
The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash
NOVEL 10
WRITTEN BY Honobonoru500
ILLUSTRATED BY Nama

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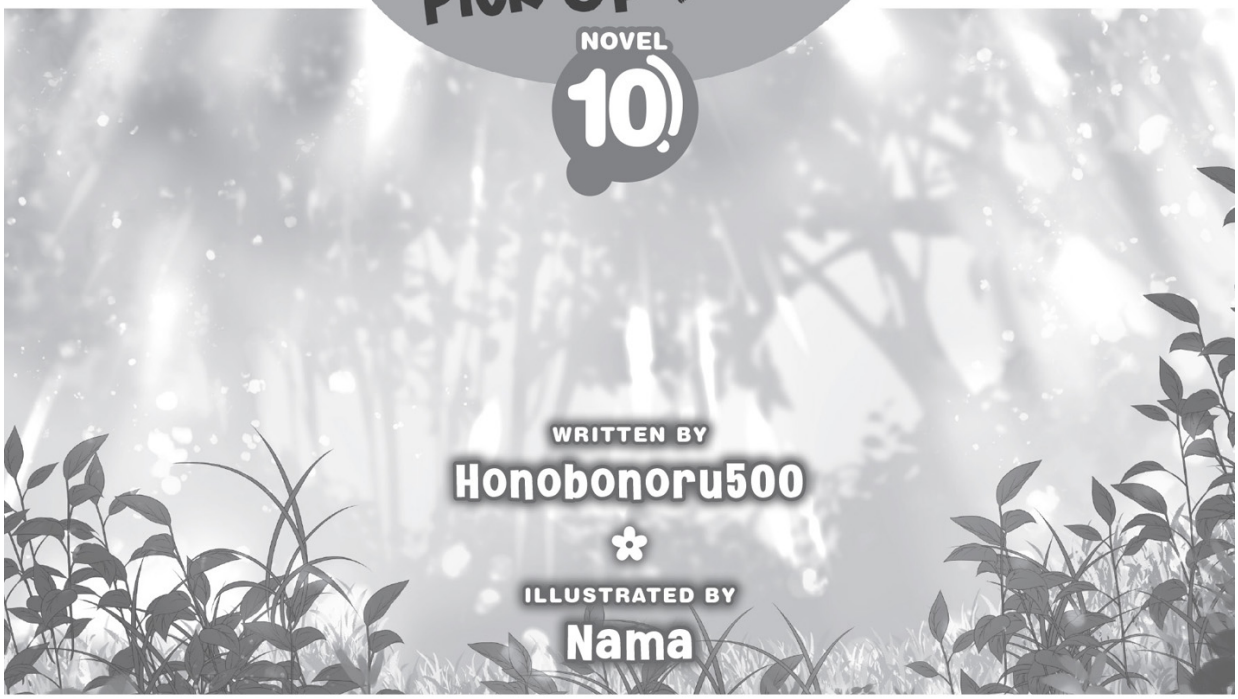






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✿

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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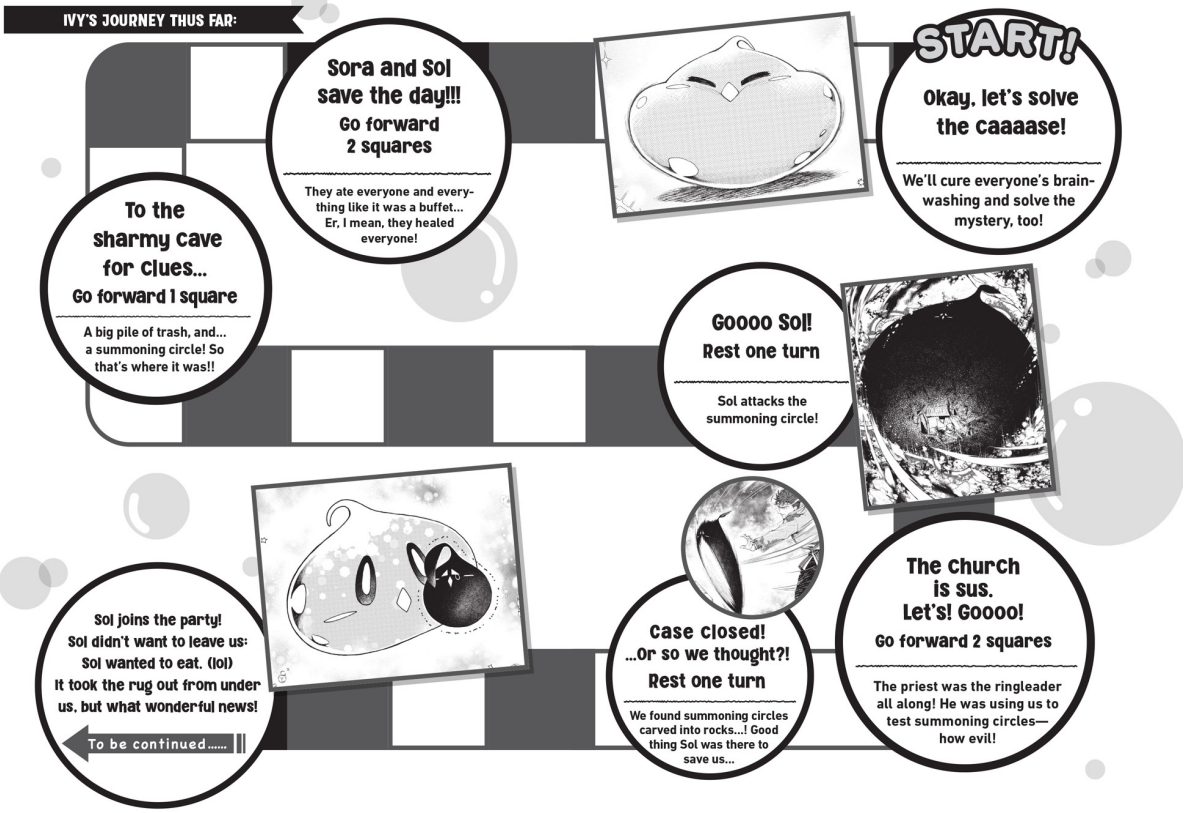
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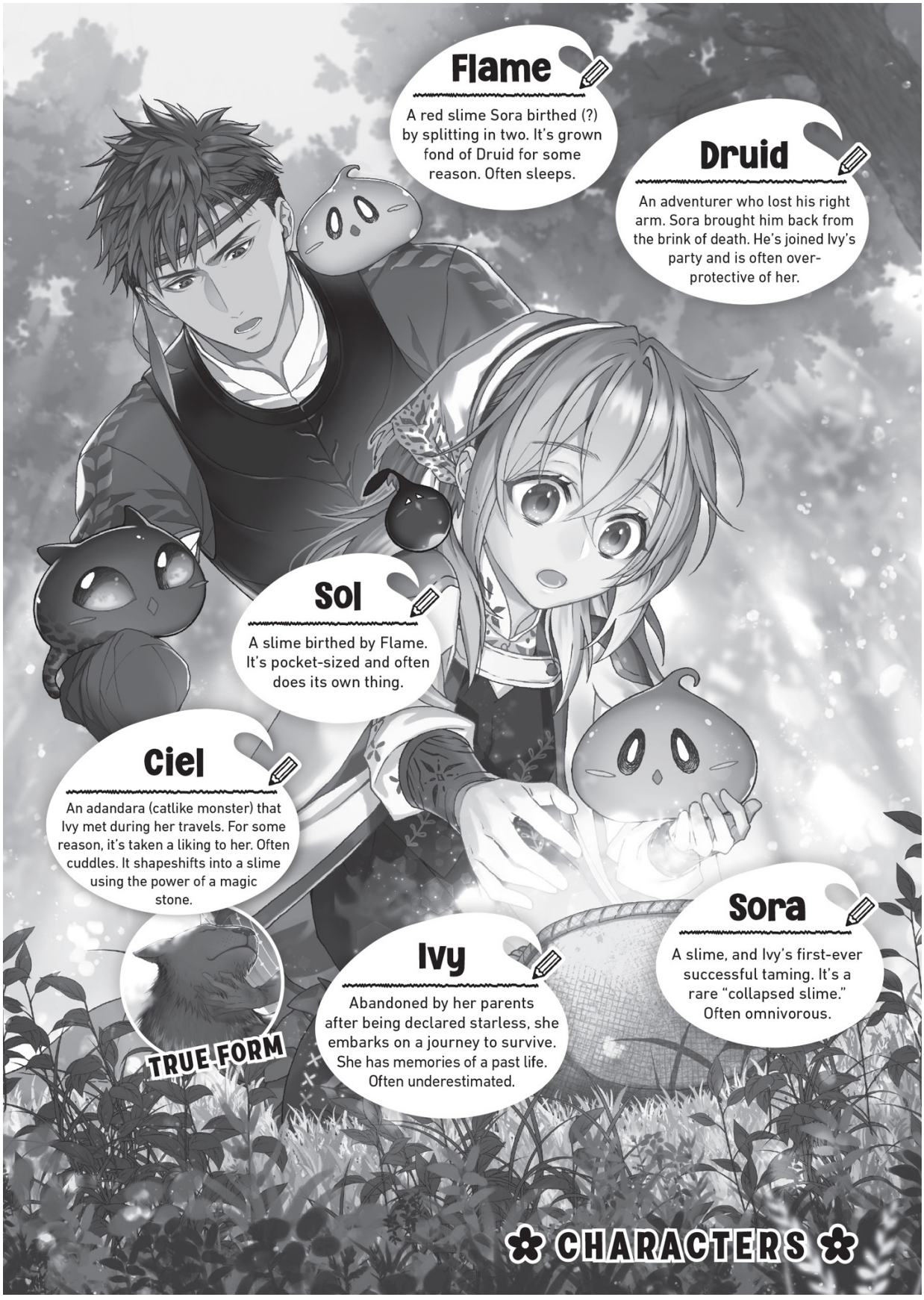
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IVY'S JOURNEY THUS FAR:
START!
Okay, let's solve the caaaase!
We'll cure everyone's brain-washing and solve the mystery, too!
Sora and Sol save the day!!!
Go forward 2 squares
They ate everyone and everything like it was a buffet... Er, I mean, they healed everyone!
To the sharmy cave for clues...
Go forward 1 square
A big pile of trash, and... a summoning circle! So that's where it was!!
Goooo Sol!
Rest one turn
Sol attacks the summoning circle!
The church is sus. Let's! Goooo!
Go forward 2 squares
The priest was the ringleader all along! He was using us to test summoning circles—how evil!
Case closed!
...Or so we thought?!
Rest one turn
We found summoning circles carved into rocks...! Good thing Sol was there to save us...
Sol joins the party!
Sol didn't want to leave us:
Sol wanted to eat. (lol)
It took the rug out from under us, but what wonderful news!
To be continued.....


Flame
A red slime Sora birthed (?) by splitting in two. It's grown fond of Druid for some reason. Often sleeps.
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.
Sol
A slime birthed by Flame. It's pocket-sized and often does its own thing.
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.
TRUE FORM
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.
Sora
A slime, and Ivy's first-ever successful taming. It's a rare "collapsed slime." Often omnivorous.
CHARACTERS

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 10
Story by Honobonoru500
Illustrations by Nama
©2024 Honobonoru500
This edition originally published in Japan in 2024 by TO Books, Inc., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with TO Books, Inc., Tokyo.

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digital editions is available from Digital Operations Manager CK Russell
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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
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ISBN: 979-8-89373-784-4
Printed in Canada
First Printing: August 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PART 9 * Escape from Hataru Village—Part 1

SIDE:
I'm Sending You a Faax

CAPTAIN OGHT'S PERSPECTIVE

"CAPTAIN OGHT! Where *were* you?! I've been looking all over for you."

I covered my ears at the sound of my screaming subordinate. *Chipper as ever, aren't we…*

I softly glanced at the man and received a sour glare in response. *Uh-oh. He's really mad. Has work really been piling up that much? Actually…come to think of it, I haven't been in the office for a whole week, have I…?*

"Long time no *see*, Captain."

Yikes…I'm doomed.

"Sure is, huh? W-e-ell…let's get to work, Velivera."

He's glassy-eyed. But hey, how was I supposed to know it would take a whole week?

Velivera sighed. "So, did you manage to sniff out their trail?"

Ha ha ha! That's Velivera. He noticed without my saying anything.

"We found where they're hiding the evidence. They were working with somebody we didn't expect, so I'll need you to investigate that later. Get a team of twenty or so. We've got to seize the evidence."

"Understood, Captain. I'll make the arrangements, so please, just finish all this paperwork—right now!"

"You're a monster."

"Humph!"

Well, I couldn't blame the guy. I did abandon my paperwork for a whole week.

"Oh! Captain Ogh‌t, you got a faax."

A faax? I hope it's not another favor. What a pain.

"Thanks."

I took the faax one of my underlings brought me and looked at the sender's name.

"Ivy?"

"Er—you mean the girl?" Velivera yelped in surprise.

I nodded. "Looks like a status update."

Ivy—the girl dressed like a boy. She was always vigilant, always frightened. I had approached her at first, hoping to help her, and I'd been surprised to find out she had quite the adorable personality. I did everything I could for her when we were together, but I always worried that she might have died. The forest is not the sort of world a child could survive in alone.

"The paperwork… Well, you can always do it after a break."

That was a string of words I never expected to hear from Velivera. Suppressing a chuckle, I rushed into my office and sat on the sofa. Velivera sat on the couch opposite me.

"It says: *Dear Captain Ogh‌t, Vice-Captain Velivera, it's been a while since we last spoke. Do you remember me? I'm Ivy. I was in your care only for a little while. I hope I'm not imposing, but I just wanted to send you a letter to tell you I'm doing well*."

"That girl's polite as ever," Velivera chuckled. He looked pleased—he really did like her.

"*I'm in Hatow Village right now. I've found some travel companions*—aha, so she's opened herself up to company now."

It would have been easy to tell Ivy back then that it was dangerous for a child like her to travel alone. But since she was so clearly fearful and repulsed by others, I wasn't sure it would be okay to tell her so. No matter how you looked at it, Ivy was in no mental state to be around other people for very long. Telling her wouldn't have been any benefit to her, so I decided it was best to keep my mouth shut—I didn't want to scare her even more. But I had worried all this time that I had made the wrong choice.

"It sounds like she must have met some wonderful travel companions on the way to Hatow," Velivera said.

I nodded and kept reading. "Yes. Let's see… *My main travel companion is Druid, a man I met in the town of Oll…* Hm? Oll? Druid?"

"As in…the guild's secret weapon? Surely she can't be serious. Him? The notoriously coldhearted guy?"

I looked at the faax. "She says, *Mr. Druid is very kind, and he's always so helpful…* Different Druid, maybe?"

That was a far cry from the Druid I knew. Town Oll's Druid was known to make cruel judgments without so much as a raised eyebrow, and he showed no emotion as he carried out those decisions, making everyone around him shiver in terror. Now, I know rumors like that are easily exaggerated, but I'd seen him at work firsthand. And he really was a terrifying fellow—no trace of emotion in his eyes.

"Must be a different man," Velivera said.

I nodded in agreement, yet a part of me could easily envision the guild's secret weapon standing beside Ivy.

"Well, people do change. Whether it's the Druid we know or not, Ivy should be fine as long as she's with someone she likes."

Yeah, that wasn't enough even to convince me. I'll have to follow up on him later.

"She says, *I'm a tamer. Sorry I didn't tell you before*."

"Oh, so she's a tamer," Velivera said, a curious look in his eye. "Did she say why she hid that from us?"

I continued to read. "*I didn't tell you because I was scared to. My village banished me because of it*. Her village banished her? But taming is a highly treasured skill. What happened?"

We exchanged confused glances.

"*My tamed slime is very cute and good at manipulating its shape. When I first met it, it was stretched out in a collapsed pile on the ground. It was really so, so flat. Pristinely flat, believe me.* If she can tame slimes, she needs one star, right?"

And did having one taming star get her banished?

"A…collapsed slime, you say?" Velivera asked.

Those words tickled something in my memory. *A collapsed slime?*

"Ohh, right. A collapsed slime—the weakest of 'em."

"But that monster is so weak, it takes more than one star to tame it. She couldn't have done it."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

I reread the faax. *Hm? Why does she repeat the word "collapsed" so many times? It's almost like she's trying to tell me the word is important. If that's what she's trying to say…then are collapsed slimes really impossible to tame? Even if you have just one star, a monster that's too weak will die when you give it any magic.*

But if that were true, then—

"If a tamer has less than one star…maybe then she could tame a collapsed slime," Velivera suggested.

"Less than one star? Wait, are you suggesting Ivy has *no* stars?"

"Do you think that's why she cryptically said so in her faax?"

Velivera looked perplexed. No stars… If that theory were - correct, then she couldn't have stayed in Ratomi Village. That village was very insular; the church's teachings ran deep through it. And according to the church, a person who had no stars was *abandoned by God.*

"She might have narrowly escaped death—I wouldn't put it past that sick village," I murmured.

"Sad but true. So, what else does the letter say?"

"Give me a minute—I've got a bad feeling."

I pressed the button of a magic item on the table. Now our voices would not travel outside the room.

"Okay, I'll read more. *I know Vice Captain Velivera warned me about them, but you know that band of human traffickers? Well, I had a little run-in with them while I was traveling—okay, more like they almost kidnapped me*… What?!"

"Oh, Ivy…" Velivera pressed a hand to his forehead.

"*But thankfully, that's how I met the Sword of Flames and Lightning Royals. I made friends with them and they helped me out, so don't worry, I managed to get rid of that problem*. Wait a minute, aren't those parties made up of persons of merit who helped crush that crime organization?"

"Yes, they are. You know, it didn't interest me enough to look into it, but I think I remember you saying a child's name was included on that list of persons of merit…"

"Right, I do remember hearing Ivy's name come up then…"

"I'll check the persons of merit list later."

"Thanks. Okay, I'll read more. *I forgot to mention this, but before I met Rattloore and the others, I made another friend. A very strong, very courageous friend. Probably the third-strongest and third-most-courageous friend I have. Number 3. I want them to be Number 1, but I don't want to be a fool, so I'm satisfied with placing*

them at Number 3. This friend is like a dream come true to me. Huh?"

"Sounds like she's being cryptic again to avoid spelling out the truth. I've never seen a faax like this before." Velivera chuckled in amusement.

I couldn't help but join in. "So who is it this time? A friend? So, something she didn't tame? And what's this Number 3 stuff?"

"If it's someone she didn't tame, but they're traveling with her, wouldn't that make them her friend? And wait, is this even a person? No, I don't think it could be. If it were, she would have used the word *person* in the faax. This *Number 3* thing does strike me as odd."

I nodded. Number 3…and she said if she made it Number 1, that would make her a fool—why?

"Strong and courageous… Number 3… As in, it's the third-strongest? No, no, it couldn't—wait!"

"By 'fool,' does she mean the saying *Only fools rush in*? And Number 3…Adandara?"

Velivera shook his head in shock. "No, Captain, surely it can't be that."

"I wouldn't think so, no. She did write 'This friend is like a dream come true to me,' though. So she has no stars, and she's tamed a collapsed slime and an adandara?"

"How should I put this… Um…maybe we're reading too much into it?"

"Fair point," I agreed. "That's entirely possible."

Was it, though? She was definitely hiding something between the lines, and she seemed to be emphasizing the words she wanted us to pay attention to.

"It doesn't seem like we'll be able to grasp the true meaning of this faax with just a cursory reading—we'll have to be mindful, won't

we?"

Apparently, Velivera agreed that there was some hidden meaning to it.

"But with her hiding so much, how can we decipher it all?"

"Well…I doubt the entire letter is going to be things she needs to keep hidden…right, Captain?"

"Don't ask me." I sighed loudly. "Okay, moving on. *Oops! There was something else I needed to tell you at the start and I forgot. You see, I'm actually a girl. Somebody told me I would be safer traveling alone as a boy, so I deceived you all. I'm so sorry. Um, I've grown a lot recently, and I'm really happy about that*."

Her deception hadn't exactly worked on us, so she really didn't need to feel sorry.

"What's next, Captain? Another two pages? I'm starting to feel a strange sense of foreboding…"

I glanced at the papers in my hands. And indeed, I had just finished the first page and was about to start the second.

"Don't worry, I doubt there's anything disturbing…or so I hope."

Why couldn't I be so sure? With a short sigh, I began to read the second page.

"*I'm sorry, the ordering of this letter is just all over the place, isn't it? I still haven't even told you the names of the creatures I've tamed. My slime is Sora, and the other one is Ciel. Then, the next one I tamed was a slime named Flame.* Flame?"

"She didn't mention that creature on page one, did she? A slime named Flame? Do you think she met another collapsed slime?"

I skimmed the first page again but found only one slime. Everything in her letter was so shocking that I wondered if I'd simply forgotten about it.

"The slime named Sora has to be that collapsed slime she met first. Her next encounter was Ciel—why do you think she didn't tell us what sort of monster it was? She mentioned that her third encounter was a slime."

He had a point. And Ivy wasn't the sort of person who would neglect to reveal something like that.

"Must be a monster she can't talk about in a faax," I concluded.

"Yes, it would have to be."

"This friend she made on page one was an adandara… Nah, couldn't be."

Adandaras were creatures of legend. They possessed great magic.

"She calls them *the creatures I've tamed*, though," Velivera pointed out. "Adandaras are tough creatures—even five-stars can't always tame them. Maybe you could befriend one, but tame one? Besides…if we're reading this right, Ivy has no stars."

"Even befriending an adandara is already an incredible feat. But then what *is* Ciel?"

Did she just forget to say what kind of monster Ciel was? Hmmm.

"We could be wrong on the adandara theory. Or maybe we're wrong about Ivy and she actually has five stars?"

If Ivy had no stars, Ciel couldn't be an adandara…and if Ciel was an adandara, Ivy couldn't have no stars… *But wait a minute, Ivy couldn't have tamed the collapsed slime unless she had no stars. So Ciel can't be an adandara… Now nothing makes sense anymore.*

"What a confusing mess this has all turned into," Velivera said. "Let's have a nice long think about this later."

"Yeah, good idea. I'll just finish reading the faax for now. I am curious about this Flame character."

I only hoped there was a simple explanation.

"*Ever since Mr. Druid and I started traveling together, we've liked to split round fruits in perfect halves and eat them. I've really come to like this method lately. The first time I made a round fruit into two perfect halves, I was quite shocked. When one becomes two, you get twice the joy. Right, that's how we met Flame. It happened in the spot where I met Druid. Flame's first joy was collapsing into a puddle just like Sora. It seems like everyone loves collapsing at the start. It's just so cute.* Uhhh, Ivy…can you please be less cryptic?"

I originally thought she was talking about how she and Druid are such good friends…but this is all about Flame, isn't it?

"How incredibly perplexing," Velivera agreed. "Cutting a round fruit in half. One becomes two… I don't get it."

"The only thing that's clear from this is that Flame is also a collapsed slime."

"Right. She did use the words *just like Sora*. I guess the words *half* and *one becomes two*… One becomes two?"

"Did Sora become two? Nah, couldn't be."

I've never heard of a slime splitting into two before. Arrrgh, what a headache.

"Are you sure it couldn't be?" Velivera asked.

"Hm?"

"I think when she wrote *made a round fruit into two perfect halves* and *one becomes two*, she was talking about the same thing. And Ivy was very surprised by whatever it was. And the only monster she mentions in this section is Sora. So maybe Sora split into two perfect halves and that shocked Ivy quite a lot."

Flame was a slime Sora created by splitting in two? Was it really something that insane?

"If you focus just on what Ivy is saying, the whole thing does seem beyond sanity," Velivera said.

"True."

It would absolutely turn all common sense on its head.

"So something happened in the place where she met Druid, then Sora split in two, and Flame was born?" Velivera asked.

A part of me totally believed this theory. After all, collapsed slimes supposedly couldn't even survive their first day of life, and Ivy had tamed one. Abandoning common sense might indeed bring us closer to the truth.

"Anyway, something apparently happened to Druid, so I'll look into that," Velivera said.

"Please do. If we figure that out, we might get the answers we need."

And those answers might only stress us out… But I guess knowledge is more important than comfort.

"I'll read more now…"

I had never read a faax with so many interruptions before. Usually I just breezed through them.

"*We met Mr. Druid's master in Oll, the town where he lived. I was introduced to his master's friends and I also got to know the guild master there. But when I was staying in Oll, there was a little crisis since there were monsters going berserk*. Am I crazy, or does Ivy get herself caught up in trouble just a little too often?"

"You're definitely not crazy, Captain. So Druid's mentor…well, that settles it. This fellow Ivy is with must be the guild's secret weapon."

There was only one man in the town of Oll referred to as "master." And what's more, she'd been in Oll during the berserk monster scare.

"That must've been scary for her…" I continued reading. "*In the town of Oll, Druid's father and I created a cooking sauce. We registered it with the merchant guild, so do have a taste if you'd like*. Wow, she's accomplishing some amazing things."

"She sure is. I'll look into the sauces registered in Oll today if I can."

"Good idea… *We made grilled onigiri, gave them out to the people, and solved the food shortage*. Whoa, now, she's *really* doing some amazing things."

"Ha ha ha ha! And she just writes it all matter-of-fact, too. You know, I just remembered, rumor has it that an unusual magic stone was used to solve the berserk monster crisis. Also that a very powerful monster helped out…"

Velivera cut himself off midsentence and stared at me. I'd heard that rumor as well. Apparently, this very powerful monster never showed itself, but it helped the townsfolk like a guardian angel.

"Hmmm… You think it's an adandara?" I asked.

"Let's read more."

"Right, it's pointless rationalizing it. *The brave adventurers of Oll helped solve the crisis of berserk monsters rampaging around the town's outskirts. I shuddered the first time I saw that they were ready to die for the cause. And I'm also happy that the assistance of my very precious friend helped out, if only just a little. The guild master smiled for me, too.* Gee, this *just a little* phrase sounds suspicious. Her friend probably did something astounding."

"Agreed. Though I doubt we'll be able to find anything if we search Oll's records now. Their guild master is a crafty one, and the master in question has apparently returned by this point."

Yeah, between that infamous master and guild master, I know we'd hit a dead end.

"We shouldn't do anything out of line, I reckon," I said.

I finished reading the second page of the faax, which was just as packed with events as the first one. Wasn't Ivy's life just a little *too* enriched?

"Okay, I'm starting page three*. My travels are much more fun now, probably because I have more companions*. Good for her*. It's especially exciting to walk through the forest behind Ciel, because there's no telling what we'll find.* Hm? *Ciel is so amazing! We've been escorted to so many neat caves…* Could it be they're traveling far off the village roads?"

Ciel guides them through the forest… What does that mean? Caves? But caves are usually full of vicious monsters.

"*Sora is really good at finding us places to sleep…* But Sora's a slime, right? Wait—do slimes have that ability?"

"The fact that Ivy told us that means she thinks it's so normal that she didn't feel like she needed to hide it from us."

Ack! I have to tell her to be careful about that.

"*Oh, by the way, Mr. Druid taught me that when snakes get big, they turn into monsters called serpents. This one was so big, so gentle, and so cute.* This is just so insane I don't even know what part of it to joke about first."

"Hmm… Sounds like they're having quite the fun journey," Velivera said.

"You've just completely given up on rationalizing it, haven't you?"

"Yes, I've decided to just accept it. There's no need to wreck your brain trying to figure it out. As long as Ivy's having a good time, and she is, I'm happy."

"Yeah…guess you're right. Let's see… *My adandara is so big and so soft! We met by chance in the forest, and I tamed it… Well, no, I didn't tame it. We're friends.* Wait a minute…it looks like she accidentally admitted that she tamed it, then tried to pedal it back… but she didn't fool me."

Up until the second sheet of the faax, she was vague about her monsters' classifications, so she probably decided to add that in…but she basically revealed everything in the end.

"She certainly didn't. And while I did have my suspicions, hearing the name *adandara* was still a shock. That monster is legendary. And she *tamed* it… She *tamed* an adandara!"

That's right. She admitted to *taming* it!

"Yeah, it really is a shock. She must have used a different taming method than the ones we know about."

What's more, if word got out that someone with no stars tamed an adandara, she knows that would put a target on her back. I should probably put this faax under lock and key…or maybe I should burn it? No, I'd hate to lose it. I'll lock it up instead.

"Okay, she finishes the faax with the generic letter-ending things. *Sorry I've worried you, but I am doing quite well on my travels. When I come back to Ratome, I want to thank you properly. Thanks for reading. –Ivy*."

Velivera sighed. "Whenever we read a faax from Ivy, we have to suspend disbelief, don't we? But she did sign her name at the end, didn't she?"

"She probably didn't know the best way to go about telling us everything."

After all, she wrote *my adandara is big and soft!* as a non sequitur. Well, it was shoehorned in at the end, so I doubted anyone would have noticed it unless they read the faax carefully.

"I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted."

"Me, too, Captain. And all we did was read a faax."

"That'll be all for now, Captain. I'll turn in the report by tomorrow."

"Sure thing. Thanks."

Now that the evidence had been confiscated, there were no more pressing matters to tend to… *Oops, I still have that paperwork I didn't do this afternoon… What a nuisance. I wonder if I can pawn off half of it on Velivera? Nah…that's not gonna fly.*

"Oh well, guess I'll get it done—oh! That's right, I need to reply to Ivy. Also, Druid wrote a line after Ivy, didn't he? Strange, he's never struck an interest in others before."

This must have meant he wasn't the Druid I knew. I mean, he would never have written something like "Hello, I'm Druid, the man traveling with Ivy. She's probably told you a lot of things that have caused you concern, but I promise I'll take care of her. Ivy is my lifesaver and my light."

I wonder how she's his lifesaver? And if she's his light…does that mean Ivy was the catalyst for him to change? Well, this is all just conjecture, so I have no idea how close to the truth I am. But she's his "light," huh…

Hah! What in the world did Ivy do to him? I'll have to ask him when I see him next. But wow, the guild's secret weapon…now a travel companion to a girl. Ivy certainly has earned herself quite the reliable protector.

"Okay, let's write that reply."

I sat in my chair and got some faax paper ready. I'd have to start with a thank-you.

"*Dear Ivy—I'm happy to hear from you. Velivera and I were worried about you, so it was a relief to hear you're doing well. We're also happy to hear you've met such wonderful people on your travels. Now, about this Druid from Oll…*"

Should I tell Ivy he's famous as the guild's secret weapon? But what if she doesn't know that? Hmmm…maybe I shouldn't write that, then? That's between him and her, after all.

"Uhh, let's see… *I hear he's very strong, so that's a relief*. Nope, that's not gonna work. I know, how about *Ivy, I suspect you already know the major details. Thanks for finding a creative way to tell me about it all.* Hm…does that sound too passive-aggressive? Maybe I should rephrase it? Well, I think that'll do."

"What are you muttering to yourself about, Captain? It's really disturbing."

"Velivera, sometimes you can be really mean."

"Well, you brought it on yourself. So, what're you—*ohhh*, you're writing a reply. Yes, she's probably anxious about how you took it. I can understand why you'd want to send a reply as soon as possible."

He was right. If my reply came late, she might feel sad that I'd forgotten about her.

"If there's anything you want to say to her, Velivera, I'll add it," I suggested.

"I'd like to write her a letter of my own, if I may."

"All right. I'll send my faax when you do, then. *I'm glad to hear Sora, Ciel, and Flame all get along so well—I was especially surprised by Ciel. Truly*. I assume I'd better not touch upon the monsters' species."

"Yes, that would be for the best."

A glance at Velivera revealed he had taken some of the documents I was supposed to handle. It was a big help, but I wished he had taken a bigger pile. I looked at the pile of documents waiting for me on my desk. There were enough to make a guy just want to throw them all in the trash.

"Finish your faax as fast as you can and get back to those documents, okay? Quickly, now!"

"Fine."

I don't think there's any escape for me. Well, what should I write next… Aha! I know.

"*You said Sora is good at finding places to sleep—what an unusual talent that is. I've never heard of it before.* There, that should clue her in. If Ivy doesn't get it, Druid will."

And it was safe enough to use just the name Sora, but I should definitely conceal the fact that Sora was a slime.

"*You say you walk around the forest—just be careful. There are all sorts of vicious monsters out there.* I don't have to hide this, do I?"

"I think what you wrote should be safe enough… I'm sure her future faaxes are going to say similar things anyway."

He had a point. She seemed to enjoy Ciel's excursions through the forest. She would definitely veer off the main road and into the forest many more times.

"That's right, Captain, I looked into the crime organization's activities in Otolwa."

"Right, Ivy didn't mention much in her faax about Otolwa, and I'd like to know why—did you learn anything?"

"Yes, the crime organization targeted a young child, so two adventure parties in Otolwa teamed up to protect the child while destroying the crime organization. Now this part is only a rumor, but they actually used the one being targeted by the organization as a decoy to trap them."

"That decoy… I hate to say it, but that must have been Ivy."

"Yes. I tricked a friend of mine into helping me look into it… and it was definitely Ivy."

Velivera always did have a knack for getting classified intel.

"Did Ivy's name come up in any of these reports?"

If so, we would need to cover it up. Her very existence seemed much more dangerous than I'd ever predicted.

"No, only a brief description. The reports all think she's a boy, too, so she should be in the clear."

"Good."

Starless individuals were rarities. We couldn't let those bastards set their sights on her…

But wait a minute. Ivy knows what her skill is, and she knows she has no stars. Which means the church would have had to look into her. If they knew about her, Ivy would have already been taken away.

"You don't suppose the church bastards in Ratomi Village are actually trustworthy, do you?"

"Captain…do you have brainworms?"

"*Hey*. Why did you have to go there?"

"Because you asked a ridiculous question. Not a single member of the church can be trusted. Why did you ask that?"

"Because Ivy knows both her skill and the fact that she has no stars. In other words, the church had her skill read."

"Yes, I guess that would have to be so. But they didn't capture Ivy. Maybe because she had no stars, they decided they didn't want her?"

Those church bastards loved to collect anything they considered a rarity—and they didn't want a starless child? No. They collected *everything*. There must have been some other reason they didn't take her.

"The church… Wait a minute, the church branch in Ratomi Village… I think I remember they lost contact with the priest there many years ago—didn't the priest from this village go to investigate? It caused quite a stir for a while; rumor had it the priest suddenly disappeared."

The priest suddenly disappeared? Ohh, right, I remember that. When did that happen again? I think it was…

"Right, four years ago. That was when the priest disappeared. Ivy is about seven, so I guess they're not connected."

"No, Ivy is nine right now, Captain. So the priest who disappeared most likely saw Ivy's skill."

"She's nine? But she's so small."

"When I made the request to Ratomi's guild master, I looked up her age. And there's no mistaking it—that tiny girl is nine. She probably was malnourished for many years."

She must have been. Learning she was nine filled me with an inexplicable sense of wrongness.

"I'll just tell her *It's important to eat well to grow, so be sure you eat your fill*. Okay, that should do it."

"…You shouldn't just say that on a whim. You'll make Ivy uncomfortable."

"She'll be fine. So anyway, was this disappearing priest just a coincidence?"

"Not sure. Could be."

He didn't seem very interested in it.

"Aren't you curious at all?"

"Well, I guess I am just a little, but I'm not all that inspired to look into it."

I decided I couldn't blame him there. After all, we knew they didn't capture Ivy, so all's well that ends well. But if they left her alone on purpose, why did they do it?

"Did you finish your faax yet?"

"No, far from it. *Now, re: Otolwa, we mostly get what you were trying to tell us and we're glad you're okay. Also, congratulations.* There. If I word it like this, she'll understand that we're in the know on a lot of things. *It sounded like you had a tough time in Oll, but I'm glad you met some good people. I'm interested in that sauce, so I think I'll buy some*. Okay, now I just need to write

about us a little. *Velivera and I are doing well. Work has been piling up and it's a real drag. I wish we had somebody here to do it for us*."

"What in the world do you think you're writing, Captain?!"

"Just the current conditions. Why?"

Velivera sighed. "Are you quite finished?"

"Uhh… *I hope we'll get to see you again soon. Druid, we've heard a lot about you, and we're very happy that you're traveling with Ivy. Let's have a drink when you come by*. There, that ought to do it."

"It's a difficult balance, isn't it? But I guess it is what it is."

I handed a faax paper to Velivera. "So what're you going to write?"

"Nothing much. Just tell them I'm doing well. *Hello, long time no see. Everything's the same for the captain and me. Don't worry about anything else—just come visit and let us see your happy, healthy self. You're always welcome here*. Wow…this is my first time writing a letter to a nine-year-old. It's tough to figure out what to say once you get started."

"You're telling me. It's actually quite hard."

"Yes, I'm learning that."

Velivera gave his faax paper back to me. I decided I would send them both later that day on the way home.

"Right—the nobleman who helped crush the crime organization… Was that Lord Foronda?"

"Yes, it was," Velivera answered. "Good thing it was him."

Conditions in Ratomi Village were not good. If things kept on their current course, the village would quite likely be destroyed. And some people in that village were sure to know Ivy had no stars. If they were going to conceal her existence, they would need help from a nobleman.

Guess I'll drop him a line, too. It wouldn't be a bad idea to connect with the folks in Otolwa…

RATTLOORE'S PERSPECTIVE

I GRABBED THE FAAX and headed for the council room of the adventurer guild. I knocked twice on the door before opening it—and found that everyone else was already there.

"You're late, Rattloore."

Our leader Seizerk sounded grumpy, but it didn't bother me in the slightest. I had a faax in my hand…and it was driving my curiosity wild.

"Something good happen to you?" Sifar asked.

I slapped a hand to my cheek. Was I really that easy to read?

"Rattloore?" Gnouga called my name worriedly.

"I'm okay—a guildsman called on me before I came here and gave me this faax. It's from Ivy."

Seizerk and Gnouga just stared at me in shock. I didn't blame them. I hadn't told Ivy about faaxes because they cost money, but I had been dying to tell her. Whoever told Ivy about faaxes had done us a huge favor. *Thanks, whoever you are.*

"So…what did Ivy say?"

"I haven't read it yet."

"Ah. Then we should read it right away—that's an order!"

Sifar smiled at me so hard I could practically see the word "grin" floating over his head.

"But don't we have to discuss our next job…?"

"We'll do it after we read Ivy's faax. We can take care of it superfast."

Uh, but didn't we go through the trouble of reserving the council room because we got a pretty important request from the higher-ups?

I looked at Seizerk. He was staring hard at the faax in my hand.

Well, whatever.

"Okay, I'll just read it through, then."

"Good. Do it." Gnouga encouraged me without objection; he seemed just as curious as the rest of us.

"Okay, it says… *Dear Mr. Rattloore, it's been a while. It's Ivy, enjoying my travels as usual. How are all of you doing?* Polite as ever, that kid. *I am staying in Hatow Village right now. And I'm not alone. I was advised to get myself a slave, but I met someone wonderful on the road and decided to travel with him. He's Druid from the town of Oll. He's very kind and very sincere, so don't worry —I am in safe hands*. Hm? Druid?"

"I'm happy to hear she's not alone, but Druid from Oll… Could it be *him*?"

Sifar gave me a conflicted look. Seizerk also had an indescribable expression on his face.

"We traveled with him once before, didn't we?" Gnouga asked.

I nodded. We'd been tasked to stop a drug sale from going down. It was kind of a big scandal, since there were traitors in the adventurer guild. Druid had worked with us then, and if there was one thing that could be said of the guy, he was merciless—especially to traitors. And from the grim look on the face of Seizerk, who had seen Druid's anger up close and personal, I imagined his wrath was formidable.

"Kind and sincere… That's like the exact opposite of the Druid we know," Seizerk said.

A cynical grin spread across my face. He was absolutely right. The Druid we knew took no interest whatsoever in other people. He

carried out tasks perfectly but had not an ounce of compassion to spare for anyone. He sounded like the complete opposite of the man Ivy was writing about. I'd have to investigate further.

"Rattloore, read the rest."

"Sure… *For personal reasons, he's no longer an adventurer, but he's very strong, so even Sifar would be satisfied that he's with me. Tell Sifar I'm sorry for not using his referral. He was so kind to write me one, and now I've wasted it*."

So he was a man named Druid from the town of Oll who was strong but not an adventurer. There really was only one man that could possibly be.

"She doesn't have to feel bad about not using the referral…but if she really is traveling with the guild's secret weapon, didn't she score herself the best possible protection out there? His resume is stacked beyond the norm, and he's able to see people for who they really are."

Sifar sounded convinced that this was the same Druid we had done that job with. Not that I disagreed with him…

"I'm reading more. *I met Mr. Druid while I was on my way to Oll. When I found him, he was mortally wounded from a monster attack, but my friends worked very hard to save him. Actually, that was when I made another friend—a slime named Flame. It's a beautiful red slime just like Sora. Also, I have some news: Sora became a solid-blue slime. Isn't that surprising? I was very surprised. Mr. Druid was also quite surprised. It's apparently quite amazing. Flame's biggest talent right now is stretching itself flat in a collapsed shape. It's stretched out so flat, just like Sora was when we first met. Flame also loves sleeping, which I'm a little worried about. I thought Flame and Sora would have the same personality, but they're worlds apart. They're very cute, though*."

The words hung in the air.

I read over the first sheet of the faax once more. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something seemed a little off.

"Well, she has a new slime in her party—that's a good thing. But…what is it? Something feels wrong…" Sifar tilted his head to the side.

"Oh! It's Sora being just one color. Also, I realize now that she overly emphasized the word *surprised* a lot."

"Hold up."

Everyone turned to look at Gnouga just in time to see him pulling a magic item from his magic bag. Then he set the item on the table in the middle of the group and pressed the button.

"Thanks, man. You saved us." Seizerk smiled sheepishly at the magic item, which prevented our voices from seeping outside the room. It had come in handy many times when Ivy was around.

"Never thought I'd use this item just to read a faax—that's Ivy for you."

"You look amused, though, Sifar."

"I am."

Seizerk looked tired at Sifar's response.

"Anyway, want me to read more?" I asked.

"No, I'm so anxious it'll just go in one ear and out the other," Gnouga answered. "Just read the first part again."

I reread the part about meeting Druid, and something definitely felt amiss.

"Sora used to be a blue and red slime, right? And now it's just blue," Sifar offered.

"And the new slime is red, right?" Seizerk followed up with an edge in his voice.

A possible answer popped into my head. But I had never heard of such a thing, so I assumed I was wrong…

"Maybe the impossible has happened…" Sifar suggested. "That's why she repeated the word *surprised* three times. And it was

something so amazing that it surprised even Druid, a seasoned adventurer. Sora gave birth to a slime? Hmm…I suppose it wasn't a *birth*…more like, the red part split off? Do you think that could be it?"

Sifar nodded silently to himself, seeming to agree with the theory.

"You think it's possible?" Gnouga asked Seizerk.

"Don't ask me," Seizerk replied. "Based off everything I know, I'd say *no*. But y'know…this is Ivy and Sora we're talking about. Whenever those kids get involved, you can't help but think the impossible may be possible."

Everybody laughed. Because it was true—that was the kind of person Ivy was. It was so strange how she made you believe in crazy things like that.

"Wait a minute, wasn't Oll having problems with berserk monsters that only got resolved a little while ago?" Seizerk asked.

I nervously picked up the second page and read. "*I'm sure you've already heard about what happened in Oll, and yes, I got there right in the middle of their berserk monster crisis*. Yeah, she wound up right in the thick of it."

"That's our Ivy. Did she get caught up in it against her will again?" Sifar smiled awkwardly. Seizerk also looked somewhat troubled.

"Let's see. *I saw a monster go berserk before my very eyes. It was a little scary, but Mr. Druid and Ciel protected me. I'd heard that Ciel was very strong, but that was the first time I experienced it firsthand. Ciel really is quite strong. That got us in a little trouble, but the guild master helped us out. Since Oll's guild master and Mr. Druid are friends, he was very kind to me. Though the second time around, he did clutch his head in stress*… What did she do the second time?"

She experienced Ciel's strength firsthand… How?

"Did they have a full-on war with the berserk monsters? Adandaras are battle-maniacs, after all."

Yeah, that does sound plausible. Wow, an adandara fighting all-out…I'd love to see that.

"*The second time around, he did clutch his head in stress…*" Seizerk began thoughtfully. "I guess that means the adandara fought the berserk monsters twice, then. And adandaras love fighting so much that they're called battle-maniacs. That creature must've brutally and mercilessly killed every monster in its periphery."

"Wish I could've seen that," Gnouga marveled enviously.

"Yeah, I'd love to see an adandara go all-out at least once in my lifetime," I said.

Everyone nodded in agreement. To see a creature at the height of intelligence and battle prowess fight… Did Ivy catch a glimpse of Ciel in that state? If so, we were all jealous.

Sifar piped up. "I wasn't all that interested, so I didn't pay much attention when I first heard about it, but there was a rumor of a top-tier monster helping end the berserk monster crisis in Oll. Sounds like that could have been Ciel."

Seizerk nodded. "Must've been. What else did Ivy say?"

Everyone's gazes gathered on the faax in my hands.

"Rattloore, keep reading," Gnouga coaxed me.

