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Nema

NOVEL

7

The
Weakest
Tamer **Began**
a Journey **to**
Pick Up Trash

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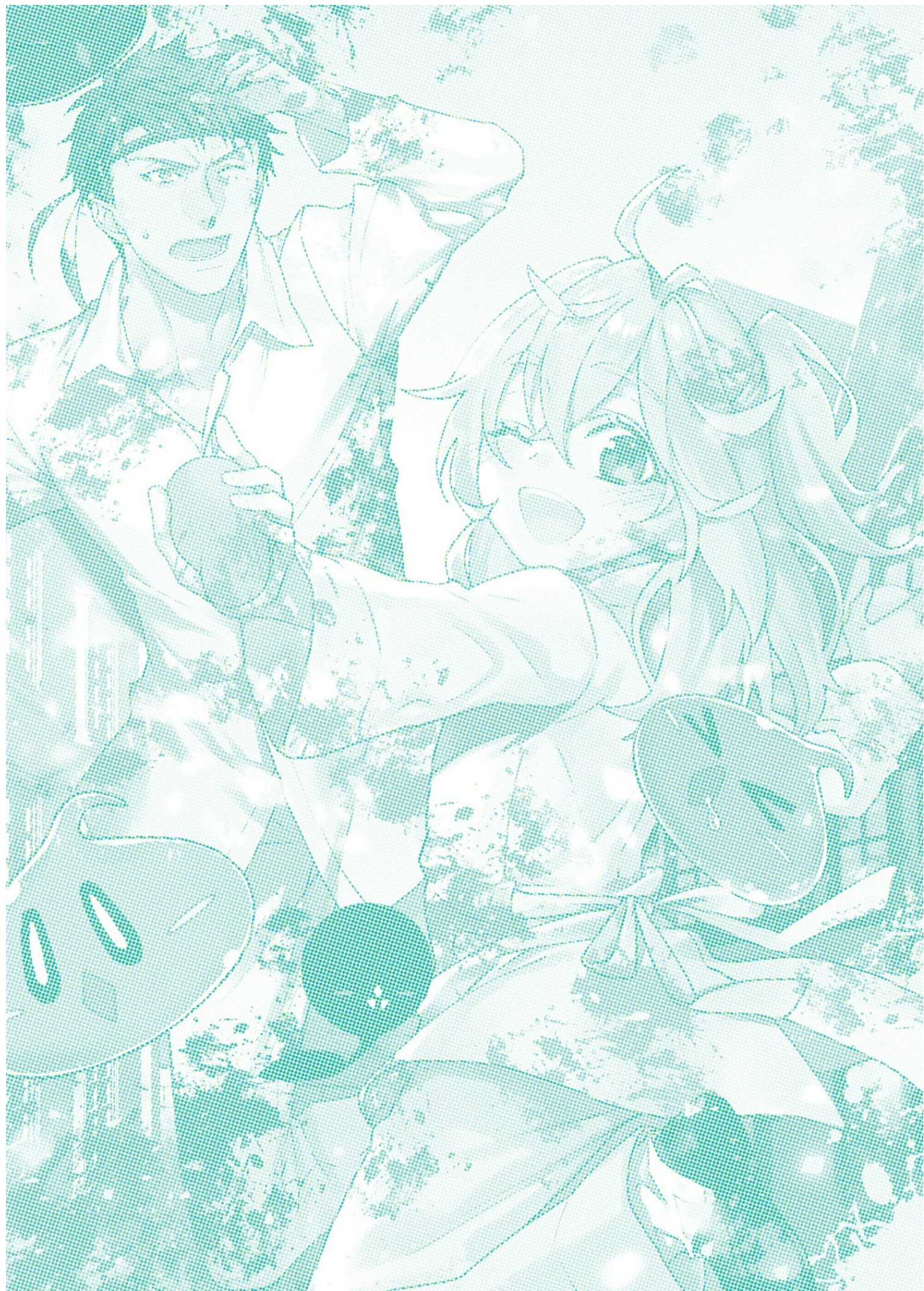
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Honobonoru500



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Nama



Seven Seas Entertainment

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START!

**It's snowing in
Hatow Village!**

Yay! Winter is
finally here!



**What! Do!
We! Have! Here!
Another slime?!**
Go back to start

I wish it were just my
imagination...

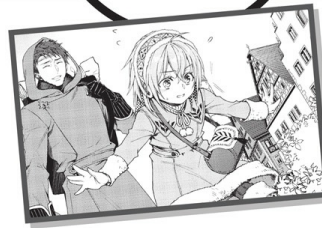
**Help clear
the snow!**
Go forward 3 squares

Nobody does it
like Flame!



**Shopping
was a real struggle...**
Depending on the outcome,
go back/forward 2 squares

Mr. Druid, stop laughing!!



**Now,
let's go party
at the spring
festival!**

← To be continued..... ||

**I love playing
dress-up♪**
Go forward 2 squares

Can I pull this off?
I can't wait to
wear it.

**Mr. Druid is
super angry!!!**
Go forward one square

I'd better be careful not to
make him angrier...

✿ CHARACTERS ✿



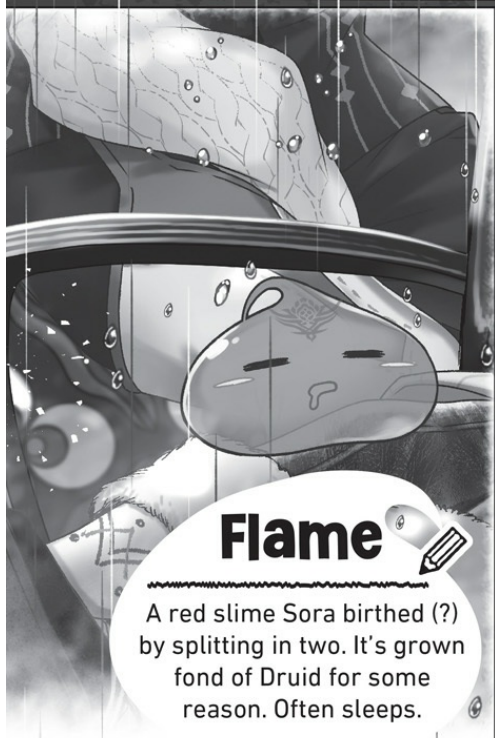
Druid

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.



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.



Ciel

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

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.

TRUE FORM



The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 7

Story by Honobonoru500

Illustrations by Nama

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PART 7 * Festival in Hatahi Village



THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

Chapter 325:

A Brightly Colored Village

“Ciel, Sora, you’ll both have to get back into the bag now.”

Since we were getting close to Hatahi Village, it was time to return everyone to their bag. Seven days had passed since we found all that fruit. Since then, we’d mined some magic stones from a cave, foraged some more fruit and nuts, and even happened upon an illegal dump. That was where Sol really got a chance to show off. The symbols that appeared on Sol’s body when it floated had turned into a muted silver that looked really cool. But Sol was perpetually round now, and we were a little worried that it wasn’t returning to its former shape.

“Ivy, do you sense any human auras around?” Druid asked, casting glances at our immediate surroundings.

“Lemme check... Nope.”

I did feel a human aura in the distance, but there weren’t any monster auras nearby. That was probably because Ciel had been out of the bag earlier.

“Then let’s head on to the village road.”

“Yes, let’s.”

We walked in the direction Ciel had told us to go until the village road came into view. *That’s our Ciel!*

“We’re almost there,” Druid remarked.

“Yeah.”

“Since we’ll be arriving about fifteen days ahead of schedule, we’ll have our choice of an inn.”

“Do they really fill up that quickly?”

“Yeah, the village gets crowded the day of, so we’ll have to be careful not to lose each other.”

“Got it.” I wonder just how many people will be there. I’m excited about the festival, but I get a little nervous when I think about being around all those people. Hmm... Will I be able to enjoy myself?

“Don’t worry, everyone’s just there to enjoy the festival.” Sensing my anxieties, Druid gave my head a reassuring pat. “Just relax and enjoy yourself.”

“I will.” As long as Druid is with me, I should be okay. “Whoa! Is that the village gate?”

I was startled by the sight of a gate that could only be described as flashy. It was covered top to bottom in splashes of color.

“Well, flashy is the name of the game in this village. Just wait until you see what’s inside.”

It’s flashy inside, too? Is it really okay for them to have such a showy front gate? I stopped in my tracks and stared up at it. It was made of wood; that much was no different from the other towns and villages. But the wood was painted in bright colors. From reds to blues to greens, it was covered in a kaleidoscope of hues.

“That painting...what’s it supposed to be?”



It looked like the scribbled art of a toddler. In places, it even seemed like the colors had been smashed onto the door with some kind of tool.

“It probably started out as a painting of something, but it’s taken on more and more splashes of color with each festival.”

“It gets painted during the festivals?”

“That’s right. Some people throw their cakes of powdered paint at the gate.”

So that’s why the picture is abstract. But cakes aside, is it really all right to throw things at the gate? What a strange village.

“And on the day of the festival, everyone wears all-white clothes.”

“White clothes? But I don’t have any white clothes.”

“Don’t worry, they sell clothes specifically for the festival. You wear them for two days straight.”

“Why for two days?”

“I’ll explain later; let’s go inside first. The gatekeeper’s been giving us funny looks.”

The gatekeeper was staring at us, probably because we’d spent so much time talking and looking at the gate. When we got closer, we received a wary glare. Now I felt bad.

“Hello, we’d like to enter the village.”

“You would? Well, please give me either a guild card or some other form of identification.”

The gatekeeper sounded quite guarded. Were we really acting that suspiciously? Druid pulled out his guild card, so I took out mine in turn. After confirming our identities, the gatekeeper sighed loudly.

“Oh, what a relief. You’re a bit early for the festival, and you kept staring at me, so I was worried you were up to something.”

“So sorry about that,” I apologized. “This is our first time here, so I was asking him why the gate was so flashy.”

“Aha, you’ve never been here before?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, the festival sure does get flashier and flashier every year.” The gatekeeper looked up at the gate. “Do you have any plans for your stay in Hatahi?”

“Yes, we’re here for the festival.”

“What?! But that’s not for another month.” The gatekeeper was startled.

I guess we really did get here too early. “Ahh, well, we were worried we wouldn’t be able to get a room at an inn, so we came early,” I explained.

“Oh, now I see. Yes, we do get more and more visitors every year, and the inns sure do fill up.”

“Ah, that reminds me, do you know of any good inns?”

“Let me see... Oh, could you write your reason for coming to town on this form here?”

“Sure.” Druid took the paper from the gatekeeper.

“Since you’re here for the festival, I assume that means you’ll be staying for about a month?”

“That’s the plan, yes. We thought about camping in the plaza, but we figured we’d better not at this time of year.”

“Yes, don’t stay in the plaza. Just yesterday, some idiots caused another big brawl. Especially with that pretty little daughter of yours, you definitely should avoid camping in the plaza this time of year.”

Is it really that bad? So bad he had to tell us twice not to stay there?

“If you’re looking for an inn that’s not too expensive, go down Main Street, then take the fourth right. After a minute or two, you’ll come across an inn called Kokoron. The innkeeper there is friendly and full of fun.”

“Is there a bath?”

“Oh, every inn in Hatahi comes with a bath. It’s regulation; you can’t build an inn without one.”

Baths are required by law? Wow, what a village.

"That's news to me," Druid said.

"The bath at Kokoron is big, too, so it's famously nice and relaxing."

"Well, I'm looking forward to seeing it. Thanks."

"No problem. Have fun at the festival, you two."

"Thanks. And we appreciate the tip on the inn."

"Yes, thank you very much," I added.

"Oh, don't mention it."

We stepped through the gate and looked at the streets unfolding before us, which were definitely flashy. In fact, they used so many different colors that there was nothing uniform about them.

"It's making my eyes tired," I sighed.

"Ha ha ha! That's how everyone feels the first time they come here, but you'll get used to it in a month."

I guess it will take quite a while before I get used to it, then. But just look at all the colors on the doors, window frames, and walls!

All the houses clashed completely with each other. And they each used primary-adjacent colors, too, so all of Main Street gave off a bright and colorful mood.

"The gatekeeper said to go down Main Street, then take the fourth right... Oh, is that our inn?"

Around the corner and several houses down stood a bright blue building: Kokoron, the inn that the gatekeeper had told us about.

"Wow...it's so *blue*."

"It sure is," Druid agreed. "Bright-blue walls with a bright-yellow door."

"But the window frames are black."

We opened the door and stepped into Kokoron.

"Huh? It's completely different inside."

I'd assumed that the inside would be just as flashy as the outside, but Kokoron was decorated with furnishings of incredibly muted colors.

"Come on in! Welcome to Kokoron. I'm Chikar, the innkeeper."

I looked in the direction of the voice to see a bespectacled man smiling at us. He was about as tall as Druid but much thinner.

"My name is Druid, and this is Ivy. We'd like to stay in Hatahi for a while. Do you have a room available?"

"We sure do. The festival isn't for another month, so we've got plenty of space. Will you be sharing a room?"

"Yes, please."

"How long will you be staying?"

"We're going to the festival, so we still haven't decided when we'll be leaving."

"All right. I'll just calculate your bill for a month for now."

"Thank you."

"It's seven radal per month with breakfast included. Suppers are sold separately."

This village seemed more expensive than the last one. Maybe that was because the inns got crowded during the festival season.

"Okay. Do we just tell you whenever we want supper?"

"Sure thing. All right, you've got a corner room on the third floor. There's a kitchen on each floor that's free to use. I'll just escort you to your room, then."

We followed Chikar upstairs to the third floor.

"This is the kitchen."

I looked at the third-floor kitchen. It was filled with pots and pans and looked like it would be easy for me to use.

"And here is your room." He led us into a large, clean room. "Does everything look okay?"

“Yes, I’m glad to see it’s so cozy and unobtrusive,” I answered.

The common living space may have been furnished in muted tones, but I’d been worried about what the individual rooms were like. If they were splattered with color like the outside, I wouldn’t have been able to relax. But my worries were for nothing: The wood tones in the room made me feel really warm and cozy. I was so relieved.

“Hee hee! Glad you like it. Will you both need supper tonight?”

I guess he knows exactly what I was worried about. That’s a little embarrassing.

“Yes, please, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Okay, supper for two.”

As soon as Chikar left our room, I flopped onto my bed. “This village sure is fascinating.”

“It really is. Want to take a walk around later? We’ve got information for the adventurer guild anyway.”

“Sure.”

I’m so excited for the festival!

Chapter 326:

It's the Same Everywhere

“Whoa, now, just wait a gosh darn minute!”

We were at the adventurer guild office to tell them about the illegal dump in the forest and the monsters that had gone berserk from the magic energy there. The more we talked, the bluer the guild member's face grew. When we finally finished explaining everything, he ran off in a frenzy. Since Druid had warned me that our news would probably cause a stir in the adventurer guild, I wasn't too surprised by the reaction, but the sight of the bluing face gave me a good shock.

“I didn't know people's faces could turn blue that quickly,” I said.

“Yeah, that was impressive. But it was a natural reaction: Villages can easily fall to ruin if a berserk monster is on the loose.”

Berserk monsters were indeed terrifying. Even though I knew Ciel was truly powerful, I was always scared it would get hurt whenever other monsters showed up.

“I'm sorry, but could you please come this way? The guild master wants to hear more.”

Druid and I exchanged weak smiles. It seemed our news really had caused quite a stir. Even the other adventurers around were staring at us warily.

“Yes, of course,” Druid answered the guild staffer, and we all climbed up the stairs together.

“Excuse me, sir.” The staff member opened what I assumed was the door to the guild master's office, and we found a sturdily built lady in the room.

“Ahh, thank you,” she said. “And just who might you folks be? Sorry to call you up here like this.”

Hatahi's guild master is a lady? I looked around the room, and she was the

only person there. As I was studying her, she turned to look at me.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lish, guild master of Hatahi Village.”

Guild Master Lish was confident and down to earth. She was a bit shorter than Druid, but she was very muscular for a lady.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Druid.”

“And I’m Ivy. Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“She your daughter?” Guild Master Lish looked back and forth between us in confusion. She probably thought it was strange that we didn’t look alike.

“No, but she’s like a daughter to me.”

Druid’s answer made my cheeks burn. It took everything I had not to melt into mush while I gave Guild Master Lish a little nod.

“That so? Anyway, hate to get right to it, but can ya tell me a bit more about those berserk monsters?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Druid pointed at the map and showed her where we found the monsters. We’d spent a few days checking the map to make sure we knew exactly where it happened so we could provide a good explanation to the guild. And Ciel had helped us part of the way through, so our calculations should have been right. Then again, Ciel’s help didn’t really amount to much since the creature couldn’t read maps.

I looked around the office and saw that the shelves were piled with books. Curiosity getting the better of me, I had a closer look and noticed that most of them were about monsters.

I wonder if she has any books on slimes? I’ll have to ask later.

“Okay, so you’re sure you saw them at this rocky boulder, then?”

“Yes, we’re certain of it.”

“Arrgh, what a hassle. I keep telling those brainless adventurers to be careful.” Guild Master Lish sighed heavily. “Since you don’t know how many there are, guess we’ll hafta send out a cleanup party. Wanna be a part of that?”

“Er, no thank you,” Druid shook his head.

“Too bad.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Druid said. “Well, we’d better be on our way.”

“All right, lemme know if ya change your mind. Oh, and can I see your bank card for a bit? I wanna pay ya for that tip.”

Druid handed our family account card to Lish. She pressed it to a magic item, then gave it back to Druid.

“Um, ma’am?” I said.

“What’s up, my dear?”

“I noticed you have a lot of books... Are any of them about slimes?”

“Slimes, you say?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I nodded.

Guild Master Lish walked over to one of the shelves and pulled out a book. “For slimes, this is the best book I’ve got.”

Looking more closely, I saw it was the same book I’d bought. “Oh, I have this book!”

“Do ya? You’ve got good taste, my dear. All the other slime books are half-baked compared to this one; no point in reading ’em.”

Oh dear. That’s too bad.

“If ya wanna learn about slimes, does that mean you’re a tamer, Ivy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Since hiding my skill just made people nosier about it, I had decided to say right away that I was a tamer whenever I was asked. I was a little worried people would ask to meet my slimes, but anyone stupid enough to ask to see someone’s tamed monsters was fair game to ignore. Druid said we could even take legal action if people got too inquisitive.

“Aha. Are ya gonna keep traveling past Hatahi?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said as Druid nodded beside me.

“Hmm, too bad. I’d actually love to have a slime tamer stay here for a while.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“Ha ha ha! Don’t apologize, my dear. Still, lemme know if ya change your mind. I’ll make it worth your while.” Guild Master Lish smiled, looking straight into my eyes. For some reason, the strength and confidence in her expression was infectious. I somehow managed to look away and turn her down again. “What a pity,” she answered.

We left the adventurer guild and headed to the merchant guild next. We were going to sell the magic stones, fruits, and nuts we’d found in the forest.

“It won’t be a problem if we sell all our magic stones, right?” I asked.

Druid had figured out that they were about level seven or eight, all the types of magic stones you’d see in normal circulation.

“Yeah, they’re low-level enough for us to sell them all without drawing attention.”

We had mined thirty-eight magic stones in total, and we could sell all the low-level ones at once without any problems. We decided to sell the diamonds two at a time. The only thing we weren’t so sure about was the fruit we’d foraged in the forest. Then again, we’d eaten most of it anyway, so we only had three pieces left. It was just fruit...and there were only three of them...so they probably wouldn’t give us any problems.

We entered the merchant guild and headed straight for the front desk, where there were two women and one man. Druid headed for the older of the women.

“May I help you?” she asked us.

“We’re here to sell some magic stones and some tree nuts and fruits.”

“All right, please show us your guild card.” Druid took out his merchant guild card and she pressed it to a magic item. “Looks good to me. Go ahead and place your items on the counter.”

The lady placed a long white board onto the counter—I wondered if it was a magic item. I was excited to see what it did, since I hadn’t seen anything like it at other merchant guilds. Druid took everything we were selling out of the

magic bag.

“Your magic stones all look fine to me. The pharmacy will love your tree nuts. Now, what have we here... Ooh! What a rarity.”

Each time a new item was placed onto the white board, we got an immediate reaction from the lady. Apparently the board told her the item’s classification and price.

“This is...incredibly rare. It’s from the baronial tree, and they only bear fruit once every several years.”

The baronial tree? And it takes years for the fruit to grow? Agh, we ate up twenty pieces without realizing it!

“We’ve never heard of it,” Druid explained. “We just happened to find a tree in the forest.”

“Oh, really? Well, you can only find baronial trees on the outskirts of Hatahi, so that makes sense.”

So it was native to Hatahi. I guess we couldn’t help not knowing what it was.

“Every year aristocrats in the capital send word asking to buy any fruit we happen to find.”

They get requests from aristocrats in the capital? Better not tell anybody we ate the fruit. I glanced at Druid and saw he was thinking the same thing. Our eyes met, and we nodded.

“Bringing us three whole fruits sure is a big help,” the lady said.

Sorry...it should’ve been more than three.

“Don’t mention it. Also,” Druid pulled out the diamonds, “we have these.”

The lady was even more surprised by them than the fruit. She even let out a soft gasp as she said, “What a treasure... Thank you so much. Anyway, this is what we’ll pay you for everything.”

Instead of saying the number out loud, the lady jotted it down on a receipt so only we would know. Druid nodded in agreement, and the lady ripped up the paper and threw it away. When I gave her a surprised look, she laughed and

said, "It's to keep everyone else from getting stupid ideas. How should we transfer your money?"

Stupid ideas? Like what?

"Deposit it in our account, please," Druid answered, handing her our family account card. She took it and performed some operation on it.

"Have a look; it's all transferred. Thank you very much for your business."

Wow, that was the fastest transaction in my life.

We thanked her and left the merchant guild.

"That was so fast," I told Druid.

"Yeah, I was right to pick her."

"Um, what did she mean by 'stupid ideas'?"

"She didn't want the adventurers around us to hear how much money we got and then be tempted by the allure of crime."

Tempted by the allure of crime?

"Lots of adventurers are low on funds this time of year, so money clouds their judgment. Well, it's complicated."

Now I get it. I've always thought of spring as a nice, warm time of year, but I guess it's also a season when you have to be extra vigilant.

Chapter 327: Where the Dump Is

Before we left the merchant guild, we took some sheets of paper for sending faxes. In our last fax, we had told everyone we would let them know when we arrived in Hatahi. Since we had gotten here ahead of schedule, we had plenty of time, but it was better to do it right away before we forgot about it. If we forgot to send a fax, everyone would worry about us.

When we left the merchant guild, I felt a warm breeze in the air.

"It's heating up," Druid remarked.

"Yeah. Spring is heeere!"

"Ha ha! It sure is. Well, want to check out Hatahi's dump?"

"Sure."

We had Sol's meals to think about, so we had to make absolutely sure we knew where the dump was. We also needed one other thing...

"Do you think there's somewhere we can hunt nearby?"

"Shouldn't be a problem. But I think I remember there aren't any wild rabbits in these parts."

"There aren't?"

I'd always thought you could find wild rabbits anywhere.

"Yeah, the wild rabbit population cuts off around here. If you get closer to the capital, you won't find any field mice, either."

Oh dear. That's a little upsetting. Once upon a time, I was going to make a living selling just those two animals. Ignorance sure is terrifying. There's so much more I need to learn.

"Wait a minute, does this mean there's no dried meat in the capital?"

"No, there's this popular dried meat made from a monster called nobear."

A monster called nobear? I guess there are different kinds of dried meat depending on where you are. I wonder if I can hunt nobear?

“The only catch is that nobear are just a tad violent. That’s why it’s a lot more expensive than other dried meats.”

So they’re violent. I guess that means we can’t hunt them. “If there aren’t any wild rabbits, does that mean we can only hunt field mice around here?”

“No, you can trap obitsune, too.”

“Obitsune?”

“Yeah, they’re monsters who can use magic a little. They’re not that powerful, so you don’t need to worry about them.”

They can use magic? Um... Is it really okay not to worry about them? “Are you sure I’ll be okay? I can’t use any attack spells.”

“You’ll be fine. All obitsune can do is give you a little electric shock, but that’s it.”

I guess I’ll be okay, then. But if I can catch an obitsune, that’ll be the first time I’ve ever hunted a monster. If Druid says I can do it, then he must be right. Now I’m looking forward to it!

“But what kind of traps should we use?” I asked.

Ever since I started hunting with Druid, my traps had gotten much better. Between the thickness and strength of the ropes and the way I hid them, they were completely different from the traps I’d made when I was on my own.

“Obitsune claws aren’t very strong, so our ropes don’t need to be that tight. But maybe they could escape the trap with magic? Well, I don’t think they’re powerful enough to break out of the cage, so we shouldn’t need to worry...”

I looked at Druid next to me. With his help, we could probably hunt many more animals and monsters using some other method. Yet there he was, eagerly planning how to make better traps and excitedly going with me to see the results. He was probably acting excited for my sake, since he’d been so dubious when we first started trapping together. And I was feeling a little guilty about it now...

“Actually, even though it only makes a light shock, the trap might weaken if it shocks the ropes enough, so I guess we really will have to make the traps sturdier. The question is what we should use. With electric shocks, they might catch fire. Hmmm, what would be good?”

Now, all traces of his former dubiousness were gone, and he truly did look excited about trapping. What had turned him into such a big fan?

“Hm? What’s up?” he asked me.

“Nothing. So are we going to trap the obitsune in cages?”

“That’s the plan. They’re about three times as big as wild rabbits, so we’ll need the cages to be on the large side.”

Three times as big as wild rabbits? I didn’t realize they were that big. At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if Druid wanted to trap something even bigger soon. When I caught him absorbed in a hunting book the other day, he had it open to a section on large traps. What exactly is he working toward? It makes me worry...

“Let’s not try to hunt prey that’s too big, okay?”

“Oh, I think obitsune are just right for where we are now.”

“Huh?”

Wait... That answer he just gave me... “Where we are now”? Well...we’ll probably be okay.

“Once we get used to this size, we’ll go from there.”

Or not. I glanced next to me. I couldn’t tell what was on his mind, but he looked awfully pleased with himself. *I... I might not be able to stop him.*

We walked through the gate and into the forest, looking for the dump as we went.

“I don’t see it.”

I looked all around, but I saw nothing resembling a dump. We were too far from the village for it to be nearby, anyway.

“Maybe we went the wrong way,” Druid suggested.

“Yeah, we did pass that fork in the road. Think it was the other way?”

“Let’s go find out.”

“Oh, wait! I should take my creatures out of the bag.”

I searched our surroundings for auras and didn’t sense any. It was probably safe.

“Sorry it took so long, guys.”

I opened the bag, and out jumped Ciel and Sora. Flame was awake that day, so it sprang out of the bag, too.

“I don’t see Sol. Are you still asleep?” I peeked inside the bag, and my eyes met with Sol’s. The slime was awake, but I could tell from the look in its eyes that it was still sleepy.

“Go back to sleep. I’ll wake you up when we get to the dump.”

“Pefu!” Sol answered, closing its eyes again.

“It fell asleep.” I closed the bag and looked at the other monsters. “Ciel, do you know which way the dump is?”

Mrrrow.

Ciel slipped back into adandara form and walked back the way we came. It looked like we had indeed taken a wrong turn. We walked for a while and returned to the fork in the road. I thought we would take the other path, but instead, Ciel walked straight back toward the village.

“I guess we were completely off,” Druid said.

This was the first time we had been so wrong.

“Looks like it.”

When we got closer to the village, Ciel took us off the village road and into the forest. Then, after a while, we arrived at something that looked like a dump. Apparently the dump really was in the complete opposite direction from what we’d thought. And it was quite close to the village, too.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

Ciel shook its tail back at me.

“This dump looks...organized.”

“It does. A caretaker probably comes by to keep it clean.”

“Wake up, Sol. We’re at the dump.”

I took Sol out of its bag. It had a look around, then rolled eagerly out of my arms. I wondered if it would ever learn to jump.

“Okay, let’s find a cage. I wonder how we can make it stronger.” Druid smiled as he headed out to the dump; a smile on his face was surely a good thing.

Mrrrow?

“Thanks, Ciel.” I slowly petted its head, and it rubbed against my hand in turn. *What a sweetheart.* “Okay, I’d better go pick up the things we need.”

I looked at the dump. Black energy balls were rising around Sol. A few feet away from its fellow slime, Sora was swallowing swords. And Flame was nearby...but today, it was quietly eating potions. Then there was Druid, cage in hand, rummaging through the trash.

“Everyone’s so carefree,” I remarked.

Mrrrow.

I gave Ciel’s head a light pat, then I went into the dump. I stayed alert for auras as I gathered the items we would need. This took a while, since Druid and I checked with each other as we went on about what things we would need to strengthen the cage.

Mrrrow.

Ciel’s voice told me to look for auras, and I found some approaching us. I looked around. Sol had already finished eating.

“Come here, everyone. Somebody’s coming.”

The auras were human, and there were three of them. They were probably on patrol.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Sora and Flame bounced back to me, and I returned them to their bag. I went to grab Sol, who’d only made it halfway, and put it in the bag with the others.

Mrrrow. Ciel came close and shapeshifted into a slime, so I added it to the bag as well. Druid and I looked around to see if Sora and Flame had left any evidence behind.

“All clear. Nothing’s dropped.”

Druid and I picked up everything we needed and left.

As soon as we stepped out of the dump, we heard a man’s voice say, “Oh, are you travelers?” We looked over at the sound and saw three men wearing the uniforms of the Hatahi Village Watch.

“Yes, and we’re alone. Is there a problem?”

“Oh, no, we just thought we sensed a monster with a very powerful level of magic energy around here.”

My heart jumped in my chest, but I managed to act calm.

“Well, it’s just the two of us,” Druid said.

“I see. And what were you both doing here?”

“We were gathering some supplies we need to make traps,” Druid answered.

The watchmen exchanged confused glances.

“We’re going to make cage traps and hunt with them,” Druid explained.

The three men looked impressed. I guessed none of them had any experience with trapping.

“Well, that sounds like a very fun way to hunt,” one of the men said. The other two nodded in agreement.

“Oh, it’s lots of fun. And it’s really rewarding to find an animal in a trap you’ve made.”

“I see.”

“Well, we’d better get back to the village. Good day.”

“You should be all right, but please be careful. We’re still worried about that monster aura.”

We lightly bowed to the three watchmen and headed back to the village. We walked for a while in silence until they were out of sight...then we sighed in relief.

“That dump is too close to the village,” Druid remarked.

This dump was about half the distance from the village compared to the other ones I’d been to. That meant keeping my creatures hidden there was going to be quite nerve-racking.

“We’re going to have to be very careful,” I agreed.

“Yeah. I think we’ll need to draw up a plan.”

Chapter 328:

Detect Magic Skill

We left the dump and headed back to the village.

“It’s so close,” Druid said.

I nodded. Walking the distance made it clear just how close to town the dump was. I could stay alert for auras as we went, but people with faint auras were tough to detect. I could pick them up as long as they were moving, but I might miss them if they were too close.

“And the stronger people in the adventurer guild and the village watch can mask their auras. It’s quite a hassle.”

We left Main Street, opting for the emptier roads as we headed back to our inn.

“What should we do about it?” I asked.

“Well, we should have Sora and Flame with one of us at all times. Whichever one of us is free should keep an eye on Sol so we can whisk it into the bag if anyone is coming. That’s really all we can do. We’ll also have to make sure everyone sticks close to us at all times.”

Druid was absolutely right. As long as everyone was close by, we could act quickly if needed. The only problem was that this made our range of movement a lot smaller. It was going to make everyone feel a bit too cramped for space.

“Good idea,” I answered.

“We’ll have Ciel shapeshift into a slime and stay close, too. Come to think of it, Ciel spotted the human auras before you, right?”

“Yeah.”

If Ciel hadn’t warned me, we would’ve acted too late.

“Let’s have Ciel tell us if anyone’s approaching.”

“Okay, I’ll ask.”

I felt a little better having a rough plan in place. It wasn’t perfect, but things would all work out somehow.

“Okay! So I’ll walk either with Sora and Flame or with Sol.”

“I guess that’ll have to do. Oh, but one of the watchmen could sense magic.”

“Yeah.”

Since he’d said it was powerful magic energy, it must’ve been Ciel’s magic he was picking up on. How could he have sensed Ciel’s aura? We always kept it hidden whenever we weren’t deep in the forest.

“He probably has the detect magic skill.”

“The detect magic skill?”

“It’s one of the rarer skills. You can sense magic energy, even when it’s hidden. Depending on the number of stars you have in it, you can also sense the location and level of the magic, too. It’s a useful skill for an ally but pesky to deal with if it’s used against you.”

He was right, it would be a helpful ability for an ally to have.

“We’ll just have to keep an eye on the village watch. If they get suspicious of us, we’ll either have to explain everything to them or give up on the festival and move on to the next village.”

“Okay.”

It really is out of our hands. I wonder how much magic energy he detected? He did say it was powerful.

“Wait...”

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked.

“If he noticed magic energy, why didn’t he search my bag?”

Ciel was in my bag in slime form, so he should have sensed it. Unless Ciel’s magic energy was different as a slime than it was as an adandara?

“You know, you’re right... Nobody’s following us, are they?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve been searching for auras this whole time because I was afraid they saw something, but it looks like we’re not being followed.”

Everyone in that party of village watchmen had a faint aura, and I’d kept myself alert for them all this time. But they were heading deeper into the forest instead of toward the village, which meant we were safe.

“Okay, good.”

I thought back to the village watchman who could detect magic. He’d seemed genuinely concerned about us going back to the village alone, and I didn’t think he was acting.

“Anyway, I guess we’ll just have to be extra careful,” Druid said.

“Yeah.”

“Ivy, can you sense Ciel’s magic when it’s hidden?”

“No way.”

Come to think of it, how does one go about sensing magic energy anyway? I had read some books on magic energy, but they only talked about how compatible it was with magic items. I probably had a hard time sensing magic energy because my own supply of it was so weak to begin with. That was my theory, anyway.

“What does magic energy feel like to you?” I asked Druid. “I don’t really get it.”

“You don’t get it?”

“Yeah. If I don’t think about magic energy, I forget it even exists.”

“I guess you would.”

“Huh?”

“Magic items are scattered all throughout towns and villages. If you picked up on each and every one of them, life would be pretty hard, wouldn’t it? So everyone who isn’t sensitive to magic energy comes to forget that it’s always there.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yeah, once you get used to something being a part of daily life, you don’t give it a passing thought. What is the forest like for you?”

The forest? You know, I do sense magic energy when I scan for auras. And now that I think about it, whenever I sensed a monster, I did somehow get an intuitive idea of how powerful it was. So, was my subconscious picking up on magic energy and calculating its power?

“Yeah, whenever I sense a monster’s aura, I sort of naturally pick up on how powerful it is, too.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. That’s normal.”

Oh... So I’m normal?

“There are some adventurers who can’t detect magic energy at all, much like how I can’t detect auras at all.”

“Oh no! That must be horrible to deal with.”

I could tell how powerful a monster was by its magic energy. If I couldn’t sense that, then how would I know how to deal with it?

“Just one of the adventurers of legend couldn’t sense magic energy, and this adventurer was quite the scholar: There wasn’t any animal or monster they didn’t know about. They probably compensated for their inability to detect magic energy by acquiring as much knowledge as possible.”

That made sense. So that adventurer dealt with the monsters they met not by sensing the creatures’ magic energy but by drawing upon their own knowledge. What a feat. There are so many monsters and animals out there to learn about.

“I don’t know if it’s true or not, but legend has it this adventurer was the first person to write books about monster ecology.”

“That’s really impressive. Is that why they’re famous?”

“No, that adventurer became known for their incredible skill with a magic sword. They’re one of the people adventurers idolize most.”

A magic sword? “Did this adventurer have magic of their own?”

“They couldn’t sense it, but it’s said they possessed high levels of magic energy.”

Wow. I just assumed they couldn’t sense magic because their own energy level was low. Magic energy sure is full of wonders.

“I don’t see any shops around here.” Druid was looking around, so I joined him. We had strayed from Main Street to have a look around the village, but it seemed we’d run clear out of shops.

“You’re right. Should we head back to the inn?”

“Might as well. When we get back, we’ll work on our traps until suppertime. Let’s make the usual strength traps for now and see how they work.”

“You’re having fun, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I have to write our faxes before we start.”

“Oh, right! So do I. Oh well, I guess I’ll just breeze through them.”

I’m not sure how that’ll work out. Druid’s father might not mind, but his mother and sister-in-law might have a fit. Oh, and I wanted to tell everyone about Snakey, but we probably shouldn’t. Sometimes third parties peek at other people’s faxes. Oh well.

“Take care, you two,” Chikar the innkeeper called out.

“See you later,” we replied.

We were headed out to the merchant guild. Our itinerary for the day was to send our faxes, go to the dump to feed the slimes, and then set our traps. The location of our traps was key to our chances of success, so I hoped we could find some good spots.

“By the way, what did you finally settle on?” Druid asked. He probably meant whether I’d decided to write about Snakey in my faxes.

“I just wrote, ‘We met some new friends in the forest.’ That’s all.”

“Yeah, I guess you really couldn’t say what actually happened.”

“Nope.”

No way could I write, “Yeah, we all hopped on Snakey’s back and took a ride through the forest!” There was already too much gossip about us.

Chapter 329: So Bitter!

After we sent our faxes, we headed for the dump. I searched the area for auras but didn't sense any coming toward us this time. Still, we couldn't completely let our guard down.

"Flame, Sora, you stay together, okay? I'm going to be with Mr. Druid today."

"Sora, Flame, be good."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

After Druid and I talked a few things over the previous night, we told everyone our plan and they all agreed to cooperate.

"You're with me, Sol," I said. "Behave yourself, okay?"

"Pefu! Pefu!"

"And, Ciel, you stay by my side in slime form, all right?"

Mrrrow.

Good. Now we'll be okay no matter who comes our way...I hope.

I scanned the dump for auras and kept track of where my creatures were while Druid and I searched for materials that would make good traps.

"You guys full already?" Druid asked.

I looked up at the sound of his voice to see Sora and Flame bouncing in front of him. They'd finished eating much faster than usual.

"Pefu!"

"Huh? You're done, too, Sol?"

"Pefu!" it chirped happily, giving a satisfied jiggle.

I guess it's fine, then. I hope I'm not cramping everyone's style. Maybe we

should give up on the festival after all?

“Ivy?”

“Yes?”

“Um, are you okay? You look like something’s on your mind.”

“I’m just worried we’re putting too much pressure on the monsters.”

I kept close watch over them as we left the dump. Nothing looked out of place to me, and they were all happily playing, but they had clearly cut their mealtime short today. I hoped they’d gotten enough to eat.

“Well, I’m not sure about that. And if we asked them, I’m sure they’d insist they were fine.”

Yeah. They’re so kindhearted, that’s the kind of answer they’d give us. “Did Sora and Flame eat less than usual?”

“No, I feel like they ate the same amount, just faster,” Druid answered.

They just ate faster? Is that really all? If so, I guess everything will be okay, but I’m sure everyone would prefer to take more time with their meals.

“If they act the same way tomorrow, how about we give it some more thought then?” Druid suggested.

“Good idea.”

We left the dump and headed deeper into the forest. The forest on the outskirts of Hatahi had thin trees, so visibility was clear. *I guess that means if we want to hide, we’ll have to climb the trees?* I looked up. Since it was springtime, the branches were beginning to bud with a faint green hue.

“Ciel, you can turn back into an adandara now.”

I’d scanned the area and found no human auras. There were monster auras in the distance, but it was nothing to worry about.

Mrrrow. Ciel, back in adandara form, stretched its front legs and arched its back to loosen up.

“Does that feel good?”

Mrrrow.

“Glad to hear it.”

Mee!

I looked at Ciel, surprised by the new vocabulary word. It looked off into the distance, then back at me.

“Do you want to go hunting?” Now that I thought about it, Ciel hadn’t gone hunting since we’d started traveling again. It’d been a little while.

Mrrrow.

“Well, be careful out there. Some people in this village can sense magic energy.”

Mrrrow. Ciel rubbed its face against my hand, gave a short meow to Druid, and then ran off. I was worried about the adandara, but I didn’t want it to starve, either. We would just have to wait for it to come back.

“Want to go a little deeper into the forest?” Druid asked.

“Sure. Hey, Mr. Druid, what are obitsune like?”

I thought I’d better learn more about obitsune if I wanted to trap any. I’d tried looking them up in my books but hadn’t found anything.

“Obitsune... Well, they’re very quick and agile. They’re nocturnal and many of them make their nests in the holes of trees. Also, they use thunder magic. They’re not very powerful, but they do sometimes attack you by surprise, so you have to keep your wits about you.”

Quick, agile, and nocturnal—check. Beware of sudden attacks—check.

“Should we set our traps near their nests?”

“Their nests are hard to find, but their favorite fruit is qiblakarla.”

“Is that what they mostly eat?”

“Yeah. It’s too bitter for humans, though.” Druid’s nose wrinkled as he remembered the taste. But if obitsune ate qiblakarla, I thought I’d like to at least taste it once.

“I know it’s spring, but is there still some fruit left on the trees?”

“Yeah, you can easily find some. They ripen in the autumn and stay on the trees all winter until they fall off in the spring.”

“Oh, really?”

So there’s a fruit that lasts all winter. Now I’m kind of excited to try it.

“Oh, look! That’s a qiblakarla tree.” Druid pointed at a tree full of fruit.

“Wow, it’s loaded.”

The qiblakarla tree was filled with much more fruit than I’d imagined, and some were even within my reach. They were a beautiful green. They didn’t look that appetizing, but I was still curious, so I picked one, wiped off the dirt, and took a little bite.

“Urk!”

What a flavor! It’s really bitter... I didn’t know fruit could taste so bitter... My poor tongue.

“Ivy...did you eat some just now?”

“Ung!” I nodded quickly, taking my thermos out of my magic bag and gulping down some water. “That’s really something. When you said it was bitter, I assumed it wouldn’t be that bad, seeing as how obitsune eat them.”

“Your mouth feels like there’s cotton in it, right? It’s hard to describe.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually try some like I did, Ivy.”

So Druid couldn’t resist temptation, either. Well, I guess he wouldn’t have known how it tasted otherwise.

“Qiblakarla is used for medicine, too. Especially the skin.”

“Oh, really?” *Yeah, as bitter as it tastes, I’m not surprised.*

“Okay, now that we’ve found a tree with an obitsune’s favorite snack, let’s set our traps around it.”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

I took our bigger-than-usual cage out of my magic bag. I made sure to place it the right distance from the tree as I set the trap. I picked about a dozen qiblakarla fruits from the tree and put them inside the cage, which I camouflaged with some fallen leaves and brush.

“Mr. Druid, the cage is so big I can’t really hide it.”

“Oh dear... Yeah, I hadn’t thought about that. I’ll go find some twigs big enough to cover it.”

“Okay. I’ll start setting the next trap while you’re gone.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back soon.”

I checked the placement of my first trap compared to the qiblakarla tree. There was a bush nearby, so I decided to put the second trap there. It would be much easier to hide.

“Okay, all set. Where should I put the third one?”

“Sorry I took so long,” Druid said, returning with an armful of small branches.

“Thanks.”

“Are you setting a third trap?”

