

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey ^{to} Pick Up Trash



WRITTEN BY
Honobonoru500
ILLUSTRATED BY Nama

NOVEL
4!

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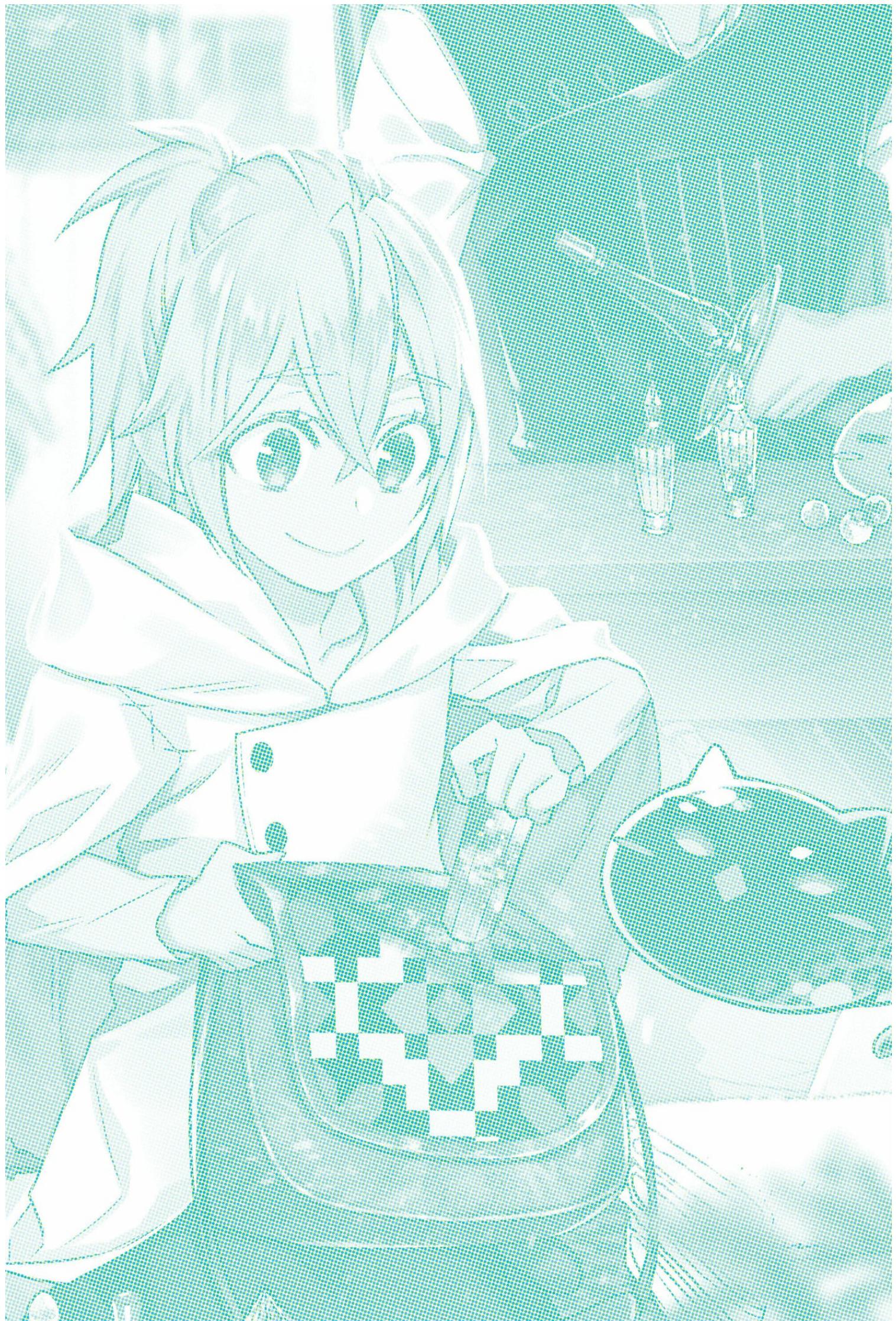
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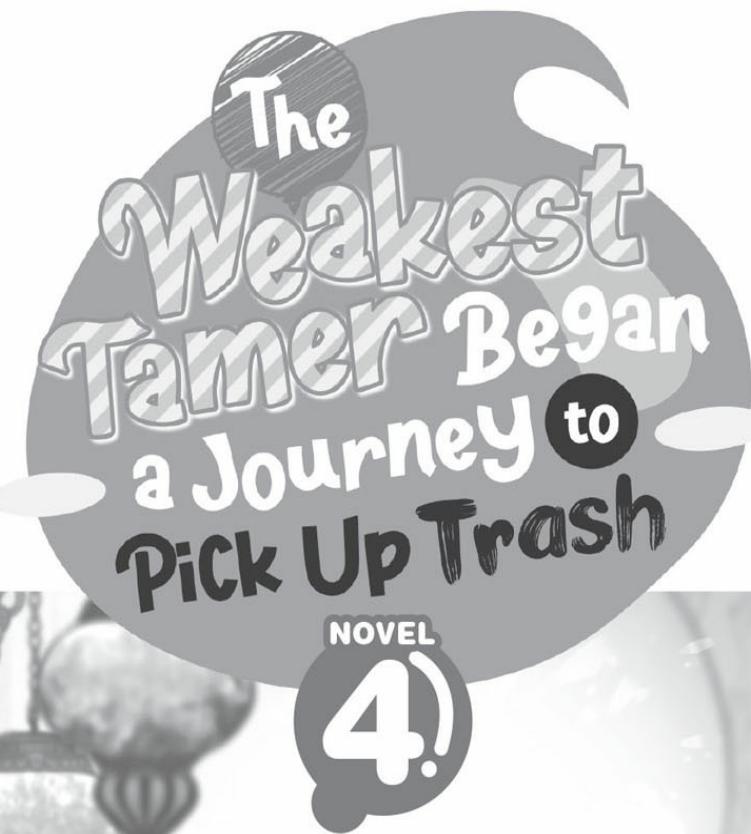
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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IVY'S JOURNEY THUS FAR:



CHARACTERS

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 becoming a bit of a father figure to her.

Ivy

Abandoned by her parents after being declared starless, she embarks on a journey to survive. She has memories of a past life. Often mistaken for a boy.

Ciel

An adandara (catlike monster) that Ivy met during her travels. For some reason, it's taken a liking to her. Often cuddles.

Sora

A slime, and Ivy's first-ever successful taming. It's a rare collapsed slime. Often omnivorous.

Flame

A red slime Sora birthed (?) by splitting in two. It's grown fond of Druid for some reason. Often sleeps.

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 4

Story by Honobonoru500

Illustrations by Nama

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PART 4 * My Companions in the Town of Oll – 2



Chapter 172: I'm the Representative?

“Thanks, Ivy. I think this should make people a little more open to the idea of eating ryce.”

“I’m just happy to help, sir.” *I hope everyone likes rice. Wow, I’m starting to get a little nervous.*

“For today’s formula, we’ll register Druid, myself, and Ivy, with Ivy as the rep. If there are any dividends, we’ll split them five-to-two, five-to-two, and five. That sound good?”

Hm? What’s he talking about? Register what? Dividends?

“Yeah, that should be fine. Thanks for setting everything up, Dad.”

“What?!”

Druid had answered for me before I even had a chance to sort out my confusion. *When he said “register,” he was talking about the sauce we just made, right?*

“Um, Mr. Druid, what’s all of this about?”

“The patent for the sauce. If we’re going to sell the sauce you made, we’ll need to pay a fee to own the rights to it. Then, even if we make improvements on the recipe later, the patent will be based on the original version.”

Oooh, that’s neat. Wait...what?

“Um, what does it mean to be the representative? As the shopkeeper, wouldn’t it be better for you to be the representative instead of me?”

All I’d done was run my mouth and have Druid and his father do all the work to make the sauce.

“No, Ivy, you’re the whole reason why we made this sauce in the first place,” Druid insisted. “And since you took the initiative and thought up the flavors, you should be our representative.”

Really, though? Well, I should probably take Druid's word for it. But is this really all for the best?

"Don't worry, Ivy. My father always knows what to do."

"Really? Well, I guess it's okay, then."

I'll just worry about technical things like patents after we actually get people to like our sauce. The food shortage is the bigger problem right now.

"When are we going to start selling it?" I asked Druid's father, who'd finally finished writing down a bunch of notes and numbers on a piece of paper.

"Yes, about that... What's the best way to do it?"

The best way? "To advertise, sir?"

"Yes. If people hear the word 'ryce,' it's hard to believe anyone will show up to buy it."

I guess people really are resistant to the idea of eating rice. What's the best way...oh! Maybe we could lure people to the store with the smell of rice? It worked with his wife and daughter-in-law.

"If we grilled some onigiri in front of the shop, I think that might draw people to your store."

"Like it drew the ladies here?"

The ladies in question had each eaten three grilled onigiri before running back to the front counter to work.

"Yes, sir."

"You've got a point," Druid said. "Judging by their reactions, the smell of onigiri does have an alluring effect."

We all looked at each other and chuckled. Still, I was quite impressed by how eager those women were. Once they figured out that the burnt bits were tasty, they both obsessively tried to char the onigiri just right when it came time to grill the third batch. I was content to just smile and watch them, but they swept me up in their wave of fervor, and I found myself staring hard at the onigiri, arguing passionately with them over just how much char was best. I'm kind of

ashamed of myself, thinking back on it now.

“Was that okay, Ivy? My mom and sister-in-law both love getting people worked up into a frenzy.”

“It’s okay. I was a bit startled, but I had a good time.”

I felt like I’d experienced a new side of myself. I’d never gotten so passionate about grilled food before. It was fun, too.

“Well, I still feel bad. When those two ladies join forces, all hell breaks loose.” From the sentimental tone of Druid’s father’s voice, I could tell he was speaking from experience. I bet his eldest son got caught up in plenty of their shenanigans, too. But Druid’s father looked pleased rather than upset. This family must have had a lot of fun times together.

“Well, I’ll take this sauce to the guild. Then, tomorrow...”

Since Druid’s father is going to make all the arrangements, maybe I should just start cleaning up? I started to wash the giant pot I’d cooked the rice in. Wow, I just realized that we ate all the rice even though I cooked such a huge amount. Well, I didn’t think Druid’s father would actually eat five whole onigiri. Ooh, maybe I should add some spices to today’s sauce and grill some more. I’d better run that by Druid’s father.

“Um, excuse me, sir?”

“Hm? Oh, Ivy, Druid, thanks for washing up.”

“No problem, sir. Your wife tidied up a bit before she left, so there isn’t much to wash.”

“Glad to hear it. Oh, you wanted to ask me something, right?”

“Yes, I was thinking we should add some spices to the leftovers of today’s sauce.”

What would go well with it? We could add some fiery spice or maybe some texture...

“Ah, good idea. We’ll need some different types of sauce when we grill the onigiri in front of the store.”

Oh, good. Glad he's on board.

"Ivy, I have a request."

"Yes, sir?" I asked, a bit startled by the seriousness in his tone.

"I want you to help me grill the onigiri. As my lead ryce steamer."

"You want me to be the leader?!"

I doubt that someone like me, who still messes up the water-rice ratio, is fit to be in a leadership position...

"Of course I'll pay you for your work. We'll start with five days a week and see how things go. What do you think?"

Work? Pay? But I'm doing this as a personal favor because he's Druid's father. I couldn't accept wages...

"Don't worry, Ivy, I'll help you. Let's have you earn some proper wages."

"Okay. I graciously accept, sir... Huh?" *Wait a minute, I just said yes automatically...what did I just agree to?*

"Pfft!" Druid's laugh echoed through the kitchen.

"Mr. Druid!"

"Sorry, you just looked like you were thinking over it so seriously, then you suddenly blurted out yes."

I was just as surprised as he was, though I guess that goes to show how much I trusted Druid. *Well, I suppose that's a good thing, since he and I are travel companions.*

"Druid, stop that! You're making Ivy uncomfortable," Druid's father barked, getting angry on my behalf.

Meanwhile, I was weak in the knees from the way I'd agreed to the deal so nonchalantly. Words like "leader" and "wages" made my brain hurt...but I never minded lending a helping hand.

"It's really not that complicated. I just wanted to hire you to work for me, so I called your job a lead role. Sorry about that."

“Oh, it’s okay, sir. Though I don’t really need any wages.”

“No, I insist on paying you, since I’m going to be selling something you made. As a merchant, I take a hard line on that.”

He takes a hard line on it as a merchant... I’m not sure why, but that sounds so heroic.

“Then I accept your request. And I look forward to working with you.”

“Great! That’s good news. I’ll be counting on you, too, Druid.”

“Understood.”

“I hired Druid to be your underling, Ivy, so drive him as hard as you want to.”

“C’mon, Dad, don’t be ridiculous.”

It sounded like the two were comfortable around each other again.

“Hm? What are you smiling about?” Druid asked me.

He must have noticed me grinning over their interactions. If I told him I was smiling at their wholesome relationship, they’d probably get nervous. After all the great progress they’d made, it was probably best to keep my mouth shut.

“Oh, I’m just so excited.”

“Excited?”

“Yes, sir. I’m a little worried that people won’t like our food, but I’m still very excited.”

I was worried that our business wouldn’t go very far, but I was eager to see how everyone reacted to our product.

“I just thought of something, Dad. Do the townsfolk know there’s a food shortage? I don’t feel like anyone is in emergency mode.”

“Yeah, they know about the shortage. But something similar happened to them in the past and they managed to overcome that, so they probably figure they’ll make it through this crisis, too.”

That made sense. That must have been why nobody was panicking. I felt sorry for people like Druid’s father, who knew just how bad things were. Not only did

they have to consider food security, but they needed to change the way the townsfolk thought.

“You’ve got a daunting task ahead of you, sir.”

Druid’s father smirked knowingly back at me. “Yeah, the population is much higher this time around.”

Oh, that’s right! Tokihi did mention there was a huge influx of migrants from the next village over, though I forgot to ask him why that was.

“Hm? Oh, the sun’s already setting. I’d better hurry and get to the guild.”

Druid’s father gathered his papers in a bag and started getting ready to leave.

“You’re sure in a hurry, Dad.”

“Well, I’ve got a lot of ideas for sauce recipes. We need to get them on paper as soon as possible once they’re finished. I also want to consult the guild on the food shortage crisis. If I tell them I’ve got a plan to solve the crisis with our big supply of ryce, that’ll put their minds at ease a little.”

Wow, Druid’s father must really be something to talk to the guild like that.

We said our goodbyes to Druid’s mother and his sister-in-law Shurila as we left the store. Druid’s father gave us a hasty goodbye before he set off to the guild.

“That man’s always on the go,” Druid said proudly as he watched his dad walk away. His cheeks puffed up in a smile. “Hm? What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Mr. Druid. Let’s work hard for your father.”

“Sure. Just not *too* hard, I hope.”

Ooh, he’s blushing. A smile filled my face at the sight. *Okay! Now I’m fired up! Let’s make the best sauce and rice so everyone in town can smile like that!*

Chapter 173: All Sorts of Problems

As Druid and I walked back to the plaza, I kept getting a nagging feeling that I wanted to ask him something...but what was it? Everything had been so hectic that day that I'd completely forgotten.

"Something troubling you, Ivy?"

"There was something I didn't understand and wanted to ask you about, but I forgot what it was."

"Huh. I wonder what it could be?" Druid joined me in my puzzlement.

"I'm not sure... Oh! Yes, it's about all those migrants coming in from the neighboring village. Why are they doing that?"

"Oh, that. There was a power struggle in their village."

A power struggle? Do villages even have power struggles?

"Whenever a village chief has more than one child, there often are disputes when the chief dies. And when it's a feudal lord, those disputes can get pretty bloody."

Aha. Maybe if the villagers could elect the people they like to be chiefs or lords, something good could come of that.

"So did the people who lost in the power struggle move here?"

"No, the ones who didn't want any part in that mess fled the village and came here. I hear it got pretty violent."

Wow. I didn't know there were villages like that. It's amazing how traveling lets you hear about all kinds of village disputes and scandals.

"I guess villages have their fair share of problems," I said.

"Well, it's inevitable when you gather a group of people together. The biggest problems come up when a feudal lord and village chief swap places. Their disputes over the line of succession spread all the way out through the entire

town."

"I always thought it was the eldest son or daughter who succeeded."

"In most cases, that's how it works. But power corrupts, after all. And sometimes the people on the edges get stirred up by it. The next-biggest problem after that is when a new specialty product is invented. Disputes over the patent are motivated by money."

Money disputes, patent disputes... Past Me was in tune with these phrases. I guess that means you'll find those types of disputes in every world.

"Oh, right! Did I give you the guild master's message?" Druid asked.

"No, sir."

"Sorry about that. Anyway, he says he's sorry for the wait; he'll be ready about three days from now."

"Ready? Ready for what?" *I'm not waiting for anything from the guild master...am I?*

"Your gratuity. Did you forget?"

Oh! I was gonna get that. I completely forgot.

"Now I remember. For clearing out the gurbars, right?"

"Right. Twice, in fact."

Ahaha, oh yeah. Ciel hunted up a bunch of gurbars twice.

"Ciel sure was magnificent. So agile and light." I imagined the scene of Ciel hunting. The adandara's movements were so smooth and precise.

"Yeah, I was amazed when I saw it hunt."

We reminisced about Ciel's magnificence as we walked the rest of the way back to the plaza. We arrived at the tent and...huh? *Did I invite Druid over for dinner today? Well, it's not a problem that he's here. I can just make something simple.*

"Oh!"

"What's wrong, sir?"

Druid looks troubled. Is something wrong?

“Oh, no, Ivy. I just realized I came back to your tent without meaning to.”

Come to think of it...this isn't the first time this has happened.

“This reminds me of the day we met. Would you like to stay for dinner? I can make something quick and simple.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I don’t want to impose so many days in a row.”

“It’s just as easy for me to cook for two.”

Druid hummed as he fell deep into thought. It didn’t seem so complicated to me.

“That’s it! I’ve got an idea, Ivy.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Want to go out for dinner tonight? At the food carts. My treat. You know...to thank you,” Druid trailed off, his cheeks a light pink.

When I saw that silly look—er, I mean, that look on his face I’d definitely never seen before—I was a bit startled. I wondered what he could possibly mean by ‘thanking me,’ but nothing came to mind.

“For helping me with my parents.”

Oh, for helping him patch things up with them? That must be it. But they weren't exactly enemies before. Their relationship would have repaired itself over time anyway.

“You helped me be myself in front of my parents for the first time in a long time.”

Well, he does have a point. When he first set foot in his father's shop, he looked so...pfft!

“Ivy.”

“Ha ha ha! Sorry, sir. Yes, you and your father both act the same way to cover your nervousness.”

“Huh? Do we?”

"Yes, you do. I was really surprised when I first saw it."

Druid appeared startled by what I'd said. Didn't he know about that?

"Like father, like son. Eh, sir?"

Druid did say that he deeply respected his father. He must have watched him closely since he was a child, copying his every move without even thinking.

"Huh...how about that... Like father, like son..." Druid covered his mouth, but I could still see the smile in his eyes. I was really proud when he smiled like that. It felt so good to help people.

"Okay, I'm gonna buy you a delicious feast."

"Ha ha ha. Oh, do you suppose the food carts have enough ingredients right now?"

"That's a good question. I wasn't thinking—I just assumed everything would be okay without any proof."

Well, most people don't develop a sense of impending danger if everything around them looks normal.

"Why don't we keep an eye out while we walk around the food carts, sir?"

"That's a good idea. And if you see anything you want to eat, don't hesitate to tell me."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

I slipped inside my tent to check in on Sora and Flame and ask if they wanted to come with us to the food carts.

"Hey, we're going to the food carts! Would you like to come with us? Or you could stay in the tent. Um, if you want to come with us, give me a wiggle together. If you want to stay in the tent, stay still. Okay?"

The two slimes wiggled in unison as they looked up at me. They both wanted to come along.

"Thanks, Flame, thanks, Sora. You're both so kind."

I lightly patted their heads, and the way they happily wiggled in reply was so adorable that a smile filled my face. After getting my cuteness fix, I gently put

the slimes into their bag, slung it over my shoulder, and left the tent.

We talked about food as we walked along the street that led to the food carts. Druid recommended a soup that had a bunch of meat in it.

“All right, sir, let’s go to that food cart.”

“Sounds good.”

Once on the main road, we could see the food carts in the distance...and we could tell something was wrong. The air was dead.

“And the shortage rears its ugly head.”

“Looks like it, sir.”

As my eyes passed over the row of food carts, I noticed a few of them were closed. They probably had to close shop because their ingredients were either too expensive or not available at all.

“Even if we get everyone to eat rice, the problem’s never really going to go away until we do something about the gurbars. They’re what’s causing it.”

“You’re probably right,” Druid said with a heavy sigh. According to the plaza grapevine, the veteran adventurers hadn’t returned as scheduled, and many of their comrades were worried that something had happened to them. I remembered three teams of veteran adventurers had gone deep into the forest to scout the gurbars. I really hoped they would come back in one piece.

“Well, hullo there, Druid.”

I glanced over at the owner of the voice and saw a rather brawny old man. I felt Druid shiver next to me at the sound of the voice. I glanced at him curiously, and for some reason he had a forced smile on his face.

“Hey, aren’t ya happy to see your mentor? It’s been ages.”

“Uh, yes. Glad to see you’re looking well.”



Aha. So that's Druid's mentor. The old man grinned at the uncomfortable look on Druid's face. *Oh dear, Druid. You look so stiff.* Things were so tense that I almost offered Druid my condolences.

Chapter 174:

Mentor

“So, I hear your arm got eaten off? That sure was dumb of you.”

Wow, Druid’s mentor is pretty ruthless. Who would bring up the eaten arm first thing at a reunion?

“Well, you certainly haven’t changed, Master.”

Ah. Guess Druid’s used to it.

“A man doesn’t change much once he reaches my age. Ooh! Is this the Ivy kid everybody’s talkin’ about?”

Hm? That’s right, I did hear there were rumors about me. I’d forgotten about it, since I don’t really care.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Ivy. It’s an honor to meet Mr. Druid’s mentor,” I said with a bow.

Druid’s mentor looked startled for a moment, but he quickly grinned back at me. *Hmmm... I know that smile. He’s plotting something.* I felt a little chill down my spine.

“I heard it was a *dumb* kid who was followin’ Druid everywhere, but I guess the rumors were wrong.”

A dumb kid following him everywhere? Well, we have been to lots of places together lately. I guess it looks to outsiders like I’m just tagging along.

“Is that what they’re saying about us?” Druid sounded a bit flustered. He shouldn’t have had to feel that way.

“Mr. Mentor?”

“Oh, you got a complaint, kid?”

“A complaint? No, sir. I’m fine with being a dumb kid.”

“What?!” both men gasped.

All kids are dumb in one way or another. And I don't see anything wrong with it.

"Well, you sure are a *weird* kid."

"Master! That was rude."

"Oh, Druid, ya always did take things too seriously."

The old mentor looked a bit exasperated, and Druid looked a bit exhausted. Even though their expressions were completely different, they seemed very much in tune with each other. But still, I was pretty amazed by how abrasive the old mentor was.

"What brings you here, Master?"

"Gettin' some grub. Same for you, Druid?"

"Why, yes... Wait, no. What are you doing in this town?"

"I used to be in the next town over, but I heard this place was askin' for help, so I popped in to check up on my apprentices."

"That's right, the guild master did say he put out a request for aid."

He must have come here because he was worried about his old apprentices. So the old man *did* have a kind bone in his body.

"Didn't you come here to laugh at me and the guild master?" Druid asked.

Hm? I don't think even *he* would stoop so low...

"Yeah, ya could say that. But I really was worried, just a *little* bit."

Oh...so I was wrong. Then again, he could just be posturing.

"I was really surprised to see how bad the gurbars set this town back. About half the damn food carts are closed."

"That many, Master?"

"Yep. I've been checkin' on things for the past week, so I know I'm right."

Wow. But up until just a few days ago, most of the carts were still open.

"Is that so? What should we do, Ivy? With so many carts closed, I don't think we'll be able to get dinner here."

“Would you like to go back to the plaza? I still have some ingredients, so I can cook something simple. Do you want to join us, Mr. Mentor?”

“What?!” said Druid.

“Ooh, could I? Gee, thanks, Druid.”

Come on, Druid. Stay calm. Your mentor only makes fun of you because you speak your mind.

“Sure thing, Master. Just try not to give Ivy a hard time, okay?”

“Wow...the rumors really were wrong.”

I'm kind of scared to ask what kind of rumors he heard about us. I should probably go with my default policy: not thinking about it.

“Hey, Ivy...are ya curious about those rumors?” the mentor asked.

Agh! Now I'm his target. “No, sir, I'm not really that curious. Anyway, are there any foods you can't eat?”

“Wow. For a kid, you're not very childlike.”

I'd rather you not sulk just because I didn't fall for your trap... Wait a minute, is his sulking also a trap? I feel like he's spying on me or something... I'll just ignore it.

“Well, since you don't seem to have any preferences, I'll just cook whatever I feel like.”

“Yikes! You're completely different from kids like Druid or Gotos. Are ya sure you're only six or seven years old?”

Yeah, yeah, get my age wrong—I'm used to it! Wait...who's Gotos? Oh! I think the guild master's name sounds like that...but not quite?

“Mr. Mentor, I'm nine years old.”

“Nine...? At that little size?”

Urk! The word “little” is my biggest trigger.

“Anyway, let's head back to the plaza. Ivy, should we look for places where you can buy some ingredients on the way?”

I already had some wild rabbit and field mouse meat, as well as some vegetables. And I'd restocked my rice, so I'd have an extender when resources were scarce. I'd also saved up a fair amount of spices and medicinal herbs from my travels, too.

"I'll be fine, Mr. Druid, but I might have to make another *donburi* dish like I made yesterday. Is that okay?"

"Of course. Let me know if you need any help."

"Oh, I'll be fine. It's really easy."

I'll be fine...or, to be more accurate, I don't like being helped. While I appreciated the gesture, I wouldn't be able to cook exactly the way I'd planned if someone were helping me, and I'm not too keen on that. Though I wouldn't mind if he did something small like set the table.

That reminded me... When I first started cooking for Rattloore and his party, we'd prepare everything together. But over time, it morphed into me doing all the cooking and everyone else doing simple things like pouring water or tea or setting the table.

Could it be...that I subconsciously project my reluctance to accept help into my behavior? Oh, they did ask me once if it was easier to cook all by myself. And back then, I didn't notice I had this quirk, so I was confused as to why they were asking me that. Maybe they were being mindful of me and trying to give me the best cooking experience possible. I really should thank them the next time I see them.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing, just thinking about the past a little."

"Really? Well, if you need help with anything, I'm here."

"Thanks, sir."

Since I made oyako-don yesterday...I guess I'll make a gyuu-don filled with meat today? Will it work with wild rabbit and field mouse? Well, I might as well try. If I put enough meat into it, it's bound to be good. Oh, that's right! With gyuu-don, you really taste the meat, so I'd better use some medicinal herbs to

take the gamey taste out of the wild rabbit and field mouse.

“So, what’s a *donburi*? Never heard of it.”

Ack! I forgot to ask Druid’s mentor if he was okay with eating rice.

“You’ll just have to wait and see, Master.”

Druid, I see that mischievous twinkle in your eye. I’m sure your mentor sees it, too.

“Ohhh, well, that sounds like fun.”

Was Druid taking advantage of his mentor’s arrogant personality? Something about being around this pair is bad for my heart.

When we returned to the plaza, I went into my tent to take Sora and Flame out of their bag.

“I’ll just set down your potions for you, okay? Take your time eating them.”

The two wiggled back at me at their different speeds.

I left the tent and started making supper. That’s right, I remember Past Me used to soak the rice before steaming it, but this world’s rice gets too soggy when you do that. I guess this rice is a little different.

“I’ll make us some tea.”

“Thank you, Mr. Druid. Does your mentor need anything?”

“Nah, he’s fine. Actually, I need a break. How can he still have so much energy?”

Ha ha ha! I did get the sense that Druid’s mentor was messing with him a lot today.

“Hang in there, trooper.”

After Druid finished making the tea, he heaved a big sigh and returned to his mentor’s side. Sensing his aura of despair, I was worried his mentor would mess with him more... *Oh, his mentor said something to him. I hope everything’s okay?*

The rice was all ready and just needed to steam, so I had to get the meat and

other toppings ready on time. I put the wild rabbit and a few herbs into some broth to simmer and seasoned it with soy sauce and honey. And this time, I added some dried herbs that had a little heat to them. Then I needed eggs...or hexa fruit, as they were called here, and it would be all done.

“Dinner’s ready.”

Okay, let’s bring it to the table! Hm? Wait, why is Druid lying on the ground? And his mentor is...aha, he looks like he’s having a lot of fun. Boy, it’ll take a lot of courage to go over there...but I’d better hop to it. I don’t want our food to get cold.

Chapter 175: You're So Young!

“Hey...Druid, what *is* this?”

Druid’s mentor stared hard at the beef bowl (though, since we didn’t have beef, it was technically a wild rabbit bowl) and twisted his face in disbelief.

Is something wrong with it? I took a bite, and sure enough, the meat was delicious and not at all gamey. And I’d been getting better and better at steaming rice, so there were no problems there, either. I really liked the subtle heat that tickled the tongue.

“What is this? Meat and veggies over a bowl of ryce, Master. I think it’s wild rabbit.”

Wow, Druid’s smile is filling his entire face. But is it just me, or does he look a bit mischievous?

“Ryce...but that’s animal feed. I’m a human, dammit! I ain’t eatin’ no ryce!” Druid’s mentor snapped, shoving his spoon in Druid’s face.

Wow, now that’s a little over the top. Is it really that bad? You’re missing out, buddy.

“That’s why Ivy *asked* you before dinner if there was anything you wouldn’t eat. And if I recall correctly, you didn’t say anything. Isn’t that right, Ivy?”

You’re throwing the conversation onto me now, Druid? Well, I did ask him if there was anything he wouldn’t eat and, since he didn’t give me an answer, I was free to assume he was fine with anything. Then again, I’m sure he never imagined I’d serve him animal feed for dinner.

“That’s right, Mr. Druid,” I answered, since it was technically correct.

“And there you have it.”

“Druid...ya duped me.”

It seemed more like Druid’s mentor had duped himself.

“Well, I know you were eager, Master, but you reap what you sow. Come on, eat up. It’s good, I promise.”

“Ugh! Look at me, a distinguished and mature man, eating animal feed...”

Well, gee. If you’re gonna put up such a stink about it, now I’m curious to know why.

“Why don’t you want to eat it, sir?”

“Probably because the older you get, the pickier you become,” Druid answered.

I gave him a strange look. *Older* people are pickier eaters?

“Hey, I’m still a young man. Don’t treat me like I’m over the hill.”

“Then you can eat it, right, Master? Since you’re so spry and young.”

Ha ha ha! That had to be payback for everything he put up with today. Wow, I’ve never seen Druid so sly and mischievous before.

I quietly turned my attention away from the two men and focused on my own dinner. I was worried that watching them any longer would give me indigestion.

Oh! I still didn’t ask him why he hates rice... Well, I guess I can talk to him about it later. I’d like to avoid asking him anything right now.

“Urggh, dammit!”

Hey, he took a bite! I’d been trying not to look his way, but now I glanced at him out of curiosity. Wow, that’s a deep crease between his eyebrows. Did he not like it?

“It’s...good.”

“Ivy’s cooking is always good. Though I can’t say the same for the ryce’s appearance...”

“Yeah, it looks like maggot larvae.”

“Ha ha ha ha! It’s best to not think about it, Master.”

Hm? Does it really look like maggot larvae? I didn’t know that. I guess that’s why people are repulsed by the sight of it.

"It really is surprisingly good, though. I don't taste a bit of gaminess in the wild rabbit. I like it."

Oh, good. He's enjoying it.

"But, kid, what gave ya the crazy idea to eat *ryce*?"

"Umm..." *What should I tell him?*

"Ivy loves experimenting with all sorts of ingredients."

Thanks, Druid, you're a lifesaver. I hadn't actually thought about what I could say to convince him. I'd better thank him properly later.

"Wooo, and you're so young, too. How did ya make the rabbit not taste gamey? Rabbit's always got a little twang to it, even when it's fresh."

"I use medicinal herbs."

"Medicinal herbs in cooking? Wow, I didn't know that was a thing."

"Even with your extensive knowledge, Master, you've never heard of such a thing?"

"Nah. I'm not that interested in food, but I still get told a lot about it. But I ain't never heard of food with medicinal herbs in it. The only thing I can think of is that wild pigeon soup I'd rather forget."

Ah. So Druid's mentor also hates wild pigeon soup.

"Oh, but Ivy's a wizard who knows how to use medicinal herbs in cooking."

Hearing him praise me like that felt a little wrong, since I could only cook like this by relying on Past Me. As my eyes darted uncomfortably along the ground, I felt a warm hand on my head. I looked up to see Druid's mentor looking down at me.

"Mr. Mentor?"

"Ivy, you are so young, yet so amazing."

Huh...something about his response this time seems a bit different from before. Everything he's said so far had been passive-aggressive or a backhanded compliment...but not now. He's being friendly, but I also feel like I'm being sized up... He's hard to pin down.

“Yes, so amazing...” For just an instant, deep wrinkles formed around Druid’s mentor’s eyes.

Oh! His smile changed. I don’t sense any cynicism behind it. It only lasted for a moment, but he looked genuinely happy.

“Thanks for dinner,” Druid’s mentor said. “It’s been a while since I’ve had something that tasty.”

“Yes, thanks, Ivy. That was delicious. I’ll do the dishes.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll help. It’ll be faster that way.”

“Thanks. I just can’t get the hang of using one arm.”

“It’s not your fault, sir. I’ll wash, you rinse, okay?”

I stacked the dishes, and Druid swiftly picked them all up for me. I thanked him, and we both turned to walk toward the kitchen.

“I thought ya had a mentor-apprentice relationship...but ya seem more like a parent and child to me now.” There was a twinge of teasing in Druid’s mentor’s voice.

Parent and child... The word “parent” did not conjure up good images in my mind. *But, huh...Druid as my father...*

“I’m happy to have such a kind father. I’ll just fetch the tea now.”

“Huh?!”

I heard a rather strange yelp beside me, but I ignored it. I was free to think what I wanted to think.

“Ha ha ha! Lucky ya got such a sturdy kid, Druid. Ya must be a proud father, eh?”

“Please, keep it down. Do you want to spread bogus rumors again?”

That’s right. I was already the “dumb kid following him everywhere.” What if we added “...who is actually his biological child!” on top of that? Druid’s father would have a heart attack.

“Sorry, it happened aga—”

“It’s not a problem, sir.”

“But don’t you hate rumors? People seem to make up all sorts of silly things about you.”

It’s not worth fighting rumors, so all you can do is ignore them.

“You can’t make a rumor go away. In fact, if you put up a fuss, it’ll only spread further, so it’s best to just ignore it.”

“You’re right...” Druid sighed. “I’m sorry. Me being around you is only making it worse, huh?”

“It’s not your fault, Mr. Druid. Besides, don’t you think a dumb kid following you everywhere is a fun rumor?”

“You think so? Doesn’t it annoy you?”

I looked at Druid and saw his face was lined with anger. He was angry on my behalf, and I realized how blessed I was to have someone like that in my life.

“I don’t mind it because I’ve got you, Mr. Druid.”

“Huh?! Me?”

“Yes. Do you believe the rumors?”

“Of course not.”

“I’ve got somebody who cares about me. He ignores the gossip and sees me for who I really am. That’s more than enough, so the rumors don’t bother me—I don’t care what people say about me anymore.”

“Oh...okay.” Druid sounded embarrassed, which made me feel embarrassed in turn.

“Okay.”

We finished washing the dishes, then we refilled the teapot and returned to my tent. I looked over at my neighbor’s tent and saw he was still out today. I’d borrowed his table and chairs without permission, and I thought I should make him a proper meal soon to thank him for that.

“Master, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“Sure thing. This tea is really good.”

“Ivy foraged that tea in the forest. Anyway, do you know why the gurbars have been acting up?”

“In the forest, eh? I’m impressed. Okay, the gurbars... I did look into ‘em a bit earlier, but I couldn’t figure them out. But I heard that, in the past, other types of monsters like gurbars started going berserk around here—and it wasn’t because of trash.”

They’re talking about gurbars and tea at the same time...that’s a talent.

“So this happened a while back? Well, if it wasn’t trash, then what made those monsters go berserk back then?”

“Nobody really knows. A book said the monsters went berserk wild because they ate monsters that had died of natural causes. But we know that eating monster meat doesn’t make anybody go berserk.”

“I know, right? But if a book said so...I wonder why that is?”

Monsters that died of natural causes?

Druid gave his mentor a dubious look, but he only shrugged his shoulders in reply. That was probably all he knew. Unfortunately, we hadn’t gotten the clue we needed to solve the puzzle.

Chapter 176: A Strange Writing Style?

“By the way, did ya hear the news? The scout party of veteran adventurers who went out to look into the gurbars all got wiped out.”

What?! Well, there were rumors that they were behind schedule coming back... But were they all wiped out?

“Please, don’t be silly. They’re fine. They got in touch with us recently. Well... I’ll admit, it didn’t sound like they were in an ideal position.”

That doesn’t sound like they’re doing okay at all...

“Not in an ideal situation... That sounds bad,” Druid’s mentor said. “If ya don’t hear back from them again soon, you’d better prepare for the worst.”

“Well, yes, I suppose so...”

“We’ve gotta do *something*. They may only be circling near town for now, but it’s only a matter of time before they start coming through the gates.”

Druid sighed. “Yeah, you’re right... But, um...I think we’ll still be safe for a while.”

Druid’s mentor gave him a funny look. His answer *had* been a little strange. I was also confused for a moment, but then I remembered Ciel. Druid probably thought we’d be safe as long as Ciel was out there protecting us. But if the gurbar herds increased in number, maybe even Ciel—strong though it was—couldn’t stop them, so I wish he wouldn’t put so much pressure on the adandara.

“Isn’t there a way we can make the gurbars go back to the way they used to be?”

“Ooh, that’s a tall order...” Druid’s mentor said.

Druid sighed in turn. “I see.”

Wait a minute, the book said monsters once went berserk like that in the past,

too. *What did the people do back then?*

“Um, may I ask a question?”

“What’s up? Somethin’ on your mind, kid?”

“Yes, sir. You said something like this happened in the past. How did the villagers solve the problem then?”

“Oh! Yeah, that *is* a good question. What do you think, Master?”

Druid’s mentor had an astounding number of wrinkles between his eyebrows. His gaze was frighteningly sharp, too. *Was that an inappropriate question?*

“Yeah, about that...” he sighed. “This book said they burned the monsters who died of natural causes.”

They burned them? That sounds...strange. Just a minute ago, he’d said that some monsters went berserk because they ate other ones who died of natural causes. If those other monsters were eaten, how could there be bodies for the people to burn? Did it mean there were just a lot of monsters that died of natural causes?

“Um, Master, are you sure your source is reliable?”

Aha! Yes, it could be false information.

“It was a government-certified book written by the villagers, so it’s absolutely true.”

It was government-certified. That meant the document was inspected and verified to be true. In other words, there really were monsters who went berserk over ones who died of natural causes. *Wait a minute, why did they write this in such a roundabout way?*

“What’s wrong, Ivy?” Druid asked, noticing I was making a face.

“Um, I was just wondering...why did they specifically mention that the monsters ‘died of natural causes’?”

“Hm? Because it’s true, I assume.”

“Well, yes, but I don’t see why they had to word it that way. Besides, did they even write down what kind of monster it was that died?”

It should have mattered less that they died of natural causes and more what kind of monster they were. If we knew what the monsters were, we'd have something to keep our eyes open for.

"You know, that *is* a good question," Druid said.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

"Master, didn't the book say anything at all about the type of monster that died?"

"Nope. All it said was 'The monsters who ate the monsters that died of natural causes went berserk and attacked the village,' and 'When the monsters that died of natural causes were burned, the berserk monsters calmed down. That solved the problem.'"

Huh?

"So, the name of the berserk monsters wasn't written down anywhere?"

"Nah, it wasn't. I guess it was a pretty half-baked report. I'm surprised they got away with writing somethin' like that into the public record."

"I agree. And if they didn't know the name of the monsters, they should have at least included a few key details about them."

Since I hadn't read the book myself, I couldn't say for sure, but it was a rather strange writing style. But since it was government-certified, that meant somebody else who knew it was true had verified the information. In other words...

"Maybe instead of the monsters' name, their *natural deaths* were more important," I suggested.

Huh? Why did they both gasp and give me a strange look?

"Um, since the account was certified, that means it should contain all the important facts, right?"

"Well, yeah. The book has all kinds of past experiences that'll come in handy in the future. Like what makes different monsters unique or how to keep 'em at bay. There's also plenty of firsthand accounts of what happens when ya attack high-level monsters."

"It's an important document that ensures our continuing survival," Druid added.

Wow, I had no idea it was such an important book. "Well, that just makes my theory all the more likely. The monster's type is much less important than its 'natural death.' Maybe they didn't bother to name the monster, not because they didn't know it, but because the same thing could possibly happen to other monsters, too."

"Other monsters?"

"Yes. Um, if they wrote that it was gurbars who died natural deaths in the past, people in the future would only be wary of gurbars. But if any other types of monsters started dying natural deaths and caused the same crisis, the people of the future wouldn't connect it to the gurbar situation. That would be dangerous."

"I see," Druid said. "So, by leaving out the monster's name, they applied the situation to all monsters."

I nodded in reply.

Druid's mentor patted my head. "Wow, Ivy. Druid, this brat's smart. A little weird, though. Not sure whether he's more weird or smart."

"Master, don't call Ivy a brat—that's rude. And you shouldn't call *anyone* weird!"

"Okay, I'm sorry I called ya a brat. But ya *are* still weird."

Druid's mentor had a rough way of speaking, but I didn't really mind. I guess it was because his voice meshed well with his general style.

"So, what're we gonna do?"

"Er, about what, Master?"

Druid and I both shot him confused looks. *He really could've been clearer.*

"Well, Ivy just gave us some important new info. Aren't ya gonna tell Gotos about it?"

"Oh, right. Yes, I'll go tell the guild master."

“Are you sure that’s wise, sir? It’s just a hunch I had.” I knew the guild master would be able to make the right call about this, but I really felt bad burdening him with disturbing information when he was already so busy.

“Ain’t a problem, kid. Gathering intel and sorting out the good from the bad is that bastard’s job. Besides, I think your idea could be big, Ivy.”

“He’s right, Ivy. Though I do think you should have picked up on that clue sooner, Master.”

“Watch your tongue, boy. *I* was the guy who brought it over in the first place. I did more than enough.”

Erm, how exactly was that more than enough?

“Master, cut the excuses. It’s painful to watch.”

“And *what* about me is painful to watch, exactly?”

Does he even realize he didn’t own up to making excuses? I somehow managed to hold in my laughter. I didn’t want to get involved—that would be too irritating. I turned my eyes away from the pair so I could calm myself down a bit.

“Oh, wait... Mr. Guild Master?”

My averted eyes caught a glimpse of a very flustered guild master. *Oh! He’s entered the plaza. Is he looking for Druid?*

“Everything you’ve said and done today, Master. *That’s* what’s painful to watch.”

“Wooo, look who’s talking big now. Where’s the little brat who used to cry like a baby and run around the forest like a lunatic?”

“I never cried like a baby. For crying out loud...”

“Um, the guild master is here, Mr. Druid. Maybe he wants to see you?”

At the sound of my voice, the two men turned their focus toward the guild master, who was running up to us.

“Agh! I should’ve known!” The guild master looked and sounded terribly annoyed.

Hm, that's the same reaction Druid had a little while ago.

"Howdy. How ya been?" Druid's mentor had a look in his eye I couldn't quite place...like a predator stalking its prey. If he looked at me like that, I'd definitely turn and run.

"What are *you* doing here? Some fools were saying you'd come to town, so I came here to ask Druid if it was true..."

The guild master's eyes landed on Druid, but he got no response. Druid had already had enough of being mocked, so he probably wasn't going to help out the guild master. *Hm? Um, Mr. Guild Master, don't look at me with those puppy dog eyes. It won't work.*

"Good luck, Mr. Guild Master!"

"Ivy, don't abandon me!"

Well, I don't think I'm cut out to be the mentor's playmate.

"Wow, you insensitive bastard. Is *that* any way to treat your old mentor you haven't seen in years? Ya didn't mean that, *did ya, Gotos?*"

Good luck, Mr. Guild Master!

Chapter 177: What?! It's Edible?

Probably about five minutes had passed since the guild master and his old mentor were reunited. And I'm not sure why, but the guild master looked like he'd aged a wee bit. It was probably just my imagination.

I was still surprised to see how politely the guild master spoke to his old mentor. Druid was on his best behavior, too...though his mask slipped now and then.

"Let's leave it at that, Master. If you wear out the guild master any more, he'll be useless."

"Dang. Pathetic, ain't ya? C'mon, how much abuse'll ya take before ya stand up for yourself?"

Uh, I don't think it's exactly fair to insult him just because he didn't respond very well to the gurbars. The guild master was trying his best, so the least he could do was give his former apprentice a little encouragement. Unless that was his special way of encouraging them? I glanced at the mentor, who looked thoroughly amused.

"So, were all the veteran adventurers wiped out?"

The guild master sighed. "We don't know for sure. This is the third day in a row we've received no word from them."

Three days, huh... Sounds like this problem is getting much worse than I thought. I'd always assumed that once the veteran adventurers had returned, we'd be able to think of a plan to resolve the crisis. I never even considered they might not come back at all.

"Well, I hope you've got a Plan B."

The guild master fell silent, a harsh look in his eyes. *Was there a Plan B? Or was it going to be more difficult?*

"Listen, Guild Master, don't get me involved in this," Druid spat, in a tone of

voice I'd never heard from him before. He sounded so unlike his usual self that I wondered for a moment if someone else had spoken.

"Yeah, I understand. I don't want to become worthless, after all."

Don't get him involved? Become worthless? It didn't make sense to me, but it sounded awfully complicated. Hmm... I wish I could do something to help. But I'm pretty puny on my own. Whenever I help out with problems like this, I always lean on Ciel. With everything, too. But that's wrong. I need to find a way to help all by myself.

"What's this? C'mon, Druid, don't lose hope now of all times."

"Master, no. This is one area where I cannot be swayed." Druid stared sharply at his mentor, which startled him a little.

Then he took a quiet breath, nodded, and muttered, "Understood."

Wow...the person I admire is just so heroic. I was eager to say that out loud, but I let it go. I'll just tell Sora and Flame about it later.

"Oh yeah. Ivy noticed something very interesting."

Uh, something very interesting? I'm pretty sure I'm not the only person who's noticed it.

"And what is that, exactly?" the guild master asked.

"Did ya look into the reason why the monsters started going berserk?"

"Yes, of course. Even though the account I read of it was rather old, I figured we could learn something from it since we were faced with a similar problem... but it wound up being useless."

"Ya mean the 'natural death' part?"

The guild master gave his old mentor a questioning look. "Yes. It's that stupid writing. If only they'd left some details about the monsters—at least their name—then their report might have been able to help us out. Why did our predecessors even approve such a report? It's unbelievable."

Yeah, I figured he'd interpret it that way.

"See, Druid? That's the natural way to think about it. Ivy's just a bit bizarre."

Um, Mr. Mentor, I don't think now's the time to prove your point. Also, the part about me being smart flew out the window, and now I'm set in stone as a bizarre kid. Well, I guess the fact that I remember my past life does make me bizarre.

"Master. You've reduced Ivy to just a *bizarre kid*," Druid sighed wearily.

"Neither of you has been making any sense since I got here!" Gotos sighed.
"What about /vy? What did Ivy find out?"

"Ivy had a different interpretation of that old report," Druid said before his mentor could get a word in. He probably assumed the old man would say the wrong thing.

"A different interpretation? I...I don't get it. What do you mean?"

"The report didn't describe any specific characteristics of the monsters, correct?"

"Right...that's why I thought the report was useless. Was I mistaken?"

"Ivy thinks the 'natural death' part was the important bit."

"Natural death?" the guild master asked me.

I nodded at him.

"That's right. If natural deaths were the important part, that means the same thing could happen to any monsters later on. That's why they didn't write any details about the monsters who died, and they didn't describe the ones who went berserk, either."

"So, you're saying this could happen to any monster...and that's why no details about the monsters were written." The guild master seemed a bit taken aback. "Now I see... So there *was* a reason why the report was written like that... I see..." He fell deep into thought. If my theory turned out to be wrong, I'd really feel guilty about it.

"If that's all true, then the way they solved the problem...what does all that mean?"

Yes. *That* was the problem. If the monsters who died natural deaths were eaten, that meant their corpses would be gone. And yet, the solution to the

problem was to burn the bodies of the monsters who'd died of natural causes. It didn't make a lick of sense.

"Aaand *there's* the problem... That part's a mystery."

I had a feeling whoever wrote that report included only the most important parts so as to avoid causing a misunderstanding. Which meant they must have written down the solution to the problem very concisely.

"Was there more to the part about the monsters getting eaten? Were they... actually *not* eaten?"

"Ivy...do you have an idea?"

Hm? Uh-oh, was I thinking out loud again? "I was just wondering, is there something that won't disappear even if it's eaten?"

"Um...is that a riddle?"

"No, sir! Um..." *Maybe I phrased my question the wrong way. How should I ask it...?* "If the monsters were eaten...but then they were burned...wouldn't that mean that eating them didn't make them go away? Oh! Or maybe the *corpses* weren't eaten. Maybe something *belonging* to the dead monsters was eaten instead?"

That's it. Surely this will lead us to something, right? But I still can't understand why the report's writer didn't say what that thing was.

"Now I get it. I guess ya could think of it that way. This bra—Ivy's sure got a funny brain."

And the old mentor sure has a funny face when he's nervous. He almost called me a brat again. Not like I really care what he calls me anyway.

"Yikes! Stop staring daggers at me, Druid..."

Hm? The old mentor's saying something, but his voice is too quiet for me to hear it.

"Master?"

"Er, never mind. Now, can any of ya knuckleheads think of what that *something* could be?"

The guild master and Druid fell deep into thought. And after pondering for a long time, they shook their heads. Their old mentor gave it a good mulling over, too, but he came away with a big empty sigh. What *was* it that caused the monsters to go berserk? It was...a very difficult question.

“Um, is it unusual for monsters to live to a ripe old age?”

I have always wondered about that. If monsters could go berserk just because other ones died a natural death, that should have been a much more common occurrence. But the report said it had only happened once, and very long ago, too. Which would have to mean that it was monsters rarely lived to a ripe old age...maybe?

“Nobody really knows much about that. But it’s survival of the fittest out there—if you get even slightly weaker, you’ll become dinner to whoever’s stronger than you.”

That makes sense. No matter how powerful a monster is, it will grow weaker in its old age. That’s when they get hunted and killed. It’s a harsh world out there.

“Just how long do monsters live, anyway?” I asked.

“Well, according to our reports, their life expectancy is over two hundred years.”

Two hundred years! Wow, that’s impressive. They can live two hundred whole years? Any monster who makes it to the end of its natural life must be really powerful. So powerful that it won’t be attacked, even when it gets old and feeble.

“Strong monsters inherently have magic, right?” I asked.

“Well, of course. All monsters do.”

“Of course. Um, so, say there’s one so powerful that it lives all the way to the end of its natural life. What happens to that magic when it dies?”

“Hm?” The old mentor cocked his head sideways.

“Imagine a monster who’s been alive longer than two hundred years. A monster with so much magic power that it’s never been killed, even in its old

age. Surely, it must have a huge amount of magic, yes?"

Does magic spill out of monster corpses? If it does...

"What if, say, somebody could *eat* this magic power...?"

All three men gasped.

"Magic spills out from a dead monster. Monsters who eat that magic go berserk... Yeah, I know, it's a silly idea. Oh! But if my theory is true, the corpses would still be there, so you would still be able to burn them."

Wow. That's really a stretch.

"Ivy!"

"Yes, sir!" I yelped in shock. Hey, Druid called my name out of nowhere! *Wait, what? Did I cause some sort of problem?*

"Ivy, ya really are amazing. Ha ha ha! That's it. The *magic*," the old mentor said, staring at me with the most awestruck eyes I'd ever seen.

Eek! I'm kinda scared...

"Thanks, Ivy. That's it. The *magic*."

Um...Mr. Guild Master? Why are you thanking me? I don't understand.

"Come to think of it, the scouting party did say something about magic in their report. I'd dismissed it at the time since I didn't think it was connected to our current crisis."

Magic? Oh, right, my theory that the thing the monsters ate was magic... Wait, huh?! Is magic actually edible?

Chapter 178:

It's a Ruthless World for Monsters

“Sorry, I’ve got to go back and have another look at the old report,” the guild master said, fumbling out of his seat.

“I’ll come with you.”

Oh, good. The guild master’s old mentor is going to help... Uh-oh. Mr. Guild Master, don’t let him see that sour look on your face!

“Oh, got a *problem* with that? And here your old mentor was being *kind* enough to help ya out.”

See? He takes advantage of any possible opening.

“Ha ha ha! Ahh, I’m so grateful!”

I looked back and forth between the guild master’s deflated frown and his mentor’s big smile. I got the same impression from him and Druid. It really was strange how he still seemed to have a good rapport with them.

“Well, see ya later.”

“Bye. And good luck!” I called out.

I don’t envy the guild master... Now he has to go back to the guild and reread the whole report. Oh, right! There was something I wanted to ask Druid!

I went ahead and asked him the question that had been nagging at me the past several minutes. “Mr. Druid, do monsters ever eat magic?”

“Hm? Wait, don’t you know, Ivy?”

“Huh?!” *Don’t I know what?*

“Sorry, I just assumed you knew. Yes, many monsters are known to eat magic.”

“Really?”

So they *did* eat magic. And judging by the tone of Druid’s voice, it was

common knowledge. Yikes! Now I feel really embarrassed.

“And some monsters only eat the magic fruit of the Spirit Tree that grows deep in the forest.”

“Wow, monsters like that exist... So, they’re monster herbivores?”

“Huh? What did you say?”

“Er, nothing, sir.”

That was Past Me again! Argh, I get so relaxed around Druid that it’s easy to run my mouth. I need to be more careful. I don’t want it to happen when other people are around.

“So, what do you think happens when monsters die before their time is up?”
Do they spill magic even when they die by unnatural causes? No, if that were the case, there would be many more reports of monsters going berserk. Which means that when they die by some other means, their magic...disappears?

“Unnatural deaths would usually be the result of a fight. And they use up a lot of magic when they fight, so there probably wouldn’t be much left over when they died.”

Oh! That makes sense. I totally forgot that monsters use magic when they fight. And if they’re fighting for their life, they would definitely consume a huge amount. Which means the losing monster would have little to no magic remaining. So, does that mean if another monster eats up what little magic is left, it won’t go berserk?

Hmm...the only other way they could die is of illness, I guess? But monsters are probably pretty easy targets when they’re sick and weak, so maybe it’s quite rare for a monster to reach the end of its natural life span. That would explain why the books don’t say anything about it.

“But why do you suppose the report didn’t mention magic anywhere?”

If monsters eating magic was a given, that should have been written in the book. Why didn’t they put it in there?

“Maybe they didn’t know.”

“Huh?! But I thought everybody knew.” *At least that’s what you said, Druid...*

“When you read reports that were written before we found out about the magic-eating, you’ll often see it described as a *black haze*.”

That’s right, his mentor *did* say the report he’d read was very old. In other words, it was probably written at a time before anybody knew that monsters ate magic.

“He said he was going to reread it. I hope he discovers something new from it.”