I looked down at the faax and read. "*Mr. Rattloore, have you ever eaten ryce before? It's a food near and dear to my heart, but sadly, it's known typically as livestock feed. But I wanted to eat ryce so badly that I found some in Oll and bought it. And as fate would have it, the shopkeeper turned out to be Mr. Druid's father. I found out the truth later, and I was really surprised*. Wow, talk about major coincidences. *After getting to know Mr. Druid's father, I decided to try my hand at making sauce. And I was excited to have my sauce officially registered in Oll's records. I would love it if you took a shot at making grilled onigiri. All you do is steam some ryce, squeeze it*

into a ball, brush on the sauce, and grill it. When you buy my sauce, it comes with a paper telling you how to use it. Sifar is so handy, I'm sure he could easily make them. The trick to making really good grilled onigiri is to not squeeze the balls too tight. And thanks to grilled onigiri getting popular in Oll, we solved their food shortage. Mr. Druid's father was so happy about that. Their food shortage… haven't they been having that problem for years now? Our town gave them a little aid, didn't we?"

If I recalled correctly, the food shortage came about from a sudden population boom. They were supposedly fixing it little by little…but maybe the berserk monsters had messed with their supply chain.

"That was my understanding…but we weren't directly involved, so I don't know."

Seizerk reached out, so I handed him the first two pages of the faax. He skimmed them over quickly and nodded to himself.

"I'm impressed. Imagine, making *ryce* palatable."

Gnouga was right—that was an impressive feat. Ryce was usually thought of as livestock feed, so most people were reluctant to eat it themselves. Trying to push ryce as a food alternative during a shortage always ended in a huge failure. But even though Oll was the only positive case so far, Ivy had succeeded in promoting ryce there. Merchants and adventurers would probably help spread the gospel—merchants would be fools to let such a sweet opportunity escape. In time, every town and every village would probably add ryce to their diet.

"Still, I am curious about this *onigiri* food," Seizerk said. "You squeeze ryce into balls, coat them in sauce… Sifar, think you can make that?"

"I doubt you'd offer to make them, Seizerk. But yeah…I'm pretty sure I can make them."

"I'll help," I offered.

"Don't you dare help me, Rattloore. You'd turn them into ryce bricks."

Seizerk's diss offended me, but I could so easily imagine such a scenario that I thought I'd better keep my mouth shut.

"But this sauce sure sounds nice," Sifar said. "It'll give Ivy an intermittent income."

Sifar was right. If the sauce sold well, Ivy would rake in dividends.

"Okay, I'm starting the third sheet of paper. *There were so many new things to learn while I stayed in Oll. For example, if you use up magic stones they turn into rocks just like the ones you find at the side of the road. I found lots of stones like that at the dump. They really did look just like normal rocks. But if you put magic energy into those stones, they turn back into magic ones, of course. Only people with high levels of magic energy can turn stones into magic stones—another new thing I learned. I still have so many things to learn, don't I? I figured Flame didn't know about that, either. Mr. Rattloore, have you seen a stone turn back into a magic stone before? I'm sure it must be very pretty. I really think I want to see it. Oh, and Mr. Rattloore, do you know every ability slimes have? Apparently, they have powers even Mr. Druid didn't know about. I'm so excited to see what Flame's future holds…* It sounds like she's trying to tell us something, but I don't think one read through will make sense of it."

"Hee hee! Ivy really is a funny girl," Sifar said. "Also, this faax is chock-full of information that really shouldn't leak to the outside world."

From the troubled look on his face, I wondered if he knew what Ivy was trying to tell us.

"Sifar, did you decipher it?"

"It's not that complicated, so we should be able to figure it out quickly. You know, it sounds like Ivy just got exhausted with all those things on her mind."

When she talked about magic stones…it sounded like she'd figured out how to recharge spent ones. And wait a minute, why did Flame's name come up then? The other thing that sticks out is the fact that Druid didn't know about every slime ability. And why did Ivy think recharged magic stones would be "pretty"…?

She said she "wanted to see it"… Did she mean the slime's powers?

"Here's a crazy idea…" Seizerk said. "Maybe Flame recharged spent magic stones?"

A wrinkle formed between my brows. Was that even possible? No, this was Ivy. The impossible happened all the time around her, like Sora giving birth to Flame.

"AHA!"

"Seizerk, keep it down."

"Ack, sorry. Anyway, besides the stories about the high-level monster, do any of you remember rumors about magic stones coming from Oll?"

Rumors? That's right…I think I remember hearing that magic stones were used to solve the berserk monster crisis, and that somebody had a miracle potion… I thought they were just baseless rumors, but…what if those magic stones were spent ones that Flame recharged? Then there's that miracle potion. She didn't mention it in her faax, but I have a hunch…

"Ivy's name didn't come up in any of these rumors about Oll, I hope?" I asked.

Seizerk shook his head. "She's in the clear there. But I'm still worried about her, so I should look into that. I only hope Oll's guild master is keeping her identity under wraps…"

"By the way, is that all of her faax?" Gnouga asked.

I shook my head. "There's still a bit more to go. *Sorry this faax has gotten quite long. I'm doing very well, and so are Mr. Druid and all my travel companions. Oh, that's right, my hair's gotten longer*

and I got a little taller, too. I also got a bit fatter. Mr. Druid says there's nothing wrong, so I'm sure everything's okay. I can't wait to see you all again someday. When she says she got a bit fatter, that must mean she's a healthier weight now—she was underweight to begin with."

Just when I was thinking I'd look into whether or not she was getting proper nourishment, she snuffed out that flame.

"There's another line at the end… *Hello, this is Druid from the town of Oll. It's been a while. I did a job with the Sword of Flames a while ago. If you remember me, you're probably all kinds of worried right now, but I promise I will protect Ivy no matter what happens, so please rest assured*."

That final sentence took Seizerk aback.

"Gee, he's like a different man from the Druid we know," Sifar said with a smile. "I can't believe he's being considerate of our feelings. To have changed him like that…Ivy really is a wonder."

Seizerk frowned. "Yes, but I'm still worried… First, Ivy got targeted in this village by the crime organization, then she got caught up in the berserk monster scare in Oll… Is there something special about her? I have a feeling it's something bad."

"Yes, and since she used some special potions and magic stones, she's sure to have attracted the attention of some unsavory characters," Gnouga agreed. "Then there's her monsters to think about. I'm a little worried by the idea of Druid being her only protector. There's a lot of scummy characters among the nobility, too, you know."

Gnouga indeed had a very valid point that needed to be considered.

"Should we get Lord Foronda involved? He did take a liking to Ivy, after all."

And he would definitely help us…but would that be enough?

"Maybe I should make a contract with him. He's not a fool, but you never can be too careful."

Everyone looked at Sifar in shock.

"Hm? Why're you staring?" Sifar looked at us in confusion.

"Well, you said a contract…with Lord Foronda?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

That's right, Sifar is the type of guy who'd go to any length to protect someone he liked. I'd just forgotten about that side of him, since he hasn't had any loved ones around lately.

"It's been a while since I've found someone who's striving with all her might just to survive. Can you blame me for wanting to root for her?"

Striving with all her might… He's right. I want to do more than just root for her; I want to do whatever I can to help her.

"I'll get in touch with Lord Foronda," Seizerk said. "But I won't mention the contract. Wait until you see him before you decide for sure."

Sifar shrugged in resignation.

"Well, I'm tired. Wanna go grab some dinner?" Seizerk suggested.

I stood up and stretched my limbs. *Wait…why did we all come here today in the first place?*

"Don't we have to talk about the job?" Sifar asked.

I gasped. I'd completely forgotten.

"Ehhh, we can just talk about it over dinner."

"Are you sure?" Gnouga asked.

Seizerk made a face. "It's a stupid job from some annoying royal. I reserved this room before I saw the actual request, and it turns out we won't need it."

"Aha, is it a request from one of those princes fighting each other for power? Yeah, that does sound stupid."

Sifar rose from his seat.

Now it made sense. The only point of this request was to get in good with adventurers who'd made names for themselves.

"This royal power struggle sure has ramped up lately, hasn't it?"

I only hope Ivy stays clear of the fighting.

"Aggggh, I'm exhausted."

I lowered myself into a chair in the adventurer guild rest area. Royal request or no, this job really was a glorious pain in the backside. After all, it was a guarding assignment within the borders of Otolwa. Ironic, since Otolwa was finally starting to see some peace now that the crime organization was behind bars. What's more, we were tasked to protect a nobleman from the royal capital. He'd brought his own private guards with him, yet he'd ordered us to protect him as well since he didn't feel safe enough with just his own personal guards.

"How could he possibly feel unsafe with *ten* bodyguards? And the little brat just had to drop the prince's name so we couldn't say no."

Well…I'm sure the real objective here was to appease us and get us all on that prince's side. That's why he forced us to say yes.

But to appease us, he would need to talk to us first, so we were positioned right next to the nobleman. The past two days really had been a living hell. When the nobleman had the audacity to try to extend our assignment, the look on Sifar's face was terrifying. Just picturing it now gave me chills…

Wait a minute, what's this nobleman's name again? But it's not like I forgot it…I simply never learned it to begin with.

"Agh, who even cares? I finally have a chance to write a reply to Ivy."

The bodyguarding job had taken up all my time, so I'd given up on writing to her, and now two whole days had passed without my writing a reply.

"Okay, what should I say…?"

I set my faax paper on the table and tried to shake off my bad mood.

"I should start with *It's good to hear from you again. I'm glad to hear you're doing well. I'm also happy to know you've made friends. Like Druid…* Can I just drop his name casually like that? Should I be a bit more formal?"

I looked around, but I saw none of my friends had arrived yet. Too bad.

"I just don't write letters, so what should I even do? Well, whatever, I'll just be myself. *Druid did a job with us once. He's a very strong person, so I'm glad he's taking care of you. He's a very good man.* The Druid I know is anything but a good man… I think I'll cross that part out. *I'm glad you found somebody to travel with. Don't worry about the referral Sifar gave you. He's not bothered by it*."

Now all I have to do is fill her in on our end of things—oh, but before that…!

"*You wrote that you've gotten fat, but believe me, you were underweight before. If Druid thinks you're fine, I'd wager there's nothing to worry about. So just eat as much as you'd like! If you want to grow, you need to get plenty of food and sleep!* I'd bet she'd eat very little if she were left on her own…"

I had seen her eat by herself before, and it surprised me. She ate one piece of dried meat and one piece of fruit and nothing more. Since she'd cooked for us, it hadn't even occurred to me that she might eat that meagerly on her own. She probably had money

worries, but Sifar tried his best to convince her to eat more for her long-term health on her travels.

And, well…Ivy's cooking was delicious, so it was all a great memory for us, but still…

"Oh, now I remember. *Sifar made us some grilled onigiri with your sauce, Ivy. I offered to help, but he adamantly refused, which was too bad. Oh, right, and he couldn't get the onigiri shaped like triangles. They were round like dumplings. He seemed really upset about it, so next time you're in Otolwa, please show him your ways? Do it for me, too. They were really tasty. Everyone around us was surprised to see us eating ryce at first, but they liked it*. After all, I bought and gave away extra with the nobleman's money as a necessary expenditure."

Sifar had done his thing and cooked extra onigiri to give to the nobleman's bodyguards and maids for free advertising. It was starting as a slow trickle, but I was sure it would spread far and wide over time.

"Okay, one more thing… *So, a new friend named Flame joined your party. I'm really happy for you, and I know you will form a great bond*."

Maybe I shouldn't really linger too long on Flame? I definitely shouldn't mention the magic stones.

"Man, faaxes are harder to write than you'd think."

I could always ask her for more details the next time I saw her in person, so I should just write the sort of faax that would be okay for anyone to see. Which meant I should write about my party.

"Okay, I'll start with Seizerk. *So, recently, Seizerk got rejected by yet another lady. He's so popular, yet his rejection rate is really high—must be an issue with his personality. Poor guy. I do wish he'd lay off the sauce every time he's rejected, though. Sifar shacked up with a lady about ten days ago. Seizerk and I are betting how long this one will last. I wagered three months; Seizerk says one year. Bolorda, who happened to find out about our bet, and Rickbert each*

bet half a year. Whoever wins the bet gets treated to the most expensive liquor in Otolwa. Do you think he'll do me a favor and break up with her in three months? I've really got my hopes up. This is the kind of alcohol I'd never buy for myself. Anyway, Ivy, could you pray that they'll break up in three months? Thanks. There!"

Oh, right. I have to tell her about Gnouga.

"*As for Gnouga, he ate a monster on a dare and was laid up in bed for two whole days. No need to worry, he just overindulged, that's all, but Seizerk was still really angry. But he didn't look like he would hold a grudge over it, so no need to worry.* Well, we were all really shocked by it when he collapsed out of nowhere. To think he was just stuffed…"

"Rattloore! What depravity are you exposing Ivy to?!"

My shoulders jumped at the sudden voice behind me. Apparently, I'd been way too focused on my faax.

"Depravity? I'm just telling her the truth. Are you done, Seizerk?"

"Yeah, I gave the guild master our report. I also asked him not to give us such a stupid job ever again."

Not like it was the guild master's fault…

"Anyway, the intel on Druid came in. You were wondering about his injury, weren't you?"

That was Seizerk for you. He worked quickly.

"Yeah, Ivy did say he was mortally wounded."

"A monster ate his right arm."

So he was missing his right arm? I hadn't realized his wound was that serious.

"And apparently, a kid who just happened to be there saved Druid—supposedly it was a miracle that saved his life."

The "kid" in question had to be Ivy.

"A miracle?"

Had Sora's cover been blown?

"The child in question said they were confused, so they just gave Druid all the potions they found nearby without paying attention to their type."

"What?!"

Confused? Ivy was confused?

"You know how potions have mysterious effects when they're combined, right?"

"Yes, I have heard about that, but don't most people doubt it's really true?"

"Yes. But those mysterious effects happened to take place that time. That's why they called it a miracle."

Seizerk shrugged his shoulders. In other words, somebody had probably planted the idea that it was a miracle. But that "miracle" had most likely just been Ivy and Druid. There were people near us by then, so we couldn't talk about the slimes.

"I see. Well, that sounds like quite the crazy story."

I'll bet Sora was the one who cured Druid's wounds. Ivy did say that slime had incredible healing abilities. I guess meeting Sora was life-changing not only for Ivy but for Druid as well.

Seizerk finished reading my faax, glared at me, and said, "So what's this about me having a bad personality and being a poor guy?"

"I was just being honest with Ivy. Believe it or not, I was censoring myself a little."

I had quite a lot more steam to blow off about Seizerk, after all.

Seizerk brooded over what I said for a bit, then disappeared off somewhere. I watched him leave and saw he was getting some

faax paper. Apparently, he was going to write Ivy his own reply—clearly containing something needlessly mean about me.

I'll definitely have to read it later.

Chapter 451:
Monsters in the Cave

"HEY, DAD, are you sure they're safe?"

"Puuu!"

"Ryuuu!"

"…fu."

Sitting in front of us were three slimes and one moving sapling. At a glance, the wiggling sapling looked like it was trying to attack the slimes, but it was actually playing. Ciel in particular showed no signs of agitation and was just watching the quartet play. Since the adandara wasn't leaping in to the rescue, I assumed it was safe, but since I had experience being attacked by a tree, I was a little scared.

"Yeah…" my dad trailed off thoughtfully. "That's a monster that likes to crawl around inside caves, but I've never seen one in that form before. What happened to you, little buddy?"

"Puuu!"

"…fu."

"Ryuuu!"

Sora, Sol, and Flame were climbing up and sliding down the wiggling sapling one after another. They caught the sapling as it wiggled from side to side, then they pushed it back… It was easy to tell how much fun they were all having.

"Huh, so you don't know, then."

Something even Dad doesn't know… Well, from how they're all acting, I can tell it's safe. Does that mean the tree monster that attacked me is a different species from these tree monsters who live in caves?

"Something on your mind?" my dad asked.

"Yeah, a while back, I was attacked and badly hurt by a tree monster, so this is kind of weird…"

From watching my slimes play, I knew I was safe, but I still couldn't go near it.

"A tree monster attacked you?"

"Yeah. If Sora hadn't been there, I would've died."

"You were hurt that badly?" He looked quite surprised.

"Yeah. That was the first time I learned what Sora's power was."

That was the day my feelings for Sora changed. Before then, my main feeling for Sora was a maternalistic need to protect it from death. But everything changed that day. I came to see our relationship as mutually protective. Even now, I think Sora protects me more than the other way around. As Sora jumped on my head and I felt its warmth, a smile filled my face.

"Right—are the tree monsters outside the cave a different species from this guy?"

Since this little tree wasn't attacking me, I assumed the answer was yes…

"I think they're the same."

Huh, that's interesting. They're…the same…?

"Really? What?! But—"

Suddenly, there were way more saplings playing with my slimes than before.

"They multiplied."

"Sure did. I've heard there's only one type of tree monster, so the tree monsters that attacked you and these playful ones are probably birds of a feather."

"Does being in a cave change them or something?"

"No, tree monsters are one of the species you have to watch out for in caves. They're notorious for stealth attacks."

My father and I discreetly looked behind us. When our eyes met, we both smiled sheepishly.

"I don't see any," I said.

"Yeah, we're alone."

Thank goodness.

"Pu! Puuu."

"Pefu! Fuuu."

The sapling was twirling Sora and Sol into balls and tossing them away. They landed softly, then ran back to the tree monster in excitement and jiggled pleadingly. Noticing this, the sapling came up to the slimes and twirled them around its little branches again.

"That tree monster is a good babysitter," my father observed.

"Sure is. Oh, there they go again! Once my slimes find a game they like, they make you play it over and over—you think this one's safe for them?"

Would the tree monster get angry with them? I couldn't help but worry a little, so I got ready to spring into action should the need arise.

"This cave sure is a wonder, though," my father remarked. "Look at all those guardian stones stuck to the stone walls."

I followed his gaze and saw the special magic-imbued stones that were stuck to the gemstones to protect them. Guardian stones were sometimes found in caves, but there were many in this cave with the saplings. And they were multicolored, to boot.

"I didn't realize they came in so many colors," I said. "Ooh, there's a gold one! And this one's purple. There're even splotched ones."

As I pointed out the stones, my father followed them with his eyes. "The mixed-color ones are pretty rare."

Huh, I didn't know that.

"Puuu," Sora wailed loudly.

I nervously looked at my slime and saw what might possibly have been the face of the tree's main body pop out from between the boulders on the cave wall.

"I've never seen a tree monster's main body inside a cave before," my father said, a little on edge as he placed his hand on his sword. Seeing him like that made me even more nervous.

After a long pause, my father finally said, "I think we're okay."

"I think so, too."

We watched as Sora and Flame jumped onto the tree monster's main body. Sol tried to jump on as well, but it slammed into the tree's branch and fell to the ground.

"Wow, I've never seen Sol mess up before," I said.

"Yeah, Sol seems to do everything with effortless perfection."

Ever since I tamed Sol, I'd felt much closer to the slime than before. I was very happy about that, but at the same time, it had seemed to become even more ditzy than before. Why was that?

"Hm? Is it just me, or are they coming toward us?"

I followed my father's gaze to the tree monster in front of us, and sure enough, it was scooting along the ground in our direction. I checked and double-checked my slimes' reactions, and everything looked safe enough…but I was still scared.

"Gyuum."

The tree monster wiggled softly to the right.

It somehow seemed like it had just greeted us, so we bowed our heads lightly in reply. Then the tree monster bobbed itself up and down. It looked happy, but with each vertical movement, the cave made ominous cracking noises that sent chills down my spine.

"Father…you don't suppose this cave is going to collapse on us?" For whatever reason, my polite speech tic had returned.

"We'll be okay…I think."

"Gyuum?"

Hm? It seems like the tree is trying to ask us something…but I have no clue what.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you're trying to tell us."

For whatever reason, the tree monster suddenly seemed very adorable to me. How strange. Just a few seconds ago, I'd been scared of it…

"Gyah, gyah."

The tree monster reached a branch toward me, and I reflexively grabbed it with a yelp. Was it okay for me to touch it? I looked at the tree monster cautiously…and it wiggled back at me.

"What a funny monster," my dad observed.

"Yeah. I actually think it's kind of cute now."

"I wouldn't go that far."

For some reason, my father immediately disagreed. Too bad; I thought it was cute that the tree monster was still wiggling coquettishly at me.

"Gyah!"

The tree monster froze, stretched its branches toward the guardian stones, and snapped them off the boulder walls. Then it brought them to us.

"Gyah!"

The tree monster presented us with an array of multicolored guardian stones. It gestured as if to say *Help yourselves.*

"Er…no thanks, I'd feel bad taking these."

I politely declined, but the branches shoved themselves even closer. It felt like the monster wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Thank you," I heard my father say beside me.

I looked over and saw him taking the guardian stones from the branch.

"Come on, Ivy, we might as well accept the gift. We still have lots of room in our magic box anyway."

Ah! Right, these should go in the magic box.

"Thank you." I took some guardian stones from the branch. Now that I could get a closer look at them, I found they each had a different color, and some of them were mixtures of three colors. Now they would definitely have to go in our magic box.

"Gyah! Gyah!"

The branch withdrew only to reappear before us with a nut to take. I looked at the tree monster and it stared hard back at me. Was it excited?

"Thank you." I delicately removed the nut from the branch. I brought it to eye level for a closer look…it seemed just like any old tree nut, with nothing special about it.

"Hey, Dad, do you know what this is?"

"Hm? Nope, no idea."

My father stared at the tree nut with me. As we watched it, it rolled around my palm and got smaller.

"Huh?! What's going on?"

I was so stunned I couldn't take my eyes off the nut in my hand.

"Gyah!"

The tree monster screeched, but I couldn't bring myself to look at it.

Roll, roll, roll.

Roll, roll, roll.

Roll, roll, roll.

Crack, crack!

"Crack, crack?"

The nut formed tiny cracks that got bigger as we watched. I stretched my arm wide and moved the tree nut as far away from myself as I could.

Crack, crack!

Pop!

I could feel the tree nut popping open in the palm of my hand. I cautiously peered down at my hand and found…a baby tree monster?

Chapter 452:
A New Friend

I STARED AT THE BABY TREE MONSTER with two little leaves as it wriggled in the palm of my hands. It had three thin root-legs and was desperately trying to stand up. As I watched, it shakily raised itself on its legs.

"Hey, Dad…it stood up."

"Looks like it."

Aw, I'm not sure why, but it's really cute. It's still jiggling. You know, I remember looking this monster up after I was attacked, and it only had information about the parents in there. I wonder what babies need when they're newly born? Tree monsters are vegetables, not animals, right?



"Do you need dirt and water to grow?" I wondered out loud.

"*That's* the first thing you're worried about?"

I gave my father a confused tilt of the head. Was I missing something?

"Gyah?"

The tree monster gave the two of us a curious look. My father chuckled softly and shook his head. *What was that all about?*

"Never mind," he said. "Anyway, does your baby need water?"

The tree monster answered by shaking its body left and right. Did that mean no? Or had it just not understood the question?

"Gyah!"

The tree monster brought its roots close to us and flapped them. Then I noticed there were water droplets on the roots.

"Wow, I guess they gather moisture from the air, then," my father said.

"Gyah!"

"Can your babies do that, too?" I asked, holding up the baby tree monster in my hands.

"Gyah!"

Apparently they could.

"Wow, that's incredible. Okay, so nutrients… What do you think they eat?" I asked.

"Tree monsters grow by absorbing magic energy, so I'd assume that?"

Magic energy?

"Do you think they can absorb energy from magic items like Sol can?" I asked.

"If they can't, maybe I should give it magic energy?"

Huh? He should give it magic energy?

"Gyah-gyah."

The tree monster, who had been listening in on our conversation, shook itself side to side more fiercely. Apparently we were on the wrong track.

"So it's not that… Could you tell us what your kind need to grow?" my father asked.

We looked at the tree monster, and it used its root tip to point at the bag hanging off my shoulder. The bag contained everything we needed for our travels. I opened the lid, and the root slid inside and pulled something out.

"A purple potion?" I asked.

"That's right, purple potions have a unique magic energy that lifts curses," my father recalled.

Is that so? I didn't know that. I lifted the purple potion to eye level. It was a bit cloudy. Would the baby tree monster be okay drinking degraded potions just like my slimes? I looked at the tree monster and saw that it was staring intently at the purple potion.

"Do you want it?" I asked.

The tree monster wiggled in reply. I handed the potion to it, bottle and all, and its roots deftly opened the lid and poured the potion on itself.

"What a delicate touch," we commented in unison.

I looked at the areas of the monster that had gotten doused just in time to see the potion seep into the bark. It looked less like it had evaporated and more like it had been absorbed. I took another purple potion out of my bag, opened it, and poured it on the baby tree monster in my hand.

"Oops! I think that was too much."

I had drenched the baby tree monster in a puddle of purple potion in my hand. When I showed my father, he picked the little

sapling up so I could pour what was left of the potion on the big tree monster.

"Dad, is the baby okay?"

"Yeah, getting drenched in potions doesn't seem to bother it."

He showed me the baby tree monster in his hand. It was happily wiggling, which looked extra cute at such a tiny size. The big tree monster (I wasn't sure if we should call it the baby's "mother") also looked cute when it wiggled, but at its ample size, it gave off more of an intimidating air.

"By the way, Ivy, what're we going to do with this baby?"

"Um…I dunno?"

What should we do, exactly? For that matter, why did the tree monster give us the baby? I looked at the monster, who was now wiggling much more vigorously.

"Uhhh…sorry, what're you saying?" I asked.

The tree monster stopped still. Then it stared at me, took the baby from my father, and handed it to me.

"Are you saying it's mine?" I asked.

The tree monster bobbed up and down, and the cave rang with cracking noises again. I went ahead and took the baby tree monster… *I guess it's mine to raise now?*

"Um, Dad…do you know how to raise a tree monster?"

"Can't say that I do. Maybe you just give it purple potions?"

"Is that all it needs?"

The real question was why this tree monster had given me a baby. Following my first encounter with a tree monster where I was attacked, this was only the second one I'd ever met.

"Well…are we taking it with us?" my father asked.

"Um…we might as well. It does such a cute dance, after all."

The little tree monster in my hand was deftly using its little roots to jump up and down with grace.

"You're so tiny, yet you can move in all sorts of ways. Isn't it amazing, Dad?"

As I watched the little tree monster dance in my hand, my father gave me a perplexed look.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well, I heard that tree monsters are born by filling a tree with magic energy…so the sight of this baby just feels a little strange to me."

He was right: I did remember reading about that in a book once. But we'd seen a tree monster give birth with our own eyes…

"Maybe they're born in different ways? It doesn't have to be just one," I suggested.

"Yeah, I guess that could be."

"Gyah! Gyah!"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

We looked toward the creatures when we heard them all cry out, just in time to see the big tree monster disappearing back through the stones in the cave wall.

"Huh?!" we both gasped.

It had been next to us only a second ago. When had it moved? *Wow, they really are stealthy.* The tree monster slipped between the cracks, and with a glance at us and a little wave of its root, it disappeared completely from view.

"Guess it went home," my father remarked.

"Uh-huh."

In a daze, my father and I both watched the tree monsters depart. Could you blame us? We hadn't expected them to just leave.

"Looks like you got left behind," my father said to the baby monster in my hand.

"Sure did."

I looked at my hand with him and saw the baby monster gazing up at both of us.

"Not a care in the world."

I giggled. "You said it."

The baby monster in my hand didn't seem to mind that its parent was gone. Maybe this was normal for tree monsters?

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Mrrrow.

My creatures bounded back over to us now that their playmates had left.

"Did you have fun?" I asked. "They were so nice to play with you."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuu."

"Pefu!"

"Ciel, thanks for keeping an eye on everybody."

Mrrrow.

I petted them one after another with my free hand.

Mew!

Ciel yipped at the sight of my hand, and the slimes also cast curious glances at my palm.

"Ivy, you'd better give it a name."

True. If this little tyke is going to travel with us, it needs a name. A name… What's a good name for a tree monster?

"Ooh, Toron! How about Toron?"

The baby tree monster stared at me for a moment, but it bounced happily in my hand the moment it heard that name.

"Seems like a hit," my father said.

"Yeah."

Thank goodness. But my, are you a tiny one. We'll have to be careful not to step on you.

"Hey, Dad, I'm worried about how small it is."

"Me, too. Let's look for something at the next dump we can use."

"Okay. But…what do we do until then?"

Chapter 453:
A Place for Toron

"WOULD THIS DO IT? Is it still too big?"

We were at an illegal dump in the forest, looking for anything that would serve as a cart to carry Toron in, but we were having no luck. Everything was just too big for the newborn baby tree monster. Toron was about the size of my hand, but it was so frail that I worried I might break it if I squeezed too hard.

"A tiny basket would be ideal," my father said.

I nodded in agreement and searched for something like that.

"Aaaagh, my back!"

All that searching in a crouched position made my back hurt. I stood up tall to stretch out my muscles and let out a satisfied moan. Then, as I looked around, I noticed that my slimes were searching for a basket for Toron while eating potions. They were all such good kids.

Toron was now outside the illegal dump, sitting on Ciel's head. Its root feet were securely gripped onto the adandara's fur, so I wasn't worried it would fall.

"I never imagined I'd spend the day looking for Toron four whole times, though…"

The first time I lost Toron was back in the cave when I stumbled and the baby flew out of my hand. That time, Ciel had noticed the exact direction Toron flew in, so we found it right away. Boy, was I relieved.

The second time, I put Toron in my bag because I was worried transporting the baby by hand would be dangerous—but Toron would have none of that. Thinking it was the lid Toron didn't like, I put a smaller, lidless bag inside the bigger one and put Toron in that.

Toron took to that bag okay, so I thought everything was settled… but the next thing I knew, Toron was gone. We nervously retraced our steps and took a good thirty minutes looking for Toron until we finally found it wandering listlessly. I quickly gave it a purple potion and watched over it for a little while. It quickly recovered, but it refused to go into the tiny bag.

Since that didn't work, I lined a large basket with cloth, put Toron inside, and had my father carry it. After a while, we saw that Toron once again looked weak and listless, so we revived it with another purple potion. Just then, we noticed the cloth in the basket with Toron was damp. The bag and the cloth in the basket were both fabric, so we concluded fabric was bad for a tree monster's constitution and moved Toron into the basket without the cloth. But with the cloth removed, the basket was too big for Toron. It rolled and slammed against one end, then the other…and before we knew it, Toron had fallen out onto the ground. My father noticed this quickly enough that it only took us five minutes to find Toron, but that was our sign that the basket was too big.

And since all the earlier times Toron was lost happened inside the cave, we learned it was even harder to look for Toron elsewhere when it got blown out of its basket by a gust of wind and we had to search for it in the forest. Though the two leaves on Toron's head were small, they had served as a good marker for finding it in the cave. But in the forest, those leaves did not stand out in the slightest. What's more, Toron was tiny and took over two hours to find.

Flame was the one to eventually find Toron, tangled in a vine stuck on a tree branch. And the poor baby must have struggled quite a lot, since the twin leaves on its head were broken. When we were discussing what to do, Ciel nudged its head in front of me. I was petting its head, not knowing what the gesture meant, when Toron suddenly jumped onto it. Then, when the baby monster fiercely grabbed onto Ciel's fur with its little roots, Ciel looked

satisfied. I asked Ciel if everything was okay and received a nod in reply, so we decided to let Toron stay there and keep a watchful eye.

And after that, we were able to walk through the forest without losing Toron—which brings us to the present, at the illegal dump. I wanted to replenish Toron's dinner supply—purple potions—so we decided to get what we needed at that dump.

"I can't find anything…"

My father joined me and crouched by my side. He was holding tiny baskets, but they all looked too big for Toron.

"No luck here, either."

Sora, Flame, and Sol were eating potions and magic items as they delved through the piles of trash. They found tiny baskets and brought them to us, but none of them popped out as being just the right size for Toron.

"The basket Sol just brought us is the smallest so far, so maybe that's good enough?"

I handed the basket by my feet to my dad, who looked it over and nodded.

"Yeah, Toron shouldn't roll around in here or get lost too easily."

"That's true, but I just worry that without something lining the basket, Toron will fall out."

We had been prioritizing size, but this basket was a bit shorter than the others. That meant we would need to modify it a little if we were going to use it.

"You're right. A gust of wind or jostling from walking might toss the kid out."

"I think we should put some sticks at the bottom of the basket for Toron to grab onto—what do you think?"

I picked a thin stick off the ground and put it in the basket to demonstrate.

"That's a good idea. Based on the way Toron grabs Ciel's fur to stay on, those roots do seem to be very strong and supportive."

"Yeah, do you think this stick is the right thickness? We need to find ones that are easy for Toron to grab onto. Then, we should get some string and sling it through the basket so we can wear it over our shoulder."

There sure were a lot of adjustments to make.

"Well, let's start by picking up the things you mentioned first," my father suggested.

"Okay, can do."

We collected some sticks of different thicknesses and looked for some string to hang the basket over our shoulders. We also collected several sturdier baskets to use to reinforce the durability of the little basket.

"Sora, Flame, Sol, we're about to go. Did you find any purple potions?" my father asked.

"Only four," I said.

"Agh, that makes sense. There isn't much demand for curse-lifting potions."

Sickness and injury were much more common than curses, so not nearly as many purple potions were made to begin with. That meant many fewer purple potions were thrown away by comparison.

"Well…" my father sighed. "I guess we should just consider ourselves lucky that we found any at all?"

"Yeah. Anyway, I grabbed all of them."

Since Toron was still a baby, we wouldn't need too many purple potions. But when it grew up, we might be in for some trouble.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu! Pefu!"

The three slimes happily bounced over to us, satisfied by their trip to the dump.

"Should we get going?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu! Pefu!"

We left the dump and returned to Ciel's side, immediately checking the top of its head to make sure Toron was still there.

"Thanks, Ciel."

Ciel's tail wagged in reply and I petted its head, careful not to disturb Toron.

"Think we should put Toron's basket together right here?" my father asked.

"Yeah. We can reinforce it and put the string strap on in no time."

We lined up the baskets and other supplies on the ground. We wiped the basket Toron would go directly into with a damp cloth until the cloth came out clean, then we cut the stronger baskets down to the correct size to use as reinforcement. We fit the smaller basket inside the larger one and tied them together with thin rope, then tied on another length of rope to hang the basket from our shoulder. Lastly, my father and I stuck the sticks we had gathered through the outside of the basket to line its bottom so Toron could grab onto them for support. The sticks we'd gathered that were longer than the basket's width worked perfectly for this. Then, all that remained was to tie the sticks down with twine so they wouldn't move around, and our basket was complete.

"There. We made the basket a little taller, and we have the rope to hang it off our shoulders… This ought to do it!"

Then we put away all the tools we had used.

"You're really crafty, Ivy." My father gently tugged on the basket to check its durability. After several tests, he nodded in approval. "Good. Okay, Toron, now it's your turn."

My father showed the basket to Toron, who was still on top of Ciel's head. Toron stared at the basket for a while before ambling into it.

Oh, good. The basket doesn't look as nice after all the adjustments we've made, but it's strong enough for the trip. This basket ought to work just fine until we get to the next village.

"Okay, it's getting late, but let's head for Hataru Village."

Chapter 454:
A Field of Karyo Blooms

"HEY, DAD, we're going to run out of purple potions soon."

"We should reach Hataru Village in two more days—is there enough to last until then?"

I looked at the purple potion left in the bottle. There was so little left that I wasn't sure it would be enough. My father looked at our supply, and a solemn shadow fell on his face. Meanwhile, Toron stared intently at the purple potion from the basket hanging off my father's shoulder.

"We should try to get to Hataru faster."

I nodded in agreement. Toron needed a drop of purple potion three times a day to keep the twin leaves on its head from withering. We were too scared to find out what happened if the leaves withered away completely.

"Ciel, pick up the pace. We need to get to Hataru tomorrow," my father said.

Ciel gave him an inquisitive look but nodded after a moment. I was confident that we would definitely arrive in Hataru Village by the next day if Ciel thought we could.

"Can you handle the rush, Ivy?"

I nodded. I had lost a little energy when we first left Hataka Village, but I was back to my normal self now, so there would be no problem.

"Okay! Break time's over—let's get to Hataru."

We washed the dishes and stored them in our magic bag. Once everything was put away, we looked around to make sure we had all we needed.

"Aaaand we're all set! Okay, everyone, let's go!"

At my signal, Ciel jumped into the lead position. As I watched the slimes bounce quietly beside Ciel, I let out an impressed cheer. Flame, who had done nothing but sleep at the start, had suddenly gotten more energy after we left Hataka Village and stopped sleeping in the bag whenever we traveled. Sora seemed pleased with that, and it was often twisted playfully around Flame. Sol had recently taken to joining in, so our party was a lot more cheerful than before.

"You know, Ivy, Sol has changed since you tamed it."

He was right. Ever since Sol received the taming symbol, it had been different than before. Sol used to spend much more time alone than with the group, so I had just assumed the slime preferred being alone, but that was apparently not true. Now Sol spent much more time with the group than alone.

The other big change was that Sol was affectionate with me and my father. Before, it had seemed to keep us at a distance, but now it competed with Flame and Sora for our attention. Adjusting to suddenly having four needy creatures in our care was chaotic, but they were all too cute for words.

"I'm surprised at how graceful they all are," my father remarked.

The slimes effortlessly bounced along the branches, no matter how thick they were. The sight had made me nervous at first, but now it made me smile. And, well, yes, they did fall now and then… and it was always out of nowhere, so it was rather alarming.

"Hey, Dad?"

While the sight of the trio playing was heartwarming, I was a little concerned.

"Hm, what's up?"

"Am I crazy…or are slimes not supposed to be graceful jumpers?"

I clearly remembered finding no record of that when I first learned about slimes.

"Well…your slimes are rare. It's just another one of their un-slimelike behaviors, I guess."

Well, exactly. So I was right, it wasn't slimelike. I got the feeling it would be easier at this point to find atypical behaviors from them than typical ones.

"Our kids are too unique for comfort," I remarked.

"Ha ha ha! You can say that again."

We looked at the trio without sacrificing our walking speed.

"Pu! Puuu."

"Te! Ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Their voices boomed through the forest, which was not a good thing.

"Keep it down, kids. We don't want to attract monsters," I warned them gently.

Since Ciel was with us, monsters wouldn't actually come to us, but some other problematic creature still could show up.

"Pu!"

"Ryu!"

"Peh!"

The slimes answered me quietly.

"They're sure having fun," my father remarked with a shrug.

Then Ciel suddenly stopped a few paces ahead of us and growled.

"What's wrong, Ciel?"

The adandara was glaring sternly at the path ahead.

Mrrrow.

At Ciel's deep trill, the slimes quickly jumped down from the trees and gathered around us.

"Looks like something's ahead." My dad put a hand on his sword. Ciel also proceeded with caution. And after a while, we smelled something sweet. Something intensely sweet.

"What's that smell? It must be really strong to make it all the way to us."

My father whipped out a cloth and put it over his mouth and nose. "You smell it, too, Ivy?"

I took a cloth out of my own bag and covered my nose and mouth. "Are you okay, Ciel?"

Mrrrow.

Ciel sounded irritated but not in danger. I looked at the slimes and noticed that they appeared irritated as well.

"Ah! I know this smell!" My father stopped in his tracks, an alarmed look on his face.

"Dad, you recognize it?"

"Yeah, I think it's karyo—a narcotic."

What?! A narcotic?!

"Will inhaling the fragrance hurt us?" I shot a nervous look at my father, worried about our creatures.

He patted my head. "Stay calm; we'll be okay. Only the roots of karyo are a narcotic, so the scent won't hurt you. Just don't breathe in too much, or you'll feel some irritation."

The scent was indeed so intense that it was making me feel suffocated rather than irritated.

"How strange, though," he remarked.

"What is?"

"Even though karyo grow naturally in the wild, you'll never find a bunch of them growing in the same area. But based on how strong

this smells, I get the feeling there's a lot of karyo planted around here."

I couldn't quite imagine just how many karyo was "a lot," but it was safe to assume this wasn't natural. Did somebody plant them, then? Planted flowers with narcotic properties. In other words…

"Somebody must have planted these to sell drugs," I said.

"I assume so. Which means there's probably a bumper crop of karyo here. What do you think we should do about it?"

What should we do about it? I don't think we can turn a blind eye on a known field of drugs. But would that just land us in another mess again? So maybe we should ignore it? But…I wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it.

I glanced at my dad.

"If we leave it alone, we won't be able to sleep at night," he said.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

I know our conscientiousness gave us grief sometimes, but something this serious just couldn't be ignored.

"It'll take some time, but we might as well destroy the field," my father said.

"But how?"

"If we find a patch of them growing in the forest, we rip them out by the roots and burn them."

"Isn't that a bit extreme?"

It seemed to me that we could just leave the karyo there as long as they were growing naturally.

"Karyo are highly addictive—even one bloom can turn many people into addicts. So even if we find just one flower, we'll need to rip it out by the root—the narcotic part of it—and burn it."

Now that made sense. So they were addictive. That was a little unnerving. I nervously searched for human auras. It took longer than usual because the powerful fragrance made it hard to focus, but I somehow managed to scan the area.

"No human auras nearby, Dad."

"Okay. Yeah, the smell's gotten much stronger."

"Uh-huh. I feel sick."

I was still covering my nose and mouth with a cloth, but it was quite pungent. I managed to suppress the urge to vomit as we walked on until we came into a clearing.

"Ah!" we both yelped in unison.

Before us lay a sea of karyo blooms.

"Wow."

"Yeah, this has human cultivation written all over it." My father sighed loudly. "This is gonna be a big job."

The field of karyo blooms spread out far and wide. If we had to rip each one out by the roots and burn it, this would be a mammoth task for sure. And we didn't have time to spare…

Chapter 455:
The Third Leaf

"WELL, THESE FLOWERS won't burn themselves—we might as well get started."

"Sure thing," I agreed. "Ciel, will you stand guard and make sure nobody comes?"

Mrrrow.

Ciel's expression looked a bit grimmer than before, and I couldn't blame it. Ciel had a great sense of smell—these flowers must have really been a pain.

"Ciel, you can go far enough away that you don't smell the blooms if you want. It's bothering you, isn't it?"

Ciel considered my offer for a moment, then gave a tiny nod and went to patrol the perimeter. Then it bounded off into the forest, likely having caught sight of something.

"I guess this smell really was bothering Ciel," my father said, pulling a fresh cloth from his bag and doubling up the mask on his face. I copied him and put a second cloth around my nose and mouth, too. It provided more relief than just one, but the ever-pervasive stench that made it through both layers was getting on my nerves.

"It's better, but it still smells terrible," I remarked.

"Well, with all these flowers, we might as well surrender to the stench. Oh! Is that Ciel?"

I looked where my father was pointing to see that Ciel had climbed a large tree.

"Ciel can look for trespassers from up there and won't have to smell the blooms, either," he observed, sounding impressed.

"Ciel sure is smart."

"Sure is. Okay, let's do this. One thing, though: I doubt we'll be able to finish this today."

"Yeahhh…" I answered disappointedly as I beheld the endless sea of karyo before me. "Hey, how are the slimes doing?"

Did slimes have a powerful sense of smell? They had looked a bit irritated earlier. If they were suffering, I wanted them to move someplace safer.

"I think the slimes should be okay," my father said. "They're just hanging out over there."

I followed my father's gaze and noticed the three were snuggled up together under the root of a tree.

"Maybe smells don't bother slimes all that much?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Did you read anything about that in your books?"

My books… Was there anything in them about slimes and their sense of smell? I didn't remember. Either I'd forgotten because I didn't think it was important, or there was no record of their sense of smell to begin with… I had a feeling it was the latter.

"Whoa, these are really thick!"

I looked in the direction of my father's voice to find him trying to rip out a karyo by the root. I walked over and looked at his hand, and I could tell the root he was grabbing was thick. The blooms of the karyo plant were pale orange and looked very cute, so I'd assumed the roots would also be dainty and thin. However, the deeper into the soil they went, the thicker they got—thick enough that my father couldn't yank them out of the ground with a gentle tug.

"This is gonna be a full-body workout."

As I listened to the annoyance in my father's voice, I could feel my own face twist in discomfort. Maybe we really couldn't finish this

task in just one day.

"Okay, one, two… Ah!"

Just as I was reaching for a karyo root, I realized I still had my belongings on my back. I quickly ran over to my slimes to set down my gear.

"Hm? Well, good morning, Toron. Sorry, buddy, we were going to book it to Hataru, but something came up and we're going to take a bit longer now."

When I lowered Toron's basket off my shoulder, I woke up the little tree monster. Toron had been sleeping standing up. It surprised me at first, but it was, after all, a tree. I realized that sleeping standing up might be perfectly normal.

Once we get to Hataru Village, I'll have to look for some books on tree monsters. I should be able to glean a little information from them.

"I'm sorry, your leaves are probably going to wither quite a bit."

I was a little worried, but the idea of leaving the karyo tugged on my conscience. The tree monster's two-leafed head bobbed quizzically to the side.

Wait a minute, does Toron have a neck? From the position of its eyes, the leaves don't look like they're tilting from the neck. They're tilting from above the eyes.