“Yeah. I put the second one in the bushes, so can you check it over for me?”

“Sure.”

As I set the final trap, I searched the area for auras and found a human one. It was still quite distant, but it was coming toward us.

“Mr. Druid, there’s someone coming. I think it’s just one person?”

“Sora, Flame, Sol, get over here. Somebody’s coming,” Druid said.

The three slimes stopped playing and bounded over to us. Sora and Flame kept bouncing until they were in my arms.

“Agh, one at a time, guys! I can’t catch you both!”

I somehow managed to grab Sora, but Flame slammed into my arm and fell to the ground.

“Are you okay, Flame?”

“Teryuuu.”

“Aw, you don’t have to give me sass.”

“Ryuuu.” Flame stared hard at me.

“Come on, Flame, stop playing around. You’re giving Ivy a hard time,” Druid said, firmly grabbing the slime.

“Ryuuu.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Ivy put Sora in the bag, and you have to go, too, Flame.”

“Teryuuu.”

“Somebody’s coming. You can play later, okay?”

“Ryu! Ryuuu.”

“We’ll play together, I promise.”

Wait, were Druid and Flame always this chummy? Ohhh, right. I think I’ve caught him talking with Flame now and then.

“C’mere, Flame.” I took the slime from Druid and put it in the bag after Sora. Then I added Sol, who’d been waiting by my feet, to the bag and searched for the aura. It was definitely approaching us, slowly but surely.

“Let’s just head back. We’ve finished setting the traps anyway,” Druid said.

“But Ciel hasn’t come back yet.”

“We’ll take our time going back and wait for it to catch up. I know, why don’t we look for another place to set a trap along the way?”

“Good idea. I don’t think we’ll have much success with traps in only one place.”

We returned to the village, looking for qiblakarla trees along the way. After a while, we saw someone approaching us.

“Oh!” I gasped. “I recognize him.”

“Yeah, it’s that village watchman we ran into at the dump yesterday.”

I tensed up. Approaching us with a light bow was the very same watchman who had picked up on Ciel’s magic energy the previous day.

Chapter 330:

Not Again!

“Hello there,” the village watchman said, approaching us with a smile for some reason. *Was there more to him than met the eye?*

“Hello. By yourself today?” Druid asked.

I looked around, and sure enough, nobody else was with him, which was odd. Watchmen always traveled in groups of two or more when they were on patrol, in case something came up. I searched for auras, thinking someone might be hiding, but there really was nobody else around.

“Well...I’m off duty for the day, actually,” the watchman explained. “I was just looking around town when I noticed you two walking out the gate. I was going to wait until you got back, but I just couldn’t hold myself back anymore, so I followed the magic energy to you.”

He followed the magic energy?

“Why did you want to see us?” I could hear the tension in Druid’s voice.

The watchman, also picking up on it, quickly held his arms out and waved his hands. “It’s not what you think. I’m not suspicious of you, I just, um, wanted to thank you.” He looked at us both, his eyes filled with insecurity.

“Thank us?” we both asked.

This was only our third day in Hatahi. I couldn’t recall us doing anything worth thanking. *Oh, wait! Did Druid maybe help him out in the past?* I looked at Druid next to me, but he shook his head in reply.

“Um, my name is Ashley. So...my father is the adventurer guild master’s assistant. If you’re suspicious of me, feel free to check with the guild about who I am. My father will vouch for me.”

“Ashley?” Druid said.

“Yes?” Ashley’s face lit up. He didn’t look to me like he could possibly be a bad

person.

“What did you want to thank us for?”

“Well, um, I just wanted to give you and Miss Ivy a proper thank you.”

“Me?” Druid asked.

“And me?” I echoed.

I stared hard at Ashley, but I couldn't remember anything about him. Maybe the summoning circle had tampered with my memories of him.

“You see, Mr. Druid, you rescued me from a monster three years ago. And, Miss Ivy, you and I have never met properly, but I wanted to thank you for helping take down that criminal organization.”

So Druid saved him three years ago, and I helped get rid of the crime organization.

“Huhhh... Three years ago?” Druid asked, looking closely at Ashley. After a while, he shook his head no. “Sorry. I can't remember,” he apologized.

“Oh, it's okay, please don't apologize. I didn't want to make you feel bad. See, about three years ago, a giant boulder near this village crumbled apart and a big mess of monsters got loose. Do you remember now?”

A bunch of monsters were set loose from a giant boulder? I didn't know that was a thing. Gee, that's scary.

“Oh, right, I did help clean up some monsters when I happened to be near Hatahi.”

“That's right! I was still a rookie at the time, and you saved my life. See, I was a little full of myself since I have the detect magic skill. My cockiness got me attacked by three monsters and I thought I was a goner, but you saved me, Mr. Druid.”

Gee, Druid's quite the hero.

“Huh? That was *you*? Wait...what?! Was that *really* you? You seem... different?”

“Arrrgh, yeah. I used to be a little shi...well, let's just say I was going down the

wrong path... It was a phase. You could say I'm quite a different person now. Um, wait, I didn't mean...!"

Yikes, Ashley's face is bright red. He must've really changed a lot.

"Hee hee! Mr. Druid, what was Mr. Ashley like back then?" I asked him.

Ashley waved his hands nervously in protest. "P-please, don't ask!"

Seriously, what did he use to be like? Now I really want to know.

"Well...he was going through a phase a lot of youngsters go through. Yeah, we'll go with that."

A phase a lot of youngsters go through? Um...what does he mean by that?

"Wow, so that kid was you. What a shocking transformation," Druid said, his voice rising a little with amusement.

"Everything was so crazy with the monsters back then that I never got a chance to thank you properly. So, um, thank you so much, truly. I have a family now because you saved me that day. Seriously, thank you so much."

Ashley bowed at the waist to Druid. *He has a family... Does that mean he got married?*

"Well, thank *you* for coming all this way to thank me. It means a lot."

Ashley and Druid smiled and shook hands. I found myself smiling too as I looked at the heartwarming scene.

"And, Miss Ivy," Ashley said, releasing Druid's hand and turning to me.

"Yes?" What could he be about to say?

"Thank you so much for keeping my daughter safe from that criminal organization." Ashley bowed deeply to me. He must have meant *that* criminal organization. So their evil had reached all the way out here, too...

"Please, sir, don't bow to me. I'm just happy your daughter is okay."

"So am I, really," Ashley nodded, beaming radiantly. It was clear just how precious his daughter was to him.

"Um, if you don't mind my asking...what happened to your daughter?"

“Some of the organization’s goons had been planted in Hatahi’s guilds and village watch. When you helped bring them down, we got a list with all their names. We found their secret base and went to investigate, and they had written plans to kidnap the children and grandchildren of Hatahi and traffic them. They even had a list of names of the kids they were targeting.”

Wow, that gang really was rotten to the core.

“And when I saw my daughter’s name on that list, my spine froze. It was probably because my father is the guild master’s assistant. My daughter is home safe right now because of what you did, Miss Ivy. I truly cannot thank you enough.”

“I’m glad their crimes here were stopped before they even started. I really mean it.”

I’d truly been terrified when they almost kidnapped me. I had Ciel to keep me safe, but there’s no telling what would’ve happened to me if they’d succeeded. Just the thought of it scares me to death.

“Ashley, may I ask you a question?” Druid said.

“Yes, anything.”

“It makes sense that you know about me since we’ve met before, but where did you hear about Ivy? Her involvement was top secret.”

Huh? Oh, come to think of it, yeah. Only the top dogs are supposed to know about all that.

“I sensed a powerful magic energy near the village yesterday, stronger than any I’d ever sensed before. But strangely enough, I wasn’t at all scared by it. That tugged on my curiosity, so I went to check it out with the watchmen who were on patrol with me. Now, just seeing you was surprising enough, Mr. Druid, but I was even more startled by the incredible levels of magic energy I sensed from Miss Ivy’s bag.”

So I was right. He did sense the magic energy in there.

“Then what happened?”

“Even when I got closer to the energy, my impression of it stayed the same, so

I thought I'd keep an eye on her for a while."

"I see. So you followed us?"

If he did, that would mean we hadn't noticed him.

"Oh, no, Mr. Druid, I knew I couldn't outsmart you. So I went to ask the head watchman if I could check back at the spot where I'd found you. And the guild master was there, too, so she told me about the young girl traveling with you. Then, they talked about Ivy among themselves for a little bit and decided to tell me."

Aha. So that's how he knew my name.

"Okay. Well, we don't want people knowing about this," Druid said. His eyes were a little stern. And I didn't blame him—this was top-secret information.

"Well, um, there was a reason they told me. See, the head watchman's daughter was kidnapped by the organization...and after everything, she was unaccounted for."

"What?!" we both gasped.

"So he just had to thank you, Miss Ivy."

"Did they ever find his daughter?"

"She's still missing. The head watchman says he's resigned himself to the fact that she's probably dead."

The more I learned about that organization, the gladder I was that I'd helped destroy it.

"Also, he said he wanted to meet you two. He didn't want to cause a fuss by calling you both to see him alone, so he sent me to be the go-between. After all, I can always find you by sensing your magic energy...and I owe a debt to you as well."

So the head watchman had gone out of his way to keep everything discreet. We would have to thank him for that.

Chapter 331:

A Private Dining Room

Ashley took us to a private dining room on the second floor of a restaurant. When we went inside, Guild Master Lish greeted us with a smile.

“Thanks, Ashley. You’re a real trouper,” she said, punching him on the shoulder for some reason.

“Guild Master, please, how many times do I have to tell you that hurts!”

“Awww, you’re such a softie.”

Next to Guild Master Lish stood a man dressed in a watchman’s uniform and another man who greatly resembled Ashley. That was probably his father.

“Er, no, Guild Master, I think you’re just abnormally strong. Remember how many poor young adventurers you’ve made cry over the years? It’s high time you know your own strength and learn to control it. It makes trouble for everyone around you at some point.” The man standing beside Lish, who I assumed was Ashley’s father, gave her a stern talking-to. I was rather impressed by the way he just spoke his mind without hesitation.

“But they’re *adventurers*, right? They shouldn’t be crying to mommy over a little tap on the shoulder.”

“I’m a watchman, you know,” the other man interjected.

“Don’t you think it’s wrong describing it as *a little tap* when you could crush a boulder to pieces with just a squeeze? I sure do. One wrong move and you might end some promising young adventurer’s chances of making a name for themselves. When you think about everything, Lish, you really should restrain yourself. Don’t you agree?” he asked, looking at Druid.

“What?!” Druid looked uncomfortable to be suddenly roped into their argument, and I didn’t blame him. What’s more...she could crush a boulder with just a squeeze? Was that true? That might be something I’d actually like to see.

“Lish, Ashley, knock it off. Can’t you see Mr. Druid’s uncomfortable?” The man I assumed was the head watchman stopped them both. Druid’s expression immediately softened in relief.

“Sorry about that. Have a seat. Ashley, wanna join us?”

“Oh, could I, sir?”

“Mr. Druid, Miss Ivy, are you all right with it?” the head watchman asked us.

“Fine with me. How about you, Ivy?” Druid asked.

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

We sat in the empty chairs, and a waiter came to take our orders.

“Are you folks fine with the restaurant’s most popular items? If there’s anything you’re especially in the mood for, feel free to speak up.”

It was nice for the head watchman to ask, but we didn’t know anything about the restaurant anyway.

“What does this place specialize in?” Druid asked.

I was in awe at how casually he could interact with everybody there. But as a longtime adventurer who had worked his way up through the ranks, it’s not surprising he would be comfortable at a nice restaurant like this. For me, this was the first restaurant I’d ever been in besides taverns and food carts. I hadn’t even known restaurants had private rooms like this until today. That was why my heart had been racing since the moment we first stepped in.

I took a look around the room to try to calm my nerves. *Ooh, what beautiful paintings on the walls! And look at that fancy jug over there. It must be expensive. I’d better be careful not to knock anything over while I’m here.*

“This restaurant is known for its braised meats. They’re tender and very tasty,” Lish said.

The look on her face made me more interested in the food. *I might never have another chance to eat at a nice restaurant like this. I should get the most out of it!*

“Are you okay with ordering what Guild Master Lish does, Ivy?” Druid asked.

“Sure.”

If I'm too nervous, I might not even be able to taste the food...and what a waste that would be. Okay, let's focus on calming down until the food arrives! They were so nice to bring us here, so I'm going to enjoy myself.

“We'll each have one of your special glur soups.”

Glur? I wonder if that's a type of meat.

“As you wish, ma'am. Coming right up.”

As soon as the waiter left our room, the head watchman pulled something out of his magic bag. “This item will keep our voices confined to this room. May I turn it on?”

“Yes, please.”

The familiar-looking item turned out to be a noise-canceler. Druid and I had often used similar ones before, so naturally, it looked familiar to me. The head watchman set the canceler down on our table and pressed a button to turn it on.

“Thank you both for taking the time to come see us today. First, allow me to introduce myself. I am Tabulo, head watchman at Hatahi. It is an honor to meet you both.”

So the head watchman's name was Tabulo. It sounded awfully similar to Tableau. One of the people in my family had that name, too, and I'd met adventurers named Tableau and Tabulo. There were also a lot of Tabs and Tabilos; many of those names sounded alike. *Maybe I should ask Druid later if there's some reason behind that.*

“I mentioned her yesterday, but this is Guild Master Lish. I was too distracted by my business at the dump yesterday to notice, but it looks like I wasn't mistaken, and Miss Ivy here is indeed one of the heroes. And my goodness, what an adorable child she is, too! When I started to make the connection yesterday, I couldn't believe it.”

I'm not a hero... I wish I could correct him.

“I am Arash, Ashley’s father and assistant to the guild master. Mr. Druid, Miss Ivy, thank you so much for saving my son and granddaughter’s lives. It is because of you, Mr. Druid, that I didn’t have to lose my precious boy, and I feel terribly guilty that I wasn’t able to thank you properly until now.”

Arash bowed directly to Druid. *What an upstanding man.*

“Oh, don’t worry about it, sir. The village was in chaos back then, so you couldn’t have reached me anyway. Especially since I left to go traveling before things really settled down.”

“Well, I’m grateful to hear you bear no ill will. Last year, you both helped me even more when Miss Ivy saved my granddaughter. Now, I take pride in my work. But when I got the news that she was almost kidnapped and it would have been my fault, well, I was a nervous wreck. If the kidnappers had succeeded, I would have never been able to forgive myself. Truly, I cannot thank you enough.”

This time, Arash turned to me and bowed even deeper than before.

“You’re welcome. Please, you don’t need to bow to me, sir. I’m just glad the kidnappers’ plan never came to fruition. I mean it.”

Arash beamed radiantly at me.

“And thanks to you, Miss Ivy, I was able to identify the enemies within our ranks and sentence them all to slavery,” Tabulo said. “Thank you... It wasn’t much, but I felt like I got to help my daughter just a little. That crime organization was a menace, not only to her but to our entire village.”

I remembered that Tabulo’s daughter had been kidnapped by the crime organization and her whereabouts were still unknown.

“Well, I’m happy I could help, even if it was just a little.”

“But it *wasn’t* just a little.” Guild Master Lish shook her head at me.

Captain Tabulo nodded slowly and looked into my eyes. “The things you two did for our village were huge. Quite a lot of people travel from the capital to Hatahi for our festival. Lately, more and more of them are nobles, and the crime organization was going to exploit that. Some of their freed victims told us they

were going to blackmail the vulnerable aristocrats into giving them riches and passage to the capital.”

Captain Tabulo’s face twisted with anger as he spoke. I could understand why he was so upset: His beloved festival would’ve been defiled.

“We were aware of shady activity in the background, but our investigations didn’t uncover who was behind it all. I never would have dreamed my own comrades were among the enemy. But because of you both, we didn’t have to cancel our festival. I truly cannot thank you enough. And also, I deeply apologize for telling Ashley about you two without your permission.”

Guild Master Lish bowed her head, and Captain Tabulo and Arash followed suit.

“Please, it’s okay! We’ve gotten more than enough thanks!” I yelped frantically.

The trio looked up at me. *Thank goodness. It’s really not right for three of the most powerful people in this village to be bowing down to me.*

“What?! Nobles are coming to our festival?” Ashley sounded surprised.

Er, didn’t he know?

“That’s right, but that information is top secret. It’s classified intel that the crime organization was reaching out to the nobility, too. Don’t tell anyone about this, Ashley.”

Wait... Am I in the middle of a top-secret scandal yet again?

There was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me...” Captain Tabulo turned off his magic item and stashed it under the table. “What is it?” he said.

“I’ve brought your food.”

“Ah yes, come on in.”

The door opened, and a mellow aroma filled the room, doing away with the strange atmosphere that had been choking the table.

“What a lovely smell. I can never get it out of my mind.”

“Thank you for your continued patronage.” The waiter set the dishes of food in front of each of us. As the smell filled the entire room, my stomach started to growl. “Have a lovely lunch.”

As soon as the waiter left the room, Captain Tabulo said, “Let’s eat up before it gets cold!” and happily brought a spoonful of soup to his mouth. Arash was already eating. I was stunned by their eagerness, but Druid encouraged me to dig in.

“Thanks for lunch!” I said, taking my first bite.

Chapter 332:

Mmmeeeoowww!

Lunch was delicious. The meat had clearly been braised nice and long: its fibers simply melted away as soon as it entered my mouth, and yet it still had a bite to it. It just might have been the tastiest meat I'd ever eaten in my life. The soup was also rich and bursting with the savory flavors of the vegetables. Paired with white bread, it was divinely delicious.

"Do you like it?" Arash asked me.

"Yes, sir, very much!" I answered with a big smile.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it."

"Thank you so much for this lunch. Everything was delicious. Right, Mr. Druid?"

"Yeah, it's no wonder that dish is this restaurant's specialty."

After we'd all finished eating, Captain Tabulo set his magic item on the table again and switched it on.

"Now, Miss Ivy, I know it's presumptuous of me to demand that you trust us, but I swear that nothing said at this table tonight will go beyond anyone sitting at it right now."

Captain Tabulo did not seem like a liar. *So I guess I can trust him?* I glanced at Druid next to me and saw that he was giving Captain Tabulo a long, searching stare.

After a while, Druid finally said, "Understood, sir. We trust you."

Captain Tabulo and Guild Master Lish bowed respectfully. *Oh, good. I think everything's settled now.*

"Well, we'd better be on our way," Druid said.

"What? So soon?" Arash sounded disappointed.

“Yes, we have things to take care of.”

“Oh, I see. Well, that’s too bad. I’d love to chat longer... May I call on you sometime?”

I didn’t see any problem with it. “I’m okay with it. Are you?” I asked Druid.

He nodded in reply, so I told Arash that would be fine. He was unbelievably grateful to hear my answer. I felt a little uncomfortable, getting such a reaction from him when all we’d agreed to do was see him again sometime.

“Well, good day, everyone. Thanks for lunch.”

Druid and I stood up from our seats.

“Thanks for lunch,” I said. Then I turned and hurried out of the restaurant.

“Do you think everybody’s all right? I hope Ciel isn’t angry with us.”

“Let’s apologize first thing.”

“Okay.”

Druid had accepted their invitation to lunch for two reasons: to get Ashley away from that spot he shouldn’t have been at, and to see what the guild master and the head watchmen were thinking. And I was happy to go along with it, except I had one little problem: We’d gone back to the village without telling Ciel anything. The creature had left to go hunting three hours ago, so it must have returned by now.

“So...what do you think about Guild Master Lish and Captain Tabulo?” Although they had told Ashley about us, I didn’t get the sense they had done anything else that could cause trouble. I guess some might call me naive for thinking that, though.

“Well...I think everything’s okay. How did Sora react?”

“It said they’re all safe.”

Sora hadn’t reacted negatively to Lish or to Tabulo, and the same went for Arash. So those three were safe.

“Maybe they told Ashley about you for your protection, Ivy.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

How would that protect me?

“Since Ashley has the detect magic skill, he would naturally be curious about the source of any powerful magic energy he encountered. Lish and her counterparts knew that, so I think they told him who you were on purpose. He’d instantly start treating you better if he knew you saved his child’s life.”

Ah, now I see. Yes, I remember him saying he went to consult Captain Tabulo about us. So, does that mean Captain Tabulo told Ashley the truth out of consideration for my safety?

“Besides, they told us something that would put them at a disadvantage.”

“And what’s that?”

“The classified intel.”

“Oh, right! We weren’t supposed to hear all that, were we?”

It did involve the nobility, after all.

“Yeah...but they told us on purpose. They were looking at me meaningfully while they told us about the scandal, so I got what they meant by it: if they mistreated us, we could use that intelligence against them to get even.”

But I thought leaking classified intel was a serious crime. I knew it was probably their way of earning our trust, but...that was just too extreme.

“Are you sure that’s what they were doing...? But why would they go so far?”

“Hatahi’s festival is basically its entire economy, and we saved it from being canceled. That makes us like messiahs to them.”

Messiahs.

“What’s wrong? You look pretty serious.”

“It’s nothing... It’s just...are there other villages like this one? Personally, I’d just like to put that crime organization behind me.”

It was flattering being thanked by strangers, but the burden was too heavy for me to bear.

“Argh, I’m sorry... It’s my fault for agreeing to have a chat with them. But don’t worry, things will settle down a little after we leave Hatahi. After that, I

think the only strangers who will want to thank you are the royal family and noble houses in the capital, maybe?"

Oh, good. So things are going to settle down... Wait a minute.

"The royal family and noble houses? What's *that* supposed to mean?!"

"Seizerk says that some people in the capital are interested in you."

When did Seizerk tell him that? No, wait, Druid has been awfully engrossed in his faxes lately.

"Okay...what else did he say?"

"The royals and nobles in the capital feel quite indebted to you. Apparently, the organization almost got their evil claws on someone close to the king."

This all sounds very familiar...

"Ahh..." I sighed.

"Hey, it's okay. You don't need to be so nervous about it. Just take it easy."

The king wants to meet me, and I should take it easy? I gave Druid a reproachful look. He chuckled lightly and tousled my hair.

"Cheer up! Whatever will be will be. Also, I'm sure the trek from Hatahi to the capital will be peaceful and quiet."

"Oh, I really hope so! But...how do you know?"

"Since the organization was planning on using this festival to meet and blackmail the nobility, I don't think they would've traveled much beyond this point. That means the towns and villages after this were probably spared from harm."

Aha. Yeah, as long as there aren't any victims, there's nobody to feel indebted to me, either.

"Well, that's good to know. I think I do feel a little better."

I'll just forget about the king for now. Nothing good would come from it anyway.

We passed through the gate and plunged into the forest. We were walking

much more quickly than usual. *Aha, I sense Ciel's aura! It's approaching awfully fast.*

"Ciel's picked up on us. It's running really fast our way."

"That's good."

I walked in the direction of Ciel's aura.

Meeeeeoowww!

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

Ciel jumped from the trees above and landed on the ground in front of us. Then it bolted right at me.

"Agh! Ciel! Sorry...something came up and we... Agh! Ciel, listen to meee."

Ciel slammed right into me, and the impact almost sent me flying backward. Thankfully, Druid lunged in and braced me from behind, saving me from disaster.

Mmmeeeeoowww!

"I'm so sorry. Something came up and we didn't know if we were safe, so we had to go back to the village. Sorry we left without saying anything."

Mmmeeeeoowww!

I patted Ciel's head over and over and over. After a while, the adandara finally calmed down and heaved a very loud sigh.



“Don’t worry, Ciel, we’ll explain everything.”

Druid and I went on to tell Ciel about our conversations with Ashley and Guild Master Lish. It listened intently and purred loudly in reply.

“Do you forgive us for leaving you like that?”

Mrrrow.

Oh, good. All is forgiven.

Chapter 333:

Total Trap Annihilation!

“Looks like all our traps got destroyed in epic fashion.”

When we went to check the traps we’d set in the forest, we found they had all been annihilated. Even the cages were totally smashed.

“Maybe they weren’t strong enough? Oh, or maybe it was magic?” Obitsune could use thunder magic, if I recalled correctly.

“No, from the way these were broken, they clearly weren’t strong enough. If they were destroyed by thunder magic, there would be burn marks on the ropes, but I don’t see any.”

“Oh. Well, how do we make the traps stronger, then?”

“Good question. We could double up the cages or wrap rope around them. Which do you think would work better?”

Double up the cages or wrap rope around them? Did he mean we would bundle up the cages with the rope?

“Step One: We go back to the dump,” Druid said. He sounded excited.

Mrrrow.

“What’s up, Ciel?” I asked. The adandara sounded restless.

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked, curiously peering at Ciel.

Mew! Ciel chirped, looking at the broken cages.

Oh! I think I know... “Ciel, do you want to help us with the hunt?”

Mrrrow.

Ciel had always helped me hunt when I needed it, but I had to get a promise from it first.

“Ciel, can you promise me you’ll go easy on the obitsune?”

If I didn't say anything, Ciel would hunt an incredible number of the monsters for us.

...Mrrrow.

Ciel sounded disappointed, as usual. But if I gave in then, we really would have a big problem on our hands.

"Promise me you'll go easy on them. Okay, Ciel?"

Mrrrow.

Success!

"This is so funny to watch. It's the exact opposite of the conversation you'd see from most tamers."

"Ciel is just too powerful. If it really put its mind to it, the obitsune in this forest might be wiped out completely."

"Yeah, I could definitely see that happening."

"So it's not just me?"

"Yep, obitsune are easy prey for an adandara."

Is the power difference really that big? Ciel did promise to go easy on them... but would they be okay? I looked at Ciel, who was waving its tail and looking all around. *Hm? Is there something out there? Wait, don't tell me Ciel is thinking of going hunting already? It can't be, right?*

Mew!

"Huh?!"

I turned my head at the happy sound Ciel had made and gasped at the sight of the adandara bounding off into the forest.

"What happened?" Druid asked, staring blankly as Ciel ran away. "Come on, what happened?"

"Pu! Puuu?"

"Teryu?"

Sora and Flame stopped playing and watched Ciel run into the trees.

“Ivy, what happened to Ciel?”

“I think...it went to hunt obitsune.”

Ciel *had* been awfully interested in our immediate surroundings. Would it be able to hunt obitsune that quickly for us?

“Oh! Ciel’s come back. Wait, can it really hunt something in such a short time? That’s amazing.” Druid did look quite impressed as he watched Ciel’s triumphant return, and I felt the same way. It had been gone for barely fifteen minutes.

“You really did hunt obitsune, didn’t you?”

Ciel happily swished its tail to and fro. In its mouth were some animals I’d never seen before.

“Are those obitsune?”

“They’ve got two tails, so they’re definitely obitsune. And there’s three of them, to boot.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Sora and Flame cheered agreeably in reply.

But if Ciel kept up hunting at that pace, we would have quite the haul of obitsune to bring back to the village. *I’d better have a talk with Ciel again. Killing three obitsune in fifteen minutes was probably its idea of “going easy on them.”*

“Ciel, happy to have you back. You never cease to amaze me. Look at you, hunting all those monsters so quickly!”

Thud!

Mrrrow.

Ciel was so proud that it was hard to break the news. *Wait, maybe I should give it a maximum number to hunt.*

“Ciel, thank you so much for catching these. I’d like you to hunt five of them for me every day, please.”

Obitsune were indeed bigger than wild rabbits, so even five of them made quite a large amount of meat.

Meeew.

Yeah. Ciel is crazy upset.

“Please, Ciel, we want to have a chance to hunt them, too.”

Just ignore those broken cages, okay? I know, I know, we didn't catch anything today.

“Ciel, share some of the joy of the hunt with us...all right?”

...Mrrrow.

“You're so good to us, Ciel,” Druid said. “Now, since we've got a nice big catch, we'd better clean and butcher them while they're still fresh.”

“Good idea. How do you cook obitsune anyway?”

“They have a very unique flavor, probably because they eat mostly qiblakarla.”

“Oh, interesting. Do they taste good?”

A “unique” flavor... It might overpower whatever dish you put it in, depending on how you use it.

“I'm not sure, I've only seen them salted and grilled.”

That must mean they have an unusual flavor that's hard to pair with anything. I'll have to taste it on its own once to see.

“Is it okay if I use the meat we butcher today for tonight's supper?”

“Yeah, that's fine. I told the inn we wouldn't need supper tonight. We'll sell two of them to the merchant guild and have the other for supper.”

“Oh, good. Okay, we'll have to butcher them first. Ciel, do you know where there's a river?”

I couldn't hear any water even if I strained my ears, so I had asked Ciel. After a few seconds, its ears prickled and turned, and then it yipped once.

“Will you take us there?”

Mrrrow.

“Thanks.”

We followed Ciel for a while until we came upon a river streaming between two giant boulders.

“The rocks must’ve blocked out the sound of the river.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Yeah, people say they sometimes can’t hear a river because of the direction it’s facing or because of boulders. I’m not sure how true that is, though.”

The river between the two boulders was quite narrow. Its flow was slow and smooth, too, so there was probably no way I would’ve heard it.

“Do I butcher these the same way as wild rabbits?”

“Yeah, except it’ll take longer to bleed them because they’re bigger.”

So it takes longer. In that case, we’d better get right to it.

“You really do know your way around a carcass,” Druid murmured as he watched me break down the obitsune.

“Well, I *have* been doing this since I was five.”

“Yeah...I guess you’d have to be good at it, then.”

It took a bit longer than usual to bleed the carcasses, but we finished butchering them quickly. I wrapped the meat in bana leaves and put it in my magic bag. I was so grateful for the time-stopping feature since it meant we could swing by the dump on our way back to the village.

“Okay, next we’ll go to the dump,” Druid said. “We need cages and rope. Ideally, we’ll find two cages around the same size.”

“Two cages around the same size. Got it.”

“Yeah, that’ll help us make them stronger.”

“Understood. I’ll do my best to find them.”

“Pu, pu?” Sora hopped over to me and tilted to the right. That was one of the ways it told me when it was confused or curious about something. I wondered

what was making it feel that way. It would have to be something from the conversation we'd just had.

"Cages?"

Sora just stared back.

Not cages.

"Um...the dump?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Sora has a question about the dump? Oh, I get it. We already went there before we checked on our traps, so the slimes are wondering why we're going back to the dump when they've already had their meal. Yeah, Sora and Flame were playing far away from us when we were talking about that.

"We need some stuff for our next hunt, so we're going to the dump to look for it," I explained.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Good. It understands now.

"Oh, and somebody might show up, so can you hide in the bag?"

They already ate, so it ought to be okay.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Thanks, Sora and Flame."

"I just realized, is Sol still asleep?" Druid asked, looking at the other two slimes. I opened the lid of the bag hanging on my shoulder and showed Druid. Inside was Sol, who had been sleeping since it finished its lunch.

"Yup. Still asleep."

"Okay."

I didn't know what had made Sol decide to go to sleep in the bag right after lunch that day. I was worried it wasn't feeling well, but it had told me it was doing okay. Maybe it just hadn't slept well the night before.

I searched for auras as we walked out of the forest and toward Hatahi's dump. Going there always made me nervous since it was so close to civilization.

"Sora, Flame, Ciel, can you get in the bag now?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

"Thanks."

I put them all in the bag one after another and kept my eyes on the gate as we walked past it on our way to the dump.

"Okay, let's get some cages!" said Druid.

"Yes, sir!"

Chapter 334:

Dying to Know

“It’s really hard to find two cages that are the same size,” I remarked.

“Well, that’s what you get when you look in the trash.”

“Still...”

“Personally, I think it’s fun, searching the trash for two cages that fit just right together.”

I wasn’t sure how fun the activity itself was...but I was sure he was having fun doing it.

“Oh! I found a match!”

Well, it does make me happy to see him find a perfect pair...which makes me take the hunt a little too seriously.

“I think you’re having just as much fun as I am, Ivy. You love looking for materials and making the traps.”

“I won’t deny that... Oh! Shoot, if only it were a bit taller, it would be a perfect match. But yes, catching prey with traps I built myself is a lot of fun. Maybe that’s why searching for the materials isn’t a nuisance to me at all.”

I was angry whenever I failed to catch anything, but I was twice as happy when I succeeded. In a way, that knowledge was what made searching for supplies at the dump enjoyable.

“Oh, somebody’s coming! Wait...huh?” I knew that aura. “It’s Ashley...and probably some watchmen.”

Druid sighed. “They must be on patrol.”

There were three human auras headed straight for us at a moderate speed. The two people with Ashley must have picked up on our auras because they sped up their approach.

“Oh, you’re the folks we ran into earlier! Are you looking for supplies for your traps again?”

“Good afternoon. Yes, we are.”

One of the watchmen eagerly approached the dump. He was probably interested in the idea of hunting with homemade traps.

“What are you collecting?”

“We set some traps earlier, but they all got destroyed, so we decided we needed stronger cages. We’re going to double up two cages at a time, so we’re looking for pairs of cages around the same size.”

Druid showed the watchman two identically sized cages.

“Oh, I see. Are you hunting obitsune?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How are you countering their magic?”

“Obitsune magic isn’t that powerful, so we’re not worrying about that now.”

“You’re right, obitsune magic is only effective when they can surprise you with it.”

Everyone looked rather excited over the whole thing. Which was nice and all, but I didn’t like that I was being watched. I stole a glance at Ashley...and sure enough, he was staring at my bag. His detect magic skill must have picked up on Ciel’s presence in there. *Well, he probably just senses that it’s powerful magic, not that it belongs to an adandara. For that matter, he would never suspect an adandara would be inside a bag in the first place—though Ciel is in slime form right now. Wait a minute... It doesn’t matter that Ciel is disguised as a slime if Ashley can still detect its powerful adandara magic.*

“Wow, that’s incredible!”

Oops! I wasn’t paying attention. What’s incredible?

“So nobear are your goal, eh?”

Hm...? My head drooped to the side in confusion over Druid’s conversation with the watchmen. *Methinks some dreadfully inauspicious words just reached*

my ears... Something to the effect of “Nobear are your goal”... No, no, nobear are those violent monsters, aren’t they? Or are they animals? No, they’re definitely violent monsters. This is bad. I’m getting worked up.

“Oh, nobear aren’t my goal.”

Thank goodness. Yeah, nobody would do something that reckless.

“Nobear are my stepping stone. My true quest ends with a prize much bigger than that.”

You heard nothing, Ivy, got it? Nothing. Wait a minute... Those giant traps I saw the other day... Is this guy planning to hunt the monster they were made for? That can’t be right, can it? Druid...please tell me I’m wrong.

“Hello there, Miss Ivy.”

“Agh!”

“Whoa! Sorry I startled you.”

“Do you know each other?” one of the watchmen asked, wondering why Ashley had called me by name.

“Oh! Um, yes, we sort of know each other.”

Ashley, don’t panic so obviously!

“Yes, we met the other day. Hello again.” I looked Ashley in the eye, willing him to calm down...but his eyes fell on my bag. Then he quickly shook his head and looked back at me.

The watchman beside Ashley frowned at him, and I had to sigh at his suspicious behavior. I guess he just couldn’t ignore the mysterious powerful magic energy he sensed coming from my bag. When I saw how hard he was trying, I felt guilty. But the detect magic skill sure was amazing. Ciel was so good at masking its aura that I couldn’t even sense it unless it was quite close to me.

“So...what brings you gentlemen here?” I had to say something before they got suspicious. Even without my help, Ashley was getting plenty of dubious stares from the watchman next to him.

“Ahh, well, I didn’t come to talk about anything in particular. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks. And you, Mr. Ashley?”

“I’m all right.”

This conversation is kind of weird. It’s making me feel even more nervous...

“What’s wrong?”

Druid’s here! Oh, thank goodness. I could just fling my arms around him and thank him right now.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I smiled.

Druid gave me a sly smile back. Then he patted my head. “Hello there, Watchman Ashley.”

Watchman? Oh, maybe I should’ve called him by that title, too?

“Hello, Mr. Druid.”

“Well, we were about to head back to the village. Take care,” Druid said.

“Oh! Yes, sir. You two take care,” Ashley said to Druid, stealing glances at my bag all the while. *I guess once his curiosity is sparked, it just won’t go out... There’s a turn of phrase like that, right? Or maybe not?*

“Thank you for your service,” I told Ashley and his watchmen as we turned back to the village. Even as we walked, I still felt his eyes on my back.

“Pfft! Ha ha ha, that Ashley was failing miserably to contain himself,” Druid chuckled.

“Uh-huh, that was pretty painful to watch.”

“Should we try to meet with him sooner than later?”

“Yeah.”

The previous night, we’d explained Ashley’s detect magic skill to our monsters. We also told them that since he didn’t know the source of the powerful magic energy, he would probably be dying to find out. So I asked everyone if it would be safe to tell Ashley about Ciel under those circumstances and, for some reason, they all recommended we tell him. From the loud, shrill tones in their voices, they seemed adamant about it. Maybe they all liked Ashley?

“Should we go to the village watch office after dinner? Or should we leave a message instead?”

“I’m not sure. Which would be better?”

I wanted whichever option was more discreet. Lots of people must have known about his detect magic skill, so we wouldn’t want them to hear that he had taken an interest in us. If they asked us why that was, we wouldn’t be able to answer.

“We can think about it on our way to the merchant guild.”

“Okay. First, let’s go sell the obitsune Ciel hunted.”

I was curious about Ashley, but I also wondered about the obitsune. Even though they were about three times the size of wild rabbits, they weren’t exactly rare here. And since Druid had said they had a unique flavor, I thought maybe I shouldn’t get my hopes up.

We entered the merchant guild and looked at the front desk. I made eye contact with the lady who had helped us last time.

“Let’s go to her.”

The obitsune sold for about twice the price of wild rabbits. As I suspected, they were hunted regularly and weren’t that expensive.

“They’re easy to prepare.”

We asked her for advice on how to cook it, and she told us they were best salted and grilled, and also that if you put them in a stew, their flavor overpowered the dish. I still wanted to see how it would do with a short braise, though.

“Oh, look. That must be Watchman Ashley.”

I followed Druid’s gaze to find Ashley’s backside. His shoulders were slumped, and I could even hear him sighing heavily. I wondered what had happened.

“Perfect timing,” Druid remarked.

“Yeah, perfect timing.”

Chapter 335:

Come with Courage and an Open Mind

“Good evening, Mr. Ashley.”

“Huh?! Oh! Miss Ivy...Mr. Druid. Good evening.”

“Hello. Hey, is everything all right?” Druid asked. “You look kind of down.”

Ashley looked a bit taken aback by Druid’s question, and his eyes shifted. “I just got in trouble at work,” he said with an awkward smile. Then he heaved an embarrassed sigh. He really did seem glum. I hoped he was going to be okay.

“Let me guess...was it because you were obsessed with Ivy’s bag?”

What?! Really?

“Urk! Yes, a little...?” Ashley answered gracelessly, his eyes darting in every direction.

Does this mean his bosses got mad at him because he was so fixated on the powerful magic energy he sensed coming from my bag?

“Wow... I’m so sorry about that,” I apologized.

Ashley vigorously shook his head from side to side. “It wasn’t your fault, Miss Ivy. I need to pull myself together.”

“Actually, we wanted to talk to you about that.”

Ashley’s face went from red to blue. *Oh dear... Did he just totally misunderstand us?*

“D-don’t worry! I haven’t told anybody!” he stammered.

“No, no, it’s not that.”

“Huh?!”

“We trust you, Watchman Ashley,” Druid assured him. “That’s why we want to talk to you.”

“You trust me...” Ashley’s cheeks pinkened a little when he heard that. His expression was changing so rapidly it was kind of funny to watch.

“We’d like to talk with you sometime soon. When are you free?”

“I’m off work the day after tomorrow, so any time then is fine.”

The day after tomorrow... Druid looked at me, and I nodded in approval.

“All right, can we meet up at the front gate the day after tomorrow? Say, just after lunch?”

“At the front gate? Were you thinking of talking in the forest?”

“That’s the plan, yes.”

“Um, I know a lot of restaurants where you can reserve a private room. And I have a noise-canceling item, so there’s no need for us to go into the forest,” Ashley said, eyeing my bag all the while. I could see his line of thinking: a monster that fit in my bag could be brought out in a room at a restaurant. But Ciel couldn’t fit in my bag in its true form...and if an adandara appeared out of nowhere in a restaurant, all hell would break loose.

“I’m sorry, but for reasons we can’t explain yet, the forest would work better for us.”

“Would it?” Ashley looked at my bag again.

Now I get it... That’s how someone would react to my bag if the only thing they knew about it was that the magic energy was powerful. It’s kind of funny.

“Understood. The day after tomorrow, after lunch, at the front gate, right?”

“Yeah, thanks. And sorry again to trouble you. Our conversation won’t take long...but you might need a while to recover afterward.”

“Recover?”

“Yeah. You’ll need to approach that day with courage and an open mind.”

I looked at Druid and saw an amused smile on his face. He was definitely looking forward to seeing Ashley’s reaction. *Honestly, Druid...*

“Um...why? Am I in danger of getting hurt or something...?” Druid’s warning had clearly made Ashley a little dizzy.

“Don’t worry, you won’t be wounded,” I assured him.

“Okay. Well, see you in two days.”

My promise seemed to put him in a better frame of mind, though he still looked troubled.

“Yes, we look forward to speaking with you in two days,” I answered, giving Druid’s back a little tap. But all he did was shrug at me. “Oh, Mr. *Druid*! Don’t tease poor Mr. Ashley!” I told him sternly after Ashley was out of earshot.

“But I’m not teasing him... Um, I was just enjoying his reactions a little.”

“Well, don’t.”

“Sorry...but I actually meant what I said.”

I was surprised. *So he wasn’t just teasing Ashley after all?*

“Ivy, have you ever shown Ciel to young adventurers or rookie watchmen before?”

Showed Ciel to them? “No, I haven’t.”

I thought back to the people who knew about Ciel and realized that all of them were highly experienced in their fields. They were masters of their crafts or adventurers who had already made names for themselves. None of them were young.

“So this will be a new experience for you as well as him, Ivy.”

A new experience? What does he mean by that? I looked at Druid, but he wasn’t giving me any clues. *Does he mean that there’s no need for me to rush into things? Or that I should watch Ashley closely when we see him in two days?*

“Okay. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Good.”

Hmm... What’s this all about? Now I really want to know, but I’m sure Druid won’t tell me. Guess I’ll have to wait a couple of days to find out.

When we returned to the inn, we found Chikar cleaning by the front entrance.

“Welcome back, you two.”

“Good evening, sir.”

“You two don’t need supper tonight, right?”

“Huh? Oh, um, that’s right.”

Chikar looked a bit troubled when Druid answered him. I wondered what was wrong.

“Is something wrong, sir?” I asked.

“Um... Could I trouble you to take some side dishes?”

“Huh? Side dishes?”

“Yes... See, I cooked too much today.”

“Mr. Druid, could we take some?”

“Sure.”

All I had planned for dinner that night was grilled obitsune; I hadn’t decided on any side dishes yet. So it wasn’t a problem for me to take some from Chikar, especially because the food there was so good.

“Oh, would you?” Chikar sighed in relief. He really was troubled by the extra food. Still, it was funny that I had met only two innkeepers so far, and both were hardworking yet scatterbrained at times. Maybe it was a coincidence? Or maybe diligent people with a hint of ditziness were just cut out for the business of innkeeping?

“We’ll pick it up from the dining hall later.”

“Thank you. It’s a side dish that doesn’t taste nearly as good the next day, so you’re really helping me out.”

