I thought I knew about slimes has been turned upside down.”

“Heh! Just wait, there’s probably more to come.”

Seriously, there probably was—and I dreaded to hear it. But we weren’t getting anywhere.

“Guild Master,” Appas sobered his tone. I felt my spine straighten. “I request five watchmen and five adventurers for a mission.”

Appas’s gaze told me that he knew exactly what his request might mean. To break the first summoning circle’s curse, we might need to use another summoning circle. And the more a person used a summoning circle, the more their mind was consumed by it. In the end, they went mad. I squeezed my eyes shut, then slowly opened them again. When I took my position, I made a vow to carry the weight of everyone’s sins on my back. Those sins would just increase in number now, that was all. A person in my position was not allowed the liberty to falter or be afraid.

“Understood. I’ve already spoken with them, and they’re giving me an answer tomorrow.”

Chapter 423:
Huh?! Finished Already?

NOT FAR AWAY from the sharmy cave, Nalgath stopped walking and looked at Piarre. “The sharmy might be awake now, right?”

“Yeah… Want to check first?”

“Yes, let’s.”

Piarre, who was stationed at the mouth of the cave, gave the signal to hide, so I grabbed Sol and hid behind a big tree. I looked at Ciel and it bounded up to the top of a tree. Sol started jiggling restlessly in my arms, so I set it by my feet.

“Stay out of sight, okay?” I said.

Sol looked up at me and jiggled. I gave its head a pat and turned my attention back to the cave. It didn’t look like anything had changed. The only problem was that I couldn’t see inside, so we really would need to go in just to make sure.

“We’re just going to take a look. Stand by,” Nalgath told my father as he and Juggy ventured into the cave. I kept my eyes on the surrounding trees as I watched them go inside. Nothing was different in the forest.

“Do you think they’ve been asleep this whole time?”

I thought back to the sharmy. The way they wrapped their four limbs around themselves and snuggled against the wall in tight little balls as they slept made it look like they were shielding themselves from something. I’d assumed that was the way they’d always slept, but now that I knew they were trapped under the summoning circle’s spell, I felt a heavy pain in my heart.

“I’m not sure. If they’re still asleep, I’d love to free them from the spell before they wake up.”

“Me, too.”

My father and I talked in hushed voices as we carefully sneaked peeks at the cave from behind our trees. Nalgath and Juggy had just reached the mouth of the cave and were stepping

inside. As I stood and waited in silence, I started to hear the trickle of the river.

"Huh?"

I closed my eyes and strained my ears. The sound of the river...the wind rustling through the trees...I could hear those sounds but not a single noise made by any animal. We were in the forest, yet I couldn't hear any animals.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't believe we're in the forest, but we don't hear a single animal." My father nodded. "So you noticed?" I asked.

"A little earlier, yeah. I think something's wrong with the entire forest." There was a grim look on my father's face which filled me with dread.

"Look, they're back."

Piarre's voice jolted my attention back to the mouth of the cave, just in time to see Juggy and Nalgath coming out of it.

"The sharmy were asleep and completely motionless. We didn't sense any other animal or monster auras, either, so we should be good to go. Ivy, are you ready?"

"Yes." I picked up Sol, and it jiggled in my arms. "Sol, do your thing."

"Pefu!" Sol quietly chirped back in reply.

Everyone formed a protective shield around me and Sol as we slowly made our way toward the cave. As I set Sol down at the mouth of the cave, Ciel gracefully jumped down from somewhere and landed by my side. It made me flinch a little. Ciel was so stealthy that it really was bad for my heart.

"Ivy?"

"Yes?"

Arly approached me and looked at Sol. "Do you know what Sol is going to do?"

"Um...have dinner?"

"Uhh...like, *how*?"

Oh, I understand! "With trash, Sol sucks out the magic energy and chomps it down," I explained.

Piarre joined Arly in turning around and staring at Sol. “It… chomps magic energy down?”

“Yes, sir. Sol’s tentacles float in the air, grab hold of the magic energy, and carry it to its mouth. Then it chomps it down.”

“Sol’s *tentacles*?”

Huh? Haven’t they ever seen Sol’s tentacles? Oh, right, I don’t think they have.

“Yeah, Sol has tentacles it can move, kind of like hands. They’re pretty cute, actually.”

“Er, no, they’re not,” my dad quietly protested.

Not cute? Well, at least I think they are.

“What’s wrong, sir?”

Piarre had walked over to me, picked up Sol, and started inspecting it from many different angles. “Er, sorry… I was just wondering if Sol actually was a slime, but turns out it is.”

“Of course Sol’s a slime! Flame gave birth to it…I think.”

After Sol was born, all signs of the black stain that used to be on Flame’s body had disappeared completely, so I was sure Flame had given birth to Sol. And since Sol came from a slime, surely it was also a slime. I knew I had to be right.

I heard a loud sigh.

“Is something wrong, Mr. Arly?”

“Nope, everything’s okay. Anyway, Sol…time to shine.”

“Pefu!”

Sol bounced toward the cave. I carefully followed, my heart racing. If the sharmy woke up, they might attack Sol. If that happened, I was supposed to grab my slime and run away.

“They really have stayed asleep, haven’t they…?” my father said.

I looked up at the sharmy, who did indeed look exactly the same as before. I kept following Sol deeper into the cave. When we got to a darker part of the cave, Sol stopped and extended its tentacles.

“Wow, those are tentacles all right. Amazing…”

They were indeed amazing…but they were extra-long. Much longer than I'd ever seen them. Sol's tentacles moved back and forth over the sea of trash. Without touching any of it, the slime was moving the layer of air above the garbage left and right. After repeating the motion over and over, the tentacles suddenly froze. Everyone's eyes shot to Sol, but the slime didn't seem to mind. It bounced up high and perched on top of the sea of trash. I was afraid this would activate the summoning circle, but I didn't stop Sol.

"Pefu!… Pefu!… *Pehhh*-fu!"

Its deflated voice boomed through the cave. I stole a cautious glance at the sharmy, but they showed no signs of waking. I sighed in relief and looked at Sol again. When it approached the peak of the trash, the ground flashed with a black light.

"Agh!" Juggy jumped back from the edge of the trash pile and hugged the wall.

"Don't touch it! You'll lose your memory," my father barked.

Nalgath's men pressed their bodies against the wall to avoid touching the black light.

"*Pehhh*-fu!"

When they heard Sol's voice—louder than it normally was—their eyes darted from the cave floor up toward Sol.

"Ah!" Before my very eyes, Sol's body was expanding to cover the entire ocean of trash. It reminded me of the way Sora had expanded beyond imagination when it swallowed Ciel that one time. But there was just so much trash…and from the size of the glowing black light, I could tell the summoning circle was quite large, too.

"Think Sol will be okay?" I asked.

"It doesn't look like we need to worry about it," my dad answered.

He was right: I could hear the mirth in Sol's voice and feel its excitement. *I guess there was no need to worry about Sol after all.*

“Slimes really can stretch so big you’d never know their original size,” Arly murmured as he gazed at the scene in awe.

“Maybe it’s because Sol’s special?” Nalgath asked.

“Because Sol’s rare?” Piarre added simultaneously.

I cautiously peeled my back away from the wall to have a look at the two men. Just like Arly, they were in complete awe at the expanding slime before them.

“Would you look at that—it swallowed up the whole ocean of trash,” Juggy said.

I looked at Sol, and sure enough, it had covered the entire pile. It had stretched even bigger than Sora.

“Wait a minute, I just realized the summoning circle’s light is gone,” Nalgath said, looking at the ground.

The black light that had been there before was now missing. Had Sol neutralized the summoning circle in such a short period of time?

“I think it’s neutralized? Look, the circle’s light changed color.”

I looked where my father was pointing and saw that the bits of summoning circle visible beneath the trash had indeed changed. The circle had been drawn with black lines before, but now it was white.

“Pefu!”

I frantically looked for Sol and found the slime perched atop the pile of trash, round as a balloon. *Oh, good. You don’t look much different…you’re just rounder.*

“*Breh*-pu!”

I guess you did eat too much. Don’t tell me you’ve already finished your dinner?

Chapter 424:
We Must Be Patient!

"ER, IS SOL FINISHED...eating?" Nalgath's cautious voice echoed through the cave. It had all happened so quickly that everyone just stared, frozen in place, at Sol.

"Probably. Wow... Now I feel silly spending all that time worrying," my father said.

Nalgath nodded with a loud exhale. On our way to the cave, we had gone over contingency plans in case something went wrong, which was probably what my father was referring to.

"It was all over in the blink of an eye... I don't think any of us saw that coming." Piarre sat on a large magic item beside him and glanced around the cave. The interior didn't look much different from before, but something had changed.

"I can feel a breeze now," I said.

Somebody murmured an agreement. A while after the black light of the summoning circle changed to white, a breeze had started to flow through the cave. It startled us at first, but we quickly realized it was strange that it hadn't been there earlier.



“I feel deflated…” Nalgath crouched down where he stood, and Juggy followed suit. Arly rested his back against the cave wall, and my father and I sat on the ground.

“No wonder—we were ready to do whatever it took to get the job done,” Piarre said. The other members of Cobalt smiled and nodded.

“Kewww! Kewww!” A loud chorus of voices echoed through the cave. Nalgath and his men jumped to their feet, weapons in hand. My father drew his sword from its sheath and whisked me protectively behind him.

“Sounds like the sharmy are awake.” Juggy looked up and readied his bow. I nervously followed his gaze upward, and several pairs of sharmy eyes stared back down at me. I couldn’t tell how many there were, but quite a lot of sharmy were staring menacingly down at us.

“Kewww! Kewww!”

“Kewww! Kewww!”

“Kewww! Kewww!”

“Kewww! Kewww!”

The sharmy slowly began to move, and the air felt tenser and tenser. I carefully picked up Sol, who had wandered by my feet, and cast my gaze toward the mouth of the cave. I needed to get out of the way.

Mee-YAAA! Ciel’s intimidating cry bounced off the cave walls. The sharmy jumped at the sound of it, then retreated in the opposite direction of where they’d been screaming. As I watched them retreat, the fear that had frozen my muscles slowly melted away. That was just too scary for me. Ciel’s angry cry made me tremble even harder.

“Ciel came to our rescue.” My father extended a hand to the adandara, who immediately bounded over to us. We’d instructed it to wait outside the cave so it wouldn’t excite the sharmy, but it had probably rushed to our aid when it heard the sharmy screaming.

“Thanks, Ciel. You really saved our hides!”

Mrrrow.

A look deeper into the cave revealed that the sharmy were completely frozen with fear, keeping a close eye on us all. I started to feel a little sorry for them.

“What should we do about them, sir?” I asked Nalgath.

He looked at the sharmy. “They won’t attack us as long as Ciel is here. I’d love to look around this cave, but I’m not sure if that’s the best idea.”

“First, let’s all go outside,” my father said. “We don’t want to excite the sharmy.”

Nalgath seconded the motion, so we all made our way to the cave entrance, mindful of the sharmy all the while. Since Ciel turned around and growled at them as we went, we managed to escape the cave without being attacked.

After we’d arrived at a spot where we could just barely see the mouth of the cave, my father stopped in his tracks. “We should be safe, now that we’re this far out. The sharmy are still nervous about Ciel.”

The members of Cobalt each sat down, keeping an eye on the cave as they rested their bodies.

“That jolt of terror right after the moment of relief sure took it right out of me…” Arly sighed.

Piarre smiled sheepishly. “We were in peril—we should never have let ourselves feel relieved in the first place.” Arly and Nalgath both chuckled nervously in reply.

“So what’s the next move?” my father asked. “Are we going back to investigate the cave?”

Nalgath thought for a moment before answering, “I think we’d better give the sharmy some time to calm down after all that excitement. Also… Um, never mind. It’s nothing.”

When I thought back to how worked up the sharmy had been, I agreed we should give them some time.

“Something on your mind, Nalgath?”

“Er, no, it’s okay. Why don’t we take a minute to catch our breaths and then head back to the village?” Nalgath looked at the cave again, so I followed his gaze. The sharmy were showing

no signs of emerging, and from the distance at which we sat, I sensed we weren't in any danger.

"Good idea. Let's head back," my father replied, standing up and offering me his hand. I grabbed it to stand and saw Ciel stretching out its back beside me. Noticing my gaze, Ciel butted its head right at me. I gave it some gentle pats, and Ciel closed its eyes and purred contentedly. Seeing the creature like this made it hard to believe this was the same being that had charged into the cave with murder in its eyes. *I don't think I'll ever tell Ciel I was petrified with fear just then. I'll keep it to myself.*

"I'm sorry, Ciel… And thanks."

Mew?

The innocent curiosity in the adandara's eyes made me laugh. I really did prefer this side of it.

"Thanks. Let's head back."

Mrrrow.

When we arrived at the captain's house, we found him in bed with Eche yelling at him. When we asked why, it turned out his fever had come back. The guild master sat in a chair near the bed, shaking his head at their argument. Sometimes, the captain would shoot the guild master a pleading glance, but he would only shrug his shoulders in reply. As far as I could tell, there was no animosity between the two. Did that mean the rumor that they were quarreling was a lie? Who would have started such a rumor?

The captain sighed in relief and flopped onto the bed. "That was so scary! I barely escaped her attempt to poison me." He turned to the guild master. "Sorry you had to see that."

"Me, too." The guild master nodded.

"Anyway, good to see you're all back. It must've been hell out there, eh?" the captain asked.

Nalgath and his men got peculiar looks on their faces, and the captain and guild master exchanged a glance. "Ahh, don't worry, everyone fails a mission now and then. We'll think of some other solution."

Huh? Failed mission? I cocked my head quizzically at the guild master, which made him and the captain exchange another confused glance.

"Don't worry, the summoning circle is neutralized and our problem is solved," my father said. "It turned out to be a lot easier than we thought. In fact, it only took *five minutes* to completely neutralize it."

"What?!" both leaders gasped.

"*Five* minutes?! How is that possible? Wait, you did come back awfully quick, didn't you...?" the guild master stammered, looking at the clock.

"Were you really able to neutralize the summoning circle that fast?" the captain asked. Nalgath answered that we had, and the guild master and captain both dropped their jaws. "Wow... All right, Cobalt, I have an order for all of you. Don't breathe a word of anything that happened today, not even among allies."

The members of Cobalt all gasped at the captain's order, and I was just as startled as the rest of them—so startled that I cast a suspicious glare at the captain.

"We still don't really know what type of summoning circle it was, but what you all did today was clearly quite extraordinary. I feel strongly in my bones that we need to keep not only Sol but Ivy a secret as well. Therefore, I forbid you to speak of this, even among allies. No matter how careful you are, the secret always has a chance of leaking out if you let it leave your mouth. That's an order! Understood?"

The men's eyes shot open at the captain's order. Then they immediately gave their word.

Chapter 425:
The Importance of Trust

"DRUID, IVY, I hear you're staying at the plaza?" the captain asked.

"Yeah. Why do you ask?" my dad replied.

The captain scratched his chin for a little while before looking at the guild master, who nodded in reply.

"We still haven't the faintest clue who our mastermind is. It's dangerous to stay in the plaza—wanna stay at my place?" the guild master offered. "It's on guild master land, so it's about as big as this house. And I live on my own, so you wouldn't be imposing at all. What do you say?"

I did think it would be dangerous for us to stay in the plaza when we still didn't know who the mastermind was. And since the adventurers and watchmen near the plaza were all under the summoning circle's spell, there was no guarantee any of them would come to our aid. The mastermind could even be among them, for all we knew.

"The news about the captain waking up will likely reach everyone's ears by tomorrow, and the enemy will know we're on the case," my father said.

The captain and guild master nodded. "They've probably *already* caught on to us—there might be spies stationed around this very house."

I suddenly realized I hadn't even given that a passing thought, and I'd gone in and out of this house without bothering to hide. I hoped everything would be okay.

"Damn, that was careless of us," my father sighed gloomily, coming to the same realization.

"We'll be fine, Dad. At least I hope we will be..."

Even though I hadn't been on guard for spies, the tenseness of the situation had been leading me to search for auras all this time. I'd never sensed any aura near the captain's

house that felt unusual, although I wouldn't have noticed it whenever the elite adventurers were standing guard.

"So you have no leads at all on the mastermind?" my father asked the captain, who sighed loudly in reply. The guild master shook his head no.

"I can't say we've investigated *every* possibility in just one day, but nothing has struck us as especially noteworthy so far," the guild master answered, tiredness coloring his voice. His complexion looked a bit dull as well.

"So we're going back to the sharmy cave tomorrow to investigate. Anything we should keep an eye out for?" When Nalgath asked that question, Ciel, who had been sleeping in the bag at the foot of the captain's bed, jolted to its feet and bounded over to Nalgath. "Agh!" Nalgath fumbled to catch the creature, but it bounced off his chest instead. "Ciel! What was that for?" Nalgath clutched his chest, shaken by the sudden attack. The captain and guild master looked on with tense expressions.

Mrrrow!

Everyone's eyes darted over to Ciel, who seemed angry for some reason. I looked on in surprise. *Did something bother it? We were just talking about the plan for tomorrow and... Aha!*

"Ciel, do you want to go to the sharmy cave with them?"

Mrrrow!

I was right.

"What time are you going tomorrow, sir?" I asked. But they gave me uncomfortable looks in reply. "Can't we come along?" *It's not like we're going on a picnic. Maybe we're not allowed...*

"Oh, no, it would be incredibly helpful for Ciel to join us so we can make sure the sharmy don't get hurt unnecessarily. But are you sure, Ivy? Between today and the last few days, you've really gone out of your way to help us..."

He must have meant that the sharmy wouldn't go on the offensive with Ciel intimidating them, and Nalgath's party wouldn't have to kill them. I hadn't thought that far into it, but yes, I would be devastated if the sharmy had to be killed—they

were victims, too. But I didn't like this "gone out of your way" wording... They couldn't have been more wrong!

"Believe me, gentlemen, I haven't gone out of my way to help—I just saw there was something I could do, so I did it. And it was really my creatures making that call, anyway."

"But any help that monsters give is credited to their tamer, because without their command—come to think of it, I've never seen you give them a command..." The captain trailed off, looking between me and Ciel with puzzlement.

"That's because I never have given them a command. I do ask a lot of things of them, though."

"*Ask* them, you say?" The guild master echoed the captain's puzzlement as he looked over at my slimes, sleeping in the captain's bed. Noticing his gaze, Sora woke up and looked at me.

"Yes, sir. Sometimes they do what I ask, and sometimes they don't." I looked at Sora and added, "Isn't that right?" It gave a big vertical stretch in reply. *Er...what was that supposed to mean? Sometimes these guys give me the strangest reactions—I still can't figure all of them out. I feel like Sora was just teasing me right now, though.*

"Sometimes your monsters don't comply... Wow, so they really are requests, then." The captain looked amused. My father and I gave him a questioning look, and Nalgath and his party looked equally confused. "I was just thinking, it turns out Marsha was right," he explained.

Marsha... I've heard that name many times in Hataka, but I can't remember who it is. Hmm...

"Marsha was a tamer in this village. She passed away a few years ago, but her grandkid is a tamer now."

Oh, a tamer! Yes, I think that name came up in some of the village gossip. Okay, so she was a tamer.

"And what did this Marsha have to say?"

"She always said it was important for tamers and monsters to open their hearts to each other. I was still a kid when I heard her say that, so it didn't make sense to me at the time...but now I understand what she meant." The captain smiled softly,

reminiscing over bygone days. It sounded like he had some good memories from his childhood.

“Speaking of Granny Marsha, she did have an amusing theory,” the guild master said with a playful smile. “That granny said monsters would help you out even without a tamer-monster covenant as long as you had a trusting relationship with them.”

“Right, she did say… Wait a minute.” The captain stopped midsentence, his eyes darting to his feet where the slimes were asleep. He was probably looking at Sol specifically.

“I think Marsha the tamer was absolutely right, sir. I haven’t tamed Sol, but it still helps me out.”

“What?!” The guild master looked shocked, but Nalgath’s party nodded their heads in understanding. I gave Nalgath a questioning look, and he answered, “We noticed Sol doesn’t have a taming symbol.” That was right: If you just looked at my creatures, the other ones obviously had taming symbols while Sol didn’t.

“Does it really not have a taming symbol?” Apparently, the guild master had never checked.

The captain rolled his eyes at the guild master. “It’s standard practice to look first thing. Why didn’t you?”

“Hey, I just woke up from an enchantment—it took everything I had just to keep myself from dying of shock! Then I had way too many things on my plate and… Okay, so it turns out that old lady was right after all.” The guild master stole a gentle glance at Sol, just as the slime was waking up. It stared back at the guild master, who was seated quite close by. “Wow, you’re right. No taming symbol.” Sol squirmed a little in discomfort from his prying eyes.

“C’mon, stop staring.”

“Ack—sorry! It’s just that, the more I watch these slimes, the more amazing I realize they are.”

Every single person in the room nodded earnestly in agreement.

“By the way, how’s Marsha’s grandkid?” the captain asked.

“What do you mean?” the guild master asked back.

“How skilled are they? Marsha taught them, right?”

“Hmm… Wait a minute. Huh?” The guild master frowned hard. He fell deep into thought, then shook his head. “I can’t remember. Why? It’s Marsha’s grandkid, right? Hm?” The guild master looked at Nalgath’s party, but they shook their head back at him, equally clueless.

“I think we’re all missing that part of our memory. And here I was feeling reassured because I could remember the names of everyone I worked with…”

It must have been an aftereffect of the summoning circle’s spell. I wonder if there’s a trigger that could bring their memories back?

“Can you remember this tamer’s name, sir?” I asked.

“Their name? Um… No, I can’t. For some reason, ‘Marsha’s grandkid’ is the only name I can’t remember.”

And the guild master wasn’t the only one. Nobody in Cobalt could remember the name, either. I looked at the captain, and he shook his head at me, too.

Chapter 426:
It’s Just Too Much…

EVERYONE HUNG THEIR HEADS: None of them could remember the name of Marsha’s grandchild.

“What do they look like?” the captain asked the guild master and the others, but they all just shook their heads. My father and I wouldn’t have known in the first place, so all we could do was look on in silence. I did find it odd, though, that nobody in the room could remember the person’s name or face.

“I think we’re on to something here,” my father said.

“I think so, too. It’s strange, right?”

Did somebody in this village want everyone to forget about Marsha’s grandchild? Or was the grandchild themselves directly involved with the summoning circle?

“Be careful, Uliga,” the captain told the guild master. “Our mastermind is sure to find out tomorrow that some of us have broken the enchantment. If Marsha’s grandchild is working with them, they might come after us.”

The guild master nodded. “I know. I’ll be careful, but I can’t stop the investigation or we’ll never get anywhere. I’ll ease off on solo work for now, but I’ll make sure somebody from Zinal’s party is always with me.”

“Good. Please do,” the captain said with a relieved smile.

“So, Druid and Ivy, what are your plans for dinner? I always go to food stalls, since I live on my own.”

Dinner, huh… I wonder what we should eat. Wait a minute, the guild master lives on his own? But I thought he was married. Yeah…I know I’m not wrong. I heard he has a wife and the two are really close.

“Mr. Guild Master, what about your wife?”

“Oh, that’s right!” My question seemed to jog my father’s memory, too.

“Huh?! My wife?” The guild master looked baffled by my question.

“Oh, you remarried? That’s news to me.”

What? Remarried?

“Ivy…what are you talking about? I was married once, but she got sick and passed away fifteen years ago now. I’ve been on my own ever since.”

“Really?” my father asked, a stern look in his eyes.

“As far as I know, this guy’s wife died fifteen years ago. He’s been a widower ever since,” the captain said.

The guild master gave him a nod, then demanded, “Where did you hear I was married?”

“Mr. Zinal told us… When they were talking about how you started acting odd two years ago, I asked if you were having money troubles or if you’d lost someone special to you. And that was when they said you had a wife.”

How was any of this possible?

“Um, sir, are you sure you aren’t married?” Nalgath cautiously asked the guild master. His voice was clouded with worry. I looked over at Nalgath and saw he was quite pale for some reason.

“Is something wrong?” the captain asked.

Nalgath and his party looked at each other and nodded. “I think this was about two and a half years ago…but you introduced us to a woman, Guild Master, and told us she was your wife,” Nalgath said.

“I was there, too,” Arly added. “Actually, this was at the adventurer guild, so most of the adventurers were around.”

The guild master and captain froze. Nalgath and his men also looked deeply troubled as they watched the guild master’s reactions.

“Sorry…but are you sure? Did I really introduce someone to you?”

“Yes, sir. We know we’re not mistaken,” Piarre confirmed with a nod.

“How is any of this possible…?” The guild master clutched his head in his hands.

“What was she like?” my father asked.

Nalgath pondered it for a moment while the guild master looked up and stared hard at him. “She had dark blue hair, shoulder length. She was about thirty years old—I remember being surprised at how young she was. She seemed very sweet. Two years ago, I’d often see the two of you together at the guild.”

“Do you know where Zinal and his party are?” my father asked. “We should hear their side of the story, too.”

Arly and Juggy promptly left to go find them.

“Uliga, you went back home after you were freed from the spell, didn’t you?”

“I did…” the guild master answered the captain’s question listlessly. All the color had drained from his face; the revelation really seemed to have hit him hard.

“Did you notice anything different in your house? Like, were there any women’s things there?”

“No, and I’m sure of that.”

“Okay… So that means the woman you introduced as your wife didn’t live with you.”

“My angel…she was my only wife. I would never take another!” The guild master’s voice was bitter with tears as he snapped at the captain.

“I know that. But whether you remember it or not, the fact remains that you introduced somebody to us as your wife. Everything felt normal at home, though, didn’t it?”

“Yes… Yes, it did. I’m glad she wasn’t there.” The guild master sounded a little relieved, but the muscles in his face were still tense. It was a little scary.

“But who could it be?” The captain tilted his head. “A sweet woman in her thirties with shoulder-length dark blue hair? A few people come to mind, but they’re all married.”

“This is just evil. Who would do such a thing?” the guild master growled.

The captain gave his shoulder a gentle pat.

“Okay, what’s the problem?” Zinal and his men finally walked into the room. “Arly told us to come here—did something happen?”

“Zinal, there’s just something we need to check, that okay?” my father asked him, offering the trio some seats.

“Sure. What do you need to know?” Zinal sat in a chair facing my father.

“Remember how you said the guild master had a wife?”

“Yeah, I think they got married a couple of years ago. There was a woman with him when I stopped by the village to visit, and he introduced her as his wife. What about it?”

So the guild master was indeed the one who had introduced her. When my father explained to Zephyr that he had no memory of such a thing, their jaws dropped.

“Wait… Are you sure? But you introduced us yourself, Guild Master, I know it.”

“I’m sorry…but I don’t remember.”

Zinal flinched a little when he noticed the strain in the guild master’s eyes and voice. The more we talked about it, the paler the guild master became. He needed some time to process everything. If we tried to cram his brain with any more information, it would only overwhelm him.

“Excuse me, but could we stop here for the day?” I asked. “I think we’re pushing too much information onto him at once.”

“Yeah, he needs to take a break for a while,” my father echoed.

The guild master was about to say something, but then he shook his head and softly said, “You’re right.” He knew he needed some time to calm down, too.

“Sorry, Zinal, I know it was a hassle coming all the way out here.” My father stood up and started getting ready to leave.

“Oh, it’s all right. I’ll ask my fellow adventurers for more details. So, what’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“We’re looking into the sharmy cave tomorrow morning, so we should meet back up here around noon. That sound good to you, Captain?”

“Sure. Let’s spend the morning investigating what we can—except you, Uliga. You stay put. You’re not doing so well right now. Come straight here tomorrow morning after you wake up.”

“I’m fine,” the guild master insisted.

“No, you’re not!” the captain hissed. “You come right over here, Uliga. I can’t have you going nuts on my watch.”

The guild master glared at the captain, and the captain glared right back…until the guild master finally let out a loud sigh. “Fine. Sorry, but I need a little…”

“I understand. Sorry, Druid, but I’ll need you to make sure this guy comes straight to my house tomorrow morning.”

“Aye-aye, sir. Ivy, are you ready to head out?”

I put my creatures in their bag and double-checked to make sure I had everything. I nodded that I was good to go, and my father gave the guild master’s shoulder a pat. “We’ll be coming by your place in a bit, so be sure to get us some dinner from the food stalls. Get plenty of food—Ivy’s got quite the appetite. Three portions won’t be enough, but try not to get too much; we don’t want leftovers.”

“Huh?! Oh, right, dinner… Okay.”

“Also, Ivy loves dessert, so don’t skimp on that.”

I was a bit startled by my father’s behavior. Was that really the way you should talk to somebody who’d just received a shock? As I stood there, fidgeting awkwardly, I noticed Zinal laughing softly. Our eyes met, and he laughed even harder.

“The mind’s distracted when it has tasks to attend to. To the guild master, Ivy, you’re a savior.”

The word “savior” embarrassed me a little, but the guild master himself had used the same word, so I knew Zinal was just reminding him of that.

“And Ivy’s palate is quite refined—she won’t accept anything less than *delicious* for dinner.”

Dad, was it really necessary to say that last part?

Chapter 427:
The Difference

WE HAD DINNER at the guild master's house after we'd gathered our things from the plaza. When we saw the spread on the table, we had to try hard not to laugh.

"Come on, I told you to be careful not to buy too much…" The multicourse meal meant for far more than three people prompted my father to shoot the guild master a disappointed look. As I gawked at the spread, I got permission from the guild master to let my creatures out of the bag.

"Sorry, before I knew it, I'd bought way too much food," the guild master chuckled. It was good to see that he was much calmer now than he'd been at the captain's house. His mind was still racing with theories about his "wife," but at least he'd regained some of his composure. My creatures were bouncing around the room, excited by how new everything was to them.

"*Guys!* Keep it quiet."

"It's okay, Ivy, let them have their fun," the guild master said. I bowed in thanks.

"Take it easy, kids," my father said to the slimes. "Now, let's eat some dinner."

I noticed that my father's manner of speech had been swinging back and forth between polite and casual, first at the captain's house and now here. I wondered if he realized he was doing it.

"Why did you buy five of the same thing, sir?" he asked.

"They're all from different food stalls."

Whoa, that's some frown you've got there, Dad!

"C'mon, Dad, let's eat! I'm starving."

"All right. What do you want to eat first, Ivy?" With a soft sigh, my father showed me each dish on the table one by one. Everything looked delicious.

"I'll have this." I picked a stir-fry of meat and vegetables. It was supposed to be good served on bread, which the guild

master had also bought. “Thanks for dinner, Mr. Guild Master.”

My father and the guild master each began to eat what they’d chosen. They shared some of their food with me, and everything was so good. Once we’d finished our dinner, we chose our desserts from the huge pile of pastries.

“Now this is luxury,” I said.

“Sure is.”

“I’ll put all the leftovers in a magic box for you—eat them whenever you want,” the guild master said as he started to put the remaining food away. I really was grateful for time-stopping magic.

“Are you okay?” my father asked with concern as we were leisurely eating our dessert. “You must be exhausted from everything that’s been going on today.”

“I’ll be okay,” I answered. “But you’re right, way too many things happened today.”

“Right… Hey, Ivy, what do you think of my house?” the guild master asked.

I looked around the room. When we were setting our things down in the spare room, I’d noticed that the house seemed rather empty. And everywhere I looked, I saw nothing that seemed feminine.

“It looks like a typical bachelor house, sir, though it’s kind of big for one person.”

“I see…” The guild master took a bite of pastry and quickly followed it up with a sip of tea. Maybe he wasn’t a big fan of sweets, but then why had he bought so many?

“Do you think this is too sweet?” the guild master asked.

My father took a bite and shook his head. I took another bite and decided it most definitely was not too sweet.

“I think it’s well balanced, sir,” I answered.

“Er—really?” The guild master gave us a funny look. I curiously took another bite of pastry, and a tangy sweetness filled my mouth.

“Ivy, wanna go over what we found out today?” my father suggested.

I sat up straight and nodded.

“Okay, the first thing we learned about was the summoning circle in the sharmy cave. After that, we learned that nobody remembers the name or face of the tamer’s grandchild. Then there’s your wife, Guild Master. I’m not missing anything, am I?” my father said, looking at me and the guild master.

“No, that’s everything,” I said. “The problem of the summoning circle in the sharmy cave is basically solved, right?”

“Yeah, it will be by tomorrow morning, after they conduct their final investigation.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

My creatures, finished with their tour of the house, came bouncing back onto our respective laps. Sora and Sol were on my lap, Flame was on my father’s, and Ciel was on the guild master’s.

“Sorry about that, sir...” I apologized.

But the guild master looked pleased. “Oh, it’s not a problem at all. Just think, this cute little slime is really an adandara...”

That’s right, the guild master hasn’t seen Ciel’s true form yet. I’ll have to show him sometime.

“Mind if we get back on topic?” my father asked. The guild master and I nodded. “Don’t you think we should’ve asked Melisa and Eche about this grandchild? They were never under the spell, right?”

The look on the guild master’s face said *Oh, damn.*

“You’re right,” I said. “I guess I forgot in all the confusion.”

“Me, too,” my father chuckled softly. It really was important to be calm whenever you had to think through things.

“Aren’t Ms. Melisa and Ms. Eche former adventurers?” I asked.

“Yes, they both have the healing skill, so they were quite the heroes back in the day. Well, then again, one of them was a

hero *behind* the scenes."

He must be talking about Eche.

"Something on your mind?" the guild master asked.

"When I was helping them out, I asked them where they got their medicinal herbs, and they said they bought them from the merchant guild. I just thought it was strange that they weren't under the spell since we assume there's a summoning circle at the guild."

"You know, you have a point there. Eche uses many special medicinal herbs which she can't buy in large quantities. I heard the herbs she used to stabilize the captain were particularly valuable, so she must have gone to the merchant guild often to restock..."

From the way the guild master is talking, it sounds like there can't be a summoning circle at the merchant guild. You know, it was wrong of us to assume there was a circle at either guild in the first place. It just seemed like if somebody wanted to brainwash all the adventurers and watchmen in Hataka, targeting the guilds would be the most effective way to do it.

"If only we knew where the summoning circle was, I'm sure we'd start to see traces of our mastermind's identity." The guild master tapped his fingers on the table. I stared hard at his fingers—this was the first time I'd seen him do it.

"Hm? Oh, sorry, I've had this habit since I was a kid." The guild master, noticing my staring, took his hand off the table.

"It's okay, sir, don't worry about it."

If this was a habit of his, it was odd that I hadn't seen it before. He hadn't tapped his fingers at the captain's house, had he?

"It's hard to break a habit, you know," the guild master said. My father nodded eagerly in agreement. "My wife reminded me about it all the time, but I still couldn't stop. *'My ears hurt!'* she'd yell at me." The guild master smiled fondly.

That's right, the guild master started acting strangely because of the summoning circle's spell. According to Zinal and his men, it was like "a different person took over his body." Did he still remember his late wife when he was under the spell? Wait, probably

not… He thought some other woman was his wife then, so he almost certainly forgot.

"Huh?"

I just thought of something…

"What's up?"

"Nothing, there's just something on the tip of my tongue…"

What was it again? While the guild master lost his mind… No, it wasn't that. It was when Zinal and his men said it was like "a different person took over his body…" Ah! Why was the guild master the only one whose personality change was a dead giveaway? All the other people under the spell weren't obviously different, to the extent that you could tell from a brief conversation, like he was. Was it because of his position of power? And then they brought on more gatekeepers when there started to be trouble in the forest. That's right—they didn't act like they felt anything was wrong. Was it because they were under the spell for a very long time?

Was that our lead? The gatekeepers' behavior over the past few days had become noticeably odd. Does that mean the guild master had been brainwashed a little too early? Was there something about him that was different from the other villagers?

"Ivy?"

"The captain's the same way!"

"Huh?!"

That's it! The captain's situation is different from everyone else's, too. The mastermind could've just put him under the spell—so why did they poison him instead? The captain and the guild master… What about those two men is different from everyone else?

"Hm?" Sensing something, I looked up. The worried eyes of my father and the guild master stared back at me. *Oops, looks like I was lost in a sea of thoughts again!*

Chapter 428:
It’s Just One Problem After Another…

“WHAT’S ON YOUR MIND?” my father asked, giving my head a pat. His eyes were a little tense with solemnity. I wasn’t sure if I should tell him what I was thinking, since I didn’t quite understand it yet myself, but I knew my father and the guild master might help guide me to some answers.

I asked, “Do you remember what Mr. Zinal said?” My father gave me a curious look. “About the guild master, I mean.”

“About me?”

“He said you were acting strange. His exact words were: ‘*It was like a different person took over his body*.’”

“Ah, right… He did say that,” my father nodded, remembering. The guild master sitting before me looked rather pitiful.

“If people noticed something wrong with the guild master, he must have been acting strangely, right? I was just wondering why he did that if he was under the spell. Wait a minute—why were the gentlemen of Zephyr able to sense something was off in the first place?”

“Hm?” both men asked.

Weren’t Zinal and his men also under the spell at that point? So how could they even notice something was wrong? Maybe they hadn’t been placed under the spell yet? Is that even possible? They were investigating the anomaly at the time, after all… No, no, they must have been under the spell then. Otherwise, they would have noticed the adventurers were behaving strangely.

“What is it?”

“I was just wondering how Mr. Zinal and his party could have noticed that something was wrong in this village even though they were under the spell.”

“You know, that’s a good question. If they were under the spell, they should have been just as oblivious to it as everyone else.”

“Then I thought of one other thing: Remember how Mr. Nalgath and his party said they told the captain a year and a half ago that the guild master was acting strangely? Now, how could they have noticed this when nobody else did? Unless other people *did* notice and just didn’t say anything?”

The two men pondered in silence.

“Another strange thing I noticed was that somebody tried to poison the captain. Everyone else was placed under the spell, so why was only the captain poisoned? Was the captain’s case separate from everyone else?”

“No, I doubt that. Whoever tried to kill Appas must have done it because they wanted his position,” the guild master said. It did make sense.

“But isn’t that still a little strange, then? Why didn’t they finish the job?”

“I’d wager it’s because Melisa caught on to them.”

If that was so, then Melisa and Eche had saved the captain’s life.

“But the mastermind could’ve easily put Melisa and Eche under the spell, too. All the other adventurers and watchmen in the village were.”

“Yeah… Fair point. Then maybe the mastermind had some other motive…but I can’t think of what it might be.”

My father and the guild master fell into thought. *Arrrgh, it’s just one problem after another. I feel like we just keep getting further and further away from the answer. Okay, Ivy, calm down. Let’s see… What’s the biggest question we need to answer first? I think it’s what makes the captain and the guild master different from everybody else. I guess I’ll just ask that.*

“Um, Mr. Guild Master, is there something about you and the captain that’s different from everyone else?”

“I’d say the main difference is our levels of magic energy.”

“Your levels of magic energy?”

“Yeah, Appas and I have a little more of it than most people.”

“Do you?” My father scratched his chin.

“Yeah… But does that mean anything?”

“Maybe. Is it harder to fall under a summoning circle’s spell if you have a lot of magic energy?” I asked. If that were the case, then the two men were *significantly* different from everyone else.

“Magic energy levels aren’t related to the activation of a summoning circle’s magic, so I’m not sure. Hmm… Yeah, I don’t think it would be harder for us to fall under its spell.”

That’s right, I remember hearing that before. For a second, I even hoped that meant I could learn how to use attack magic. Huh… I’m just not seeing anything else that links the two men, so then I’ll think about them separately. Let’s see… With the guild master, the biggest mystery is why other people noticed there was something wrong with him. Just the guild master… Just the guild master? Wait a minute…

“What if the guild master was put under a different spell than everyone else—isn’t that a possibility?” *That could be why he reacted differently than the others.*

“*I* was under a different spell? But that…could be true, come to think of it.”