"Ack! Stop screwing around, Ivy. Okay, you sit here with your friends, and—huh?! You wanna come out?"

As I turned to run back to the field of karyo blooms, Toron escaped its basket. Then it elegantly walked on two little root legs towards the field.

"Excuse me, buddy."

I grabbed Toron with one hand and carried it to the field of karyo. Searching for Toron was such an ordeal that I felt safer letting

it finish whatever it was going to do.

"What's going on?" my father asked.

"Toron wanted to come over here."

I set Toron by my feet and watched. It looked at the karyo field, then at the karyo my father was trying to yank out of the ground.

"See, Toron, these flower roots contain something that's addictive, so we have to rip them all out and burn them," my father explained.

Toron stared intently as it listened. Then the little tree monster waddled over to the karyo field and buried two of its root legs into the earth.

"Ooh, you're a digger. Hey, Dad, do you know what it's trying to do?"

"Uhh… No, I'm clueless. I just remembered something I read about tree monsters—apparently, they dig their roots into the ground when they've found some prey… I wonder what Toron's prey is?"

My head tilted in perplexity. We didn't exactly want Toron hunting prey right now…

"Now Toron looks like an ordinary plant, huh?" my father remarked.

Toron dug itself deeper into the earth until only the twin leaves at the top could be seen.

"You don't think it's saying goodbye, do you?"

"Well…I'd like to think not…"

My father joined me in staring at the monster. Not only its root but its eyes were buried under the ground now, so we couldn't see its expression. We watched for a while, but nothing changed.

"Wait a minute—do you smell the flowers?" My father shot up to his feet. "Whoa…they're all dead!"

"Huh?!"

I followed my father's gaze from Toron's twin leaves to the karyo field, and we were met with a sea of withered karyo blooms. Not only was their smell gone, but their petals were strewn about on the ground, leaving withered flower corpses in their wake.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I'm…not sure?" Then, after a brief pause, "Oh! Was it Toron?"

Toron?

I looked over to the spot where Toron had planted itself.

"Oh! There's a third leaf!"

Toron was rising from the earth, now with three leaves instead of two on top of its head. Once its root tips were completely above ground, it wiggled and shook itself, sending clods of dirt flying.

"Its roots are a bit thicker now," I observed.

"They sure are."

Toron's formerly thin roots—which had given us concern—were now twice as thick as before. Since they were beyond too thin to start with, I was a little concerned that they were still too thin even after the growth spurt.

"Toron, were you the one who killed the karyo blooms?" my father asked.

Toron looked at him and said, *"Gyah!"*

It spoke! Wait a minute…it's super tiny, but its voice sounds just like a mature tree monster? No, I think it's a bit higher-pitched? But it sounds so much deeper than my other monsters!



"Toron's voice…"

"Ivy, that's the least of our worries right now."

I looked at my father and smiled sheepishly. He was right, but that didn't take away the shock…

"Anyway, is our theory correct?"

Our theory… Oh, right, that Toron killed the karyo blooms.

"Toron, if you were the one who killed the karyo blooms, can you speak once?"

"Gyah!"

"Okay. Thanks, that was really helpful. Did you get bigger by absorbing nutrients from the karyo plants?"

My father nodded to me. "I'd assume so, but I've never heard of tree monsters taking nutrients from other plants. Then again, not much is really known about tree monsters to begin with."

He was right. Now that I thought about it, all the books I'd read didn't say much about tree monsters at all. Even their life span and sex differences were unknown.

"Well, we might as well check on the karyo roots. If they're all dead, then our work here is done, and we can head for Hataru again."

"Okay, good plan," I said.

Still, what a shock it was to see the rich field of karyo blooms suddenly become a withered karyo wasteland.

"Looks like we're in the clear. They're completely withered…" My father paused. "Beyond recognition, really."

He picked up a root, and it disintegrated into little pieces through his fingers.

"In just a few minutes?" I asked.

My father nodded.

They withered and dried completely… What state did they have to get in to dissolve beyond recognition like that? I really don't get it.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Mrrrow.

I looked over at my chirping creatures, who had all surrounded Toron and started celebrating its growth spurt.

"I guess some things will just have to remain a mystery," my father said.

"True. Well, the important thing is that Toron's growing up."

"Sure is."

Chapter 456:
Did You Get Stronger?

"HEY, DAD…we're completely out of purple potions now."

I showed him the empty bottle.

"So we didn't quite make it… Toron, can you hang in there a bit longer?"

Toron stared intently at the empty bottle, then its focus moved to my father and its leaves bobbed to the right.

"Sorry, Toron, we ran out of your potions. We should get to Hataru Village soon—can you last until then?"

"Gyah!"

Toron nodded to my father, then waddled over to the slimes.

"You think it'll be okay? Its leaves look healthy enough for now…"

"I think the latest we ever gave Toron a potion before was one hour behind schedule," I recalled.

"Yeah, we were looking for a place to camp, and it ran late."

I nodded. "That's right. Then we suddenly noticed that Toron's leaves were withered."

"That was really scary, huh? Toron looked a bit worried, too."

And Toron's roots were droopy, so we quickly gave it some purple potion. I think its leaves are in better shape than they were before. Toron seems stronger now that it's absorbed the nutrients from the karyo plants. It's thicker as well. But I still can't help but worry.

"Anyway, let's keep an eye on Toron and see if anything changes," my father suggested.

"Okay."

"Gyah! Gyah!"

I looked over at Toron to see it was cheerfully sitting on Sora's head. Sora happily jiggled in turn, seemingly unbothered by it. Sol and Flame bounced around them, and Ciel looked on from a close distance.

"You know…they look like a big happy family," I said.

"They sure do. Slimes, an adandara, and a tree monster… Kind of a family of misfits."

He was right. It was an odd combination.

"Um, I've been thinking this for a while, but…Ciel seems sort of like everyone else's mother…"

"I can see that," my father agreed. "It's the look in its eyes that does it."

A mother protectively watching her children play. Ciel was still quite young, though. I hoped we weren't putting too much responsibility on the creature.

"Oh!"

Ciel pushed Flame down on the ground. Apparently, it had been a bad little slime.

"Now that's a mother scolding her young," my father observed.

I definitely saw the resemblance.

"Well, we should get going," he said. "Oh, wait, we need to check where we are first. Let's see…because of that boulder, we must be around here. So…we ought to get to Hataru Village in another four hours."

I looked at the map with my father and saw there was a boulder drawn on the spot where he was pointing. I compared the boulder nearby with the one on the map. *Yup, definitely the same boulder. Okay, four more hours… Ooh, I can't wait to see what kind of village Hataru is.*

"Okay, everyone, we're on our way," I called out. "Toron, back in your basket."

"Gyah!"

Toron waddled away from the slimes. No matter how many times I saw this behavior, it was still so cute. Cute…but slow.

"Gyah?"

"Sorry, buddy." I gently picked it up and put it in its basket. "The slimes seem like they've got plenty of energy left."

"Yeah, they've been out of the bag a lot lately. They sure are robust."

"Uh-huh."

We walked on towards Hataru Village as the slimes bounced playfully ahead. This was the way our caravan had looked ever since we left Hataka Village. *Was living in tents and houses all that time so restrictive? We'll have to give them plenty of playtime in the forest at our next stop.*

"We're almost in Hataru now." My father stopped walking and compared our surroundings to the map.

"So we should get back on the village road, then?" I asked.

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No, let's stay in the forest and go to the village dump first. Our shopping list keeps getting longer and we need to pick up our purple potions first thing, right? Then we have to circle the village and make sure there aren't any stones with summoning circles carved in them or anything."

Right, that's another thing we have to worry about. I don't think this village will be under a summoning circle's curse, but you can never be too careful.

"Okay, good idea."

"Sorry, Ciel, but we want to go to Hataru's dump first. Can you take us there?"

Mrrrow!

Ciel wagged its tail, looked around the trees, and slightly changed direction. It probably knew where the dump was.

"Is Toron doing okay?" my father asked.

I looked in the basket, and Toron happily popped its head out. Its leaves were dewy and in very good condition.

"Looks good to me. Maybe the nutrients from the karyo made Toron stronger?"

"Well, that field was where Toron grew. Oh! Toron, can you hide in your basket when we get to the village?"

"Gyah!"

Toron nodded obediently. I couldn't pat its head like I did with the others, so I gently stroked its leaves.

After walking a while through the trees, we arrived at the dump. We were surprised to find it was much bigger than we'd thought it would be.

"This dump is way too big for a village this size. Is there a catch?" I asked.

I'm tired of getting caught up in messes. I just want to have a boring, relaxing trip for once.

"Well, let's get started before somebody shows up," my father said.

"Okay. Let's see, now we need three types of potions, magic items, and… Huh? It's empty."

I peeked into Sol's magic item bag in confusion.

"We still had plenty of stuff in there yesterday, didn't we?" my father asked.

I nodded. I'd thought we had at least a two-day supply…

"Maybe we didn't look hard enough," he suggested.

"You think so?" I asked doubtfully as we headed for the dump. I searched for human auras along the way, but there weren't any

around this area. I felt several auras in the distance, though. They were faint, so they might have been veteran adventurers. We'd need to be a bit careful.

When we entered the dump, the slimes happily dove straight into the trash.

"Be careful, okay?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

I looked outside the dump to find Ciel lying protectively beside Toron's basket. Toron must have felt at ease, since the basket was perfectly still.

"Okay, let's get collecting!"

First, we had to find purple potions for Toron. It sure was helpful that Sora and Flame ate the empty potion bottles; otherwise, our bags would have been full of clanking bottles.

Wait a minute, does that mean Sora and Flame would be fine with just eating empty bottles? Hmmm… I seem to remember feeding Sora just an empty bottle once… How did that turn out again?

But I digress…

"There aren't that many purple potions," I commented.

"I found ten. What about you, Ivy?"

"Seven. I'll try somewhere else."

"Thanks. I'll pick up the other things we need."

"Thanks."

I scanned the area for auras as I went to collect purple potions. Since there weren't many purple potions going around to begin with, there weren't many discarded ones, either. So I picked

up potions for the other slimes while I kept an eye out for purple ones.

"How's it looking?"

"Um, Dad…I only found fifty purple potions."

"I found twenty-one. There aren't so many, huh?"

"I know. What should we do? We're going to run out eventually."

"It'll take a while to run out since Toron's doses are so small, but considering how much it's going to grow, we definitely don't have enough."

And we can't substitute other potions, either. Oh dear, what a pickle.

"Let's call it a day for now," my father suggested. "We've got plenty of potions for Sora and Flame, and Sol has enough magic items, too."

Oh no! I wound up making Dad do all the work.

"Thanks."

Hm? I feel like the adventurer auras are coming closer.

"Hey, Dad, they're still far away, but some adventurers are coming."

"Okay. Circle up, everyone."

In answer to my dad's signal, everyone came together.

"Some people are coming, so we should get going," he said.

The slimes nodded.

"Okay! It should take a while to circle the village, so we'd better hop to it."

He was right. That would be quite a distance to walk.

"What a pain," I sighed. "Can't we just walk for a few meters and say the place is safe if we don't find anything?"

"That would be great, yes. But all it takes to stir up mayhem is one summoning circle getting activated. It's an annoying job, but somebody's gotta do it."

Chapter 457:
Adventurer Auras?

"WANT TO START LOOKING for a place to camp for the night?" my father asked.

"Sure. Walking a whole circle around this village sure is an ordeal."

"Yeah, I'd talked myself into thinking it would be much easier. Sorry about that."

I shook my head. "It's okay, I thought it would be easier, too."

It was an odd misconception, since it stood to reason that a village with a lot of people would take quite a while to walk around…

"Sora, will you find us a place to sleep for the night?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Sora jiggled and looked around the trees. Then it bounded deeper into the forest and away from the village.

"We're going that way, apparently," my father said.

"Seems so."

We followed Sora for a few minutes until we came to a place filled with boulders and trees.

"Wow, I didn't know trees could grow in the crack of a split boulder."

"Yeah, I've never seen it before," I agreed. "It looks like the boulders are hugging the tree."

"Aha. It looks that way to you, Ivy?"

When we got closer, we found the boulder had a big hole in it. Sora dove right into it.

"Sora, be careful!"

But I knew from Sora's behavior that there was no danger, so I scanned for auras and stepped inside with Sora…and Flame. When had Flame jumped in there? I hadn't even noticed.

"Okay. Now, where's our water source… I hear one," my father said. "Sounds like a river nearby. Let's have dinner there."

"Sure."

I loved camping by the river—it made it so easy to wash everything.

"Want to have something premade for dinner tonight?" my father asked.

"Why premade?"

"Well, walking around the village tired us out more than we expected, and besides, it's past our dinnertime."

He had a point. I *was* a little tired. If everything had gone according to plan, we would be having a relaxing evening in the village right now. And it was starting to get dark, so it would be hard to start cooking this late.

"Okay. Let's make it simple, then."

We followed the sound of water to find the river, which was much bigger than we expected. We walked along the bank for a while until we found a flat area to set down our mat.

"What do we have left? We ate most of it, didn't we?" my father asked.

I checked all the cooked food in my magic bag. "All I've got at the moment is…vegetable soup, spicy soup, some gyuudon, and some stir-fried vegetables. I've also got some marinated meat with a few other things in a bowl. Oh, I also still have some sandwiches! But only enough for one person, as luck would have it."

Everything was delightfully mismatched with nothing in common, and it didn't look like quite enough for two people, either.

"Well, we did just kind of eat whatever we wanted for a while there," my father said. "Let's save the sandwiches for breakfast tomorrow. Then we'll…"

"I'll just take everything out."

I put the table on the mat and started taking all the food out of the magic bag while my father got the tea ready.

"Gyo!"

Hm?

I turned toward the voice to see Toron carefully peeking out of the basket.

Oops! I forgot to get Toron's dinner.

"Looks like Toron's awake," my father observed. "It's been a long time since its last meal, but those leaves still look nice."

Interesting. I thought Toron didn't get enough purple potion, but its leaves are still lush.

"Well, good. Looks like the karyo blooms really nourished it."

"Sure did. Takes a load off my mind."

"Mine, too."

If Toron's leaves would stay vibrant even if dinner ran late, that gave us some wiggle room. After all, there would always be days where we would have to stray from the schedule.

"Are Toron's potions in the magic bag with the others?"

"Yeah."

While my father took a purple potion from the magic bag, I got out a little cup. I poured a tiny dose of purple potion into it, walked over to Toron, and then set Toron inside it.

"Gyohhh." Toron drank the purple potion through its roots.

"Drink up slowly, okay?"

"Gyah!"

I kept an eye on Toron as I finished taking all our food out of the magic bag.

"Oh, you've even got a salad with hexa fruit on it! I really like that."

My father eagerly crumbled the hexa fruit on top of the plate of vegetables and mixed it in. Then he added some cheese, and it was complete.

"Okay! Let's eat," he said.

As we ate, the slimes had a little post-dumpster diving dinner-time rest a ways away from us. They must have been tired from all that bouncing around they'd done all day.

"Ivy, want some soup?"

"Sure, I guess so."

"Which one?"

"Either is fine. What about you?"

"I don't know, they're both so good… Can I take the spicy one?"

"Sure, of course."

Little by little, the food on the table wound up in our stomachs. And though it was nothing new, my father ate a lot. *Wait, actually, he doesn't really eat all that much. I've met people who eat even more than him.*

"What's up, Ivy? You need to eat more."

"I'm already full."

"Your appetite hasn't been increasing much, has it?"

He gave me a worried look, but I already thought I'd eaten plenty. I'd had a full serving size for an adult, after all. Then again, adventurers were all hearty eaters, from what I'd seen. Maybe I wasn't actually eating a full portion?

"Ahhh, your cooking is always so good. Thanks."

I handed my father (who had just finished enough portions for three) a fresh cup of tea. Nothing could beat a piping hot cup of tea after a meal.

Hm? I don't know why…but I feel like I'm missing something…

"What's up?"

"Um…something's nagging at my conscience," I answered.

"Your conscience?"

Oh, it's human auras! They're quite suppressed, but they're definitely there. They're so thin that it's hard to spot them.

"I think they're veteran adventurers. I've been sensing their auras in the forest…"

Grr!

I heard Ciel growl and looked in its direction to find it dubiously eyeing the trees.

"Are they coming our way?" my father asked.

"Umm…no. They were, but now they've stopped."

I shook my head. It had felt like the auras were interested in us, but they weren't anymore. Maybe I was just imagining it.

"I think we're in the clear. Wait a minute… Now I sense more adventurers."

I scanned the area, paying extra attention to auras, and managed to detect three. They were probably traveling as a party.

"I think it's a party of three veteran adventurers on the outskirts of the village."

"On their way back to the village, maybe?"

On the way back? Based on the auras' positions, that didn't feel right.

"I don't think so."

My father frowned grimly. “Sora. Flame. Sol. Come here. Ciel, sorry, but could you shapeshift into a slime? Ivy, get Toron in the basket.”

“Okay, but their auras are still far away.”

Besides, they weren’t coming any closer.

“I know. But you sense something is off, don’t you?”

“…Yeah.”

He was right. Something was wrong. I didn’t know what it was, though.

“Then we need to take precautions just in case. Let’s move.”

“Okay.”

If we waited until we were already in danger, it would be too late. So Ciel shapeshifted into a slime, and the real slimes hopped over to the mat with us. My father took the sleepy Toron and put it back in its basket.

“I’ll just clean everything up…”

I quickly rinsed the dinner dishes in the river and put them in the magic bag. Once we got to the village, I’d wash them more properly.

“Let’s head to the campsite Sora found for us. Ivy, how are those auras?”

“The three aren’t moving.”

“Okay.”

I took the magic bag off my shoulder and folded the mat into it. Then we went back to our campsite. I searched for the auras, but they weren’t moving. I had a bad feeling about it. I could only hope it was unfounded.

Chapter 458:
Let's Just Ignore Them

"...GOOD MORNING."

"Morning."

We were too worried about the auras I'd sensed yesterday to get any sleep. It didn't help that the auras had been moving around in the middle of the night, either… I was so tired.

"Ahhh," I yawned.

"Doesn't sound like you slept much." My father peered at me worriedly as he put away our bedding.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Did I toss and turn a lot?"

I'd moved every time the auras did, so I was worried I'd disrupted my father's sleep… Actually, I *knew* I'd disrupted it.

"It's okay; I was too worried to sleep myself. They came pretty close to us during the night, didn't they?"

"Yeah. That made me a little nervous."

I had stayed perfectly still, since I'd had the feeling a snap reaction would be a bad move…

"Those auras were definitely moving in a suspicious way, right?"

They had to be adventurers or travelers. And there was an unspoken rule: "If you're taking a break in the forest, stay as far away from travelers or adventurers as you can." Often, a rest in the forest meant hypervigilance. That rule existed to give everyone some relief, no matter how minor, so they could rest. It was the bare minimum so that everyone could come out of the forest alive.

"They sure were. I can't detect auras, but I can judge a person's strength by their movements…and no matter how you slice it, those auras belonged to veteran adventurers, so of course they would know about the sacred rule… Maybe something happened."

"In Hataru Village?"

"Yeah. They might be looking for someone."

That made sense. That would explain why they would continue their search indiscriminately at night. *Wait a minute—I remember they were constantly on the move. And weren't there signs of irregular movements, too?*

"What's up?" my father asked.

"I sensed three auras, and two of them definitely seemed like they were searching for someone…but I think one of the auras was completely still the whole time."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. It was the aura farthest away from us. It's been in that same spot since yesterday."

I'd been so preoccupied with it that I'd searched for that aura many times, so I knew I wasn't wrong. Even now…it still wasn't moving.

"Don't scan for auras too long. It's dangerous," my father warned.

"Oops! That's right; I'll be more careful."

My father patted my head. "Let's eat breakfast and head to the village. Mark my words, we *are* going to Hataru Village today! Oh, by the way…can we stay at an inn?"

"An inn? Sure, that would be fine. But why?"

He usually let me decide. Did he have a special reason to push for an inn?

"Well, the curse in Hataka Village was enacted in the plaza."

Ohh, that's right. Maybe we should avoid camping in open spaces from now on? But if we stay at an inn and there winds up being nothing wrong with the village…it just seems like it would be a waste of money. Which is silly to think, since Ciel and the others keep our money worries at bay.

"Good morning, everyone."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Toron was still asleep. I quietly peeked in its basket and found the little tree asleep standing up. It was an impressive sight. It was swaying in its sleep, but it gripped the twigs we'd placed in there to keep from toppling over.

"What an incredible talent… That is a talent, right?" I asked.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

Sora and Sol's replies made me smile. Apparently, the way Toron swayed while sleeping was a talent… But was it, really?

While my father got breakfast ready, I put away everything we'd taken out of the magic bag yesterday.

"Thanks, Ivy. Are you ready to eat?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Dad."

We discussed the day's schedule as we ate breakfast. Since we were tired, our top priority would be to get to the village. We decided to ignore the auras in the forest.

"But if they come any closer, we won't be able to ignore them."

I nodded. "Yeah. Should we keep the creatures in the bag today?"

"Hmm…the auras are still far away, right?"

"Uh-huh. They're nowhere near us."

"Then let's play it by ear. They'll have to stay in hiding a lot once we get to the village, after all."

He was right. We could let them out in our room at the inn, but they wouldn't be able to leave, so it would be best to let them get the jiggles out of their systems while they could. We would try to visit the forest as often as possible, but there was no telling what might happen.

"Okay. Now let's finish this breakfast."

"Good idea."

After a rest, we set out for the village. When we started to move, I sensed that an aura was scanning us.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"Ciel, I assume you're suppressing your magic and your aura?"

Mrrrow.

"Then let's just ignore them. I feel like we shouldn't get involved."

I smiled. "Yeah, I'm tired of getting involved in all sorts of problems."

I wanted to get a room and just relax. I wanted to have a nice long sleep and forget about those auras!

"Same here."

After we stopped once for lunch, then again for a rest, the gate to Hataru Village finally came into view.

"Can you all get in the bag?" my father asked.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

Mrrrow.

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Gyah!"

"Toron, you go in the basket."

I put the slimes into the bag one by one, then Toron in the basket. Toron had woken up at lunchtime and had been clinging to the top of Ciel's head ever since.

"Toron, I'll have to shut your lid when we get to the village gate, okay?"

"Gyah!" Toron nodded.

"Should we go?" my father asked.

"Okay."

When we got near the village gate, we noticed a bunch of adventurers gathered there.

"Looks like something did happen…" my father observed.

"Sure does."

"Judging by their gear, it doesn't look like a monster hunt. I really do think they're looking for a person."

Maybe a criminal had escaped? But I hadn't sensed any other auras in the forest besides the three adventurers.

"Helloooo. Visiting the village?"

We looked toward the voice to see a man waving at us.

"Yeah, but we can wait if it's a bad time," my father said.

"No, no, it's all right; they're leaving soon. Come on over."

Apparently the adventurer party was just tying things up. Whenever a large group of adventurers were gathered for any task, they went through a procedure to make sure everyone was accounted for. Since the gatekeepers handled that, sometimes you had to wait if you arrived at that time. If your luck was lousy, you'd have to wait over an hour.

"Sorry about that," the gatekeeper apologized. "All right, so, press your card here, please."

We looked where the gatekeeper was pointing—a white board. My father and I pressed our merchant guild cards to it one after the other, and the gatekeeper read them.

"Okay, you're good to go—wait, no… Where's that thing I gave the adventurers…ummm…huh?"

The desk in front of the gatekeeper was buried under a chaotic stack of papers. Apparently, he couldn't find the permits that were necessary to let us into the village.

"Wait just a moment, please—oh no!"

The gatekeeper's arm bumped into the pile, knocking it over.

"Oh no!" we echoed.

"Sorry about that. Umm, okay, the permits…"

While the gatekeeper looked for the documents on the desk, my father and I picked up the other papers, making sure not to look at them. *We aren't supposed to see these documents, right? Is it really okay for us to be doing this?*

"Captain…what do you think you're doing?!"

We flinched at the sound of the screeching woman's voice.

Yeah, we weren't supposed to see these.

I looked at my father, who smiled sheepishly back at me.

"I apologize; I really am so sorry about him. Um, and who might you folks be?"

"Ohh, uh, I just gave them permission to enter the village," the gatekeeper answered her.

She sighed loudly. "Um…then let them in?"

"Ha ha ha ha! Well, I'd love to, but have you seen the permits?"

"You crappy-brain captain! Why do you think I'm always telling you to keep the desk tidy?!"

Crappy-brain captain? What an impressive insult…

"Um, but I *have* kept it tidy."

"Funny, I don't think I've ever *seen* you tidying it up!"

"It was tidy two weeks ago, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, because *I* cleaned it! And how did you manage to get it so messy in just two weeks?!"

Oh dear. I wonder how long it'll take us to get our permits…

Chapter 459:
CheChe Inn

"I REALLY AM SO SORRY about that. Here are your papers. Do your damn job, Captain! You're cleaning that desk *today*, you hear? I won't let you get out of it."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Oh, no, thank *you* for waiting so long. I'm Leah, lieutenant of the Wall Exterior Platoon. Welcome to Hataru Village!"

The Wall Exterior Platoon? I tilted my head in confusion at the unfamiliar phrase. *And she's a lieutenant… Looks like she's got a lot on her plate, too.*

"I'm Druid, and this is my daughter Ivy. We'll be staying here for just a little while."

"Thanks for the warm welcome," I told Lieutenant Leah.

She bowed lightly. "I am truly honored. Is this your first time in Hataru?"

"No, I've been here once before, a very long time ago," my father answered. "It's my daughter's first time, though. That's right. Do you know of any reasonably priced restaurants? Food carts are fine, too."

"Reasonable restaurants, eh? *Well*…if you go straight down Main Street, take the third right, then walk a little ways, there's a place called Rosha Meats. Their soup is delicious. It has big chunks of meat in it, and it's a real pleasure to chew on."

"Rosha Meats, you say? Thank you very much. Ivy, wanna try it out?"

"Sure. I can't wait."

A soup with big chunks of meat? That sounds great.

"May I ask where you two will be staying tonight?" Lieutenant Leah inquired.

"We'll find an inn," my father answered.

"An inn… Well, I do know a great place, though it's a tad on the old side… What do you think?"

"We don't mind if it's old, as long as it keeps out the wind and rain."

"Oh, no problems there! My father repaired it real good! He was a carpenter."

Her father? Does this mean Lieutenant Leah's family runs an inn?

"Where can we find the inn?"

"Okay, you take the second left off Main Street and go straight until you hit an inn called CheChe. That's the place."

"Got it. We'll check it out."

"Um, Leaaah, no soliciting at the gate, pleeease."

"I'm not soliciting; I'm just giving a recommendation as a citizen."

"Um, no, you were definitely soliciting."

"Captain, your hands are idle. Besides, there's no rule against soliciting during operating hours."

I couldn't help but laugh at their conversation. They had such a great rapport.

"Well then, thank you in advance for all the info."

"No problem—ah! No! Captain! You told them about the alarm, didn't you?"

The alarm?

"Oops! I totally forgot."

"Ugh! *Captain!* I'm sorry; let me just explain it to you now. So, a few years ago, this type of monster started trying to climb over our village walls to get inside. Whenever that monster shows up, an alarm rings through the entire village. It might startle you the first time you hear it, so just be aware. Anyway, when the alarm goes off, there might be monsters scaling the walls and attacking, so be on standby to evacuate."

Does she mean the walls around the village? But I heard that village walls are charmed with monster-repelling spells to keep them away… Is that not true?

"Is your monster-repellent spell not working?" I asked.

"No, none of the repellents work," the captain answered. "We even got an extra-powerful monster-repellent spell from the royal capital, too."

"Yes, they just jumped over the walls like it was nothing," Lieutenant Leah added with a defeatist sigh.

"Yeah, it was useless," the captain lamented.

"How are you dealing with the monsters, then?" my father asked.

The captain shrugged. "We go out and kill them. Even hitting them with shock pouches doesn't work. They just stand there."

"What?! Shock pouches don't work?"

As in, the shock pouches that make any monster flee in terror when you hit their faces with them?

"Yes, that's right—Ivy, was it? And these shock pouches are even stronger than the ones you know."

Wow. These monsters sound like a real nuisance.

"And thanks to those pests, we've had to reassign personnel to the Wall Exterior Platoon, and the captain rides our asses…"

Ha ha ha ha! This captain is kinda starting to scare me. But okay, the Wall Exterior Platoon—it only exists in this village, so it's no

wonder I'd never heard of it.

"Got it. So if the alarm goes off, we'll get ready to evacuate," my father said.

"Good, thank you. *Leaaah*, tea?"

"*After* you finish those documents, I guess I'll bring you some —if I *must*. So just hop to it, will you?!"

"…I can't believe you used to be *nice*."

"Well, *somebody* taught me that *nice* wouldn't cut it."

My father smiled awkwardly at the unending string of quips.

"Well, we'll just be on our way, then," he said.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry. It's all the *captain's* fault, okay?!"

"It's *my* fault?"

We left the office with their banter echoing behind us as we entered Hataru Village.

I giggled. "That was fun."

"Sure was. But I'd have enjoyed myself even more if I wasn't so tired."

He does have a point there. When you're tired, you're just so… moody, I guess? But I still had some fun and I had some tired. Huh? Did I say that weird…? Yeah, I must really be pooped.

"So, the inn is called CheChe, and it's the second left off Main Street," my dad reviewed.

We walked at a leisurely pace, admiring the village as we headed for our inn. The villagers were all chatting and sipping tea merrily. It had been a little worrisome seeing all those adventurers at the front gate, but once we were inside the village, we didn't get the sense that there were any major problems. The other adventurers still there didn't seem nervous, either.

"Looks like any old village to me," I remarked.

"Yeah. When I saw the high-level adventurers out there, I assumed they were dealing with a big problem, but I guess I was wrong."

"Uh-huh."

Something about it all felt off. I would have to be extra careful not to get involved.

"Aha! There it is," I said. "Yeah, it does look a bit older than the other buildings around it."

The walls of Hataru Village's buildings were awash with green tones. CheChe's walls were also green, but the paint had peeled over time. That alone made the building look old.

"It looks old, but it's been nicely renovated, so this place should be fine," my father said.

"Yeah, I'm okay with it."

When my father opened the door to CheChe, the aroma of flowers wafted out.

"Welcome! I'm Leffrey, master of this inn."

"Lieutenant Leah told us about this inn—we met her at the front gate."

"Oh! Leah sent you here? Well, I'm very grateful for that." He was a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, a sturdy frame, and a merry smile. It was the kind of smile that made you feel warm and cozy.

"So, what kind of room would you like, sir?"

"Is there one with a basic kitchen?" I asked.

"I'm so sorry, but we don't have rooms with kitchens here."

No kitchens. That's too bad.

"Um, but you're free to use the inn kitchen during off hours," Leffrey continued.

"Oh, could we, sir?"

"Yes, no problem."

Oh, good. And since inn kitchens are bigger than average, I could cook a bunch of things at once. What should I make… Ooh, I can't wait to plan it all.

"I'll escort you to your twin room. It's quite large."

Large? This is the first time anybody's ever mentioned the size of our room. Is it because we're near the royal capital now?

As I watched inquisitively, the innkeeper gave my father a key. "This is the biggest room in the inn. Second floor, at the end of the hall."

"All right, thank you. Should we go?"

"Sure."

Wait, huh? Did my father ask about the price?

"Um, Dad, what does it cost?"

"One gold plate. Comes with breakfast and dinner."

When did they even talk about all of this? How strange…

"Something wrong?"

"No, I just couldn't remember you talking about the price…"

I went over the conversation in my head and couldn't find it in my memory.

"It was on the piece of paper on the desk—it had a price chart for the rooms. Didn't you see it?"

There was a paper on the desk? Wait…I think I saw something like that.

"Ivy…just a hunch, but do you feel extremely tired?"

"Yeah…I probably am. My head feels all fuzzy."

"Hm?" My father stopped a few steps in front of me and turned around. Then he reached out to my forehead. "Maybe you're a little warm? Can you make it to our room?"

"Yeah…I'm okay."

"You don't look okay to me. Hang in there. We're almost there."

Chapter 460:
All Better Now

AN AROMA WAFTED through the air. A sweet, rich aroma…

"I'm hungry… Wait, huh? Ohhh, that's right. I fell asleep."

As soon as we got into our room at the inn, my father gave me one of Flame's potions—the sickness-curing kind. I drank the potion in a daze, wondering if I had a cold, and I quickly felt lighter all over. I thought I was in the clear then, but the last thing I remembered was getting in bed at my father's insistence. Apparently I fell right asleep after that.

"What time is it?" I glanced out the window and saw it was already dark outside. "Wow, it's late already? I think I fell asleep at four…but what a lovely smell. What could it be?"

Then I heard the click of the door opening.

"Hey, Ivy. Feeling better? You should eat something—think you can do that?"

I looked in the direction of the voice to see my father, peering at me worriedly.

"I'm all better now. I feel much lighter, too. But what's that smell? I'm starving."

"Ha ha ha ha! If you've got your appetite, then you should be okay. If you can get out of bed, we should eat in the other room—everyone's worried about you."

"Okay."

The suite my father had booked for us had beds and sofas in an adjoining room. I felt bewildered staying in a place like this for the first time, but he had apparently gotten us the big space so the creatures wouldn't feel too cramped.

"Hey, everyone. Sorry I worried you all."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Gyah!"

"Pefu!"

Mrrrow.

A smile spread across my face as they all answered me.

"Oh, right, their dinner…"

"They already ate. Come on, sit. You need to eat."

"Thanks. Oooh, that looks so good! What is it?"

There was a plate on the table filled with…bite-sized dumplings? And there was a bowl that contained sauce made of vegetables.

"One of this village's specialties, I hear. They're called *daryu*. You make little dumplings out of flour, then serve them with this sauce."

I wonder if that sweet aroma I've been smelling is this sauce. Looks like the dumplings are a little charred.

"Think you can eat the normal amount?" my father asked.

"Yeah, I think I can manage that."

My father put some dumplings onto a clean plate, covered them in sauce, and handed them to me.

"Careful, it's hot."

"Okay, thanks."

"Well…let's try these."

I put a dumpling into my mouth. It was firm and satisfying to chew, and the vegetable sauce's sweetness really brought out its savory qualities.

"It's delicious."

"Glad to hear it. There's plenty more where that came from."

There were four plates of daryu on the table and five bowls of sauce. It was delicious, but I was worried that my father had bought too much and we'd get bloated from eating all of them.

"Oh, I looked around town while I was out shopping."

"How was it?"

My father paused thoughtfully. Had something happened?

"When I asked about the monsters, nobody sounded all that nervous about them, so I got the sense this is just a part of normal everyday life here."

Did that mean the monsters showed up that often?

"Also, I found out what the adventurers were looking for."

That news made me lean forward a little. I mean, veteran - adventurers were on the move. How could I not have been curious?

"A devotee stole a bunch of money and fled the church."

…The church? As in, the church I've been warned to stay away from no less than three times? And a devotee stole some money and ran off?

"Umm… We shouldn't get involved, I assume."

"Well, yeah. If you're worried about it, we can leave this village today. What do you think?"

What do I think? Darned if I know.

"Shouldn't we learn a little more about it first? The devotee might be captured quickly."

My father nodded solemnly. Wait a minute, was *he* worried about something?

"Okay. I just don't think the information about this case is at all trustworthy."

"Why not?"

"Well, I looked into the escaped devotee, and he was just an ordinary boy."

An ordinary boy?

"This village's veteran adventurer parties got the notice to search for him yesterday. Those were probably the auras you sensed in the forest."

Since they were masking their auras like top-level adventurers, that had to be right.

"Hm? But why did they send three whole veteran adventurer parties just to look for a boy? That's weird, isn't it?"

Veteran adventurer parties were usually mobilized when the escaped person was dangerous. For example, if an adventurer murdered somebody out of self-interest and ran away, veteran adventurers would be sent on the hunt before there was another victim. But why send three veteran adventurer parties after just one boy?

My father answered, "Whenever veteran adventurer parties are mobilized, it takes quite a lot of money."

He was right. The price jumped up exponentially with veteran adventurer parties. If the church was willing to pay the price, that meant the escapee was very, very important to them. So was the escaped boy special somehow?

"What I'm most curious about is what the boy stole—I'm not sure it was really money."

My father had a point. This boy might have stolen something very important to the church.

"Are you going to look into it?" I asked.

"No. I don't want to get myself involved. I just want to see if this info is true or not. If they're hiding something, that would mean there's something wrong with this village's church and we would have to leave immediately. I'm tired of falling into dangerous situations."

Yes. Getting wrapped up in danger was something we needed to avoid at all costs.

"Thanks for dinner," I said.

"Yeah, that was really good. And since you ate so much, I take it you're feeling better."

"Yup."

I thought I'd eaten a little too much, in fact. I touched my stomach and found it was bulging out a little… I wasn't looking forward to moving later.

"Oh, right. Hey, Dad, can you book a spot in the kitchen for me? Since we might leave this village any day, I want to cook a bunch of food for the road."

"Got it. I'll ask them to reserve a time for you tomorrow."

"Thanks."

We needed to be able to leave at a moment's notice if anything came up. Even though I tried to stay away from the church, I couldn't exactly avoid them if they caused some problems in this village, could I? Huh, ironically, you could call it an "act of God."

"Oh wait, Dad!"

"What is it? Going to bed already?"

I looked at my father, who was reading a book.

"I have to write some faaxes…to Grandpa and Grandma."

Druid's parents had said in their faax to me that they wanted me to call them Grandpa and Grandma, but I still felt shy doing it. Maybe it was something I should only call them to their faces?

"You want to write a faax? Oh, that's right! I still haven't congratulated Dolgas and his wife yet…"

That's right. We didn't reply when they sent us the news they were pregnant. We'd better send an apology and congratulations

quickly before they get the wrong idea.

"Oh, and Shurila is having her baby this year, too," I said. "Things sure will be chaotic when we go visit."

"That's for sure. Two more babies… It's a surreal feeling."

That reminds me, Rattloore and I haven't exchanged faaxes ever since he said he was busy with a job. Should I send him a reply from this village? But I don't know how much longer we'll be here… Maybe I should wait until the next village.

"What's up?"

"Oh, I was just thinking I haven't heard from Rattloore and his party in a while."

"Right, didn't they say they had a job?"

"Yeah."

"After that summoning circle disaster, there's no telling what might happen."

"I know."

Rattloore and his party were very good fighters…but I was still worried. I hoped they hadn't gotten hurt.

Okay! I don't know how long we're going to be here, so I'll send them a faax from the next village… Hopefully I won't forget.

Chapter 461:
Scumbags?

WE ARRIVED AT THE merchant guild to find somebody haggling over a price. They were really going at it hard, which made me wonder if the thing for sale was particularly rare.

"Well, that's odd," my father said.

"I know. There aren't many negotiators here today."

You could negotiate prices at the merchant guild, but a magic item appraised whatever items you brought in. Since refuting that item's appraisal was no easy task, not many people bothered negotiating. But if a rather rare item came in, you could sometimes get a higher price for it than the magic item's bid. Because of this, people did sometimes negotiate. (They were seldom successful, though.) "Okay, the faax is… Aha, over there."

We spotted it in a sectioned-off space in the corner of the building with simple partitions. That struck me as odd. In most villages, the faax area at least had a desk.

"You wanted to send a faax, too, right, Ivy?"

"Yeah, to Rattloore." I'd decided to send him one after all.

The faax area was staffed by a lone, meek-looking man.

"Excuse me, could I please have some faax papers?"

"Here you go."

My father promptly bought some faax papers, sat in a chair, and started writing. I also bought two pieces of paper and wrote a letter to Rattloore.

"Wait, I just realized I didn't get a reply from Captain Ogh t," my father remarked.

Is everyone really busy? Oh! What about my father's master? He helped us with our investigations in Hataka Village, so we really should tell him we're doing okay.

"Hey, Dad?"

"What's up?"

"Are you going to write to your master?"

"Blech…!"

Gee, you don't have to gag…

"Ahhh, all right. Guess I should tell him we're doing okay."

"Yeah."

I watched my father buy an extra sheet of paper.

I really need to tell Captain Ogh t we're doing okay, too. Then I should also tell both Rattloore and Ogh t that we might leave this village soon. That way, they'll think about writing back. Then again, if they're really busy right now, there's no telling when they'll get around to reading our faaxes in the first place.

"Okay, who else…?"

Lord Foronda told me to send a faax as soon as we got to the village, so I guess I should send him one, too? I'm not sure…maybe I should wait until I know more about what's going on here? He is a busy man… Yeah, I'll wait until I have more to say about this place.

"Something wrong?" my father asked.

"I was just wondering what I should do about Lord Foronda."

"Yeah, he did tell you to send him a faax as soon as you got to the village."

"I know."

"Let's figure that out after we look around town today."

Oh, good. We're on the same page.

"Yeah, I was just thinking that would be the best idea."

I wrote a letter to Captain Oght on my newly acquired piece of faax paper. Then I handed the papers to the meek-looking man to send.

"Thank you very much." I nodded politely to the man.

"Do come again," he said.

I'm not sure why, but I feel like we're being watched… Am I just being paranoid?

"Did you send your faaxes?" my father asked.

"Yeah."

My father and I stepped out of the merchant guild just in time to see adventurers coming back from the forest. From their facial expressions, we could tell the fugitive was still on the lam. I looked at my dad. His eyes were pointed away from the adventurers, downcast in thought.

"Something on your mind?"

"Uh, no…I was just thinking I sent my faax replies a little late. I'm worried they'll be mad at me."

My father had a rocky relationship with his father and brother. He must have been worried that a faax might worsen their already-fragile relationship.

"But you explained why you're late replying, didn't you?"

"Yeah, except I didn't go into detail about the mess we got ourselves caught up in."

Well, yeah. He couldn't exactly write about the summoning circle curse in a faax.

"It'll be fine; don't worry," I assured him.

I knew everyone else would put in a good word for my father with Dolgas.

"You're right. I just have to trust them." My father nodded excessively, heaving a tiny sigh. "Okay, let's go do some laundry." He

slung the magic bag containing our laundry over his shoulder, trying to regain his composure.

"Good idea. The weather's perfect for laundry!"

My father laughed. Since we were staying at an inn, we could do our laundry in any weather, but word around town was the public wash facility was the best. It was a prime gathering place for talkative men and women. And if we were lucky, we'd hear two or three "Just between you and me"s. I was just a little wired—sometimes these stories were quite scandalous.

"Oh, aren't we gonna sell the magic stones we got in the cave?" I gave my father a curious look. We weren't exactly strapped for cash, but I felt like it wouldn't have hurt to sell some of our goods while we were at the merchant guild.

"Let's not do it here. We're not really hurting for cash anyway."

"Okay."

Was it so we could stay inconspicuous?

I kept an eye on the village atmosphere as we headed to the wash area. The villagers weren't gossiping about the fugitive boy; maybe they weren't concerned.

"They don't seem to care, do they?" I observed.

"They sure don't. They seemed to care a little yesterday, though…"

When we arrived at the wash area, there were ordinary villagers and adventurers gathered around.

"You find all sorts at the wash area, don't you?"

"Well, adventurers do pile up their laundry before they come here," my father explained. "So it takes them a long time. Look over there."

I looked where he was pointing and saw a basket packed full of clothes to wash.

"Isn't that a little *too* piled up?"

"That's what happens when you don't have a woman in your party to kick your butt into gear. Guys will often just wear the least dirty clothes they have."

Eeek. That's gross. I'd never allow that.

"Don't you dare do that, Dad, okay?"

"I don't wear dirty clothes, I swear! Ivy, you're scaring me!"

We found an empty spot and started doing our laundry. Even with one arm, my father was still strong, so scrubbing was his job. He had a washboard, too. As we washed and rinsed our clothes, we listened to the voices around us to see what we could learn.

"You know, I hear we had an incognito visitor recently."

"Ugh, really? But we haven't had any of those in ages!"

Incognito?

"Yeah, somebody saw one. And I thought after two years we were finally rid of them."

"You're telling me. Okay, so what kind of bastard showed up this time?"

"Well, they say he *looked* like a nobleman, but he had this nasty air about him. Like, if he was dressed differently, he wouldn't've looked noble at all."

A nobleman? Incognito…do they mean a nobleman visiting a village in secret?

"That so? Damn, just who did those church scumbags invite this time?"

…Scumbags?

"Seriously. And those pieces of crap had been nice and quiet for the past two years, too!"

I was a little shocked. I'd never imagined the villagers here would detest the church or that they'd call them scumbags. I glanced at my father. He had a conflicted look in his eyes.

"There you are!"

I looked toward the slightly panicked voice to see a woman in her forties. Spotting the gang of women gossiping beside us, she ran over to them and joined their circle.

"Girls, did you *hear*? People are saying that incognito *scumbag* did something to that refugee boy."

Whaaaat?!

I gritted my teeth and focused hard on my washing.

"That so? Why the hell is the adventurer guild working for those leeches?!"

"Seriously! Adventurers are no better, if you ask me."

I can't put my finger on it…but why do I feel like we should leave this village right this second?

"That reminds me, did you hear they've called out the *veteran* adventurers, too?"