Druid and I returned to our room and took the creatures out of the bag. Druid turned on his magic item so they wouldn’t be discovered.

“Thanks. Okay, I’ll get straight to cooking dinner.”

Now that we had the side dishes sorted out, there wasn’t much I needed to do. I sprinkled the obitsune meat with salt and pepper. The raw meat didn’t have a particularly strong odor. Maybe it would smell more once I grilled it, like everybody said.

“I’ll help. What do you need?” Druid asked.

“Well, since Chikar is giving us side dishes, there’s not much for me to do, either.”

I had already made soup that morning, and all the obitsune meat needed was to sit on the grill.

“Grilled obitsune... It’s been a long time.”

“You’ve had it before?”

That’s right, Druid mentioned that he’s been to Hatahi before. Did he eat it then?

“Yeah, I stayed at a cheap inn here, and their food was lousy. The only edible thing they served was the grilled obitsune. Well, I say that partly because I just love grilled meat.”

I would hate to stay at an inn with bad food... I looked at the clock and saw it was about time to put the obitsune on the grill.

While I was putting the obitsune meat in a grilling basket, Druid walked right next to me and said, “Putting it on the grill? Let me do it.”

“You want to? Okay, thanks.” I handed the meat to Druid.

Since Druid is taking care of the meat, maybe I’ll whip up another side dish. I think I’m in the mood for braised vegetables.

Chapter 336:

We Should Have Warned Him

“**H**e’s not here yet.”

“Nope, not yet.”

We stood at the village gate and looked around. Maybe we’d come too early?

“So, did you get any ideas?”

“Huh?”

“On how to cook obitsune.”

We had eaten obitsune grilled with salt the night before, and it was indeed delicious. We also understood why people tended to only grill it. The subtle aroma it gave off from grilling was overwhelmed by the pungent, unique flavor it had when you actually bit into a piece of it. Past Me even butted in for the first time in a while with a sarcastic “Is this frickin’ *garlic*?!” Druid worried when I froze up from the sound of her voice. I didn’t know what *frikingarlic* was, but its flavor must have left a strong impression for me to be able to hear my past self scorning it.

“It’s pretty odd,” I said, puzzled. “I’ve never encountered food that smells strongest when it’s inside your mouth.”

When I was eating it the previous night, I’d been sure it would leave a smell on our breath the next day, but it hadn’t. Obitsune was a meat of many mysteries.

“So you think grilling it is the best after all?” Druid asked.

“No. One other idea did pop into my mind.”

“From your old memories?”

“Yes. You make a wrapper out of flour, mince the obitsune meat in a food processor, and mix it with vegetables, then you put the flour wrapper around it and grill, boil, or steam it.”

“A wrapper...out of flour? Food *processor*?”

According to Past Me, this food was called “gyoza.” I was startled by the rather detailed recipe that had popped into my head the night before. It was completely different from any other flashback I’d had. Maybe Past Me loved that food, and maybe that was why I was dying to try it now. (Though last night, I was so disoriented I had to suppress that urge.) “Yup. As God is my witness, I’m making gyoza!”

“We’re making proclamations now...?”

“Excuse me?”

“Er, never mind. *Gyoza*, huh? I look forward to trying it.”

“Good. I know they’ll be super delicious.”

Maybe they’ll go well with white rice. Whenever I remember gyoza, I always see white rice with it. I think I’ll try that.

“Sorry I’m late!”

While Druid was trying his best not to laugh at me, Ashley ran over to us.

“No need to run, sir. There’s still plenty of time.”

“Oh, but I was just so excited about it,” Ashley said with a quick glance at my bag. From the look in his eyes, it was clear his curiosity was at bursting point, and I couldn’t wait to see his reaction when I let Ciel out of the bag.

“Well, let’s go,” Druid said.

“Okay.”

When we greeted the gatekeeper, we got a strange look in response. The nature of our relationship with the watchman must have been rather mysterious.

“Is there a problem, Watchman Ashley?” the gatekeeper asked.

“Huh?! Oh, no. How should I put this...?”

“He wants us to show him how we hunt with traps,” Druid explained while Ashley floundered.

The gatekeeper's eyes lit up. "Oh, I've heard about you guys! People are talking about the adventurers who hunt obitsune with traps. So that's you, then?"

"People are talking about us?" Druid asked with a polite smile.

The gatekeeper replied, "There are rumors among the village watchmen."

"Oh, I see," Druid said. "Yes, I guess that would be us."

Druid frowned slightly when he heard that there were rumors about us. It was such a subtle change in expression that only I—somebody who was with him all the time—would notice it.

"So it's about the traps, then," the gatekeeper said.

"Yes, sir. They take a while to set up, so we'd better be on our way."

"Oh! All right. Take care."

"Thank you."

We bowed our heads and walked through the gate. I looked up to see that Druid was looking thoughtful.

"You okay?" *Is it bad that there are rumors about us?*

"Rumors like those are nothing to worry about. And the truth is, we really are going hunting."

I guess it's okay, then.

"Where are we going, exactly?" Ashley asked.

"Let's go all the way out to the place where we'll set our traps. Not many people go there, so we'll have plenty of time to talk."

"All right."

After we walked through the forest for about an hour, we arrived at the spot we'd found earlier. *Is the coast clear?* I searched for auras and found no human ones. "Mr. Druid, I think it's safe now."

"Right here?" Ashley asked. "Oh! Yes, I see the qiblakarla trees obitsune like." He looked around the area and nodded in satisfaction when he spotted the

trees.

“Okay, Mr. Ashley, I’d like you to meet my friends.”

“Er, your friends?” Ashley gave my bag a dubious look. Then I remembered that he didn’t know I was a tamer.

“I’m a tamer, you see.”

“*Ohh*, you’re a tamer... Wait, what?!” His expression quickly changed to one of shock. He probably couldn’t believe that a monster small enough to fit in my bag could possibly have such powerful magic.

“Okay, guys, come on out.” I opened the bag and took out Sora and Flame. I could hear Ashley gasp at the sight of them. Next came Ciel.

“Huh?! It’s that *slime*?!”

Wow, he knew it was Ciel’s magic right away. I took out Sol last of all. “So, um, this is Sora, Flame, Ciel, and the one I’m holding right now is Sol.”

“...Those are some awfully rare slimes you’ve got there... Wait! Is that magic energy coming from the slimes? Wait, what? Really?”

Ashley was quite perplexed. *Will he be all right if I let Ciel return to its true form?* I glanced at Druid, who smiled awkwardly back at me.

“It’s all right, Watchman Ashley. Calm down.”

“Err...yes. Thank you. I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? You don’t look okay to me.”

“I am...just a little surprised, that’s all. I didn’t think slimes could have such powerful magic.”

“Yeah, a slime couldn’t possibly be that strong,” Druid agreed.

“Yes, you’re quite right... Wait, what?! But then...” Ashley stared at Ciel.

“Stay calm...and listen. Don’t lose your head and run away. Ivy has tamed Ciel, so you’re in no danger.”

Druid’s warning made Ashley tense up as he looked into Ciel’s eyes.

“You see, it’s like this...Ciel has shapeshifted for me,” I explained.



“Shapeshifted?”

“Yes, sir. I’m going to have Ciel turn back into its true form. Are you ready, sir?”

“Oh! Oh, now I get it. Yes, of course it couldn’t be a slime. What a relief! Wait...its true form?”

Will this guy really be okay?

“Ciel, you can change back now.”

Mrrrow.

“Huh?! What did it just say?”

As Ashley sputtered in confusion, Ciel’s slime body ballooned out into the shape of an adandara.

Ashley was speechless.

Mrrrow.

“Thanks, Ciel. Um...Mr. Ashley?”

But Ashley was completely unresponsive.

Uh-oh. He’s giving me nothing.

“Well, let’s just be grateful that he didn’t run away. If he lost his head and ran back to the village, we’d have a problem on our hands.”

Yeah, if he ran screaming into the village about an adandara on the loose, there’d be hell to pay.

“Well, I’m glad we avoided that disaster, but what’s wrong with Mr. Ashley?”

“Agggh... He’s frozen. Watchman Ashley?”

We’ve got a dead signal here. Just as I looked up to check out his expression, he teetered over backward.

“Augh!” Druid lunged to catch Ashley, but the two men wound up falling down together.

“Watch out!”

Ciel swooped under Ashley.

“Phewww, that was a close call. Thanks, Ciel.” Druid righted himself and gently set Ashley down on his side. He had fallen unconscious.

“I didn’t think he’d faint,” I said.

“Really? That was one of the possibilities I had in mind.”

“It was?”

Nobody had fainted at the sight of my adandara before, so I didn’t know how to feel about it.

“Weird. Ciel isn’t all that scary.”

Mrrrow.

I patted Ciel’s head. The way it squinted its eyes and smiled was so adorable.

“I mean, just look how cute you are.”

Purr, purr, purr, purr.

“Oh! We probably should’ve warned him what Ciel was going to shapeshift into beforehand.”

That’s right. If we’d told Ashley that Ciel was going to turn into an adandara, he probably wouldn’t have been so shocked.

“Now that you mention it, yeah.” Druid clearly considered the venture a failure.

“Should we just go ahead and set all the traps while he’s out?” I suggested.

“Might as well.”

“Ciel, Mr. Ashley is a little fragile right now, so stay close and protect him, okay?”

“Err, Ivy, isn’t that a bit cruel?” Druid looked slightly exasperated with me.
Why’s that?

“Oh! Oh, I see your point. Um, Ciel, could you protect him from a little farther away?”

The poor guy had fainted at the sight of Ciel. Seeing the adandara right next

to him when he came to would probably cause a repeat performance. That would indeed add insult to injury.

Chapter 337:

Asking for Advice Is Important

We had Ciel look after the unconscious Ashley while we set the traps. Now that we'd reinforced the cages, I wanted to actually catch something this time!

"Do you think Mr. Ashley will be okay?" I asked.

"I'm sure he will. I want these traps to be more stable, so we should flatten the earth where we're setting them."

"Whereabouts? Here?"

We moved some of the dirt to flatten the spot where we would set our trap, then took our enhanced cage out of the magic bag and set it on the even ground.

"We'll have to make sure it stays still."

"Yeah," I agreed. "But what made you think that Mr. Ashley might faint?"

"Because he put curiosity over caution."

Curiosity over caution? Yeah, he did seem awfully careless, especially since he knew he was dealing with powerful magic. I wonder why?

"Yeah, most people would be more careful, wouldn't they?"

"It all comes down to experience. He's still young, so his personal curiosity got the better of him."

"His curiosity put his life in danger once before, didn't it?"

I wonder if he's the type who would make the same mistake twice.

I took twelve long stakes we'd found at the dump out of my bag.

"Yes, but he had an obstacle standing in the way of his vigilance this time, Ivy. It was you."

"Me?" I used the stakes to attach the cages to the ground.

“Since you, a child, controlled the source of the powerful magic, he probably assumed it couldn’t be all that harmful.”

Well, that’s a dangerous assumption to make.

“Once he gets more life lessons, he’ll prioritize caution over curiosity.”

“Is that how it works?”

“At first, I thought he was worried about how it would affect the village, but judging by his behavior, his personal curiosity seems to trump that. Besides, when we invited him to talk, he agreed to it without question. That was the wrong thing to do.”

It was wrong for him to agree to our proposal, even though we were the ones making it? Why was that? I... I don’t get it. But boy, I’m always amazed by how much Druid thinks everything through.

“If he had been at all careful, even the sudden appearance of an adandara wouldn’t have stunned him into inaction.”

So I guess he was so curious that the surprise sucker punched him unconscious. That reminded me of my solo travel days, when I had looked up after a nap and locked eyes with a monster in a tree above me... I almost passed out from terror. I ran like my life depended on it that day. Well, if I had passed out, I would have died. And even though I managed to get away, I wound up lost in the forest.

“I guess this’ll work?” I grabbed the cage and tried to shake it, but it was secured firmly to the ground. Next, I picked some qiblakarla and placed it in the cage.

“Looks sturdy enough,” Druid agreed. “Now we just need to hide the cages with leaves and stuff.”

I looked around, but I didn’t see anything on the ground we could use. “Hmm... I’ll just go find us some leaves.”

“Thanks. Don’t go far, okay?”

“Of course not!”

I searched for human auras and decided I was clear. I quickly got to work

searching for leaves and twigs to hide our cages. Once I'd gathered enough, I returned to the area with our trap and covered the cage with the debris.

"Thanks. Now the cage is nicely hidden."

"Yup. What about the other one?"

Since we'd thought our conversation with Ashley might not leave us enough time to set all the traps, we had only brought two traps out that day. The first was the one we'd just set, but where would we set the other one?

"I decided to put it over here, in the brush you found earlier. I think it's a good spot."

"Yeah, I think so, too!"

Gee, it sure is flattering when someone agrees with you.

After we finished setting the second trap, we went back to check on Ashley.

"Looks like he's awake," I observed.

Ashley was sitting up and looking at Ciel, frozen in shock.

"You awake?" Druid called out to him.

Ashley slowly turned his head to look at Druid. Then he opened and closed his mouth like a fish.

"Thanks, Ciel."

Mrrrow.

Ciel pulled itself up from the ground into a sitting position. As I gave its head some nice leisurely pats, I sensed a pair of eyes piercing into me with impressive intensity. I turned to see Ashley looking at us, his mouth half open.

"Watchman Ashley, pull yourself together, man," Druid said. "So, how does it feel to know where that magic came from?"

"Huh?! It feels, um...shocking," Ashley answered, stealing nervous glances at Ciel.

Druid sighed loudly. "Listen, kid, you're lucky it was us. Do you know what kind of danger you could have put yourself in?"

“Huh?!” Ashley and I gasped in unison. What danger was he talking about?

“Watchman Ashley, did you tell anybody that today we were going to tell you the source of a powerful magic energy you sensed?”

“Oh, I would never do something like that!”

Druid sighed. “Well, that’s where you went wrong.”

Really? But he promised us he wouldn’t tell anybody.

“Ivy isn’t scheming to hurt this village through you, but what if she was?”

Hmm... Yeah, a powerful magic energy could be used for a lot of things. Is that what he was getting at? I’ve never really thought about it like that before.

“Oh! Well...”

I wonder if a person could use that kind of powerful magic to put the entire village in danger...

“When we suggested this to you, your first move should have been to ask us if it was okay for you to tell your supervisor what we told you. And we are already on speaking terms with Guild Master Lish and Captain Tabulo, too. If we didn’t know them, you should have asked your supervisor for advice in secret.”

That made sense. In case something happened to him, he should have shared the information beforehand with someone he trusted. That must be why Druid said it was foolish of Ashley to agree to speak with us without question. Come to think of it, it would have made perfect sense for Ashley to secretly check with his supervisor about the powerful magic. *I’ll have to be more careful to talk with my allies whenever I need to decide something.*

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Well, because I know you, Mr. Druid.”

“A man can change in a few years. That means you should always be cautious, even of people you think you know.”

Oh! Yeah, I’ve heard that advice from so many different people now. People change, don’t trust them so easily. Druid and his mentors both told me that.

“Forgive me, sir,” Ashley apologized.

So Druid wasn't just making fun of Ashley for kicks; he was trying to get a better sense of the guy. I realized I'd misread the situation a little.

"No, I was wrong, too," Druid said. "I should have warned you that Ciel was an adandara."

"Oh, no, I'm okay now." Ashley sounded kind of sad. This must have been a valuable life lesson for him, too.

"Pu! Pu, puuu!" Sora, who had been playing a few meters away, eagerly bounced onto Ashley's head.

Yikes... Now that probably wasn't the nicest thing to do to him.

"Um...what's this? Huh?"

"The slime on your head right now is named Sora," Druid explained. "Don't worry, this one is a real slime."

"Well, that's good to hear." Ashley's arms suddenly went from frantic to frozen.

Wait, can't he tell Sora's a real slime from its magic energy? I thought this guy had finally calmed down, but is he still all wound up? Druid's trying not to laugh, so maybe Ashley really isn't doing too well after all...

"Well, I'll end the lecture here," Druid said. "Would you like to ask us any questions?"

"May I?"

"Ask Ivy. She's the one who tamed Ciel."

"All right. Miss Ivy, may I ask you some questions?"

He seemed awfully nervous, and it was making me nervous, too. "Sure, go ahead."

Ashley's eyes shifted over to Ciel. "Is that really an adandara? I've only read about them in books."

"Yes, Ciel is most definitely an adandara."

"A real adandara... I've never seen one before today." Ashley stared at Ciel in amazement. I'd assumed he would ask me a bunch of questions now that he

knew what the powerful magic was...but he didn't seem to have any.

"Maybe we should've brought out more traps today," I murmured.

"Maybe," Druid agreed.

Chapter 338:

Penta Fruit and Tetra Fruit

“All Mr. Ashley did was stare at Ciel,” I remarked.

He asked no questions and simply stared and stared...until Ciel got annoyed, and he stopped. I hadn't thought he would just stare and not say anything at all. Everyone else asked a bunch of questions or petted Ciel, who seemed to enjoy it. However, this new reaction confused not only Ciel but us as well.

“Yeah, not even I predicted that reaction,” Druid smiled. “Ivy?”

“Uh-huh?”

“You always come and talk to me when you have a decision to make, and that takes a great weight off my heart. But make sure you keep coming to me for advice from now on as well. Consult with me and with your creatures.”

“Of course I will. There's still a lot of knowledge and experience I don't have, so I would never make judgments all by myself.”

I could certainly say that with confidence. I think it's very important to not reach a decision until you've heard lots of opinions on the matter.

“That's a relief to hear.” Druid gave my head a couple of gentle pats. “Right, we should check on our faaxes. Knowing our friends, they must've replied by now.”

“Yeah, Rattloore and his friends are quick to get back to us, and so's your family.”

Whenever I sent faxes to Rattloore and his friends, I usually heard back within two days. The next fastest to reply was Druid's family. Captain Oght took his time.

“It feels good knowing people care.”

“Yeah. Then again, half of it is my mom worrying that I'm giving you a hard time.”

“Ha ha ha, guess I’ll have to write your mom another letter, then.”

“Yes, please do. My sister-in-law would love that.”

We stopped by the merchant guild and made our way to the table in the corner.

“How can I help you?”

“We’ve come to check on our faaxes.” Druid handed his guild card to the clerk, who then reached into a drawer in the table and pulled out several letters.

“Here you go,” she said.

“Thank you very much. Could we please have ten sheets of faax paper?”

“Right away, sir. Let me just account for that in your records.” She subtracted the cost of the paper from Druid’s guild card and handed it back to him.

“Thanks a lot.”

“Thank you for your business.”

The fax clerks in Hatahi sure were wooden. This lady was smiling, but otherwise she didn’t seem comfortable interacting with people.

“Want to read them here?” Druid asked.

I shook my head no. I wanted to take my time. “Let’s go back to the inn. What do you want to do for supper? We told Mr. Chikar we didn’t need any today, right?”

“Weeeell... I actually have a request.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I want to eat gyuu-don, that dish with the hexa fruit. Is that okay?”

Hexa fruit? Oh, right, that’s eggs. In other words, he wants a beef and rice bowl. That’s easy to make, so it shouldn’t be a problem.

“Sure, I can make it.”

We still have some meat, so I don’t have to get that. But we don’t have eggs, so I’ll need to buy some on the way back. Oh, right! Not eggs. Hexa fruit. Gosh,

this is so confusing.

“Oh, that reminds me! Since hexa fruit is a thing, do you think there’s also such a thing as penta fruit?” I asked.

“Huh? Um, everyone knows that.”

Is it really common knowledge? I’ve never seen penta fruit or tetra fruit sold anywhere.

“Wait a minute...you really didn’t know?” said Druid.

“Nope. Is it really that well known?”

I’d never seen any number-related fruit sold in shops except hexa fruit, so why would it be common knowledge?

“Oh, I think I get it! Yeah, they haven’t been selling anything besides hexa fruit lately.”

“Oh, they haven’t?” *I guess you couldn’t blame me for not knowing about them, then.*

“Yeah, the other fruits are rotten on the inside.”

They’re rotten? “Well, then I can see why the shops won’t sell them. But then why were they ever sold in the first place?”

“Some people used to eat them in the past.”

“They ate...rotten food?”

“Apparently. That was decades ago, though.”

Maybe this was during a time when food was scarce? I had read about this country’s history, but I’d never noticed anything about that. Perhaps I’d missed it.

“Well, people all have their unique food preferences, including rotten food...”

No, that’s not cool! You shouldn’t eat rotten food!

“Ivy, don’t make that face.”

What kind of face am I making? I touched my hands to my cheeks.

“You’ve got quite the perplexed expression on your face, Ivy.” Druid sounded

amused.

Well, I couldn't help but make a face. Just the thought of eating rotten food made me feel a little sick.

"All joking aside, I did try the rotten fruit once. It was the penta fruit."

"What?! Really?"

"Yeah. It was white and it smelled sour, so I decided not to eat it after all."

Oh, good. So he didn't actually eat it. Still, I'm surprised by the odd things Druid does sometimes.

"What groceries do we need, then?"

"Just the hexa fruit."

We bought some hexa fruit on the way back to the inn. Once we were inside, I took my creatures out of their bag.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

I took blue potions and five swords out of my bag, then I got out the red potions. Sora and Flame merrily jiggled toward the potions, and Sol rolled all the way over to my feet.

"Your dinner's over here, Sol. There weren't many magic items in the dump, so there might not be much magic energy for you to eat this time. Sorry about that."

"Pefu! Pefu!" Sol happily bounced up and down on the magic items I'd brought back.

"Eat quietly, okay?" No amount of soundproofing the room could ease my worries, even when it was done with a magic item.

I took our dinner ingredients out of my magic bag and headed to the kitchen. I'd just realized it had been a while since I last made gyuu-don, and since it was Druid's special request, I wanted to do it justice.

"Okay, first I've got to steam the rice."

“I’ll help. What should I do?”

You want to help me? But it’s just beef over rice. It really comes together in no time.

“Oh, but beef and rice is very easy to make.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, so if you help, then I’ll have nothing to do. You can take it easy today.”
I think I’ll make the side dishes while the rice cooks.

“Okay. I guess I’ll read my faaxes, then.”

“Tell me what everyone said later, okay?”

“Of course.”

Druid got the faaxes from our room and began to read them. I hoped everyone was doing well.

“What?!”

Just as I was finishing up the second side dish, Druid, who was reading faaxes behind me, let out a yelp of surprise.

“What’s wrong?”

“Shurila’s having a baby.”

A baby? “Wow, really?”

“Yeah, and she said that Doluka is being overly protective and it’s very annoying.”

Annoying? Wait, Druid is thirty-three years old, right? I wonder how old his big brothers are.

“How old is Doluka?”

“Hm? He’s thirty-nine... Wait...is he forty? Well, something like that.”

I wonder how old their wives are, then.

“Um, so how old is Shurila?”

Oops, I asked out loud. I hope that wasn’t rude.

“I think Shurila is...about nine years younger than him, which would make her about thirty.”

Wow, so they're nine years apart.

“Why are you so curious about ages all of a sudden?” Druid asked.

“Oh, no reason. I just heard that childbirth can be dangerous later in life.”

“Dangerous? Why would it be? We've got childbirth potions.”

Childbirth potions? Wait...what are those?

“Oh, did you not know about them?”

“Yeah, do potions like that really exist? I always thought there were only four types.”

“Well, they're only used during childbirth, so I guess it's not common knowledge.”

So they have potions to help people give birth smoothly. I had no idea.

“My parents were worried about those two since you can't have a baby unless you've got a good relationship. I guess this has put their minds at ease.”

Ooh...I just know any baby of Shurila's will be adorable. I can't wait to meet it.

Chapter 339:

Straight from the Source

Is it just me...or did Druid say something very strange just now? Why can't someone have a baby if they don't have a good relationship? Two people with a bad relationship can still have babies, can't they? Gee...I've never had any big doubts like this before... So why am I suddenly so obsessed with it?

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing... Um, weird question: Can't a couple still have a baby even if they have a bad relationship?"

"Huh?! No, of course they can't."

Right, of course they can't. "Wait...huh?" My mind began to swim. Um...so, if a couple has a bad relationship, they can't have a baby. Yes, everyone in this world knows that. So why does it seem so strange to me?

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I think I'm fine."

Is this coming from Past Me? She does seem to have a "common knowledge" that's different from this world. Okay, Ivy...let's calm down.

"I'm okay now. Oh, the rice is done!" All I needed to do was mix the eggs with the stew and serve it over rice. "Mr. Druid, supper's ready."

"Sure. So, hey...what came over you earlier?"

"Don't worry about it. Past Me's memories were just mixing themselves into my brain."

"Got it. That must be horrible to deal with."

He was right. Why was I born with memories of my past life? Then again, it's because of those memories that I'm alive today, so I should be grateful. If only they didn't keep mixing themselves in with my current knowledge...

We both sat down to eat.

“This is always so good,” Druid said.

“Thanks.”

I thought I’d made too much, but he ate it all up. Was he really that eager to eat it? *You know, I wonder what sort of special products Hatahi has. I forgot to look it up.*

“Mr. Druid, do you know if Hatahi has any special products?”

“Special products?”

“Yeah, I just realized I never looked into it.”

“Obitsune would be one example, but I don’t know much about it myself. Want to go look around the shops tomorrow?”

“Yeah...let’s do that. I’m curious about it.”

While Druid made our after-dinner tea, I washed the dishes. When we got back to our room, Sora and Flame were already asleep on my bed. Ciel got up to greet us as soon as we entered.

“Hi, Ciel.”

Mrrrow.

I looked for Sol and found it staring out the window.

“What’s up, Sol?” Druid asked.

Sol jiggled in response to Druid, but its attention remained fixed outside the window.

“Think there’s something out there?”

“I’m not sure.”

Mrrrow.

As I watched Sol, I felt something lightly slamming against my thighs. I looked down to find Ciel staring up at me.

“Sorry. What’s up?” I picked up Ciel, who jiggled and closed its eyes in my arms. Was it just sleepy? I sat in a chair and set the adandara down on my lap.

“Here. You wanted to read these, right?” Druid handed me the faxes.

“Thanks.”

This time, Gnouga was in charge of sending the fax. Everyone in that group took turns sending the fax on behalf of the whole team, so it was distinctively different each time. Gnouga had written in detail about the meat from monsters they’d slain. In fact, half of the fax was about monster meat. He let each person drop a line at the end.

“Oh!”

“What’s up?” Druid looked up from the fax he was writing.

“Um...Mr. Sifar says, ‘I heard a rumor that a lot of serpents are on the loose near Hatada Village... Hope I’m not jumping to conclusions.’”

Does this mean he knows we had something to do with it? I’m not sure. What did he mean by “Hope I’m not jumping to conclusions”?

“Yeahhh...” Druid sighed. “I feel like he knows it was us.”

“Why?”

I didn’t even bring it up!

“I’d say he’s just going off what he knows you’ve already done.”

“What I’ve already done? But I’m just an innocent traveler.”

Druid’s eyes shifted around when I said that. *What? We are just innocent travelers, right? We aren’t making trouble for anybody, are we?*

“Well, sure, but from an outsider’s perspective, your travels have been extremely eventful.”

Really? But I’m only having Ciel take me on adventures through the forest. I think the only unusual thing I’ve done is travel through the forest on Snakey’s back, right? I really can’t think of anything else besides that. And I haven’t caused any other disturbances, either. Oh, and the Snakeys didn’t actually attack that village, so that wouldn’t be a problem...unless their powerful magic energy was an issue? You know, that’s right. If a bunch of serpents gathered together like that, the area would have to be full of extraordinarily powerful

magic. And if that wave of powerful magic moved through the forest, that would scare people. Yep, it would scare me. But c'mon, that was unavoidable!

"Well, it's okay if your friends know."

"I know that, but the idea that they *might know* is giving me the jitters."

"Ha ha ha! Yeah, they might get angry the next time they see you. Yell at you for calling attention to yourself."

"But I wasn't doing that! Besides, nobody knows it was *me* riding on Snakey!"

If I recall...they thought I was a new species of monster that was human on top and serpent on the bottom. That's right, everybody thinks they saw a monster, so it's not really me!

"Yeah, I'm a new species of monster, so it's okay."

"Uh, no, *that's* what makes it *not* okay. What will Seizerk and his friends think if they hear that rumor?"

Huh? What if Seizerk and his friends hear that rumor? Yeah...they'll figure out right away that I had something to do with it. Rattloore and Sifar will both think it's hilarious, and everyone else will laugh and tease me relentlessly for it. But they'll be anxious, too. They're all such worrywarts.

"Gee, I don't want to worry them."

"Well...then why don't you make sure they hear the rumor straight from the source first?"

"What, you mean I should tell them, 'Hey, guys, I turned into a new species of monster that's half human and half serpent'?"

"When you put it that way, that really is a strange monster. And you shouldn't say you *turned into* it. At least make sure they know it's a *rumor*."

"Oh! Right."

"Why don't you tell them about the rumors of the strange monster and make sure to say that you're okay? They'll still worry about you, but it would be better to hear the rumor from the one it's about than from a third party."

So, basically, he wants them to hear it from me first.

“You’re right, I should tell them. It’s an embarrassing rumor to tell them about, but I’ll do it.”

I took a sheet of fax paper from Druid and started with a greeting and a thank-you for the fax. *I think I’ll tell them about our trapping expeditions and about Hatahi Village next. I’ll say it’s a lively place. Now I just need to tell them about the rumor and say that we’re doing just fine.*

“All done,” I sighed.

“I’m finished, too. Okay, let’s get to bed. It’s late.”

“Yes, let’s.”

All that writing had worn me out. I looked at my bed to see all four creatures sound asleep on it. *Wait, when did Ciel get off my lap? I didn’t notice it at all.* I took a look at my sleeping beauties.

“Sol’s been looking out the window a lot lately, huh?”

It had started the day after we arrived in Hatahi. That was when I noticed Sol at the window, staring outside. Seeing it like that made me nervous for some reason.

“Yeah, it’s done that a lot since we came to this inn.”

“Yeah.”

Whenever I asked Sol about it, I always got a jiggle of “I’m okay” in reply. But for some reason, I couldn’t help but worry.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

Chapter 340: Trouncing Trauma

“Look, Mr. Druid! There’s an obitsune in this trap, too!”

“Seems like all the traps we set today worked.”

We were two weeks into our trapping experiments, and after much trial and error, we finally had the knack of it. You double over the cages, tie them together with rope, and paint them with wax.

You had to use cages that were as new as possible and very thick rope. It took us two weeks of toiling to finally figure this out.

“All that information about obitsune in books didn’t help much at all,” Druid remarked.

“Yeah, they especially didn’t say how strong their fangs were.”

Our early cages had been destroyed not by obitsune magic but by their fangs. Their sharper-than-expected teeth cut right through the cages, allowing them to escape. But the books didn’t talk much about their fangs; they simply weren’t seen as all that important. And because of this, it took us a while to figure out how the obitsune were escaping. But when we happened to use a cage with wax and an obitsune didn’t escape, we finally realized that wax was their weakness.

“Let’s kill and butcher them right now,” Druid suggested.

Since we had set four traps, we’d caught four obitsune. Today was going to be a good day for butchering.

“Okay.”

Mrrrow. Ciel ran ahead, cradling two obitsune in its mouth. Druid and I carried one obitsune each and followed along.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

Ciel’s tail wagged softly in reply. The adandara had been using its tail to

communicate quite a lot recently. So as long as I didn't anger it, it wouldn't body-slam me anymore. Even now, its tail was contentedly swirling to and fro, but it wasn't stirring up a miniature dust storm like before.

When we got to the river, Druid pulled a magic item out of his magic bag. When we learned that obitsune corpses took a long time to bleed, Druid had bought an item that aided in draining blood. It was a mystery how the thing was constructed, but if you left it activated on top of a corpse, it would drain the blood for you. I'd watched it do its thing many times, but I still didn't know how it worked. One thing was certain, though: It was very useful.

"All right, Ciel, do your stuff."

Mrrrow.

Druid skinned the obitsune while I cut the meat into portions. Since Druid had no free arm to keep the obitsune steady, that was where Ciel came in. Ciel would hold down the obitsune and Druid would use a knife to skin them. Over the past couple of weeks, his form and speed at skinning had improved greatly, so I had to be quick when I cut the meat up.

"Okay, all done. Thanks, Ciel."

Mrrrow.

Druid's voice signaled me to look up from my butchering, and I saw two skinned obitsune right in front of me. *Yup, they were too fast for me.*

"I'll help you, Ivy."

"Thanks. You guys are just too fast."

"Well, Ciel knows the right spot to hold onto, so it's easy to do."

Meowww, Ciel sang proudly as we finished up the butchering. We wrapped the smaller pieces of meat in bana leaves and stuck them in our time-stopping magic bag. Then we were good to go.

"We're finally done!" I sighed.

"It does take a long time when you have four obitsune."

"Yeah, but your magic item made the bleeding go faster, so we still did the job

pretty quickly when you think about it.”

“I guess you’re right. But still...”

On our way back to town from the river, I picked up on a familiar aura coming toward us.

“Mr. Druid, Mr. Ashley is coming.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

During the past two weeks, one thing had changed: Whenever Ashley had any time off work, he always came to visit Ciel.

“Hello,” he greeted us.

“Hi,” we replied.

The day after he first met Ciel, he came to see us in the forest asking for a favor. Since he had been attacked by monsters in the past, he always froze up whenever he saw ones that were big, highly magical, or both. Even before then, just the sight of a monster in the distance would make him tense all over, but he was able to convince himself it wasn’t an issue. But fainting at the sight of Ciel—an unfair surprise though it was—had finally gotten him to admit he had a problem, and he came to us begging for help to overcome it.

“Did you get off work at noon today?” Druid asked Ashley, who was already dressed in civilian clothes.

“Yes, sir. Um, I have this for you.” Ashley brought us something to eat every time. We always told him we didn’t need anything, but he insisted he thank us for letting him interact with Ciel.

“Thanks, you’re too kind,” Druid said.

“It’s the least I can do after all your help.”

At first, Ashley had been curious about the powerful magic energy he sensed from my bag. But just as Druid had predicted, he had figured the bag was so small that whatever monster was in it couldn’t be too dangerous. The fact that I, a child, had this bag built up his false sense of security even more. But the great power of the magic compared to the small size of the bag made him nervous, and this nervousness had made him obsess over the bag. Startled,

Druid had asked, “So you were staring at it not out of curiosity but out of anxiety?”

When we made the first move after we noticed his staring, he hoped we would show him that everything was indeed safe. But then an adandara—a giant monster with great magic powers—was standing right before him. And that led to an inevitable result: He fainted. With an uncomfortable grin on his face, Ashley had confessed to us that this had finally gotten him to confront his past trauma. Incidentally, his memories of the day Ciel shapeshifted into an adandara were vague. That was intriguing to me since he’d still been able to talk and answer questions that day.

“How was your hunt today?” he asked us.

“A big success! Every trap we set caught an obitsune.”

“Wow, that’s great. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Anyway, today I’ve brought you the latest pastry creation of the year: Kerpow.” Ashley opened the bag, so I peeked inside and saw that it contained some baked pastries. I thought their name was quite extravagant, but then again, a lot of Hatahi’s pastries had grandiose names. Apparently, this was meant to make them stand out at the festival.

“Let’s take a little break,” Druid suggested.

We found a spot to sit, and we all had a rest. As soon as Ashley settled down on a stump, Sora came dashing up to him.

“Pu! Pu, puuu!”

“Agh! Sora, not again!”

Sora had decided Ashley was a good playmate, and that meant it body-slammed the watchman every time he came to visit. Though if you asked me...I felt Sora did this because it thought Ashley’s flustered reactions were funny.

“I imagine things will get busy at work pretty soon, right?” Druid asked him.

In just a little over a week, Festival Eve would begin. I was shocked to hear the eve lasted five whole days, and the main festival itself also lasted three days.

What's more, many people stayed awake the entire three days. According to Druid, this made people start acting very strange on the third day. I was looking forward to the festival...but it also scared me a little.

"Oh, you bet," Ashley answered. "Festival visitors started arriving in Hatahi a little while ago, and fistfights are on the rise. Breaking up those fights really has been quite a tough job."

"Well, we thank you for your service," I said.

Mrrrow, Ciel chimed in, rubbing against Ashley's thighs. His body tensed up for a moment, but then he slowly let himself breathe and gave Ciel's head some gentle pats.

"You've gotten a lot better," Druid remarked.

"Oh, yes. I really do owe Ciel a huge debt."

At first, just sitting beside Ciel would petrify Ashley, but he worked hard to conquer his fears. Noticing this, Ciel would inch in closer and closer, little by little. Thanks to Ciel's gentle patience, Ashley was no longer petrified even when their bodies were touching.

"Thanks for everything, Ciel." Ashley slowly petted Ciel's head, and the adandara closed its eyes and purred contentedly.

Chapter 341:

He Yelled at Me

“This is pretty tasty.” The pastry was fragrant and had a subtle sweetness, so the name Kerpow felt utterly inappropriate. *Couldn’t they have given it a more delicate name?*

“The shop that made this gives their pastries really funny names.”

“Do they?” Druid asked.

Ashley took a bite of his Kerpow and nodded. “Yes, their last creation was Baboom, and the one before that was Vavoom.”

Kerpow, Baboom, and Vavoom. Wow, hats off to whoever came up with those crazy names. But why was it Kerpow and not Papow, huh?

“Incidentally, their first pastry was named *Aaa* and their second one was *Eee*. This is their second week at it.”

So I guess they didn’t put much thought into the names after all; they just couldn’t be bothered to. Yeah, I’m sure that’s it.

“But they’re too tasty to have those names...”

As I ate the delicious pastry, those ridiculous names made me feel shortchanged. I wondered whether they were meant to draw people’s attention at the festival.

“Um, so...” Ashley began.

“What’s up?”

“Earlier this morning, I told the captain everything. I’m so sorry I bothered you.” Ashley gave Druid a little bow.

“I see.”

Ashley had kept his little problem a secret from Captain Tabulo. The village watch’s main duties involved maintaining public order, but they often had to

deal with monsters in emergencies. If Ashley froze up in fear over the monsters, he would be a liability to the force. Worst-case scenario, he would put not only his own life but the lives of his fellow watchmen in danger. Ashley was scared that he would be forced to resign because of this, so he couldn't muster up the courage to tell his captain.

"And what did Captain Tabulo do?"

"He yelled at me."

"Yeah...I thought he would."

"Yes, sir. He said, what if something bad had happened before I told him?"

Captain Tabulo was right. If he didn't know about Ashley's phobia, he might have sent him off to deal with a monster. And if something had happened to Ashley as a result, he would have been hurt that Ashley didn't confide in him and angry with himself for not noticing. I hadn't gotten to talk to Captain Tabulo much, but he did seem like a kindhearted person.

"He said I could keep my job. Also, I decided to get help from a doctor who specializes in mental health."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Thanks. So, um, since you said I could do it, I told Captain Tabulo a little about Ciel."

"And what did he say?"

"Um, he wanted me to ask you if he can come along on my next visit. He said it's okay if you say no. He insisted that I shouldn't pressure you into it. Um, the captain just really wants to meet Ciel."

"Ivy...what do you think?"

"Hey, guys, Captain Tabulo wants to meet Ciel. Is that okay?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Mrrrow.

Everyone's enthusiastic responses made Ashley look a bit troubled. *Oh, I think this is the first time he's seen them all answer together.*

"They say it's okay for him to visit, so it's fine with me, too. Oh, wait... Sora, Flame, Sol, do you want to meet him as well?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

"They say they would."

Ashley looked back and forth between me, Sora, and Flame. "Can...you actually communicate with them? Wait a minute, I thought it was hard to build a mental link with slimes..."

Come to think of it, I think that's true about slimes. I'd read about them in books, but my own slimes were nothing like what was being described, so I tended to forget what it said.

"It's okay, just don't worry about it."

"Yes...you're quite right. I mean, from the look of them, I'm sure they're unusual in a lot of other ways, too. Especially the way that one downs swords so quickly. Yes, that must be it."

A few days ago, Sora had discovered a chipped sword on the ground in the forest and eaten it right in front of Ashley. It devoured it happily, in the blink of an eye. When he saw the spectacle, Ashley forgot to be scared of the adandara beside him and froze up because of Sora instead. Ciel rested its chin on Ashley's petrified shoulder, and perhaps because he was so shocked, he petted Ciel's head like it was no big deal. Druid said you might call that "exposure therapy." Anyway, ever since that day, Ashley had been able to touch Ciel without any trouble, so we decided it was a net positive.

"Um, so, my next day off is in six days, so he'll come with me then."

"Knowing Captain Tabulo, he'll probably juggle his schedule so he can come earlier," Druid said.

"Agggh, yes, you may be right," Ashley smiled.

“We come to the forest every day unless it’s raining, so let him know there’s no rush. He can come when he’s free.” Druid said, grinning at Ashley’s expression.

“Thanks, I appreciate that. I’ll tell the captain.”

“Okay. Let’s head back to the village.”

“Yeah. Thanks for the pastries, Mr. Ashley. They were delicious.”

“Glad to hear it. I hope you’ll like the next ones I bring.”

“Me, too!”

We quickly cleaned up the area and headed back to the village. Ciel jogged leisurely alongside Ashley.

“He looks completely relaxed now,” Druid said, smiling in relief as he watched Ciel and Ashley together.

“He sure does. He gets a bit jumpy when Ciel approaches him suddenly, but he’s much less afraid of it now.”

Indeed, Ashley was relaxed enough to pet Ciel’s head as long as it didn’t approach him from behind. He had changed quite a bit. At first, his face would drain of color even when Ciel approached him slowly from the front.

“That’s progress, right?”

I looked at Druid to see that he seemed to be deep in thought. “What’s wrong?”

“I’d like to think he’s made progress...but maybe he only feels safe around Ciel because he knows you’ve tamed it.”

Ah, yes. I guess someone would be less afraid of a monster once they knew for sure it was safe. Wait a minute, if that’s true, then...

“Hey, Ciel, can you still make your taming symbol disappear?”

“What?! But, Miss Ivy, taming symbols never disappear!”

While Ashley shook his head in protest, the taming symbol on Ciel’s forehead vanished.

A symbol is the only way you know for sure a monster has been tamed. Without it, Ashley won't be able to know for sure that Ciel is safe, right?

"What do you think now, Ashley? Can you still touch Ciel, even without a taming symbol?"

"Taming symbol? Huh? Where's its symbol?"

"Never mind that. Can you touch Ciel?"

"Um...can taming symbols disappear after all? Oh! Can I touch Ciel? Um, yes, of course I can."

With uncertainty in his voice, Ashley reached out and touched Ciel's head. He didn't look scared.

"Oh, Ivy, you are so... Hee hee hee!" Druid burst out laughing.

I gave him a questioning look. *Did I do something funny?*

"You hit poor Ashley with something so absurd that he's completely confused."

Huh?! I looked at Ashley to find that he was leaning in close to Ciel, staring at its forehead.

"Wow, he really has gotten comfortable around Ciel."

"Ha ha! Yes, he has. But, Ivy, even with the taming symbol gone, Ashley already knows Ciel is safe, so that won't tell us whether he's okay with touching an untamed monster."

Oh! Yeah...I hadn't thought it that far through. He's right, if Ashley is already comfortable with Ciel, it doesn't mean anything if the symbol is gone.