“Me, too.”

“Well, I should head on home. Your teacups...”

“Oh, I’ll wash them. I can do it in a flash while I heat up my bathwater.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. I’m just sitting around while the water heats up, so it’s nice to actually have something to do.” Time did always seem to drag on while I waited for my bathwater to get warm, but if I had something else to work on, like washing dishes, the time flew by.

“Okay, well, thanks. That wild rabbit ryce bowl was delicious. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow! Have a safe trip home.”

“Ha ha ha. Thanks.”

I watched Druid until he was safely out of the plaza. “Wow. Today sure was hectic.”

I washed the teacups while my bathwater heated, then I returned to my tent.

“Sorry I took so long, you g—aaand you’re asleep.”

Sora and Flame were already deep in dreamland. I wiped myself off and changed into some fresh clothes. *Gee, I’m going to need to do laundry soon. Maybe I should look in town for a place to wash my clothes. No, I think I’d rather go with a river. That way, I can spend more time with Ciel.*

“Okay. Tomorrow, we’re going river-hunting.” I smoothed out my mat and lay down. “Good night, Sora. Good night, Flame.”

I'll go to a river tomorrow to wash my clothes...then I'll swing by Druid's father's shop and hear what he has to say about the sauce. Ahh...good night.

As I woke up the next morning, I sensed people moving back and forth nearby.

“Mm! Good morning, Sora. Good morning, Flame.”

But the two slimes were still asleep. Seeing them so cozy made me want to lie down again, but there was quite a ruckus outside my tent. What was going on? *I hope I didn't oversleep... No, that can't be.*

Judging by the angle of the sun coming through the tent's flap, it was still morning, but people were bustling outside.

“Guess I'll have to check it out...” I sat up and stretched my arms. *Ooh, that feels so good.* In the time it took me just to do that, the ruckus outside my tent intensified. *I'd better hurry out there... Now I'm getting worried.* I got dressed and stepped outside my tent.

“Good morning.”

I turned around at the sound of the voice. It was my neighbor, Mathewla.

“Good morning, sir. Has something happened?”

“It's the scout party of veteran adventurers... A few of them just came back.”

“Oh! Really?” *Thank goodness they're safe... Wait, did he say “a few”?* “Hasn't everybody come back yet?”

“We don't have any confirmed reports yet, but only three of them returned, and I heard they're all terribly wounded.”

Only three! I remembered clearly that three teams of veteran adventurers had been sent into the forest to scout gurbars. Druid said the three teams included a total of thirteen people. *And only three of them came back? I only hope the report we got yesterday was useful.*

I thanked Mathewla and went back into my tent. I wanted to go see Druid right away and ask him for the report, but I decided to wait a bit. My being

there wouldn't be helpful, anyway.

"Sora, Flame, get up. Let's eat breakfast."

Sora's eyes blinked open. It yawned and looked at me.

"Good morning, Sora."

Sora wiggled happily in reply and bounced gleefully around me as I took the breakfast potions out of my magic bag.

"You're sure chipper this morning, Sora." As I gave Sora's head a pat, Flame woke up and did a leisurely vertical stretch. "Good morning, Flame."

Flame gave me a jiggle, then stared down at the potions lined up in front of it. Was it hungry?

"Go ahead. Eat your fill."

I watched over Sora and Flame as they ate their potions. The plaza was still quite noisy, and I wondered if any news had come in.

"Oh, I just have to know! Maybe I should try to find Druid? But I don't want to get in the way..."

Sora and Flame jiggled in reply. I felt like they were cheering me on, though I could have been wrong... *Okay.*

"I'll go look for Druid, but I'll give up if I can't find him right away or if he looks busy. That's what I'll do."

Yup. I'll be very careful not to get in his way and...

"Ivy, are you up?"

"Agh!"

"Er, Ivy?! Sorry."

"No, it's okay. Wait just a minute."

Hearing Druid's voice out of the blue when I'd just been thinking about him had given me a real fright. Then again, it was my fault for getting caught up in my thoughts and forgetting to pay attention to my surroundings.

I took a deep breath and calmed myself. *It's still really early in the morning.*

What is Druid doing here at this hour?

Chapter 179: Ciel, the Lifesaver

“Good morning.”

I stepped outside my tent to find a rather perplexed-looking Druid. Something didn't seem right.

“Good morning, sir. Did something happen?”

“Sorry to bother you so early in the morning, but can you come with me for a bit?”

Something really did happen. “Okay. Could you wait just a minute? I'll be ready in just a minute.”

“Take your time. Sorry about that.”

So it's not particularly urgent, then? I went back into my tent and told Flame and Sora that Druid had asked me to go somewhere with him. “Would you like to come along?”

Both slimes jiggled at their preferred speeds in reply. That meant “Yes!” I'd learned that when they didn't want to do something, their response would be to sit completely still and avoid my gaze. The first time they did that was a real shock. I hadn't known yet what they were trying to say, so I got pretty flustered.

“Okay, I'm ready to go.”

“Sorry to bother you so early.”

“It's all right, Mr. Druid. I'd just finished my breakfast and was about to go look for you.”

“Oh, really? So, um, you heard the news?”

“Only that three of the adventurers returned heavily wounded... Is that true?”

“Yeah, but they're fine now. They got all healed up.”

I was glad to hear they were okay, but it was scary to learn that there really

were only three of them that had returned.

“Is this a good place?”

“Huh?”

I’d just been following Druid and hadn’t been paying attention to where we were going. I looked around and saw we were in a deserted area a bit off the main road.

“The guild master still hasn’t announced the finer details, so everyone in town has their ears to the ground. Since we don’t have a magic item, somebody could easily listen in on us. Sorry, Ivy, but do you sense any human auras around here? I don’t have that ability.”

So he has something to tell me that he wants kept secret. Are there any auras...?

“No, I don’t sense any auras, so we must be the only people around here.”

“Thanks. So, about the three adventurers who made it back. According to the guild master, it was Ciel who saved their lives.”

“What?!”

So that’s why Druid had looked for a quiet place to talk—he wanted to tell me about Ciel. *Wait, Ivy. Ciel saved them?*

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. They were heavily wounded but quite conscious during the ordeal. This is just what I heard from the guild master, but these adventurers were sent deep into the forest to find out why the gurbars have been going berserk. However, they were attacked by a gurbar herd and almost killed. Three of them almost managed to make it back to town, but before they realized it, they were surrounded by gurbars and chijikas.”

“Chijikas?”

“Monsters with big tusks. They’re usually gentle, but they’ve gone berserk, too.”

“Oh dear.”

“Just when the adventurers thought they were done for, a monster that looked like an adandara showed up and killed all the chijikas and gurbars.”

Killed *all* of them? If it really was Ciel, it must have had a pretty hard time of it.

“The adventurers thought they would be next after the chijikas and gurbars... but then the monster hoisted an adventurer with a wounded leg onto its back and carried him all the way back to town.”

If that was Ciel, it did a very good thing. I'll have to give it some love later.

“The guild master, my old mentor, and a few adventurers just went into the forest to check out the gurbar and chijika corpses.”

“Um, can we go into the forest, too? I want to see if it really was Ciel.”

“Yes, the guild master said it was okay. Do you know where Ciel might be? The creature might have gone over to the same place as the guild master's party.”

“I'm not sure where Ciel is; that adandara is hard to keep track of when it's in the forest. Do you think it might be hurt, too?”

“Ack. I'm sorry, but I didn't hear the story directly from the adventurers, so I don't know how Ciel is doing.”

“Oh dear...”

If Ciel really did take on two herds of monsters, I wonder if it made it out okay? Maybe it needs some medicine... No, wait, we have Sora on our team. Ciel will be fine.

“Would you like to go into the forest right now?”

“Yes, sir.”

The main road was filled with townsfolk, but a grim sorrow hung in the air. It was hard to believe they'd been so confident and lively the day before.

“Looks like the rumors have already spread through town.”

“They sure have. There was a pretty big ruckus in the plaza as soon as the sun came up.”

"Well, I don't blame them. Losing veteran adventurers is quite a hard blow. It won't be long before people get riled up and demand that someone keep the town protected."

"Do you think the guild master will be okay?"

"Yeah. My old mentor has good instincts."

"Instincts, sir?"

Why was he bringing up his old mentor?

"He's a pretty famous veteran adventurer. He's probably already sent word to his old comrades."

Oh, so his mentor must have been quite the adventurer. By "comrades," I suppose Druid means his former party members?

"He probably has his old party on standby, to come out and put down any town uprising when it happens. And they'll use all the clout they've got. That way, the guild master will be able to do his job much easier."

Wow, so that's why Druid's old mentor came to town. He was preparing for the worst-case scenario.

Druid sighed. "It seems like I'll never be out of that man's debt."

"Yes. He's a wonderful mentor, sir."

"He'd be even more wonderful if he'd just stop teasing people all the time..."

Really? I actually feel like teasing people is part of what makes him who he is.

Druid approached the gatekeeper. "Good morning, sir."

"Are you sure you want to go into the forest, Druid? Especially if you're bringing Ivy with you?"

"Yeah, there's something we have to check on. Please?"

The gatekeeper looked a bit perplexed. He was probably baffled by the fact that Druid was taking a child into the forest just after a massacre. *But please let us through, Mr. Gatekeeper. We need to go.*

The gatekeeper sighed. "Okay... But promise me you'll be careful. Promise?"

“Yes, don’t worry. If something happens, I’ll make sure Ivy is safe.”

“Okay... Be careful out there.” With a resigned sigh, the gatekeeper opened the gate. Gee, that poor guy was having to deal with us just about every day now.

“Thank you very much, sir. We’ll be back soon,” I promised the gatekeeper as I walked with Druid out of the gate toward the forest.

“Where to first?”

“Let’s go to the dump.”

We set off in that direction. Once we were halfway there and the coast was clear, I took Sora out of its bag.

“Don’t wander off alone today, Sora. Gurbars and chijikas have been on the rampage.”

“Pu! Pu, pu, pu, puuu.”

And Flame is...yeah, still asleep. “Flame, shouldn’t you start spending more of your time awake? I think you’ve given yourself plenty of rest.”

“Teryu-ryuuu...ryuuu...”

Why did it whine in its sleep when I asked it to wake up? Mrrrgh... Okay, that’s it. Once this berserk monster mystery is solved, I’m going to have a firm talk with that slime. Yeah, I’m gonna ask it to try to stay awake longer.

“Okay, the slimes are ready to...go.”

Before I knew it, Sora was in its designated spot. That slime really did love being on top of Druid’s head.

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked, completely unconcerned about the slime sitting on his head. Maybe he really didn’t mind.

“Nothing, sir. Let’s go. Oh! I see Ciel coming toward us.”

I caught a whiff of Ciel’s aura on the wind, so I stopped in my tracks and waited. Then Ciel gracefully jumped down from a tree. I quickly gave the creature a looking over, and there was no sign of injury or blood on it.

“Ciel, did you protect the party of adventurers from the village?”

Mrrrow, Ciel replied smugly.

Yup. It was definitely Ciel, all right.

“So it *was* you, Ciel! Thanks,” Druid said, gently patting the adandara’s head.

“You did such a good thing, Ciel! You’re so brave. But I was worried about you. Are you okay? You didn’t get hurt anywhere?” Even though I had given Ciel a good looking-over, I was still worried it might have internal injuries.

Mrrrow.

I guess that means it’s okay? Phew, what a relief. But still... “Wasn’t that hard for you? Imagine clearing out a gurbar herd and a chijika herd at once—I’m impressed!”

Mrrrow.

Aha. Ciel’s obviously in a very good mood. I don’t want to tell it to stop, but... yeah, I’ve gotta.

“Ciel, um...could you tone your tail down a little?”

Ciel’s tail froze midair. Then its ears drooped a little. Awww. That’s why I didn’t want to say anything. I knew it would be upset.

“Don’t worry, Ciel, I’m not mad at you. It’s just...you’re causing a little sandstorm...” Ivy, what the heck are you even saying? Now you’re just making Ciel even more depressed.



“Thanks for saving our friends from town, Ciel,” Druid said. “They said they owed their lives to you.”

Thanks for the assist, Druid. Now Ciel’s tail was gently rocking back and forth. *Oh, good. It’s dialed the wagging back quite a bit now.*

“You’re really magnificent, Ciel.”

Ciel’s tail swished violently a couple of times at the praise, but it quickly calmed down. Ciel was cute already...but its tail was every bit as cute.

Chapter 180: Evolution? Maturation?

Ciel coming to the adventurers' rescue was nice and all, but I was worried that it had only gone and caused more problems.

"Um, so, how did the guild master explain Ciel to everyone else?"

"Don't worry about that. My mentor explained that adandaras are smart, so they tend to do things like that."

"Is that really true?"

"Um, no, I'd never heard of an adandara doing anything like that before. I'm sure the guild master's behavior clued in our old mentor that something was up, so he just said what he did to deescalate the situation."

We'd better tell Druid's mentor the truth later. It feels like the right thing to do.

"So, Ivy...is it okay if we tell my old mentor about Ciel? He would never blab your secret to anybody else; the guild master and I can vouch for him."

"I don't have a problem with it. I was just thinking it would be a good idea if your old mentor were in on our secret, too."

"Thanks. With him on our side, I know you and your monsters will be safe."

He really trusts his old mentor a lot, doesn't he? And his mentor must have earned that trust with years of good behavior. I'd really love to sit down some time and hear a lot more about him... I have a feeling there are some pretty funny stories about Druid and his old mentor.

"Puuu?"

I looked up at Sora on Druid's head. It was looking at the forest across from us and whimpering. I scanned the area for auras, but I didn't sense anything...

"Puuu, pu! Pu, puuu."

Oh! It's back to normal. I wonder what that was about?

“Are you okay, Sora?”

“Pu! Puuu.”

Seems okay to me. I’m a little concerned about the forest, but I don’t sense any auras. I wish I could understand what Sora’s trying to tell me...but it’s too complicated for me to figure out.

“Is everything okay?”

“I think so, sir. I wonder what Sora was whimpering about?”

“I’m not sure, but its tone sounded a bit different from usual.”

Sora was whimpering in a concerning way... Its pitch was definitely higher at the end. I’d never heard Sora make that type of sound, as if it were asking a question, so I was a little concerned at first, but everything seemed to be normal again. Sora was back to its cheerful self, doing its vertical stretching exercises atop Druid’s head. I was so used to the sight by then that I hardly even noticed.

“Okay, I feel bad for Ciel, but we have to head back,” Druid announced. “If we’re out too much longer, I wouldn’t be surprised if that gatekeeper came here looking for us.”

“Sorry, Ciel. Thanks for saving the townsfolk, but please don’t do anything too reckless, okay? I don’t want you getting hurt!”

Mrrrow.

I guess it understood me? I was still a little worried, though.

We parted ways with Ciel and headed back to town. Sora had slid down from Druid’s head and was bouncing in circles around us. It seemed to be in a very good mood.

“Hey, Sora, can you get back in your bag soon?”

“Pu, pu! Pu, puuu,” it sang, jumping high and landing in my arms.

Huh? Did it measure the distance and jump into my arms on purpose? Up until then, I’d always had to maneuver myself to catch Sora. But this time, the slime

had flown gracefully into my arms.

“Sora...did you mean to do that?”

“Buuu!”

“Bu”? Did you say “bu”?

“Whoa! Did Sora learn a new word?” Druid asked in awe as he stood beside me. “It definitely sounds like it’s speaking a language now.”

So I hadn’t misheard the slime. “Sorry, Sora. Don’t get mad. You just surprised me. I see you’ve figured out how to measure distances now.”

“Puuu.”

Which was it, evolution or maturation? Well, regardless, Sora *had* gotten a little easier to understand.

“Thanks, Sora.”

“Pu, puuu?”

Aha! Its tone went up in the end. How cute! I gave Sora a hearty helping of pats before returning it to its bag. Flame yawned really wide and fell right back asleep.

Oh well. I guess Flame is maturing at its own pace... Oh, wait! I don’t think I’ve seen Flame yawn before. I see Sora do it all the time, though. So Flame yawns now...and I’m not sure if that’s evolution or maturation, either. What a puzzle.

As we slowly made our way back to town, I sensed a presence coming toward us from far away. After a while, three heavily armed guards marched into my line of vision.

“See?” Druid groaned. “What did I tell you?”

Wow, I didn’t think they’d actually come after us. After barely half an hour, too.

“We were worried, so we came to check up on you. Have you finished your errand?”

“Yes. Thank you, gentlemen.”

“All right. We have to get back to our posts.”

Um, we’re only a little walk away from the gates, you guys.

“Hey, guys, we *told* you we’d be all right.”

“What if the worst had happened?” the oldest-looking guard snapped. “I can’t let a kid die on my watch.” He seemed very fired up, but maybe I was just imagining it...

“Yeah, fine. So, where’s the guild master’s party?”

“They got back a minute ago with plenty of gurbar and chijika meat.”

“Okay, good. Ivy, I’m gonna swing by the guild. Do you want to come along?”

“Sure. I want to thank your mentor.” *And let him in on our secret.*

“I see. Well, take it easy,” one of the gatekeepers said.

“We will, thank you.”

We were now safely on the other side of the town gate, so the three guards looked satisfied.

“I’m amazed they actually came to check up on us, Mr. Druid. I didn’t think they would.”

“Ha ha ha! Anyway, do you want me to tell my mentor about Ciel?”

“No, I think I should tell him since Ciel is my monster. Thank you, though.”

I wonder if Druid’s mentor knows much about slimes or adandaras? I’d love to have some better information about my beloved travel companions...

When we arrived at the guild lodge, there was quite a crowd of people around it.

“Why do you think they’re here, sir?”

“The townsfolk are probably anxious for news. I’m sure some of them are just curious to see what gurbar and chijika corpses look like, too.”

Upon closer glance, there were several corpses of two types of monsters piled in front of the guild lodge. I guessed that those were the ones Ciel had killed.

“Wow, the chijika are huge,” I marveled. They were larger than gurbars and

their tusks were quite thick, too. Their bodies were also very muscular.

“Their territory is in the forest. If you leave them alone, they’re actually quite docile.”

But both the gurbars and the chijika had gone berserk and expanded their territory. What could have caused that?

“Let’s go this way.”

“Yes, sir.”

I followed Druid through the crowd and into the guild lodge. This was my first time walking in such a big mob, so it was a real relief to make it through to the other side.

“Phew...”

“You okay? That crowd was much thicker than it looked.”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Since I’m short, I got squished too many times to count. Druid came to my rescue whenever that happened, but...I never wanted to experience *that* again!

There weren’t nearly as many people inside the guild lodge as outside of it, but it was still much more packed than usual. There wasn’t a relaxed face in the room.

“Heeey, over here,” Druid’s mentor called, waving at us from the stairs.

We walked up the stairs and found two men around the same age as Druid’s mentor. Who could they be? Maybe they were the reinforcements Druid said he would call.

“Good morning. Wow, it’s been ages since I last saw you,” Druid greeted the pair, and they responded in turn. Unlike Druid’s mentor, these men looked like they took things more seriously.

“Ah, morning. I see ya brought Ivy along. Anyway, let me introduce you to Marual and Tombas.”

The two men waved, and I bowed back at them.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Ivy.”

“Marual. It’s a pleasure.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m Tombas.”

“So that thing I was telling ya about earlier? *Ivy* was actually the one who discovered it. Smart kid, yeah?”

“Whoa! I’m impressed.”

Discovered what?

“We’re going down to look over the monsters they brought in,” Tombas said. “We’ll report back to you once we’ve found something. Let’s go, Marual.”

And with that, the two men walked down the stairs to look at the monsters outside. I wondered if they were going to perform autopsies. *Oh! That’s right, I wanted to talk to Druid’s mentor.*

“Mr. Mentor, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“Hm? I’m a little busy here. Can it wait?”

“Please, Master. Let us talk to you first,” Druid said gravely.

His mentor nodded and gestured to the next room over.

“Thank you, sir.”

As soon as the three of us were in the room, Druid’s mentor pulled something out. It was a magic item that looked like the one that Bolorda had used when we wanted to avoid being overheard. I guessed it was definitely the sort of thing high-ranking adventurers tended to have. As someone with a lot of secrets, I sure wished I could have one. *Huh. I wonder how much they cost? Are they within my budget?*

Chapter 181: Battlemania?!

“So, what did you want to talk about? Is it about Gotos’s secret adandara?”

I guessed that meant the guild master hadn’t told him anything. He must have had a really hard time dodging his old mentor’s probing.

“Yes, sir.”

“I see... Well, before ya tell me, Ivy, let me give ya my oath.”

His oath?

“Gotos wouldn’t spill a thing about the secret. That means what you’re about to tell me must be something important—something ya don’t want anyone else knowing. So...”

Um...Mr. Mentor? How exactly did you ask the guild master about it? I hope he didn’t get hurt...

“I promise that no matter what ya tell me, I will not repeat it to anyone else. I won’t use the information for my own benefit, either. I know it’s just a verbal agreement, so you might not be sure about it, but don’t worry. You can trust me.”

He sounded a bit different...and there was a solemn look in his eyes. Seeing him like this made me understand just why Druid and the guild master trusted him so much.

“Thank you very much, sir. I’ll tell you everything now.”

After another bow, we all sat down to talk. First, I told him how I was a tamer with no stars and that I’d tamed an adandara by some unknown means. Then I told him that I’d tamed two failed slimes. To be honest, I didn’t know just how much I should reveal. But he’d looked so serious when he gave me his oath that I decided to trust him. Druid had vouched for the man, too, after all. I was sure he was safe. Besides, Sora’s alarm had never gone off around him, either.

Okay, um...so I told him everything, and now he hasn't said anything for a very long time. I shot Druid an uncomfortable look.

"It was probably so far outside what he could imagine that he's having a hard time processing it. Don't worry, he'll be himself again in a bit."

Outside what he could imagine, huh?

"Well, I understand. Sora, Flame, and Ciel are all very extraordinary creatures."

I'd tamed two slimes who ate both organic and inorganic matter, and an adandara, who was already a rare presence among the most powerful monsters. I never thought we were an unusual group when we were together, but whenever I told other people about my companions and saw their reactions...I was sure hit hard with the reality of just how rare they really were.

"Ya should put yourself in ya list of 'extraordinary creatures,' Ivy. Ya *tamed* 'em. *That's* amazing."

"Huh?!"

I'm extraordinary, too? I highly doubt that.

"Arrrgh," Druid's mentor sighed suddenly.

Huh? Did I do something wrong?

"Ha ha ha! Well, no wonder Gotos wouldn't talk."

"Oh, wait! I haven't told the guild master about Sora and Flame."

"Really?" Druid asked. "Well, I guess the adandara was enough of a shock for him."

"But, wow. Ya tamed an *adandara*... Daaaang, never thought I'd hear the likes of that before I died."

Was it really that shocking? Since it was happening to me, I couldn't really tell.

"Ivy. Listen to me. Don't ya dare spread the word about this willy-nilly. Ya have to be very careful about who ya tell."

Oh! There it is again. Every time I tell somebody about the monsters I tamed, they give me the same warning.

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Okay, then. But I really am relieved to know this adandara is absolutely nothing to worry about.”

What does he mean?

“Adandaras love violence so much that people say they’ve got battlemania.”

Hm? Battlemania?

“If your adandara had turned out to be our enemy, we’d all have to abandon this town and evacuate somewhere else, no matter how dangerous that would be.”

Err...

“Battlemania...that’s an adandara in a nutshell.”

Wait, what was it I wanted to ask him again? The shock is just too intense...

“Master, do adandaras actually like violence that much? I’ve never really heard that before.”

“It’s not widely known, but I ain’t wrong. When I was young, there was many an excited party who thought they could tame an adandara. What little we know about the creatures today gradually trickled in through ‘em. And one of the reports said they were very fond of killin’ things.”

I’d wanted to know more about adandaras, but this wasn’t quite what I was expecting. Besides, Ciel didn’t seem like it particularly *loved* killing... Actually, on second thought, it did seem very happy when it was killing all those gurbars.

“Did any of those adventurers ever manage to tame one?”

“Nope, adandaras are way too powerful. About ten famous adventurers died trynna to tame ‘em. Nobody’s tried ever since. People enjoy stayin’ alive, ya know.”

“What?! *Ten* people failed?”

If they were well-known adventurers, they had to have been quite powerful. And all ten of them were...killed? Ciel must have been more powerful than I’d imagined.

"Well, ya know that old saying: *Only a fool goes after dragons, suhabas, and adandaras*. That's just how dangerous those monsters are. If ya try to tame 'em, you're just askin' for it. That's why I was shocked to hear you'd tamed that adandara, Ivy. And ya really have no idea how ya did it?"

"I don't, sir. My symbol...er, the mark that appears on a monster's body after I've tamed it...Ciel imitated Sora's symbol and made its own. At least I thought that's what happened, but before I knew it, my magic was coming from Ciel's symbol, too."

"It imitated your symbol? But that's impossible... Well, I know you're not lying, Ivy... So I guess it's gotta be true."

Uh-oh. Looks like I confused the old mentor again.

"Okay, now I understand. So, ya said ya also have some failed slimes, right?"

"Yes. Their names are Sora and Flame." I pointed at the bag on my shoulder, and the old mentor gave it an eager look. "Do you want to see them?"

"C-could I? I've seen failed slimes before, but they disappeared so quickly."

I opened my bag. "Sora, Flame, be quiet, okay? We're in the guild lodge. Mr. Druid's old mentor says he wants to meet you both. Is that all right?"

Sora and Flame jiggled agreeably in reply.

"Thanks. Okay, Mr. Mentor, go ahead."

"Thanks. Mmf! What's this?" The old mentor froze mid-peek, his eyebrows drawing into a deep crease. Then he made a lopsided frown.

"Master?" Druid said to him.

He finally looked up from the bag. "Are ya *sure* these are failed slimes? They look awful sturdy."

Ah, right. They do look quite different from the failed slimes I've seen in books. And this old man seems to have seen the real thing.

"They were incredibly frail at first. They looked like they'd dissolve any minute."

"Really?"

“Yes, sir. But little by little, they transformed into the slimes you see now.”

“Whoa... So failed slimes can mature, eh? They’re not like other slimes, then.”

Wait, it’s not normal for slimes to mature?

“Wow, what pretty colors they both are. Half-transparent slimes, eh? By the way, where’d ya find them?”

“Well, um, I found Sora first. I met it by a lake where there were some very pretty flowers blooming.” Taming Sora was one of my most vivid memories.

“And, um, Flame was birthed by Sora.”

“What?! *Birthed?*”

Oops, that’s not quite right. “Sorry, sir, technically, Sora split into two and that’s how Flame was born.” That was a more accurate way of phrasing it.

“A slime...gave birth to another slime?”

“Yes, sir.” Was that also strange? “Um, Mr. Mentor?”

“So I guess you really are unusual,” Druid said, peering into the bag. Sora jiggled happily back at him. “I was right there when Sora split into two, but I was so preoccupied with my own problems that I just couldn’t believe what I was seeing.”

That’s right. I was so confused that I don’t even remember how Druid reacted. I wonder if Sora’s division left a stronger impression on him than losing his own arm did.

“Sorry, Ivy, but if there’s still something ya haven’t told me yet, you’d better tell me now. I need to brace myself for it.”

He “needs to brace himself for it”? Is it really that extreme?

“Um, *is* there anything I haven’t told him?” I asked Druid.

I think we’re all covered. But did I forget something?

Chapter 182: The Most Powerful Monster

When I asked him just how much I should tell his old mentor, Druid told the rest of the story for me. As I sat next to him and listened, I realized just how many things I'd left out. Sora's healing powers saving Druid's life, and the other things the slimes ate—those things weren't as high-priority for me. Come to think of it, I'd forgotten that Sora ate true swords, too.

"Ivy's monsters experience a full range of emotions, and they can communicate all sorts of things by the way they vocalize."

But aren't all slimes that way? I looked at Druid's mentor. His jaw had dropped...so that must have meant I was wrong. But when you tame animals or monsters, your consciousness is linked to theirs, right? And it's pretty clear that monsters and animals experience emotions...though the only way they can express them is by making noises with their mouths.

"Flame's powers are currently unknown. And we're not sure about this yet, but according to Ivy, Sora has the power to determine whether somebody is a good or bad person for him."

A good or bad person for me...? Oh! Right, he's talking about how Sora was able to pick out the members of that criminal organization. Wait, does Druid think I was the standard Sora was judging other people against? Is...is that really how it works?

"Master...are you all right?"

Druid's voice zapped me out of my thoughts. I looked over at the old mentor and saw he was clutching his head in his hands. *Huh? Did something happen to him?*

"Mr. Druid, is your mentor okay? Did I...?"

"Ivy!" the old mentor growled.

"Yes, sir?" *Oh dear, he sounds angry!*

“Ya did a bad thing!”

“Huh?!”

“Listen, ya shouldn’t have told me something this heavy. Ya only met me a few days ago! For the love of God, ya *need* to doubt people more! Don’t pass judgment until you’ve at least had a good long talk with ‘em. Ivy, this world is crawling with people who *seem* like good guys but aren’t. And if ya tell them what ya just told me—gave ‘em intel that would make ‘em rich—ya might be in *grave danger*. Got it? *Don’t* judge people by how they look. And *definitely* don’t trust somebody like me that ya only met a few days ago. *Do you understand?*”

Umm... You were talking so fast, I lost track of what you were saying halfway through. But you probably meant that I shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.

“I understand, sir. But don’t worry, I’m okay.”

“No, you’re *not* okay! Ya barely know me! Yet ya just told me this really huge secret. What if I tried to get rich off of it? Then what would ya do? I could steal Sora and Flame right out from ya if I wanted to.”

But I don’t think that sort of person would order me not to trust them. “Um, but Mr. Druid vouched for you, sir. And Sora told me you were trustworthy.”

When I’d told Sora and Flame that Druid’s old mentor wanted to meet them, they’d both bounced around with glee. (Well, technically, Sora bounced Flame around.) And whenever they were out of their bag, they would sit perfectly still and stare hard at me if anything was wrong. When they were playful, that meant everything was safe.

“Sora? Ah, so that’s what you mean. Well, ya may be right there, but... Argh, just don’t be so quick to trust people. Okay?”

“Okay, sir. I understand.”

“You too, Druid. Don’t trust a man ya haven’t seen in years. What would you have done if I’d changed? You’d have walked Ivy straight into a trap. I could’ve used ya to get anything I wanted. A man can change into a whole new person in as little as a year. And ya haven’t seen me for years and years. Have another long, careful look at me before ya pass judgment.”

“Yes, Master. But you haven’t changed a bit.”

Now Druid’s master was directing all his anger at his former apprentice. But still, it really was something for a man to demand that you *not* trust him. That explained even more why Druid *did* trust him.

The old mentor let out a long sigh. “Wow, Ivy turned out to be a real prodigy, eh?” He even sounded a bit angry.

“A prodigy, sir?”

“That’s right. Ya had the power to assemble quite the team.”

The power of assembling a team? “But I have no power, sir. I have zero stars.”

Come to think of it, the old mentor didn’t react very strongly when I told him I didn’t have any stars. Wouldn’t it be funny if he’d heard stories in the past about other people with no stars?

“Come to think of it, I was so stunned with all the new information that I barely even noticed that, but having zero stars really is quite a shocker.”

Ah. So he just hadn’t thought about it. Too bad.

“So, you see, sir, I’m not powerful at all.”

“No, kid, that’s not the kind of *power* I was talking about. How should I put it... Ya have the power to draw people and monsters to ya and connect ‘em to one another.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“Sorry, I’m bad at explaining things.”

“It’s okay, sir.”

“You have a charming personality, Ivy,” Druid said. “That’s what brings creatures to you.”

That surprised me. *It’s my personality? Er...what about it, exactly?*

“Yeah, that’s definitely part of it.”

Not you, too, Mr. Mentor! Urrrgh, I don’t get it. As I craned my neck to the side, pondering, Flame and Sora moved back and forth inside their bag. I guess

they were craning their necks and pondering, too...though they didn't have necks.

"By the way, Master, did you hear anything from the adventurers about the monster corpses or the magic?"

Oh! That's right. We were supposed to find out something about monsters dying of natural causes or reports of magic left over from dead monsters.

"Yep. They did find a dragon corpse."

Dragons...if I recalled correctly, they were the most powerful monsters alive. You'd never encounter one unless you traveled into the deepest parts of the forest, so they were completely out of my experience.

"A dragon, you say?" Druid asked. "Yes, I suppose *that* is a monster that's highly likely to live out its life span."

"Yeah, the adventurers were pretty startled when they happened upon its corpse. And there was magic spilling out of it, just like you'd imagined there'd be, Ivy."

"Really, sir?" I was worried that we'd all just misread the old texts.

"Yeah, Gotos made the three survivors of the adventure party confirm it over and over."

So my theory was correct. Oh, thank goodness. That means our berserk monster problem might go away if we burn that dragon corpse.

"Did they say whereabouts in the forest the corpse was?" Druid asked.

For some reason, his mentor smirked. "It's right under the biggest cliff deep in the forest. Ain't that a great place?"

"That's really where it is? Yeah, that *is* a great place."

"Yeah, we don't have to worry about the fire spreading, so we can cast our worries aside and let 'er burn!"

It sounded like an ideal place to burn a dragon corpse. Venturing that deep into the forest was a scary prospect, but at least we had a solution to the problem. Druid and his mentor proceeded to lay out a plan of action. To be

honest, what they were saying was a bit of a mystery to me. But I did gather that going into the forest was quite dangerous and it would take a few days—that much was clear.

Will Druid be part of the party? Even with just one arm, he still has plenty of experience as an adventurer, and he's quick on his feet. Hmm... I wonder what he's going to do?

"Okay, Ivy, wanna head out soon? My father is probably already waiting for us."

Oh, are we done talking, then? "Yes, sir. Mr. Mentor, thank you for having this talk with us."

"Oh, no, thank you for telling me. Umm...Ivy? I've got a request for ya."

"Sure. What is it?"

He sounds really uncomfortable. I wonder what he's thinking? Wait...is Druid holding back laughter? Does he have an idea what his mentor is about to say?

"The adandara...um, Ciel, right? Please...let me meet it. I'm begging you." And with that, he leapt out of his chair and bowed deeply to me.

"Agh!" Druid yelped, horrified by his old mentor's antics.

"Oh, Mr. Mentor, please don't bow to me. Of course I'll let you meet Ciel."

"Ya mean it? Wow, I've always wanted to meet an adandara at least once. Are ya sure it's okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, Ivy. Wow, it's so good to be alive!"

That's a bit extreme! Sometimes I get the idea that Ciel exists on an entirely different plane from the rest of us. I never feel that way whenever we're in the forest together, though... Ciel isn't a different type of adandara, is it?

"So, um, are there any other monsters similar to adandaras?"

"What?!" both men gasped.

Er, please don't look at me like I'm a freak.

Druid seemed to have read my mind. "Ivy, make no mistake, Ciel is *definitely* an adandara."

He gave me a little chuckle, but I couldn't help it! Ciel wasn't anything like the adandaras other people described!

Chapter 183:

Woman's Righteous Anger Conquers All

There was a ruckus when we arrived at Druid's father's shop. Druid and I exchanged curious looks.

"Should we go inside, sir?"

"Let's wait and see what's going on first."

We peeked in through the window and...agh!

"Agh!" Druid grunted, unable to hold it back like I had.

I glanced at him and...he had a huge wrinkle between his eyebrows, which made me chuckle a little. Druid used to be able to shove all his emotions beneath the surface, but now they exposed themselves freely. Maybe something about him had changed on the inside.

I peeked into the shop again. Marching angrily over to Druid was his brother, Dol...huh? *Why can't I remember that guy's name? I must be rejecting it subconsciously.*

"Why are you letting *him* in here?!" the troublemaker yelled at Druid's father. Druid's mother stood hopelessly beside her husband. And next to her was her daughter-in-law, staring at the agitator...with a look of contempt...? *No, I must be imagining it.*

"What should we do?" I asked Druid.

"Huh. Why do I feel this way?"

Hm? What does he mean?

"Until very recently...I used to feel guilty when fights like this happened..."

But not anymore? Does that mean he's gotten over his past? "It means you've moved on."

"What?! Oh. Right...I've moved on."

Did I get that wrong? No, no, he felt guilty all those years because he was shackled by his traumatic past. And if he doesn't feel guilty anymore, surely that means he's moved on, right? Well, who cares if I'm wrong? Druid looks kind of pleased with himself.

"So, Mr. Druid, what are we going to do? Walk into the store and greet everyone with a smile?"

"Ivy...you've got a streak of dark humor in you, you know?"

"But you don't want to be rude. Good manners are important, aren't they?"

"Uh, but if I waltz into the shop and say hello with a grin on my face, that would come across as totally sarcastic."

"Aww, but I think it would be nice."

Greeting people with a smile is the foundation of good manners! So it wouldn't be sarcastic at all...I think.

"What is *wrong* with you people?!" the troublemaker yelled. "*I'm* the victim here! Why do you keep taking *his* side?"

His voice was getting louder, and it definitely wouldn't do to be heard all the way outside of the shop. Reaching the same conclusion as me, Druid swung the door open.

"Argh, can you just grow up already? Are you a damn fool? Or are you just a pile of garbage?"

Huh? That was Druid's sister-in-law's voice. Druid and I both froze to the spot. I stole a careful glance at her. If I had to describe her outward appearance, I'd say she looked docile and neat as a pin. She was probably the kind of lady whom men dreamed about treating like a princess. I couldn't believe the insults I'd just heard from her lips... I almost wished I'd imagined it all.

"You keep repeating 'victim' like it's the only word your stupid brain can hold."

"How dare you! I'm a real—"

"Stop playing the victim card. You're not a five-year-old anymore."

“How dare you!”

Shurila was not even close to yelling. Her voice remained calm and quiet...yet, for some reason, the sound of it sent chills down my spine. And it was a hot summer day, mind you.

“Ohh, you poor thing. You really are a damn fool! If that unfortunate incident hadn’t happened, you’d have been kicked out of this shop ages ago. But your kind father let you work here in the hope that your pathetic ass would grow up a little. Well, if *I* were in his shoes, you’d be on the streets now. Why don’t you man up and look at the situation you’ve put yourself in? *Nobody* will ever take your side, Dolgas. It’s pointless to try and help you.”

Oh, right! It’s Dolgas. I need to buckle down and remember that. And is it just me, or were there some pretty fiery words sprinkled into her speech just now...? To think that such dirty phrases would come out of such a pretty lady’s mouth! I’m shocked.

“C-cut the crap! And you can’t kick me out! You don’t have the right to—”

“Ahh, right, I guess I forgot to tell you. Sorry about that. I’m taking over this shop, so if you’re gonna keep that lousy attitude of yours, then get out. The shop’s better off without you. And I can’t stand the sight of you, either.”

I’m terrified. From the look in her eye, I knew she meant every word. I wouldn’t be surprised if she kicked him out then and there.

Her mother-in-law burst into supportive applause. Her father-in-law smiled sheepishly beside her. An indescribable atmosphere of chaos hung in the shop.

“I want a do-over.” Druid’s meek voice broke the silence. I agreed with him, but if we left the shop, I knew they’d hear us closing the door. They hadn’t noticed us opening it in the first place because Shurila’s voice had masked the sound. Druid and I exchanged glances. I’m sure we both had the fire of fight or flight in our eyes.

“Oh, hello there, Druid. And Ivy.”

Shop Mistress...I wish you hadn’t said hi to us now of all times...

“Oh, good morning, Ivy,” Shurila said, sounding quite normal. “Thanks for

helping out today.”

“Er, good morning. What exactly am I helping out with?” I asked, trying to sound normal, too. But when I looked at her, Dolgas came before my eyes as well. He looked like he was about to blow his top. I didn’t want to go near him, so I stayed right by the door, barely inside the shop.

“Oh, didn’t you know?”

What is she talking about? I looked at Druid, but he seemed just as confused as I was.

“Sorry, we sent you a message, but I guess you didn’t receive it.”

Well, we did leave early this morning to go to the forest. “Sorry, we had a matter to attend to. Did something happen?” I asked, ignoring Dolgas, which only made his face get redder and redder. He seemed quite angry. I slowly turned my gaze away from him so I wouldn’t have to look at the terrifying sight.

“Ivy? Is something wrong, dear?” Shurila, noticing something odd about my behavior, looked next to her and—*oh no*. She burst out laughing.

Yikes...now Dolgas’s grimace looks even more terrifying. Shop Mistress, no! Don’t you laugh, too!

“How dare you all make a fool of me!”

The phrase “I am woman, hear me roar” spun around and around in my brain. The phrase didn’t sound familiar to me, so it must have come from Past Me. And boy, did she roar...with anger and laughter. Only a truly mighty woman could laugh in the face of an angry man like that. Druid’s sister-in-law and his mother were quite possibly the two strongest people I’d ever met.

“Dammit! Outta my way!” Dolgas marched over to the door with a wide stride. And, aiming a foul grimace at Druid, he stormed out.

“So sorry about that,” Druid’s mother apologized. “He never did grow out of that disappointing nonsense in his head.”

Druid’s father smiled in defeat.

“Did something happen?” Druid asked. “He’s never acted out that harshly before.”

Was that true?

“He used to treat the shopkeeper—his father—with respect, at least,” Druid’s mother explained. “But now that he’s found out we’re handing the shop over to his sister-in-law, he doesn’t need to hold back his true feelings anymore, you see?”

“Um, were you holding back your true feelings, too, Mom?” Druid asked.

“Of course I was. Dolgas is my son and I’ll love him no matter what, but you’re my son, too, Druid. And it killed me to see my two elder sons cursing my sweet baby boy. Only a fool would behave so terribly. I warned him to stop many times, but he kept insisting he was the victim like it was some kind of mantra. To think that his personality *and* his brain were both rotten... We tried to talk things out with him over and over, but it was hopeless.”

Druid’s cheeks filled with pink at his mother’s words.

“I’m so sorry, Druid. Your whole life, we’ve made you turn the other cheek.”

“No, Mom, I’m sorry. You’ve all had so many horrible fights because of me.”

“That’s not true, Druid. We never once thought of this as your fault. Those boys are mine. It was my duty as their mother to teach them that fighting is wrong. But no amount of reasoning worked with them. Arguing didn’t work, either. To be honest, I really agonized over how I could possibly get through to them.” There was a brief flash of exhaustion in her eyes.

“Mom...”

“Well, that took a huge weight off my back. I’ve washed my hands of it. I’m going to focus all my energy now on staying out of Shurila’s way. She’s a saint for marrying my good-for-nothing son Doluka. I need to cherish her.”

“Oh, thank you, Mother. You’re so sweet.” Shurila’s pretty smile erased all traces of her terrifying aura from earlier, like it had all been an illusion. There was no hint of ice in her tone, either.

This must be what she’s usually like...

“Sorry for getting you caught up in our family drama, Ivy,” Druid’s mother said, bowing her head to me.

“Oh, don’t worry, ma’am! I’m not bothered by it.”

“I’ve been meaning to thank you for saving our Druid, too.”

“Oh, but I didn’t save him...” I didn’t remember doing anything of the sort. “He’s helped me out an awful lot. If anything, I’m worried I’m causing Mr. Druid all sorts of strife.” *Ack! I’m so nervous that I think I worded that kind of strangely.*

I felt a hand rest softly on my head. I looked up to see Druid’s gentle smile.

“Ivy, you’re like a messiah to me.”

A messiah?! No, no, you’ve got me all wrong!

Chapter 184: Getting Ready

I'd finally calmed down from the minor bombshell Druid had just dropped, so I was ready to hear the shopkeeper's plans for the day.

I'm Druid's messiah? No way. Not even slightly possible. If anybody is Druid's messiah, it's Sora.

"So, it's like this," the shopkeeper began. "The wealthy are hoarding grain, so we're running out of food faster than we expected. They've imposed some limits, but it's already too late."

"I can't believe those bastards!" Shurila sounded a bit on edge. "In times like these, we're supposed to help one another!"

She was right. The actions people take in times of crisis greatly impact the future.

"And that's where we come in. The guild sent in a request. They want us to get the public eating ryce as soon as possible."

"Oh, I see. Did they give us a deadline, sir?"

"Could we do it right now?"

Right now? But there are preparations... Actually, they're not needed, are they? We've got rice. And we picked a sauce recipe whose ingredients we can get in large supply at short notice, so we can make a lot of it right away.

"That shouldn't be a problem, sir. Could we make the products here?"

"We should," Shurila answered. "I think the smell of those onigiri will lure customers here better than word of mouth ever could. We need to make them forget that they're eating animal feed."

She was right. The aroma was quite savory and mouthwatering. *Ahhh, just the thought of it is making my stomach growl.*

"Ivy, dear, could you teach me how to steam the ryce?"

“Of course, ma’am. I’m still at the experimental stage myself, though.”

“Hee hee. Okay, thanks.”

Shurila really was so pretty. I don’t know whether to describe the feeling she gave people as fluffy or fuzzy... Whenever she was near you, it felt like a gentle breeze was caressing your heart.

“So, you need ryce and a pot for this recipe?” she asked as we walked over to the kitchen area.

“Yes, ma’am. You also need bana leaves and a wooden box.”

We both started getting everything ready for production. I put rice in the pot and adjusted the water level until it was just right. The air felt a little humid, so I used a bit less water.

“I sure hope this works, ma’am.”

“Oh, don’t worry. If we ruin this batch, we’ve got huge piles of ryce stored up in the shed out back.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. None of the other shops have any use for it, so Father bought up most of it. That means we have heaps of ryce to spare. My husband and I would always fight over how much ryce went to waste every year, but I really like the way Father is doing business. I want to keep it up.”

Rice went to waste? I didn’t quite follow. If they had too much rice, they could always just grow less of it...so what was the problem?

Noticing my look of confusion, Shurila smiled kind of sadly. “There are farmlands just outside the town walls. And for some reason, the only thing that can grow in the dirt there is ryce.”

What?! Rice is the only thing that will grow? I didn’t even know that was a thing.

“They were going to expand the farmlands to counter the overpopulation, but since ryce was the only thing that could grow there, it was a big disaster. But the folks who bought land there had nowhere else to go, so they resigned themselves to growing ryce. But it’s normally used just to feed livestock,

remember? So there wasn't any money to be made in it. All the other shops sell it dirt cheap. Father's managed to push his stock a little, but we always have huge amounts of it left over every year."

Druid's father sure was something, to buy a bunch of rice when he knew he wouldn't be able to sell it all. But I was still surprised to hear about the dirt that only grew rice. Did such a thing really exist?

"Um, the people who farm those lands...haven't they tried to change the soil somehow?"

They could have added fertilizer or put in new soil...what's that called again? Breaking ground? No, wait, I think that's something else...

"Well, they tried all sorts of things, but that soil just stayed the same. They even tried replacing it altogether, but that didn't work."

Not even changing out the soil did the trick? Wow, I guess that dirt really can only grow rice.

"Well, if rice gets popular and everyone starts buying it, then those farmers could earn enough money to finally move somewhere else."

"Huh? Ivy, if there ends up being enough demand for ryce, I don't think they'll need to move."

Hm? Oh, right! They did say rice grew even in bad soil. For that matter, they were on land that could grow nothing but rice. Past Me's knowledge of rice was messing everything up: They knew rice as a grain that required very rich, wet soil to grow.

"Sorry, yes, you're right. Well, let's do our best to help those poor farmers!"

"Yes, and let's make my blockhead of a husband ashamed of himself for telling Father he was wasting his time and money!"

Shurila seemed to be unleashing her sassy side more and more... *Every rose has its thorns, I guess. Hm? There's Past Me again. She just keeps popping things into my brain. I really need to be careful not to say them out loud.*

The aroma of steamed rice filled the kitchen. I always found that smell very soothing. I grabbed the lid and said a little prayer. Everyone seemed to get

uncomfortable when I showed too much emotion at this part, so I was discreet. *Dear rice, please turn out good...* I lifted the lid, and...

“Oh, thank goodness. It steamed up really well.”

“It sure did. It looks delicious. I’m pretty sure I know the right amount of water, but is it always the same ratio?”

“No, it’s a bit humid today, so I added a little less water.”

“Oh, I see. I guess I’ll just have to learn through trial and error then.”

She’s so cute when the wheels in her head spin. Gee, I hope I’m a cute woman like her when I grow up.

“Okay, then! It’s ryce ball time...”

“Wait, no! We need to put it in the wooden bowl to cool off a little before we shape it into balls. It’s too hot right now.”

I had tried to make an onigiri just once with freshly cooked rice, and I regretted it terribly. My already misshapen rice balls were even more misshapen—and the rice burned my hands, too! It was so hot!

“I’ll just make the sauce while we wait.”

“Oh! That’s right, I got the piece of paper from Father with the correct ingredients and ratios.”

I looked at the paper. The ingredients for our onigiri sauce were neatly written down in detail. *Wow, I’m impressed. If I were left to my own devices, I’d just wing it. But that’s wrong: If I want lots of people to like my onigiri, I have to make them perfectly every single time. All right, I’ll measure everything carefully for the sauce! Gee, this’s the first time I’ve cooked using a recipe.*

“The sauce is ready.” *It sure was a hassle measuring everything.*

“Okay, let’s turn them into balls! I had a lot of fun yesterday just making that one ryce ball. I had a hard time shaping it into a triangle, but today will be different! I’m gonna make the best-shaped onigiri ever!” she declared, gripping her fist.

“Just don’t squeeze too hard, okay?” I remembered she’d messed up

yesterday because she'd squeezed too hard, so I needed to warn her in advance.

"Oh, don't worry. I won't make the same mistakes I made yesterday...I hope."

As we stood there, forming onigiri together, Druid and his father popped into the kitchen.

"We've set up the grill. Do you need help with anything?"

Druid walked over and examined our onigiri. "Shurila, you need to squeeze more gently."

"Urrrgh, I *know* that. I just can't help but squeeze too hard." Apparently, no amount of warning could suppress her iron grip. She was a lot stronger than she looked, especially with those delicate hands. She truly was a woman of many wonders.

"All done." *Phew, that was a lot of work. Wait, the second batch of rice is almost done cooking. We'll have to form that into onigiri next.*

"Ivy, do you think this is the right amount of water?"

I looked at the paper the shopkeeper showed me. It had the amounts of rice and water written on it.

"Yes, sir. That should be okay."

Druid deftly carried three wooden bowls over to the rice-cooking area.

"Thank you, sir."

"Sure thing. All right, let's get to grilling."

"Oh, okay! Let me put the sauce on first."

"Shurila, don't steal any bites while you cook," Druid's mother warned as she handed her a brush for the sauce. Funny, she didn't seem like the type of person who'd nibble on the food she was making.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not gonna steal any bites—I'm gonna scarf down all the onigiri I want."

Appearances really were deceiving with her...

“Now, that really won’t do, honey.”

“Hey!” Shurila protested. “The bowl at the bottom has *my* onigiri.”

“Huh? Ohh...right. The onigiri duds.”

Sure enough, several of Shurila’s first attempts at onigiri had been squeezed way too hard. We’d decided they weren’t good enough to sell, so they were Shurila’s personal supply.

“Grilling o-ni-gi-ri! Grilling o-ni-gi-ri!”

Shurila sang gleefully next to me as we painted the sauce on the rice balls. I stole a glance and she’d already painted one of her failed onigiri with sauce and put it on the grill. It smelled so savory and yummy. *Now I think I want to eat those failed onigiri, too...*

Chapter 185:

Business Is Booming Beyond Belief

“The rice is ready!”

How strange. Why is business booming?! Where did everyone's rice aversion go? All sorts of confused thoughts bounced around in my stressed-out brain as I scurried back and forth between the kitchen and the sales counter.

Back in the kitchen, I prepared another batch of rice to cook. There were four pots next to me, all at various stages of steaming. Two of them were almost done.

Druid ran frantically into the kitchen. “Sorry, Ivy, but we’re almost out of sauce. Where are the ingredients?”

“They’re all here, and so is the recipe... Are you really going to make *that much*, sir?”

I was a bit taken aback when I saw the size of the pot Druid had chosen for the sauce. It looked about three times as big as the original sauce pot.

“Oh, is this the recipe? You think this pot is too big? But Dad said I’d need to make this much. Do you think I’m up to the task?”

He was making an awful lot. We were bound to have extra.

“It’s okay. All you have to do is mix everything together really well.”

“I guess I can do that with one arm.”

I watched Druid get the ingredients ready to measure while I scooped the freshly steamed rice into a wooden bowl. I’d borrowed a fan, which I used to blow off some of the hot steam.

“This is wild!” I exclaimed. “I never expected this many people would show up.”

“Neither did I. When the first customer yelled at us for giving him animal feed, I thought we were in for an uphill battle. But once the children got into it,

customers started flying in.”

“That’s right. They came to the store because they loved the smell. And even when we told them it was rice, they bought a bunch right away when they saw how cheap they were.”

“Right, and then they hollered in front of the shop about how delicious the onigiri were. I panicked at first—I thought Father had paid them to do that.”

The children must have really liked the onigiri. They told all their friends and before we knew it, the front of the shop was packed with children. And the orders just kept coming, so it was hard to steam the rice quickly enough. We even had to call Druid’s mother away from the sales counter to help us. And Druid’s father had also helped out in the kitchen earlier, come to think of it.

Then the children told their parents about the onigiri. They were hesitant at first when they heard it was made of rice, but all it took was one taste and they liked it. Then we started selling so much rice that we were shorthanded, so Druid’s eldest brother wound up helping out. I was really nervous about meeting him.

Okay, I got all the steam out. Now I need to move the rice. It’s a bit heavy... Can I manage?

“Let me help you with that.”

“Huh?” I spun around at the sound of the voice behind me. It was Druid’s eldest brother, Doluka, the one I’d just met.

“Do you need me to carry this?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“No problem. Druid...Dad says to bring him the sauce as soon as you’re finished making it.”

“Oh! Ah, yes. Copy that, sir.”

Druid! You’re way too stiff! “Mr. Druid, are you done?”

“Huh? Oh, ummm, I just need to stir it, right?”

“Yes, and mix it thoroughly, please. It tastes wrong if you don’t let the salt and

sugar dissolve.”

“Understood. But...yeah...this is an awful lot of sauce.”

“Um, of course it is?”

He was using a pot with a capacity of about ten liters. We both made a face when we saw how much sauce was in it. It was just too much, no matter how you looked at it. Did Druid’s father have special plans for all that sauce?

“One of the guys...one of the customers who bought some ryce said he wanted some onigiri sauce, too. Dad’s probably just trying to fill that demand.”

“He’s going to sell it, sir?”

Wait...what? We haven’t gotten the sauce patent from the guild yet, so I don’t think we’re allowed to sell it. The guild had to conduct a thorough investigation to make sure nobody else was trading in a sauce that was too similar. Then, if there were no issues, we could sell our sauce. But until then, we were prohibited from doing so.

“He might be planning on handing it out as a complimentary item with a purchase of ryce instead of selling it.”

Complimentary... That word reminded me of all the times I’d bought something and it had come with something else free of charge. Was that what he was talking about?

“You mean, like a gift?”

“A grift?” both brothers asked, mishearing the word.

Oh no! I’ve done it again. I always say the wrong thing when I let my guard down. But wait...huh? I distinctly remember the fortune-teller using the word once before...

“It means a present.”

“Ohh, right, a gift. I don’t hear that word often, so I’d forgotten about it.”

Oh. I guess they do know that word.

“We usually say ‘present’ instead of ‘gift,’” Druid explained. “So it just feels a little strange to hear the word ‘gift.’”

“True,” his brother agreed.

Interesting. Oh, wow! Druid and his brother are talking to each other normally. That’s a relief to see.

“Let’s go back. We don’t want to keep them waiting,” I said.

Still, I was surprised to learn that the word “gift” did exist in their vocabulary. It had been getting harder and harder for me to tell which words in my memory were from my past life and which were from this one.