Why would the mastermind put just the guild master under a different spell? Their potential motives…were too many to count. If you had the guild master in your back pocket, you could do just about anything you wanted—and the easiest way to get him in your back pocket would be to put him under a mind-control spell. That way, you could do whatever you pleased.

So let’s say the mastermind put the guild master under a mind control spell… I guess they couldn’t risk leaving him alone for a while. They’d want to keep close watch over him to make sure he was still under their control. Hm? Wait a minute, that woman the guild master introduced as his wife—she was with him at the adventurer guild, wasn’t she…? Was she the one watching him? Let’s see, Nalgath said he introduced her as his wife two and a half years ago. Wait a minute, that’s strange. When Zinal saw him two years ago, he wasn’t behaving strangely yet, so it’s hard to believe he was under the spell before then. But is it really that hard to believe? What if the mastermind put him under their mind control little by little…?

“Um, does the magic from summoning circles always have to be powerful?”

“Powerful in what way?”

“Like, are there circles where you have to cast the spell over and over for them to take effect…or spells that take effect gradually?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you cast a powerful spell all at once, I think everyone would notice something was wrong.”

“You’re right, they would…” The guild master’s face turned pale. He seemed to understand what I was getting at.

“Then couldn’t the mastermind have cast a spell on you *slowly* so that nobody in your circle would notice?”

“Like brainwashing?” my father asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not sure of that much…but I don’t think we can rule out that possibility.”

“In other words, I was being used.” The guild master looked anguished.

“We aren’t quite sure of that yet, sir.”

“But if the mastermind had me under their control, it would be easy to cast a spell on the adventurers and watchmen. All they’d have to do is make me summon them to my study and have me cast the spell.”

“Guild Master, slow down. Can somebody under a spell cast a spell?”

“I don’t know… But I do know that if the mastermind had me in their back pocket, it would be easy to cast a spell on the adventurers and watchmen of Hataka.”

That’s right, it would be incredibly easy. Not many adventurers or watchmen would question a command from the guild master. By taking advantage of that fact, the mastermind could easily lure their victims one by one to the place where they’d cast the spell. It was an evil scenario, but entirely possible.

The guild master let out an anguished sigh. “My God, what have I done?”

“We still don’t know that you did *anything*, sir,” I quickly piped up. Nothing was settled yet, as far as I was concerned.

“No, I think you’re right, Ivy.”

“Mr. Guild Master?”

“It’s intriguing… When you said the word *brainwash*, a woman’s face popped into my mind. It might be her…”

“Your wife?”

“I really hope I’m…” the guild master murmured, shaking his head.

“Did you remember something?”

“No…just a face. But this face gives me a very bad feeling.”

In other words, his wife might be our mastermind.

“Ngh…!” The guild master pressed his temples and moaned. He seemed to hold off the pain for a moment, but then he clutched his head with both hands. The agony must have gotten worse.

“Are you okay?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Boing… Boomf!

Sora jumped in from nowhere and swallowed the guild master’s head whole. We all froze to the spot in shock. Even the guild master was rapidly blinking his eyes inside Sora’s body.

“After they’re done, let’s ask him how the world looks through Sora’s belly,” my father suggested.

“Yeah, let’s.”

Chapter 429:
Granddaughter? Wife?

“HERE, SIR, have some tea.”

“Thanks… I thought I was going to drown for a minute there.” With a laugh, the guild master poked Sora on his lap.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Does it still hurt?” my father asked.

The guild master shook his head. “The pain vanished as soon as Sora swallowed my head. You’re a real wonder, Sora!” He squeezed the slime tight in his arms, and it looked a bit pleased with itself. I didn’t really get what was happening, but I decided all’s well that ends well.

“Thanks to Sora, I remember now. It was three years ago—that’s when I met Marsha’s granddaughter.”

Marsha’s granddaughter? What’s he talking about?

“The woman I called my wife was Marsha’s granddaughter.”

“Really?”

“Yeah… She wasn’t doing too well as a tamer, so she came to me for advice—I remember that clearly now.”

So the woman posing as the guild master’s wife turned out to be the tamer’s granddaughter… Did that mean the granddaughter was directly involved with the conspiracy?

“Do you remember everything now?” my father asked.

“No, only fragments. I remember Marsha’s granddaughter asking for my advice, and I’m sure something happened after that, but my memory cuts out there…and then I was in some other room, standing face-to-face with her.”

Even fragments of memory would serve us well in solving the case. We’d had no leads whatsoever before this.

“It’s just like you said, Ivy, I remember being inside a summoning circle many times. I know it was a summoning circle, but as for the glyphs themselves, well, my memory’s a bit fuzzy there.”

If he'd been inside a summoning circle many times, there must have been a reason for it.

"Why would anyone need to be put inside a summoning circle more than once?" I asked.

The guild master shook his head. "I don't know why. I just know I remember seeing that window somewhere before."

"A window?"

"Yeah... It was in the room where the summoning circle was... I remember the room had a window. I think I saw it from where I was standing in the circle."

"Oh..."

"Do you remember any other details about the room with the summoning circle, sir?"

"Other details, eh... Well, I feel like there was a lot of multicolored light...and a window... Sorry, I can't remember anything else. All I do know is that it wasn't in the adventurer guild or the merchant guild."

Okay... So neither guild was involved. It was a failure on our part to assume they were and plunge into the investigation. But multicolored light? The light coming in from a window is all the same color. If only we could figure out that piece of the puzzle, we could narrow down where that room was.

"I also remember giving something to an adventurer. Marsha's granddaughter was with me then. I was probably commanded to give out directions to the summoning circle and lure people there that way," the guild master explained, a wretched look on his face.

"Do you know where Marsha's granddaughter is right now?" my father asked.

"Well, she's a tamer, so she's probably at work. I don't have any recent memories of Marsha."

"Ah, then she probably already skipped town," my father said.

Huh? Wait a minute...

"There almost certainly isn't a summoning circle at the merchant guild or the adventurer guild, right, sir?" I asked.

“We’ll look into that tomorrow, but I don’t think it would be there. Why do you ask?” A deep crease formed between the guild master’s brows.

“Dad, where did you and I get put under the spell?”

We had assumed it was the adventurer guild, so I hadn’t put much thought into other possibilities…

“Yeah, that *is* a bit odd. The first time we met the guild master was when we freed him from the spell.”

Where else might we have met him? The plaza?

“We did check the plaza, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, we scouted around secretly because we knew there might be people watching, but we didn’t find anything that looked like a summoning circle.”

I thought back to the summoning circle in the cave. I’d only been able to see a part of it, but it was a rather large circle. The one that affected Snakey was also large. A summoning circle of that size should be easy to spot, so since we hadn’t found it, maybe it was a small one. Was it at the gatekeeper’s station? It could be there… No, there were walls all around it. Part of the wall had a bunch of notes with messages scribbled on them, but the wall was bare otherwise. You couldn’t hide a summoning circle there. But what if this circle was much smaller than we were imagining it?

“How small could a person make a summoning circle?” I asked.

“Hm? Why do you ask?” my father said.

“It’s the *size*. All the summoning circles we found together were huge, but I was just wondering if smaller ones also existed.”

“I’ve never heard of smaller ones. But then again, summoning circle research is restricted now, so there’s not much we do know,” the guild master said.

I smiled and shook my head. That was a big wall that blocked us from cracking this case. Since summoning circle research was prohibited, there wasn’t much information on them. That meant we were just blindly flinging ourselves on

what little we did know, and we weren't reaching the correct answer.

"We'll just have to ask the captain more about summoning circles. I have no idea how much he knows, but it's probably a fair amount," my father said.

The guild master nodded. "We should turn in soon. We've got an early start tomorrow morning."

"Good idea." My father gave my head a pat and did the same to Sora on the guild master's lap. Sora closed its eyes and happily jiggled.

"All the danger we're in scares me, but being around your monsters always calms me down, Ivy. It clears my head, too." Pleased by the guild master's praise, Sora jiggled even harder. "It really is like therapy."

"It sure is," said my father.

Both of them murmured, looking fondly at Sora. They must have been incredibly exhausted.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, everyone."

When we left the guild master's house the next morning, we found Nalgath and his men already waiting for us at the gate.

"Ready to head out?" Juggy took the lead, which surprised me a little. Yesterday, Nalgath had gone in front. I looked for him and found him behind me.

"What's wrong?" Nalgath looked confused by my staring.

"Oh, I was just wondering why Mr. Juggy was taking the lead today."

"Ah, well, we change up our order now and then."

Oh, okay. Rattloore and his party always walked in the same order. I guess every party is different.

"Fill me in while we walk there. I want to compare notes."

My father brought the members of Cobalt up to speed on everything we'd found out yesterday. *Come to think of it, Nalgath and his men met the guild master's wife, but their memories from*

two years ago were missing, so they didn't remember she was Marsha's granddaughter, right? Maybe they remembered her as the wife but not as the granddaughter? What a strange way to have a memory erased.

"So that woman…was Marsha's granddaughter?" Piarre's voice quaked once my father finished filling them in.

"You didn't notice, Piarre?" Arly asked.

"Did they have some kind of connection?" My father looked at Piarre.

"Well, um…it was a little while ago, but we dated. But the guild master's wife…I remember what she looked like, and I don't think she was Matorry… Was Matorry really the guild master's wife?"

Matorry? That's right, I never got the name of Marsha's granddaughter… Why didn't I? That's the sort of thing you'd usually ask.

"Matorry?"

When I voiced the name, Nalgath stopped in his tracks. He stayed there a while, thinking…then he gasped and said, "Agggh, that's right, it's Matorry! Piarre, I can't be wrong! Why did we forget it? That's who he introduced us to at first—it was Matorry!"

His memory suddenly came back? Is that a thing? It looked like Nalgath wasn't the only one: Juggy and Arly also remembered.

"Was her name the trigger?" my father asked. Nalgath and his men answered that it probably was.

"But what about me? I still can't wrap my head around Matorry being his wife." Piarre looked at everyone in bewilderment. That was a good question. Why was he the only one who couldn't remember?

"Maybe because you two were involved with each other? If you innocently said her name, your comrades' memories would return, so they must have put a different spell on you, Piarre."

That makes sense.

We resumed our trek back to the sharmy cave. Piarre's gaze was a bit downcast; he was obviously in shock.

"Um, about what happened a year and a half ago…" I began. "You said you felt the guild master was acting strange, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. When we asked the captain for advice, he got poisoned. We should have been more discreet," Arly growled bitterly. Juggy nodded.

"How did you notice he was behaving oddly? Did something tip you off?"

"Nothing tipped me off, per se… It's just that he was acting strange when I came back from my business trip to the capital and I went to give him my report. Come to think of it, Matorry was with him then."

Oh, so he was away from the village! That's why he wasn't under the spell. That makes sense.

"Yup, she was there." Arly looked awfully pleased with himself, while Juggy smiled sheepishly.

"In what way was he acting strange?"

Chapter 430:
Why They're Scared

"IT WAS THE GUILD MASTER who ordered me to go on the business trip to the capital. I was supposed to work as a bodyguard and dig up some classified info. When I went to deliver that info, Matorry was standing beside him—that was when he introduced her as his wife. But when I told him the intel was sensitive and his wife needed to go outside, he wouldn't listen. She showed no signs of complying, either. I thought they were both clearly acting bonkers, so I went straight to the watch station after I left the guild master's study."

Yeah, you definitely shouldn't give sensitive intelligence to someone not on the list—even if it's the wife of somebody who is. It's only natural that Nalgath and his party would think something was odd. But something doesn't add up. Why didn't Matorry leave? It would have only taken ten to twenty minutes to deliver the intelligence briefing. It wouldn't be hard to leave for that short a time…unless she couldn't *leave for some reason? But if the mastermind knew Nalgath and his men were coming back, they would have tried to cover their tracks, right? Why would they act in such an obviously suspicious way?*

"Did your business trip at the capital go as planned?" my father asked.

Juggy smiled sarcastically. "Well, it was supposed to take a year, but one thing led to another, and it ended after just three months."

A year-long job got shortened to three months? Oh, then the mastermind couldn't cover their tracks because Piarre got back earlier than he was supposed to!

"Okay, so that's how you were able to notice the guild master was acting strange."

To Matorry, it was the worst thing that could have happened, but what about the guild master? In any case, the mastermind sure is playing the long game. Matorry approached the guild master three whole years ago. The plot must have already been in motion by then. Why did they take so much time to get things off the ground?

Was it to profit off Hataka? To take over the village? It looks like they could have succeeded with either plan, but once you bring a summoning circle into the equation, it's only a matter of time before things start falling apart. That also goes for the person casting it. If you use a summoning circle too long, you eventually destroy yourself. Didn't they know about the dangers of those things? I really don't think that's possible. They know all sorts of ways to use summoning circles, so they must be experts. That means they were well aware of the danger, yet they used a summoning circle anyway. Matorry needed to do it, even though it meant putting herself at greater risk.

I suddenly sensed a hand reaching for my face and squeezed my eyes shut.

"If the wind changes, you'll stay like that forever," my father teased, poking the deep crease on my frowning brow. I clamped a hand over my forehead to hide it and glared up at my father. "Way to ruin such a cute face."

A little warning, please? Now I'm embarrassed. I turned slightly away from him and softened my brow. *It's okay. I don't think I got a permanent wrinkle from that.*

"They've come out of the cave." Juggy stopped in his tracks and looked around. Nalgath and the others also scanned our surroundings, their faces stiff with apprehension.

"Oh! Are those sharmy?" At the top of the trees where I was looking, there were a few of the creatures I'd seen in the cave. I was able to make out four or five of them, but there was something different about them today.

"Yeah. It's faint, but I do sense their aura."

"Me, too."

Arly's and Piarre's faces filled with relief as they looked at the sharmy. There was indeed an aura I'd never sensed before. Did it belong to the sharmy?

"Being able to read auras must be nice. I can't do that," my father murmured.

"You can't read auras, Mr. Druid?" Nalgath looked at him in shock. My father smiled sheepishly and shook his head.

“Their faces look a bit different,” Juggy said, staring at the sharmy. And indeed, their faces were docile now, completely unlike the menacing looks they’d given us back in the cave. Had they gone back to normal when the summoning circle’s spell was broken?

“Is this what sharmy are supposed to be like?” my father asked.

Nalgath and his men shook their heads. “They’ve been friendly with Hataka’s people for many generations. They’ve never been this untrusting.” After a moment’s hesitation, Nalgath slowly reached up toward the sharmy. He wasn’t close enough to actually touch them, but they opened their mouths wide and hissed when he reached out to them.

“Wow... I feel gutted...” Nalgath hung his head a little as the sharmy hissed at him. I remembered how the villagers were also sad that they hadn’t seen the sharmy this spring. It went to show just how strong the ties were between Hataka’s people and the sharmy.

“We have to check their cave. You okay?” Juggy quietly asked Nalgath.

“I’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

We headed for the cave, keeping a cautious eye out for the sharmy as we went.

“Wow, a lot of them came outside,” my father remarked. Sure enough, I could see sharmy peeking out from all the trees. Quite a few of them must have come out of the cave.

“It’ll be much easier to search their cave now,” Piarre said, casting a happy glance at the sharmy. Even though they weren’t acting like their normal selves, he was just happy to see them again. The people of Hataka truly did love the sharmy.

“But don’t you think they’re a little too scared of us?” Juggy asked, perplexed.

“Maybe they know it was somebody from Hataka who cast the spell on them?” Piarre suggested.

“I dunno, but it makes me really sad,” Juggy said gloomily. If the sharmy did know somebody from the village had cursed them, they might not be able to rebuild their old relationship.

The cave came into view, so we stopped for a moment. There were countless sharmy in front of it.

“Let’s watch them for a bit before we go inside.”

Since there were sharmy in the trees, it would be pointless for us to try and hide, so we looked at the cave from where we stood. As I watched, Ciel rubbed its body against me. I looked down to see it was smiling and purring. *Aha!*

“Maybe *Ciel* is the reason why the sharmy are scared?”

Why hadn’t I thought of something so obvious? Ciel had been walking alongside us the whole time, so the sharmy would have gotten a good look at it.

“Oh!” The members of Cobalt all looked at Ciel and froze. They must not have thought of it, either.

“Ciel’s become so normal to us that we forgot it’s a universally feared high-level monster,” Arly said. “And from the way it growled menacingly at the sharmy yesterday, of course they’re terrified of it.”

I looked at the sharmy. Now that I knew they were scared, it was easy to see that it was Ciel they were wary of. It suddenly made me feel quite guilty.

“We should finish the job and get away from the cave as soon as possible,” Nalgath said.

“Good idea. Nalgath, is everything ready?” Druid asked.

“Yeah. What are you doing, Mr. Druid? Ivy, I want you to stand by outside. There’s no telling what’s in there.”

I nodded. “Got it. Be careful.”

“Okay, Juggy, you’re on guard.”

So they assigned Juggy to stand around with me… I hate that I can’t tell them I’ll be fine on my own. Maybe I should have waited back in the village after all…

Mrrrow?

“Is Ciel coming with you?” I asked.

Nalgath shook his head. “As far as we can tell, the sharmy are free from the spell, so I’d rather have it stand by outside with you, Ivy.”

Mrrrow.

“I’d like to join you in the cave. That okay?” my father asked Nalgath.

He nodded. “You know a lot more than we do, Mr. Druid, so we’d appreciate that.”

Nalgath took the lead as the party walked into the cave. The sharmy by the entrance stood up and kept a wary eye on us.

“Ciel, let’s just wait quietly right here, okay?” I stood as still as possible; I felt bad scaring the sharmy any more than we already had.

Mrrrow.

“By the way, where are your slimes? Did they stay behind today?” Juggy asked me curiously.

“They’re asleep in their bag. They’re tired after all their hard work yesterday.”

“Oh, okay. Sorry we overworked them.”

“Not at all, sir. They really enjoyed themselves.”

“Well, I’m glad they feel that way because I really do feel like we asked too much of them.”

From the way they were acting yesterday, they didn’t feel at all like they’d been working too hard. They were in very high spirits, after all.

Chapter 431:
Critical Levels

“AH, GOOD, they’re coming out… Something doesn’t look right, though.”

My father and the rest of the scout party were just coming out of the cave. It was a relief to see them, but Juggy was right: Something about them looked off. I swallowed the anxious lump down my throat and waited patiently for them to come all the way back.

“Welcome back,” I greeted my father as the team approached.

“Hi. Let’s take a little break,” my father said.

“Yes. Let’s,” Nalgath nodded.

Huh? Why is he being so curt…? I took a closer look and saw Nalgath’s face was quite tense. Juggy made room for the scout party to sit on the ground.

“Thanks…” my father said.

“Are you guys okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Juggy peered anxiously at the group. Arly answered that he was fine, but his voice was lacking its usual luster. Once everyone had sat down, I pulled a pot of hot tea and several cups out of my magic bag. I had borrowed the guild master’s kitchen that morning to cook.

“Here, have some tea.” I hoped it would ease everyone’s nerves a little.

“Thanks, Ivy…” Piarre took his cup and nodded to me. I smiled back at him, and relief filled his face.

“Sure is soothing…” Nalgath sighed.

“Yeah,” Arly echoed.

Their tense expressions softened a little, which put me a little more at ease.

“Thanks,” my dad said as I sat beside him. I nodded and smiled. Of course I would do everything I could to help them.

“So, are you okay to talk about it?” Juggy asked the scout party.

“Deep in the trash…in the deepest part of the cave, I think… well, we don’t know the exact number, but we found the remains of about ten people.”

Human remains…

“One of them was wearing a ring that looked familiar… I think it’s our vice-captain.” With a grim edge in his voice, Nalgath described the cave to us. I remembered the vice-captain was one of the people who had gone missing earlier. So they were dead…

“We also found one person wearing holy vestments. Probably a clergyman from the church.”

The church… The word struck a chord in my memories from long ago. I had already shut away all recollections of my parents, but I still remembered the stare I’d received from the person in the church when I had my skill read. I had no recollection of their face whatsoever, but their eyes were still vivid in my memory. When that pair of eyes stared at me, my body trembled all over in fear. *Looking back now, I wonder why that person’s eyes assaulted me with so much intense hatred…*

“Ivy? Are you okay?”

“Huh?! Oh… I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? You were looking awfully somber.”

I guess the resurfacing memories of my dark past had shown in my face. I took a deep breath to steady my emotions. *I’m okay now… That life is long in the past.*

“I was just remembering something from my past. But I’m okay now…”

Now I had a father who would always be by my side, even though he knew all my darkest secrets. I had Ciel, and I had my sleeping slimes in the bag, too.

“Do you know who the clergyman was?”

“No, and we haven’t heard from the church that they’re missing anyone.”

Juggy and Piarre tilted their heads quizzically.

“How strange. They wouldn’t have been under the spell, would they?” Nalgath got a curious look on his face, too. I answered with the same expression, unsure of what was confusing him. “If the people at the church were under the spell, I could understand why they wouldn’t have filed a missing person’s report with the village, but they weren’t under it. But if one of your comrades went missing, you’d definitely contact the village watch station, now, wouldn’t you?”

Aha, that’s right! We still haven’t found any people outside the adventurers and watchmen who were under the spell. And it is strange that unaffected people wouldn’t file a missing person’s report. Unless not everyone who works at the church gets along?

“Is everyone who works on the church on good terms with each other?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” my father asked.

“Well, I was thinking if they didn’t get along with each other, they might not care if somebody went missing, or maybe somebody just ran away because they were having problems…”

Men of the cloth are still men, after all. It’s entirely possible that one of them ran away because of their own issues.

“I’d rule that out. The clergymen’s sense of camaraderie is strong—disturbingly strong,” my father said. I looked at him in surprise. Noticing my stares, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Anyway, there’s more to them that meets the eye.”

Did the church do something to him? Hm, lots of adventurers distance themselves from the church. Funny, the common folk in villages and towns regularly rely on the clergy. I wonder why adventurers don’t?

“What do you think, Mr. Druid?” Nalgath asked.

My father and I both looked quickly back at him. “Sorry, we weren’t listening. What did you say?” my father asked.

That’s because he was talking to me. Now I feel bad.

“I was just thinking we might want to give the people in the cave a more thorough looking over,” Nalgath explained.

“I think so, too,” my father said. “Maybe we should go back to the village and see if anyone’s missing. Check with their

families first."

Nalgath and his men nodded. "Got it. Okay, let's head back to the village." Taking this as a signal, we started packing up to leave.

"I've already washed these," Piarre said, setting the clean cups down in front of me.

"Thank you, sir." I put the cups back in my magic bag and stood up from my spot on the ground.

When Ciel began to stir, the sharmy, who had been keeping an eye on us from the trees, tensed up with fear. I could feel it in my skin.

"They really are terrified of you, Ciel. How could they be? You're so cute."

Mrrrow.

I gave Ciel's chin some scritches and it purred back at me. The creature really was so cute that I couldn't keep from smiling around it.

We arrived at the village to find a completely different team of gatekeepers. That was normally unheard of, so we approached the gate with surprise.

"Good morning. Is there a problem?" Nalgath asked the gatekeepers. They gave him uncomfortable looks in response. "What is it?"

"Well, about an hour ago, one of the gatekeepers suddenly got violent."

They got violent? Does that mean the spell's damage reached critical levels? Wait a minute, when the spell's damage becomes critical, doesn't the person it's cast on become an empty shell? I thought the caster was the one who loses control of themselves and goes mad.

"How'd you handle it?" my father asked, approaching the gatekeeper.

The gatekeeper recoiled a little. "We managed to pin them down and quarantined them on the guild master's orders. Right after that, the people who were working next to them collapsed and were taken to the infirmary."

“Got it. Thanks.”

The gatekeepers, who were fidgeting with fear from our intimidating questions, relaxed the moment my father thanked them.

“Let’s go.” Arly took off, and I followed behind. Where was he taking us? This wasn’t the road back to the captain’s house.

“Where are we going?” my father asked. Arly caught his breath, turned back to look at us uncomfortably, and muttered an apology. I gave him a questioning look.

“I just couldn’t let Ivy get anywhere near somebody who’s lost their mind.”

“Yes, sir. Um…”

So then the gentlemen of Cobalt were trying to see the affected gatekeepers.

“By all means, investigate if you want to. I’ll give the report to the captain,” my father said.

“Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Druid,” Nalgath said. “Arly, Juggy, you two go and check on the gatekeepers. We’ll deliver the report to the captain.”

The two nodded, and with a little bow to my father, they jogged over to where the gatekeepers were being cared for.

“Arly and Juggy were rescued by gatekeepers when they were little, so I’m sure they’re extra worried,” Nalgath explained as we made our way to the captain’s house. That would certainly explain why they were so flustered.

“I understand. I hope those gatekeepers make it,” my father said.

“Yes… Me, too,” I replied.

Chapter 432:
Mental Exhaustion

THERE WAS AN INTENSE FLOW of people coming in and out of the captain's house, probably because of the mad gatekeeper incident, so we went in the back entrance.

"With this many people coming and going, it's hard to tell who's under the spell and who isn't," my father remarked.

Nalgath nodded. "Let's head upstairs. Nobody else will go up there."

You could only go to the second floor with the captain's express permission. I remembered how we had wandered freely around the captain's house the first time we came there, and now I wondered if that was wrong of us.

"I'd better apologize to the captain later," I said.

"Hm? What for?"

I frantically shook my head in embarrassment; I'd accidentally voiced my thoughts out loud again. Piarre gave me an equally confused look, but then he patted my head twice and turned his attention back to walking upstairs. When we finally made it to the room on the second floor, I felt a wave of relief for some reason.

"I'll just tell the captain we're here. I'll get us some tea, too." Once Piarre left the room, Nalgath gave a heavy sigh and flopped into a chair.

"You look exhausted." My father sat opposite Nalgath and I sat beside him.

"I'm sorry, sir," Nalgath apologized pitifully.

"If you constantly put yourself on the edge trying to be a good leader, you'll fail. I know that *just take it easy* is hard advice to follow, but please don't kill yourself."

I could see dark circles beneath Nalgath's eyes. "I know you're right, sir, but I've never gotten mixed up in such a big case and I'm at a loss for what to do. I want to do *something*, but I just don't know what."

Since they were adventurers, Nalgath and his party couldn't just blindly obey orders, after all.

"Just so you know, dangerous conspiracies like this don't usually happen all the time," my father said.

Dangerous conspiracies… This is my second one. I could just cry. Was Past Me a terribly evil person or something? Come to think of it, Past Me's knowledge came in very handy when we were dealing with the human trafficking organization. If I knew what kind of organization we were facing right away… Was it because I had prior experience? Oh God… What if it turns out I really was a horrible person in my past life?

"*Ivy*…what's wrong? You tired?" My dad's worried voice made me flinch in an odd half-grimace. "Let's just take it easy the rest of the day."

"I'm okay. Just have a bunch of things on my mind, that's all."

Maybe I'm more tired than I thought. At times like this, it's easy to take bad or stupid thoughts seriously.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Everything that's happened—it's just a lot to process."

I probably haven't given myself a real mental health break. I thought back on the past few days. *I saw the terror of a summoning circle firsthand, learned about the different problems threatening the village, and now I've found out the gatekeepers have reached their breaking point… I tried to ignore it…but I really am mentally and emotionally exhausted.*

"I know." His big, warm hand rested on my head. The gentle rubbing motion felt so soothing.

"Oops! I forgot to take my slimes out of the bag."

"Hm? Oh, I also forgot. Guess I'm at my wits' end, too."

"Hee hee! We're peas in a pod."

I opened my bag, and out everyone flew. They'd ordinarily go bouncing around the room, but this time they stayed close to me and my father. I assured them we were okay and petted their heads, and they jiggled in reply. Then Sol stole a backward

glance and promptly hopped into Nalgath's arms. Flustered and surprised, he fumbled to catch the slime, then he smiled and hugged it tight to his chest. Little by little, we were all realizing we were mentally drained. If only all our problems could be solved soon.

"Tea time!" Piarre returned with tea and refreshments. "The captain says he'll be up once he's finished what he's doing."

"Okay, so we'll take a rest until then."

I took a sip of hot tea and a bite of pastry. Its sweetness tingled pleasingly through my veins.

"Sorry I took so long." The captain entered the room with Arly and Juggy, whose eyes were dark with gloom. "First, thanks for checking out the cave. How'd it go?"

"The sharmy were really on edge, so we couldn't get close to them, but they seem to be turning back to normal."

"They were on edge?"

"Because of Ciel, the adandara."

"Ohh, right. Adandaras are some of the most powerful monsters in the world. Definitely a species the sharmy don't want to cross paths with."

I understood in my head, but it just felt so wrong in my heart. I looked over at Ciel, curled up on my father's lap. Its eyes were closed contentedly as my father petted it. The captain looked at Ciel as well, his eyes colored with conflict. I understood how he felt.

"Also, we discovered some human remains deep inside the cave. Among them...we found someone wearing a ring like the vice-captain's. We also found someone in holy vestments."

The captain froze for a moment when he heard Nalgath's report. "I see... Thank you," he said in a normal tone after a brief pause. "Have you been filled in on what's been happening here on my end?"

"We heard about the gatekeepers, but have you learned anything new?"

"The spell's effect on them has reached critical levels," the captain answered.

My father narrowed his eyes. “But we heard one of them lost his mind and went on a violent rampage.”

“Yeah… I was afraid you knew about that. We don’t have the details yet, but the one who went mad probably cast the spell. So please, keep this a secret. Nothing’s been verified yet.” The captain gave everyone in the room a stern look.

“Understood.”

The one who went mad might be a caster…which means he could be one of our masterminds. I heard Zinal and his men were going to test the gatekeepers to see if they were under the spell, but were they unable to find out? I think it would be pretty tough to fool high-caliber men like them…

“The gatekeepers who collapsed probably had the spell cast on them. Arly, Juggy, didn’t you go to see them?” the captain asked the two somber-faced men.

Juggy looked up and nodded. “They were awake, but their minds might have been damaged. I couldn’t even get them to talk to me.”

From the grim looks on their faces, they had clearly seen the unspeakable.

“I see… Sorry to hear that,” the captain said. The two men hung their heads. Was the gatekeeper who saved them when they were children one of the victims?

“Zinal and his men are looking into this incident, and they found something suspicious.”

“I see. So when are we going to free them from the spell? I assume we’re short on time.”

That’s right, the captain said there was a way to free people from the spell. Now that we had people at critical levels of exposure, didn’t we need to start curing them as quickly as possible?

“Several watchmen are already working on it as we speak…”

The captain’s strained voice startled me. I gave his face a scrutinizing stare. *Is there some catch to the breaking the spell? I seem to remember him mentioning they’d use another summoning circle to break the spell from the first one… Wait a minute—use a*

summoning circle to save them? But doesn't using a summoning circle cause damage to the caster, until they eventually lose their minds… Now I see…somebody's going to sacrifice themselves by taking the summoning circle's damage.

"If we could just find the summoning circle, we could reduce the casualties among our brave officers…"

But we haven't found it yet. Where is the stupid thing? Multicolored lights and a window… I've got an image in my memory, but I can't quite grasp it.

"Oh, could you investigate the church?" my father asked. "See if they've sent in any missing persons reports."

"The church? Ah yes, you said you found the body of someone in holy vestments."

"We're not sure if it was genuine or not, but it ought to be looked into anyway."

My father's conversation with the captain reached my ears. *I don't want to have anything to do with the church, so I'll just let them… Hm? The church? Multicolored lights and a window… What's that called again? Stained…glass. It's stained glass.*

"That's it… It's stained glass! The summoning circle is probably in a place with stained glass!"

The captain's face tensed up at the sound of my voice, and my father looked a bit troubled as well. Had I said something concerning?

Chapter 433:
It's Angry

"Ivy... why do you think there's stained glass in the room with the summoning circle?" The captain stared intently at me.

A little nervously, I told him what the guild master had told us. "When I heard the word *church*, I was reminded of the light coming through a stained-glass window I saw many years ago. I just thought it sounded like the *multicolored light* the guild master mentioned."

In this life, I had only seen stained glass once, when I had my skill read. But Past Me had often seen stained glass, so she had many memories of it.

"I see... Uliga did mention the multicolored light in the room with the summoning circle. I've also seen stained glass several times before, and Uliga's right—it makes *multicolored light*."

Oh, good. Maybe we can narrow down our locations from that hint.

"Where can we find stained glass?" I asked.

Even though we had a good lead on a location, I sensed bewilderment in the air. Was there a problem involving the place where you usually found stained glass?

"Ivy... You'll only find stained glass in churches."

What—in churches?! Does that mean the summoning circle is in a church? Was the caster a clergyman?

"What'll we do now? You can't touch the church without any proof," my father said.

The captain frowned deeply. The church was an independent entity; neither the guilds nor the village watch could mess with it unless they had a good reason. I remembered hearing some adventurers talking about that once.

"Agh... What do we do now?"

Knock, knock.

“I’ve brought the goods, everyon—whoa, why all the gloom?” It was the guild master. The moment he set foot in the room, he cast a wary glance at everyone. “Ivy, are you okay?”

Er, me, sir?

“I’m okay, sir. Oh, we think we know where to find the room with the multicolored light you mentioned yesterday!”

“Oh! Really?”

“Yes, sir. We were just saying it might be the stained glass in a church.”

It had to be okay to tell the guild master since he was on the case.

“Stained glass in a church?... Oh! Must be the confessionary in the back.”

“What?!” Nalgath’s men and the captain looked at the guild master. He scratched his head for a few seconds and looked at the captain.

“I just remembered. That’s where the summoning circle is. It was the stained glass in the confessionary.”

He got more of his memory back? Isn’t it strange that it only takes a trigger word to break the summoning circle’s strong spell? This is really frustrating.

“Appas, you get the spell-breaker ready. I’m gonna go to the church and check something.”

“Wait, you don’t have any proof!” The captain jumped out of his chair in a panic.

“I remember what happened—what other proof do I need?”

“Well, sure, it’s *technically* proof, but...”

“Besides, we don’t have time to waste sitting on our asses, do we? People will die.”

The captain scowled bitterly at the guild master. He was probably referring to the gatekeeper who’d gone mad.

“Oh, fine, you win,” the captain sighed. “Just promise me that you’ll be careful. There’s no telling what’s out there.”

The guild master grinned wickedly at the captain. The sight of it sent chills down my spine. “Of course I’ll be careful. I just need to thank them properly for how they had their way with me the past couple years. Yes… I must *repay them for everything they’ve done*.”

Eeeek, I’m scared. I’m so scared I could die. He’s smiling, but I can just see this black cloud rising behind him… Stop it, overactive imagination! I carefully looked away, but I still felt something ominous pricking at me. I looked over at Nalgath and his party and saw that all their faces were white. Apparently, even elite adventurers were terrified of the guild master right then.

“Nalgath! You and your men will help me out.”

“Eep!” Piarre squeaked at the guild master in terror, which only made his smile wider.

“We’ll go with you, sir! We insist!”

God speed, Nalgath. I’ll say a little prayer for you all. At least this mood is better than the gloomy one from before…I hope.

“We’re going.”

“Yes, sir!”

As Nalgath and his comrades ambled behind the guild master, they reminded me of condemned men being led to prison…but it had to be a trick of the eyes. Yes, that was it.

“Looks like they’re going to prison,” the captain whispered, his voice reaching my ears loud and clear for some reason.

“Is it really okay to let the guild master go?” my father asked. “He seemed like he was ready to murder some criminals… He didn’t look stable.”

“He’ll be okay,” the captain assured him.

There must really be a deep bond of trust between the captain and the guild master.

“I hope.”

There was an awkward silence.

Will he really be okay? I’m suddenly super worried about him.

“Okay, we’d better get ready, too.” The captain rose from his chair and exhaled softly. He meant we needed to get to work on

breaking the spell. I assumed that meant he would have some of his watchmen or some adventurers unleash the new spell. I knew it was a necessary evil, but it still broke my heart. I cast a careful glance at the captain and saw the anguish in his eyes. I looked away, and my eyes landed on my slimes, jiggling and playing on the sofa.

"Pong! Pong!"

Hm? I took a closer look and saw that Sol had suddenly spat out two black magic stones out of nowhere.

"Sol? Why did you make those magic stones?" I meandered over to the slime, who looked up at me and pushed the stones against my chest. I took them, sensing that Sol meant them as a present for me.

"Whoa! They're beautiful..."

The black magic stones were enveloped in a faint white light and they looked incredibly mystical. I took a closer look and saw silver symbols engraved on them.

"Incredible..." My dad peered at the stones in the palm of my hand.

"Isn't it, though? It's so beautiful." I carefully picked up a magic stone with my thumb and index finger and held it up. The magic stone Sol had made before was also black, but it wasn't shiny or engraved like these were.

"I wonder what the difference is?" my father asked.

Well, for now I should just drop these magic stones in my magic bag for safekeeping. If anyone sees them, we'll be in big trouble. And even though I don't hear anybody coming up the stairs, there's no guarantee somebody won't barge in any minute. I opened my magic bag to put in Sol's magic stones and...

Bonk!

"Huh?"



When I was about to drop the magic stone in the bag, Sol slammed against my hand and jiggled angrily at me.

“Pefu! Pefu!”

What was wrong? Was Sol trying to tell me not to hide the magic stones in my bag?

“Should I not hide these in my magic bag?”

“Pefu!”

I guess that means yes. Then what should I do with these shining magic stones?

“Think Sol’s trying to tell us we should use them?” my father asked.

“Pe-*fuuu*!” Sol bounced happily in reply.

I see. Sol made us these magic stones because we need them. But what do we need them for? I glanced up to see the shocked eyes of the captain, staring at the stones. I looked back and forth between the captain and the stones in my hand. *Could it be…?*

“Can we use these to break the spell?” It was the only idea that came to mind.

“Pefu!”

“Agh!”

Happy that I’d understood, Sol vigorously slammed itself into my arms. The captain gave me a bewildered look.

“Okay… So this will break the spell. What useful magic stones you’ve made us.”

“Pefu!”

I hugged Sol to my chest and stared at the magic stones in my hand. The beautiful black stones were glowing with white light.

I moved closer to the captain and held them out to him. “Here you go, Captain.”

The captain’s jaw dropped. “No, I can’t accept this…”

“If you use these magic stones, those heroes might not need to sacrifice themselves,” my father assured the sputtering captain.

The captain stared hard at the magic stones… Then, after a while, he took them both. “Once things have settled down in Hataka, I’ll pay you handsomely.”

I didn’t intend to sell the stones, but the captain’s eyes were so earnest that I felt I couldn’t refuse him. *After everything’s over, I’ll let him know I provided them free of charge.*

Chapter 434:
You're My Security Blanket

"BY THE WAY...how exactly do you *use* these magic stones?" the captain asked.

My father and I were silent. *How do we use them... How* do *we use them?*

"Sorry, we don't know. We don't even know how to break a summoning circle's spell in the first place, so I can't even imagine how to use them."

"Ah...right." The captain pursed his lips in thought. I stared at him as he thought it over, until our eyes suddenly met. The captain smiled sheepishly at my inquisitive gaze. "Ivy...you've got a good look in your eyes. Reminds me of myself when I was young."

I have a good look in my eyes? What does he mean by that? I glanced at my dad and saw he was smiling proudly. I gave him a quizzical look and he patted my head.

"Did you go through a phase like that, Captain?" he asked.

"Of course I did."

I hung on to every word, but it still didn't make sense to me. But they were both amused, so everything must have been okay.

"Truth be told, I don't want to get you two any more involved than you already are, but I suspect it's already too late. Besides, you should probably know the truth. Wait just a moment." With that, the captain left the room.