"He knows Ciel won't attack him because it's been tamed... Oh! Then what if we make sure he understands that even a tamed monster could still attack him?"

"Um, what? How would we do that?"

"Oh, it's easy. I'll just have Ciel give Ashley its best murderous gaze."

A murderous gaze means you could be attacked, of course. No human alive could possibly think a monster with a murderous gaze is safe.

“Hey, Ciel, could you give Mr. Ashley a murderous gaze?”

“Whoa, whoa, wait. Ciel, don’t.” Druid frantically stopped me.

“Can’t we?”

I think a little murderous gaze couldn’t possibly hurt...

And Druid heaved quite the impressive sigh at me in reply.

That must’ve been an especially bad idea.

Chapter 342:

A Heroic Name

I added flour and water to a glass bowl and mixed them together. I was making gyoza for the first time today. Since I was relying entirely on my memory, my chances of success remained a mystery. But I was confident that even if I failed, the ingredients I was using would at least make the results edible.

“That’s sure taking a long time to make,” Druid commented.

“Yeah, it might be the most boring thing I’ve ever cooked.”

Everything else I’d cooked was easy compared to gyoza, though my memory was hazy enough that there was no telling whether I’d be able to recreate everything perfectly. Anyway, at the very least, it all was edible.

“Oh, Mr. Druid, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

While I chopped the vegetables that would fill the gyoza, I looked at Druid as he expertly kneaded the dough with one arm.

“You know how Ashley’s memory got hazy when he was so surprised? Does that happen to other people, too?”

I’d been thinking for quite some time about how Ashley could still talk and answer questions that day. You might even say he seemed perfectly normal. And yet, days later, I was surprised to hear that he didn’t remember any of it.

“Yeah, you can sometimes lose your memory if you’re shocked mentally or emotionally. Also, sometimes a physical blow to the head can erase your memories.”

“Really?”

Since Ashley hadn’t been hit on the head, that would mean he experienced a mental or emotional shock. Was it because he didn’t want to come to terms

with the part of himself that feared monsters?

“Some people who have been attacked by monsters are psychologically traumatized by it, just like Ashley. Some of them can’t get over their trauma, either, and they have to quit being adventurers or watchmen.”

Wow, so some people even lose their jobs because of it.

“Every town and village has at least one doctor who specializes in this kind of thing, but going to see these doctors is often a struggle.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, even if you know a doctor can help you, it takes a lot of courage to show your weaknesses to someone else.”

“Oh, yes, that’s true.”

It took a lot of courage for me to accept the fact that I had no stars. In my head, I knew it was true, but that didn’t mean I’d come to terms with it. It took the support and kindness of so many people to help me get this far.

“But Mr. Ashley will be okay, won’t he?”

“Yeah, he’ll be fine. He’s got a lot of obstacles to overcome, but he’s been blessed with a good supervisor.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.”

That’s right, he’s surrounded by people with plenty of experience. I know he’ll overcome his trauma.

“Did I knead it enough?”

“Ideally, it would be as soft as an earlobe.”

“Um...that’s both easy and impossible to understand.”

“Aww, it’s okay. Just wing it.”

“Will do.”

Okay, I mixed the veggies and meat together to make the filling. Now all I need to do is wrap them... Wait, we need to roll the dough into circles first.

“Mr. Druid, can you roll a bunch of little balls of dough like this?” I took a

small chunk of dough and rolled it into a neat ball on the table. Then I showed it to Druid so he could get a sense of how big it should be.

“Okay. You just want me to roll a bunch of balls of that size?”

“Yeah. Once they’re like that, it’s easier to do the next step.”

I took the little balls and rolled them out on a wooden board with a rolling pin.

“Sorry, Ivy...”

“What’s wrong?”

I looked over at Druid’s workstation and saw a bunch of mismatched dough balls.

“I think it’s hard for me to make them all the same size with just one hand.”

Oh dear, that does make sense. “Okay, I’ll separate the dough chunks for you then.”

“Thanks.”

I broke off the pieces of dough and handed them to Druid. Once they were all separated and formed into balls, I rolled them out with a rolling pin.

“Hmm...it’s hard to get them into perfect circles.”

I’m just really bad at this. I feel like I could do a better job making them rounder...but I guess it’ll be okay when we fill them, right?

After working together silently for a while, we finally finished the last dough circle. It was a much nicer shape than the first ones.

“Ahh, I’m so tired.”

And we still have to fill them. This really does take forever. But we’ve come this far... We’re almost there! I put some filling in the center of one of the circles and pinched it shut. I had to be careful not to break the dough.

“It’s filled.”

It was filled...but it looked quite ugly. And that wasn’t all...

“Good job. What’s wrong?”

As I frowned at the gyoza I was holding, Druid gave me a curious look.

“It’s twice as big as the gyoza in my memory. I wonder why?”



It was bigger than the palm of my hand. It was supposed to be about the size of two bites...but there was no way anybody could finish that gyoza so easily.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s big; it’ll just be that much more satisfying to eat. So, what are we going to do with them?”

“Well...I guess we’ll cook them all today.”

“Think I can do it, too?” Druid picked up a frying pan.

“You’re supposed to sauté them for a bit, then add water, put a lid on, and steam-fry them.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Since Druid was going to cook the gyoza, I started working on the salad and white rice.

“Let’s eat in our room today,” Druid suggested.

“Sounds good.”

Since cooking the new dish was kind of exhausting, I did want to take the time to savor everything in our room. Still, I’d had no idea gyoza were this exhausting to cook.

“Yeah, they’re nicely browned, so they should be okay. Okay, dinner is ready.”

Since we had already moved everything that wasn’t gyoza into our room, all we had to do was carry the cooked gyoza back with us.

“They smell wonderful. Boy, I’m hungry!” I said.

“Me, too. I’ll have to stop myself from eating some on the way back.”

We’d washed all the dishes aside from the frying pan while the gyoza were cooking. Now we’d only have to wash our dishes after we ate.

We returned to our room and examined the gyoza. The more I looked at them, the more I realized they weren’t twice as big as the gyoza in my memory...they were three times as big!

We sat down to eat. Truth be told, I had no idea how they would taste, but I did know I’d seasoned the filling well. The only problem was that the dough was

too thick. *I guess I failed. The dough-to-filling ratio is way off, and the wrappers should probably be half as thick.*

“We’ll roll the wrappers thinner next time, and we’ll make the circles smaller, too,” I said.

“These actually taste pretty good the way they are, but yeah, they’d probably be even better with a thinner wrapping.”

I guess he likes the flavors okay, then.

We cleared our dishes, then took our baths and sat on our beds to relax for a while.

“Oh, I completely forgot!”

“Forgot what?”

“I had one other question for you, Mr. Druid.”

I’d been wanting to ask him for a while, but I kept forgetting since it wasn’t that important.

“What is it?”

“It’s Mr. Tabulo. And Mr. Tableau... Do you know why those names sound so similar?”

“Sure I do. They’re probably all named after that hero Tablow.”

A hero?

“This was quite a long time ago, but there was a time when the entire world was just crawling with monsters.”

Funny, when I was reading about the history of this world, I don’t recall the books mentioning a time when that happened.

“How long ago was this? When I studied up on this world’s history, the books didn’t mention anything like that.”

“I don’t know for sure, but it was before this country was even a country.”

That long ago! I guess that’s why it wasn’t in the country’s history books.

“When monsters covered the land, there was a hero who helped and guided

humans and cleaned the monsters out of this world. That man's name was Tablow, this world's earliest hero."

Wow, I never knew there was ever a hero like that.

"Some parents name their children after Tablow in hopes that they'll be courageous and have a strong sense of justice. It's not as popular as it used to be, but it's still a quite common name."

Aha. So that's why there are so many names that sound like Tablow.

"I had no idea such an amazing person ever lived."

Cleansing the entire world of monsters sure would be an incredible feat indeed.

"Oh, I'm sure the story was embellished a little since it happened so long ago."

I could definitely see that, but at least part of it must have been true. *Tableau... That was my father's name. Did he ever have any of that ancient hero's sense of justice?*

"Are you okay?"

"Huh?!"

"You looked like you were zoning out." Druid reached out and touched the area just between my eyebrows. I probably had a huge frown-wrinkle there.

"I'm fine."

I didn't mean to zone out. I mean, it's all in the past now... Wait, I just realized something... It doesn't hurt as much now when I remember the family who abandoned me. It used to make me so bitter, angry, and sad, too, so I tried not to remember. But when I look back on it now...even though it was a tragic thing to experience, it doesn't hurt me anymore. Oh...maybe that's why I was finally able to ask about the name, because remembering the name of my father who abandoned me doesn't make me sad anymore. Oh...

"Now you look happy."

"I *am* happy. Something wonderful just happened to me."

SIDE:

A New Beginning

I was brought to a small room at the village watch station. Starting today, I would spend eight years working out my days as a slave here. This was the place where I would reflect on my crimes.

The adults of my village were given minimum sentences of forty-five years for all the blackmail, intimidation, damage, assault, and murder of their fellow villagers. The children's sentences varied in length, depending on their level of involvement. My father was sentenced to fifty-five years for his crimes, including the attempted murder of my little sister. My mother received fifty-five years as his accomplice. They would surely die before their sentences were up. My big brother hadn't assisted with any of the murders, but since he was a willing collaborator in all the other crimes, he was given thirty-eight years.

For his various crimes of extortion, terrorism, damage, assault, accessory to murder, and murder, the chief of Ratomi Village was sentenced to life as a slave. Since I had reported the crimes and hadn't committed any of the murders, my punishment was rather brief at eight years. To be honest, when my sentence was read to me, I thought it was too short. I just watched and said nothing while the only baby sister I ever had was threatened and beaten. No, I did more than just watch. I said the worst thing I could have possibly said to my little sister. *I wonder if she overheard me saying that...*

How had she felt when I said such a horrible thing to her? And that wasn't all I'd done... I'd turned a blind eye when a friend was killed. I had committed all these sins. Eight years of slavery would never wash my slate clean.

"Excuse me, I've brought the prisoner."

A watchman knocked at the door, asking permission to enter. I clenched my fists. This was the place that had given a home to the prisoner I'd become, and it was also the place where my little sister might've been trying to go.

"Come in."

“Thank you.”

“H-he...” My voice trembled. *Pull yourself together! You’re going to spend the next eight years making everything right in this place that was kind enough to take you in.* “Hello, sir. I look forward to serving you well.”

As soon as we entered the room, I saw a sturdily built man with a rugged face sitting in a chair. The sight of him almost made me recoil, but I somehow managed to compose myself and enter the room with a bow.

“Good to see you. I’m Abira, chief of Ratome Village.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

I then noticed a man next to Chief Abira who was staring at me and frowning with a deep crease between his brows. His eyes looked menacing. They made me shake.

“Oght.” When the chief called the man’s name, his gaze shifted away from me. I heaved a long, quiet sigh of relief. I didn’t know it, but I had been holding my breath all that time.

“Greetings. I’m Oght, the captain of the department in charge of you.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir.”

So he was my direct superior. And I remembered that Oght was the man who had found her. The man who had sent me that letter. I discreetly looked at him...and our eyes locked immediately. As I stared into his eyes, Captain Oght stared right back into mine. And I definitely sensed anger in his gaze, like he blamed me personally for something... Unable to stand it anymore, I looked at the floor.

“Oght, is everything ready?”

“Yeah, all good to go. I’ve briefed all my subordinates. And Velivera... Well, I’m sure he’ll be okay.”

“You sure? Wasn’t he opposed to it all along?”

“Yeah...but he understands now, especially since we got a faax from her.”

“By the way, is she doing well?”

“Yeah, there’s just one little thing that worries me.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s just a rumor, but you heard about the giant serpent migration near Hatada Village, right? People are saying it’s a new kind of monster.”

“What about it? That has nothing to do with her.”

“Probably not, but I keep noticing that all these rumors seem to follow her wherever she goes on her travels. Besides, she arrived in Hatahi Village way too early.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Just a gut feeling of mine, but that girl is very mysterious, so I have a feeling she’s got something to do with it.”

“Ha ha ha! You’re overthinking it, my friend. I may have only met her once, but she seemed like an ordinary kid to me.”

“Yeah, I thought she was ordinary at first, too, but she’s the kind of kid who gets odder and odder the more time you spend with her. So much so that it wouldn’t surprise me if it was her, traveling with all those serpents.”

“Come on, that can’t be true.”

“I agree, it’s impossible. I’ve never heard of serpents getting along with humans.”

“But I’m surprised she’s made you so unshakable, Oght. Maybe the next time she comes by the village, I should spend some more time with her.”

“Over my dead body.”

“What?! Why?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? A man of your age and looks having a weakness for cute things... It’s a disgusting personality trait, let me tell you. And just so you know, I won’t be the only one stopping you. Velivera will definitely step in, too. He’s sharp as a knife, and he’ll use any means necessary to get his way. He’d even drag your wife into it.”

“Him, too?! And hey, as I’m sure I’ve reminded you countless times, I’m *your*

superior, you know!”

“And as I’ve reminded *you* countless times, I know that. And what’s it got to do with anything anyway?”

“...You impudent little bastard!”

I quietly listened to Captain Oght and Chief Abira going at it. I didn’t really understand what they were fighting about, but they were clearly talking about somebody. As I watched them, they suddenly stopped, noticing my stares. *I hope I’m not bothering them.*

“Sorry. Uh, what should we call you?”

“Huh?!”

Oh, that’s right! They introduced themselves to me, but I didn’t return the favor.

“I’m so sorry, sirs, I’m Fecilla.”

How could I be so nervous that I forgot to give them my name? I’m the worst.

“Fecilla. Got it. I’ll take you to the place you’ll be working. Come with me.”

After confirming my name, Captain Oght marched straight out of the room.

“Oh! Um, yes, sir! Um, excuse me, sir.”

I said a hasty goodbye to Chief Abira, then went after Captain Oght. He was marching so quickly that I practically had to run to catch up.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I was going too fast.” Captain Oght, noticing how I’d had to sprint to catch up with him, slowed down for me.

“Thank you, sir.”

I breathed slowly in and out to steady myself. I got a good look at Captain Oght’s face when he turned around. His eyes were in slits, and his mouth was drawn into a tight line. I hoped he wasn’t annoyed by getting me as his assignment, but I knew he probably was. When I was sentenced to work here, I was told that watch stations rarely took on slaves. I was even asked if I had a friend or relative working there, but I had no friends or family here. My only relations were in Ratomi Village. When I shook my head and answered “no,”

they gave me the most perplexed looks.

“Here’s where you will be working, Fecilla.”

I looked at the building. There was a sign on it that read “Village Watch Station.” When Captain Oght stepped inside, a flurry of greetings from the staff I would be working with bounced off the walls. I raised a hand and said hello to them, and then I was escorted to a room in the back.

“We’re here,” Captain Oght said.

“Welcome back. Is she the one?” said the man in the room.

“Yeah, this is Fecilla. Fecilla, this is my vice-captain, Velivera.”

“Nice to meet you, sir. I hope I prove to be satisfactory.”

“Likewise.” Vice-Captain Velivera’s eyes were as sharp as knives. His name sounded familiar, too. He was the man who had found my little sister, alongside Captain Oght.

“I just remembered; I got a faax.”

“From her?”

I sensed an immediate softening in the moods of both men.

“Yes, and it was pretty funny.”

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this...?”

“See for yourself. Fecilla, read the documents on that table. They’re the village watch rules you have to follow.”

“Understood, sir.”

“You can sit if you’d like.” I’d been about to just read the documents standing up, but Vice-Captain Velivera offered me a chair. I thanked him, sat down, and started reading.

“Velivera?”

“What is it, sir?”

“It says here, ‘Those friends I met in the forest of Hatow Village traveled with me to Hatada Village. It was so much fun.’ Just a gut feeling, but...does that

mean what I think it means?”

“I think so, yes. And I don’t know which I found more shocking: that, or her first faax where she wrote, ‘Adandaras are so big and fluffy.’”

“That one was definitely more shocking. I didn’t get what she meant at first, but I’ll never forget the horror I felt when I figured it out. I can’t wait till the next time I see her.”

“Sounds like she might come back with a lot of new friends in tow.”

As I read over my own documents, I couldn’t help but overhear their conversation. Maybe this was the same person Captain Oght and Chief Abira had been talking about. She sounded very important to them. They were both smiling out of pure joy, and stealing glances at their smiles made my heart feel warm. I was so grateful that these were the men who had found my sister. But for some reason, part of me hoped earnestly that she was still alive, and that stopped me from asking them about her. I couldn’t possibly ask them where she had died.

Chapter 343:

A Wonderful Friend

“Thank you very much for squeezing us in today.”

It was the day after Ashley told us that Captain Tabulo wanted to meet Ciel, and the captain really had come. Druid and I had predicted that he just might join us the very next day, and we were right. Ashley looked extremely tired as he stood next to the captain, and I thought maybe it was best not to mention it. As I stared at him, our eyes met, and he gave me the most pitiful smile I’d ever seen. *Oh dear, did Captain Tabulo give him a very hard time? For that matter, does he give everyone under his command a very hard time?*

“It’s quite all right,” Druid assured him. “Was it easy getting time off work, Captain Tabulo?”

“Er...yes.”

The pause before he said “yes” was very suspicious indeed. Druid had a pained smile on his face, and I knew I was probably making a similar expression.

“Anyway...” Captain Tabulo looked over at Ciel, and his reaction was...well, much like everyone else who had met Ciel. His eyes were sparkling.

“This is Ciel, my adandara.”

“Er, nice to meet you, Ciel.”

Mrrrow.

“Wow...an adandara just said hello to me,” he whispered to me as I stood next to Ciel.

What should I say back...?

Captain Tabulo reached out carefully, but his fingertips stopped just short of Ciel.

“Um, may I touch your adandara?”

“Ciel, is it okay if he touches you?”

Mrrrow.

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you very much.”

Captain Tabulo’s hand slowly moved out to touch Ciel. At a closer look, his hand was trembling slightly. I glanced at his face, and he was clearly in awe. I quietly slipped away from them and joined Druid.

“Do forgive me. I just didn’t think he’d come visit so soon,” Ashley apologized to us.

“Don’t worry, it’s exactly what we were expecting,” Druid answered with a laugh, and I could practically see the nervousness melting out of Ashley.

Satisfied from the couple of pats he had given Ciel, Captain Tabulo walked back over to us. Sora and the other slimes were merrily frolicking behind him.

“Was it everything you hoped it would be, sir?”

“Yes, thank you so much. And I’m sorry I got so flustered.”

“It’s all right. Just please keep this a secret, okay?”

“Oh, of course. In fact, I drew up a contract.”

Again with the contracts? Every time another person meets Ciel, my collection of contracts gets thicker and thicker. Druid read the document over and nodded in approval, so it was probably all right, but I skimmed it anyway for good measure. Captain Tabulo promised not to tell any third parties about Ciel, and if he broke his promise, the punishment and compensation amount were detailed at the bottom.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Druid and I signed the contract and handed Captain Tabulo his copy. Then he took a magic item out of his magic bag. It was a rectangular board about forty centimeters long with a long hole carved into it. He put the contract and a blank sheet of paper into the item, and the blank paper came back out with writing all

over it. Captain Tabulo checked over the papers, then handed one to Druid. I looked at Druid's document, and it really was identical to the contract we had just signed. The only difference was the word "copy" written on the upper-righthand corner.

"What an unusual item you have there, sir."

"I've had it for ages, but this type of thing is rather hard to find. You can only get it from monsters deep inside caves."

Monsters deep inside caves... That must mean it's a very expensive item.

"There are bigger items that do the same thing, of course, but you can't carry them around."

"Are they really that big, sir?" I asked.

"I'm sure you'll see for yourself whenever you go into a guild or the village watch."

Really? Wait, does that mean I've already seen one?

"You mean those big white box thingies at guilds and village watch stations?" Druid asked.

I thought back to the guilds we'd been to. *Big white box thingies? Come to think of it, yeah, every guild and watch station I've been to has had one of those.*

"I'm pretty sure that's what you're thinking of," Captain Tabulo said. "They work the same way as this magic item, but they're quite big and heavy."

So they're heavy, too? They must be difficult to move.

"Also, I wanted to thank you for taking care of our Watchman Ashley here." Captain Tabulo cast a soft glance over at Ashley, who was petting Ciel.

"Oh, it's no problem, sir. Ciel seems to like being with him, too."

"That's good to hear. By the way, I've been noticing a most peculiar thing for quite some time now..." Captain Tabulo's gaze shifted over to Sora and Flame, who were frolicking around us. Sol was still asleep in my bag.

"Those are my tamed slimes, Sora and Flame."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Sora and Flame had been behaving themselves while Captain Tabulo got his fill of Ciel. But they seemed to have realized that he was done because now they were frolicking all around us.

“They’re both rare, aren’t they?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ve never seen slimes with such pretty colors before.”

Sora’s half-transparent blue body and Flame’s half-transparent red body were glittering in the sunlight.

“So you’ve tamed an adandara and two rare slimes. Miss Ivy, your taming powers are quite extraordinary.”

Captain Tabulo’s words of praise confused me. My powers were extraordinary? I thought back, but nothing special came to mind. *And besides, Sora is technically the only one I actually tamed. Flame’s taming symbol was... inherited? Is that the right word? Inherited from Sora. And as for Ciel...what about Ciel? How would I even describe that...? Ciel accepted me as its master? That doesn’t feel quite right. Hmmm...well, anyway, I didn’t tame Ciel. So I feel like my powers aren’t all that special.*

“Is something wrong, Miss Ivy?”

“Huh?! Oh, er, no, sir. It’s just that my powers are not at all extraordinary. They’re all just very gentle.”

“They’re all gentle?”

“Yes, sir.”

I looked over at my creatures. Sora and Flame certainly looked like they were teasing Ashley for the way he was petting Ciel, and Ciel was looking on in amusement. *Wait a minute... Is it just me, or is Ashley basically a sort of plaything to Sora and Flame?*

“It looks like Sora and Flame have taken a liking to Watchman Ashley,” Druid said. “They’re definitely teasing him.”

I just had to chuckle. *Hey, guys, could you at least not bounce on top of Ashley's head? Well, then again, he seems to like it.*

"Watchman Ashley seems to be enjoying it as well." Captain Tabulo looked a bit envious.

"Agh!" Ashley yelped.

I looked over to see Ciel leaning on Ashley. He had frozen in shock for a moment, but he quickly came to and gave Ciel a piece of his mind.

"What a wonderful friend Watchman Ashley has made. Ciel has given him a level of care no therapist ever could."

I didn't understand emotional trauma very well, but maybe playing with Ciel was a good way of treating it? I wondered whether Sora and Ciel knew that. They'd both seemed incredibly interested in Ashley from the start.

"Sora, Flame, and Ciel all like Watchman Ashley a lot," I said.

Captain Tabulo moaned a little when I said that. "I'm very happy for him...but truthfully, I'm jealous."

Aha! His true colors are out.

Druid gave Captain Tabulo's shoulder a couple of pats.

"You're so lucky to travel with them, Mr. Druid," Captain Tabulo said.

"Yeah...it's a fun time with all sorts of new experiences."

"If only Ciel could stay in town, then I could visit whenever I had the time. But I could never give permission for such a powerful adandara to stay in our village."

"Oh, but sir, we're all staying in the village together."

"Huh?!"

"Ack!"

I'd messed up. We hadn't decided whether to tell him or not, and I went and blabbed. I looked at Druid...and he was laughing. *Urrrgh. I really dropped the ball this time, didn't I?*

Chapter 344:

An Equally Rare Magic Stone

“Ciel uses the power of a magic stone to shapeshift into a slime so it can be in the village.”

I was a little conflicted on how to go about telling them, but when I saw how merrily Sora and Flame were frolicking around Captain Tabulo, I decided to hide nothing and tell everything.

“It uses a magic stone...to shapeshift into a slime? You know, I think I did read somewhere in the ancient texts about a magic stone that has shapeshifting powers, but... Wait, do you actually have that stone?!”

“Yes, sir.”

Tabulo watched Sora bounce around him. Then he suddenly gauged Sora’s size with his hands, looked at Ciel, and shook his head. He probably thought it was bizarre that a creature as big as Ciel could shapeshift into the size of a slime. He probably wouldn’t be able to believe it unless he saw it with his own eyes. Though, when Ashley had first seen the owner of that enormous magic power appear right in front of him, the shock made him completely forget that it was an adandara that had shapeshifted from a slime. It wasn’t until after he had come to visit us many times and happened to witness the adandara turning into a slime that it finally registered with him...and he had yelped in shock.

“Even your magic stones are rare...”

“Ha ha ha... But we’re lucky we have this one. It’s what lets Ciel travel with us.”

I felt eternally grateful to Flame. If the red slime hadn’t made that shapeshifting magic stone, Ciel would have been very lonely.

“Yeah... Anyway, we’re running short on time, and what a pity. Things are going to get quite busy in Hatahi, so I won’t be able to see you again for a while. Besides, I can’t come visit Ciel in the village anyway—I’d draw too much

attention if I did.”

Too bad, I thought he could come visit us if he knew Ciel was in the village. But I’m glad he declined so as not to call attention to us.

“Yes, there would be plenty of reasons to visit an adandara, but not so much for a slime,” Druid said.

I nodded in understanding. You could use an adandara’s immense powers as an excuse to keep close observation, but you couldn’t do that with a slime. Not even a rare one.

“Yes, it’s really too bad, knowing it’s in the village and not being able to visit.”

Wait, does that mean Ciel shouldn’t stay in the village?

“Captain Tabulo, are we doing okay on time?” Ashley asked.

“We can stay just a little longer,” Tabulo said curtly.

“But the Vice-Captain will yell at you.”

“True... Well, if I must, I must. Let’s go. Thank you very much for letting us visit today,” Captain Tabulo said with a heavy sigh of resignation. Then his gaze shifted over to Ciel...and sighed again. It really would be hard for him to visit again now that the village was going to be all abuzz with the festival.

“Ha ha ha, good luck with your work. We’re looking forward to the festival,” Druid said.

“Got it. I promise it’ll be a good one.”

After petting Ciel, Sora, and Flame one last time, Captain Tabulo left for the village. Ashley was going with him, so we waved goodbye and sent them off. I hadn’t told them about Sol. I opened the bag to peek inside, and it was still asleep.

“I’m still surprised he came to see us in the morning,” Druid said.

“Me, too. I assumed he wouldn’t come until the afternoon.”

Captain Tabulo had come the very first morning after he heard about our adandara. The response was just so fast that Druid and I were both a little awestruck.

“I’m surprised he could find time to see us. He must be swamped with festival preparations.”

“Yes, and I got the impression he was giving his coworkers a hard time,” I said.

“Yeah...he probably is.” Druid chuckled, which made me laugh in turn. I felt bad for doing it, but imagining him running around flapping his arms was just too funny. I was sure he was a nice, decisive man otherwise. People who stood at the top had to be that way.

“Well, let’s finish up our tasks for the day. The village is about to fill up with tourists for the festival, and we won’t be able to go hunting anymore when that happens.”

“You really think we can’t?”

“People will be coming and going all the time, so monsters will stay out of sight to avoid them.”

“Oh, really? Huh, so monsters like to hide from people, too.”

“Yeah, humans are the natural enemies of weak monsters. The only monsters who actually come closer when they sense human auras are either excited, berserk, or the type of monster that attacks humans.”

I thought back to the berserk monsters we had met on our way to this village. “Yeah, I’d definitely like to avoid running into any more berserk monsters for a while. I’ve had more than my fill of them on our travels so far.”

Their eyes were utterly terrifying. And even though Druid and Ciel had protected me, I was still scared and worried.

“Isn’t there a way that...maybe I could learn to fight, too?”

The last ordeal we went through had really made me feel like a burden, but I didn’t have any fighting skills... I had exercised, hoping I could develop the muscles to fight, but I couldn’t put on any bulk for some reason. I’d asked Rattloore to have a look at me, but he just chuckled and recommended that I enhance my aura-perceiving powers so I wouldn’t have any encounters with monsters in the first place. Why did I have so much stamina yet so little fighting ability? It baffled me.

“Mmmrrrgggh...” Druid made a puzzled noise.

I’d had Druid evaluate me, too, so I understood where that reaction was coming from.

“All I need is to be able to buy some time to run away whenever we’re attacked,” I insisted.

I wanted to let Druid and Ciel fight freely without needing to worry about me. When that berserk monster attacked me, they were both fixated on keeping it away from me, and that clearly distracted them from the danger they were in. If something like that happened again, and if they were hurt because of it, I would just...

“You’re right. If we’re going to the capital, it’s something we should think about. The area around there is full of dangerous characters.”

“Dangerous characters”?

“Do you mean humans and not monsters?” I asked.

“That’s right. Humans are more cunning and vicious than monsters. Their intelligence makes them a real menace.”

The more I hear about the capital, the less I want to go there. Strange, since it’s the center of this country.

“So, like you said, maybe we should find some way to give you a window to run away if we’re attacked.”

“How can we do that?”

Druid frowned thoughtfully. He seemed to be racking his brain for ideas...but was nothing coming to mind?

“I can’t think of anything right now. If we’re dealing with monsters, we could use a simple tactic. But if it’s humans, that wouldn’t work.”

Are humans really that troublesome?

“Bad people plan their misdeeds meticulously, and they have experience dealing with people trying to stop them. That’s why they’re hard to fight.”

“Oh.”

“Well, we’ve still got a while before we get to the capital, so let’s take our time to think it through. We could also look for a magic item that might help you.”

“Maybe we should send Rose a fax.”

“Great idea. She’s a good person to ask for help.”

We walked into the forest for a while until we came to a little grove of qiblakarla trees. It was a new spot we had discovered two days ago, and we had set our traps there.

“Sounds like we had another successful hunt.”

I could hear the cages rattling, meaning something had to be trapped inside. In fact, it was three cages. And since we had only set those three traps, you could say our hunt was a complete success.

“By the way, didn’t you say you were going to give the gyoza another try today?”

“I did. I remembered a little more about them. The dough apparently stretches better if you use hot water.”

There was one other point about the dough that tugged on my memory. I remembered that you let some time pass after you made the dough. At first, I assumed you used that time to make the filling, but now that seemed wrong. It was like you were supposed to let it sit for a while on purpose...

“I can handle the dough,” Druid said.

“Thanks. I’ll focus on the filling, then.”

Maybe I’ll follow my memory and wait until the dough is completely ready before I make the filling.

“About that filling, could you make it a little spicier?”

Spicier?

“Oh, you mean because we’re taking the day off tomorrow, so you’ll be drinking wine tonight?”

“Yeah, it’s been a while, and I’m in a drinking mood. And the last time we ate

gyoza, I thought it would go really well with liquor.”

“Gotcha. Okay, I’ll spice up the filling a little more this time.”

Maybe the flavor would get a little better if I switched up the vegetables? And if we’re going to eat a lot of them, should I add more meat? No, they’ll taste better if they’re full of veggies, too.

“Was the amount of meat compared to the vegetables okay with you?” I asked.

“It was fine, I liked it. But personally, I think I’d prefer if they had more meat in them.”

I guess it’s all a matter of taste. Maybe I’ll make them spicier and add more meat. Then we’ll need to roll out the wrappers thinner and make them small enough to be eaten in two bites.

“Okay, let’s start butchering,” Druid said.

“Yeah, it does take a very long time to make those dough wrappers.”

Lately, I’ve been the one bringing down our speed in the butchering department. Isn’t there a faster way I can cut the meat? Come on, Druid and Ciel, you’re skinning the obitsune way too fast!

Chapter 345: Festival Eve

“What a crowd.”

Hatahi Village was packed with tourists for the festival. The population had risen steadily over the past week, and today there really was quite a throng. As I stood there, dumbstruck by the sheer number of people, Druid gently told me there would soon be even more. Since there were already so many people as it was, hearing that scared me a little.

“I’ve never seen so many people together in one place... Oh! Pardon me, sir.”

We were walking down Main Street, and there were crowds of people every way we turned. If you didn’t pay constant attention, you’d bump into somebody. Then again, *not* bumping into people would be stranger. I looked around to see long lines snaking from every booth and every shop. It would take a very long time just to be served.

“When we get into the festival proper, it’ll be like this *plus* you’ll have people throwing colored powder cakes at each other... It’s quite the event.”

That’s right, the main event of the festival is the Battle of Colors. I looked around and saw people already smooshed up next to each other. Would we even be able to have a proper color battle in these conditions?

“Is it okay if I hold your hand? I don’t want us to lose each other,” Druid said.

“Sure.”

He squeezed my hand tight, which was a little embarrassing.

“Mr. Druid, can people even have a real color fight when it’s like this?”

Everywhere I looked, people were just too close to each other. It made me feel like it would be impossible to throw color cakes at each other.

“It’s not so much a cake-throwing fight as a cake-tapping fight. As long as there’s a little space between you and the other person, it’s fine.”

So it really works. I can't picture it right now, though.

The festival proper lasted three days. On the first and second days, people threw powdered color cakes at each other. It was an important religious practice to ward off evil. On the third day, you colored your white clothes with dye, and you wore those clothes to pray for good health. Then the festival was over. I was worried about our clothes being dyed so easily, but Druid told me Hatahi Village had its own special dyeing agent. After melting it in water and dipping your clothes in the solution for one hour, all you had to do was wash and dry them like you normally would. The process was so simple that I was surprised when I first heard about it. What was even more mysterious about the whole thing was that nobody really knew how it worked. All they did know was that if they mixed the fruit of a tree that had grown in Hatahi since ancient times with the dyeing agent, the colors would easily set on the clothing permanently.

Once Festival Eve began, there was a list of things we had to do, and one of them was buying our white clothes for the festival. That was why I had braved the crushing crowds to go and get them. Every shop in Hatahi sold white clothes this time of year. I was fine with shopping at whatever store was closest to our inn, but Druid insisted we go to a special store off Main Street.

"My mentor told me about this place. They design their clothes to last longer than the other shops do. Don't you want to wear your clothes after the festival is over?"

"Yeah, you've got a good point."

We looked at the clothes being sold near our inn, but the stitching was shoddy. The fabric was thin too, and they didn't look like you could wear them more than a few times. When Druid saw the state of them, he suggested going to the shop his mentor had recommended.

"There it is." Druid was looking at a shop ahead of us. The sign in front of it made me squint my eyes.

"A laundry?"

"Yeah, they apparently sell sturdy clothes here. And look at the line!"

We got in the back of the long line winding out of the entrance. Their service was quick, though, and Druid and I got into the shop without waiting for too long.

“It’s packed inside, too,” Druid remarked.

The shop was indeed stuffed solid with people.

“Sure is.”

We moved with the herd over to the shelves with the clothes for sale. I picked up the garment right in front of me and examined the fabric. It was indeed sturdy, and the stitching was neat. It was completely different from the clothes at that other shop.

“Found something in your size?” Druid asked.

I looked over to see that he was already holding up a pair of pants and a shirt.

“Oh! Sorry, I got distracted. Um, I’ll take this and this.” I pulled a pair of pants and a shirt that were my size off the shelf.

“You can have a dress, you know.”

I followed Druid’s gaze over to a pure-white dress. Since it had no extra trappings, it looked quite plain. I pictured myself wearing it and blushed a little.

“I’m fine with pants,” I said.

“Really? You’d look nice wearing another skirt now and then, though.”

Oh? I didn’t know Druid liked skirts. Skirts, huh... Yeah, the skirt Druid bought me that one time really is pretty, but I don’t have many chances to wear it with all the traveling I do. Besides, I’m going through a growth spurt right now, so I’ll grow out of it too quickly. That would mean I could only wear it a few times, which would be wasteful. Yeah, I don’t need another skirt.

“I’d rather have these pants; they’re easier to move in.”

“Sure, pants are more practical for when we’re on the road, but it’s okay to dress up a little when we’re in town if you want. I know, why don’t we go shopping for summer clothes when the festival is over? We’ll look and see if they have a skirt you like.”

“Huh?” *Summer clothes? And again with the skirts?*

“I’ll go pay for the clothes; wait for me outside the shop.”

“Oh... Uh, okay.”

Druid took my clothes and went off to pay for them. I did as he said and weaved through the sea of people until I was outside and could wait for him without getting in the way.

Was he really going to buy me skirts for the summer? I felt a little silly about the idea, but I did love dressing up. Then again, I spent much less time in civilization than I did on the road. It wasn’t often that we stayed for a whole month in a village like this. Getting skirts to wear for such short periods of time...was just so wasteful. But still...I thought I did kinda want some skirts.

“Mom, Dad, look! I’m a bigger size than I was for last year’s festival!”

Hm? I looked beside me and saw a girl happily holding up her white shirt. A man and woman were smiling proudly back at her. *They must be her parents.*

“Wow, so you are. Two sizes bigger, in fact. My little girl’s growing up fast.” Her father chuckled proudly and smoothed her hair with his hand while her mother looked on with a soft smile on her face. The sight of it made me feel so warm and cozy.

“That must be nice...”

It was such a happy sight, but for some reason...it also made me feel bitter.

“What’s wrong?”

“Er, nothing! Did you pay for our clothes?”

“Yeah, and boy, were they fast. I guess they’d have to be, doing this every year for so many people.”

I looked back at the shop we’d just been in. The line of shoppers going out the building was even longer than before, and it was growing longer still. The interior was also overflowing with customers, and the clerks ringing up the bills looked quite frantic. But if you paid attention, you’d see that each customer was promptly served and sent out of the shop. The employees were quite skilled at their jobs.

“Let’s go,” Druid said, extending a hand to me. I grabbed it, and we set off for our inn.

“If we’d bought our clothes earlier, it wouldn’t have been so crowded.”

“Yeah, I do wish they’d start selling the clothes sooner, but they’re only sold during Festival Eve. It’s tradition. Maybe they all enjoy the frantic atmosphere.”

“Hee hee! Oh, we’re going to get dye for our clothes, right?”

“Yeah, there’s a shrine on the way back to the inn that distributes the dye. Let’s stop there on the way back for a little prayer.”

There was one other thing we had to do during Festival Eve: get the dye for our clothes. You could get it for free at any of the shrines in Hatahi by going there and praying. When you went there, you didn’t choose your own color; it was determined by fate. The idea sounded interesting when I first heard about it, but now I was starting to worry that I might wind up with an extremely flashy color. I was supposed to pray for good health while wearing it, so I had to put it on at least once, no matter what color it was. And we’d bought sturdy clothes, so I would have to wear them again and again in the future. *Wait a minute... maybe I should’ve bought flimsy clothes after all?*

“That looks like the place. There’s already quite a line.”

I followed Druid’s gaze to see a line so long that it must have had over a hundred people in it. They had all come to pray and get their dye.

“We might as well join them; the line’s not getting any shorter.”

“Yeah.”

We stood at the end of the line, and I immediately sensed more people getting in line behind us. I braced myself for a long wait, but since the prayers only took a minute, the line moved rather quickly. I knelt where I was told and offered a prayer.

“Thank you very much. Now, please choose a bundle from this basket.” A person dressed in white held out a basket containing a bunch of bundles of dye wrapped in leaves. I was supposed to choose one at random, apparently.

“I can’t tell what color any of them are...” I said.

“Yeah, we’ll just have to go with our gut.”

Druid and I each selected one package from the basket, praying for good colors all the while.

“Okay, we’re done with our Festival Eve tasks for the day. Let’s head back.”

“Good. I’m exhausted.”

“Hang in there until we get back to the inn!”

Chapter 346: A Close Friend?

It was the second day of Festival Eve. Just like yesterday, this was a time for people to buy their festival clothes and get the dye. Then, on days three and four, we would dance on Main Street to welcome the spring. When I first heard about this part, I was surprised that it didn't happen during the festival proper. I always got the sense that dancing was a festival standard. And on the fifth and final day of Festival Eve, we rested in preparation for the main event.

"What do you want to do today? Go eat at a stall?"

"What? In this mayhem?" I glanced outside. It was incredibly crowded, just like the day before. I turned to my side and saw Sol aimlessly staring out the window. "Sol, you've been looking out the window a lot lately, haven't you? Do you wanna go out and play?"

But Sol didn't respond.

So I guess that means no? I gave Sol's head some gentle pats, and it jiggled happily in reply, leaning into my hand. That was the signal for *More pats, please.*

"Sol, be sure not to lean against the window too much, okay? If somebody spots you, we might get in trouble."

"Pefu!"

"You're right, there is quite a crowd. Should we stay in after all?"

I paused in thought. "I still want to know what's up with that cart we saw yesterday."

Near the inn, I'd spotted a food cart that sold braised obitsune. The meat was sliced thinly and stewed with white vegetables. It had a unique fragrance that was very alluring when we walked by.

"That stew, right? Yeah, it did smell delicious."

“I know.”

I looked for the cart from the window and saw it had a huge line, just as I’d anticipated. The question was whether that line was worth standing in.

“It did say it was only available during festival time,” Druid reminded me.

That’s right! If we could eat it after the festival, I’d just wait it out, but it was a festival-exclusive item. Druid said he wondered if that was false advertising, but I would regret not eating it if it were true.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Sora’s and Flame’s voices drew my attention back to the room. The two slimes had shaped themselves into spheres and were on my bed, rolling to the right and rolling to the left...then rolling to the right and rolling to the left.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

“Dunno. Maybe they’re bored?”

They just kept rolling...and rolling. Ciel took one look at them, then turned around and went to sleep. It was like the adandara couldn’t follow the game.

“Well, Sora, Flame, don’t play too hard, okay?” Druid said.

Roll, roll...roll, roll...roll, roll...roll, roll...

“Pu! Puuu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryuuu, ryuuu.”

Maybe they were bored because we hadn’t been to the forest in a week. Now that there were too many people in town for the plaza to hold, adventurers had started camping in the forest. Animals and weaker monsters like obitsune had stopped showing up.

“Okay, what do you want to do?”

“I just have to try it! Can we go buy some obitsune stew?”

“Of course. Let’s go now.”

“Okay. The words *festival-exclusive* are really lethal, aren’t they?” Seeing that

phrase, you couldn't help but panic.

"Yeah, it makes you take notice."

"Yup."

"Okay, kids, we're gonna go do some shopping. Be good," I told everyone.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Meowww. Ciel sounded half-asleep.

We left our room and locked the door.

"Did you lock the second lock, too?"

"Yeah, we're all set," Druid said.

When we first arrived at the inn, we were surprised to see that our door had two keyholes instead of one. We asked Chikar about it, and he said that one lock would normally be enough, but he wanted his guests to use two locks now that so many festivalgoers were in town. There was apparently a lot of crime targeting tourists. Incidentally, if the second lock were opened by any means other than its key, an alarm would sound. I had heard of alarms like that before, and sure enough, I heard one going off yesterday somewhere in the inn. I was startled by how loud it was.

We left the inn and headed for the food cart. I held Druid's hand so we wouldn't lose each other, but the crowd was even thicker than yesterday. We got jostled around a little by the waves of people, but we finally managed to reach our destination.

"I already saw it from the window in our room, but it sure is crowded here," Druid said.

"Yeah, but what a good smell."

Druid and I stood side by side. Since this was the last day to buy festival clothes, there was an incredible number of shoppers out, but also a massive crowd of sellers. I watched them, in awe of their charisma. We slowly moved

along until the food cart sign came into view. It said: *Braised Obitsune—A Festival Exclusive. Due to the crowds, we serve it on the lukewarm side.*

When it was our turn, we stood at the window and the cook said, “Hello, what’ll ya have?”