“Good idea. I wouldn’t be surprised if they started yelling and pounding on the counter.”

Uh, I don’t think anybody would do that. Well, Shurila sometimes shoots meaningful stares at us, but she’s probably too busy to put up a fuss right now.

“Okay, the rice and sauce are ready!” I announced.

“Sorry, dear, can you form the balls for me? I’m really tied up right now. Please?”

I looked at the front of the shop and saw there was quite a line of customers. There were even some elderly people among them, which was a new sight. Apparently, flavor had won over their aversion to eating animal feed. At this rate, rice might become popular much faster than we’d anticipated. All it took was one taste, and we had them.

“I’ll just form a bunch of onigiri, then.” I checked the wooden bowl and saw that there weren’t many onigiri left. *Good thing I made it out here on time.* And after the sheer number of rice balls I’d formed, their shape was starting to be consistent. The strength of my grip was perfect. There was just one problem... we needed way too many rice balls for one person to make!

“Thanks, Ivy. You must be tired, huh?”

“Yes. After all that work, it was bound to happen.”

“We have a break room, so go have a nice rest in there. Sorry I didn’t give you a break sooner.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Rumors of the “strange, yet delicious” onigiri had spread through the town, and the diners just kept pouring in. Because of that, there wasn’t a lag in customers from lunch to dinner and I hadn’t gotten a single break.

“Here, restore your fluids,” Druid said, handing me a drink. His parents were cleaning up. I wanted to help, but I couldn’t move my body. I really was completely drained of energy.

“Are you okay? You were wobbling a little toward the end.”

“I’m fine.” Everybody had said it was okay for me to take a break more times than I could count, but there were just too many customers. I sure was impressed by my coworkers, though. After that hectic rush, they still had energy to spare.

“Ahh, I’m beat,” Druid sighed as he flopped down beside me. He looked awfully tired. “I haven’t been exercising since I lost my arm, so I think I’ve lost some muscle. I’ll need to get back in shape before we go traveling.”

It sounded like I was Druid’s top priority. That flattered me a little.

“We’re Team Tired, aren’t we, sir?”

“Team Tired? Oh, I get it, so my parents are Team Toiling On, then?” Druid asked with a smirk.

“Yes, they’ve still got some life left in them. But I’ve reached my limit, sorry to say.”

“Well, it’s no wonder. You didn’t take a single break all day.”

But we were so busy. There was no way I could have taken a break. I would have been too anxious to rest.

“By the way, our plans from this morning turned out to be meaningless, huh?” Druid said.

I laughed. That morning, before they opened shop, Druid and his father had strategized about what they would do if nobody wanted to buy the rice. They figured that since the most important thing was to get people to taste it, they would give out free samples. When the ladies overheard their plan, they laughed and said that wouldn’t be necessary. Druid’s father skeptically shook

his head, asking where their confidence was coming from. In the end, they decided they'd see what kind of traffic they got first and make the onigiri accordingly...and I'm glad we didn't have to make any free samples.

"So then I guess your mom and sister-in-law were right, huh?"

"Yes, they were. Oh, but then again, I heard a rumor that some people were running out of food in the last day or so. That might have had something to do with it."

Yeah, people do tend to notice when store shelves get empty. But hearing that we had plenty of rice probably eased some of their worries.

"Good work, everyone! That was the best day ever!" Shurila cheerfully entered the area between the sales counter and the kitchen. It looked like she had good news. All traces of fatigue were gone from her face.

"Did something happen, Shurila?" Druid asked.

"Oh, just listen to this! So, the rich guy who hoarded the most food? Well... somebody from his house came to buy some rice. It was like, 'serves you right, jerk.'"

Maybe the fatigue was making her extra sassy today. Yeah, that had to be it.

"I'm liking this sassier side of Shurila, and I kind of hate myself for that," Druid whispered.

And I couldn't help but nod in agreement. It's scary what a person can learn to like.

Chapter 186:

It's a Hit!

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for dinner?”

“Sorry, I really can’t. But thanks for the boxed lunch.”

They’d asked me to stay and eat with them, but I had to turn them down so I could go take care of Sora and Flame. They’d been in their bag ever since sunup. They both seemed fine whenever I checked in on them, but I wanted to let them get out of there as soon as possible. They had to be hungry, too.

“Will that be enough food for you, dear?” Druid’s mother asked with concern.

I looked down at the wooden box I was holding. From its heavy weight, I could easily imagine a feast the likes of which I could never finish in one sitting.

“Don’t worry, this is more than enough.”

“Are you sure? We have plenty to spare.”

“Oh, no, ma’am, I really am fine, thank you.” In addition to the lunch, Druid was carrying a box of onigiri for me. And judging by the labored way he was holding it, I was almost scared to open it and see how many onigiri were inside.

“Sorry again about today. I didn’t think things would get that hectic. Can we give you your wages tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

Everyone looked exhausted from the unexpected rush that day. Anything that wasn’t urgent could definitely wait until the morning.

“Mr. Druid, are you sure you don’t need to stay?”

“Of course, Ivy. I’m going back to the plaza with you.”

Druid had also been asked to stay for dinner, but he’d decided to walk me back to the plaza instead. Now that he was on good terms with his family again, it would have been perfectly fine for him to stay...though I guess I was a little grateful for the help carrying all my things home.

“Take care, you two. See you tomorrow.”

Druid’s brother and sister-in-law had both gone home to take care of other business, so it was just his mother and father who said goodbye to us when we departed for the plaza.

“Have Sora and Flame been doing okay?” Druid asked, looking at their bag.

“Yes. At least, they’ve seemed fine every time I’ve peeked into their bag.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

I guess he was worried about them being left alone all day. Druid might actually be a bit more overprotective than I thought he was.

On our way back to the plaza, an older man called out to us, “Oh, hello there, Druid! That was great!”

But by the time Druid was able to respond with a “Huh? Oh, thank you,” the man had already gone off somewhere.

“What do you think that was about?”

“Probably the grilled onigiri.”

Oh, that makes sense. It’s pretty unusual to get complimented in the street like that... was what I thought, but a lot of people proceeded to thank Druid. And every time, he thanked them back.

“Are you okay, sir?”

“Yeah, I’m all right. But I’m pretty stunned at how big a hit your onigiri became in just one day. That’s really impressive.”

He was right. People of all ages were approaching us. It seemed like the popularity of our onigiri had crossed all boundaries.

“Do you think we’ll get another big crowd tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yeah, and we’ll probably get big crowds for quite a few days. I just don’t think it’ll last that much longer. Our main objective here is to make ryce popular.”

He was right. The whole reason we’d thought of selling onigiri in the first place was to get people over their aversion toward eating rice. And we couldn’t

exactly say we'd succeeded yet, but the townsfolk *were* eating our onigiri with no resistance. Some were hesitant at first, but once they were confronted with the delicious taste of the rice balls, they no longer seemed to care. We also sold a good amount of uncooked rice, too.

"Ivy, I think you have a real knack for business."

"Huh? What makes you think that?"

"Well, because you're good at luring people to you."

Am I, though? I feel like I'm cheating a little, since I rely on memories from my past life so much.

When we returned to the plaza, the smell of grilled rice greeted us from all directions, which made us both laugh. Apparently, everyone had wasted no time eating our onigiri.

I went back into my tent and let Sora and Flame out of their bag. "Sorry for leaving you both cooped up all day."

Both slimes jiggled in reply.

Oh, good. They're not angry with me. They probably know I was busy with other things.

"I'll just set out your potions, okay?"

I laid down some extra potions for them and watched for a while as they ate. They were eating the same way they always did, so they really did seem to be fine.

"I'm going to go eat my dinner now, okay?" I told them, stepping out of the tent.

When I got out of the tent, I found that Druid had set all our dinner out on the table we'd borrowed from my neighbor. I looked next door to see if he wanted to join in, but he wasn't home. I'd borrowed his table without his permission so many times now, and I really did want to thank him properly as soon as I could.

"Thank you for helping," I said to Druid.

"All I did was put it on the table," he replied.

“Well, let’s eat.”

“Okay! I’ll just go make some tea.”

I heated up some water in the kitchen and got the tea things ready. Somebody was cooking rice nearby, and it smelled good. A smile spread across my face. I never dreamed that we’d see such dramatic results in just one day. The whole thing made me feel kind of giddy for some reason.

“Your tea, sir.”

“Why, thank you. Boy, just how many people did my mom pack this lunch for?”

As I thought, between the boxed lunch and the onigiri, the table was piled high with food. No way was this a meal for two.

“Well, well. I’d say you kids scored a big victory today.”

“Oh, Mr. Mentor! Perfect timing. Would you like to join us for supper?”

Druid’s old mentor was walking toward us with a tired look in his eyes. But when he saw the feast I was pointing at, his eyes lit up.

“Well, that *does* look good. Are ya sure there’s enough for me?”

We looked at the box... There was definitely enough for three people. And then some. In fact, we *needed* his help eating it. There was just way too much food.

“Be our guest, Master,” Druid said, pulling out a chair. Naturally, it was borrowed from my neighbor. I really, *really* needed to thank him properly.

“You look awfully tired. Are you all right, Master?”

“Yeah, well, getting the adventurers together was nice and all, but we didn’t exactly have any solid proof that our method for curing the berserk monsters would work. So, well, ya can probably guess how that caused a few issues.”

He was right. We *didn’t* have any solid proof. It was just a theory we’d arrived at by reading the old texts, and we could possibly be wrong, so I could understand why the adventurers might put up a stink about it.

“Well, the merchant guild guys were excited. They finally had hope that the

food shortage would be resolved.”

That’s right, Druid’s father did get that request about the rice from the merchant guild. I was glad our plan had succeeded.

“We thought people would be more reluctant to try ryce, but surprisingly, they weren’t,” Druid said, taking a bite of onigiri. The flavor had soaked nicely into it. To people who were used to strongly flavored food, something delicate like rice would feel lacking to them. That’s why we used a lot of seasoning when we grilled the rice balls. The savory aroma was quite potent, and Druid’s family liked it a lot. They seemed to enjoy filling the onigiri with other ingredients as well.

“These are really good, ya know.” Druid’s master liked the onigiri, too. I suddenly realized that his aversion to rice had significantly decreased. Maybe eating it seemed normal to him?

“So, are you okay with eating rice now, sir?”

“I can’t believe I’m sayin’ this, but yeah. I’m fine with it.”

So it’s true. All it takes is one delicious bite and all resistance disappears.

“Why were you so resistant to eating it before?” It was a question I’d always had on my mind. I could understand him feeling a little strange about eating something he thought was animal feed, but he’d been so thoroughly repulsed by it earlier.

“It’s probably the church. They preached that ryce was an unclean thing for humans to eat.”

The church? Did they really say that? What a strange thing for a church to say.

“The church, huh... A bunch of meddlers, that’s all they are.”

Druid’s words startled me. There was a low stiffness in his voice I’d never heard before. Did he have some sort of bad memories involving the church? As for me...well, I certainly didn’t have any *good* memories.

Chapter 187: What Makes a Top Adventurer

We ate a fair amount of the mounds of onigiri and other dishes we'd been given...but we still had some leftovers. Druid's mother had insisted the meal was for two people, too... The three of us had made quite a dent in it, but we still had enough to feed one more mouth. I put the remaining onigiri and side dishes into a box and tucked it into my time-stopping magic bag. That way, I would be able to eat it the next day.

"Whew... Ya really saved my hide. I didn't have anything to eat all day." Druid's mentor rubbed his belly as he took a sip of tea. He certainly looked very relaxed.

"Did they set a date for the forest expedition?" Druid asked.

His mentor gave a nod in reply. "Yeah, guess so... Oh, right, I meant to tell ya, some of the adventurers who were making waves back in my day have joined the party. So things're gonna get pretty interesting."

"Back in my day"? That reminds me, Druid did say his mentor had sent word to some of his old friends. So they actually came here. Wow, that's good.

"So they made it here okay? I guess they must be pretty strong adventurers."

They'd have to be strong to make it through the gurbars-infested forest. I'm impressed.

"They ain't as strong as me. Still, if all they've got to deal with is berserk gurbars, they can push through with a little teamwork. Actually killing the gurbars is another matter, though..."

I see. I'd assumed nobody would dare to come to this town after its veteran adventurers were killed. They'd have to be at least as strong as Druid's old mentor.

"Those veteran adventurers only died because they were asking for it."

"Huh?! They were asking for it, sir?" I gasped.

Druid looked just as confused as I was. “What exactly happened to them?”

The old mentor shrugged his shoulders theatrically. “Those idiots underestimated how serious this is. They had a little squabble over leadership on their way into the forest. What were those jackasses thinking?!”

Druid and I both fell silent. *Yeah, I guess they kind of were asking for trouble, then...*

“If they’d each stayed in their own lane, they’d have escaped easily. But those fools just had to try and be heroes and get all the glory.”

“They probably got ambitious,” Druid suggested. “Since a lot of their rival veteran adventurers were taken in by the human trafficking organization and suddenly knocked out of the running.”

Being ambitious is usually a good thing. It can take you to greater heights...but not always. I felt bad for the adventurers who had died, but their deaths could possibly lead to even more victims. We needed to figure out what our top priority should be in solving the problem.

“Yeah, there’s some ambitious adventurers in the group, hungry to be at the top. But they’re a liability when they get riled up. We have to do something about them.”

Any party that ventured into the forest would need to have excellent teamwork. If somebody threatened that balance, it would make the mission much more dangerous.

“If you’re not satisfied with some of the adventurers, can’t you just remove them from the party?”

“I would, but we need all the people we can get.”

Some of the adventurers were hungry to be at the top. Was there some way we could cool them off a little? Should we give them each a turn at the top so they could see for themselves just how hard that position could be? If one of them turned out to be a good leader, we could always have them keep that position... *Wait, huh? What does the person at the top do anyway? Do they lead monster-hunting parties like Bolorda did?*

“Um, when you say hungry to be at the top, do you mean they aim to be the leader of a monster-hunting party?”

“Partially, yeah, but there’s more to it than that. A top adventurer is like the guild master’s right hand. Their job is to observe the other adventurers from up close and make important judgments about ‘em. And to counter that, their powers are restricted to an extent.”

So they’ve actually got a pretty important role, then. This isn’t a decision we can take lightly. What sort of person could be a top adventurer that everyone would accept?

“Um, what are the minimum requirements for the top adventurer?” *Is there some way we can easily sift out the unqualified?*

“Requirements, eh?” Druid paused thoughtfully. “Well, you definitely need to be strong. You also need the ability to lead. Sometimes you’ll need to keep your subordinates in line, but you can’t be a closed-minded dictator, either. You also need critical thinking skills to determine what is and isn’t needed. If you mess up your priorities, you might get your comrades killed.”

It sounded like strength was the most important factor. Then leadership... which was probably a difficult trait to judge. Besides, sometimes when you’re in a position of leadership, your followers can make you stronger. Then, you also needed the ability to keep your subordinates in line, but you couldn’t be a dictator about it. And you also needed a critical mind... In a way, that almost seemed like the most important trait. It could be the difference between life and death.

“Ivy, do you have any ideas? I suggested we start by asking around and seeing who wanted to be the top adventurer. But since this quest is just too dangerous, they turned me down.”

Oh, he was thinking the same thing I was! But it was no good, huh? Too bad. I guess strength is the easiest requirement by which we could weed out the unqualified. Strength... Strength, huh... Oh! Well, if strength is what we need, then...

“Why don’t we determine the top adventurer by fistfight?”

“Well...that was the *last* suggestion I expected to hear.” The old mentor gave me a shocked look. Why was that?

“Ivy, that just won’t work.” Druid was also looking at me in shock.

Um...why not? “But, uh, it sounds like strength is the most important quality to have. And since we’re short on time, I figured a bunch of fistfights would be the fastest way to eliminate the unqualified people. And that way, we’d also get rid of the reckless ones, too...but it won’t work?” My voice got quieter and quieter toward the end. *Eep, yeah, I guess my idea was a little too extreme.*

“But we don’t want our pool of adventurers to get wounded. I doubt they’d hold back in the fistfights.”

Druid was absolutely right. That was a pretty reckless suggestion I’d given, since we needed all the people we could get.

“Sorry, sir, I didn’t think about people getting hurt. You’re right. That idea won’t work this time.”

“Ivy...that idea won’t work *any* time.”

Hm? Oh, right. If we weren’t pressed for time, we’d be able to slow down and think of better methods. We wouldn’t have to resort to fistfights.

“Ha ha ha. Sorry, sir. Nix the fistfights.”

“Ha ha! You’re a funny kid, Ivy.”

Oh, great. I made the old mentor laugh.

“A fistfight, eh? Ya know, in a way, that’s not a bad idea. It *is* the fastest way to see who’s strongest.”

“Master. No.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Anybody who tries to fight their way to the top doesn’t have what it takes to be a top adventurer anyway.”

Eep...well, I guess since I tried to make the trial-by-fistfight happen, that means I don’t have what it takes to be a top adventurer. Well, it sounds like a really difficult job anyway, so I probably shouldn’t think about it.

“AHA!”

“AHA!”

Hm? Why did Druid and his old mentor cry out at the same time? Did they get a good idea or something?

“Ivy. That’s it. That’s *it*!”

“Ivy, ya *really* are an enigma!”

Um...what do they mean? How am I an enigma? The two men ignored the confused stare on my face and talked in hushed tones, like it was something important.

“We *will* hold a fistfight.”

Huh?! But didn’t they say we shouldn’t? People will get hurt...

“Yeah, we’ll have everyone who’s interested sign up. And whoever signs up fails the test.”

What do they mean? Why would they disqualify everyone who signed up? Um...if they have a fistfight, the people who participate might get hurt... Oh! So that was their way of telling who had a critical mind—who could determine what was needed the most right then. And anyone who agreed to participate in a fistfight when we needed all the able-bodied fighters we could get would be particularly bad for the cause at that moment. We couldn’t entrust people’s lives to anyone who would prioritize their own lust for power.

“This will be an easy way for us to see who’s quick to do the wrong thing. And if the guild master or party leader make the wrong decision, we can see what they have to say about it.”

Apparently, there were more benefits to the plan than I originally thought.

“Thanks, Ivy. Is it okay if we go with your fistfight idea?”

“Of course, sir,” I answered, lowering my tone to match theirs. “I wish you the best of luck with it.” Not like they needed my permission to have a fistfight.

“I think we’re gonna have a lot of fun tomorrow.”

“Master...just don’t go too far, okay?”

I looked at Druid’s mentor...and he had a huge smile on his face. He was

definitely going to try something.

“Oh, don’t worry. Well...if anyone does throw a fit, I *am* gonna quiet ’em down.”

There was an indescribable quality to the old man’s smile. Druid sighed heavily in defeat. And I didn’t blame him—I didn’t think anybody could stop his old mentor now that he had his mind set on it.

Chapter 188: Druid's Announcement

“Good morning!” I opened the door of the shop and greeted everyone. *Okay, let's put in another good day's work.*

“Good morning, Ivy.” Greeting me with a smile was Druid... *Wait, huh?*

“Weren't you going to go help your old mentor today?”

“Huh? Oh, no... Though I did tell the guild master first thing this morning what his plan was.”

Huh... I had braced myself for an extra-busy day of work without Druid, so I was really relieved to see him. I *was* ready to do whatever it took...but to be honest, I was quite insecure about it.

“After how busy this place got yesterday, there was no way I could run out on you now.”

That was Druid's character in a nutshell: He was fully committed to doing what needed to be done.

“Oh!” an unfamiliar voice yelped.

I looked in its direction...and saw Dolgas the troublemaker emerge from the back of the shop.

I got it right! That's the first time I thought of Dolgas's name on the first try! As I stood there, silently rejoicing...I realized the air around me was quite heavy. What happened to the light, bright morning cheer?

“Oh, good morning, dear,” Druid's mother said, emerging from the back with a large sack in her arms.

“Good morning, ma'am.”

“Druid, thanks for helping out again today. Dolgas, if you're not working, then stay in the house or get out. You're in the way.”

The cool, unfazed way his mother just told him he was in the way with a smile

on her face...she was not a woman to be crossed. It looked like her daughter-in-law wasn't the only one.

"But Mom!"

"What did I tell you yesterday? Nobody is willing to put up with your crap anymore. Just grow up already."

Er...I should make myself scarce, right? But the mother and son were blocking the way to the back of the shop. *Maybe I should leave?* I glanced at Druid. *Oh! He looks terribly uncomfortable.* He was trying desperately to act normal, but his face was a convulsing mess.

"But why..." Dolgas whimpered, listlessly hanging his head.

"Everybody goes through hard times. That's how we learn and grow. I know that losing your stars was very hard for you, Dolgas. But you have your health and a family who supports you. You need to appreciate just how blessed you really are. I've told you so more times than I can count, remember? It's high time you finally give what I've said some serious thought."

Not showing a hint of anger, Dolgas quietly slipped into the back of the shop. He was probably going back home.

"Sorry you had to see that," the shop mistress apologized.

"It's okay, ma'am." The Dolgas I'd just seen was different from the last time I'd encountered him. I only hoped he was moving in a good direction.

"He really hurt you, too, didn't he, Druid?"

The word "hurt" gave me pause. All I'd seen on Druid's face earlier was a look of hyper-bewilderment.

"I'm fine, Mom. I've done some growing up, too."

"Huh?! Oh...yes, you have. Hee hee, perhaps we have Ivy to thank for that?"

Huh?! Me? Er, but I didn't do anything.

"Yeah, we do have Ivy to thank for that. That reminds me, Mom, there's something I need to tell you."

"What is it?"

“I’m thinking of joining Ivy on her travels. Wait, that’s not quite right. I’m going to join Ivy on her travels. I want to see the world with her.”

Huh? I asked *him* to come travel with me, right? But from the way Druid phrased it, things sounded a bit...different?

“Oh, really? Ivy, are you sure you’re okay with that? Won’t his missing arm be a liability?”

Told you she wasn’t a woman to be crossed.

“It’s not a problem. In fact, I actually asked him to come with me.”

“Really? Well, I hope you’ll make good use of him, if you can.”

“Er, that’s not quite what I meant...” I didn’t exactly ask him to join me on my journey so I could order him around. Druid’s mother cheerfully finished her task and returned to the back of the shop.

“I really am grateful to you, Ivy.”

“Huh?!” I looked at Druid in surprise. There was a serious look in his eyes as he stared down at me. There was something different about it...and it made me feel a little nervous.

“Since you found the blessed incense, we figured out that this whole thing was orchestrated by my client. So you spared me a huge debt that I’d have had to pay off with slavery. Thank you.”

Oh. So that’s what he meant. Thank goodness.

“Also, I still hadn’t given you a proper answer yet. Thanks for choosing me to come with you on your travels. I’m excited to join you.”

He still hadn’t given me an answer? But he’d said earlier that he had to “get back in shape before we go traveling,” so I’d just assumed he was coming with me.

“I’m excited to go with you, too,” I said with a little bow. Druid bowed back at me as well. It felt kind of silly being all polite like that.

“Once the gurbar and ryce problems are sorted out, can you gather everything we’ll need for our journey?”

“Yes. I can’t wait.”

“But we’ll have to make it through today first...”

Right. We may have settled that Druid was going to travel with me...but we needed to make it through today’s rush first!

“Here you go, trooper,” Druid said, handing me a drink.

I was in the break room, drained and barely able to move, just like the day before.

“Thanks. What a crowd we had today, huh?”

After our rush from the day before, I was worried about how many customers we’d get today, since I’d assumed the same people wouldn’t come two days in a row. But the first customers who bounded into the shop as soon as we opened were the same kids from yesterday who’d sung the onigiri’s praises in front of the store. And they’d brought their friends this time, so we were even busier than the day before. And once the kids tapered off, the adults came flocking in and...until just a little while ago, the shop was constantly packed.

“Yeah. It was busier than I expected.”

“It sure was.”

The succession of hectic days was starting to push my body to its limit. My legs were like putty... Could I even make it back to the plaza?

“Oh, there you are. Here’s your wages from the last two days. You really rescued me there. I had no idea we were going to be this busy. You and Druid completely saved our hides, Ivy. Thank you.”

Druid’s father handed us each a slip of paper. I just stared at my own slip in confusion while Druid picked his up beside me. Noticing this, I nervously grabbed mine, too. The paper had the name of the shop written on it as well as the words “total pay.” I assumed those were our wages. Druid’s father immediately returned to the back of the shop after we took the papers—I guess he was busy.

“Um, Mr. Druid, are these our wages?”

“First time?”

It was my first time receiving payment in the form of a check. “Yes, it is.”

“Oh. Well, if you take this slip to the guild, they’ll change it into money for you.”

“Really? Wow, that’s neat.”

“They can transfer it directly to your account if you want.”

Hey, that’s great! But the paper says five gidals on it... “Mr. Druid, um, isn’t this too much?”

“No, he probably took the rush into account. If you want more, you can always negotiate.”

“Oh, no, sir!” I frantically objected.

“Ha ha ha!”

I guess he was teasing me. Ugh.

“Oh, there you are!” Shurila popped her head into the break room. “Can you both stay for dinner this time?”

“Sorry, but once I get my energy back, I have to go back to the plaza.” I wanted to take Sora and Flame out of their bag.

“Awww, really? Too bad. Okay, I’ll just make you another boxed meal like I did last night.”

“Oh, wait! Can I please have less food this time? I still have some left over from yesterday.” I’d eaten some of the leftovers for breakfast, but there was still a lot remaining.

“Ivy, you have to be sure you eat enough.”

“Enough” is good and all...but not even at my hungriest can I possibly eat two adult portions!

Chapter 189: Not a Single Person Was Left?

“Mr. Druid?”

“Hm?”

“I seem to recall asking for less food this time...”

“Ha ha ha.”

We were both carrying a wooden box of food—that much was no different from last time. But his container seemed just a *tad* bigger than it was yesterday. When she’d handed us the boxes of food before we left for the plaza, Druid’s mother had insisted, “Oh, just let me *help* you. Besides, you need more meat on those bones for your travels!”

Druid sighed. “Shurila probably told her to ease off on the food, but Mom must have thought we were refusing her help to be polite.”

Aha. So that explains why the boxes are bigger than yesterday. I was happy to receive a lot of food since it tasted so good, but a part of me was worried that we were imposing. Still, I was glad I had the common magic bag. When the weather was this hot, it was important to keep your food as safe as possible. I really was grateful to the person who’d given me the bag.

Once we got back to my tent in the plaza, I took Sora and Flame out of their bag.

“Sorry I kept you cooped up again today, but this’ll be the last time. Would you like to go to the forest tomorrow?”

The two slimes jiggled happily in reply.

Since rice’s popularity had spread much faster than we’d anticipated, Druid’s father decided around noon that day that we didn’t need to run our onigiri promotion any longer. He put out a sign that said “Sale Ends Today,” and the rumors must have spread quickly because we soon had a crowd of people pushing and shoving to get into the shop. Apparently, they’d mistakenly

thought that the shop had entirely run out of uncooked rice for sale, so the crowd was a huge and frantic.

Druid's father hastily put out a new sign that said "Rice can be purchased every day here," which seemed to settle everyone down. The whole day really made me marvel over the power of gossip.

"I'll just take your potions out. Here you go! Urrrgh...my hands hurt." *I squeezed way too many onigiri... I feel a dull pain whenever I move my fingers.*

Sora and Flame began to eat their potions. I watched them for a while, but they both seemed to be doing fine. *Gee, I'm so sleepy...* As I sat there, looking at the slimes as they ate, my eyelids began to fall. *I really must be tired.*

Grr! Grrrr...

"Oh!"

A very loud noise sounded from my stomach and echoed through the tent. Only Flame and Sora were there to hear it, but I was still a little embarrassed.

"Um, I think I'll go eat my dinner. See you both later."

I had no idea my stomach could growl that loudly. Thank goodness I was inside my tent.

"Thanks for waiting for—oh! Hi, Mr. Mentor, Mr. Guild Master."

When I stepped out of my tent, I found that an unfamiliar table and chairs had been set out in front of it. The wooden boxes we'd brought back with us were sitting open on the table. And, as I'd suspected, there was an awful lot of food. Thank goodness we had company.

As I looked over the three men, I saw a slightly tired yet mischievous smile on the old mentor and a somewhat annoyed frown on Druid. Then there was the guild master, who looked so exhausted that I was almost worried about him. I wondered what had happened.

"Sorry I was away. Um, where did you get the table and chairs...?" *I might as well ask them the easy questions first.*

"We had extra ones, so we brought them over. You can keep them. It's a great set—since it's magic, you can make it small."

Hm? Did I mishear that? It sounded like they said the table and chairs were magic, and I could “keep them.” But I must have imagined that. They look awfully expensive.

“Isn’t that great, Ivy? These were my Master’s table and chairs, so it’s okay.”

Druid’s smile finally made it sink in. For some reason, his old mentor was giving me a very expensive magic item.

“Oh, no, sir. This is far too expensive for me to accept.”

“Oh, please, take it. I’ve got two more sets just like it. It’s to thank ya for your help today.”

My help today...does he mean the fistfight idea? I am a bit curious about how that turned out, but from the look on the guild master’s face, I’m kind of scared to ask. But...is this really okay? I’m pretty sure this is a very expensive magic item.

“See? Check this out. *This* is the table’s selling point.”

I looked where the old mentor was pointing. There was a magic item I’d seen before embedded in the table. It was a device that muffled your voices to outsiders. *Huh? Wait a minute, is this item super rare?*

“Master!”

“If Ivy’s gonna keep traveling, this item is a *must*. You’re gonna travel where there’s a lot of people around, aren’t ya?”

Oh! That must be why he picked this table for me. But it has to be incredibly expensive.

“You should keep it, Ivy. He gave me presents now and then when I was his apprentice.”

It made sense that the old mentor would give a present to his apprentice...but he’d really chosen this table with me in mind, hadn’t he?

“Um...thank you very much, sir.”

“Oh, don’t thank me. It’s no problem.”

Yikes...I just got a really valuable present I didn’t deserve. But I’ll admit I’ve

been wanting a magic item that lets me have private conversations, so I'm actually really happy about this.

“Well, it’s grub time,” the old mentor announced.

“Of course, sir. Help yourself.”

The four of us began eating...and it was oddly quiet. Neither Druid nor the guild master seemed to have the energy to talk. *Well, today was a really hectic day. Was it like that for the guild master, too? Or did something particularly bad happen? Gee...now I wanna know. Which means I'd better ask the most energetic of the three...*

“Mr. Mentor, did you run into some problems today?”

“Hm? Oh, no, we were able to weed out the unqualified adventurers without a hitch. Something kind of unexpected happened, though.”

Something kind of unexpected?

“Turns out, all the adventurers we called in were pretty cringey. I never dreamed *every single one of them* would sign up for the fistfights.”

Yikes... All of them. Who'd have thought?

The guild master sighed. “*Unbelievable*, right?”

“Yes, sir. *All* of them is a bit unbelievable.”

So that was why the guild master looked so exhausted. It wasn’t his old mentor’s doing, it was the adventurers.

“When Druid told me the plan, I thought it would be a great way to scout out some talent. I never imagined not a single person would be left.”

The guild master had a very important job: nurturing adventurers. These people were to be the town’s next batch of veteran adventurers...their candidates for the next guild master... That must have been really hard for him to watch.

“Um, sorry you had to deal with that, sir.” Those were the only words I could give him.

“Thanks,” he sighed.

"Uh, this tastes really good, so please eat it. Eat this, too." *If he fills his stomach, maybe that will calm his nerves? Or maybe it's a lost cause?*

"What are ya gonna do about it, though, Gotos?"

About what?

"Yeah, *that's* the question," he sighed. "As a town, it's a big problem for us not to have veteran adventurers. It seems training the adventurers we've got is the only way..."

That's right: Since the previous group was killed by the gurbars, this town had no veteran adventurers. And that *did* put them in a precarious situation. Veteran adventurers ensure the townsfolk's safety, so much so that their absence was enough to make a lot of people nervous.

"We could always put the word out to veteran adventurers on quests and see if they'll come help, but that has its own problems."

I'd heard there were a lot of veteran adventurers on quests for different reasons, so it wouldn't be easy to get them to help out.

"Can't we find a steady stream of veteran adventurers somewhere?"

Mr. Guild Master...that conjures up a pretty scary image. I can just picture adventurers bubbling up from the ground... Ack! That won't do. Those people are probably buried corpses. Wait, that was a pretty crazy image I just conjured up, huh? Are Past Me's memories mixing in with my thoughts? And for that matter, did corpses rise from the ground in the world I used to live in? That's terrifying beyond words.

"What's wrong, Ivy? You look pale."

"Er, I'm fine, sir."

Making myself sick from my own fantasies is the worst feeling. Okay, let's think of something fun. Something fun...

Chapter 190: Flame, Too!

We passed through the town gate and headed toward the forest.

"Wow...I sure am tired," Druid said.

"Me, too. I never thought it would be this exhausting just to walk to the forest."

Druid sighed. "I appreciate the gatekeepers' work ethic, but still..."

"I'm sorry. But do you think they'd let us out of the gate without a fuss if we told them the truth?"

"No, I think they'd act the same way, even if they knew about Ciel. That's what they're like."

I was excited to see Ciel after two days away from it, but we'd had to stand and listen to the gatekeeper lecturing us for over ten minutes. They were just doing their job—there had been increased reports of gurbar sightings—but it was still exhausting.

I'm so glad Druid came with me. If I'd tried to go alone, they definitely wouldn't have let me through.

I checked on the conditions of the forest as we walked to the dump. We'd only been away for two days, and there were already many more tracks from big monsters here and there. They were probably gurbar tracks, since all the claw and paw marks were the same size.

"We should be on guard. They've come pretty close to the town."

"Yes, sir... Oh! Ciel's come out to meet us."

We stopped and looked around. After a little while, Ciel gracefully jumped down from overhead.

"Huh?!" I looked up while I patted Ciel's head and saw an empty space between the trees. In other words, there was no tree where Ciel had come

from.

After a long, awkward pause, I finally asked Druid, “Mr. Druid...do adandaras fly?”

“No, I never heard of such a thing. Maybe it jumped down from that tree over there? All the way to this spot...”

I looked where Druid was pointing. There was a big tree about a dozen meters away from us. It was quite a long distance, but judging by Ciel’s muscles it might be able to make the jump.

Mrrrow.

“Oh, sorry, Ciel. Good morning.”

Mrrrow.

Ciel’s eyes darted to the top of Druid’s head. I followed its gaze...and my eyes froze. Sora was dancing on Druid’s head. It wasn’t the vertical stretching exercises or the sideways jiggles—it looked like full-on dancing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, Sora is...dancing on top of your head.”

“What?! Are you sure it’s not the usual vertical stretches?”

“No, sir, it’s bobbing up and down, swaying left and right, and bobbing up and down, and shaking its...er...hips?”

I tried to describe Sora’s dancing, but...I couldn’t. Slimes didn’t even have hips. But from the way Sora was moving, it did look like it had upper and lower portions of a body.

“Ivy, it’s okay, you don’t need to describe it to me. It’s moving in a way you’ve never seen before. That’s what you mean, right?”

“Yes, sir. I haven’t seen anything like this. Do you think it’s another evolution?”

“No, I don’t think movement has anything to do with slime evolution... except...Sora is special.”

The phrase “Sora is special” suddenly made everything make sense to me. As I

intently watched Sora, Ciel nuzzled up close to me. Was it jealous that I was giving Sora all the attention?

“Ciel, look. Sora’s doing something really neat. Do you think it’s happy to see you?”

Mew?

Ciel was so cute when it meowed like that. While we walked to the dump, I told Ciel everything that had happened the past couple of days.

“I really worked my butt off, Ciel.”

Meowww.

Ooh, that’s a meow I haven’t heard before. It sounds like it’s saying, “I’m proud of you, kid.” Aww, you’re so sweet.

When we arrived at the dump, it looked exactly the same as the last time we were there a few days ago. Maybe that was because no one was allowed to leave the town much these days. But boy, what a big dump this was. It had everything we needed.

“Ciel, could you watch Flame for me?”

Mrrrow.

I took Flame out of the bag and gently set it down at the root of a tree. I kept scolding it to stay awake longer...and I was epically losing that battle. *Was there a way to make Flame stay awake longer? It was a hard nut to crack.*

I walked to the dump to find that Sora was already there, bouncing around. It certainly had gotten awfully good at jumping around the dump. In the past, it would always get itself buried or stuck in the trash. But since Druid was nearby, Sora would be okay no matter what happened, so I went a few paces away to look for potions...

“Puuu.”

Hm? I turned in the direction of the strange sound Sora had just made...and saw it had gotten stuck in the trash and Druid was helping it out. Apparently, it

did still do that.

I collected blue and red potions and put them in my bag. Since I'd brought an empty bag with me, I was able to carry home a lot of them. Druid kept an eye on Sora as I added several swords to the bag. And Sora was...in the middle of a meal. Every time I looked at Sora, it was devouring a different sword. How many could it even eat anyway? I looked over at Flame and Ciel...and for some reason, Ciel was in the trash. Did something happen?

"Ciel, what's wrong?"

"Something happen?"

"Puuu?"

We all moved over toward Ciel, who was staring intently at something. We followed its gaze and saw that Flame was eating something. *Um...what is it eating, exactly? It doesn't look like a potion...*

"Is it okay? Oh, is that Flame? How strange. It's not usually awake."

"I know. Um...Flame is eating rocks."

"Rocks?"

Apparently, Druid couldn't see it, but Flame was indeed eating rocks. *Rocks,* of all things.

Druid moved over next to me. "Whoa! It's true," he exclaimed when he saw it with his own eyes.

If Flame could eat rocks, did they have to come from the dump? Come to think of it, why were all these rocks by the dump in the first place?

"Mr. Druid, why are there so many rocks around here?"

"Oh, well, these were originally magic stones."

"Magic stones?"

"Yes, when you use up all their magic, they become like normal rocks."

Wait, I've heard about that before. Okay, so these used to be magic stones. I picked one up and looked closely at it...but it looked like an ordinary rock to me.

“Are these still rocks? Or are they something else now?”

“I guess they aren’t technically rocks. If you focus magic into them, they’ll turn back into magic stones again.”

“Oh, really? Then why do people throw them away?” *What a waste. They could always reuse them.*

“You need someone with a high-density magic power to imbue the stones with magic.”

High-density magic? I’ve never heard of anyone like that. I wonder where you might find them?

“By the way, people with such special magic are apparently born only once every several hundred years.”

Aha...so they could technically be reused, but nobody’s around to fill them with magic.

“Teryu-ryuuu.”

I turned to look at Flame and saw that it was jiggling more intensely than usual.

“Ryu! Ryuuu, ryuuu.”

“Flame, are you okay?”

“Ryuu,” it moaned a little louder.

Something’s definitely wrong. Did eating those rocks cause some sort of problem?

“Ryu... Pong!” Something flew out of Flame’s mouth. I took a closer look...and saw a beautiful green stone. But Flame seemed to take no interest in the pretty new rock. Instead, it turned around to eat another former magic stone.

“Mr. Druid...”

“Yeah...”

He had told me barely a minute ago. The ones who can imbue magic stones with magic were quite rare. We looked at the thing Flame had just spat out, and it looked exactly like a magic stone to us.

“Ryuuu.”

My shoulders flinched at the sound of Flame’s voice. *Again?* I braced myself for another surprise...but Flame just seemed to be upset that there weren’t any more rocks nearby.

“Oh, I’m sorry! Sit tight.”

Druid and I gathered a bunch of rocks and piled them up in front of Flame, who jiggled with excitement at the sight of them. Then it began to dissolve the rocks with the same vigor as it did potions. As we watched Flame eat, we picked up the green stones it spat out.

“Mr. Druid, are you *sure* these are magic stones?” I handed one of the green gems to him.

He checked it over carefully. “Yes, no mistaking it. This is a magic stone.”

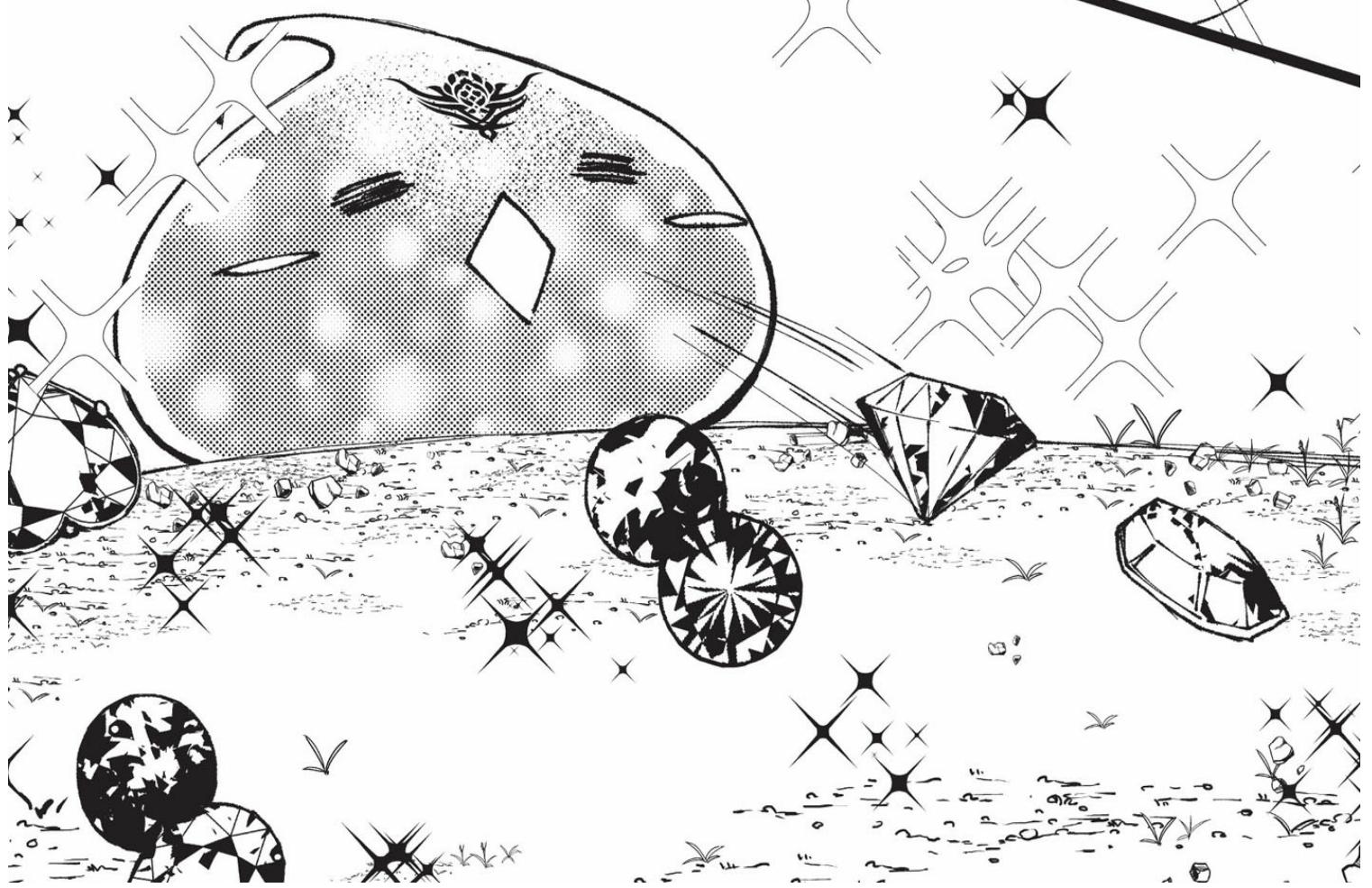
Er...so Flame followed in Sora’s footsteps and evolved into a super-rare slime.

“Ryu! Ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu... Pong!”

If Flame keeps eating rocks, will it just keep turning them into magic stones? What’s more, if it just keeps spitting them out as magic stones, I have a feeling it’ll never get full...

“It’s okay, Flame, you don’t need to work so hard. We have enough magic stones.”

If it stops spitting them out, it’ll definitely get full. I hope.



Chapter 191:

Rarest of the Rare

We turned our attention back to our tasks. I collected potions, and Druid picked up swords. We each loaded our bags quite full of them.

“Thank you for helping me, Mr. Druid.”

“It’s faster to divide the work, right? Besides, I’m going to be your travel companion, so I need to start doing jobs of my own.”

It *was* faster to divide the work. And if we were going to travel together, we *would* need to assign roles to ourselves. The reality of it suddenly hit me: Druid really *was* going to travel with me.

“Now, we should head back to Flame. After you, Ivy.”

“Oh, no, after *you*, Mr. Druid.”

The reason we were both reluctant to take the lead was the “pong-pong” noises in the distance. Just how many magic stones had Flame made? I was scared to check. Druid and I looked at each other and smiled awkwardly. Then we walked over to Flame side by side.

“I’m really glad that we’ve found out Flame’s new power,” Druid said. “But it’s hard to celebrate, knowing Flame is even rarer now.”

I nodded in agreement. I was happier to find something else Flame could eat than to learn about its new power. But if Flame could make magic stones...what exactly did that *mean*?

“A slime that can regenerate magic stones...that’s really amazing.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Hm? Yeah, and Sora is a slime that can regenerate potions.”

“Huh?”

“When you hand Sora the used potion bottles, wouldn’t it be funny if it could actually refill them with the highest-level potions?”

“Puuu!”

We both fell silent. Druid’s brow wrinkled as he processed the words he’d just said. He’d said it on a whim, but he just realized how significant that would be if it were true. And, as the icing on the cake, Sora was singing in a very confident tone.

Sora enveloped wounded people and monsters and healed them with potions it created, or at least that’s what it seemed like. What if Sora could excrete these potions—potions strong enough to bring people back from the brink of death—and we could fill bottles with them? We’d have to keep them sealed up in a magic bag forever. If even one of them got out, people would go nuts over it. But still...

“Should we...test out that theory?” I asked, looking up at Sora on top of Druid’s head. It was jiggling merrily.

“That’s probably a good idea... Then again, from the way Sora’s acting, I think we already know the answer.”

Druid was right. Judging by the way Sora had been behaving the last couple of minutes, it was easy to imagine the slime filling bottles with potions.

“I *have* always wanted to analyze the quality of Sora’s healing potions.”

The thought had crossed my mind that one time Sora healed my wound, but that was before I knew just how extraordinary its healing ability was. A part of me was too scared to find out...but Sora was my friend, and I wanted to understand everything I could about it.

“If we want an analysis, my old master’s friend could probably help.”

His old master’s friend...he means Marual or Tombas. “What kind of things do you need to analyze a potion?”

“You need the appraise skill.”

Oh, the appraise skill! That’s the one where the more stars you have, the more things you can learn about a substance, right?

“His friend has that skill? I’m impressed.”

“Yeah, and he’s got four stars in it, too... Oh, right, the friend I’m talking about

is Tombas.”

Four stars! Wow. So Tombas has four stars... Wait, what? I can't remember what he looks like.

No matter how slowly we walked, my eyes were stuck on the ground beneath Flame. I wasn't surprised by what I saw, since it had been like that a little while ago...but all the trash around Flame was peppered with magic stones...magic stones...and more magic stones.

“I've never seen so many magic stones buried in a dump. But you know what else I've never seen...?” Druid looked at Flame with a perplexed look. I was a little confused, too. Flame had a rock stuck in its mouth—it had probably fallen asleep mid-bite. That would have been enough of a puzzle already. But since the rock was in Flame's mouth, there was drool...such an extraordinary string of drool hanging from it.

Mrrrow. Ciel sounded a little pitiful. Maybe the adandara had tried to wake Flame.

“Ciel, thanks for watching Flame.”

Mrrrow.

“Flame, um, time to rise and...yeah, no. Not happening.”

I carefully removed the rock from Flame's mouth. *Urk...drool.* No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't avoid touching all that saliva. I gently picked up Flame...and there was a long string of drool connecting it to the ground.

“Pfft! Ha ha ha.”

“Pu-pu-pu-pu-pu.”

Druid burst into a chuckle. Sora seemed to be laughing as well.

“I don't think Flame can help it,” I said.

“Sorry, ha ha. Anything I can do?”

“Um, there's a cloth in the slime bag. Can you get it out for me? I need to wipe Flame dry first.”

I couldn't put it back in its bag when it was so slimy. Druid handed me the

cloth, and I wiped Flame clean. Thank goodness the drool hadn't gotten all over Flame's body. Once it was dry, I put the slime into its bag.

"Okay, we can't leave the dump like this." I looked at the magic stones scattered about us, wondering how many there were. Druid and I picked them up together.

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

"Um, I found fourteen."

Counting the first green magic stone Flame had made, we had twenty-seven of them in all. We left the dump and sat in the shade of a big tree. Then we lined up all the stones on a cloth.

"Agh! No...I don't want to see it."

"Ha ha ha. Come on, Ivy, let's face reality together. Boy, they sure are pretty, though."

The moment I saw the neat row of magic stones, my eyes were drawn to two of them because they were transparent. When we'd collected them from the trash, I'd thought they were all pretty, but I hadn't noticed just how pretty they were.

The more impurities magic stones had, the opaquer they were. This meant the magic inside them was of lower quality and quantity. These were everyday magic stones and were sold at comparatively cheap prices.

On the other hand, transparent magic stones had very few impurities and were said to charm those who looked at them. And it was true—the moment I saw the clear gems, I held my breath in awe. They were just so different from all the magic stones I'd seen thus far.

"How extraordinary..." Druid marveled, holding a stone in his hand.

"Um..."

"Hm? What's up?"

"That magic stone...it's extremely rare, right?"

"Yeah...this is my first time seeing a magic stone this transparent. It's the

rarest of the rare.”

I knew it. Yeah, I definitely saw that coming...

“Puuu!” Sora suddenly squealed, breaking the silence.

I shivered intensely. “What’s wrong?”

Sora looked angry. But why was it so mad?

“Puuu!”

“Do you think it wants some empty bottles?” Druid asked.

Sora began to bounce in reply. *I guess that’s a yes.*

“Okay...I guess the sooner we settle this, the better,” said Druid. “I’ll go look for some bottles.”

“The sooner we settle this, the better”...what did he mean by that? I curiously looked over at Druid as he picked up an empty bottle from the dump. He returned with it and rinsed it clean with some drinking water we’d brought along.

“Here you go,” he said, handing Sora the clean bottle...which it promptly chomped down.

“Okay, so I guess it can’t put a potion into the bott—oh, wait, it’s done it.”

Sora had produced a bunch of bubbles like it usually did during a meal, but they quickly dissipated, and a bottle plopped out of the slime’s mouth. And, naturally, it was filled.

“Wowee!” It was a clear blue potion, and it was even sparkling a little. I’d never seen or heard of a sparkling potion before.

“It’s so pretty, but it’s the sort of potion we could never use in front of anybody.”

“True,” Druid agreed. “We’d be shining a beacon on ourselves.”

Between the sparkling potion and the transparent, bewitching magic stones...nobody would blame us if we wanted a little escape from reality.

Chapter 192: Two Days from Now

“Be careful, Ciel. There’s a bunch of berserk monsters hanging around the outskirts of town, so don’t do anything reckless, you hear?”

Adandaras loved to hunt, right? If I put my foot down and forbade Ciel to hunt, would that hinder the creature too much?

“Um, if you *know* you can win, it’s okay to fight them a little, okay? But if you’re at all unsure, just say no.”

Mrrrow.

There was one other thing I needed to make clear. “Oh, right! Also, a team of adventurers from town are coming out here to find out where the berserk monsters are coming from, so try to stay hidden, okay? Some of the people in the party know about you, so they probably won’t mistake you for one of the monsters and kill you. But there’s going to be a lot of adventurers out there, so just be on your guard.”

Mrrrow.

“One more thing. Since the forest has gotten so dangerous, they might not let us leave town for a while, so if I don’t show up for a few days, I’m really sorry.”

Mew!

“I know, I wish things would just go back to normal, too.”

Mrrrow.

“Seeing this gets more surreal every time.”

Huh? Ciel and I gave Druid confused looks. What surreal sight was he talking about?

“Never mind. Don’t mind me.”

Okay, I guess it doesn’t matter. I gave Ciel’s head several long, leisurely pats. “Do you think Ciel could come to town with us if it were smaller?”

“Sure, as long as nobody found out it was an adandara. But I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Yeah, too bad. Well, Ciel, we have to go. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

Mrrrow.

I was a little worried about Ciel, but I had to let it go. We said goodbye and headed back to town.

“You know, I just realized our little welcome party didn’t come out today,” Druid said.

Come to think of it, we had been in the forest for a while, but they hadn’t come looking for us, had they? Well, they probably had too much on their plate today to bother checking in on us.

When we saw the gatekeeper, we gave him a little wave and he waved eagerly back at us. It seemed like he was worried. *Did something happen while we were gone?*

“We’re back.”

“And thank goodness you are! I was about to go looking for you since you’ve been out so long, but Druid’s old master wouldn’t let me!” the gatekeeper grumbled.

Aha, so Druid’s old mentor stopped him. Maybe he did that so we could have more time to catch up with Ciel undisturbed?

“When I told him I was worried about you two, he said he’d given you some special shock bags, so there was nothing to worry about.”

“Thanks for your concern, sir. But as you can see, we didn’t run into any problems.”

“Yeah, sure, but *please* be careful out there. Last night, they got so close they were right in front of our noses.”

“Really, sir?”

“Yeah, so we decided to increase the size of the night patrol. I’ve just got a bad feeling about all this.”

The gatekeeper looked quite tense. And I didn't blame him, what with the giant gurbar tracks that had been left so close to the gate. It really made me worry about Ciel again.

We parted ways with the gatekeeper and headed to the guild lodge to get an appraisal of our magic stones and potion. My heart was racing a little. I knew they looked extravagant, but maybe the appraiser would still say they were "normal"... *Yeah, no, that won't happen. I'd better not get my hopes up.*

We entered the guild lodge to find it packed with adventurers. I remembered then that they were going to meet up there to get ready for the quest.

"Mr. Druid, won't we get in the way?"

"Hm? Oh, we'll be fine. C'mon, this way."

We dodged the adventurers as we climbed up the stairs to the second floor, which was so quiet I wondered if anyone was even in there.

"They said they'd be getting ready for the quest, so they're probably in this room." Druid knocked on a marked door.

"It's open!" somebody called out from inside.

We opened the door. On the other side, we found a huge stockpile of shock bags and...some other unidentified thing they were making.

"Hello there, Druid. What's up?"

"I have a request for you and Tombas, Master."

"Hm? And Ivy's part of this, too, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Understood. Well, you lot, finish up this job. I want twice as much as we've got now."

The adventurers signaled to the old mentor that they'd do it. *Maybe I should join them and do what I can to help?*

"So, what's up?" the old mentor asked. He'd taken us out of the crafting space and into another nearby room. He'd also taken out his magic item so nobody else could hear what we were talking about.

"We've got a couple of items we want Tombas to appraise. Ivy?"

"Yes, sir."

I pulled the twenty-seven magic stones and the sparkling potion out of my bag. *Oh, good, it didn't spill.* I actually didn't have a stopper for the bottle, so I was nervous that it might have spilled inside the bag.

"I see you've brought me yet another collection of marvels... Wow, what's with these magic stones? Those look awfully clear...and this sparkling potion... does it cure wounds?"

"Yes, sir. Sora made the potion, and Flame made the magic stones."

"Ahh, yes, I see... Potion...Ivy's slime, Sora...ah, yes, I see..."

The old mentor looked a little puzzled. *Er, I'm supposed to just wait until he settles down, right? That's what I had to do last time.*

"Phew... Well, I'll go get Tombas and we'll see. Ivy, you can leave. It's probably best for you not to know."

Huh? Well, I don't really mind leaving...but why?

"Ivy... D'ya remember what I told ya earlier?"