"What did he mean about my eyes?" I asked. I just couldn't let it go.

"When you look at people, Ivy...you look them straight in the eye, to get a better sense of who they are."

Do I do that? Yeah...maybe I do. But why does it matter?

"Older people like the captain and I are quick to judge or suspect others—we think too much about things, and we forget

to just really *see* a person for who they are. Our years of experience and knowledge get in the way. That's why, Ivy, when we see the way you earnestly look at someone to see who they are, you really shine."

Now that makes sense. But I feel like a lot of that is because I'm of a lower status than everyone else. The only ones I have to worry about protecting are those who can fit in my tiny embrace. I don't have big groups of people to take care of like my father or the captain do, so I think I'm a little too vulnerable at times. And besides—I glanced at my father—*I trust that my father will take care of me, so a part of me feels safe to open up.*

"I just think you're my security blanket, Dad."

"Er, your security blanket? Really? I don't feel like it," he protested, shaking his head.

"Oh, but you are," I insisted again. "You keep me warm and cozy." My father looked down at me with a proud smile.

"Hm? Something happen while I was gone?" The captain wandered into the room and interrupted our little moment with a searching stare.

"We were just having a father-daughter moment," my father said.

The captain smiled. "Lucky you. My kids are all grown up and don't have time for me. And even when I do see them, they're never as affectionate as they used to be." There was a loneliness in his voice as he set a stack of papers on the desk. They had summoning circles drawn on them. "You draw this first summoning circle on the floor, and this second one on the ceiling above it."

The drawings were numbered, and the captain pointed at each of them in turn.

"I see that the floor and ceiling summoning circles are different," my father observed.

"This is ancient script, apparently."

Ancient script? Does he mean letters? I looked at the glyphs the captain was pointing to. I couldn't read them at all, probably because they were no longer used today. There were also drawings of animals on the papers. *A snake, and a horned*

creature walking on two legs… What is it? Hmm… I dunno. I don't recognize a lot of these animals.

"Those things that look like animals? They're actually letters."

"What?! These are *letters*, sir?"

But they look like a bunch of animals to me. Wow, ancient peoples sure wrote in crazy ways.

"So to break the spell, you put the enchanted victims on the summoning circle drawn on the floor, then you activate it. This summoning circle supposedly has the power to heal a wounded magic core."

"*Supposedly*? Has it never been tested?" My father cast a doubtful glance at the captain.

He nervously shook his head and held up his hands. "We have tested it properly on a small sample size, and it did work. That's how we know it can heal a wounded magic core. But this time…there's just so many people. We also need to keep in mind that it might have been a fluke."

There really were a lot of people to heal. Most of the adventurers and the village watchmen were under the spell. I looked at the magic stones in the captain's hand. *We should probably ask Sol how to use them.*

"Sol, do you put these magic stones inside the summoning circle?"

Sol answered with silence.

That means no. Do we have the enchanted people hold the stones? No, that doesn't feel quite right, either. We have so many people to heal, too.

"Does the caster hold the stones?"

"Pefu!"

"Captain, I think the caster has to hold these magic stones."

The captain, who'd seen my little exchange with Sol, nodded. "Got it. Thanks." He looked at the magic stones, then at me and my father. "I'm so sorry I got you both caught up in this mess."

My father and I both shook our heads. “We were under the spell, too. We have every reason to try to help.”

“He’s right, sir.”

The captain smiled sheepishly. “But you’re just a pair of travelers who happened by this village. If you were adventurers, we would obviously ask for your help, but you’re not adventurers—you’re travelers.”

He was technically right: Since my father and I weren’t registered with the adventurer guild, we were not adventurers. That *would* make us travelers, meaning we were under no obligation to help Hataka in their time of need.

“But we just did what our hearts told us to, sir,” I said. The captain gave me a questioning look. “Sure, it would have been easier not to get involved, but I think we would have been dying of curiosity.”

We could have left Hataka the moment we were freed from the spell. There were still the brainwashed sharmy, but surely Ciel could have disposed of them all if it wanted to. But my father and I decided to stay, and that was surely because we couldn’t stand the thought of doing nothing to help. What if we found out later through the grapevine that everyone in Hataka had died? I know for sure I would have hated myself for failing to act.

“We just don’t want to feel guilty in the future, sir.”

The captain’s eyes were somber. Fate really had helped me meet some truly good people.

“Yes, but…”

“You’ll be in trouble, too, Captain, once this problem is solved—or whenever those people from the capital arrive. You’ll be forced to hide us.”

I was shocked at the provisions in that crazy contract he’d signed.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve already drawn up a plan to get you two out of this village without anybody noticing.”

Whoa, he already thought up a plan? I looked at my father and he seemed equally surprised.

“Isn’t it a bit soon for that?” my father asked.

“There’s no telling when help will arrive, so please rest assured. Now I’m going to go get everything prepared! In just a little while, our summoning circles will be ready.”

“Where are you putting the summoning circles?” my father asked.

“In a tiny room on the first floor... Wanna come see?” the captain asked after a short pause.

“Could we? Isn’t it technically illegal?”

“It feels wrong to hide it from you after everything we’ve been through together.” Still, there was conflict in his voice as he said that.

“Uhh... Ivy, what do you say? Wanna see it?”

I had only gotten a good look at one summoning circle before: the one that controlled poor Snakey like a puppet. And since I had only seen a small part of the summoning circle in the cave, I was actually a little disappointed about it.

“I think I do want to see it.”

I was curious. Besides, I seemed to be a magnet for trouble. Maybe I’d get caught up in summoning circle shenanigans again someday. I really wanted to avoid it, of course! But looking back on all my experiences thus far, it seemed best for me to learn as much as I could.

“Okay. Let’s go, then...”

The captain left the room, so we followed suit. I had forgotten about the pandemonium on the first floor earlier, but it was very quiet now.

SIDE:
The Guild Master's Wrath

GUILD MASTER ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

I STOPPED IN MY TRACKS when the church came into sight. Little by little, my memory was coming back to me.

Three years ago, I was following somebody into this church… Oh, that's right, it was Vice-Captain Twill I was chasing! Yes, I tailed her into this church.

"But why was I in such a panic that time?"

Now I remember I was going to investigate that church. But… why did I want to do that?

"It's no use. I can't remember."

"Huh?!"

Surprised that my inner thoughts had received a reaction, I turned to the sound of the voice and saw Nalgath looking at me worriedly. Then I remembered that his party had come with me and felt pathetic for losing track of my surroundings.

"I'm okay."

Pull yourself together, Uliga.

"Guild Master…it's not your fault."

I shook my head. I was the guild master. I was in a position of power, and that meant all responsibility fell on my shoulders.

"Guild Master…"

"Let's go."

I started to walk again. Villagers were happily chatting at the church entrance.

"Nalgath, get all these people out of the church. There's no telling what *they'll* do."

"I understand, sir. But…"

"But what?"

“I was just wondering how we might evacuate them without drawing suspicion, sir.”

Without drawing suspicion? Not happening.

“Don’t worry about it. Just get them out quick.”

“Huh?! Er, is that okay, sir? Word of it will spread like wildfire. The villagers will be worried and upset about it.”

He was right. I was going into the church as the guild master, not a private citizen. However...

“Rumors that Appas woke up are already going around. As far as our mastermind knew, Appas shouldn’t have recovered from his illness, but now he *has* recovered. So what’s their plan? They’re probably trying to gather intel. And how do you think they’d go about doing that?”

Those bastards had tried to murder Appas. They must have been panicking, knowing that he had woken up from his coma.

“I guess...it would be quickest for them to use the adventurers or watchmen under their spell, sir?”

“Exactly. Then, if they find out some of the adventurers have been freed from the spell, what do you think they’ll do next?”

“Oh!” Piarre gasped. “Do you think they’ve set a trap for us, sir?”

I nodded. “Can’t say it’s impossible, can you? And if they do set one, they’ll have to use a summoning circle.”

I wasn’t that much of an expert on summoning circles, so maybe my worries were unfounded. But I couldn’t rule out the possibility that they’d set a trap, and who could honestly say they *wouldn’t* use a summoning circle for it?

“Since we can’t predict their next move, we need to put them in custody as soon as possible. I don’t want there to be any more victims of summoning circles.”

“Got it, sir. I’ll get the people out of the church right away.”

Nalgath’s answer was a relief to hear. Now no villagers would be harmed if something happened here.

“Good afternoon, sir,” a villager standing by the church door greeted me with a smile. I bowed lightly and answered, “Please leave this place immediately. Something’s wrong here.”

“Huh?! But this is a *church*, sir.”

“I know that, but a problem has come up, and you must follow my orders.”

These people were devout worshippers, but I didn’t give a damn about that right now. The villager was wary of the situation, but one look at my face and they stopped breathing. Then they quickly called out to the other worshippers to leave the church, and they all scurried away together. *I must have been making quite the menacing expression there. Well, I won’t apologize for that.*

“Excuse me, but you must leave this church at once.”

Nalgath and his men stepped out from behind me into the church and called out to the people inside.

“What are you doing?! This is a *church*!” A white-haired clergyman scolded Nalgath and his men, but his face tensed when I set foot inside. I held him in the corner of my eye as I ordered all the villagers inside the church to evacuate. They were hesitant at first, but when they saw the look on my face, they promptly jumped out of the pews and scattered from the building.

“This is a church—the adventurer guild has no jurisdiction here! Leave this place at once! That’s an order!” The white-haired clergyman marched up to me, barking commands. I would have obeyed if I were still under the spell, but the spell was broken and my memory was coming back. And *that’s* how I knew. I knew that the way he was speaking to the master of the adventurer guild was very strange.

“What are you doing? I gave you an *order*! Leave!”

He never even considered that I might be free from the spell. He must’ve just been that confident in his spell-casting abilities, which meant that slime Sol’s powers were likely quite tremendous… Without Sol—without Ivy and her party—this village would have been finished.

“But the church struck first—it bared its fangs at the village, and you’ll pay for that.”

“What?!” The white-haired clergyman’s face morphed into shock.

“I’ve got my memory back. I *might* even remember what you did to me in this very place.”

“What… What utter foolishness. Nonsense!”

“You sure sound confident. I guess you cast an extra-powerful spell? But sorry, I remembered. That’s the truth.”

The white-haired clergyman—*what was his name again? Was it three—no, five years ago that the capital officials sent this priest here? Or is he a bishop? I remember this guy casting the spell on me, but I still can’t remember who the hell he is. There’s still a gap in my memory.*

“Everyone’s evacuated, sir,” Nalgath reported, standing at attention beside me.

“The use of summoning circles is illegal. Do you know that?”

“I… I don’t know anything about summoning circles.”

“You don’t?”

I shifted my eyes toward the back where the confessionary was. This church had three of them. Two had their doors open, but the one in the back was shut. When the white-haired clergyman noticed my gaze, the blood drained from his face. I’d told him I had my memory back, but he still didn’t seem to believe me. I could tell that his emotions were incredibly unsteady, though. Why was he so worried when he noticed I was looking at the confessionary? His eyes were darting about something fierce, too.

“That’s the room, right? The room where you brainwashed me.”

I walked toward the confessionary in the back. When I got close to it, another clergyman—one with blue hair—blocked the door. “When the door is shut, it means somebody is inside, sir. We cannot let you disturb them.”

I grabbed the clergyman’s shoulder and tossed him over to Arly.

“Agh!”

Arly caught the stumbling blue-haired clergyman and held him still while I raised my hand to the door.

Click.

It was locked and would not open.

“You’re scaring the people inside. Leave this place at once. I must protest this blasphemy!” The white-haired clergyman—the one not being held back by Arly—grabbed my shoulders and glared into my eyes. He probably thought he still had an angle, which pissed me off. So I gave the door a mighty kick.

“Don’t…!”

The door broke down with a *crack*. Then I saw it—a summoning circle, glowing with an otherworldly light.

“Damn!” The white-haired clergyman body-slammed me onto the ground. The force of the impact pushed me right inside of the very summoning circle which had distracted me.

“Do it!”

“Yes, Father.” The blue-haired clergyman touched the summoning circle with his hand, and the light flashed brighter.

“Guild Master! Arly, grab them!”

A blue light floated up from the summoning circle and bound me like a rope. *That’s right… That’s what happened that day. A blue light rose up from the circle and tied me up like this.*

Consumed by an inexpressible terror from that realization, I writhed inside the summoning circle. But I couldn’t escape—the blue rope of light sank into my body… *That’s right… That day, Matorry was with me…and they pushed me into the summoning circle. And then this blue rope of light…!*

“Nalgath! Get back!”

SIDE:
The Guild Master's Memories

GUILD MASTER ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

FOR SOME REASON, I was worried for everyone who was standing outside the summoning circle. Why was that? The image of a woman keeling over flashed into my mind. *What's that? Who was that? There's a blue line of light between my eyes…*

"Augh! Run! If you touch that, you'll die!"

That's right… The blue line affects everyone outside the summoning circle. The day I chased after Vice-Captain Twill, I lost sight of her. Yes, and I found the summoning circle while I was looking for her. Then I got pushed inside of it. She reached out to save me, but then…before her hand could reach me, the blue line of light attacked her. And she died. I can't remember how she ended up being declared missing several months later, but she died then and there. How could I have possibly forgotten?! Why wasn't I more careful? History is repeating itself!

"Get away! Now! Run for your lives!"

Nalgath and his men tried to turn back, but it was too late. The rope of blue light picked up its momentum and began to penetrate my body—and I could see it shooting toward Nalgath's party at the same time.

"Please, stop!"

I tasted bile, remembering the revolting feeling of the foreign body trying to enter my flesh. But…time ticked on, and that disgusting feeling never came. Why?

"What's this? What's going on?!" the white-haired clergyman protested frantically.

I looked over to see him staring at my legs in shock. I followed his gaze to see that the blue beam of light was being swallowed by my trouser pocket. What was happening?

"Ouch—it's hot!"

As I stared, captivated by the scene, the blue beam made my right trouser pocket burn. I plunged my hand into my pocket

and felt something hard, but it wasn't hot like before. I quizzically removed the hard item from my pocket.

"Wait a minute..."

The blue beam of light had been rising from the summoning circle all the while. But that hard item in my hand—the black magic stone—was swallowing the light just as fast as it rose.

"Guild Master? Is that...?"

From the way Nalgath and his men were staring in shock, they clearly knew about the black magic stones. The blue beam of light gradually waned and the glow of the summoning circle faded with each passing second.

I heard a thud. Looking toward it, I saw the blue-haired clergyman, his face drained of color and his lungs violently gasping for air. The white-haired one pointed soberly at the magic stone.

"How? How did you... Why did the summoning circle... Why...?" He was clearly distraught and not making any sense.

"Guild Master—are you all right?" Arly asked worriedly.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I answered with a smile, casting my gaze down to the jet-black magic stone in my hand. I'd heard that Sol had made it. Ivy had given it to Appas, then Appas gave it to me. Sol's magic stone. Ivy had given it away without much of an explanation. I didn't understand what it was for, but I'd put it in my pocket because I sensed something special about it. But until that very moment, I had forgotten I was carrying it.

"Wow... So *that's* what it can do." The party of four nodded solemnly. "They saved our lives yet again."

That tamer and her monsters really had saved our lives too many times to count. I could never repay them as long as I lived.

The light disappeared completely from the summoning circle. I looked the circle over again before cautiously stepping outside of it. The white-haired clergyman was shaking, his face drained of color.

"Tough break, Bishop Gupinus."

Now I remembered. The white-haired clergyman was Gupinus, a bishop of this church, and the blue-haired man was Father Salify. The deceased man was another priest—I seemed to recall that his name was Miche.

“You’re finished, Gupinus.”

Bishop Gupinus fell to his knees on the floor, mumbling under his breath. I strained my ears to hear what he was saying.

“Why… Why did I fail? This summoning circle was perfect… The experiment was…”

Experiment? What experiment?

“It couldn’t have failed… Th-that magic stone… That’s it! The stone!” Bishop Gupinus looked up with a start. His eyes met mine, then darted down to my hand. The next thing I knew, his hand was flying toward the magic stone. I jumped back a step and clutched it in both of my hands. I would never let him have it.

“Haaand iiiit oveeeer!” Bishop Gupinus howled maniacally as he charged forward.

Nalgath wrapped his arms around the bishop’s neck and knocked him unconscious.

“Phew… That’s the *last* feral bishop I ever wanna see!”

“Agreed.”

Piarre and Juggy sighed heavily in a release of adrenaline.

“Don’t relax yet—they might have buddies lurking nearby.” I stepped out of the confessionary and looked around the church. The multicolored light shining through the stained-glass windows was a beautiful sight.

“You mean there’s more *sick* clergymen like them?” Juggy asked.

I frowned. One of the faces in my memory was familiar, but I wasn’t sure if he was our enemy. After all, he was the one who pushed me inside the summoning circle.

“Chemanta—the former guild master.”

Nalgath and his party froze when they heard the name. Chemanta was a world-famous adventurer. He was never

formally decorated, but many adventurers—myself included—worshipped him. I was deeply honored to take on his mantle. At least I used to be...

With a tired sigh, I said, “Juggy, sketch a copy of that summoning circle.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Nalgath, Arly, come with me. We’re searching the church.” The two nodded. I ordered Piarre to guard the two clergymen we’d caught. “This church has three floors, right?”

“I think so, sir. Do you want to search from the top down?”

“Guess so.”

We climbed up to the third floor and looked around the rooms up there. That floor probably wasn’t in use—all its rooms were empty. We climbed down to the second floor and found signs that two of the rooms were lived in. These were probably Bishop Gupinus and Father Salify’s quarters. Once we made sure nobody was hiding in them, we searched their contents. We found many letters and pieces of paper containing sketches of summoning circles.

“What have we here...?” Nalgath picked up a piece of paper and squinted harshly at it.

“What’s that?” I took the paper from Nalgath and looked it over. It outlined the types of the summoning circles they used, as well as their effects.

“It looks like they were running experiments, sir.”

“I think somebody was giving them orders,” Arly added, handing me some letters. Sure enough, they contained orders to Bishop Gupinus about which summoning circles to use. The letters were unsigned, so we had no idea who had sent them.

“Any leads on who sent these letters?” I asked. I looked over the letters and papers with Gupinus and Salify’s handwriting while Nalgath and Arly searched beside me. They were instructions for the same types of summoning circle experiments that had been performed here. I looked at the results column and found that many subjects had died.

“Um, sir…” Arly held up a piece of paper. When I saw it, I stopped breathing. It was about me: How to brainwash me with a summoning circle, just how much I could be controlled—everything was written up in detail.

“It looks like we were all lab rats, sir,” Nalgath said. The weight of his words hung in the air.

“We sure were. We’re taking all this evidence back to Appas.”

“Yes, sir.”

I somehow managed to swallow my feelings and get busy stuffing the letters and papers into a nearby wooden box. Once everything was packed up, we looked around the room again.

“They might still be hiding something with magic items… What should we do, sir?”

Nalgath’s question reminded me with a jolt that it was indeed possible. And magic items could sometimes only be deactivated by their owners. I thought of the priest and bishop for a moment, but I knew they couldn’t be convinced to cooperate.

“We have a magic item that helps us find magic items, right?” I asked.

Arly nodded. “That can help us *find* any magic items that might be here…but we still wouldn’t be able to *open* them, sir.”

Damn…I guess I’ll have to convince the bishop and priest to help after all. Argh… Here goes nothing.

Chapter 435:
Summoning Circle—Activation

WE ENTERED THE ROOM to find Melisa half-seated, carefully writing out each of the summoning circle's glyphs one by one. I looked up at the ceiling to find an already complete summoning circle.

"Oh, is something wrong, Captain? I'm just finishing up this summoning circle—I'll be done in a jiff."

"Thanks. We just came to check in on you," the captain answered.

"Oh, I'm just fine. I assure you I won't make any mistakes." Melisa flapped the piece of paper in her left hand. It had every glyph used in the summoning circle neatly drawn out.

"You've gotten quite good at drawing, haven't you?"

"Only because I practiced my tail off! So many of these glyphs don't look like proper letters."

I followed Melisa's gaze as it wandered from the captain to the rest of the room, which was full of messy piles of papers covered in practice drawings.

"Ha ha ha! You really did practice your tail off. Thanks."

"You'd better be thankful. These stinking glyphs…"

I gazed at the summoning circle as I listened to the captain and Melisa banter. I could tell its glyphs were completely different from the ones used in the summoning circle that had enchanted Snakey. And if you asked me, some of those "letters" looked an awful lot like pictures…

"There! Just one more glyph and…I'm *finally* done!" Melisa stood up and patted her lower back, which looked awfully stiff.

"That's my Melisa—not a single mistake to be seen," the captain said. "It's perfect. Thanks."

Melisa sighed in relief. "If this thing activates okay, that'll break the spell, right?" Melisa stole a glance at the captain while she was tidying up.

“Yeah, this summoning circle should be able to save a lot of people, but we won’t know whether it works or not until we activate it.”

Even though Melisa copied the summoning circle perfectly, they still don’t know if it will work?

“Is that so, Captain? But I know I didn’t mess up any of the glyphs…”

“Even if you draw them perfectly, sometimes a summoning circle won’t activate.”

“Wow, what a troublesome little thing you are! And here I worked so hard to draw you perfectly, too,” Melisa muttered under her breath at the summoning circle.

“Well, there’s only a slight chance that they won’t work—most summoning circles produce results once you activate them, so it should be okay.”

“I see. Well, I’ll just have to have faith it will work.” Melisa shrugged her shoulders.

The captain nodded. “Yes, faith…” He gave the summoning circle an anguished look, while Melisa uncomfortably stared at the floor.

“Shall I…bring in the people to activate it?” Melisa asked. “They’re standing by…”

The captain frowned and held his chin in his hand. “Sure… let’s try activating the summoning circle for a moment. If it works, then we’ll lift all the curses in order.”

Melisa nodded at the captain’s instruction and left the room.

“Druid…Ivy…people will be coming in here shortly.”

“All right. Let’s go, Ivy.”

“Okay.”

On our way out, I stole a glance at the captain. He was just staring emotionlessly at the summoning circle.

“Phew…” Once we were out of the room, I heaved a quiet sigh. Summoning circles needed to be activated by human hands. Everybody knew what might happen to those people… I

felt the weight of a hand on my head. It moved gently, and all my pent-up tension melted away with it.

I'd been a nervous wreck without realizing it.

"Let's go upstairs."

"Okay. Do you think Sol's magic stones will help?" I asked my father as I walked up the stairs behind him.

"Yeah. I know they will."

We hadn't the faintest clue what sort of powers those magic stones had, but Sol had made them just for us, so there must have been something to them. I just had to have faith.

"Ivy, this house is going to fill up with adventurers and watchmen soon. Let's go back to the guild master's place."

"Okay, good idea."

While my father went to talk to the captain, I turned and started packing up to leave. "Sorry, guys, but we need to lay low at the guild master's house for a while."

My creatures jiggled in reply. I got their bag ready, then put them in one by one.

"Hey there," my father greeted me when he came back. "Ready?"

"Oh, wait!" As we were walking out the back entrance of the captain's house, Eche stopped us. We turned around to see her carrying a basket. "Take this lunch with you. Don't worry, I would never poison anything meant for Ivy to eat."

Does that mean…she would poison the food if I wasn't *eating it?*

"Also, the summoning circle activated. Have a safe trip back." With that, Eche promptly returned to the house. *She must be busy.*

"So the summoning circle works," I said.

"Sounds like it. The watchmen will be here any minute, I'll bet."

"Oh…"

I should be happy that it activated, but I'm not. I feel torn. Being able to make that decision shows how strong the captain is.

“I’m going to tell you what the captain told me, Ivy. I think it’s best you know.”

“Yes, please.”

“They’re going to keep the summoning circle active as long as they can. For today, however, they’re just keeping watch. They have a target of one hundred people for now, and they’ll see how it affects them.”

So they’re testing how well the summoning circle works for now?

“If those one hundred people have no adverse reactions tomorrow, then they’ll go into full swing, breaking the spell on the adventurers and watchmen. Since they want to free as many people from the spell as possible, they’re going to activate the summoning circle repeatedly without a break.”

I could see why. If they waited much longer, more people could wind up like the gatekeepers. On the other hand, if they activated the summoning circle that way, would the people working the spell be okay?

“The only catch is, while this summoning circle has been activated a number of times, it has never been done in succession like this, which means there’s no telling if any problems might come up.”

“What kind of problems?”

“The captain said they can’t even predict it… But you’re worried about the spell-casters, right, Ivy?”

“Yeah. I’m afraid they might go mad.”

“I know. It happened to one of the gatekeepers.”

“Yeah.”

“The people who’ve gathered to operate the summoning circle have no idea how many times they’ll be able to activate it.”

“Really? They have *no* idea at all?”

“I’m afraid not. We’re hoping everyone will be freed from the spell before any of the casters lose their minds, but I think that’s going to end up being difficult.”

Well, yeah… There are just too many people under the spell. And with a lot of them, we aren't even sure whether they're under it or not.

"That's why Zinal and his men are on standby at the house—in case the worst happens."

They are?

"When someone loses their mind, their sense of pain dulls. Sometimes they'll lash violently out at people until they can't move. And since they're not in their right mind, they're hard to fight because their moves are tricky to predict. According to the captain, there've been documented cases of people still rampaging several minutes after their hearts stop."

That's terrifying.

"Since the captain is in no condition to handle that, Eche is on standby with Zinal and his men."

I remembered how frail the captain looked. The light in his eyes was strong, but he definitely seemed weak in the muscles.

"But Mr. Zinal and his men should be able to take care of everything, right?"

"Yeah, they'll be fine… Will you be okay, Ivy?" My father peered at me worriedly. I smiled awkwardly back and nodded. If I had to say one way or the other, I probably would be okay. I just felt so terribly hopeless…

I wish summoning circles would just go away forever.

Chapter 436:
Terrible and Tragic

“I’M BACK... OOH, SOMETHING SMELLS GOOD.”

My father and I were sitting down to a dinner of improvised gyuu-don when the guild master returned, lines of fatigue in his face. Juggy was with him, eyeing what was in my hands with curiosity.

“Would you like some, sir? I can make you a bowl in no time.”

“Oh, really? That stuff you’re eating looks...very peculiar.” The guild master meandered over to us and stared skeptically at the gyuu-don on the plate. I gave him a curious look back. He seemed more than tired—I sensed a sort of desperation and hopelessness in his eyes. Had something happened to him?

“That really does smell good. Can I have some? What about you, Juggy?”

“Do you have enough for me as well?”

“Of course, sir. Will anyone else be joining us?” If Nalgath and the others would be coming, I might not have quite enough to go around.

“No, it’s just us.”

“Got it. Wait just a moment.”

“It’s okay, go ahead and finish eating yours first.”

“All right.” I hurried through the rest of my own gyuu-don before heading off to the kitchen to cook more for the guild master and Juggy. I had made enough for there to be leftovers, so the pot still had plenty. While I transferred it to smaller bowls to reheat, I took some hot rice out of the magic box I kept in the kitchen.

“Lemme help,” Juggy said, popping his head into the kitchen.

“Oh, but there’s actually nothing to do, sir.”

“Really?”

“Yes. All I need to do is pour the stuff on this rice and it’s done.”

“Dang, that’s fast. By the way, what kind of meat are you using?”

“A few different types. This time, I’ve got five or six kinds. I just add all the leftover bits I happen to have.” I really loved how you could make the dish tasty in a whole new way by swapping out the meat. “Oh, also, would you like me to add some hexafruit?” Lately, I’d managed to stop calling them “eggs” instead of hexafruit…though sometimes I still slipped up and would say “eggs.”

“Is it better with or without?” Juggy asked.

With or without? Hmm… It really depends on what you like.

“I like it better *with* hexafruit,” my father said, entering the room after overhearing our conversation.

“Then I’ll have mine with it, too.”

“Ivy, I’ll take one of those as well.”

Now both Juggy and the guild master were adding hexafruit. Once the stew was warm, I added a lightly warmed hexafruit on top and put it on the flame. Then I set all that on top of the rice. When I set the two portions before the men, they delightedly tucked in.

“Yum! What kind of meat is this?”

“It’s a mystery—I added all the little bits of leftover meat I happened to have.”

“Oh, did you? It tastes awfully good, considering.” The guild master was eating with such vigor that I was a little stunned. He finished his dinner and was staring at his empty plate before I knew it.

“We still have more, sir.”

“Oh… Could I?” The guild master awkwardly handed me his plate.

A smile filled my face. “Yes, sir.” When I took the plate, he smiled back. *Oh, good. He looks calmer now. Maybe he’s been able to sort out his feelings a bit*. I got him a second helping and set it

in front of him. “Here you go.” I looked at Juggy’s plate and saw that he was already finished, too “Would you like some more?”

“No thanks, I’m full. It was delicious.”

The satisfied smile on Juggy’s face made me smile in turn. *I really do love it when people say my cooking was delicious and mean it.* After everyone had finished eating, I took all the plates back to the kitchen.

“You could have all stayed at the table and relaxed,” I told the guild master and Juggy as they washed plates and pots next to me. I’d suggested they all have some tea, but they insisted on thanking me by helping with the dishes. They tried to do all the work between the two of them, but that didn’t feel right to me, so I was helping, too.

“*You* could have stayed at the table and relaxed, Ivy,” the guild master sighed.

Should I have? But wouldn’t it be rude for me to relax when the guild master and Juggy must have had a harder day than me?

My father poked his head into the kitchen. “Tea and dessert are ready. Are you all finishing up in here?”

“Yeah, we’re done.”

“Okay then, let’s all have a nice cup of tea!”

We returned to the room where we’d just eaten dinner and I sat beside my father.

“Guild Master…something happened, didn’t it?”

As the guild master and Juggy sat still, quietly sipping their tea, my father fixed a scrutinizing look on the guild master, who smiled sheepishly. I didn’t detect any of the earlier desperation or helplessness in his eyes, but he looked very sad.

“Damn. What gave it away?”

“Well, those eyes, for a start.”

The guild master took a long sip of tea. “When we got to the church…a lot of memories came back. I remembered the people who shoved me into that summoning circle.”

The guild master had an expression I couldn’t quite place… Was it resentment, or perhaps conflict?

“Chemanta, the former guild master who showed me the mental state and skills I needed for the job—he was the one who pushed me into the summoning circle, right along with Matorry.”

The former guild master?

“That bastard betrayed this village.”

“I’m so sorry…”

The guild master tearfully chuckled under his breath. When I saw the look in his eyes, I could feel the heavy weight pinning down his heart.

“We also found out what exactly they were doing in Hataka… They were conducting summoning circle experiments.”

Experiments? My father and I exchanged quizzical glances, then turned toward the guild master. He looked at my father and sneered bitterly. “We found letters in the bishop’s room with orders on which summoning circles to use. Then they charted out the results of their experiments—we found those papers, too.”

Oh my God!

“We arrested the bishop who had the letters and the priest who was activating the summoning circle. Chemanta wasn’t anywhere to be found, and he hasn’t been around Hataka lately anyway. He probably skipped town long ago.” The guild master tightly clenched his fists.

“We’re going to search the entire village tomorrow afternoon,” Juggy said, keeping an eye on the guild master as he spoke. “We’re looking for the former guild master Chemanta, Matorry the tamer, and Agache, Mitoria, and Sasaela—all mid-level adventurers.”

A search of the entire village? And I wonder how those mid-level adventurers are involved?

“Why are you looking for those mid-level adventurers?”

“Since their names were mentioned in the letters, we’ve concluded that they must have been accomplices, and so we added them on our list. Also, the ringleader probably sent in Sasaela as a mole among the adventurers.”

“Ah.”

A mole among the adventurers? What for?

"Um, why do you think Sasaela was sent in, sir?"

The guild master gave me a quizzical look. "To keep track of the progress, I imagine."

Keep track of the progress? "But what progress, sir?"

"To see how long it takes…before people are no longer useful."

To see how long people are useful? Does he mean to see how long they can last before they lose their minds? How terrible!

"Do you know who was sending the orders?" my father asked.

The guild master and Juggy shook their heads. "Whoever sent those letters didn't say a single thing about themselves. We're going back to the church tomorrow for another search. I only hope we find something."

"What about the bishop and priest?"

"We're figuring out if they've been poisoned—and also if they've been cursed."

Poisoned? Cursed? I have heard of crime organizations making their lackeys poison themselves if they're captured so they can't leak information, but would the priest and bishop actually do that? And what kind of curse would they be under?

"What kind of curse, sir?"

"From what the captain learned in his last run-in with a summoning circle, there's a curse that kills the victim if it's activated by a trigger word."

How terrifying.

"He said he wanted to check to see if they were cursed. If they are, he wants us to find a way to free them, no matter how long it takes. There's a lot we'd like to ask them, you know."

I would think so! But my goodness, it really seems like these people who love summoning circles have no regard for human life whatsoever. They run experiments on them, cast them aside without a care…and it's just so very tragic.

Chapter 437:
Sol's Magic Stones

"Is there a way to break the spell?"

"The captain says there is…but we're not sure yet." Juggy shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, by the way, Appas had a message for you, Ivy," the guild master said.

"Did he, sir?"

"Yes. He said, 'Thanks. You really saved us.'"

I really saved them… How? The only thing I can think of is the magic stones, maybe. I hope they worked out well.

"It turns out there are much fewer distortions if you use the magic stones to activate the summoning circle."

So it was *the magic stones… Wait, "distortions"? Um, what does he mean by that? I've heard so many lectures about summoning circles lately, but I don't remember hearing anything about distortions.*

"What's this about *distortions*?"

My father's question confirmed it was something we simply had not been taught. *What a relief. I mean, my head has been crammed with so much information over the past few days that I'm a little disoriented. I would have normally noticed the gap in my knowledge right away… Maybe I'm over-exhausted. Funny, I feel like I'm getting plenty of rest, though.*

"Remember how activating a summoning circle damages your magic core?"

"Yeah, I remember," my father answered. I nodded—that I did remember well.

"When your core is wounded, that distorts your magic energy."

Ohh, okay. So I guess it's like vibrations from the wound?

"The greater the distortions, the more wounded your core will be. On the other hand, the fewer distortions, the lighter your

wounds will be."

Okay, so using Sol's magic stones to activate the summoning circle caused fewer distortions, which meant people didn't get hurt too badly. Does this mean the brave people operating the summoning circle might not lose their minds?

"That might be wishful thinking, but still..."

I hope we can stop them from losing their minds... But wait a minute, how do you even activate a summoning circle with a magic stone? I'd better ask the captain next time I see him.

"Sol's magic stones sure are incredible," my father said.

I smiled softly. Sol never ceased to amaze me. Truth be told, I'd been nervous giving them the magic stones when I didn't know if or how they would work. I never would have dreamed they'd help activate summoning circles more safely... I looked at the four creatures curled up on a pile of towels in the corner of the room, all sleeping off a hard play session. Just the sight of them was therapeutic. Noticing my gaze, the guild master looked to the corner of the room.

"They're all so cute."

"Yep!"

Oops, I just answered him casually like he's my father! I need to be more careful.

"Pefu!"

Noticing our stares, Sol woke up and looked around before yawning and falling back asleep. I didn't blame it; the quartet had chased each other gleefully around all the rooms ever since we'd gotten back to the guild master's house. They had to be pooped.

"Oh, I've been meaning to thank them, too," the guild master said, pulling something black out of his pocket and handing it to me. It was one of the magic stones Sol had made that I'd given to the captain. I remembered how surprised I was the first time I saw Sol make magic stones just like Flame did.

"Huh? Why do you have this stone, sir?"

I don't remember giving any magic stones to the guild master...

"Appas let me borrow it."

Oh, so it's from the captain.

"He told me Sol made this black magic stone. And if you can believe it, I was pushed into a summoning circle earlier today—I almost got cursed."

"What?! Oh, are you okay, sir?" How could he say something so horrific with a smile on his face?

"I'm fine, as you can see. It was terrifying and disorienting, of course, but the magic stone saved me, Ivy."

The magic stone saved him? I took the jet-black stone from the guild master. It still made me feel a little scared, even now.

"When I was in the activated summoning circle, a blue beam of light tried to pierce my body, but this magic stone devoured it all."

The magic stone devoured it? I looked at it again. "Wow, I didn't realize it could do that."

"You didn't know?"

"I had no idea whatsoever, sir. Right, Dad?"

"Yeah, we'd never seen black magic stones before."

The guild master smiled sarcastically at the casual tone of our conversation. Juggy observed the scene with a look of vacant shock. "Um, wouldn't most people be a little more surprised by that? Mr. Druid, Ivy, how can you be so calm?" he asked.

I gave him a quizzical look. "Oh, but we are surprised."

"It's a magic stone Sol made, after all… Anything was possible," my dad added.

The guild master laughed and Juggy let out an exasperated sigh. "Are your creatures really that full of surprises?" he asked, looking at the pile of sleeping creatures.

"Well, they certainly have surprised us in many ways," my dad admitted. "I was overwhelmed by it at first, but now I'm used to it."

My father really had adjusted to a lot of things. I remembered how he used to look worried every time Ciel, Sora, or Flame did something. It wasn't that long ago, but those days already felt like a happy memory.

“I can’t quite put my finger on it…” The guild master stopped chuckling and looked at each of us one by one. We answered with confused looks, and then he broke into a big smile. “After I found out the former guild master betrayed us, I was fuming with anger when I got home.”

I gave him a quizzical look. It seemed less like he was angry and more like he was feeling desperate or helpless.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly angry…it was more like an inexplicable resentment. I was worried what I might say or how I might act, so I had Juggy come home with me since he knows the situation.”

Oh, wow. I had no idea.

“And when I stepped in the front door, I got a shock.”

A shock?

“The mood inside my house was just so starkly different from the way it usually is. Usually, my home feels, well, *cold* to me…but today, it felt warm. There were even delicious smells coming from the kitchen. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I smelled them. And when I came inside, you greeted me with a smile and fed me a delicious meal. Then, before I knew it, the resentment I’d been feeling before was all gone. It’s strange, I know.”

“*Is* it strange, sir? Eating delicious food *always* calms frayed nerves.”

The guild master chuckled softly. “I didn’t know that until today.”

“Wow, I feel sorry for you.”

“Ha ha ha ha!” The guild master and Juggy both laughed.

“To be honest, I was torn on whether to tell you what we learned today. I didn’t want to get you two any more involved in our mess. Appas wasn’t sure, either.”

As far as I was concerned, we were already fully involved. Besides, if the captain and guild master hadn’t told us about the day’s news, we definitely would’ve asked.

“But for some reason, I wanted to confide in you both. I’m sorry—I was thinking only of myself.”

“If you hadn’t confided in us, I would’ve asked you about it anyway,” my father said. “I don’t feel right if I’m stuck on the margins.”

The guild master smiled sheepishly. “But the more you learn about summoning circles, the more danger you’re in. You might even become tempted by their power.”

Was that what had happened to the former guild master? Did he succumb to the summoning circle’s temptation? As for me, the more I learned about summoning circles, the more they terrified me.

Though I’ll admit that a part of me felt tempted by them since I had no magic energy of my own. It came at such a big price, though. Maybe that was why summoning circles felt terrifying and creepy to me, rather than tempting…

SIDE:
The Captain's Anguish

VILLAGE WATCH CAPTAIN APPAS'S PERSPECTIVE

"WHAT'S THE VERDICT?"

When I entered the room, the summoning circle flashed for a moment, then quickly faded out. Then, the person inside it gasped and looked at their surroundings. Melisa called them over and then gave them a checkup while explaining what had happened to them. She had the patient go into the next room to rest while Acting Vice-Captain Gigina briefed them on what the plan was moving forward while answering their questions.