"Right! Can't believe they took a job from those *scumbags*."

Isn't this supposed to be a secret rumor?

The women's voices just kept getting louder and louder until they boomed through the whole area.

"Hey, of course they took the job. The boy stole money and ran—"

"That's what the *scumbags* would have you believe! How can you take any of their bull seriously?! Huh?"

Just when an adventurer leapt in to defend his kind, some women doing laundry in another area jumped up and yelled back at the adventurer. The other women in the wash area all glared at him in sympathy.

"Er, well, what I meant was—"

"Did they bother investigating to see if the allegations were even true?" a new woman stepped in, asking the adventurer quietly.

"I sincerely *hope* they did."

The adventurer clammed up.

The woman gasped. "You mean they *didn't* look into it?! Well, of course they didn't. You can't say anything about what the church does, can you? No matter how repugnant, no matter how awful those sorry excuses for human beings are, those *scumbags* are still the church, after all."

What horrible insults…but it sounds like the church must have done some horrible things to earn them. Anyway, we'd better finish our laundry quick and get out of here.

Chapter 462:
Let's Hear Them Out

AFTER WE FINISHED all our laundry, we discreetly slipped out of the wash area. The people who had called the church scumbags were no longer around, but most of the women there had more similar things to say the longer we stayed.

"Hey, Dad…has the church ever been this hated before?"

My father thought about it. After a while, he looked like he remembered something. "When I was very young…I did hear about a town near the royal capital that rejected the church and banished them. I wonder which town that was…"

The church was banished from a town?

"But I always thought the church was a cornerstone in towns and villages."

In the village where I was born, everyone went to church to pray whenever anything happened. I even had memories of praying there myself before I turned five. So it was a bit shocking to hear the true state of affairs with the church.

"Well, the church usually sees to it that people think of them as a cornerstone."

"Oh, so that's how it works."

"Yeah. The church needs money to maintain itself, so it collects that money in the form of tithes from towns and villages. Ordinary residents are cherished by the church."

Well, if they were so cherished, they wouldn't say such horrible things, would they?

"If they're hated that strongly, do you think they're getting enough tithing from this village?"

Most people wouldn't donate to scumbags, I guess. Unless it's the law in this village?

"No, I don't think they are getting enough," my father answered. "Ah! Look ahead, that's the church over there."

I followed my father's gaze to find a white building which looked much more pristine than the other churches I had seen.

"It looks like they have money to spare, doesn't it?"

Considering the elaborate designs on their walls and windows, it was hard to believe they were hurting for funds.

"Sure does. From the look of that building, they spared no expense."

As we stared at the white building, we noticed adventurers coming out of it. The townspeople glanced at them as they walked by, but they immediately looked away in disinterest. *Oh, scratch that! Some women are glaring at them.*

"Let's go," my father said.

"Okay."

Come to think of it, the women were mad at the adventurers at the wash area. And the people who glared at the adventurers coming out of the church just now were also women. What about the men? Um…at the wash area…there were some men there, but what were they doing?

"Hey, Dad?"

"What's up?"

"It seems like most of the people who hate the church are women."

"Yeah…the men seemed to awkwardly turn their eyes away."

That's right! That's Dad for you. He notices things.

"Just a theory…but I think they were attacked."

"Attacked?"

"Uhhh, this isn't an easy thing for me to tell you, Ivy…"

"Huh?"

Why's it hard to tell me?

"The church cronies probably attacked women or children, and that's why the village women hate them. The men turned a blind eye because it's the church, but there's probably some mysterious power at play here."

"Ah."

"Well, I'm not sure if I'm right or not, but one thing's for sure: They made the women of this village seriously angry."

That person who came here incognito—they seemed to really hate him, too.

"Do you think it's the nobleman who showed up incognito?" I asked.

The "mysterious power" my father mentioned might be a nobleman's authority.

"Yeah, from the way they were acting, that checks out."

If my father's theory really was right, then…

"Noblemen are the worst."

Lord Foronda was probably an exception to the rule, but that nobleman who came here incognito was definitely scum… Well, okay, I can't say for sure.

"Oh! Now I know why something felt weird," my father gasped.

"Huh?! What do you mean?"

What was he talking about?

"They probably attacked a child."

"Why?"

"Haven't you noticed?"

Haven't I noticed what? My father was looking all around us as we walked, so I copied him. It was a bit livelier than before, probably because it was almost lunchtime. There were more people out, many of them standing in groups and chatting excitedly. The people working the booths called out cheerfully. It looked no - different from any other village…

Wait a minute.

"The children… Where are they?"

I looked around again. There were infants in their parents' arms, but there wasn't a single child under the age of ten. And I remembered seeing them yesterday on the way to the inn. But today… *That's right, I haven't seen any children since this morning. Why?*

"Maybe it was the incognito nobleman? Maybe their parents told them to stay inside so something terrible wouldn't happen?"

"That makes sense."

Wait, huh? What is this feeling…? I think someone's staring at me. Am I just being paranoid?

"Ahhh, there you are!"

I turned around in surprise to see Lieutenant Leah running over to us.

"Oh, thank goodness you're safe."

Safe?

"Go back to the inn at once."

"Got it. Ivy, let's go."

"Okay."

We ran back to the inn with Lieutenant Leah, and the villagers all seemed relieved to see us. Why was that?

"Hi."

"Hm? Oh, that you, Leah? What's wrong?"

"Dad! *Please*! The church scum is here—explain to Druid what that means, won't you?!"

Ah! Even Lieutenant Leah called them scum.

"I thought so."

"Dad?"

"Were you keeping the kids safe from the incognito nobleman? So he wouldn't take them away?"

Leah looked shocked by my father's question at first, but then she nodded quietly. "I'm so sorry. For the past year…two years, maybe? We haven't had any incognito visitors, so we let our guard down."

"What happened?"

"Well…" Leah's eyes wandered uncomfortably.

"Lieutenant Leah," my father addressed her sternly.

Then, with a deep exhale, she looked at my father and said, "Yes, I guess it would be too late *after* something happened to Ivy. I'd better explain everything."

We entered the dining hall, and the innkeeper brought us some tea. The hot drink warmed my joints, which were cold and stiff from doing the laundry.

"Um, okay. I'm going to tell you some heavy things, so please just listen. Druid, I know you're probably, um…a church devotee—"

"Hell, no. Not even slightly."

Both Lieutenant Leah and the innkeeper's jaws dropped. Was it really that unusual for someone to reject the church? *I guess most of the people I've met so far have been more like my father. Oh! Except I do get the sense that lots of people prayed at the church for our safe travels.*

"Oh…so you don't support them. Thank goodness."

The tension melted from Lieutenant Leah's shoulders in relief.

"We don't have any proof…but those church bastards have been selling kids from this village to the nobility."

"That's beyond evil," I said.

Lieutenant Leah nodded. "But we don't have jurisdiction to investigate it. Our guild master when this started was bought and paid for by the nobility and was completely useless."

"Wow… I'm so sorry, that sounds terrible."

Lieutenant Leah pounded the table. "It *was* terrible! That priest was always a shifty guy, but for the past twenty years, he's just gotten worse and worse. He didn't care a bit that we weren't tithing enough anymore. And why should he, when a nobleman just comes here incognito and gives him all the money he wants? But if only that were all he did—we could turn a blind eye to it. But ever since the noblemen started coming around, twenty-one children have gone missing. Whenever one disappears, we always try to investigate the church, but we can never get any proof. We don't have the jurisdiction for a proper search."

Proof… I think it would take more than proof and testimony to take down the church.

"And the stupid men of this village prattle on about how they can't go against the guild master here…"

The innkeeper smiled sheepishly when he heard this.

"Is your current guild master also bought and paid for?" my father asked.

"No, it's somebody different. The former one was already sentenced to slavery."

Lieutenant Leah's happy expression when she said that was a bit unnerving. (Though I suppose the guild master deserved it.) "No, our current guild master is safe. We can trust him."

Chapter 463:
An Inevitable Inconvenience

WE CAN TRUST THE GUILD MASTER? But this guild master is sending adventurers out to look for the fugitive boy, right?

Lieutenant Leah smiled when she saw the skeptical look on my face. "I know, our guild master is sending out search parties because the church sent in a request, but he dispatched veteran adventurers the day before that to search for the boy. Only the gatekeepers know about that, though."

Oh, now that makes sense.

"I see, so that's why three whole parties of top-tier adventurers are on the move," my father said.

"That's right. Our mid-level adventurers are all right, but many of our novice ones side with the church, so we've been trying to get the boy to a secure location before we sent the search parties out."

Lieutenant Leah's face clouded over with worry, and my father sighed quietly at the sight. "And you couldn't find him?"

"No… The boy—his name is Bith—is the second son of a merchant, not an adventurer, so he doesn't know much about forests. In theory, it should be difficult for him to hide from top-tier adventurers, but they still can't find him…"

How strange. Sifar always said that it's hard to completely hide your tracks from high-level adventurers when you move in the forest. If this Bith boy isn't familiar with forests, he would definitely leave tracks. But if there aren't any tracks, that has to mean…he isn't in the forest?

"Is it possible he isn't in the forest?" I asked.

For that matter, why do they think he's in the forest to begin with? He'd have to cross through the gate to get there. You'd think

the gatekeepers would have stopped him.

"Ahh, well…you see, one of the gatekeepers is good friends with Bith. He got some sweets from Bith and fell asleep. Apparently, Bith used a sedative in the sweets."

Okay, so he put the gatekeeper to sleep and headed to the forest…but is that really where he went? Or did he just make it appear that way?

"Since there are no tracks in the forest, maybe he just made it look like he was going there?" my father asked.

Lieutenant Leah nodded grimly. "Druid—you have a card with the merchant guild…but are you a former adventurer? I noticed you're very perceptive."

"Well, anybody could have figured that out with a little thinking. Haven't your veteran adventurers and guild masters thought of it, too?"

"Well, yes, they have…but you only just now heard the story and you've already put it together. That's impressive."

My father chuckled cynically. "I think Ivy put it together, too, didn't you, Ivy?"

"Um…yes. I did think it seemed like he was creating a diversion…"

Wouldn't most people think that, based on the evidence? But Lieutenant Leah's eyes widened in surprise.

"Ah!" my father exclaimed. "Was it the guild master who started the rumor?"

The rumor? As in, the one we heard at the wash area?

"Um…yes. It was. The men of this village can't be counted on for anything, but—"

"*Hey*, now." The innkeeper grunted disapprovingly, but Lieutenant Leah gracefully ignored him.

"But the women of this village *are* dependable. If we get them mad at the church, they won't be able to do anything unreasonable to Bith. That's why we spread the rumor."

Now I see. She's right, the women of this village make incredible watchers. I could easily imagine them getting a little violent to protect someone.

"Okay. I assume this is all confidential?" my father asked.

"That's right. I'm sorry, but please don't tell anyone."

"We won't."

Lieutenant Leah's face softened at his response.

"Now, would it be okay if I ask you some questions?" he asked.

"Sure. You sound like you want to help, so I'll answer whatever questions I can."

"Why do noblemen visit the church in this village? Do you know?"

Yeah, that is a pressing question. It seems like all sorts of nobles gather here, and that sort of nobleman wouldn't bother coming out here unless he had something to gain.

"Well, we don't know," she replied. "They used to show up in our village a lot, even though they had a bad attitude. But starting about twenty years ago, they kept their distance from the village, and their attitudes got even worse. Then the next thing we knew, they were coming incognito. Something must have happened twenty years ago, but our investigations didn't give us any answers."

A resentful look filled Lieutenant Leah's eyes. That gave me pause. She looked like she was only in her late twenties, so she couldn't have had any direct involvement, but she was acting like she had a personal vendetta.

"If I'd just had more courage back then, I could have caught them red-handed."

Wait, is she older than she looks?

"Lieutenant Leah, may I ask how old you are?"

I know it's rude, but I really wanna know!

"How old am I? Forty-five."

"What?!" my father and I gasped.

No way. She doesn't look it at all.

"I assumed you were in your late twenties," I said.

Lieutenant Leah smiled, which made her look even younger.

"Ack! We've really veered off topic… Um…where exactly did I leave off?"

It's okay, I think you already covered most of the important stuff.

"Oh, right! Anyway, this incognito nobleman probably likes children, so Ivy should stay indoors for a few days. This nobleman might abuse his authority to do something to her."

Yeah, I figured she'd say that. That's probably why the women of this village seemed so worried about me—because of the nobleman.

"Got it. We have some things to take care of anyway, so we won't leave the inn."

While we're holed up at the inn, I'll just cook a bunch of food to put leftovers in my magic bag. This actually worked out really nicely.

"I'm so sorry about all of this. The church is a menace, with how much power they have…"

Since Lieutenant Leah had carved out some time from her busy day to talk to us, she returned to work right after she was finished. I felt bad putting her behind schedule.

"Mr. Druid, I'm so sorry we were late getting this information to you," the innkeeper said.

"No need to apologize—it's not a problem. Now, can we borrow the kitchen for a while?"

The innkeeper gave my father an inquisitive look.

"We like to cook food and keep it in our magic bag for our travels, but we ate all our leftovers on the way here, so we wanted to build our supply back up," I explained. "I want to cook a lot, so it would be helpful if I could use the kitchen whenever it's available."

"Ahh, yes, I understand. Well…you should be able to use it now."

But we don't have the ingredients yet.

"Could we use it tomorrow? We still need to buy groceries," my father said.

I guess he'll have to go shopping alone. That's too bad. I wanted to have a look around the village.

"Well, if you don't mind waiting until tomorrow, you can buy your groceries along with mine," the innkeeper said.

We can buy our groceries with his?

"If you're okay with the vegetables the inn orders, I can just add more to my order for you."

It was a nice gesture, but I'd feel bad getting groceries at wholesale prices.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" my father asked.

"Why would I? I get a bigger discount with the more I order anyway."

Oh, now that makes sense.

"Then we'll take you up on it. Oh, could we order some ryce, too?"

"Ryce? Is that the ryce I think you mean?"

"Probably, yes…"

What a conversation. How funny would it be if the ryce he was thinking of was something completely different? (I mean, we would panic, of course.) "Ivy, could you write a list of vegetables we need?"

"Sure."

I'm glad I have something to do now. But if we have to stay holed up in the inn anyway, shouldn't we just leave after we've cooked all our food? If we stay too long, we might wind up crossing paths with the church.

"Okay, so first I need to write down the ingredients for my rice bowl…then there's salad and soup. Hey, Dad, are you craving anything in particular? I'm fine with anything, no matter how complicated."

"Ooh! Gee, that's great… What's that thing you made that one time with the finely minced meat? You know, you made them into flat thingies, grilled them, and put them in buns… What were those again? I can't remember the name."

Does he mean hamburgers? He didn't really get how they were different from sandwiches, but I remember giving them a try when I found some round white buns at the market. I minced the meat really fine, shaped it into balls, flattened them, grilled them, and then put them between buns, I think.

"Do you mean hamburgers?"

"Yeah…I think that's what they were called?"

Hmmm…I could make those if the bakery has round white bread rolls, but not many places have those. I'll have to go to the bakery and see… Wait, I can't. I'm not supposed to leave the inn. Ugh. What a pain.

Chapter 464:
Chemia

"OKAY, AFTER THE SECOND RISE, you bake it, then it's done."

I was in the kitchen of CheChe, trying my hand at baking bread for the first time. Leffrey's wife Chemia was teaching me. When I touched my bread dough for the first time, its puffiness made me laugh.

Since my father wanted to eat hamburgers, I asked the innkeeper if any of the bakeries sold round bread rolls. Then he said that his wife was good at baking bread and she would bake some for us. His wife Chemia was a friendly woman. When I asked her if it was okay for me to watch her bake the bread, she offered to let me make it with her. Since I was interested in learning, I took her up on the offer, but kneading the dough turned out to be a lot harder than I'd expected, and my arm muscles were throbbing.

"Thank you very much," I told her. "I didn't realize how much time and energy bread-making took."

Apparently, the reaction from yeast bacteria was crucial in bread-making. Your dough wouldn't rise if it didn't ferment enough, and it wouldn't taste very good if it fermented too much. According to Chemia, the flour you used also made a difference. I realized quickly that bread was a very complex art. It was definitely a lot harder than I'd thought it would be.

"You're right. It does take time and energy."

Considering the way it was made, I realized it would be impossible to bake bread while we were on the road. Making big batches whenever we stayed in villages and towns and storing them in my magic bag would be best. We took our risen loaves and put them in the oven to bake.

"It smells so good."

A fiery fragrance filled the room. The smell alone was making me hungry.

"It really does," Chemia agreed. "Your loaves are rising nicely."

"You mean it?" I sneaked a peek at the oven in the distance, and she was right. My loaves were nice and puffy. "What a relief."

"Hey, Ivy, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. What is it?"

I looked at Chemia. For some reason, she had the biggest smile I've ever seen, which made me start back a little.

"What's a *bamburbur*?"

A bamburbur? Oh, does she mean hamburger? Wow, what a crazy name it turned into.

"I overheard you talking about it yesterday—what kind of food is it? I'm kinda curious about it now."

Apparently, she had overheard me giving my father the grocery list.

"Well, um, a hamburger is a meat patty and some veggies between two buns. It's a really popular fast foo…?"

Huh? What was I about to say?

"Fast what?" Chemia asked.

"Er, never mind. Anyway, hamburgers are great for lunch."

It would be a lot easier to explain if I just cooked her one.

"So, um, would you like to cook some with me for lunch?"

"Ooh, the master has become the student! Thank you, that would be lovely."

Chemia sounded really excited, but we might not have them ready in time for lunch if we started at this point.

"You said you squeezed minced meat together—what kind of meat? Also, should the bread be flavored?"

"No, I think it's best for the bread to be plain."

"Okay. Hmm, then I think I'll use this."

Chemia took a lump of meat out of her magic box. Taking a closer look, I could tell it was marbled nicely and probably expensive.

"Um, Ms. Chemia, you can use cheaper meat. We're going to mince it very small."

I mean, wasn't that meat intended for dinner?

"Oh, really? So you don't want a fancy roast…"

Chemia sounded a little disappointed.

"Let me guess—you like meat?"

"Oh yes, I love giant hunks of meat!"

I looked at Chemia as she smiled. She still held such an ample youthfulness that she could pass for being in her late twenties, with her delicate frame. Hearing "I love giant hunks of meat" from such a thin person sounded like it had to be a joke.

"Well, if we're just gonna cut it up all small… Ooh! Could I use scrap meat?"

"Oh yes, that's just fine."

"Yeah, I always find myself with leftover scraps of meat. I'm always annoyed because the only thing I can think to do with them is make soup."

Come to think of it, the meat we'd eaten last night at dinner had had the tough outer areas all cut off. I'd been surprised, since the other inns we'd stayed at didn't really do that. It seemed to be common practice at CheChe, though.

"May I have a look in your magic box, ma'am? There're other things I need."

"Go ahead! Use anything you need for your hamburgers."

Doesn't she need some of this stuff for dinner, though…? Well, we have to cut up her meat really finely anyway, so let's just not think about it and make those burgers.

"Oh, wow…this is great. Oh, crap…is it okay if I eat the leftovers, too?" Chemia asked.

"Umm…sure?"

Just where inside her small frame did she fit all those burgers? I watched in awe as they disappeared down her throat at an - impressive speed. What was this phenomenon called again… A fat kid at heart?

"Anyway, these are so good! We should definitely add them to the menu here at the inn. Yup."

I was glad that she liked them, though I guess she wouldn't have eaten six if she didn't. Good thing I'd set aside some burgers for my father and the innkeeper since they had gone out.

Since we had a lot of meat scraps left over, we cut them up really fine, then added some minced onion, salt, and pepper and mixed it well. Then I separated some hexa fruits, added in some minced stale black bread along with some medicinal herbs, and mixed it some more. Then I formed them into little balls, smashed them, and seared them off, and my patties were done. Then I put the meat in the buns with some leaf veggies and some sauce.



I was pretty proud of my hamburgers if I did say so myself. My buns were baked nice and fluffy and they hadn't burned. Plus I'd made extra meat mix, so the patties were nice and thick.

"Can't I eat those, too?" Chemia asked.

"No, ma'am. They're for the innkeeper and my father."

Uhh…where does all that food go?

I looked over Chemia once more.

Aha! Her belly is bulging a little… Is she gonna be okay?

"These are delicious, even with scrap meat! Thanks, Ivy—now I've got another use for herbs."

"Um, no, thank you. Now I know how to bake delicious bread."

As Chemia and I began washing up, the innkeeper and my father returned.

"Hi. How did it go?" I asked my father as he popped his head into the kitchen.

"Had a good haul. The innkeeper took me to a shop that sells great vegetables."

When the innkeeper saw our grocery list and realized our vegetable list was wider-ranging than he'd expected, he took my father shopping the next day instead of placing an order. They'd left early that morning, but it looked like both the innkeeper and my father had gotten everything they needed.

"Glad to hear it. Oh, you might have already eaten lunch, but I made some hamburgers for you both. Would you like some, sir?"

"Oh, really? Wow, those look good."

"Hamburgers?"

The innkeeper stared at me in shock. His extreme reaction made me look back at him in confusion. Was what I had done really that startling?

"You have leftovers? Chemia actually left some food?"

Ah… Now I get it.

"Yes, sir. I cooked the burgers for the two of you first and put them aside."

From the innkeeper's expression, it was easy to figure out that the way Chemia had gorged herself was typical. *Oh, wait! If she eats that much food, does that mean the innkeeper does, too?*

"I only saved two burgers for each of you…" I apologized.

Yeah, that definitely wouldn't be enough. And I didn't have any extra bread rolls, so I couldn't whip up any more.

"Thanks. That's just the right amount."

"Huh?!"

Wait a minute, did the innkeeper say it was just enough food? So he doesn't need more?

"Don't worry, Ivy. My husband doesn't eat very much food."

Chemia's words came as a huge relief to me.

"I may not eat very much compared to you, Chemia, but I eat a normal amount," the innkeeper told Chemia with a hint of frustration in his voice.

Chemia frowned a little at his tone as she stuffed her face with dessert.

Wait. She still has room?

Chapter 465:
They Really Are Scumbags!

SINCE WE WERE FINISHED with lunch, we went back to our room to have some tea.

"Hey, Dad, did you get all the vegetables okay?"

"Yeah, I picked up everything on the list. I even got ryce."

Oh, good. Now I can make all the dishes to eat leftovers.

"So that hamburger meat—it was different from the kind you used last time."

"Ohhh, right… We had so much that I had to change plans halfway through. Did you like the other meat better?"

I'd tried to cut up all that meat the best I could, but my arms had started getting tired and I'd wound up cutting the mince less finely than I'd wanted.

"No, I actually preferred this one. There was more to sink my teeth into."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and the patties were thicker this time, too."

"Uh-huh, Chemia told me she wanted more meat."

When I shaped the first thin patty, she got all dewy-eyed and begged me to make them thicker. She pleaded so earnestly that thicker meat would taste better that I went ahead and let her have her way. I had to put my foot down and keep it at only twice the thickness of the last patties, but I'm sure the patties would've been even thicker if Chemia had made them.

"I get that. When you feel like pigging out, that thickness is just about right. But when we're on the road, the thinner ones you

made last time would be better so we won't get weighed down."

He was right: For lunch during our travels, reducing the meat and increasing the vegetables would make us feel lighter. It's easy to feel weighed down and sluggish when you eat too much meat, even if it's not in a big hunk. Then again, sometimes you just want to pig out…

"Maybe I should cook two different types of hamburgers in advance, just in case."

My father looked pleased to hear that. He really did love hamburgers*. I think the only other time I got a reaction that happy was for the gyuudon? Maybe I should make extra gyuudon, too.*

"Oh, one other thing!" my father said. "The innkeeper wants us to teach them how to make gyuudon as well."

"Gyuudon?"

"We bought ryce, didn't we?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he asked what it was for, and he got interested when I told him we were going to eat it. You know, since ryce is cheap and all."

Could Chemia be hurting their food budget? Well, I guess if she added ryce to her diet, they could cut down on their bills a little.

"And when I talked him through the recipe, he seemed really interested in gyuudon."

"Okay, for efficiency's sake, I can always teach them to make it while I'm cooking a bunch for the road—will that be okay?"

"Sure, that should be fine. Also, they said you can use the kitchen all you want after breakfast tomorrow. They'll prep all their vegetables at dinner tonight."

So it looks like I'll be cooking all day tomorrow. It'll be nice to cook my heart out after so long. I can't cook all that time we're on the road.

"Okay. I can't wait."

"I'll do what I can to help; just let me know."

"Thanks."

I'll have to schedule what I'm going to cook. When you cook in batches, you can't afford to waste a minute.

"Also, I saw the scouting parties come back from the forest. They didn't find anything."

So it was safe to assume we were right and Bith had not been out there.

"The church bastards also realized he might be in the village, so they put in a search request with the adventurer guild, but there was an argument and the guild refused."

"They refused?"

"The church scumbags apparently told them that a general search of the village was pointless and they should search every inch of every home. When the guild said that was against village law, the church said they should just use their guild authority to bypass the law…and things got heated, apparently."

"Yikes…those people really are unbelievable."

"Yeah, and the guild master couldn't contain himself anymore and refused the search flat-out."

"And did the church politely leave?"

I highly doubted that.

"No, they accused the adventurer guild of harboring a fugitive, and there was a big ruckus."

These people really didn't betray my expectations.

"Who started the ruckus? The priest and bishop?"

After what had happened in Hakata, the church had already left a bad impression, but it was still so terrible. It was like a gathering of the worst people in the worst place.

"This village has two priests, and it was apparently them."

"Wow, this village has *two* priests?"

This church really was odd. Except in big towns and villages, just one bishop and one priest per church was standard practice. For a town the size of Hataru, one priest should have been more than enough. Had they added a second priest when the nobleman started visiting?

"And the ruckus was so intense that the guild master finally yielded and said they'd search the whole village if the church presented evidence that the boy was indeed a criminal."

Evidence, huh. "If" they presented evidence…? How exactly did they decide Bith was a criminal without evidence?

"Why do you think Bith was accused in the first place?" I asked.

"The church bastards saw somebody running away, apparently."

So it was an eyewitness.

"Anything else?"

"Nope."

"Huh? It was just an eyewitness account, then? By one of the church devotees?"

"That's right. There's also a rumor going around that the village watch looked into it and couldn't find a single bit of evidence incriminating the boy, so the head watchmen said the village watch would not cooperate."

I'm not sure why, but that rumor feels odd… Why is that?

"Well, the rumor was probably spread on purpose by the - village watch for the villagers to hear."

They spread the rumor intentionally…for the villagers?

"Do you mean they were trying to tell the villagers they wouldn't be prosecuted if they harbored the fugitive boy?"

"Could be…but it's just a rumor."

"A rumor."

"That's right, a rumor. So it's also a rumor that the village watch might have decided there was no evidence that the boy was a criminal. Rumors can either be untrue or true."

If a nobleman was visiting the church, the village watch likely realized that any moves they made in the open might catch the nobleman's attention. So maybe their best way of avoiding that while protecting the boy was to spread rumors.

"Oh, and I did a little digging into the church here," my father said.

"Are you sure you wanted to do that? I thought you were trying to steer clear of them."

"Well, I was…but being in the dark is scary. Don't worry, I didn't snoop hard enough to put myself in any danger."

I assumed he wouldn't, but I wished he wouldn't do anything dangerous.

Come to think of it, what level adventurer was my father? Wait…I think I heard it once? Was he a mid-level adventurer…or not? Looking back on everything he's done since I've met him, I don't see how he could've been anything but a top-tier adventurer.

"What's up?"

It would be really strange asking him now after all this time.

"Nothing. Anyway, what did you find out about the church?"

"They're quite the tyrannical bunch, and they've gotten worse in the past twenty years, just like Lieutenant Leah said. Ever since then, noblemen have been visiting here often, but nobody in the village knows why. The guild master or head village watchman might know, but I'm not going to ask."

"Good. We shouldn't get in too deep."

"I know. Anyway, as for the noblemen visiting the church… I didn't get all their names, but I did get four, and they're all known to adventurers as notorious scumbags. They're violent and threatening, and whenever that comes to light, they use their wealth and power to make it disappear. You know, real pieces of crap."

So the villagers' assessment was correct, then. But that brand of nobleman was always sneaky with money. And even if you put it charitably, an excessive amount of money had gone into that church, so that must have meant the noblemen were financing it.

"I guess it's safe to assume the noblemen are pouring money into the church here, then."

"Huh?"

"Tithing isn't what's supporting the church, money from the noblemen is, right? I was just wondering what kind of situation could've made the noblemen whip out their checkbooks."

"Well, that's easy. Noblemen pay up whenever they have something to gain."

Whenever they have something to gain… So the noblemen must have something to gain from this village's church. But what?

"Something the church has that could benefit the noblemen… I can't think of anything. Can you, Dad?"

"Not in the slightest. I hope it's not another summoning circle. I've had enough of those."

I was sick of summoning circles, too. Some of my memories that had gotten erased when I met Snakey still hadn't returned, and it was scary not knowing which memories I'd forgotten. While I was in Hataka Village, my thoughts could have been manipulated by someone…

"Yeah, I really hope it's anything but a summoning circle," I said.

"Me, too… Maybe we should get ready to leave this village right away."

"Yeah, that's probably for the best."

We had to get out of this village before we got caught up in whatever was happening here.

Chapter 466:
Let's Cook Up a Storm!

"HEY, DAD, can you stir that pot next to you?"

We had borrowed the kitchen to make food for the road, and it was a lot more hectic than we'd predicted.

"Okay."

It looked like we'd flown a little too close to the sun, but it sure was convenient having a bunch of ready-made meals in our magic bags. The thought of returning to the old days of dried meat and fruit was excruciating. Buckling down and cooking was our only choice.

"Agh, it got a little burnt!"

"A little burnt is fine; don't worry about it."

Good thing my father is so understanding. Wait, was it okay to burn that dish a little? It's supposed to be a soup with a white sauce as a base… Eh, I guess a little burnt flavor won't be too bad.

"The bread's all ready! It smells so good."

Chemia took the bread from the oven, and the fiery smell filled the entire kitchen. We had been cooking for a little over three hours by then, and I was so hungry I had to stop myself from grabbing the bread.

"You sure do get some funny ideas, though! Imagine, putting herbs in bread!"

"Ha ha ha! Well, yeah, it sounded like a fun thing to try…"

The night after my first bread-making session, a lot of memories from my past life about bread returned to me for some reason, and one of those memories involved bread with herbs

kneaded into the dough. It looked simple, so I made a test loaf and it was delicious. That got me on an herbed bread kick, and I tried a bunch of other experiments, which Chemia wound up helping me with. Chemia was surprised, and I was stressed. The way my father said "Don't mind her, she's an oddball" really hit a nerve.

"What's that?" Chemia asked me.

I paused from kneading a crushed hexa fruit into my dough and answered, "Um, I thought I'd knead some hexa fruit into the dough and see what happens."

I'd decided to embrace my oddball identity and go ahead and experiment. And thanks to my defiance, I had a row of different filled buns on the counter that I'd loved in my past life. I was stunned to find out that you could put food inside of bread rolls.

"Ivy, I see you're making something interesting again."

My father, who'd just finished grilling the marinated meat, looked at my work station and smiled. I lined up rows of dough stuffed with fillings, put some water into a steamer, and waited for them to rise for the second time.

"Well, I thought it would taste good, so I'm trying it. Is that weird?" I quietly asked my father.

"Well, let's just say it's enough to turn my little oddball into a *big* oddball."

I glared at my father. "I hate you."

"Sorry. I wish I could've thought of something better to say about you, but I just blurted out *oddball*…"

"Ha ha ha! It's okay; it doesn't really bother me."

That my father would be more hurt by his words than me—it was just so funny, I had to laugh.

"Well, the soup's finished. How's the stewed meat?" he asked.

"The flavors come out more after it cools, so it's cooling down in the pot. Once it's chilled, we'll heat it back up and put it in the

magic bag."

As we put the finished dishes into the magic bag, we wrote down their names and portions on a sheet of paper. That way, we would know exactly what we had and how much of it.

"Okay, I think we've finished a good chunk of this! Once the bread in the oven finishes baking, let's have lunch. Chemia, would you like to join us?" my father asked her.

She giggled. "Oh, Leffrey offered to have lunch with me, so I wonder…"

Chemia's response confused me. Was it really okay for my father and me to hog the kitchen like this?

"I'm roasting a fow in the garden that I killed three days ago—want to share it with me?"

I remembered that fows were monsters on the outskirts of Hataru. *Wait, did she say she killed it?* I looked at Chemia. Though she was thin and looked young, she was in her sixties.

"Ms. Chemia, did you use to be an adventurer?"

"What?! Oh, no, I've always worked here at this inn. But my father begged me to take up hunting—he said, 'Please find a way to get your own meat, or else you'll make us go bankrupt!' So I thought I'd put in the work and figure out how to hunt my own meat."

Wow, respect. I don't know what kind of monster fow is, but it's impressive that she learned how to hunt it.

"Now, there's no monster near this village I *can't* hunt!"

That really is amazing. Oh! Does she know about the monsters climbing up the walls? Yeah, when I heard the monster repellent didn't work on them, my curiosity was piqued.

"I heard about the monsters that aren't affected by monster repellent—can you hunt them, too?" I asked.

"Ohh, you mean the wall-climbers? Of course I can hunt them. They're actually surprisingly tasty. So whenever the alarm goes off, I head straight for the walls."

Wall-climbers? Was that their name? It couldn't be…

"Um, what are the…*wall-climbers*?"

"Huh? Ohh, yeah, the name 'wall-climbers' just kind of stuck—it's the monsters that are immune to repellent. They're actually called *forgans*, but we were already calling them wall-climbers before they got that name, so it was the one that stuck. That's why I call them that."

Before they got a name? Oh! That's right, the monster was first discovered at this village, so they didn't have a name yet.

"Ooh, I think the bread's done!"

I opened the oven to see the bread with herbs in it was nice and toasty.

"Okay, let's have lunch," my father said.

After putting the bread in a basket, I followed Chemia out the back door of the inn and into the spacious garden where the innkeeper was roasting several hunks of meat.

"Ooh, great! Damn good timing—er, pardon me."

"It's okay; just talk normally. It's easier for everyone, myself included," my father said.

The innkeeper nodded politely. "Even after decades running an inn, it's still hard for me to talk all polite."

Chemia smiled. "And if you let your guard down, your true colors slip out."

"Yeah, I can't help it. I'm always terrified I'll screw things up when it's most important."

"Oh, but you're always polite when it matters, Leffrey. Don't worry about it."

"Am I? Well, if you say so, I'm happy. Here—" The innkeeper handed Chemia the expertly carved fow roast.

"Thanks. Smells great."

"Dang, it always blows me away how strong you are."

"*Anything* for meat!"

Yet another plate piled high with carved meat was placed in front of me.

"I'm so sorry, but I just can't eat this much, ma'am."

"Huh? Oops, sorry. Force of habit."

The innkeeper quickly cut the fow thinner and added some grilled vegetables to the plate. "Here you go."

"Thank you, sir."

"Ivy, you can talk normally, too."

"Oh! Yes, sir."

Talk normally…with someone besides Dad? I'm friendly with Rattloore, but I only met the innkeeper recently, and he's much older than me. How should I talk to him?

"Ooh! This is delicious. This meat has a very rich flavor, doesn't it?" I said.

My father nodded next to me.

"I know, right? Ooh! If you've still got room in your magic bags, why not take some fow meat to go?"

"Huh?!"

Take Chemia's food supply? But we couldn't. I mean, look at her now, going for her second helping. Dang, she's a fast eater.

"Ever since the wall-climbers started showing up, we've been getting more fow around here too. Hunting got a lot easier, so there's plenty of meat to go around."

Chemia pointed off into the distance as she spoke. There was a small building that stood out from everything else in the garden.

"What's that building?" I asked.

"A meat shed. I killed four whole fows three days ago, and the room is packed. Well, what do you say? Wanna take some meat off my hands?"

She hunted four whole fows? Then I guess it shouldn't be a problem if we took just a little…

"Well, if you insist, Ms. Chemia, then we'd be happy to."

"Really? You'll take some? Ooh, thanks!"

"Oh no, you'll be helping us out a lot. Right, Dad?"

"You sure will. Thanks."

Well, I guess we just got ourselves some tasty meat. The flavor is so rich, all it needs for seasoning is a little salt. Maybe I should cook something with fow in the afternoon.

Chapter 467:
Forgans

I WATCHED CHEMIA SIP HER TEA with a satisfied smile on her face. I was so impressed. I couldn't believe she'd eaten that big meat roast all by herself…

"Okay! Who wants dessert?"

What?! Oh, right, they say we have a separate stomach for dessert.

"Get enough to eat?" the innkeeper asked as he handed out some tea and sweets.

"Yes, sir. It was very delicious. Thank you so much."

"Well, hearing praise like that makes all the hard work worth it."

Oh, I had something I wanted to ask. Since they're still on break, maybe I can?

"Um, if you've got a moment, may I ask you something?"

Chemia and the innkeeper both nodded.

"The wall-climbers—er, I mean the… Wait, what were they called again?"

"Wall-climber" had left such a strong impression on my mind that I couldn't remember their real name. *Let's see, it was fo…fo…*

"You mean the forgans?" the innkeeper asked.

I nodded. "Yes, sir. The forgans—what kind of monster are they? I heard that monster repellent doesn't work on them."

Since they were a new type of monster, I needed to study up on them.

"Forgan meat is a bit tough, so you have to stew it low and slow. You can also eat their intestines and stuff."

The innkeeper smiled sheepishly at his wife. "Chemia, I don't think she was asking about cooking."

"Huh?" Chemia gave me a bewildered look.

"I was wondering what they look like and how to attack them…"

"Ohhh, now I get it. Well, they have long tails and thick necks. Their legs are short and their feet are shaped funny—probably because they climb walls."

I'm…having a hard time imagining that.

"Do they look like any other monsters?" my father asked.

The innkeeper shook his head. "No monsters in these parts look like forgans. A traveling adventurer who came here a while ago said they were kind of similar to a monster in the royal capital, though. What was it called again? Toga? Toba?"

Toga? Toba? If it was Toga, I knew they were in my monster manual. They had scales like a snake and they looked a little like snakes too. They looked as if a snake had grown short legs.

"I haven't heard of toba, so it's probably toga," my father said. "So, does it look like a snake at all?"

The innkeeper tilted his head thoughtfully. "Snake? Hmm…I guess maybe they look a little alike? Except their torso is fatter than a snake and there're spikes on the tail's tip. They've got fangs, too."

Fangs? Well, snakes do have fangs, but from the look on the innkeeper's face, maybe these fangs are also different from a snake's.

"Sounds like they don't really look alike. Do forgans ever attack people in a pack?" my father asked.

Chemia shook her head. "No, they never attack like that. I've fought them many times and I usually find them alone."

"Okay. Since they seem to behave differently from toga as well, they must be a separately classified monster."

"Forgans are good at water magic. They attack with these sticky water balls that are *so* annoying. If they stick to your skin, you can't wash off the stink. They're really the worst."

"They attack with water magic?" I asked.

"That's right. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

I nodded silently. While monsters possessed magic energy, not many of them attacked with magic. And the monsters that *did* attack with magic mostly used earth or fire magic. I had read about monsters that attacked with water magic, but I had never seen them in the wild.

"When you say they're *good at* water magic, do you mean they can wield it at will?" my father asked.

Chemia nodded. "That's right. The first time I saw it, it really took me by surprise."

"Forgans must be very smart," I said.

To attack with magic, you first had to visualize the element in your head, whether it was fire, earth, or water. Monsters with strong instincts weren't good at that, so they couldn't attack with magic.

"That's right, they are very smart—annoyingly so. They broke my mechanisms."

"Mechanisms?"

I was puzzled that she hadn't used the word "traps."

"I put some mechanisms on the walls so they couldn't climb. They're supposed to cut their feet when they step on them—simple devices, really—and the forgans avoided them all beautifully."

So they really had to be smart. It made me very glad they hadn't shown up when we'd spent the night just outside the village.

"About how big are they, ma'am?"

Chemia spread her arms out. “Let’s see…I’ve seen ones as big as three meters recently. Haven’t spotted many smaller than that. Actually, I only saw one. But I think it was at least two meters long.”

Does that mean they stay hidden until they grow up? Still, three meters? That’s big.

“Also, they’re surprisingly tough.”

“Tough? Like, do they have scales?”

“They sure do. If you don’t have a true sword and you attack them with a multi sword you get from a monster-drop, it’ll break easily against those scales unless you sharpen it good. Seriously, they just snap clean in two—give you a fright. Fire attacks are their weakness, though.”

My father tilted his head in confusion. “Even though they have scales?”

He had a point. Scales were a good defense against fire attacks.

“It’s their faces. Their faces don’t have scales, so you hit them with a fire attack. You can’t hit their bodies—they’re the parts that’re covered thick in scales.”

So they didn’t have scales on their faces.

“Interesting.”

“You know, that reminds me,” the innkeeper piped up. “I heard recently that people have seen forgans in the next village over.”

The next village over?

Chemia sighed at her husband. “Yes, I heard that rumor, but is it really true? If it is, that means the forgan territory is spreading.”

If a monster immune to monster repellent was expanding its territory, that would be dangerous for adventurers. Sleeping in the forest would no longer be safe.

“I’m sure they’ll start another survey. Who do you think they’ll send out?”

"You mean a forgan survey, ma'am?"

"That's right. There are still so many things we don't know about forgans. We don't even know where they were first born. The current theory is there was a sudden mutation—that seems to be the most popular. Then, some other people think somebody spliced some monsters together to make them."

To make them? Make…monsters?

"Well, I'm sure those are just stupid rumors that popped up since these monsters came out of nowhere."

"Is that so?"

Huh? Is that an edge I hear in my father's voice?

"Okay, Ivy! Wanna get back to cooking?"

"Good idea. Oh, did you still want to have gyuudon for dinner tonight?" I asked.

The innkeeper, who was putting out the fire, nodded eagerly. "Could we? I'm just really curious about ryce. Especially since Druid says it's one of his favorites."

"Yeah, it's really good."

My father certainly did love gyuudon.

"Yes, we can do that. There's a trick to steaming the ryce which I'd like to explain properly, so please come to the kitchen about two hours before dinner. I'll be finished cooking our food for the road by then."

"Gotcha. Oh, and we have ten inn guests in total, including you two. Also, Chemia eats for four at suppertime."

"I understand, sir."

I'd better cook twenty portions just in case. That way we should have enough if any of the inn guests want seconds.

"I'm wiped."

My poor arms just weren't meant to feel normal after a full day of cooking. I wouldn't be able to hold a ladle or a spatula for quite some time. And kneading all that bread dough was quite the ordeal, probably because I was still new to it. Maybe it would become easier once I got more experience.

"Hey there, trouper. Here you go," my father said, handing me a cup.

"Wait, isn't this tea?"

"It's water mixed with juice from a specialty fruit of this village."

A specialty fruit?

"It's sour… Ooh, but very refreshing!"

The moment I sipped, my mouth was filled with sourness, but sweetness soon followed and made my mouth feel refreshed.

"The fruit is called *kabo*. They mix its juice with water to make this drink."

"Kabo, huh? It's really refreshing… I like it."

"Yeah. But we sure cooked a lot of food. Are you sure you didn't make too much bread?"

"It was my first time baking bread, so I let myself have a little fun. Besides, I won't be able to bake any once we're on the road again."

"Right. Thanks for everything today. You were smart to ask them about forgans."

I smiled. Knowing about monsters was vital for our journey, and since I was a child, I could ask all sorts of questions that he couldn't.

"I'm going to do some more research on forgans tomorrow," he said.

"Why? Is there something about them that worries you?"

A deep crease formed between my father's brows. "I'll tell you after I learn more."

"Okay. I understand."

It doesn't sound like it could be anything good. I'd better prepare myself for the worst.

Chapter 468:
Monster Siege

I WAS PLAYING WITH my creatures when I sensed my father outside the door to our suite. About two hours had passed since he left to research forgans—he was back earlier than I'd expected.

"Hi," he said.

"That didn't take long. Did you find anything?"

"There wasn't much to find. But I did learn that two years ago in the spring, they suddenly crossed the walls and started attacking the village."

That must have been a shock to them. We were conditioned to think that monster repellent worked.

"A hundred and four people were attacked and killed in that first raid. There was a long list of wounded as well, so it sounds like quite the tragedy."

Yeah, that's a lot of casualties.

"Wow, I'm sad to hear that. I'll make us some tea."

"Thanks. It's already quite warm outside. Just walking made me sweat."

"Would you prefer iced tea? I could borrow the kitchen downstairs."

The temperature spiked this morning. I wish I had thought to make some iced tea earlier.

"Nah, I'd still rather have hot tea."

"Really?"

"Yeah, warm drinks are more relaxing."

I made some tea and set it on the table in front of my father. When I sat down, I noticed Toron waddling over to the window. When I watched the creature bathe for several hours in the sun every day, it made me realize that, yes, Toron was definitely a plant.

"Toron's leaves have gotten a little bigger," my father observed.