What he told me earlier? What did he say again? Umm...oh, right! The thing about not being so quick to trust people?

"But isn't he an old friend of yours, sir?"

"He's no exception to the rule. I doubt he's changed, but I haven't seen him in many years, so ya can ne'er be too careful."

"Well, um..."

If he says so, I guess we should be wary of him just in case?

"Understood. I request an appraisal, please." I bowed my head.

"Sure. Oh, wait a minute! I'll write it down." Druid quickly produced a document saying that I'd given his mentor twenty-seven magic stones and a potion for an appraisal. "Master, we'll be waiting in the plaza. Thanks for helping us."

“Yes, thank you, sir.”

We both bowed to him.

“Not a problem, guys.”

Druid and I left the room.

“Do you think it was okay to shove the task on him like that?”

“Well, once he gets an idea, he won’t take no for an answer,” Druid said with a shrug of his shoulders. And it certainly *did* seem like his old mentor would be a difficult man to convince of anything.

We returned to the plaza and started preparing dinner to be ready by the time the old mentor arrived. Since I had plenty of time to spare, I decided to stew all the rest of my meat. I wanted to make something hearty that would give Druid and his old master strength.

I’d heard at the guild lodge that the quest was scheduled to start in two days and that Druid’s old mentor would lead the party. Druid would join the town’s patrol, which would be significantly thinned down during the quest, so they needed all the strength they could get.

“Sorry I’m late. Something smells good.”

“Good evening, sir. It’s almost ready! I hope you’ll join us.”

“Thanks. I’ve actually got another little request for ya.”

A request? I want to know what it is, but maybe we should wait until after dinner? We need to fill our bellies first!

We had meat that I’d braised for several hours with some flavored onigiri. The town was almost out of wheat and barley, and the merchant guild master had come into town to thank us personally for popularizing rice just in time.

We sat down and ate. When I slid my spoon into my soup bowl, the meat just fell apart. The texture was perfect, and it tasted good, too.

“Ivy, ya sure are a good cook. I’ve never eaten most of the stuff ya serve before, but it’s all good.”

The old mentor's praise flattered me. "Thank you very much, sir."

"Ha ha ha, no, thank *you*, Ivy. You're the one who did all the cooking."

Aside from a few moments where the old mentor brought up some stories of young Druid that embarrassed him greatly, we had a nice, relaxing meal. Strangely enough, gurbars didn't enter our conversation once.

Once we had finished eating and started drinking our after-dinner tea, the old mentor took out a little bag and a stack of documents, setting them on the table. I gave him a curious look.

"I couldn't exactly bring the items in question out in the open," the old mentor explained. "So please look inside the bag without taking anything out of it."

Oh, that makes sense. I can't take out the magic stones or the sparkling potion in public like this. I peeked inside the tiny bag. *The magic stones are definitely in there. Huh? There's a stopper in the potion bottle.*

"Looks good, sir. Thanks for the stopper, too. So, what's this?"

"Your appraisals. There should be twenty-eight sheets in all."

I guess that's for the twenty-seven magic stones and the one potion. I looked over the documents. The first several were appraisals of the magic stones with impurities, listing the impurity levels and how much magic each stone contained. The magic stones were Level 5.

"What does their level mean?"

"It shows how rare a magic stone is. The lower the number, the rarer it is. The most common level is Level 10."

If the least-rare level is Level 10, then... I flipped through the appraisals and saw that all twenty-seven of the magic stones were Level 5 or better. Twenty of them were Level 5, three of them were Level 4, two of them were Level 2, and two of them were Level SSS... "What's SSS?"

"Those more powerful than Level 1 are expressed with an S. The highest level is SSS."

Er, so that means...the pretty red magic stones are the highest level possible.

Yikes! The highest level...that's terrifying!

Okay, and the last piece of paper must be for the potion. I kind of don't want to look at it...but I also kind of do.

I took a deep breath and looked at the potion's appraisal.

Potion appraisal: impossible.

Impossible...? Um, does this mean...it's not a potion after all?

Chapter 193: Cooking Class

“Good morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning, Ivy. Thanks for helping out again today.”

“Oh, I appreciate the opportunity.”

Three days had passed since the old mentor took the party of adventurers into the forest to deal with the berserk monsters. It would be at least a week before we got any news.

“There’s going to be fifteen people today. Is that too many? Shurila’s going to help you.”

People who’d purchased uncooked rice from the shop kept saying, “We don’t know how to cook the rice. Can you please teach us?” So, two days earlier, Druid’s father had approached me with a proposal. I would borrow the shop kitchen to run a sort of cooking class, although it wouldn’t be quite as grand as a proper class. All I had to do was teach them the proper rice-to-water ratio for steaming rice, then how to form, grill, and season the onigiri, so it would all be pretty easy.

“It’s okay, ma’am. What we’re doing isn’t really all that difficult.”

“Oh, good. Also, sorry, but we keep getting in orders. Think you can take care of them? Druid warned me not to overwork you.”

“Hee hee, it’s okay. I’ve got Shurila helping me.”

“Thanks, dear. Oh, maybe we should put a cap on the class size? I’m worried we’re just going to keep getting more and more people.”

“Sure.”

The shop mistress and I proceeded to set a bunch of rules, one of which was that we would teach no more than fifteen people per day.

“Thank you very much, ma’am. I’ll just go get ready for class now.”

“Sure thing. Shurila should join you soon.”

“Okay, ma’am.”

With a little bow to the shop mistress, I headed to the kitchen. The giant pots we’d used in yesterday’s cooking class had been washed and dried. I checked each one over to make sure it was spotless as I got ready for my session.

Okay, so we’re having fifteen students today. That’s four more than usual, but I’ve got this.

“Good morning, Ivy. I’m ready to put on another great class!”

“Yes, me too!”

Shurila really liked teaching people to cook. Actually, cooking classes didn’t seem to exist in this world. When I’d explained the concept to the shopkeepers, they’d been very confused. At the time, I regretted opening my big mouth, but when I saw how much fun Shurila was having, I was actually glad I’d told them. It was a strange feeling.

“Druid’s shaping up to be a real worrywart. He’s been warning me since dawn not to give you too much work and tire you out.”

“Ha ha ha. Sorry about that.”

The spark that lit the flame of his overprotectiveness had started two days earlier when I’d gotten a fever. It was probably a combination of fatigue from all our hard work promoting rice and relief from the whole thing being over.

When the fever suddenly made me get wobbly in my tent, Flame jumped up and enveloped me. My fever immediately went away, so that part was okay, but Druid got very worried when I told him what had happened. Personally, I was pretty excited by the whole ordeal, since I learned that Flame had a power just like Sora. But when the shopkeeper came over and asked me about teaching people to cook rice, Druid sent him away, saying I needed to rest. That really made me frustrated. He finally gave me permission to teach the class, but only after the shopkeeper and I both promised I would take lots of breaks and not overwork myself. *Maybe this is what it’s like to have an overprotective father?*

“Okay, everything’s ready to go. Oh, look! Today’s students are starting to arrive.”

“They sure are. Well, Shurila, let’s teach another great class today.”

“Sure thing, Ivy.”

“Good night, Shurila.”

“See, Ivy? After two days of it, it all comes naturally.”

“Yes, it does. I did much better than yesterday’s class, so we were able to finish sooner, too.”

We were cleaning up from the class we’d just taught and getting ready for the next day’s session as we worked.

“All done,” I said, stretching my arms after washing my last pot. Bending over all that time to scrub pots really did tire them out.

“Okay, I’m all done over here, too. Let’s take a break, Ivy. I’ve got some snacks.”

“Thank you.”

Shurila made us some tea, which we leisurely sipped as we snacked on tiny dumplings topped with sweet sauce. *Come to think of it, I wonder if these dumplings are made of mochi rice like Japanese dango are? I’ll have to ask Druid later.*

“Do you think we could use ryce to make sweets?” Shurila asked.

Rice sweets? Nothing was really coming to mind... So I guess Past Me didn’t know, either?

“I’m not sure.”

“Hmm, well, don’t you think we could make *something* sweet out of ryce? Wanna do a little brainstorming with me?”

“That sounds like a fun project.”

“What sounds like a fun project?”

I flinched at the sound of the voice; I’d thought just Shurila and I were there.

Turning toward the speaker, I saw Druid's father and a man I'd never seen before. When I bowed to him, he looked startled for some reason. I wondered why.

"This is Dash, a ryce farmer. I'm about to run out of ryce, so we were just talking about how much I could buy from him."

About to run out? Even with all those huge piles of rice he was stockpiling?

"Can I call you Ivy, honey?"

Whoa! He called me "honey"! My heart raced a little. Come to think of it, not many people have called me "honey"...why is that?

"Yes, sir."

"I never thought such a young child would be the one who discovered how to cook ryce."

Ha ha ha...yeah, I'm used to it by now.

"Oh, Ivy is actually nine years old."

"What?! Oh, I'm so sorry. How rude of me."

"It's okay, sir."

"Anyway, thanks to you, we finally feel secure enough to start a family. Thank you, truly!" Dash said, on the verge of tears.

"Er, it's okay. I just happened upon it by accident. Um, thank you."

For some reason, Dash and I got in a bowing contest. For a minute, I wondered why he was being so emotional, but then I remembered that farmers like him had bought wastelands that could only grow rice and they were stuck there.

"Hey, how much longer are you two gonna keep bowing?" Druid's father asked.

Oh, good. I was starting to wonder what I should do.

"Ahhh, I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be a bother."

"Oh, it's quite all right."

Dash and I exchanged awkward smiles. Druid's father sighed and tapped Dash's shoulder.

"You ridiculous man... Now, about this ryce business."

"Ha ha ha! Sorry, yes, that's right. How much ryce do you need? You said you were running out. When should I bring over a new supply?" Dash asked.

Druid's father smirked. "Well, we're gonna run out tomorrow, so bring me everything you have. I can pay you right now."

"Um...what? You're, um, going to run out tomorrow? Of that big stash you already had? Um, you want my entire supply?"

Dash looked utterly stunned. And I was pretty shocked, too. Druid's father had shown me his rice supply before we'd started, and it was a pretty large amount. The thought that it would all be gone tomorrow...it boggled the mind.

"Yeah, even though I ran out of the rest of my inventory, the customers came in droves to buy up my ryce. They really seem to like its versatility, how they can flavor it any way they want. Oh, wait! Don't tell me the other shops are putting in orders for your crop, too? If that's the case, you don't have to sell all of it to me."

"Oh, no, it's all yours. I really owe you a great debt for your business all those years."

"Don't think like that. You need to think about your future and be a good businessman."

"Ha ha ha, you never change, do you? Well, the other shops haven't made any orders for my ryce, so if you want my entire stock, you can have it."

"Oooh, thanks! That's a big help. Let's talk it over in the back."

I watched as Druid's father and Dash scurried off to the back of the shop to chat.

"Wow, this has certainly escalated quickly."

"That's for sure. Ryce usually can't be sold in large amounts because the insects get at it very easily."

Insects? Oh, I didn't know that. I'd better be more careful about how I use my rice.

"Okay, Ivy, let's dream up some ryce sweets!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

Rice sweets... I wonder if we can think of something?

Chapter 194: Huh?! Already?

“Hello, Professor Ivy.”

I turned toward the sound of the voice and saw Druid walking into the break room. Six days had passed since his old mentor ventured into the forest.

That's strange. He's usually still out helping the gatekeepers around this time.
“Did something happen?”

“I just heard a little while ago. Their quest was a success.”

“Huh?! But it's only been six days.”

“C'mere.”

“Okay.” *Is it something he doesn't want anyone else overhearing?*

I followed Druid out of the break room to the very back of the shop. We stood in front of the shed that stored rice and other supplies.

“I don't have any specific details yet, but it sounds like Ciel helped them out.”

Ciel...helped? As I'd predicted, I hadn't been able to go into the forest for the past several days, so I hadn't seen Ciel at all. I was worried about the creature, but I never would have imagined it had gone deep into the forest with Druid's old mentor and his party.

“Um...is Ciel hurt?”

“They contacted us with a magic item, so they didn't give a lot of details. But Master says there weren't many wounded in his party, and the monster who helped out was okay, so I think Ciel should be fine.”

“Oh, good. What a relief.” *That's a big load off my mind.*

“They'll be back in about three days.”

Three days? That's pretty fast. “Oh, what happened to the berserk monsters? If the quest was successful, does that mean they're back to normal now?”

“The gatekeepers are searching the forest right now to find out. We’ll probably know for sure later today or tomorrow.”

“I really hope all the monsters are back to normal...” If they weren’t, we were all out of ideas.

“Yeah, well, judging by the sound of my master’s voice, everything’ll be fine. They should get a solid answer well before we do.”

Oh, right. They were in the middle of the berserk monsters’ territory, so if there’s a change, they’ll know about it right away.

“Are you tired?”

“Mr. Druid...who would be tired from working four hours with a one-hour break?”

It was a mystery just what Druid and his father had been saying to each other about me, but Druid’s father was giving me a one-hour break for every four hours of work. I’d told him that I didn’t need that much time off, but he said it was too late and he’d already promised Druid.

“Ha ha ha. Ivy, you’re still just a child. Let people take care of you.”

Let people take care of me...that’s easier said than done.

“Anyway, here’s the real reason I wanted to talk to you. I think you should sleep here tonight.”

Hm?

“The news that the quest was successful will probably arrive sometime today. And when that happens, there’ll probably be a street festival.”

“A street festival...”

Was that what had happened back in Ratomu Village? I remembered how everybody made a big fuss when there were rumors that the ogre king had been defeated. The plaza was a chaotic mess, too. I’d been a bit scared.

“Since the town was in real danger, everyone’s gonna drink like there’s no tomorrow. And where there’s heavy drinking, there’s more drunken brawls.”

I thought I caught the gist of what he was trying to say. If I stayed in the plaza,

there was a good chance I'd get hurt.

"I'll ask Mom and Dad for you. I'll make sure they let you stay here for the night."

"But...are you sure that's okay? I mean, um..." What with the situation with Dolgas, would it really be all right?

"You could stay at my house, but it's pretty far away. You'd be much safer here. Don't worry about my brother. I'll tell Shurila to keep him in check."

Well, I am very happy to have Shurila on my side...but is this really okay? Won't it only provoke Dolgas? Then again, I don't think I could rest in my tent, either. If this town celebration is going to be worse than the last one I experienced...maybe drunkards will wander into the tent? They might discover Flame and Sora...

"Um, thank you. I accept the offer."

"Good. I'll tell everyone. I've got to get back to my post soon."

"Okay, thank you. And be careful out there."

I guess he's going to have to deal with berserk drunks today instead of berserk gurbars. Poor guy.

"Thanks. Bye."

"Goodbye." I went back into the store and watched Druid walk over to his parents. I was still technically on break, so I went back to the break room.

"So Ciel helped out. That creature sure is reliable...but I do hope it didn't get hurt."

I'll go to the forest tomorrow. Oh, but if Ciel followed Druid's mentor's party deep into the forest, it probably won't be anywhere near here, so I might not be able to meet up with it even if I go to the forest? Well, I guess I'll just wait and see.

I walked through town on my way to the forest, and every person I passed had a smile on their face. I hadn't seen the likes of these smiles for over a week,

and that made me smile in turn. Rumor had it that the monsters had returned to normal. It really was a relief that the quest had been successful.

But I stopped in my tracks and looked at my surroundings. Drunks were scattered here and there along the road. I'd seen them there even when times were normal...but they'd multiplied. There were way too many today. The neighborhood watch had been giving them a stern talking to, one by one...and it seemed like quite the task.

"Good morning. How's the forest looking today?" I asked the gatekeeper.

"Good morning, Ivy. We haven't seen any gurbars since yesterday around noon."

Apparently, the rumors were true. "Is it all right if I go into the forest?"

"Hmm...I'm not sure about that."

Was the answer still no? But all I wanted to do was go in for a while to check on something.

"I'll come along."

Huh? I turned around to find Druid standing behind me. "Oh, hello, Mr. Druid. Have you finished your work for the day? Aren't you tired?"

"I'm fine...though I don't think I ever want to see another drunk person again," Druid smirked.

He must have had a hard time of it. His clothes were all disheveled, which meant he'd probably gotten in a few fights with the drunks.

"Well, if you're too tired, then..."

"I want the forest to heal me."

"Huh? Did you say something?" the gatekeeper asked. Apparently, what Druid had just whispered was only loud enough for me to hear.

"It's nothing. Now, it shouldn't be a problem if I go with Ivy, right?"

"Yes, I think that should be fine. Just please be careful, okay?"

"Thanks. Well, Ivy, let's go."

“Okay. Goodbye,” I waved to the gatekeeper as we walked through the gate toward the forest.

After we were a little way into the forest, I took Sora out of its bag. Druid immediately grabbed the slime and held it in his arms.

“Puuu?”

“Are you okay?”

“Ha ha ha, yeah, I’m fine. I’m just still amazed at how rowdy the town got.”

He was right. There were big drums and flutes playing. It really was exactly like a street festival.

“Do you think everyone’s just relieved to finally feel safe?”

“Probably, yeah. The veteran adventurers getting slaughtered really took a toll on the town.”

Well, they do say that the simple presence of veteran adventurers makes everything feel different.

“I guess they’re going to have a hard time moving forward without any veteran adventurers.”

“My old master says he’s going to stay here for a while to train any promising new blood he finds.”

“Oh, really? Well, I’ll bet that takes a load off the guild master’s mind.”

“Ha ha ha, well, his face twitched when he heard the news, actually.”

But why? He’s going to get some new veteran adventurers trained.

“He’s grateful, but you know what my old master’s personality is like.”

“Ha ha ha.” *Yeah, the only way I can respond to that is laughter. Oh!* “Ciel’s here.”

We stopped walking, and Ciel soon floated down to the ground.

“Ciel, I heard you helped the questing party. Are you okay?”

Mrrrow.

Starting with its head, I patted Ciel all over to make sure it wasn’t hurt. I

couldn't find a single scratch on its body. *What a relief.*

"Thanks, Ciel. You helped us solve the problem faster than we'd expected. And I hear we kept casualties to a minimum, too."

"That potion...do you think he tested it out?" Druid asked, sitting at the root of a big tree nearby. He still had Sora in his arms.

I sat next to him and said, "I'm not sure. Though I don't think he would have used it unless someone in his party was on the brink of death."

We were talking about the potion that Tombas had deemed impossible to appraise. Apparently, when he used his appraise skill, letters or numbers would appear near the item he was trying to evaluate. But when he tried to do this with the potion Sora had made, the letters sparkled so much that he couldn't read them and the appraisal failed. Druid's mentor said he'd muttered under his breath that this had never happened before. And when Druid heard the story, he marveled, "That's Sora for you."

So Druid and his mentor thought that Sora's concoction was much more powerful than even the highest-level potion. I was going to lock it away at the bottom of my bag, but Druid's old mentor offered to buy it from me. This had surprised me, since I'd assumed he would have a hard time fending off all the people asking him questions about it.

But Druid's old master said, "This quest is particularly dangerous. If this potion means one more of us can come back alive, then I'd rather have it with me. Please, let me buy it."

And after a lot of thinking, I asked that he only pay me for the potion if he wound up using it. If he didn't use it, he would return it to me. Incidentally, he also took the red magic stones, which were used in fire magic attacks, with him. I wondered if he'd made good use of them.

Chapter 195:

Druid's Master Is Seething

The sight of the crowd spilling out over the main road struck me with awe. I had known this was a big town, but I didn't realize just how many people lived here.

It was midday, four days after Druid's announcement that the quest had been successful. And, though it was one day late, his old mentor's party was to return today. The people had been decorating the town since sunup and a festive atmosphere was already buzzing in the air. The only thing that was different this time was the absence of drunks in the street. I wasn't sure why.

"Boy, what a crowd. Mr. Druid, are you sure it's okay for you to be away from your post?"

"Yeah, there aren't any drunks out today, so they're fine with the normal number of people on patrol."

"Oh, really?"

"Most people consider it very disrespectful to drunkenly greet our heroes if they've just returned from a deadly battle. The only drinkers today are going to be the heroes in question and their families."

Ah, that makes sense. That's why there aren't many patrollers.

"They sure went all out this time, didn't they?"

"Did they?"

"Yeah, I hardly ever see the main road decorated like this. That goes to show just how big an impact the gurbar crisis had on this town."

I looked at the main road. It was adorned with flowers, many of which were wildflowers I'd seen in the forest. A bunch of people must have gone there early this morning to pick them.

"Oh! Hey, kid! Kid!" a familiar voice sounded from behind me.

I turned around and saw... *Oh! It's the slave trader.* Unfortunately, I couldn't remember his name.

"Um, long time no see, sir."

"I've been wanting to see you."

"Huh?!" Oh! That's right, he was going to look for a possible slave who fit my guidelines, and I never told him the deal was off. Oh dear, what should I tell him?

"I'm terribly sorry, but I haven't been able to get any slaves because of the gurbar crisis, so I'm still looking."

Oh, so that's all it is. Thank goodness. "Yes, about that, I've actually found a travel companion."

"Oh, really? Well, that's good news. I was worried I was making you wait too long."

Argh...what a careless thing for me to do. "I'm so sorry, sir. I forgot to cancel my order."

"It's fine, kid. We were all on edge there for a while. Well, let me know if you ever need my services."

"I will, sir. Thank you."

The slave trader didn't seem particularly bothered. And thank goodness—if he'd said he found me a slave, I wouldn't have been able to turn him down.

"That was Golga the slave trader, right?"

Golga? Was that what he was called? "I'd forgotten his name."

"Ha ha ha, that's unusual."

"Oh, no, it happens now and then with me. Sometimes it's very hard for me to remember a person's name."

I'd had a really hard time with Dolgas's name...though I somehow managed to remember it now.

"Interesting... Maybe you have trouble remembering names that don't seem to fit their owners?"

Is that my problem? Well...maybe it is.

As Druid and I walked and talked, we started to hear cheering coming from the gate. The adventurers had returned. The cheering gradually spread all throughout the town, and I felt funny inside as I watched it unfold.

“Don’t you want to get a little closer to them?”

“No, I’m fine here. What about you, Mr. Druid?”

“Yeah...I’d rather stay here. I don’t do well in noisy crowds.”

Druid and I both stayed a bit away from the celebration. It looked lively and fun, but there were just a few too many people for comfort, so watching from the sidelines was perfect for us.

“Master doesn’t like noisy crowds like that, either.”

“He doesn’t?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t like how you can’t complain if you get squished in the mob of people.”

It was actually easy for me to imagine the old mentor yelling, “Get offa me, cockroaches!” at people in the crowd. When we saw the old mentor emerge from the throng, we both chuckled a little. I could clearly see the strain in his face. He was smiling, too, in a way that made all the veins stand out on his neck.

“Wow, what a sight...” Druid laughed. “Oh! Did he just glare at us?”

“Yes, it did look like a glare...”

“He’s definitely seething. I wouldn’t be surprised if he called us traitors later for laughing at him.”

“Ha ha ha! Still, I’m really amazed by all those people reaching out to touch him.”

The old mentor’s face was spread tight with anger—with bloodlust, even—and yet some people were reaching out to touch him. I didn’t have that kind of courage.

“It’s a way of thanking him, really. But when he so clearly doesn’t like it, touching him comes across as plain harassment.”

Yes, I can see how everyone means well and wants to show their gratitude, but there's just too many people. And with the adventurer party so exhausted...I actually feel a little sorry for them.

"Well, now that I've seen my mentor and the guild master both look well, it's time to get going."

Druid and I left the main road. Now that the gurbar crisis had been settled, we needed to discuss what our next move would be. Winter was just around the corner, so we had to decide where to stay until spring. And since we would be traveling as a group of two, there were extra preparations that needed to be made.

We returned to the plaza and spread a map out on the table along with some paper and pens.

"First, let's make a list of everything we'll need."

"Yes, sir."

Druid began to write down everything two people would need for a journey. "And we'll need to travel light, too."

"Good point."

"Oh, wait! There was something I needed to ask you about."

"What is it, sir?"

"It's your tent. Do you think we could get one that holds three to four people? Or would you rather have another type?"

A bigger tent? If he wants it to hold so many people, that means he and I would share. I don't really mind.

"I'm fine sharing."

"Oh, good. I have a magic tent from my days traveling with my master. You can put up a patrician in it and it's high quality, so I think it'll serve us well."

"A magic tent?"

"Yeah, it has a noise-canceling function as well as a size-altering feature, so it's bigger on the inside than it looks."

“Wow, that sounds really neat. Are tents like that common?”

“No, they’re pretty rare. I think it would be a safe place for Sora and Flame to bounce around in, too,” Druid chuckled.

“Well, I can’t wait to see it.”

“Yeah, I’ll take it out so you can have a look at it. I’ll probably be able to find it right away.”

Be able to find it? What does he mean by that?

“And Master already gave us a table, so we’ve got that. Oh, and I think I have some extra sleeping mats somewhere.”

“Sleeping mats?”

“Hm? Haven’t you heard of them?”

“No, sir.”

“They’re magic mats. I hear they’re very soft and comfortable to sleep on.”

“You *hear*?”

“Yeah, I’ve never actually used one. Now, where did I put them again? In *that* room?”

He’s definitely going all out to prepare for our travels. Is this really okay? I feel bad using all of his things.

“Um, sir...”

“I’m pretty sure I have four of them, so you and I can each have one. And maybe we should take the other two as extras just in case. They can be rolled up quite small, so they won’t take up much room.”

“Oh, uh, sure! Um, sir?”

“What’s up?”

“Are you sure you’re okay with me using all your stuff? It must all mean a lot to you.”

“I’d prefer that you use my stuff, actually. It’s all stored away collecting dust anyway.”

“Really?”

It sounded like everything he mentioned was either magic, rare, or both. If he’d kept them all these years without selling them, surely that meant they were special to him?

“I was holding onto them in case I ever needed something to sell, but you don’t really need much money when you live alone. And until you asked me to join you on your travels, I’d forgotten I even had a lot of this stuff.”

Keeping old things to sell if you needed money...what an idea. If I were in his shoes, I’d have already sold them and taken the money to the bank.

“Um, okay, then. Thanks for sharing your supplies with me.”

“Sure thing. Though, I have something to ask you, Ivy.”

“What is it?”

“Could you help me clean my house? I’m sure I have some other things that would come in handy for our travels, but I can’t remember where I put any of them. I’m using three rooms for storage right now, so they’re all bound to be in one of them.”

“Sure, I don’t mind. I’d love to help!”

“Thanks. Right, I guess I might as well sell the things I don’t need. We can use the money to cover our travel expenses... And while I’m at it, maybe I should sell my house.”

“What?! Sell your *house*, sir?”

I thought back to the one time I’d visited his house. It *was* a bit isolated, but it was a pretty big building.

“I bought that house to avoid being around people, so if I decide to come back and live here after our travels, I won’t need to live in my old place again.”

So that house was like a refuge for Druid, but he didn’t need it anymore. *Now I see... Hee hee. Gosh, I’m so happy for him.*

Chapter 196: Worse than Imagined

Druid's house was definitely quite large. He had eight rooms total.

"Why did you pick such a big house?"

"Hmm...just because, I guess."

If Druid was able to buy such a big house *just because*...he must have been pretty well-off.

"I only use two of the rooms."

"Huh? Only two?"

"Well, I live alone, so two is more than enough for me."

Right... If you lived alone, you wouldn't need that many rooms. I didn't know anybody who slept in a different room every night... *Did* someone like that exist?

"Three of the extra rooms are used for storage, and the other two are just empty. Now, let me apologize in advance—they're dirty."

I gave Druid a strange look. We were in the kitchen at the moment, and it looked quite tidy. Druid obviously cleaned it in a normal way, so how could the rest of his house be dirty?

"I think you should put a cloth over your mouth."

What?! Is it really that bad? I shrugged my shoulders and tied a cloth around my face, covering my nose and mouth. *Will I really need so much protection from the dust?*

"Okay, this way."

I followed Druid down the hall. We didn't enter the first room we saw.

"I sleep in this room, so the ones after it are sort of like my storage rooms."

Six out of the eight rooms were storage... It was actually a pretty luxurious

way to live, when you thought about it. I followed Druid further down the hall. *Huh? Is it just me, or is the air...stagnant?* Druid opened the first door.

“Ack!”

The moment the door opened, the light illuminated a cloud of dust dancing in the air. There was a deep crease between Druid’s eyebrows. And with the door open before him, he took...no steps inside. I peeked curiously into the room... and saw that things were piled high all the way out to the door. It’s not that he *wouldn’t* go inside...he *couldn’t* go inside. And oh, how dirty it was. There was so much dust covering the objects in the room that I almost wanted to whip out a ruler and see how many centimeters thick it was.

“Um...let’s do this room later,” Druid said, shutting the door.

We then proceeded to the next door. Druid opened it, said nothing, and closed it again. He repeated the action with the remaining four rooms. Then we returned to the first door he’d opened.

“Let’s start here,” I said.

“Good idea. I didn’t think all six rooms would be equally bad.”

“And you have five storage rooms, too.”

“How strange...I could have sworn it was just three rooms.” Druid looked quite puzzled. He didn’t think he had this much stuff—even though he was the one who put it all there in the first place.

“And just *who* was it that saved all this stuff?”

“Me...”

“Right?”

“When I was storing it, I didn’t think much of it. I just put it in my empty rooms. Before I realized it, I had quite a stash.”

Does it really happen that easily to people? “Is that so? Well, we have to do something about all this dust first. So, um, if you could wet some papers you don’t need with water, we’ll give it a good wiping down.”

“I guess that’s a good place to start. And I can always burn the rest of the

papers."

"Right."

Our eyes met. Then we both smiled... This was going to take a very long time.

"Sorry. I had no idea it was this bad."

"It's okay. We'll get through it together."

"Thanks."

Well, with both of us working together, maybe we'll finish before the day is over?

"I'm exhausted," Druid sighed.

"Me, too. I had no idea this would be such a hard task."

We'd cleaned up three rooms that day, but I'd been naive to think we could finish in one day. Just cleaning the dust was hard enough by itself, and there was just too much stuff. It took a long time to look at everything and see what it was.

"It was really exciting to find so many magic items, though."

"Even I was impressed—and it's my stuff."

"Mr. Druid...these are all things you've collected throughout your life, right?"

"Yeah, you could say that. But I didn't even bother opening some boxes because I wasn't all that interested to see what was inside."

I'd had the impression that Druid was very well organized, but it turned out he had his sloppy side. Or maybe it just showed that if you kept a bunch of stuff you didn't really care about, this would be the end result.

"Well, let's stop here for today and have dinner."

"Sure. Oh! Do you think Sora and Flame are okay?"

I'd let the two slimes loose in the kitchen while we were cleaning the rooms. I was about to rush out into the kitchen when Druid stopped me.

"We need to sweep the dust off ourselves before we go."

Right, we're still covered in dust after all that cleaning. I patted my body and dust came flying off me... Wow.

"I think this is a job for that magic item we found earlier. Sit tight."

That's right, we did find a pretty interesting item a while back. According to Past Me's memories, it was like a little vacuum cleaner, but it was actually an air-powered magic item that sucked up dust. All we could think of when we found it was how it would come in handy to clean our tent.

"This was it, right?" Druid asked.

"Right."

I took the magic item from him and flipped the switch, resulting in a soft whirring noise. I pressed the mouth of the item to my clothes, and it sucked the dust right up.

"Ooh, how amazing!" I giggled. "This thing is really fun."

"You're right. Turns out it's actually quite useful! Oh, let me take the dust off your back for you."

I handed Druid the magic item and turned my back. He moved the tiny magic vacuum cleaner up and down my back. Its suction power wasn't that strong—it was just right. When I was done being vacuumed off, it was Druid's turn. And after I removed the dust from his back, we were all ready.

"It's useful, but a little annoying that you need a partner to clean your back."

"Mr. Druid, I don't think this item was intended for dusty clothes."

"Oh! Yeah, you're probably right."

Now that we weren't so dusty anymore, we went to check on Flame and Sora. I was pretty sure they weren't up to any mischief, but I still wondered how they were doing without us.

"Sora, Flame, we're back."

When we entered the room, we noticed them right away.

"Whoa, they sure are easy to spot," Druid said.

For some reason, the two slimes were asleep on the table. I glanced around

the room and didn't see any signs of mischief. Well, they always behaved themselves when I left them alone in the tent, so I wasn't *that* worried about it.

"Puuu?"

"Ryuuu?"

Sensing our presences, they both woke up. *Whoa! Flame woke up, too. I wonder if it went through some sort of evolution of its mental state?*

"Rise and shine, Sora, Flame. Wow, Flame, you woke up all by yourself today."

Flame stared hard at me in reply. What was going on? I stared at Flame in confusion for a minute until both slimes turned their attention toward the front door. Just then, there was a knock.

"Ah, that must be my master. He never uses the doorbell." Druid walked over to the door. Since it might *not* have been his old mentor, I put the slimes in their bag.

"Ya little brat... First ya give me a smug smile when that crowd nearly smothered me to death, *then* ya left me hangin' out to dry?"

Druid's guess was right—it *was* his mentor. I put my bag back down and hurried over to the door to greet him.

"Congratulations on your success, sir."

"Oh, you're here, too, Ivy? Wait, huh? Aren't ya a little dusty, Ivy? You as well, Druid."

I guess we were still a bit dirty. I'd just assumed that since we were no longer caked in the stuff, we were in the clear.

"We were cleaning my storage rooms."

"Ah. So ya finally got around to it, eh?" The old mentor seemed to know exactly what state those rooms were in.

"Yeah, I wanted to clean house before we hit the road. I knew I had some stuff that would come in handy during our travels."

"Yeah, I'm sure ya do. But ya must've had a hell of a time diggin' 'em out of those rooms."

He'd said the word "digging" like he was talking about artifacts. And that wasn't too far off, since we *still* hadn't found the magic sleeping mats or the tent yet. Druid had tried his best to find them, but to no avail, so they must have been in another room. Still, we did have a nice collection of magic items we'd found today. And Druid's tent and mats would turn up eventually.

"So, Master, what brings you here?"

"Well, I went to the plaza, but Ivy wasn't there, so I came here to ask if ya knew anything. I never thought Ivy might be at your house. Can I come in? I bought somethin' ya might be able to turn into dinner."

He's been looking for me? "Was there something you wanted to ask me, sir?"

"Hm? Oh, no, I just thought you'd wanna hear what happened with Ciel."

Oh! That's right. I was going to go see him if he was available so I could ask him about Ciel. "Oh, yes, please! I want to hear about Ciel! Was it magnificent?" Ciel always looks so mighty when it hunts.

"Oh yeah, it was *very* magnificent. Though at first, we were all kinda stunned...well, more like shiverin' messes."

Shivering messes?

"Ciel came to rescue us when a gurbar herd had us surrounded—so at first, we misunderstood what was happening. We thought a monster even more powerful than gurbars was about to attack us. And, as ya can imagine, we resigned ourselves to die."

Wow, I didn't realize things had gotten that dangerous.

"But then the gurbars started retreatin' for some reason. And by the time we figured out what was goin' on, the adandara had already thinned out the gurbar herd quite a bit. Then, when I realized it was the same one ya told me about, Ivy, my muscles nearly gave out. *Damn!* Ciel really was so strong. The way it hunted was a masterpiece."

"I'm glad to hear neither you nor Ciel were hurt," I said. When Druid's party was wiped out and he lost his arm, a herd of gurbars had been responsible. His mentor might have been able to survive the attack without Ciel's help, but he

would definitely have been heavily wounded. It really was a big relief.

Chapter 197:

It Was Amazing

“Here ya go, Druid.” Druid’s old mentor handed him a bag of food.

“Oh, thanks... Um, Master?” For some reason, Druid made a sour face when he looked inside the bag. Was there something in there he didn’t like?



“What’s wrong?”

“This isn’t dinner—these are groceries.”

“I said it was *somethin’ ya could turn into dinner*. I never said it was *dinner-dinner*.”

“Yeah...you’re technically right.”

“Y’know that thing ya made that one time? I’ll have that, please.”

Druid cooks? I’d sure like to taste his food.

“But, Master...” Druid whined.

“I can’t wait to eat it!” I said.

“Huh? Ivy?”

“Huh?!” *What? Why is Druid looking at me with such shock in his eyes? Did I say something strange?* His old mentor wanted to taste his cooking, and so did I. That’s why I said I was excited to eat it.

“Woo-hoo, Druid,” his old mentor whistled. “Feed us.”

“Master...” Druid sighed. “Could you not get Ivy involved when you tease me?”

“Sorry, but I got a really strong hankerin’ for your cookin’ today, Druid. Ya made it a lot, remember? I forget what it’s called, though.”

“Really?” Druid gave his old mentor a dubious look, to which the old man just shrugged in reply. It was hard to tell whether he was lying or not, but either way, Druid gave up.

“Fine...I can cook. But it’s just a hodgepodge of meat and vegetables—that’s all it is.”

“Yeah, but whenever ya make it, it tastes real good for some reason. I tried to duplicate the recipe many times, ya know, but to tragic results.”

I was really curious as to what those “tragic results” were, but I figured it was best not to pry. I should just trust my gut. *So Druid’s specialty dish is a stir-fry, eh? I wonder what it tastes like? I can’t wait!*

“Ivy, don’t stare at me with sparkles in your eyes. It’s throwing me off...”

“Huh?”

“Er, never mind. It’s just that you’re a good cook, Ivy... I don’t want to let you down when you put your faith in me.”

Hm? He was so quiet that I missed the last part. I heard my name, but that’s it.

“Mr. Druid?”

“It’s nothing. Okay, I’ll cook. It’s simple, so it’ll be ready right away.”

“Can I do anything for you?” *Does Druid hate to get help from others like I do? If he does, I probably shouldn’t throw him off by butting in.*

“Ivy, there’s a lot I wanna ask ya while Druid cooks our dinner.”

If it can wait until after dinner, I’d rather we do that.

“Ivy, all I have to do is cook everything through, really. I’ll be fine,” Druid said.

What should I do?

“C’mon, let’s get the tough conversation out of the way first so we can relax and enjoy our dinner,” Druid suggested. He must have noticed I was stressing myself out over it. And he had a point: Talking about complex things over dinner always made me sleepy.

“Um, okay, then. I’ll see you at dinner, then,” I told Druid as I walked over to join his mentor, who had already opened and started drinking a bottle of wine.

“Okay, what was it you wanted to talk about, sir?”

“That potion and those magic stones ya gave me.”

Oh, so he wants to talk about the items that Sora and Flame made. I wonder if he did anything with them?

“Did you use them, sir?”

“Yeah, well, the thing about being attacked by a herd of gurbars is it’s hard to walk away from it without any injuries.”

So I guess he used the potion. “Were everyone’s wounds healed?”

"More than healed. Just one swig of it stuck a ripped-off arm back onto a guy."

Huh? Just one swig? That little?

"Lots of our adventurers were heavily wounded by gurbar tusks, so it was tough to decide who I'd use the potion on. And well, somebody was bleedin' freely, so I had 'im take a swig first."

A bleeding wound *would* need immediate attention if you were in the forest. If a potion wasn't enough to stop your bleeding, other monsters might be drawn to you. And you'd absolutely want to avoid being in a position where you're a constant target.

"You're usually supposed to pour the potion directly on the wound, but we didn't have much of it, so I figured if he took the potion internally, it'd at least do *some* good. Then I was gonna follow it up with a common medical potion to treat his wound, but that wound up not being necessary."

"Why not?"

"Well, because the potion had already cured everyone's wounds. And it reattached a man's arm that had almost been torn clean off, too. That potion is *insane*, Ivy."

All it took was one swig to repair a ripped-off arm? This was so extraordinary that it didn't feel real to me.

"Are you sure about all of this, sir?"

"Yeah. Then there were those SSS-level magic stones ya gave me. They were powerful beyond belief. I gave 'em to someone who was good with fire magic to burn the monster corpses...and it took just three rounds of magic to turn that giant dragon corpse into ash. That's why we came back ahead of schedule—we thought cleanup was gonna take three days, but we only needed one."

A three-day job took one day...and only three tries, at that. Just how powerful *was* this magic, anyway?

"Also, I had my adventurers who can't use fire magic try the stones, and they were able to use novice fire magic with 'em."

Hm? Even adventurers who normally couldn't use fire magic could do it with the stones? Does that mean I'll be able to use fire magic? That would be great, if I could...but would I have to use up those beautiful clear stones every time? No way could I do that!

"They were excited at first, but when they found out they were SSS-level magic stones, they all put up a fuss. They could never afford 'em, ya know."

That was probably true. I couldn't even imagine how much those stones would cost.

"You can have these back. Also, we used up the Level 5 magic stones. Here's what's left of 'em."

"Thank you, sir." I looked at the twenty used magic stones. They seemed just like the rocks I'd seen at the dump.

"Ryu! Ryu, teryuuu."

A nonsensical sound, as usual. "Flame, what's wrong?"

I looked at Flame, who was staring hard at my hand. The hand that was holding the spent magic stones.

"You mean these stones?"

"Ryuuu, ryuuu," Flame sang, swaying back and forth like a pendulum.

"Thanks, Flame. The magic stones you made were a huge help."

I lined up the spent stones in front of Flame. It daintily took one in its mouth and swallowed. Then a bunch of bubbles appeared inside its body. And after a while...

"Ryuuu, ryu, ryuuu...pong!" A magic stone flew out of Flame's mouth. The whole thing was really cute, but at the same time kind of nerve-racking... After all, it might be an SSS-level stone.

"Oh, good. This one's just a common magic stone."

"Most people would hope for a higher-level one."

"Oh, but there's no way I could use a Level SSS stone."

"You could always sell...no, wait, ya couldn't. You'd draw way too much

attention. If ya were a famous adventurer, you could always say ya got 'em from monsters ya killed."

"Yeah, I couldn't pull that off. But maybe Mr. Druid could?"

"Good idea. If he said he scored them back during his adventurer days, that story might fly."

Okay...so maybe if we're ever low on money, I could have Druid sell the magic stones for me.

"Oh, by the way, I already put in an expense claim for the potion and magic stones I used on the quest," said the mentor.

"Huh?!"

"Gotos, that poor bastard, was pulling his hair out."

Huh? Did I forget to tell the guild master about the potion and magic stones?
"You didn't really have to pay, sir. But, um, I don't think I remembered to tell him about the potion..."

"I sent the bill to the guild on your behalf, Ivy, so when Gotos pays ya, don't ya dare give the money back. Ya need to make sure ya get full compensation when people use your things. Got it?"

"Do we really have to do it that way, though?"

"Yeah, we do. The guild's reputation is riding on it, too."

"Their reputation, sir?"

"That's right. Adventurers feel would rather have a guild that pays its bills promptly."

That did make sense... I didn't think I'd want to do business with a guild that had money problems.

"A guild's reputation is very important to adventurers. It's their livelihood, after all."

"Understood, sir. I'll make sure I get the payment, and I'll also tell the guild master about the potion."

"Hm? Won't that be a problem for you?"

Why would it be a problem? “Not really...”

“Well, okay, then.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Druid announced. “Master, Ivy will be okay. We just forgot to tell the guild master.”

I’ll be okay? What exactly are they worried about?

“Ivy, Master thought you hadn’t told the guild master about the potion because you had some sort of problem talking to him in general.”

“Huh?! Oh, no, sir! It’s not that at all!”

“Ha ha ha, yeah, I guess not. Well, glad to hear it.”

Now it all made sense. That explained why the old mentor had sent the bill in my place. “Thank you, sir.”

“Ha ha ha. Well, I thought this would be a great opportunity to mess with Gotos, and I just couldn’t pass it up.”

This guy always bluffs to hide his true motives. Is he actually a big softie?

Chapter 198:

All Done!

We ate the hodgepodge of meat and vegetables that Druid had cooked. He didn't seem to be wild about vegetables, though—there were only three kinds and most of the rest of the dish was meat. The meat part was rather flexible, and he had used three types today. At a glance, it looked like a meat stir-fry.

"This is great, Mr. Druid."

"Good. Hearing that from you, Ivy, is a huge relief."

Hm? It's a relief?

"It's been a while since I've eaten this, and it's just as good as I remember it. How do ya get this flavor out of the town's sauce?" the old mentor asked, taking a bite and making a face.

By "this town's sauce," he must have meant Oll's very salty mother sauce. Did he really use that sauce to produce this flavor? It *was* a bit of a mystery how he'd done it. I'd used the sauce myself, but it was too salty for me to change much.

"Oh, I've been meanin' to ask, when're ya guys leavin' on your journey?"

Huh?! Did Druid already tell his mentor about it?

"My gut told me," the old mentor explained.

Druid looked a bit perplexed. "Your gut?"

"Yeah. Guys like you who're turnin' over a new leaf are easy to read, Druid."

"Ah...is that so? Well, we haven't picked a day yet."

"Aha. Well, I just got some interesting intel, so could ya wait a bit until I figure out if it's true or not?"

"Sure. Does it have something to do with us?"

"Nope, it'll just be a bother if ya guys get caught up in it."

I didn't really understand, but maybe it had something to do with the next village over. I *definitely* wanted to avoid getting involved in any trouble for a while. The gurbar crisis had kind of hit this town like a bolt from the blue, after all.

I'd like to have some low-key travels for once... Come to think of it, it seems like I've done nothing but get knocked around from one problem to the next. Is it just my imagination?

"Well, the guild still owes ya for that potion, Ivy, so you're stuck here until Gotos gets his wits back."

"By the way, Ivy, did you get your gratuity from the last time you helped with the gurbars?" Druid asked.

"Er, no, sir. Not yet."

"Argh...that idiot," both men sighed.

Huh? Is there some problem I don't know about? I haven't had much of a chance yet since things have been so hectic with the gurbar crisis.

"Ivy, you need to be a lot stricter about your money," Druid said.

"Well, the guild master seemed to have his hands full as it is. Besides, there's still the medicinal nuts to deal with, too."

"Medicinal nuts? That's right, the guild master was going to go through the merchant guild to deal with those nuts you foraged in the forest. So *that* deal hasn't been closed yet, either?"

"No, sir."

Both men fell silent...and I'm not sure why, but there was a rather eerie air around them. I hoped I hadn't said something out of turn.

"I'm gonna go have a word with Gotos on the way home," the old mentor growled.

"Good. Please do," Druid replied.

Guild Master...I'm so sorry. But they're too scary—I can't stop them. "But, sir..."

"Don't ya worry about it, Ivy. Like I said, payments that are 'prompt and in full' will give the guild a good reputation. This is especially important right now, when this town's got no veteran adventurers. We need to attract travelin' adventurers to the town, and rumors about the guild not paying its debts are bad for business."

The old mentor's eyes were harsh. I could tell this was quite important.

"If bad rumors get out, adventurers will stop comin' here altogether, so we have to be extra careful right now."

Druid's old mentor left immediately after we finished our dinner. He was probably headed straight to see the guild master.

"Your old mentor really does care about his apprentices, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. That's why we'll always feel indebted to him."

He must have looked into the surrounding areas when he heard Druid was going to go traveling so he could make the journey as smooth as possible for him. He was going to stop the guild master from doing anything that would cause problems for himself or the town later on, and he was doing it all out of kindness...though I'm sure he wouldn't admit it.

"All done!" we both cheered.

It had taken three whole days to clean the storage space. Druid and I sat down in the now-tidy, dust-free room furthest in the back of his house. It had been the dustiest of all the rooms we inspected on that first day, and also the first that Druid had started to fill with stuff.

"Thanks for all the help, Ivy."

"No problem."

"That sure was an ordeal."

It really was. When a room was filled with years' worth of dust, just moving around stirred up clouds. We'd started by slowly and carefully sweeping up all the dust, but the more we swept, the more dust kept coming out of nowhere. I cleaned so hard that I felt like my mind was floating far out of my head.

"Still, we sure found quite a few valuable magic items," Druid said.

I looked at the pile of items, which included the ones we'd found in all the other rooms as well as this one. I was shocked to realize we'd found over thirty common magic bags. Druid moved five of them into his bedroom for us to use on our journey since we didn't want to sell all of them by mistake. We'd also found magic stoves, and we decided to take one on our journey as it would come in handy. The rest we would sell. I think we wound up finding almost ten in all.

We also found magic boxes. These were like magic bags, but they were especially useful because they could fit more things inside. However, since the boxes were a bit large, they wouldn't work well for traveling, so we decided to sell all of them.

We'd also found nearly twenty unknown potions whose colors had changed. In addition, we excavated a supply of magic stones which hadn't lost their powers, so Druid said we'd be able to use them on our travels, but since there were so many, we would only take the ones that were in the best condition.

"I'll put in a sales request tomorrow. Now I'm getting excited."

With a little grunt, Druid stood up. I joined him. *Ahhh, I've still got dust on me...*

"Oh dear," Druid sighed. "First we got the room all clean, and now we're all dirty."

"We sure are. There's even dust in my hair."

"Did you bring a change of clothes?"

"Yes."

This was our third day of cleaning. Every day, I brought a change of clothes and took a bath after our work was done. After years of traveling, baths were practically foreign to me. I hadn't taken one in four years, so I was a bit confused the first time I used Druid's bath, but it felt so good.

"I'm going to burn all the papers we used for dusting, so you can go in ahead of me," Druid said.

“Thanks.”

I watched Druid walk out of the room with the last of the dusty papers before moving slowly to the bathroom so I wouldn’t get any dust on the floor. I washed my hair with the bar of soap Druid let me borrow. I was worried one attempt wouldn’t be enough, so I washed it twice. I also wiped my body and relaxed in the hot water.

“I feel like royalty...”

Baths are a luxury when you’re on the road. Well, then again, there’s always at least one bathhouse in every village and town, but those things cost money. So, up until now, I hadn’t bothered to use them, but now that I’d been spoiled and knew just how good baths felt, I thought I just might want to start taking them regularly.

Well, since I’ll get some money from selling that potion, it might not be a bad idea to spend it on baths.

Chapter 199: Rocks on the Side of the Road

“Good morning, Ciel. We finally finished cleaning house.”

Mrrrow, Ciel purred, affectionately rubbing against me.

I gently patted its head. Ciel’s fur was nice and warm, probably from sleeping in the sun. *I just realized...the wind has been getting pretty chilly lately.*

“The seasons changed while I wasn’t looking.”

Mew?

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Teryu?”

I was going to have a nice, leisurely day with Ciel for the first time in a while. I’d come to the forest in the morning with a picnic lunch and a magic mat I’d borrowed from Druid. It was so soft and comfy to sit on, and Flame and Sora seemed to like it, too. I brought another one for Ciel, who apparently felt the same way.

“These mats are great, aren’t they? My butt doesn’t hurt a bit. I’ll need to thank Mr. Druid later.”

“Pu! Puuu.”

“Teryuuu.”

“Is it nice and soft for you, too, Ciel?”

Mrrrow.

“Hee hee. Oh, the weather is so nice! The breeze feels wonderful.”

“Teryuuu.”

Come to think of it, Flame’s been staying awake a lot longer the past few days. When did that start? Oh! It began when it regenerated those magic stones. Was that the reason? Is that even possible?

“Teryu-ryuuu, teryu-ryuuu, teryu-ryuuu.”

I wonder what's come over you? I watched my whining slime...and noticed it was staring intently at something. It was a rock bigger than my fist, on the ground a little bit away from the edge of the mat.

“Is this what you're talking about? But I think it's just a normal rock.”

“Teryuuu!” Flame cried, stretching out toward the rock in my hand. That surprised me a little. The slime stretched quite a bit during its exercises, but I had never seen it extend this much before. It stretched far now, though, to reach the rock I was holding.

“Sit tight. I'll give it to you.”

I was a bit worried, but since Flame wanted the rock, it must have been okay. I wiped the dirt off of it and set it in front of Flame, who happily chomped the whole rock into its mouth. After a while, a bunch of foam bubbled inside of Flame's body.

“Hmmm...so you're fine with ordinary rocks, too? They don't have to be former magic stones?”

But the only answer Flame gave me was the “shuwaaa, shuwaaa” sound of its bubbles. It squeezed its eyes shut and... Wait, was it savoring the flavor of the rock as it ate it?

“Pu-pu, puuu.”

“Hm? Sora, are you hungry, too?”

Seems a bit early to eat, but okay. I took out the potions I'd brought for Sora's lunch and set them out on the mat in front of it. Is Flame okay with just rocks for lunch? I have some potions for it, too... Well, I can always ask after it's finished eating that rock.

I watched Sora and Flame eat. They were both filled up with bubbles, which was a rather strange sight.

“Teryu...teryu...te-ryuryuuu...pong!”

Huh? The rock I gave Flame was just an ordinary one you'd find at the side of the road...right? And yet...there was a beautiful, bright-red magic stone sitting

in front of Flame. I could tell it was fairly transparent, even at a quick glance.

Erm, I guess I'll need to take this home with me.

"Teryuuu, teryuuu."

"Oh! Er, wow, Flame, good job! I've never seen such a pretty magic stone. Thanks."

Flame jiggled merrily in reply. It was an adorable sight, but I couldn't take my worried eyes off the magic stone sitting in front of it. I took a little breath in and out, then grabbed the stone... It was huge. It was the biggest one I'd ever seen. I knew the more transparent they were, the higher levels of magic they held, but I wasn't sure if size played a factor.

"Teryu-ryuuu. Teryu-ryuuu, teryu-ryuuu," Flame sang in the same way as before.

I cautiously looked at the slime. Then I followed its gaze...and I felt like pulling my hair out. It was eyeing a stone, a bit bigger than the one I was holding. Was it going to do the same thing to that stone as well?

"Teryu-ryuuu...teryu?" Flame stopped, curious about my lack of response, and leaned up against me. That was probably its way of asking me what was wrong. It was cute...it was *really* cute, but... *Are you really gonna change that stone, too?*

Flame stared at me. I stared back...then I got up and brought the stone over to it.

"Teryuuu!"

It's fine. I'll just have more magic stones to secretly carry in my bag. Besides, they might come in handy someday.

"Here you go, Flame. But this is the last one."

"Teryu?"

Maybe Flame didn't want to stop. Did it need the materials the stones provided? That could be it.

"The last one for *today*. You can make more magic stones some other time."

“Teryu-ryuuu.”

I set the stone in front of Flame, who chomped it right up and happily closed its eyes.

“Once we get back, we’ll have to tell Mr. Druid about this.” He would need to know that Flame was turning random rocks in the road into magic stones.

“Pu-pu, puuu!” Sora had finished eating and was playfully tumbling around with Ciel. It had been a while since I’d seen Sora do that. When it rolled over to Ciel’s belly, the adandara didn’t mind. It even rolled the slime around with its front paws.

“Er...isn’t that the wrong way to play?”

“Puuu!”

Mrrrow.

Well, Sora at least looks like it’s having fun, so I guess it’s okay?

“Teryu! Te-ryuryuuu...pong!” A transparent magic stone rolled out in front of Flame.

“Huh? That one isn’t red.” I picked it up and examined it closely. It was a pure, colorless magic stone. I knew you could tell a stone’s attributes from its color: Red was for fire, blue and aquamarine were for water, green and yellow-green were for wind, and brown was for earth. But what elemental was clear? I’d always thought magic wouldn’t matter to me since I had so little of it, so I’d never studied it in detail.

“Guess I’ll have to ask Mr. Druid about this, too.” *I seem to be relying on him for a lot lately. Maybe I should go to a bookstore and look for information about magic and magic stones.*

Wait...I sense an aura approaching me. It was still far away, but I could definitely tell it was getting closer.

“That aura belongs to Mr. Druid, right?”

Mrrrow. Ciel felt it, too.

There was another aura with him... “Is that his mentor? The aura is so weak

that it's hard to read."

Actually, why would he come here so confidently without hesitating? I know I said I'd be spending the day in the forest relaxing with Ciel, but I didn't tell him the exact spot.