It was a scene I had already witnessed countless times. At first, the adventurers and watchmen would be awestruck when they were freed from the spell. Some took longer than others, but everyone managed to grasp the situation in the end. It was clear from the looks on their faces that they were relieved to learn they had friends going through the same crisis. It's reassuring to know you aren't alone.

"It truly is remarkable, Captain. I'm not at all tired."

The one operating the summoning circle at the moment was Mithran. One of his gloves had a protrusion in the palm where Sol's magic stone was concealed. When Ivy first gave me the stones, the power they held was a mystery, but none of us could have ever foreseen what remarkable abilities the stones had. I shuddered to think what would happen if our enemies got ahold of them.

"Mithran, don't you dare tell a soul…"

Under no circumstances could anybody ever see or find out that we were using a magic stone to operate a summoning circle.

"I know. We're dealing with some crazy-dangerous stuff here." Mithran's eyes narrowed to slits. He put on a friendly face, but he was a force you did *not* want to mess with. I couldn't count the number of times I'd been relieved he wasn't my enemy. Especially now—I was so glad to have him as an ally.

“Well, for the time being, it’s a necessary evil for us.”

We’d had Sol free Mithran and the other summoning circle operators from the spell because they had a degree of knowledge about the circles and I believed they would agree to help me. I openly told them everything: what was happening and what we were planning on doing. As I talked to them, they realized what I was asking of them and committed to the potential consequences. I almost broke down and begged for their forgiveness multiple times, but I didn’t have the right to apologize to them. My guilt didn’t matter; only their bravery and sacrifice would resolve this problem. In times like this, I felt so helpless. No matter what I did, I couldn’t save them.

“I’ve still got a few rounds left in me. Go ahead and bring in the next subject.”

As Mithran assumed his usual smile and casually waved in another person, a wry smile crept onto my face. Sol’s magic stone was easing my worries. I was starting to believe that maybe I wouldn’t have to lose Mithran and the other operators after all.

“Be sure you take breaks. I don’t want you fainting on my watch.”

I had to project strength and confidence. When I accepted my title, I’d made peace with the fact that people were going to resent and hate me. I would protect Hataka, even if it meant sending people off to their deaths. I had to make peace with all of this and commit to the job. But committing was one thing; accepting reality was no easy task. There were countless times when I’d wanted to run away from it all, and I even almost went through with it once. I stayed here because I had allies, and yet I had made the call to sacrifice them.

“Come on, we’ll be fine. If something happens, I’ll deal with it,” said a voice from the corner of the room. It was Ugalpa, who had been working the summoning circle before Mithran.

“How are you feeling? Notice any changes?” When I shot him the questions, he laughed and answered he was fine. Hearing that made the tension in my shoulders melt away, and Ugalpa laughed again at the sight of it.

“Ha ha ha! You really are a worrywart. We’ll be *fine*, okay? Thanks to those magic stones, we aren’t feeling any side effects. There’s not even a hint of the discomfort I felt before. It’s baffling, really.”

Ugalpa and Mithran were adventurers I’d met during my previous run-in with a summoning circle. They knew full well the dangers of the circles, and yet they’d agreed to help me. They were the best friends a guy could ever dream of.

“How did Mapa do?” Ugalpa asked, referring to another adventurer in the same party as him and Mithran.

“Sleeping soundly as we speak. Won’t wake for quite some time, I imagine.”

Ugalpa started laughing again, but his smile vanished at the sound of a knock at the door. “Come in.”

The door opened, and in walked a middle-aged village watchman with a younger colleague in tow. “Sorry we’re late.”

“Ah, good. You’re here. Sorry, but would you mind standing in the middle of that area for a bit?” Mithran asked.

The younger watchman looked apprehensive, but since I wasn’t commanding Mithran to stop, he cautiously stepped inside the summoning circle.

“Mithran, if you sense anything is wrong, abort *immediately* and call for me.” I repeated the warning yet again as I walked out of the room. The middle-aged watchman followed. “Anyone try to escape?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Good. Bring the next one in. No—hold that thought. You’ve already been working for three hours. Get somebody to replace you and go take a break.”

“Um, sir, I can keep going…”

“It’s only going to get wilder from here. Take breaks whenever you have the chance.”

My watchman raised a curious eyebrow at my order, but he knew he had to obey regardless how he felt about it, so he nodded.

“Rest up while you can. You might not get any breaks tomorrow.”

The watchman nodded and called out to his replacement. After I confirmed that the exchange was made, I went upstairs to the room where Mapa was asleep.

“Phew…” I sighed heavily.

“You okay? You look exhausted.” My shoulders flinched a little when I realized Mapa was awake. I’d assumed he would be asleep for a while longer.

“I’m fine. The effects of the booze wear off yet, Mapa?”

When the summoning circle was ready and Ugalpa and Mithran asked their comrade to join them, he’d been quite drunk. He apologized, but that wasn’t the first time his drinking had caused problems.

“I’m still a bit buzzed but okay otherwise. Are Ugalpa and Mithran operating the summoning circle in turns?” Mapa poured some water from a pitcher into a cup and gulped it down.

“Yeah, they are… Mapa, ease off on the drinking, will ya? You’re too old for this.”

Mapa was the oldest in his party, after all. He scowled at me and said, “I ain’t *that* old.”

“Bull—you’re over sixty.”

Mapa sighed quietly and adjusted his clothing. “Okay, guess I’ll go join my buddies and help out.” He got out of bed right away and turned to leave the room, but then he stopped by the door and said, “Appas…you made the right call. I believe in you.”

Mapa’s words hit me right in the heart. He knew exactly what I was going through and was eager to help.

“Thanks…” I finally managed to squeeze the word out.

“I’ve got your back!” With a hearty chuckle, Mapa walked downstairs. Sol’s magic stones were saving our hides, but how much longer would they last? We still had so many cursed people to save. Would the stones’ power hold out until everyone was free?

Knock, knock.

“Hm? Who’s there?”

“Hello there.” Zinal popped his head around the door and smiled sheepishly at the sight of me. I must not have been hiding my feelings well. “We’re standing by on the first floor in case something happens.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

“Not at all. Captain, you should go to bed.” And with that, Zinal promptly closed the door, his descending footsteps echoing from behind it.

“Agggh…” I knew he was right, but I just couldn’t fall asleep these days. I’d been tricked by the enemy’s spell, and I’d made the choice to sacrifice my friends… I couldn’t get those thoughts out of my head. “Guess I’m getting too old for this, too.”

Which reminds me… The person I was hoping to choose as my replacement died in this whole summoning circle mess.

“Argh… What do I do now?”

SIDE:
The Captain and the Guild Master, Part 1

VILLAGE WATCH CAPTAIN APPAS'S PERSPECTIVE

"I'M COMING IN... A-Appas, what are you doing?"

A glance at the door revealed Uliga, flustered by the sight of me. *Well, I don't blame him. I'm even more embarrassed than he is. Imagine having your friend walk in on you while you're smoothing your wrinkles in the mirror...* I'd been thinking about how I was getting too old for this, then my eyes naturally wandered to the mirror and my rather wrinkled face stared back at me. Since I had been asleep for a couple of years and lost a lot of weight, the wrinkles were very deep. So I was just innocently tugging at them a little, to smooth them out...never even dreaming that somebody'd walk in on me. I discreetly lowered my hands and meandered over to a nearby chair, trying not to look at Uliga.

"Agh... Go ahead and sit."

"Right. Hey, have you lost your mar... Er, never mind."

"No, I have *not* lost my marbles!"

"...Okay."

Hey, what's with the pause? Well, then again, if I walked in on Uliga doing the same thing... Yeah, I'd be concerned for his sanity, all right, even if he insisted he was sane. I shouldn't have snapped at him.

"I just came back from the church." He was changing the subject on my behalf, and I appreciated it.

"How'd it go?"

"I remembered a lot. I think the whole plot started right around the time Bishop Gupinus came to this village."

Bishop Gupinus? Who was that again?

"Don't you remember him? I recall him stopping by the guild and the village watch station to introduce himself."

"Bishop Gupinus... Ohh, yeah, he was a sketchy guy, wasn't he?"

That's right. The moment I saw him, a bad feeling ran through my veins.

"You think so? He didn't seem sketchy to me."

Uliga's words gave me pause. Were we each thinking about a different person?

"I'll have a look at Bishop Gupinus when I get a moment," I said.

"We slapped slave bands on his wrists and threw him in a cell at the watch station. We locked up his accomplice, Father Salify, at the guild."

Slave bands?

"But they haven't been officially convicted of their crimes yet. Why did you put slave bands on them?"

It was fine and all to put slave bands on someone who'd been properly convicted, but they were merely arrested suspects. If we put slave bands on them prematurely, there would be a mess for us to clean up later. Uliga was well aware of that…so why had he done it?

"Did you forget? A trigger word might activate a curse on them."

"Ohh, yes, now I remember. Well, I'll look into that right away, so you should be able to take off their slave bands."

The culprit who used the summoning circle in my earlier encounter died because I said the wrong word and activated the circle. But now, I could quickly figure out if somebody was under a similar curse. Even if they were under it, they would be fine as long as they didn't *hear* the word—the curse would not activate if you simply *saw* the trigger word. Because of this, it wasn't as dangerous as it had been in the past. Still, the method for breaking the curse had many opportunities for things to go wrong, so you couldn't say it was a hundred percent safe.

"Their bellies and backs," Uliga said.

"Hm?"

"Gupinus and Salify's bellies and backs had summoning circles carved on them."

"What?!"

Summoning circles carved on their bellies and backs… Wait— carved*? How?*

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, we noticed them when we put them in their cells and changed their clothes. There was no telling what might happen, so we used the slave bands. That way, they can’t try any funny business themselves.”

True, those men would not be able to do anything. We could simply restrict all their movements with the slave bands. But couldn’t somebody else still activate the summoning circles?

“*Oh!* Is that why you put them in separate cells?”

“Yeah, there was no telling what they might try if we kept them together. We put slave bands on Father Salify as well.”

From what he was telling me, the slave bands did sound like a reasonable precaution. Even if we got in trouble for it later, we had a valid explanation. Then again, from the sound of things, I had a feeling it would get swept under the rug anyway.

“I also remembered who pushed me into the summoning circle to begin with: the former guild master, Chemanta.”

“What?!”

I felt like I’d just heard a very strange name.

“Chemanta, our former guild master, was involved in the conspiracy.” Uliga looked at me and smiled sadly.

“And you’re sure of it?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Chemanta was Hataka’s former guild master. Could it be possible that a man who loved this village so much had put its citizens under a curse? But I could tell from the look on Uliga’s face that he wasn’t lying. In fact, the grim truth had probably hit him the hardest of all. Chemanta had been like a father to Uliga.

“Wow. Chemanta, eh…?”

What the hell happened? Chemanta had become the guild master a little while before I took over as captain of the watch. We drank and made merry together, and we solved Hataka’s

problems together. I saw how passionate he had been about helping Hataka. *So why…?*

"One more thing…"

Ugh, there's more?

"They were using Hataka as a testing site for experiments." Uliga took a stack of papers out of his magic bag. I grabbed one of the sheets and looked it over. It had a sketch of a summoning circle with a list of its aftereffects on the side. The more sheets of paper I read, the more I saw the word "deceased" pop up. Were those the corpses we'd found in the cave? I suddenly noticed one of the papers was different from the others in the pile. I pulled it out and read it, and discovered it was a letter addressed to Gupinus with a list of commands.

First the papers documenting the experiments, and now this letter…

"Yes, it does look like we were a big experiment. And somebody was orchestrating the whole thing."

"We haven't done a full investigation yet, but the letters look like they're all in the same handwriting, so we assume it was just one person behind everything."

Uliga pulled a letter out of the stack of papers. Then his face twitched. I kept an eye on him while I looked over the several remaining sheets. Each one documented in detail all the negative effects of the summoning circle activations.

"Say, Appas…why do ya think people got hurt every time a summoning circle was activated? Don't they only hurt people if you keep activating them over and over?"

Come to think of it, I still haven't explained all the details about summoning circles to Uliga yet. I didn't want him in too deep.

"That's partly true—if you keep activating a summoning circle, you'll eventually lose your mind. People kept getting hurt or killed whenever a circle was activated because the glyphs were written incorrectly. If even one of the glyphs in a summoning circle is off, its power becomes wildly unstable. That's why you must *always* write each glyph in a summoning circle with absolute perfection."

Summoning circles might seem easy to draw because they're made of a specific combination of words, but that couldn't be further from the truth. To make a proper summoning circle, you had to choose the right words. This selection process was a particularly brutal task—if you got the balance of words even slightly off, the circle's power would go wild and people would get hurt. What's more, sometimes it would yield results not intended in your combination of words. In short, you had to spend a lot of time and hurt a lot of people to finish a summoning circle.

"Oh...! Looks like Chemanta *was* tempted by the summoning circle's power."

In the upper margins of the papers documenting the summoning circle's issues, I spotted some very familiar handwriting. It was a stylized script I had seen for years and years while working together with its writer. It was Chemanta's handwriting.

"Appas...do many people fall victim to a summoning circle's temptation?" Uliga asked, tracing the lines of the circle on the paper with his finger.

"Not many fall...but quite a few do. Many scientists have fallen into temptation, gone mad, and had to be put down."

"Oh, wow..."

Those who fell into temptation always experimented with small summoning circles that were difficult to trace. But with each success, their efforts would get more and more extreme until they eventually tried their hands at the most dangerous circles.

"Do you know where Chemanta might be right now?" I asked.

"We're going to conduct a full search of the village starting tomorrow. He might have already skipped town."

That was probably true. Considering Hataka's fate, it would make sense for him to retreat and pick up the experiments in a new place—if he still had his mind intact, that is.

"Any ideas on who delivered those letters?" Uliga asked.

I looked at one of them. They were clean and beautiful, with nothing unique about them—they were textbook-perfect letters. Unfortunately, they didn't look familiar to me.

"I don't know… Could be somebody connected with the church."

Uliga nodded. Since a priest and a bishop were involved, it threw the entire church under suspicion. They had an abnormally strong sense of camaraderie. The church's influence waned the closer you got to the capital, but it still held power in the more remote villages. It manipulated the villagers with useless teachings, and it consolidated its power with each sacrificed life.

"So what do we do about it?"

"Now that the church has reared its ugly head, we must report to the royal family. Know anything, Uliga?"

"About how the church and the royal family get along? I don't know much, but I've heard they have a bad relationship."

"Ah."

"So what's their relationship really like?" Uliga asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's not so much the royal family and the church—it's the *king* and the church. They'll keep on fighting until one of them disappears."

Uliga nodded grimly. "So watch, I'll bet they're using summoning circles to attack each other," he joked.

I nodded. "Exactly."

"Huh?! Seriously?"

Uliga probably hadn't been expecting that answer. He gave me a rather bewildered look, and I smiled grimly.

"Yeah. Seriously."

SIDE:
The Captain and the Guild Master, Part 2

VILLAGE WATCH CAPTAIN APPAS'S PERSPECTIVE

"IS IT OKAY FOR ME to know about this?" Uliga gave me a wary look. *Was* it okay for him to know? I wasn't sure, but we were already right in the thick of a big summoning circle plot orchestrated by the church.

"Don't you think that ship has sailed?"

Uliga clutched his head and groaned. I wasn't surprised—this was the same guy who always suspected what I was up to and had become an expert in avoiding getting involved. Not sure how to put it...

"Sorry for your loss?"

"Thanks. I'm *beyond* pissed off."

Hey, watch your mouth. Technically, I'm your senior. Well...title-wise, we're equals, though.

"The connection between the royal family and the church goes way back—for centuries, as far as I know. Search high and low and you won't find out how their connection got started, but the royal family has been trying to take power away from the church while the church has been trying to take *everything* away from the royal family. We thought it was just your typical power struggle for a while, but turns out it goes deeper than that."

"And they just whisk us up into their big conspiracy," Uliga sighed. "Well, if it's not a power struggle, then what is it? And what do summoning circles have to do with it?"

Ooh, so he's all in? I looked at Uliga...and when I saw the anguished look on his face, I couldn't help but grin.

"Stop smiling. Pisses me off."

Well, I can't help it! I'm just excited to finally have somebody I can confide in.

"I don't know how many years ago this happened, but the church bastards tried to use a summoning circle to brainwash

the king's little brother into murdering him. The catch is, this story has *a lot* of holes in it. I couldn't do enough research to find out if it's true or not. And the higher-ups made me drop the case halfway. The fact that they made me quit makes me think it's at least partially true."

That was sure a sticky situation! I'd really been terrified they'd disappear me if I stuck my nose where they didn't want it.

"So the church brought summoning circles back into play?"

I shook my head. "We don't know anything about that. Considering the experiments they were doing on Hataka, it's possible. But then, the royal family is *also* heavily involved with summoning circles."

"They are?"

"Yeah. Long ago, I found a summoning circle under the castle. It was quite old, to boot. It was so big I could hardly see the entire thing, and I remember it used some very complex glyphs. I might've learned something about that summoning circle if I could've looked at it just a little longer, but somebody almost caught me and I had to hightail it out of there."

"You ran away?"

"Yep, and I almost didn't make it." If I had been just ten seconds slower, they would've found and disposed of me. "I tried casually strolling down there again, but they'd amped up security and it felt risky, so I gave up. The thing is—there *is* a summoning circle under the castle, so the royal family must have a connection with the things."

I wished I could have seen it just once more. It looked old, but it was very beautiful.

"Appas…I'm surprised you're even still alive."

"Ha ha ha ha! I'm just lucky. When I was younger, I couldn't resist the urge to play detective."

As I laughed, I heard the loudest sigh of my life blow in my ear. "So? What do we do now?"

"If it were just a summoning circle, that would be one thing. But now that the church is involved, the crown will give out royal orders."

“Ah… What a pain in the ass.”

Exactly. Once the crown issued royal orders, that made everything more difficult. Our current king was sharp as a razor, so Uliga and I had to coordinate very carefully what we would tell him.

“Think we’ll be able to keep our little friends a secret?”

“Oh, don’t worry about them. If a cursed contract is broken, whoever told the secret, whoever heard the secret, and whoever commanded it are all cursed. Unless our king is a fool, he would never go out of his way to be cursed.”

Cursed contracts are terrifyingly powerful things.

“Why do you think Zinal and his men used that kind of contract anyway?”

That question was nagging at my mind as well. It was already odd that they happened to be carrying so many sheets with them in the first place, but I was very curious as to why they had used cursed contracts without hesitation. I’d heard that they were in Hataka to celebrate Zinal’s son being promoted to elite adventurer—but was that even true? Something didn’t add up.

“Thinking about Zinal?” Uliga asked as he took a sip of tea.

I nodded. “Nothing came up when you ran his name, right?”

“Nothing suspicious, no,” Uliga gave me the same answer as he did before.

“Yes, I guess nothing would.”

“Appas, why did you believe my answer so easily? You usually have your doubts, even when I look something up for you.”

“Aghhh…”

“What? Just say it.”

“It’s just… Ivy said, ‘Zinal and his men are safe.’ Ha ha ha! I just kinda believed her for some reason.”

I mean, how couldn’t I, when she looked me so earnestly in the eye and said it? Uliga seemed satisfied with my answer, however.

“What is Ivy’s deal, anyway? I feel like there’s a power behind her words.”

“Well, one thing’s for sure: She’s *not* just a cute little girl. Not only is she mature beyond her years, she has sharp judgment, too. Sometimes she looks her age, but there’s something…*off* about her. The thing is, I don’t think she’s an enemy.”

It was a strange sensation. Something felt very off about her. Ordinarily, I’d be suspicious of a person like that—even if they saved my life. But not an ounce of suspicion surfaced when I thought of Ivy.

“One thing I *do* know, though, is I don’t want the royal family or those church freaks to know about her. I’d rather die.”

Ivy had no idea just what incredible powers she possessed. She had some extremely rare and valuable slimes in her service, and she had the help of an adandara—a monster legendary even among elite-level creatures. She had a keen sense of judgment and knew when she needed to be on guard, and yet, for some reason, she hadn’t noticed that she herself was incredibly powerful. The mystery of it all tormented me, but if I asked her about it, she wouldn’t understand what I was talking about. From the look of Druid, he must have issued her all sorts of warnings over their time together. And she understood these warnings on a linguistic level, but she didn’t grasp the true meaning behind them. It was the sort of thing that she simply *couldn’t* understand until she noticed it for herself.

“It’s bizarre that she shows people all her cards so easily,” Uliga said.

I smiled cynically. The way she spoke so openly about her slimes and her adandara made *us* more uncomfortable than her.

“Well, I don’t think telling her will convince her of anything, but I’ll try to give her some advice next time I see her.”

“And I imagine she’ll act like she understands.”

Of course she will. She always acts like she gets what we’re saying, but that’s all it is—an act.

“Wait—what were we talking about before?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh… Oh, right, we were wondering if we could trust Zinal.”

Ah, yes. That’s what it was.

“Maybe we should have another talk with Zinal, just in case?”

Uliga was right. We needed to know what they were *really* doing in Hataka, whether it was actually to see his son or not.

“Appas, how much do you think we should tell Ivy and Druid? I think they’re at my house right now.”

“Good question…”

In my heart of hearts, I didn’t want to get them any more involved than they already were, but that was wrong of me. There was a church in every town and every village. We could advise Ivy and Druid to stay away from the church…but they’d demand an explanation. So we should just tell them the whole story…which was actually impossible. There was still so much even I didn’t know.

“Uliga, tell them everything you can. I’ll talk to someone on the royal side and get some info from them.”

“Will you be okay?”

“I’ll manage. I want to tell Druid and Ivy everything before they leave this village.”

Okay, how should I get the information out? Maybe I’ll casually drop some questions to the people I was looking into summoning circles with. Then I’ll ask the people who make a living off their work under the table…

“Don’t do anything too dangerous,” Uliga said flatly.

“Er… A little danger should be okay. I can adjust as I go.”

I used to get cocky and put myself in danger, but now that I had years of experience behind me, I’d learned how to judge from a person’s face just when I needed to back off. Now would be a great time to make use of that skill.

“Appas…you look like you’re enjoying this. That’s the same smile you had the day you became captain of the watch.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You make that smile when you’re scheming something wicked.”

It wasn’t exactly wicked. I was just gonna hint at some skeletons in their closet and poke the facts I needed out of them. Looking back on the stuff you did as a youth is really cringey when you’re older. *Mwa ha ha.*

“Captain, you’re scaring me!”

SIDE:
The Guild Master and the Summoning Circle's Activation

GUILD MASTER ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

"AGH, I'M BEAT."

I flopped face-first onto my bed. The day was finally over—actually, it was past midnight—and so much had happened in just the one day. I'd talked with Druid and Ivy about the day's revelations and what our plan would be moving forward. *I think I told them everything… I did, didn't I? Wait, did I tell them about the priest and the bishop?*

"Eh… It's probably okay."

Okay, tomorrow morning, I'm going to… What am I going to do again? That's right, I'm going to see Appas, ask how the people freed from the spell are doing, and then select the people for the village-wide search… There's so much to do. Right, we're going to free adventurers from the spell, starting tomorrow.

"I wonder if they'll be okay…"

I thought of the people activating the summoning circle over and over in such a short time. They were quite friendly with Appas, so they were probably in the know. I wanted to make them

stop because of the potential harm, but we had no time left. We needed to break the spell quickly, or else everyone would wind up like that mad gatekeeper. Sol's magic stones were a great help, but we didn't know how long they would last… *I should ask Ivy to let us borrow Sol's magic stones tomorrow. No, no, we've already relied on them way too much. I shouldn't ask for any more favors.*

"Agh… I feel so powerless."

I'd fought fiercely over the years to protect my village. I'd failed over and over and left a mountain of regrets in my wake. But never had I ever felt so powerless as I did now. I was supposed to protect this village, yet I'd put it in danger. Nobody

chastised me, but this wouldn't have happened if I hadn't let myself be put under a spell. After all of this was over, I needed to reconsider how I acted around here.

"The other issue is, who am I going to choose as my successor?"

I'd had some candidates in mind for my job, but once my memory returned, I couldn't recall who they were. They weren't anywhere in my recent memories. I heard there was a pile of bodies in the sharmy cave and wondered if my candidates were among them. If so, I knew they'd been targeted because of me. It was a thought that haunted me.

"It could be just a coincidence—but it sure doesn't feel like it."

Anyway, tomorrow was going to be another busy day. I needed to get some sleep while I had the chance. I closed my eyes and felt myself drift away. I must have been really exhausted.

Knock, knock.

Knock, knock. Knock, knock.

"Guild Master! Guild Master!"

Arrrgh... What is it? What's that noise?

"Are you all right in there, sir? Oh... Got it. Wait just a moment, I'll go wake him up."

Urrrrgh. Sleepy.

"Ivy! Be careful when you open the front door!"

"Sorry, but they want the guild master. I'll just go wake him up."

Those voices... Ivy and Druid? "I'll just go wake him"—do they mean me? Right, I recognize one of those voices. Who is it?

"Guild Master, please get up. There's a problem at the adventurer guild."

A problem? Ah... I'd better get up. I opened my eyes to see light faintly streaming through the window. It was probably

about four in the morning. Feeling dizzy, I sat up and shook my head. *Agh… I'm so tired.*

"Guild Master? Are you up? Oh dear… What do I do?"

"Don't worry, I'm up. I'll be right there."

"All right, sir. Ilya of the adventurer guild staff is here to see you."

Ilya? Oh, right, I remember. That's… Huh?

"You mean Ilya, the dungeon master?"

If he's here, did something happen to Salify? I quickly got dressed and ran down the stairs. I found Ilya in the room closest to the front door, with Druid and Ivy standing in front of him.

"Here, wipe your face, sir. You'll feel better." Ivy handed me a hot towel. I scrubbed my face and felt refreshed and energized.

"Thanks. So, what happened?'

"Sir, Father Salify activated a summoning circle in the middle of the night. The guards watching over his cell collapsed."

He activated a summoning circle? But he's wearing slave bands. I didn't think he'd be able to do anything on his own.

"Did somebody else come into his cell?"

"No, sir. We checked, but nobody entered the cell. Since I was told to put him under maximum security, I heavily restricted entrances and exits. So nobody got close to him—of that I'm certain."

"I see."

What a pain. This means he activated the summoning circle without any outside help. So there's even a summoning circle that will respond to verbal commands. Damn it!

"How many people collapsed? And what's their condition?"

"It was four adventurers around the perimeter of the dungeon and two adventurer guild employees, sir. All of them are unconscious. I contacted the captain at home, as per your orders."

"Okay. Thanks for that." It was reassuring to have a capable employee like Ilya. "Druid, anything could happen, so tomorrow

—well, today, actually—don't leave the house."

Either the church had stepped in or the clergymen's accomplices did something when they heard they were arrested. With so many unknowns, we couldn't even predict what might happen, so I needed to ensure Ivy's safety first and foremost.

"I understand. We'll stay here inside all day," Druid nodded.

"Please be careful out there, Captain," Ivy said, looking at me worriedly. I smiled and gave her head a pat. I couldn't let those bastards have their way any longer.

"I'm going back to the adventurer guild. I probably got an answer back from Appas already."

"Yes, sir."

I left my house with Ilya. Once I heard the door lock securely behind us, I ran toward the adventurer guild. Now that a summoning circle had been activated there, it would be dangerous to get too close.

"I might be okay, though?"

I'd slipped Sol's magic stone into my pocket when I left the house—it had protected me at the church. I'd already tried to give it back to Ivy, but she said, "You might still need it, sir," and insisted I keep it.

"I'm gonna go check on the cell. Don't let anybody else come near me."

"Will you be all right, sir? If you get near an activated summoning circle…"

I rubbed my pocket again, to make sure the magic stone was still there. "I'll be fine."

"Understood, sir. Please, be careful."

"Ilya, go inside the adventurer guild and make sure there's nobody acting fishy in there."

"A mole, sir?"

"Yeah."

It gave me no pleasure to suspect my own people… But still, how could he have activated that summoning circle? Was there some other way of doing it that I didn't know about yet?

When I got closer to the adventurer guild, I noticed a small group of thirteen adventurers crowding around the front door. They were my most trusted people, and the ones I'd freed from the spell first.

"What's going on inside?" I asked.

The closest adventurer to me shrugged their shoulders. "Everyone's going about their business, even though they know a summoning circle has been activated."

"Damn, that's creepy."

"Hey, that was us just a few days ago."

"Ee-yaaagh."

The adventurers who were freed from the spell had already been debriefed on how summoning circles suppressed their consciousness, but seeing the effects from the outside had shaken them up a little.

"You okay?" I asked. The adventurers nodded. "I need two of you to check on Father Gupinus in his cell."

Since I hadn't heard anything about him, it was probably okay, but I thought we'd better make sure.

"Guild Master!"

I looked in the direction of the voice to see Piarre and Juggy running over to me.

"What's wrong?"

"The captain told us to move the people who got knocked out to his house at once."

That would be a big help, but could they handle it?

"What about the guys operating the summoning circle? Are they okay?"

"They said they're fine. They just need us to hurry."

"Got it. The other eleven of you, help carry the unconscious guards to the captain's house. Make that your top priority."

At my command, the remaining adventurers headed over to the dungeon in the adventurer guild. The six unconscious guards had been placed in a nearby room.

“Ilya, do the thing.”

I didn’t want to believe there was a mole among us…but there had to be.

“Will do, sir.”

I watched as Ilya disappeared into the adventurer guild.

“A mole, sir?” Juggy asked.

“Yeah… At times like this, they’re easiest to spot,” I answered listlessly. I was always reluctant to do this kind of search. After a while, the adventurers emerged from the guild, carrying their unconscious comrades on their backs.

“Are you coming with us, Guild Master?”

“No, I’m going to check in on Salify.”

“I’m coming with you, sir,” Piarre raised his hand.

“What?! Whoa, easy, you two. Salify’s dangerous—you should stay away.”

Juggy grabbed my arm. I turned my head and a pair of eyes, shaking with fear, stared back at me. These men hadn’t been elite adventurers for very long, and yet I had gotten them mixed up in such a serious situation. To make matters worse, I had let the enemy brainwash me and use me at will. They had every right to be afraid.

“Everything will be okay,” I said. I felt him squeeze my arm. “Juggy, you go back to the captain’s house with the others. Piarre and I will check on Father Salify together.”

Juggy looked back and forth between me and Piarre. “But sir…”

“We’ll be fine. We have a talisman to protect us,” Piarre said.

I gave him a quizzical look. *What did he mean by “a talisman”?*

“Got it. Be careful out there. I’ll be at the captain’s house.” Juggy kept an eye on his surroundings as he made his way to the captain’s house. Once his retreating figure was out of sight, I looked at Piarre.

“Ready to go, sir?”

“Sure.” One look at Piarre told me that he was scared, too. “You can wait out here if you’d rather.”

“No, sir, I’m coming with you.”

I sensed a strong will in his eyes. But there was an activated summoning circle nearby, and it was too dangerous to let him get near it.

“Leave me when I’m halfway there.”

SIDE:
The Guild Master's Grit

GUILD MASTER ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

I WATCHED AS PIARRE looked more and more scared. It would be best not to push him too hard.

"You can wait here if you'd prefer."

"No thanks, sir. I have my talisman."

There it is again—talisman. What is he talking about? Something he got from Appas?

"Did Appas give you something?"

Did he bring an item that can control the summoning circle's power? If he did, that would be a big help.

"Er, no, sir. Miss Ivy gave me the protection of Sol's magic stones."

"Oh, did she now… Wait—Sol's magic stones?"

"Yes, sir. The captain said it would be horrible if anything happened to Ivy, so he told me to take one for protection. So I went to your house to see her, but then I think Mr. Druid and Miss Ivy said they would be okay… Right, they did. Yes. So, when I was about to leave, Miss Ivy said, 'Sol made some magic stones. This is for you.' I guess Sol did a little magic stone-making before I arrived at your house and… Wait, huh?"

Is this guy okay? He just strung a lot of words together in a weird way. Well, I think I got the gist of it. I stole a glance at Piarre, who was walking a few paces behind me. His face was even paler than before.

"Um… Aren't Sol's magic stones incredibly rare, sir?"

"Yeah. They have magic powers, the likes of which we've never heard of."

"Yes, I thought so. And, well, I've got five of them… What should I do with them? I've got *five*."

Is that why he's nervous? Not because of the activated summoning circle but because he's carrying magic stones? Well, yeah, they are really powerful magic stones after all. And five of them, too… Hnnf?! How many did he say he has?

"*Five* stones?!"

"Yes. Would you like to carry one, Guild Master? I already gave half of them to Juggy."

Meaning he was originally given ten of them?

"Please take it off my hands, sir?" he piped up desperately. I looked over to see him shoving his bag in my face. It probably contained Sol's magic stones.

"Pfft! Kee-hee-hee!"

"Why are you laughing?!"

"I assumed you were scared about the summoning circle, not this."

Piarre looked down at his bag and sighed. "Yes, the activated summoning circle did scare me at first, but when I was telling you about the magic stones from Miss Ivy, I remembered the captain talking about them, and as I talked, I realized that the magic stones I was carrying were super amazing, and um, how much do you think these magic stones would sell for, sir? Think we could pay Miss Ivy back if something happened to them?"

"How much would they cost? Uhhhhhh… Maybe a pile of gold plates for one? Nobody's ever heard of a magic stone that sucks up a summoning circle's powers."

"Um, sir?"

"Yeah?"

"Two of the ten magic stones I got were glowing. I tried to give them to Juggy, but he was very resistant to the idea. They're inside this bag. Please, take them off my hands, sir."

Er… Are these really the same stones that have been helping us activate summoning circles safely?

"No, Piarre—you keep them."

"But *I don't want them*, sir!" Piarre sputtered desperately.

I smiled and shook my head. Ordinarily, it would be for the best if I kept them, but now I felt safer with Piarre carrying them. I hadn't hidden the fact that my memories from when I was under the summoning circle's spell had been returning little by little. Our enemy had probably heard the news by now, meaning they would try to save their hides before I got *all* my memories back. Naturally, I had no intention of letting them kill me without a fight, but you never knew what they might do to me. And if that happened, I couldn't be trusted with a magic stone. I was already preoccupied by what I'd do if somebody attacked me while I had one in my pocket.

"You keep them for now."

"Urrrrgh... Yes, sir."

Piarre and his comrades had gotten wind of what I was trying to do, which must have been why they kept casting worried glances at me. I felt bad about it, but the best way of luring the rats out of hiding was with some bait.

"You okay? Again, you can always wait here if you'd prefer."

Piarre shook his head. His complexion was much healthier now. "I'm all right, sir."

We paused at the top step of the staircase that led to the basement.

"What happened to the guards, sir?"

"I told them to leave this spot and the inside of the cell vacant, just in case."

I had stationed the guards farther away to keep them safe if Father Salify activated a summoning circle, but I'd never dreamed that would actually happen.

"Let's go."

We slowly walked down the stairs. The moment we arrived in the basement, a faint light could be seen from one of the cells.

"Looks like the summoning circle is still working, sir."

I nodded in reply. That illumination was probably coming from the activated summoning circle. Light was streaking out between the bars of the cell.

"So hot!"

I spun to look behind me and saw Piarre pulling something out of his bag. It was a magic stone, glowing with a faint white light.

“Wait… It’s *not* hot?” he said.

“You okay?”

“Yes, sir. I took it out because something felt hot, but…it’s not hot. What’s going on?” Piarre tilted his head quizzically at the magic stone. It was hot…yet not hot. I knew that feeling.

“The black magic stone I’m holding isn’t glowing, but it has the same reaction. Keep holding it—you’ll be fine.”

“Okay, sir.”

As we approached the cell together, another burst of light seeped out from between the bars, and a part of it floated toward us. A trickle of cold sweat hit the base of my spine.

“Ack!”

I turned around to see Piarre’s magic stone absorbing the beam of light. *So it does react in the same way.*

“Agh!”

While we watched the stone in fascination, it fell out of Piarre’s hand.

“What happened?”

“It started spinning, sir…”

Well, that’s new. The fallen magic stone spun and slid along the ground toward the cell, as if it had a mind of its own, and then it absorbed all the light coming from the cell. When I saw the light was no longer directed our way, we stole a cautious glance into the cell.

“Is that…Father Salify, sir?”

I nodded tentatively in reply. He was wandering aimlessly around the cell, and he did not look sane by any stretch of the imagination.

“He has an unsettling aura about him—like he’s possessed.”

It was just as Piarre said: As Salify walked around the cell with empty eyes, he looked eerie rather than unsettling. While we stood there watching him, it reminded me of something. But

what? *I've seen it before, many times. But I can't remember what it is…*

"Oh! Is *that* Father Salify, sir?"

"Yes, why?"

Piarre stared at Salify for a moment, then nodded. "One night after I was walking home from work, I saw Father Salify wandering around the plaza. But he had a strange aura about him, so I left the plaza right away."

"He was wandering…around the plaza?"

As I repeated the words, a light in my brain switched on. *Where did that happen? It was in a very familiar spot… Oh, the plaza! That's right… But why am I remembering the plaza? I think… something happened there? Or maybe…I saw something happen?* I turned my attention back to the cell and saw Father Salify staring at me with hollow eyes. *It's no use… It's on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't remember.*

"Sorry, I can't help you." I shook my head in defeat. Then I heard a thudding noise in the cell and looked over to see that Father Salify had collapsed.

"What should we do, sir?"

I wanted to walk over and see what condition he was in, but light was still coming from the summoning circle. It was probably still active.

"It's too dangerous to approach him."

"Yes, I thought it would be."

Spin, spin, spin, spin.

The magic stone stopped in front of the cell and spun in circles closer to Father Salify. It really did look like the thing had a mind of its own. As we stood there, waiting to see what would happen, we noticed the stone was drinking in the light as soon as the summoning circle produced it.

"I think it's safe for us to get closer, sir."

"Yeah."

As I went to get the key to unlock the cell, I heard Ilya's voice above me. "Everything all right down there?"

“We’re fine, thanks.”

“No problems with Father Gupinus. We spoke for a bit, but he was acting creepy,” Ilya said.

“It’s safe to come down,” I told him.

“Oh—yes, sir!” Ilya scurried down the stairs and looked nervously around the area. When he noticed the stream of light coming from the cell, his body jolted like it was struck by lightning.

“Come on, it’s not *that* scary…”

“Oh, I can’t stand it. I hate the sight of someone losing their sense of self!”

Yeah, I can sympathize. It brought back an old memory, but it felt like it was about someone else and it made me feel sick. I was me, yet not me. My judgment, my interest in work… Everything was different.

I sighed. “Yeah, I don’t ever want to have to deal with this again, either.”

SIDE:
The Guild Master and the Traitor, Part 1

GUILD MASTER ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

"UHH, WAIT A MINUTE."

I completely forgot. If Ilya looks in the cell, he'll find Sol's magic stones. Am I really that sleep-deprived? I need to pull myself together.

"Don't come down yet—we don't know what's in here. You can talk from up where you are." With a sigh of relief, Ilya backtracked up a couple of steps. I chuckled lightly at the sight of it, then walked closer to the stairs so I could get a better look at him. "What did you mean when you said Bishop Gupinus was creepy? What happened?" I looked behind me and saw that light was still spilling out of the cell. We had to clean up everything in here somehow, but I had a feeling Sol's magic stone would make it all work out.

"Well, when I told him his accomplice activated a summoning circle in here, he laughed and said, 'Soon I will be free.' Then what happened afterward was, well...he was terrible."

"In what way?"

"He just ran off at the mouth, sir... 'Take off my slave bands. Do you know who the hell I am?' and 'If you let me go, I'll take care of you.' When I ignored him, he had a tantrum in his cell. He destroyed his bed, threw the fragments at me—it was horrible, sir."