“Three helpings of braised obitsune, please.”

Since all they had to do was spoon the food into bowls, their turnaround time was quite fast.

“That looks so good! I can’t wait.”

“Yeah. Excuse me, but do you really only serve this dish during the festival?”

“Yes, that’s right, sir. I normally run a weapons shop; I’m not a cook.”

“Huh? You sell weapons?”

“Yes, sir. This braised obitsune was a specialty of my dad’s back when he ran a tavern. I wanted to bring it back to life for the festival.”

The phrasing of “bring it back to life” made me wonder if his father had passed away.

“Oh, that’s neat.”

“Thanks. Well, here ya go. It tastes much better if ya heat it up.”

“Thanks.”

We took the braised obitsune from the cart owner and headed back. We somehow pushed our way out of the crowd and back to our inn.

“Carrying food makes me nervous,” Druid said.

“Yeah, I’m glad we didn’t spill any.”

We opened the front door to the inn and stepped inside. Two men in beautiful clothes were talking with Chikar...and they didn’t look friendly.

“What’s going on?” I asked Druid.

“This doesn’t look good. Let’s just head upstairs.”

I nodded and walked toward the stairs.

“You two are staying at this inn, right?”

I was startled by the man’s intrusiveness. Druid quickly slipped between me and the men.

“Stop harassing my guests!” Chikar yelled nervously. It looked like he really was being threatened.

“Shut up. You two, let us in your room at once. This is an order from the nobility.”

Yikes... These guys are nuts.

“All the festival’s guests are equal, whether they’re common or noble. That’s festival custom.”

“Oh, hang your custom. You said you couldn’t give us a room, so we’ll take our own. It’s quite simple, really. What are you two doing? Let us in your room at once!”

What should we do? I glanced at Druid. He was angry. Flaming angry, in fact. But these were noblemen...

“Oh, how very droll.”

“Huh?!”

Wait a minute... I think I’ve heard that voice somewhere before.

“What’s your game, man? You got a bone to pick with us?”

I carefully peeked out from behind Druid to look at the owner of the familiar voice. *Wait... Lord Foronda? What is he doing here?*

“Why, no,” Foronda answered. “I came here to visit an acquaintance of mine only to find some cretins were behaving foolishly, so I came to crush...er, stop them.”

In spite of his smile, he was cold and menacing somehow. And I thought he’d said some rather worrying things. Had he come to see me? I’d mentioned in my fax to Seizerk that we were staying at an inn called Kokoron, so it wouldn’t be entirely out of the question for Lord Foronda to come visit us.

“Do you know him?” Druid whispered to me.

I nodded and whispered back, "That's Lord Foronda."

Druid jumped a little and looked up at him in surprise.

"Cretins, are we? You bastard! Do you know who the hell we are?!"

"Why, no, I don't. Nor do I care."

Ha ha ha... Lord Foronda's got murder in his eyes.

"Well, we are representatives of the renowned capital family of Mitche!"

Wow, I didn't know a person could be spoiled so rotten... You gonna be okay, pal? You're making the esteemed gentleman quite angry.

"Oh, so you're with Mitche, eh? The disgraced house."

"Disgraced, you say?!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, weren't you the ones who incurred the royal family's *wrath* when you tried to get too friendly with them?"

Yikes... Lord Foronda is having too much fun with this.

"H-how did you know that...?"

"A friend of mine was affected by the little problem you caused."

"Er, your friend? You don't mean...?"

The two noblemen's faces drained of color in a flash. They must have figured out who Lord Foronda's "friend" was.



“That’s right. My aforementioned acquaintance staying at this inn...is that young lady standing right there.”

“What?!”

“And my close friend who was victimized by your family insisted on seeing that young lady, too. That’s right, I seem to remember you gentlemen were rude to this young lady whom my friend and I adore, demanded that she let you in her room or some such nonsense... If I told my friend about this, I’m sure things would get quite interesting around here, don’t you agree?”

Wow... The phrase “close friend” is doing a lot of work here. This friend of his must have quite a bit of power.

“Eep!” The noblemen’s faces paled beyond white into an even grimmer color. They looked like they would keel over any second... Were they going to be okay?

“W-we were o-o-only checking to s-see if there was a r-room available! Excuse us!”

The two noblemen tumbled out of the inn in a frenzy. I don’t know how else to describe them except pathetic.

Chapter 347: A Nobleman's Duty?

“Happy to see you again, Ivy.”

“I’m glad to meet you again, too, Lord Foronda. Have you been well?”

We had faxed back and forth a number of times, but I hadn’t heard anything from him since we arrived in Hatahi. Since he had said in his last fax that he was traveling to the capital, I was going to wait a little while before sending another.

“Um, do you know this gentleman?” Chikar the innkeeper asked me, his voice colored with worry.

“Yes, sir, we’re acquaintances.”

“Oh, but aren’t we friends?”

Friends? That’s right, he did say in a fax that he wanted to be friends... So he really meant that! I looked up at Lord Foronda, and he smiled back down at me sweetly...which felt intimidating, somehow.

“Er, yes, of course we are,” I assured him.

The first time I met Lord Foronda, he’d seemed high-strung and hard to get along with, but all traces of that were gone now. I first noticed the change in him when I happened to bump into him in town one day right around the time the criminal organization’s wrongdoings had mostly been righted. When he called out to me with a smile, I didn’t even recognize him at first. I quickly realized who he was and gave him a quick greeting in reply, but I was quite taken aback that day. Lord Foronda had really been on edge before because he never knew where members of that organization were lurking. That was when I realized just how much a person’s general appearance and mood could change when they were no longer in a state of constant vigilance.

“Um, if you’d like to chat, I could open a conference room if that works for you.” After hearing a little of our conversation with a look of surprise on his face, Chikar came out from behind the counter and unlocked a nearby room for

us.

“What is this room, sir?”

One look inside revealed that the furnishings were a little on the expensive side.

“Sometimes noblemen come to the festival incognito, so I’ve set this room aside for them to have business meetings or catch up with friends. It doesn’t get much use, though, to be honest.”

The word “much” meant it did get used at least once in a while. Now, what was Lord Foronda doing in Hatahi anyway?

“Thanks, I think I’ll take you up on that offer. Allow me to pay.”

“Oh, no, that’s quite all right, my lord. Any friend of Ivy’s can use this room for free.”

“Oh? Well, thank you very much.”

“Not a problem, my lord—you are a nobleman, I take it? With ‘Lord’ as your title, I just assumed so.”

“Yes, I am Foronda, the Lord of Otolwa. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Th-the pleasure is mutual, my lord. It’s nice to see there are good people among the nobility. Thank you so much for stepping in earlier. I was very nearly quite rude to those customers... Well, I suppose I *was* quite rude. I’m sorry for the discomfort I caused you, Mr. Druid. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it.”

Chikar looked genuinely guilty about the way those noblemen had harassed Druid.

“And I apologize for my fellow noblemen’s behavior.”

“Oh, no, Lord Foronda, you shouldn’t apologize. You saved us.”

“It’s little shi—er, *little-minded scum* like them who give the nobility a bad name. They’re all menaces.”

He’d changed what he was saying mid-sentence, and I wondered why that

was. Still, Chikar was startled by how pleasant Lord Foronda could look while he was speaking badly of others. I had noted this personality trait in our faxes, so I wasn't fazed by it. And since Druid had read them with me, his face was twisted in an attempt not to laugh.

"Anyway, yes, let's use that room. I would love a nice, long chat with you both," Lord Foronda said.

"Be my guest, my lord."

Lord Foronda, Druid, and I went into the room and sat on the sofa, which was incredibly soft. It was even a little softer than the one in the guild master's office. I was tempted to bounce on it, but I nipped that urge in the bud.

"I'll just leave some tea for you," Chikar said.

"Thank you very much."

"Ah, I just realized I never properly introduced myself, Mr. Druid. I am Foronda, Lord of Otolwa. Ivy and I met each other there, and we now are friendly correspondents. I am pleased to meet you."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, too," Druid said. "I'm Druid, a native of the town of Oll, and Ivy's travel companion. You may call me Druid if you wish."

What a peculiar sight this was. I never dreamed I would see Druid and Lord Foronda meeting and talking to each other in Hatahi Village.

"By the way, Lord Foronda, what brings you to Hatahi?"

"Hm? Why, the festival, of course."

"What?! You mean the one where people throw colored dye at each other?"

"Yes, of course."

So noblemen really do come here incognito to participate.

"Well, this is all part of a nobleman's duty, you see," Lord Foronda continued.

A nobleman's duty? Throwing cakes of colored dye is a nobleman's duty?

"Looks like you might not understand," he said. "Participating in festivals is a nobleman's duty."

Now that makes more sense.

“Since I’ve become rather well known for helping take down the crime organization, I’ve been invited to more events lately. Declining invitations from other nobles isn’t much of a problem, but if a town or village invites me to attend their festival, I am obligated to make an appearance. It would be dishonorable of me to turn everyone down, you see. Having said that, I do have to pick and choose which festivals I attend.”

“That sounds like quite the ordeal...” I guess even noblemen have their problems.

“Nobles have parties where we can network with other aristocrats from all over the land, but festivals are a great opportunity for outreach: We’re selling the idea of Otolwa to adventurers.”

Networking and outreach for Otolwa... Lord Foronda really is quite a guy.

“And why did you choose Hatahi’s festival, my lord?” I asked.

“Adventurers from all over the country come to it. And if I’m there, I can spread the name of Otolwa far and wide. We’re currently short on hands there, you see.”

“So does this mean you’re in Hatahi Village as a guest of honor?”

“That’s right. I’ll be giving a little speech during the festival proper.”

He’s giving a speech! Well, I was going to wait until the festival was underway before I joined in, but maybe I should be there a little earlier. Oh, wait, if he’s here as a guest of honor, would he be angry if I hit him with a color cake?

“Lord Foronda, would it be all right if we went to throw color cakes once the festival starts?”

“What...? Ivy, you aren’t going to hit Lord Foronda with a color cake, are you?”

“Of course I am! I mean, it’s supposed to ward off evil, right?” *Unless I’m not supposed to do that to guests of honor...*

“Sure, I don’t mind. Perhaps I shall procure some color cakes of my own.”

I could tell from our fax correspondence that Lord Foronda was quite affable—completely the opposite of the antisocial vibe he'd given off when I first met him.

"Are you sure that's okay?" Druid asked skeptically.

I'm sure it is. Lord Foronda said so himself.

"Well, I'd best be on my way," Lord Foronda said. "I would love to have another chat later, if I may?"

"Yes, of course."

Lord Foronda rose from the sofa, shook Druid's hand, and walked out of Kokoron. We sent him off at the front door, then returned to the conference room.

"We'll need Chikar to lock up this room for us," Druid said.

"Yeah."

We put the tea things back on the tray and carried it to the counter to look for Chikar, but he wasn't there. We headed straight to the dining hall, where we found him cooking.

"Mr. Chikar, thank you for the room and the tea."

"Oh, you're done already?"

"Yes, sir. We had a lovely time, thank you."

When Druid and I gave him a polite little bow, Chikar looked flustered. *I wonder why?*

"Mr. Druid, Miss Ivy, are you members of the nobility?"

Us? Nobles? I shot a shocked glance at Druid, and his equally shocked eyes stared back into mine. When our eyes met, we laughed. *Us? Nobles? Not in a million years.*

"No, sir, we're not," Druid explained between chuckles.

Chikar exhaled in relief. "Oh, thank goodness."

Our friendly conversation with Lord Foronda must have caused quite the

misunderstanding.

Chapter 348:

A Day of Dancing

It was the third day of Festival Eve. Today and tomorrow, we would dance on Main Street to welcome the spring, and the stories I'd heard about this part of the ceremony didn't do it justice. Main Street was filled with musicians playing instruments, and around them was a big double circle of dancers. The musicians played a cheerful little tune, and everyone danced with big smiles on their faces.

"What great music. It's making my heart pump," I said.

"Yeah, it sure is."

As I watched the dancers, I noticed they were all performing the same choreography. I was a bit nervous about the kind of dancing we were supposed to do, but I was relieved to see it wasn't that complicated.

"Everybody's doing the same steps," I observed.

"Yeah, that's the way this festival is. See that couple dancing in the center of the circle?"

I looked where Druid was pointing and saw two people dancing next to the musicians.

"Yes."

"They're the dance leaders. Everybody copies what they do."

I saw what he meant. "It's just like the bon-odori!"

"Bone-oh-dory? Never heard of that. Is it a type of dance?"

"Huh? But it's the dance you do at that big festival, the...huh?"

Wait, I just said a bunch of things without thinking, didn't I?

"Did I say something weird just now?" I asked.

"You said it was like the bone-oh-dory."

“The bone-oh-dory? Huh? What’s that?”

“That’s what I asked you... Could that be your old memories talking?”

“I guess so. I just blurted out the words without even knowing it.”

Bone-oh-dory... The words slipped out while I was watching the people dancing, so did this mean I knew a similar dance in my past life? *That’s strange, I should have a basic idea of what it is since I knew the word for it, but nothing’s coming to mind. Now I’ll be racking my brain to figure out if there was a festival like this one in my past life!*

“Ivy...want to dance?”

“Sure. But how do we even get in the circle?” I watched the dancers, and there were so many of them that there wasn’t much room to join in. “We’ll have a heck of a time pushing our way in.”

“No, we can’t push into the circle; that’ll start a fight. What you do is step out of the crowd of spectators and raise your hand. Then one of the dancers will let you switch places with them.”

Now I understood. Druid and I both stepped forward and raised our hands. After we’d been standing like that for a little while, a mother and her eight-year-old daughter switched places with us.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“My pleasure. Have a blessed day.”

Druid said the same thing back.

“Mr. Druid, what does that mean?”

“Oops, sorry, I forgot to tell you. When you trade places with a dancer, you’re supposed to say, ‘Have a blessed day.’”

Oh, interesting. I’ll have to say that next time.

I watched the dancers in the middle and copied their movements. *Oops, wrong arm. Ack, I messed up!*

“This is hard...and it looked so easy, too.”

“It’s your first time, you can’t help it. Just relax. Once you’ve got the steps

down, you just keep doing them over and over.”

It sounds easy when you put it that way, but...ack! I did the wrong arm again. Maybe I'm just not cut out for dancing?

“You’re okay. Just relax and take it slow. Right, then left. Yes, just like that.”

Druid danced behind me, calling out the steps as he went, which meant I could finally do it right. Now that I was starting to get the form down, I tried doing the steps to the music. Since the same step was repeated over and over, I had more and more fun as I danced.

“This is fun!”

“Glad to hear it. You were a frantic mess earlier.”

Druid probably thought my dancing looked ridiculous.

“Yeah, that was a little embarrassing. But boy, am I exhausted!”

“Of course you are. You were dancing over half an hour!”

“Was I really?!”

I’d been so focused on keeping up with the other dancers that I hadn’t noticed. Thirty minutes would exhaust anyone. *But wait, that person dancing in front of me never left the circle the whole time. Aren’t they tired?*

“Let’s switch out. I see some people over there who want to cut in anyway.”

I looked where he was pointing to see a couple who looked like they were on a date. The man looked nervous, and the woman was giggling at him.

“Yes, let’s switch with those two,” I agreed.

The woman noticed us and told her male companion, who sighed heavily in response.

“Have a blessed day.”

“Have a blessed day.”

When we switched places, I took a look at the couple. The woman was comfortable with dancing and immediately got in tune with the music, but the man’s movements were clunky. Maybe he was a novice just like I was. Watching

him reminded me of how I'd felt dancing a half hour ago. His silly dancing just might've given mine a run for its money.

"Agh! I messed up *again*! Mommy, this is too hard."

My eyes shot over to the sound of the whining voice, and I saw a little child trying their best to dance.

"It's okay, sweetie, just calm down and take it slow. Right, right, left, left, right. There, see? You're doing it!"

"Ooh, I really am! I'm dancing, Mommy!"

As I watched the mother and child happily dance together, I was reminded a little of my past. Whenever I mastered a new skill, I would always excitedly brag to my mother.

I looked around and saw that there were many parents teaching their children how to dance. Everyone was laughing and having so much fun. It hit me that this village had a lot of parents with small children in tow, probably because of the festival.

"You did very well for your first time."

The gentle hand on my head was warm and a little heavy. I looked up to see Druid smiling down at me, and a smile naturally formed on my face.

"I can dance now!" I said.

That's right... I have somebody I can brag to again.

"Yeah, you did a great job."

"Thanks."

The way Druid smiled at me made my stomach feel odd.

"Wanna go grab some lunch?" he suggested.

"Hee hee! Sure. Should we go back to the inn?"

I had cooked some soup last night in advance.

"Good idea. Let's go back. There's no way we can have a proper lunch out here."

As Druid started walking, I spotted a food cart that looked like it was selling sandwiches.

“Ooh, sandwiches...” My heart fluttered as we approached the cart, and sure enough, that’s what it was selling.

“Hello there, would ya like to try some sand-thingies? They’re an Otolwa specialty.”

“Er, sand... What did you call them again?”

The salesperson laughed and told me again that they were sand-thingies.

“And they’re an Otolwa specialty, you say?” I asked.

“Yes, some heroes made them famous.”

Heroes?

“Could they mean Mr. Bolorda and his party?” I whispered to Druid. If I was right, then maybe they really were sandwiches. Well, they looked like sandwiches, so I couldn’t be wrong. But why had they gotten such a strange name as *sand-thingies*?

“Want to buy some for lunch?” Druid suggested.

Since I was curious about them anyway, I eagerly agreed. “Yes, please. They look delicious.”

I looked at the rows of sand-thingies before me. Each of them was heavily stuffed with goodies. *Too* heavily, in fact. Just one of them would fill me up.

“How many do you think you can eat?” Druid asked.

“One should be plenty.”

“Really? I think I’d be up for two...no, three.”

So we ordered four sand-thingies.

“What kind do you want?”

“Meat, please.”

The sand-thingies were filled with meat or vegetables. From the ones on display, the meat-filled ones were clearly more popular.

“You’ve got it. Here ya go.”

We took the sand-thingies from the cart owner, and Druid paid for them.

“Thank you,” we told the cart owner.

“Do come again!”

We looked out for the crowd as we walked back to our inn, and the sight of it was a big relief. The festival atmosphere was fun, but it was hard to feel comfortable among so many people.

“Welcome back,” Chikar greeted us as we walked in.

“Thank you. We’re exhausted.”

“It’s hard to walk out there with all those people.” Druid looked a little tired, too.

“Well, we get more festival tourists every year. We didn’t used to have so many, you know. So in the old days, the dancers couldn’t get a break—now that was quite the ordeal, I’ll tell you.”

If the dancers couldn’t get a break...does that mean they just danced all day back then? What incredible stamina they must’ve had. I could never do that.

Chapter 349:

We Overslept

I squinted my eyes at the sunlight streaming through the window. It seemed awfully high in the sky... Had I overslept?

“After all that, I still feel so—hmmm?”

Even though I’d slept so long, I still felt tired. Well, the last two days had been a lot of fun, but they sure were draining. I hadn’t realized Hatahi’s festival required so much stamina.

“I thought all that dancing would be a breeze...”

Days three and four featured dances to welcome the spring. We sometimes joined the circles of dancers on Main Street and danced our hearts out. Since there was only one dance, it wasn’t all that difficult once you learned it. The real challenge was the music: It quickened and slowed in tempo at times, and it was hard to keep up. Day Four was full of dancing just like Day Three, except the style was different. The music was much faster and lighter, and the dancing was a little more intense. You also joined hands with the people in front of and behind you and spun around, so it was even more fun than Day Three. But the dancing lasted forever! Over the two-day period, we had danced over ten hours in total with breaks in between. Since it was so much fun, we couldn’t ever refuse when we were invited to dance...and by the afternoon of Day Four, our muscles were like putty. Out of energy, we had turned in early last night but to no avail.

“What time is it?” I sat up in bed and yawned. I stretched my arms and back, and boy, did it feel good.

“Morning. It’s eleven,” Druid answered. He was sitting in a chair, playing with the slimes. I looked over and saw that Flame was on top of his head.

“Sorry I overslept. Good morning, everyone.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

“Don’t blame yourself—you danced beyond your limits yesterday. But one thing, Ivy...”

“Yes?”

“The festival proper starts tomorrow. Will you be okay, or are you too tired?”

That’s right. It was still Festival Eve, but the Battle of Colors would begin tomorrow.

“I’ll be fine as long as I take it easy today.”

“Okay, that’s good. Well, you won’t need as much energy tomorrow as you did yesterday.”

“Really?”

But won’t we be having a cake fight?

“You don’t do much running around. You just throw cakes at the people you can reach, so it’s a lot easier than the dancing was.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good news.”

I got out of bed, picked out some clothes, and headed for the washroom. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and put on my clothes. Then I realized that I didn’t know much about what was going to happen at the actual festival.

“Mr. Druid, are there any customary things we need to do tomorrow?”

“We each get thirty cakes. Once you’ve thrown them all, you’re done. It doesn’t matter who you hit, but you try to get them with a color they don’t already have. The Battle of Colors only lasts from one to three in the afternoon.”

So it’s a set time period, then. I have to throw thirty cakes in two hours? I don’t think I’ll need all that time—once I throw them all, I’m done.

“It may sound easy, but it’s actually pretty hard to find the right colors to

throw. You also have to deal with other people hitting you at the same time.”

“Ohhh, yeah, I can see that.”

“Well, you don’t *have* to hit people with colors they don’t already have. But according to tradition, the more colors you get on your clothes, the luckier you’ll be. Everyone gets incredibly caught up in it.”

It was easy to imagine how intense it was. The last couple of days, there’d been that one person who was so dedicated to the dancing that they refused to take any breaks. *Come to think of it, I wonder what happened to them?*

“Also, since there are so many more people doing it this year, they’re going to decide by lottery who goes on the first day and who goes on the second day.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, there’s about twice as many participants this year as there were the last time I came.”

“*Twice* as many? Well, there definitely are a lot of people here.”

Everywhere I walked there were people, people, and more people. I’d finally gotten a little used to it, but the size of the crowd was still a bit overwhelming to me.

“Oh, by the way, I already put our names in the lottery,” Druid said.

“Thanks.”

“We’ll be doing it on the first day, which is perfect for us, since we wanted to hear Lord Foronda’s speech anyway.”

“Yeah, I’d love to hear his speech and then smack him with a color cake!”

“That should be easy. I doubt many people will go throw color cakes at Lord Foronda.”

“Because he’s a nobleman?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Grrr.

Agh! My stomach growled.

“It’s okay, we did skip breakfast. Wanna go have lunch? It’s about time.”

“Sure. Oh, look! Sol’s looking outside again.”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right.”

I was about to tell everyone we were going to lunch when I noticed Sol staring out the window. The sight always made me feel uneasy.

“Where do you think Sol’s... Never mind. Okay, kids, we’re gonna go out to lunch. We’ll be back soon.”

Y’know, we really should get back to the dump soon for some potions and magic items. There’re just too many people, though.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was just thinking that we should go to the dump.”

“Yeah, we filled up our magic bags as much as we could, but I’m getting a little anxious.”

“Me, too.”

Since we knew there would be far too many people around to visit the dump, we had stocked our magic bags with enough potions and magic items to last the slimes a week. But since there were even more people than we’d been planning on, we weren’t going to be able to make another trip until much later than we’d thought. Sora and Flame could make do, but Sol might run out of food. We really wanted to get to the dump before that happened.

“It sure is dicey,” Druid mused. “There really are people everywhere you look.”

“True.”

Wait a minute, why are we going to the dining hall for lunch? I thought this inn didn’t serve lunch?

“Mr. Druid, aren’t we cooking our own lunch today?”

“Remember how we shared some gyuu-don with Chikar that one time?”

That’s right, we did do that. He happened to see us eating rice one day and was shocked by the sight, but when he saw the gyuu-don topping, he asked if

we could share some with him. He was so eager that we went ahead and gave him some to taste.

“Remember how you taught him how to cook it after that?”

“Sure, it’s easy enough to make that I just told him how.”

“Yeah, well, he cooked some. And he found me this morning and asked if we could come taste it.”

Wow, I’m impressed. Gyuu-don may have been easy to make, but there was a trick to steaming rice properly.

Sensing our auras, Chikar popped his head into the dining hall to greet us. “Good morning! Thanks for indulging me; it’ll be ready in a jiff, so just have a seat.”

“Good morning, sir.”

After we greeted him, he scurried back into the kitchen. A little while later, an aroma wafted into the dining hall that kicked my appetite into gear.

“Oh, no...this smell really hits hard when you’re hungry.” My stomach just wouldn’t stop growling.

“Sorry for the wait... It was pretty hard to steam that ryce,” said Chikar as he came back in. “I put in a little too much water and it got all soggy.”

“Maybe you put in more than a little too much water?”

“Ha ha ha! Yes, I actually put in twice the amount you told me. I got quite the shock when I took the lid off the pot, let me tell you. It was like soup.”

“You know, that’s actually pretty tasty in its own way if you add some extra salt and mix in ponzu or shoyu.”

“Oh, really? Well, I tried some and it was pretty bland. Not much to look at, either, if you know what I mean. So I threw it out.”

Oh, no! What a waste.

“But it’s a great food for people who are sick with a fever, since it’s easy to digest.”

“Ohhh, I didn’t know that. Is there any other way you can save it? Maybe by

putting stuff on top of it?”

“I think that would work well. It would be good with meat that you’ve seasoned pretty heavily.”

“Okay, next time I mess up a pot of ryce, I’ll give it a try.”

So he’s resigned himself to failure... That doesn’t feel quite right to me, but I guess he can’t help it since he’s not used to cooking it.

“Here you go. I think you’ll find it tastes a lot like your dish.”

“Thank you, sir,” we both said, taking a bite of gyuu-don. It was delicious...but a little heavy on the seasoning. The more I ate of it, the less tolerable it was. Druid and I gave Chikar some notes.

“Thank you, Mr. Druid and Miss Ivy. I’ll keep that in mind and cook it again for supper tonight.”

It seemed that rice was taking over the whole land little by little. Well, that was a very good thing indeed.

Chapter 350:

Just Before the Festival

Early that morning, Main Street was already full of cheer. There was still another two hours before the festival would officially begin, but a huge crowd of excited festival-goers was waiting. It was incredible seeing how white Main Street was, with all the Day One participants clothed in that color. Tomorrow's participants would be wearing something else, but the coloring today was overwhelmingly white. I thought it was impressive yet surreal; I had never seen anything like it before.

"Where do we pick up our color cakes?" I asked.

"We go to the shrine where we got our dye and trade the lottery tickets I drew yesterday for them. We should go now before it gets too crowded."

"Okay."

Just as Druid had said, there was already a long line of people waiting to get their color cakes.

"It's a quick trade, so we should be done soon."

"Looks like it," I agreed.

The line was moving quite fast. The transactions were brief since they only involved exchanging lottery tickets for color cakes. We weaved our way through the crowd and got in line. Other people followed us right away, just like they had when we came here to get our dye.

"Even though it's divided into two days, there's still a lot of people," I remarked.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they do it over three days next year."

"Neither would I."

As we chatted, our turn came up. Druid gave our lottery tickets to the person behind the counter, who then handed us two bags of color cakes and said,

“There’s been a change to the festival rules, so please read that sign over there.”

A change to the festival rules? We looked at the sign and saw a crowd of people in front of it.

“Let’s go have a look,” Druid said.

“Yeah. I wonder what they changed?”

“It probably has something to do with how many more participants there are.”

That made sense: There were definitely a lot of us. After a little while, the crowd of people parted, and we could read the sign.

“Okay, it says: *An hour before the festivities begin, there will be a treasure hunt where you can find color cakes in white and other special colors.* A treasure hunt, huh? What will they think of next?”

A treasure hunt? What does that have to do with the festival?

“It also says, *When the festivities begin, people dressed in black will arrive. Hit them with white color cakes before they escape, and good things will happen to you all year.*”

So now there were going to be people dressed in black who would try to escape. This was starting to sound a lot more complicated than the festival I’d originally heard about.

“I wonder why they went and added a treasure hunt?” I asked.

“I dunno...but anyway, we’re in the way, so let’s move.”

“Ah. Right.”

Some staffers guided us away from the sign and to an area with fewer people. We turned onto Main Street and slipped onto a side street. After a few minutes, we could finally walk at a leisurely pace again.

“White color cakes, eh? I wonder if we have any in our bags?” I asked, lifting mine up.

“Let’s check.”

We slipped into a corner to look in our bags. Inside were thirty cakes, each small enough to be hidden in the palm of a hand. They all looked alike on closer examination, except none of them were the same color.

“Wow, they’re all different colors. A lot of them seem to be shades of red, though. And I don’t see any white ones.”

I picked up one of the cakes. It was slightly soft and wouldn’t hurt if it hit you.

“I seem to have mostly green cakes. I’ve got a few red ones but no whites.”

“Do you think we can only find white cakes in the treasure hunt?”

“Probably, yeah.”

After Druid and I looked over our color cakes, we turned onto an empty street to make our way to the village watch station—Lord Foronda’s speech would be given in front of it. Once the station was in sight, we saw that an appropriately large crowd had formed there.

“We still have some time. Would you rather wait out here instead of in that crowd?” Druid suggested.

“Yeah, can we slip into a corner and take a little break?”

“Sure. There are definitely a lot more people here today, since the festival has officially started now.”

“Yeah, I thought the Festival Eve crowds were big enough already, but today’s are much bigger, aren’t they?”

I looked at Main Street and all the side streets connecting to it. They were filled with even more people now, and it seemed like walking on any of them would be a struggle.

“Yeah, it’s way too crowded. I only hope nobody gets hurt.”

He was right: I thought help might not be able to get there on time if anything happened. I hoped everyone would be okay.

“I’m so glad we didn’t bring the slimes with us.”

Worried about the growing crowds during Festival Eve, we had kept the creatures inside the inn all day that week. Just walking down the street caused

us to bump into people left and right. It would be horrible if we hit someone too hard and one of the creatures got injured. Druid assured me they probably wouldn't get hurt, but I was still worried. Besides, I'd asked them if they wanted to go to the festival, and they'd all said no. Maybe they didn't like crowds, either.

Just as we leaned against the wall of a shop for a little rest, we saw several people run frantically out of the village watch station.

"Do you think something's happened?"

"What's this? Why, Ivy and Druid! Good morning to you both," a relaxed voice said from behind us.

We turned around to see Lord Foronda waving and approaching us.

"Good morning, sir."

"Is something wrong over there?" Lord Foronda asked, following Druid's gaze.

"With such a big crowd, I wouldn't be surprised if somebody got hurt," Druid said.

If that was what had happened, I hoped it wasn't serious. Someone getting hurt at a festival would be so tragic.

"By the way, about my speech..." Lord Foronda said.

"Yes?"

"It's been moved to the last day of the festival. I'm so sorry you've come all this way for nothing."

So it got postponed... Well, this festival's had a lot of last-minute changes. I guess it couldn't be helped.

"It's all right, sir. The last day of the festival is for praying, right?"

"Yes. And I'm giving the closing speech."

Impressive. That's a big role.

"I am quite surprised by the people in this village, though," Lord Foronda said. "When they realized they would have more attendees than anticipated, they immediately divided everyone into smaller groups to avoid anyone getting

hurt.”

They divided us? I gave Lord Foronda a confused look. “Is that why we’re having a treasure hunt?”

“Yes, that way Main Street won’t get overcrowded. People will naturally spread out to the side streets to hunt for treasure, you see.”

That made sense. And if people were hunting for treasure, not only would they move away from Main Street, but they would move more slowly as well. *Wait, that would be enough to fix the problem, right? Then what about the people dressed in black?*

“Excuse me, sir, do you know why they added the people dressed in black?”

“I’m guessing the people in black will ‘run away’ to the less populated areas to keep the crowds from becoming too concentrated,” Druid answered.

Lord Foronda smiled and nodded in reply. I had to agree; crowds getting packed too tightly was not a good thing.

Peep! Peep! Peep!

“Is everybody ready?” A man’s voice suddenly boomed out through the village together with the sound of a whistle. It was so shrill I jumped a little.

“Let the treasure hunt begin!” the man shouted.

A loud roar from the crowd followed.

“All right, Ivy, Druid, let’s hunt for treasure.”

“Are you joining the hunt, too, sir?” Druid asked in surprise.

I shot him a smile and saw that Lord Foronda was already looking around with eager eyes. He looked wired.

“Of course I’m joining the hunt—it looks like so much fun! Come, come, now, let’s go.”

Lord Foronda marched off, and Druid and I rushed after him. We were planning on hunting for treasure anyway, but we hadn’t expected Lord Foronda to take the lead. We slowly walked down the street, looking for white color cakes as we went. After a while, I heard voices behind me. I turned around and

saw a large herd of people dressed in white moving our way. Their heads were darting left and right like birds as they searched for color cakes.

“They look so strange,” I remarked.

“Sorry to break it to you, Ivy, but we’re just like them.”

Druid’s words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I looked down at my white clothes.

“Ah. You’re right.”

Druid and Lord Foronda laughed. Then I heard somebody cheer for joy in the distance. I looked and saw that they had found a color cake where we had just been looking.

“Look how tiny that box is.”

It was far away, but I could still see the item that person had found. It was a tiny box smaller than a person’s hand. It must have contained just one color cake.

“Ah, how vexing indeed. I was just searching there,” Lord Foronda cursed earnestly.

Druid and I looked at each other and laughed.

“Well, now that we know what we’re looking for, let’s get on with the hunt!”

Chapter 351:

The Festival

“I just can’t find any.”

I’d looked carefully in every shop windowsill, pillar, and nook and cranny, and yet I couldn’t find any color cakes.

“This could make one feel quite stubborn,” Lord Foronda said.

I nodded in agreement. Druid smirked. The festival proper was going to start in ten minutes, so we just had to find some!

“Aha! I found one!”

While I was psyching myself up, I heard Lord Foronda’s cry of joy. When Druid and I went to check on him, he had a tiny box in his hand.

“What color is it, sir?” Druid asked.

Lord Foronda opened the box and looked inside. “Alas, it is not white but green.”

I looked at the color cake in his hand, and it was indeed green.

“I’ve never seen such a pretty color, though,” I said.

“Yes, it is quite pretty, but I wanted white.”

Lord Foronda was so earnestly upset that I couldn’t help but giggle a little, and Druid soon lost control as well. Lord Foronda glared at us both, but we just couldn’t contain our laughter.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s quite all right. A friend of mine often scolds me when I get like this, saying, ‘Whenever you get your heart set on something, you betray your wise years and act like a petulant little child.’”

Wow, that’s harsh...

Druid clamped his hands over his mouth.

“Well, shall we give this one final push?”

As I turned to follow Lord Foronda, I noticed a row of little boxes behind the sign of a clothing shop.

“Oh, look over there!” I cried. Lord Foronda and Druid turned to look. “Aren’t these them?” I was so excited, I wasn’t speaking properly... Well, I guess it didn’t matter. I pulled the boxes out from behind the sign. There were five in total. I found it strange that there were so many boxes there, but I assumed there was nothing wrong with them.

“You found five of them?” Lord Foronda asked.

“Yes! They’re still good, right?”

“I guess they are,” Druid said, inspecting the cakes inside the boxes. Two of them were white, two were silver, and one was gold.

“You got white. Good show, Ivy!”

“Here, Lord Foronda, please take one.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t!”

“We found them together, and since Mr. Druid is traveling with me, we only need one between us. But since you’re on your own, Lord Foronda, you get one. They’re supposed to bring you good luck, so consider this my blessing for your safe travels.”

I wasn’t sure how much faith to put in this since it was a brand-new tradition for the festival, but I hoped my feelings got through to him.

“Thank you very much. Well, now if I see someone dressed in black, I shall have to hit them with this white cake.”

Peep! Peep! Peeeeeep!

“The treasure hunt is over, and it is time for festival proper! Please be careful, and may this year be a healthy and fortuitous one for you all. And now...begin!”

A cheer roared all throughout the village.

“Well, it has begun. Wait, where did I put my color cakes?” As Lord Foronda

searched through the bag on his shoulder, a voice called out from behind us.

“Yes?” we answered.

“Have a blessed year!”

As the voice rang out, the three of us were hit with cakes of colored powder. Since they were thrown from a short distance, it didn’t hurt, but it was sudden enough to scare us.

“Agh!”

A splatter of color appeared on my clothes, sending a flurry of dust flying. As if that were a signal, more and more cakes began flying at us.

“Well, we can’t take this lying down, can we?”

There were no winners or losers, but I did hate the idea of being only the receiver and not the giver of color. I pulled a color cake out of my bag and looked around. *I’m supposed to only hit people who don’t already have this color...dang, that’s hard!*

“Hack! Hack!”

I looked toward the coughing to see Druid with colored powder on his face.

“Mr. Druid, that’s quite a look.”

There was a big streak of blue going from Druid’s left cheek to his neck.

“I turned to run away, and a different cake hit my face.”

“But you’re not supposed to avoid the cakes.”

“It’s a reflex... Just hazard of working as an adventurer,” he explained as he turned and threw color cakes at the people around him.

“Ivy, look!”

I looked where Lord Foronda was pointing and... *Black clothes!*

“Found you! Let’s go. Agh, they got away!”

That’s right, they did say the people in black clothes would be running away. Druid, Lord Foronda, and I chased after them, and a crowd of people joined us. When I tried to slip through them, I got hit on the head with a color cake.

“Aghh, I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay! Sorry I got in your way!”

“Chasing black clothes? Good luck! Go for it!”

We shouted at each other as we zipped down the street, and my assailant wished me luck for some reason. Then, before I knew it, people were opening up a path for me. I could hear them cheering, too.

“Wow, now we really can’t let them get away,” Druid remarked, smiling awkwardly at the cheering crowd.

“Agggh!”

I heard a strange howl ahead of us and looked up to see a man hunched over, moaning. *I wonder what’s wrong?* I checked on him while I ran past.

“The white cakes...they’re not breaking apart right! Be careful!”

They’re not breaking apart? Does he mean they’re not turning into powder?

“Squeeze it into powder and put your hands on their clothes,” Lord Foronda suggested.

I nodded in reply. *Okay, I’ve got this!*

“Agh!”

A person in black stopped in their tracks. Somebody else was closing in from the other direction, trapping them in a pincer attack. *We’ve got ’em!* Lord Foronda crushed his white powder cake in his hand and touched the person’s shoulder.

“Good job! Have a blessed year,” they said.

“Mr. Druid, give me your hand.”

“Huh?”

I pressed my hand into Druid’s, giving him some of the white powder. Then we both pressed it onto the black-shirted person’s arm.

“Have a blessed year!” they said.

“My goodness, you’re fast. Have a blessed year.”

“Ha ha ha! They picked fast runners for this job. Have a blessed year.”

They picked fast runners, eh? We thanked them, then looked for someone else to hit with color. We were tired from all that running.

“Ooh, silver!” a lady in front of me cheered when I hit her with a silver cake.

“Thanks. Have a blessed year.”

“Have a blessed year!”

I looked in my bag and realized my cakes were gone. I had somehow used them all up without noticing.

Peep! Peep! Peeeeeep!

“That ends the Battle of Colors for today! May you all have a blessed year!”

Applause erupted all around us.

“I’m beat,” Druid said.

I nodded.

“I am positively exhausted!” Lord Foronda sighed, slumping onto the ground.
“I am far too old to run like that. My legs are shaking.”

Everyone within earshot laughed this time, not just me and Druid. I looked around and saw that many other people were sitting on the ground just like Lord Foronda.

“I’ll have to get into better shape for next year...”

“Hey, Grandpa, are you gonna run around next year, too?”

I heard some voices in the distance, and I looked over to see a slightly portly white-haired man sitting on the ground. Kneeling in front of him was a young woman. Since they had similar features, they must have been related.

“Of course I’m gonna run. Next year I’ll catch those slippery bastards in black clothes for sure.”

“Please don’t hurt yourself! Know your age!”

“Aw, I’ll be fine. I’m still plenty young.”

“Don’t be silly! Don’t you always beg me to rub your shoulders since you’re in

pain all the time? Well, if you're so young, I guess I won't do that anymore!"

"Urgh...!"

A wave of laughter sounded again.

"Ha ha ha ha! He's chipper indeed. Well, I must be on my way." After enjoying the little show from the young woman and the old man, Lord Foronda stood up and dusted himself off.

"You have to leave already, sir? That's too bad."

"Yes, I have a gathering to attend. I must evangelize my town."

So he had his nobleman's duties to attend to... I supposed that was out of his hands.

"Well, good luck, sir. We'll come and see your speech on the last day."

"Thank you. I will do my best. And thank you for everything, Druid."

"No, thank *you*, sir."

We watched as Lord Foronda headed for the village watch station.

"Okay, let's get back to our inn. I want to dye our clothes."

"All right."

I looked down...and saw that my clothes had become quite vibrant while I wasn't paying attention.

"That's incredible...oh, what a pretty blue!"

There was a bright blue splotch right around my midsection. I couldn't see my back, but I had felt plenty of cakes hitting me there, so I assumed my backside had quite a splattering of colors as well.

Chapter 352:

Oops!

When we got back to the inn, we went straight to the laundry room to dye our clothes. We put water in a bucket and dropped the dye wrapped in black paper right into it. After a little while, the water slowly changed colors with the dye.

“What?! It’s pink?”

When I saw the color of the water in my bucket, I realized that the dye I’d been given was pink. And a very vibrant pink, at that.

“Yikes... Yeah, that’s quite a dark pink.”

“What color did you get, Mr. Druid?”

“I got navy blue.”

Ugh, lucky... I wish I got a more subdued color like that. Oh dear, I don’t want to wear pink head to toe. How embarrassing.

“Do the top and bottom have to match?” I asked.

“No, when I was here last time, I saw quite a few people with mismatched tops and bot... Wait, why do you ask?”

“I just don’t want to be pink all over...if I could at least have dark blue pants, I’d be much happier.”

“Yeah...I see where you’re coming from. Pfft! Ivy, pink all over...” Druid’s shoulders began to shake with laughter. “Sorry, my bad. Okay then, want to dye your pants along with my clothes?”

Yahoo! I managed to escape my all-pink fate. Oh, wait, there was one more thing...

“Mr. Druid, why don’t you dye your top pink, too? Then we can be twins!”

“Er, you want me to wear pink, too? Uh, I don’t think I can pull that off.”

“Aww, come ooon. You’d look great.”

I hope so... No, I know so.

“Really?”

“Yeah! C’mon, gimme your shirt.”

“Okay, you win. Here you go.”

Yay! But wow, this pink really is vibrant. I wonder what color our shirts will be after they’re dyed? I’ve never worn pink clothes before, so this is all a little new to me.

I put my clothes into the dyed water. After a soak, all they’d need was a wash. If you wanted a darker color, you just left the clothes in longer.

“This is incredibly easy, huh?” I said.

“Yeah. Think we should leave our pants in longer so they’ll be darker?”

“Sure. Okay, let’s just go for it and leave our shirts in, too. Make ’em bright pink!”

“Ha ha! I don’t feel right wearing pink at my age. Hey, why don’t we buy a little more dye before we leave Hatahi?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Remember those clothes that got too stained to wear? If we dye them, they should be okay again.”

“Oh, good idea.”