"Teryuuu."

"It's okay, flame. It's Mr. Druid and his mentor."

I searched for more auras, but it was just the two. Both auras were calm like they always were, so it probably wasn't an emergency. After a while, I saw Druid and his mentor emerge from the trees. They noticed me and waved.

"Good morning," I said. "Is something wrong?"

"Hi, Ivy. Master insisted he had to see the adandara, so I brought him here. Is this a good time?"

"Yes, it's okay." *Aha. Yeah, I do remember him begging me to introduce him to Ciel.*

"Hey, Ivy, sorry to bother ya on your day off."

"Oh, it's all right, sir. This is Ciel. Ciel, this is Mr. Druid's old mentor. He's been helping me out a lot."

"Uh, I think *you're* the one who's helpin' *me*, Ivy," the old mentor said, staring hard at Ciel. Ciel stared hard back at him...and after a while, it started to purr. That meant it had decided he was safe.

"Whoa, ya really are a magnificent beast. Oh, and thanks for savin' our hides last week."

Ciel thwapped its tail lightly in reply.

"Mr. Druid, how did you know where to find us?"

"We were going to take all the safe parts of the forest where the adventurers don't go and search them one by one. We didn't think we'd find you so quickly."

Ah. So they didn't know exactly where I was. Wow, the old mentor has the scariest look in his eyes. He's been a grinning mess ever since he saw Ciel. That face...it's so crazy, I just can't look away.

Chapter 200:

A Lazy Day

“Erk?!”

That was the response I got from both men when I told them what Flame had just done. Their only answer was their indescribable expressions, which wasn’t what I’d been hoping for.

“Er, so, what you’re saying is...Flame changed some random rocks in the road into magic stones?”

“I think so, sir?” *I guess that* is *what happened*? “Um, do you think they might actually have been old magic stones that adventurers used up?”

“That *is* possible. Could I see the stones?”

“Oh, right! Here they are.” I took out the two magic stones that Flame had produced and showed them to the men.

“Wow...it’s just one miracle after another.”

“Since I’ve never heard of regular rocks being turned into magic stones, do you suppose these really *were* spent magic stones that got left on the road?” I asked.

Druid took the red stone I was holding out of my hand and held it up to the sky. It was so transparent that you could clearly see the distant scenery through it.

“That’s what I thought at first,” Druid’s mentor said. “But if ya used up a magic stone this big...would ya really throw it away?”

“I wouldn’t,” Druid said. “I’d keep it as a memento.”

“Yeah, me too.” I awkwardly smiled in reply. I guess such a big stone was so rare that you *would* want to hold on to it.

“Boy, would ya look at that transparency?” Druid’s mentor marveled. “If we took this to the guild for an appraisal, it’d be the talk of the town. And as big as

it is, I'm sure the rumors would spread all the way out to other towns and village."

I guessed that was his way of saying "Don't—under any circumstances—take this to get appraised." Not like I was planning on doing that anyway.

"But as for this colorless one..." The old mentor gave the stone a dubious look. "It has to be a magic stone, 'cause I sense magic comin' from it. But it doesn't have any color..."

Why is he so perplexed?

"I've never heard of a colorless magic stone, either," Druid agreed. His mentor nodded back.

So I guess this magic stone is connected to an unknown element?

"Should we have Tombas appraise it?"

Tombas—that's the old mentor's friend who appraised the potion. I'm sure we can trust him.

"Could we ask him to do that, sir?"

"Sure, that guy loves to appraise new stuff. He was thrilled when I gave him that sparklin' potion of yours. Well...too bad he couldn't figure it out."

Did he say, "new stuff"?

"Yes, I remember how he used to be quite annoying during our travels," Druid said. "Whenever we'd find something he hadn't seen before on the road, he'd throw the day's schedule out the window so he could appraise it. I remember you'd often butt heads with him, Master."

This Tombas fellow sounded like a free spirit.

"Yeah, and all that headbuttin' was *his* fault. Whenever a monster he didn't recognize suddenly popped up out of nowhere, he'd prattle on about needin' to appraise it while the rest of us fought for our lives."

Now that's dedication. But couldn't he have waited until after the monster was dead?

"Yes, but did *you* really have to ignore the monsters so you could bicker with

him?"

"Eh, it was fine. We managed to kill 'em anyway."

"Yes, we did. Me, Marual, and the guild master, that is."

"Okay, technically, you're right. But I was just so frustrated. It was all Tombas' damn fault."

That sounded like a hell of a quest...especially since they had two free spirits, Tombas and their mentor, to deal with. I could just picture the torment in Marual's eyes.

"Ivy, let's be sure to help each other out on our travels," Druid said gravely.

"Of course, sir," I answered with equal solemnity.

"Aw, I can be helpful when I try," the old mentor scoffed.

"You just never try," Druid replied.

"Yep."

Druid heaved a heavy sigh. And I just had to chuckle.

"Um, why do you think Mr. Tombas insisted on appraising a monster while your party was being attacked?"

"Well, the appraisal will get ya different results when the monster is dead."

I didn't know that. I'd always assumed an appraisal would come out the same way no matter what.

"But *damn*, you're so mighty! I can't believe I'm with an adandara up close and personal. I'm literally shakin'."

Druid's old mentor had hardly taken his eyes off Ciel the whole conversation. Ciel didn't seem to mind—it just kept playing with Sora. The slime bounced around and slammed against Ciel's tummy. Then the adandara would repel it with its front paws, and Sora would rebuff the attack. They just kept doing it over and over... Was Sora truly okay with that? Wasn't there a better way of playing with the creature than being tossed around? *Sora...are you a masochist?*

"Wait, what's a masochist?" I asked.

“Huh? Mass-oh-kist?”

I guess that was Past Me’s knowledge. But the word was just giving me vague feelings instead of specific impressions, which was unusual for me.

“What’s up?” Druid’s mentor asked.

I shook my head in reply. There was no way I could explain it to him when I didn’t even understand it myself.

“It’s nothing, sir.”

“Hey, Ivy...do you think it would be okay if I touched Ciel just a little?”

“Ciel, he says he wants to pet you a little bit. Is that okay?”

Mrrrow.

“Ciel says you can do it. Go ahead, sir.”

The old mentor looked like he envied my rapport with the adandara. “*Damn.* You are so lucky.”

He kept saying how lucky I was, and I was always at a loss for how to react. Ciel started wagging its tail, so the old mentor stopped staring at me in envy and slowly reached out toward the adandara. Then, just as his hand made contact with Ciel’s neck, he froze.

“Mr. Druid...what happened to your mentor?”

“He’s fine. He’s just awestruck, that’s all.”

He’s awestruck? Well, whatever emotion he was feeling, this was the biggest reaction I’d ever seen from him.

“Yikes...I’m touching an adandara. *This* adandara.”

Druid’s old mentor was muttering something very softly—too softly for me to make out what he was saying. But from the words I could faintly hear, it was clear just how deeply moved he was.

“Ciel...can I pet ya?” The old man’s voice shook a little. I saw Druid clamp a hand over his mouth out of the corner of my eye. He was trying to stifle a gasp.

Mrrrow.

"Whoa, ya answered me! Thanks, buddy." As he gently petted the creature, he looked like a little boy—it was so precious. As we watched the scene, a strange sound emitted from Druid's mouth. He was trying to keep himself from squealing...and failing miserably. Well, I couldn't blame him. This new side of his mentor *was* pretty funny to look at.

"Whoa, you're so amazing! Agggh!"

"Ha ha ha, it's no use. It's too funny," Druid choked, suppressing his laughter beside me.

"You look so precious, Mr. Mentor," I chimed in.

"Pfft! Ivy...no. He's *not* precious!" Druid burst out laughing, shaking his head in protest. A little *too* much in protest, I thought.

"Really, sir?"

"Yeah, if you think my master is *precious*, you need to get your eyes checked."

Isn't that a bit extreme?

Druid and I sat side by side on the mat and watched Ciel and the old master play. Judging by his nonstop grinning, he must have been satisfied. Sora, tired from playing, was sleeping next to me, and Flame had moved over to snuggle up with it for a nap.

Gee...watching those two slimes together always makes me feel so warm and fuzzy. "I love this."

"What?"

"Lazy days like this."

"Yeah. Me, too."

Ever since I came to this town, life had been so hectic that it was a nice break to have a day like this where I just relaxed and did nothing.

Chapter 201: Gold Plates?

“I am so deeply sorry!”

The moment I entered the guild master’s room at the lodge, I was bombarded with apologies. It was probably about the unpaid bills.

“Um, sir, please stop bowing. I, um...” *What should I even say to him? “I don’t mind?” Or would “I’m okay” be better?*

“Don’t worry about a thing, Ivy,” Druid assured me. “It’s all the guild master’s fault.”

I smiled awkwardly back at Druid. Yes, the guild master may have been in the wrong, but I wasn’t particularly angry...

“Um, let’s just have a talk about it, okay, sir?”

The guild master looked a bit troubled by what I said. And confused. “Ivy...he told me you were mad at me.”

“Huh? Who told you that?” This time, I was the perplexed one. Druid also shot the guild master a strange look.

“My master did.”

The three of us shared an awkward silence, just staring at each other. Then we sighed in unison. *Oh, that man is just impossible!*

“Well, this is definitely a relief,” the guild master said. “I knew I was late paying you back, so I thought you really were angry with me.”

“Oh, no, sir. I’m not mad at all. I know you’ve been busy.”

“Oh...okay. But I admit I’ve been taking advantage of you. If you were an ordinary adventurer, you’d already have complained.”

“You need to be more careful, man,” Druid said sternly.

The guild master nodded. I know I’ve said this before, but he really did have it

tough. He just had way too many things on his plate. Come to think of it, the other guild masters I'd met all had helpers... Didn't Gotos have one?

"Um, isn't there somebody who can assist you, sir?" I asked. "In my experience, guild masters usually have assistants."



“I technically do have an assistant...who’s been off on maternity leave for two months.”

“Wow. I guess a string of bad luck just fell on you all at once.”

“Ha ha, yeah, I suppose so.”

“I admire your grit, sir,” I said.

“You really are a good kid, Ivy.”

“I know, right?” Druid agreed.

There they both go, praising me again. I’m not sure why, but it makes me feel so embarrassed. The guild master does seem to be exhausted, though. I wonder if he’ll be okay?

There was a knock at the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Please excuse me, but I heard that Mr. Druid was here,” said a man’s voice.

Druid replied with a nod, indicating his permission to the guild master to open the door. In walked a man I’d seen before at the adventurer guild’s counter.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Druid, but some people want to consult you about something. Do you have time to spare?”

Druid looked at me.

“It’s okay, sir.”

“All right. I’ll see you later.”

“Sounds good.”

I watched Druid walk out of the room with the man.

“Gee, *somebody’s* sure popular.”

That was true—Druid *was* quite popular among the younger adventurers. Whenever he was at the guild lodge, he was often approached.

“Yes, indeed.” *The guild master sure looks pleased.*

“Oh! I almost forgot. Here you go, Ivy.” The guild master handed me a couple

of papers.

I took them and began to read them over. The first sheet of paper mentioned the gratuity for rescuing Druid and Ciel clearing out the gurbar herd... *Let's see here...hm? This number's gotta be wrong, right?* I rubbed my eyes and looked over the total gratuity again. The “six gold coins” included the compensation for finding the blessed incense. It said I “helped avert a catastrophe”... What did that mean?

I read the other sheet of paper to settle myself down. This one was about the medicinal nuts I’d foraged in the forest. The guild’s appraisal and purchase value were indicated, and I was happy to see that the sale had already been made. But golly, medicinal nuts sure were expensive! And I’d brought in several of them, too...which had added up to a price that hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“I’m very sorry the sale of your foraged items was unsatisfactory.”

“Huh?!”

“They weren’t supposed to be sold until you agreed to the price, but there was a miscommunication and, before I knew it, the deal had already been made. I truly am sorry about that; I was careless,” the guild master apologized, bowing deeply to me.

“Oh, it’s okay. This price is actually a lot higher than I thought it would be.”

It really was a shock to see the sales total. I never dreamed I would get so much for my services... *Gee, I ate a lot of those foraged nuts and fruits on the way to this town. If I’d exchanged all of them for money instead... No, stop. Don’t even think about it.*

“I really do apologize for all this. This was the first time I’ve done business with the merchant guild.”

“Does your assistant on maternity leave usually handle that for you, sir?”

“Yeah, she’s mostly in charge of the negotiations. I generally take care of settlements, confirmations, and bringing together adventurers.”

Wow. That’s a terrible workload. “Isn’t there anyone else around to help you?”

"Technically, yeah. But their main responsibility is training adventurers and so on. Business negotiations aren't really their forte."

It really did seem like a bunch of different things had just piled up and he'd fallen too far behind.

"I guess you'll just have to slowly go through it all one thing at a time, sir."

"Hm? Ha ha ha, yes, I guess so. Better that than rushing it and making careless errors."

Oh dear...is he speaking from experience here? Is this guy really gonna be okay? Oh, wait a minute, I think there was something I wanted to tell the guild master...what was it again?

"Now what did I...?"

"Ivy? Something wrong?"

"Er, well, there was something I wanted to tell you... Oh!" I remembered. It was Sora's potion and Flame's magic stones. *Er, yeah, if I'm gonna tell him, it'd better be now.* "So, um, I've got a little news for you."

"Wh-what is it? You sound so serious...which is sort of scaring me."

"Um...could we make sure our conversation isn't heard outside the room?"

Druid and his mentor had both insisted I use magic items whenever I had conversations like this.

"Ah, yes. Understood." The guild master took out a magic item and activated it.

Okay, that should do the trick. "So, it's about the potion and magic stones that your old mentor took on that mission."

I told him that they belonged to me, that I had tamed two slimes in addition to Ciel, and that those slimes had regenerated a potion and magic stones. I wasn't sure if "regenerated" was really the right word to use...but I didn't know how else to explain it.

"So, um, I'm not quite sure if I'm describing this the right way. Sora might have just eaten some degraded potions...and then collected all the good parts

from them? I do think Flame replenished the magic power in the stones, though..."

Explaining things sure is difficult. I just hope he understood me. Okay...that's everything I hadn't let him know about already, right? Once I start talking, it's hard to figure out what I should tell him...or remember what I already have told him... It's a little confusing.

The guild master sighed. "Okay, whoa...hold on a second. I need to think about this."

"Yes, sir."

The guild master clutched his head and muttered something. He always scared me when he did that, and I felt myself shrinking back in my chair.

"Hm? Oh, it's okay. You don't need to cower like that."

"Ha ha ha. Sorry, sir." *Well, I was scared.*

"Okay. So that potion Master had...that potion...was yours...Ivy. Yet again, you've come up with the most terrifying things..."

"I know, sir."

"Everyone in the party was stunned speechless when they saw those magic stones work."

"They were stunned, sir?"

"Well, yeah. The dragon corpse was so large that everyone assumed it would take a few days to burn up. They were setting up camp for the night when Master asked someone with fire magic to use the stones, and, well, they thought the stones would simply add a little boost to the blaze...but when they actually used them, they created pillars of fire."

Pillars of fire?! Wow...now that's terrifying.

"They were too amazed to say a word. Anyway, when they looked at what was left of the dragon corpse after the pillars of fire burned out...that was when they realized how strange those magic stones were. After all, *half* that giant dragon's body had been burned to ash."

So that's how powerful it was. I remembered how the old mentor said they'd only needed to use the magic stone three times to burn the corpse away completely. If those stones were that powerful, then that means the new big ones that Flame just made must be... Nope. Don't think too much about it, Ivy. It'll only make your brain hurt.

"Okay...so if that potion and those magic stones were yours, Ivy, I should just give the certificate I prepared to *you* instead of my master. Hold on a second." The guild master returned to his desk and brought out a new piece of paper. He handed it to me and said, "Here's the usage fee for the potion and the stones."

This just might be the scariest bill for me to look at... I timidly ran my eyes over the figures. It listed the number of people the potion healed, the uses and results of the magic stones, and my payment...three gold plates. Gold plates? Plates? Wait, not the kind you eat off of? My mind went blank for a moment.

"Is there a problem? Sorry, I wish I could pay you more, but this town doesn't have that kind of money."

"It's okay, sir. There's absolutely no problem at all. If anything, it's *too much*." I blurted all this out before I could even think.

"Ivy...let's both calm down some."

"Yes, sir... Whew... Seeing those numbers confused me a little."

"Ah, I understand. But I actually like seeing you act your age for once, Ivy."

The guild master's words brought a sudden sense of calm to my soul. "It *is* a terrible amount of money," I said sincerely.

"Much of that payment is for the potion. It healed all the adventurers' wounds without leaving so much as a scar behind. We really are eternally grateful to you. To be honest, we thought only half the party would survive the mission—if we were lucky."

What?! I didn't know that. The guild master and his old mentor and all the adventurers had said everything was fine when they headed into the forest... Wow. Adventurers who protect towns are truly some of the bravest people alive.

"Without your help on this mission, Ivy, we would have suffered so many

more casualties. Thank you.”

“Oh, no, sir, I didn’t do anything. Ciel and the slimes did all the important work.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Ivy. I don’t think Ciel would have saved our party if you hadn’t accepted us into your good graces. And it’s because you’re so good to those slimes that they can...regenerate?...all sorts of things.”

Is that really true? Well, if the things I’ve done gave everyone else the strength to accomplish their mission...then I guess I’m pretty proud of that.

Chapter 202: An Extraordinary Potion

I proceeded to sign all the documents. Since I was getting such a huge amount of money, it would be deposited directly into my bank account. And thank goodness. If he'd just handed the money to me, I would have been too scared to leave the room. The transfer would be made within the day, so I would check with the bank in a few days to see if it had gone through. To be honest, I was too scared to check my account. I wanted to keep it out of sight, out of mind...but apparently that wasn't an option for me.

"Understood, sir."

"If you have a problem with the transfer, *please* let me know right away. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"That reminds me, you and Druid are going traveling together, right?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Druid officially said that he would come with me."

"I see. Thanks for that."

"Huh?"

I looked at the guild master and saw a very gentle expression in his eyes.

"He's been suffering alone all these years. Even when he smiled, a part of him always looked sad. But whenever he's with you, Ivy, he seems genuinely happy. I guess he's finally found a place where he belongs... It's hard to put it into words. But anyway, you're a huge support to him, Ivy."

A support... "Well, Druid is a big support to me, too. Or actually..."

"Or actually?"

"He's like a father to me."

"Pfft! A father? Ha ha ha...ah, I see. You're a family."

He was right—Druid had become like family to me. Whenever I started working on something new, he was always there to watch over me...and lend me a guiding hand if I ever got lost. He was dear to me...so very dear to me...just like a father.

“Take good care of Druid for me, you hear? He’s my best friend, and I love that guy.”

“I will, sir. Wait...that sounds funny. He’s the one who’s taking care of me.”

“No, Ivy, I assure you, from everyone’s point of view, *you* are taking care of *him*.”

“Oh, please!”

“Ha ha ha... Oh, by the way, you found a blue fruit when you were foraging in the forest, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir. And it fetched a pretty high price, too, if I remember.”

“Yeah, well...it’s pretty expensive no matter where you go. The medicinal nuts go up and down, you know. But if you want to get into foraging more, you should focus on that blue fruit. It’ll give you a steady income.”

So medicinal nut prices varied. I didn’t know that. The blue fruit he was talking about had kind of a special flavor, I think. It was more than just sweet; it had a very unique taste to it. I didn’t care for it.

“Thanks for telling me, sir. If I find it again, I’ll be sure to collect some of it.”

I thought I’d found it pretty far into the forest. If it didn’t put too much of a burden on Ciel, maybe I would go exploring deep in the forest sometime. Come to think of it, I didn’t know that blue fruit’s name. I’d never seen it in any shops, either.

“Guild master!” A voice shouted from outside the room before I could ask about the fruit. It sure was a busy day here.

“Well, I’d better be on my way. Thank you for seeing me, sir.”

“Again, I’m sorry it took so long. I swear the money will be in your account by the end of the day.”

The guild master seemed more bothered by it than I was. I gave him a nod and turned to leave the room as he deactivated the magic item. Outside the room stood a pretty lady...who looked a bit angry.

“Ack! Sorry I’m running late,” the guild master stammered.

“Huh?! Oh, no, no, it’s not your fault. Don’t worry about it,” the lady said, walking through the half-open door with a big stride.

“Agh! Alumi, what about your baby?”

“Baby, my *foot!* I told you to let me know if there were any problems, remember? Well, there I was, all relaxed because you hadn’t told me anything... then I find out you’re way behind on your work and you’ve messed everything up!”

“Er, well, I just—”

“You *just* need to ask for help when you need it...like you do now! If you’re so worried about my baby, maybe consider that I can’t relax and be a good parent in a town that’s in shambles! I told you over and over before I took the time off, remember? And you *promised* you’d contact me right away if the work was too much for you!”

Apparently, Alumi was the guild master’s assistant. Either she’d heard rumors that he was floundering, or she’d figured it out on her own. Regardless, the guild master would probably be okay now that she was here.

“I’ve told your wife you won’t be home for a few days. I won’t *let* you go home until we’ve gotten through this pile of backed-up work, you hear?!”

“Alumi! What are you even—”

“*Did. I. Stutter?*”

“Eep! Er...no, ma’am. Forget I said anything.”

I carefully slipped out of the room and left the guild lodge. Two adventurers were deep in conversation close to the door. I was going to walk right past them, but...

“Was the potion really that amazing?”

I stopped in my tracks. They were talking about *the potion*.

“Yeah, it was just incredible. I got gored by a gurbar tusk, ya see. Thought I was a goner for sure. I was even starting to black out. Then, the next thing I know, I’m awake, not bleeding, and not even scratched... It sure was a surprise.”

“Huh?! You mean you don’t know what happened?”

“Well, no, I don’t. I was out cold when it all went down.”

“Aw, some storyteller you are!”

“Sorry, I can’t help it. I lost a lot of blood.”

“So you’re saying you don’t know anything about that potion?”

“Well, no...I saw it.”

“You saw it?”

“Yeah... There was this poor bastard who was left until the end to be saved, probably because his wounds were the worst and they figured he was a goner. Anyway, I saw them pouring all the potions they had left down his throat. And it *sparkled*...that potion sparkled!”

“A sparkling potion? Never heard of such a thing.”

“At first, I didn’t know what they were making him drink. But there was no mistaking it—a guy who was gonna die in a few seconds was up on his feet only a minute after drinking that potion. I was pretty shocked to see it. The gaping hole in his stomach was all knitted together. And even though he’d been bleeding out and his face was all pale...his normal color was back.”

“Seriously? C’mon, I don’t care *how* extraordinary this potion was. I’ve *never* heard about anything like that.”

“That’s what I said in the first place: It was an incredible potion the likes of which I’d never seen before!”

“Okay, okay, I get it, stop yelling at me! Ya know...it makes me wonder, why did they use a potion like that on us? That guy everyone calls ‘Master’ was carrying it, right?”

"Yeah. We asked him for more details, but he wouldn't give us any. Still, it was definitely *his* potion. No mistake."

"Oh, wow. He's a lifesaver, then."

"Yeah, a *lifesaver*. When I volunteered to be a shield on this mission, I knew damn well I was likely to die. So when I came back to town in one piece...when I saw the looks on my family's faces...I almost *bawled*."

"I seriously *did* bawl when I saw you."

He volunteered as a "shield"? I think those are members of a party who will shield their comrades if that's necessary to make a mission successful. I quietly looked over the faces of the two adventurers. Both of them were still so young. And one of them had volunteered to be a shield? In a mission where he knew there was a strong chance of dying? I felt the tears well up inside me...but I swallowed hard and started to walk.

"You really cried?"

"Yeah, I cried for real."

I heard the two laugh behind me. I was so glad that Sora's potion helped people. I gave the bag hanging on my shoulder a gentle pat and sent a silent "thank you" to it, and the bag jiggled a little in response.

"Thanks, Sora... Thanks, Flame." I just had to say the words out loud, so I murmured them quietly so nobody else could hear. The bag jiggled much harder than before, filling my heart with a reassuring warmth. *I'm gonna give those slimes all the potions, swords, and spent magic stones today.*

Chapter 203:

Family Registry

After leaving the guild lodge, I arrived at Druid's house to find some merchants carrying boxes of stuff out the front door. Druid stood there and looked on.

"Hello," I greeted him.

"Finished with your business at the lodge?"

"Yes. Oh, this lady named Alumi came to see the guild master."

When I said the name, one of the merchants walking past me groaned audibly. He had an indescribable expression on his face. As I looked up at the groaner in confusion, Druid laughed.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Alumi handles the guild's business negotiations, so all the merchants are terrified of her. They try to work things out on equal terms, but if they're not careful, the deals always seem to favor Alumi. Still, I was surprised to hear such a foul reaction just from hearing her name."

Druid looked pretty amused, but the merchant had a grimace on his face as he got back to work. *That's right, the guild master did say his assistant was in charge of negotiations.*

"She was really angry with the guild master."

"Ha ha ha! Well, she *has* warned him about that a lot."

"Warned him?"

"Yeah, the guild's gears weren't running smoothly, and they'd made a lot of careless errors here and there. Alumi kept scolding him to check in with her sooner."

"Oh, I see."

"But the guild master said he couldn't consult her anymore, what with the

baby and all.”

Yeah, the guild master was really concerned about Alumi’s new baby, but she was more upset that he hadn’t kept her in the loop.

“But now that she’s back, everything should sort itself out. After all, she is quite a tyrant of a boss.”

A tyrant...that makes me shudder. “Oh, right! And she’s not letting the guild master go home until he’s finished all the work that’s piled up. She even got permission from his wife.”

“Yikes... Alumi, that was a ruthless move, getting his one source of comfort on your side.”

From the terror in the guild master’s voice, I could tell there was more than met the eye with Alumi. It sounded like she really was quite a woman.

“Oh, right. This is for you.” Druid pulled a green card out of his pants pocket. I didn’t recognize it, but it looked similar to my bank card.

“What’s this?”

“A card the merchant guild gives to registrants.”

Huh?

“I registered you with the merchant guild today and they approved you right away.”

“Oh! Thank you very much. I completely forgot I’d asked you to do that.”

“Well, you had a lot on your plate. And, I was thinking...if you’re okay with it, would you like to do a family registration?”

“A family registration?”

“Yeah, lots of families do business with the merchant guild, so you can register with them as a family. I looked into it and you can register even if you’re not blood-related. We’ve been using bank cards as proof of guarantor, but it would be a lot safer to use a guild card.”

It seemed a lot like how some adventure parties registered as families with the adventurer guild. I was surprised that we didn’t need to be blood relatives,

though.

“You don’t need to register your skills when you register as a family. All you need is consent of the parties involved and a little blood.”

Blood?

“Um...why do they need blood, sir?”

“Huh? Didn’t you have to give a blood sample when you made your bank account?”

Did I? At the time, I was so worked up over the fact that I was getting a bank account that I didn’t pay attention. Though, come to think of it, I think I did press my finger against something.

“I think I did?”

“You mean you don’t remember?”

“I never even thought I *could* have a bank account, so I was really overwhelmed by the whole thing.”

“Ah, now I get it.”

At the time, I was just trying to keep my head on straight, but looking back now, my memories of those days were so hazy that I couldn’t really remember much. Though one thing I did remember very strongly was the disappointment I’d felt over *not* having my head on straight.

“I understand. It *is* pretty exciting making a bank account in your own name. The first time I used my account to transfer over my retaining fee, I remember feeling a rush.”

“You felt it, too, Mr. Druid?”

Druid smiled and nodded. Looking at the calm, mature man he was now, it was hard to imagine him like that. For that matter, I couldn’t even imagine him ever being young.

“Okay, we’re all done,” one of the workers called out to us as we stood and talked in the doorway. I guessed that meant they’d finished hauling away all the stuff.

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you. You sold us quite a lot of useful goods. It won’t be long before the adventurers come pushing and shoving to buy it all.”

Adventurers pushing and shoving? Is there something that valuable in there?

“Ha ha ha, yeah, I can definitely see that happening. Transfer the money to my account, okay?”

“Of course, sir. Well, bye.”

And the packed carriage took off.

“Um, Mr. Druid, why would the adventurers push and shove to buy your stuff?”

“We’re not sure how this happened—it could be because they went berserk—but we found out that gurbars have extremely pure magic stones inside of them.”

High-purity magic stones. That would definitely bring adventurers in droves if they heard about it.

“Not all the gurbars have those magic stones, but apparently you have a pretty good chance of finding one.”

“Well, that does sound impressive. I’d love to see how rare it is.”

“I saw one of the magic stones, but the highest level they reach is Level 2.”

Level 2? My perception has been a bit out of whack since Flame started spitting out SSS-level magic stones out of nowhere, but...that’s actually considered pretty powerful, isn’t it?

“I’m tired of standing. Let’s go inside and have a proper chat.”

“Okay.” *Oh, right! I still haven’t given him an answer yet.* “Um, Mr. Druid...the family registry...I’d like to do that.”

“Oh...are you sure?” Druid asked, looking a bit worried. I’d probably made him anxious by taking too long to answer.

“Yes. I’m happy to join the family...Dad.”

“Ha ha ha, now I have something to show off to the guild master.”

Huh? Show off...what? I looked at Druid, and the smile on his face was so soft and gentle. To my relief, I couldn’t find a trace of the worry that had previously been in his eyes.

“If you go see the guild master right now, you might also see Alumi.”

“I think...I won’t go right now. I’d feel bad getting in his way.”

Maybe it was because of everything he’d been through in life, but sometimes Druid looked incredibly insecure. I hoped I’d see that look on him less and less in the future.

“Is that the real reason why?”

We walked into the dining room, which now seemed incredibly spartan. Druid had already sold all his unneeded furniture. He sure worked fast.

“Ah, so you found me out. Yeah, well, Alumi is a bit of a drillmaster. If I went to the guild now, she’d definitely put me to work. I can’t count the number of times the guild master got me caught up in things.”

Druid sighed heavily. I guess he was right. If he showed up at the guild and Alumi had asked him to work, he wouldn’t be able to refuse—Druid is too kind.

“Oh, that’s right.” Druid pushed the button on a magic item that I’d never seen before.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a magic item that keeps noises from escaping an area.” It was a bit smaller than the similar items we’d used before. “It covers a small range, but it should be enough for just us two.”

Ah. That makes sense.

“The one drawback is that it only works inside a tent or a house.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, because it doesn’t hide our mouths.”

“Our mouths?”

“Didn’t you know? The noise-canceling magic items that you use outside make it so people can’t read your lips.”

“Wow, people can actually read lips?”

“Yeah, if they have the lipreading skill.”

I didn’t know that was a thing. What with the existence of these magic items, was there any situation where the lipreading skill could actually be used?

“So, did they give you a fair price, Ivy?”

“It was so much money that it made me scared of my bank account.”

“Scared of your bank account? That’s a bit of an overreaction.”

“But I’m *not* overreacting. They gave me, um...three gold plates.”

“That checks out.”

He knew? I gave Druid a confused look, but he just smiled and gently patted my head.

“That’s the standard price for a potion that saved the life of an adventurer. Adventurers are like treasures to the guild. Depending on which one you saved, you could even get five gold plates.”

What?! Five gold plates... If that had been on my receipt, I surely would’ve fainted. Three gold plates was confounding enough already.

“Oh, and I just sold all my stuff at a pretty high price, so that should add even more to our travel fund.”

That reminds me, we haven’t actually discussed how we would divvy the fund up. Though I guess we could always check our accounts tomorrow.

“Um, do you think we should talk about how much to save for the travel fund?”

“That’s a good idea. I’d like to leave as soon as we get everything ready.”

“Me, too.”

Okay...let’s get everything sorted out so I won’t be a burden on Druid!

Chapter 204: Butting Heads

“I’m exhausted.”

“That’s because you’re pushing too hard, Ivy.”

“Well, you’re a bullethead, Mr. Druid.”

“Well, you’re stubborn, Ivy.”

Druid and I were glaring at each other in silence. I never thought we would get into an argument...over our travel fund, of all things.

The way I saw it, since we would be traveling together, we should go fifty-fifty on our travel fund. Because of that, our journey would wind up being a bit less lavish than what Druid was picturing. And though I did feel bad about that, I figured we would just have to grit our teeth and bear it.



But when I suddenly got way more money than I was expecting, that meant we could have a much more luxurious journey even if we did split the expenses evenly. So that's how I opened the conversation with Druid. But then...

"I'm the grown-up, so it's only natural that I should contribute more to the travel fund. In fact, you don't need to pay anything, Ivy."

For some reason, Druid had drawn a line in the sand...and he wasn't willing to budge at all.

"But it's going to be a really long trip. I don't feel right relying so much on you."

The longer the journey, the greater our expenses would be—and I would be more and more of a burden. And when I thought about what lay ahead, I knew I had to be strong and carry my own weight.

"Ivy, you're just one person. It's no problem at all for me to cover you. I've saved up a lot of money."

"No, I can't let you do that."

"You don't need to be so by-the-book with your father."

"But that's a completely different thing."

For some reason, we were talking past each other. When I said I would pay for part of the trip, he insisted he cover 50 percent of my expenses. When he wouldn't surrender a single percent, I face-palmed. But I wasn't going to back down, either, so I countered with "At least make it 48 percent." And then it devolved into a quibble over numbers. And as you can imagine, it wiped me out.

"Well, I don't think arguing like this is going to get us anywhere," Druid sighed. "So why don't we lock down some of the other travel details first?"

"That's a good idea." *Thank goodness. I was about to let Druid's momentum crush me.*

"It's going to be winter soon, so let's decide where we're going to settle for the season." Druid spread a map out on the table. "You're a pretty fast walker, aren't you, Ivy?"

“If I do say so myself.” I was a fast walker and runner, probably because my whole journey began with me running away from home. I didn’t need to run from anyone anymore, but I could still keep pace with the average adult...and I was pretty proud of that.

“Um, I have a little request,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I want to forage fruits and nuts deep in the forest, so I’d like to plan on taking extra time.” In Oll, I’d learned that selling fruit and nuts actually got you a pretty good price... Well, make that a *really* good price. So I definitely wanted to make time to search for tree fruit during the journey.

“Okay. Considering that, we’ll probably stay in the next village or town.”

The next village or town? I looked at the map and saw that there were two main roads connecting Oll to the capital. One path led to a town, the other to a village. Then, after those areas, the paths converged back into one road that led to a tiny village. *Huh? This map is different from the one I own.*

“Um...this map...it’s different from my map.” I pulled my map out of my bag and spread it out on the table. It showed two villages next to Oll. Beyond them was a town, and a very big one at that.

“Oh, right. This kind of map is based on descriptions from adventurers, so whoever drew it probably misheard them. Either that or there wasn’t enough information, so the cartographer just filled in the gaps with their best guess.”

Oh, so that’s why. I didn’t know maps could be so uncertain. I’d always assumed they were made with a lot more precision.

“So, which way would you rather go?” Druid asked. “And while we’re on the subject, what are your plans for winter?”

“My plans for winter? Is there anything I *can* do? Where I used to live, it snowed so hard that you couldn’t even leave the house much.”

“Oh, okay. Well, the town of Kohl and the village—Hatow Village—both have snow up to your waist in the heaviest years, but you can still leave the house. You just have to be careful when there’s a blizzard.”

“Yes, blizzards are pretty scary. Back in my home village, many people died every year in them.”

“Yeah, well, you lose all sense of direction in a blizzard. What are you going to do about hunting in the winter?”

“Can we hunt in the winter?”

“Yeah, some monsters only come out in the winter, so adventurers like to go after them. The merchant guild’s prices rise in the winter, too—that’s why they do it. Then again, the prices are still cheaper than they are with the adventurer guild.”

“Winter monsters...”

Adventurers do have clients to serve, after all. But just think, I can sell meat with the merchant guild, too. Druid registering me with them has opened up a lot more options for me.

“From the way you hunt, Ivy, you’d be more successful if you went for the smaller monsters. That means Hatow Village might be better for you than Kohl. Lots of small monsters come out in the wintertime over there.”

“I always thought monsters and animals stayed in their dens for the winter.”

“Oddly enough, these monsters only come out in the winter.”

“Only in the winter?”

“Yeah, people have searched for them in the summer, but with no luck.”

What strange monsters. It’s good to know I can still hunt in the winter, though. I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me.

“Okay, let’s go to Hatow Village,” I said, looking at the place on Druid’s map. Hatow and Kohl were about the same size. Either one was bound to have several options for lodging.

“You can’t tell from the map, but Kohl is bigger. In fact, it’s even bigger than Oll.”

“Oh, really? But it looks the same size on the map.”

“Well, it’s really hard to find maps that are drawn to scale.”

Maybe we just shouldn't depend on the map too much? Though I have relied on mine an awful lot thus far.

"Hatow Village is about the same size as Oll, but since it's surrounded by towns on both sides, it's often overlooked. It's actually a hidden gem of sorts."

"Oh, really? Do you know anything about the lodging available there?"

"It's probably got plenty of places to stay, since it's a big village. And it'd be cheaper than the inns in Oll and Kohl."

"Now that's good news. Is there somewhere near Hatow where Ciel can stay?"

"There is. There're some caves nearby—a lot of them, in fact."

That should cover Ciel, then. "Um, Ciel told me a while ago that it doesn't hibernate, but do you think it would be all right living in the cold?"

"I've never heard of adandaras not doing well in the cold...but we should probably ask Ciel personally."

"Okay."

So our next destination is Hatow Village. All that remains now is...well, we've already talked about what belongings we're going to take with us...so it's just the money question.

"About how much does it cost to stay in Hatow Village?" *Let's figure out first how much money we'll need.*

"Well, you rent by the month in the wintertime, so it'll be about three to ten gold plates."

That's quite a range... "What do the different prices get you?"

"The price is based on the lodging's location. If it's near a main road or off by a little street, it'll be more expensive."

Okay. So the most accessible places cost the most.

"There's also our meals to consider. If we can cook for ourselves, we'll save a lot of money, especially if we gather our own ingredients."

So the more help we get from the inn staff, the more expensive it will all be.

Well, I can cook, and we can store food in magic bags for long periods of time. I wonder if we can borrow some for cheap?

“The next question is whether we want an inn with a bath. If you ask me, having a bath is a huge plus.”

“Really?” *Taking baths at his house definitely felt great...but I don't think I have to take one every day. I'd be fine with just a sponge bath.*

“If you plan on doing any hunting, baths are an absolute must. You'll catch quite a chill out in the elements.”

Oh, that's right! I wanted to hunt.

“Unless you warm yourself up afterward, you'll easily catch cold, so I think a bath is an absolute must.”

“Okay. Let's get a place with a bath, then.” *I hope I can earn a lot from hunting.*

“I guess all that's left is to talk it over with someone who works at an inn. They might be able to give us some tips for saving money.”

“Understood.” *So I guess we should set aside about five gold plates for our lodgings?*

“Right, are you okay with sharing a room?”

“Yes, of course.”

If anything, I *needed* to share a room to feel safe. I'd never rented a place to live before... Just the thought of it made me nervous. But I was definitely excited about it, too.

Chapter 205: If We All Work Together...

“If we try to go over our travel budget, we’ll just have a repeat of what happened earlier,” Druid said.

“We sure will.”

Isn’t there some good way we can settle this? A way where Druid will let me take on some of the burden? Huh...what if the problem is that we’re trying to get all the money ready up front? What if we decided to earn it as we traveled...?

“Um, why don’t we use all the money we get from hunting and gathering along the way to pay for our travel expenses?”

“Hm? You mean all the profits from today on?”

“Yes, sir.” *That way, it’ll be money we’ll earn together. He should be okay with that.*

“Spending all our earnings on our travel expenses is no good.”

Why not?

“There’re personal items you’re going to want, right? If we spend all our earnings on our travel expenses, you won’t be able to buy anything for yourself.”

“That’s fine. There’s nothing I really want for myself.” The money I’ve been saving all this time was for the winter anyway, so I wouldn’t be missing out on anything.

“See, *that’s* why it’s no good, Ivy. You’re still so young. You should get yourself the things that you want.”

How strange...I was sure he would be on board with that idea. Wait...huh?

“Isn’t there anything you’d like to have? Like clothes or shoes?”

“Um...we can talk about that later. For now, I want to lock down our travel

expenses.”

I just got the feeling we shouldn’t be having that conversation. I felt like we’d have a big problem on our hands if I gave him the wrong answers...

Druid sighed. “Oh, okay.”

“So, um, let’s figure out how much money we’ll need for the whole trip...and then we’ll negotiate how much each of us should put in.”

“No. I don’t want to negotiate.”

No matter how hard I push him...he’s probably not gonna budge. So should I just give up this fight? Come to think of it, how much money does Druid even have? It’s...kind of rude to ask, isn’t it? I’d better not.

“Okay, then...I’ll let you take care of me, Mr. Druid.”

“Good girl.”

Urrrgh, I feel like I’m not getting my way at all here...

“If we want to put your ideas into action, Ivy...it sounds like we should make a whole new bank account.”

“A new bank account?”

“Yeah. We currently have personal accounts for each of us, but you don’t like the idea of all the money coming from my personal account.”

“Of course I don’t like it.”

“Then why don’t we make a family bank account?”

A family account? Is that even possible?

“That way, we could put all the earnings from our travels into that account, and you could also add as much of your own money as you want.”

That’s a good idea...that way, we can keep our travel fund and our personal money separate. I might even be able to stop Druid from using too much of his own money.

“That’s a great plan. Could we make that new account right away?”

“Once we register as a family with the merchant guild, we should be able to

do it."

I want to do whatever I can to prevent Druid from using up all his money. Oh, but wait... If we got a family account, wouldn't Druid be able to slip money in there without me knowing it?

"Mr. Druid...promise me you won't put a bunch of your own money into the family account without telling me."

"Uh...okay, I won't."

Hey! I saw your eyes darting around for a second! "I'll watch our family account balance. If I see you've put money in there, I'm giving it back to you."

"Ivy, I think you're being way too strict about this. I mean, do I *look* like a pauper to you?"

"No, not at all. In fact, you look richer than the average adventurer."

Most of the adventurers I'd encountered were the traveling type, so I couldn't say for sure, but Druid had a house and a lot of magic items. It made me think he was probably the wealthiest of all the adventurers I'd ever met.

"Well, that's only because I've taken on nothing but suicide missions, so the pay was really good. I just didn't have anything to spend it on."

I remember him telling me a little bit about that. He didn't have a reason to live, so he'd volunteered for some pretty dangerous gigs. I remembered feeling very sad for him when he explained that.

"So money is one thing I have plenty of. I haven't even checked my account balance all these years, so it was a real shock when I looked at it earlier. I have about one thousand radal."

What?! Did he...just say...one thousand radal? Er, a gold plate is ten radal, so that's...more than one hundred gold plates?

"Huh?! What?!"

"Don't you have a heart attack. Imagine how surprised I was."

Does that mean he took on one thousand radal worth of dangerous jobs?

"Now I understand why the guild master and my old mentor kept scolding me

about doing such dangerous work all the time. Thinking about it now makes me feel a little squeamish."

Hearing the laughter in his voice as he said that made my blood boil. "That's not funny! Don't you realize you've put yourself in mortal danger to the tune of *one thousand rada!*?"

"Huh?! Er...Ivy..."

My angry screams soon turned into tears...it was a miracle Druid was still alive. "Mr. Druid... I'm so glad you're still here..." I whimpered, wiping my eyes.

Druid looked shocked by the sight of me. But soon...he melted into that pitiful smile I was now so used to seeing on him.

"Me, too... Thanks."

Just what kind of peril had he put himself in to get all that money?

Druid rested his big hand on my head. "I'll be more careful from now on."

"Mr. Druid...you need to cherish yourself more."

"Okay...I promise I will."

"Just so you know...now that you and I are going to be travel companions..."

"Yeah."

"When I set my sights on a goal...you'd better be there to watch me achieve it!"

"Huh?"

It seemed like Druid thought it would be okay for him to disappear at some point. Well, I wouldn't let him!

"Promise me. Promise me that you'll be there to watch me reach my goal."

Even if it wasn't a written contract, I knew that Druid would keep his vow, so I was going to *make* him promise!

"Err..."

"Promise me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Good... But wow. One thousand rada!

“Your bank account is another jack-in-the-box, Mr. Druid.”

“Ah...so I’m in the box now, too?”

“Oh, you were already in it, Mr. Druid. All we did was add more parts.”

“I don’t know whether I should be happy about that or not...”

“Hee hee, me neither.”

We both laughed the tension off. It was like everything I’d felt up until that moment had been washed away.

“Anyway, we need to register as a family and then get a family bank account.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then we should set up a fund for the winter.”

“And I’m going to put all the money I’ve been saving for the winter into our travel fund. I won’t let you stop me!”

“Oh, fine... In that case, I’ll...”

“Please match my amount.”

“Huh?!” Druid gasped. I was sure he was going to put in more money than me.

“Please put in the same amount as me. It might mean we’ll have to stay at a cheaper inn...”

“I don’t mind that. I’ve always stayed at the cheapest ones when I’ve been out missions. Filthy inns without a bath.”

This is coming from the guy who just said not having a bath was a deal breaker?

“Let’s start from scratch,” I said. “Together.”

“Start from scratch?”

“That’s right. We’ll hunt and gather as much as we can between here and Hatow Village so we can stay at the best possible inn! Don’t you think that’ll be fun?”

We might fail. But even failing would be fun, as long as we failed together. Especially when we had such powerful allies in Ciel, Sora, and Flame.

“Fun, eh? Yeah...but what if we can’t hunt or gather enough?”

“Then we’ll stay at whatever inn we can afford with what’s already in our family bank account.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Of course. If I were traveling alone, I would definitely be staying at the cheapest possible inn.”

Actually, even if I had saved up a fortune, I’d still stay at the cheapest inn. I had to keep the next winter in mind...and the next winter after that. But now that I had Druid with me, I didn’t have to be so pessimistic.

“Puuu!” Sora’s voice rang through the room, breaking up my little staring contest with Druid.

My eyes darted toward the bag. *Oh no, I forgot to take them out of there.* I reached into the bag to pick up Sora, but the slime was already squiggling out on its own. Then, with another cry, it leapt onto the table between me and Druid.

“Pu!”

Wow. Why are you so irritated?

“Teryuuu.”

I could hear Flame’s voice, too, but the other slime still wasn’t able to crawl out of the bag on its own yet. The bag just kept wiggling with Flame still inside of it. I quickly took it out of the bag...and it also seemed quite angry.

“I’m so sorry. I completely forgot to take you guys out of there.”

They both just stared at me. It didn’t look like they were angry about being left in the bag. *What is it, then? Let me see...* I went over the conversation I’d just had with Druid. I didn’t *think* we’d discussed anything that would make Sora mad.

“Why are they so angry?”

“I’m not sure... Oh! I think I know.”

“What is it?”

I turned to the slimes. “Do you guys want to help us hunt and gather?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu!”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu!”

Oh, good. Guess I was right.

“Well, gee, with Sora and Flame helping us, my confidence in this plan just went way up.”

“Don’t forget, Mr. Druid, we also have Ciel on our side.”

“Ha ha ha. Yeah, we sure do.”

I know I’ve had this realization before, but I’ve got three powerful allies, don’t I?

Then we both paused in thought...

“Mr. Druid...let’s not stay at *too* nice an inn.”

If Flame, Sora, and Ciel got too serious about helping us out...well, the idea worried me a little.

“Good idea... Let’s find one that’s well within our means.”

Apparently, Druid and I had imagined the same scene of the three creatures helping us...to some very extreme results.

Chapter 206: It's a Promise!

It was just after noon. I was standing outside the merchant guild office, waiting for Druid, when I saw somebody hurrying toward me.

"Sorry! I was running late."

"Oh, it's okay—wait, what happened? You look awfully tired." It was clear from Druid's appearance that he was more than just "tired."

"Ha ha ha... Alumi found me."

Oh dear. "My condolences."

"I'm glad I promised to meet you at noon, Ivy. Otherwise, she'd probably make me stay there all night." Druid heaved a big sigh. That would have been a real ordeal.

"Um, was the guild master doing all right?"

"Ha ha ha..." Druid laughed, giving me no answer.

I guess that means "no."

"Should we bring him a care package later?"

"No, no, no. If you go there, you'll never leave."

Yeah...I guess I'd like to avoid that.

"Anyway, let's go get us registered and set up an account."

"Yes...let's."

I'm so sorry, Mr. Guild Master. Alumi is just a little too intense for me. And staying overnight is just a little too...impossible for me, so I'll be wishing you well from afar.

I followed Druid into the building. Since the morning bustle had calmed down some, there weren't many people inside.

“Oh! There you are,” someone greeted us.

“Huh?”

“You’re the gentleman who made an inquiry with us yesterday. This fine lady will serve you.”

“Thanks.”

Druid and I approached a lady who smiled and greeted us. “Hello, there.”

“Hello, I’m the one who asked yesterday about registering as a family. We also want to make a family bank account.”

“Understood, sir. Here are the necessary forms. If you’ll just fill them out, please.”

They had the forms ready for us right away. Apparently, they all remembered Druid. I guess that was a veteran adventurer for you?

“Thanks. Ivy, let’s fill them out over there.”

“Okay.”

We wrote our names and ages onto the forms. Then we both checked the boxes consenting to be registered as a family. Druid wrote something down in the “Parent/Guardian” section, but I couldn’t see what it was. After he finished writing, we turned in the forms with my bank card and Druid’s merchant guild card and, in less than five minutes, our family registry was complete.

“Wow, that was quick.” Almost *too* quick. I was quite startled.

“That’s because you already have a bank card, Ivy. Without that, it would have taken a little longer.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’ve got an impressive lineup of guarantors on your card.”

“Huh?”

The guarantors on my bank card? They were Captain Oght from Ratome Village, the guild master of Otolwa, and Police Captain Barxby. I knew they were all powerful people, but what did that have to do with anything?

Druid answered my questioning look. “I’m from this town and people know me, so there’s no problem on my end, but you had no ties with this town before coming here, right?”

“Right.”

“Without those three powerful men vouching for you, they might have had to investigate you first. They probably checked in with the guarantors on your card to verify your identity.”

“Really? Oh dear! You don’t think they bothered them, do you?”

“Don’t worry about that. They probably decided you were safe when they saw those names on your card.”

“Oh... Well, that’s a relief.”

“Still, they originally told me it would take at least two days, so I was surprised that the whole thing only took five minutes, start to finish. Those three names certainly are quite powerful.”

“At least two days...turned into five minutes... Yeah, they *must* be really powerful.”

As I sat there, stunned by what Druid had told me, our two new cards were placed in front of us on the desk. Since we’d already been able to complete the family registry, we went ahead and made a family bank account, too.

“There you go. These are your family cards. Will two be enough?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My own bank card was plain and white, but the family one was white with a red and blue line on it. It made my heart race a little.

“Now, if I could please get blood samples from both of you right here.”

There were round, transparent things on top of each of our family cards... I recalled them from when I made my bank account. Relying on what little I remembered, I pushed my finger into the small concave circle.

I felt a slight pang of pain in my fingertip just as the plate glowed, showing my name and age along with Druid’s name.

“Your name showed up on mine, Mr. Druid.”

“And yours is on mine, Ivy.”

Aha, so it shows your family's names on your plate. That's pretty neat.

“Thank you both. Now that we've registered the two of you as a family and made you a family bank account, is there anything else I can help you with today?”

“No, that's all, thank you.”

“Thank you very much, ma'am,” I said, following Druid's example.

“What a cute daughter you have. Looks like your father is going to have a lot more to worry about now.”

Huh?! A lot more to worry about?

“Ivy's got a good head on her shoulders, so I don't think she'll give me any trouble...but do you think we'll start getting a hard time from people we meet?”

“Probably, yes. I mean, she's such a lovely little lady.”

“Ha ha ha, thanks. Well, I'll try to keep the creeps away.”

What? Keep the creeps away? Does he think I'm going to creep away or something? Or did he say creeks? Wait, maybe the place going is full of a bunch of dirty creeks? I'm fine with creeks, but not if they've got gross bugs around.

We parted ways with the nice lady and headed over to the cluster of tiny rooms in the corner of the guild lodge, where we would check our account balances and transfer money into our family account.

“Mr. Druid...what's wrong with creeks?”

“Huh? Creeks? Um...what are you talking about?”

Huh? Wait, did I mishear him?

“Um, when you were talking with the lady earlier, what did you mean when you said you'd keep me away from the creeks? Does the next town we're going to have some scary water bugs in it or something?”

“Aha... Now I get it.” For some reason, Druid pressed a hand to his forehead

and sighed. Then he smiled and said firmly, “You have absolutely nothing to worry about, Ivy. Just forget about it.”

I got the feeling that I shouldn’t press him any further about this. I was really curious...but I figured he wasn’t going to explain it to me. *I guess I’ll have to find the right moment to ask him later.*

“All right, let’s check your account balance first, Ivy. Then we’ll transfer your money into the family account.”

“Sure.”

“Make sure you leave plenty of money in your personal account. Promise me, okay?”

“Oh...okay.”

I was fine with transferring all the money out of my personal account, but Druid made me promise to leave at least half of it. He said he’d agreed to let me contribute to the family fund, so now I had to accept his terms and only give up half my money. I felt like I was being cajoled a little, but I knew that if we both kept being stubborn, we wouldn’t make any progress, so I surrendered.

“Okay, I’m just going to go check my balance,” I told Druid.

“Okay.”

A part of me was terrified to see a huge amount of money in my account, but now that I was only allowed to put half of my money in the travel fund, another part of me was hoping to see a lot of it. And now I wasn’t sure how to feel.

We went into one of the little rooms, and I set my bank card on top of the white plate in front of a tiny window. A bunch of numbers immediately popped up...until they finally displayed my balance.

“Whoa!” I gasped in surprise.

“What?! I should have made it one fourth...” Druid muttered behind me.

I spun around to look at him. There was a deep crease in his brow.

“Mr. Druid?”

“So, about our agreement...”

“I’m still giving one half!”

Druid sighed softly in reply.

Sorry, Mr. Druid, but I’m dying on this hill.

My balance was over one hundred and ninety radal. That was nineteen gold plates. I’d completely forgotten that they gave me one hundred radal for helping take down the human trafficking organization. I must have pushed that memory into a corner of my brain since I’d had so much to deal with at the time.

Come to think of it, I got some gratuity that time, too. Then, with the money I got from Sora’s potion and Flame’s magic stones, I’d managed to raise one hundred and ninety radal in all. That meant my contribution to the travel fund would be ninety-five radal. So, in gold that would be...nine and a half gold plates.

“Yahoo! I get to transfer ninety-five radal to the travel fund!”

Druid groaned a little in reply, but a promise was a promise.

“I really dropped the ball, Ivy... I had no idea you’d earned that much money.”

He’s grumbling something... Eh, I’ll just ignore him. It looks like I won’t have to put all the burden of this journey on him after all. I owe it all to Sora and Flame. And Ciel, for helping clear out the gurbars. My friends really have helped me out so much.

Chapter 207: First Grandchild

We were on our way back to Druid's parents' shop from the merchant guild. Druid had realized his mother was the only person he'd told about the journey ahead—he'd been so busy that it had just slipped his mind. And though he said his mother would definitely have told everyone for him, this sort of news really needed to be delivered personally, so we were on his way to his father's shop to do just that.

"Hey there, what'll it be—oh, it's you, Druid. Hello, Ivy, come on in."

Druid's father, mother, and sister-in-law were all there.

"Sorry to disturb you during business hours."

"Oh, it's fine. Doluka's making us some tea for our break right now. He's doing it *of his own volition*."

Is it just me, or was there an emphasis on the words "of his own volition"?

"I guess people really do change," Shurila said. "Just when I'd given up on him, he went and surprised me."