Ilya's description of Gupinus's behavior made my jaw drop. I had no idea things had gotten that bad. That wasn't the way a man of faith should behave. Either he thought it was safe to drop the act, or maybe the summoning circle had affected him...

"The words coming out of his mouth—well, they were just strange. Then there was his expression...how should I put it...he was smiling, but it was the creepiest smile. The last time I saw him, he didn't give off that impression at all."

So his expressions changed, then.

“He probably used the summoning circle too much and went mad,” I said. Even assuming Gupinus had gone mad, his statement that “*Soon I will be free” was* concerning. That probably meant somebody would come rescue Gupinus if Salify activated the summoning circle carved on his body.

“Add more guards around Gupinus,” I told Ilya.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, sir. When he said, ‘Soon I will be free,’ I was so concerned that I doubled the guards around him.”

Ilya truly was an asset. He wasn’t cut out to be the guild master, though. Despite being a tough guy, he wasn’t any good in a fight…a shame, really.

“That’s my Ilya.”

Ilya beamed proudly at my praise.

Okay, Gupinus is contained for now… Then again, since we probably have a traitor among us, I can’t say he’s completely contained.

“Any progress on the traitor front?”

“As you said, Guild Master, I noticed a few people who were behaving strangely: three adventurer guild employees and four adventurers. But some of them were hard to read, probably because they were confused by the bishop’s arrest.”

Yeah, if you’re a devout churchgoer, your bishop getting arrested would be hard to believe. I only hope those people don’t lash out.

“And who were these hard-to-read people?”

“Two adventurer guild employees, sir. They were getting too close to the dungeon, so I gave them a warning.”

Two employees… Not as many as I thought there’d be.

“Got it. Thanks for the prompt investigation.”

“Of course, sir. I just love detective work.”

I know. He was the first guy who ever begged to be the dungeon master because it would give him “the fun of watching criminals all day.” He’s a great talent otherwise. Truly a shame.

“Guild Master?”

I turned around at the sound of Piarre's voice and heard a scuffling on the stairs. I looked up to see that Ilya had retreated to the top step. Not that it mattered...

"What's up?" I asked.

"The summoning circle stopped glowing, sir."

So it's done? I walked over to Salify's cell and looked inside. Indeed, all signs of light had disappeared from the summoning circle, and the cell was dark again. Salify was sprawled on the floor, his body twitching and convulsing.

"I'll just take a look at him, sir." Piarre started to step inside the cell.

"No, I'll—"

"Don't, sir. If anything were to happen to you, the consequences would be much greater," Piarre said curtly, slipping into the cell. Then he rolled Salify onto his back and checked his pulse. After examining his complexion and eyes, Piarre came out of the cell.

"How's he looking?"

"Unconscious, sir. His eyes aren't red and I don't think his condition is critical, though his face is pretty pale."

"Okay, thanks."

Maybe the shock of activating the summoning circle had knocked him out, but we couldn't be too sure of that yet. I should be able to talk to him once he's woken up...but only if he hadn't lost his mind.

"Ilya, go to Appas's house and tell him the summoning circle is off now."

"Yes, sir."

I heard Ilya leave the stairway.

"I'll just put him in bed, sir." Piarre returned to the cell and moved Salify from the floor to the bed.

Oh, damn it. I found out how many possible traitors there are, but I didn't get their names. Argh, what a stupid mistake to make.

"Should we station a new guard, sir?" Piarre walked out of the cell and locked the door.

“Good idea—but we’ll need a security team, not just a guard. Somebody may show up to take Salify away.”

Deciding it was best to leave the dungeon, we began to climb up the stairs leading to ground level.

“Is this the place? Guild Master, are you there?”

“Who is it?”

The voice sounded familiar, but it didn’t seem to belong here.

“Sorry. It’s me, Garitt.”

Ahh, Garitt. He’s on Zephyr, Zinal’s party.

“Something happen?” I asked. His voice had sounded a bit flustered. I gripped the stairway rail as I looked up. Garitt was standing on the top step, waving at us. When we got to the top of the stairs, I noticed something at his feet. I curiously approached it and realized it was human. A closer look at their upturned faces revealed two men who looked like a guild employee and an adventurer. As I gave the unconscious men a quizzical look, Garitt slipped me a tiny bottle of something. I hesitantly took it. “What’s this?”

“They were carrying a drug that causes instant paralysis. We usually use it when we’re ambushed by monsters more powerful than us.”

Did he take me for a fool? Of course I knew what it was, from the color of the substance. Monster-numbing drugs had a clear aqua color.

“Hey, don’t glare at me. These poor bastards were gonna throw it at whoever jumped out of there. They probably figured they couldn’t win if they attacked you fair and square.”

Hm? By “there,” did he mean the door at the top of the stairs to the dungeon? And by “whoever jumped out,” did he mean me and Piarre?

“Well, guess these are two of the traitors,” Garitt said.

“Yeah…” I sighed. I’d known they would come for me, just not this quick.

“Thanks for saving us.”

“No problem. The captain said you were in danger and asked me to check in on you. There’s still a lot of people under the spell here, aren’t there?” Garitt asked.

I nodded. There weren’t just a lot—*most* of the people here were still under the spell.

“We’re almost done at the village watch station, by the way.”

“Whoa, wasn’t that a bit fast?”

“They drew up another summoning circle and doubled the people operating them.”

“But that would put the people operating the summoning circles in a lot of danger.”

“Hm? Ohh, right, don’t worry. The ones breaking the spell asked for the second summoning circle.”

Piarre yelped in surprise from behind me when Garitt said that. I didn’t blame him. We were already running the summoning circle at a tremendous pace, and yet they were asking for more.

“How are they doing?” I asked.

“Fit as fiddles. Everyone’s delighted; they say the summoning circles are easy to operate and can be used plenty of times in a row.”

I gave Garitt a look—his explanation was quite strange. Then I sensed a presence nearby. I wasn’t sure if it was friend or foe. *Well, since they’re hiding and spying on us, they must be one of the traitors*. Piarre cautiously peeked out from behind me. He’d probably noticed our stealthy friend, too.

“Good. Glad to hear it. By the way, is the sun up yet?” I asked, making my voice louder.

“Yeah… Wanna go eat some breakfast?”

Garitt was clearly torn on what to say. I stole a glance at Piarre, who then masked his aura and crept toward the hidden presence.

“Good idea. Pfft…! Before that, I need to get some guards for Salify.”

Garitt glared back at me as I tried not to laugh. “That can wait until after breakfast. Come on, there aren’t any problems here anymore!”

Garitt…you don’t have to sound so angry. Our little spy friend will pick up on our charade.

“True, we did catch all the traitors, after all.”

Conk!

“Augh!”

I looked toward the noise to see Piarre pinning a man onto the floor of the hallway. When I saw who it was, I could feel my face twitch. “Wow. I didn’t think *you’d* be a traitor.”

“You know this guy?”

“Yeah… He’s an old friend.”

SIDE:
The Guild Master and the Traitor, Part 2

GUILD MASTER ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

"AN OLD FRIEND?" Garitt gasped.

I nodded. The man Piarre was restraining was unmistakably my old friend, Tig. We used to be each other's training buddies, and we hunted monsters together. Our personalities clashed at times, but I never would have pegged him for a traitor.

"It's a misunderstanding. I came here because I was worried about you."

"Please, you're embarrassing yourself. If you were worried, why would you hide?" Garitt asked.

Tig glared back at him. *When did this guy turn traitor? Scratch that, it doesn't matter... Knowing that wouldn't mean anything.*

"Tig, I'm sorry it had to be this way."

Tig glared back at me. His eyes assaulted me with a sorrowful look, but I had my role as the guild master to uphold. I took a shallow breath in and out to reset my emotions. I probably wouldn't be able to get Gupinus or Salify to talk, so it would be a better strategy to coax the truth out of Tig. He had a short temper—if I exploited that, he would blurt out everything I needed to know.

"Wow, so you're a traitor... Now I get it. Our seniors figured you might turn on us. That's why you were the last in our cohort to be promoted to elite adventurer. I heard some people opposed your promotion to the very end."

"Shut up! What the hell do *they* know?!"

"Oh, and ex-guild master Chemanta had his concerns about you as well."

"Shut up! Ha ha! For your information, Chemanta is on *our* side! Sorry to break your heart. So, how does it feel, having people you trusted betray you?"

It feels like hell, but now I have proof that Chemanta betrayed us. I trusted my newly returned memories, but a part of me didn't want to believe them. I won't falter anymore, though. All I need now is where Chemanta is… Does he know?

"I already knew Chemanta was a traitor, and I don't think anything of it. He's my enemy."

"What?"

"I'm telling you, I *knew*."

"That's a lie. When he left Hataka, he said you were still in the dark so I could use you however I wanted. Hah! Posture all you want—it'll do you no good."

So Chemanta's no longer in Hataka. But wow, is it just me, or is this guy more of a blabbermouth than I thought? I'm not even turning the screws on him. Does that mean he's bluffing? I narrowed my eyes and looked critically at Tig. *He doesn't look like he's bluffing, but maybe he needs a little shaking up.*

"Damn, you're a blabbermouth. That must be why nobody thinks highly of you. Poor guy."

"Wha…?!" Tig's face twitched with anger and he lashed out. Piarre quickly pinned him down, but he got kicked off.

"Gah—what the…?!"

Tig smirked wickedly the moment Piarre's hands left him, but Garitt promptly restrained him again. My suspicions were clearly correct—Garitt was hiding something, and so were the other members of Zephyr.

"Damn it!"

"Feeling frustrated? Well, the restrained look suits you."

"Hah! Don't get cocky, pal. You're too late—there's nothing you can do to stop us. One word from Arpy, and all the adventurers and watchmen of this village will go on a rampage. I don't know how you got them sane again, but you're too late! Ha ha ha ha!"

Arpy… He's a merchant here. I seem to remember he has stores in other towns and villages, too. Okay…so it was him.

"Thanks for the info, buddy. I'm surprised you blurted out the name of your VIP so easily."

I remembered how his loose tongue used to ruin our own operations.

“Urk… Don’t be so smug about it. If Arpy doesn’t hear from me, he’ll make all the watchmen and adventurers go on the rampage. You fine with that? Your villagers will suffer. Ha ha ha ha!” Tig’s creepy laugh echoed down the hall.

“Our watchmen can take down however many adventurers are still on your side.”

“Are you stupid? Didn’t you hear me? All the watchmen are under my command, too! Make nice with me while you can and I’ll offer ya a little olive branch, as they say. You’re lucky I’m such a nice guy.”

You know, Tig always did want to stand above other people. He acted really bitter when I was promoted to guild master, too, but his loose tongue and arrogant ego stopped him from even being on the list of candidates for the position. I’d warned him time and time again about it, but I guess he never learned.

“Tig, don’t you think it’s just a little strange that I got my sanity back?”

“You were the first person we cast the spell on. I assume that’s why.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Anyway, let me go! I mean it: If you treat me like this, your villagers will *die*. Unless you think you have some clever way out of this? Hah hah hah!”

His menacing laughter made me feel sick. *That thing they say about getting mellow with age is a lie. He’s worse now than he ever was.*

“True, there would be a lot of casualties if the watchmen and adventurers went on the rampage.”

But the moment I said this, Piarre gave me a single nod and then disappeared. I assumed he was off to report to Appas, to get orders from the man with full authority over the village watch.

“Then order this guy to take his grubby hands off me!”

“Why would I order him to let you go? You’re a criminal.”

“Huh?” Tig looked at me in bewilderment. *What an utter bonehead.*

“I’ll answer your last question. I believe it was ‘Do you think you have some clever way out of this?’ Well, I do.”

Granted, if the adventurers still under enemy control really did go on the rampage, there would be some casualties before the village watch could respond. But I still wouldn’t listen to Tig’s demands. That was a hard rule.

“But that’s impossible.”

“Now what about *my* question: Don’t you think it’s odd that I was able to regain my sanity? You blamed the magic, but that wasn’t it. I broke the spell by other means, and we’ve used that same method to free all the village watchmen from it. That’s why your plan will never succeed.”

We technically used a different method to free the watchman, but it was best to tell him it was the same. There would definitely be an investigation after all of this was over, and they’d certainly question this guy, too. His loose tongue was going to work to my advantage. I was sure he’d tell them what I told him here as a bargaining chip.

“No…our plan would never fail. Wait… Was it a summoning circle? Were you guys using a summoning circle, too?” Tig panicked. I smiled innocently back at him, and Garitt scowled at my grin in disgust. Did my smile really look that hideous? Well, maybe it did…

Shocked by what I’d said, Tig muttered something under his breath.

“Garitt, I’m sorry to ask, but…”

“What is it?”

I sighed grumpily. “Show me his back and abs, please.”

“What?!”

Hey, don’t look at me like I’m a pervert!

“I’m not like *that*, I assure you! I just want to make sure he doesn’t have summoning circles carved on him like Salify. There’ll be hell to pay if he does.”

“Ohh, right.” Garitt held Tig back and lifted his shirt—he really did have skilled hands. But Tig had no summoning circles on his stomach or back. That was a relief.

“Hold that pose for a bit.”

I ran back to the dungeon and grabbed a slave band. There were people with summoning circles carved into their skin in the dungeons at both the watch station and the adventurer guild. We didn’t know how they were activated, but I knew Tig would try to do something. Putting him under my control was the only way I could stop him. *Agggh… I’ll get an earful for this later, won’t I?* I could use the excuse that Salify and Gupinus had summoning circles on them, but Tig didn’t have one. *Oh well, I’ve got no other choice.*

“Sorry I took so long.” While Garitt restrained Tig, I snapped a slave band onto his arm.

“Not on his neck?”

“He hasn’t been properly sentenced yet. These aren’t allowed under normal circumstances.”

Garitt looked satisfied by my explanation. I peered into his eyes, realizing that he didn’t seem to question the idea of using slave bands on a man. *Come on…most people would think twice about it, wouldn’t they?*

“Well, we’ve got a wealth of experience under our belts. We know it’s within the realm of possibility.” Garitt smiled, noticing my scrutinizing stare. *A “wealth of experience,” eh…?*

“Do you and your boys work *under the table*?”

I heard about some adventurers who solved problems that couldn’t see the light of day. Eche was one such adventurer.

“Well… I guess that’s also within the realm of possibility.”

I knew it. He’s not a normal adventurer. But…what did he mean by “that’s also within the realm of possibility”?

Chapter 438:
Zephyr's Report

KNOCK, KNOCK.

"Ooh, I think we have a visitor. Comiiing!"

When I heard a knock at the door of the guild master's house, I stopped eating my breakfast and got up from my seat to answer the door—only to have my wrist grabbed tight. I looked over to see my father smiling innocently at me. *Oops... I messed up.*

"Ivy."

"Yes, sir?"

I could just feel the steam rising from my father's smiling face. "Don't make a peep until the person at the door says who they are."

"Yes, sir."

"If it's a stranger, answer them without opening the door. Even if it's somebody you know, don't open it unless you're very close to them."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you *really* understand?"

"Of course I do..."

I just couldn't help it... A conditioned reflex, I guess you'd call it. *Maybe I just don't have enough of a sense of danger?*

Knock, knock.

"Oh! Er, um..."

What should I do? I looked at my father, but he just patted my head.

"I'll go see who's there."

"Thanks."

My father left the dining room, but I couldn't help but wonder who was at the door. *It might be Garitt again. I hope the magic stones did the trick for him.*

“Okay, he shouldn’t mind if I sneak a peek from behind!”

I looked outside through the window. It seemed like the village had been bustling since early that morning. Our enemy was probably on the move, but I didn’t know if things were going in a good direction or a bad one.

“I hope everybody’s doing okay… I’m afraid they might be taking too many risks.”

I pictured Zinal and his men in my mind. Exhaustion had been mounting inside of them, even though they tried to hide it. I hoped our problems would be over quickly. As I left the hallway and headed for the front door, I heard my father’s voice.

“Oh, Zinal, it’s you. Come on in.”

It’s Zinal?

“Sorry to barge in this early in the morning, but I’ve got a lot to report. Also, the captain said Ivy and her monsters are a higher priority than him, so he asked us to come guard you all.”

Me and my monsters are top priority? That seems a bit too much…

“Anyway, give us something to eat. We haven’t had anything since a little snack last night.”

“Tell that to Ivy. She’s in charge of groceries, and you might ruin her plans if you use something up.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. If I handle the cooking, I wind up making way too much and regret it. So I just assist her.”

A smile filled my face hearing that. There was one time when he cooked so much food that we spent the next four days eating up all the leftovers. What’s more, he had seasoned the food so heavily that I couldn’t change up the flavors. We were overjoyed when we finally ate the last of it. Remembering how we had cheered for joy together that night made me laugh, and that laugh made my father and Zinal look at me.

“Good morning!” Zinal said, catching my eye and waving.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Sorry to barge in on you so early. Uhh, so did you hear all that?”

“Yes, sir—would you like something filling or a light meal?”

“All that moving around made me hungry, so something filling, please.”

That means meat. I think I still have some marinated meat. I could coat that in potato starch and fry it. Then there’s rice and vegetable soup—that ought to be enough.

“Will do, sir.”

“Sorry to trouble you so early in the morning.”

I looked at Zinal. He was horribly pale, but I noticed something about him was different today. Yesterday, there’d been this tense air about him, like he might snap at any minute, but today he seemed a bit softer. Maybe things were moving in a good direction.

“But I love cooking, sir, so it’s no trouble at all.”

I headed into the kitchen and took the marinated meat and potato starch out of my magic box. I made a soup in a small pot out of bone broth and finely minced vegetables, then dredged the meat in the potato starch and deep-fried it. Next, I took some steamed rice out of the magic box and put it in a wooden bowl. Once the meat came out of the oil and the soup was seasoned, everything was good to go. I brought the food into the room where Zinal and my father were and found Zinal hugging the table.

“Are you all right, sir? You look exhausted…”

“Aghhh, sorry… Whoa, that smells good!” said Zinal as I set the food in front of him. No sooner did he say “Thanks” than he dove into the meal with tempestuous vigor. I stared at him blankly for a few moments before fumbling to get him some tea.

“Ahhh, now that was a meal!”

In less than ten minutes, his plates and bowls were empty. Had I not fed him enough? “Do you need more, sir?”

“Hm? Oh, no thanks, I’m full. It was delicious—thank you. I’m a new man.”

He was being overdramatic, but “delicious” was a good word to hear. I grinned despite myself. As I was clearing the dirty dishes…

“Oh, no! I’ll help. Ivy, you sit down.”

I wasn’t particularly tired, so I didn’t mind cleaning up, but Zinal whisked his own dishes away. If I chased after him, he probably wouldn’t let me help wash the dishes. *Well, he said he had a report for us, so I’ll just make some tea and have it ready for him.*

“Dad, want some dessert?”

“Sure. Something not too sweet, please.” Tired from his post-breakfast body-slamming playtime with Sora, my father sighed and slumped into a chair. Since Ciel and Sol had also joined in halfway through, it had been a rather violent session.

“You’re a real good sport, Dad.”

“Those three…they show no mercy.”

“They don’t?”

“Not with me, anyway.” He gave me a scornful look, so I stared back and smiled at him for good measure. My creatures did all treat my father a little differently than me. They went easy on me, but they body-slammed him with all their might. If it were just Sora, my father could handle it, but when Ciel and Sol joined in, too, it really was quite the ordeal for him.

“Ooh, what perfect hosts you are!” Zinal returned to the room wiping his hands and sat at the table.

“Have some tea, sir.”

“Thanks. Okay, now, where should I start… Eh, let’s go with the reason why I was called out in the middle of the night. Anyway, you know how Father Salify had summoning circles carved in his body? Well, one of them was activated during the night and the guild master got the call. There weren’t any victims thanks to the magic stones you gave us, Ivy, but the traitor didn’t know that and he went on the rampage.”

“On the rampage, sir?”

“Yeah, our theory is that the summoning circle on Salify’s body was a sort of brainwashing spell. We haven’t analyzed it

yet, so we don't know for sure. But we were able to catch the traitor because he ran wild. He's an old friend of the guild master's, apparently. Anyway, he's got a loose tongue. Garitt said all it took was a little coaxing and he sang like a canary."

An old friend of the guild master's? I hope he's doing okay…

"He gave us some info about a certain person of interest which made it easy for us to figure out everyone who was in on the conspiracy. Early in the morning, the watchmen started securing everyone involved. Before I came here, they said they'd apprehended just about everybody, so the incidents that took place in this village should be resolved very soon."

I don't know what it was, but…he worded that strangely, didn't he? It sounded like something still needs to be done…

"In other words, this problem affected more places than Hataka?" my father asked.

Zinal nodded. "The summoning circles used on Hataka were placed here under somebody's orders. I'm sure they'll investigate this person, but the captains think it's highly likely the church is involved, and so do my men and I."

"Oh, what a mess. They aren't an easy group to investigate."

"I know. Even if we have the proof we need to take them down, it's not easy to get a warrant." Anguished creases appeared in Zinal's face. He looked almost resentful…

"Are you sure it's okay for Ivy and me to hear all of this?" my father asked.

Zinal stared hard at me. His eyes scared me a little; I wondered if I was just seeing things.

"Well, you both seem like easy targets."

Yes, indeed. I regret to inform you that we always find ourselves in the middle of some plot without realizing it.

"Besides, it's scarier if you don't know, right? If you're aware of what's happening, at least you have a chance to try and avoid it."

Chapter 439:
The Church

"AVOID IT... You think that's even possible?"

My father's question gave me pause. I couldn't exactly avoid getting in the middle of a conspiracy when it always happened to me without my knowing it.

"Well, good luck out there," Zinal said with a cynical smile.

My father shrugged his shoulders. "So why did you come here, Zinal?"

"To protect you and Ivy, like I said."

"Even though most of the conspirators have been caught?"

Zinal froze for a moment. "Is that all I told you?"

"Yeah, it is."

Zinal hung his head. "Sorry...guess I'm really out of it. We caught most of them, but the most important one is still on the run. They're a village watchman, and they might know who you are, Druid. That's why I'm here to protect you."

I hadn't known Zinal for long, but one thing I did know was that he wasn't the sort of person who would forget something important. I guess that showed how exhausted he was?

"Are you okay, sir?"

For some reason, Zinal was staring hard at me. I gave him a curious look, and then he grabbed my shoulders. "Ivy...do you have some sort of interesting skill?"

An interesting skill? Not sure what he meant, I looked at my father, but he just shrugged. "No, I don't, sir. Why do you ask?"

"As exhausted as I am right now, I would never lower my guard in a situation like this... Yet I forgot something this time. I thought about it, and I think it's because I always feel relaxed or soft around you. Don't get me wrong—I'm not blaming my own mistake on you, Ivy... What am I even saying? Sorry."

Zinal released my shoulders and tilted his head in confusion. He was so genuinely conflicted that I was starting to

feel embarrassed.

"I'm just a tamer, sir. That's my only skill."

"Yeah, I know… Sorry, guess I'm more tired than I thought. By the way, how did you find out your skill?"

I didn't think there was any other way besides the church. "The church read it."

"The church? Wait, Ivy, does the church know you have no stars?"

"Er, yes, sir. At least, the church in Ratomi Village knows—that's where I was born."

Speaking of which, how is Ratomi Village doing? I heard everyone got arrested, but I don't know what happened there after that.

"Ivy, don't you dare trust anybody from the church. That goes for you, too, Druid." Zinal's eyes were so stern that it scared me a little.

"No problems there. I already don't trust them."

"Oh, really?"

I realized that my father had never said anything about going to church. That was strange, since some adventurers liked to go there to pray for safe travels.

"A lot of stuff happened when I first became an adventurer… I've had nothing to do with them ever since."

"But that means you had a little something to do with them before, right?"

"Yeah, a little. Is there a problem with that?"

"Yes. You're known as the Guild's Secret Weapon, Druid. They might have looked into you. And if they find out you were involved in solving this case, it's possible they'll try to contact you."

"That's unlikely…"

"But not impossible. If they try to get in touch with you, ignore them, you hear? We at Zephyr are investigators, but we also work behind the scenes with…"

"Stop! That's top secret!"

“Yes, but I don’t mind if you two know about it. I trust neither of you will tell on us.”

My father and I answered Zinal’s serious gaze with an assenting nod.

“In our work behind the scenes, we’ve dug up a lot of intel—and much of it involved the church or people connected to it. If I’m being honest, some of it was so shady that it makes me wary of the crown for being so hands-off with the church. That’s why I can say confidently that you should stay away from the church. The people who work there don’t regard others as human beings. If it would benefit them, they’d kill people without a second thought.”

I’d never felt comfortable with the church because they were the ones who had rejected me, but they sounded even more dangerous than I’d imagined. But to think they *killed people without a second thought*?

“I understand.” My father looked at me, so I nodded. “Zinal?”

“Hm?”

“If the church is after Ivy, do you think it’s because she has no stars?”

“Yeah. This sounds bad, but they love collecting oddities. Somebody with no stars is a real rarity. I’m surprised you’ve managed to stay safe for so long.”

Whoa—was I really in that much danger all this time? I’ve always stayed away from the church ever since they looked at me so scornfully that day, but I never got the sense they were looking for me.

“These oddities they collect—what happens to them?”

Zinal shook his head at my father’s question. “No one knows.”

Well, I imagine they’re awaiting something cruel. Wait a minute—rarity? Do rare skills count?

“Mr. Zinal, would the church put a mark on somebody with a rare skill?”

My father's skill was rather rare, and a bad actor would want to use it for evil.

"I'm sure of it. My other buddies who do secret work got riled up one time and said the church cared about skills more than anything else. I didn't really get what they meant, though."

I looked at my father. His brows were knitted, deep in thought. Did he have some idea what Zinal's companions had meant?

"Oh, has the former guild master been found yet?"

Huh? The former guild master? Oh, he's talking about the summoning circle conspiracy! He changed the subject so suddenly that I didn't understand.

"That was a sudden change of subject. Well, anyway, he skipped town ages ago. Also, we captured Matorry the tamer."

So they caught the tamer. From what the guild master said, it sounded like she was in cahoots with the former guild master. I wonder why she didn't run away?

"Matorry had already lost her mind, I hear."

Oh—she couldn't *run away.*

"Too bad. Well, what about the three mid-level adventurers mentioned in the letters?"

"Don't worry, we caught them all. They were in charge of guarding and tending to Matorry after she lost her mind. Since she had people taking care of her, she managed to survive despite the madness."

They were guarding her? And taking care of her? People who go mad from summoning circles aren't supposed to be able to return to normal. They just grow weaker and weaker until they die. So, if Matorry was given caretakers, did that mean the former guild master didn't want her to die? Was she doing a very important task or something? No, then he wouldn't have let her operate a summoning circle in the first place.

"Could it be...that this tamer in question was...?" My father trailed off and looked at Zinal. A solemn look came over him as he nodded back at my father.

What did he mean? Was Matorry the tamer important in some way? But she went mad from the summoning circle… Oh! This village was being used to run summoning circle experiments. Was Matorry kept alive for those experiments?

"Phew…" I wished I was wrong, but I had a feeling I was right.

"You all right?" My father gave me a worried look.

"I'm fine. Just have a lot on my mind."

"Oh, okay." My father slowly caressed my hair in a soothing way. It calmed me just a little.

"Thanks."

Between the church's true nature and the possibility that I was their target…there had just been too many shocking revelations, and our current crisis was hanging at the crossroads between resolved and unresolved. But this village's problem had at least been worked out. Still, something was still tugging at my conscience.

"It doesn't feel over," I said.

"I know," my father agreed.

"We learned one other thing: One of the adventurers was looking into *you*, Druid."

We held our breaths. *What does that mean? Why were they investigating my father?*

"He was probably wondering what you were doing in the captain's house."

Was that really all there was to it?

"Um, Mr. Zinal, where is this adventurer now?"

"Sorry, but he got away."

In other words, he was still at large.

"Do you know this watchman's name or what he looks like?" I asked. Unless I knew those things, I couldn't keep myself safe from him.

"His name is Cholshi. He's thirty-one years old and has a wife and daughter."

He's a father and a husband? Why did he get mixed up in things that would make him need to abandon his family?

"He has short red hair and light green eyes."

Short red hair and light green eyes.

"Cholshi's got two moles at the base of his right thumb, or so I've heard. I've never met him personally."

Two moles…

"Thank you, sir."

"Nah, I don't think that information will help you that much. We're going to meet up with the captain and his people soon—we'll ask for more details then. But for now, we need to focus on keeping you both safe."

"Of course, sir."

"There's one more thing I think you two should know, but I can only tell you part of it. The captain and the guild master said they'd come see you once everything's settled down. It'll probably be tonight or tomorrow."

The guild master and captain sure had their hands full. I thought it would make more sense for us to just go see them. "Shouldn't we go see them instead? My father and I have time to spare."

"No, don't do that. There might be church goons lurking among the villagers."

"I feel like that ship has already sailed."

My father's right. They already know we've been at the captain's house a lot.

"Yeah…that may be true," Zinal sighed. "But if you went to the captain's house now, you would be revealing that you know what's been going on in this case. Only authorized persons are allowed to go in. Besides, they should be able to manage it until the investigation of Hataka starts."

Would they? I hope so. I guess we'll just have to trust the captain and guild master and wait for them.

Chapter 440:
Ciel Is Smaller?

“MR. ZINAL, please rest for a bit.”

If I begged him to sleep for the day, he wouldn’t listen. But his fatigue was showing in his face—he needed to take at least a little rest.

“No, I’m fine. Besides, I’m supposed to be guarding you. I can’t sleep at my post.”

Um, yeah, but you’ve been acting weird since you got here. And didn’t you yourself say you were too tired?

“I’ll be fine. My father’s here, right?”

“Yeah, you really should lie down for a bit. You’re not at your best right now.”

“True…but still…” Zinal wavered. How could we get him to lie down?

“Oh, and if something happens, we have Ciel to protect us!”

“Ah. Ciel…”

Mrrrow? Ciel woke up at the sound of its name.

“Sorry to wake you up.”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” my father agreed.

Zinal stood up and walked over to the adandara. “Hey, Ciel, it’s okay for you to take your true form inside this house. Take good care of Ivy and Druid for me, okay?”

“Huh?!”

“Heh?!”

Mrrrow!

Er, not so fast, Ciel! I mean, is it even okay for you to be in your real form right now?

“Damn, pure majesty.” Zinal smiled in satisfaction at Ciel’s adandara form.

“The room feels much smaller now.” My dad shot Zinal a frustrated look, but he showed no sign of trying to stop them as he said what he thought of the room.

Er—is this really okay? It can’t be, right? I thought Ciel’s magic energy was too powerful and people were sure to detect it… Wait a minute, Ciel recently learned how to mask its magic energy. So does that mean it’s okay now?

Mewww…mew! Ciel cocked its head and meowed tentatively at my father. After a while, the sound got softer and softer until Ciel’s body shrunk a little.

“Wow.”

“Whoa!”

My father and I rushed over to Ciel, who was now about two-thirds its original size. At this smaller size, Ciel’s physical appearance gave a different impression—it was cute. Of course, Ciel was cute even at full size, too.

“Ciel can change its size?” Zinal asked.

“This is the first time I’ve seen it, sir.”

“What?!” he yelped in surprise.

“Ciel, you’re incredible!” I told my adandara. “I had no idea you could change size without shapeshifting.”

Mrrrow.

I petted Ciel’s head, and its tail swished violently back and forth. *So cute.* Ciel truly was adorable at this smaller size.

“It looks exactly the same…except dangerously cute,” my father said.

“I’m surprised you two *aren’t* surprised, seeing this for the first time,” Zinal gave us a frustrated look. “Aren’t you worried about Ciel being a different size?”

“Not really. That’s Ciel for you.”

“Is it really that simple? Most people would be shocked.”

“Our adandara can turn into a *slime*. Why would we be shocked by it shrinking a little?” my father asked.

Zinal cocked his head. “I think you’re missing the point…” He gave Ciel a few restless pats. “Ooh, I didn’t know how soft

adandara fur was!”

“Yes, sir, it’s very soft. Feels great, right?”

A smile crept onto Zinal’s face as he petted Ciel.

“You have a nice nap now, Mr. Zinal. Feel free to use the bed in the next room.”

Zinal looked a bit troubled by my offer. “Aww, can’t I stay just a little…”

“No, sir. Ciel worked hard to get smaller just so you could feel safe enough to take a nap.”

I don’t know whether it really was hard work for Ciel or not, though…

“Oh, if you insist. Well, if something happens, I can get out of bed in a flash.” He looked at Ciel, exhaled softly, and then stood up.

“Sleep well, sir. Be sure to stay in bed at least three hours.”

“What?!”

Unless I said otherwise, he’d probably only stay there for one hour.

“Do rest up, okay, sir?”

Zinal shrugged his shoulders in defeat and headed into the next room. When I heard the door close behind him, I was sure he would get some good sleep.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

Mrrrow.

I petted Ciel for a while, then went back to where I was before to drink some tea with my father. Ciel wandered over to us and lay down on the floor.

“Hey, Dad, you changed the subject on purpose back there, didn’t you?” I wanted to make sure I knew how my father felt about all of this.

“Yeah… It’s not that I don’t trust Zinal and his men, I just think my skill can probably *change* people.”

I nodded in understanding. Even the best of people might change for the worst if they found out there was a way they

could increase their number of stars.

“Sorry, Ivy. I know you trust Zinal.” He really did look guilty.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

My father’s skill could change another person’s powers, and since there were a lot of people in this world who wanted to have more stars, my father had made the right call.

“Also, I know for sure the church has been investigating me.”

“H—really?” When he said that, he startled me so badly I bit my tongue. After staring at me in stunned silence for a couple of beats, my father laughed. *“Dad…”*

“Sorry. Back when I didn’t know what my skill did, I went to the church many times. I think I remember going there because they summoned me.”

I guess the church was trying to figure out if they could use him.

“When my brothers’ stars disappeared and we found out that my skill stole those stars, I remember the church stopped reaching out to me.”

“Do you think they were scared of losing their stars?”

“I guess so.”

So even though they were interested in his skill, they didn’t want to lose their stars. So, in a way, his skill had saved him.

“Then it might have been for the best that I stole my brother’s stars. If I’d given him more stars, I might have lost my freedom.”

That absolutely would have happened. I felt bad for his brothers, but it really was for the best.

“Pu, pu?”

I looked toward Sora’s voice to find that the slime was bouncing around Ciel and staring curiously at it. The slime was probably trying to figure out where we were since Ciel was in its true form.

“Sora, we’re in the guild master’s house right now.”

Sora stretched itself in response. “Puuu?”

“Mr. Zinal said it was okay for Ciel to take its true form inside this house.”

Sora gleefully bounced up and down.

“Just don’t go *too* wild, Sora. Okay?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu!” Sora merrily bounced over to Ciel. As it bounced, Ciel sat up and slapped a paw on the eager slime’s head.

“Pu!”

Mew!

My cheeks softened at the ever-adorable pair. Sora stopped and stared at Ciel, then did just one bounce, for some reason.

“Pu?!” After Sora landed, it opened its eyes wide and gave Ciel another scrutinizing stare. I watched on. I had no idea what the slime was doing, but it looked startled.

“Think Sora noticed Ciel got smaller?” my father asked.

Sora’s eyes darted to my father.

“Looks like it. That’s right, Sora, Ciel shrank a little so the room wouldn’t feel so full.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Satisfied by my explanation, Sora slammed into the curled-up adandara’s belly.

“Sora was probably trying to figure out Ciel’s height earlier by jumping,” my father said.

I nodded in agreement, but that level of brain power seemed a little too advanced for a slime.

“By the way, Ciel, were you always able to change your size like that?”

The adandara was silent.

No answer. I guess that means it couldn’t do it before.

“Did you just start doing it?”

Mrrrow.

Okay, so it’s recent. Wow, that’s amazing.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if this was literally Ciel’s first time trying it?” my father asked.

I smiled at him, knowing that was a silly idea.

Mrrrow.

Huh? What were you saying “yes” to? Wait, you mean the thing about this being your first time trying it?

“Ciel, is today the first time you’ve tried changing your body’s size?”

Mrrrow.

So it was *the first time. What a wonder you are.*

“Well, you did a great job.” My father petted Ciel’s head, sending its tail swishing gently back and forth. Our adandara was in a great mood.

“So when the captain and guild master come by, we’ll hear what they have to say…”

“Yeah.”

“…and if there’s nothing wrong, we’ll get ready to make tracks out of Hataka.”

“Good idea.”

They had signed contracts to help hide our identities, but we didn’t want to trouble them any more than we had to. Plus, there was no telling when the people from the capital would arrive. We needed to leave Hataka—the sooner the better.

Chapter 441:
The Summoning Circle Carved in Stones

KNOCK, KNOCK! Knock, knock!

“Zinal! Druid! Sorry, but could ya open up?!”

I jumped in my seat when I heard the sudden knock at the front door.

“Who’s that? Is that the guild master’s voice?” My father got up and stood protectively in front of me.

“What’s going on?” Zinal asked, hurrying out of the next room to check on us. “You okay?”

“Yeah. That’s the guild master’s voice, right?”

Knock, knock! Knock, knock!

“Zinal! Druid!”

Hearing the voice again, we realized it was definitely the guild master. With a nod, Zinal headed for the door, and my father followed behind.

“Stay put, Ivy,” my father snapped.

“I’m coming, too.”

My father wavered a bit, but I just had to know what was going on. “All right, but stay back a little.”

“Okay.”

Nervously following behind my father, I stopped in a spot where I could see the front door, Ciel by my side. I gave Ciel’s head some soft pats, and it purred back at me. The adandara’s content demeanor calmed my anxious nerves.

“Guild Master, you gave us a scare!” Zinal opened the door and yelled at the man we assumed was the guild master.

“Sorry, there’s no time—I’ve got a favor to ask of Ivy.”

Me?

“What is it?” my father asked, a hint of disdain in his voice.

“You can come in first,” Zinal said.

“I should hope so. It’s my house…”

After briefly looking over the area surrounding the house, Zinal waved the guild master inside. It was a sobering sight to see—it made me realize I had to be careful with people, even if I knew them well. *I’m going to pay more attention from now on. I don’t want to worry my father, either.*

“Er—Ciel? Huh?” The moment the guild master entered his house, he froze at the sight of the creature beside me.

“Yes, sir… It’s Ciel. Right?”

Mrrrow.

“Er, um, yes…of course it’s Ciel.” The guild master nodded vaguely, coming the rest of the way into his house. “Thanks for having me over.”

I gave him a look, thinking it odd that he would thank us for letting him in his own house. There was a nervousness in his eyes that I couldn’t understand.

“Is this gonna take a while?” Zinal asked.

“Yeah, I don’t want to take a long time, but I’ll probably have to.”

Zinal and my father exchanged grim looks. I watched the three men retreat to the dining room, then I went into the kitchen and got to work making some tea. I looked around to find Ciel staring at me from behind.

“Thanks for protecting me, Ciel.”

Mrrrow.

It really was a relief having Ciel nearby.

“Phew… Boy, am I exhausted.”

I didn’t know why, but I felt like I got more tired with each passing day—like fatigue had more of an effect on me now. I originally thought it was all in my mind, but maybe it wasn’t. *When did this start happening? Ever since we got involved with this case, right? Does that mean it’s the summoning circle? Did it take a deeper toll on everyone than we thought?*

Mrrrow?

“Hee hee, don’t worry, I’m okay. The tea’s ready now, so let’s join them. The guild master wants to have a chat with me.”

Mrrrow.

I carried the tea to the dining room. The moment I stepped inside, I noticed a peculiar feeling in the air that made me smile awkwardly.

“Pefu!”