"You think so, too? Yeah, I think they've gotten just a bit bigger."

"Toron is still so thin, though. I'd feel much less nervous holding the little tyke if the trunk were just a tad thicker."

It was indeed a little scary to hold Toron, seeing as it felt like a hug might snap its trunk in two. Intellectually, I knew Toron was probably safe, since the slimes played hard with the little creature and didn't break it, but the thin trunk still worried me.

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

I looked in the direction of Flame's voice to see it stretching upward at my feet. Since this was code for "Pick me up!" I gently lifted the slime and set it on my lap.

"Ryu! Ryuuu."

Its happy little voice brought a smile to my face.

"Okay, where should I start…" my father sighed.

"Was there anything that particularly worried you?"

He smiled cynically. "Remember the theory of forgans being a hybrid of two monsters?"

Right, that was because forgans just suddenly appeared. I wonder if he found evidence for that?

"Did you find an actual example of somebody doing something like that?"

If that was what my father was focusing on, maybe he had found an actual example.

"Well, I wasn't involved personally in it, but many years ago, somebody did do some experiments off in some village."

Many years ago in some village? That's a very vague lead.

"Do they know what village it was?"

"I couldn't dig for more details. That information is heavily protected, and I knew we might attract the wrong kind of attention if I dug too deep."

Yeah, my father is definitely not your average adventurer…

"So do you think the forgans are a hybrid of two monsters?" I asked.

"I was hoping I'd prove that one way or another, but my search hit a dead end at that vague piece of information. It just bugs me, though, wondering how they suddenly came into being. If it were an evolution, they would have left traces of it behind. And even if it were a sudden mutation, we'd still find unmutated monsters nearby, if not on the outskirts of this village, at least in some other town or village."

Indeed, if it were an evolution or sudden mutation, we would have found unaltered versions of the monster nearby. But the innkeeper had said there weren't any monsters like forgans in these parts.

"And you're sure there aren't any in the nearby towns or villages?"

"Not as far as I know. I asked about snakelike monsters, but they thought I was talking about something else. And since I talked to adventurers who had actually fought the things, I think their testimonies are pretty credible."

Okay…

"Oh! What if it was a sudden mutation so extreme that they didn't retain any of their old characteristics?"

"Monsters have come into being from sudden mutations, but they always hold on to some of the traits they had before."

So I guess that theory is impossible, then.

"Maybe there was a super long-range migration?"

"The first time the forgans attacked this village, there were about seventeen of them. If seventeen three-meter-long monsters migrated, somebody definitely would have seen them somewhere and said something about it."

"Yeah, I guess so."

I remembered the crazy rumors that got stirred up when Snakey went on the move.

"If we could just find the forgans' nest, then we might learn something."

"People still don't know where they nest?"

"Apparently not. They've sent several scouting parties out to look, but nobody's found their home yet."

I thought I remembered hearing that it was important to find a monster's nest if you wanted to know its way of life. Once you found its home, you'd know what it ate and what its children were like.

"It sounds like there are still so many things we don't know about forgans," I said.

"Yeah. I hung out at the adventurer guild and drank with a few adventurers to feel them out, but they all gave me the same story. Oh, and I swung by the merchant guild to sell some magic stones. Was that okay?"

"Of course."

Aw, he didn't need to worry that I'd get upset.

"Okay, so before we hit the road—"

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.

"Huh?! What's that?"

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.

"The alarm?"

The alarm…meaning the forgans are attacking the walls? Wait, it's a siege?!

"Ivy, I'm gonna check it out. Will you be okay here?"

"Yeah. My creatures will take care of me."

"Ciel, if Ivy's in danger, protect her. Change into your true form if you have to."

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Ciel I can understand, but why are Sora and Flame so gung-ho to protect me? Aren't slimes supposed to be weak?

"Sora and Flame? Ha ha! Good, you two keep her safe, too. Anyway, I'll be out for a while. I might have to help."

"Got it. Be careful out there."

"Of course."

As I watched my father grab his sword and leave, I heard several pairs of footsteps running chaotically on the first floor. They were probably adventurers preparing to fight the forgans. I closed the door and locked it tight.

"I can't see the walls from the windows…"

I stood at the windowsill and looked outside. What I could see was a bunch of adventurers running toward the wall.

Knock, knock.

"Ivy, it's Leffrey." The innkeeper's voice sounded outside my door.

"Yes… Is something wrong?" I answered without opening the door. My father had told me not to open it if he wasn't there. Once I almost opened the door and Ciel got mad at me.

"Druid just left—are you okay? If you're anxious, come to the conference room on the first floor. The other kids staying here are in there together."

So they're all shut in here, then…

"Thank you, sir. But I'll be fine up here."

"Okay. But if anything changes, be sure to call me."

"Okay."

When I felt the innkeeper's presence leave the door to our suite, I sighed in relief. I turned my eyes back to the room to see a slightly smaller than normal adandara.

"Ciel, did you go back to normal? Don't worry, I'm safe."

Mrrrow.

Ciel chirped in reply and curled up by a chair, staying the same size.

"Thanks for protecting me."

Mrrrow.

Ciel could perfectly control its magic energy by now, so I assumed nobody would sense an adandara in the building, even in its true form.

Booooom.

As I reached out for my tea, I heard a low, rumbling explosion in the distance.

"Is everything gonna be okay?"

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Ciel, Sora, and Flame all nodded their heads in reply. I knew they were assuring me we would be fine.

"You know, I just realized you all learned to nod yes a while ago."

This was much easier to understand than when they'd just jiggle in reply, but I wondered how they'd learned to nod. Was it an evolution of the mind? The last time I'd tried to teach them, they'd just stared blankly in reply, so I gave up… Well, however it had happened, I was glad we had an easier way to communicate now.

"Thanks for the understandable replies."

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

"Gyah!"

"You, too, Sol and Toron. Hee hee, you're so cute."

Booooom.

There was that explosion again.

"Since forgans use water magic, I guess the adventurers are attacking with fire magic?"

Though my creatures insisted we would be okay, I couldn't help but worry.

Chapter 469:
No! It's Dangerous

"I WONDER IF Dad's all right…"

Mrrrow.

I looked at Ciel, who was lying on the bed. From the relaxed posture, I assumed everything was okay, but twenty minutes had gone by since the first explosion. And the explosions had been sounding without stopping ever since, which meant the attack at the wall was probably still ongoing.

"Listening to all those explosions is making me nervous… How are you all so calm?"

Is it because they know everything is okay somehow? Oh! The explosions stopped…?

"The explosions stopped. Do you think it's over?"

Is Dad okay? I looked out the window toward the wall, and I could see smoke rising from a few spots.

"Do you think Lieutenant Leah and Chemia joined in the fight? I hope they aren't hurt."

I knew it wasn't safe for me to go outside anyway, what with the nobleman on the prowl, but it was killing me to just sit and wait. *I should've gone with Dad… No, wait, I can't fight. I would definitely get in the way.*

"Hmmm… And whenever I try to take up sword fighting, everyone tells me I shouldn't do it…"

Well, I'm sure I'm the reason why. I'd thought at first that sword fighting didn't agree with me because the sword was too big for me, but when I got a sword my size, I still almost skewered my own feet. And when Dad saw that, he whisked the sword away from

me without a word. Afterward, he got me a dagger and told me I should only use it for self-defense. In other words, I should never initiate a fight. I just wasn't cut out for fighting with sharp objects.

"Oh! What about a different kind of weapon, though?"

"Pu?!"

"Gyah?!"

Sora and Toron looked sharply at me. A pat on Sora's head received a happy jiggle as an answer. And when I petted Toron's head…the three leaves shook in reply.

"I was just thinking, I want to fight, but since swords don't agree with me, maybe I should try some other weapon."

Mewww.

I looked over at Ciel to see it firmly shaking its head *no* at me. They were nodding yes and shaking their heads no—we had gotten really good at communicating. That made me very happy, but Ciel saying no just then must have meant…

"Are you saying I should stay away from all weapons?"

"Puuu."

Oof…Sora nodded yes.

"Couldn't I use a bow and arrow?"

Why did everyone keep shaking their heads no? A ranged weapon would keep me far enough away from the monsters that I'd be safe.

"Oh! Let me guess…you're afraid I might accidentally shoot my father while he's fighting the monsters?"

"Teryu."

"Flame…please don't nod yes so eagerly."

But they were right; I couldn't ignore that possibility. I guess the only other weapon I could think of was a shield, but I could never use one. I'd never be able to develop the muscles I'd need for

it. And since I had no magic energy, magic attacks were out of the question as well. Huh…were there any other weapons?

"Either a spear or an axe, then. Actually, I seem to remember somebody fighting with giant claws on their fingers."

What weapon was that? Well, I don't think that would be a problem for me. But no matter what weapons I thought of, I couldn't imagine myself using any of them all that well.

"Should I just give up on weapons? Too bad; I have the stamina, if nothing else."

I had the energy to walk an entire day, even back when I wasn't eating enough. It startled my father, but I could walk an entire day without a break, no problem. And now that I was eating more, I could walk even further with fewer rest stops.

"Oh, the adventurers are coming back!"

I was starting to see adventurers here and there from my perch at the window. As far as I could tell, none of them were hurt badly. I looked for my father, but I couldn't find him.

"Oh, there he is!"

"Pu! Pu, puuu," Sora chirped happily, gazing out the window with me.

"Thank goodness. He doesn't look hurt."

His gear looked a bit dirty, but at a glance, I saw no blood.

"Maybe I should get him some tea. Think he'd like it hot?"

But since he was moving around a lot, he might rather have it iced. I think I'll go downstairs and use the kitchen.

Knock, knock.

Oh, he's back already!

"Coming!"

"Hi, Ivy, I'm back."

"Glad to hear it."

I unlocked the door, and my father stumbled into the room, looking a bit tired.

"Oh! Ciel?"

I looked at Ciel, remembering the adandara was in its true form, although in a smaller size…but Ciel was already back in slime form.

"When did you do that…?"

"What's up?"

"Ciel had gone back to adandara form to protect me."

"Good. Thanks, Ciel."

Mewww.

With a happy jiggle, Ciel slammed itself against my father's legs along with Sora and Flame.

"Hey, cut that out. He's tired."

Sora and Flame gave my father a nervous look.

"Are you worried about him?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Thanks." My father gave Sora and Flame a pat each, and Sol slipped in between them. When my father noticed, he gave Sol a pat of its own, and the slime smiled contentedly.

"Dad—I'll get you some iced tea."

At a glance, I could see he was quite sweaty. He looked like he was still uncomfortably hot.

"Thanks. Oh, but the innkeeper said he'd have the bath ready for me. I'll just take a quick dip."

"Okay, take as long as you'd like. I'll have your tea ready for you when you get out."

"Thanks."

After my father got his things for the bath, I followed him down to the first floor.

"What's going on? It's a little noisy."

When we got to the first floor, there were people gathered in the spot where we'd had our fow luncheon. There was a giant monster there.

"Is that a forgan?" I asked.

"Yeah. Maybe they had one of the corpses delivered?"

Chemia was smiling happily next to the forgan corpse.

"Chemia sure looks happy. I don't think she can make that for tonight's dinner, but maybe tomorrow?"

She had said it was a bit tough, so I assumed she would need to give it a low and slow braise.

"I'm already excited for tomorrow," I said.

"Me, too. By the way, Chemia fought so savagely out there, you'd never believe it from the way she looks."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Her fighting style was very flamboyant." My father smiled as he looked at her.

What did a "flamboyant" fighting style even look like? I couldn't picture it…

"Oh! Hey there, Druid, good work out there. I was surprised to see what a strong fighter you are."

"Well, I was surprised to see you just dive in at them single-handedly, Chemia."

What? Chemia dove in at the forgans all by herself? Yikes, how daring.

She giggled. "Well, that fighting style suits me best. But I've never seen anybody use a sword with such powerful magic stones in it. You made those pesky forgan attacks explode one after another."

Explode?

"That surprised me, too. I didn't know I'd make them blow up."

Were all those explosions I heard from the magic stones in my father's sword?

"But those magic stones sure are amazing. I was shocked that their magic energy held out for the whole battle. Most of them only last a few attacks and get useless halfway through."

My father sheepishly smiled. "Uh, well, we stumbled on these magic stones by luck. There's still a lot about them we don't know."

"That so? Well, you'd better be careful around nobles. They love to claim other people's stuff as their own."

"Yeah, I'm well aware."

My father shrugged cynically, and Chemia gave him a sardonic smile in return. The nobility sure were hated in Hataru Village, though that made perfect sense. We parted ways with Chemia, my father going to the bath and I to the kitchen to make iced tea.

"Mr. Leffrey, may I please have some iced tea?"

"Sure thing. I've got some chilled in that magic box there."

"Thank you very much."

I opened the magic box the innkeeper had indicated, took out some iced tea, and went back to our suite. I stopped along the way to watch Chemia dress the forgan corpse for a little while, and it was shocking to watch her wield such a large sword. If she charged at a forgan with that sword single-handedly, she probably would look "flamboyant," just like my father had said.

Impressive for such a skinny lady.

Chapter 470:
Exhausted…

I POURED SOME ICED TEA into two cups and put them down on the table.

"Thanks. All that moving around got me beat."

"And now you can take a rest; you deserve it. So, those explosions were you?"

"You heard them?"

"Yeah. I think the whole village heard them."

"Agh, yeah, they probably did. They were really loud."

"Uh-huh. I was startled the first time I heard it."

"Me, too. I didn't think I'd make such loud explosions."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I wasn't even going to help out, but there were just so many forgans."

"Were there really that many?"

"I counted on the way back, but there were apparently over fifty. Usually there're only about ten, so there were way more this time."

There were usually ten, but this time there were fifty? Did the forgan herds change somehow?

"Some of the adventurers couldn't handle the number of forgans, so the scene was pretty chaotic. Unfortunately, some of the forgans took advantage of the chaos and crossed over the wall."

"Whoa! They got past the wall?"

"They sure did. A lot of the novice adventurers screamed and ran away when they saw it."

They ran away…

"Since there was chaos everywhere and it didn't look like it would let up anytime soon, I jumped into the fight. We couldn't have forgans just waltzing around the village."

"Sure, but weren't there any high-level adventurers around?"

"Well, I noticed something when I was fighting. You know how the walls form a protective ring around the village?"

"Yeah… Oh! There's way too many places to guard."

"Exactly. There were high-level adventurers out there, but they were defending different locations, so there weren't any posted where I was. Apparently, extra-powerful forgans showed up in two spots, so that was where the veteran adventurers went. And the other veteran adventurer team headed into the forest to fight them there."

Monster repellent not working really was a pain. And since there were more forgans today than there usually were, there must have been way more locations that needed defending.

"I just didn't want to stand out, you know," my father explained. "I was going to help out as much as they needed, then disappear discreetly, but when my sword blew up a forgan's water magic attack on contact, the other forgans noticed and came at me, too…"

Yikes…what a disaster.

"So by the time I realized I couldn't get out of there, I was basically in the middle of the battle."

A sheepish grin appeared on my father's tired face. That was because he cared.

"But when I saw those guys attacking…"

"Who are *those guys*?"

"The village adventurers—judging by their skill level, I'd say they were mid-level ones. They tried to counter the forgans' water magic attacks with fire arrows, but their fire arrows were shoddy."

Shoddy fire arrows?

"It took more than twenty fire arrows to disintegrate one water magic attack. Now, to be fair, the balls of water the forgans make are imbued with dense magic, and they do have thin shields around them. I think that's why they exploded on contact with my sword, but it also explains why they needed crazy amounts of fire arrows to penetrate."

"Yeah, twenty arrows is definitely too much."

"Right? I was astounded by how many arrows they wasted. If they'd just put more care into making their fire arrows, they wouldn't have needed twenty to take down a forgan."

"What do you mean, put more care into their arrows? Can't they imbue fire arrows with magic like people do with balls?"

"You make magic balls by hardening magic energy into a sphere, but fire arrows have pointed tips, right?"

"Right."

"So they make magic balls, then transform them into sharp tips that can pierce through things. But if all you do is change the shape, the magic energy tends to escape out the tip."

Oh, wow. I had no idea that was how it worked.

"They were probably using fire arrows because fire is a natural defense against the forgans' water magic, but there's a trick to fire arrows, both in making them and in enhancing their power. Besides, if a fighter can use fire magic, they're better off doing some other attack, if you ask me. I have no idea why they were so adamant on using fire arrows. It makes no sense."

Fire arrows sounded very tricky. Also, I didn't know that you make magic balls by hardening magic energy into spheres. Come to think of it, I'd seen somebody fight a monster with fire arrows just

once. Then again, my father and I were standing on a cliff, so we just watched from a distance…

"Hey, Dad?"

"What's up?"

"Do you remember the adventurer we saw on the road fighting with fire arrows?"

"You mean the adventurers fighting beneath a cliff?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah…one of them did fight with fire arrows, huh?"

"Were that adventurer's fire arrows powerful?"

I thought I remembered them penetrating the monster very forcefully. The monster went down in just two hits—or was it three? Anyway, I seemed to remember it didn't take much to kill that monster.

"Well…I can't be sure because we were watching from a distance, but those arrows probably were made very meticulously."

So for fire arrows to fly with such force, they had to be made with care. I wonder how powerful a fire arrow could get if it was made incredibly carefully?

"Oh, I almost forgot! Did you learn anything by seeing the forgans in action?" I asked.

"From what I saw, I couldn't figure out which species of monster they were. They had characteristics from three different types."

A monster with characteristics of three different species?

"So does that mean the theory that they're a hybrid of different monsters is more likely now?"

"I would assume so. But if that theory is true…"

A deep crease formed between my father's brows. I watched him as I sipped on my iced tea.

"If forgans really are a hybrid of different monsters…then somebody from the royal capital is probably already here investigating."

Somebody from the royal capital?

"But we haven't met anyone who meets that description."

"Either they're in disguise or they've hired somebody part-time from this village to do the work for them. Either way, somebody is here. Ivy…we should leave this village before the week is over."

I gasped, then went quiet. "Okay."

Does this mean he doesn't want to run into the scout from the capital? I looked at my father and saw he was deep in thought. *Is he okay?*

"Dad?"

He blinked with a start. "What's up?"

"I don't think today is the best day to make a decision—you're really tired."

If you try to make an important decision when you're exhausted, your mind tends to spiral where it shouldn't, so it's best not to do that. We would both be thinking much more clearly the next day, when we were more rested.

"You're right…I am really tired."

"It's almost dinnertime. You should go to bed after we eat."

"Hmm…yeah, I guess I'll do that."

He really must be exhausted, then.

"I've gotten used to Ciel taking the center position in battle lately. And it helps that monsters don't come near us with Ciel around."

Yeah, everyone runs away when Ciel lets out a threatening growl.

"But we still meet plenty of monsters in caves," I pointed out.

"Yeah, cowardly monsters."

"Ha ha ha ha! Yeah, and there are monsters who stick themselves to walls and look down, too."

"That's right. I sure got scared the first time I saw that. After all, that monster had attacked me once before."

Mrrrow?

Ciel gave us a curious look.

"We're just talking about how strong you are, Ciel."

Mrrrow!

I gave the very proud-looking Ciel a gentle pat, and the adandara smiled and swayed its tail side to side.

"Doesn't look too strong right now," my father teased. "Though to be fair, Ciel's in slime form at the moment."

He was right. Nobody would suspect Ciel was a battle-crazed adandara just then.

"Ah, it's dinnertime," I said.

"Let's go eat. All that fighting tired me out."

When I noticed his unusually sluggish movements, I chuckled a little.

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's go eat so we can get some sleep."

Chapter 471:
A Sense of Impending Doom

KNOCK, KNOCK.

"Who could that be?" I wondered to myself (my father was still asleep.) I walked up to the door and called out quietly, "Who's there?"

"Sorry to bother you—is now a bad time?"

That voice… Lieutenant Leah?

"It's okay, but my father is asleep."

"Oh, I'm sorry! Could you give me a call when he wakes up? I need to talk to him."

She needs to talk?

"May I ask what it's about?"

"The captain of the watch wants to meet him and thank him for his help yesterday."

Ohhh, so it's about yesterday. Oh dear. Knowing my father, he wouldn't want to get too involved…but would it be rude to turn her down? What should I do…?

"Oh, if Druid doesn't want to come, he can totally say no. But when he wakes up, could you tell him the captain of the watch wants to see him? Then you two can talk between yourselves about whether or not to go."

Oh, so we can say no.

"Okay then. I'll let him know when he wakes up."

"Thanks. Today's my day off, so I'll be here in CheChe. Come to me anytime."

"All right."

"Sorry to bother you so early in the morning. Have a good day."

Once I'd made sure she was gone, I stepped away from the door. I quietly looked at my father and saw that he was still fast asleep.

"Thank goodness."

"Puuu."

Sora gave me a worried look. Upon closer examination, Ciel was also awake.

"Don't worry; she just wanted to talk a little."

At that news, Sora went right back to sleep. When I sat down, Ciel jumped into my lap.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

Mew!

We chatted quietly as we looked out the window. It was such a peaceful, ordinary morning outside that it was hard to believe forgans had besieged the village the day before.

"Forgan attacks must just be a way of life here."

And that seemed odd to me… Though I guess you'd have no choice but to make it a way of life.

"It must be so horrible for them. All the other villages are protected by monster repellent, but that won't work here."

But what a lovely day it was. The sunlight streaming through the window was so warm and cozy.

"Ivy…Ivy…don't sleep in a chair. You'll get sore."

Huh? My eyes shot open to see my father standing in front of me. Ciel was sitting in my lap.

"Oh! Did I fall asleep?"

"Yeah. Did you have a tough night? Are you hurt at all?"

I giggled. "No, I'm fine. I must've just fallen asleep while I was looking out the window."

I moved Ciel onto the table so I could stand up and stretch my limbs. They cracked and popped, probably from sleeping in that chair. *Ahhh, my neck hurts.*

"Oh! That's right, Lieutenant Leah is downstairs waiting for us."

"She's waiting?" My father looked confused by my phrasing.

"She says the captain of the watch wants to come thank you for helping out yesterday, but she also told me it's okay to say no."

"The captain wants to thank me?"

"For helping defend against the forgan attack, I guess."

"But why would he bother to meet me just for that? There has to be something else."

"What makes you say that? Is meeting someone to thank them really that unusual?"

"Thanking people is normal enough, but the captain of the watch coming all the way out to meet an ordinary traveler is strange. It's an unwritten rule that all available adventurers should help out in an emergency."

"Maybe it's because you're not an adventurer?"

"No, that's really not enough to make the captain of the watch come meet me."

Hearing it put that way, I guess it *was* a little odd that the captain would leave his post. My father was sure the captain wanted something else…but what could it be?

"Lieutenant Leah said you could turn him down if you didn't want to see him."

"It would be strange to turn him down when all he says he wants to do is thank me."

Yeah, that would be weird. It's hard to say no to someone thanking you.

"Huh, I guess the captain picked his words carefully so you couldn't say no. Must be a smart guy. Ha ha, wouldn't it be funny if he was downstairs waiting to see you right now?"

Then there was dead silence.

Huh…I just got a sense of impending doom.

"He wouldn't be, would he?"

"I sure hope not. But the type of person who becomes captain of the watch in the first place tends to be pretty crafty."

My father looked like he'd chewed on an insect. It sounded like he had all kinds of past experiences to back up his claim.

Then, with a sigh, he said, "Oh well, guess I can't avoid it. If the worst happens, I'll drop Lord Foronda's name."

"Is that okay?"

"He said to mention his name if we ever needed to, remember?"

"Well sure, but…"

It felt wrong bringing him up for something like this.

"If I do wind up dropping his name, I'll send a faax later. I'll tell him I mentioned him and apologize."

"Okay. That sounds good."

"Now, on a completely different note, it's lunchtime. Want me to buy us something from a food cart?"

"A food cart, huh… Nah, I'm fine with onigiri."

I just woke up, so I don't have much of an appetite anyway.

"Really? Okay, I guess I'll have onigiri, too. I've been thinking about those onigiri with little pieces of meat in the middle lately."

"Okay, I'll take them out of the magic bag."

"No, I'll do it. You go wash your face."

"Okay, thanks. Oh, wait, the creatures need to eat!"

"Don't worry, I already fed them."

"Thanks."

I washed my face, got dressed, and headed back to the main room to find tea and a big plate of onigiri on the table. I took one of the unfilled onigiri seasoned only with salt and ate it.

"You eat a lot of salt-only onigiri, don't you?"

"I know it tastes bland to you, but I really like the purity. And you sure eat a lot, even early in the morning."

My father preferred either the meat-packed onigiri or the ones with minced meat mixed into the rice and molded. Both were flavored heavily with meat.

"Well, they taste great. I could eat a hundred of these."

Maybe I should have made more. I thought I did make about a hundred…

A little while after I was done with my breakfast, my father finished, too.

"Ahhh, I'm stuffed. Thanks, Ivy, those were delicious."

He ate twelve onigiri in one sitting. I really should've made more. Next time, I'll make it two hundred.

"All right, time to go see Lieutenant Leah," he said.

"Okay."

"We're going down to the first floor for a bit," he told the creatures. "If anything happens, hide."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

"Pefu!"

"Gyah!"

The sound of everyone's happy little voices sure nourished the soul.

"Bye, everyone," we both called out as we left the room. Then we locked the door tight and walked downstairs.

"*Again*, I'll explain myself for the *last time*, I'm telling you to please *leave*, you blockhead!"

When we got downstairs, we heard Lieutenant Leah yelling from the dining hall. My father and I looked at each other.

He shrugged his shoulders. "That can't be good."

"Yeah."

As we approached the dining hall, the voices got louder and louder.

"What good is it coming here before you've gotten permission to see him? Are you an idiot?"

Ah, so it is *the captain.*

"Leah, I am technically your superior, you know."

If you have to say that, it's not a good sign.

"So what?"

Yikes! Lieutenant Leah's voice just went down an octave.

"I feel uncomfortable interrupting them," my father said.

"Yeah. I feel uncomfortable being here at all."

"Uh-huh."

Knock, knock.

"Excuse me. Good morning, Lieutenant Leah."

When Lieutenant Leah saw my father, she pounded the table in front of the man sitting before her with both fists.

"Aaagh, see? Now they've come to see you, you crap-for-brains captain!"

"Leah, your language is getting worse and worse. Who's influenced you?"

"Maybe look in the mirror, Captain?"

"Yeah, fine… Huh, I don't see anything in it?"

This captain…he's really cunning. He's talking with Leah and sizing us up at the same time.

"This guy's good," my father observed.

Will we be able to leave Hataru Village without a fight?

Chapter 472:
The Master's Apprentices

"SO IT *WAS* YOU, Druid. Long time no see."

What?! The captain and my father know each other? I cast a curious glance at my father…and he was looking at the captain with a docile expression.

"Wait, have you forgotten me? A long time ago, we—"

"Ivy."

"Yes?!"

My father's voice was so abnormally deep and quiet that my spine shot up straight.

"Let's leave this village right now."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up, you little twerp—isn't that a cruel way to greet me after all these years?"

The captain ran over to my father in a fluster. The nervousness in his step made me laugh a little. All of his previous imposing edge was completely gone.

"Arrrgh."

"Why're you sighing, Druid? C'mon, we trained under the same master."

"What?! You trained under the Master?" I asked him.

As in, the mentor my father calls "Master"? That's right, I remember hearing he trained a lot of adventurers…

"I sure did. Nice to meet ya."

"Oh, nice to meet you, sir! I'm Ivy."

"What a good kid."

The captain reached out to me—and my father promptly slapped his hand away.

"Don't touch Ivy."

"See? Why are you being so *mean* to me?"

My father patted my head. I gave him a confused look when the pressure felt harder than it should've and saw him smiling sweetly at the captain.

"Long time no see. Glad to know you're doing well. Bye!"

"Why you always gotta be so *cold*, man? If you walk out that door, I'll just give you hell like I used to."

My father answered the captain's threat with an exhausted sigh. "I didn't know you were captain of the village watch here."

The captain smirked triumphantly at my father's willingness to finally talk. "Well, yeah, long story short, I stole the job from the old captain."

He "stole" it?

"Something happen?" my father asked.

"Who needs a leader who's bought and paid for?"

"Ah. So the guild master wasn't the only crooked leader here."

The church had bribed the former guild master, so I assumed that meant they had the captain of the watch in their back pocket as well.

"You bet. We got a new guild master and new captain of the watch in the same season. By the way, Beith is the guild master. Remember him?"

"Oh, Beith, eh?"

"That's the one. So I had a hunch when I saw your name, and it really was you! I was sure you'd never leave that town as long as you lived…and you've got a completely different air about you now, to boot. I guess people change, don't they?"

"Yeah…a lot of stuff happened. But I have a hard time believing you're the captain here, Poleon." My father smiled at his old friend.

"Don't blame ya. I have a hard time believing it myself."

I'm not sure how to feel about that…

"Excuse me, but…did you both train under the same master?" Lieutenant Leah asked, looking back and forth between my father and Poleon.

"Yeah, we both trained for about five years under a mentor named Monz," my father answered. Poleon nodded.

"Aren't you a bit far apart in age to have trained under the same master?" Lieutenant Leah asked. "You're about forty-five, right, Captain? And Druid, I assume you're in your late thirties?"

"…I'm thirty-three."

Eep! He looks a bit pitiful. He's self-conscious about his age, I know, but they really are far apart in age, aren't they? I heard that mentors usually took in apprentices around the same age so the difference in strength wouldn't be too great.

"I'm sorry… You just have the dignity of an older man," Lieutenant Leah apologized sheepishly. (Of course she couldn't just outright say my father looked old.) "Um, anyway, isn't there a big age gap between you two?"

"Well, Beith and I both were slaves for a while," Captain Poleon explained. "We trained under Master right after we were both freed."

"You were a slave?" I asked.

Captain Poleon shrugged his shoulders. "I did some stupid things when I was young and got sentenced to slavery. But since there were extenuating circumstances, they cut my sentence down to eight years."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, sir."

"What?! So that rumor was true?" Lieutenant Leah shrieked. *I guess that means she didn't know?*

"It was Marual who caught Poleon," my father answered.

Marual used to be in Monz's party, didn't he?

"Poleon and Beith tried to steal from Marual, who looked like your average everyday merchant at a glance, and they got paid back—big time."

"We sure did! What a glorious smack in the face I got that day. Well, the encounter was meant to be, since that's what got me my apprenticeship."

So Guild Master Beith was with him then.

"But anyway, did you come all this way to see me just because of my name?" my father asked Captain Poleon, a shade of frustration in his eye.

Captain Poleon shook his head. "No, no, no. I just wanted to thank you. It's gonna be much easier taking down the forgans from now on because of you."

My father and I both gave him a confused look.

"Didn't you think it was strange, Druid, that we used so many fire arrows taking down forgans?"

"Oh, yeah…I wondered why you focused so much on fire arrows. It didn't make sense."

"Captain, when are you going to sit down? Are you going to stand up and talk all day?"

The rest of us gasped. It was then I realized we'd been standing at the dining hall entrance all this time. Both Captain Poleon and my father smiled sheepishly at Lieutenant Leah.

"Sorry, want me to order us some tea?" the captain asked.

"Already done, sir," Lieutenant Leah sighed tiredly, then disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a platter. "Ivy, help yourself to sweets. These are a new village specialty. Wanna try?"

"Thank you, ma'am."

I sat in the chair Lieutenant Leah offered, and my father lowered himself beside me. Tea was set in front of us, and my father said thanks. Maybe he was a little calmer now?

"So, why the insistence on fire arrows?" he demanded.

"Because, even though high-level adventurer magic attacks are powerful enough to work, low and mid-level adventurers can only do any damage with fire arrows."

"Wait—their other attacks don't work?"

"That's right. We tested a lot of other options, but fire arrows were the only attack those magic balls couldn't repel."

"Huh. The shields didn't look that powerful to me," my father said, puzzled.

The shields? I don't really understand what they're saying, but it sounds like forgans are tough to take down.

"I know, they don't look substantial, but not even the most powerful fire or water magic attacks from mid-level adventurers could break through those balls' shields. Only the high-level adventurers' attacks could penetrate them, and it took a great deal of magic in each attack. But you don't need to imbue fire arrows with much magic for them to damage those magic water balls."

"How strange. Why is that?"

"It's a mystery. No matter how hard we look, we can't find any answers. If only we could, then we could take care of those forgans so much easier."

"Yeah, they do sound like quite the pests," my father nodded. "Especially if you're attacked by a herd as big as the one from yesterday."

"Yeah, we were in real danger yesterday. The village watch and the adventurers all bravely got themselves ready for the worst."

"Bravely, you say? But I saw some adventurers running away."

"Ahhh, yes, I did hear about that. The guild master is probably driving them hard right now."

"Ah. So sorry for their loss."

So sorry for what loss?

"So anyway, when I went to talk to the guild master about getting into the fight, one of the watchmen rushed into the office and yelled, 'He cut them! He *cut* them!' Now, I thought he'd lost his mind from the fight, but when we calmed him down and made him talk us through it, he said this adventurer he'd never seen before was cutting through the forgan attacks. And that made no sense—we hadn't gotten word of any veteran adventurers joining us. So I sent him off to watch and he said this adventurer didn't seem to be using any magic in his attacks, either—it was a chaotic mess."

"Ahh…sorry about that," my father said sheepishly. "I retired from adventuring."

"Apparently…" Captain Poleon glanced at my father's arm, and a flash of melancholy filled his face for a moment. "I wondered why you'd attack the forgans the way you did, but now I know it was because you didn't know anything about them."

"Yeah, I didn't know the forgans' water magic attacks were shielded until I saw them for myself."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry we didn't give you enough information. Good thing your ignorance actually helped you out here."

Captain Poleon seemed very remorseful, but I didn't think he was at fault.

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you enough when we were at the gate," Leah said, bowing.

Now Lieutenant Leah is apologizing to him.

"No, no, no, Lieutenant, it's not your fault. I didn't tell anyone I was an adventurer when I came to this village, so you wouldn't have known to do that."

Indeed, Lieutenant Leah would have explained everything thoroughly to my father if she'd known he was a former adventurer, just in case he would need to join the forgan suppression force. But my father and I had both entered Hataru Village as humble travelers. There was no need to explain anything to us that we didn't ask about.

"So, do you know why my sword worked against the forgan attacks?" my father asked.

Chapter 473:
The Magic Stone's Power

"WE'RE NOT ENTIRELY SURE YET, but we think it's your magic stone."

Magic stone?

"Your sword has a magic stone embedded in it, right, Druid?"

"Oh, right…so it does."

"We think that stone has some power forgans are vulnerable to. By the way, Druid, what kind of magic stone did you put in your sword? Everyone who saw it said, 'It's *unreal*!' in the same amazed tone…"

Well, Flame made that magic stone. And it is *unreal beyond words. That's why my father makes sure not to let other people see it most of the time.*

"Uhh…I think it's close to the highest level you can get?" my father answered vaguely. "Got it by a stroke of crazy luck."

"Luck, eh? Well, I'm jealous. Where did you find it?" Poleon asked.

"We got lost during our travels and stumbled upon a cave—that's where it was. We wandered lost in the forest for days before we finally made it back onto the village road, so we don't know where that cave was, either."

I felt my lips stretching into a grimace, but I managed to stop them. My father seemed like his normal self, which must have meant I was the only one of us who was worried they would know he was lying. My father's cool head never ceased to amaze me.

"Don't you at least have a general sense of where it was?" Captain Poleon leaned forward slightly.

"I'm sorry, no. We don't even know how long we were wandering lost—we lost track halfway through."

"But you must have a *little* idea—"

"Believe me, I looked, but I couldn't find it again."

"Ah…well, that's too bad." Captain Poleon looked like a sulking child. I was amused by his various facial expressions.

"Oops! We got off topic there… Well, it doesn't matter. You'll have to show me that sword of yours later," the captain said.

Would that be okay?

"You haven't changed a bit," my father said with a smile. "Fine, I'll show you my sword later, so let's get back on topic. There was something else you wanted to discuss with me, right?"

Captain Poleon answered my father's frustrated smirk with a shrug of his shoulders. "Okay, the jig is up. Yes, we got confirmation that you need a high-level magic stone to counter forgan attacks."

Huh? Ohh, the conversation went back to forgans.

"And…was there any reason I needed to hear this?" my father asked.

"Not really," the captain replied. "I was just hoping you could tell me more about magic stones."

My father gave him a curious look.

"Did you know high-level adventurers took part in the fight yesterday?"

"Yeah, I caught glimpses of them now and then."

"Well, one of them noticed your magic stone when he saw you fighting. He tested his own sword against them, but it didn't work as well. So what was different? The magic stone. Yours seems exceptionally pure and shiny. From that, he realized there was a big difference in levels between the two of you, so he attacked with the most powerful magic stone he was carrying…and he could easily

break through the shields. By the way, we got a report that his magic stone was Level 4."

I guess that means the magic stone has to be quite high in level.

"Anyway, that high-level adventurer noticed something after using a lot of magic stone attacks. As long as you're using a magic stone, your attack will still smash through the shields, even if you use less attack power."

Wait, what is he saying? The attacks still worked, even at a lower power? So then…all you need is a magic stone, and your attack power doesn't matter otherwise?

"Are you sure about this?" my father asked.

"Yes, I'm sure," the captain answered. "He let a novice adventurer borrow his sword to test out the theory. The first attack didn't work, but the second broke the shield and he managed to deal damage to the forgan."

That's…kind of an incredible breakthrough, isn't it?

"Conventional wisdom is that magic stones raise a person's attack and defense power, but maybe they have powers beyond that. So, Druid, haven't you heard anything along those lines? Like, if you use your magic stone to attack, you gain some unique power?"

My father shook his head. "No, I never heard anything like that. Magic stones amplify power—that's what we know."

"And in most cases, that's true. But anyway, it was because of you that we found out novice adventurers are also capable of taking down forgans, so I just wanted to thank you personally. The name *Druid* also caught my attention anyway."

"Well, I'm glad you found a way to control your forgan problem," my father replied. "They sure are pests, though."

"You're telling me. Don't know why they made a monster like that."

Huh? Wait…did he just say…?

"Ahh, but at least we're finally managing to solve one of our problems. Do you have any idea how devastated I was when I found out most attacks didn't work against them? I just about wanted to skip town when that happened. But thanks to you, Druid, we now know that even novice adventurers can stop them as long as they've got magic stones. Those water magic balls the forgans made as shields were our biggest obstacle—no matter how badly we wanted to attack the forgans, those pesky balls always got in our way. But that all changes now. Even if another big herd comes at us like yesterday, we can take them down. I really can't thank you enough, Druid."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, but… Poleon, I have to ask—" My father's mouth suddenly shut.

"Hm?" Poleon gave him an inquisitive look.

"Never mind… It's nothing."

Wait, why isn't he going to ask? Oh, that's right, we're in the dining hall! We're talking right out in the open.

"Why don't you—oh!" Captain Poleon cut himself off, his eyes darting uncomfortably around the room. Apparently, he'd figured out why my father was reluctant to talk. He looked at my father, then at me, and then he quickly looked away.

"You haven't changed a bit," my father said.

The captain blushed slightly.

"You're too careless."

"Oh, shut up!" Poleon hissed. "I let my guard down because I'm with *you*, Druid."

Lieutenant Leah watched on in confusion. Noticing her gaze, the flustered Captain Poleon jumped out of his chair. "We can't do this today. Come see me in two nights."

"Heh! Got it," my father smirked.

Hee hee! He's running away.

"Beith will probably be with me. He was wondering about your name, too," Poleon said.

"Noted."

With that, Captain Poleon and Lieutenant Leah left the dining hall. After they'd gone, we went back to our room and caught our breaths. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but the captain was a strange man. Most of the people who became head watchmen were odd, and I guess Poleon was no exception.

"Sorry, Ivy, but it looks like our departure date just got pushed back."

"It's okay, I don't mind. You guys sure are close, aren't you?"

"…We're average."

Why did I detect a sour look on his face? Come to think of it, Captain Poleon did say something about "giving hell" to my father before. Would it be insensitive to ask him about that?

"Huh? What's up?" my father asked.

"Well…"

"If it's about Beith or Poleon, ask me anything. I've got nothing to hide."

Oh, good. Now I can ask him.

"What did he mean when he said he used to *'give you hell'*?"

"Ohh, that. Well, we got started as apprentices under our master before he did."

"Who's *we*?"

"Huh? Oh, Gotos and me."

"Mr. Gotos, eh?"

My father and Gotos, Captain Poleon, and Guild Master Beith, whom I hadn't met yet. They were surely a little different back then, but they must have been a lively bunch.

"Since Gotos and I became apprentices before they did, you'd assume we were both stronger than them. But they apparently didn't like that idea, so they'd pick fights with us over anything and everything. And if we tried to run away because we didn't want to bother, they'd chase after us. Then if we ran away again, they'd keep chasing us everywhere for the whole day. Eventually, we'd get sick of it and fight them. They made us keep fighting them until they were satisfied. And when we tried to escape them, they'd just keep chasing after us again. It really was a living hell. To make things worse, our master didn't stop them—he cheered them on."

Well, knowing my father's mentor, of course he didn't stop them.

"But did you notice what Poleon let slip? He said somebody *made* the forgans."

"I noticed."

He definitely had said that.

"Damn, I only hope he hasn't stuck his neck in another mess."

I looked at my father, and he was clearly worried. Two nights from today, they would talk…I hoped it wasn't anything serious.

"Wait, Dad, what about your sword?"

Captain Poleon had told my father he wanted to see it, but he had left without looking at it.

"Well, that's Poleon for you. Oh well, I'll just have to bring it with me when we go for that talk."

SIDE:
My Father and His Training Buddies, Part 1

—DRUID'S PERSPECTIVE—

I STOOD IN FRONT OF THE RESTAURANT I'd been invited to and took a deep breath in and out. I had not seen Poleon or Beith in over five years. I knew what their personalities were like, and I didn't think either of them had changed much, but I also knew better than anyone that given the opportunity, a person could change dramatically. That meant I had to stay vigilant.

"Good evening, sir," a middle-aged woman called out to me when I stepped into the restaurant.

"I'm meeting with a group," I told her.

"Oh, the captain and his party?"

"That's right."

"Then you'll find them in a private room in the back. They're already there."

I bowed to the woman and headed to the back. It was a beautiful restaurant, and despite it being a little early for dinner, the seats were already quite full. Apparently, it was popular.

"Ah! There he is."

"Wow, it really is Druid. Long time no see."

"Good to see you again… Beith, that scar…"

"Isn't it epic?" Beith put a hand on his head and smiled.

"Yeah…"

Beith's bald head had a big scar on it, extending from the back to the front. Since he had a gentle face—the kind women loved—the

scar really clashed.

"Yeah, I thought I was a dead man when I got this baby, but I survived somehow."

"Glad to hear it."

I guess a lot can happen in five years.

"Sit down. Let's drink," Poleon said. I sat across from them.

"I just ordered some stuff at random for you—was that okay?" Beith asked.

I nodded and answered that it was fine, but I couldn't take my mind off his scar. It was an incredibly big one. He must have been in mortal danger when he got it.

"Druid."

"What?"

"I know you can't get your mind off my head, but I can't get my mind off your missing arm."

That's right… I guess Beith isn't the only grotesque one here.

"Oh, this? A monster got it."

"Figured. Same thing happened to me."

A smile filled my face at Beith's answer. He was talking about it as easily one would the weather.

"It was a nasty gash, but I'm glad I survived it," Beith said with a smile.

"Me, too," I answered.

"But wow, Druid, you're a *dad*. Got a wife?" Beith asked.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not married. And Ivy and I aren't blood related."

"That makes sense. I didn't see the resemblance. She's way too pretty to be yours," Poleon said.

I smiled sheepishly. "I know. Isn't she adorable?"

"Aren't you worried about her future?"

"A little, yeah. But I'm okay with someone else taking care of her one day as long as they're stronger than me."

"That's quite a tall hurdle to clear," Beith sighed with a tired glance at me.

"Well, she needs somebody with a basic amount of strength."

"A *basic amount*, you say? Ivy…that was her name, right? She's gonna have a hard time when she grows up."

Beith shrugged it off like it was a joke, but I was willing to die on that hill.

After a while, our food arrived. As the table was buried under all the dishes, I chuckled softly. They had eaten an astonishing amount of food when we were in training, and it looked like that hadn't changed a bit.

"You still eat as much as you did when you were young?" I asked.

"Shut up; we ain't that old yet," Poleon snapped. "Besides, I run around all day on my job. I gotta eat to have the energy for it."



Well, I guess he had a point.

"I still can't believe you're the captain of the watch. I guess a man really can change," I said.

"Hey, nobody's more shocked than me," he said. "So, Druid, about your sword—"

"Hold that thought." Beith nervously cut him off and pulled a magic item from his magic bag. He set it on the table and pressed the button.

"Sorry, you still hadn't set it up yet?" Poleon asked, nodding apologetically to Beith.

"I had to wait for the food first."

"Oh, right."

He had that now-familiar item on the table that prevented your voices from escaping to the next room, and once he had pressed the button, it was working.

"Okay, back to the topic at hand—can I see your sword?"

"Sure, be my guest."