Ooh, I've never seen Shurila smile like that before. It's a warm smile, embracing all things... Urgh, it's hard to explain in words. But one thing was clear: She was very happy.

"There's some news I wanted to share with you all." And then, his face tense with nervousness, Druid announced to his family that he would be leaving Oll to travel with me.

"I see...you're leaving on a journey..." His father looked surprised at first...but his face quickly melted into a smile.

"What? Didn't Mom tell you?"

"Did you know?" Druid's father asked his wife.

"Yes, I did, but I forgot to tell you."

“Um, *darling...*” Druid’s father sighed. His wife just shrugged her shoulders innocently.

“Ivy, are you sure about all of this?” Shurila asked.

“Huh?” *Sure about what?*

“Being with Druid when he’s dealing with so many problems. Won’t he just get in your way?”

Druid’s mother and sister-in-law really were a pair of straight shooters. They were very much alike.

“It’s not a problem at all, ma’am. My dad takes very good care of me.”

Everyone else’s eyes popped open at the word “dad.” My heart raced a little when I explained to them that we’d registered as a family.

“Did you really? Wow, I’m proud of ya, Druid. Look at this sweet daughter you’ve got yourself!”

“Since she’s Druid’s daughter, that makes her our first grandchild!”

Druid’s parents were unusually excited, a sight that startled their son.

“Yeah, you guys wouldn’t shut up about how sweet Ivy is,” Shurila chuckled with a tired shake of her head.

Oh no...I can feel my face turning red.

“This really is wonderful news,” Druid’s mother said. “Ivy, make sure Druid—no, make sure your *father*—takes good care of you, okay?”

Takes care of me...

“That’s right. You need to let him care for you like a princess.” Now Druid’s father was sounding just like his mother.

“Listen, Ivy. It’s okay to let other people take care of you,” Druid said, continuing his parents’ theme. For some reason, I felt like I was being besieged.

“Er...I’ll try.”

“You’ll *try* to let other people take care of you? Ivy, you really are too good for your own good.” Shurila roughly tussled my hair.

“What’s the ruckus all about? Druid? And Ivy?”

“Hello, Mr. Doluka,” I greeted him.

“Hi...” Doluka nearly whispered to Druid.

“Er, hi...” Druid nervously stammered in reply.

Everyone looked happy to see the two brothers exchange awkward greetings. The whole scene made me feel a little uncomfortable...but in a good way.

Shurila broke the silence. “Hey, we’ve got some big news for you!” She proceeded to tell him that Druid and I would be leaving on a journey. Doluka looked surprised by the news, but in the end he smiled and made Druid promise him to tell him all about it when he got back.

We wound up staying for dinner, and I cooked together with Druid and his mother. I don’t know why, but Doluka served as our assistant. (Shurila was there, barking orders at him from the sidelines.) As we worked, Druid and I talked in hushed whispers about how much Doluka had changed. His mother overheard us and whispered, “Seriously, it’s been an amazing transformation to see.”

Doluka and Shurila’s relationship looked a lot more relaxed than it used to be. It actually made me blush a little, seeing them as a happy couple for the first time.

After dinner, as we were settling down to relax for the rest of the evening, I approached Shurila and bowed my head.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Shurila.”

“Huh?! What?! Er, why are you sorry? And please stop bowing, Ivy.”

I’d felt remorseful for so long that I apologized before I even got a chance to explain myself...and now I’d gone and confused her.

“Um, it’s about those rice sweets you wanted to make. I’m sorry I wasn’t any help at all.” I’d promised to help her brainstorm some ideas, but nothing had come to mind, and then I got preoccupied with packing for the journey.

“Oh, please, don’t worry about that. It was my idea anyway, so it’s my job to come up with something!”

“But I promised I would help you...”

It had been bugging me the whole time. She was so nice, offering to make a rice pastry with me, and I hadn’t been able to think of anything. And now that the cooking classes had settled into a calmer rhythm, Shurila and Druid’s mother had taken on the task of dessert-making, but I’d abandoned them.

“Really, don’t worry about it, Ivy. You’ve already done more than enough to help us. The cooking classes are going very well, too. We’ve got regular students and a steady source of income from it.”

Wow, I didn’t know that. That really is pretty incredible. “Miss Shurila, that’s amazing!”

“Thanks, Ivy. But you’re amazing, too.”

“Huh?”

“Without you, we wouldn’t have even thought to start a cooking class. You’re the reason we have one now, Ivy.”

Cooking classes had never existed in this world, so I didn’t blame her for not getting the idea on her own. And I wouldn’t have even thought of it myself if I didn’t have memories of my past life.

“You helped set the wheels in motion for so many good changes in our lives, Ivy,” Shurila said. “We’re very grateful.”

“Yeah, the town wouldn’t have come to embrace ryce if not for you, Ivy,” Druid’s father chimed in. “Thanks to you, the people are going to make it through the food shortage. We can’t thank you enough.”

Everyone is so nice... I need to make sure they know how I’m feeling right now.

“Um, well, I had a lot of fun doing all those things with you. Thank you very much.” I wasn’t quite sure what to say, so some pretty cliché phrases tumbled out of me. It really was difficult putting my feelings into words, but everyone seemed to understand me anyway.

Shurila gently ran her fingers through my hair. “We’ll be waiting for you and Druid when you get back.”

“Thanks!” It was such a good feeling, having warm people to come home to.

Druid and I decided to cut our visit short since we needed to go back to his house to pack for our trip.

“Good night. And let us know when you’ve set a departure date.”

“We will,” I answered. “Good night.”

We waved goodbye to everyone—they’d all come outside the house to send us off—and then left for Druid’s house.

“Ivy, I’m going to make arrangements to sell my house tomorrow. It’ll probably go through within three days.”

“Wow, can you really sell it that quickly?”

“A real estate agent is going to buy it off me, and apparently it’ll be an easy sell. But if that doesn’t work out, I guess we’ll just have to wait patiently.”

“Wait patiently...” *Does that mean our journey might get postponed?*

“If the agent says the house won’t sell, I’m prepared to let my father handle the transaction.”

“That’s a lot to ask of him.”

“I know, but I think he’ll be okay with it. I’m going to let the buyer name their price.”

Hm? But wouldn’t that mean Druid is going to take a loss?

“Because so many people are moving into this town, housing prices have gone up. All the houses close to mine are going for higher prices than before, so I’m pretty sure I won’t lose any money on the sale.”

That’s Druid for you—he’s thought of everything. “So I guess once your house is sold, we’ll go on our journey.”

“Ivy...”

“Yes?”

“Did we forget that we’re getting the new magic stones appraised?”

Oh! That’s right. We were going to have them appraised through Druid’s mentor.

"When do you think we'll get the results? Master and his gang all seem really busy."

"Yeah, and I'd feel bad rushing them."

What should we do, then? If they take too long with it, that'll put us behind schedule. Wait...is that somebody coming? They look a bit nervous...and like they're in a hurry.

I stopped walking and turned around. When Druid noticed, he did the same, and we both gasped at what we saw. It was Dolgas. When he realized we'd spotted him, he stopped in his tracks, keeping a little distance between us.

Chapter 208: Remorse and Retreat

Err...what an uncomfortable silence. Druid and Dolgas are both still as statues. What did Dolgas come here to do? He couldn't have been running on this very road by coincidence, could he? No...that's not possible.

The uncomfortable silence dragged on. I got the feeling that we would be stuck this way forever if I didn't make a move.

"Er, Mr. Dolgas...is something wrong?"

"No..."

Uhh...is that all? Then is it okay for us to go? "Um, if you don't need anything, we'll be on our way."

"No! Oh! Uh, it's not like that. I, um..."

Something about Dolgas...seemed a bit off. There wasn't a trace of his usual harshness. As I stood there, staring at him, it looked like there was something he wanted to say, but he was having a hard time getting it out.

I cast a cautious glance at our surroundings, and I saw there was a wooden bench a few paces away. Maybe Dolgas would have an easier time talking there? I looked at Druid, meaning to ask him about it...but there was an impressive number of wrinkles on his brow.

"Mr. Druid...you've got an awful lot of wrinkles on your forehead. You already had plenty before, but now you look even older... If the wind changes, you'll stay like that."

"Ivy...do I really look that decrepit to you?"

Druid massaged the wrinkles out. Maybe he was sensitive about that? *I'd better choose my words more carefully around him.*

"Yes—er, I mean no. You don't look at all decrepit." *Darn it... It just slipped out.*

“Honesty is a virtue, I’m sure.”

“Hee hee...” *Let’s just laugh it off!*

“So, uh...” an awkward voice cut in.

Oh, right! I completely forgot Dolgas was here. And hey, I actually remember his name today! Looks like I’ve finally got it down. That’s something to celebrate.

“Why don’t we all sit on that bench to talk?” I suggested to the brothers as I pointed at it.

“Well, Dolgas...what do you say?” Druid asked, his voice a little tense. Dolgas nodded quietly in response.

Oh, good. Now they can talk it out, brother to brother.

“Ivy, I want you to be a part of this.” Druid stared hard at me.

“Yes, please. I want you there, too,” Dolgas cut in before I could say no.

Wow...I never thought I’d hear Dolgas use the word “please” with me. “Okay, I understand.” We’re not going to sink into the nasty atmosphere Dolgas used to bring with him, are we? It’s scary when he gets like that.

When we all sat down on the bench, something seemed amiss. Isn’t this a weird arrangement to sit in? Why am I in the middle? Well, I guess it’s easier for both of them to talk if there’s a wall between them, so I’ll try my best to fill that role...

But rather than talking, the two remained silent.

Oh, come on. Say something.

“Mr. Dolgas?”

“Yeah?” Dolgas flinched, startled by my loud voice.

Mrrrgh...that reaction hurts my feelings a little. “Did something happen?”

“Not really... No, that’s a lie. So, it’s like this...”

“Yes?”

Dolgas’s eyes wandered, like he was searching for the right words.

Meanwhile, Druid finally noticed his brother's unusual demeanor. He looked surprised. *Gee, a bit slow on the uptake, aren't we?*

"I'm sorry. I was wrong."

Druid and I gasped in unison. That apology came way out of nowhere. Did my ears deceive me? Was Dolgas...the infamous Dolgas...*apologizing*?

I pinched my cheek. "Ouch!"

"Ivy, what are you doing?"

"Er, nothing."

Now Druid and Dolgas were both giving me confused stares. I was so embarrassed that I hung my head a little.

"I have just one really good friend..." Dolgas began.

Wow, he has a friend? I'm not sure why, but that's reassuring to hear.

"He has three stars in the cultivation skill."

Hmmm, so he's obsessed with stars even when it comes to his friends? But wow, three stars...this friend of his does sound pretty impressive.

"We always assumed that if a person had a lot of stars, they could accomplish anything."

Yeah, I used to think that way when I was younger, too.

"So when he decided to try and make crops grow on land that only grows ryce, I was supportive of him. I thought he'd get results right away. But...his skill was completely useless. Even with three stars, it meant nothing."

Then why are you so obsessed with stars?

"But if I admitted his stars didn't matter...I was worried that reality would break him."

Wait a minute...was that why he's been such a true believer in stars all this time? For his friend's sake? Come to think of it, Druid's father mentioned that most of the farmers who moved to those barren lands had already given up on their lives. That many of them had turned to crime or become slaves.

"And while my poor friend was struggling to barely make ends meet...you were pulling off big successful missions as an adventurer," he finished, looking at Druid. "I felt like you were taunting me. Making a show of the fact that a person can still do great things with even a small number of stars. I felt so bitter that you were so successful while I couldn't even help out my own best friend."

I guess the weight of one thing after another piling up really got to him, so he hardened his heart to shut out the pain...and only made it worse.

"Whether a person has stars or not doesn't matter... To tell the truth, I knew that all along. But I refused to admit it."

So all that menacing chest-puffing...maybe he was only doing it to protect his ego. The guild master was right—he was quite the coward. That's why he lashed out with anger so much. It was the only way he could deal with his feelings.

"But the strangest thing happened...he *smiled*."

By "he"...I assume he's talking about his friend?

"When he took a bite of the onigiri...he looked so happy. I hadn't seen him smile like that in a very long time." Dolgas suddenly stood up and faced both of us. "I'm sorry for the way I treated you both. I also owe you my gratitude."

Druid and I gasped in unison. Dolgas had bolted away.

"Did you see Mr. Dolgas's face? It was bright red."

"Yeah...I've never seen him like that before. He was all wobbly in the legs, too."

"Yeah."

He had stumbled a little as he was running away. His limbs were probably giving out in embarrassment and nervousness.

"Um, Mr. Druid?"

"Yes?"

"What do you think Mr. Dolgas was trying to tell us?" *I think I have a general sense of it, but still...*

"Hmm... I guess that his friend who was stuck growing ryce was really happy when he learned he could eat it?"

Yeah, I guess that's what he was trying to say.

"And then he wanted to thank us for making his friend's failing rice farm a success."

"Yeah, that's what I thought..."

Druid and I looked at each other...and burst out laughing. We could tell from Dolgas's behavior that he was really embarrassed, but he could have at least explained himself a bit more clearly.

"Do you think it's safe to assume...that he's headed in a good direction?"

"I think so. Mom and Dad will probably be relieved to see it," Druid smirked wickedly. I supposed it was hard for him to forgive his brother right away after the years of verbal abuse he'd suffered.

"Maybe you can all have a nice long talk about it after we get back from our travels. Brother to brother to brother."

After a little time has passed...I just know they can patch things up.

"Yeah... I hope we can."

Chapter 209:

Someday...

“What happened?! Why is Dolgas being so gross?!”

Apparently, Dolgas had apologized to the rest of his family the night before, which was why Shurila was angrily pounding on Druid’s door at the crack of dawn. He rubbed his sleepy eyes and let her vent.

“I mean, can you *get* any more messed up than that? He knew the truth all along? Then fix your behavior sooner, you jerk! You wanted to stop, but you couldn’t? Well, that sounds like a *you* problem!”

Druid and I exchanged awkward smiles. Shurila’s griping just wouldn’t stop.

“I think he just needed a little courage,” I offered.

“Yeah, he did let himself go really rotten, and I’ll admit it’s hard to come back from that. But he brought it all on himself!”

“Well, yeah...that part is true.” I stifled a yawn. We’d been up pretty late the night before planning our trip. Druid seemed to be doing okay, but I was quite sleepy—so sleepy that if I wasn’t careful, I could just nod off then and there.

“First I hear he apologized to you both. Then I came here to see for myself if it’s true, only to find out he half apologized and then ran off. I always knew the guy was an idiot, but I never knew he was spineless to boot.”

Wow, she’s showing him no mercy... Urrrm...I’ve got bleary eyes.

“Seems like his parents already noticed how he’d changed, but it took me completely by surprise. Guess I’m not as wise as I thought I was. But, Ivy, when Dolgas showed up, did he traumatize you at all?”

Who, me? Oh dear...I was slipping into dreamland, wasn’t I?

“Was everything okay? Did he do anything to you?”

Er, what is she talking about?

“Did he hurt you?”

“No, Shurila,” Druid cut in. “Everything’s fine.”

“Yes, everything’s fine.” *I don’t know what she’s talking about, but if Druid says everything’s fine, it must be.*

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Shurila sighed loudly. “I’d be lying if I said I *didn’t* know how Dolgas got so stubborn.”

Huh?

“There were rumors that the guild knew those wastelands only grew ryce when they sold them to the farmers. The guild did everything they could to deny it, but a lot of the town still has hard feelings about it. Things got pretty bad there for a while... People were attacked and their houses were set on fire.”

Wow, that sounds pretty intense.

“And that good friend of his worked so hard to make that land produce after he moved his farm there—this is all according to his mother, mind you. I thought he was an insufferable child obsessed with stars, but I knew he was trying to help out when his friend suffered crop failure after crop failure. He tried so hard to help his friend that I almost respected him for it. But whenever he came home, he’d take out all his anger on us.”

That must have been pretty terrifying. It definitely would have traumatized me.

“Dolgas always was hard to read, but ever since then, his mind has been a total mystery. He was probably just desperate to help his friend.”

Shurila took another deep breath in and out. “But even if we give him all of that, he still let himself get messed up for far too long. It lasted twenty years—*twenty whole years*. No, wait, he was like that even as a kid, so it’s more like thirty years...forty years? It’s way too long, anyway!”

It sounds like she thinks he had a good reason for acting the way he did, but that still doesn’t excuse his behavior. Well, twenty years is long enough as it is. But when it turns into thirty years...or forty years...

She shrugged her shoulders and added, “Then again, my own husband was messed up for a good forty years himself, so I’m one to talk.”

Then there was another knock at the door. Druid went to answer it.

“How’s Druid doing? Did he say anything about Dolgas?” She seemed genuinely worried about Druid. After all, he was pretty good at hiding negative feelings and anger inside.

“I think he’s all right, though he seems a bit disoriented.”

“Aha. Well, Druid does tend to conceal his feelings.”

So she *was* on to him.

“Sorry I got you caught up in our family drama, Ivy.”

“Oh, it’s okay.”

I heard two sets of footsteps coming our way—there was someone else with Druid.

“I thought I’d find you here, Shurila.”

“Oh, hi, Doluka. What brings you here?”

“Um, maybe the surprise and fear of waking up to find my wife was missing?”

Wow. She came here without telling anyone?

“Huh?! But I told your mother I was here.”

“What?! I asked her where you’d gone, but she said she didn’t know...”

Would Druid’s mother really lie like that?

“Let me guess, did you try to talk to her when she was working?”

“Oh, yeah...she was busy with something.”

“Well, that’s your fault, then.”

“You’re right.”

That’s a married couple for you. What they were saying was an utter mystery to me.

Shurila answered my curious look. “Whenever she’s focused on something,

she'll always answer you like she's listening even though she actually isn't. I can't count how many times that's gotten us in big trouble."

Oh, that's interesting. She always seems to have everything together.

"She's always been like that," Druid chuckled.

I guess you can't judge people on outward appearance. Well, I had a prime example of that idea standing right in front of me. I stared at Shurila, who gave me a questioning look in reply. At first glance, she truly looked like your typical damsel in distress, but once she opened her mouth, she was anything but that. You really can't judge a person by how they look, and she taught me that lesson on a visceral level.

"Druid?" said Doluka.

"Yes?"

"I'm sure after everything you've been through, you'll never be able to completely forgive Dolgas. Or me, for that matter."

"Oh, I wouldn't say never..."

"It's okay, you don't have to pretend. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I were in your shoes."

Druid fell silent.

"Someday...when you're feeling up to it, let's have a drink. I'll be waiting for you."

After a few seconds, Druid answered. "Okay."

We stood in the doorway, watching the couple leave. It felt like we'd been under constant assault from a storm since the evening before. I looked at Druid beside me. There was a mixture of confusion and unease on his face, but from time to time...he looked happy. There was a look in his eyes that was difficult to express. His mind was probably swimming with thoughts about everything he'd been through up until that moment. I gave his hand a squeeze.

"Huh?"

"Would you like some breakfast? I'm still sleepy, but I'm hungry, too."

“Yeah...breakfast sounds nice.”

If he takes some time to sort out his feelings...I’m sure that he and his brothers will be able to greet each other with smiles again someday.

“Good morning.”

“Ahh, hey there. Sorry to drag ya all the way out here.”

While we were in the middle of breakfast, we’d received a message from Druid’s mentor. Today was shaping up to be hectic from start to finish.

“Good morning, Mr. Mentor.”

“Druid...what happened?”

“Huh? Er, nothing.”

The old man’s got eyes like a hawk.

“Aha... Well, anyway, that appraisal you asked for came through. Here it is.”

We took the documents, inhaled deeply, and began to read. I’d assumed that the new red magic stone Flame had produced was SSS-level just like the other ones. The real issue was the transparent magic stone—that’s what I was most curious about.

The top sheet of paper said the red magic stone was Level SSS, and I wasn’t at all surprised. I decided to keep it tucked away in my bag unless there was some dire emergency. Then, I looked at the second sheet of paper.

“A transparent SSS-Level magic stone. Type: Shapeshifting.”

“Shapeshifting?” Druid asked. “What does that mean?”

Is shapeshifting magic an actual thing? For that matter, what exactly are we supposed to shapeshift with it?

“Beats me. I looked it up, but none of the books say anything about a magic stone that shapeshifts...or that shapeshifting magic even exists, for that matter.”

In other words...this stone has the power to shapeshift things, but we don’t

know what those things are. Hmm... Level SSS. Shapeshifting.

“If this means Ciel can shapeshift into a smaller version of itself, that would really make me happy.”

“Why?!” both men exclaimed.

“Huh? Well, because if I could make Ciel small, it could always be with me, whether I was in the forest or in town.” It would sure put my heart at ease during the wintertime, too.

“Is that even possible? Nah, it can’t be...”

“You don’t know that for sure, though,” Druid argued. “Sora has done so many spectacular things for Ivy’s sake. Don’t you think Flame might be trying to do what it can to help Ivy, too?”

“Yeah, I guess ya might be right.”

Both men sounded rather serious...but I knew it couldn’t be true. Not even magic was powerful enough to make a living creature bigger or smaller. *It’s impossible...or at least that’s what I think.*

Chapter 210: Shapeshifting

“Are you really going to try it out?”

“Just once, okay? Please, Ivy.”

I glared at the old mentor, but he had begged me. He was determined to test the shapeshifting magic on Ciel.

“What if something bad happens to Ciel? What will you do then?”

“If Ciel doesn’t like it, I’ll stop. In fact, if Ciel doesn’t like it, we’ll all be ripped to shreds in a matter of seconds anyway.”

“Don’t worry, Ivy. I promise Ciel won’t be hurt.”

With a lot of coaxing from Druid and his old mentor, I’d followed them into the forest to look for Ciel. This was all because I’d been secretly thinking how nice it would be if Ciel could shrink down and stay with me all the time.

“You really think it’ll be okay?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, we won’t do anything to Ciel without its permission.”

I wasn’t worried about offending Ciel, I was worried about *hurting* Ciel, especially since neither of the two men had ever heard of shapeshifting magic. *Errm...I shouldn’t have let them come here. Stop it, Ivy, your brain is a jumbled mess again.* As I stood there, working myself up into a tizzy, the bag on my shoulder began to jostle around.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I’ll let you out right now.” I took Sora and Flame out of their bag.

“Pu! Pu! Pu! Pu-puuu!”

“Te! Te! Te! Teryuuu!”

What’s going on? They’re happier than I’ve ever seen them.

“Aren’t they in an especially chipper mood?”

"You think so, too, Mr. Druid?"

"Yeah..."

We both gave the slimes a curious stare, and they responded with a synchronized jiggle. It looked like they really *were* in a chipper mood.

"What's wrong? Something funny?" the old mentor asked, staring at the two slimes.

"Oh, no, we were just wondering why they were in such a good mood."

"Ooh, I didn't know slimes' moods could change," the old mentor marveled. "That's really neat."

That remark confused me at first, but then I remembered how impressed he'd been when I told him how I could communicate verbally and telepathically with the slimes.

"Um, what are most slimes like, sir?"

"Well, they're known for having voices only their tamers can hear. Also, they're expressionless."

A voice only their tamer can hear? Expressionless? Er...expressionless? Well, let's just ask about one thing at a time.

"What kind of voice do they have?"

"I can't say. Never heard it m'self, but tamers can hear a slime's voice in their head if it's hungry."

"They make sounds to tell you they're hungry?"

I looked at Sora and Flame. I'd never heard a sound like that from either of them.

"You've heard it, haven't ya?"

"No. Not at all."

"What?!" both men gasped.

I haven't, right? I searched my thoughts...and found nothing.

"But then how do they let ya know when they're hungry?"

“Sora will slam against the bag I keep their potions in, and Flame will puff out its cheeks and tumble. It started doing that recently.”

“Wow...that’s quite a way of communicatin’. Just so ya know, that’s not normal.”

“I suppose it’s not, but I didn’t know that until just now. There’s nothing wrong with slimes making noises out loud, is there?”

“It’s unusual, but slimes like that do exist. But—hang on a second—hey, Flame, Sora, speak for me.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Slimes never have cute voices like that. The ones I’ve heard are much lower.”

Lower voices... Both of my slimes have rather high-pitched voices. Well, I guess except for that, they still pass for normal slimes.

“I think Ciel is here,” I said.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu. Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Huh? What’s up with Flame? It usually didn’t show that much excitement, but it was clearly overjoyed to see Ciel.

Mrrrow.

“Hello, Ciel. Sorry to come see you at this time of day.”

Mrrrow, Ciel purred, rubbing its entire self against me. I wasn’t sure why, but Ciel also seemed to be in a particularly chipper mood. It was stroking me so hard I almost fell over. Druid had to swoop in to hold me up.

“Er, Ciel...could you please tone it down a little?”

Meowww.

Uh-oh! Now it’s a little upset. “It’s really sweet of you to rub against me so much, but I’m sorry. I’m not strong enough for that yet.”

Mewww?

“Hm? Are you worried about me? It’s okay, I’m fine.” *Aww, you’re so darn*

cute. As I petted Ciel's head, I saw Druid's old mentor closing in on us out of the corner of my eye. I looked at him...and he had full-on gaga eyes. It was kind of off-putting.

"Master...you're grossing me out."

"Ya cheeky little jackass. Wait, Ivy, why're you scooting away from me?"

"Er, your face, sir, it's...uh, never mind."

"See, Master? Even Ivy is grossed out by that sick look on your face."

"I don't think he looks *that* disgusting!" *Wait...did I just say the wrong thing?*

"You...little...brats!" He huffed an exaggerated sigh.

I've been putting my foot in my mouth lately... I need to be more careful.

After getting Ciel's permission, the old master gave the adandara some pats. *Agggh...his face...it's going all gaga again... Oh!*

"Pfft!" Druid spat out his laughter. Ciel's behavior had become too much for him to handle.

"Ciel, don't shove his face like that."

Just when I was thinking about how disturbing the old man's gaga face was, the adandara had pushed it with its front paws. It was almost like it was saying "I don't wanna see that!" And yeah...it was definitely a little gross...disgusting...a disappointment, for sure. But that was still no excuse to cover his face with one's paws.

"Ciel...I thought we had somethin' special!" the old mentor yelled, through his grinning teeth.

"Leave him. He's hopeless," Druid said.

I wanted to ask him exactly what he meant, but I kind of already had an inkling, so I stayed quiet. The old mentor had definitely shattered his heroic image in so many ways. Even Ciel recoiled at the sight of him. To make even powerful monsters shrink back from him...in a way, the old mentor was terrifyingly powerful.

"Now, Ciel. I've come here to ask you something. Ivy?"

“Ciel...if you don’t like it, then feel free to jump away, okay?”

I pulled the transparent magic stone out of my bag and stared at it. The magic stone that was free of any impurities... I was still worried about it, but...hm?

“Um, sir?”

“Don’t worry. We won’t force Ciel to do anything.”

“No, it’s not that. Do you, um, know how to *use* shapeshifting magic?”

Both Druid and his old mentor fell silent. Neither of them seemed to have an answer to my question. Of course they didn’t, since this was an unknown type of magic. How *could* they know how to use it?

“We overlooked a very important step in the plan, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did.”

They were both so excited about their idea that they’d completely forgotten that they didn’t know what they were doing. They were way too brash.

Mrrrow.

“Sorry, Ciel. Thanks for coming to see us, but... Oh! Ciel!”

The men looked over when they heard me cry out. Then their eyes opened wide.

“Ciel, don’t... That’s a magic stone! Spit it out!”

I don’t know what Ciel was thinking, but it chomped the magic stone right out of my hand. I gave its back some nervous taps, but it seemed perfectly calm.

“What should we do, Mr. Druid?”

“Stay calm...Ciel wanted to put the stone in its mouth, so it’s probably okay.”

He may be right...but who just swallows a magic stone whole like that?

“Te! Ryu! Ryuu!” Flame was tumbling all around Ciel in a circle.

“Are you okay?”

Mrrrow.

It seemed fine...but I was really starting to regret testing the magic stone. Ciel

started to shake all over. I took a few frightened steps back...then its body began to glow.

“Ciel!”

I knew we shouldn't have done it. Oh no. What do we do now? I shielded my eyes from the harsh light with my arm...until, little by little, the light disappeared. I cautiously lowered my arm and looked at Ciel.

“What?!”

“Whoa!”

“Ahh, so that's what it does.”

“Pu! Pu! Pu! Pu-puuu.”

“Teryuuu. Te! Teryuuu.”

Where Ciel once stood...there was a slime. And it was shaped like an adandara, too.

“I see...” Druid's mentor grinned. “So, it didn't turn Ciel into a smaller version of itself, it shapeshifted Ciel into a slime.”

His words confirmed that my eyes weren't deceiving me.

Mrrrow.

Even as a slime, Ciel still meowed the same way. It was so funny I was almost moved to tears. But more than that, the tears were because...

“Thank goodness you're all right!” I sighed, softly petting Ciel. And it began to glow again, although it was not as bright this time.

Mrrrow.

“Whoa!” we all gasped.

Ciel's slime shape had changed slightly from before.

“You're so cute...”

This new little slime had adandara ears and a tail. I'd never dreamed a transformation like this was even possible.

“You know...I think the look suits you,” the old mentor said.

All I could do was keep nodding in reply.

“But doesn’t Ciel look a little unusual for a slime?” Druid asked.

Ahh, good point. “Sorry, Ciel, but you’ll have to...”

“No, wait. I’ve read somewhere about slimes with protrusions.”

Protrusions? I looked at Ciel. Its ears and tail...did those count as protrusions?

“Uh, no, Master. I don’t think that’s going to work.”

Ah, too bad. I was hoping it would be okay.

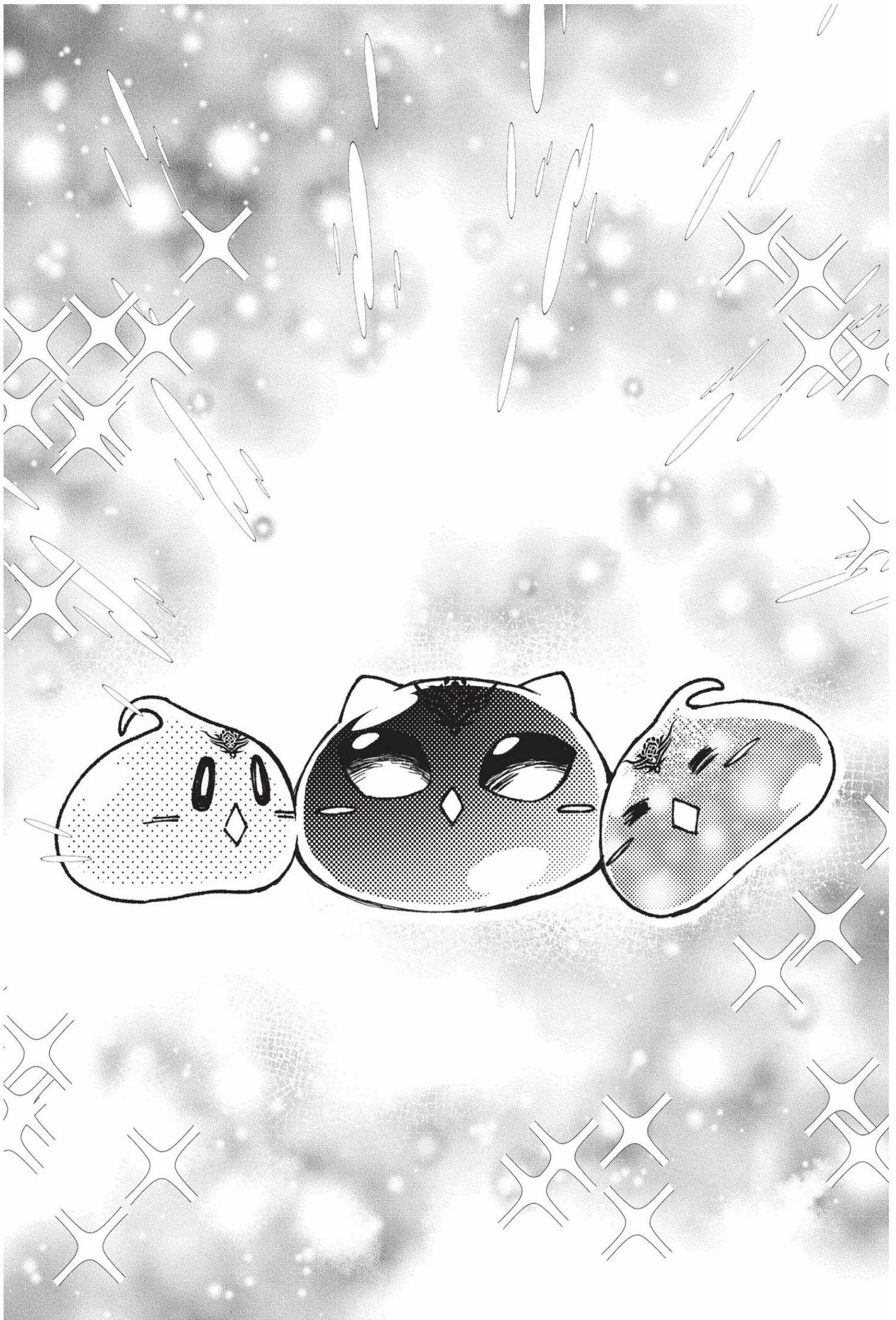
“Aw, don’t worry about it. Besides, even though Ciel’s a slime now, it still can’t just be out in public anyway, can it? That skin pattern is pretty unique.”

Its skin pattern? Yeah, it does have the same skin it did as an adandara. But if it could change its look even more, maybe then I could take it out of its bag when we’re in town?

“Ciel, could you shapeshift the patterns on your skin at all?”

Ciel jiggled itself right and left. *Too bad, guess that’s a no. That means I can’t let it roam freely in town, then.*

“Guess it won’t work,” the old mentor shrugged. “Well, in that case, the ears and tail won’t be a problem. And ya seem to prefer that Ciel be cute anyway, eh, Ivy?”



He's right...if I have to keep Ciel hidden anyway, I'd like it to stay looking like this. Ears and a tail! It's just too cute.

Chapter 211: Almost There

“**W**hat a peculiar sight,” Druid’s mentor remarked. Druid laughed in turn.

Before us were three slimes. When we looked at them in a row, the slime Ciel had shapeshifted into was clearly a little bigger than the other two and its body shape was the same as before—with ears and a tail—so it looked a bit peculiar.

“Have you ever heard of a slime with a similar skin pattern to Ciel’s?” I asked.

He’d mentioned the Ciel-slime had a unique skin pattern, but were there any other slimes like it? The two men paused in thought.

After a while, Druid’s mentor shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve compared a lot of slimes to each other, but I’ve never seen a slime with a speckled pattern like that.”

Speckled? But I think Ciel’s skin is more like a leopard’s. “What about other monsters with that skin pattern?”

“Aside from adandaras?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmm...yeah, I dunno. Then again, it’s not like I know about every single monster out there, so I can’t say for sure they don’t exist.”

“But most people won’t bump into them when they’re out and about,” I suggested.

“Yeah. If ya wanna know about the towns and villages around here, I’m your guy.”

He’s so reliable. “Thank you, sir.”

I looked back at the slimes. Sora was teaching Ciel how to do the vertical stretching exercises. Sora stretched itself as high as it could go, then Ciel copied it. Flame stretched itself in turn...and then flopped over to the side, for some reason.

"Flame is a bit of a klutz, huh?" Druid observed.

I smiled. He was right. Flame's body was pretty solid now, so it should have been able to jump around at will...but it still moved mostly via tumbling. I'd seen it jump many times, but it seemed to have a hard time aiming its landings properly. Though I'm not sure I'd describe Flame as a klutz...more like a ditz.

"I've been wondering about something..." There was a serious look in Druid's eyes that surprised me a little. "That transparent magic stone...do you think Sora, Flame, and Ciel *knew* what it was going to do?"

"Huh?"

"Ya think so, too, Druid?" his mentor asked.

They both think that? I gave each man a curious look.

Druid explained his reasoning. "Remember how all three of them were in a really chipper mood?"

He was right. When I'd taken the slimes out of their bag, they'd been so much more chipper than usual that I was a little worried.

"Looking back with everything we know now, maybe they were so excited because they knew what was about to happen."

Aha...that's definitely possible.

"And when Ciel shapeshifted, neither Flame nor Sora looked surprised—they were happy," Druid's mentor chimed in. "I'm sure they both *knew* that magic stone was gonna turn their friend into a slime."

It all made me think back on what had happened. When Ciel had shapeshifted, I was too freaked out to even notice much of what anyone else was doing, but Druid's mentor had—that's a veteran for you.

"This is great, innit, Ivy? Now Ciel can come with ya into any village or town. It can even stay in your room with ya."

The old mentor's words confused me. "But didn't you say Ciel couldn't come into town because of its skin markings?"

"Hm? Oh, sorry, I worded that wrong. Ya can always hide Ciel in your bag and

take it with ya into villages or towns without anyone seeing it. And now that it's a slime, I can't detect its unique adandara magic, either. You've kept Sora and Flame hidden all this time, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, then ya should have no problem taking Ciel with you into civilization."

He was right. Why hadn't I been able to realize such an obvious fact?

"I'm surprised you didn't think of that yourself, Ivy. Are you tired from worrying about Ciel?" Druid asked with concern, patting my head.

Was I tired? Well, yeah...my heart had been racing nonstop since Ciel swallowed that magic stone...

"Extraordinary things seem to follow ya wherever ya go, Ivy," Druid's mentor chuckled.

I frowned at him a little. "That's *not* a good thing!"

"Whoa! Sorry, sorry," he apologized with an expression that was anything but sorry. But I knew he couldn't help but be himself...and what he'd said was true, too.

"By the way, when're you guys leaving town?" he asked.

Druid and I looked at each other. *That's right...* Now that the matters of the magic stones and our money had been settled, all we needed to do was pack and leave.

"That's a good question," Druid said. "Ivy, I guess we'll be ready to leave once we've saved up enough food for the journey, if you're okay with that?"

Once we've saved up enough food... We needed food for ourselves as well as Sora and Flame, so that would take a little while. After all, we'd be in big trouble if we ran out of potions and swords along the way.

"Yes, that sounds good."

"So, we'll probably leave in two or three days," Druid said.

"Okay. Well, I hope I can come send ya off, but there's no tellin' what I'll be up to then. So, in case I can't see ya, take care, you guys."

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“You take care of yourself, too, Master.”

“Thanks. Oh, I almost forgot! Which way are ya guys going?”

Which way?

“We’re planning on going to Hatow Village,” Druid explained. “We’ve got a long way to travel ahead of us, so we’re going to spend the winter there.”

“Yeah, that *is* pretty far from here.”

He was right. It didn’t look very far on the map, but if we relied too much on that information, it might bite us in the butt later. We needed to be careful.

“Remember that ‘interesting intel’ I mentioned a while back?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Well, there was an incident in Kohl, but they caught everyone. I don’t think Hatow Village will be affected by it.”

That’s good to hear. I don’t know exactly what he did, but at least whatever was wrong has been resolved.

“Thank you very much, sir,” I told him.

“Don’t sweat it. Go see the world and come home a smarter lady.”

“I will, sir.”

“Master...thank you so much for everything,” Druid said, joining me in a bow. And Druid’s mentor patted both our heads in reply.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Sora, Ciel, and Flame chimed in. They all body-slammed the old mentor...all except Flame, who was slamming in a completely different direction. The old mentor’s face started to melt into that perverse gaga look...

“Master...stop being gross.”

"Aw, shaddup. You're pushing it, jackass."

Chapter 212:

Departure

“Take care, you two,” Shurila said. “Ivy, if Druid slacks off on you, kick his butt. You have my blessing.”

“Ha ha ha ha! I don’t think that will be necessary.”

Shurila was being sassy as ever. Her mother-in-law had said the same thing to me a little earlier, too. They really were so alike, even though they weren’t related by blood. Not alike in looks but in words. *Bye, Druid’s father...Doluka... and you, too, Dolgas!*

“Oh, thank goodness I made it...”

“Mr. Guild Master! Was it okay for you to take time off work today?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. But are you really sure you’re okay with me taking *the loot* from you?”

“Yes, sir.”

To be honest, I was grateful to him for taking “the loot”—meaning a set of potions and magic stones—off my hands. I definitely didn’t want to walk around with those powerful rarities in my possession.

Two days before our departure, Druid and I had gone to the dump to collect food for the slimes. Ciel enjoyed a nap in the sun while we did that, and Sora and Flame went straight to eating potions, swords, and spent magic stones, so we let them have their fill.

But then...

After we filled our bags to the brim and returned to the two slimes, we found a mess scattered on the ground around them. Sparkling blue and red potions. Transparent, high-purity magic stones filled with power, and a first for me: a sword adorned with a magic stone.

The scene was so amazing that we both froze at the sight of it. We wanted to

just pretend we didn't see it and move on, but a treasure trove like that would certainly cause problems down the line, so we scooped everything up into our bags and hurried away from the dump. The instant we were safe inside Druid's house, a wave of relief washed over us.

We inspected the haul. There were eight sparkling potions: four blue and four red. Each of the eight bottles was different, so Sora had clearly filled up empty containers from the dump. Seriously, people, please don't throw away perfectly usable bottles!

There were six magic stones that had to be either Level SS or Level SSS, plus fifteen stones of lower levels. And for some reason, there was a sword...a sword with a high-level magic stone embedded in it, at that. Druid said it must be Level SS or SSS, which meant it was probably a true sword. I was surprised that Sora could create swords now, but after everything else I'd experienced, it didn't come as a huge shock. Druid's catchphrase, "Because Sora and Flame are special," had become rather convincing.

Both of the slimes looked quite proud of themselves. They'd probably meant to help instead of pulling a prank on us. I did remember they were staring at us awfully hard when we talked about raising money for the trip. Maybe they figured if we'd sold all the treasures they'd just produced, we could have gone on quite the luxurious journey...which would no doubt lead to rumors and trouble for us, so we couldn't sell the items and we could only use them in emergencies. But since they had done all of this for us, we did thank them, and they were so cute when they jiggled happily in reply.

Just when we were staring at the pile of loot and wondering what to do with all of it, the guild master happened to pop his head into Druid's home. So we forced—no, we *donated* it all to him. He turned us down at first, but we were desperate. We would be nervous wrecks if we had to carry all those treasures in our bags on the road.

We finally managed to convince him to take three red potions and three blue potions, as well as all the magic stones. This was a great weight off our chests; now we could travel with our minds at ease. We told the guild master not to worry about repaying us.

But he insisted, “If you ever need money, contact me at once. I can send you some funds to thank you for *the loot*.”

“Thank you, sir. But *the loot* was a donation, so don’t worry about it.”

“Is that you, Guild Master? Don’t you have to work?” Druid, who had finished speaking with his relatives, joined us. I looked over at his family and saw that Dolgas was with them, too, now. The entire family had come to send him off.

“Don’t worry about me,” the guild master insisted. “So I hear you and Dolgas patched things up?”

“Yeah... You could say that.”

“Well, I’m happy for you.”

“Where’s Master?”

“On an emergency hunting mission. You should’ve heard the way he grumbled and cursed when he left.” The guild master smirked. “Arrrgh, well, *good luck, jackass*.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Okay, Ivy...we should be on our way now.”

“Sounds good.”

We said one final goodbye to everyone and then passed through the gate. Our last farewell was to the gatekeeper. This one had served the longest out of all of them, and he had really helped both of us out a lot. Come to think of it, I never got his name.

“Thanks for everything, sir,” I said.

“No, thank you, kid. You kept our town safe. Take care.”

Wait...huh? The gatekeeper doesn’t know about Ciel, does he? I shot Druid a confused look, and he smiled back at me.

“There’s a veteran gatekeeper for you,” Druid told him.

“Well, I’ve seen my fair share of unusual things over the years, but I never got any solid proof.”

What did he mean by that? Is it...what I think it is? "Will you please keep our secret, sir?"

"Of course."

"Thank you very much." Druid bowed, and I hastily did the same.

"See ya later."

"Sure thing."

What was that all about? I was dying with curiosity, so I asked Druid once we were safely out of earshot. "Mr. Druid, did the gatekeeper find out about Ciel?"

"The thing about him is...all those years of experience have given him the intuition to know what's really going on in any situation."

Intuition from years of experience... That's pretty cool.

"He probably pieced it together from the rumors of that *very strong monster* that started popping up the minute you arrived in town and how neither I nor the guild master ever tried to stop you from going into the forest. There were many other clues, but he likely figured out that the monster was connected with you, Ivy, and that it protected the town."

Yeah, I guess the truth is kinda easy to figure out once you put all the pieces together. I'll need to be a little more careful from now on.

"By the way, I was surprised to see Dolgas there."

"Yeah...he told me to give you his regards. Also, Mom made us a box lunch for the trip."

"Is it heavy? I can't wait to see it."

"It's heavy beyond all imagination."

Beyond all imagination? Just how many people did she pack for...?

I looked up at Druid, and he looked quite pleased despite what he was saying. His relationship with his brothers was still a little strained, but I was sure everything would be okay the next time they saw each other.

I perked up my senses for auras in our general area...then I double-checked with my eyes. *Okay. We're alone.*

“Mr. Druid, let’s head farther into the forest.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

When I was traveling with Sora, Flame, and Ciel as an adandara, it was safest to choose a route that was deep in the forest, so that’s where we were going to walk, just as I’d done when I traveled alone.

“I think this spot should be okay.” I opened the slime bag, and Sora and Ciel both jumped out of it eagerly. It had only taken Ciel a day to master the art of jumping. All that graceful bounding through tree branches had clearly trained the creature well.

Then there was Flame...who jumped out of the bag and promptly went splat on the ground. *Yup. You’re definitely a ditz.*

“You okay?” I asked, picking up Flame and wiping the dirt off its body.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Well, it doesn’t seem hurt, so it’s probably fine. “Ciel, it’s okay for you to turn back into your true form now. We’re going to be in the forest for a while until we reach Hatow Village.”

Mrrrow, Ciel trilled, dissolving in a beam of bubbling light and turning back into an adandara. I’d already seen the creature shapeshift many times so far... but the sight still stunned me. I couldn’t help but worry that it would hurt itself.

“Do you feel okay, Ciel? Anything hurt?”

Mrrrow.

It was happily rubbing its face all over me, so it must have been fine. What a relief.

“Pu! Pu! Puuu!” Sora chirped, jumping really high and landing on top of Druid’s head.

“Sora, if Druid gets tired, you should come down, you hear?”

“Puuu.” For some reason, Sora sounded upset.

“Sora. If Druid gets tired, you’re coming right down. Got it?”

“Puuu!”

“Okay, maybe I should make you come down right now.”

“Pu-pu, pu-pu, pu-pu!” Sora snapped, wiggling its hips from side to side.

Was this its version of taunting me?

“Then at least promise me you’ll come down.”

“...Pu-pu, puuu.”

The pause concerned me a little, but I assumed it would be okay since Sora had promised me.

“It gets funnier every time I see it.”

“Mr. Druid, please don’t encourage Sora, okay?”

“Ha ha ha. Aye, ma’am.”

Druid seemed to have a soft spot for anyone who’d been trapped in a bag. I got the really strong sense that he felt the same way about me. *I’d better keep him in check... I don’t want him being too soft on me.*

SIDE:
The Guild Master and His Mentor

Pov: The Mentor

“Hey there.”

I opened the door to find Alumi organizing a heaping pile of documents. Gotos was hunched over on his desk beside her.

“Hello, sir. Have you finished?”

“Yeah. You, too?”

“I finally reached a stopping point, yes.” There was a bit of snark in her voice.

She’d finally finished the mountain of work that Gotos had let pile up. But dang...how did that guy even manage to fall so far behind?

“Guild Master, once we’re done, please actually ask for help when you need it from now on. You’ll only make things worse if you don’t.”

“Yes, ma’am... Thank you for all the help... Can I please go home now?”
Gotos’s voice was hoarse with fatigue.

“Yes, I suppose you can go home. Enjoy a well-earned rest. But you’re going right back to the grind tomorrow!”

“Ah...yes, ma’am.” The guild master looked like he was going to talk back to her, but he thought better of it. He simply shut up and smiled.

“Well, Master, if you’ll excuse me...” Alumi said.

“Make sure ya rest up good, too, Alumi. Sorry ya had to deal with this blockhead.” She was always a star among my apprentices, and she still never ceased to impress me.

“Oh, I have my baby to soothe my soul, so I’ll be fine.”

“As it should be. Say hi to the husband for me.”

“You’d better get home and rest up, too, Master.”

There was a spring in Alumi’s step as she left—she must have been excited to see her baby. I sat down in a chair across from Gotos.

“So...are those crazy kids gone now?”

“Yeah. Ivy left a message saying *Good luck with your work. Please don’t push yourself too hard.*” Gotos tried to mimic Ivy’s tone with his own gravely voice, and the results were rather gross.

“Cut that out. It’s giving me the creeps.”

“Rude.”

I showed Gotos the bottle of hard liquor I’d brought with me, took out some cups, and poured the wine.

“To the two travelers,” we said, raising our glasses and gulping the wine down in one swig. The burning sensation tickled my throat... *Damn, I love that.*

“What a strange child Ivy is,” Gotos said.

I thought of Ivy...and yeah, definitely a strange kid. I took my magic item out of my bag and activated it so nobody could hear us talking.

“So, how much do ya know?”

“What do you mean?”

“About Ivy.”

“I suppose you mean that Ivy’s a tamer who has two rare slimes named Sora and Flame, has memories of a past life, and has no stars?”

Aha. Not clear if he has all the info, but he at least knows as much as I do.

“Oh, and Ivy also gave me potions and magic stones.”

“Oh... *What?!*”

“Sparkling blue and red potions. And some very powerful magic stones—Level SSS, I think?”

“That damn fool! Did you actually accept them? Did you pay?!”

“I tried to pay but got turned down. Was told it was a donation.”

Wait a minute, red potions? I thought Flame was the slime that ate illness-healing red potions. So this means it can also make potions now? Wait, yeah, I think Ivy did mention once that Flame cured illnesses... Things were so hectic back then that I forgot to ask for more details. But still...why more magic stones and potions?

“Did the slimes want them to be donations?”

“No, no, according to Druid, the slimes made those things when they were at the dump gathering what they needed for their travels, and they were too nervous about taking such valuable stuff with them on the road, so they donated them.”

So that's how it went. Sora and Flame might've made those items to sell for the travel fund, then.

“Okay. Well, don’t use them just any ol’ time. Only in extreme emergencies.”

“Of course I won’t. And I told Ivy and Druid to get in touch if they ever needed money. If I ever do use any of the magic items, I doubt I’ll be able to reimburse them what they’re really worth, but I do intend to pay.”

“Okay. I guess that’ll do.” Arrrgh. Still, it’d be real nice if they didn’t have to drop a big bombshell right before they left.

“Oh, wait, Master! One more thing. Those fools who tried to bring blessed incense into our town have been sentenced.”

“Ah. *The blessed incense.* “So, what’s the verdict?”

“The eighth-generation shopkeeper—the one who tried to smuggle the blessed incense—was sentenced to fifty-five years as a slave, and the seventh-generation one got the same punishment for collaborating. The remaining criminals were sentenced to thirty years of slavery.”

Right...if I recall correctly, the guy he just called “the eighth generation” used to run Oll’s number one shop.

“Why were they messing with blessed incense, of all things?”

“When the eighth generation took over the business, sales plummeted, so he set his sights on blessed incense to bring his business back to life.”

But...how could blessed incense possibly do that?

“So the seventh generation heard about this and decided to help the eighth generation to get back at the sixth generation.”

“Are they braindead?”

Gotos smirked at the word. The sixth-generation shopkeeper was the innovator who had made his business the most acclaimed in town, but he hadn’t achieved that success overnight. He’d started young, promoting his shop all over town until it had caught on. I remembered this well, since he’d spoken about it so passionately when we’d had a drink together once.

“Well, no matter. By the way, what were they gonna do with the blessed incense once they got it into Oll?”

“Huh? Didn’t I tell you?” he asked, tilting his head. That gesture was always adorable when Ivy did it, but Gotos’s version made my eyes bleed.

“I ain’t heard nothin’.”

“Oh. Well, he wanted to get monster meat and magic stones with it.”

“What?!”

“He would lure the monsters into town, then hire adventurers to hunt them. See, the further adventurers have to go out to hunt, the more they cost, so he figured it would be a lot cheaper to bring the monsters to town instead.”

What kind of stupid-ass plan is that?

“Also, freshness is important when it comes to meat. He said he could sell the monster meat at higher prices if they were killed close to town. After all, meat is an exception when it comes to magic bags. You have to put it in there immediately after it’s hunted, or it gets less fresh and the price goes down.”

“Yeah, all of that does actually make sense...” I sighed.

So they were going to use blessed incense to lure monsters to town. Meanwhile, the monsters had gone berserk, which made them far more dangerous than normal, and *those* were the monsters they were luring to town. They were genuine blockheads, the lot of them. We were seriously lucky that Ivy discovered the blessed incense.

"So what's gonna become of those blockheads' shop?" *Is anyone in line to take it over?*

"The sixth generation is still alive, so he's running things for now."

"Aha. But I'd heard rumors that the eighth generation was full of promise ... Unless those were lies?"

"Oh, the rumors definitely weren't lies. But it would be better to say he had the *potential* to be full of promise."

Potential?

"He had two skills related to business and three stars in each."

"Three stars, eh? Yeah, ya *would* expect great things from him."

Well...it doesn't matter if ya got one star or three stars unless you've got the experience to back it up. Ya can't possibly get good at something without putting in any effort... The world ain't a fairy tale.

"I've noticed...more and more poor bastards are relying too much on their stars and failing as a result." *Does this mean it's become more common to think that more stars mean less work? Damn stupid if ya ask me.*

"I think you're right, Master, though at one point I believed there was an advantage in having more stars."

"Ya whaaat?"

"Please don't get angry! It's just that Alumi does her job flawlessly, and she has more stars than me."

Oh, does she? I forgot.

"But meeting Ivy made me realize how wrong I was. Ivy insists it's because she has these memories from her past life to rely on, but memories and knowledge aren't enough. You have to be able to use them wisely."

Damn straight. The more ya read, the more ya know. But if ya want to use any of that knowledge in real life, ya need experience and intuition. And those are things no number of stars can ever improve.

"Looks like you, Druid, and I all met a valuable ally."

“Indeed we did.”

She really is an enigma. “I only hope she comes back while I’m still alive.”

“Oh, I’m sure *you’ll* still be alive, Master.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re not the type of person who’d let himself die, no matter what happens. Ha ha ha.”

Was that a compliment or a dig? Gotos was pretty hard to read when he got all drunk and happy.

“Master...Guild Master...*why* are you both like this?!”

Alumi’s screeching voice rang through my hung-over head. We’d gotten carried away with our drinking last night, and before we knew it, the sun was up.

“Are you even *listening* to me?!”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry,” we squeaked in unison.

There were more than ten empty liquor bottles strewn about on the table. *Funny. I don’t remember drinkin’ that much...*

Chapter 213: Traveling with Ivy

We were three days into our journey to Hatow Village, and Ciel had been zipping ahead of us in the forest for about an hour.

“Er, Ivy?”

With my eyes glued to my feet, I loudly answered, “Yes?”

Since we weren’t exactly walking on a proper road, Druid was behind me instead of beside me. The ground was crawling with vines, so we had to watch our step.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“...I don’t know?”

“Aha... Argh...is it always like this?”

Like this? Like what? “Um, I don’t quite follow.”

“I mean...when you traveled alone, did Ciel always run ahead and lead you down treacherous paths like this?”

“Come to think of it, yes.”

Earlier this morning, we were still walking down a fairly easy path near the road to Hatow Village. But along the way, Ciel had changed course and sent us deep into the forest. I was used to it, so I followed the adandara without question, but...was there a problem with that?