I looked over at the sound of Sol’s voice to see the three slimes were awake and looking at me.

“Here, have some tea.” I made my voice as chipper as possible to lighten up the mood as I set a cup of tea before each person. Once the tea was distributed, I sat beside my father.

“So, what’s this request you have for Ivy?” There was a sense of dread on my father’s face. I looked up at him quizzically while eyeing the guild master. The guild master smiled awkwardly at Zinal and my father’s behavior, then pulled himself back together and began to explain.

“We found another one of their home bases besides the church, and the documents we confiscated had some intel on a very special summoning circle. This one is made of twelve stones surrounding the village, each carved with a summoning circle. I ordered several adventurers to search the forest, and I heard that they found it right away. The captain and I talked it over and decided to destroy it.”

“Did you decide destroying it wouldn’t backfire on us?” Zinal asked, propping his elbows on the table thoughtfully.

“Not exactly. Actually, we thought destroying it would be the safest course of action. There was a little description of that summoning circle written up in the documents, saying that it restricts certain people’s movements and thoughts of specific people.”

Specific people?

“Which specific people are we talking about?” my father asked.

The guild master sighed and shook his head. “*Specific* is a misleading word—these people aren’t chosen by the caster. Er,

the papers described these people as '*Possessing alien skills and memories.*'"

Huh?! My father and Zinal both tilted their heads quizzically.

"What do they mean, *alien*?"

"We don't know the full details. That's all that was written."

Alien? Skills and memories…huh? Something's really on the tip of my tongue… Skills? Memories?

"Well, if you destroyed it, problem solved, right? You shouldn't need to ask Ivy for any help."

"We tried to break it…but it wouldn't break."

My father raised an eyebrow at the guild master. Zinal also looked bewildered.

"We tried to destroy it physically, since the summoning circle was carved into the stones, but nothing we did could break them. So I borrowed the spell-breakers from the captain and had them try their hand at it…but that didn't work, either."

So neither physical nor magic attacks could break it?

"Maybe there's a shield?"

"It's not showing any shield effects, so we were thinking maybe Sora or Sol could do something about it. Sorry, Ivy…" The guild master turned to me and lowered his head.

"Pefu!"

I was about to ask him to stop bowing to me, but then Sol bounced onto the table, waddled up to me, and stood up straight.

"Sol, are you going to help?"

"Pefu!"

The guild master's face shot up at the sound of Sol's voice. My father and Zinal glared at him.

"*Dad*. Mr. *Zinal*," I scolded them both.

The guild master smiled sheepishly. "I don't blame them. They don't want me to get you involved."

"Good. We're on the same page," Zinal said blandly.

The guild master shrugged his shoulders.

“Pefu! Pefu!” Sol bounced up and down on the table. It looked like the slime was either in a hurry or wanted us to get moving…

“Let’s say Ivy does help you. You’re going to make sure none of those bastards see her, right?” Zinal demanded.

The guild master nodded earnestly. “Arly and Juggy are already standing on that, so don’t worry.”

“Pefu! Pefu!” Sol squealed impatiently. The men gave it a confused look.

“Want to come with me? I think Sol wants to go right away.”

“Pefu!” Sol cried happily, as if to say, *“That’s right!”* I stared at Sol, wondering why it was so important for us to hurry.

“All right, let’s go.” Sensing something from Sol’s behavior, my father jumped out of his chair and started getting ready to head out.

“Ciel, can you stay in slime form until we get to the forest?” I had my reservations about Sol’s behavior, but we would probably find out what it meant when we saw the summoning circle.

Mrrrow. Ciel shifted quickly into slime form. I put it in the bag with the other slimes and headed for the front door, where the guild master waiting for us.

“Again, sorry about this.”

“It’s all right, sir. I’m glad to hear the adventurers can help now, too.”

I remembered him saying earlier that he’d ordered adventurers to go look for the summoning circle, which must have meant they’d been freed from the spell.

“Yeah, the magic stones you gave the captain helped us break the spell much sooner for everyone. And when we asked the spell-breakers how they were doing, they said they only felt some minor negative side effects. Thanks, Ivy.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

After all our precautions, they still felt minor side effects. I hope they’re going to be okay.

“Something wrong?”

“No, sir... It’s just that they do feel some bad side effects, right? Will they be okay?”

“Hm? Oh, they’ll be fine. They said they were all right when I asked—they seemed incredibly chipper, actually.”

Incredibly chipper? Then...I guess they’ll be okay?

Chapter 442:
Sol, Enraged

WHEN WE LEFT THE VILLAGE, Fische was at the border waiting for us. We ventured into the forest with him at the helm.

“Whoa! Did the forest change?” my father asked.

“You noticed?” Fische answered.

Zinal also looked around in confusion. “Yeah, it has a different feel than forests usually have.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Nothing *looked* different as far as we could see, and yet the forest gave off such an alien impression that we all sensed something *was* different.

“We noticed it as soon as we went into the forest, too. Except it wasn’t a *bad* feeling, so we decided we’d keep our eyes and ears open.”

It was as Fische said: Something was different, but that didn’t make us uncomfortable. It was just *different*, that’s all. I gave the trees a curious look, thinking it strange that I didn’t know what was strange. My focus was pulled away from the trees when I felt a rustling in the bag hanging off my shoulder.

“Is it all right if I take my creatures out, sir? Where are the other adventurers and watchmen?”

“They’ve already gone back to the village, so you can take them out,” Fische said.

I stopped walking and opened my bag. Ciel came flying out first; it promptly returned to its true form and had a look around.

“Damn, that’s majestic. And a lot more muscular than the drawings I’ve seen in books.” Fische smiled, happy to see Ciel in adandara form. Next, Sol jumped out of the bag, followed at last by Sora and Flame, who sprang out in unison.

“So much energy. Well, let’s get go… Hey, Fische!” Zinal barked at Fische from behind as the man grinned dumbly at Ciel.

“Agh, sorry. This way.”

After walking for a while, we came upon a stone about as tall as me. Near it, Garitt was sitting on a fallen tree.

“I see you’ve tried a lot of things,” my father said.

Fische smiled. “Too bad none of them worked.”

There were a bunch of tools scattered on the ground around Garitt. At a glance, I could see at least ten magic items designed to break stone—I could also tell right away that every one of them was broken. Those stones must have been incredibly tough.

“Sorry we took so long,” Fische said, waving at Garitt.

“It’s all right. Nothing’s changed since you left.” Garitt stood up from the fallen tree he was using as a chair.

“What hasn’t changed?” When the guild master approached the stone, it floated slightly off the ground and the summoning circle glyphs on it glowed brighter.

“Guild Master! Get back!” Garitt yelled. The guild master scooted back a step.

“Pefu! Pefu! Pefu!”

Startled by Sol’s deeper-than-usual voice, I looked at the slime and saw it glaring menacingly at the stone. I barely had time to gasp in surprise before the little slime charged head-on for it.

“Sol! Watch out!”

My father moved quickly to stop Sol when he heard me scream, but the slime only picked up more speed as it ran and then flew at the stone. The next thing I knew, Sol’s body grew huge, its jaw opened wide, and it swallowed the stone whole.

Crack!

The moment Sol swallowed the stone, a loud crack boomed through the air.

“What?!” we all gasped.



We got closer to have a better look at the stone and noticed a huge crack in it.

“It broke,” Garitt said. Fische nodded silently, his jaw dropped.

“Pefu!” Sol spat the stone out, jumped on top of it, and bounced up and down. With each bounce, the stone cracked more.

Crack! Crack!

When the cracks ran all the way from the top to the bottom of the stone, the glowing glyph started to fade.

“It looks like that stone’s pretty easy to destroy…” Zinal said, but Fische and Garitt shook their heads.

“No, believe me, nothing we tried could break it.”

“Still, watching Sol work, it does look easy to… Oh! Is that a hammer? How’s it even holding the thing?”

“Oh, yeah, Sol has tentacles,” my father said casually.

“What?!” Zinal’s party yelped in shock. Sol ignored them and kept pounding on the stone with the hammer that had been left next to it.

Kong! Kong! Kong!

“Sol’s on a rampage,” my father said. Zinal laughed.

“That hammer didn’t break the stone when you used it, right?” Garitt asked Fische.

“No, not a single crack…but now it’s smashed to pieces.”

“Is it a magic hammer?” my father asked.

Zinal smiled sheepishly and replied, “It’s a *rare* magic hammer. It’s served us well over the years, too, since it can easily break tough things or enchanted items. Are you sure that hammer didn’t break it when you tried?”

Fische nodded. “Not a bit.”

“Anyway, do you think Sol knows what that stone is?” the guild master asked.

That made me think, *Yeah, Sol must know, or else it wouldn’t be so desperate to destroy it.*

“Pefu!”

Sol tossed the hammer aside in satisfaction. The broken stone lost even more of its pale glow until it turned into a pitch-black rock. *Wait…what’s this I feel? It’s like all my tiredness just faded away…* I looked up at my father in confusion, and our eyes met.

“Ivy…do you feel okay?” There were deep creases between his brows.

“Yeah, I’m fine. In fact, I feel much lighter now, like all my fatigue is gone… I think I’ve healed from something.”

“Okay, so it happened to you, too.”

Me, too? My father looked at the now-black stone*. That reminds me, why was this stone put here in the first place? I don’t know why, but I’m suddenly dying of curiosity. Okay, so the guild master said it involved restricting the movements of people with foreign memories and skills. I guess my father and I would fit that description, wouldn’t we?*

“What is it? Is something going on?” The guild master gave me and my father a concerned look, noticing something was off. The other three looked at us, too.

“Mr. Guild Master, did you feel anything when the stone turned black?”

The guild master thought about my question for a moment, then shook his head and said, “No.” I looked at Zinal and his men, but they all shook their heads at me, too. Which meant my father and I were the only ones who felt it.

“Pefu!” With a worried chirp, Sol bounced over to me. Had Sol known about this stone all along? Did it know that the summoning circle carved on it was affecting me and my father? But if Sol did know, it definitely would have told us.

“Thanks, Sol. We’re okay now.”

What would have happened to us if Sol hadn’t broken the stone? The thought made me shudder. My father gave me a few gentle pats.

“Druid, is it something you can tell us?” Zinal stared at my father.

“It’s a long story, but yes.”

“Okay, I understand.” With a nod, Zinal went to speak with the guild master and the others. They wanted to go see what had happened to the other eleven stones. After a while, Zinal returned with four sticks. I wondered what he was going to do with them.

“Whoever wins stays here to guard Ivy and Druid,” Zinal said. The others nodded. Were they going to use these sticks to decide who would check on the stones?

“Make one of them shorter than the rest, then hold them so we can’t tell which one it is.”

Oh, so that’s how they’ll decide.

“Got it.” My father walked away from the others, then shortened one of the sticks and gripped them all in his fist. “They’re ready.”

The other men each chose a stick. Then, on the count of three, my father let go.

“I win! Okay, guess I’m guarding you again.” Since Zinal had drawn the shortest stick, he waved goodbye to the other three as they left. I sent them off with a wave of my own.

“Aw, I wanted to stay and play with Ciel!” Fische pouted.

I smiled. “Hee hee! Be safe out there!”

“Say hi to those stones for me!” Zinal shouted.

The other men sighed and went the opposite way from where we came, deeper into the forest. “Once things settle down, come back to the village. The captain’s house… No, that won’t work. Everyone, meet at my house.” The guild master handed my father the key and promptly joined the others in their march.

“Seriously, be careful out there,” I called after them.

Chapter 443:
Another World

"UHH... WERE YOU OKAY with it being me?" Zinal looked back and forth between my father and me. His uncomfortable expression made me chuckle under my breath. Zinal and the other members of the party called Zephyr were incredible people. Not only were they investigators, but they were doing secret *behind-the-scenes* work as well. The thought of me making one of those extraordinary people uncomfortable tickled me a little.

"Ivy?" Zinal stared at me.

"Sora! Is Zinal safe?"

Zinal gave me a strange look. Sora, who was playing on top of the broken black stone, immediately ran over to me and answered, "Pu, pu, puuu!" Now that we had Sora's seal of approval, I knew we should be fine.

"The thing about alien skills and memories...that fits with my father and me."

"Ah, right. The guild master said something... Yes, aha, I see..."

Huh? He's taking it much better than I thought.

"Huh...? Ivy! Druid!"

"Yes, sir?"

"What?"

Zinal lunged forward and grabbed my shoulders. There was a terrifying glint in his eyes. "How's your health? How's your condition? Any summoning circle side effects? Let's get you to the captain's right this minute—we'll have Eche examine you."

That surprised me. Also, why would he ask about my condition *and* my health? Weren't those the same thing? As I just stared blankly at Zinal, he sputtered and said, "Ivy? You feel okay? Druid, why are you laughing?!"

I looked at my father. His back was turned, but I could tell he was laughing. A strange noise was coming from him, too—

probably from covering his mouth.

“Hey, Druid?”

I needed to calm them down first. “Mr. Zinal, please take a breath. My father and I are both okay.”

“Really? But we don’t know what this summoning circle is capable of. I don’t want something happening to you on my watch.” Zinal looked me up and down, gave a little nod, and then looked at my father. All this time, I’d felt like Zinal kept himself guarded around us, but he’d never felt closer than he did now.

“We really are okay, sir. Besides, if the summoning circle was still dangerous, Sol would let us know.”

Zinal gasped. His eyes darted around looking for Sol…then he sighed in relief. “Sorry… So what does this *alien* business mean?”

When he heard Zinal’s question, my father finally stopped laughing and looked at me. I nodded back at him. If we hid that truth from Zinal, we couldn’t explain the summoning circle to him.

“In this case, *alien* means another world.”

Zinal cocked his head. “Another world? Not this world… That reminds me of one of the fairy tales I read as a kid. A boy came here from another world and went on an adventure.”

What a story. I think I’d like to read it…

“So *alien* means…your skills and memories come from another world?” Zinal looked at us in bewilderment.

“That’s right,” my father nodded.

Zinal’s thoughtful face grew serious. “Does this mean you have memories from another world? And skills, too? Skills from another world…? Whoa, but that’s incredible!” The moment he realized what it all meant, Zinal began to panic. “We shouldn’t be having this conversation out in the open. Let’s go back to the guild master’s house. We’ll have Eche take a look at you both first.”

Zinal was determined to have Eche examine us so he could get rid of his worries about our health, but I was confused about

why it had to be Eche. Wasn't she a former assassin? Maybe you had to be well versed in the human body to have a job like that...

"That okay with you?" Zinal asked my father, who agreed with an awkward smile. Worrying Zinal was the last thing we wanted to do, so we didn't mind going along with what he wanted if it would ease his anxiety.

"Wait just a minute..." Zinal scooped up all the scattered magic items. We helped him collect the pieces of broken black stone.

"What is it? Feel anything?" Zinal asked.

My father picked up a fragment of stone and stared at it. "I don't feel anything—I've just never seen a stone as black as this before."

I looked at the stone in my hand. I had seen black iron and other metals before, so black stones weren't exactly rare. But the one in my hand sent an ominous chill down my spine when I looked at it...

"Yeah, I wonder what this stone is...but staring at it makes me feel like I'm looking into a dark abyss."

I nodded at my father. His wording sounded strange, but it perfectly fit the feeling I was having.

"Okay, all packed. Let's go. Oh—let's get these, too. I want to show the captain." Zinal stopped us from tossing aside the black stone fragments. We handed them to him, agreeing the captain should see them.

Zinal stared intently at the black fragments of stone in his hand. "So creepy." He put the fragments into a small bag and hung it from his belt. "Okay, we've got everything now. Let's go."

Ciel in slime form was taking part in its usual contest with Sora. Today, they were playing the body-slamming game.

"Hey, Dad? How do they decide who's won?"

"Huh, I've been watching all this time and I still don't know. Is it whoever has the biggest reaction? Or whoever causes the most pain?"

I looked at the two, but I still couldn't tell who was winning. As I stood there, staring, Flame bounced over to join them. When

the three of them slammed into each other, Flame's body got bigger for a moment. Because of this, Sora and Ciel were propelled a little farther away.

"I don't usually see Flame join in the fun," my father remarked.

I nodded. Flame generally liked to watch from a distance, but for some reason it was in the mood today. I looked for Sol and found that it had wandered beside me, so I picked it up.

"Pefu!"

"Thanks for deactivating that summoning circle. You really saved us." I had forgotten to properly thank Sol before, so I looked it in the eye when I showed my gratitude. Sol jiggled shyly in response, and it was such a cute reaction that I hugged it even tighter.

"Pefweee..."

Huh? I think Sol said something different than usual. Well, whatever.

"Teryuuu."

I looked toward Flame's satisfied cry to see Sora and Ciel hanging their heads in defeat.

"I guess the one who flies the farthest away loses," my father said.

I just had to laugh at the confusing game.

"Okay, guys, can you get back in the bag for me?"

The playful slimes all gathered by my side. As I put them in the bag one by one, Zinal looked on in awe. "It really is incredible."

When the three of us left, Zinal walked protectively next to me opposite my father.

"What's incredible, sir?"

"Your relationship with your tamed monsters. It's better than any I've ever seen."

"Well, if you just try to connect with them on a spiritual level, it's easy to build a good relationship with them."

“Yeah, watching you all has made me a believer, Ivy. Just *hearing* about it isn’t convincing enough…” Zinal shrugged his shoulders. I agreed that showing was faster than telling.

“Good afternoon, sir.” We greeted the new gatekeeper as we entered Hataka Village, and a burst of loneliness overcame me. Nobody had told me outright, but none of the original gatekeepers had made it.

“The poor villagers are confused, aren’t they?”

“Looks like somebody explained what happened to them.”

Now that we were back from the forest, the villagers were behaving differently than before. Apparently, somebody had filled them in.

“Aha! There you are!”

As we walked down the main street, Kohl and Lizzy, the people who had eaten marinated baaba meat with us and worked so hard to start a food stall selling it, rushed over to us.

“Oh, thank goodness! We couldn’t find you in the plaza, then the captain told us this crazy story, and we were worried something happened to you both.”

From the shaking in Kohl’s voice, it was clear they’d been worried sick looking for us.

“We’re okay, sir, thanks. We’re staying with a new friend we made here.”

“Oh, really? But anyway, did you hear what happened? Scary, right?” Lizzy looked rattled, rubbing her arms as she spoke. Her face was a bit tense.

“The captain and guild master are back to normal now, so I’m sure everything will be okay.” There was an edge in Kohl’s voice as he said that. He had to be scared as well.

“How’s the village looking? Everything under control, I hope?”

Disorder and discontent sent people into panic mode. Even a tiny disturbance in Hataka would be a big problem.

“No problems there. The captain said all the conspirators have been arrested.”

Oh, good. I think everything will be okay, then.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Oh, and the food stall is doing great. Come have a bite! Our treat.”

“Sorry, but we have plans today. Once things settle down, we’ll swing by,” my father said.

Kohl and Lizzy looked disappointed to hear it. After we promised to visit their food stall later, we parted ways.

“I feel bad. We worried them,” I said.

“I know. Let’s try to go to their stall tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

We didn’t know how much longer we could stay in Hataka, so we needed to follow through on our promise as quickly as we could.

Chapter 444:
The Truth About Sol

WE'D DECIDED THAT Zinal would bring Eche over from the captain's house, so we parted ways with him at the guild master's front door.

"Will this all be okay, sir? I feel like Eche will draw people's attention if she comes here." Since everyone knew she worked at the captain's house, she would stand out if she was spotted at the guild master's place.

"It'll be okay as long as they don't recognize her. Leave that to me."

I gave him a curious look. What did he mean by *as long as they don't recognize her*?

"Well, see you later."

We watched Zinal walk away, then unlocked the guild master's front door.

"Ivy, let's get our story straight. Turns out we were just under a spell, after all."

"Okay."

I'd assumed we were all right now since Sol had broken the spell, but I guess not. The only thing we were sure of was that we wouldn't fall under the spell again because Sol told us so. We thought about all the possible explanations, but we didn't have enough information to draw any conclusions. Once we were inside the guild master's house, we took the creatures out of their bag.

"Sol, could I ask you a few questions?"

"Pefu!"

"Thanks."

I went into the dining room and heaved a quiet sigh.

"I'll go make some tea," my father said. I jumped up to follow him. "Aren't you tired? Sit down."

"I'm not tired. It's more like my brain is a confused mess."

My father nodded in understanding. He returned to the room with some tea and some sweet snacks. Meanwhile, Ciel had returned to the small version of its true form. I assumed that was okay, now that it had permission to do so.

“Pefu!”

As I sat and took a sip of tea, Sol jumped on top of the table and then looked up at me and my father.

“Thanks for everything you did today, Sol. You freed us from the spell by breaking that stone.” I looked it in the eyes and thanked it, and I meant every word. There was no telling what would have happened to us if Sol hadn’t been there… Just thinking about it terrified me.

“Pefu!”

“Sol, we have a lot of questions we want to ask you…is that okay? If it is, make a sound. If it’s not, then don’t say anything.”

“Pefu!”

“Thanks.” *Okay, what should I ask first…?* “So, um, did you know what kind of effects that summoning circle had?” *I mean, if it didn’t know, it wouldn’t have smashed it up like that.*

Silence.

“Huh?” my father and I both gasped. Sol didn’t know? Then why had it destroyed the stone so aggressively?

“Um… That means you didn’t know, right?” I asked, just to make sure.

“Pefu!”

Okay, so Sol didn’t know. Then why did it destroy the stone that way? I asked if it knew “what kind of effects” the summoning circle had, didn’t I?

“So, you didn’t know the summoning circle’s exact effects, but you *did* know that it was hurting me and Dad?”

“Pefu!”

Aha, that’s why Sol was so mad. I wonder know long it knew? Well, then again, it would have told us as soon as it knew…

“Did you realize that summoning circle was hurting us the moment you saw it?” my father asked.

“Pefu!”

So Sol didn’t know until it saw the summoning circle. Hmm, now would be a good time to ask a question that’s been bothering me for a while.

“Hey, Sol…you’re planning to leave me and my father, aren’t you?”

Sometimes I would catch Sol staring out the window listlessly. Seeing the slime like that always made me feel like we would have to part ways soon… I looked at Sol, who responded with a bewildered expression. *Uh-oh, was I wrong? Now I feel embarrassed for all that agonizing I did, and how I psyched myself up to give Sol my full support to make whatever decision it wanted…*

Sol kept looking at us without a noise.

No answer… That probably means I was mistaken. But, Sol, you’ve always looked so sad whenever I watched you from behind… Maybe that was just my imagination.

“But why do you always stare outside so intently, then?” I asked. “Is it because you sense magic energy?”

“Pefu!”

Oh, is that why Sol looks outside? Because it senses magic energy?

“Sol…how should I ask this?” my father stammered. “Uhh, do you notice magic energy from far away?”

“Pefu!”

“Oh, okay…” My father looked confused by Sol’s enthusiastic response, and I didn’t understand its feelings, either. I was curious about it, but I decided I’d better ask some other pressing questions.

“Sol, you freed me from the spell in the plaza, right?”

“Pefu!”

“When you did that, didn’t you say I’d never be under the spell again?”

“Pefu!”

“But the summoning circle etched in the stone cursed me again, right?”

“…Pefu!”

Oh no, I’ve upset the poor thing. Does this mean Sol couldn’t have predicted it?

“Were you not expecting the summoning circle to curse the entire village?”

“Pefuuu.”

Oh dear, now it’s really upset. But I had to ask, or else I wouldn’t know.

“I’m sorry, Sol. Please don’t be upset. You saved us all, Sol.”

“Pehhh.”

I gently petted Sol’s head, but it did little to console the poor slime. Its eyes still looked incredibly sorrowful.

“Teryu.”

Just as I heard Flame’s voice, it jumped onto the table and nuzzled maternally up to Sol, who jiggled affectionately against it.



“Hm?”

Do slimes even have sexes? I looked at my father, who gave Sol and Flame a startled look in turn. We had never seen them act like that before. *Well, let’s just give them some space.*

“Thanks, Flame.”

I decided to let Flame take care of Sol while I went over everything we knew: Sol could sense far-away magic energy, but not even Sol had predicted the summoning circle etched in stone. The stone summoning circle must have been quite the exceptional exception, especially when you consider how it was meant to target people with alien skills and memories. That would mean somebody out there knew about us and wanted us gone. Worst-case scenario, they might be trying to kill us this very minute…

I don’t know why, but I feel like I’ve always been the center of trouble even though I’ve tried to avoid it all these years. That means there’s no point in trying to run.

“Sol, did you know that summoning circles were being used in Hataka *before* we came here?” my father asked.

Sol just stared up at him blankly.

Sol’s gaze was so icy that my father nervously gave its head some pats. “Sorry, Sol! Er, I wasn’t blaming you! I was just making sure.”

Well, that’s what you get for wording your question in a misleading way, Dad.

“Aww, Sol, please forgive us. We’re just trying to eliminate some theories one by one.”

“Pefu!”

Okay, let’s organize everything we know about Sol. It likes magic energy and can sense it from far away, but it can’t tell what kind of magic energy it is from a distance.

“When you see summoning circles, you can tell if they’re dangerous then, right?”

“……”

Er—silence? Wait, but Sol just said it knew when it saw the summoning circle… If it's not the summoning circle…then it's the magic energy? The summoning circle's magic energy?

"Can you tell whether a summoning circle is good or not from its magic energy?"

"Pefu!"

Okay, that makes sense. So it's actually the magic energy that Sol can read. You know, the more I learn about Sol, the more of a mystery it becomes. Sol, the slime who sits at the window, sensing magic energy in the distance. Sol, the slime who eats magic ener… Huh?

"Wait a minute… When you sense the magic energy in the distance…does it make you hungry?"

"Pefu!"

My father and I stared in silence.

Now I get it. That definitely would make me feel sad. To sense such delicious magic energy but know it's so far away… Oh! No…it can't be…

"Hey, Sol…have you ever thought about leaving us because you sensed some magic energy and wanted to go off and eat it?"

Sol paused for a long time, and then…

"Pefu!"

Ha ha ha ha ha! Well, it looks like Sol's loyalty to us is stronger than its appetite for now.

Chapter 445:
Requirements for Taming

WHEN I HEARD the long hesitation before Sol's answer, I didn't know whether to feel sad or happy that the slime had chosen me. I laughed it off but wound up in kind of an emotionally complicated place.

"Pefu?" Sol's eyes, innocent and curious, made me want to press the question a little harder. Would I regret the answer I got?

Argh, yeah, I've really gotta know.

"So, um…what about now? Have you ever felt like leaving us lately?"

"……"

Oh, thank goodness! Unlike the last time I asked the question, Sol stared earnestly at me in reply without any conflict in its eyes. Spending time together must have helped us forge a good bond.

"Happy for you both." My father patted my head and Sol's too. I nodded and Sol jiggled happily in reply. "You know, we can, never keep a conversation serious for long, can we?"

Huh, he's right. We always get so laid-back when we talk. I tilted my head and raised an eyebrow, and Sol stretched itself tall and proper for some reason. *So. Stinking. Cute.*

"It's just how we roll," I said with a smile. My father nodded. As the two of us shared a laugh, Sora jumped onto my father's shoulder.

"Pu! *Puuu*." Sora sounded a little upset. It was probably jealous that we were spending all that time talking only to Sol.

"Sorry, Sora. We were talking about something important."

"Pu! Pu, puuu." As I petted Sora, Flame hopped over to join us. I petted them each in turn, and they all jiggled contentedly in reply.

“Sol, let us know if you ever sense a magic energy that interests you. We’ll try to help you get what you need.”

Whenever we were in the forest, we would frequently go off the path or deep into the trees if Ciel or Sora asked us to, so we could take some detours for Sol, too. I wanted to travel in a way that made everyone happy.

“Pefu! Pefu!”

Ooh, Sol looks very happy about that. I hope we weren’t stopping it from having fun all this time. I gave Sol’s head a gentle pat. “Oh! What?! Um, *Dad*! Sol has a symbol!” As I was patting Sol’s head, a taming symbol began to glow on it. *But, um, why? I didn’t give Sol any magic energy.*

“Wow, I’m impressed.” My father walked over to us and touched Sol’s symbol. “This is your magic energy, Ivy. I’m sure of it.”

Sora and Flame merrily bounced around the room. And Ciel’s tail… *I’ll clean that up later.*

“Sol, are you sure?”

“Pefu!”

Sol looks happy, so I guess it’s okay? Still, I really have no clue what the requirements for taming are. What happened in that moment? I learned something about Sol, and I decided I’d do what I could to give it what it wants… That’s all, right?

“Maybe both parties opening up to each other is what you need for taming,” my father suggested.

Opening up to each other? But doesn’t that just sort of naturally happen when you spend time with someone? It’s weird to have a relationship where you’re both closed off all the time.

Knock, knock.

“Hm, Zinal and Eche, maybe?” my father said.

Right, it has been a while since Zinal left for the captain’s house.

“I’ll go answer.”

“Thanks. I’ll make some tea for Zinal and Eche.” I made my way to the kitchen.

“Good day to you all.”

Wait, was that the guild master’s voice?

“Ivy, three teas, please.”

“Okay!” I got another cup going and picked out several different snacks. I was starting to feel hungry myself. I carried everything into the dining room, where I found someone I didn’t know as well as Zinal and the guild master.

“Huh?!”

Is it okay for Ciel to just be out like that? Er, it’s not okay, right? I looked at my father, who just smiled sheepishly back at me.

“So, um…”

“Are you feeling well, Ivy?”

“Huh?!”

The person before my eyes was a short man, yet I was stunned to hear a woman’s voice come out of him—a familiar woman’s voice, at that. I stared at the man, but I still didn’t recognize him. I tried to place his voice instead…

“It’s Eche… Wait—you’re Eche?” I finally noticed the man had her voice.

“Er, what are you… *Ohh!* I’m sorry, I forgot I was in disguise.”

Even though she looked completely like a man, she had a lady’s voice. It all felt completely surreal.

“Why do you look like that?”

“So nobody will know it’s me. Perfect disguise, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” To my eyes, she was a man I’d never seen before. “It’s an incredible disguise—I don’t recognize you even though I know it’s you.”

“Oh, my disguises got quite a lot of mileage in my old profession.”

You mean when you were an assassin? Yeah, no…I can’t ask her that.

“Oh, really, ma’am?”

“Yes, the closer I could get to a person, the easier the job was to carry out.”

Yeah…definitely an assassin.

“Right! So I heard you weren’t feeling well?” she continued.

“Huh?”

“That’s not quite right, ma’am. We feel fine now—we just need someone to check us,” my father explained.

Eche shot Zinal a look.

“Oops, did I say the wrong thing?” he said.

Eche sighed. “*Seriously, Zinal*… Well, it’s okay. I’ll just send some magic energy through you both to see if anything’s wrong with you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Since Eche looked different from her usual self, I felt oddly nervous. It also felt anything but comfortable to hear a woman’s voice coming from a man. My heart raced as I stuck out both hands toward Eche. She gave my hands a gentle squeeze, closed her eyes, and slowly sent her magic energy through my body. I felt it softly ripple out of me.

“Thank you, ma’am. So you were a doctor all along.”

I remembered when I used to think she was an apothecary.

“A doctor can come in handy in a number of ways.”

Handy, you say?

“Doctors can easily infiltrate any space.”

That made sense. Eche proceeded to give my father a checkup while I looked on worriedly, but she said everything was fine. *What a relief.*

“By the way, that’s an incredible monster you’ve got in this room. I’ve only seen them in books. It’s, um…an adandara?” Eche looked at Ciel with awe.

“Have some tea, ma’am.”

“Oh, no thanks, I’m not staying. I left that foolish impulsive patient of mine on his own. Hee hee hee!”

Is she talking about the captain? What did she do to him…? Her eyes were seriously scary just now.

“Did you do something to him?” my father asked Eche, curious about the same thing I was.

Eche smiled innocently at him, and I could practically hear the sparkles in her eyes. *I’m glad I didn’t ask…*

“That old fool decided he needed to test it on himself, so he tried to operate that summoning circle with that frail body of his. Hee hee hee!”

Yikes… She’s utterly terrifying. But so’s the captain—what the hell was he thinking?!

“Well, we just got a message from the capital, so I doubt I’ll try anything foolish anytime soon.”

A message from the capital? Was it about the summoning circles?

“What did it say?” my father asked.

“They found another village besides Hataka that was being used for summoning circle experiments,” the guild master said.

“What?!” we gasped.

It’s happening outside of Hataka, too?

“What’s the damage?” my father asked.

The guild master looked grim. “Complete annihilation. It was a tiny forest village in the middle of nowhere, so nobody noticed there was anything wrong. When communications stopped coming from the village, the capital sent out an investigation team…and they found what was left of the village a week ago.”

Complete annihilation…

“Wow, I’m sorry. Were there any other villages?”

“I haven’t heard of any more since I came here, but if there’s anything else, I’m sure the captain will find out about it for us.”

Eche chuckled. “He sure will. The captain is a master at getting information out of people. I’m sure he’s picking up the most important facts as we speak.”

Maybe we can ask him all sorts of questions later.

“Okay, I’d better be on my way. I’m sure the captain’s okay, but I still worry about him. He really is a pain of a patient.”

“Gee, it almost sounds like you don’t trust the guy,” the guild master teased her.

“Only a fool would,” Eche responded solemnly. It was an answer only somebody who had gone through a lot with the captain could give.

I wonder what they’ve been through together? A part of me wants to know…but I’ll keep my mouth shut. I don’t wanna see that creepy smile of hers again.

Chapter 446:
Three Days

AFTER WE SENT the guild master and Eche on their way back to the captain's house, we returned to the dining room.

Zinal sighed. "This is just getting more and more complicated."

My father nodded. It really did feel like everything was getting out of our control. Not that it had been in our control much to begin with.

"I don't like this. Druid, could you leave this village right away?"

Huh?!

"We'll have to pack first, but…it shouldn't be a problem. What do you think, Ivy?"

Right away…would be a tall order. We need to pack and tie things up first.

"A day should be enough. Do we need to get away from Hataka, sir?"

"I'm not sure yet. But you should at least be ready to leave at a moment's notice, just in case."

I solemnly nodded in agreement. Just in case of what, though? Did he mean the guild master or the captain might try to do something to us?

"Oh—the guild master and captain are safe. I wasn't talking about them. It's just…what with the survey team coming from the capital to check out the summoning circles, I feel like you should leave as soon as you can."

A survey team?

"Since we can't completely erase our tracks here, the survey team will probably go after us," my father said, the crease between his brows deepening. I hated the idea of being targeted by a survey team—they usually investigated criminals.

“Yeah, that’s too bad. I don’t think there’s anything the captain or guild master can do about it, either.”

I feel bad for all the trouble we’re causing… Maybe we should just talk with the survey team? I have a feeling they’ll think we’re on the run if we skip town.

“Why don’t we have a talk with the survey team, sir? Otherwise, they’ll think we’re running away.”

“Yeah, they’ll most likely think that. Only, the people they send on those survey teams are just *kinda*…well, you know.”

Was there some problem with them? But wouldn’t people on a survey team be trustworthy citizens?

“How many people on the survey team are legit?” my father asked.

Huh? “Legit” survey team members?

Zinal sighed. “Uhh…about half?”

Does that mean the other half are no good?

“Isn’t that…a poorly run organization, sir?”

If only half an organization’s members do their job properly, the whole organization is a failure, as far as I’m concerned. Why can’t they get the slackers to quit? Is something stopping them from firing people?

“Yeah, but it’s sort of that way by design.”

I guess that means there is some reason they can’t make people quit. And for a reason that can’t be easily explained, to boot. How unsettling. But still…Zinal’s expression is even scarier. The more he talks about the survey team, the darker the mood in the room gets. Maybe we shouldn’t have asked in the first place? Even so, Zinal’s knowledge never ceases to amaze me.

“You sure know a lot, don’t you, Mr. Zinal?” Did all investigators have as much information as him?

“Zinal also has his work behind the scenes… I imagine that’s where he gets most of his tips from.”

Oh, right! His secret job, then.

“Could be,” Zinal said vaguely. “I did get most of my requests from royalty and people in their circle. I wound up

learning about a lot of taboo stuff, but I turned a blind eye. Nothing good would come of me sticking my nose in, not to mention we're a neutral organization."

Royalty and people in their circle… Wait, was it okay for him to tell us that? Isn't that the sort of thing a contract would stop you from talking about?

"Is it all right for you to tell us that, sir?"

"It's fine. I'm talking about it in a way that won't violate the contract."

He's cunning… Is it wrong for me to compliment him that way?

"Ivy, make sure you read your contracts, okay?"

"Er…yes, sir! Huh?" Zinal's question had caught me off guard. What did he mean?

"You *do* read them, right?"

"I do, sir." I make a habit of reading my contracts all the way through.

"Listen to me—make sure you're always at the center of the contract."

Make sure I'm at the center?

"Like, make sure it's the kind of contract where you can say yes or no when there's an important decision to be made. If the other party has that power, don't sign. Got it?"

Er… So I have all the veto power, and I shouldn't let the other party have it. Oh, now I see! That's what it means for me to be at the center of the contract.

"I understand, sir."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Yes…I think."

In other words, I need to sign contracts where I'm at the center of them, so the other person can't leak something I want kept secret to a third party after the contract is signed. If I'm not at the center, the other person might possibly tell my secrets to a third party… right? Wait—my brain is a mess. Something about contracts—whenever I see them, I just have this negative reaction to them. Odd, since the contracts in this world are so concise. Wait a minute—"the

contracts in this world"? Are memories from my past life getting in the way again? What's this I'm seeing…a contract in small print, several pages long…but I've never seen such a thing in my life.

"Argh…" I sighed.

"You okay? Was it really that tough to follow?" Zinal asked me in confusion.

I shook my head. "No, sir, my memories just got all mixed up. I'm fine."

I thought back to the contracts that I'd signed in this life. They were all very straightforward and only one page long. They each had a clear sentence that placed me at the center of the contract. It was the same with the contracts Zinal had drawn up.

"Mr. Zinal, thank you so much for everything."

I bowed to him, and he smiled and patted my head—though a bit roughly. It messed up my hair, but I decided I didn't care.

"Don't damage her hair."

The same moment my father said that, I heard a slapping noise. I looked over and saw that Zinal's hand was a bit red.

"…Um, the little misunderstanding you had about me is cleared up, right?"

Misunderstanding? Oh, right, that he likes kids!

"Of course."

"Then isn't it okay?"

I would think so.

"…Fair enough."

Dad, why the long pause?

"I feel really sorry for whoever Ivy brings home to get your blessing for marriage…" Zinal gave my father a tired smile.

I raised an eyebrow as I smoothed my hair with my hands. *Marriage? But that's not even slightly on my radar.*

"I'd never object to anyone Ivy chose," my father insisted.

What are they even talking about? I guess I'm happy to know he trusts me, though.

“Really?”

“Yeah. If Ivy’s suitor proves stronger than me and can hold their own against Ciel in a fight, I’ll have no objection to leaving Ivy in their care.”

“Huh?!”

“Er… Isn’t that basically the same as objecting?”

“I wouldn’t object. I’d just need to make sure this person is strong enough to protect her.”

I looked at my father. His eyes were hellishly serious. *He means it. Every word.* Zinal recoiled a little in terror at the sight of my father’s eyes.

“Um, what kind of superhuman could hold their own in a fight with Ciel anyway?”

I had the same question. I looked at Ciel, whose eyes were sparkling eagerly for some reason… *Wait, Ciel, you choose violence, too?!*

“I’ll have you know I’m only nine years old.”

My father nodded gruffly, and Zinal gave me a pitiful look. *How did we even get on this subject in the first place?*

“I’ll just go make us some more tea.”