I handed my sword to Poleon. After a little nervous soul-searching, my conscience told me they were both safe, so I decided to trust them.

"Dang, this magic stone is epic." Beith examined the stone beside Poleon in awe. I didn't blame him; that magic stone was breathtakingly beautiful this close up.

"Druid…are you ready to hit the road again?"

"Huh?! Oh, uh, mostly, yeah."

Wow. What's the rush?

"Good. You should leave tomorrow if you can."

I stared at Poleon in a daze. Beith was nodding next to him.

"Why?"

"The parasites leeching off this village heard about your sword."

Poleon handed me my sword back. Parasites… Did he mean the church?

"Are you talking about the church?"

"I mean those *scumbags* under the church's protection who *call* themselves adventurers."

That's right… I heard some of the novice adventurers were cronies of the church.

"I use my captain's authority where I can to keep the novices in check, but the church bastards are always on my case."

From the length and loudness of Poleon's sigh, it was clear that the church must have been getting on his case a lot.

"If those scumbags tell the church about your sword, they'll throw a fit again. Get out of here before you get caught up in it."

"Okay, I'll do that."

I was a little on guard when I first got here, but it seems like I can trust these guys. Oh! Could it be…?

"Is that why you asked me where I found the magic stone?" I asked.

"Could be. I wanted to know if your stone was one of a kind or if you knew where people could find more. The scumbags sure wanted to know. If experience has taught me one thing, it's that if you try to keep a secret, they'll do something stupid, so I just thought I'd lend you a hand, Druid."

"Ah."

He didn't exactly "lend me a hand" so much as he got caught up in something without knowing it…

"Those scumbags are anything but loyal to each other. All it would take is one magic stone, and they'd be at each other's throats

—they wouldn't get to you right away, Druid. If you knew where you'd found the magic stone, I would've given the signal."

"The signal?"

"You know, the one we used to use. You remember it, don't you?"

"…I think so?"

"Then maybe it's a good thing I didn't use it."

"Yeah…"

There was a hint of frustration in Poleon and Beith's eyes as they looked at me. Well, how would I know the signal? We hadn't used it in years…

"Truth be told, I was going to tell you about all this first, but too many of those scumbags caught a glimpse of your magic stone up close and they tried to do something right away. I know I'm just making excuses, but I had to get you involved against your will. Sorry."

"It's all right."

Looking back, most people wouldn't have asked such intimate questions in an unguarded place like that. For that matter, did someone overhear us? I didn't notice anybody… Oh, wait! There was *somebody.*

"Did you use the innkeeper and Lieutenant Leah? You know, make them spread a rumor?"

Since a lot of people were curious about the magic stone, the rumor was sure to spread quickly.

"Leah caught on to Poleon's idea and took the initiative to spread the rumor herself, with a smile on her face all the while." Beith looked equally amused as he said it.

"Yeah, and thanks to her, the rumor spread far and wide by noon today, just like I expected. Now everyone thinks there's only one magic stone. And according to my men I have spying on the

scumbags, they're all fighting over who gets to steal the magic stone from you right now, Druid."

"You really are good at this," I said. "So, is that why you asked me out tonight?"

"That's right. What do you think would happen if you left without a magic stone on your sword?"

Now it made sense. If I left this restaurant with no magic stone on my sword, people would assume either the guild master or the captain of the watch had it.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

He didn't seem worried, at least. But nothing was ever a hundred percent certain.

"Just how long do you think I've been dealing with those scumbags? I know *exactly* how to fight them. Besides, this'll be a great chance for me to have some fun."

For just a moment, I caught an iciness in Poleon's gaze. I could tell he had a lot of pent-up frustrations to purge.

"I think I'll let myself loose too. About time we pound some discipline into these newbies."

When I saw the look on Beith's face, chills ran down my spine. He looked gentle, but he could be ruthless when the occasion called for it. Made me wonder just what those scumbags had done.

"Well, as long as you'll both be all right…"

I took the magic stone off my sword and put it in the tiny magic bag around my waist. All the pieces were now in place.

"Should I go right now?"

"No, wait for my signal. Besides, why not let them stew for a while?"

I nodded at Beith.

"We'll handle the scumbags somehow, but the nobleman is in town, you know. If we wait too long and he manages to give us an order, things will get dicey. So you should skip town as soon as you can."

"Got it."

"Sorry we roped you into this without asking," Poleon said.

I shook my head. He'd said the novice adventurers would "do something stupid." The first thing that came to mind was them taking Ivy as a hostage. Poleon and Beith had kept her safe, so they didn't need to apologize to me.

"Oh! Did you also leak the information about the forgans on purpose?" I asked Poleon. His face turned slightly red, so I assumed I was wrong.

"I was just so happy to see you again, Druid, that I…I just let it slip out. Ha ha ha!"

Beith gave Poleon a frustrated look.

"I'm not sure if it's okay for me to ask this, but are forgans man-made hybrids of other monsters?"

With a sigh, Beith nodded. "Yeah, they are. One of the veteran adventurer parties in this village came from the royal capital to solve that problem."

So an adventurer team was dispatched to solve it. That must mean it's very important.

"So even the people in the royal capital think it's a big problem?"

They both nodded.

"We're trying to stay out of it as much as we can," Beith said with a cynical smile. "The church gives us more than our fair share of problems already."

"You said it," Poleon groaned.

Yeah, the church alone already poses all sorts of problems. I never wanted to have to deal with them, either. I just wanted to find out how dangerous forgans were because we were traveling. Now I know how to fight them, and I've got a general sense of what their characteristics are. I might not need to know anything more about them.

SIDE:
My Father and His Training Buddies, Part 2

—DRUID'S PERSPECTIVE—

"I NEED A DRINK," Poleon said.

Beith snapped back, "Oh, shut up. I've been itching to drink just as bad as you."

"I don't think a drink or two will affect you that badly," I suggested.

The two glared at me. Why were they upset at me? I know those two wouldn't let a couple of drinks keep them from losing a fight. Neither Poleon nor Beith could even get drunk without a lot of help.

"I'm afraid I'll lose control," Beith said.

This gave me pause. Was he really so mad at the bastards eyeing my magic stone that a few drinks would send him overboard? Based on everything I knew about him, this struck me as odd.

"What happened?" I asked.

A grim look filled their eyes.

"Little by little…we've managed to back the church into a corner," Poleon said.

I nodded. When you were up against a megalomaniac who wasn't afraid to abuse their power, you couldn't lose your head. You had to go slowly, moving in one inch at a time so your enemy wouldn't be wise to what you were doing.

"Besides, we don't exactly know how we should handle things since we don't know why the church teamed up with those noblemen," Beith said.

With a cynical smile, Poleon continued, "One wrong move and the nobles can end us. It's bloody annoying."

It was indeed annoying to get on a nobleman's bad side. They had an unlimited supply of easily bought men in their back pocket to do their bidding—and sometimes their bidding was unthinkably ruthless.

"But I'm guessing you haven't taken any of this lying down, right?"

Knowing Poleon, this was a fair question to ask.

"Well, we protest as much as we feel safe to. I know people in the royal capital, so I've got a little intel."

Beith smiled at Poleon. "And we've been trained well enough to know just how we can leverage what little intel we have to heavily damage an enemy."

I'm thinking these guys might have spread the other rumors, too, not just the ones about me…

Poleon smiled faintly. "During the past couple years, since the noblemen were gone and the church had lost its ample supply of funding, they made the kind of mistake they never would've made before. That finally gave us the concrete evidence we needed to take them down."

"And all the evidence we'd gotten before that wasn't quite the clincher we needed," Beith said, and Poleon nodded.

"And what're you going to do with that evidence?" I asked.

"We sent it to someone. And that someone will be able to drive the church away from this village very soon."

It did seem impossible to arrest the church bastards on incriminating evidence alone. To protect the village, driving them away was their only option.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," I said.

I'm sure they really would rather arrest the church leaders. Is that what's making them so incredibly mad?

"They let their guard down—all of them," Beith said bitterly.

"The church bastards didn't notice that Bith had gotten into their ranks, even though they had a watcher and all."

Bith… That was the boy the church was looking for.

"What did this Bith boy do, exactly?" I asked.

They both shook their heads.

"We don't know. But one thing's clear: He made the church *clench their buttholes*. They said he took their money and ran, but Bith wouldn't have done something like that. He's a very kind boy with a strong sense of justice."

Do these guys know Bith personally?

"Is he still on the run? Not in the forest, but hiding here in the village, right? If so, then maybe somebody is harboring—"

"If only. No, one of the church's men found him."

What?!

"And there must've been a real struggle. When we found him, he was in horrible shape."

"…Was he dead?"

Beith shook his head no.

I quietly sighed in relief. "Who got him?"

"Four men. We arrested them right there and locked them up in a special place."

I had a feeling their "special place" was not a legal jail cell.

"He was on death's door," Beith said. "For a minute there, I almost thought we ought to just let him go quietly then and there. But then Bith grabbed my hand, so I saved him. But they must've done something to him because the magic inside Bith's body acted up and the potion didn't work very well on him. His magic energy

still isn't stable, even now. That's making what little life he had left in his body fade away, and now potions hardly even work on him anymore."

"All we did was drag out his suffering." Poleon slapped Beith's shoulder.

"Those bastards tortured Bith to get something out of him." Beith pounded his fist into the table.

"Cool it," Poleon said.

Bith was alive because they needed to get some information out of him, but things looked bleak for Bith. If he was so weak that potions no longer worked on him, he was beyond saving. Except—"Druid, the bastards who are after you are part of the same gang that was looking for Bith. We already have the actual perps in custody, so we know. But those bastards were helping the church. They'll make a nice punching bag for all our pent-up frustrations."

It was natural for them to be consumed by fury. I wouldn't be surprised if the bastards who hurt Bith were no longer alive*. No, wait, I know these two. They're alive. But in what state, that remains a mystery.*

"Is it about time?" Poleon asked.

Beith stepped outside our private room. He came back after a while, looked at me, and nodded. Apparently, they were all ready to attack me.

"They might come at you, too, Druid. Um…how well can you fight right now?" Beith asked, tactfully eyeing my missing arm with sad eyes.

"Don't worry, I can still fight like I used to. I just had to change up my style a little."

I had gotten used to one-armed fighting, but I was still a little nervous going up against bigger groups of enemies or ones with unique fighting styles. Because of that, I now always took the initiative and struck my enemy down first so they would never have

the chance to defeat me. And since I sized up their strength before I attacked, my fighting style was… Well, it was a little more forceful than before.

"Okay then…" Poleon answered stiffly, glancing at my arm.

"You wanna know a secret?" I asked.

"What?"

Poleon and Beith both looked at me curiously.

"With my missing arm, my opponents think I'm hopeless, so they go easy on me. It's actually turned out to be quite an asset."

After a long pause, Poleon chuckled. "Has it, now?"

Beith followed with a dazed, sheepish smile. I'd use whatever tools I had to win a fight unscathed, because Ivy would cry if I came home hurt.

"Huh, so you're okay even with just one arm. Why don't you be an adventurer again?" Beith coaxed, smiling at me.

"Hard pass."

Back at his old tricks, I see…

"Too bad. And here I was gonna make you my lackey."

I sighed at Beith. "And I know you actually meant that."

"But of course! The guild's secret weapon is putting on his next epic show at Hataru Village!"

Beith's proclamation made me sigh yet again. *I'm starting to remember I used to sigh all the time whenever I talked with this guy. He really hasn't changed a bit.*

"So, when're you skipping town?" Beith asked.

I thought it over. We were mostly ready to leave, but not completely. We still needed to get some potions at the dump.

"Tomorrow at…" *If we hurry, maybe we can make it out by lunchtime?* "We haven't settled on a time yet, but we're leaving tomorrow."

"Got it. Poleon?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. We've gotten a good handle on our noble friend's behavior, so if he makes a move, I'll take care of him. I can slow him down for a few days, so don't you dare rush it and get yourself hurt."

"Roger that. Thanks."

I stood up and lowered my sword from my shoulder. I checked on the magic stone in my magic bag again and grabbed one of the potions inside. It was one of Sora's. I always kept it in a tiny bottle in my magic bag in case of emergency. Normal potions degraded quickly, but Sora's potions never did. Whether it was right of me to take this potion without talking to Ivy was another matter, though…

"Something wrong?" Beith asked me.

Beith and Bith…those names must have come from a famous adventurer from this area. I think his name was Bireith?

"Bith…he's still alive, isn't he?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah…he was still alive before we came here. The doctor says he won't make it through the night, though."

"So it has to be tonight… Don't ask any questions. I won't say anything, either."

"Huh?"

I pulled the tiny bottle out of my magic bag and pressed it to Beith's chest.

"What's this? It's so clear and blue… What is it?"

"It's a blue potion."

Poleon and Beith stared hard at the little bottle.

"But Druid, this is—"

"Thanks," Beith cut off Poleon, slipping the little potion into his magic bag.

Poleon grunted at him in protest, then after a few seconds, he said, "All right, you win. Now, we'd better get to Bith as soon as possible! We can't waste a moment."

"Damn straight. Let's end this."

The three of us walked out of the restaurant together.

"Thanks for letting me have your magic stone, old friend," Poleon said to me.

I froze for a moment. *Bastard didn't tell me we'd be doing improv!*

"Well, this village is in such a bind, I'm just happy my magic stone can help you guys out."

My only worry is, will our enemies actually fall for this stupid charade? I gave Beith an anxious glance. He grinned and nodded in reply. Apparently, they were swallowing it.

"Well, good luck," I said.

"You, too, Druid. Come back and visit once things have settled down. Next time, we'll let you take it easy."

After I parted ways with them, I quickly headed back to the inn. I sensed murderous intent along the way, but whoever it was left me alone. But seriously, who would attack anyone while letting such strong bloodlust come out in full display? It was like announcing "I'm coming to kill you!" just before you attacked…

I was worried at first, but if that's the level of enemy they're up against, they should make it back to save Bith in no time.

Okay, as soon as I get back to our room, I'll wake up Ivy and fill her in on everything, then we'll leave. But seriously, our lives have been nothing but hectic ever since we left Hataka Village. I hope we'll get some peace and quiet in the next village.

Chapter 474:
Chatting and Packing

"I'M BACK."

"Oh, hi, Dad!"

When I saw the look on my father's face as he stepped through the door, I felt relieved. He'd been a little nervous when he left, but now his expression told me that neither the guild master nor the captain of the guard had changed.

"How was your little reunion?" I asked.

"They haven't changed a bit."

"Glad to hear it. You were worried about that."

"You noticed?"

When I saw the slightly shocked look in his eye, I couldn't help but giggle. Just like my father could now pick up on my subtle mood changes, I had recently started managing to pick up on *his* subtle mood changes as well. It made me so happy.

But wait a minute, something still seems off about him. Did something happen?

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Well, they both told me a lot about what's been going on, and it means we're going to leave this village tomorrow."

Tomorrow? That's…sudden.

"We'll need to get some more things together, but we're mostly ready to go. Did something come up?"

"Remember how I used my sword when we took down the forgans?"

He took the sword off his shoulder and showed it to me. *Wait a minute…the magic stone is missing.*

"The adventurers who're working with the church want my magic stone."

"Yikes… They're the worst!"

"I know. That's why my old friends said we should skip town before word gets back to the nobleman."

That made sense. We really did need to leave as soon as possible.

"Hey, Dad, what did you do with the magic stone?"

"It's in here."

He showed me the magic bag he always carried with him, and out of it fell the magic stone. It was such a beautiful stone, no matter how many times I saw it. I could understand why people wanted to steal it.

"Wait, but Dad, don't you usually hide the hilt with the magic stone under cloth?"

And I thought I remembered seeing the cloth on the sword when he was fighting, too.

"The cloth fell off while I was fighting. I realized it after a while and fixed it, but somebody noticed the stone."

The cloth slipped? Talk about bad luck.

"Ohh, okay. Well, I wanted to meet your old training friends, but I guess I can't if we're leaving tomorrow. That's too bad."

"I'd rather you not meet them. They can't keep their big mouths shut."

"That's the part I was looking forward to the most!"

My father looked a bit surly when he heard that. Was he really that upset about it?

"Well, even if we could make a little time to see them, they'll have to clean up after their ambush, and they've got other things on their plate, so the most we could do is pop in and say hi."

"Oh, right. I figured they'd be busy… Wait a minute, *ambush*?"

My father had said the word so casually I almost let it slide, but what did he mean by "ambush"?

"Oh, yeah… They probably got ambushed right after they parted ways with me. Our enemy thought I gave them my magic stone and they were lying in wait."

That must have been why he didn't have the magic stone on his sword.

"Will they be okay? I guess they must be strong fighters if they're the guild master and captain of the watch, but still…"

"No need to worry about that. Their fuses were blown."

Their fuses were blown?

"It'll take a while for me to explain… Let's get some tea while we talk."

"Okay. Oh, but before we do, do you want to take a bath? We'll be leaving tomorrow, right?"

We would be without that glorious luxury for a while.

"Aagh, you're right. It'll take about ten days to get to the next village."

"And that's if we go by the village road."

As long as our creatures didn't want to take us on any detours. We had never once experienced the joy of just taking the village road to the next village.

"Ha ha ha ha! Right you are. I'll go take that bath."

"Have fun. I'll have tea waiting for you when you get back."

As my dad left the room, I took some cold water out of our magic box. Something too cold wouldn't be good for us right then,

but if I took it out now and let it sit for a while, it would warm up to a more pleasant coolness.

"It's getting hotter and hotter at night these days. Oh, yeah, I need to tell everyone the news. Then again, they probably already heard, since we're in the same room!"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

I looked in the direction of Sora's voice to see that everyone was looking at me except for Toron, who had already gone to bed.

"We'll be hitting the road tomorrow. Is that okay?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

"Pefu!"

"Well, thank you, everyone. Our travels start again tomorrow."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

"Pefu!"

"Thanks. Now, Dad and I still have some talking to do, so you all can go to bed if you want."

When I said this, everyone started looking for comfortable places to sleep. *Gee, I couldn't give them much time to play in this village, either. I'll take them to the forest to play in the next village, so help me!*

"Sorry I took so long."

While I was putting the room in order, my father came back.

"That's okay. The tea's ready when you want it."



"Thanks. Did you do all this yourself? I can help—what do you need me to do?"

Since we were ready to skip town at a moment's notice thanks to the church, there really wasn't that much to do.

"Don't worry, it's all done. Besides, we haven't really unpacked much since we got here."

"Oh. True." My father looked around the room and nodded.

"Oops! But I don't think we have enough food for the creatures."

"Guess our first stop after we leave this village is the dump."

"Good idea."

I sat down and drank some tea. My father sat next to me. "Okay, first I'll tell you about the church."

"All right."

"Poleon and Beith have been working for a very long time on setting the chips in place to drive the church out of this village for good."

I was a little surprised to hear this. Drive out the church? It'd apparently been done before, but it sounded like an uphill battle. I still hoped it went well, though.

"Wow, that's incredible."

"I know. They're incredible guys."

Then my father told me about the men who were after him, and also about Bith.

"How horrible."

I wish the church would just be destroyed.

"And I have to apologize to you about something, Ivy."

"About what?"

My father confused me. From what he'd said so far, he had nothing to apologize for.

"You know how I put Sora's special potion in a little bottle and carry it around with me?"

"Yeah."

I'd begged him to put a little potion in a magic bag and carry it around with him since there was no telling when he would get hurt. I always carried a little potion in the magic bag around my waist, too. Ordinary potions immediately deteriorated when you put them in different bottles, but Sora's and Flame's potions didn't degrade over time, so we could keep them as long as we wanted. But why was he bringing up the potion in the first place?

"I gave my potion to Poleon and Beith."

He gave it to them? Oh—was it for Bith?

"But you said that he barely had any strength left and potions didn't work on him."

"I know, and that's true. Sora's potion is special, though."

He was right. Sora's potions were extraordinary. But maybe Bith's body was too weak for it to work on him.

"You're right. It might save Bith."

"Sorry I gave it away without talking to you first."

I shook my head dismissively. I would have done the same thing if I were in his place, so he had no reason to feel bad.

"Don't worry about it. I hope Bith will be okay."

"Me, too."

I nodded. I really did hope the potion would work.

"Oh! Did you tell them about…you know?"

My father gave me a confused look.

"The field of karyo flowers, you know, with that addictive narcotic? You said someone definitely planted and maintained that

field, remember?"

"Oh… *Oh!*"

…Don't tell me he forgot?

"I completely forgot. I didn't even tell the adventurer guild about it."

"Oops! That's right."

I'd completely forgotten to do that, too.

My father let out a long groan. "Okay, so before we leave tomorrow, we'll check to see if we got any faaxes, then I guess we'll tell the merchant guild about the flowers."

"Will the merchant guild do?"

"Yeah, if we're just offering information, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Okay, so what time tomorrow are we leaving?"

"We'll eat breakfast, get the meat from the innkeeper, then head straight out."

Get meat from the innkeeper? Oh, that's right, Chemia said she would give us some meat.

"You mean the meat that Chemia offered us?"

"Uh-huh. When I told her we would leave before lunchtime tomorrow, she checked in to ask how much meat we could take off her hands."

That's right, she was practically begging us to take some meat since she only had one room to store it in.

"Well, let's get to bed," he said. "We've got an early start tomorrow."

"Okay."

Since our objective is to get as far away from this village as possible, we'll probably have to walk without taking any breaks tomorrow. Okay, let's get some sleep!

Chapter 475:
First Stop: The Dump

WE SAID OUR GOODBYES to Leffrey and Chemia, took some of their fow and forgan meat, and checked out of CheChe by lunchtime. Before we left the village, we stopped at the merchant guild to see if we had any faaxes. There was one from Grandpa, which we took; it was a good thing we checked. When my father told everyone at the merchant guild about the field of karyo flowers we'd found in the forest, there was a big panic.

"They've been seeing a lot more addicts recently," my father explained to me.

"Oh dear. Well, I hope they get some help."

"Me, too."

We left the merchant guild and headed for the village gate. Along the way, we passed by some chatting villagers.

"Did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"The head watchman and the guild master got assaulted last night."

Aha. The rumor is already out.

"Really? Details!"

"Well, you know those guys; they fought them off in a flash. Anyway, they were a group of adventurers mixed up with the church."

The rumor is really that detailed? Dang, these villagers are shrewd.

"Whoaaa, are they stupid? They'd have to be, to attack that pair!"

"I know, right? Why would you attack the guild master and head watchman? They *saved* this village. The church really does nothing but bad things, don't they?"

So they're saviors here? I'd better ask them to tell me more next time we visit.

"I'd love to drive them out of here."

Huh?

"Wait, you mean the church? Is that even possible?"

"I'm not sure, but do you honestly think this village needs a church that despises us?"

"We sure don't. Yeah, I'd love to give the church the boot. Then our kids could play outside without worrying."

"The noblemen haven't been coming around lately, either. If we're gonna make a move, now's our chance."

Wow, this is quite the conversation I'm overhearing. Well, the village leaders are getting ready to drive them out anyway, so if the villagers give them the final push, they'll probably succeed.

"Hi there. What're we all talking about?"

"We're talking about kicking the church out of this village."

"Whoa! What the heck?"

Wait a minute, somehow the conversation completely switched from the village leaders to the church. I looked curiously at my father and noticed a subtle smile form on his lips.

"What?" I pressed him.

"Nothing…I'll tell you later. Oh, look!"

I followed my father's gaze to see that the same officer who'd met us at the gate when we arrived was there again.

"Will it take a while for us to get through the gate?" I asked concernedly.

"It shouldn't take long; all we have to do is return our permits…"

Thinking back on the situation in Hataru when we first arrived made me a little worried.

"Oh, it's you two again. Good morning! Going into the forest today?"

"Good morning," my father answered the gatekeeper. "We're leaving, actually."

The gatekeeper looked disappointed to hear that. "Oh, that's too bad. Uhh, y'knooow…this village is going through a lot. Do you really have to leave?"

We handed the gatekeeper our permits and he took them without arguing. *What a relief. He'll let us go.*

"Swing by again sometime, will you?" he said. "Next time you come around, Hataru will be a much nicer place to stay."

"We will, thank you," I answered.

"Thanks," my father echoed.

We went out the gate and headed for the dump.

"Think we'll find any purple potions?" I asked.

"If we don't, we'll be in trouble. Toron can't consume fresh purple potions."

"I know."

Purple potions broke curses. Sometimes people found cursed stones or treasure chests in caves, but that didn't happen very often. People could be cursed directly, too, but victims could naturally repel simple curses unless they were sick or weakened. And I'd read in a book that casting powerful curses took years of training. This meant curses themselves were rather rare, and so not many curse-breaking

purple potions were made. As a result we never found many purple potions at dumps.

Worried that we wouldn't always be able to find enough purple potions at dumps, we bought a purple potion to test on Toron…and the little tree monster outright snubbed it. Then we offered Toron a degraded potion, which the little tree happily lapped up. In a side-by-side tasting, Toron always went for the degraded purple potion. That told us we'd need to find a lot of purple potions at the dump, or we'd be in trouble.

"You look for the potions, Ivy, and I'll collect the magic items. Once I fill a magic bag, I'll help you find potions."

"Okay."

I scanned the area for human auras. I was itching to let my creatures out of their bag.

"Somebody's coming…"

The presence was still far away, by the village gate, but somebody was definitely heading our way. When it got a little closer, I recognized it.

"Lieutenant Leah is heading for us," I announced.

"She is?"

"Yeah."

Had we forgotten something? I was drawing a blank.

"There you are! I didn't believe the captain when he said you went this way, but he was right."

Lieutenant Leah was now standing right by us.

"Hello. Is there a problem?" my father asked.

"The head watchman gave me a message for you, so I was waiting by the gate, but the captain gave me a bunch of extra work and I just missed you when you left."

That's…a terrible stroke of bad luck.

"What's his message?" my father asked.

Lieutenant Leah steadied her breath. "I don't really understand it, so I'll just deliver it word for word: *Full recovery. Come back soon*."

Full recovery? Does that mean Bith was saved? From the way Lieutenant Leah spoke, it was hard to understand for a moment.

"I see. Thanks for the message."

So Bith was saved. Thank goodness.

"No problem. Is there anything you'd like me to tell him back?" she offered.

"Uhh…" my father paused in thought. "Tell them they owe me and Ivy an expensive dinner next time we come by."

Lieutenant Leah giggled. "Message received. Well, if you're here to dump some trash, want me to help?"

Her offer confused me for a minute, but then I realized she assumed we had come to the dump to dump our trash. It felt odd to me, since we always came to the dump to *pick up* trash.

"Oh, no thanks. Are you sure it was okay for you to leave your captain alone?" my father asked.

Lieutenant Leah's eyes wandered. "I guess he'll be all right for a little while…"

The anxiety in her face was concerning… What in the world did her captain do to make her worry so much over him?

"You should probably get back to him before he does something crazy," my father advised her.

"I know, but…" She looked torn.

"If we have a repeat of what happened with us before, you'll have a problem on your hands."

Yeah, if he's dealing with short-tempered adventurers, there'll be trouble.

Lieutenant Leah sighed. “I know, you’re right. If I let him out of my sight, he always does stupid things.”

With another loud sigh, Lieutenant Leah bowed to us and turned on her heel. She was such an honorable woman.

“Do come back to Hataru Village someday. We’ll all be waiting.”

“Thank you. We’ll definitely be back to visit,” I told her.

After we said goodbye to Lieutenant Leah, we headed toward the dump again.

“Wanna let the creatures out of the bag when we get to the dump?” my father asked.

“Okay. I really feel sorry for Lieutenant Leah—she’s got her hands full.”

“She sure does. I don’t envy her.”

A chuckle escaped me.

After we walked for a while, the dump came into view.

“This dump really is a little too big for the village,” I remarked.

This wasn’t our first time at Hataru’s dump, but it seemed even bigger the second time.

“You’re right. That’s a good thing for scavengers like us, but it must be a problem for the villagers.”

There were giant piles of trash at the dump. If only the tamers would open their hearts to their monsters soon, then all this trash would no longer be a problem.

Chapter 476:
Potions Secured

"THINK YOU'LL GET ENOUGH purple potions? Here's another one." My father handed me a third purple potion.

"Thanks."

I took the potion, set it at my feet, and looked at the piece of paper with a line drawn on it. Whenever we gathered ten potions, we put them in a magic bag and drew one line on the paper. That way, we knew how many potions we had in the magic bag without taking them out and counting them. And our current haul was…252 blue potions, 269 red ones, and 85 purple ones. We had the least number of purple potions by far, but we were lucky we were able to collect as many as we did.

"We've gathered eighty-five as of now, so we're almost at our goal."

Our goal was one hundred, and even that would barely be enough to get us to the next village. 120 potions would put us in the clear, but I knew we shouldn't get our hopes up.

"Eighty-five, huh? Another twenty would be nice."

"I know. That might put my mind at ease. But if Toron starts eating more, we'll run out early."

"True. Toron's diet hasn't changed yet, right?"

"Right."

Toron ate the same number of purple potions as before. The little tree had grown a little taller since it killed the karyo flowers, but its intake hadn't gone up. Still, we assumed that Toron would eat more someday, and since we didn't know when that would be, we wanted to make sure we had as many purple potions as possible.

"I wish we could find other things for Toron to eat, like we did with Sora and Flame," my father said.

I nodded in agreement, but we had run a bunch of tests and nothing had worked. I could only come up with one other thing to replace Toron's meals…and I didn't think it would fly.

"There's just one other thing, isn't there?" my father asked. "I've been trying to keep my mind off it, though."

Apparently, my father was thinking the same thing.

"Yeah. But we can't feed Toron that, can we?"

"We can't…but I think we should lay out some rules about it, thinking about the worst-case scenario."

"I agree with you there, but…"

When Toron dried out the karyo field, the little tree had grown. Toron had quite clearly taken nutrients from the karyo flowers. Meaning that, in an emergency, it could probably get nutrients from trees in the forest. But that might kill the trees…

"Toron's meals are a big, constant problem for us," my father reminded me. "I just think we should have a Plan B in place."

He was right. We had to know just what Toron needed beforehand.

"Do you think the forest will be okay if its trees die?"

I thought back to the field of karyo flowers. When the sea of flowers withered in an instant, the scenery's atmosphere changed. What if that happened in the heart of the forest…? I just thought that would be wrong.

"Well, if an entire grove of trees died just like the karyo field, we'd have a problem, but I don't see why a few trees would be a problem."

"A few trees?"

"Yeah, we'd ask Toron to take it easy."

Would that be okay? But was Toron even able to control its powers? Were my father and I even on the same page here? Maybe we should just ask Toron.

"I guess we'll have to ask Toron a lot of questions," I decided. "Um…where *is* Toron?"

When the karyo field withered in an instant, I should have gotten some answers then and there. The only thing I'd learned for sure that day was that Toron had definitely made the karyo field wither and die. I'd just been too shocked over what Toron had done to do anything else.

"Toron, where are you?" my father asked loudly.

"Gyah!" Toron's voice sounded from a distance. We walked over toward the voice to find Toron inside a tossed-out bottle.

"Oh, Toron…" My father smiled.

"Um, did you fall in the bottle, little guy?"

The three leaves swayed side to side in reply. That must have meant Toron hadn't fallen in. In other words, it entered the bottle on purpose?

"Having fun?" I asked.

"Gyah!"

Toron's leaves bobbed up and down, its voice a little higher-pitched than usual. Then again, maybe the bottle was just amplifying its voice. Either way, Toron seemed happy in there.

"I wonder what's so fun about being inside a bottle?" my father asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Yeah, I have a hard time understanding it. But as long as Toron's happy…"

"I guess so."

I nodded. Toron was having fun, that was what mattered most. Except now I was curious about something. The bottle containing

Toron was rather long and skinny, so the only part of the tree outside the bottle was its leaves.

"Hey, Toron, can you get out of that bottle on your own?" I asked.

The happily swaying leaves came to a sudden stop. *"…gyah?"*

Toron began to squirm nervously inside the bottle…but since the bottle wasn't all that wide around, the little tree had hardly any room to move.

"…I don't think Toron can get out," my father remarked, smiling awkwardly at the bottle.

Toron twirled around in a huff. (Maybe my father's words had hit a nerve.) I giggled. "Since that bottle is so long and thin, Toron got stuck perfectly inside it."

"Sure did."

Toron struggled inside the bottle for a while, but it eventually gave up and stared hard at me.

"Wanna come out?" I asked.

"Gyah!"

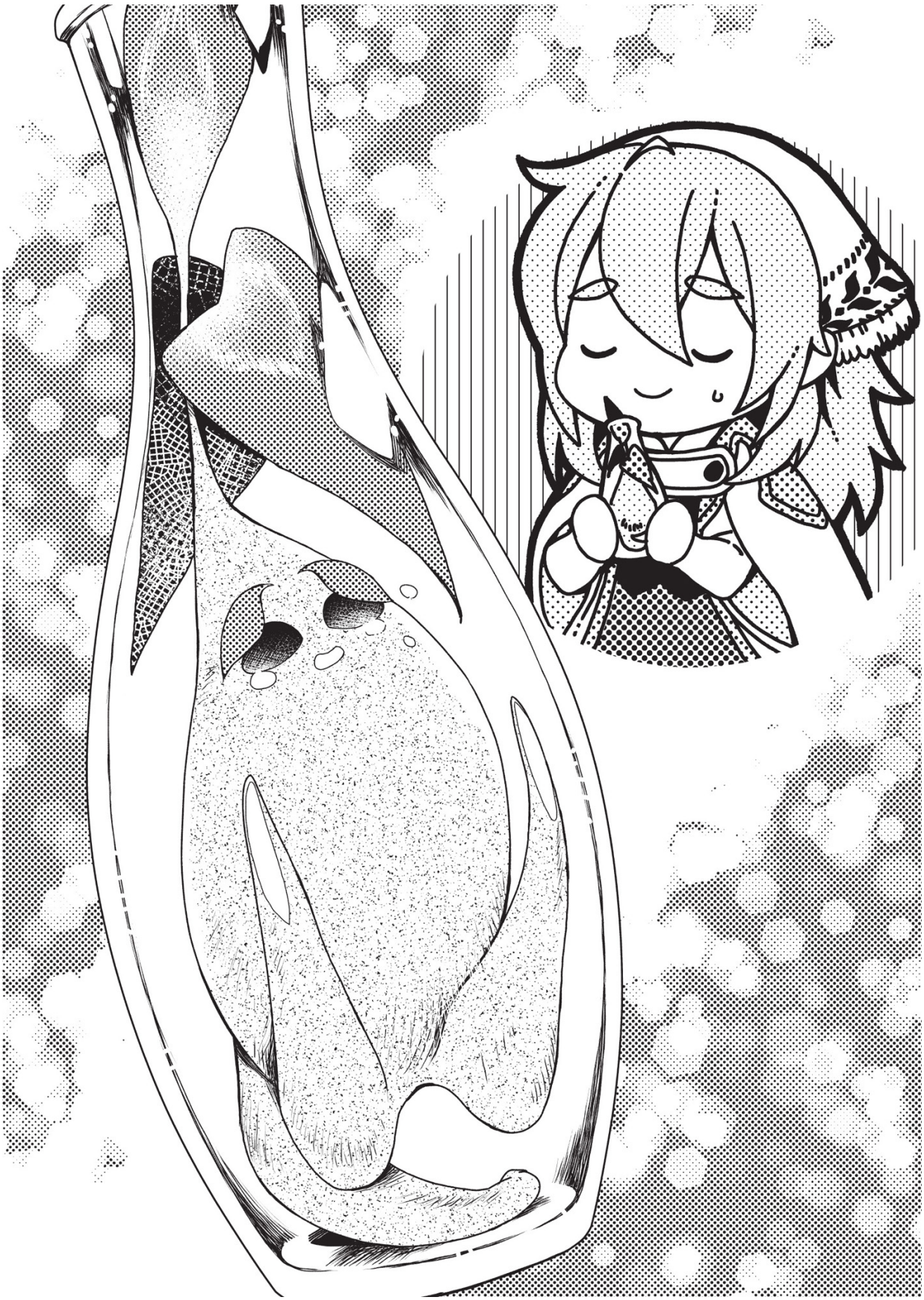
Holding back a chuckle, I picked up the bottle. *Okay, how should I handle this? Should I flip the bottle upside down? Or should I grab Toron by the leaves and pull…*

"Maybe if you tip the bottle on its side, Toron can get out on its own?"

I took my father's advice and laid the bottle sideways on the ground. After a while, Toron squirmed out of it.

"Whewww."

Wait a minute…did Toron just sigh in relief? I looked at Toron. Our eyes met.



"Gyah! Gyah!"

Does that mean "thank you"?

"Let's be more careful from now on, okay?"

"Gyahhh!"

"Well, it was cute, though," my father said.

Toron's leaves moved very peculiarly in response. Usually the three leaves all moved in the same direction, but now they were out of sync. Was Toron embarrassed?

"Oh, right! We were going to ask Toron something," my father said.

"Gyah?!" Toron leaned toward him.

"A little while ago, you made a big field of karyo flowers wither and die. Was it because you sucked the nutrients out of them?"

"Gyah!" Toron cried, nodding its head.

So we were right.

"Okay. Can you take nutrients from other trees and flowers, too?" my father asked.

Toron nodded right away.

"Looks like we'll be okay even without purple potions," he said.

That was true, but I still thought it would be wrong to kill the plants of the forest.

"We can't have the forest dying on us," I insisted.

I'd often heard adventurers say that animals and monsters were highly sensitive to any changes in the forest. If a wide grove of trees died because of Toron…it scared me to think how that might affect the monsters nearby.

"I still think it would be fine if Toron ate only a few trees. Some trees get eaten by insects and die that way, after all."

"I guess you're right…but we'll need to find out if Toron can hold back first."

"Fair point."

Looking back, when Toron killed the field of karyo flowers, the other trees in the area were fine, and they'd been right next to the flowers. Was that a coincidence? Or had Toron spared them on purpose?

"Hey, Toron?" my father said.

"Gyah?!" Toron squawked happily in reply.

"Can you by any chance control how you suck energy out of plants?" I asked.

Toron leaned to the side. That meant "I don't understand."

"Um, okay… Can you take energy from just one tree in the forest, instead of a grove of them?"

"Gyah!" Toron nodded without hesitation.

So it was possible.

"Wow, you're amazing, Toron."

I slowly patted Toron's leaves, and it swayed happily in reply. If Toron ate just one tree, that shouldn't affect the forest much at all.

"I guess we'll still consider the forest plants a last resort," my father assured me.

"Yes, of course," I agreed. "So we'd better collect as many - potions as possible to make certain of that."

"Sure thing."

If we ran out of potions, we'd have to let Toron feed on the forest, but we needed to collect as many purple potions as possible to make sure that didn't happen.

"Okay, we had a nice little rest. Let's get back to it," my father said.

I made another circle around the dump, looking for potions. When my father finished picking up magic items, he joined me in my search.

"All done!" I sighed. "The magic bags are stuffed. Agh, my back hurts!"

My mid-back was having a hard time. I raised both arms to try and stretch it out. "This hurts, but it feels good."

"Ooh! I think I heard mine just say *craggle*." My father, who was stretching next to me, pounded his back with his fist.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Anyway, how many purple potions did we get?"

"Uh, gimme a sec… Okay, there's thirteen lines, so that means we have 130 potions."

"That's impressive."

"Yeah. But some of them are so degraded that we should have Toron check them."

Sora and Flame were fine with very degraded potions, but that didn't mean Toron was. I'd have to show it the most degraded purple potion later and ask.

Chapter 477:
A Little Transformation

CIEL LED US DEEPER into the forest. After a while, the adandara stopped and looked around.

"What's wrong?"

Mew?

Ciel sounded confused.

"Something up there?" My father gripped his sword and quickly looked around. The slimes were also starting to look tense.

"Ivy, can you scan for auras?"

"On it."

I took a deep breath and scanned for auras. I cast as wide a net as I could, but nothing landed in it.

"I don't sense anything…"

"Okay. No humans or monsters?"

"Oh, wait, there was a monster aura, but it's far away and isn't getting any closer. Besides, if it were a monster, Ciel would've reacted to it."

"That is certainly true. Ciel, are you sensing a strange aura?"

Ciel thought about my father's question for a moment before shaking its head. So it wasn't a living being… Was it an object? A place?

"Ciel, is this thing you're sensing dangerous?" I asked.

Ciel answered that it wasn't. Flame and Sora jiggled side to side, answering no in turn.

"So it doesn't sound like a dangerous object or place, either," my father observed.

It wasn't dangerous, but it still worried me…

"Do you want to see what it is?" I asked Ciel.

Ciel answered with a gentle growl. I noticed that Sol seemed to be staring intensely deep into the trees, too.

"Hey, Sol, do you sense any magic?"

If Sol was interested in whatever it was, it had to be magic.

"Pefu!" Sol cried, staring hard at me.

"So it's a strange kind of magic energy?"

"Pefu!"

Does this mean the thing that got Ciel's attention was magic? So it was either a magic item or place…

"Hey, Dad, any idea what it could be?"

"No, not the foggiest. But it's a magic energy that an adandara and some slimes are very interested in. This energy, whatever it is, must be something incredibly different. Could it be a place? Well… sometimes magic energy does radiate from the ground, but I'm not sure…"

Magic energy radiating from the ground? I never heard of that before.

"That's actually a thing?"

"It's a very rare phenomenon, so be extra careful if it happens."

"Why *extra* careful?"

"Because this magic energy could affect the nearby monsters and make them go berserk."

"Isn't that always a bad thing?"

"It is. But Ciel and the others said it wasn't dangerous, so I don't think that's what it is. Maybe some rare magic item got dropped?"

A magic item? Does anyone ever find those things just randomly dropped in the middle of a forest? Did an adventurer drop it? No, they'd never drop anything valuable. But it would make sense if they didn't need it anymore.

"Think there's an illegal dump made by adventurers?"

"I'm pretty sure our creatures would say that was dangerous."

They would. Monsters could go berserk from the pent-up magic energy in illegal dumps, so if Ciel and the others deemed it not dangerous, that explanation seemed a little off.

"Ciel, is this mysterious place an illegal dump?"

Ciel answered that it wasn't. The slimes were telling me the same thing.

"Since talking about it isn't getting us anywhere, let's just go to this mysterious place and see for ourselves. You want to go, don't you, Ivy?"

"Yeah."

My father looked at Ciel, who headbutted his thigh in reply.

"Thanks for showing us the way… Well, you always show us the way, but thanks right now, specifically."

Mrrrow.

"Pefu!"

Huh? Sol? Why did I hear Sol answer with Ciel? I looked over and saw that Sol was eagerly hopping alongside the adandara. This was the slime who had said nothing and just stared longingly out the window whenever it sensed some mysterious magic energy. Whenever I saw Sol like this and suggested we investigate, Sol would never go…and now, that same slime was taking the lead.

"Sol's really keen. That's new," my father remarked with a perplexed look at Sol.

"It sure is."

I had never seen Sol like this, either, so it was very exciting. It looked like this magic energy we were tracking was incredibly interesting. What could it be?

"Gee, now I'm dying to know what it is," my father said, grinning at Ciel and Sol. I was surprised at first to see him smiling like that, but I quickly smiled in turn.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. Let's go."

When I first met my father, he didn't care about anything in the world. But now that we were a family, he was always trying something new. And it was all for me, not because he was personally interested but because he wanted me to have fun. And it was fun trying new things with him. But the look on my father's face now was a little different than before. His gaze was gentle as ever, but there was something…sparkling in him? A tiny transformation. It was subtle, but I loved to see it.

"I wonder how far we're going?" he asked.

"Yeah, we've been walking quite a distance, haven't we?"

Ciel and Sol continued to lead us deeper into the forest. Craggy boulders littered our path more and more as the scenery began to change.

Mew!

Ciel yipped and stopped in front of a large boulder.

"This the place?"

Mrrrow.

According to Ciel, this was the spot. Sol was also staring intently at the boulder.

"Guess this boulder is what's been radiating that mysterious energy," my father said.

"Do you sense anything?"

I had the ability to sense magic energy, but I felt nothing here. I looked up anxiously at my father and he patted my head.

"It's extremely faint. Ciel and the others being able to sense such faint magic energy from so far away is a ridiculously incredible feat."

My father gazed in awe at our creatures. So the magic energy was faint, but detectable. Looks like I had to try harder to hone my magic-detecting ability.

"Pefu!"

I looked at Sol and saw that it had stuck itself to the boulder. My father and I both tensed up at the unbelievable sight.

"What…is Sol doing?" I managed to ask.

But Sol didn't leave the boulder. A closer look showed that Ciel's tail was patting the spot next to Sol.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," my father murmured. "Ivy, you should stay back."

"But Sol—!"

I looked at Sol once more, and then I noticed that the boulder was shaking faintly. Was that Sol's power? Did it have the ability to make boulders tremble?

"This is just a hunch…but I think Sol is sucking the magic energy from that boulder," my father said.

I looked at Sol. "Oh! Sol's tentacles are stabbing into the boulder!"

That subtle energy… Sol was sucking it all up.

"Oh, look! Sol left the boulder," my father said.

Sol bounced away from the boulder and met up again with Sora and the others, who were a ways away.