Oh, now I get it! This is Druid’s first time traveling with Ciel...so he doesn’t know Ciel is guiding us somewhere. That was my mistake. I guess I should have explained that to him.

“Um, Mr. Druid, whenever Ciel goes deep into the forest like this, it’s because there’s something worth exploring up ahead.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Sometimes it’ll be medicinal nuts, sometimes it’ll be rare healing herbs... so it’s always a good idea to follow Ciel’s lead.”

“Oh. But isn’t it dangerous to wander deep into the forest with such a small party?”

Dangerous? I haven’t had any problems up until now.

“Hmm...I’ve never been attacked by monsters or animals. And Ciel warns me if there’s a dangerous cliff or something up ahead.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

Mrrrow, Ciel trilled proudly. It must have been listening in on our conversation.

“Well...I guess it’s okay then.”

Oh, good. Druid seems fine with trusting Ciel’s judgment now. “It’s always exciting, though, wondering what might be up ahead.”

“Ha ha ha. Well, I’m nervous.”

“Nervous?”

“Yeah. Even though Ciel is with us, we’re terribly vulnerable when we’re this deep in the forest.”

Nervous...is he scared? Worried? “But we’ll be okay, you know?”

Druid laughed again.

His words gave me pause, but I still followed Ciel. After walking for a while longer, we came upon a very large tree. A tree with blue fruit.

“Oh! This must be the blue forest fruit the guild master told me about.”

“Looks like it. Do you know what it’s called?”

“It’s a really long name that’s hard to remember. *Totorasera sera...*”

“See? You remember it.”

“No, I don’t. There’s more to it.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. I’ve heard it’s called *toto* and *totosera* in other villages and towns... They each call it by a different name, but shopkeepers everywhere recognize the blue fruit.”

Totorasera seratora... What came next? I tried to remember it but couldn’t. It was a tongue-twister of a name.

Mrrrow. Ciel plonked down at the root of the big tree, so this must have been where it meant to lead us.

“Thanks, Ciel. We’ll pick as much fruit as we can.”

I took out my bag and began to harvest the blue fruit. With Druid helping, the bag got filled a lot faster than I thought it would.

“Wow, that’s a lot of fruit,” Druid marveled.

“The guild master recommended this fruit since its price doesn’t go up and down. That’s why I got a bunch.”

“Oh, okay.”

I hoisted the bag up in my arms, but Druid yanked it away from me.

“Mr. Druid?”

“C’mon, I’ve got this.”

Should I just let him take care of it? Well...yeah, we’re going to pick up all kinds of other things, so he can take care of handle the blue fruit.

“Okay, thanks. I’ll carry the next thing we find.”

“Ha ha ha. I appreciate it, thanks.”

After we picked the blue fruit, we took a little break. Since there were so many trees where we were, that meant a lot of shade and a chilly temperature. Up until just a little while ago, I’d thought it was pleasantly cool.

“I’m really surprised how far into the forest this fruit is,” Druid said.

“Me, too. This blue fruit and the yellow one grow really deep in the forest.”

“The yellow fruit...it’s called hakuto, right?”

“Yes. And I love it.”

“I’ve never had it.”

“It’s very sweet and so yummy.”

“Do you think it would bring in a lot of money, too?”

“Not sure. The last time I picked some, I ate them all up.”

“I see... Well, I seem to remember it was around the same price as the blue fruit,” Druid mumbled quietly. I couldn’t hear him very well.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

What’s wrong? His face looks a bit tense. Is he just tired? “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Well, we’d better get going.”

As soon as Druid said that, Ciel leapt to take the lead.

“Um...I should follow Ciel, right?”

“Yes. We have no idea where we are, anyway.”

Whenever you followed Ciel in the forest, you would lose all sense of direction and wind up relying on the adandara for everything. At first, I thought I could at least try to keep track of which direction we were going in, but it was futile.

“Fair point. Well, lead the way, Ciel.”

Mrrrow.

I looked up at the sky peeking between the trees. I’d noticed that it had been getting dark earlier lately. At our current speed, I wasn’t sure we would make it back to a path near the village road before nightfall.

“Ciel, let’s look for a place to camp.”

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Teryuuu.”

Oh, did Flame wake up? I opened the bag to find Flame yawning. “Good morning... I mean, good evening, Flame.”

Wait...huh? Was Flame yawning just now? Hmm, has it ever yawned before? Well, whatever.

“Camp? Um...Ivy...do you know anything about this area—wait, no, of course you don’t.”

“No, sir.”

Druid looked a bit troubled. *He’s been acting a little strange all day. Is he really just tired? If he is, we should turn in early for the night.*

“Sora, will you do the honors?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu. Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora chirped cheerfully, searching the area. Then it spotted something and bounded off.

“Let’s follow.”

“Ahhh...okay.”

His voice sounded quite lackluster. *He sure must be tired.*

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora cheered, jumping up and down. Druid and I chased after it, and, after a while, we found the slime jiggling at the mouth of a big hole in a tree trunk. Apparently, this was the best place to sleep.

“Thanks, Sora.” I carefully peeked inside and found it was big enough for Ciel to fit, too. There were no signs that monsters had been there lately, either. It looked safe.

“Mr. Druid, let’s sleep here for the night.”

“Ha ha ha. That’s funny. Sure.”

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Ha ha ha.”

How strange. He can’t even talk properly. Is he really that tired? We’re still only three days into the journey.

Mrrrow.

“What’s up, Ciel? Something wrong?”

Mrrrow.

“Mr. Druid, I’m going to follow Ciel because it’s found something. You seem tired, so you should stay here and rest.”

“Huh? Oh, but I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not fine. You’ve been acting a little off all day.”

“Well...it’s just because this journey is turning out to be much more intense than I thought it would be...”

An intense journey? But I don’t feel like we’ve done anything particularly unusual. I gave Druid a curious look, and he just smiled back at me.

“Well, um, go ahead and rest anyway, okay?”

“Okay... I’ll set up our sleeping things.”

“Er, but then you won’t be resting.”

“I’m fine.”

“Really? Please don’t push yourself too hard. Well, um, look after Flame for me.”

I’m a little worried, but it’s already getting dark. I’ll just get whatever Ciel wants me to pick up as quickly as possible and return right away.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Be careful out there.”

“Flame, traveling with Ivy sure is intense, isn’t it?”

“Teryuuu.”

“I never dreamed she’d take us deep into the forest like this without packing anything we need... I’m a veteran adventurer and even I’m a little spooked.”

“Teryuuu.”

“And Sora just stumbles onto the perfect sleeping spots in the middle of the

forest, too. That slime really is amazing.”

“Teryuuu.”

“And from the way Ivy’s behaving, I guess all of this is normal to her.”

“Teryuuu.”

“Could it be...that I’ve gone and joined a very rare type of party?”

“Teryuuu.”

“Come to think of it, we’re so deep in the forest, but I haven’t seen any monsters or animals... Ciel’s presence sure is powerful, I guess.”

“Teryuuu.”

“Flame...are you even listening to me?” I stared at Flame, and it stared right back at me. Looking into its little eyes calmed me somehow. “Thanks. I’ll do my best to get used to it.”

“Ryu!”

Chapter 214: Spelunking with Ivy

We walked through the forest with Ciel leading the way. Since the trees were a bit thinner now, Druid was able to walk next to me. I stole a glance at him. He'd been acting strangely ever since we got into the forest. He'd been mumbling under his breath more and more, and it even seemed like he was having conversations with Flame. If something was wrong, I wished he would talk to me about it...

Mrrrow.

I looked at Ciel and saw there was a large cave a little ahead of us. Its mouth was also fairly wide. Ciel wanted us to go in there.

"If you think that cave is safe, Ciel, I'm happy to follow along."

"Huh?!" Druid yelped in shock. I looked at him and saw his brow was heavily creased.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

Yay! I finally sounded casual! He had said we should be more easygoing with each other since we were travel companions, but I'd noticed my speech around him was still stilted—filled with "Sir" this and "Mister" that.

At first I was a little uncomfortable speaking to an elder so casually, but Druid had said, "We're family now. Isn't it a little weird to call me Mister and Sir all the time?" so I'd been trying to think of conversations with him as chats between a father and child. To be honest, I felt very shy about it, but it was also an extremely happy feeling to think that I could be part of a real family just by changing the way I spoke.

Druid smiled and shook his head in response to my question. It was an action I'd seen a lot from him over the past few days. *Maybe we should have a talk about it...*

Mrrrow.

“Oh! Sorry, Ciel. Come on, Mr. Druid, let’s go.”

“Ha ha ha. Of course.”

Was there a reason for him to laugh? Is he just tired? But we’ve only been walking about four hours. With a confused frown on my face, I followed Ciel into the cave.

“Ivy, do you always just wander into a cave whenever you see one?”

“Um, no? Only when Ciel says we should go in. It’s dangerous otherwise.”

“Oh, so you at least understand that concept?”

Understand what concept? “Um, what do you mean?”

“I was just worried that maybe you didn’t understand how dangerous caves were, since you just waltz in like it’s no big deal.”

“Oh, of course I know they’re dangerous. That’s why I only go in if Ciel goes in first.”

“Okay... So if Ciel says a cave is safe, does that mean there are no monsters inside?”

“No, there are monsters.”

“There are?”

He looked awfully shocked. Did I say something strange? “Yes. Um, is there a problem with that?”

“Do you mean they’re not scary monsters?”

“Scary monsters? Well, I often don’t know what kind of monsters they are, since caves are dark.”

“Okay...”

“Well, they *are* scary if they howl at you out of nowhere. But Ciel shuts them up right away if that ever happens.”

“Er... That’s interesting.”

It was definitely scary whenever monsters or animals howled at me in a dark cave, but Ciel always made them stop so quickly that I would only be scared for

a second or two.

“Oh! Take those monsters over there—I see them a lot on my travels.”

Druid looked over to where I was pointing...and for some reason, he froze. There were five large monsters with fangs and claws, a type that I’d seen relatively often in caves. They usually liked to hang out by cave mouths, so they were one monster I’d been able to get a good look at. I’d looked them up in books but couldn’t find them, so their name was a mystery to me. When this pack of monsters saw us, they all began to howl at us.

Hiss! Ciel snapped, stepping protectively in front of us.

The pack fell silent, then all of them flopped onto the floor submissively when they saw Ciel, meaning that they would not bother us anymore. The first time this happened, I was absolutely terrified. But after experiencing it many times, I’d learned that when monsters flop to the ground like that, it meant they would not attack you.

“The monsters are...prostrating themselves?”

“Yes. Whenever they do that, it’s a signal they won’t attack you, not even if you turn your back to them.”

“I...didn’t know about that. Wow, how about that...”

Huh? Maybe it’s just because we’re in a cave, but Druid’s face looks awfully pale. “You look sick... Would you like to lie down?”

Druid slowly shook his head. “I’ll be fine... Once I get used to this, I won’t have any problems.”

Get used to what? Is there something I need to do, too? “Is there something I should get used to as well, sir?”

“No, Ivy...you’ll be fine. I *guarantee* it.” His tone was very firm, like he was sure of it.

Still feeling a little confused, I walked past the pack of monsters. No matter how many times I’d seen them, it was still hard to ignore their sharp claws and huge fangs. If they did attack us, we wouldn’t last a second.

“So you actually go pretty deep into the caves, huh?” Druid remarked.

"Yes, I guess I do. I'm not sure how deep Ciel is going to take us today, sir." I checked on the adandara ahead of us. Its tail was still wagging softly downward, so that meant we were still a little bit away from our destination. *Gee, I'm kind of excited to see what we'll encounter next.*

"Ivy...you're calling me 'sir' again."

Am I? Dang, and I was trying extra hard not to. "I'm sorry, I'll be more careful, sir—I mean, I'll be more careful."

"Hah! Your old habit comes back whenever you try to form longer sentences."

"Does it?" He may be right. I do tend to get pretty preoccupied with other things.

Mrrrow.

Aha! Ciel's tail wagging just got a bit more intense. And its voice has raised a bit in pitch, too.

"Looks like this is the place." I took stock of our surroundings...but there wasn't much to look at. All I could make out were some black rocks sticking out among the larger boulders. Other than that...there was nothing.

"Mr. Druid, do you know why Ciel chose this place? I'm having a hard time figuring it out."

Druid was carefully observing the rocks between the boulders. Was that what Ciel had wanted to show us? The black rocks?

"Ciel, is this what you wanted us to find?" I asked, touching one of the rocks. It was cool to the touch and felt wonderful—I was probably a little overheated from all that walking.

Mrrrow.

"I don't know why...but I'm feeling kind of scared now."

Druid's words confused me. There weren't any monsters around us, so what was he scared of?

"Mr. Druid, what are those black rocks?"

"They're blackstones. You make true swords out of them."

“Blackstones... They’re named exactly what they look like, huh?” Did whoever named them just go off outward appearance?

“No, they have a proper name, but it’s hard to remember. Sorry.”

Wow, it’s unusual for Druid to forget things.

“So, are you going to collect these?”

“Of course!”

“Yeah...I shouldn’t be surprised.”

I tugged on one of the black rocks protruding from the boulders. *Did it move a little? Maybe if I pull a little harder, I can actually get it out.* I grabbed the blackstone and yanked with all my might.

Pop!

“Ha ha ha. I actually got one.”

It was surprising just how easy it was to get it out from the boulders. I looked at the blackstone I’d just picked. It was about as big as one of Druid’s fists, a bit larger than I was expecting. I reached out to grab another...

“The rock you just picked out is enough for three swords, you know.”

“What?! Just from this one rock?”

“Yep. You just mix a little of the ore into the metal when you forge a true sword.”

“Oh, really...” I lowered my arm from the boulder and looked at the blackstone in my hand. It could make three whole true swords...

Mrrrow? Ciel sounded a little worried. It was probably wondering why I’d only picked one rock.

“Sorry, Ciel. But he says this can make three true swords, so I think just one rock is plenty.”

If Druid hadn’t been with me, I would have gathered a lot more and sold the lot at once. Good thing he was here.

Mrrrow, Ciel trilled in understanding, swishing its tail side to side a bit more

energetically. Its tail hit the cave walls a little *too* energetically, and blackstones started tumbling out of the boulders.

“Do you...think we should pick these up?”

Druid sighed. “I think Ciel wants us to.”

“Agreed. And I just can’t say no to those soulful eyes...”

We went ahead and put the displaced blackstones into our bag. We had about a dozen, and some of them were pretty big, too.

“We’ll have to sell these little by little, won’t we, sir?”

“Yeah...especially the biggest ones. We should be extra careful with those.”

Just how much money would we get from all the blackstones we now had in our bag? The thought scared me a little—not as much as Druid earlier—but it still scared me.

Chapter 215: Druid and the Guild Master

After we collected the blackstones, Ciel showed us where some other precious gems were, so we added those to our collection as well. I mean, this cave...it was ridiculous. And I was scared to look in my bag. Druid kept saying we would definitely become walking targets if we sold all of our loot in the next town we came to.

“Ciel sure is amazing,” Druid marveled as he stared at the clear gemstone he’d just excavated.

I cast Ciel an admiring glance...and saw that it was already trying to guide us to yet another treasure. I nervously put a stop to it. I just couldn’t bear the thought of fearing my bag’s contents more than I already did.

“We already have enough—more than enough. Thank you, Ciel.”

Mew!

It sounded upset, but for my own peace of mind, I couldn’t take any more. Besides, we needed to start looking for a place to sleep.

“Mr. Druid, we have to find a place to sleep, don’t we?”

“We sure do. We should probably head out of this cave soon. Also, you’re calling me ‘Mister’ again,” he said, with a firm pat on my head.

“Huh?!” *I’m back to my old habit? Gee, it sure is hard to change old habits.*
“Sora, found any great places to sleep yet?”

“Pu, pu, puuu,” Sora chirped, bouncing along inside the cave. We chased after it until it veered off the main path and into a hole.

“Looks like that’s the best place to sleep tonight.” I followed Sora into the opening. It was a narrow entrance, but the area inside was spacious. “Is this spot all right, Mr. Druid—oops! I mean, is this okay?”

Druid didn’t answer.

“Mr. Druid?”

“Oh! Right...inside the cave...”

“Yes?”

“No, I’m okay. Sora says it’s safe, after all.”

That was too quiet to hear. I hope he’s going to be okay.

We crawled into the hole Sora took us to and searched for monster tracks. There were some traces of creatures, but everything looked safe. I took the bag off my shoulder so I could set out our sleeping mats. I looked over at Druid and noticed he was talking with Flame about something. Had he learned to communicate with the slime?

“Mr. Druid...let’s get ready for bed?”

“Oh! Sorry. Yeah, I’ll help. We probably shouldn’t build a fire since we’re in a cave and all.”

“Yup.”

I made sure not to light fires in caves since I’d heard other adventurers say it was dangerous. However, I didn’t know *why* they thought that.

“Why isn’t it safe to build fires in caves, sir?” *Oops! I called him “sir” again.* Druid saw my expression and laughed. I guess my surprise at myself was clear.

“It stirs up monsters and lures them to you, and there’s no escape route in a cave. Also, you put yourself in danger of asphyxiation.”

That made sense. I had heard stories about somebody’s campfire riling up a monster into attacking. Animals may be scared of fires and keep their distance, but that wasn’t always the case with monsters. I looked around and noticed there was only one entrance to our sleeping area. If a monster stood in front of it, we’d have no way out.

“Still, this is all new to me,” Druid said. “I’ve never spent the night in a cave with a traveling companion.”

“What do you mean?”

Druid sighed. “Well, if we see monsters at a cave entrance, we won’t go in

there in the first place.”

“But those monsters aren’t a threat anymore, remember?” They’d prostrated themselves before Ciel and surrendered to its power, so they wouldn’t attack us.

“I’ve never heard of an adventure party including a monster of Ciel’s caliber.”

“Well...you might find one if you look hard enough.”

“No, I definitely would’ve gotten word of a party like that. That’s just how ridiculous it would be.”

Wait a minute... Are we really that different from other adventure parties?
“Mr. Druid...is our journey not exactly...”

“There is no right or wrong when it comes to traveling. It’s free, and I like it that way.”

So...are we really that different from the others? I looked over at Druid, and he smiled back at me.

“Wait a minute... Are you and I really that unique?” *Um...now I’m feeling a little insecure.* I had traveled a little with Rattloore’s party, but all we did was walk along the village road back to town. I had no idea what a *normal* journey was supposed to look like.

“We’re a little...we’re *quite* unique, I guess.”

He backpedaled! “Is that so?”

“Yeah... Well, anyway, it’s getting late. Let’s make camp and get dinner ready.”

We made our beds. I even set out a mat for Ciel, who wagged its tail happily at the sight of it. Our dinner was one I hadn’t had in a while: dried meat and fruit. The past few days on the road, we’d still done some cooking—albeit simple—so this was our first time having dried meat. This journey was a lot more luxurious than the ones I’d been on at the beginning.

“So, Mr. Druid, what exactly makes my traveling style unique? How is it different from journeys you’ve had with other adventurers?”

"Hmm...well, I suppose since you'll probably travel with other people in the future, it's best you learn a few things now."

"Yes, please." *It won't necessarily be just the two of us on this journey forever, and I need to be careful not to do or say the wrong things when other people are around.*

"For starters, like I just said, we never sleep in caves with monsters—not unless we don't want to ever wake up."

I guess I really do have Ciel to thank for my ability to sleep in caves.

"Second, we're traveling way too light to go this deep into the forest. You'd never go with a party this small, either. This entire location is a problem, for that matter. You can't pinpoint it on a map, so we have no idea where we are. And for that matter, I've never heard of a slime being the one to pick where you make camp."

It's really that different? I guess...I'd better think over his points one by one. Okay, so, we're traveling too light to go this deep into the forest? I looked around me. There was my magic bag filled with everything I'd need for the journey, and the other one containing food for my slimes. Then there was my magic bag filled with things I'd collected in the forest and the bag to carry my slimes in. Common magic bags sure are efficient. Without them, this would have been a pretty tough journey to make. Wait, I'm getting off track here. Am I really traveling too light?

"When I say we're traveling too light, I mean that we don't have any fighting supplies."

Now it was making sense. None of the things I was just thinking of even touched upon that. Fighting supplies? I cast my eyes toward the sword beside Druid. Its magic stone was shining clearly. That was all we had.

"I guess we *are* traveling a little light."

"Yeah, you need a lot of equipment when you travel deep into the forest. You'd never take just one sword, not even by accident."

Argh... Druid might have had a lot of concerns about our journey. Now I feel awful. So what was his next point... The party size?

“So, what’s a normal size for a party traveling into the forest?”

“Make that *deep into the forest*. And very deep indeed.”

Druid was absolutely right. Judging by the types of trees and grasses growing here, we’d clearly gone quite far into the forest.

“I’m not sure what the correct answer is, but I’d say eight people at least.”

“Eight people?!” *What?! Is that many really necessary?*

“Well, the deeper into the forest you go, the greater the number and type of monsters you’ll encounter.”

He was right; there *were* more monsters here. I couldn’t sense any auras approaching us with a quick search, but I was well aware that there was a large number of monsters around.

“You’d need at least eight people in your party, including whoever’s staying up to keep watch.”

“So, wait... If other adventurers happened upon us here, would they think we were really odd?”

“They absolutely would.”

I was glad I’d always avoided any other adventurers I’d encountered during my travels—that was definitely the right move. *Wait...huh? Come to think of it, I feel like other adventurers ran away from me first. Was that because...the sight of me was unsettling?*

“Ha ha ha ha.”

“Ivy?”

“There’s probably rumors about me—about *that dangerous abomination* deep in the forest.”

“Ha ha ha ha! Well, yeah, if anyone sensed a lone human aura in the forest, they’d definitely run for their life. Nobody would want to come near someone like that.”

So I was right! I always did think it was a little strange that I kept sensing auras running away from me.

"Wouldn't it be funny if a rumor went around that a monster who impersonates human auras was traveling through the forest toward the capital?"

Druid's offhanded remark made us both fall silent. Then we both laughed.

Well, it doesn't concern me. It's just a rumor...a rumor we're not even sure exists. Not my problem!

Chapter 216:

Ciel's Anger

I decided to not dwell on the rumor, especially since I had no idea whether it even existed or not.

"There's no guarantee the maps sold at the guild are accurate, but it's common knowledge that you should double-check your course on the map. Being in completely uncharted places, like we are right now, is very dangerous."

Hearing the words out loud made me realize how true they were. If Ciel weren't with us, we would be totally lost. We'd be attacked by all the cave monsters, too.

"If Ciel left us here, we would be done for."

"Yup."

Mew! Ciel snapped in protest. The creature was giving Druid the most intense glare I'd ever seen from it.

Druid shivered in fear from that look. "Er, no, Ciel, I'm not saying you'd actually leave us behind. It was just a 'for instance'! A 'for instance'!"

There was a tremble in Druid's voice. Even the seasoned adventurer was scared of this side of Ciel, and I didn't blame him. There was an ominous feeling to the adandara, not only in its eyes but in its entire aura.

"Ciel, don't glare at Mr. Druid like that. He's giving me a lesson on traveling right now."

Mew?!

"We don't think you'd ever abandon us. You're staying with us always, right?"

Mrrrow.

I wanted to tell Ciel I hoped it would stay with me forever, but I decided not to. Maybe a fated encounter was awaiting Ciel during our travels, and if something like that happened, I would want Ciel to prioritize it over our

journey. But I would miss my friend dearly, of course!

“Thanks.”

That seemed to finally calm Ciel down. This, in turn, settled Druid’s nerves... but his face was still a little pale.

“Are you okay, sir?”

“Ha ha ha, I’m all right. I didn’t think Ciel would get that angry with me.”

“Neither did I.”

Ciel gently nuzzled its face against mine. Its eyes were a little droopy. *So cute.*

“Don’t worry, Ciel. We’re not afraid of you. We know you’re kind.”

I slowly petted its head. The way its tail floated dreamily in reply was so precious.

“Pu, puuu, pu, puuu.” Sora was playing with Ciel’s tail. It was business as usual for the little slime, who could never read a room.

“I’m sorry, Ciel,” Druid said.

Meowww. Ciel nuzzled its face up to Druid.

Oh, good. They’re back to their normal dynamic. But, wow, it sure was shocking to see Ciel so mad. Phew...it tired me out a little.

“Mr. Druid, would you like to turn in for the night? I, um, think I get the gist of how my way of traveling is different from everyone else’s.”

And I’d better tuck those facts firmly into my memory. If I act too unusual when other people are around, their gut instincts might make them discover Ciel and my slimes. Yeah. I’ll have to take Druid’s notes to heart.

“That would help me out a lot, actually. That little episode with Ciel tired me out.”

Ciel’s death glare had worked its magic on Druid. His complexion was back to normal, but he was obviously still exhausted from the ordeal.

We cleaned up after our dinner and settled into our beds. When sleeping out in the wild like this, we always kept our shoes on, so we could respond to any

emergency right away. We also left the lights dim. It was a bit too bright for comfort, but we had to deal with it. It was an essential survival tactic.

“Good night, sir.”

Mrrrow.

“Yeah, good night.”

“Puuu.”

“R...ryu...”

Flame was definitely sleep talking.

We stepped outside of the cave. It was a lovely day, with the sunbeams trickling through the branches of the trees above. But with each passing day, the winds were getting noticeably colder. I thought we should probably head out to the village road.

“Yeah... I think I’m getting used to the Ivy school of travel by now,” Druid said, yawning by the mouth of the cave. He looked thoroughly refreshed.

But what was the Ivy school? “What do you mean by that, sir?” *Oops! I did it again.*

“I slept like a log.”

“Well, yes, we did sleep around some logs.”

“No, I mean I would never have slept so well in a cave before traveling with you.”

Ohh, *now* that made sense. Before I met Ciel, I don’t think I ever slept soundly in the forest. Just the sound of trees rustling was enough to wake me up. And on windy nights, I think I was awake and tired much more often than soundly asleep.

“Having Ciel around is making us too comfortable. It’s sapping our sense of vigilance.”

“Ciel certainly does have that effect. It’s so easy to take advantage of the comfort it gives us.”

The only reason I was able to sleep soundly and wake fully refreshed was because I had the big adandara protecting me. Without Ciel, my life really would be much harder in so many ways.

Mrrrow. Ciel sounded satisfied—it probably liked what it was hearing.

“I guess we’ll have to be careful not to over-rely on Ciel,” I said.

“Agreed.”

Mew! Ciel didn’t sound so pleased about where the conversation had turned, but we couldn’t let ourselves grow too soft. We needed to be more mindful of that.

“Puuu.”

“Teryuuu.”

Alerted by their voices, I looked at the slimes...and noticed that something had fallen. I headed over to them and saw it was a black orb.

“What is this?” I asked Druid, but he was just as confused as I was. I looked at the black orb again. It resembled a stone, but a closer glance showed that it was faintly moving, like it was breathing. I gave it a little poke with my finger. It quivered a little, then shrank to a much smaller size. I realized I might have scared it.

“Puuu.”

“Teryuuu.”

Sora and Flame wanted me to do something.

Er, from the way they’re talking...do they want me to hold it in my hands? “Do you guys want me to pick it up?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Druid was a bit startled, but I understood Sora’s and Flame’s message loud and clear. I carefully picked up the black orb, trying not to frighten it, and felt a warmth from it in my hand. It was definitely alive.

“Ivy...are we taking that with us?”

“Yes. Flame and Sora asked me to.”

“I see. Well, sleeping in the cave was enough of a shock as it is, but seeing you casually pick up unknown objects like that is yet another surprise.”

He seemed to have a problem with what I was doing, but I trusted Sora and Flame. I knew they would never make me do anything that would cause me harm, so if we happened across another strange object or creature and they asked me to pick it up, I’d comply without thinking much of it.

“That thing you just picked up is alive, right?”

“Probably. I felt a little warmth coming from it, and it *was* moving a little.”

It was a black orb that fit snugly into the palm of my hand. No matter how hard I stared at it, it wouldn’t budge. I really wondered what it was.

“Well, I guess staying here and talking about it won’t amount to anything. Let’s go.”

“Sure. C’mere, Flame.” I put the black orb into the slimes’ bag and picked up Flame. Sora bounced all the way to the top of Druid’s head. Then Ciel took the lead.

“Ciel, let’s go walk near the village road, okay?”

Mrrrow.

“Our bags are already so full of treasures it’s freaking me out. Please don’t have us stop to look for more, okay?”

Ciel stared blankly back at me.

“Come on, Ciel, we’ve already got more than enough loot. Let’s just go straight to the village road!”

Mrrrow. Ciel sounded incredibly dissatisfied, but I wasn’t going to give up any ground this time. Earlier that morning, Druid and I had gone over the contents of our bags, and he’d said we had enough to pay for a stay at the nicest inn in Hatow Village...for two whole years.

Sora and Flame made rare potions and magic stones, and Ciel found precious cave gems and rare tree nuts. When the three of them all brought their A-game,

being buried in valuable items was inevitable—and all I could do about it was shake my head and laugh.

Chapter 217: A Mysterious Creature

I looked at the bag hanging on my shoulder as we walked. The black creature I'd picked up earlier was in there. Sometimes I would hear a rustling in the bag, but the movement would stop whenever I looked at it. I felt sorry for the little thing, so I started trying to ignore it when it moved...

"What's wrong?" Druid asked.

"It was moving earlier, but it's gone completely still now. I'm a little worried about it."

I gently caressed it through the bag, but I didn't feel so much as a flinch from it. Had something happened? I didn't want to give it a scare like I'd done earlier, so I was reluctant to open the bag to check on it.

"Sora?" As Druid said this, Sora made a big stretch on top of his head. "Hey, Sora, stay still or you'll fall off." Since Sora had moved so suddenly, Druid was a little frazzled.

"Sora, please don't tease Druid."

"Pu! Puuu."

Sora really does love to play... Well, I guess it would be more accurate here to say that Sora loves to play with Druid's emotions.

"Sora?"

"Puuu."

"That black creature has stopped moving. Is everything okay?" Druid asked.

Sora jiggled in reply. That meant everything was all right.

"Sora says it's fine."

"Glad to hear it."

"But what do you think this creature is? Is it a monster?"

"I do sense magic coming from it—it's faint, but it's there, so definitely a monster. A black orb monster?"

"Have you heard of anything like that, sir?"

As a veteran adventurer, Druid knew his way around monsters and animals. Also, in preparation for our big journey, he had spent time talking with many other adventurers to see if there was any new information to be had.

"I would definitely have remembered if someone told me about such an unusual monster. Since I don't recall it, that means nobody's been talking about it."

In order to be talked about, a monster first needed to be seen by an adventurer. And if this little monster had been deep in the forest all this time, it was likely nobody had discovered it yet.

"So that makes us Discoverers Number One?"

Druid laughed at my wording. "I guess it would. Should we tell the guild as soon as we can?"

I tilted my head and pondered the idea. I knew we were supposed to report new discoveries to the guild, but I wasn't so sure about this...

"Teryu?"

"Oh! Good morning, Flame. I'll let you meet the black orb monster later, okay?"

"Ryu...? Ryu..." Flame fell right back asleep, apparently not that interested. I bounced it gently in my arms.

"For someone who takes so long to wake up, you sure fall asleep quickly, don't you?" Druid said.

"Pu! Pu. Pu! Pu."

Mew.

It sounded like Sora and Ciel were laughing. And Druid was right—Flame did fall asleep quickly. Any time and any place, too.

"In a way, that's a good personality trait."

Since we still didn't know how aggressive the black orb monster was—or anything else about it, for that matter—we adopted a "wait and see" policy. The adventurer and merchant guilds had strict rules to report unfamiliar creatures who showed any sign of aggression, but if the new monster didn't seem aggressive, you could study its ecology and whatnot before informing the guild about it. This was all news to me.

"This area sure is easier to walk in," Druid said.

I nodded. The path to the cave had been quite treacherous with boulders in the way and roots sticking up here, there, and everywhere. Our current path was quite easy in comparison.

"If we keep up this pace, we'll reach the village road ahead of schedule," I remarked.

"True. How about checking the map once we get close to the road?"

"Hee hee, sure."

Druid was clearly anxious about not knowing where he was. Treks with Ciel were always like this, so I was used to it...but maybe that was a *bad* thing to get used to?

I looked at Ciel, marching in front of us. Just the sight of its sturdy shoulders was so reassuring. As I stared at it, Ciel's head turned over its shoulder to glance back at me. Its tail was wagging happily to and fro.

"Ciel...thanks."

Mrrrow.

Yep. So cute.

Druid suggested we start looking for a place to make camp, so I stopped in my tracks and stretched my arms out. We had walked quite a distance today, so I was a little tired.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

When Druid also stopped walking, Sora bounced off his head and landed on

the ground. Its eyes quickly darted around, and, after a few seconds, it suddenly bounded off.

“Pu! Puuu. Pu! Pu, puuu.”

That’s our Sora. Druid and I exchanged chuckles, then hurried after the slime before it went out of sight. Our campsite for the night was a bit far away.

“Sora! Slow down!” I yelled at the slime, who had disappeared from view, but the grasses kept swishing in the distance. Ciel was calm beside me, so I knew there wasn’t a problem, but I always got nervous whenever Sora left my line of vision. The moment I finally caught a glimpse of Sora sitting between some trees, all the adrenaline drained out of my muscles.

“Sora...please...a bit slower...” I stumbled over to the slime, looked around... then froze. A few feet away from Sora was a giant snake. And it was staring right at me. Druid rushed in front of me and drew his sword.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Sora’s voice relaxed our tense nerves a little, but we were still scared. I risked a glance at the slime. It was staring at me, not the snake. Curious, I looked back at Sora...then I noticed it was staring at the bag on my shoulder.

“Sora...is that monster friendly?”

Sora wiggled in reply. *Okay, what does that wiggle mean again?* I was so terrified my brain wasn’t working right. *If Sora does that...it’s not an enemy.*

“Mr. Druid...that monster is safe.”

Druid exhaled hard in reply, but he kept his sword drawn.

“Puuu,” Sora insisted, its gaze still on the bag. Was it talking about the black creature we’d picked up? I opened my bag and checked on the black orb monster.

“Augh!” Druid yelped.

I shivered. My eyes darted from the black orb monster to the snake.

“Augh!” I yelped, the exact same way as Druid. But I think anyone would have reacted like that, because the giant snake’s body was shooting out a bunch of

black orbs. Well, no, it wasn't exactly shooting them out. Rather, the black orbs were just moving to places where we could see them.

The sight was rather macabre. Still, I pulled the black orb we'd found in front of the cave out of my bag. Seeing it, the snake swayed left and right.

"Oh, neat. The snake wiggles, too."

"Ivy, your reactions to things are kind of weird sometimes."

"Huh?" I looked at Druid, but he just shrugged. *Well, I can't help it.*

As we were talking, the black orb moved in my hand and I dropped it.

"Sorry...are you okay?" I apologized to the fallen creature...and noticed it was moving toward the giant snake. I wasn't particularly worried about it moving away since it had some companions.

"I always assumed the orb would sort of...open up, and become a half orb with little feet," Druid said, mimicking the creature with its hands. It was rather similar to what I had imagined. Past Me remembered an insect called a pill bug, so I was surprised to see the orb just move as an orb... And with its tiny little legs, it was moving very slowly, despite all its efforts.

The black orb finally reached the snake, and, for some reason, the sight made me feel relieved. The poor little thing had stumbled over rocks on the ground and gotten itself stuck in protruding circles of roots. Each time that had happened, I'd given it a helping hand, so it had taken quite a long time to get to the snake.

"If it was going to go to the snake all along, we should have just put it on top of the snake at the start," Druid said.

A chuckle spilled out of my mouth. When I was helping the little orb along, I'd been surprised when I found myself right in front of the giant snake. I'd come so close to the creature that if I'd reached out, I could have touched it. The moment I noticed, I panicked and was about to scoot back, but then I noticed the little black orb, struggling in the brush below.

I freed the creature, sent it to its friends, and then took the opportunity to flee. Though I suppose I would have been fine anyway, since the snake showed

no signs of aggression. If anything, it seemed to smile in a motherly way as it watched the little black orb run along... Was it the orb's mother?

Chapter 218:

Ms. Serpent

“Mr. Druid...do you know anything about this giant snake?”

“Hmm...it’s jet-black with a white pattern on its skin, right?”

“Yes. And there’s also some sort of pattern on the top of its head, isn’t there?”

I was too short to get a good look, but I’d caught a glimpse of it the last time the giant snake had moved its head.

“Yeah... The black orbs are covering it too much for me to make it out, but I do see a sort of pattern on its head.”

The giant snake had too many black orbs sitting on its head for the markings to be visible, though.

“Yeah, it’s no use. I can’t see it,” Druid continued. “But I’m more worried because I didn’t hear any rumors about big black snakes on the outskirts of Hatow Village.”

Druid shook his head in defeat. I moved a little to try to get a better look at the markings on the snake’s body and...*what*!?

“Um...Mr. Druid...Sora is bouncing all over the giant snake’s back.”

“What?!”

Sora was playfully bouncing among the little black orbs and...*huh*? I rubbed my eyes and took a closer look. Then I looked at the spot where I last saw Ciel... *It’s gone*.

“Mr. Druid...Ciel has turned into a slime and joined the party.”

“What?! Oh! Yeah...how about that?”

Two slimes were mixed in with the black orbs, and they looked like they were having a grand old time. I looked up at the snake and saw its head twisted around, looking at Sora and Ciel. The sight gave me the chills, but the snake

showed no menacing reaction. Then it returned its gaze to us. *I guess that means it's okay with letting Sora and Ciel play on top of it?*

"Um, sorry about Sora and Ciel. They're just having a little fun on top of you. Is that okay?"

Its head bobbed slightly up and down, as if it understood me. And that probably wasn't just wishful thinking on my part.

"I don't know much about snakes, but this one has been alive for quite some time."

"It has?"

"Yes. Snakes grow bigger the longer they live. At this size, this monster is probably a serpent."

"A serpent?"

"The biggest among the snakes."

The biggest among the snakes...well, the snake before my very eyes was definitely the biggest I'd ever seen. Then again, I hadn't seen that many snakes.

"It's been quite a while since I've seen a snake this big, though," Druid said. "I hunted a serpent once before, but it wasn't as large as this one."

"You...hunted it?"

"Yeah. It had slithered out of a cave and was attacking and eating people in a nearby village, so I was tasked to hunt it."

That made sense... I supposed hunting it would be their only choice. I looked at the giant snake before me, then at all of its little black orbs. Since they were all together now, it was impossible to tell which of them was the one I'd picked up. That was a little disappointing—I wished we could have spent more time together.

But what concerned me even more was what Druid had just told me about the snake attacking villagers. I looked up and saw that this giant snake—or serpent, rather—was still looking at me and Druid. It was staring hard at us...but it wasn't thinking about an attack, was it?

“Oh, Ms. Serpent...are you going to attack us?” I figured I might as well ask it first.

“What’s the use in asking the snake?” Druid asked, his voice a little tired.

But the snake looked me in the eye and shook its head left to right. And this movement was deliberate and clear, not vague like the ones it had made earlier.

“It’s not going to attack us.”

“Oh...wow, I didn’t think you could actually communicate with that creature... And the fact that you just took its answer like it was the most normal thing ever...it makes you the *least* normal thing ever, Ivy.”

Druid was saying something to me, but I was so distracted by the thrill of talking to the serpent that I didn’t hear it. Well, it probably wasn’t important anyway.

“Are those little black orbs your babies?”

The serpent nodded once in reply.

“Oh, neat. Were you looking for that little lost baby? Did we bother you by picking it up?”

The serpent shook its head. *Oh, good. We didn’t bother it.* “You’re incredibly big, Ms. Serpent. Have you lived a really long time?”

I was so overjoyed we could communicate that I just kept asking questions. And I was tickled pink that the serpent was indulging my curiosity.

“Oh, Mr. Druid, it’s been alive over a hundred years! And the slimes say it’s okay!”

“Yeah, I gathered that.” Druid was looking at me with a great deal of admiration, for some reason. *I wonder why that is?* I gave him a questioning look...but he just laughed.

“I was just thinking that only Sora’s tamer could accomplish this.”

“Hm?”

“Ack! Sora! The serpent’s going to get mad at you for that.”

I followed Druid's gaze...and there was Sora, bouncing up and down atop Ms. Serpent's head. I looked at the serpent, fully expecting it to be angry...but when our eyes met, it simply nodded at me. *Oh, thank goodness this serpent is so kind.*

"I'm so sorry Sora is tumbling around on your head, Ms. Serpent."

After about five minutes, Ciel and Sora had their fill of playtime and returned to us.

"Pu! Puuu."

Mrrrow.

"Hi, you two. Now, what do we say to Ms. Serpent?"

The two monsters performed a synchronized jump in front of the serpent. *I guess that's their way of saying "thank you"?* The serpent nodded deeply in reply. *Wow...they understand each other.*

"Well, I think it's time to find a place to camp."

Oh, that's right! We were right in the middle of looking for a place to sleep. I completely forgot.

"Good idea. Want to look around here?"

"I guess we'll have to, yeah."

"Puuu," Sora whined. It was upset that we were starting to walk away.

"What's wrong, Sora?"

It was angry about something. But what? *Oh! I think I know...* "Sora, please find us a place to sleep."

"Pu! Pu, puuu." That seemed to turn its mood right around.

"Sora is on a roll today," Druid sighed, seeming a little annoyed.

Sora bounced in the air and Ms. Serpent slithered in turn.

"Oh! Looks like it's leaving."

"Sure does."

The serpent disappeared into the trees, slithering so smoothly that you

almost forgot it was piled high with all those little black orbs.

“Farewell, friend. Thank you.” *Thanks for being so kind to Sora and Ciel.* I waved enthusiastically at the serpent, and then it stopped. It stayed still for quite some time.

“Do you think something’s wrong?” I fidgeted, unsure of what to do. Then the serpent turned and looked at me. Our eyes met.

As Druid and I both stood there, thoroughly confused, Ms. Serpent’s head lunged forward. It caught me so off guard that I recoiled a little.

“Whoa, you scared me there. Hm?” I gasped quietly as I saw a little black orb in front of me. It was sitting atop the serpent’s tongue. As I stood there, unsure of what to do, the serpent stretched its tongue out, pushing the orb against me. When I touched it, it was quite cold, completely unlike the way it had felt before. Apparently, this was not its baby.

“Is this for me?”

The serpent’s tongue coiled back into its mouth. It stared at me in silence for a few moments, then returned to the trees.

“Welp. I got a present.”

“Yeah...what *is* it, anyway?”

“It’s cold, so I don’t think it’s alive.”

Druid took the orb in his hand and raised it to eye level. He gave it a good going-over. “I have no idea what it is.”

“Oh well.”

Boy, that serpent sure was magnificent, though. Black skin with white markings...kind and understanding... Druid and I looked in the direction where it had slithered. It had been a brief yet magical encounter.

After a while, Sora’s voice echoed out from a patch of trees in the distance. *Oops. I totally forgot it was looking for a place for us to sleep.* I ran off toward Sora...and when I found the slime, its eyes were a lot more slanted than usual.

“Sorry.”

“Buuu.” It was so angry that its “pu” had changed into “bu.”

“Sorry about that,” Druid chimed in, but Sora snubbed him.

“Buuu!”

I wonder how I can put it back in a good mood?

Chapter 219: Halfway Point

“Ooh, I see a road.”

This was our seventh day of traveling since we left the cave deep in the forest, and at long last the road was in sight. Druid looked quite pleased about that. I supposed the forest had made him quite anxious.

“Okay, first we’ll have to try to find out where we are.” Druid took the map out of his magic bag.

“I’ll look to see if I can find a landmark.”

“Thanks.”

Whenever you wanted to figure out where you were on a map, you always had to find a landmark of some sort. Something like a big boulder, a river, or a lake would be ideal. Aside from that, you could also use giant trees that grew rare fruits and nuts.

I checked our surroundings, looking to see if anything stood out. I scanned the area over and over but found nothing. Maybe there *was* nothing?

“Mr. Druid, I’m not seeing anything.”

“Okay.”

This response took me a little by surprise. From our current lack of information, it was pretty clear we weren’t going to be able to pinpoint where we were on the map, but Druid didn’t show any signs of panic or frustration. I wondered why that was.

“Are we here? No... Here? No... Maybe we’re too far away where we’re at right now?”

Wow...just from my meager information, he’s already narrowed our spot down to a few locations. I looked at the map as Druid’s finger pointed at three different places. He was mumbling something under his breath. *Hmm...he’s too*

quiet. I can't make out what he's saying.

I looked at the spots he was pointing at, but nothing seemed to be remarkable about them. Not a word was written down about any boulders or rivers that one could use as landmarks. *Oh, now I get it...* He was looking for spots *without* landmarks.

"So I've narrowed it down to two spots, but I'm not sure which one it is."

How did he get it down to just two?

"I think we're probably on the side of the village road closer to Oll. Based on how far we've traveled so far, it would be pretty hard for us to have made it to the farther point."

I found the town of Oll on the map, then checked the two locations Druid was pointing at. The village road that was closer to Oll would be a very easy destination for us to have reached by now, while the other one was a pretty difficult distance to travel in that time.

"Well, either way, we're sure to find a landmark if we walk a little while," I said. The village road closer to Oll had a river, and the one farther away had some mysterious flowers that grew year-round. "So let's just walk on the road until we hit a landmark."

"Good idea. I definitely want to figure out where we are as soon as possible, so let's do that," Druid said, stashing the map away in his bag. "Okay, let's go."

At Druid's command, Ciel shapeshifted from its adandara form into a slime. We'd asked it to do that as a precaution whenever there was a chance it might be seen.

"Thanks, Ciel."

Mrrrow, the slime trilled in the cute voice of an adandara. It still felt a little off.

I searched for auras and found clear indications of monsters, but no humans. That meant I wouldn't need to put the slimes in their bag. I told Sora and Ciel as much, then Druid and I set off toward the village road. When we got there, we did another survey of our surroundings. And, as expected, we found nothing

that would serve as a landmark.

We set off toward Hatow Village—and boy, were proper roads easier to walk on. Sora and Ciel had an easier time bouncing, too. They were playing chase with each other the whole way. I tried waking Flame up, but it just fell right back to sleep after a few big yawns. I hope the lack of exercise wouldn't make Flame ill. It worried me a little.

After we'd been walking on the village road for about three hours, just when it was starting to get dark, we came upon a giant tree. And it had flowers we'd never seen blooming on it.

"So, it's not the river...it's flowers."

"Yeah...how the heck did we cover that much ground in such a short time?"

Considering the detour we'd taken, we should have needed about twenty-five days to reach the giant flowering tree, but today was only our eighteenth day on the road.

"Well...at least we found out where we are," I said.

"True."

We were right at the halfway point between Oll and Hatow. Halfway through our trek.

"Okay, we should start looking for a place to sleep," Druid said. Sora wiggled happily in reply atop his head. "Sora, don't wiggle. You'll fall."

Sora stopped wiggling and jumped off his head. The slime then began bouncing around us in circles. It was in a very good mood.

"Sora, can you find us a place to sleep?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu," Sora sang, cheerfully bounding away to find a place to make camp. As usual, it was quite confident.

"We'd better hurry before we lose sight of it."

"Yes, sir."

We followed the excessively cheerful Sora as it bounced off with extra vigor. Sometimes it bounced so excitedly that it slammed into trees... *Is it going to be*

okay?

“Hm? Sora, stop! I see a dump.”

Druid’s voice prompted me to shift my gaze from Sora to the direction he was looking, where there was indeed a rather large dump.

“Looks like this was made by adventurers, the stupid fools.” Druid sighed loudly.

“I’ve seen a lot of dumps in the forest, though. Is something wrong with them, sir?” I guess it *was* probably wrong to dump trash just anywhere without permission...

“Yeah, it’s completely wrong. You’re only supposed to make dumps close to towns or villages. It’s a very important rule.”

Come to think of it, I did seem to find a lot of adventurer-made dumps near towns and villages, though I’d also encountered others in completely different locations.

“People throw away all sorts of things in dumps, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

We approached the dump and surveyed the trash. There was indeed a variety of discarded items in there. Well, adventurers’ dumps far away from towns and villages did tend to have a much larger amount of trash.

“Do you know what that is?”

I looked at where Druid was pointing. It was a ripped magic bag. “A magic bag?”

“Correct. Now, there isn’t much, but it’s got magic woven into its threads.”

Magic was the power source of magic items—that was a tidbit of information you were sure to hear if you were on the road any length of time.

“Yes, I know.”

“But even when the bag is ripped, its magic is still there.”

I guess it would be, since the magic was infused into the fibers.

“And a monster can suck up that magic.”

A monster that sucks up magic? What’s he talking about? “But don’t all monsters suck up magic, sir?”

“Hm? Oh, you mean, like gurbars?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, that dragon corpse was filled with a lot of magic, so any monster could have sucked it up. But if there isn’t much residual magic left, ordinary monsters can’t consume it.”

Oh, that’s interesting. There’s still so much I don’t know.

“Now, if they just sucked up the magic, that wouldn’t be a problem. But sometimes they go berserk or go through sudden mutations.”

“They go berserk? You mean like the gurbars? And they mutate, too?” *That’s terrifying.*

“Yeah, and the mutating is the scariest part of all. Here’s this monster you think you know, except it might be much more powerful, its magic might have changed... It takes much longer to deal with that sort of mutant.”

“I didn’t realize discarded magic bags were so powerful...”

“Well, I doubt a monster would mutate just from one magic bag, but garbage does pile up.”

Going berserk...mutating...I guess both of those things take a lot of magic.

“That’s why unsupervised dumps like this are pretty dangerous.”

This dump *did* have an awful lot of trash. If every item in here contained just a little magic, a monster could get quite a hefty portion from sucking up all of it.

“About how much magic would one of those monsters need to mutate?”

“People are doing research on that, but nobody has any solid answers yet, so the guilds keep close watch on the dumps, too. There’s a record of a monster mutating and wiping out an entire village many centuries ago.”

Wow, that’s intense.

“Whenever you register with the adventurer guild, they’re supposed to explain all of this very clearly to you,” Druid sighed.

Whenever someone thinks they’re not being watched, they’ll do whatever is the easiest for them. That was why there was a dump here. As I hadn’t known the rules before, even I had thrown away some items in adventurer-made dumps like this, so from now on I would need to be more mindful.

“Ivy, do you see anything that could serve as a landmark? I want to report this dump to the guild in Hatow Village.”

After some searching, I found a river relatively close by. Druid was already writing a note about the dump on his map.

“There’s a river just a little bit away, sir.”

“Thanks. Hm? Oh, I think Sora’s doing its part to clean up the dump.”

I followed Druid’s gaze...and there was Sora, gleefully devouring a sword. As usual, the slime looked like it had a blade sticking into its head.

“Okay, I’ve written it down. Now let’s collect some food for the slimes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 220: Proud to Have You as My Friends

“Beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Sure are.”

Before us stood a line of sparkling blue and red potions which the slimes had made while we were getting food for them at the dump. There were five of each color, and there were also red magic stones strewn about Flame’s general vicinity.

“Pu! Puuu.”

“Te! Ryuuu.”

Is it me, or do they look smug?

Mew! For some reason, Ciel seemed a bit upset.

What’s wrong, Ciel? I examined the three creatures with a puzzled look. They were usually such good friends...but were they in the middle of a quarrel?

“Just an idea...but maybe Ciel feels jealous?” Druid suggested.

“Jealous?” *Of whom, though?*

“Ever since we set off on this journey, Ciel has always been taking the lead, taking care of all sorts of things for us, right? It even found us some treasure in that cave.”

That was true. And thanks to Ciel, our bags were ridiculously valuable right now.

“Maybe Sora and Flame wanted to show us how helpful they were, too. Hence, *the loot.*” Druid pointed at the collection of sparkling potions, with a very proud pair of slimes sitting beside them.

“To show us how helpful they are...”

But Sora found us great campsites and Flame regenerated magic stones. That

was already more than enough help.

“Well, it’s just a theory, but watching the three of them kind of gives me that feeling. And since Ciel is acting a bit jealous this time around...maybe it’ll be the next one to show off?”

I looked at the trio again. Druid’s theory was entirely plausible. “Mr. Druid, what do you think would happen if we showered Sora and Flame with praise right now?”

“Ciel would definitely lead us deep into the forest. It might even personally find us some rarity from the trees.”

That definitely wouldn’t work for us. I didn’t want to increase our collection of rarities any further—my brain already hurt just thinking about it. The treasure that was already in the bag on my shoulder was more than enough, and we’d just added more sparkling potions against our will. I really wished my monsters would take it easy the rest of the trip.

“I guess I’ll have to explain this to them,” I said.

“I guess so.”

Druid and I looked at each other and laughed. Sora and Ciel could both be rather stubborn. Flame wasn’t as obstinate as the other two, though...I hoped. I still hadn’t quite grasped Flame’s personality. *But it’ll probably be okay...I hope. I’d like to think it will be.*

But what should I tell them? It’s not like they’re misbehaving or anything. Maybe I should just be honest and tell them I don’t want any more stuff? Would that be able to get the trio out of their frenzy? Oh, what a conundrum... I wish I had some good ideas. What do I do now?

Then again, I was certainly lucky to have this “problem.” There I was, saying I didn’t want any more *treasures*. I looked at the bag on my shoulder. According to Druid, this bag alone would bring us quite a hefty sum...a thought that scared me no matter how many times it hit me. *Carrying something so valuable on my shoulder is much too stressful. It’s not good for my mental health. I’ve been so worried that the first thing I do every morning is check my bag! I need to do my best to nip this in the bud.*

“Um...thanks for the potions.” After a lot of thought, I decided I needed to thank them first. They really hadn’t done anything wrong—they were just making us things that would help us on our travels. Except...the things they made were way beyond the highest quality. Well, *that* was the problem, after all...

“Sora...Flame...Ciel... I want to thank you all so much for all the help you’ve been. You’ve made and found so many items that are useful to us on our travels. I truly cannot thank you enough.”

The three creatures each reacted happily in their own way. *Oh, good. I think they understood me.*

“So anyway, we’ve got enough now.” *C’mom, how am I supposed to say it?!* *Arrrgh, now Ciel is giving me the strangest look.* “Erm, see, the bag is already full of plenty of treasures...I don’t need any more. So I don’t need you to find or make anything else for me.” *Oh, Flame looks upset! Oh dear, are you a stubborn little one, too?* “Um...Mr. Druid?” *How can I convince them to listen to me? I haven’t the faintest clue.*

“Wondering how you can persuade them? Well, the fact is, we have more than enough money for the trip now. We don’t need more, so we want you to keep treasure-hunting and potion-making to a minimum.”

“Puuu,” Sora whined in disapproval. The other two creatures looked just as upset. Flame’s eyes kept darting between me and the potions, too... *I hope it’s not thinking of making more?* I really wished it would give up on the idea.

If there was one thing I’d learned from this, it was that both me and Druid were terrible at the art of persuasion. Maybe the best way to get them to understand was just brute honesty.

“Listen, guys...I want to have a nice relaxing trip with all of you, but that means we can’t do anything that will make us stand out. Sora and Flame, you two are rare slimes with incredibly unique powers. If someone discovers either of you, you’ll probably cause a panic. The same goes for you, Ciel. Just being an adandara already makes you very rare. If people find out I’ve tamed you on top of that, you’ll be the talk of the country.”

“Adventurers might come after you,” Druid explained. “The capital might

even send an emissary. And if that happens, we won't be able to have any fun while we travel anymore."

An emissary from the capital? Huh? What's that? I shot Druid a look of disbelief.

"Puuu."

"Teryuuu."

Mrrrow.

The whimpers of the trio snapped my attention back to them. They looked pitiful, rather than upset. Had I gotten through to them?

"So...will you go easy on the hunting and creating?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuu."

Mrrrow.