“And since Hatahi specializes in making dye, they’ve got a huge variety to choose from—it’ll be fun hunting for the right one.”

My curiosity was piqued. “I’d love to do that,” I said.

“Okay, it’s a plan.”

I remember we intended to leave Hatahi once the festival was over and some of the adventurers had moved on. I wonder how long that will take?

“Mr. Druid, how much longer will we be staying here after the festival ends?”

“I’m thinking we’ll leave one week after the festival.”

Would things really settle down so quickly?

“The adventurers need to earn enough money to pay off their winter debts, so many of them move on right away,” Druid explained. “And the reports say winter was particularly harsh this year for everyone, so I think most of the adventurers will leave as soon as they can.”

“Yeah, I remember hearing lots of people froze to death this year.”

“Unfortunately, yes. And most places weren’t able to set up protections like Hatow Village did.”

People froze to death every winter, but the adventurers reported that the number of casualties this winter had been particularly high. *I wonder...what happened in Ratomi Village? They never had harsh winters, so they probably came out okay if they had a normal one...*

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Why did I suddenly start thinking about Ratomi? I have no good memories of it.

“Think it’s been enough time?”

Oh, right, we’re dyeing clothes! I lifted our shirts out of the buckets.

“Yikes... Now that’s an incredible pink...”

“Incredible is right. We could wear that color here no problem, but it’d definitely make us stand out anywhere else.”

“Yeah. We’ll have to use them as pajamas.”

Our shirts were a brilliant pink color; I probably should have taken them out earlier. It was too late for that now, though.

“Wow, that’s so pink!”

“Huh?”

We weren’t the only ones dyeing our clothes; the other guests at the inn were doing it, too. One of the girls’ eyes sparkled when she saw the shirt I was holding. She looked like she was about four or five years old, and her big round

eyes were really cute.

“Oh dear, pardon us. Sweetie, you shouldn’t disturb the young lady like that.”

“But, Mommy, look! That color is so pretty!”

“It sure is, but you mustn’t bother her.”

“Mommy, I want that color, too.”

“Come on, don’t be selfish.”

The little girl seemed to have her heart set on that brilliant pink shade. She kept begging her mother over and over.

“Mr. Druid, can this dye be used again?”

“Probably? I heard the color doesn’t set as well, but I’m not actually sure.”

I crouched down to the girl’s level. “Listen, I’m not sure if the color will be as bright since I already used this dye, but you can have it if that’s okay with you.”

The little girl’s face shone with joy. She looked up at her mother.

“Are you sure it wouldn’t be too much trouble?” The mother was still a little unsure.

“We don’t mind, ma’am. I just can’t guarantee it will work as well for your daughter since we already used it.”

The mother nodded once, then turned to her daughter. “Mimi, your clothes might turn out lighter than hers. Are you still okay with that?”

“Well...yeah, I don’t care if it’s lighter. I want pink!”

After getting her daughter’s blessing, the mother turned to me and bowed humbly. “Thank you so much. I had horrible luck—we only got brown and gray.”

Yeah, those colors wouldn’t suit the little girl with sparkling eyes. I handed the mother the bucket. That done, I washed the two shirts I’d dyed and set them to dry next to the pants that Druid had washed.

“They sure are eye-catching,” he said.

“They really are.”

I looked at all the other clothes drying on the line. Most of them were in

muted colors, so the pink shirts really stood out.

“Well, it’s okay—it’s a festival,” Druid said.

True, but I would never wear a bright color like that anywhere else.

“But I think you could pull it off, Ivy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I know you always wear softer colors, but I think a bright color like that could work for you.”

Really, though? But, Druid... Well, okay. It’s a festival, so I’ll let it slide.

“I couldn’t pull it off. Scratch that, I don’t *want* to pull it off.”

Instead of joining the festivities on the second day of the festival, we stayed indoors and watched the frolicking participants from our window. It was neat to get a bird’s-eye view of all the colors of powdered dye flying around. Most fun of all was watching the white clothes get more and more colorful.

“It’s almost over,” Druid remarked.

“Yeah.”

“Ha ha, that expression on Lord Foronda’s face...”

I gave Druid a curious look. “What do you mean?”

“You know how you slapped his back from behind yesterday? Remember how startled he was?”

Ohhh, that. Yeah, there were so many color cakes flying all around me that I went into panic mode and forgot to hit Druid and Lord Foronda with mine. Then when I looked in my bag and saw the golden cake, I suddenly remembered and threw it at them both really fast. Yeah, and I was so flustered that I crushed the cake in my hands and gave both their backs a hard slap. Wait...I slapped him?!

“Oh, no! Mr. Druid, I slapped Lord Foronda’s back *really* hard!”

“Wait, you mean you didn’t notice?”

“...No, sir.”

“Pfft! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Oh, nooo...what should I do?”

I don't think he was mad, but...Ivy, what were you thinking?!

“Don't worry, he saw the gold handprint, so it was obvious what you were doing. But still... Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Aaaggghhh... Next time I see him, I'll apologize. But why did I slap him that hard anyway? I don't care how rattled I was, I could've been a little gentler.

“Mr. Druid...” I sighed. “You don't have to laugh so hard.”

As Druid continued to shake with laughter, I gave his shoulder a light punch.

Chapter 353:

A Magical World

We put on our dyed clothes and stood before the mirror. To be frank, they were gaudy. Was I pulling it off? I felt like the girl in the mirror wasn't me. *I guess I'll be okay, though?*

"What's wrong?" Druid asked.

"Um...do I look all right?"

"Yeah, perfect."

Really, though? I'm not a good judge of this myself. I looked at Druid in the mirror. *Pink... I don't know how to say this, but he looks worse than I ever could've imagined.*

"Ivy...I know *exactly* what you want to say. You didn't think it was possible for me to look so bad."

"Pfft!" He looked so incredibly terrible that I couldn't hold in my laughter.

With a sigh, Druid said, "Guess I'm stuck in this for the day. Oh well, let's go."

"Hee hee! Okay. Sorry to leave you guys again today," I called out to the slimes as we left the room. I longed to have a good hard play session in the forest with everyone once things settled down.

It was the last day of the festival. We would pray in our dyed clothes, and then the festival would be over. I'd learned yesterday that alcohol was prohibited starting on Festival Eve, and the ban would be lifted when the end of the festival was officially signaled. In other words, people could start drinking this afternoon.

"Do you think the town will be full of noisy drunks this afternoon?"

"Part of it, yeah."

"Really?"

I'd just assumed everybody would be drunk.

"People think that if you let loose and act foolish during the festival, you'll be plagued with injuries for the rest of the year."

"Oh, really?"

"Well, some people say it's just a superstition, but most adventurers believe it. If you're an adventurer, an injury would cause big problems for you."

"Yeah, I guess they can't make money if they're too hurt to fight."

When we stepped out of our inn, a magical world expanded before our eyes. Everywhere we looked, color upon color dyed the scene.

"Y'know, it looks like we got zapped into a magical world," I said.

Some people were clothed in a single color, but others wore mismatched tops and bottoms like Druid and me.

"What a sight," Druid said.

"Yeah. Ooh, the booths are back today!"

The booths that had been missing during the festival proper were back on the street. A closer look revealed that each and every one of them had liquor to sell.

"Will you be drinking today?" I asked.

"Well, they are selling liquor that you can only get at the festival today, so I would like to taste it. Is that okay?"

"Of course. Just don't drink too much."

"I know."

He always says he won't drink too much, then he does it anyway. I'd better make sure he keeps his promise.

"Oh, look! It's her."

I looked where Druid was pointing and saw the little girl from the laundry room. She was wearing clothes a slightly lighter shade of pink than ours, and she looked very pleased with herself.

“The dye worked nicely,” Druid remarked.

“Yeah. I’m glad it did.”

We checked out all the booths as we walked down Main Street toward the village watch station, where Lord Foronda would be giving his speech.

“The station is already packed,” Druid said.

“Yeah. Think we’re at an okay spot?” I couldn’t see Lord Foronda, but I assumed I’d at least be able to hear him.

“Sure. We only came to hear him talk anyway.”

“Yeah.”

“Want to get lunch from one of the booths?”

“Anything you have in mind?”

“Yeah, I want to eat those obitsune skewers—they’re mixed with a lot of scorchions.”

Scorchions were long green onions with a spicy heat to them. I suddenly remembered that one of the booths we passed had obitsune skewers topped with minced scorchions. *Maybe that’s what Druid meant. They did look tasty.*

“Sign me up.”

“I know they’ll go great with booze.”

Peep! Peep! Peeeep!

“Dear friends, this year’s festival was mostly without incident, and we thank you very much for helping make this possible. And now, for the festival’s closing remarks, please give a warm welcome to Lord Foronda of the town of Otolwa!”

“Whoa! It’s a lord!”

“Oh my gosh, is it really him?!”

“Lord Forondaaa!”

Huh?

“Why are they so excited?” I asked.

“Lord Foronda is a popular guy,” Druid explained.

The moment his name was called, a cheer welled up from the adventurers and rippled out through the crowd.

“I knew he was popular...but I guess even more so than I thought.”

“He’s one of the few noblemen who’ve actually fought side by side with adventurers,” Druid explained.

Now that made sense. Most noblemen were tyrants who looked down on adventurers, but Lord Foronda had worked together with them to take down the crime organization. Yeah, he basically had to be popular.

“Thank you for your rousing welcome,” Lord Foronda said. “I participated in the festivities with you all and I enjoyed myself thoroughly.”

When the adventurers heard he had taken part in the festivities, they cheered even louder. My ears were actually starting to hurt.

“I pray that each and every one of you who helped make this festival a success will have a blessed year of good fortune. May everyone who enjoyed this festival have a healthy year free of injury. And may everyone here today meet again next year. And now...I declare this festival over!”

A storm of applause and cheers filled the village. After a while, the noise died down and the people began to scatter.

“So...there’s no guarantee we’ll be able to talk to him, but do you want to go to the station?”

“If we talked to him out here, we’d definitely stand out,” I said. Besides, Lord Foronda was surrounded by adventurers, and I didn’t have the courage to try to join them.

“I see where you’re coming from.”

“I don’t think he’ll leave Hatahi right away, so why don’t we go see him after things have settled down a little?”

“Good idea, let’s do that. Okay, now let’s go get some lunch.” Druid looked at the booths around us, all of which had long lines snaking around them.

“Hmm...they’re all packed.”

“Are you gonna buy some liquor to take back to the inn with you?” I asked.

“No, I already asked Chikar to get some for me.”

Okay, so all we need to do is buy the obitsune skewers. “There are some booths near the inn. We should buy it there so it won’t get cold on our way back.”

“Good idea. That’s where we’ll look for the skewers.”

As we walked down Main Street, there were already people drinking. Every one of them was smiling with glee.

“Oh, do you think that braised obitsune we ate during Festival Eve is still available today?”

“I’m not sure... We just went by their booth, but I think they might be closed today.”

Really? I do remember passing the booth...but were they closed? Well, we can always check one more time on our way back. If they’re still open, I’d love to eat that braised obitsune again.

“Oh, how about that booth over there?” Druid suggested. “See how nicely the obitsune is cut?”

I followed Druid’s gaze to see a booth with two men working quickly behind it. I took a look at their merchandise, and the obitsune meat was indeed cut and skewered very neatly.

“Sounds good to me.”

“You can tell by the line just how good it is.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, that’s a trick for finding a good booth: You check the people in line.”

I looked at the people waiting. From their build, I could tell most of them were adventurers. But there were plenty of adventurers in the other lines, too, so it couldn’t be that. What else was there...?

“Oh! There’s lots of women who don’t look like adventurers, huh?”

There were more middle-aged women and women with children in this line.

“Exactly. From the way they act, I can tell they’re locals, and the locals know the food here better than anyone else, so what does it say when they all line up at one booth?”

“That booth has the best food.”

“Right. That’s how you tell which booths are the best: Look for the locals.”

Now I get it. Yeah, if the locals like it, then I know I should have what they’re having. I got in line beside Druid.

“Hi! What’ll ya have?”

“Fifteen skewers, please.”

I looked at the rows of obitsune skewers on the grill. Plenty of fat was dripping from the large slices of meat and sizzling on the grill. It looked so good.

“Would you like scorchions on yours?”

“Yes, please.”

They piled our meat skewers on a wooden plate, heaped them with scorchions, and topped it off with a squeeze of sauce.

“Here ya go.”

Druid took our food and paid the man. Our wooden plate of obitsune was covered by a wooden lid fastened with string.

“Thanks for coming. See ya next time!”

We thanked the men and headed back to our inn.

“It smells so good,” I sighed.

“It sure does. Let’s hurry.”

We quickened our pace back to the inn.

“I guess they’re closed,” Druid observed when we reached the braised obitsune booth.

“Yeah, too bad. I wanted to eat it again.”

The booth's lights were out. It was a shame, but we would certainly enjoy our obitsune skewers.

Chapter 354: Trash Mountain

“Wow... Now *that’s* impressive.”

We were back at the dump after a long absence. The overwhelming number of adventurers at the festival had caused the previously well-maintained dump to overflow with trash.

“Yep, that’s a lot of trash. That’s what you get when you have that many visitors, though.”

“Yeah. It’s Trash Mountain.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora was excited to see the trash. I felt a little conflicted, but I guess my slimes saw it as Food Mountain? Their reactions would make sense that way.

Mrrrow.

“Hm? What’s up, Ciel?”

Ciel peered into the forest, then looked back at me. That was adandara language for *I’m going to lunch*.

“Have a safe trip. There aren’t many adventurers left, but you be careful.”

Mrrrow.

With a quick reply, Ciel majestically headed off into the forest. As I waved goodbye, I looked over at my slimes, who were all fidgeting. *Gosh, they’re so cute.*

“Sora, Flame, Sol, sorry I made you wait so long. Go eat your fill, okay?”

I watched as the three slimes bounced eagerly toward the trash.

“It’s nice to see everyone looking so well.”

“Yeah,” Druid agreed.

Ever since Festival Eve began, my poor creatures had had to sit at home. I was

worried about them when I saw how listless it was making them, but now they looked like they were back to their normal selves.

“What do you want to do after this?”

“I thought we could go deeper into the forest so everyone can get their wiggles out. That okay?”

“Sure. We’ll let them play to their hearts’ content.”

“Good.”

Which way should we go when Ciel comes back?

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu! Pefu!”

I looked over at the three gleeful voices to see the slimes bouncing up and down on Trash Mountain.

“They look happy,” Druid remarked.

“They sure do.”

After a while, Trash Mountain collapsed a little. Amused by this, the trio slid down the slope of trash.

“Wait a minute... Where’s Sol?”

Sol had vanished before my very eyes. Was it buried in the trash? I approached the pile, walked over to the spot where I’d last seen Sol...and found it under the trash.

“Sol...you shouldn’t bury yourself in the trash.”

“Pefu?”

I yanked Sol out of the trash and placed it gently on top of the pile. “Aren’t you gonna eat? The trash we picked up for you ran out three days ago... Aren’t you hungry?”

Sol hadn’t eaten since we ran out of pre-picked trash three days earlier. It didn’t get hungry enough to shrink, but I regretted not collecting more trash in

advance. Sol stared hard at me, chirped a quick “Pefu!”, then wandered off to materialize the black fuzzies and start eating them. I looked for Sora and Flame and found them with Druid, gorging themselves like there was no tomorrow. They’d had enough playtime—it was time to feast.

“I still can’t believe how big that procession was...” I said with a sudden chuckle as I watched Sol eat.

Starting the morning after the festival was over, and continuing well into the afternoon of the next day, a never-ending line of adventurers had been snaking out of town.

“Yeah, it was pretty incredible. The other time I went to the festival, I left the very next day, so I never got to see it for myself.”

Since all the adventurers and travelers who came to Hatahi for the festival had left at the same time, a massive procession of them had stretched all along Main Street to the front gate, and from the front gate to the roads leading to Hatada and Hataka villages. It was so long that I was awestruck by the new sight. I was also awestruck by how awestruck Druid was.

“Seeing that long line made me really appreciate just how many people come to this festival,” Druid said.

“Yeah. I knew a lot of people were here, but I didn’t realize it was that many.”

I searched for auras as I watched Sol eat. Since there were still no human auras near us, I could let Sol relax and enjoy its meal for a good while longer.

“Oh!” I tensed up a little when I sensed an aura...but then I noticed it was a familiar one. It became stronger the instant it passed through the front gate, which probably meant its owner had made his presence known to me on purpose. “Mr. Ashley is coming.”

“All right.”

After a little while, Ashley appeared at the dump entrance and said, “Hello, you two.”

It was Ashley who had told us it was safe to go to the dump now that most of the adventurers had gone. When we explained the situation with Sol to him,

he'd been rather worried about it.

"Hello, sir," I greeted him back. "Thank you for the information you gave us yesterday."

"No problem; happy I could help." Ashley looked at Sora, Flame, and Sol, then at the area around us. He was probably searching for Ciel.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ashley, but Ciel is off getting lunch right now."

"Oh! Oh dear, really? Is it all right if I wait a little while?"

"Of course."

Ashley looked happy to hear that.

"By the way, aren't you exhausted?" Druid asked Ashley as he handed out potions to Sora and Flame.

"I'm feeling all right. A little tired, yes, but it's the same every year."

I looked at Ashley's face, and he did indeed look a bit more tired than usual.

"We're going to be here for a while. Go ahead and have a seat," Druid told him.

"Thank you. But I really am all right; I slept long and deeply last night."

"You sure? You don't need to act tough on our account. By the way, weren't there more guests than they had anticipated? I heard some of the villagers talking about it."

"Oh, yes there were. We were just as surprised by the number of visitors as anybody. And the event planners predicted people would get hurt because of that, so they had to change the events at the last minute. Everything was so chaotic right up to the actual festival! But this year's festival was a success, so all's well that ends well... Oh! Right, sorry, did you both enjoy yourselves?"

Um...are you sure you're not still exhausted? You changed the way you were talking mid-sentence.

"Yes, we liked it very much, thank you."

"It was my first time here and I had lots of fun!" I chimed in. "Thank you so much for all your hard work, Mr. Ashley."

Our praise made Ashley blush a little. It felt good to thank him properly.

Mrrrow.

“Ciel?”

Huh? I didn't sense Ciel's aura at all. Was it hiding from me?

“What?!”

As I sat there, stunned and wondering why I hadn't picked up on Ciel's aura, Ashley yelped in surprise from his spot outside the dump.

“Is something wrong, sir?” I asked.

“Er, well...” Ashley looked incredibly perplexed. I wondered what was going on. “I couldn't sense Ciel's tremendous magic energy.”

Mrrrow. Ciel trilled proudly, wagging its tail. Had the adandara found a way to mask its magic energy from people with the detect magic skill? Was that even possible?

“Ciel, did you figure out how to block the detect magic skill?” I asked.

Druid stared at Ciel in shock. Ashley had the same reaction.

Mrrrow.

That meant yes. *Wait...isn't that, like, a really incredible thing to do?!*

“First it countered a magic item, now a skill? I'm amazed,” Druid said.

I nodded in agreement. Ciel was beyond amazing.

“Wow, adandaras truly are extraordinary monsters!”

Ashley looks quite giddy... Uh-oh! “Guys, somebody's coming. Ciel, can you come hide over here?”

I shouldn't have let Ciel distract me like that. I quickly hid the adandara while Druid placed Sol and Flame in the bag we kept on hand in case we needed to hide them suddenly. I stashed Sol in the bag, too, and left the dump.

“Goodness, that was quick,” Ashley marveled. “Also, just wanted to let you know, it's my fellow watchmen who are coming.”

“On patrol?”

“Most likely, yes.”

After a little while, three men in watchman uniforms approached the dump.

“Huh? That you, Ashley?”

“Hello, Dutch! Everything’s okay here.”

“All right. But what are you doing all the way out here?”

The officer Ashley had called “Dutch” was the oldest-looking of the three. He nodded to Ashley, then stole a glance at me and Druid. I gave him a nod, and he returned it...but he looked a bit uncertain.

“Well, it’s like this...”

“Ashley?” Dutch gave Ashley’s behavior a dubious frown.

“We were just looking in the trash for materials for our traps, sir,” Druid explained.

Dutch sternly processed what Druid had said...then he suddenly remembered something and smiled at us. “So *you’re* the ones!”

Trapping was so rare around here that even Dutch had heard rumors about us. With an awkward smile, Druid nodded in reply.

Chapter 355:

The Tamer-Monster Relationship

After talking about traps with Druid for a while, Dutch got back to work. Or rather, his two fellow watchmen dragged him back to work.

“He seemed really interested in trapping,” Druid remarked.

“Yes, when Dutch heard about your trapping exploits, he bought a book called *The Art of Trapping*.”

“Did he, now?”

I wonder what that book is like? I kinda wanna read it.

“He did. I’ve seen him talking about it a lot with other watchmen who are interested in trapping.”

“Huh. It’s always guys around my age or older who are the most interested in trapping,” Druid said.

Is that true? You know, I guess it has mostly been people in that age range. I searched for auras and made sure that Dutch and his men were gone before I took Sol out of the bag. Seeing this, Druid removed Sora and Flame from their bag, too.

“Having another bag on standby was a good idea,” Druid said.

“Sure was. You can never be too prepared.”

“True.”

The bag I’d given Druid for Sora and Flame was a newly purchased one. It had been the right call to get it just in case we needed an extra bag.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“What’s up?” I asked Sora, but it only jiggled in reply. *Hmm...what kind of question would get it to answer me?*

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

I looked at Flame just in time to see it riding on Ciel's back. Maybe they were all finished eating?

"Are you guys full?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

"Okay, then let's all go in the forest to play."

The three jiggled happily in reply. Ciel's tail twirled in turn, stirring up one of those long-absent mini-tornados.

"Looks like they've really been looking forward to it," Druid observed.

"Well, yeah, they've been cooped up in our room for over a week."

"Yeah, they did sulk a lot."

They sulked? Wait, was everybody really upset? They weren't just bored?

"Guys, were you all mad at us?"

Agh, they all avoided looking at me! Oh, no. So they were angry. Well, we did have all the fun without them, didn't we?

"I'm sorry, guys."

"*Puuu.*" Sora bounced over to me, jiggled a little, and did a bunch of flips. Then it stretched itself very tall.

"Huh? Ha ha ha! You're so cute."

That's the first time I've ever seen Sora flip. Sora sang and did even more flips in a circle around me. After a while, it jumped into my arms. I grabbed it with ease and squeezed it tight, and it shut its eyes contentedly.

"Okay, which way should we go?" Druid asked.

Ciel peered deep into the forest.

Wait a minute... Sol is sitting on top of Druid's head. When did it jump up there?

Mrrrow. After staring into the forest for a while, Ciel let out a noise and began to walk. Druid and I followed, and Ashley scrambled to keep up with us.

“Um, pardon my asking, but...do you just let Ciel tell you where to go?”

“That’s right, sir. Ciel is an expert when it comes to forests.”

“Really?”

The confusion in Ashley’s voice confused me in turn. *Did I say something strange?*

“Surprising, isn’t it? I know just how you feel, Ashley. I was just as surprised as you the first time I saw it,” Druid said, merrily patting Ashley’s shoulder.

“How should I put it... The way you’ve built up such a trusting relationship... it’s extraordinary.”

A trusting relationship? Well, I’m a tamer, so it’s only natural for me to trust my tamed monsters. I mean, they trusted me first and decided I was safe to be with.

“Well, of course I trust them!”

“Huh?”

Ashley fell into a perplexed silence, which I thought was quite strange. Had I said something wrong?

“They trust me. That’s why they help me, of course. So why wouldn’t I trust them back?”

“Oh...right, that’s the kind of person you are, Ivy. It’s just that there are many tamers who use force.”

They use force? But that’s terrible. I feel sorry for the monsters they tame.

“They force their monsters to stay tamed? That’s so cruel! And it’s also a wasted opportunity.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you tame them by force, that’s one thing, but who wants a relationship where you have to keep forcing someone to obey you?”

If you've tamed monsters, you should forge a bond with them.

"If you tame monsters by force, doesn't that make it really difficult for you to trust each other?" I continued.

"Would it? Yes, I guess it would take some time..."

So it can't be done? But I wonder, just how helpful would a monster you tamed by force be to you anyway?

"Sora, Flame..."

"Pu! Pu, puuu?"

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu?"

Flame looked at me from Ciel's back, and Sora peered up from my arms. Sol was napping on Druid's head.

"Hmm, how should I say this... If I had tamed you by force, would you still do everything in your power to help me?"

Both slimes just stared at me without moving. In other words, that was a no.

"Would you help me half as much?"

They still just stared.

What? They're not giggling, so does that mean it's even less than half?

"Um...would you give me thirty-three percent?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Thirty-three percent... That's not much!

"You'd only give thirty-three percent, eh? That's a lot less than I thought." Druid looked just as surprised as I was.

"Huh?! Wha?! Um, what are you talking about?"

"They're saying that monsters only give about a third of their effort to help someone who's tamed them by force."

"No freaking way! Er... I mean, are you sure about that?" Ashley stammered.

“It’s all right, Mr. Ashley, you can talk normally around us.”

“No, no, it’s a matter of integrity. But thank you all the same.”

Integrity?

“Um, would they really only give thirty-three percent?”

“Ciel, is that true?” Even though I hadn’t technically tamed Ciel, I figured I’d ask just the same.

Mrrrow.

“I guess it is,” I said.

Ashley looked gloomy, and I wondered why.

“Is something wrong, sir?”

“The slimes in Hatahi...they’ve been getting rid of less and less trash every year. We’ve tried swapping their taming with different slimes, and nothing changed.”

Swapping their taming? Does that mean you can un-tame monsters?

“Hey, Sora, can people un-tame a monster?”

Sora, Flame, and Ciel all shot me alarmed glances when I asked that.

“Oh, no, it’s not what you think. I don’t want to un-tame you guys. I want you to be with me forever. I really do!”

As the three held their hard stare, I nervously looked back at them. And after several seconds of scrutiny, Sora finally answered “Pu! Pu, puuu,” and Ciel slowly began to walk again. I sighed in relief. I hadn’t expected that kind of reaction from them.

“Wait a minute...what was Sora’s answer, then?” I was so shocked I forgot what I’d asked.

“I think Sora means that yes, you can un-tame a monster. In other words, the tamer gets to decide.”

“The monsters can’t?”

“No,” Druid smiled awkwardly, giving my head a little pat. I looked up at him,

and he chuckled down at me. "They all love you so much."

"I'm glad they do, because I love them all, too!"

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

Huh? I looked toward the voice coming from the top of Druid's head...and met with a pair of very sleepy eyes.

"Thanks, guys. You, too, Sol."

"Pefu!"

As he watched our little exchange, Ashley suddenly froze in his tracks. Everyone else stopped in turn and looked at him.

"Um, may I ask your monsters a question?"

"Is that okay, guys?"

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

"Go ahead," I said.

Ashley gazed at each of my monsters one by one, a somber look in his eyes. "Can monsters who are tamed by force forge a bond of trust with their tamers?"

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

"Apparently, they can. Is it hard to do?"

They all remained silent.

“They say it’s *not* hard to forge a bond of trust. Um, does it take long?”

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

“It takes a long time, but it’s not hard to do.”

Huh? But if it takes a long time, wouldn’t you call that “hard”?

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

“Ummm... Yes, you can build a trusting relationship with monsters, even if you’ve tamed them by force. It takes time, but it’s not hard. That’s what they told me.”

Ashley looked incredibly relieved to hear their answer.

Chapter 356:

My Precious Family

“Have their trash disposal powers really gotten so much worse?” Druid asked.

Ashley nodded, a strange look on his face. “Somebody figured it out a while back and determined that their current disposal rate is less than half of what it was twenty years ago.”

“Less than *half*?!”

Maybe it's not just a matter of trust...and there's some other underlying issue? Like, maybe the slimes themselves are getting weaker? Wait a minute...

“Um, these slimes that are losing power...are they tamed? And is this happening with other monsters, too?”

“We don't have conclusive data yet, but even the other monsters haven't been helping out, either.”

They haven't been helping?

“Can you explain?” Druid asked. He looked puzzled.

“According to the veteran adventurers, tamed monsters that used to give great results have been failing, and stuff like that.”

Huh? That sounds like...

“Sounds like it could be a life-threatening problem,” Druid said.

“It is. Though it's still under investigation.”

All the tamed monsters have gotten weaker? No, it's really not that at all... It's more like they've abandoned their tamers. Does that even happen? Was it because they never forged a trusting bond? And while we're at it, why does everyone seem to rely on power so much in the first place?

“Are the slimes and other monsters otherwise healthy?” Druid asked.

“Yes, there are no problems.”

Are there slime doctors out there? I'd love to get my slimes an appointment. They seem healthy enough, but I might be missing something. I looked at my slimes, who were merrily playing around us as we talked. Ciel had turned into a slime and was having fun with them. I felt guilty that I wasn't playing with them, especially since that was what we'd come here to do.

“Ivy, your slimes are almost *too* healthy. You've got nothing to worry about.”

Really? I looked at Druid, and he smiled back at me.

“Besides, there's no such thing as a monster doctor. You figure out how healthy they are by reading their magic energy.”

Magic energy. Oh, that makes sense. You know, Druid always seems to know what's on my mind.

“Am I really that easy to read?” I asked him.

“No, it's just that you looked at your slimes when we started talking, and then you looked at Ashley. And I know you, Ivy, so I figured that's what you were wondering.”

Now I see. So I'm easy to read. I need to be more careful; an adventurer is supposed to be a little better at keeping secrets. Arrrgh, I'll bet he's reading my mind right now. I looked at Druid...and, as I dreaded, he was laughing. I'm not sure why, but I was bitter about it.

“Oh, *please*.”

“Sorry, Ivy. You're just very easy to read when it comes to your creatures.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. You're too protective of them.”

I'm too protective?

“Excuse me...”

Ack! I forgot Ashley was here.

“Sorry, sir. Um, have *all* the slimes in Hatahi Village lost their digestive powers?”

“Most of them, yes. But some of the slimes are all right.”

So some of the slimes haven't lost any power. I wonder what their relationships with their tamers are like?

“The tamers whose slimes are okay...what kind of people are they?”

“They're the elder tamers. People say it must be their years of experience that make them good at it.”

Elder tamers? That's right, I remember when I bought a book about slimes at a bookstore a while back, the shopkeeper said, “New tamers these days are just no good.”

“Well, yes, because they're elders.”

“Mr. Druid?”

“The longer you build a relationship with someone, the stronger the trust.”

“Oh, now I get it! So a trusting relationship really is the key to everything?”

“That's what I believe,” Druid said. “Especially after seeing your relationship with your monsters, Ivy.”

Druid and Ashley both looked at me. *My relationship with my monsters? But I don't think there's anything special about it.*

“You've studied slimes, Ivy. What they are, how to make them happy. Ashley, do these tamers you know do anything special for their tamed monsters?”

“Huh?! Well...not really, no.”

“They don't do anything?” I asked.

That can't be true.

“From what I've seen, they haven't done anything special for their monsters, no.”

“Yikes...I feel so sorry for their monsters! Slimes are unique individuals, and you have to treat them all differently.”

“They're unique?” Ashley asked.

“Of course they are! Sora is a prankster with an assertive personality. Flame is

chill and very good at going with the flow, but when it wants attention, it likes to hide and wait for you to find it. Sol loves to sleep and is uncomfortable with affection, so it can be a bit clingy at times. And I worry sometimes because I feel like it puts me above its own needs too much. And I'm sure there are parts of their personalities I don't know about yet, so I keep looking while we share our lives together."

"I never even thought that slimes could be unique."

But that's so sad...

"Learning your tamed monster's personality is a crucial first step."

That was all I could say. In fact, I couldn't believe that people would ever take the slimes who made their lives better for granted. To be honest, I fumed a little when I heard people tamed their slimes by brute force. I'd called it a "wasted opportunity," but truthfully, I was angry.

"Ivy...you're angry, aren't you?"

"What?!"

Druid was smiling, and Ashley's jaw had dropped.

"So it's that obvious? Yeah, I *am* angry. When I heard what Mr. Ashley said about the other tamers, I felt something snap inside. They *force* their slimes to obey? That's really the worst thing you could do to another creature. Would you like it if somebody did that to you? You wouldn't, would you? So how could anybody use force to control the creatures who help them, protect them, and do their job for them?! It's obvious if you just *think* a little about it. That's a messed-up relationship! And anyone who can't understand that doesn't deserve to be a tamer! If your tamed monsters hate you, of course they won't help you! Of course they won't get rid of as much trash; anyone could've seen that coming. It's not the monsters who are wrong here, it's the tamers! Who would help out a person they hate?!"

"I'm so sorry. Um...so..." Ashley nervously tried to apologize.

But I shook my head. I was angry, but it wasn't his fault. I took a deep breath to calm myself. "I'm not mad at you, Mr. Ashley. It's those awful tamers. I could never bring myself to use force on my monsters. They're my family."

“They must be very precious to you.”

“Of course they are.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Pefu!”

I was honored to hear them all say I was precious to them, too. I mean, they were like family to me.

“Your precious family...” Ashley said.

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

I had a family once...and I lost it. I'd never thought I would find anybody I could call family again. I shared a blood bond with my first family, but it was so fleeting, so easily severed. *How do Druid and the others feel about it? We have nothing tangible bonding us together, but they're all family to me. How do they all feel about me, though?*

“What’s wrong?” Druid looked into my eyes with concern.

“Um...I was just wondering...what’s a *family* anyway?”

Since the two of us had a family card from the merchant guild, you could say Druid and I were almost like a family, even if we really weren’t. But even if we had no blood binding us, I still saw Druid as a very precious member of my family.

“Family, huh... That’s a tough question.” Druid paused for a moment in thought. Then he looked at me and said, “I think when hearts open up to each other...maybe that’s when families are made.”

When hearts open up to each other?

“Ivy...you and I aren’t related by blood, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re my daughter.”

“That’s so sweet... You’re like a father to me.”

“Thanks. And see, Ivy? Don’t you think our hearts have opened up to each other?”

Come to think of it...he’s right. My father’s heart has opened to mine, and mine to his... It’s like our feelings are in sync.

“I think what the heart feels is more important than anything else. Even if two people have a blood bond, I don’t think they can be called family anymore if their hearts have drifted far apart.”

He might be right. I do have blood relations in this world, but I don’t think of them as family at all. Now I think of them as complete strangers who happen to share the same blood.

“You’re right...it is all about the heart.”

“Good. So, Ivy, that means you and I are family.”

“Hee hee! I guess it does.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

A smile filled my face. I could hear them affirming together that we were all a family.

“Guys...thanks.”

“It truly is...a beautiful relationship,” Ashley said.

My smile deepened.

“Maybe the problem really is the tamers’ relationships with their monsters?” he asked.

“Too bad the monsters can’t break the pacts themselves,” I said.

“Huh?! What do you mean?”

“If a tamer tamed their monsters by force at the start, there’s nothing we can do to fix that. After all, that method works. But if the tamer keeps controlling

the monsters by force and they don't like it, I just think it would be nice if the monsters could break free of their own pacts. Don't you think that would make the tamers think a little more about what they're doing, too?"

"Pefu!" Sol jiggled on top of Druid's head. It looked quite merry, like it was in a particularly good mood.

"You're right. As it stands now, only the humans can break their pacts with monsters."

"Exactly. Even though tamers and monsters are supposed to have a cooperative relationship, the system gives humans all the authority and lets them take shortcuts. But if they knew they might lose their monsters if they keep controlling them by force, I'm sure they'd find other, better ways of taming them."

"Pefu! Pefu!" For some reason, Sol was very excited about what I was saying. It was making Druid's hair quite the spectacle.

"Sol, stop bouncing around on my head. You'll fall off."

"Pefu!"

"Hee hee hee, I think Sol agrees with me."

"Pefu!"

"Dang, you're right."

"Um...I won't tell them your name, but may I pass on your advice to a tamer I know?" Ashley asked, staring hard into my eyes.

"Of course. And I hope they build a new relationship."

"Me, too. And if this helps with the waste-disposal problem, then we'll know for sure that forging a trusting relationship is very important."

He was right. If we had a case study with good results, they would know my theory was correct. It would take some time, but it was better than doing nothing.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

My other three creatures, sensing that the conversation was over, all body-slammed me. They were a little angry.

“Sorry, guys. I know I ditched you after I promised we’d play. What should we do now?”

Each member of the trio leaped as high as it could.

“A high-jumping contest?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Hee hee hee! May the best slime win. But there’s one rule: Anyone who breaks a tree branch automatically loses.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mew!

Flame was okay with the idea, but it sounded like Ciel was in the mood for some breaking.

“No, Ciel. No breaking tree branches!”

Mewww.

“Don’t sass me! Oh, I know! Why don’t we see who can jump onto the highest branch in one try?”

All three happily agreed. They all turned to the highest branch and jumped right away.

Crack!

Smack!

Crack!

“Ha ha ha ha!”

“Why are you guys all breaking the branches?”

“Puuuu!”

“Teryuuu!”

Mewww!

The three just stared at the broken tree limbs in disbelief.

“Pfft! Hee hee hee hee...”

Druid, tone it down. Come on, just look at how sad they all are.

“Miss Ivy...you really are wonderful.”

Huh? Did Ashley just say something to me? Guess it was my imagination...

Chapter 357:

Retraining

The branch-jumping contest ended with Ciel as the winner. Sora and Flame looked a little disappointed, but the fun still left them in high spirits.

“Want to head back?” Druid asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“You know, a lot of my beliefs were challenged today...” Ashley said.

I gave him a strange look. What did he mean by that?

“You mean, you came here so many times to watch me and Ivy set traps, but this was the first time you saw her playing with her creatures?”

“Yes,” Ashley answered Druid.

Was it the first time? Whenever we were setting the traps, my creatures always went off and played on their own. Oh, right! Ashley was busy conquering his fear of Ciel.

“I didn’t realize just how amazing tamers were... Actually, I should say *you’re* the amazing one, Miss Ivy.”

“I know, Ivy is amazing.”

Both men seemed sincere...but I didn’t have the faintest idea what about me was amazing.

“Pu?”

“What’s up, Sora?”

I looked at the slime to find it was staring at Ashley. Did it want something from him? Ashley seemed to be too busy talking to Druid to notice. *Maybe I should tell him? What should I do...?*

“Puuu!”

Ack, it jumped!

Sora lunged in close to Ashley, then jumped straight for his head. Startled, Ashley stumbled back and fell.

“Agggh...”

“Easy, Sora. He’s not ready for that yet.”

“Puuu.”

“Wh-what is it?”

While the flustered Ashley sat on the ground, Druid and Sora continued their casual conversation. Then I realized that Druid was now quite accustomed to Sora’s methods of playing.

“Mr. Ashley, are you all right? Sora was just...being friendly with you.”

I couldn’t tell him Sora was teasing him or using him as a plaything; that would be rude.

“Ah...is that so?” Ashley tilted his head dubiously as he watched Sora having a lot of fun.

Druid smiled at my tactful choice of words and said, “Well, I think it really is time to go. Sora, playtime’s over.”

“Puuu,” Sora whined by my feet. I picked it up.

Wait a minute, where’s Sol? My eyes darted around and landed on Druid’s head. Sol was buried in his hair. *Were you there the whole time?*

“Hm? Oh, are you looking for Sol?” Druid asked.

“Yeah. It’s asleep.”

“It sure is. It’s tangled in my hair; I can’t get it out.”

It’s tangled in Druid’s hair? I had him crouch so I could look at Sol. And he was right: There were little things extending from Sol’s body and tangling themselves in Druid’s hair.

“Sol, let’s get you in the bag. We’re going back to the village.”

“Pefu?”

“It would really help us if you got back in the bag so we could go home,” Druid

urged it.

“Pefu!” With that, Sol’s protrusions slipped out of Druid’s hair and back into its body. I picked it up and put it in the bag.

“There were protrusions stuck in your hair,” I said.

“I thought so. When I touched my hair, I felt little things coming out of Sol.”

“It’s still a slime of many mysteries.”

“That’s for sure.”

I wonder how much more we can learn about Sol. I can’t wait to find out...

When we returned to town, all traces of the festival were gone, and everything was back to normal. It was still a little crowded with adventurers and nobles, but their numbers shrank with each passing day.

“Thank you for letting me join you today... I had a great time,” Ashley said.

I thanked him in return, and he said he was going straight to see his tamer friend. There was no guarantee things would go well, but I hoped they would. I sent Ashley off with a wave.

“I hope things work out for the best,” I told Druid.

“Me, too. If this tamer of his has any pride in their work, they’ll hear him out. But if not, it’s probably a lost cause.”

I feel sorry for any monster who gets tamed by someone with no pride in their work...

“Oh, look! It’s Lord Foronda,” I cried out.

“Ah, so it is.”

Lord Foronda was a few yards away from us, along with a group of several men. The others all looked cheerful, but Lord Foronda seemed glum for some reason. *I wonder if something happened to him... Oh, he’s spotted us!*

“Pardon me, gentlemen, but something’s come up.”

“Huh?! But, my lord...”

“Do you have something to say?”

Ack, Lord Foronda's using his menacing smile! That sure is intimidating.

"That's the smile of a leader, all right. Silences the place in a flash," Druid observed.

"That's for sure."

Lord Foronda left his group and walked over to us with a wave. "Good day to you both."

"Good day, my lord. You seem quite aggravated," Druid said.

Lord Foronda sighed heavily in reply. He really did look exhausted. "Yes, those jackasses forced me to listen to their boastful stories for an entire hour."

"Ha ha ha ha! That does sound aggravating," Druid smirked.

"And what's more, I'm certain the feats they boasted of were actually accomplished by others! Imagine passing off another adventurer's heroics as your own. I don't know whether to call them stupid or scum!"

Wow, Lord Foronda's gone to the dark side today.

"I knew walking away mid-conversation would have caused me more trouble than it was worth, so I humored them and listened, but they just kept enjoying the smell of their own farts... Er, that is to say, they were being egotistical. Many times, I tried shutting their mouths by... Hee hee! I mean, I tried to silence them but to no avail."

Why does he keep censoring himself?

"Lord Foronda, you're letting your true colors fly," I informed him.

Lord Foronda shrugged his shoulders.

Well, I just hope we helped him blow off some steam.

"Forgive me, Miss Ivy. I've let you see me when I was not at my finest back in Otolwa, so I let my guard down around you."

"It's no problem. You try too hard to please everyone, Lord Foronda. It's important to let yourself relax."

"I appreciate your sentiments, Miss Ivy, but now I'm afraid I'll take advantage of your kindness."

Wait a minute...where is his bodyguard? Lord Foronda always traveled with one, ever since he was chasing down the crime organization. Whenever his bodyguard was with him, Lord Foronda never let himself get this cynical.

“He’s not with me right now,” Lord Foronda said. He’d realized who I was looking around for.

“Why is that, my lord?”

“He got married and is traveling with his wife.”

Married! How do you like that...?

“Well, give him my congratulations.”

“I will. The danger I found myself caught up in had prevented him from marrying sooner, so it is truly a relief. I made his poor bride wait much longer than she wanted.”

It must have been hard for Lord Foronda to face the crime organization on his own, but I guess it was just as hard for the bodyguard who was protecting him.

“By the way, my lord, there was something I’ve been meaning to ask you. May I?” Druid said. Lord Foronda nodded. “Has the trash disposal in Otolwa been less effective lately?”