Boom… Boom… Boom…

A deep rumbling pounded through the forest. Just as my father had predicted, Ciel's tail pounded the boulder over and over.

"Is that gonna hurt Ciel's tail? Ciel! Don't hurt yourself!"

Mrrrow.

Ciel acted like everything was perfectly normal as its tail whacked against the boulder. *What a pro.*

Boom… Boom… Boom… Crackle!

"The sound changed!"

We stared at the boulder. Ciel's tail wound back and struck into it.

Crackle… Crackle… Thud.

Part of the giant boulder broke off from the impact of Ciel's tail.

"It's the mouth of a cave," my father said.

I looked and saw there was indeed a big opening in the boulder. "That wasn't all because of Ciel, right?"

Ciel couldn't have the ability to turn this giant boulder into a cave just like that.

"No, it was always a cave. But wow, that's some tail Ciel's got there."

"I know, it was incredible… Ooh, I sense magic!"

The magic energy I couldn't sense before was faintly reaching me now.

"Looks like the magic wasn't coming from the boulder itself. Must be whatever's inside it."

My father picked up a fragment of the broken boulder and gave it a very mysterious stare.

Okay, now it makes sense. So inside the boulder there must be… Wait, is that a person's aura? Huh?

"Um, Dad…I sense a human aura inside that boulder."

"What?!"

My father frantically peered inside the boulder. "There's someone lying down… Ivy, could I get a little light?"

I took my magic light out of my magic bag and shone it inside the boulder.

"Ah!" we both cried out.

Chapter 478:
The Forbidden Slave Emblem

ILLUMINATED IN THE LIGHT was a woman in her thirties, lying on the ground and holding a green box in her arms. Around her was a mess of containers that probably used to hold food and water. My father carefully reached out and touched her neck.

"She's alive…"

"Oh, good. So…what do we do with her?"

My father thought for a moment. We wanted to help her right away, but the clothes she was wearing worried us. She was wearing a nun's vestments—it was likely she worked with the church.

"I don't want to involve myself with church people. *But*…" my father trailed off.

"I know."

If we didn't help her, we would regret it as long as we lived. But she was with the church. There was no telling what problems we might get into by helping her—that's what scared us. But when we looked at her…she was clearly struggling just to breathe.

"Dad…let's help her."

"Yeah, we have to. But if she makes any trouble, we're running—got it?"

"Yeah."

"Puuu?"

We looked toward Sora's voice and saw the slime looking at us all mysteriously. *Oh, that's right! I feel bad using Sora as a crutch, but we do need to make sure she's safe.*

"Hey, Sora, is it okay if we help this lady?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Sora answered right away that she was safe. The others nodded in agreement as if this were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Huh…so she's safe," my father murmured. "Okay! Let's move her away from here first. She's got a fever."

My father slung the woman's arm over his shoulder and picked her up. The green box fell from her arms as he did this. Knowing it must be important to her if she was holding it tight to her chest even while unconscious, I picked up the box.

"Are you okay?" I asked my father.

"Yeah, she's light…a little *too* light, maybe."

I took one of her hands. It was skin and bone, not an ounce of flesh on it.

"Yeah, she's really emaciated."

"Uh-huh… Think she's got a dangerous secret?"

I smiled wryly at my father's theory. Right when I thought we'd finally escaped all our problems, there were still more waiting for us. We crawled out of the mouth of the cave and looked around.

"Anything else catching your interest?" I asked the creatures. They all answered that there was nothing else.

My father said, "Sora, sorry, but is there any place besides this cave where we can settle down for the rest of the day? We need to give her somewhere to rest."

"Is she really that bad off?" I asked.

"If she catches cold in her malnourished state, she could die."

He had a point.

"Should we at least give her a potion?" I suggested.

"Good idea. Can you get one of Flame's potions out right away?"

I took Flame's sparkly red potion out of the magic bag I kept on my waist.

"How long ago did we portion out this potion into smaller bottles?" my father asked.

"Um, I think it was about…three months ago?" I answered.

"It hasn't degraded at all." My father looked at the bottle in awe. Just like Sora's potions, Flame's didn't degrade, even if you put them in smaller bottles. They truly were a wonder.

"Can you hold her up for me?" I asked.

"Sure, just a minute…"

My father held the woman and lifted her face a little toward me. I gently pressed the mouth of the bottle to her lips and gradually poured the potion down.

"Go slowly. We don't want her choking."

"Okay. She's doing all right… Okay! She swallowed it all."

The woman's breathing gradually steadied, which implied the potion had worked. Her complexion had gotten better as well.

"I think she's gonna be okay," I said.

"Me, too." My father shifted the woman in his arms…then he sat still.

"Dad?"

"Ivy…let's go back to the cave."

"Huh?!"

My father held the woman close and returned to the cave we had just left. I frantically followed him inside to find him loosening the woman's collar.

"What's wrong?"

"Just saw something that worried me…I have to see if my hunch is right."

Once the woman's neck was exposed, something that looked like black ivy came into view.

"What is this thing?" I asked.

"It's a slave emblem they used a long time ago. It's forbidden now, though."

"A slave emblem? Even though she's with the church?"

Panic filled my father's eyes. "This slave emblem… You can't tell by looking at it what kind of commands she's been given. She can be given up to ten commands."

"Ten?! But isn't it restricted to three commands now?"

"Yeah, the law changed to protect the slaves, so this slave emblem is illegal now. I can't believe some sick person out there is still using it."

If I recalled correctly, somebody once used slaves to commit crimes on their behalf, so the law changed to allow only three commands. The slave collars were also rigged so that you could tell at a glance which commands they'd been given.

"Well, that's a problem," my father sighed. "Once her magic energy has stabilized, she might start carrying out her commands again. And we don't know what those commands were, either…"

My father looked around the cave. Then his eyes landed on the green box I was still holding.

"That box…" he said.

"Yeah, she was holding it."

"Can I see it?"

"Of course."

We didn't have her permission, but that ought to be okay. I handed my father the box. He slowly opened the lid…and was astonished when he saw what was inside.

"It's a magic item," he said. "This woman might be on the run."

"On the run—from the church?!"

Even though she has a slave emblem?

"It's just a theory, so I can't say for sure, but it's definitely possible."

My father took a black sheet of paper out of the box.

"A piece of paper?"

Was this how she managed to escape? But it looked like an ordinary piece of black paper.

"Yeah. This black paper sucks the magic energy out of a person's body and destabilizes it. It used to be employed as a torture device."

"What?!"

It looked like an ordinary piece of black paper…but what power it had. And for torture? Was sucking out and destabilizing a person's magic energy torture? I gave my father a questioning look, and he rested a hand on my head.

"Her magic energy was abused. Used by some powerful people."

Her magic was used by powerful people? That makes sense. She must've used this black paper to suck away her magic power so they couldn't use it. But wait—wasn't there a magic item that makes your magic unusable by other people? Why did she use this black paper instead of that?

"I don't want to use this magic item," my father said. "But I can't think of any other way to suppress her slave emblem."

"Pefu!"

"Huh? Sol?"

My father looked at the black paper, then at the woman as Sol approached her. Then it hit me that Sol had looked rather dazed after it had sucked all the magic energy out of the boulder.

"Sol, are you feeling okay now? You were acting a little funny back there, weren't you?" I said.

I'd been so distracted by the mysterious woman that I'd forgotten to check on Sol. Some tamer I was.

"Pefu!" Sol nodded, then happily jumped at the woman.

"Ahh!" we both cried out as Sol enveloped the woman. Then the slime jiggled and fell silent.

"Dad…"

"Uh-huh?"

"Maybe we don't need that black paper anymore?"

"Yeah…I have a feeling we don't."

My father and I both stared at the woman and Sol.

"Well, staring isn't going to help," my father remarked. "I think we'll have to take shifts tonight in this cave and in our tent."

"You're right. The three of us can't fit in this cave together."

We fit if we were just sitting down, but only barely. We left the cave to find Ciel leisurely lying around with Sora and Flame nestled in its belly. And Toron had fallen asleep at some point in the bag hanging from my shoulder.

"Well, that was disorienting," my father remarked.

I set down Toron's bag in front of Ciel. "Sorry, Ciel. If Toron wakes up, can you tell us?"

Mrrrow.

"Oh! One more thing: We're going to spend the night near this cave, so we'll need your help to keep watch."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

I petted each of their heads in turn and went to help my father set up the tent.

"Here, let me help."

"Thanks. Hold that side for me?"

After pitching the tent, we got supper ready.

"Think she'll wake up?" I asked.

"Hmmm… Having your magic destabilized saps your strength, so she might not wake up today. She's so thin that she doesn't have much strength to begin with."

"True. But there's no guarantee I can cook her anything the minute she wakes up… Guess I'll make her something that's easy to digest."

"Good idea. I'll help."

"Thanks."

Chapter 479:
She's Awake!

"GOOD MORNING."

"Morning. Are you tired?"

"Nope. You, Dad?"

Whenever we slept in the forest, my father, Ciel, and I took turns standing watch. At first it was just my father and Ciel, but I finally managed to make them include me after quite a lot of begging. (Having said that, my shift was a lot shorter than my father's or Ciel's.) "I'm all right," my father answered.

My father stirred up the fire and started breakfast. He didn't look tired, but I could tell his smile was forced. That meant I'd have to keep an eye on him.

But it sure is quiet out there.

Toron, Flame, Sora, and Sol were still asleep in the tent. A couple of hours after Sol wrapped itself around the woman's neck, the slime left her. Then, after staring off in a daze for a while, Sol went to sleep. We were worried about Sol, so we asked Sora and the others for reassurance. They said it was okay, but we noticed they were acting a little strange then. So I tried asking them again, using different words this time, and they answered that there was nothing wrong. What *was* their initial reaction about, then?

"Ivy…"

"What's up?"

"About the way Sol was acting…"

He means when Sol was in a daze, right?

"Yeah, did you figure something out?"

"Not exactly…but did you ever think Sol might have been savoring the aftertaste of its meal?"

Savoring the aftertaste? That just seems so farfetched… But then again, thinking about how Sol was behaving last night…

"You might be right?"

"That was the magic energy that was making everyone curious, right?"

"I think so."

It seemed like my father's theory was right.

"Ivy, remember how you asked the other creatures about Sol yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"I was just thinking they all looked like they were a little annoyed."

Ohh, so they were annoyed? Yeah…maybe they were. I was so caught up in my worries that I couldn't look at everyone with a clear head. But still, why were they annoyed…?

Remembering the looks on Sora's, Flame's, and Ciel's faces, I burst out laughing, and my father did the same.

Savoring the aftertaste of dinner… Yeah, that definitely sounds like Sol. I'll have to ask them about it later.

"Hey, where are Sora and Ciel?" I asked.

"With the woman. She hasn't woken up yet."

"Oh. I wonder what happened."

The woman with a slave emblem who used to be with the church… I felt nothing but a sense of impending doom.

"Maybe she was why the noblemen kept going to Hataru's church," my father suggested.

"Yeah, that could be."

The woman might have been bound to the church with her slave emblem. She'd been starved to skin and bones, and her hair was brittle and in tatters.

"Pu! Puuu."

We looked at the cave entrance and saw Sora coming out.

"Good morning, Sora. Did she wake up?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu." Sora happily nodded. I started walking to the cave, but my father stopped me.

"I'll go."

"But she might be scared if it's a man."

"…You have a point. But I don't want anything happening to you, so I'll wait at the cave entrance."

"Okay, thanks."

Even though my creatures had said the woman was safe, she still might lash out in fear, so I should keep a safe distance to avoid getting hurt.

"Knock, knock," I merrily called out, trying not to startle her. "Good morning, Miss."

I entered the cave to find the woman scrunched up against the back wall, shaking.

"Um, it's okay, Miss. My father and I won't hurt you."

I reached out and waved my hands, but I knew that wouldn't do much to reassure her that she wouldn't be harmed.

"Return…me…" her raspy voice squeezed out of her throat.

I took a good look at her. From the way her hands were clutching her neck, I could tell it was taking all her strength just to talk.

"I'll get you some water. Drink first, and then we can talk."

"Return…me…"

Return me…to somewhere? Or return something to me? I don't know which it is. Well, if she escaped from her enslavers, she would be most worried about…her slave emblem. If she's scared of it, I need to let her know she's safe now.

"You don't need that magic black paper anymore, Miss. We made your slave emblem go away."

When I told her the black paper was gone, she looked grief-stricken for a moment, but when I said that the slave emblem was gone, a dazed look filled her eyes as she carefully rubbed her neck with her hands. Then she gave me a worried look. She clearly didn't believe me…and I didn't blame her. She didn't even know who I was.

"Hey, Dad?"

When I called out to him, the woman's shoulders trembled.

"What's up?"

"Can you bring me a mirror? I want to show her that the slave emblem is gone."

"Got it."

I sensed my father moving away. *Wait a minute, where's Ciel?* I looked around the cave entrance but didn't see the adandara anywhere. I thought maybe Ciel had turned into a slime, but I saw no trace of that, either. I thought that Ciel had gone with Sora to where the woman was, but I must have been wrong.

"Here's the mirror. I got some water, too," my father said.

"Thanks."

I took the mirror and cup of water from my father and slowly approached the woman, keeping an eye on her all along. I stopped just short of reaching distance and stretched out my hand.

"Here's some water. And here's a mirror."

I set the mirror in front of the woman as slowly as I could so as not to scare her. When she saw the mirror and the cup of water, she reached for the mirror while staring warily at me. As she took it,

I could tell she was sizing me up. Then I set the cup next to her, slowly stood up, and backed away from her.

"Have a look for yourself, Miss," I coaxed her, pointing at my own neck.

And with a bewildered expression in her eyes, the woman looked at her neck in the mirror.

"Um…here, Miss," I said, approaching her again and handing her a cloth.

She gave me a confused look—did she not know she was crying? I hesitated a moment, but I took another step toward her, crouched to my knees, and wiped her wet cheek with the cloth.

"Oh…!"

So the woman really hadn't noticed she was crying—the wetness of the cloth startled her. Looking at her up close, I saw that she was clenching her jaw. Had she been trying not to cry all this time?

"It's okay, Miss… Cry as much as you need to."

I felt pathetic that this was all I could say to her. But I didn't want her to keep all her emotions festering inside, so I squeezed her hand and spoke from the heart.

"Let it out."

I wasn't sure if my feelings had reached the woman, but then she burst into tears. Relieved, I slid next to her and gently rubbed her back. She squirmed and shuddered under my touch. How long had she been holding in all that pain?

"Are you okay?"

The woman's head bobbed slightly up and down in reply.

"Have some water. You must be thirsty."

She'd just woken up and had a big cry; of course her throat was parched. I handed her the cup of water by her side. Potions would cure her illness, but they couldn't quench her thirst.

"Thank…you…"

"No problem."

The woman took the cup and pressed it to her lips, but she didn't drink. I wondered why, then I noticed that she was nervous.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

The woman shook her head, then slowly tipped the cup toward herself. She took a small sip…then she eagerly glugged the rest of the water down and let out a long sigh. As I'd thought, she was quite thirsty.

"Shall I bring you another cup?"

The woman looked at the cup and nodded softly. I took the cup back and turned to go get some water when I saw my father behind me, holding out his hand.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

The woman watched us intently.

"You have a fever. Do you feel sluggish?" my father asked.

The woman nodded nervously back at him.

"Sorry about that. You're hungry, too, aren't you?"

The woman shook her head.

"You're not hungry? But you need to eat to get your strength back. Ivy made you something gentle on the stomach—can't you eat just a little?"

The woman looked at my father in bewilderment. Then her gaze wandered nervously.

"We were about to have breakfast," I said. "Want to join us?"

The woman looked back and forth between us many times… then gave a single nod. I could hear my father sighing softly in relief.

Chapter 480:
First, Let's Get Some Food in You

"HERE YOU GO."

I smiled as I handed the woman a bowl. From the way she hesitated a moment before taking it, I could tell she was still scared. I wanted to ease her mind as much as I could, but I had no idea how to do it.

My father also seemed confounded by her fear; after all, she trembled every time he so much as talked to her. I thought we should get some food in her first, hoping that having a warm, full belly would soothe her, but was she even in any condition to eat?

"Um…so…" she stammered.

"Yes? What is it?"

Her eyes darted back and forth between me and my father. He had decided to eat sitting at a bit of a distance since she seemed particularly scared of him. Maybe I should have done the same thing?

"I'm…fine with…eating…next to…you…"

She's fine with eating next to who? I looked at my father. *Next to…*

"Oh! Are you saying my dad can eat with us?"

The woman nodded, but she still looked scared. I looked at my father, not sure what to do.

"Guess I'll come sit just a little closer." My father scooted a bit closer to me and started eating again. The woman looked slightly relieved by the sight. Was this her way of telling us that she was scared, but we shouldn't worry?

"Eat up while it's still warm," I coaxed her.

I had cooked something from my past life memories—ojiya, a hearty rice porridge seasoned with vegetables and meat. I had simmered it thoroughly to make it tender, and it would be gentle on the stomach, too.

"This is called ojiya—it's very tasty," I assured her.

To me, it was a very nostalgic flavor. One bite made me feel warm and cozy all over.

Uh-oh, but is it too bland for other people? It's just right for me, but I'm not sure.

I looked at the woman. She was staring hard at me. I gave her a curious expression and she looked away, flustered.

"It might be a bit bland for you. Let me know if it is and I'll give you some salt."

The woman nodded, took a spoonful of ojiya, and brought it to her lips. My heart started to race. Would she like it?

"It's…good…"

A faint smile appeared on her face. It was a relief to see.

"Is it seasoned okay?" I asked.

"Yes."

"There's plenty more if you want."

The woman nodded silently and ate more porridge. Both my father and I were so happy to see that.

"Is ojiya really that good?" he asked.

"Oh, it sure is. But it might be a little bland for you."

I had made the ojiya to suit my own taste, so it was seasoned lightly.

"Can I have a taste?" he asked.

I giggled. "Sit tight… Here you go."

I held a little saucer containing two bites of the porridge up to my father. He ate it right away, then tilted his head.

"Uh-oh, is it too bland?" I asked.

"No, it does have flavor, though it's subtle."

"Wait, you can actually taste it?"

"That was a very misleading way to put it."

"Ha ha ha ha!"

Well, whenever I seasoned things lightly, he always said it was bland.

"Did you season it lightly like you usually do? Are you sure you didn't add more?"

"I didn't," I assured him. "It's the same as always."

"Huh. Well, it's subtle, but it does have a flavor. It would probably taste better with more seasoning, though."

Was that his way of telling me he wanted me to season it more next time? But if I were to serve my very physically active father ojiya—porridge for the infirm—I would have to cook an awful lot of it to fill him up.

Oh, but since he's not sick, I could just serve him the ojiya as a side dish! Maybe I should just do that—I like ojiya. But I'd have to season it two ways, one lightly seasoned and one heavily.

After we finished breakfast, my father and I made some tea.

"Ciel sure is taking a while," I remarked.

"Sure is."

Before Sora had come back to my side, Ciel had popped out, then immediately run off somewhere. The slightly different-than-usual behavior worried me a little.

"Don't worry; Ciel is strong," my father said.

"I know."

Still, I wished the creature wouldn't take so long.

"Um…thank…you… It was…very…tasty…"

"You're welcome."

After the woman emptied her bowl, she looked a bit more relaxed. I hoped that her fears would gradually melt away.

"I'll just get you a cup of tea," I told her.

"Oh—!"

I smiled softly at the way she cried out in a mixture of apology and gratitude. When I handed her the cup of freshly brewed tea, she accepted it with a little bow. Her mouth opened and closed a few times, but no words came out. Then she drank the tea.

"May I ask your name?" my father said.

The woman froze.

"If you don't want to tell us, that's okay. We just want to talk about what's next for you. If there's someplace you want to go, we can help get you there safely."

The woman's eyes darted everywhere. She looked at me and my father several times, opening her mouth, then having second thoughts and closing it.

"Um…my name…Marya…"

"Marya? Okay. I'm Druid and this is my daughter Ivy. Nice to meet you."

Whew, she seems less scared now that she's eaten.

"Nice to…meet you."

So her name is Marya.

"Very nice to meet you, Marya," I said.

As she looked at me and my father, a faint but visible smile formed in her eyes. I was happy to see it. Her eyes had been so frightened from the first moment she saw us, and we honestly were

at a loss for what to do. So I was happy to see a smile from her, no matter how subtle.

"I'm…sorry… It's hard…to talk…"

"Don't worry about it; we understand you just fine," my father said. "And if we ever don't understand something, we'll ask what you mean, so when that happens, I hope you won't mind telling us more."

Marya nodded. She was a little short on words at times, but that wouldn't be a problem.

"I was for…bidden from talk…ing…so long… It feels…strange… to talk…"

They forbade her from talking, so it felt strange to talk—did suddenly talking after all this time shock her muscles? And would she be able to talk normally again if she worked on it?

"I see."

Wait, is that a little anger I see in my father's eyes? Marya didn't seem to notice. Good. I gently tugged on my father's sleeve.

"Dad, you're being scary."

"Oh, sorry. I have to keep my face under control," my father apologized quietly. I nodded silently back.

"Um…that…boy."

What boy?

"Urch…he…escape?"

Urch?

"You mean the church?"

The woman trembled when my father said the word.

Okay, so what she said was… "Did that boy escape from the church?"

"Marya…you were in Hataru Village, weren't you?" my father asked. "The church there held you prisoner."

Marya nodded yes in reply.

Oh! So is the boy she asked about Bith? Then the church must have been so desperate to find Bith because they wanted to find Marya, too. My father said that Bith was hurt by the adventurers working with the church. Did they torture him trying to get Marya's whereabouts out of him? Wow… I'm so glad he's okay now.

"The boy you asked about…is his name Bith?" my father asked.

Marya nodded deliriously with tears in her eyes. "Yes… He… escaped to…village… He was…so…"

Bith was probably worried they'd catch Marya if he stayed with her, so he stayed behind in the village to draw their attention to him.

"Don't worry, Bith is safe now. The guild master's taking care of him," my father said.

The tears flowed down Marya's cheeks. "I'm…sorry… I'm okay…now…"

"So…what's next for you, Marya?" my father asked.

Marya looked lost.

Mrrrow.

"Ciel!"

I hadn't noticed the adandara—or rather, its aura was completely masked. Ciel was standing right in front of me, but I couldn't sense its presence or magic.

Mrrrow.

Oh, the aura and magic are both back! That's impressive.

"Something wrong, buddy? Why'd you mask your aura?"

I hugged Ciel and carefully examined the creature up and down—no wounds. *Thank goodness.*

Mew!

"Huh? Got something in your mouth?"

Ciel put something into my hand. I looked down and saw ten tiny purple nuts.

"Tree nuts?" I asked.

"Wait, Ciel, are those puska nuts? Wait—is that why you wandered off? To bring us these?"

Mrrrow.

Wait, what are those? And why does Ciel look so smug? Huh? Puska nuts? I've never heard of them… What are they like? I never read about them when I studied tree nuts and fruits… Are they at all well known?

My father sighed. "I wondered why you suddenly disappeared. But you noticed, didn't you?"

Mrrrow.

"Good work, Ciel." My father rubbed Ciel's head, and it seemed to wag its tail a little more intensely than usual.

"Um…that crea…ture…when…woke up…"

Oh no! Marya must be scared of Ciel.

I shot a look at her, but since she'd been scared ever since she woke up, it was hard to tell.

"Um, Marya, this is Ciel. A very beloved member of our family."

Mrrrow.

Ciel trilled merrily at my introduction. The tension in Marya's face softened a little at the sound.

"Whoa!"

What a shock. It only lasted a second, but Marya looked incredibly peaceful.

"Ivy…you okay?"

"I'm fine. Anyway, what're puska nuts?"

If only Marya could look that peaceful all the time.

Chapter 481:
The Curse and the Phantom Tree Nut

"PUSKAS ARE PHANTOM TREE NUTS that break a slave emblem's curse—they're the only things that can do it."

Whoa, they break curses?!

I looked at Marya and found her staring at my father in shock. From the look of her, I could tell she hadn't noticed.

But if it's a curse…

"But, Dad, can't purple potions break curses?"

"Most curses, yes, but a slave emblem's curse can't be broken by a purple potion. Several potions have some effect on it, but the curse is way too powerful to break completely."

Wow. I didn't know such a powerful curse existed.

"Marya?" my father addressed her quietly.

Her shoulder flinched. "Ye…s?"

"By any chance, did your slave emblem command you *twice* not to speak?"

Marya nodded yes. *She was given the same command twice?*

"That's why you're talking like that—it's the curse. Unless your curse is completely broken, you'll soon lose the ability to speak."

"Whoa, she won't be able to talk at all?"

I'd just assumed she was talking funny because she hadn't spoken in so long. I never dreamed it would be because of a curse.

"Yeah, she said it felt strange for her to talk."

"Ye…s."

"That strangeness increases by the day until eventually the entire voice is silenced. And I imagine it'll hurt."

Oh no. And I thought she was finally freed from the slave emblem.

I looked at Marya. Her face had turned white and she was trembling. I slowly reached out and squeezed her hand.

She gasped sharply.

"Don't worry. We have puska nuts, and they'll break your curse."

My father said they could do it, so she would be okay. I looked at the puska nuts in my hand.

"A slave emblem's curse is quite unique," my father explained.

I glanced at him and saw a strained look in his eye that made me overwhelmingly uncomfortable.

"Slave bands are locked by a magic contract, but a slave emblem itself *is* the curse. Once you've been branded with a slave emblem, the curse binds you. And if you remove the emblem, the old curse is overwritten by a new, even stronger unique curse. That's why she was given the same command twice: to speed up the effect of the second curse if her slave emblem was removed."

It sped up the effects of the curse… So that's why Dad said she would quickly lose the ability to speak.

"But can't these puska nuts cure her?" I showed him the nuts in my hand.

"Yes, puska nuts are the only way to break the curse. But it's not guaranteed."

"What do you mean?"

It's not guaranteed… So then sometimes they can't break a curse?

I stared intently at my father and watched as his expression hardened.

"A person can only eat up to ten puska nuts total. Any more, and the body is harmed."

"Harmed—how?"

"The effects vary from person to person, but all roads lead to death."

Death.

Marya's hand shivered in mine. I tightened my grip on her a little bit.

"Hopefully, the puska nuts lift the curse before the person dies, but that doesn't always happen."

Then we wouldn't know until Marya ate the nuts.

"Do the puska nuts ever negatively affect a person if they eat fewer than ten? Marya is already so frail."

"She can eat up to ten just fine. The books on curses say so."

If the books said so, that must be right. But ten nuts? Hopefully Marya's curse would be broken, but ten nuts seemed far too little.

"Um…those…phan…m nuts…n't…serve."

Huh? I understood "those phantom nuts," but what does "n't serve" mean?

"Marya, what did you say after the phantom nuts?" I asked.

Marya pressed a hand to her neck. "I…don't…de…serve."

"I don't deserve it!" Ohh, so that's what she meant. Neat. Wait, no, that's not neat. You need to convince her she's wrong.

"Marya, Ciel foraged these puska nuts so your curse would be broken. So please, don't say you don't deserve them. Besides, you're the only one who's cursed right now. If you don't eat them, they'll just rot."

"Puska nuts only last a day, so we can't sell them, either," my father added. "So please, put away your insecurities and eat them.

Ivy's right. If you don't eat them, they'll just rot."

Marya stared at the puska nuts, our words hanging over her.

Mrrrow.

"Ciel wants you to eat them, too," I said.

Marya looked at Ciel.

"Marya, we can't be sure these nuts will break your curse," my father told her. "But if you don't eat them…that wouldn't be good for you."

Marya looked at my father. Then she nodded once, slowly reached for the puska nuts in my hand, took one, and put it in her mouth.

"Does it taste all right?" I asked.

"It's…sweet."

So they're sweet? Then they must go down easy. That's good to hear. If they tasted bitter, eating them would be quite the hassle.

"Nothing's changed," my father remarked. "Eat another one."

"Dad, what happens if the curse is broken?"

"Black smoke comes out from the cursed area. It's easy to spot."

If black smoke comes out from the cursed area, I guess we should watch her neck. Marya ate the second puska nut. No change. She ate a third.

"It's not work…ing."

No black smoke after three nuts. Marya looked disappointed.

"Don't worry. Would you like some tea?"

My throat was scratchy with anxiety. I prayed that we'd see black smoke during one of the next seven nuts.

I was standing up to get tea when I felt something tugging on me. It was Marya's fingers, clutching the hem of my clothes.

"Sorry…please…stay…"

"Of course."

Marya put the fourth puska nut into her mouth and chewed it slowly. But no matter how long we waited, there was no change. So she ate a fifth.

"Hm?" Marya's head tilted sideways.

"What is it?" my father asked worriedly.

Marya looked puzzled.

"If it feels at all strange, spit it—"

Then black smoke puffed out of Marya's neck and quickly vanished into thin air.

"Oh!"

"We did it!"

Black smoke means the curse is lifted, right? And she only ate five nuts. Thank goodness five was all it took. Even if the book said ten nuts was safe, I couldn't help but feel nervous about her eating that many.

"Oh…!" Marya touched a hand to her neck in shock.

"Marya…are you okay?"

"The pain… It's gone."

Maybe because she hadn't spoken in so long, Marya's speech was still slow, but it was much clearer than before. There were no abrupt pauses in the middle of her words.

"It doesn't…feel strange." Tears spilled from Marya's eyes.

"Thank goodness. We're in the clear now," my father said.

That made Marya cry even harder. "Thank you… Truly, thank you so much."

I handed her a cloth.

"Thank you."

Through her tears, Marya thanked us over and over. My father softly moved closer and patted her head.

Chapter 482:
Marya's Past

"FEEL BETTER NOW?" my father asked Marya.

"Yes. Thank you so much."

"Here's something to cool your eyes." I handed Marya a wet towel. Her eyes were red and swollen from all the crying, but there was a cheerful brightness in them now.

"Thank you."

She was still a bit restrained but no longer scared. Though she still seemed tense, I felt like she had opened up to us a little.

"I'm gonna go clean up the breakfast dishes."

After we talked with Marya, we might need to move right away, so it was best to be ready.

"I'll help," my father offered. "What do you need?"

"It won't take long. Just make us some tea and get out some sweets, okay?"

I felt exhausted, even though I hadn't done much of anything. I was craving something sweet.

"Good idea. It's been one thing after another since yesterday."

"I know."

While my father got the tea ready, I cleaned up the breakfast dishes. Marya anxiously fidgeted like she wanted to help, but my father told her to stay seated. Marya sure was frail. Traveling would be quite rough in her condition.

"Okay, the dishes are done! I dried them and put them all away in the magic bag. What else… And the trash is taken care of… Okay!"

I was done. Since I'd tidied things up while I cooked, cleanup was easy.

"Thanks for doing the dishes—I got chobar for our tea snacks. Is that okay?"

He held up the snacks made from flour that we'd bought in Hataru Village. They were slightly sweet and crisp. I remembered that the cho inside was sweet and very good. Ever since Lord Foronda bought them for me once, they'd been a favorite of mine.

"Sure. You don't find chobar for sale that often, so it's been a while. I can't wait!"

You could always find bar only without cho or chobar filled with dried fruits, but I loved it best with black cho filling.

"We can't be sure these ones will taste like the chobar we've had in the past," my father reminded me.

"They look the same, at least."

Marya was staring at the chobar with a wondering look.

"Have one," I offered. "They're sweet and crisp."

"Oh, all right. Thank you."

After I'd made sure Marya had a chobar, I took one for myself. *Yup. They're a bit sweeter than the chobar Lord Foronda bought me, but they're delicious.*

Crunch, crunch.

Crunch, crunch.

"Mmm, I forgot how good these were," my father said.

"Me, too."

My father side-eyed Marya, probably wondering when and how to start the conversation. I looked at Marya with him and saw that she had finished her chobar and moved on to drinking tea.

"Okay…think you can talk now?" my father asked.

"Yes… I can…talk."

"Only answer questions you feel comfortable answering, okay?" my father said.

"Okay. Um…so I came to Hataru Village when I was seven years old. My mother wanted to find out what my skill was, so she took us there…"

Marya's eyes darkened then. So they had gone to the church to have her skill read.

"They read my skill. It got bright all around…then my mother disappeared. They put me in a dark room…and I always stayed in there after that, all alone. I cried and cried, but nobody came. My mother was gone…and my father was gone."

What?!

I looked at Marya. She looked like she was about thirty—had she really been in solitary confinement since the age of seven?

"Were you never let out of your room?" my father asked.

"I was."

Okay, so she wasn't completely locked up, then.

"When I went out of my room…someone was there. People would hold my hand. Then I told them what I saw. Other than that, I was in my room. Oh! Someone also came to clean but didn't talk."

She met with someone? From the church…or the nobility? They must have let her out of her room only when the noblemen were in town and done something to her then. All other times, she was locked in that dark room. The only person who ever visited her was the janitor. But if that person never talked to her, that didn't count.

"Do you know when you were branded with that slave emblem?" my father asked.

"I don't. I left my room once to look for my mother…then they hit me, and next thing I knew, I had it. I couldn't talk anymore."

How evil! Wait a minute, she said earlier that she'd "tell the person what she saw." What did she mean by that?

"Marya, you couldn't talk, right? Then how did you tell anybody what you saw?"

"When I was with Chaslice, I could talk. Nobody else."

So aside from one person, she couldn't talk to anybody else?

"Is that even possible?" I asked my father. He nodded.

"Yeah, it's possible…" My father leaned in close and whispered, "That's one way for a master to make a slave submit."

My eyes shot open. *Make a slave submit?!*

"How *evil*!" I cried louder than I meant to.

Marya gave me a curious look.

"Marya, what was this Chaslice person like?" my father asked.

Marya's face softened into a smile. "Chaslice was very kind. I was so happy when we met."

So the church's method worked. Whenever Marya mentioned Chaslice, she looked very docile. They'd forced her into a life of solitude so she would cozy up to the one person she could talk to. *How evil! How deplorable! How infuriating!*

"Marya, do you know what your skill is?" my father asked.

A shadow spread over Marya's face as she shook her head.

"Okay…" My father's expression hardened a little. "You mentioned telling Chaslice what you could see. What *did* you see?"

"Things about the people whose hands I held. They were all terrible."

Marya shuddered. We might have triggered a bad memory in her. But from the way she was talking…did she literally *see* something in those people?

"Also, sometimes…there were black lumps on their bodies. I'd make them go away."

Black lumps on their bodies? Huh?

"Where did you find those black lumps?" I asked.

Marya thought for a moment. Something felt off. Ever since we mentioned her skill, Marya had been acting strange. Was she scared?

"Most of them were here," Marya said, pointing to her heart. Then she said, "And here," and touched her belly. Finally she said, "And here," and touched her head. "The black lumps are inside every place I just touched."

Inside… Black lumps inside people's bodies? Was it a sickness? But if it were, wouldn't potions be able to cure it? Though if the sickness had progressed too far and taken a person's strength, not even potions could save them. If those people could make it all the way to Hataru Village, they should have had enough strength to take potions.

"…What are the black lumps?" I asked my father.

He smirked cynically. "Probably curses."

"Curses?"

But curses can be cured with purple potions…

"If you're a nobleman, you can't let anyone in your circle know you've been cursed. People will speculate that you were cursed because somebody hates you or you did someone dirty. Even if those speculations aren't true, a nobleman can't stand having rumors spread about him—his ego won't allow it. So he has to have the curse lifted behind closed doors."

I don't get it. I still feel like a purple potion would be enough to lift a curse.

"But couldn't they just secretly use a purple potion?" I asked.

"Most people who curse noblemen are other noblemen."

"Sure."

"The curses nobleman use are ultra-powerful, so sometimes you have to use many purple potions to break them. If you suddenly bought dozens of purple potions out of nowhere, wouldn't people wonder why?"

Oh, so they'd be found out! But wow, there really are people out there who can cast ultra-powerful curses, even though you need a lot of training. How badly must those people have wanted to curse somebody?

"Marya, can you make those black lumps disappear in one try?" my father asked.

"Yes."

"Okay. Since she can break a curse in one session, she's quite valuable. That's why they used a slave emblem on her." My father gave a heavy sigh. "Marya. Your skill—"

"I can't use it!" Marya stood up and yelled.

"Huh?" we both gasped.

"Marya, are—"

"I didn't want it… I prayed. Every day…every day… So it went away. I won't use it! I don't want to use it!"

Marya's cries drowned out my father's voice. Her face was twisted in terror. *Skill* seemed to be a trigger word for her.

"Marya…it's okay; stay calm. You don't have to use your skill." I stood up and gently clasped Marya's shaking hand. She flinched at my touch, but she squeezed my hand back.

"I didn't want it. So I prayed…it went away."

"Okay. Well, if you didn't want that skill, it must have been useless. I'm glad you lost it."

"…Really? Chaslice…was angry. So very angry… I was scared."

Would a lightning bolt of karma please strike down this Chaslice guy right now?

"He said that I was useless… I was trash, but he could still sell me…"

Just send him straight to Hell, please!

"Neither me nor Ivy want to use your skill, Marya. It's just… We need to know the truth. That's all. So you don't need to use your skill. Right, Ivy?"

"Right. You don't need to use it," I said, nodding firmly.

Relief washed over Marya's face.

Thank goodness. I think she believes us?

Chapter 483:
What Sort of Skill

"HEY, DAD, do you know what Marya's skill is?"

A skill that breaks curses… What would that even be? If she cured sickness, it would be Light and one other skill. Does her skill help her see a person's future? In that case…

"Marya, there's something I want to ask you just to understand more," my father said.

"Okay."

"You said you could see things when you touched people, right?"

Marya nodded yes.

"The things that you'd see… Would numbers appear next to them?"

"Numbers?" I gave my father a confused look.

He nodded. "It could be a fortune-teller's skill… So, were there numbers?"

"No, I'd just see images with the people I touched in them."

"Okay…" My father's expression grew a little troubled.

"Dad? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just a little surprised. I think Marya's skills are Light… and probably Foresight."

"Light and Foresight?"

Foresight… That was one of the extinct skills. Wait a minute, who did I learn that from?

"I can't believe it, either…that there would be somebody with the Foresight skill alive today."

Marya shuddered at my father's words.

"Is it really that rare?" I asked.

"Rare isn't even the word—it's a skill that no longer exists. But it does come up when people talk about skills they *wished* they had."

Wait, a skill that no longer exists?

"You said your skill disappeared, right?" my father asked Marya.

"Huh?! Erm, yes. They checked over and over. It's gone."

Relief washed over my father's face. Marya looked bewildered by his reaction.

"Dad?"

"If the church bastards checked her several times, it must be gone. I've never heard of a skill disappearing before, though."

I didn't know a single example of a skill disappearing, either.

"Is it impossible?" I asked.

"Guess so. But if the church decided that it disappeared, that definitely means a lot fewer people are looking for Marya now."

He had a point. If she had both the Light skill and the Foresight skill, everybody and anybody would come looking for her. But if her Foresight skill disappeared, she wouldn't be very useful to the church.

"Wait, *a lot fewer people*? So is somebody still coming for her?" I asked.

Based on what Marya said, it sounded like nobody valued her anymore, so why would they come looking for her? Worried by my question, Marya looked at my father.

"Sorry to break it to you, but there are. A bunch of damn fools are looking for her."

Damn fools…? Was he talking about the noblemen?

"Marya, did any of these visions of yours…have criminals in them?"

Marya answered my father with a grim nod.

"Oh! Are the people coming after Marya the thugs hired by the noblemen?" I asked.

"Yeah, Marya's testimony would expose their crimes. There must be a lot of noblemen who'd like to avoid that fate."

Marya's face twisted with grief. She had seen visions of the future against her will. She had been used like an object. Was she fated to be on the run for the rest of her life? Wasn't there anything that could be done?

"Marya. What do you want to do?" my father asked her.

Marya gasped in surprise and looked at him.

"I'm asking about your future. Is there anywhere you'd like to go? Anything you'd like to do?"

I looked at Marya. Her eyes were darting to and fro, a bewildered expression on her face.

That's right, she said she and her mother were separated… No, I shouldn't bring that up. Knowing the church, her mother must've met a gruesome end.

"Oh…what should I do?"

Marya was in emotional torment, and it was completely understandable. She'd been held captive by the church all her life, so she probably didn't know how to live anymore.

"Marya—we're traveling to the royal capital. Would you like to come with us until we get to a safe place? The only potential issue is that since we're traveling out in the forest, it might be a little… Well, it will definitely be very hard on you."

Huh? Is he implying we could maybe do something else for her?

"What's our other option?" I asked.

"I could get in touch with somebody we trust and put Marya in their care."

Marya suddenly grabbed my father's hand.

"Huh?"

"With you. Please."

Marya's hand shook as it held my father's.

"Traveling is pretty exhausting. Can you keep up?"

"I can," she insisted.

"You okay with that, Ivy?" my father asked.

"Of course."

"Um, can't we go back to Hataru Village?" Marya asked. "I want to thank the boy who helped me escape."

"Sorry, but you shouldn't go back there. Too many church cronies."

Since the village leaders might have started up their carefully designed plan by then, we couldn't be sure of that. But she definitely shouldn't go near any place that might be dangerous.

"Marya, once we get somewhere safe, let's send a letter," I suggested.

"A letter?"

"That's right. My father is friends with the guild master and head watchman, so you can send a message to Bith that way."

Marya looked at my father, and he nodded. "They're safe people. They won't tell a soul about you."

"Thanks. And thanks…for letting me join you." Marya bowed her head in gratitude.

"Puuu."

A tiny gasp escaped Marya's mouth when she heard Sora's sudden cry. I looked over and saw Sora sitting on her lap.

"Sora, don't scare her."

"Pu?" Sora looked up at me quizzically from Marya's lap.

"Don't play dumb. I know you understood me."

"Pu! Pu, *puuu*."

Yeah, I thought so. But despite my complaining, Sora's antics did lighten up the mood.

"Um…who is this slime?"

"I'm a tamer, Miss Marya. And that slime is Sora. There's also…"

We had gotten so focused on the conversation that I'd completely forgotten about everyone else. I frantically looked around and found Flame and Sol beside Ciel. And Toron was… Huh, not there. I looked in Toron's bag but found nothing.

"So, um, this is Flame, and the little black slime is Sol. The big one is Ciel." I looked around while I introduced everyone, but still no Toron.

"What's wrong?" my father asked.

"I can't find Toron. I'm not sure what to do."

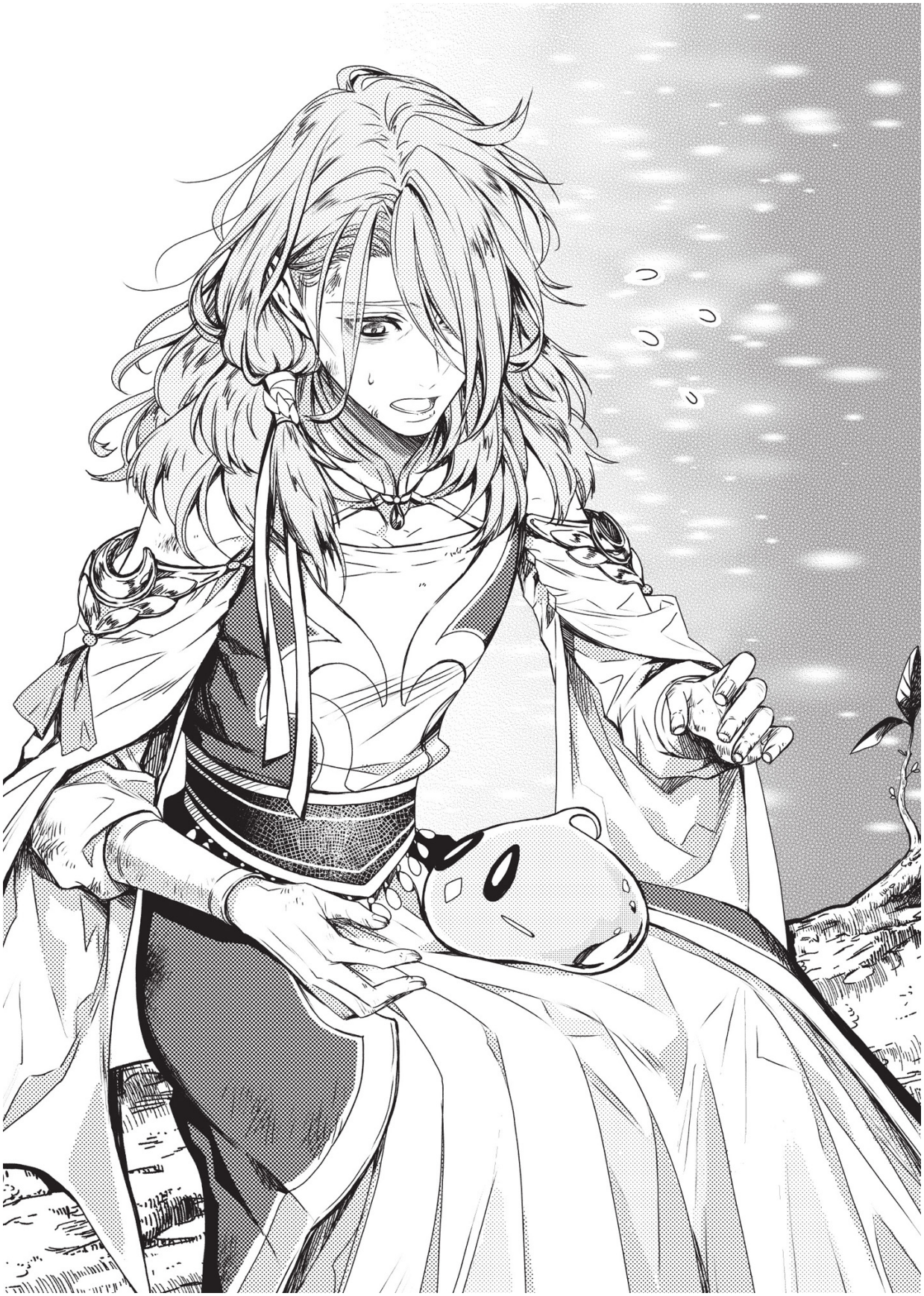
My father helped me look. "Ciel, do you know where Toron is?"