Oh, thank goodness. What a relief.

"Thanks. I promise I'll sell everything you guys gave me little by little and put the money in our travel fund."

Sora and Flame wiggled happily in reply. Ciel's tail was swishing up quite a storm.

"I guess you got through to them."

"Yes, sir. Wait, so what's this about an emissary from the capital?"

"If Sora's powers are discovered, the capital will definitely send someone."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, with a personal letter from the Crown."

"Well, that wouldn't be nice."

"Pu! Puuu." Sora looked a little worried.

"Don't worry, Sora. I've tamed you. That means we'll be together forever."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

I looked around and noticed it was getting dark. “Okay, I’d kind of like to find a place to sleep soon. Sora?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Ooh, Sora, you’re so helpful! Thanks for helping us find a campsite again.”

Sora bounded eagerly off. Apparently, Druid’s words had really cheered the slime up.

“Teryuuu,” Flame whimpered quietly, staring hard at Sora.

“Flame?”

“Ryuuu,” came its listless reply.

Hmm...is something wrong? I looked back and forth between Sora and Flame. *Oh! I think I know...*

“Should we go?” Druid asked.

I picked up Flame and chased after Sora. “Flame, Sora’s able to find good campsites, but you can make potions *and* regenerate magic stones. So please don’t get discouraged comparing yourself to Sora. You have your own gifts, Flame.”

“Ryuuu?” Flame looked up at me.

I gave it a gentle pat. “I am proud to have all of you as my friends. I’m so proud of you that I want to sing your praises to everyone in the whole world.”

“Teryu!”

Aha! It’s cheerful again.

“As much as I’d love to sing their praises...we have to keep them a secret if we want to have a peaceful journey.” Druid sounded disappointed, but he gave Flame’s head a gentle pat in my arms.

“He’s right, Flame. Truth be told, I wish I could brag at the top of my lungs just how proud I am of all my friends.”

This earned me a laugh from Druid, but I meant every word. I really did want to brag to the world. I wanted to forget about everything and just show the world my friends who I was so proud of. I knew I couldn’t...but I still wanted to.

But, wow... They wanted to prove themselves useful to me... Am I behaving the wrong way with them? I should ask Druid about that later.

Chapter 221: So Competitive

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

I crawled out through the big hole in the trunk of a giant tree and spread out my arms. It felt so good to exercise my back. Druid was yawning and stretching beside me.

“Pu! Puuu,” Sora said, doing its vertical stretches.

Do slimes do morning stretches, too? I wonder if it feels good? “Sora, does it feel good when you do that?”

Sora didn’t answer. I guessed that meant it didn’t necessarily “feel good.” Then why did it stretch? What a mystery.

Mee-how... Ciel’s sleepy mew was so cute. Since last night’s sleeping nook was too big for an adandara, Ciel had slept in slime form and now slime-Ciel was doing a vertical stretch just like Sora.

Meee...

That was a happy sound. Did Ciel enjoy moving like that? “Hey, Ciel, does stretching feel good?”

Mrrrow.

That was a yes. I guess slime-Ciel is different from slime-Sora? I’ll have to ask Flame how it feels the next time I see it stretching.

I raised my arms to the sky again. Huh. I’m not sure why, but I feel a bit heavy today. Maybe I didn’t get a good night’s sleep. I need to be more careful about that.

I let Druid pack up our beds while I got breakfast ready—which was easy, since all that really meant was reheating yesterday’s leftover soup. The only other thing I had to do was cut some fruit. Hot soup was a welcome breakfast,

since the evenings and mornings got quite chilly this time of year. It was enough to give me the energy boost I needed to get through the day.

I asked Druid last night if my attitude toward the slimes and Ciel was what had made them so competitive. If I was doing something wrong, I would have to be careful or the three might quarrel again.

But Druid assured me my behavior was not a problem at all. I'd never said anything that would incite competition, and I'd never given one of them more affection over the others, so it was a mystery why the slimes had started this rivalry with Ciel. We bounced ideas off each other but still found no answers, so we decided to just keep an eye on them for a while.

We checked on the trio now as we ate breakfast. For some reason, Ciel—still in slime form—was jiggling. *Why* it was doing that was a mystery. Sora and Flame had hearty appetites, as always. The potions were disappearing in quite a flurry, and Sora was making swords vanish in the blink of an eye.

I wonder if slimes can taste things? "Sora, Flame, does it taste good?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

I guess it does taste good. I've tried potions before, but they didn't taste that great. Their sense of taste must be different from mine.

After we finished breakfast, we took a little break. Then, when it was about time to clean up and get moving, I looked over at Sora and Flame...

"Oh, Flame, not again..." I sighed. "Yikes...so much drool."

Flame was carrying on its usual tradition of falling asleep mid-meal, with whatever it was eating hanging out of its mouth. I liberated Flame from the string of drool spilling out of its mouth and wiped its body clean. As I did this, the deteriorated potion slowly dissolved. I was a little impressed in spite of myself that the slime could eat while sleeping.

I washed the soup pot, put it in my bag, and checked the area to see if I'd forgotten anything. Everything was fine, so I put Flame in the bag and carefully slid my arm through it.

“Okay, everyone, let’s head out,” Druid said.

“Okay. Sora, Ciel, let’s go.”

“Pu! Puuu.”

Mrrrow.

We got on the village road we’d found the day before and started off toward Hatow Village. I’d wanted to go a little off the road and walk in the forest, but since Ciel had remained in slime form, I figured it didn’t have a problem with taking the village road and so we decided to head that way. Even if we crossed paths with someone, there would be no rumors of adandaras on our watch. I mean, if somebody saw Ciel in its slime form and recognized it as an adandara, that in itself would be an impressive feat indeed...terrifying, even.

“It sure is easier to walk here.”

“Yes, indeed.”

We marveled over the simple pleasure of a smooth village road. It was so easy to walk when you didn’t have to worry about tree roots or burrs in the grass.

“Pu! Puuu.”

Mewww.

I turned my gaze toward the sound of Sora and Ciel’s voices...and saw that they were bouncing up and down a few paces ahead of us. For some reason, the pair were jumping with all their might. What were they doing?

I watched them as we walked, and it looked like they were having a contest to see who could jump the highest. Sora had just bounced higher, which would explain the smug smile and the puffed-out chest. Seeing this, Ciel tried to out-jump Sora...which it apparently did, because now Ciel was the one puffing its chest out at Sora.

“I’m glad you guys are having fun. Just don’t hurt yourselves, okay?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

They’d heard me, but were they really going to be careful? *My goodness, look*

at them jump. It's making me feel queasy just watching them...

Boing...boing...SMACK!

"Oh, Ciel! Are you okay?" I knew somebody would crash. Ciel had jumped so eagerly that it smashed right into a thick branch hanging overhead. It sounded really painful. The branch was broken as well. How much force did it take to snap such a thick branch like that?

I ran up to Ciel. "Are you okay?" I asked, touching it gently. Sora looked worried, too.

Mrrrow, Ciel jiggled in reply. Its pain now gone, it resumed its jumping contest with Sora.

You kids never learn, do you? "Oh, honestly!"

"Say, Ivy?"

"Yes, sir?"

Druid's brows were knitted tightly together—he was pondering something. What could it be? I looked around and noticed nothing out of the ordinary. I didn't sense any auras approaching us, either.

"What's wrong?"

"You know how Ciel led us to that cave with the blackstones and how Sora made those sparkling potions...do you think *that's* the reason why?"

I saw that he was pointing at Sora and Ciel, having their jumping contest. Was that what he was talking about? *Um, how is a jumping contest related to finding valuable stones or making potions?*

"Don't you think they might have been having a contest to see who could help you out the most?"

Oh! I was mistaken. Yeah, that makes sense. Jumping high has nothing to do with finding valuable stones. It was actually pretty obvious once you gave it a little thought. How embarrassing... I'm glad I didn't say the wrong thing out loud.

"Ivy? Something wrong?"

“Er, no, sir.” I softly touched a hand to my cheek. I thought it was just a tad hot.

“Ivy?” Druid looked a little concerned by my odd behavior.

“Ha ha ha, I’m okay.” *Er, what were we talking about again? Oh yeah! That they were having a contest.* “You may be right about that.”

I looked at the duo ahead. They were jumping even more brashly. *They must be really excited. I hope nobody smashes into a tree again.* I felt little prickles all over my skin as I watched them.

“Think we should just ask the little rascals?” Druid asked.

“Yeah. Let’s do that.” *He’s right. We should just ask them if there’s something we don’t understand. I’m not sure why...but I feel a little lightheaded.*

“Not so fast.” Druid grabbed my arm, stopping me in my tracks and turning me to face him. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I’m not sure why...but he seems really worried about me. But...I feel totally normal. Just a little lightheaded, that’s all.

“Pu! Puuu?”

Mew?

Sora and Ciel peered anxiously at us. I hadn’t even noticed they’d returned to our side.

“I’m ohay.” *Hm? Why can’t I move my mouth like I want to?* I suddenly noticed something cold on my forehead. It felt so nice that I closed my eyes. “That feels good.” *Wait, what’s touching my forehead?*

“Ivy...you’ve got a fever all right.”

A fee-ver? A fee...ver?

“The sudden drop in temperature last night probably weakened your system. Are you okay?”

“Fee-ver?”

“Yes.”

“Fee-ver?”

“You don’t seem okay to me.”

Fee-ver? As I stood there, trying to remember what a fever was, I felt the bag on my shoulder rustle. *Oh...Flame wants out.* I plopped onto the ground and took it out of the bag.

“Teryuuu?”

I see Flame...oh. Why is it spinning in circles?

Chapter 222:

Self Care

My consciousness shot up to the surface. I opened my eyes, but it was too dim to tell where I was. From my prone state, I looked around...but it was too dark to see anything. When my eyes finally adjusted, I could faintly make out a rugged wall of boulders.

“I’m in a cave?” I slowly sat up and saw there was a magic lantern shining a few meters away from me. “Where am I? Huh? Wait, why was I even sleeping in the first place?”

Um, we were on our way to Hatow Village on the main road. Then Sora and Ciel were having a contest, so I... What did I do again? Funny. My memory is so hazy.

“Teryuuu.”

Hm? I think that was Flame’s voice. I looked around, but it was too dark to see anything. Maybe I was just hearing things?

“Flame?”

“Teryuuu.”

Oh! So it was Flame. I looked toward the sound of the slime’s voice...and I could faintly make it out. Well, its silhouette, at least.

“Good morning, Flame. Where are we? Do you know?”

Flame rolled over to my side, and I was finally able to see it clearly. I gently picked it up, wiped off the dirt that had stuck to it along the way, and placed it in my lap. Flame wiggled happily in response.

Huh? Come to think of it...all that heaviness I felt in my limbs this morning is gone. Maybe I just needed more sleep? As I stretched my arms and took stock of things, the dark space lit up.

“You awake?”

I looked toward what I assumed was the mouth of the cave just in time to see Druid walk in, lantern in hand.

“Yes. Er, so why was I asleep?” I’d thought about it but couldn’t find an answer, so I figured asking was the best option.

“Do you remember getting a fever?”

Fever? Oh, right. I think Druid and I were talking about fevers. Yeah, then he asked me if I had a fever... Oh! I think I know what happened.

“Your fever spiked while we were talking, and you fainted.”

I knew it! “I’m so sorry I troubled you.” So that was why my limbs felt so heavy when I woke up—I had a fever.

“Don’t apologize. Everyone gets sick now and then.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Druid pressed his hand to my forehead. His touch was soft and warm.

“Your fever’s gone down. Do you feel sluggish?”

I touched my forehead to see how hot it was, and the temperature in the palm of my hand felt normal.

“I’m fine. Um, about how long was I asleep?”

We had *just* been talking earlier about how we needed to speed up our pace since the nights were getting chillier.

“About two hours.”

“Two hours...oh, good.” I sighed in relief as Druid slowly ran his fingers through my hair. He had a strained smile on his face.

“Don’t panic. We planned some extra days into this trip, so we can take our time. We should stay here and rest for the next couple of days.”

“But...”

“There’s no need to worry. Remember how Ciel’s shortcut put us several days ahead of schedule?”

“Yeah.”

I remembered how the adandara's shortcut through the forest had gotten us to the halfway point several days sooner than we'd originally planned before we left, but we were losing that time now, all because of me.

"Ivy?"

"Yes?"

"You should have a more relaxed attitude about this journey."



A relaxed attitude?

“You’re probably having a hard time dropping the habits you built as a solo traveler. You’re trying to take on everything all by yourself.”

Am I?

“You should rely on me and your creatures more. Besides, everybody knows travel plans always go awry, so you shouldn’t let it bother you.”

I think I rely on them already, though... But do travel plans really always go awry?

“When you travel, you’re heavily affected by the natural world around you, and, well, you *can* foresee some of that and plan accordingly, but it’s pretty rare for a trip to go exactly as you thought it would.”

Oh, so that’s what he meant. But this delay is all my fault... “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Hmm...well, if you don’t like the idea of staying here and resting, can you instead tell me the moment you don’t feel entirely well?”

“Huh?” The moment I don’t feel entirely well?

“Like, if your throat is a bit scratchy when you wake up or if your head feels heavy.”

“But is it really okay to delay our travels just for that?”

“Yeah. And if I’m not feeling well myself, we can strategize.”

Strategize?

“If one of us is feeling sick, we’ll talk it over and decide whether or not to take the rest of the day off so it won’t get worse.”

“Okay...I understand.” So I guess we’re strategizing right now since I woke up feeling feverish. But what if our strategizing leads us to take another day off...?

“Ivy, if you neglect your health, it could turn into severe problems down the line. Don’t ever forget that.”

He’s seeing right through me. “Yes, sir.”

When I was traveling on my own, I would push myself whenever I was feeling

ill. I mean, it was too dangerous to stop and take a breather in the middle of the forest, so I had to keep moving and get to a village or town as quickly as I could. It was *that* mindset that helped me relax.

“Oh, and speaking of your fever, all it took was one sip of that red potion Flame made, and you were cured in seconds. That stuff really is ridiculously effective.”

That red potion Flame made... “Thanks, Flame.”

“Teryuu.”

I gently patted Flame, and it jiggled contentedly. *So cute.*

“Mr. Druid, where are we right now?” Since we were in a cave, I didn’t have the faintest clue.

“Not too far from the spot where you passed out.”

Druid explained that after I’d fainted, Ciel had turned back into an adandara and carried me here. That made me realize I didn’t see Ciel or Sora around. Where were they?

“Um, where are Sora and Ciel?”

“I’m not sure. They both just disappeared somewhere. Flame said they went off hunting.”

Come to think of it, it’s been three days since Ciel last hunted. It must be getting hungry. “Flame?”

“Teryuuu.”

“Did Sora go off hunting with Ciel?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

So it was true? But Sora has never gone hunting with Ciel before. Would they be okay?

“I think they’ll be okay. Anyway, you should get some more sleep.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I feel light as a feather.”

“Do you? Well, you should still take it easy.”

“I will.”

The last time I was out with a fever, I’d realized that I felt kind of uncomfortable having someone worry about me. As I sat in the cave and chatted with Druid and Flame, I heard something fall outside.

“What do you suppose that was, sir?” *Oops! I’m back to calling him “sir.”*

“It’s okay, don’t stress over your speech today. I’ll go take a look.”

“I’ll come with you, Mr. Dru—I’m coming, too!”

I took Flame off my lap and put it on top of the blanket as I stood up.

“Will you be okay? Can you even walk straight?” Druid asked, putting a steady hand on my back as I got to my feet. I’d almost forgotten how much of a worrywart he could be. I wouldn’t be surprised if he made me rest even more for the remainder of this trip.

“I’m fine!”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really,” I said, staring him hard in the eye.

But the worried look in Druid’s eyes did not fade in the slightest. *Yup, he’s definitely gonna make me rest more. I need to convince him not to do that.*

Druid kept his hand supporting my back as we walked out of the cave.

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

When we got out of the cave, Sora and Ciel gave us a cheerful greeting.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re o—” I froze midsentence when the thing they’d brought here entered my vision. It was something very big, sitting behind them both. It was furry, so it was probably the body of a monster or an animal.

Er...Ciel brought its kill back to us?

Chapter 223:

A Present

“Well, Ciel is once again a big-shot hunter.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, this is a rare monster. Some adventurer parties travel purely for the hope of catching one.”

They travel purely for the hope of catching one... Wait, and Ciel caught it, just like that? That's super impressive, isn't it?

“I think they meant it as a present for you, Ivy.”

“Why?”

“This monster is called a gooth. It’s known for producing magic that’s good for your health.”

“Magic that’s good for your health?”

“Yes, there’s a magic power that’s generated inside the gooth, you see. And when we eat its meat, the magic in it gives our stamina a boost.”

“Whoa! I didn’t even know magic like that existed.”

“Yeah, though the way it’s produced remains a mystery.”

Huh... I'd never heard of this type of monster. I kept an eye on the gooth corpse as I slowly approached it. Its legs were short and thick, but it had a very sturdy frame. From its physique, it didn't look like it could run very quickly. Since it was lying on its side, I wasn't sure exactly how big it was, but it looked at least as tall as me. I moved to get a good look at its face.

“Eek!” I shrieked. Its face...well, I can’t even describe it. Its most distinguishing feature was its giant mouth filled with misaligned fangs. Just the sight of it gave me the shivers.

“Potions are great for curing illness and injury, but if you want to restore your stamina or energy after a tiring day, gooth meat is just what the doctor

ordered."

So if you get sick, take a potion, and if you want an energy boost, eat gooth meat. But why are they called "gooth"? I've never heard that name before. I wonder if it has a different name in different regions?

"Are gooth called the same thing no matter where you go?"

"I think so. But dang, that grotesque face is always a horrifying sight."

I couldn't help but nod eagerly in agreement. For a monster with such a cute name, its face was a far cry from cute. It was a visage that nightmares were made of.

"I've just never heard of a monster called *gooth* before."

"Their meat is well known among the elderly for its potency. The only reason younger adventurers don't know about them is because not many living people have seen one."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. They never leave the deepest parts of the forest, you see."

So gooth lived deep in the forest. That would mean the only people who ever saw them were veteran adventurers. And when a monster has very few witnesses to its existence, it also has very few rumors spread about it...which would explain why I'd never heard of them before.

"Catching one of these guys is a real ordeal. They always travel in packs."

In packs...a whole pack of these horrifying faces? What a nightmare.

"Puuu?"

I looked over at Sora. It was staring right back at me with anxious eyes. *I wonder what's wrong... Oh! That's right, Druid told me the gooth was a present, but I still haven't thanked them.*

"Is this gooth a present for me?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

"Thanks, guys. That was really sweet of you."

It was obvious just how suddenly their moods lifted. Sora jiggled quite cheerfully, and Ciel's tail kicked up an incredible cloud of dust.

"Thanks. Ciel, can you please calm down a little?"

Mewww, Ciel whined, turning around and drooping its head. It was probably upset that it just couldn't control its swishing tail when it was excited. And while the adandara's high spirits did tend to cause a lot of trouble, I was still happy to know how it felt.

"Please don't be upset, Ciel. I love your tail, you know."

We were in the forest, so it was okay if Ciel caused some minor damage. What was a fallen skinny tree in the wake of Ciel's tail in the grand scheme of things?

"But I wonder...just how far out did Ciel and Sora go to hunt this?" Druid said.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, you can't find gooth anywhere near Oll or Hatow."

Did they put forth even more effort for me than I thought? "Thanks, guys."

I took time to give both Sora and Ciel plenty of pats on the head, and they contentedly closed their eyes all the while. Then I happened to look across from them, and I noticed that Flame was staring at the pair.

"Flame, thank you for making me that potion. You were a really big help—I mean it." Then I gave Flame some thank-you pats. The slime jiggled for a while until I started to hear some contented sleepy breathing from it.

"Oh, Flame, you never change, do you?" I petted all three one after another... which was a frantic task, seeing as how I only had two arms.

"Ivy, I'm going to go butcher the gooth by the river."

My eyes darted around and saw a river just a little ways away. The gooth corpse was ready for butchering.

Oh, darn. I was getting too cozy with the kids. "I'll help!"

"No, you fainted. You need to take it easy."

“But I’m okay now, so I can help!”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Druid’s worrywart spirit was alive and well.

“Yes, really. I really am okay. If I feel even slightly off, I’ll take a break.”

“If you feel even slightly off you tell me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay...you can help me.”

I did get his permission, but he looked awfully worried. I need to make him understand I really am fine.

I was about to lift the corpse and carry it to the river for butchering, but Ciel helped us move it in the blink of an eye. Ciel was able to effortlessly carry a monster bigger than itself... The adandara truly was quite strong.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

Gee, my heart won’t stop racing... I’ve never butchered a monster this big before. I’d better do my best to stay out of Druid’s way.

“That should do it,” Druid said as he cut the rest of the meat into large, equally sized pieces.

Phew...I’m wiped out. Since I’d never butchered anything of this size, Druid gave me instructions as I helped him. *But wow, look at all that meat.* I counted it up as I wrapped it in bana leaves. We had eighty-five parcels, and that was after Ciel had eaten its share of the meat. It really was a huge monster.

“Okay, um...I guess I’ll use some of this meat for dinner tonight. I think I’ll braise it, since the pieces are so big.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Okay... Can you handle dinner while I clean up?”

Oh, good. I finally got him to understand I'm all right. "Sure. I'll have it ready in no time."

"If you feel even slightly unwell, take a break, okay?"

Ha ha ha...guess I spoke too soon.

The sun had fallen quite a bit while we were butchering, so I wanted to get dinner cooked as quickly as possible. The air was soon filled with the aroma of meat and vegetables. I tasted the meat. It was tender and a bit gamey, but very good. Braising it had been the right move.

"I'm back," Druid said, returning to the mouth of the cave after cleaning up the aftermath of our butchering.

"Dinner will be ready soon."

"It smells good."

"I've made a braise of gooth meat and fruit tonight."

"Meat and fruit?"

"Yes. Would you like to taste it?"

"No, I don't want to ruin the surprise," Druid said as he stepped into the cave.

I'd already heated some water for us to wash up, so I told him to take it to the front of the cave. Whenever you butchered large animals or monsters, the stench of blood always stuck with you, so you had to carefully wash your clothes and body to avoid luring monsters.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

When I saw that Druid had returned to the cave with some hot water, I proceeded to finish off the meat. *Okay. All done.*

I took out our magic table and chairs. As I lined up the slimes' potions, Flame stirred and woke up to eat dinner with Sora. *Flame sure is good at waking up when it's dinnertime... That's a fine personality trait to have.*

I piled the meat high on a plate. All I need now is...I think we still have some black bread left over, and also some tea.

“Wow, what a feast.”

“And we have Ciel to thank for it. Sorry, Ciel, but could you please not swish your tail during dinner?”

Mrrrow...

“Thanks.”

Sorry, but I'd rather not eat my dinner in the middle of a dust storm.

Chapter 224: Premium Meat

“This is good.”

“Yup, it’s delicious.”

I was a bit worried that I hadn’t braised the meat long enough, but there didn’t seem to be any problems with it. The fruit wasn’t overpowering, either—it added sweet notes and a nice richness to the dish. My only thought was that if I’d braised the meat a bit longer, it would be softer to the touch. Next time, I’d try to make it fall-apart tender. Still, considering its short cooking time, dinner was a big success. My only mistake was going with black bread.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had black bread...and now I remember why.”

“Yeah, I served it because we had some left. I’ll be sure to bring it out next time we eat soup.”

Druid was complaining about how black bread was so dry that it soaked up all the moisture in your mouth and made it hard to swallow. It was a surprising revelation to me, too, since I hadn’t eaten it in a while. I didn’t realize just how dry it made your mouth. While the bread was good if you soaked it in the meat juices, there still just wasn’t enough moisture. I had to wash down the dry bread with some tea.

“My compliments to the chef.”

“It was my pleasure.”

“That was my first time eating gooth, but I could definitely get used to having it more often. It’s such a unique flavor.”

“Huh? That was your first time?”

“Yeah. After all, gooth meat is expensive.”

Expensive... I looked at the magic bag I’d just packed full of gooth meat. “Does it really cost that much?”

"Well, yeah. It's rare, so I've seen pieces the size of my fist sold for as much as ten radal each."

Ten radal...but that's equal to one gold plate! A piece of meat the size of a fist goes for one gold plate?! I peeked into my magic bag of gooth meat again. No... don't think about it. It's just normal meat. Normal meat... I stared into the bag and made a fist...which worried Druid an awful lot. It was so terribly embarrassing.

"I actually heard about a fight breaking out in some town recently over gooth meat."

"A fight?"

"Yeah, somebody paid a group of adventurers to attack another team who'd managed to catch a gooth."

I sighed. "Wow, that's quite a story."

"Well, there's no way a team of adventurers who were clever enough to catch a gooth could be beaten by a group of second-raters somebody hired. The hired adventurers lost, and all of them became slaves."

"I don't even know what to say..."

"The adventurers who took the money were fools, and so was the guy who paid them."

"Ha ha ha, yes, it does seem that way." *It's still scary to think that a fight like that could happen over meat.*

"And the whole reason those fools got all riled up over gooth meat in the first place was because there were rumors it made you young again."

"Does it really do that?"

"Of course not. The only thing the magic in gooth meat can do is make you less tired and replenish your strength. It could never do anything extreme like adding years to your life span."

"Oh, I see." *Well, if gooth meat really could make people young again, they'd have been wiped out ages ago.* "So how did that rumor start in the first place?"

"I'm not sure, since I never heard that part of the story...but I figure somebody probably ate the meat and said, 'Wow, I feel years younger,' and somebody else misheard it as 'I *am* years younger.'"

That made sense. I couldn't blame them, seeing as how I misunderstood things all the time.

"Well, let's clean up and go to bed."

"Sure."

I put the pot with the braised meat leftovers into my bag. The hearty soup I'd been simmering for tomorrow's breakfast was nicely flavorful, so I placed that in the bag as well. *Okay, all done cleaning up.*

"Did you have a bath yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then you go on ahead of me. I'll come to bed in a while."

"Okay. Sora, Flame, Ciel, let's go take a bath."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

I picked Flame up and walked out of the cave. Ciel was staying in adandara form today. It was nice that the cave was big enough for it to spend some time as its true self.

But wow, that gooth meat...it sure is powerful. Flame's potion may have cured my fever, but it's not so easy to remove all the weariness from weeks of traveling. A simple night's sleep didn't make all the pent-up exhaustion in your bones just melt away, either. But right now, I no longer felt any of that dull fatigue that had built up during our journey. Ever since I finished dinner, my body had felt lighter and lighter with each passing minute. At first I'd thought it was just my imagination, but by the time I finished cleaning up, it was quite clear to me. All the pent-up fatigue was gone.

I returned to the cave and wiped myself down. Then I did some light

stretching to loosen up my joints. Since I'd spent extra time lying down today, my muscles were a little stiff. After some light movement, I noticed it had taken much less time to loosen up than usual. Was that also the gooth meat at work? If so, then I could hardly blame anyone for claiming it "made you young again."

"What's up?" Druid asked when we were both back in the cave.

"All my travel fatigue is completely gone. I think it's the gooth meat."

"So...you did feel fatigued."

Oops. "But not anymore!"

"Ivy."

"I mean it. Besides, I think being a little tired when you travel is inevitable."

"Well...yeah, I guess you're right."

"I am *definitely* right!" *Erk...he rolled his eyes at me. I'd better laugh it off.* "Ha ha ha!"

"You silly girl... But you're right, Ivy. Gooth meat is quite powerful."

"So you feel it, too?"

"Yeah...I'm not tired at all anymore. My body feels light."

"I really don't think you'd be wrong if you said it made you younger."

"That's for sure... Well, let's get to bed. There's no use getting rid of our fatigue if we don't get enough sleep."

"Yeah. Good night, everyone."

I lay down, listening to the voices of my three creatures. I didn't know quite how to express it, but I really did feel a certain...freshness in my body. *I'd better be careful rationing out the rest of our gooth meat so we'll have enough to last us until Hatow Village.*

I woke up in the morning feeling good. In fact, my body felt extremely light. It had felt that way ever since dinner last night.

During breakfast, I persuaded Druid that we should continue toward Hatow

instead of spending the day resting. Feeling the positive effects of the gooth meat himself, he was pretty easy to convince.

“I still can’t get over how light I feel.”

“Me, too. Gooth meat sure is incredible. Ciel, Sora, thanks again for hunting it for us.”

Sora and Ciel—who was in slime form—both jiggled at me in reply. Flame, still quite sleepy, yawned widely beside them. I put it in its bag and set off on the village road.

“They’re competing again,” Druid pointed out.

“They sure are.”

Sora and Ciel were performing the same motion in the distance. Whenever they did that, it was likely to be some sort of contest.

“I wonder what they’re trying to do this time?” I asked.

“I’m not really sure.”

CRACK!

The sound of wood splintering ripped through the air a little ahead of us. We saw that Sora had slammed into a tree branch and broken it. Noticing this, Ciel jumped at an even bigger one and, after quite a few body-slams, Ciel’s branch finally snapped in two with a loud crack.

Druid and I just stood there...and sighed. Today’s game was Who Can Body-Slam Branches the Hardest. Why were they competing over *that* again, of all things?

“Do you think we should stop them?” I asked.

“If we do, don’t you think they’ll just make up some other contest?”

He had a point: They would definitely find some other way to one-up each other. At least branch-breaking kept the casualties to a minimum, I guess?

CRACK!

Ah. Now Sora broke a branch.

“Pu! Puuu.”

Mew!

CRACK!

One point to Ciel... Wow, they're both breaking really thick branches with such ease.

Mee-owww.

“Pu!”

We followed along the pair, dragging the wood out of the road so it wouldn't bother any travelers who came after us. How much longer would their contests last? *I hope they'll get tired of this eventually...*



**EXTRA * A Master Always Has His
Apprentices on His Mind**



Master's POV

“Gotos, where’s Druid?”

I let myself in through Gotos’s front door to see him unheroically jump up from his seat—he’d probably been asleep.

“Whoa! Don’t scare me, Master!”

The guy always did let his guard down too much in his own home. Well, guess I can’t blame him. I’m just a little miffed, since I’ve been so busy with work. I wish I could’ve taken Gotos along with me—I sure could’ve tied things up a lot easier that way.

“Easy, pal, I ain’t threatenin’ ya. Now, where’s Druid?”

“At home.”

I just now noticed this, but dang, Gotos’s house is filthy. Learn how to clean, pal. I mean, you’ve got way too much stuff. Meanwhile, Druid’s house...well, it’s a failure in its own way. He’s only got the bare necessities on display. Actually, scratch that, he doesn’t even have the necessities.

“If he were home, I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

I did check his house and I’ve spent the day askin’ around, but nobody’s seen him. And if not even Gotos knows where he is...

“Hey, has he taken on any sketchy gigs lately?”

“Sketchy gigs?! Oh! Yeah, somebody did ask for an adventurer to explore a cave that just got discovered near here...”

Explore a cave? That’s a job for four adventurers, bare minimum. “That jackass...he took the gig all by himself, didn’t he?”

“Did something happen to Druid, Master?”

“The middle brother picked a fight with someone Druid was with. They both got hurt.”

“Again?”

Those dumbass brothers of his...I wish they'd just grow up already. They keep whining and demanding things of Druid like snotty little kids. I'd love to give 'em a piece of my mind and shut them up, but I know they'd just sulk and take it out on Druid. I wish their parents would just cut those stupid kids off...but they treat them with *kindness*, of all things. Guess they pity the boys, for all I know.

“Argh...”

“You sound tired, Master.”

“Guess I am.”

“Was there anything else you needed?”

“I got a warning from the guild master. He says he's worried that Druid is unfit to work.”

I wish I could do something to help, but I know Druid wouldn't want me to. I wonder if there's anything I *can* do...

“He and I did some work together a little while ago, and I *was* a little worried about his safety.”

“What happened?”

He'd taken on plenty of crazy-dangerous gigs in the past, but he never once seemed concerned about dying. It really hurt to watch him pour all his frustrations into his work like that.

“What happened...I'm not really sure how to put it. I'd just catch these brief flashes of something in him. I got this sense that he's going to disappear somewhere... That he'll never stop fighting a monster when he's confronted with one. And he used to vent his frustrations to me...but he's stopped doing that lately...”

So at least he'd still express his feelings around Gotos...

“His skills are causing him a lot of pain. I wish I could understand how he's feeling...but he keeps shutting me out. It's a blessing he let me be his friend all these years...”

"Don't worry, Gotos. You're very important to Druid, and that'll never change."

Druid had a mysterious skill: stealing other people's stars. If you were cursed with that, it's only natural you'd want to keep others at a distance. And it was a particularly bad twist of fate that his two victims were his own brothers, since they'd convinced themselves a person's worth was entirely determined by their stars. I'd hoped that losing their stars would help them grow up a little, but instead they raged and blamed it all on Druid.

But the reason why people stopped hanging around them...and why people mocked them for losing their stars...none of that was Druid's fault. They brought it all on themselves, yet they shoved all the blame onto poor Druid, who was still only a child at the time. And their abuse still hasn't ended. It doesn't matter to them that it's been years now since their stars were stolen.

"I don't blame Druid's parents one bit," Gotos said. "They were shocked and had no idea what to do when their eldest sons' stars disappeared. I just wish they'd opened their hearts a little more to Druid. The poor guy was crushed with guilt."

Gotos was absolutely right. I wish they'd done more for him. I wish they'd turned some of their attention away from their whinin', starless sons and given it to Druid, who was quietly suffering alone. Well, it's too late for that now, though. Over the years, Druid lost all faith in his family.

"So, which cave are we talkin' about?"

"It's about two days' walk away from town. Are you going to go there?"

"Yeah." The guy did have a tendency to neglect his injuries. He needed someone to watch over him.

"Will Marual and Tombas be joining you?"

"Yeah, I'm sure they will. They worry a lot about Druid, ya know."

"Then I'm coming..."

"No, Gotos."

"Huh?! Why can't I come, too?"

Ha ha ha! He looks crazy upset. “Something on your mind?”

Gotos avoided my gaze when I said that. Heh, did he really think he could hide it from me?

“Is it as bad as it looks?”

“It’s just a *scratch*, Master! It’s just that the monster turned out to be poisonous, so I’m keeping an eye on it.”

Well, he’s still got color in his face, so he’ll probably be fine. A “scratch,” eh? I thought he’d stopped makin’ careless blunders like that. I wonder if something’s on his mind... Oh!

“Did the guild master say anything to ya?” The guild master did say he was planning to have a talk with Gotos just before I left on my last gig.

“Yes...and if you’re thinking it was about naming me as the next guild master, he did say that. But that’s not what’s been on my mind.”

“Dang, ya look really calm. The guild master just said he wants *you* to take over for him. Shouldn’t ya be a bit more panicky about it?”

“Well, I’d heard rumors that I was next in line to be guild master, so I’d already braced myself for that talk. But what I *wasn’t* prepared to hear was that *you* were the one who nominated me... Is that true, Master?”

“*Nominate* isn’t quite the right word. The guild master asked me who I thought would be a good choice, and I said you would—that’s all. As far as I’m concerned, you’re second to none for the job.”

Gotos stared hard at me in reply. Then he sighed quietly. “I will become the guild master. I just have reservations...”

I guess it was one of those *I’m ready to be the guild master but I just need an extra push* things. Well, it wasn’t a job you could take lightly. Gotos needed just a little push... And the one who always motivated Gotos the most was Druid. *All right, then...I’ll light a fire under him. There’s somethin’ I’d like to hear from his own lips anyway.*

“Druid’s skill...do ya think stealin’ stars is all he’s capable of?”

“Huh?! What do you mean, Master?”

"Exactly what I said. His star-stealin' skill. Do ya think that's all there is to it?"

Those number-like things I had Druid write out for me...the slanted line between the two numbers... I just couldn't shake the feeling that they had more than one meaning. Maybe it's just all in my head. But what if there *were* two meanings behind it?

The one we knew about already was his power to steal stars. But what if he could do more than steal stars...what if he could give them as well? If it was just my imagination, then so be it. But if his power did have two sides, then he must have the ability to give as well as take away. And if my hunch was right, he would have to keep this secret at any cost.

"Are you trying to say there *is* more to it?" Gotos asked. "I really don't want to see him suffer any more than he already has."

"I ain't smart enough to figure out those numbers...but I'm thinkin' that if he has the power to take stars, he might also have the power to *give* stars."

"But that would be..." Gotos trailed off, staring hard at me. He really does have a keen eye for people. That's probably why the guild master wants him to be next in line. He's nothin' to write home about, but he's a good guy. And I'm confident he could actually last as the guild master, though not on his own. It's a merciless job, and I guess I'm the crappiest man alive for steering him toward it.

But I know Gotos is up to the task. I have faith that he can be a great guild master. He can be a bit of a softie at times, but he'll be fine as long as he's got good assistants to help him out.

"If he does have powers like that, Master...then isn't he in danger?"

"Yep. He'll definitely have a target on his back."

"So, you're saying I should become the guild master so I can protect him?"

"Nah. Druid would resent me forever if I made ya do that. I dropped your name for guild master, Gotos, because I think you can make this town a better place."

"Yikes! Did you just...*praise* me?"

Why're ya so shocked? For cryin' out loud. "Ya do know what kind of position you'd be in as the guild master...right?"

"Of course I do. I've seen with my own two eyes everything the guild master has done."

A guild master has to do whatever it takes to preserve a town, and sometimes that means making unethical decisions. Decisions that would lead to his friends dying. Our current guild master has had to make decisions like that time and time again. That proves just how unstable the area around the village has been. And a group of young adventurers who don't realize this would often criticize him for being cruel and unethical. While there were those who did understand what a guild master went through, there were usually more voices of condemnation than support. Still, in spite of those critics, the guild master's dedication to his job was steadfast.

"I deeply respect our current guild master," Gotos said.

"Yeah, so do I. But he's gettin' on in years."

"Yes, I suppose so... I got a bit of a shock the other day when I saw him from behind."

From behind?

"He was smaller than me. And this is someone I'd always looked up to."

"I see."

"To be honest...I'm a little worried that I won't be able to live up to his legacy."

Well, no, ya can't. Not right away, at least. Nobody could. But from the look in Gotos's eyes, I don't think he needs me to tell him. I guess my role to play here isn't to give him a push but to watch over him while he gathers the courage to take that next step. The direction the church is moving in *does* concern me. Word on the street says a lot of unfamiliar faces have been spotted in their ranks recently.

"I don't know this for sure, but...word is the church is after Druid."

"Agh?! Really?"

Dang...where did that voice even come from? It had way too much gusto.
“Yeah...I think they wanna use his weakness against him. But all they can do for now is watch from a distance for now—they don’t want *their* stars gettin’ stolen, after all. It’s just...there’s a possibility they might make a move soon.”

If the church’s purpose was to pray for peace, then I’d have no problem with them. But whenever I see anyone associated with them...I get this strong sense that something is amiss. I don’t have any solid proof, and I haven’t witnessed anything damning, but it’s just something that a seasoned, well-traveled adventurer can’t overlook. The church folks are...suspicious.

“I seem to remember ya don’t like the church, either, Gotos. You got a personal beef with them?”

“They rejected him.”

Rejected who?

“Druid came to them begging for help when he learned he had the skill to steal stars...and they threw him out the door.”

That’s right...Gotos was around when Druid found out about his star-stealin’ skill. “That’s horrible.”

“I know... If I become the guild master...do you think I’ll be able to stand up to the church?”

“Hell, no. They’re almost impossible to touch.”

Fightin’ the church is a fool’s errand. That’s why he has to help Druid some other way, and he has to give Druid a role of his own to play, too.

“Then how...how can I protect Druid?”

Protect him, eh? Heh! The plan I’m thinking of won’t exactly result in protecting him. But for both Gotos and Druid...it’s probably the best plan we’ve got.

“We’ll make him an indispensable person to the guild and the guild master.”

“Huh?!” Gotos gave me a very suspicious look.

“Tell me, Gotos, who has your back more than anyone else?”

“Druid, of course. I trust him more than anyone.”

“Right?”

“Huh?! Yeah...but why does that matter? Ohh...you want me to make him my assistant?”

Being his assistant would be a good idea...but the guild had its rules to obey.

“Nah. We’ll have Druid just keep being a normal adventurer. And because of his skill, he’ll have to be a mid-level one. But you’ll show everyone that even at that rank, he’s your most trusted adventurer.”

“Uhh...is *that* all?”

“This’ll be hard on Druid, but you’ll assign some tough tasks to him for a while.”

Gotos stared at me with his jaw dropped. I don’t blame the guy; here I said we should protect Druid, and then I go off suggesting we give him all the dangerous jobs.

“Um...I don’t quite follow, Master...”

“What I’m saying is...we shouldn’t try to steer Druid off the path he’s on right now.”

From the way Gotos talked about him, it was clear Druid was in a cycle of self-loathing. We needed to give him a safe space to channel that hate.

“You’re right...if we tried to stop him, he’d probably run off somewhere.”

“So, if we can’t stop him...then we should give him a place to blow off some steam.”

Gotos looked a bit stunned. “And if I become the guild master...I’ll be able to assign tasks like that to him. I can also pick who’s on his teams.”

“Yeah.”

“Now I understand.”

“Use Druid’s accomplishments to cement his place here and let everyone know just how invaluable he is. Y’know, he’s the guy who accomplishes all the dangerous quests. If he gets enough of those under his belt, people’ll start to

talk. That way you can prove to this village that he's a very important member of the community."

The church won't touch veteran adventurers, since that would make enemies out of way too many of their comrades. It would be nice if Druid could just be promoted to veteran adventurer, but given his special skill, that's never happening. Druid himself would be opposed to it anyway. So, what else can we do to help him? It's easy. Make everyone think he's just as important as all the veteran adventurers, even though he's only a mid-level one. It would take a little time to carry out this plan, but if I keep an eye on the church, they'll probably lay off him for a while.

And Druid's destructive tendencies will give Gotos the boost he needs. If Druid successfully carries out dangerous quests, Gotos's reputation will improve because he chose the right person for the assignment. Also, everyone knows Druid and Gotos are my apprentices. Rumors will naturally spread that Druid is taking the initiative for Gotos's sake. A lot of problems will rise to the surface when Gotos takes over as guild master, but everyone's biggest worry is whether the one who is chosen will be worthy of it. Once they see someone risking his life to carry out Gotos's orders, those worries will be washed away. They'll see he's a good enough guild master that someone would risk his life for him. Adventurers are drawn to strength, after all.

"Master?"

"What's up?"

"Does Druid...know about any of this?"

Damn. That guy's shrewd. "I'm not planning on tellin' him. But he'll probably figure it out, and faster than ya think."

"I figured."

"I ain't givin' up on the idea, though. Gotos...you really wanna be the guild master, don't ya?"

"Yes."

"If ya really do, then promise me you won't get in Druid's way."

If Gotos is truly serious about this, then there's no mistaking it—he'll work hard to cement Druid's place here. Well, he'll probably work *too* hard at times. Guess I'll have Marual and Tombas keep an eye on him for a while. Those guys'll know how Druid can help Gotos...and they'll casually steer him in the right direction.

"Master...please stay in this village until I've cemented my place here, okay?"

Ah, the look in his eyes changed. "Don't be such a softie. Well...as your master, givin' ya a proper send-off is the least I can do."

I don't know just how far the church's watchful eye has followed Druid, but if I stay near him, they might try to separate us. The best way would be to lure me away from this village on a quest of some sort. And the only way I can stop them from doing that...is to retire.

Since I'm a veteran adventurer, even if I retired, I could always be dispatched to help with some big problem in the village...but aside from that, they'd have no power over me. And since I've done my fair share of dangerous jobs, I've got plenty of money saved, too. Quitting adventuring...won't be a problem at all. Okay! I'm gonna retire.

"Well, I think it's time to go bring Druid back home."

He went to explore a cave, right? Knowing Druid, he'll be wounded but alive. When I see him, I'll give him a stern talking to, then we'll go out to eat something nice.

"Hey! I told ya not to come, didn't I?" Why was Gotos getting up to leave, too?

"How could I *not* come with you, Master?"

"You're gonna get hurt."

"I'll drink a potion. I'll be fine."

I should've known. Damn fool. Sometimes he won't heal his wounds on purpose...so he'll understand Druid's pain better. I know I told him there's no way that would help him understand.

"Drink it all up, ya hear?" I asked, carefully watching him take the potion.

“Let’s go.”

Well, then...I can’t wait to see the look on Druid’s face after all these years. If he gives me that emotionless look again, I might lose my cool.

“Oh!”

“What is it, Master?”

“I was gonna give Druid a flashy pseudonym.”

If we want the guild to think he’s important, he should have a memorable alias. A pseudonym tends to catch on faster.

“Please, don’t...”

“Got any good ideas?”

“Master, could you please drop it?”

“Guild Master’s Shadow?”

“Are you even listening to me, Master?”

“No, wait, maybe it should be something friendlier?”

“Sorry, Druid...I couldn’t stop him...”



BONUS * Don't Drink Too Much!



Druid's POV

I poured liquor into my cup. When I gulped it down, my throat burned.

“Hee hee!” Looking back on the events of the past few weeks, I just had to chuckle. I used to think that I would never leave this village. That it was the punishment I deserved. But Ivy struck down all my stubborn ways of thinking in one fell swoop.

When we first met, I thought Ivy was such a strange boy—even though she was actually a girl. Well, with her short hair and clothes, of course I thought she was a boy. Looking back now, though, I can see she always looked like a girl... It makes me wonder how I ever thought that delicate kid was a boy. Well, I was on the verge of death. That must've been why. But for a guy on the verge of death, I was abnormally awake and alert.

“Still, what a strange scene that was...”

I thought that I had died...but to my astonishment, I woke to find a blue slime in front of me. It was a bright blue, the likes of which I'd never seen before. It actually looked *happy* to see me.

Then, as if that weren't enough, there was a “boy” nearby on the verge of tears, looking back and forth between the two slimes. Well, when she explained afterward what had happened, I didn't blame her for being so distressed. If I'd seen one slime split into two, I would have definitely lost my marbles. If anything, I'm shocked that Ivy kept as calm as she did.

Just as I was wondering what I should do, enter the adandara. It was just one shock after another after I came back from the dead. Though I guess it was the series of startling events that helped me remain calm.

“Heh! When I was trying to figure out what was going on, Sora saved me, the adandara turned out to have a name... Hee hee hee! Looking back on it now, that was quite a day.”

“Teryuuu.”

“Hm? Flame?”

Ivy was spending the night at my house, since our cleaning session had taken much longer than anticipated.

“Teryu?”

“Did I wake you up? Sorry about that.”

Flame wiggled back and forth in reply, then it hopped right beside me. Flame, the slime Sora birthed. I’d never heard of a slime giving birth before. I doubt there are any books that talk about it, either.

“What’s wrong, kid? Can’t sleep?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Oh, I see. But you should still try to get some sleep now. We’re going to be cleaning again tomorrow, and it’s gonna get pretty hectic in this house.”

“Teryu!”

Hm? What’s it looking at? My hands? The liquor cup? “You can’t drink this—it’s alcohol. Besides, you only eat red potions, don’t you?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Oh, wait, it also eats spent magic stones. Well, actually, it doesn’t eat them—it puts magic back into them... Y’know, when you take a moment to just sit and think about it, Ivy’s slimes really are enigmas.

“Ryu?” Flame asked, looking at me and tilting its body a little. It did that whenever it was confused about something.

“Um...I was just thinking about what mysterious slimes you and Sora are.”

“Teryuuu.”

Why is it puffing out its chest? Wait, is it proud to be mysterious? Well, mysteriousness aside, Flame and Sora are extraordinary, and there’s no mistaking that.

“Ryu! Ryu!”

Uh...what is it now? Are you trying to tell me something?

“Ryu! Ryu!”

I don’t get it... I looked at Flame and thought hard, but I had no clue what it was going on about.

“Sorry, kid. I’m not Ivy, so I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me.”

“Teryuuu.”

Oh! Now that I do understand. I’ve made it upset. But this just made me realize something...

“Ivy has quite a gift. It usually takes tamers years to be able to communicate with their tamed creatures.”

“Ryu?”

“It’s not a lie—it’s the truth.”

I’d read books about tamers who happened to communicate easily with a creature every once in a while...but all those stories turned out to be false. It takes a very long time to tame a monster and learn to read all its subtle emotional cues and mannerisms. *That’s* how you establish a mental connection with it.

“Communicating by thought is no easy feat, but Ivy has already done it on some level... That’s incredible, for your information.”

Huh? My liquor cup is empty. Well...I’m in a good mood today, so I’ll open another bottle. I think I’ll drink something a little stronger.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Hm? Oh, you’re talking about Ivy. Yeah, she really is amazing.”

Flame was jiggling with a soft look in its eyes. It definitely looked happy.

“Are you happy to hear me say Ivy is amazing?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Yes, I agree. She’s an amazing, wonderful girl.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu,” Flame sang merrily.

A smile spread across my face. *Is it just me, or does this drink taste even better*

now?

“Ryu?”

“Hm? You’re tilting yourself again? Got a question for me?”

Flame and I stared at each other. Was it a question *about* me? *I did think earlier that this liquor tasted really good... Maybe it saw that joy on my face?*

“I was just thinking that my daily drink tasted better than usual...and it’s probably because I’m enjoying your company, Flame.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu,” Flame sang, a little louder now.

“Flame, can you tone it down a little? You’ll wake Ivy.”

“Teryu,” Flame said, hanging its head a little.

Is it feeling guilty? Now I can see why Ivy thinks Flame and Sora are so cute. They really are cute. I rubbed Flame’s head, and it narrowed its eyes and jiggled in reply. *Ahhh, this liquor tastes so good.*

“Teryuuu!”

“Are you trying to...tell me I’m drinking too much?”

That’s a stretch.

“Te! Ryu! Ryuuu.”

Huh? Was I right? Really?

“Teryu?”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t really drunk that...much...huh? Am I on my *fifth* bottle now?”

“Teryu!” Flame jumped onto my lap as I poured more liquor.

“Flame?”

“Teryu!”

Is it trying to tell me to stop drinking? “This is the last one, okay? I promise.”

“Teryu.” Flame jiggled side to side.

Guess that’s a no. But I don’t want to waste it. Okay then!

“Teryuuu.”

“Ahh, what a great drink.”

Flame glared at me.

C'mon, no need to get mad at me... “I'll be fine. I'm not drunk. And I can work just as hard tomorrow as I did today.”

“Teryu?”

“It's not a lie—I mean it.”

“Teryu?”

“Yes, really.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Oh, good, that convinced it. Still, I wonder how I drank five whole bottles without noticing?

“Flame, it's gotten really late. Let's turn in.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu,” Flame sang, bouncing toward the door. It was probably going into the room where Ivy was sleeping.

“Good night.”

“Teryuuu.” Flame bounced out of the room.

I carried the empty bottles and my cup, as well as the plate I'd used with the snacks Ivy made for me, into the kitchen. They could wait until tomorrow to be washed.

“Flame and I sure opened up there.”

Sora and I had clicked from the very start, since it had such a bold personality. But it really was fun to get closer to Flame little by little. I returned to the dining room and spread out the blanket I kept tucked away in the corner of the room.

“Gee, I'm sleepy,” I yawned.

I'm feeling a nice buzz... I should fall asleep in no time. But wow, Flame sure was an interesting drinking buddy. If I learned to communicate better with it, that would be fun.

“Huh...?”

I thought back to my interactions with Flame. Building a mental connection with a monster was supposed to be very difficult...but did I actually kind of do it? *Yeah...I did. Flame helped by doing its best to communicate with me...*

“Ha ha! Yet another thing that makes you guys rare.”

I’d encountered many a tamed slime in my day, and their behaviors were definitely much more diverse than those of their untamed counterparts. But slimes like Sora and Flame that emoted with their entire bodies? I hadn’t encountered anything like that before. They really were fascinating.

“And I guess I’ll devote my life to protecting them, too. Never dreamed I’d have someone like that in my life.”

My parents did love me, but I was never able to fully accept their love. I’d thought I didn’t deserve it because I’d stolen my brothers’ stars.

“*It’s up to you how you want to live your life...* Right, Ivy?”

When I lost my arm, my life as an adventurer ended. But the rest of my life is up to me. Well, I guess I can’t get started until I finish cleaning my house. I’d better rest up and put in another hard day’s work tomorrow.

Ivy’s POV

“**G**ood morning, Mr. Druid.” *Ready for another good day of cleaning?*

“Ahh...g’morning.”

Huh? He looks a bit tired... Is he going to be okay?

“Teryu!”

Hm? Flame sounds a bit upset... What’s wrong? I looked in the direction of the voices and saw Flame bouncing around in front of Druid. What happened?

“Sorry.”

Druid apologized...to Flame? Huh? Seriously, what is going on?

“No, I think it’s okay...”

What are they talking about?

“Teryuuu.”

Oh, now Flame is really upset!

“C’mon, you don’t have to be so angry about it!”

Huh? It sounds like...Druid completely understands what Flame is saying.

“Ryuuu!”

“Flame, please, not so loud! I really am sorry, honest!”

Aha...does he have a hangover? Yeah, that would explain all those empty liquor bottles I found in the other rooms. Five in the kitchen, two in the next room over. If he drank seven bottles in all, that would definitely leave its mark the morning after. Maybe I should make him a good hangover breakfast.

Still, what a pleasant surprise to see him so friendly with Flame... Have they always been that close?

Afterword

Hello, everyone, it's been a while. Honobonoru500 here. Thank you for getting this copy of *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*, Volume 4. And, Nama-sama, thank you for giving me yet another collection of beautiful illustrations for this volume. What do you know—this is the fourth time I'm writing an afterword! You all made it possible. And on April 15th, 2021, the manga version went on sale. I am filled with gratitude. Also, Volumes 1–3 have had a second printing! I really am so, so thankful.

Volume 4 was filled with new relationships and new departures. The part that made me struggle the most was Druid's relationship with his family. Truth be told, the shopkeeper whom Ivy first bought rice from wasn't originally going to be Druid's father, but I felt that for Druid to be able to move on with his life, he needed to make peace with his family, so I made a snap decision and changed the shopkeeper to be his father. This change greatly affected the flow of the story, but it enabled me to write about Druid evolving while interacting with his family, so I think it was all for the best. I enjoyed displaying the unique array of personalities in his family, too.

My next big struggle was making peace—whether Druid should forgive his brothers right away or not when they apologize. I really agonized over that a lot. I figured he would need to patch things up with his family if he was going to move on with his life. But then I thought about how I would react if I were in his shoes...and I realized I wouldn't be able to do it. So, in Volume 4, I had his brothers apologize, but Druid didn't forgive them. I'm deeply invested in how their relationship unfolds in the future.

Ivy's companions had plenty of time in the spotlight this time, too. I had to be careful not to overdo it in the scenes where Sora and Flame got new powers, but I really wanted to write them doing extraordinary things so casually during an average day. And I guess I was successful? I hope so.

Thank you again, everyone at TO Books. And my apologies to my editor, K-sama, for whom I once again caused a great deal of grief. Volume 4 wouldn't

exist without all of you, and I want to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I look forward to working on the rest of this series with you all, and I'll do everything I can to ensure it's a long relationship!

Lastly, I would like to thank you with all my heart for reading this book. Also, I have some news. Since so many people have bought these books, there will be a Volume 5! I hope you'll read it along with the manga. May we meet again in this "Isekai'ed into a world...where proper waste disposal rules!" light novel and manga series.

Honobonoru500

April 2021

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the fourth volume of a web novel that began in August 2018. In Volume 4, Flame's mysterious new powers will shock and amaze! Meanwhile, Ivy discovers Ciel's got battlemania?! And Sora's got its fair share of surprises, too. Then, when Ivy finally departs from the town of Oll, she has a travel companion with her.

Nama

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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