“Ah yes, I am quite familiar with that problem. Yes, it was a constant worry for me, but it’s been improving.”

“Oh! Has it, sir?”

Wow... So they’ve already found a way to fix the problem. Druid said that a trusting relationship between tamer and slime was most important, but maybe there’s another way. I need to hear what it is and let Ashley know.

“Rattloore has been retraining the tamers.”

Huh? Why’s Rattloore doing that? And what is retraining anyway?

“Um, sir, what exactly is *retraining*? And why is Mr. Rattloore in charge of it?”

“Apparently, Rattloore knows a very skilled tamer, and this tamer’s relationship with their monsters made him think of a way to improve the waste processing problems in his town.”

“Ah. I see.” Druid stole a glance at me.

Huh? Why are you looking at me?

“The retraining teaches tamers how to forge a trusting relationship with their monsters; that’s how you solve the problem. The first step is for them to get to know their monsters better.”

So it really is all about trust after all?

“At first, people didn’t want Rattloore—a person with no taming skill—teaching them, but the less experienced tamers supported him. Then the tamers gradually saw a change in their monsters, and the waste disposal issues started improving in turn.”

“So a tamer-monster relationship built on trust is important,” I said.

“Apparently so, and I intend to bring it up at the next council of lords. I don’t know how much the situation can be improved, but it’s certainly better than doing nothing. Every town and village—even the capital—has been struggling with this problem, you see.”

Then it really was all about trust. I quietly peeked into the bag my slimes were in. Retraining, huh...? Wait, I think I’ve seen that word somewhere before... Oh! Right, in Rattloore’s last fax, he said, “I’m retraining some tamers and I want to tell them about your relationship with Sora. May I have your permission to do so? I promise I won’t reveal your name.” And since he made that promise, I didn’t think much about it and gave him permission...

I’d completely forgotten about that.

Chapter 358:

Chikar Has the Jitters

We parted ways with Lord Foronda and returned to our inn. Once we were back in our room, we took everyone out of the bag.

“Puuu.”

“Did you have fun?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Pefu! Pefu!”

Huh? I looked at Sol, who seemed particularly pleased. *Come to think of it, Sol has been quite contented—happy, even—ever since I talked to Ashley about taming.*

“Sol, did something make you happy today?”

“Pefu!”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it.”

I didn’t know what it was, but as long as Sol was happy, so was I. I gently patted the black slime’s head a couple of times. The way it squinted its eyes was just so cute.

“Puuu!”

“Ryuuu!”

As I petted Sol, I felt two little body-slams against my back.

“Sora? Flame? What’s wrong?”

Were they jealous because I was petting Sol so much? I petted each of their heads in turn. Then another slime—a shapeshifted Ciel—joined them right away

for more pats.

“Oooh, you guys are just too cute for your own good!”

“Ha ha ha! But at this rate, I doubt they’ll ever let you stop.”

He had a point...but how could I resist when they were looking at me so eagerly?

“I’ll hang in there a bit longer.” I gave it another three minutes, but I finally got worn out. “Okay, time’s up. Sorry, guys, I’m too tired.”

Playtime in the forest had probably tired me out; I couldn’t last very long. I wished I could have petted them a little longer like I usually did, but oh well.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Pefu!”

After chirping their replies one by one, everyone headed off to bed. They were all quite tired after their first playtime in a long while.

“Sweet dreams, everyone,” Druid said. “Okay...I think it’s about time for us to get ready to hit the road.”

“Yeah. Where are we staying next?”

“If you’re okay with taking it slow, we could stop at Hataka Village. What do you think?”

“I think that would be fine.”

“All right, Hataka it is. When should we leave?”

I’m not sure. I want to know what happens with Ashley’s tamer friend, but it’s not like they can build a trusting relationship overnight. I do at least want to know what happens after a little while, though...

“I’m kind of curious about Ashley’s tamer friend.”

“Yeah, I would like to know how that conversation works out.”

“Uh-huh.”

I want to see what kind of slimes they've tamed, and I'd like to have a little chat if I can. I wonder if they'll let me?

"What's wrong?"

"Since my slimes are so unusually rare, I was just wondering what normal ones are like. Also, I'd like to have a little chat with the tamer."

"Yeah, your slimes are extremely rare. Have you ever encountered normal ones before?"

"I have. Mira of the Verdant Wind was a tamer who got arrested, and I tried talking to her slime once."

"Oh, really?"

"When I called its name, it looked at me...but that was all."

"Yeah, tamed slimes only answer their tamers. But a slime that was tamed by force might respond to you, Ivy."

"Really?"

"Yeah, wouldn't slimes prefer somebody who gives them more attention?"

Is that how it actually works? If my slimes left me for another tamer...I would be heartbroken.

"But that's...really sad."

"You only feel that way because you love your slimes, Ivy. I don't know if tamers who tame by force love their creatures."

Now I see. Since I use myself as a standard, I don't really understand tamers who tame by force. The only thing I do know is that the idea of it makes me sad.

"Why don't you ask Ashley how the talk went? And if that tamer is willing to change their attitude, maybe you could ask to see them? The only catch is that you'll have to tell them you're also a tamer if you do meet them."

He was right. I couldn't just demand that the other tamer show me how they work. I'd have to show them my slimes, too. *Hmmm...and there's the problem. There's always a possibility that tamer could leak information about my slimes to the wrong people.*

“No, I think I’ll stay out of this one. I can’t risk putting my slimes in danger just to satisfy my selfish curiosity.”

“Maybe there’s another way?” Druid asked with a thoughtful crease between his eyebrows.

“It’s okay, you don’t need to rack your brain on my behalf. The safety of my creatures comes first.”

“But if you asked them, your own well-being would come first, Ivy.”

“And I’d be very happy to hear they felt that way.”

“Of course you would. Now, I just realized I’m very hungry.”

I checked the clock in our room. It was almost suppertime.

“Wanna head to the dining hall?” Druid suggested.

“Sure.”

Since we had planned to spend so much time playing with the creatures in the forest, we were taking a day off from cooking. And because we knew we might be tired, Druid had suggested we let ourselves be treated to supper.

“What’s on the menu tonight?” I asked.

“I bet Chikar’s going to cook up a tasty braise.”

“I know. He braises everything just right.”

His vegetables were always braised to the perfect level of tenderness. I didn’t pay enough attention to the heat levels when I braised things, and I sometimes wound up overcooking my vegetables to mush.

“Bye, guys. We’re just going down for supper, okay?”

“We’ll be back soon,” Druid echoed.

“Puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mrrrowww.

Everyone except Flame was drifting off, and Sol was completely asleep. We made sure to lock the door to our room securely, then headed to the dining

hall. When we arrived on the first floor, we noticed Chikar standing by the front door.

“Good evening...Lord Foronda?”

For some reason, the man we’d parted ways with that evening was standing before our eyes, and he had brought something that he held up for us to see.

“Liquor?” Druid asked.

“Correct. I’ve wanted to have a drink with you for quite some time, Mr. Druid. What do you think?”

Druid looked a little perplexed, but Chikar seemed even more confused. He was quite flustered, actually, and I wondered what was wrong. *Is it just me, or is he even more nervous than the last time Lord Foronda stopped by the inn?*

“Mr. Chikar...are you all right?” I asked.

“Um, where would you like to drink?” Druid asked.

“May we borrow the room we used last time?” Lord Foronda asked. “Also, we’ll improvise our own supper.”

“You’ll improvise! Will they be all right?” Chikar whispered in my ear.

Since Lord Foronda was a nobleman, Chikar thought he needed to do something special.

“They’ll be fine,” I assured him. “Lord Foronda isn’t finicky. Could we request some of your braised dinner, Mr. Chikar? It’s so delicious, I would love for Lord Foronda to have a taste of it. Oh, wait, maybe you didn’t make enough for all of us...?”

“No, no, I have enough. I made enough for today and tomorrow at the same time.”

“But now won’t you have too little for tomorrow?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make do with whatever I have then.”

There’s a pro for you.

“Could we please take some of your braise, then? Um, and could I pop into your kitchen? I can help you bring the food out.”

When I saw how flustered Chikar was, I thought I'd better carry the food.

"Sorry, yes, could you help me, please? I'm a little excited... That's Lord Foronda in the flesh, right? He's graced *my* inn with his presence again, right? The last time he was here already seemed like a dream, and now I find out he's going to eat the food I cooked... *My* cooking? Will everything be okay?"

"Everything will be fine. Your food is the best in all of Hatahi, Mr. Chikar."

Now I understood why he was so antsy: He was excited. I didn't blame him, seeing as the lord of Otolwa was considered a hero. Come to think of it, he'd ducked away and pinched his cheeks the last time Foronda was here.

"Please, sir, just relax. Could you unlock the room for us first?"

Chikar jumped to attention and fumbled for his key. *Is this guy gonna be okay...?*

"Step right this way..." Chikar unlocked the conference room and scurried to the window to freshen up the air, but he was so nervous he couldn't unlock it. I tried not to laugh as I helped him open the window and let in some fresh air.

"Thanks."

"It's all right. Just relax, sir. Mr. Druid, I'll go get the food."

Now that the windows were open, I gave Chikar's back a little push and we headed to the kitchen.

"I see some cups in the room already, so I'll get them out," Druid said.

"Thanks," I called to him as I left for the kitchen with Chikar.

"Agggh... A super-famous person...at *my* inn... Ahhhh, how incredible!"

Could Chikar be a fan of Lord Foronda? In any case, I'd better get him to relax before we try to do anything else.

SIDE:

Druid's Decision

DRUID'S PERSPECTIVE

“Mr. Druid, try not to drink too much,” Ivy warned me.

That was the plan...but I don't have the best track record.

“I'll try.”

“Oh, *please*. You, too, Lord Foronda, be careful you don't drink too much, either.”

“Don't worry, I understand,” Lord Foronda answered with a chuckle.

Ivy frowned slightly at him. She really was fearless.

“I assure you, I don't tend to cause drunken ruckuses.” Lord Foronda seemed amused by Ivy's attitude.

“Don't tend to means you've done it at least once. Well, that's no good.”

“Ha ha ha ha! All right, you win. I promise I won't drink too much.”

Ivy slowly left the room, worry painted all over her face.

“All right then, I've brought us the best liquor Hatahi has to offer. I take it you want to drink more?”

“Yes, sir.”

What am I doing, drinking liquor with a nobleman anyway? Does he want to discuss something with me?

“Ivy sure is cute. I only have boys, so seeing the way she acts is a novel experience for me.”

That's right, Lord Foronda does have sons. Two of them, right? Wait...wasn't there that rumor about a princess courting him?

“Hm? Something on your mind?” he asked.

“No, sir. This smells lovely.” I swirled the liquor in my cup, enjoying its aroma. It was definitely some expensive stuff. *I might as well enjoy it.*

“I just wanted to have a little chat,” Lord Foronda began.

Aha. I thought so.

“What would you like to talk about, my lord?”

“Come, come now, don’t be so formal. Have you heard the news about the village where Ivy was born?”

“Yes...the chief and all the villagers were sentenced to slavery.”

“So you do know. Does Ivy?”

Lord Foronda gulped down all the liquor in his cup. His face was void of emotion.

“She knows,” I answered.

“Did she take the news well?”

“She was a little shocked...but I think she’s okay now.”

Was Ivy really okay, though? When she first heard the rumors, she looked numb. Then she acted strangely the rest of the day. By the next day, she was back to her usual self, so I figured she was fine. But was I wrong?

“I’m sorry, sir,” I continued. “I don’t actually know.”

“Aha.”

I gulped down the liquor in my cup. My throat burned.

“The village chief and her parents who hurt her will spend the rest of their lives in slavery. Humph! I heard the chief was beaten up so badly that he almost died on the spot.”

Beaten up? Did the villagers do it? Well, he deserved it, anyway.

“Is that so?”

Why does Lord Foronda know so much? Did he look into it? I gave him a sharp look...then he glanced at me and said with a chuckle, “There are some self-proclaimed big brothers in Otolwa...major worrywarts. You know who I’m

talking about, right?”

“Ohh. Yes, I do.”

He means Rattloore, Sifar, and their buddies.

“They looked into it.”

Now that made sense. Sometimes they signed their faaxes as if they were Ivy’s big brothers or her father. Lord Foronda fell into that camp at times as well.

“Ivy’s real big brother was sentenced to a very long term of slavery. As for her sister...”

What’s this? Ivy has a sister?

“Since she blew the whistle on her village, she was given a reduced sentence: eight years of slavery. Good behavior might shorten her term even further.”

If I recalled correctly, the villagers who opposed Ratomi’s village chief were murdered. Since her sentence was only eight years, that must have meant she wasn’t involved in those murders.

“Is that so?”

“She is currently in the care of Captain Oght of Ratome Village.”

“What?! Captain Oght?”

He’s Ivy’s guarantor. Why him?

“She handed over the evidence to him, and that’s what prompted him to take her under his wing.”

Ivy’s sister sent in the evidence?

“Well, that is very interesting. So she’s working for him?”

“At the village watch station, yes. That’s why I wished to speak with you: I wasn’t sure whether or not I should reveal these details to Ivy. Captain Oght doesn’t know what her current emotional state is, so he said he would entrust me with the decision.”

“Are you in touch with Captain Oght, then?”

“No, I went to see him. I wanted to see what this sister of Ivy’s was like. I only got a glimpse of her, but I didn’t really see a resemblance even though Captain Oght said there was.”

He went to see him? Wow... Lord Foronda really is a man of action. But why would he go to such great lengths for Ivy?

“Hm? Do you think it’s strange that I’m involved?”

“Er, yes...a little.”

“Well, I owe Ivy my life. If she hadn’t learned about Faltoria’s nefarious plot, I would have been murdered. After all, I sought aid from an enemy. I only found out after the fact, but my sons were targets as well. So she’s my family’s guardian angel.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that.”

So that’s why he’ll go so far to help Ivy...

“I’ve told my sons about her as well. I want them to meet her someday.”

Knowing Ivy, everyone in Lord Foronda’s circle will like her just as much as he does.

“Anyway, back to the matter at hand... What do you say? Do you think I should tell her?”

“That’s a good question. Has her sister said anything about it?”

If she exposed her village’s crimes, she must be a fairly upstanding person. If Ivy wanted to see her, we might want to think about letting her do that right away. But if there was even the slightest chance that it would hurt Ivy, I honestly wouldn’t want to let them meet.

“Ivy’s sister seemed like she wanted to ask Captain Oght something when she first started working for him, but she never did, and now she’s working very hard for him.”

Maybe she didn’t have the courage to ask... Either that, or maybe she wanted to forget Ivy?

“Once a month, she goes to the spot where they say that Ivy died and lays

flowers there.”

“Oh, that’s interesting... Wait, someone said she died?”

“Oh...you didn’t know? Yes, Captain Oght reported that Ivy died, in case people came after her.”

“Oh, God...”

So that’s what they did.

“Ha ha ha ha! You look surprised. Yeah, I was speechless when I first heard about that.”

I didn’t think it was a laughing matter.

“Apparently, Captain Oght described it as a ‘preventative life-saving measure.’”

I guess it was a good way to make sure Ivy’s journey was a little safer, but I’m surprised the head watchman let it slide.

“Back to her sister, I think it’s safe to assume she feels remorse, but she won’t reach out to talk to Ivy without Ivy’s permission. Well, I guess that’s only natural.”

“Of course.”

Come to think of it, Lord Foronda’s way of speaking has really loosened up. Is he getting drunk? I looked at our tabletop and saw two empty liquor bottles. He was already opening a third... *When did we drink that much?*

“So, what d’you think, Druid?”

“It’s a tough call... It might be traumatic for her.”

“I know, right? Bolorda and his boys don’t know what to do, either. They’re just worried that rumors about her sister might spread.”

He’s right: It’s unusual for a slave to work at a village watch station. Rumors might start spreading about her. It would definitely be better for Ivy to learn about her from someone she knows instead of hearing through gossip. Plus, this might actually be a blessing in disguise. I wanted to have that talk with Ivy soon anyway... It will hurt a lot if she says no, but...that’s Ivy’s decision to make. I

need to man up and talk about it with her.

“Druid? Something wrong?”

“I’ll tell her. There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask her anyway.”

“Oh...and just what is that?”

I looked at Lord Foronda, and a pair of dead-serious eyes met with mine. He might have picked up on what I was going to ask her.

“I was going to ask Ivy if she wanted to officially become my daughter.”

“Phewww...”

Will he be against the idea? But... I’d been thinking about this for a very long time. I wasn’t sure about it at first because I was scared I wouldn’t be able to take care of Ivy with just one arm...but then I realized that thinking that way was disrespectful to her.

“I’m glad to hear it. That’s what we’ve all been hoping you’d do.”

“What?!”

Lord Foronda’s gaze quickly softened.

“We’ve been able to learn a fair amount about you from your faaxes, and it’s clear from Ivy’s messages that you two have forged a solid bond together. So we’ve all been talking about how we want you to become her father. We just haven’t said anything because it wasn’t our place to do so. Rattloore, Sifar, and even Gnouga were all jealous when they read the faaxes from both of you.”



“Jealous?”

“Yeah, and they were confused, too. You two obviously trusted each other just like a real father and child, so we wondered why you hadn’t made it official yet.”

So that’s what’s been going on. Come to think of it, Sifar had asked me many times if I had any news to report. So that was what he’d meant.

SIDE: Druid's Decision, Part 2

DRUID'S PERSPECTIVE

“What a relief. I guess handling this wasn't a waste of time after all.” Lord Foronda pulled a document out of his bag. I looked it over and saw it was an adoption form.

So he got it ready for me. And what's more...

“Um, the guarantor names...isn't that a massive number of signatures?”

Two signatures should be enough, so why are there eight? And why is the first one Lord Foronda, for that matter? A lord as a guarantor...isn't that beyond incredible?

“These eight signatures are the ones who fought for a place and won.”

I feel like they could have whittled down the list even more... But the names I saw on there were all the type of people who wouldn't take no for an answer. And they were all heroes, to make it even more incredible.

“All the people in Ivy's circle are extraordinary, aren't they?” I remarked.

“They sure are. Seeing the row of guarantor signatures really hammers it home.”

“Yes, and you're among them, Lord Foronda.”

He chuckled and sipped his wine. “Ah yes, Ivy's future father...might you consider one of my sons for her future husband?”

“Absolutely not! Ivy is still way...way too young to even think about that.”

“Damn. Rejected...”

“It's not worth cursing over...”

Besides, I'm not even sure that I'll be her father yet. That's right...I'm not sure yet. I'll talk to Ivy about it tomorrow, and if she feels the same way, then she'll

be my daughter and... Oh no, now I'm nervous. I think she'll say yes. She did ask me about families. But she might just have been asking out of simple curiosity...

"Ha ha ha ha! Come on, man, don't chicken out on me now."

"I know I shouldn't be nervous, sir. But when I think about having the talk, I just... Oh no, oh no..."

Arrrgh, now I really am nervous. If she says no, things will definitely be awkward between us. Would we be able to keep traveling together like that? Stop it, she hasn't said no yet. And I think we've been building a good relationship together. So it should be okay...I hope...I'm sure.

"Pfft! Don't worry, man. You look scared—hee hee!—to death. Ha ha ha!" Lord Foronda laughed into his liquor, then poured more into my empty cup. I nodded slightly and gulped it down. "All right, I think we'd better call it a night. Ivy *did* warn us not to drink too much."

"I feel like we *already* drank too much..."

There were four empty liquor bottles on the table, one more than when we started.

"You think? I could keep going."

"You hold your liquor well."

"Guess I do. Arrrgh, but I'd better head out... What a hassle."

What exactly is a hassle?

Then there was a knock at the door. "Excuse me, Lord Foronda, but somebody's come for you."

"Yes, thank you. Tell them I will be out momentarily."

Whoa, his tone went back to normal. He sure gets into character quickly.

"Certainly, my lord."

Lord Foronda looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. "The world of the nobility is full of hassles. They'll chew you out for saying one wrong word."

"It does sound like I'd rather not be part of that world," I agreed. "Well, thank you for everything today." I bowed deeply to him in true gratitude. He'd helped

me commit to my next move.

“I’ll be eagerly awaiting some good news,” he replied.

“I hope so.” *It all depends on how Ivy feels.*

“I’m sure it will be okay.”

I walked him to the inn’s front door, then Chikar and I tidied up the conference room together.

“Thank you so much for letting us borrow this space,” I told him.

“Oh, of course. For Lord Foronda, I would happily loan this room out anytime.”

He really does respect Lord Foronda. Well, based on the rough way most nobles treat us travelers and adventurers, I can understand why. Things seem to have improved quite a bit over the years.

After we finished tidying up the room, I returned to our own room where Ivy was already in bed. I quietly opened the door, and Ciel and Sora looked at me.

“I’m back... Sorry I woke you up. You can go back to sleep.”

The two gave me a little wiggle, then closed their eyes again. I sat in a chair and looked over the document Lord Foronda gave me. It was an adoption application, written on magic paper. The only blank areas were the places where Ivy and I would sign our names. Everything else was already filled in. If we signed our names, turned it in, and got it approved at the national registry office at the village watch station, the state would recognize us as father and child. Since we had a nobleman in our list of guarantors, the application would surely be approved right away.

“Agggh...I’m so nervous I can’t sleep.”

“Hm? Huh? Did I fall asleep?”

I’d been up all night until the sun rose, but apparently I had drifted off a little.

Urk!

Since I’d fallen asleep in my chair, my body was stiff all over.

“Arrrgh...”

“Mr. Druid? What... Were you drinking until morning?” Ivy yawned and sat up in bed. Since I was already awake, she assumed that I had been up all night drinking. I had definitely done that once before.

“No, we broke up the party in the middle of the night,” I assured her.

“Did you? Then...are you okay? You look exhausted.”

Do I really look that terrible?

“I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“I want to talk to you about something...is that all right?”

Agh, I should have waited until after breakfast!

“What’s wrong?”

Ivy sat in the chair across from me and peered into my eyes.

“Lord Foronda gave me some news last night...about your parents.”

“What?!”

“They were arrested as accomplices in the murder of their fellow villagers... They’ll be imprisoned for life.”

“Oh.” Ivy nodded curtly, then fell silent.

Hearing her parents are murderers must be a shock to her. Maybe I shouldn’t bring up the adoption today? No, this is a perfect opportunity for it... Phewww, calm down, Druid.

“So...I want to propose something.”

Huh? Did Ivy shake a little just now? Is she scared? No, why would she be scared?

“Um...would you like to become an official family with me? You know, state-recognized?”

No, I was supposed to ask if she wanted me to adopt her...so she could be my daughter... But I’m so nervous I’m messing it up.

I looked at Ivy, feeling wretched...and, for some reason, she was crying.

What?! She's crying? My mind went blank. Was she against it that much?

"It's okay if you hate the idea."

Oh no. Now I'm gonna cry.

"No...I don't hate it! Would we be a real family?"

"Of course."

"But I..."

Ivy's not acting like herself.

"Ivy...please, what's wrong?"

Why does she look so upset?! She doesn't seem to hate the idea of being my daughter...so why?

"I... I'm the daughter of murderers, aren't I? So I might cause problems for you."

What?! I-Ivy, what the hell are you saying?

"Ivy...it's not like that. Yes, your birth parents did commit crimes, but they had nothing to do with you. Besides, those bastards think you're dead."

A child should never have to pay for the sins of their parents. Ivy's a victim, too; those bastards tried to kill her. And I'm sure some people out there might speak ill of her for it, but those people are scum. She should just ignore them. And if they try to come at her, I'll protect her.

"What?! They think I'm dead?"

"Yes, Captain Oght made a false report saying that."

"Oh...did he? I didn't know."

I scooted next to Ivy and smoothed her hair. I didn't think learning her parents had been arrested would hurt her so much. She was truly kindhearted.

"Ivy...you don't need to pay for *their* crimes."

Ivy slowly nodded her head...then she glanced softly at me, opening and closing her mouth several times without speaking.

“What is it?”

“What you just said...did you mean it?”

“Of course I did. Please, won’t you be my daughter?”

A soft smile filled Ivy’s face. It was a kind of smile I’d never seen on her before...and it was truly beautiful.

“Hee hee! I’d love to.”

“Oh, thank God!!!”

“Err... Mr. Druid?!”

I melted into a puddle of relief on the floor next to Ivy. She jumped out of her chair in shock and anxiously peered at my face.

“I was so scared you’d say no... Ahhhh, what a relief.”

SIDE: Druid and Ivy's Big Step

DRUID'S PERSPECTIVE

I showed Ivy the document.

"Lord Foronda got it ready for us. He really is something."

"Yeah. Wait... Do we really need all these people?" A look of shock filled Ivy's face when she saw the row of guarantors. I smiled at her as she stared at the eight tiny signatures that had been crammed onto the line.

"No, they only need two."

"But there's *eight*."

"Apparently, that was *after* they cut down the number of people who wanted to sign. Everyone you know has been hoping I would adopt you."

"Huh?!"

"They've been worried about you. They're all so kind."

Ivy's finger softly traced the signatures on the paper as she nodded. "Yeah."

"You've been blessed with a lot of good people in your life, Ivy."

"Yeah. Wow...so I get to have a family... Hmmf!" she cut off, with a sniffle.

When I saw the tears streaming down Ivy's face, my hand paused midair. *What should I do...? I never know what to do when Ivy cries. I'm supposed to console her, right? Umm...but how do I do that?* I gave her head a gentle pat. *Uh-oh...now she's only crying harder. None of my brothers have had kids yet, so how should I know?!*

"Um...are you okay?"

She's accepted me as her father...and I'm already a sorry excuse for one. I think I'll see if the bookstore has any books that might help me.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."



“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Finally, Sora and Flame broke their silence, jumped onto Ivy’s lap, and looked up at her with concern.

“Hee hee! Thanks, Sora and Flame. Don’t worry, I’m okay.”

Ivy’s eyes were puffy, but she did look all right. *What a relief. Those two slimes saved my hide.*

“Are you going to sign it?” I asked.

“Yeah. Where do I do that?”

I pointed, and Ivy wrote her name. *Wow...this feels so surreal.* I had already signed my own name—I did it when I was up all night, too nervous to sleep, so all we had to do now was turn it in.

“Wow...this feels so crazy. I’m happy, I’m nervous...but I also feel like I’m floating on air...”

I looked at Ivy. Her hands covered her smiling mouth as she stared down at the adoption paper. As I watched her, I could just feel the joy rising from her. That made me happy in turn, a smile filling my face.

“From now on, I’m happy to be your father.”

“And I’m happy to be your daughter. Oh, wow! Now I know that your full name is Druid Fanmarallia.”

Come to think of it, I never told her before. Well, I guess surnames aren’t really that important in your daily life.

“Yeah, only nobles bother to use their surnames most of the time. It’s only needed when you give birth, get married, or die.”

Are there any other times when a surname is important? Oh, sometimes you need to use it when you change your address or your adventuring post.

“Where did ‘Fanmarallia’ come from?” Ivy asked.

“It’s the name of the person who built the town of Oll.”

“Whoa, really?!”

Uh, didn't she know that? That's right, she spent her early childhood all alone in the forest.

"Um, yeah, everyone from Oll has the surname Fanmarallia."

"So...does that mean everyone in a town shares the same family name?"

"That's right. The only time people use their family name is when they move to a different town or village, or when an adventurer changes their base of operations."

That made sense because last names exist to show where you were born.

"Wow, I didn't know that. So that must mean there are a whole lot of Fanmarallias out there."

"Yeah, I guess so."

I put the adoption paper in my bag. I guess I can file this in the afternoon. Oh, and I need to tell Lord Foronda that Ivy said yes. All that's left is... Wait, I feel like I forgot to tell her something. What was it again? I told her about her parents... and we signed the adoption paper...

"Let's go get some breakfast," Ivy suggested, getting up from her seat.

I stood up, too. "Sure." *I know I'm forgetting something very important...* "Oh, wait a minute!" I must have been over the moon about Ivy being my daughter, because I'd forgotten to tell her something vital. "Sorry, we still have time, right?" I looked at the clock and saw that we had about an hour before breakfast would be over. With a relieved sigh, I had Ivy sit down again. "I'm sorry, but I forgot to tell you something really important."

"What is it?"

"If you don't want to hear about it, stop me anytime."

Sensing the tension in my voice, Ivy sat up straight and looked at me.

"I wanted you to know how Ratomi's villagers all ended up getting arrested. Somebody sent Captain Oght evidence of their crimes...and it was your sister, Fecilla."

"What?!"

I looked at Ivy and saw no traces of disgust on her face—she just looked numb. Maybe she could stand to hear more...

“Since Fecilla blew the whistle, her sentence was reduced. She’ll be enslaved for eight years.”

Ivy’s gaze fell onto the table. Was she okay?

“...All right. My sister... Where is she right now? Is she okay?” Ivy looked up at me, and I could tell she was sincerely concerned.

“She’s working under Captain Oght’s care right now. They say she’s working hard every day.”

“Oh...she’s with Captain Oght...” Relief filled her face, and I felt my tension melt away at the sight of it. If she had shown the slightest hint of disgust, I wouldn’t have told her anything else, but she looked like she was going to be all right.

“Captain Oght hasn’t told her...that you’re still alive.”

“Huh?! Oh, right. Everyone thinks I’m dead.”

“Yes, and nobody’s going to reveal you’re alive or where you are right now without your permission.”

“Okay...do you think I should visit her?”

Huh? For just a second, I saw fear in Ivy’s eyes. What’s she afraid of? Her sister?

“There’s no rush. You can visit her when you feel like it.”

Ivy looked surprised by my response. Maybe she thought I was trying to steer her toward meeting her sister? Well, if she hadn’t acted so scared, I might have encouraged her to do just that. But if she was afraid, I wouldn’t make her. Ivy’s feelings came first.

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t have to see her right away.”

“Sure, let’s keep going to the capital like we planned. You can think it over after that.”

That would give her more than a year to think about it. During that time, Ivy

might truly wish to see her sister, in her heart of hearts. And if she didn't, she could take more time.

"Yeah, I'll do that. I'm not quite ready yet..."

"Got it. Well, now that that's all settled, let's go eat breakfast and file this paper! And we'll need to tell Lord Foronda the news on the way back."

"Okay." It was a relief to see the clouds in her eyes clearing up.

"What do you think they've got for breakfast?"

"I sure am hungry... Umm, sooo..."

Hm? What is it?

"Let's go...Dad!"

Whoa! She's called me that once or twice before, but...boy, what a good feeling.

"Hee hee!" she giggled.

"Let's go."

"Okay!"

LORD FORONDA'S PERSPECTIVE

"Good morning, Master. You seem to be in high spirits today...did something nice happen?"

I took a sip of the hot tea my maid Amari had poured me. It was particularly tasty today.

"Yes, I accomplished the task I set out to accomplish. I may have two visitors later this afternoon."

Amari nodded in reply. Then, after a moment's thought, she smiled and said, "Did you give Lady Ivy the form, Master?"

"No, I gave it to Druid."

"Oh?! But you prepared that form after reading the faax from Lady Ivy, did

you not?”

Yes, I had drawn up that form for Ivy. Her faaxes told me that she revered Druid as a father and was taking good care of him. And in Druid’s faaxes, I saw a father who cared deeply for his daughter. Everyone who knew them wished that they would become a true family, but something was holding Ivy’s feelings back. At first, I thought it might be her former family, but that was an issue for Druid to resolve. All I could do was give Ivy a little push...so I got the adoption form and had her guarantors sign it.

“I was pleasantly surprised by those cretins. It appears they are good for something after all.”

The ones who had betrayed Ivy gave Druid the push he needed. All the pair needed was a catalyst, and I couldn’t stop myself from putting in a word to send those cretins to the worst place possible. Ah well, they deserved it.

“They tried to kill sweet little Ivy, after all.”

I was, however, glad that I heard them out. Those cretins helped me make an amendment to the matter of Ivy’s skill. It took a little threatening—er, *lecturing*—to get them to talk, but I had no problems getting the information out. And thanks to that little episode, I forged a good relationship with Sifar and Rattloore.

“All that remains is to introduce Ivy to my sons; then everything will be perfect.”

“Please don’t, Master. I feel sorry for Lady Ivy.”

“But I raised my sons well! What’s the problem?” *At the risk of sounding pompous, they really are good boys.*

“The problem, Master, is that you behave diabolically toward anyone who hasn’t curried your favor. I would hate for your wicked streak to rub off on poor Lady Ivy.”

“Oh, so *I’m* the problem... Amari, sometimes you can be so cruel.”

Maybe she was this way because she’s known me since I was born...but she truly can be cruel. And I can’t hide anything from her, either. Truly terrifying.

Chapter 359:

News

I looked at Druid as he walked beside me. Everything felt indescribably bizarre. Nothing was different from the day before, and all we had done was turn in an adoption form...but something had changed. It was just so surreal.

"Hm? What's wrong?" Druid asked.

"Nothing. Do you think the application will be accepted?"

We had turned it in, but we didn't know yet if the adoption had been approved. What if it hadn't? Just the thought made me sad.

"Don't worry. We have so many guarantors, it's bound to go through."

He was right: all my guarantors, starting with Lord Foronda, were heroes.

"Are guarantors really that important?"

"Yeah, they want to make sure kids aren't trafficked. Your guarantors will be fine, but they're heavily vetted in most cases."

Trafficked?

"In the past, people used to adopt kids so they could use them to commit crimes. That's why they started requiring guarantors."

"Oh, that explains it."

That sounds horrible. How dare they betray the children who were just happy to have parents!

"All right, want to go pay our respects to Lord Foronda?"

"Sure. Do you know which inn he's staying at?"

"I don't know which one *exactly*, but it's bound to be the best one in the village, knowing Lord Foronda."

That made sense. He must have been staying in the finest inn that catered to the nobility. *I wonder what sort of inn that would be?*

“It’s over there.”

I looked where my dad was pointing to see a building dripping with extravagance. There was somebody standing at the front entrance. Was it a guard?

“Is it okay that we’re dressed like this?” I looked down at my clothes. I was dressed for adventuring. Ordinarily, that wouldn’t be a problem, but it didn’t feel like the right thing to wear into an inn where the nobility stayed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fine.” My dad gave my back a little push, and we approached the inn.

“Wow...even the front door is glittering.”

I looked at the inn’s entrance, which was adorned with expensive decorations. Even the door was ornately engraved. *Isn’t this excessive? What a pain it must be to clean.*

“What’s this... Miss Ivy and Mr. Druid?” Lord Foronda’s bodyguard stepped out of the inn’s entrance.

“Good afternoon,” my father and I greeted him. He smiled brightly and opened the door for us.

“Are you sure it’s all right for us to come in?” I asked.

“Of course. You wish to speak with my master?”

“Yes, sir, we have some news for him. Is he in his room?”

“Yes, he is. I’ll just go tell him you’re here. Wait a moment, please.”

After I watched the bodyguard run upstairs, I looked around and noticed the huge paintings on the walls.

One in particular caught my eye, and I silently stared at it.

I don’t understand art.

“What’s wrong?”

I pointed to the painting. “What’s that supposed to be?”

It was a painting of...something...in green lines. If I had to give it a title, it

would probably be *Green Swirlies*.

“Hmmm... I have no clue.”

“Well, if it’s on display here, it must be expensive.”

“Probably.”

My dad is just as clueless about art as I am.

“I apologize for the wait. Allow me to escort you to my master’s room,” the bodyguard announced.

“Thank you very much.”

We climbed up to the fourth floor. It had only two doors, both of which appeared to lead into a spacious room. This was an inn for the nobility all right.

“I’ve brought your visitors, Master.”

“Come on in.” The maid I’d met just once when I went to Lord Foronda’s mansion opened the door. “Lady Ivy, so good to see you again. Lord Druid, a pleasure to meet you. Please come in.”

His maid always called me “Lady Ivy.” I had told her it wasn’t necessary, but she insisted that she called all her master’s guests Lord and Lady. I knew it wasn’t something I could change, but it still made me feel self-conscious to be called that; it felt so unnatural to me. Even now, my spine tingled a little.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

“Ivy, Druid, congratulations. I assume you’ve filed already?”

“Yes, sir. We did that just now,” my dad answered.

Lord Foronda smiled proudly at him, then walked over to me and gave my head a gentle pat. *He really has done so much for me.*

“Thank you so much, sir. For the form, and for signing it...”

“Oh, don’t thank me. It was in my own interest as well.”

Everyone in my life is just so kind. I’ll need to repay them all someday.

We were offered chairs, so we sat. The maid soon brought out some tea and sweets and set them on the table in front of us.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. If there’s anything you fancy, feel free to take it home with you.”

His maid is always so nice to me. Do I really deserve all this?

“Druid, how much longer will you be staying in Hatahi?”

Hm? Lord Foronda’s tone seems softer around my dad now. He used to be a lot stiffer. Does sharing a drink really make people friendlier with each other?

“We’re going to start packing to leave really soon, but we’re waiting for something to be resolved before we go.”

“And what might that be?”

“We’re friendly with one of the watchmen here, and he has a tamer friend we’re interested in.”

So he meant Ashley’s friend. Come to think of it, I wonder how that turned out?

“A tamer? Oh, is this about the retraining?”

“Yeah...you might say that.”

“I see. So, where are you headed next? Hataka?”

“Yes. And we don’t have any plans right away, so we’re going to have a nice, *leisurely* trip to the capital.”

Hm? Is it just me, or did he emphasize the word “leisurely”?

“When do you plan on leaving, Lord Foronda?” Druid continued.

“My party and I will depart in two days. My work has likely piled up to an alarming height by now, you see.”

Lord Foronda sure is a busy man. The other nobles I’ve seen in towns and villages always just look bossy and bored.

“Ivy...is something wrong?”

“No... Life sounds awfully busy for you, Lord Foronda. I was just thinking that the nobles I’ve seen in towns and villages so far look, um...bored.”

“Bored nobles, you say? Ah, yes, well, they’re all idiots, so nobody trusts them with work. They’re just biding their time.”

Ha ha ha ha! Now I get it.

“Um, we’ll come and bid you farewell, sir,” I promised.

“Thanks. Oh, Ivy, I just remembered something.”

“Yes?”

What could it be? Lord Foronda’s smile looked a bit cryptic to me.

“When you come back to Otolwa, I want you to meet my sons.”

Meet his sons? I thought he said they were living in the capital for their safety?

“Are your sons back in Otolwa, sir?”

“Yes, now that the threat has been taken care of. My firstborn is going to school in the capital, though, so he can be my heir. I only get to see him when he has long vacations. My youngest is back in Otolwa, and I would love it if you and he...”

“Master.”

“Lord Foronda.”

Hm? Both my dad and the maid cut him off? Must be my imagination. I glanced at them both, and their eyes seemed quite stern to me. Er...why? I mean, Lord Foronda is the highest-ranking person in this room by far... Is it really okay to glare at him like that?

“Master...I will be sure to provide everyone with *all the details* about this.”

Who does she mean by “everyone”?

“Huh?! Er, Amari...you are my maid, aren’t you?”

“Of course, my lord. I have served you all your life.”

“Indeed you have.”

“Yes. However, my former master gave me permission to stop you *by any means necessary*, should you veer onto the wrong path.”

“Arrrgh...”

Whoa... Lord Foronda's hanging his head in shame. Aha, so his maid is just like Rattloore. She looks harmless, but she's ruthless. I wonder if the "everyone" she mentioned is Rattloore and his men?

“But I don't think I'm on the wrong path...” he grumbled.

“Lady Ivy?”

“Yes?!”

Did I do something wrong? I can't think of anything.

“Was there any sweet you particularly liked?”

“Oh, yes. I liked this black one.”

“The chobar? Then please take some home with you.”

Huh?!

“Oh, but I couldn't...”

The maid set a small basket on the table. “We cannot eat all of these ourselves, so you would be doing us a favor.”

It's hard to say no... I glanced at my dad next to me.

“Go ahead, take them.”

If my dad says it's okay...then I guess it's okay?

“Thank you very much.”

Taking the basket, I peeked inside and saw it was filled with chobars. I was actually quite pleased.

Chapter 360: It's a Coincidence...Right?

Outside the gate to Hatahi Village were three large horse-drawn carriages accompanied by dozens of muscular guards on horseback.

"What a procession."

"I know. That explains why he's famous, even in the capital."

My dad and I had come to say our goodbyes to Lord Foronda, but the huge size of his convoy stunned us. His carriage was decorated so lavishly that it was the essence of nobility. The number of guards and horses was impressive as well. Once again, we were struck by the fact that our friend was quite an important nobleman.

Noticing us, Lord Foronda stepped down from his carriage and called out. "Ah, thank you for coming to see me off," he said.

"Lord Foronda, thank you so much for everything." My dad bowed to him, so I followed suit.

"Come now, don't fret. I helped because I wanted to. Ivy, I hope you'll send me more faaxes."

"I will. Should I send them to Otolwa or the capital?"

Since he said he was going to the capital, should I send them there?

"I'm only stopping by the capital to put in an appearance; I'll return to Otolwa immediately after, so please send them there."

"Understood, sir. I'll send them to Otolwa, then."

"Good. You have amusing faaxes, Ivy, so I shall look forward to them."

Amusing? Did I ever write about funny stuff in my faxes? I thought it was rather mundane, personally.

"Master, we'd better be on our way," one of the bodyguards told him. We

were out of time.

“Well, until we meet again.” Lord Foronda gave my head a gentle pat.

I smiled and nodded. “Have a safe trip.”

“I hope you’ll write to me as well, Druid.”

“I will.”

Then the carriage took off for the capital. After a while, the procession was swallowed by the trees of the forest.

“He’s gone,” I said.

“I’m gonna miss him.”

“Me, too, but we’ll see him again someday.”

Maybe it’ll be the next time we go to Otolwa...though I have a feeling he’ll be in the capital when we get there. No, that wouldn’t make sense...

“Okay, what’s the plan now?” Dad asked as we stepped back over the Hatahi border.

“I’m not sure. We don’t really have anything we need to do, right?”

“Not really. Maybe we should start packing for the road.”

We’d sure had a nice, relaxing time in Hatahi, but I was looking forward to seeing the next village.

“Sure, let’s do that.”

We headed for the village watch station. As it came into view, we noticed a crowd of people around its entrance. Had something happened? Dad and I exchanged looks.

“Looks like something happened there,” he suggested.

“Yeah, the vibe definitely doesn’t look normal.”

The crowd was diverse, with people of every age and gender. And every person there looked a little confused and a little angry.

“Let’s keep our distance. I don’t want to get involved.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

We hurried a bit away from the station.

“I didn’t feel much tension in the air, so at the very least, it’s probably not dangerous.”

We discreetly watched from a distance, and sure enough, the air wasn’t tense, but there was still a feeling of entrapment in the area that worried me.

“I don’t think any good would come from us getting involved. Let’s come back another day,” Dad suggested.

“Good idea.”

On our way back to the inn, we got the things we would need for our trip.

“You’ve grown a little more. Do your shoes still fit okay?”

I’ve grown? I looked up at my dad beside me. *Huh? I really don’t feel much taller.*

“Um...have I really gotten taller?” I asked.

He nodded. I stared hard up at him...and I didn’t get the sense that he was any closer in height than before. And my shoes fit just fine as well.

“I don’t need shoes. Did... Did I really get taller? I don’t get it.”

“Well...just a little.”