We’ll get the mood back to normal and talk about our plan for the next few days. Then again, we won’t get anywhere with our strategy until the guild master comes back with information from the captain. You know, it’s getting close to lunchtime. I rubbed my belly. Since I hadn’t eaten breakfast, I’d had far too many sweets.

“Let’s just have lunch.”

Knock, knock. Knock, knock.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it.” Zinal got up to answer the front door.

I guess I’ll just get some tea for now.

When I came back with the tea, I heard my father’s voice.

“Got it… We’ll leave in three days.”

“In three days?”

I could tell the guild master was a little irritated.

“Ivy, I’m so sorry. We found out the survey team is already on its way. Not even the captain could stop them.”

So Zinal was right. *This* was the possibility we needed to plan for.

“I understand, sir. Um, so I guess we’ll be leaving Hataka in three days.”

“That’s right. If there’s anything you need, please tell us. We’ll help you in every way we can.”

“Yes, sir.”

At least we had three days to get ready. We would be fine.

Chapter 447:
Right, He's the Guild Master!

"GEE, THANKS. You didn't have to make me lunch, too," the guild master said as he crammed a sandwich into his mouth.

"It's no trouble, sir. They're easy to make."

I reached for one of the sandwiches which I'd made with white bread. When the subject of lunch came up and I mentioned I was craving that kind of bread, the guild master returned from the market with a pile of it, so I decided to make some meat and veggie sandwiches. I thought I wouldn't have much room for them after all those sweets with tea, but the sandwiches were so tasty after all this time without them.

"Are these those *sandelights*?" Zinal asked.

I gave him a look. *What are sandelights?*

"Haven't you heard of them? I came across them in a village when I was on my way to Hataka."

"Uh, no, sir. I've never heard of them."

It's the first time I've ever heard them called "sandelights."

"Really? Well, they were meat and vegetables between two slices of bread, just like these things you made. The stall that made them was quite popular, so I had to see what they were selling. They went light on the meat, though, so I didn't bother to buy any."

Could it be...we have another slight name change on our hands?

"These are *sandwiches*, sir."

What I just made were sandwiches. But "sandelights"? I wonder why they got the name "sand-thingies" when Bolorda and his party made them popular?

"Come to think of it, they sell something like that in Otolwa called *sand-thingies*. *Sandelights*, *sand-thingies*, and *sandwiches*, huh... They sound *sort of* similar..." Zinal looked thoughtfully at

the ceiling. The words did sound similar, but they'd gone through an odd mutation.

I looked at the platter of sandwiches. Since the guild master had bought me so much white bread, I'd made a feast. If we had leftovers, I could just put them in a magic box to eat later. At least that was the plan…but it didn't look like we were going to have any leftovers.

"Dang, these are good! I love the seasoning on the meat," Zinal said. The guild master nodded mid-chew. They both seemed to especially like the meat.

"Mine tastes a bit spicy."

"Oh? Mine is mild."

The guild master and the captain stuffed their faces fuller and fuller of sandwiches. I was glad they liked them, but they each ate even more than my father. Zinal's appetite had surprised me enough already, but the guild master went even further. *Dang, I'm impressed. And he's the oldest one here!*

"Ahh, I'm stuffed," I sighed. Thanks to the sweets I'd eaten earlier, I was quite full, even after a light lunch.

"Already? You won't grow if you don't eat more," the guild master said.

I smiled sheepishly. Compared to the guild master, everybody ate light. "I had quite a lot of sweets before lunch, so I'm already full, sir."

"Really? But you need to eat more nutritious food, kid."

I nodded in agreement.

"Believe it or not, Ivy's appetite *has* improved quite a bit," my father said.

The guild master and Zinal shot looks at me. I thought that was a fair assessment—I had learned to eat more than I used to.

"She ate even less than this before?"

"Yeah, about half what she ate just now, maybe?"

When my father said that, I could see the uncomfortable looks on the men's faces. When I was living in the forest and traveling on my own, I rarely ate enough to fill my belly. That

made it hard for me to eat until my stomach was properly full. Rattloore was the one who called my attention to that. I remember how worried he'd been when he told me that most travelers ate much more and that I was smaller and thinner than most kids my age.

"Half?! You poor thing… I'm surprised you're still alive." The guild master reached out and gave my wrist a light squeeze. "Yeah, I see…quite thin. C'mon. *Eat*."

"But I'm full, sir. Don't worry, I've been gradually eating more and more every day." I squeezed my wrist after the guild master let go of it. Was it really too thin?

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

I turned to look at Sora to see the slime looking content after a meal of potions. I was relieved that Flame also seemed to be full. Since we hadn't been able to go to the dump, I'd had to feed them fewer potions lately.

"Hey, Dad, do you think we can go to the dump? We're just about out of spare potions and magic items."

"Weeeell, *technically* we can go there, yes…"

The rampaging sharmy had settled down, meaning we could go into the forest again, which meant we ought to be able to go to the dump, too. The only issue was whether it would actually have the items we needed. Since entering the forest had been prohibited all that time, it was likely that nobody had been going there to dump their trash.

"What do you do at the dump?"

"We need to pick up items for the slimes to eat," my father explained.

The guild master thought for a moment. "Does it have to be a dump in the forest? I think you'll find a lot of different items at the village's temporary storage area."

The temporary storage area?

"Whenever the forest is closed off, we make a temporary storage area to use as a dump."

"But isn't it guarded?"

Guarded?

“It is, but I’m the guild master—I can get around that.”

I looked at him. *He can “get around that”? Oh!*

“Oh, right! You’re the guild master, aren’t you?” my father gasped, looking at the guild master. (I guess I wasn’t the only one who’d forgotten.)

“That hurts, guys. I’m the most powerful man in this village, you know,” the guild master said, glaring at my father.

“Well… Ha ha ha ha! You just don’t *feel* like a guild master…” my father laughed.

The guild master’s shoulders drooped. “Well, I can’t help it if you keep seeing me at my worst. So, when should I send the guards away? Tomorrow good for you?”

We answered yes. *But is this really okay? Then again, this temporary storage area probably has all the things we need right now…*

“Thank you so much, Mr. Guild Master.”

“Hey, you’re doing us a favor, too, by taking all that trash off our hands.”

Right. I wonder what’s going on with Hataka’s tamers.

“How are Hataka’s tamers doing, sir?”

“Urrr… Not well. Their disposal powers have gone down a lot, and it’s killed their confidence.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, sir.”

“There’s one thing I want to ask you—may I?”

“Yes, sir. What is it?”

The guild master looked over at my creatures, which I thought was odd. “Is it just me, or does Sol have a taming symbol?”

“Oh, that’s right, sir! Sol accepted me, so it’s tamed now.”

“Ah… I see.” Zinal looked at Sol in turn. “So there must be more than one way to tame a monster.”

“Looks like it, yeah.” The guild master began to chuckle to himself, and his laughter spread to Zinal, too.

“What’s so funny?” my father asked.

“We had a famous tamer here named Marsha. I was just remembering something she said,” the guild master explained. “Nobody understood what she meant at the time, but until the day she died, she kept insisting, ‘Any tamer who relies on magic energy is second-rate. Controlling monsters by force is heresy!’”

“Huh?!”

“She lived by that motto from her teens all the way to her death. Too bad everyone else called her a fool for it.”

What did he just say…?

“Marsha became a tamer in the capital because she was highly skilled, but they drove her out since her taming methods threatened the status quo. You have to remember that tamers weren’t considered nearly as valuable then as they are now.”

“She sounded like an incredible tamer, sir.”

Even though she was ridiculed and driven out of the capital, she stuck to her convictions. She must have really been a strong person.

“Even after she came to Hataka, her philosophy never changed. So even though she was quite amazing, the other tamers shunned her. Looking back, we all should have listened to her more. When I watch you now, Ivy, I can see that Marsha was right.”

I wish I could have met her.

“I’m going to pass Marsha’s wisdom on to Hataka’s tamers. I only hope it’s not too late.”

“It’s not too late, sir. Isn’t that right, guys?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

…Mew?

Oops. Guess Ciel wasn’t paying attention.

Chapter 448:
Squisha, Shoo-waaa

"THIS IS THE PLACE."

We arrived at the temporary storage area at the time the guild master had arranged—and we were startled to find more trash piled up than we'd imagined. *When did they even start using this place as a dump? I thought the sharmy went berserk in the forest right after we arrived in Hataka, but maybe I was wrong?*

"Oh, good, you're here!"

We looked toward the voice to find Arly waving us in.

"Thanks for your help today, sir."

"Yeah, sorry to bother you."

My father and I bowed humbly, but Arly uncomfortably shook his head. He seemed to gaze upon us with sparkles in his eyes now...unless I was mistaken?

"Oh, no, thank *you*!" Arly's praise confused us. We didn't remember doing anything deserving of thanks recently. I was about to ask what he meant when I felt a rustling in my bag. My creatures' patience was at its breaking point.

"Is it okay if I take my creatures out of their bag, sir?"

"Of course! Oh, wait just a moment, please. I need to set up first." Arly checked outside the entrance to the storage area, then closed and locked the door and activated a magic item.

"What's that, sir?"

"An item that makes this building invisible from the outside. You know, since Cholshi is still at large..."

So they hadn't caught him yet... *You know, I get the feeling we're being protected more than normal here—it's not just me, right?* Had they found out something that they couldn't tell me about?

"Thank you very much, sir."

Well, there's no use worrying about it. I opened my bag, and out jumped Sora and Sol. Flame flew close behind them, and last

came Ciel.

“Puuu!”

“Ryuuu!”

Sora and Flame happily cried out as they flew straight into the mountain of trash. Sol got right to work climbing the mountain in silence.

“What incredible spunk they have.”

“Well, they haven’t had anything to eat since lunch yesterday.”

The guild master had given us all his discarded potions, but there still weren’t that many. We’d wanted to go collect some more, but we were forbidden from doing so because the entire village was bustling and it would be too dangerous for us. And since nobody was free to go shopping for us, my slimes had had to go half a day without any meals.

“We should also pick up the things *we* need while we’re here.” My father handed me a magic bag.

“Okay.”

Let’s do this! There’s no guarantee we’ll find any illegal dumps during our travels—I mean, illegal dumps are bad anyway—so let’s assume there won’t be any and fill our bags to the brim. Would you look at that…Sora and Flame are really scarfing it down, aren’t they? Good thing there’s a lot of trash here.

“Let me help you. Um… So you just want blue and red potions, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So I shouldn’t pick up the ones that have gotten severely discolored?” Arly held up a discolored blue potion for me to look at. The color was so murky and faint that it was hard to tell it had been a blue potion to begin with.

“No, it’s okay, sir. My slimes can still eat those.”

“Got it. But wow, they really do eat the potions bottle and all, don’t they?”

Wait, is this his first time watching my slimes eat?

“I wouldn’t call it strange, exactly, but it does feel unsettling to watch.”

I tried not to laugh as I picked up the potions beside Arly. I’d been surprised the first time I saw Sora eat a potion that way because it was different from the books, but that unsettling feeling disappeared quickly. But to those who were used to normal slimes, watching my slimes feed must have been kind of a scary sight.

Squisha-squisha, shoo-waaa, shoo-waaa.

“Huh? What’s that noise?”

Squisha-squisha, shoo-waaa, shoo-waaa.

I looked around, surprised by the unusual sound.

“Ivy…it’s Sol,” my father said, pointing at the top of the mountain of trash. I looked up there to see Sol sticking a magic item directly in its mouth.

“Hm? Wha? Huh?!” I was so shocked by the unexpected sight that a bunch of non-words spilled out of my mouth. *Wait a minute…isn’t Sol a slime that only eats magic energy?* But there it was, deftly using its tentacles to break up magic items into a size just a little bigger than its whole body and put them in its mouth.

Squisha-squisha, shoo-waaa, shoo-waaa.

From the sounds, I could tell that Sol was digesting them.

“Amazing!” Arly’s shocked voice piped up from behind me.

Yup, it’s definitely amazing. I agree.

My father walked over to Sol and handed it a nearby magic item. Sol eagerly divided it and stuck the pieces in its mouth. “Do you think this happened because you tamed Sol? Or is it an evolution?”

I pursed my lips and raised an eyebrow. I’d never read anything about slimes changing their diets once they were tamed. And what did he mean by an evolution?

“Do slimes evolve?” I approached Sol to get a closer look at how it was eating.

Squisha-squisha, shoo-waaa, shoo-waaa.

What a magnificent way to eat.

“No, I’ve never heard of that. Do you know something about it, Arly?” my father asked.

Having had the conversation flung at him, Arly frantically shook his head no.

“I see.”

Squisha-squisha, shoo-waaa, shoo-waaa.

All questions aside, Sol sure was digesting those magic items fast—just as fast as Sora digested swords. Looking for Sora and Flame, I saw they were paying Sol no mind and busily eating their meals. Ciel was curled up on the ground a few yards away from the trash, swishing its tail and taking a nap. *Wait a minute—when did Ciel return to adandara form? I hadn’t even noticed.*

“I guess it’s nothing to worry about,” I said. My father looked at what the three creatures were doing and nodded.

“Hey, Sol, do those magic items taste good?”

“Pefu!” Based on Sol’s satisfied chirp, I decided nothing was wrong, so I got back to work picking up potions.

“How’re things looking on your end?” my father asked.

I thought back to the potions I’d added to my bag. “I got equal blues and reds, and my bag’s almost full. What about you?”

“Same kind of thing. What about you, Arly?” my father asked, stealing a glance at Arly as he picked up a potion.

Arly peered into his bag, then looked up at us pitifully. “I’m sorry, sir, but I got seventy percent blue potions.”

“Okay. Ivy, grab some extra red potions, and I’ll go get some magic items. Arly, could you help me pick them up?”

“Okay, Dad.”

“Happy to help, sir!” Having collected potions in silence for a while, Arly climbed down from the mountain of trash. He set his bulging magic bag beside Ciel, then took out a fresh one to collect magic items.

“Hey, do you think Sol has any preferences when it comes to magic items?” Sora and Flame each had their designated potion color—did Sol have something similar?

Arly froze mid-action. “You know, that’s a good question,” my father said, climbing down the mountain of trash to put his magic bag beside Ciel. He picked up a new bag and climbed back up the mountain toward Sol. “Hey, Sol, do you like all magic items equally?”

Sol stole a glance at my father, then moved away from the magic item next to it and scurried over to feed on one that was further away.

“Looks like Sol *does* have preferences.” My father picked up the magic item Sol had discarded and looked it over. It was a magic box, and it didn’t look like there was anything wrong with it. But since Sol had refused to eat it, that meant there were some magic items even Sol wouldn’t feed on.

“Okay, that’s the last one.” I put my last potion in my bursting magic bag, climbed down the mountain of trash, and set the bag down next to Ciel, whose eye twitched open to look at me.

“Thanks for guarding our slimes’ meals.”

Mrrrow.

It was a pity my hands were too dirty to pet Ciel. “We’re almost done, okay?”

I grabbed a new bag and climbed up the mountain of trash to get some red potions.

“Hey, Sol, what about this one? What about *this* one?”

I looked toward my father’s voice and saw him pointing at several different magic items which he had lined up in front of Sol. He and Arly were both having a hard time figuring out which ones Sol preferred.

“You can’t tell?” I asked, approaching the men and staring at the magic items.

“No, we can’t. We’re stuck.”

“Which are the magic items Sol didn’t want?” I asked.

My father pointed at three of them. “Those ones.”

I picked up one of the magic items to examine it. It seemed new—it wasn’t at all damaged, and the magic energy inside it felt strong. “Wait a minute, isn’t this magic item still usable?”

My father and Arly both looked the item over. “You know, yeah, it does have some life left in it.”

“It’d be a waste to throw it away,” Arly agreed.

“What about the other two?” My father checked out the other two magic items. “Yeah, these have plenty of life in them, too. I hadn’t noticed before, because I wasn’t looking for usability.”

I looked at the magic item Sol was eating. It was old and quite weathered.

“I guess Sol doesn’t eat magic items that can still be used.”

What an incredible food preference. Come to think of it, Sora and Flame won’t eat new or new-ish potions, either.

SIDE:
Dad's Intel-Gathering

"THANKS FOR SEEING ME. So is everything ready now?"

"Just about. Thanks for telling us about that temporary storage area. It was a big help." I thanked the captain and sat down across from him. Something out of the ordinary had happened at the storage area, but the captain already knew quite a lot, so it was okay to tell him about it. I still didn't understand why Zinal had used contracts with such heavy penalties, but to be honest, they'd helped us out a great deal. It was a contract whose worst penalty was *death*. I hadn't known Hataka's leaders long enough to be completely sure they wouldn't do anything crazy, but I knew we would be okay. Sora said they were safe, after all, and Sora's judgment had never been off before.

"I heard some interesting news about what happened in the storage area. Sol sure is a wonder."

"Yeah, even I was surprised."

This guy gets his news quickly, doesn't he? Well, I guess his willingness to talk openly with me probably means that he won't use the knowledge for any shady business. I looked at the captain sitting before me. He was emaciated from being asleep for two years, but there wasn't a trace of the frailty he'd displayed when he first woke. In fact, his eyes were fiery and he looked ready for action. It was amazing how much he had changed in just a few days.

"Sorry I'm late." The guild master entered the room. He was the other person to be part of our little conference today.

"How'd it go?"

"We secured all of them. The summoning circles have also been checked."

"Okay. Good work."

"All of them?" *That must mean they caught Cholshi. Now we can hit the road without looking over our shoulder every minute.*

“Is the house guarded?” the guild master asked.

“Don’t worry, Zephyr’s handling that,” I said. The captain nodded. Zinal and Garitt were taking care of security at the guild master’s house along with Ciel. They’d all been extremely keen when I asked them to watch Ivy while I was gone, so I was sure she’d be safe. *The only problem is that I forgot to tell Ciel to take any intruders alive. If somebody breaks in, they’re dead for sure, which isn’t a good thing—we need to find out if they have any accomplices… Oh well, I messed up.*

“You know, Druid, you let that savage gleam in your eye shine loud and proud when Ivy’s not around.”

“I don’t feel any need to hide it here,” I answered the guild master. That made him recoil. All I did was tell him the truth, and I went and scared him.

“Well, no matter. So, Appas, what did you learn?”

“I asked around all over. We found that six villages had been used for summoning circle experiments like the ones in Hataka. We’re the only village that survived.”

“When did people find out about this?”

“Within the past two weeks,” the captain answered.

That gave me pause. *Within the past two weeks? Did that mean the other villages were being experimented on at the same time? All six of them?*

“Did the experiments all start at the same time?”

“No, there was about a year’s difference between them. Also, one of the villages wasn’t discovered for a whole year.”

Not discovered for a whole year… It must have been a tiny, remote village in the middle of the forest that was rarely visited. How horrible.

“Why are the survey teams treating these missions as classified? Is it because there were a lot of casualties in the villages? Or is it because of the summoning circles?”

The guild master looked at the captain. Summoning circles were indeed classified, so it would make perfect sense for the survey teams to keep this investigation secret. But from the look

on the captain's face, I gathered there was a different reason for it being classified.

"You know how the royal family's dealing with a little problem right now?"

The royal family? I wonder if it's that rumor I heard…

"Is it about the succession?" I asked.

The guild master's face twitched as the captain continued his explanation. "It is. There are two survey teams headed to Hataka, each backed by a different person."

Each team is backed by a different person? Crown succession? Ahhh, in other words, two of the candidates for the crown must have sent their own survey teams.

"Damn it, they dragged their succession crap into this?!" the guild master grumbled, pouring some wine into a cup and gulping it down.

"Appas…Eche's going to yell at you for *real*, you know."

I gave the guild master a questioning look. Eche yelled at the captain every day… Was he saying she didn't mean it "for real"?

"You were in a coma a week ago. You shouldn't be drinking that wine," the guild master rebuked him.

I poured a little into a cup to satisfy my curiosity. My throat instantly burned when I sipped it. "Yeah, this stuff is pretty strong." It was a very high proof, but it was also delicious. Still, it certainly wasn't wine the captain should have been drinking in his condition.

"C'mon, don't be a killjoy."

The guild master scowled at the captain. "Oh, *fine*. Just don't come crying to me when she bites your head off." With another glare at the captain, the guild master swallowed the rest of the wine in the cup. "Let's get back on topic."

The captain sighed loudly. "They predicted that we'd have more support from the nobility once the case was closed in Hataka. Each faction wanted to learn more than their rival, so they quickly sent their respective survey teams here in secret. That's why we've got *two* survey teams headed our way."

When the captain finished delivering his news, an indescribable atmosphere filled the room.

“Can’t they see how much destruction summoning circles leave behind?”

Exactly. But still, two survey teams? Once they arrive in Hataka, there’ll be no way for me to move about freely.

“It’s safe to assume the crown and the church are each other’s enemies, right?” the guild master asked.

The captain shook his head.

So it isn’t? Wait a minute, that contradicts something I heard earlier.

“The current monarch and the clergy are enemies—no mistake there. The crown has been chipping quite a bit of power away from the church over the years. But we don’t know how our future monarch will behave. They might have already allied with the church, for all we know.”

So we had a church that didn’t see people as human beings, and we had megalomaniac princes vying for the crown. I could definitely see them forming an alliance.

“By the way, why *did* the church run experiments on summoning circles? What’s their end game?”

“Yeah, about that… There just isn’t any info out there. Somebody’s suppressing it.”

Suppressing it, eh? The captain’s spy network sounded very large. And from the way he talked, I was sure some of his sources were rather high-ranking officials. If this person could suppress communications between them, they must have held a lot of power.

“Do you know who your suppressor friend is?”

“Not a clue. All I know is, if I’m too sloppy trying to find them, I’m screwed.”

“No kidding.” The guild master took a swig of wine. Just finding out about the survey teams was already an incredible feat. After all, each team was under top-secret orders from a prince who wanted to be king.

“By the way, how many princes are there in line for the crown?” the guild master asked. “Is it just two? Wait, wasn’t it three?”

The captain sighed in frustration, and I tactfully looked away. *I don’t know, either. I don’t have ties with any princes who have a chance at the throne, after all.*

“There used to be four…but now it’s just three. Only two of them are fighting over it, though.”

So it’s just two. But I’m surprised to hear there were four, and now three…

“Was one of them assassinated?”

“Yeah… The official story is it was illness, but who knows? There were whispers in the capital that it was murder. It happened quite a long time ago.”

The royal family sure is terrifying.

“Can the king be trusted?”

“This king? Yeah. But the two fighting over his throne? Trust is irrelevant with them.”

Taking everything I’d heard about them into account, that was a fair assessment. The current king was battling the clergy, after all.

“So we’ve got the church and summoning circles…and the royal family and the succession problem…”

Each of the problems were far too big for us to fight against alone. Also, was the king truly as trustworthy as the captain said he was? I’d heard different from Zinal. He’d said the king had evidence but wouldn’t pursue it.

“Do you know where the survey teams are right about now?” the guild master asked. I looked up at the captain.

“About five days away from Hataka.”

“Five days? Didn’t you say the same thing yesterday?”

“Well, luckily for us, the two survey teams are stalling each other. Since both teams are top secret, neither of them can make a move while the other is watching. Idiotic, right?”

“Yup, that’s idiotic.”

A scheming glint shone in the two men’s eyes. Something cold tingled down my spine, but since this would give Ivy and me a bigger window for our escape, I was grateful for whatever they were plotting.

SIDE:
Father's Vow

"SO WHAT ARE YOU going to do?"

"Nothing, really. It's just…rumors will spread. For example, people will say that monsters went berserk from the summoning circles and are on a murderous rampage in the forest. Or maybe they'll say that the culprits who escaped went mad from the summoning circle. See, Hataka is a hub of conflicting stories at this point. We can hardly help it if our villagers spread misinformation now, can we? Isn't that the natural conclusion to draw?"

I felt my face draw into tight lines as the captain spoke. There was no telling just how nervous these rumors would make the survey teams standing by in the forest. I looked at the captain, and there was an indescribably wicked gleam in his eye.

"What Hataka needs most right now is people who can dissect the summoning circles and think up some countermeasures for us—we don't want the same thing happening again. And they're busy squabbling over who succeeds to the throne? Don't gimme that shit. Oh, I *really* wanna pop 'em one. Well…not like I'd actually do that. Honest, I won't. It's just…when the survey teams arrive, we need to give them a *warm welcome*. They only move their asses in times like this anyway. After all, these are the same bastards who worked for *those* dumbasses."

Wow, I've never seen him curse this much. Is this what he's really like? No, it's gotta be the captain in him. But still…"those dumbasses" must be the two princes vying for the throne. I stole a glance at the captain. *Yeah, he's dead serious.*

"I won't try to stop you. Just try to stay off the royal family's hit list, okay?" The guild master seemed relatively unfazed. He was probably used to the captain being like this.

"Of course. There're still so many things we don't know about summoning circles. No matter what happens, a summoning circle's always behind it. *Seriously*, those circles really are a wonder."

I don't think you've got that quite right… Well, whatever. He was probably talking from the perspective of the survey teams just now.

"Druid, this is where you come in. Let's see…can you leave either tomorrow or the morning of the next day?"

Guess that means he'll set off some sort of trap after that.

"We were planning on leaving tomorrow around noon. That's what Ivy and I decided."

"Oh, okay. Gee, we're going to miss you two. Ivy is such a good kid."

"I know. She's a very good kid," I said. The guild master and the captain stared hard at me in response. *What is it?*

"I'm not sure whether you know it or not, but your vibe changes *drastically* whenever you talk about Ivy," the captain said with an amused chuckle.

"Yeah, it's impressive, seeing a man's demeanor change so much. Oh, you worked in Hataka long ago, didn't you?"

I worked here?

"Maybe I did, but I don't remember."

Truth be told, I didn't recall much of my past. I didn't remember taking my life seriously. I just took every gig offered to me without much thought, completed it, and repeated the cycle.

"Yeah, you did a gig together with the elite adventurers here," the guild master said. "It was a tough job, and casualties were heavy. When you boys came back to the village, all the potions were used up, so we couldn't save the wounded—it was pretty brutal. But I remember you, Druid. You just stood there stoically, spilling all that blood. I've seen many an adventurer in my day, but you were so downright creepy that I remember it vividly."

I searched my memories for anything like the guild master described, but I couldn't match it up. I did remember getting heavily wounded, however. Now I remembered just how brutal my injuries had been, especially during the five years before I

met Ivy. Those five years were a blur to me now, so I wasn't sure which memory belonged to Hataka.

"Sorry...I can't remember."

"Oh, I don't mind. It's just that I was stunned when I heard your name. Then when I saw how different you were, I thought you were a different guy. But you had the exact same face as him. What changed you? Was it Ivy?"

Even I felt like I'd changed into a different person, so it was no surprise that others saw that in me, too. "Yes. Ivy is my guardian angel. She's the light of my life."

The guild master and captain exchanged glances. It looked like they wanted to ask me something. What was it?

"About that summoning circle you found outside the village... We heard it affected only you and Ivy. Is that true?"

I knew that question was coming, but I wasn't expecting it so soon. Okay...I'm not sure how much I should tell them.

"It's true."

"Aha." The captain nodded. Then there was a bit of silence. I gave him a questioning look, assuming more questions would follow. "Druid, we won't ask you anything else. We just thought more information would be useful to us, in case something happens."

The guild master nodded in agreement. "We may be bound by contracts, but those things aren't absolute. Don't get me wrong—we *will* uphold our side of the contract."

"Thanks." *These two are sincere. They really are going to help me and Ivy.*

"Also, we've planned things so that all the adventurer guilds will be notified if anything happens to anybody in Hataka who knows you."

If anything happens... He means if somebody comes to Hataka and hurts people who know us while trying to get information out of them. I hope that won't happen...

"Got it. What will you say in the message to the guilds?"

"I'm not sure. What do you think would be good?"

You mean you haven't thought that far?

"Can you think of any good code words to use? They have to be words that won't tip off the ones who hurt us."

Ah, he has a point there.

The three of us sat in silence.

Nothing's coming to me. There's got to be something…

"How about '*We caught the mings. No need to search for them*'?" I suggested.

Mings were flying monsters whose territory wasn't big, but who were tiny and rather difficult to catch. They were rarely in demand, so no adventurers had learned to catch them, but sometimes we got a request for some. Hataka hadn't received such a request in a couple of years, though, so it was perfect.

"Good. Let's go with that. All anybody'd think if they read that is '*Huh, what a strange request.*'"

"True."

The captain and the guild master were both on board with the idea. Still, I hoped I would never hear that message.

"Druid, trouble is going to keep following Ivy."

The captain's words made me shudder. The summoning circle made of stones outside Hataka was one of my biggest anxieties. Its creators weren't targeting Ivy directly, but they were targeting people with memories of their past life. They would almost certainly go for her directly in the coming days.

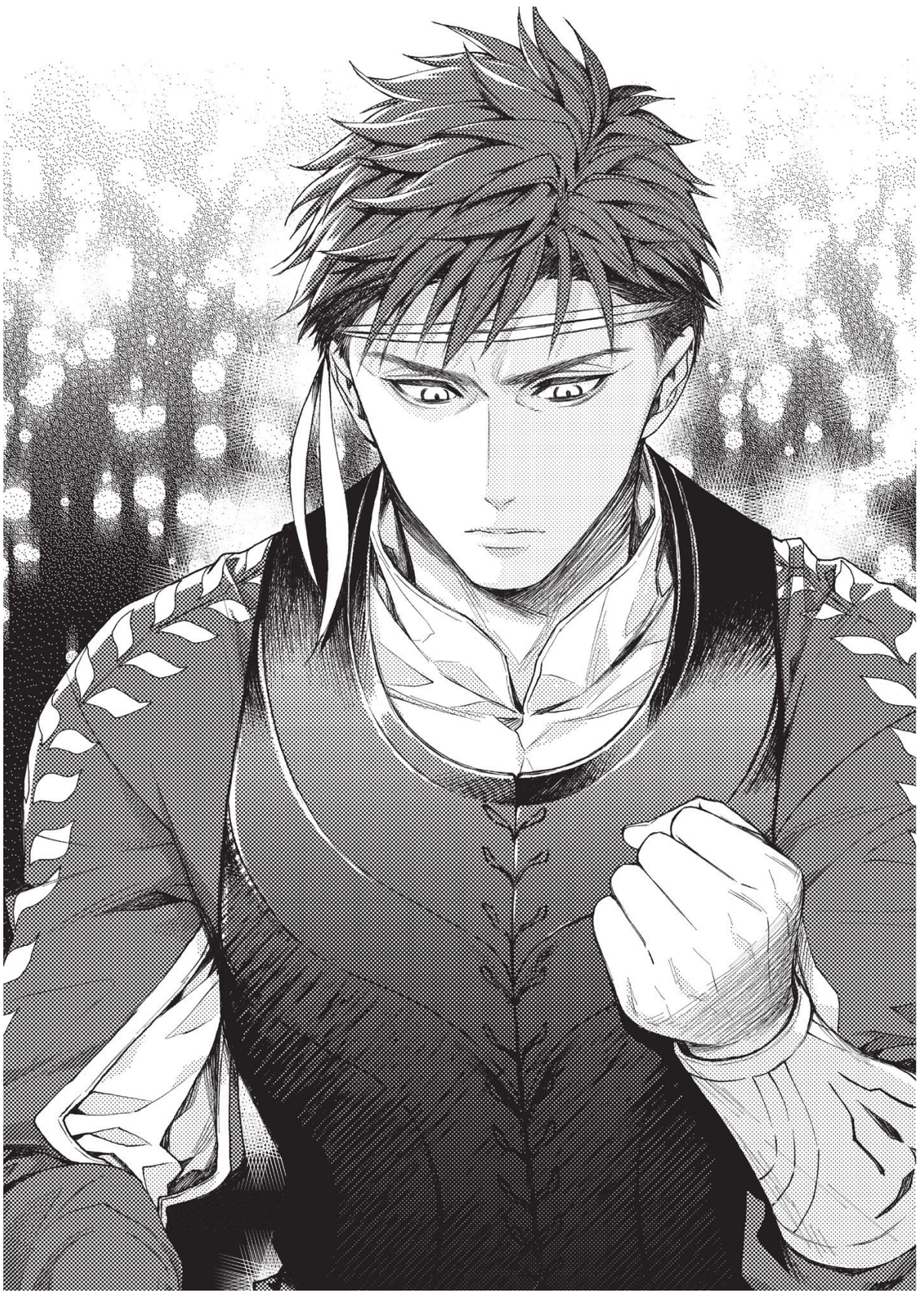
"Yeah, I know."

"Same goes for you, eh, Druid?" the guild master asked.

I nodded. "You said it. But I'm a former adventurer. I can protect myself, to a degree. I'm not gonna let anybody control or murder me." *But Ivy is another story.* "Ivy got caught up in problems that should be left to adults… She had no other path available to her." *Without an adult to protect her, she wouldn't have gone on such a dangerous journey alone.* "When she met Sora, Ciel, Flame, and Sol…and me…she finally found an environment where she could feel safe and at home. It's cruel that her life would be in danger again…"

The captain and the guild master caught their breaths. *Oh, I never told them how Ivy was almost murdered in her home village.*

“Well, this time I’m protecting her. I’ll protect her with my life.”



I sometimes felt anxious since our enemy was in the shadows, but my heart would not falter. I would protect Ivy's body and soul with my life.

"She'll be okay. She has her monsters—she has her family."

The old me wouldn't have been at all happy at the idea of having a family for friends. But now, I felt much stronger with them in my life.

"You've put our minds at ease, Druid. It sounds like you made this vow to yourself long ago."

"I did. Though I'm at a loss for what to do sometimes, since our enemy is so huge…"

Churches were everywhere, and summoning circles were easily hidden. I had my worries, but I was not alone anymore.

"Well, I'd stay away from churches for a start. Also, be on guard for people behaving strangely. I guess it's harder to give you advice on summoning circles, though…"

The captain chuckled at the fumbling guild master. "Have you forgotten about her monsters?"

He was right. Sol, Sora, Flame, and Ciel would definitely help us out.

"You guys are so *lucky*! I wish I had a slime like Flame," the guild master whined.

The captain shot him a tired gaze. "How can that happen when you're not a tamer?"

"C'mon, let a man dream! Ooh—yeah, you never got to see Ciel in its true form, did you, Appas? Tough break!"

The captain glared at the guild master's taunting grin and took a swig of wine. I looked at the bottle and saw there were only a few drops left. *Yeah, he's gonna hear it from Eche tomorrow.*

"Um, shouldn't we lay off the sauce?"

"Druid, no! I could do this all night!" The captain grabbed two more bottles of wine.

Uh-oh, this is dangerous… If I stay much longer, I'm gonna get an earful of my own tomorrow.

"Okay, let's get smashed!"

The guild master's eyes were a bit bloodshot. *Yeah, he's drunk, all right. Okay, time to leave! Nothing good will come of me staying here...*

Chapter 449:
Departing Hataka

"GOODBYE, EVERYONE."

Since the day of our departure from Hataka was chosen so suddenly, I'd assumed our final moments here would be hectic, but they weren't. To my surprise, all the members of Cobalt helped us pack and get ready for the road. They even handled the little things my father and I wouldn't have bothered with. Thanks to their diligence, our tent and camping furniture shined like new. I couldn't believe they'd actually *detailed* our supplies!

"Thank you so much for all your help," I bowed to Nalgath and his men, grateful for their work on our tent and all our belongings.

"Oh, no, thank *you*. You've helped me in more ways than you can imagine..." Nalgath smiled awkwardly and looked down. I gave him a curious look back. "*Ahh*, you know...'cause my dad and I finally talked things out. Arly was able to reconnect with his dad, too."

Arly smiled and lowered his head reverently to me. Between the summoning circle and the church, Hataka had been through the wringer, but I was glad to hear that some good had come of it all.

"Aha, *there* you are!"

I whirled around at the sound of the voice to see Kohl and Lizzy, the owners of the marinated baaba food stall, waving and running over to us. "Thank goodness we caught you! Here, eat this on the road." Lizzy handed me a package of fragrant marinated meat.

"Thank you, ma'am. Er, isn't your food stall usually open this time of day?"

It was noon. The food stalls should have been bustling by now.

"Don't worry, our parents are covering for us," Lizzy said. "Seriously, thank you! I felt so bad making you help us out

yesterday when you came to visit... If you're ever in Hataka again, stop and say hi, okay?"

I chuckled and nodded. When we'd visited their food cart the day before to eat some marinated baaba, they were swamped with customers and we felt so sorry for them that we wound up helping out. Kohl was very pleased, though. They were picking up more regular customers and steadily increasing their sales.

"Thank you so much! I'm sure we'll come visit again someday."

As I chatted with Lizzy and Kohl, I searched for my father. I found him not too far away, deep in conversation with the guild master. His brows were knit together, so it probably wasn't a very pleasant chat.

"We've gotta go now. Promise you'll see us again, Ivy!"

"Of course, I promise!"

Lizzy and Kohl waved goodbye and ran back to their food stall.

"Want to swing by on our way back?"

I heard Piarre asking Arly if he wanted to stop at Lizzy's food stall afterward. Now that the food stall had gained the adventurers' seal of approval, it was sure to do well—after all, adventurers had the biggest appetites.

My father had finished his conversation, so I walked over to him. "Hey, Dad...is everything okay?" I peered into his eyes, but they didn't look all that solemn to me.

"Huh? Oh, don't worry, it's nothing bad. We were just talking about how we have some pretty amazing allies."

Amazing allies? I don't really get who he means. Maybe he'll tell me later?

"Well, take care. You, too, Ivy... Oh, yes, I almost forgot. Appas gave me this to give to you. Unfortunately, most of them are used up. Only one of them's still in magic stone form."

The guild master handed me a bag. I took it and looked inside to find twelve ordinary rocks and one magic stone. The rocks were most likely spent magic stones.

“Wow, you sure went through a lot of these. Are you sure you don’t need them anymore? You see, Sol actually made some more magic stones after I gave you these, so…”

“Nononono, we’re good! Thanks! Besides, those dumbasses’ minions are gonna be buzzing around here soon, so I’d rather not get caught with anything dicey.”

Those dumbasses’ minions? Is that the survey teams my father told me about? Those dumbasses… He can’t mean the princes, can he? I stole a glance at the guild master. He had the sort of smile on his face that made you want to turn your head away at the speed of light. *Yeah, you definitely don’t want to get on his bad side.*

“Er, just promise me you won’t do anything too rash, sir.”

“Mwa ha ha! Ivy, you really are a sweetheart. Don’t worry, *we’ll* be okay.”

Yeah, you’ll be okay, but what about the other… You know, never mind. I’ll just forget I heard that.

“Go easy on them, okay?” my father said.

The guild master smiled. “Don’t worry, I may not like going easy on people, but I’m good at it. Oh, look at the time! You guys know the way?”

“Yeah, we go through the sharmy colony, right?”

“Right. My spies say the survey teams are waiting on either side of it. We’ve got Zephyr on standby just in case, but they won’t do anything unless they need to, so no need to worry about a thing; just march straight through.”

“Got it.”

“Also, once you guys are past the sharmy colony and know you’re in the clear, my boys are going to wander through the forest planting a rumor. So if you hear some crazy things about Hataka after you leave, just ignore them.” With a secretive smile, the guild master gave my father a pat on the shoulder.

“Will do. I know it’s a lot of work for you, but we appreciate it,” my father said.

The guild master nodded solemnly. Hataka’s leaders would have to work very hard to cover our tracks.

“Thank you for all you’ve done for us, Mr. Guild Master. I’m so grateful that you’re going to keep helping us.” I bowed to the guild master and waved to Nalgath’s party, all of whom waved back as we went on our way.

“Ready?” my father asked.

“Yup. Let’s go!”