Mrrrow.

Oh, good. Ciel knew.

"Where is Toron?"

Ciel stood up and started walking. I followed behind until we both stopped next to a giant tree.



"Here?"

"But this is…" My father gave the tree a stern look.

"What, is something wrong with this tree?" I looked up at it. *Wait a minute… It's thin on leaves, and its branches are black here and there*. "Is it sick?"

"It's got Arbor Magiblight."

Arbor Magiblight? I never heard of it. Is it a disease?

"It's a disease where the inside of a tree is filled with magic."

The inside of a tree… I slowly reached out to the tree, but my father grabbed my hand.

"Don't touch it. There's no telling how much magic's built up in there."

"Got it. Will the tree be okay if we just leave it like that?"

"Uh, no, it won't. If you let Magiblight run its course, it will spread to the other trees. The ground will collapse, too. That wouldn't be too bad on its own, but it just gives the magic another place to accumulate—that's the problem."

"The magic is a problem?"

"Yeah, the magic builds up at an unusually fast speed. So if you find a tree with Magiblight, you're supposed to burn it down… but this one's really big."

"It sure is."

If we were to burn it, we'd have to cut it down first and then—huh?

"Hey, Dad…is it just me, or is the tree withering?"

"…You're right. It completely withered up while we were standing here talking about it."

"Gyah!"

"Oh! Toron!"

We looked toward the familiar voice to find Toron budding up from the ground. *Yeah, that's a disturbing sight.*

"Gyah! Gyah!"

"Huh? What's up?"

When Toron was almost out of the ground, the little tree stopped and flailed up a storm. I got closer and found that its roots were caught on something.

Flap, flap, flap.

Flap, flap, flap.

"Let me guess…your feet are stuck on something?"

Toron stopped flailing and looked at me.

"Hey, Dad, do you have something we can dig with?"

"I've got a tree branch?"

With a little help from my father and Marya, I dug around Toron. And after a little digging, Toron's feet yanked free from the earth, sending the little tree tumbling.

"Er…and this is Toron, the newest addition to our family."

When I introduced Marya to Toron, the latter shook its leaves.

Oh, the leaves Toron had from the first day are bigger now!

Chapter 484:
A Fortune-Teller's Most Crucial Skill

"HERE'S SOME HOT WATER for washing up."

"Thank you very much."

We'd taken some of my father's clothes that would be suitable for Marya to wear, and I was stitching them down to her size. I hurried along as I listened to Marya sponging herself off behind me.

"So sorry to trouble you," she said.

"No, it's quite all right. I used to sew my own clothes all the time," I replied.

I patched up the tears with scrap fabric from other clothes and lengthened short hems by combining other pieces of clothing together. Looking back, I did wind up working pretty hard on the alterations.

"Once we get to the next village, we'll buy you some new clothes right away."

"But I…"

"Something wrong?"

"I don't have any money."

I could've just said we would cover it, but she would've felt bad. I mean, I would feel bad if I were in her shoes.

"Just help us out however you can during the journey, and we'll call it even. You can help cook or carry some things."

"Cook? But I've never cooked before…"

"I'll teach you."

"Yes, please! I'm looking forward to it."

Oh dear, my stitches are so sloppy. Well, they're clothes that she can wear, at least.

"All done!"

I shortened the pants and lengthened the hem of the shirt… will that be okay? I took it in as much as I could because Marya is so skinny, but the design has to be really messed up by now. Hmmm… guess it was inevitable. I took in the sides little by little, but I'm sure it's still too big for her. I'll just have to give up. I also got another top and bottom from my father, so I'll take more time sewing those to really fit Marya.

"Here you go."

"Thank you."

I put away my sewing things while she got dressed.

Come to think of it, I got this sewing kit at the dump, too, didn't I? And boy, did I struggle to straighten out this bent needle… and it's still kinda bent, but it doesn't bother me anymore.

"Um, Ivy…?"

I turned around to look at Marya in her new clothes.

Yeah…the outfit clearly doesn't work for her. I took it in as much as I could, but that gave it some really weird creases. Still, it's better than her church vestments…or at least I hope so.

"So, um…" Marya fumbled.

"I'm so sorry. We'll definitely buy you some new clothes as soon as we get to the village."

Yup. That would be for the best, so that's what we'll do.

"Are we ready to head out?" my father asked.

"Technically, yes…"

My father came out of the cave and tilted his head in confusion. And when Marya popped out from behind me, his jaw flinched a little.

Aha, I know that look! He's trying not to laugh.

When I glared at my father, he averted his eyes.

"We'll buy you some new clothes as soon as we get to the village."

"Huh?!"

"Pfft!"

Marya's gasp of surprise overlapped with my burst of laughter, and my father looked at us with a strange expression.

"That's exactly what I said," I explained.

"Was it? Well, I'm not surprised," my father said, giving Marya a good stare.

"Do I really look that funny?"

"Not funny, exactly… Those clothes are just way too big for you. And they were taken in so much that there're all kinds of strange creases in them."

"Is that so…" Marya looked down at herself curiously. I imagined the clothes couldn't have felt too nice on her, either.

"Anyway, let's just leave so we can get as close to the village as we can by sundown."

"Sure. Hey, guys, we're leaving now. You ready?"

My creatures entered my magic bag in order; Toron was the last to jump into the basket on my shoulder.

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"May we all have a good journey," Marya chimed in.

"Gyah!"

Er, Marya? Well…it doesn't matter.

We each took our belongings and started walking.

"Um…I could carry something, too, if you want," Marya offered.

My father shook his head. "You should walk unencumbered for a while and save your energy. We'll be fine—we're used to carrying a lot of gear."

Marya tentatively nodded in agreement. As soon as we started walking, we noticed Marya was struggling to catch her breath. She was clearly even weaker than we'd imagined.

"Hey, Dad, can we walk a little slower?" I whispered.

He looked at Marya and shook his head. "She'll just feel bad about it. Let's keep this pace for a while."

"Okay."

He had a point. She already felt bad that she wasn't carrying anything, so if we slowed down for her, she would only feel worse.

"But we'll take a break soon. Let's just take it easy."

"Okay," I agreed. "Oh, I had a question about skills."

"What's on your mind?"

"I was just wondering about fortune-tellers' skills. You mentioned something about numbers showing?"

How exactly was it different from Foresight?

"Oh, that. Well, there are two skills that you absolutely need to be a fortune-teller. One is the Prediction skill and the other is the Hindsight skill. There are some fortune-tellers with only one or the other, but most have both."

Prediction skill? Hindsight skill?

"Does Hindsight let you see into the past?"

That one was easy to understand.

"That's right. The more stars a fortune-teller has, the more specific visions of the past they can see. But I've heard they can't

look too far back into the past."

Still, it sounded like a very impressive skill.

"That skill is mostly useful in finding criminals."

That made sense. So, if Hindsight helped you see into the past, did the Prediction skill help you see into the future? Or potential futures? Maybe it would help you see the most likely outcome.

"The future shown to you by a Prediction skill is not absolute. That's probably the main difference between it and Foresight. With the Prediction skill, numbers will pop up next to your vision to let you know how probable that future outcome is. The more stars you have, the more likely your visions are—and some can achieve predictions that are never wrong. At first, I thought Marya had the Prediction skill because of that."

"Really?"

"Yeah. After all, Foresight is a skill only of legend."

Right… Most people wouldn't assume somebody had a skill that they thought doesn't exist.

"But if she had the Prediction skill, I didn't understand why that would need to be kept a secret. The church already has a known fortune-teller with five stars in Prediction, so they'd have no reason to keep Marya a secret. That made me wonder why they were hiding Marya in Hataru Village. With noblemen coming and going all the time, there was just no way they could have kept her hidden forever. That's what made me think of the Foresight skill. I quickly dismissed the idea, though."

"So that's why you asked her about numbers. And wow, I didn't know there was a five-star fortune-teller."

That was truly extraordinary.

"Yeah, I guess. The church says this fortune-teller is still alive, too."

He doesn't seem even slightly interested…I wonder why?

"When I asked Marya if she saw numbers, I was only half-sure… Actually, no, I didn't even consider the possibility that anybody had the Foresight skill. But Marya said she didn't see numbers, right? So I thought through all the skills it could be, and none of them matched. Then, by process of elimination, Foresight was the only skill left."

Now I understood why my father had seemed confused and hesitant: It was because Marya's skill was impossible.

"Wanna take a little break?" my father suggested.

"Huh?!"

We turned around to see Marya's shoulders heaving heavily. We had been walking for a little over an hour by then.

"Marya, let's take a break."

"Huh?!" *Huff, huff, huff.* "Okay!"

Will she be all right? I'm suddenly very worried about her.

"Let's all sit."

At my suggestion, Marya collapsed by a big tree. Her entire body was heaving as she struggled to catch her breath.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm…" *huff, huff, huff,* "…okay."

She didn't seem at all okay to me. I took a cup of tea out of my magic bag and handed it to Marya, who thanked me and took it.

"I'm so sorry…" *huff, huff,* "I can't walk very far…" *huff, huff,* "all at once."

"Don't worry. We like to take it easy when we travel," I said.

"That's right. We take detours if there's something we want to check out, too."

Like deep-forest groves and caves and so on.

"Yup. Hey, Ciel?"

Mrrrow?

"Take us on the easy trails to the village this time, okay?"

I had to tell the adandara to stick to the easy trails or we might wind up scaling a cliff—and that would be quite the ordeal!

Chapter 485:
Why She Escaped

"IVY, MARYA, there's something I need to talk to you both about," my father said as he sipped his tea and looked between us.

"What is it?" we both asked.

"The church in Hataru… Assuming intel on Marya was leaked, the noblemen are probably on the move already."

They certainly would be. They would hate for Marya to testify against them.

"It's still possible your secret hasn't been leaked, but I just think we'd better not be too optimistic."

I nodded in agreement.

"Marya's hard to disguise. And the noblemen have met her in person, so they know what she looks like. They'll probably assume she'll do something like cut her hair, so I was thinking of changing up her whole ensemble."

"What do you mean by *ensemble*?" Marya gave my father a perplexed look. I followed suit, equally baffled.

"They're looking for a single woman in her early thirties."

That was true.

"So to throw them off the scent, maybe the three of us should become a family. Marya and I can be married, and Ivy can be our daughter. That'll be way off the description of the woman they're looking for."

"…What?!"

Druid and Marya, my parents?! Oh, right, it'll just be a trick to keep our pursuers off our tails; we won't actually be a family. Okay,

okay… I'm their daughter? She's my mom! Wait, no, she'll only be my mom to keep the bad guys off the scent… Ugh, it's no use, my brain is swimming. Okay, so this is a lie to help us escape. It won't be for real.

"Er…but…I…"

Meanwhile, Marya was just as baffled as me.

"What do you think?" my father asked.

What do I think…? Well, I do think it makes sense as a way to hide her from people who are looking for a single woman. A family would definitely make them ignore her.

"I think it's a good idea," I answered.

"Marya?"

"I think…umm…it really would be a lot to ask of you…and I'm already such a burden…"

Marya looked very guilty, and I didn't blame her.

"Actually, Ivy and I are running from the church in Hataru ourselves," my father explained. "So having you with us would help us hide from them as well."

Huh? But is the church really that desperate to find us?

"What?! The church is after you, too?"

"Yeah. Those church bastards want something I have, so I ran from them before they could take it."

Ohh, now I get it. He's just saying this to make Marya feel better. But boy, is he sure good at mixing lies with the truth. His facial expressions look exactly the same, too. If I didn't know the truth, he'd have me fooled as well.

"Really?" Marya asked in wonder.

"Yeah. So it'd be a win-win situation, right, Ivy?" he asked, looking at me.

I smiled and nodded.

Marya finally answered. “All right, Mr. Druid…if it will help you both.”

“Glad to hear it. And yes, it’ll help.” My father’s face relaxed a little in relief. “Now, we’ll have to change up the way we talk to each other.”

Hm? Like how?

“Um… I suppose I should call you *Mother*, correct?”

“*Ivy*, not so polite. You’re making her sound like a stranger.”

Couldn’t be more true. Er, well… Agh, this is just so embarrassing. I shouldn’t think too much about it.

“Mom…?”

“Yes?”

I looked at Marya and noticed her face was red. I was sure mine was even redder. And why were we even blushing this hard just over me calling her “Mom”?

“Glad to, uh, be a family with you,” I added.

There!

“That sounded really stiff, but, well…I guess we’ll all just have to get used to it by exposure,” my father said.

“Yeah. Be patient with me until I get there.”

I wondered why it felt so weird. Talking to my father didn’t feel strange, but talking to Marya…Mom…it just made me feel itchy all over.

“Yes, Ivy, I, too, am, happy, to, be, a, family, with, you.”

Ha ha ha ha! Look who else is stiff! And look at Marya’s… Mom’s…face. It’s beyond tense.

“Kee hee hee! Ivy, Marya, you both sound ridiculous.” My father finally burst out laughing, unable to contain himself any longer. I had to admit, we did sound terrible. Why did just calling each other by name make us so nervous?

"Hee hee!"

Oh, now she's laughing, too! A bit uncomfortably, but at least she's finally laughing.

"Marya—I know we all feel pretty silly right now, but there's one more important thing you need to do," my father said.

"Huh?! Oh dear, what is it, Mr. Druid?" Marya asked, staring nervously at my father.

"Call me Druid—drop the *Mr*. You're talking to me just like Ivy's talking to you right now—like we're strangers."

"Um, I'm sorry, sir—oops!"

"Well, we all just need to settle into it over time."

"Yes, sir."

Hmm…is she gonna be okay? Maybe the more we talk, the faster we'll adjust?

"Um…" Marya spoke up timidly.

"What's up?"

"When you send the letter to Hataru Village, there's something I want you to tell the villagers for me."

"Maybe I can. What do you want to say?"

"Well, um…I actually don't know the details myself. It's just, Chaslice…"

Chaslice? Please don't tell me Marya still cares about him…

"I spent my whole life in that room…so I met that boy through the window. After I talked for a while with him, I knew I needed to get out of there. I knew I couldn't stay near Chaslice. I wanted to get away…from that room…from him. So one day, he unlocked my door for me. He helped me get out here into the forest."

She must have been talking about Bith. *But wait a minute—her story doesn't quite add up, does it? How was Bith able to come visit her room?*

"When I escaped, I noticed something—the people who were usually there were gone. Chaslice was at the church door…but when I tried to talk to him, that boy stopped me. We hid together."

Thank goodness. If she had approached Chaslice, she'd have wound up right back in that room.

"Chaslice said…that all the karyo in the forest were destroyed."

Wait, karyo? That sounds familiar… Oh, the narcotic flowers! The flowers Toron made into dinner. Wait, the church *was growing narcotics?*

"The person Chaslice was talking to sounded terribly angry. He said the whole reason he came here was to buy all the flowers, and so he'd wasted his time."

So the noblemen who visited the church were there to buy narcotics? All *the narcotics, in fact? Judging by the size of that flower field, that was way more than enough for one person to have a good time. Noblemen are the worst.*

"Chaslice was terribly angry. He said he'd have everybody check the field to see if some of it could be salvaged."

Ohh, so that's how Bith managed to get Marya out of the church when nobody was there.

"I wanted to help Chaslice. He always told me that he was kind to take time out of his busy schedule to visit me and I should leap at the opportunity to help him."

…May he be sentenced to slavery and taste the torments of hell.

"But the boy said I couldn't do that. He said I would be killed if anybody found me. And he also told me karyo were bad flowers. Flowers that people shouldn't grow."

This Bith fellow sounds like he's got a good head on his shoulders.

"Chaslice was growing bad flowers. He was the only person in my life, but what's wrong is wrong. So I want to tell the villagers about the karyo flowers. The boy told me that karyo destroys lives, and I don't want Chaslice to grow flowers like that."

Marya knew it was the church that had imprisoned her. She also knew that Chaslice worked for the church. She should have wanted to escape it all, but Chaslice was the one person who'd given her a moment's comfort in her solitude. She didn't want him to devote his life to evil. Did this count as brainwashing? I was starting to feel really sad over the whole thing.

"Don't worry, we already told them about the karyo blooms," my father said.

"What?! You did?"

"Yeahhh…and actually, we were the ones who destroyed the field."

Marya looked shocked. And it made me realize that everything we'd told her made it sound like we'd caused all of the church's torment. *(Toron, you're the best.)* "What exactly are karyo blooms like, sir?"

"Druid."

Marya gave him a confused look.

"My name."

"Oops! Um, what are they like, Druid?"

"Karyo roots are a narcotic. Do you know what a narcotic is?"

Marya nodded in reply. "The people I saw… A lot of them suffered from narcotic sickness. They were happy when I took the disease away from them."

Ha ha ha! So the bad noblemen were narcotic addicts.

"Um, narcotic addiction is not quite the same thing as an illness," my father informed her.

"It's not?"

"No… Illness is something that can assault a person suddenly. No matter what you do to stay safe, you can never avoid it entirely. But narcotics can only hurt you if you choose to use them."

"Choose to use them?" she repeated, confused by the phrasing.

"That's right. You use them by choice at first, but eventually you become addicted and can't quit. That's what narcotics are."

"You can't quit using them?" she repeated.

"After just one or two uses, you'll think you can quit anytime, but you start relying more and more on it. Users start to crave the narcotic like crazy, and some of them even change in personality. That's why it's so dangerous."

Marya slowly nodded in understanding. "Once, I saw somebody who was so desperate for narcotics that he killed a woman who was trying to stop him."

"I'm sorry…"

When she said she "saw" it happen, she must have seen it in her vision.

"Narcotics destroy the most important part of what makes us human. That's why anyone who uses or sells them is sentenced to slavery. And those who sell them are sentenced to live out their days in the worst place imaginable."

Wow, that's intense.

"Do you…think Chaslice knows all of this?" Marya asked meekly.

"Yeah…I'm sure he knows," my father said firmly.

Marya sadly nodded.

Chapter 486:
Wife? Little Sister?

"THANKS, SORA."

Now that we had added Marya to our party, it was a little harder finding a place to camp. We had only gone from two people to three, but we needed extra floor space. But that was where Sora came in—the slime found a place where the three of us and all the creatures could sleep with ample room. As I petted Sora in gratitude, I felt a heavy nudge against my back. I whirled around to find Ciel headbutting me.

"What's up, Ciel?"

Mew!

With a short yip, Ciel began to walk deeper into the forest. Had the adandara made another discovery?

"Are you hungry, buddy?"

I thought Ciel had already gone off hunting only two days ago.

Ciel looked at me and shook its head no, meaning it wasn't hungry. So maybe there was a treasure out there, like the puska nuts the adandara had found for Marya.

"Will you be back soon?" I asked, feeling a little worried.

Mrrrow.

Ciel answered with a confident nod, which was a relief.

"Got it. Be careful of the other monsters. Run away if you think it's dangerous. Don't be a hero, okay?"

Mrrrow.

"Oh, is Ciel going somewhere?" asked my father, who had come back from gathering kindling with Marya and Flame.

"Looks like it. Thanks for the kindling."

"You're welcome. Careful out there, Ciel."

Mrrrow.

As we watched Ciel bound off into the distance, we added the kindling to the fire.

"We tried to pick the driest-looking branches. Will these work?" my father asked.

"Yeah, they look okay. Dinner will be ready soon."

I checked to see if the vegetables I had been boiling in a pot were done. They would be tender in only a few minutes, so I put in the remaining vegetables and meat. I added some herbs to provide flavor and reduce the meat's gaminess, and I set the lid back on, a little askew.

"By the way, Dad, what kind of monsters live around here?" I asked my father as he busied himself pulling potions, swords, and magic items out of our magic bag. Marya was setting the potions in front of Flame and Sora as she'd been told to.

"Let's see…there's lots of fow in these parts. Fow are big and strong, so their habitat covers a wide radius."

So fow were strong, then. I had only seen them running away from Ciel in terror, so I hadn't gotten a good sense of how big they were. I could tell even from a distance that they were big, though.

"Oh, right! We're eating fow tonight for dinner," I remembered.

"The stuff we got from the innkeepers at CheChe?" my father asked.

"That's right. I thought it would be good stewed, so I gave it a try."

"Well, I can't wait to taste what you came up with. Marya, those potions are for Toron, so don't put them in front of Sora."

"Oops. I'm sorry, sir."

"It's okay; take your time. I don't want you dropping them."

"Yes, sir."

"And drop that polite tone—don't be nervous. Just take it easy."

"Yes, si…er, okay."

Huh… Is this how married couples act? I dunno, they seem less like husband and wife and more like…

"Hey, watch it. You don't need to panic."

"Yes, sir."

"*Language*."

"Urrrgh."

Hee hee! Oops—I have to season the stew now. What flavors should I go with? The vegetables and fow must have made a delicious broth, so maybe I should add just a little sauce to bring it out.

"Marya, not like that. Those are Toron's potions. Sora eats blue ones. I know it's probably hard to tell what color some of the more degraded potions are, but that one's purple."

"Huh? Um…"

"The potion in your dominant hand is Toron's purple one."

"My dominant hand, sir?"

"The hand you have in the air right now."

"Oh, so this one is Toron's potion! Thanks, Mr. Druid."

"*Language*."

"Urrrrgh."

Ha ha ha!

"Marya, that bit of ground is wet—I told you to be careful. Ahh! Your knees!"

"Huh? Agh!"

"Aggggh… Guess I'll have Ivy help you get that mud out later."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much."

"*Language*."

"Urrrrrgh."

Pffha ha ha! Hee hee hee! I dunno why, but this is hilarious.

"Ivy…what's going on?"

"Um, nothing? Anyway, supper is almost ready."

Lemme just taste it…mm. Delicious. The vegetables are perfectly cooked, and the meat is ready, too.

"Okay, the slimes are almost finished with their dinner, so you can have a seat, Marya," my father said.

"Yes, si—er, okay."

My father handed me bowls, and I ladled the meat and vegetable stew into them.

"Are we having bread on the side today?" my father asked.

"Sure. Whatever you like."

"Do we still have some of that herb bread?"

Herb bread?

"Dad…do you especially like the herb bread?"

I made three different types of bread with herbs mixed into the dough. I wondered which one my father liked.

"Yeah, I really like that bitter-spicy twang," he said.

Ohh, so that's the one he liked. I'll have to bake extra loaves of herb bread next time. Bread and onigiri both go down so easily that I'd love to make as many as possible, but the magic bags only hold so much… It's a tough balance.

"Bless this food," my father and I said together.

Marya gave us a startled look, then she copied us. "Bless this food."

What a strange but cute person.

I watched Marya eat. She was eating everything vigorously, including the herb bread.

"Oh, I almost forgot! Hey, Ivy?"

"Yeah?"

"The knees of Marya's clothes are dirty."

Yeah, I know.

"Sorry, but could you help her wash it off later?"

"Sure."

I glanced at my father and Marya. They just didn't look like a married couple. Was it because my father had an old-guy face?

"What's wrong, Marya? You're spilling things."

"Huh? Oh, so I am."

"It's all right; take your time to eat. Nobody's going to take it away from you," he said.

"Okay."

Yeah, they just don't look like a married couple. I've seen - marriage take a lot of different forms, but they just have this aura that clashes with it.

"Hm? What is it, Ivy?"

"Well, I was just thinking…you don't exactly look like a married couple…more like brother and sister?"

They looked around the same age, but the way they talked made them seem more like an older brother looking after his kid sister.

"Ha ha! Yeah, that may be true," my father laughed.

"Huh?! What?!" Marya's neck twisted in confusion.

Yeah, she really seems more like a sister than a mom to me. I looked at my father and saw he was laughing heartily over Marya's

antics.

"So, wanna take the plunge, Dad?"

"Huh?"

"Wanna just be Marya's father?"

"Come on, I'm way too young for that."

Yeah, I guess that won't work. My father is thirty-three and… Wait a minute, how old is Marya?

"Um, if you don't mind my asking, Miss Marya, how old are you?"

Marya looked a bit perplexed. "I don't know. I knew how old I was up until the age of seven, but I don't know how many years have gone by since then."

Yeah, I guess when every day is exactly the same, you do lose track of time.

"Did anything noteworthy happen the year you were seven?" my father asked.

Marya gave him a strange look. "What do you mean?"

"Well, didn't your parents mention anything? It sounded like something happened in some town or village that year."

"The year I was seven… Oh! They said a giant magic stone was found in Okanke Village. I remember it really well because that was the first time I got to touch a magic stone."

Okanke Village? I think that's closer to the royal capital than where we are now.

"And that happened when you were seven?" my father asked.

"Yes, sir."

"That means…you're twenty-seven years old right now, Marya."

"Twenty-seven?"

"Yeah. The magic stone they found in Okanke Village is quite famous. After all, everybody thought it was way too big to even get out of that cave."

"Oh, how interesting," I said. "So this magic stone was really special, then? How big was it?"

My father clenched his fist. "The reports said it was twice the size of a grown man's fist. And it was very powerful—Level 3—so a bunch of adventurers hurried to the village to try and get rich quick. It was pretty crazy, I hear."

A Level 3 magic stone twice as big as a man's fist… Yeah, I can see how that would grab a lot of attention.

"And, well…all the magic stones they got out of the cave after that one were the same level. I heard it took a whole year for the excitement to die down. But anyway—Marya, you are, without a doubt, twenty-seven years old."

"Twenty-seven…so I guess she'll have to be your little sister, then, Dad."

"Yeah. That's probably a better idea than being married."

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EXTRA:
Find Toron!

WE LEFT THE CAVE where we met Toron. Little did we know that we would have to search for Toron three whole times before we would make it out. We were lucky to find the little creature right away, but since we were about to walk through a dense forest, we would have to keep a watchful eye, or else Toron would get lost.

I looked at the basket slung over my father's shoulder. It was a little big for the newborn tree monster, which meant Toron was tumbling around inside. We had to make do for the time being, but we would look for a basket of a more suitable size once we got to the dump.

"Well, let's go," my father said. "Lead the way, Ciel."

Mrrrow.

Ciel's tail joyfully wagged as we followed behind. The sight of that tail dancing in the air always tempted me to grab it.

Mrrrow?

Sensing something, Ciel turned around and looked at me. When I waved back, Ciel's tail wagging got even more intense. Now I really wanted to catch it!

After walking for a while, I started wondering about Toron. Was the little tyke still in its basket? When I turned around, my father looked at me curiously.

"What's up?"

I stared at the basket. "Is Toron still in there?"

He smiled. "You worried?" He walked up to me and showed me the basket.

"Good. Still in there."

Toron was drowsily nodding off in the basket. The little tree looked quite sleepy, but it was jolted awake with each big shake of the basket.

"I sure hope we can find Toron a better basket at the dump," I said.

"Me, too. This one is way too big for comfort."

Mrrrow. Ciel coaxed us to pick up the pace. Apparently, we had stopped walking as we talked.

"Sorry," we both said, rushing to catch up to Ciel.

"Agh!"

When we stepped into a little clearing, a gust of wind blew on us.

"What a breeze. Be careful," my father warned me.

"I will."

My father sheltered Toron's little leaves with his arm. It really was a powerful wind. Worried about Toron, I looked into the basket hanging off my dad's shoulder…and then I noticed that it was empty.

"Dad! Toron's gone!"

"What?!" My father frantically looked inside the basket. "Ugh, you're right. But when did it happen?"

Ciel, noticing our panic, came to our side.

"Sorry, Ciel, but Toron's missing."

Mrrrow.

Ciel leaned in close, looking into Toron's basket. Then, after a few sniffs, it started searching the area.

"Ciel, can you smell Toron?" my father asked.

Ciel gave him a quizzical look. Being a tree monster, Toron should smell like the trees of the forest, so trying to search by smell

alone seemed pointless.

"Let's retrace our steps," my father suggested.

"Okay."

We turned around and walked back on the path, slowly looking as we went…

"Hey, Dad, do you think we'll even be able to find Toron?"

Since Toron was a tiny tree monster with only two leaves, it was easy to lose sight of it in the dense forest. To be completely honest, I doubted we could find Toron.

"Ha ha! I guess we'll just have to try our best."

"Right you are," I agreed.

Oh! I spy a pair of Toron-like twin leaves… Oops, not Toron.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Mrrrow.

We backtracked, split up, and searched, but to no avail.

"Don't get too far away from the group, okay, guys?" I said.

If we got too far apart, we would have to widen our search to include slimes—especially Sora. Though the little slime did its best to search, Sora had a horrible sense of direction. I quietly went up to Ciel and whispered a request that it stay near Sora.

"Thanks in advance."

Mrrrow.

Ciel's quiet trill in reply relieved me right away. Now I knew that even if Sora got lost, Ciel would bring it back.

Ciel kept close to Sora during the search. Sora glanced at the adandara but quickly went back to looking for Toron.

Oh good. Sora's none the wiser. We were sure to have an epic sulking on our hands if Sora found out I'd asked Ciel to keep an eye on it.

Sol and Flame seemed to keep track of where my father and I were while they searched. They truly were a remarkable pair.

"Clever kids." My father sounded just as impressed as I was.

"They sure are."

I waved at Sol and Flame when they turned to look at me, and the pair jiggled in reply off in the distance.

"Okay, let's get back to our search," my father said.

I pumped my fist and started looking again.

"I'm just not finding anything…" my father sighed.

I nodded in reply. We had come so far that we could see the cave again, yet there was still no sign of Toron. Seriously, where had the little tree gone? I hoped it wasn't scared.

"Toron was in the basket when we left the cave, right?"

I nodded in reply. "Yeah. I definitely saw Toron in there."

Since we had lost Toron three whole times while we were still in the cave, I'd made sure it was in the basket when we left, so I knew for certain that the little tree was in the basket then.

"What about when we stepped into that clearing?" my father asked as we walked toward the clearing.

"Well…I checked the basket before we walked in there, then I noticed a few minutes later that Toron was gone."

"In other words, Toron probably got lost right after we stepped into that clearing."

"Yeah."

My father and I talked it over as we reached the last place we'd checked.

"Was this the place?"

"Yeah. I know it was here," I answered.

Just before we left the tangle of trees, we'd been talking about getting Toron a new basket. I remembered looking into the basket then and seeing Toron.

"That's right—when we stepped out of this thicket, a really strong gust of wind started blowing," I said.

"Yeah, it was pretty powerful."

That's right. We stepped out into this clearing…then I covered my face with my arms. Yeah, the winds here really are strong.

"Oh! Maybe the wind blew Toron awa—"

"Puuu!"

"Te—*ryuuu*!"

"Peeeh!"

I whirled in surprise toward Sora's, Flame's, and Sol's voices to find the trio tumbling through the air.

"The wind must've blown them away."

My father scrambled after them as they tumbled, Ciel following close behind.

Mrrrow.

I patted Ciel's head gently when the adandara returned with Flame in its front paws.

"Thanks, Ciel. So happy you're okay, Flame." I squeezed it to my chest.

"Te—*ryuuu*."

I looked at my father and saw that he had caught Sol.

"Wait, where's Sora?" he asked.

I looked around the area. "…Not here."

I ran in the direction Sora had tumbled and looked around. *Oh no…first Toron, and now Sora has gone missing.*

"I don't see—"

"Pu! *Puuuu!*"

I heard Sora's voice in the distance. But when I looked that way, I couldn't see the slime at all.

Mrrrow.

Ciel's front paws patted at the earth. I curiously approached the spot to see a little hole in the ground. And when I looked down into it, my eyes met a very pitiful-looking Sora.

"Puuu!"

"I found Sora! Thanks, Ciel."

I stuck my hand in the hole and rescued Sora. I was almost impressed by the way the little slime had gotten itself stuck in there.

"Pu, *puuu*."

Now free, Sora looked at me and jiggled. I hugged it tight and heard a tiny sigh of relief. It sounded like Sora had gotten a little scared.

"The wind might have carried Toron away, too," my father said.

I nodded. "Maybe we should look in the places the other creatures got blown to?"

"Good idea. It's much more likely Toron is somewhere around there."

I set Sora down at my feet and looked at my creatures. "Hey, everyone, can you help us look for Toron around here?"

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

"Thanks."

We all searched the area. But looking for Toron, whose only distinguishing feature was two leaves, turned out to be quite difficult in a thicket of trees. Still, we knew Toron was probably waiting for us somewhere, so we had to try.

"I'm so exhausted…"

Two hours had passed since our search started. Maybe a little rest would improve our chances.

Wait, where's Sora… Oh, Ciel brought it back. Thanks, Ciel.

"Te—*ryuuu*!"

When we heard Flame cry out, we both gasped, and my father grabbed for his sword.

"Teryu! Teru!"

I looked at Flame, who was bounding toward me.

"Did you find Toron?" I asked, hurrying over to Flame.

Where was Toron all this time?

I looked around the area where Flame was, but still no Toron.

"Teryu!"

Huh? I looked where Flame was looking… *A tree?* Flame was staring hard at a tree which was tangled in some vines.

"Found you," my father said.

I gave him a look. *Where?*

"Ivy, see that big tree trunk?"

"Yeah."

"Look at the rock under it."

I looked at the trunk of the vine-covered tree. *The rock under it, the rock under it… Oh!*

"Toron!"

Toron was grabbing onto the vines wrapped around the tree. When it saw us, Toron started to flap and struggle, craving rescue.

"Hold still, Toron. We'll get you out of there in a jiff." My father approached the tree and cut the vines wrapped around it with his knife. Several knife cuts later, Toron was finally free.

I took Toron from my father and gave it a good looking over. Toron looked exhausted.

"Toron, are you okay?" Toron's twin leaves shook. When I saw that, I held up Toron to my father. "Dad, what should we do? Toron's leaves are ripped."

Either from grappling with the vines or being blown away by the wind, a section of Toron's twin leaves had been ripped.

"Toron?" Toron looked at my father and shook its leaves. "Looks okay to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. If Toron was in any pain, we wouldn't see any shaking."

He was right. Toron didn't seem distressed by the torn leaves. I watched Toron for a while until the little tree tilted its trunk quizzically.

"Yeah, Toron does look okay," I agreed.

My father gave a sigh of relief. "I'm sure glad we found the little tyke."

I nodded. We really were so lucky.

"Thanks, Flame. And thank you, everyone, for helping us look."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Mrrrow.

Their happy voices brought a smile to my face.

But boy, was I tired. I looked down at Toron in my hands. "We were worried about you, little one. I'm so happy we found you."

Ahh, I hope we can find Toron a better basket soon.



BONUS ✲ Amiche and Luffie Are Slowly Making Friends



BONUS:
Amiche and Luffie Are Slowly Making Friends

AMICHE'S PERSPECTIVE

"GOOD MORNING, LULU."

The first thing I did every morning was greet Lulu. Whenever Lulu was in a good mood…

"Puu."

…is how I was answered! Mornings like this always put me in a great mood.

"Let's put in another hard day's work, okay?"

"Puu."

"Hnnnn!"

I couldn't help but sigh over Lulu's reply. It had taken us a month to get here. So much hard work. And Lulu was more openhearted than I was.

"Luluuu."

"Puu."

Oh no, Lulu rejected my hug! And gave me a dirty look, too. But it'll be okay. I won't let a little rejection get me down!

I'd never realized how expressive slimes really were, and I never would have known this if Lulu hadn't forgiven me. Seriously, I will be forever in Lulu's debt.

After breakfast, Lulu and I headed to the dump. We ran into Luffie on the way.

"Morning, Luffie!" I ran boisterously up to him.

"Morning, Amiche."

Once I was by Luffie's side, his slime Ponyu looked up at me from his arms.

"Good morning, Ponyu. Have you found yourself a nice warm little place to be on this chilly morning?"

Ponyu answered with a jiggle.

"Ponyu's been sleeping in my arms lately," Luffie said.

I immediately felt envious. Lulu still wasn't that open with me yet. It was no use fretting, though. We had to take it slow.

We arrived at the dump and found some other tamers there. I'd started to feel a rift between us and them when Luffie and I started reforging our relationships with our tamed monsters, but I thought my relationship with Lulu was more important than my relationship with them, so I'd decided not to care.

"Okay, Lulu. Work your magic."

"Puu," Lulu replied loud and proud, jumping toward the pile of trash.

"Ponyu! It's all you, buddy!"

"Peh!"

Ponyu cheerfully jumped from Luffie's arms and flew into the trash pile.

"Looks like Ponyu's getting more and more affectionate," I observed.

Ponyu was hardly ever away from Luffie nowadays. Lulu stayed close to me, but it still kept to itself more often.

"Sure is," Luffie replied. "Much more affectionate than Lulu. Okay! Let's get to work."

"Yeah."

While Lulu and Ponyu were eating the trash, we cleaned up the dump. We had never given it a second thought before, but ever

since that fateful day, we'd known just how dangerous dumps could be.

On that day, Lulu fell off the top of a pile of trash and almost got hurt. I was terribly frazzled afterward.

A closer look revealed broken glass, unsheathed swords, and all sorts of other dangerous things in the pile of trash. I was ashamed that I had never noticed any of this before in all the times I'd come to the dump. After Lulu had her tumble, she wasted no time jumping back up to the top of the pile. I was so terrified by the sight that I decided to do whatever I could to keep the dump safer. And since I only had Luffie to help, we couldn't do much, but we liked to think it was better than nothing.

As we started cleaning the trash, we noticed that a truly wide variety of items had been discarded. We would even find magic items that still could be somewhat useful. After I talked it over with Luffie, we decided to take those items to shops.

"Ooh, do you think this still has some life in it?"

I'd found a magic item that was treasured in the wintertime as a heating device. Luffie brought another magic item near it to gauge its magic energy.

"Yeah, it's still usable. Let's take it to a repair shop and sell it."

"Good idea."

So today we would once again swing by a repair shop on our way back from the dump to have a magic item fixed. We had been going just about every day by then, so the shop owner knew us and had been giving us all kinds of useful news and tips.

The magic item Luffie was using just then was a gift from the shop owner, who'd said it would be useful for us to have. And indeed, since it showed us how much magic energy was left in an item, it helped us figure out which items to take. We used to just pick up the items that looked nice, and many of those turned out to be duds.

"Puu."

"Peh!"

We looked toward Lulu's and Ponyu's voices. They had apparently found something to play with in the trash.

"Is that a ball?"

I nodded in reply. "Looks like it. But if they play here, they'll tear holes in the trash."

Lulu and Ponyu were rolling the ball back and forth. They looked like they were having fun, but the trash pile was not the most stable floor, and I wished they'd pick a different spot.

"Lulu, you shouldn't play here. It's dangerous."

"Come on, Ponyu, you'll hurt yourself."

"Puu…Puu…"

"Peh! Peh!"

The two slimes looked at us, then stole glances at their ball.

"Are you done with breakfast?" I asked. "Then let's go find a safe place to play."

"Puu!" Lulu bounded into the air.

"Looks like they're finished eating for now."

"Sure does."

I walked over to Lulu and picked up both slime and ball - together. *Oh, thank goodness Lulu is okay with being held this time!*

"Come here, Ponyuuu."

Ponyu jumped into Luffie's arms. That was the kind of relationship I was hoping to build with Lulu.

"Puu?"

I looked at Lulu in my arms. The slime seemed to be eyeing me a bit dubiously. Hey, at least a girl can dream…

"Puu."

"Lulu sure has a wide range of emotions," Luffie commented.

"What?"

I shot him a dubious look. Then my eyes moved to Ponyu in his arms. And at a closer look, yeah, Ponyu's expression didn't seem to change much.

"But Lulu doesn't…"

Wait a minute, I distinctly remember several times when Lulu looked frustrated and annoyed. Wary and distrustful, even. But why did it look so frustrated all the time…?

"Amiche, you're sure easy to read."

"Puu."

"Ooh, you think so, too, Lulu? And after she gets in her head like that, she doesn't even hear what we're saying when we're standing right next to her."

"Puu, *puu*."

Huh? Why is Lulu talking to Luffie?

"Huh? Did something happen? Whoa, why do you look so frustrated? Luffie, do you know why?"

"Uhhh, yeah. Lulu and I were just having a moment."

Why are Lulu and Luffie bonding?

"What about me?"

"…Puu."

"Why d'ya think Lulu sighed?" I asked Luffie, who burst into laughter for some reason. (Even Ponyu and Lulu seemed in on the joke, whatever it was!) "How much longer are you gonna keep letting your stupid monsters get their way? You trying to make tamers look bad?"

Ohh, great. This lady again.

I looked at the woman who was glaring at us angrily and said, "We've decided to fix our relationships with our tamed monsters. We

aren’t doing anything wrong.”

Her name was Stalice. She was a tamer and our senior, but our philosophies were polar opposites. She disapproved of the way I was changing my behavior around Lulu and kept picking fights with me. She really was a thorn in my side.

“You’re a fool for believing in that phony information. If you keep treating your slime like that, the monster will *kill* you.”

Aaaagh. Seriously, what a pain.

“But that information came from the council of lords. Only a fool would call it foolish.”

Stalice was visibly mad at Luffie’s comeback.

“Who cares what that—”

“Helloooo, is everything okay over there?”

We looked toward the voice to find three watchmen. They were probably on patrol.

“Humph. You’ll regret this someday.”

Glaring at us one last time, Stalice left the dump.

“That woman never gives up,” Luffie sighed tiredly.

I smiled back. She probably didn’t like that Luffie and I suddenly were no longer doing everything she told us to.

“You kids okay?” the watchman asked.

We bowed back. “Thank you very much, sir. That was a big help.”

Trash was our village’s biggest problem. When Luffie and I started rebuilding our relationships with our slimes, the head watchman immediately called us in to his office and asked us to give him progress reports. Naturally, we agreed and asked him for advice on what was happening at the dump. This was because Stalice wasn’t the only person who had complained.

The head watchman immediately gave Stalice and the other agitators a warning that everyone complied with except for her. For some reason, her behavior got even worse. When he found out, the head watchman started sending patrolmen to the dump to check on us.

"Let us know if anything happens, okay?"

"We will, sir."

After we bid the watchmen goodbye, we headed back to the village. And of course, we took the slimes' ball and our new magic item with us.

If only Stalice could see just how adorable slimes really were.

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 10. Ladies and gentlemen, we are in double digits! This is Volume 10! When I started writing this story, I never imagined it would last this long. And thanks to all of you, this series has sold a total of over 1.1 million copies! I seriously cannot thank you enough.

Volume 10 was quite a struggle for me. In the interests of the story to come, there was a skill I just had to introduce in this arc, but it was very difficult to handle. After exerting a lot of imagination, I created the character Marya. And since I cursed poor Marya with a horrible upbringing, I had to be very careful how I handled her. I tend to forget this, but the concept for *The Weakest Tamer* is a "cozy traveling story." So after I figured out Marya's character background, I realized that just wouldn't work and quickly amended the story, winding up with her arc being escaping her past and spreading her wings to the future.

Also, this arc has some new characters who will later become important—the tree monsters. I had tree monsters attack Ivy at the beginning of the story, but I wanted to make it clear that there were also friendly tree monsters. Nama-sensei, my illustrator, thank you so much for the adorable drawings of baby Toron. When I first saw your sketches of Toron, all sorts of visions came to me. One of them was the thought that Toron would be so cute tangled in some vines—which wound up becoming an original short story for this book. I hope I conveyed my adoration and wonder for Toron to all you dear readers, too.

2024 is the year *The Weakest Tamer* will become an anime. A shockingly high number of individuals helped bring this story to life. I truly am so grateful to all of you. Some of you *Weakest Tamer* fans

might scratch your heads a little now and then, but I hope you all support anime Ivy, too.

Thank you to everyone at TO Books for your help with Volume 10. My editor K-sama, thank you for always putting up with me. We managed to get Volume 10 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 11 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

January 2024

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the tenth volume of Honobonoru500's second story, *Weakest Tamer*! Ivy's feeling warm and cozy after sending faaxes to her friends. And yet, when she arrives in Hataru Village, she finds herself caught up in yet another problem! To make matters worse, wall-climbing monsters breach the village walls!

Druid fights bravely to protect the village, but now he's a target!

They both escape the village, vowing to never get caught up in problems again. And yet…they encounter a woman alone in the forest. Who *is* this mystery woman?

NAMA

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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