A while after we set off for the sharmy colony, I felt a rustling in my bag. My creatures wanted me to let them out, so I searched our surroundings for auras. We generally knew where the survey teams were stationed, but you never could be too sure.

“Looks all clear to me,” I said.

“Me, too.”

I opened the bag, and out flew my creatures. “Hi, guys! We’re back on the road today; hope you’re all ready for a trip.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

Their cheerful replies were just what I needed. *Oh, wait, what were my father and the guild master chatting about earlier?*

“Hey, Dad, what were you and the guild master talking about?”

“Huh? You mean just before we left?”

I nodded. Ciel, back in adandara form, had Sol, Flame, and Sora perched on its back. Ciel made sure they were all settled in before starting to walk in front of us again.

“Hey, Ciel, we’re headed for the sharmy colony first, okay?”

Mrrrow. Ciel trilled in understanding as it confidently marched on. Maybe it had overheard the conversation with the guild master.

“Lord Foronda wrote us with some more information about summoning circles. Also, we’re pretty sure he’s got powerful connections in the capital,” my father said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Since we were hitting a lot of dead ends trying to learn about the church's connection with summoning circles—and what exactly summoning circles exactly *are* to begin with—I sent him a faax directly. He told us to drop him a direct line before, so I figured it was okay. I sent him a faax that said: '*Do you know anything about summoning circles? Somebody's using them to target my daughter.*'"

I guess his faax was worded a bit vaguely just in case someone intercepted it.

"Well, I got a direct faax this morning. That's what you saw earlier—the guild master was giving me the message."

Oh, I had no idea.

"He replied, '*I can't discuss summoning circles in detail over faax. I'll meet up with you soon.*' He also said, '*If the nobility gets involved, drop my name. If you mention me, most nobles will back off.*'"

Most nobles? That must mean Lord Foronda has an incredible amount of influence…

"Our Lord Foronda is a bit of a mystery, isn't he?" I remarked.

"Yeah, I'm kind of scared to find out who he really is."

"Me, too."

I always knew he was very powerful, but some things were best left unknown. Besides…

"So he's coming to see us?"

"Sounds like it, yeah. He said, '*Whenever you move to a different village or town, let me know by faax.*'"

Is it really okay for him to come all the way out here to see us in person? Isn't he incredibly important? Well, I guess it's out of the question for us to go see him…

"Anyway, let's not dwell on that. We'll see him when we see him."

"True."

It's really all we can do.

“Oh, wait! With everything that’s happened, I forgot to send everyone faaxes. No, uh… I *did* send them? Yes, that’s right, I got replies from everyone…but then I never wrote back!”

Oh, no… Everyone must be worried sick.

“Agh!” My father stopped in his tracks, rummaged in his shoulder bag, and pulled out a sheet of paper. “Oh, crap… I forgot to get in touch with them.” His eyes shifted uncomfortably, then a loud sigh escaped his mouth. “Well, too late to panic now. But we’d better send them a faax as soon as we get to the next village.”

“Send whom a faax?”

His expression was awfully uncomfortable. Who could it be?

“With everything that happened, I never got a chance to tell you, Ivy—my sister-in-law is pregnant.”

She’s pregnant? Wait a minute, I heard that Shurila got pregnant a while ago… Oh, does he mean Dolgas’s wife?

“Whoa, that’s great! Congratulations to both of them… Oh, right. You never sent the faax…” That was why he looked so uncomfortable. “Let’s make sure we remember this time.”

I wanted to offer them my congratulations, too.

Chapter 450:
I Hate Them!

“WOWEEE, look at all the sharmy!”

As we approached the sharmy colony, we spotted dozens upon dozens of the creatures perched in the trees.

“I think there’s more now than what we saw in the cave,” my dad observed.

I looked around and saw that he was right. “Think they were hiding before? Or maybe they ran away a while ago and now they’re back?”

Wait a minute, there are sharmy with long fur now. Is that the way they’re supposed to look?

“Yeah, I think they were probably runaways who came back. Most animals don’t risk their lives to defend their homes.”

But aren’t all animals like that? Oh, I guess not. Most monsters will die to protect their territory if they’ve taken a liking to it. Maybe that’s a basic difference between animals and monsters.

“Then again, weak monsters run away at the first sign of danger,” my father added.

So it’s more a matter of strong versus weak than monsters versus animals. Even monsters flee to protect their species if they’re weak.

“The people of Hataka would be relieved to know that all the sharmy came back,” I said.

“They sure would.”

To the people of Hataka, who were still reeling from the tragedy in their village, the state of their forest would be welcome news. They really did love the sharmy, which was a good thing. However...

“They’re glaring at us...glaring *hard*...” I could even hear some of them hissing and growling.

My father chuckled. “They think we’re the enemy.”

I looked up to see countless pairs of eyes glaring down at us. We saw ourselves as their colony's saviors, but they looked at Ciel as a threat that nearly scared them to death.

"Too bad we never got to be friends," I sighed. The people of Hataka had said sharmy were usually very friendly and sweet.

"Yeah, too bad. Maybe we can make friends next time we're in Hataka."

"I sure hope so."

Under the sharmy's wary gaze, we made our way to their cave. Each time a sharmy hissed at us, Ciel shot it a death glare, so the complaints tapered off.

"There's supposed to be a path next to the cave..." My father consulted the map the guild master had given him while pointing at the cave the sharmy called home. When we got closer, a tiny path came into view.

"So we should just walk along the path then?" I asked.

"Yeah, it'll help us avoid the dangerous roads."

Waving goodbye to the sharmy, we took the path as directed. It was narrow but well trodden, so it was a breeze to walk on.

"I love that there aren't any roots in the way."

On some paths, roots jutted out from the ground; if you didn't watch your step, you'd trip on them. We walked in silence for a while, trying to avoid throwing a wrench in the guild master's plans.

"We left the village four hours ago, so we should be safe now," my father said.

"Good. Can we take a little break?" I looked for some boulders that might serve as comfortable places to sit.

"Sure. We sure did walk a lot."

I massaged my ankles and nodded. Since we'd had to stay in hiding all that time in the village, we hadn't gotten a chance to move around much, so my feet were getting tired much easier than they usually did. "It's been ages since we marched for four hours straight."

“You know, you’re right. Are you guys all doing okay?” he asked the creatures.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Pefu!”

Huh? I didn’t hear Flame’s voice. I approached Ciel to find Sora and Sol had slid off its back, but Flame was still curled up there; it was sleeping, actually.

“You still sleep a lot less than you used to, little friend.” I carefully picked Flame up.

“Teryu?”

“C’mon, let’s take a little nap. Well, guess you were already doing that.”

“Teryuuu…” Flame opened its mouth wide and yawned. *Don’t ever change, buddy*. As I was gently setting it on the ground, Ciel arched its back and its fur stood straight up.

“Something’s coming our way,” my father observed.

I searched for auras and sensed a monster aura a fair distance away.

“What should we do?”

Mew! Ciel answered my father, its tail swishing violently back and forth.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

Mrrrow. With another wave of its tail, Ciel looked left and right, then jumped into a tree. It slithered through the branches and quickly vanished out of sight.

“What do we do now?” my father asked.

“Dunno…” Now that Ciel had stopped concealing its magic energy, the critters in the forest had gotten a bit frantic.

“Ciel really has gotten good at completely masking its magic energy, huh?” my father said.

“You said it. I wasn’t paying attention, so I hadn’t noticed.”

Mee-YAAAH!

“Agh!”

“Whoa!”

An earth-rumbling growl echoed through the woods. Then silence fell on the forest…until all the critters around us started to freak out.

“Damn, Ciel’s amazing.”

“Yeah. Amazing, but…”

Isn’t Ciel going a little too far? Sure, the monster that was coming for us is running away now…but I can tell from all the mixed-up auras that the other monsters and animals in the forest are also running like there’s no tomorrow.

Mrrrow. Ciel gracefully landed from the trees. The creature looked so proud of itself that I had to laugh.

“Good work, Ciel. Let’s take a break until all the other critters settle down.”

Sora and Flame were merrily bouncing around Ciel, but Sol was a few feet away, staring off into the distance.

“Hey, Sol, did you spot some magic energy you like?”

“……”

Whenever Sol didn’t answer me, I wasn’t sure if it meant the answer was “no” or if it was completely focused on scanning for magic energy.

“Oh, by the way, I asked the guild master and…here you go,” my father said, passing me a plate of onigiri and marinated baaba meat. The freshly cooked aromas danced directly into my hungry stomach.

“Ooh, thanks! What did you ask him?” I took a bite of dinner and looked up at my father.

“I asked him how we fell under the summoning circle’s spell.”

Oh, that’s right! We still hadn’t figured that out yet. I stopped mid-bite and turned to look at my father again.

“It was Father Salify, apparently.”

Father Salify? He was the one who activated the summoning circles carved on his body and made the guild master run out to stop him, right?

“When the captain examined the summoning circles carved on his body, he figured out that the spell on them brainwashes everyone within a certain radius when it’s activated.”

“So we were in his radius?”

“That’s right. The spell doesn’t cover a very big range, but it’s designed to be cast slowly and secretly.”

“Have we ever even met Father Salify?”

“I don’t think so.”

We haven’t? Then how did he cast the spell on us? Wouldn’t he have to come close to us?

“He spent his nights wandering around the plaza,” my father explained.

Now it all makes sense… He must have cast it on us while we were sleeping.

“Wow, that’s really scary. If they have that kind of magic in their back pocket, they could hurt even more people than they already have.”

“Yes, but not many people who carve brainwashing summoning circles onto their bodies survive.”

“What?!”

“Most of them go mad as soon as they finish carving the circle.”

“How terrifying…and Father Salify did it anyway. I remember them saying Gupinus had a summoning circle carved on his body, too.”

“That was a protection spell.”

A protection spell?

“It hides the caster from anyone nearby who might harm them.”

Who might harm them? So it hid Gupinus from the people trying to catch him?

“Do you think that means he was planning on skipping town by himself?”

“Probably, yeah. He tried to hide the day he was caught, but when the summoning circle failed to activate for two days, he panicked and wound up telling us what its power was. For someone who worked his way all the way up to church bishop, he really was a small man. He blabbed everything, even answers to questions we never asked.”

So if he had gotten his summoning circle to activate, he would have escaped. Hoo boy, I’m sure glad his magic didn’t work.

“And Father Salify?” I asked.

“We can’t get any more information out of him.”

Is that…because he’s lost his mind? Or because he died?

I sighed. “This case just seems like it’ll never really end.”

“You can say that again.”

I stuffed my face with onigiri. The salted rice balls paired beautifully with the marinated meat. *Very* beautifully.

“This is so yummy!”

No amount of pain or anger would get us anywhere. I wanted to march over to Gupinus and give him a piece of my mind, but I couldn’t do that. His people were after me because I had memories of my past life. *Still, I don’t think for one minute that I’d be better off without those memories. If not for them, I wouldn’t be where I am today*. I took a hard bite into the second onigiri on my plate… *Don’t take it out on your dinner, Ivy.*

“Phew… Summoning circles, the church, I hate them both!”

“Me, too.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

“Huh?!” My father and I looked at the creatures, surprised that they’d answered our rallying cry.

“What, do you guys feel the same way?” my father asked.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

They each answered him earnestly. At a closer look, Sora’s and Flame’s cheeks were puffed out, Sol’s eyes were beady dots, and Ciel’s fur was standing on end. Seeing them like this made my jaw drop…then, barely a few moments later, I laughed.

SIDE:
The Survey Teams in the Forest

SURVEY TEAM OFFICER VIG'S PERSPECTIVE

"HEY THERE, VIG—any movement on your end?"

This was my fifth year on the survey team. Tabir, a fellow surveyor who'd been in my cohort when I joined and whom I spent a lot of time around, handed me a cup of booze as he asked that question.

"Word is they'll make their move soon. C'mon, man, day-drinking again?"

Even for somebody with a special amulet, he was being a little too cocky for his own good. Not like I was gonna say no to a drink, though... I took the cup and drank. It was decent enough.

"I'll be fine, dammit. So hey, it's been a while since we've been in the vanguard, eh?"

"Sure has. Those lucky bastards behind us have it *so easy*!"

The survey team was split into two groups. The vanguard would arrive first in the village to look around and see what we were dealing with. Our comrades in the rearguard would arrive later; our job was to get everything ready for them so they could get to work straight away. Anyway, being in the vanguard was a lot of extra work, so I didn't like it.

"Well, it ain't like we can disobey the captain's orders," I grumbled. "We've gotta get moving soon. Where's our gear?"

"Over there."

I looked where Tabir was pointing and saw that the all the vanguard's gear had already been packed up.

"That's my man! You're such a fast packer, Tabir."

Tabir downed the rest of the booze in his cup and gave an apathetic shrug. He'd have been perfect if he just laid off the sauce now and then.

"So hey, did our *little problem* get solved?" Tabir asked.

I looked at him to find his eyes staring earnestly at me. “Yeah, the prince took care of it.”

“Okay, good. Guess it’s same ol’, same ol’.”

This survey team was commanded by the prince. Our current job had come from him directly—it wasn’t an official order from the crown. But even though it wasn’t official, it was still his command. Nobody could stop him. What’s more, the prince couldn’t stop us, either. So that sometimes resulted in a touch of overkill—every once in a while, we’d let loose and get a *little* too carried away. One time, one of our boys accidentally killed two villagers when he was working on an investigation. As you can imagine, we freaked out over it, but the prince covered our asses. It shook us up real bad at the time, but every single member of the survey team was sincerely grateful to him.

“By the way, are we really investigating a case of serial summoning circles?” I asked Tabir.

“Apparently, yeah.”

“Are you *sure*? The last rumor was a lie, remember?”

Tabir gulped down the rest of his drink. “No, this time we really are dealing with a bunch of summoning circles. Some people already lost their minds—and some of them died.”

So it actually is true. Kill me now.

“Agh… Then this gig is another bust.”

The prince’s orders were wide-ranging. Most of them were easy—after all, working for him meant we got the intel we needed right away. But when summoning circles came into play, you really needed to do a proper investigation, which was a real pain in the ass.

“Where’re we headed now—Hataka, right? Do they support our prince, or the other guy?”

“I looked into it but couldn’t find out anything.”

In other words, they might be neutral and refuse to cooperate with our investigation.

“Arrrgh, I *knew* this gig was a bust! Kill me!” I thrust my empty cup at Tabir, willing him to fill it with more booze—which he promptly did.

“Who’s day-drinking now, Vig?”

“I can’t handle this sober.”

We clinked our cups together and drank. As I let the fiery liquor gliding down my throat satisfy me, I caught a glimpse of one of our comrades running toward us, flapping his arms.

“Uh-oh. Looks like something’s wrong.”

“Guys! We’ve got *trouble*!” It was Walby, one of our juniors.

“What happened?”

Walby gasped for air, looked left and right, then lowered his voice to a whisper. “Chippy and I were searching the forest around here, and we spotted three adventurers.”

Three adventurers? Were they a party from Hataka?

“Chippy said we should watch them for a while, so we did. Then these two village watchmen showed up—they were freaked out—I think they were looking for those adventurers.”

I’ve got a bad feeling about this…and I hope it’s wrong.

“I think they were scared—they kept looking around to see if anybody was watching them while they talked—but they were kinda loud.”

So they were too freaked out to notice or care? Ugh, now I really *don’t wanna hear what they had to say.*

“So it’s like this: a summoning circle in the village that they missed earlier activated and made some of the villagers riot. The village leaders drove off a bunch of ’em into the forest.”

“Uhhh…really?” I asked nervously.

“Stop, take a breath. Are ya sure it wasn’t just a trick?” Walby asked him calmly.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought at first. But from the way the watchmen were acting, they just didn’t look like they were lying.”

“Where’s Chippy now?”

“He went to fill in the captain. Also…”

“Great, there’s *more*?!” I snapped. Walby shuddered in terror.

“Cool it, man.” Tabir gave my shoulder a light slap.

Tabir and Walby both had it easy—they were strong. But I wasn't as strong as either of them. That was why I *hated* it when we actually had to fight and stuff.

"Was there something else?" Tabir asked Walby.

Walby gave me a cautious glance before he spoke. "The watchmen and adventurers were talking about whether they should keep searching the forest—and then three adventurers came hurtling out of the woods. They said a summoning circle got activated in a cave and the monsters in there might go berserk, so they should all hightail it back to the village."

"What?!" Tabir and I gasped.

Monsters, berserk from a summoning circle? I already knew that trash made monsters mutate—but summoning circles, too? *Wait a minute... I feel like I talked about that with the captain once...*

"When they heard what the adventurers were saying, they ran away on the spot. And I think *the other guys* overheard their little conversation as well. Just before I was gonna come back here, we made eye contact."

That was a misstep on his part, but he really couldn't have avoided it. He was freaked out—he'd just heard there were berserk monsters on the loose.

"D-don't worry, we'll be safe. We've got our amulets," I said.

He's right. We need to stay calm. Members of the survey team all received special amulets from the prince that warded off monsters. They were extraordinary magic items that kept every kind of monster away, so we would be okay if we just wore our amulets...

"Uh, no, I heard some of the monsters that went berserk from trash were immune to our amulets."

What?!

"Are you sure?" I demanded, clutching Tabir's shoulder.

He looked at me and nodded. "Yeah, it was in a report some other surveyors made. There've been many reported cases, so we can't afford to get too cocky."

This can't be happening.

“Oi, you lot, c’mere.” The captain’s voice sent shivers down my spine. “Ya heard Walby’s news, I take it?”

“Yes, sir,” we both answered.

“We’re gonna wait and see what the other guys do.”

What?! Even though there’re berserk monsters in the forest?

“You mean we aren’t going straight to the village, sir?” Tabir quickly sidled up next to the captain. “There’re *berserk monsters* in the forest, Captain.”

“*Allegedly*, yeah. We can’t rule out the possibility that it’s a trick.”

Is he right? Yeah, he is…but why would they plant bogus intel like that anyway?

“I agree, Captain, but…”

“Tabir, I know you’re scared, but stay cool.”

Huh? Tabir’s scared? Seriously?

“Sorry, Captain.”

I glanced at Tabir, who had returned to my side. Was he really scared? I’d never seen him afraid before.

“Berserk monsters are powerful beyond our wildest dreams,” Tabir whispered in my ear. The words made me shudder. Now I understood why he was scared.

“We can’t let the other guys see us falter. Our bad actions disgrace our prince—don’t ever forget that.”

We wouldn’t have a chance to disgrace the prince if we *died* first. *Agh… But the captain’s already made up his mind, so I guess we’re standing by for a few hours here? I’m done.*

“Say, Tabir?”

“What?”

“Is there anything else unusual about berserk monsters?”

“They have weaker auras,” Chippy said, returning to us after giving the captain his report.

“Weaker auras?” Walby’s face turned green.

“Chippy, are you sure about that?” I asked.

Chippy nodded. *What the hell—they've got weak auras? How are we supposed to find them?*

"Let's just get our gear sorted for now and check our weapons," Tabir said calmly.

Everyone nodded and got themselves ready for battle. I looked toward the captain and saw he was in the middle of an intense conversation with his right-hand man, who was blue in the face.

"Argh... I wanna get out of this forest fast."

The tense atmosphere had lasted a good two hours, and I was reaching my limit.

"You okay?"

I looked toward the voice to see Tabir checking our surroundings. *Has he calmed down already? And he was so terrified before...*

"How much farther is the village?" I asked.

Tabir gave me a questioning look. *Um, why are you confused? I just wanna get to safety as soon as possible.*

"Probably two hours away."

Two hours...

"Hey, maybe it's time the captain..."

Gee-YAHHH!

A deep roar suddenly rumbled through the forest.

"Aghhh!"

"Wahhh!"

"Eek!"

"Huh?" I looked around, but it was hard to pinpoint the source of the roar.

"What? What was that?"

"We're going to the village—double-time!"

At the captain's signal, we fumbled to gather our things. *Urk! It's heavy. I wanna just leave it behind, but I can't... Faster... faster...* We made our way to the village, practically running by that point. After a while, we heard a rustling coming closer and

closer. Shuddering in terror, I turned my eyes forward—and noticed the other survey team was just ahead of us.

“Hey!”

“Hey!”

Both teams saw each other at once—then hurried the rest of the way to the village in silence.

“Poor bastards. When they get to the village, there’s just gonna be a lot of other crazy people waiting.” I heard a quiet voice at a seven o’clock angle. It was too quiet for me to understand what it was saying, but my curiosity was sparked, so I looked behind me. “What’s wrong?” Tabir asked, giving me a strange look.

“Uh, didn’t you just say something?”

“I think I sense a monster coming after us.”

“Wha…?! Gee, thanks for the warning!” I searched for auras and did indeed sense one belonging to a monster, coming up fast. “Captain, there’s a monster approaching us.”

“H-hurry, men!” Both captains’ voices overlapped, sending the two survey teams retreating to Hataka at full speed.

“Pu!”

I thought I heard a strange sound, but I was too scared to look back. I had to hurry…there was a berserk monster on the loose!

EXTRA ✲ Must Be a Miracle



EXTRA:
Must Be a Miracle

GUILD MASTER ULIGA'S PERSPECTIVE

I WAS SEATED at a table hidden from the tavern entrance, drinking alone. My succession of stressful days was slowly winding down, and the people of Hataka were ready to move on with their lives despite the huge scars left in their hearts.

Many of Hataka's villagers deeply loved the church, and that very same church had betrayed them in the worst way possible.

"If only I'd steered my people away from the church sooner..." I sighed to myself.

"That's impossible and you know it," came an unexpected answer... Well, it wasn't exactly unexpected—I'd sensed his aura approaching.

"Are you sure you're okay being at a tavern? Won't Eche have your hide if she finds out?"

I looked at Appas as he sat beside me. Though he was returning to his former physique slowly but surely, he'd lost a great amount of time. It would take him months before he could hope to return to the physical shape he used to be in.

"Don't worry about me. As long as I keep up Eche's diet and exercise regimen, I can have a little drink every couple of weeks."

That startled me. I hadn't realized he'd regained that much of his health. He didn't *look*... Well, he still looked like an invalid.

"I'm happy for you," I said.

"Thanks. So?" After Appas ordered his drink, he clasped his hands together and stared at me. I looked down into my cup, avoiding his gaze.

"So *what*?"

"What is it you're regretting?"

So he'd noticed. Well, we did go back quite a way.

“Lots of things. But…I’m okay now.” I gulped my drink. I had started drinking a lot more alcohol recently, yet I never got drunk.

“Nothing good comes of emptying a bottle of booze every night. You’ll just feel empty, too.”

“Ha ha!”

He really doesn’t mince words… I get it, I really do. I can’t help but play what-if, though. What if I had done my job better? We could have avoided so many casualties that way.

“If only I hadn’t become their puppet…”

I was brainwashed by a summoning circle, so it wasn’t my fault—but those words would not give me redemption. I was Hataka’s guild master, and yet I drove so many of my comrades to…

“True. Your brainwashing led to many good adventurers dying.”

“I know.”

“But that same brainwashing also saved many adventurers’ lives.”

“…What?!”

What the hell was he saying? My brainwashing saved lives? How was that possible? If only I’d been more vigilant, fewer people would have gotten hurt—that’s all there was to it.

“Uliga, do you remember what year Father Salify came to Hataka?”

Father Salify…one of the criminal masterminds who had carved a summoning circle on his body.

“Yeah, he… Wait, huh?”

The summoning circle’s brainwashing had erased a lot of my memories. I desperately wanted to remember them, but I had the feeling most of them were gone forever.

“Huh, I don’t remember.”

I couldn’t remember anything about Father Salify, although I’d recently remembered that Bishop Gupinus came to Hataka five years ago.

“It was ten years ago.”

“Huh?! *Ten years?*” I looked at Appas, who met my gaze and smiled.

“That’s right. His name was on the books ten years ago, meaning that’s when he came here. Now here’s a question: When do you think we fell under the summoning circle’s influence?”

Huh? When did it start?

“We thought it all started about two years ago. But the more you consider everything, the clearer it gets that it started even earlier. Probably more than ten years ago.”

More than ten years… That long ago? That’s right, just being near Father Salify made people susceptible to the summoning circle’s effects.

“Uliga, they used Hataka as a lab. Father Salify probably ran all sorts of experiments. I suspect your sense of vigilance was weakened by his summoning circle.”

But that’s not… Is that possible?

“I don’t know.” I poured myself another drink. “But…”

“Gupinus was going to murder us—that was his endgame.”

What?!

“Why?”

“Why else? The sooner you and I were dead, the sooner he could have his way with Hataka.”

“But wouldn’t it have been easier for him to manipulate the adventurers if I was around?” As the guild master, I had the dedicated support of all the adventurers.

“Normally, yes. But once he found out his summoning circle had already taken effect, he wouldn’t have needed you there anymore.”

Appas was right. They’d had to brainwash me over and over. It would have been less of a hassle for them to plant someone loyal to them in the first place.

“So answer me this, Uliga: Why did they decide to brainwash you? Remember what you told me? You were chasing

after Vice-Captain Twill, and I think that wasn't part of their plan. They weren't ready to kill you yet, so they brainwashed you to make you forget what you saw instead."

Was that true? Come to think of it, why was I near the church that day in the first place?

"That day, I think I was… That's right. A few days before they brainwashed me, I spotted Salify lurking around the plaza where the adventurers were sleeping."

I couldn't remember it before, but now I did. I'd seen Father Salify prowling the plaza.

"He was wandering around the plaza for a whole hour. I thought it was strange, so I went to investigate. And then… Huh? Oh yeah, I think I went to talk about that with somebody. Who was it? Was it you, Appas?"

I looked at Appas, but he shook his head back at me. If it wasn't him, then who was it? I didn't have many people I could confide in about the church, and I would only consult people I trusted, so who was it?

Damn it—I'm still missing bits of my memory. I spotted Salify in the plaza, and then…then somebody approached me. No, wait, I sensed someone staring at me first. The aura I sensed then was…

"It was the former guild master—Chemanta."

"Hm?!"

"When I saw Father Salify prowling the plaza at night, I smelled a rat, so I was going to go talk it over with you, Appas. But Chemanta came up to me before I could, and I wound up confiding in him instead."

At the time, I had no idea he was with the enemy, so I trusted him. Why wouldn't I? Chemanta had supported Hataka for years as its guild master. He'd even investigated the church with me once before, so I blindly assumed he was safe.

Wow, is this for real? Would I have trusted him if it all happened today? Argh, Uliga, it was a completely different game back then—you couldn't judge things the same way as you can now. You know he's a traitor at this point, so of course you wouldn't feel the same way as you did back then.

“So it was *him*,” the captain sneered.

“That’s right. When I confided in him, he said, ‘I’ll look into it, Uliga—I can move about more freely than you. You stay put.’ I appreciated the offer, so I said yes.”

Wait a minute… Something’s off. If Chemanta said he would look into it, what was I doing near the church? Was I just passing by?

“That day, Twill was… Oh, that’s right! I saw her and Chemanta together. I remember thinking there was something off about him. That’s right, it was *Chemanta* I was tailing that day.”

But why would I do that if I trusted him so much?

“You were tailing Chemanta?” Appas stared at me.

“Yeah, he was the one I was following. I lost him along the way, though. And while I was looking for him, I happened to see Twill walk into the church.”

If only I’d been more vigilant then… For that matter, why did I enter a church so brazenly? Was it the summoning circle’s influence…?

“It had to be the summoning circle,” Appas said, “I guess the only reason you could notice something off about Chemanta was because the summoning circle wasn’t finished yet. Either that, or your instincts as guild master kicked in. Don’t know which, though.”

Is that true? Was I really under the summoning circle’s influence already? Argh… It was so long ago now, it’s all guesswork at this point.

“By the way, why did you say *many adventurers were saved* because I was brainwashed?” Nothing he’d said so far had explained that.

“Just think, what if you had died and the church brought in a plant to be the guild master? Neither Zinal’s party nor Nalgath’s would have realized that anything was off about the new guild master. In other words, the conspiracy might not have been revealed until much, much later.”

“But Druid and Ivy noticed they were brainwashed. Weren’t they the ones who broke the spell on Zinal and his men?” I’d

heard from Druid that they started by liberating Zinal's team and followed with Nalgath's party.

"Fair point. But the next person they freed was you. What would have happened if you were a plant from the church?"

"It would have been dicey, but you and I both know Zinal. He would have noticed something was wrong, looked up this new guild master, and found out they were the enemy. Then they would have saved you next, Appas."

It would have taken a little extra time, but it all would have ended the same way.

"Let me make this clear: The only reason I managed to do what I did was because you were fiercely doing all that fieldwork for me. If I'd had to face it all alone, I don't think I would have made it."

Was that true?

"I trust you, Uliga. That's why I could put all my energy into freeing adventurers and watchmen from the spell."

"Oh… I see… You know, if they wanted to murder us, why do you think they were so half-assed about it?" It would have made sense for them to just kill us once their scheme was in motion.

"You were useful—they could control you however they wanted when you were brainwashed. They may have failed to kill me, but I was as good as dead. I don't blame them for thinking it wasn't worth the trouble to finish the job. They basically had the entire village under their control by then anyway."

If Druid and Ivy hadn't come to this village…everyone would have died, Zinal's party included.

"I'm shocked we're still alive."

"Yeah, the more I look into this case, the more I'm convinced it's a miracle we survived."

Appas's words brought a smile to my face. *He's right. A miracle did happen here, but it wasn't our survival.*

"It's those two coming to Hataka—*they're* the miracle."

"Ha ha! True, they are the biggest miracle of all."

And they said they'd come back to Hataka someday… Well, I don't have time to dwell in the past. I need to keep Hataka thriving so it will be ready for them to visit anytime.

"I think I'm going to have the best night's sleep I've had in a long while tonight."

"Glad to hear it. Just don't drink too much."

"Yeah…"

I'll be okay. I never want to lose myself in a drink again.

BONUS ✲ Amiche and Luffie are Making Amends



BONUS:
Amiche and Luffie are Making Amends

AMICHE'S PERSPECTIVE

"HI THERE. How's Lulu doing this morning? See any changes?"

I answered Luffie by shaking my head no. Two weeks had passed since I decided to try forging a relationship with Lulu. And so far, all the conversations between us were one-sided.

It's been seven years since I tamed Lulu. When I thought about everything I'd done to Lulu during those seven years, it was obvious that a relationship between us couldn't be built in just two weeks. I was well aware of that. But despite my two weeks of hard work, I was getting nothing from Lulu—and of course it hurt. I wasn't asking for much, just a little reaction. Even looking at me would be a nice start.

"Sorry to hear that. It's the same on my end—actually, I might be in worse shape than you, Amiche." Luffie sounded downhearted.

I looked at him. "Did something happen?"

"Well, it's like this: I've been saying good morning to Ponyu every morning, and every morning, Ponyu would look at me—actually, only for a second, but at least it would look at me. But today? No reaction." Luffie sighed sadly. "Did I do something wrong? I went over everything that happened yesterday, but nothing comes to mind. Argh... Why does it have to be so hard?"

I looked at Ponyu, Luffie's tamed slime. It was eating some trash next to Lulu, and they looked no different than they did yesterday.

"I know our relationship can't be fixed overnight—I'm not that naive."

"Yeah, I know it, too."

Over the past two weeks, I'd learned that lesson all too well: Mending a broken relationship was an incredibly difficult task.

“But you’d think Ponyu would at least have the decency to *look* at me.”

I really sympathized. I nodded in silence at Luffie’s lament. Like him, I couldn’t help but feel a little entitled. But I was sure that in Lulu’s eyes, my entitlement was unearned.

“Anyway, I got so sad about the way Ponyu was acting this morning that I…I…”

Huh?! What did you do?

“Don’t tell me…you did something bad?”

Did he hit Ponyu or something? That would only make their relationship worse.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t do anything bad. I just…remembered something.”

“What did you remember?” I looked at Luffie, and he turned teary eyes back at me.

“It was about a year after I tamed Ponyu… I remember it tried to walk up close to me. It sat near me, staring intently at me, and it reacted when I spoke to it. But I was always taught that you’ll ruin your relationship with your monsters if you’re too soft on them, so I didn’t say anything nice to it. Even worse, I yelled at it over the tiniest things so it wouldn’t think I was soft. I’ve treated Ponyu all wrong ever since the day I tamed it.”

“Luffie…”

What kind of relationship did Lulu and I have for the past seven years… Oh! Yeah, when I first tamed Lulu, I remember it wandering up close to me and staring intently. Then when I gave its head a pat, my senior tamer warned me that I shouldn’t be too soft… and after that day, I never tried to talk to Lulu. I was just as cruel as Luffie—more, even. I yelled loud and hard at Lulu whenever it ate less trash than usual, and sometimes I’d force it to go without meals as punishment.

“I was cruel to Lulu for *seven* whole years. I see now…two weeks of effort barely makes up for anything I’ve done.”

Two weeks isn’t even an effort. How long did Lulu keep trying to reach out to me? I seem to remember it wanting to be close to me

for a whole year, even though I did nothing but neglect the poor slime all that time.

"Why did we do something so foolish…?" Luffie murmured.

I looked at Lulu and nodded. "We really were fools."

I never hit my slime, but neglecting it was just as bad. I realized that when I got the same treatment. I learned how much it hurts to be ignored. Lulu must have felt terrible, too.

"Amiche… I don't care how much Ponyu ignores me. I'm going to make it my life's work to mend our relationship. All my obsessing and wondering stops today—I'm not giving up. *Not ever*."

You're wonderful, Luffie. But I need to commit to doing the work, too.

It's not about increasing our waste disposal powers. I'd had some selfish motives in the beginning, but not anymore.

I want Lulu and I to be a real family, and I'm going to make it happen.

"Ah!"

I looked at Luffie and saw him staring at Lulu and Ponyu. When I turned my attention to them, I finally noticed they were both staring intently at us. There Lulu and Ponyu sat, perfectly still, eyes locked on us. That was all they were doing, yet it made me so happy.

"Lulu…is that trash yummy?"

"……"

Oh! The trash…it's like food to Lulu. Lulu went back to eating trash, but it had definitely looked at me.

"Oh gosh, I'm so happy," Luffie said.

I giggled quietly and nodded. "Me, too. When Lulu looked at me, my heart fluttered!"

I was so happy but also a little nervous. I'd never experienced a feeling like that before.

"This feels…kind of magical."

I wish I'd fixed our relationship much earlier. I know regretting that won't change anything, but still…

“Lulu, I want you and I to be a family. I won’t give up until that happens, okay?”

“Ponyu, same goes for me. I’m going to be talking to you a lot from now on, all right?”

Silence.

I guess it didn’t work. Then again…I’m not sure what it is, but I feel like Lulu and Ponyu are both curious about us. Could just be wishful thinking, of course…

“…Pu.”

“…Peh!”

We both gasped.

Was that… Did they both just answer us? No, I must’ve misheard it. I looked at Luffie beside me, and he looked back at me, his eyes wide with shock.

“You heard that, right?” I asked him, just to make sure.

“Yeah. That was two little voices…right?” Luffie sounded uncertain, but he *had* heard the same thing as me. *Which means… Oh!*

“Lulu, thank you so much for answering me.”

“You, too, Ponyu! You just…! You talked to me just now, didn’t you?”

Silence.

No answer, but we had definitely heard them. Their voices had reached us.

“Thank you, Lulu. I hope you and I can become better friends now.”

Lulu was silent for a long time. Then it said, “…Pu.”

Eeee! Lulu really did answer me! I knew my face had to be dangerous levels of red by then. I pressed my hands to my cheeks. *Stop it. Don’t blush… Agh, I can’t stop.*

“Huh?!”

Before I knew it, Lulu was right next to me. It stared hard at me, then recoiled a little. *Er, uh-oh, I hope my creepy blushing didn’t scare Lulu. Nonono, say it ain’t so!*

“I know, I know, I’m usually so much more composed, aren’t I?” I explained. Lulu stared at me, then sighed. *Wow, I didn’t know slimes sighed. Seven years a tamer and this is the first I’ve heard of it. Oh no! I hope Luffie’s doing okay.* I glanced at him beside me. “What…?!”

For some reason, Luffie was sitting on his knees and bowing to Ponyu. What could he have possibly done in such a short time to call for such an extreme apology?

“Luffie? What did you do?”

Luffie’s head darted up nervously to look at me. “Oh! Well, um… When I tried to run over to Ponyu, I tripped and fell…right on top of it.”

He fell on top of his slime? I looked at Ponyu. Unless I was imagining it, the slime looked annoyed.

Er… For the life of me, I can’t remember our slimes ever having more than one facial expression. I can’t remember how Lulu first looked the day I tamed it, but I don’t think I’ve seen its face budge even once over the past few years.

“Now I get it. Lulu and Ponyu have had facial expressions all this time.”

“Er… Facial expressions?” Luffie looked at Ponyu, then whimpered and hung his head. I didn’t blame the poor guy. Ponyu just wouldn’t stop giving him that annoyed look.

“Luffie?”

“Huh?!” Luffie looked at me.

I smiled back and said, “The real work begins here.”

“Yeah.”

To give us reactions after just two weeks of work, Ponyu and Lulu must have been incredibly sweet slimes. *I’m so sorry I never knew. But I’m going to work hard to learn more and more about you from now on, Lulu. So please…*

“Lulu, I look forward to being your friend.”

“…Puu.”

Whoa, Lulu! Oh…you’re so cute. My slime is just so *cute!*

Afterword

HELLO, EVERYONE. Long time no write. Honobonoru500 here. Thanks for picking up a copy of *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick up Trash*, Volume 9. And thank you to my illustrator Nama-sama for the stern-faced, heroic drawings of Druid and the big, round, cute drawings of Sora and Sol.

Volume 9 ties up everything that's been going on in Hataka. Hataka's crisis wound up growing far bigger than I intended at first, but I'm glad it did, because now I was able to fully flesh out exactly what summoning circles *are* in this world. It truly is a relief to have everything resolved now.

And in Volume 9, Sol had some majorly heroic moments! Don't let Sol's cute looks deceive you—little buddy is a powerhouse! And at last, we finally learn the reason behind Sol's moments of melancholy. Actually, I had two ideas for the source of Sol's ennui. One was a little dark and serious, and the other was the one I wound up using—Volume 9 was already just so dark overall that I went with the brighter explanation. I think it was the right call.

Then there was Zinal of Zephyr, who was wrongfully accused in Volume 8. I wanted to give him a lot of badass scenes in Volume 9. But then it was like—wait *a minute, he's not in it nearly as much as I planned!* He's going to make more appearances in the story moving forward, so I'll do my best to write him into a character worthy of Ivy saying "Oh, Zinal, what a guy!" about him.

Volume 9 also had many more side stories. Starting with the captain of the watch and the guild master of Hataka, I wanted to write about what other people were going through. When I write everything from Ivy's POV, there are just some aspects of the world I can't bring out properly, so I added more side stories. It's fun writing from a bunch of different characters' perspectives, but they also had their own challenges. I like to think I did it justice, though.

Thank you to everyone at TO Books for your help with Volume 9. My editor K-sama, thank you for always putting up

with me. We managed to get Volume 9 published thanks to you all.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who read this book with all my heart. I hope you'll give Volume 10 a read, too. The manga version of *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash* is also selling well. May we meet again in this, "Isekai'ed into a world...where proper waste disposal rules!" light novel and manga series.

—Honobonoru500

June, 2023

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the ninth volume of Honobonoru500's second story, *Weakest Tamer*! The berserkers in the forest turn out to be beloved friends of Hataka Village. Ivy and her party head out to the forest to investigate. And the tragedy they find there changes little by little, thanks to Sora's and Sol's heroics. At last, they find the summoning circle. And when they do, they finally learn what happened in Hataka Village.

Nama

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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