Oh, so just a little... I’m surprised my dad even noticed I grew at all.

“How about clothes? It’ll be summer soon, so do you need anything new?”

Summer clothes, huh...?

“Maybe some shirts. All my summer shirts from last year are a little snug now.”

My body had changed a lot over the past year. Especially now that I was eating proper meals all the time, my height had shot up. That meant all the clothes I had picked up and worn last summer were no good anymore.

“Then why don’t we buy some new ones on the way back to the inn?”

“Okay. Do you need anything, Dad?”

“Not really.”

“Miss Ivy! Mr. Druid!”

Just as we were about to step into a clothing shop we saw off Main Street, somebody called out to us. I’d noticed that a familiar aura was coming toward us, but I didn’t think he had any business with us.

“Hello, Mr. Ashley. Long time no see.”

When I turned around to greet him, Ashley looked quite flustered for some reason. I gave him a curious look, and his eyes nervously darted around. Then he said, “We need to talk... Do you have a moment?”

“Sure. Is something wrong?”

“Yes... I’m so sorry, but can we go somewhere else?”

We followed Ashley until a small plaza came into sight. There were some little boys playing there, so I figured it was probably a park. Ashley walked us in and herded us over to a corner.

“Um...it’s about that thing you discussed with me earlier, Miss Ivy.”

That thing I discussed with him earlier? What is he talking about?

“You know, how monsters should decide whether or not to break off their connection with their tamers.”

That’s right, I did say something like that when I was furious about tamers controlling their monsters by force. But did I say monsters should decide?

“What about it?” my dad asked Ashley in a strange tone.

“Well, there’s a tamer in town who’s been causing a lot of problems... And, well, he treats his monsters terribly. We’ve tried talking to him about it, but his slime’s trash-dissolving powers are so strong that nobody’s had the nerve to really put him in his place. Lately, his slime’s powers have been decreasing, and he’s been taking it out on the slime...”

Yeah, I hate this guy.

“Then something happened two days ago. When the tamers with slimes went to the dump to try to clean it up, his slime began to shine, and its taming

symbol disappeared...and then the slime itself vanished, too!”

“What?!”

It vanished? Is that even a thing?

“I...don’t know what to say,” I said.

“Yes...we have no idea what happened,” Ashley said.

“He had it coming,” Druid said.

“Huh?” Ashley yelled in shock.

I also turned a surprised face to my dad. “Um...”

He sighed and said, “Monsters have feelings. I don’t know exactly how this tamer was treating his slime, but he was doing it so badly that even the other tamers who control their monsters by force thought it was cruel. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” Ashley answered. “I’d also seen how he behaved toward his slime, and it was a bit too much.”

“Then what happened was inevitable.”

I nodded in agreement. The tamer was responsible for it all because he hadn’t forged a relationship with his monster.

“So the other tamers got jittery and stormed into the village watch station...”

Oh, so that’s what that commotion was!

“Hmm...what about your most experienced tamers?” Druid asked. “Were they disturbed or distressed about it?”

“Huh? You mean Mr. Boug?”

So the longest-operating tamer in Hatahi Village is someone named “Boug.”

“He was... Well, I didn’t see him earlier in the crowd,” Ashley answered.

“Okay... Well, how would you describe his relationship with the monsters he’s tamed, Ashley?”

“How would I describe their relationship...? Oh, well, he cherishes his monsters! And his slimes’ waste-disposal powers have not gone down, either.”

“Then I think you already know what you should say to the other tamers.”

A somber look washed over Ashley’s face, and he nodded.

“It’s a shame that Hatahi’s most powerful slime has vanished, but let that be a catalyst for change. Reform the way the other tamers think of their monsters. I know of another town where they’re retraining their tamers.”

He must be talking about Otolwa and what Lord Foronda said.

“Reform their way of thinking... I’ll talk it over with my fellow watchmen. Sorry I acted like this; I panicked.”

I didn’t blame him for that. The very thing I’d warned him about had actually happened. *And yet, it’s given Hatahi a perfect opportunity to change. What an incredible coincidence.*

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Why don’t you have Boug join you when you talk to them? He’s been a tamer for a long time, and he has a lot of experience working with monsters, so his insight should be a great help to everyone.”

“Yes...I’ll go talk to Boug right now. Thank you so much.”

And with that, Ashley ran off just as frantically as he had come to us.

“What an incredible coincidence, huh?” I remarked.

“*Was* it a coincidence?”

“Huh?! What do you mean, Dad?”

But he just shook his head and began to walk. If it wasn’t a coincidence, then what was it?

Chapter 361:

Gol

“You don’t think it was a coincidence?” I asked.

My dad furrowed his brow in thought. “Just a hunch, and it might be my imagination. Nothing to obsess over.”

He patted my head and began to walk. *He said it was nothing to obsess over... but there’s already something I’ve been obsessing over.* Sol had been so strangely happy when I was talking to Ashley that day. It was almost as if it was saying... “Correct” or “Right answer”? *Hmm, nothing’s really clicking.* Anyway, Sol was definitely acting differently that day. Then it was staring out the window all the time, and the sight made me worry. It almost looked like Sol was on the verge of disappearing.

“What’s wrong? Looks like you’re lost in thought.”

“It’s nothing. Wait, Dad?”

“What’s up?”

“This is the way to the inn, right? Weren’t we going to buy clothes?”

“Huh? Oh, right...we’re going the wrong way.”

When I laughed at the funny look on his face, he tousled my hair a little aggressively.

“Fine, I’m gonna pick out your clothes, Ivy! I can’t wait; it’s been a while.”

The smile on my father’s face gave me a bad feeling inside. “Don’t worry, I can pick out my own clothes.”

“Oh, don’t be shy. Gee, I can’t wait to see what kind of fabrics they have. We’ll need something that breathes, since summer makes us sweaty.”

“I am *not* being shy! And I don’t need a giant wardrobe, either, okay?! I’m still gonna get bigger! Hey, Dad! Are you *listening* to me?”

If I let my dad pick out my clothes, he'll get girly designs—and way too many of them! I grabbed his arm, trying to stop him, but he avoided my gaze. *Uh-oh. He means business.*

“No, Dad! I really mean it, okay?”

“Ooh, I wonder what I should get you...”

I swear I'll stop him! I should've said nothing and let him walk us back to the inn.

“Huh, I wonder what's going on over there? Right in the middle of the street...”

I followed his gaze to see four girls holding slimes and one man standing in front of them all. From the stern look on his face, it looked like he was lecturing them about something.

“Yeah, I wonder what's happening?” I echoed.

After a while, one of the girls started to sob.

“Oh no. She's crying.”

The other three girls looked like they would burst into tears any minute, too.

“Think they're okay?” I asked.

“Well...no harm in asking, right?”

“Yeah.”

The girls holding slimes must be tamers. Untamed monsters usually put up a fight when people tried to hold them; Sol was a rare exception. As we walked closer to the group, we could hear what the man was saying.

“If you copy the other tamers you see, you'll lose your slimes just like that damn fool did. Use your brains.”

“But...”

“If you're gonna take shortcuts, don't you dare show your face to me again. There's nothing I can teach fools like that.”

I didn't quite follow what was happening. Were they learning to be tamers?

The girls looked to be about my age.

“Hm?” As we hesitated a few yards away, the man noticed us and shot us a glance.

“Sorry to interrupt, sir. We were just wondering what was going on, but it looks like you have everything under control.”

“Ahh, yes, sorry. I shouldn’t have scolded them in the middle of the street.” The man scratched his head and smiled awkwardly. His eyes softened, and he took on a very gentle demeanor.

“I try and I try, but they just won’t listen to me. I bet they’re just average slimes!” the crying girl screamed at the man.

He glanced at her and sighed loudly. “If that’s how you feel, then don’t come to me for help ever again. You’re not welcome.”

“You’re terrible!”

“Just get lost.”

The girls shivered at the man’s icy tone, and then they all ran off.

“Arrrgh, for crying out loud...” At a closer look, the man’s eyes were quite lonely. “I’m sorry you folks had to see that.”

“It’s all right, sir. Um, pardon my asking, but are you a tamer?”

“Yes, I am. Um, and you are...?”

“I’m Druid, a traveler. And this is Ivy, my d-daughter.”

Aha, he hesitated a little! I glanced at my father and saw he was blushing slightly.

“Oh, so you’re travelers. I’m Gol, a tamer in this village. And those girls are also tamers, such as it is.” Gol sighed and shook his head. “But they’re no good. Something’s got to change.”

I gently patted the bag holding my slimes, signaling Sora to tell me whether Gol was safe. I left my hand on the bag and felt a soft jiggle against it. I sighed in relief at Sora’s reaction, then turned back to address Gol.

“Mr. Gol...” When I said his name, there was no movement from my bag. Sora

had deemed him perfectly safe. "I am also a tamer."

Oh no! Maybe Sora's asleep and that was one of the other slimes...I'll just have to trust that he's safe.

"Oh, are you?" Gol looked surprised by the news. My father reacted the same way beside me, but then he smiled when he noticed my hand was touching my slime bag.

"Yes. Have you been a tamer for long, Mr. Gol?"

"I sure have. About forty years now."

Forty years?! Wait a minute, doesn't he look only about forty-five or forty-six?

"I know I don't look it, but I'm fifty-seven," Gol said.

My father jumped a little in surprise, and I stole a glance at him.

"Hey, you!" He bonked me on the head.

Ha ha ha ha! He realized I was thinking Gol's the opposite of him. But they can't help it. Gol looks young for his age, and my father looks old for his.

"Do you mind if I call you Miss Ivy?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, sir."

Gol was staring at me with a thoughtful look in his eyes. I stared back, wondering why.

"So...have you tamed any monsters?"

"Yes, sir. I have."

"Aha. Well, I've tamed two slimes, and... Miss Ivy, the monsters you've tamed...what do they mean to y... No, never mind. It's nothing."

Why is he faltering? It was such an easy question to answer.

"What do they mean to me? They're family. They're my precious companions."

When I said this, Gol looked startled. Judging by what he had said to those girls, he clearly cherished his tamed slimes.

"Family... I see..." Gol beamed radiantly. "That's a rare quality in a modern-

day tamer.”

“Are tamers today really so fixated on taming their monsters by force, sir?” my father asked.

“Yeah,” Gol soberly replied. “I keep telling them it’s wrong, but they don’t listen. They think taming by force is easier.”

“What a waste,” I said.

“A waste, you say?”

“Yes. Monster personalities are so well-rounded, and tamers are the only ones who have the privilege of seeing that. And I think it’s such a waste of their gift to not know their monsters fully.”

“A tamer’s special privilege, eh? I certainly agree with you, but not many others do, sadly.”

I wonder what Gol’s slimes are like? I’d love to meet them, but I’d have to show him my slimes in return...

“Miss Ivy, would you like to meet my slimes?”

“Huh?!”

“Mr. Gol?”

“Would your slimes maybe like to play with mine, Miss Ivy? They used to have other playmates, but those slimes’ tamer passed away and they’ve returned to the forest. My slimes are healthy enough, but they look lonely. You’ve tamed these slimes yourself, right?”

I looked at my father. He was giving Gol a critical stare, trying to figure out what his intentions were.

“We have a friend with the village watch. If he can join us, we’ll think about it.”

“Oh, any friend of yours is welcome to come along, Mr. Druid,” Gol answered. “I’m glad to hear it.”

My father’s harsh gaze softened a little.

“Mr. Gol! There you are... Oh! Miss Ivy... Mr. Druid?”

Huh? It's Ashley again. And it sounds like he was looking for Gol. What's going on?

Chapter 362:

Please Help Us!

“Mr. Ashley? What are you doing here?”

“I wanted both Mr. Boug and Mr. Gol with me when I go to speak with the Captain, so I’ve been looking for Mr. Gol.”

Boug is the oldest tamer in Hatahi, I remember. So he wants to see Gol as well? I gave Gol a curious glance. *Oh, that’s right. He only looks young.*

“Mr. Gol also has many years of experience as a tamer, and his relationship with his monsters is very good.”

That’s right...Gol said he’d been a tamer for forty years. I gave him a thorough looking over and decided he seemed quite unscathed for someone who’d been working with monsters that long.

“Hm? Er, is it just me, or are you thinking about something very personal right now?” Gol asked, returning my critical stare.

I darted my gaze away. *How did he know?* As my eyes darted nervously all around, my father gave my head a reassuring pat. I looked up at him...and he had cupped a hand over his smiling mouth. *So I guess my dad knows what I was thinking, too. Why am I so easy to read?*

“By the way, what did you want to talk to the captain about?” Gol asked, shifting his focus from me to Ashley.

“I assume you know about the tamed slime that disappeared a couple days ago?”

“Yeah...the slime that idiot tamed, right?” Gol frowned in disapproval. *He must hate troublesome tamers.*

“Yes, sir. Anyway, the other tamers got worried and stormed the station... It’s turned into a bit of an uproar.”

“From the sound of it, yeah. I heard the villagers gossiping about it.” Gol

sighed heavily. He was clearly irked by the disturbance. "So what did these irritated tamers say?"

"They're demanding we figure out how tamed monsters can disappear."

"Damn stupid question, if you ask me. The slime disappeared because it didn't wanna be with its bastard tamer anymore. Nothing else to it." Ashley nodded slowly in reply. "What, you thought the same thing, Ashley?" Gol asked in surprise.

Ashley smiled sheepishly and said, "I happened to meet a rather extraordinary tamer, you see. She changed the way I think about the world..."

This made Gol look even more surprised than before. I didn't think what Ashley had said was that shocking... Was I missing something?

"Wow. Ashley the Stubborn finally changes his mind about something, eh?"

What?! Is Ashley stubborn? I never got that sense from him. I gave him a scrutinizing stare...and he looked back a bit sheepishly.

"Wait a minute, do you folks all know each other?" Gol asked. "Hold up, is Ivy the tamer you're talking about?"

"Er, what?! Miss Ivy, did you tell him you're a tamer?"

"Yes, sir."

Ashley shot a glance at my father, who smiled and nodded. Ashley had probably assumed that I would want to keep my slimes hidden, since he knew they were all beyond rare.

"You jump at the strangest things, Ashley," Gol said, looking us over one by one. Then his eyes landed on Ashley, who had the most peculiar expression on his face. "Something incredibly shocking must've happened to change a mind as stubborn as yours. Well, that's a *good* thing."

Ashley blushed a little. "I'm not stubborn... Well, yes, I am stubborn...but that has nothing to do with it. Er, so, that thing I was telling you about... I want to ask the Captain to help reform the way tamers operate." Ashley's face turned an even darker red as he tried to change the subject. He was starting to look quite adorable, in a way.

“Reform them, eh?” Gol smiled in amusement at Ashley’s behavior, but his brow furrowed critically at the word “reform.”

“Yes, sir. I talked it over with Mr. Boug, and he thought the same as you: The slime was upset, so it escaped from its tamer. But if that’s true, then other tamed monsters might escape, too. We need to reform these tamers before that happens, so that’s what I was going to propose to the captain.”

“And how do you expect to do that? The captain can’t just order the tamers to change the way they see the world.”

He was right. No amount of commanding from the captain could reform anybody.

“First, we’ll tell the captain and the guild master that the monsters are disappearing because they have bad relationships with their tamers. Then I was thinking that, um, you and Mr. Boug could teach the other tamers how to have better relationships with their monsters.”

“You really think that’s enough to change them? *Those* damn fools? Fat chance.”

“I do agree that it will be a tough job, sir. But inaction isn’t an option, so...um, do you really think it would be too hard?”

Gol was correct that it would be very difficult to change the way tamers thought about the world. But Ashley was also right: We couldn’t afford to do nothing when there was a possibility more monsters would disappear...

“Well...it will be very difficult... Impossible, even.”

When Gol saw how disappointed Ashley was, he smiled and gave his shoulder a hearty slap. I remembered the way Gol had behaved toward the young tamers a little while earlier. He was probably trying to teach them how to treat their monsters better. In his own way, he had decided the current methods were unsustainable, and he was trying to show them how they needed to change. But the tamers rejected Gol, and the look I saw in his eyes at that moment was defeat. Wasn’t there a better way? Not to teach the tamers, but to... *Oh! What if we made them feel it firsthand instead?*

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk to them...but rather we should just show them

what a good relationship looks like?”

“Er, show them?”

“But they’ve already seen me at work. There’d be no point in showing them again,” Gol protested, shaking his head.

Right...they’ve already seen him since they work together. But slimes act differently when they’re playing instead of working, so I still think showing them the way it’s supposed to be is a good method.

“You should show them what they’re like when you’re *not* working, Mr. Gol. Show them how you play with your slimes.”

“Playing?” Ashley’s face lit up. “Ooh, I like that idea! The sight of slimes at play made a big impact on me.”

Is he talking about my slimes? Did it really affect him that much? Well, when they get frisky, I guess their behavior can be a bit provocative.

“Playing, eh?” Gol mused.

“Is there really a difference, sir?” Ashley asked, leaning in close. Gol recoiled a little and took a step back.

“Ashley, cool it. You know...you’ve grown up.”

He’s grown up? I gave Gol a curious look, and he smiled back at me.

“Ashley is...special, you might say...but that meant he was always a conceited little bastard. But now he’s become so earnest about the village and its people...so I say he’s grown up.”

By “special,” he must mean Ashley’s skill.

“Agggh, please, sir, forget about the past,” Ashley groaned embarrassedly as Gol smirked in amusement. “Anyway, that doesn’t matter! Is there really a difference, sir?”

Gol smiled at Ashley. The way he looked at him reminded me of my father’s mentor. They didn’t look alike, but they...had similar auras? My father must have felt it too because I heard him gagging beside me.

“Yeah, they’re completely different when they’re at play. When they’re

working, they'll follow your orders, but when they're playing...well, they do whatever they want."

"Your slimes act like that, too, Mr. Gol?" I asked.

"Hm? Are your slimes the same way, Miss Ivy?"

"Yeah, when it's playtime, they're ridiculous," my father answered. I agreed with a nod, and Gol blinked in surprise. My father and I both gave him a questioning look.

"You're so young...so I'm surprised you've already built such a strong relationship. That's amazing."

"Hmmm...I dunno. They've always all been friendly with me."

"*All*, you say? Just how many slimes have you tamed? Oh, wait! You shouldn't answer me here," Gol stammered, nervously looking around. *That's right, we're still in the middle of the street.*

"Mr. Gol, won't you please help this village?" Ashley asked, bowing to him.

"Yargh...guess I have to," Gol answered.

Ashley's face lit up with a smile.

Chapter 363:

An Inn of Excellence

“All right, does tomorrow afternoon at the front gate work for everyone?”

Since it was already getting a bit late, we decided Gol would meet my slimes the next day. He was about to go with Ashley to see the captain of the watch since Boug was already waiting there.

“That works for me. I’m looking forward to it,” Gol said.

“I’m also excited, sir!”

“Good for you, Ivy.”

From the way my father and I were acting, it must have been clear to Gol that we truly meant it. Gol smiled and said, “My kids are gonna be so happy.” We sent him and Ashley off to the village watch station, then started to walk back.

“Want to go back to the inn?”

“Sure.”

We started walking down the darkening path back to the inn. *Huh...I feel like we’re forgetting something. What is it? Oh well, whatever.*

“We’re back, Mr. Chikar.”

“Welcome back, you two.”

Chikar’s voice was coming from a different direction than usual. I looked toward it...to find him frantically at work in the kitchen.

“Here! Take this.” An overly excited Chikar thrust something at us. It was a metal object a bit larger than my fist...but what was it? I gave him a confused look. “The inns in Hatahi are evaluated and given a rank. This symbol means that we’ve been ranked as an Inn of Excellence! I asked around and found out that the nobleman who came to visit the two of you put in a word that this was a good inn. Ahhh, I truly cannot thank you enough.”

“Wow, that’s wonderful, sir. Congratulations.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever gotten the Inn of Excellence award. It was always one step out of reach, and now I have you both to thank. Again, I’m so grateful!” Chikar jabbered excitedly.

“Oh, but we didn’t do anything, sir. Your hard work paid off,” my dad insisted.

But Chikar just shook his head. “No, if you hadn’t stayed at this inn, the Lord of Otolwa would never have set foot in here. You two gave me my lucky break, and I am forever grateful.”

Apparently, Chikar had made up his mind and wouldn’t be swayed. My father smiled sheepishly and said, “You’re welcome.”

“Oh, and dinner’s on me tonight! Come eat in the dining hall if you’d like.”

We decided to take Chikar up on his offer. We returned to our room and got our bath things ready while we set out Flame’s and Sora’s potions. Once we made sure that the creatures were eating, we went to take our baths.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“All right.”

I was just about to follow my dad out of our room when he stopped at our door.

“What’s wrong?”

“Your clothes...we forgot about them.”

Oh, that’s right! We were on our way to buy clothes.

“Hee hee hee! Well, things did get a bit hectic today.”

“They sure did. Too many surprises. If we have time tomorrow after we see Gol, let’s go buy those clothes.”

“Okay!”

We then parted ways to take our baths. Now that the festival was over, only two parties other than us were staying at the inn, which meant we could take our time in the bath. When the place was crowded with guests earlier, I hadn’t been able to stay in the tub long. After a nice long bath, I returned to our room

to find that my creatures had already fallen asleep. I thought Sol was staring out the window again, but it was sleeping on the sill. I gently picked it up and set it down where Sora and the others were fast asleep.

Our dinner was lavish and a lot of fun to eat. Chikar was no bread baker, but his cooking was very good otherwise.

“Gee, I sure can’t wait until tomorrow!” As I got in bed, I started to wonder what would happen the next day. What would Gol’s slimes be like?

“You want to know about Gol’s slimes?”

“Yeah, do you think they’ll play with me a little?”

My father looked a bit confused by that question.

“I know, I know, monsters only open their hearts to their tamers, right?”

“Right...”

I knew that, of course, but I couldn’t help but get my hopes up a little. As I lay there, thinking about tomorrow, I noticed Flame waking up out of the corner of my eye. “Oh!”

Flame sat up with a start, jiggled a little, and then flopped back down to sleep. All the creatures except Ciel did that occasionally, so I always thought it was a unique slime thing. However, to this day, I had no idea why they did that. I tried asking them whenever they were awake, but they never remembered doing it.

“Huhhh, maybe they won’t play with meee... Wait a minute.”

My dad said it so matter-of-factly that I didn’t notice at first...but what he said was strange, right? Yeah, if monsters only opened their hearts to their tamers, then why...?

“Dad?”

“What is it?”

I could sense he was looking at me, but my focus stayed on my slimes. “I tamed Sora and Flame...but they’ve opened their hearts to you, too, you know.”

They came to him for affection, and they even played pranks on him. *That means they’ve opened their hearts to him, right?*

“When you put it that way...I guess you’re right. It’s just that they’ve always been that way with me, so I never thought anything was odd about it. Wait a minute... Maybe the idea that they only open their hearts to their tamers is a lie.”

Common knowledge said that monsters were only friendly with their tamers.

“Come to think of it, Sora liked Rattloore and Sifar as well.”

Maybe it was because Sora and Flame were special? Or was that just another thing that made them rare? But maybe...just maybe there was a chance I could play with Gol’s slimes, too.

“Now I’m even more excited about tomorrow!”

“If you’re too worked up, you won’t be able to sleep.”

I smiled sheepishly at my dad. My exhaustion had indeed disappeared. I might not be able to fall asleep.

We were going to meet up at the front gate of Hatahi Village. We got there a little early, but Gol was already there waiting for us. I was a little sleep-deprived because I’d just been too excited to sleep.

“Good afternoon. Sorry we made you wait,” my dad called out to him.

Gol shook his head in understanding. He seemed even more excited than he’d been the day before. He seemed antsy, even.

“Well, shall we head out?”

We were going to head into the forest and introduce our slimes to each other. But just as my mind raced through our plans, Gol told us to wait.

“Ashley’s coming, too. Also, read this and sign your names.”

Gol handed us a document which my dad seemed surprised to see. When I gave him a questioning glance, he let me have a look. *Ack, our collection got bigger!* It was a contract stating that nobody would tell a third party what we saw or heard that day. Gol had already signed it.

“Are you sure about this, sir?”

“Our conversation yesterday made me think there might be more than meets the eye to your slimes, so I drew up this contract.”

Our conversation? Did I say anything out of the ordinary?

“But it’s a little extreme...”

I trusted Gol, so I’d thought everyone would be okay.

“Ivy, I don’t know what it is you’ve tamed, but if it’s something rare, you must *always* be on guard. Besides, you’ve only just met me. It’s too soon to trust me; you need to suspect people more. Also, now that people know we’re having waste disposal issues, kids who’ve tamed slimes are being kidnapped. You need to be extra careful.”

Just how many people have demanded I not trust them at this point? I mean, it’s hard not to trust somebody who’s so clearly concerned for my well-being.

“I’d heard the rumor about the kidnappings... So it’s true?” my dad asked.

Gol nodded. “It’s been happening in the capital and the neighboring towns. I haven’t heard any news about the kidnappers being caught yet, so you and Ivy need to be careful.”

“We sure do... Ivy might become a target.”

Gol and my father stared at me, which made me feel uncomfortable. Was I really that easy a target? Well, I’d been targeted once before, so I couldn’t say I was entirely safe.

“Well, she ought to be okay, Mr. Druid, seeing as she has you.”

Having a dad was definitely reassuring, and I had Ciel and Sora to protect me in the wild. All that was left was to be mindful of my own actions as well—that was the hard part.

“Ivy, let’s sign it.” My dad handed me the papers. I signed them both and gave one to my dad, the other to Gol.

“There! Now I can see the monsters you’ve tamed to my heart’s content. Ooh, there he is!”

I followed Gol’s gaze to see Ashley running toward us.

“Sorry I’m late!” He was still wearing his uniform, so he had probably come straight from work.

“Didn’t you say you had the day off?”

“I did, but I got called in suddenly.”

Ashley’s reply made me worry a little. “Are you all right? You’re not too tired, I hope?” At a closer look, Ashley did seem a little worn out.

“I’m all right. I needed to talk to the captain about that thing I brought up.”

“By the way, how did that go?” Gol asked as he set off toward the forest. Ashley scrambled to keep up. My father and I kept a leisurely pace behind them. It was going to be quite a lively day.

Chapter 364:

I Wanna Pet Them!

Deep in the forest, Ashley and Gol looked around for auras and magic energy. Though I couldn't sense magic energy, I did my part and scanned the area for human and monster auras.

"Okay! We should be safe here; Nobody's coming." Gol lowered the bag from his shoulder and took out two slimes. One was a murky green and the other was orange with streaks of white. Both had big eyes and were very cute.

"Um, about my slimes..." I was thinking of introducing Ciel to him, too, but I wasn't sure how to bring it up.

"Getting cold feet? Well, if you'd rather not show me, I understand."

"Oh, no, it's not that. Well, I'll just let you see them as a first step."

"What do you mean, as a first step? Whoa! Ohhh...they're partially transparent? Wow, I've never seen slimes like these before."

When I opened my bag, Sora and Ciel bounded eagerly out and landed at Gol's feet. I looked in my bag to find Flame and Sol mid-yawn. The sight made me feel a bit tired. Flame jumped out of the bag with a little jiggle, leaving only Sol inside.

"What do you want to do, Sol? Stay in the bag?"

Sol shrank itself into a tiny ball, then jumped out.

"Ack! A black slime? Oh, no, no, Ivy! You shouldn't show that one to me so easily! What the hell are you thinking?!"

I made Gol mad... I wonder why? I mean, I asked everyone if he was safe, and they said yes. And from the way he's acting now, I know for sure they weren't wrong.

"But, Mr. Gol, I asked them all and they said you were safe."

"But you shouldn't show such a rare slime to just anybody! Hey, Druid, keep a

firmer grip on your daughter!”

Oh, noooo... Now he's mad at my dad, too. I looked at him, and he smiled awkwardly back at me.

“From the way you’re acting right now, Mr. Gol, I know I wasn’t mistaken to show them to you,” I said, speaking a bit louder than usual to drown out whatever Gol was trying to say.

Gol stopped and looked at me. “I’m flattered... I’m very flattered, but I’m also worried about you.”

Gol had calmed down, and he was indeed smiling proudly... But he did look at me with a hint of concern in his eye.

“Well, don’t worry, I’m fine. Now, about Ciel...”

Wait a minute...if I say “Ciel’s actually an adandara!” will he yell at me again? No, no, he’s calmed down, so he’ll be okay.

“What about Ciel?”

“Ciel is actually not a slime but an adandara... Tee-hee!”

My heart raced as I looked at Gol. His eyebrows drew closer and closer together.

“Aggggh, Ivy, adandaras are giant monsters filled with powerful magic energy... They’re monsters of the highest rank.”

“I know that, sir.”

Everybody knows that, right?

“Okay, then why are you lying to me and saying that’s an adandara?”

I looked down at Ciel in my arms, disguised as a slime.

“Ivy, I don’t think he’ll believe you if Ciel’s just like that,” my dad laughed.

And he had a point: nobody would think Ciel was an adandara, looking the way it did right then. That’s why it had been able to stay with us at the inn.

“Ciel, you can turn back now.”

Mrrrow! With a little trill, Ciel jumped out of my arms and returned to its true

form: a giant adandara who possessed powerful magic energy.

“...Huh?! What?! A slime turned into an adandara?”

Oh, good. He's not mad. I know he's just worried about my safety, but I'd like to avoid being yelled at.

“Yikes... Thank goodness I made us all sign a contract! Aha, an adandara, eh?”

I didn't know why he was sighing loudly and bringing up the contract...or why he was looking at me and heaving another big sigh. *What's this? Now my dad's smiling awkwardly and saying something to Gol. He's probably explaining how it works. Well, I'll just let him handle that.*

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

I looked over at Sora and noticed that Gol's slimes were a little freaked out about mine.

“Sora, Flame, Sol, Ciel, I hope you'll all be good friends.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

Their cheerful replies made me smile. Gol stepped back and crouched down so as not to frighten them. I looked at his slimes, who were sizing up mine. Suddenly, the green slime and I locked eyes with each other.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. I didn't want to scare it since first impressions were very important. *Gee, I wanna touch it. I wanna pet it...*

“The green one's named Ryotta, and the orange one is Nanan.”

Since Gol was kind enough to give me their names, I decided to address them that way. “Ryotta, Nanan, nice to meet you both.”

Can I touch them? No...I really shouldn't. But I'd love to give them a little pat or two. The slimes stared back at me...then scooted a little closer. Then they were at my feet. I crouched down, and now we were really close. I slowly moved my hand toward them.

“Is it okay if I touch you?” As my hand lingered there, Ryotta slowly nuzzled against it. *I got permission!* I couldn’t help but grin. I slowly gave Ryotta a couple of pats, so as not to scare it. And Ryotta just looked up at me as I petted it, completely unfazed.

“This can’t be happening.”

“I think when somebody stares at you so longingly, you have no choice but to cave.”

“It’s because Ivy’s special.”

I thought I heard the three men talking, but I was so excited about petting Nanan that I didn’t catch what they were saying.

“You’re so cute. Can we play together today?”

My slimes jiggled in reply, and Ryotta and Nanan did the same. They were just too cute. I was in heaven.

“Incredible... There are no words...”

Gol quietly watched us all from behind, and my dad and Ashley had also come a bit closer. Ciel had shapeshifted into a slime and was body-slamming Sora. I think it had felt left out. I gave Ciel a few pats, and it smiled back up at me.

“Go ahead, Mr. Gol. Please, pet my monsters.”

“Er... I can pet them?”

“I think they’ll be fine with it. They let me do it,” Ashley assured Gol, who looked startled in turn. He carefully reached out to Sora and gave it a gentle pat. Seeing this, Flame bounced high and slammed against Gol.

“Flame wants some pats, too.”

“Whoaaa, this is amazing. I’ve never met slimes like this before.”

After a while, everyone was petting the slimes.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“You wanna play? Okay, just be sure to stay where we can see you.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

Ryotta and Nanan looked at me and jiggled happily. We all sat on a fallen tree branch a few meters away to watch them play. Next to me was Gol, then Ashley, and then my father. Ciel had returned to adandara form and was rolling the slimes around with its paws. Ryotta and Nanan were a little nervous at first, but soon they were having fun.

“What an amazing sight...” Gol murmured in awe.

Was it really that extraordinary? It was something I saw every day. The only thing that made it special was that there were two extra slimes today.

“I thought it was strange that you were bringing me this deep into the forest... but with monsters as rare as yours, I don’t blame you.”

He had that right. It was especially dangerous for my adandara to be seen.

“So, um, Mr. Gol...may I ask you some questions about slimes?”

“Slimes?” he asked in confusion.

“Yes, sir. Since my slimes are so unusual, I don’t know much about what ordinary ones are like.”

“Oh, now I see. But you know...looking at them now, I’m starting to wonder if I don’t know enough about slimes.”

Gol was watching Ryotta and Flame as they played the body-slamming game.

“But they’re just playing, right?”

“They’re usually much shyer than that. They would never play by body-slamming somebody on the first day they met them...not until now.”

Well, that’s interesting... Ryotta and Nanan were merrily body-slamming my slimes before my very eyes. *Is this all my slimes’ doing?*

“Also, slimes never let people they just met pet them.”

But they looked so happy to get those pats just now.

“Ryotta and Nanan had a kind tamer, and it took them two...no, more like three years to finally be open to being petted.”

“Then I guess I just have good luck. They let me pet them right away. They sure are cute.”



“Er, that’s not what I was getting at...” Gol gave me a perplexed look, and I responded with a confused expression. Gol smiled sheepishly, then proceeded to explain what ordinary slimes were like. Lastly, he made me promise that if I ever showed my creatures to anyone, I would make them sign a contract first.

Chapter 365:

Don't Talk About Money!

“There, all packed!”

After we got everything ready for our trip, I swept my eyes around the room one last time. We'd taken out all the trash, and we hadn't forgotten anything. All we had to do was put the creatures in their bag and we would be ready to walk out.

“Okay, all set! Ivy...think we're finally ready to hit the road?”

“Yup, we should be fine.”

Sixteen days had passed since the festival ended. We'd been planning to leave a bit earlier, but a bunch of things came up which had made us drag our feet and stay in Hatahi longer than we'd planned. During that time, Ashley happily told us that some progress had been made in reforming the way tamers operated. As we'd predicted, it was much better to simply show the tamers how it was done rather than trying to explain it verbally. Gol, however, griped that he had “too much work to do now.” Ashley's monster phobia was still not entirely cured, but he promised his father that he would keep at it for the long haul until he overcame his fears someday. Ashley's father, Arash, had thanked us and said we'd helped his son get much stronger. We were a bit confused since we felt like we really hadn't done anything, but we were glad to see that everything was headed in a good direction.

“It's time... Let's go.”

My monsters gathered at my father's signal. I put them all in the bag, and then my father and I had one last look around the room before we went downstairs where Chikar was waiting to send us off.

“Thank you for being such a good host all this time,” my father said to him.

“Your cooking was delicious. Thank you,” I added.

“The pleasure was all mine. Thank you for teaching me those new dishes. I

hope you'll both come again someday."

Chikar walked us out of the inn. We waved goodbye, then headed for the front gate.

Gol was at the gate waiting for us. "Good morning. Glad to see the weather's so nice today," he said.

"Thanks for everything, sir. We had a lot of fun."

It had only been for a few days, but I'd really enjoyed playing with Gol's slimes.

"That fool Ashley was supposed to be here, too, but something came up at work. He was gutted about it."

"Oh, that's too bad. Well, tell him we said good luck!" my father said.

Gol nodded in reply. Then we walked through the gate and waved goodbye to him.

"Take care," he said.

"We will. And take care of yourself, too, Mr. Gol."

We said goodbye to the gatekeeper and left the village.

"All right...Hataka or bust!" my dad cried.

I giggled and cheered, pumping my fist in the air. When we started down the village road, my father laughed for some reason.

"What's up?"

"Nothing... I was just remembering how everyone was acting when we started getting ready to leave."

We did have quite a time preparing for our exit. It started when we first began packing, when our departure day was finally in sight. We gathered everything we'd need at the dump, and then we found rows of potions and magic stones when we returned to my creatures. There were so many that my dad froze on the spot. We managed to collect them all and regroup with Ciel, only to find that the adandara had come back from its hunting trip with a giant monster in its jaws.

“Why?”

“Maybe they overheard what we were saying yesterday?”

Through our confusion, my father and I retraced our steps. The night before, we had made a list of everything we would need for our trip. We also happened to talk about all the expenses we’d racked up during our stay in Hatahi.

When we totaled up our expenses, I said, “Oh dear, that’s more expensive than I thought it would be.” That was probably what had lit the fuse. But right after that, my father had said, “Don’t worry, we still have lots of minerals and magic stones to sell. We’ve got plenty to spare.” So that should have been the end of it. And yet...

I was flattered that my creatures were worried about us. The more we traveled, the more likely we were to get wounded, tired, or sick, so I was grateful for Sora and Flame’s potions. But I thought that *ten* of each type, that would cause a panic if we tried to sell them, was a bit much. Flame had gotten better at keeping the magic stone levels low, as most of them were Levels 5 and 6. I was grateful for that, even though there were stones of Level S and SS mixed in among them. But I thought *one hundred* magic stones was far too many. And we could never sell those potions in a million years! My father and I gave Flame and Sora plenty of pats as we thanked them for all the magic stones and potions, and we somehow got them to understand.

I really was grateful to have a good supply of meat for our journey, too. Since I had a common magic bag, I could keep it fresh. Even magic bags had their limits, though. Since the monster Ciel had hunted was so gigantic, one of them was more than enough. *I’m sorry, sweetie, but we don’t need four of them. Frown at me with those pitiful eyes all you want; they’re not fitting in my magic bag.* My father and I gave Ciel plenty of praise and told it how strong it was, which finally brought the adandara back to its cheerful self.

We could sell the magic stones and the monster meat to the guild; they would certainly be pleased. But I didn’t know where Ciel hunted the monsters, which were not a type that could be found in these parts. We would probably have no trouble selling the magic stones, but I was still anxious. As we talked about what we should do with them, Ashley and Gol approached us. We panicked—we’d

completely forgotten we had made plans to see them—and my father explained our situation and asked for their help. Gol exploded with laughter and said he'd get Guild Master Lish and Captain Tabulo to lend a hand. He popped back to the village and returned less than an hour later with the two men and a fresh new contract. They took one look at the monsters and the magic stones and signed it on the spot, meaning we'd somehow managed to sell everything without a hitch. Then, between getting our money, butchering our monster meat, and various other odds and ends, we wound up delaying our trip by a few days. Well, we had made it on the road, so all's well that ends well. Though, I felt sorry for poor Guild Master Lish and Captain Tabulo since we'd caused problems for them up until the very end. But they thanked us, saying, "The festival cost the village a lot more than we expected this year, but we'll be able to make up the deficit with all this monster meat."

"We'd better be careful never to discuss money in front of the monsters again," my father said somberly as he walked beside me.

"Yes, I think that's a good idea."

We looked at each other and laughed.

"I think it's safe now..." he said.

We had walked quite a long way out of town on the village road by then. I scanned for auras, and we were in the clear.

"Yeah, we're good."

I opened the bag. Flame jumped out first, followed by Ciel and Sora. Lastly, Sol...was still deep asleep, so I quietly closed the bag. Ciel looked around, then turned into its true adandara form. No matter how many times I saw the creature grow bigger, it looked so majestic every time.

Mrrrow. After Ciel finished stretching, it took the lead and guided us off the village road. My father and I followed without giving it a second thought. Flame was wiggling happily on top of Ciel, and when I looked at my father behind me, I saw Sora on his head. He always did spoil Sora.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Sora sure loves being up there."

My father gave the slime on his head a couple of pats. “It probably likes the view from up here.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

That made sense. Sora was usually so close to the ground.

“Be careful not to fall off, okay?” my father said.

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora happily jiggled in reply. I looked at Ciel, walking in the lead. Its body was sleek and muscled, and it was bigger now than it had been when we first set out on our travels. It was growing into an even stronger companion.

“Oh, Ciel, we don’t need any special minerals this time, okay?”

But Ciel just continued walking without responding.

Huh? Ciel...has no comment?

“Ciel...those monsters you hunted gave us a bunch of money, so we really don’t need any minerals, all right?”

Meeew.

It sounded upset, but I needed to be firm.

“You’ve already done more than enough for us, Ciel...”

Danger was imminent when Ciel got like that.

“Sora and Flame worked very hard for us, too, so we have more than enough money now. We’re super rich, so we don’t need to sell anything. Let’s just take it easy and enjoy ourselves on the way to Hataka, okay?”

“Yeah, I love a nice, relaxing trip.”

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

What a relief. Our magic box is starting to get so full it won’t fit any more of those magic stones and potions we can’t sell. Dad and I are trying to figure out if we need to buy another box...

Meowww.

“What’s wrong? Oh, yeah, I see the fruit on that tree! It looks yummy. Let’s go pick some.”

SIDE:

Fecilla's Job

FECILLA'S PERSPECTIVE

“Good morning! Have you seen Captain Oght?”

“Hi, Fecilla. No, I haven’t seen him today.”

“Thank you.”

My morning’s work began with looking for Captain Oght. The sight of me running frantically around the village watch station had become quite common there.

Many of the staff said they hadn’t seen him before I could even ask, which made my task of finding him a little easier. Whether or not that was a good thing remained a mystery, though. Captain Abira would always smile sheepishly and give me a piece of candy whenever I saw him. One of his staff members once asked him, “Aren’t you going to give Captain Oght a warning?” and he answered, “I only fight battles I can win.” On that day, he’d given me candy and a cookie.

I had been in Ratome Village for about two months now. I spent my first week following Captain Oght, having my duties explained to me, and meeting the people who worked there. In addition to the staff, there were also the trainees, which made remembering everyone’s names quite a task. I still messed up people’s names to this day, but they all let it slide, saying, “You can’t help it; there’s so many of us.” It was a constant relief to me that everyone was so kind.

Just when I’d started to settle into my job there, I had a hard time finding Captain Oght when I went to make my morning rounds and get my instructions for the day. I assumed something had come up, and when I was cleaning his office, Vice-Captain Velivera came in. When he noticed Captain Oght was nowhere in sight, he smiled angelically. I gasped in terror the moment I saw it. I

nervously clamped a hand over my mouth, but our eyes had met. He saw it.

“Good morning, Fecilla.”

My heart raced, wondering if he was going to yell at me, but Vice-Captain Velivera returned to his normal demeanor. I gave him a curious look as I greeted him.

“I thought he was finally taking his job seriously...but it didn’t even last two weeks.” Velivera set some papers down on Captain Oght’s desk and sighed heavily.

“Pardon me, sir, but did Captain Oght perhaps get a sudden mission?” I figured I might as well talk to Velivera since I still needed to get my tasks for the day.

“Nope. He’s playing hooky.”

“*Ohh*, he’s playing hooky. Wait...hooky?” It was bizarre hearing that word come out of Vice-Captain Velivera’s mouth.

“You’re the only one who doesn’t know about the captain’s hooky habit. He does it every day without fail.”

Captain Oght...the man who diligently worked for all those days in a row...is a slacker? Sensing something odd was going on, I gave Vice-Captain Velivera a strange look.

He smiled back at me and explained, “Didn’t you know? The staff have been placing bets on when he would get bored and start slacking.”

“I didn’t know, sir... Um, let me just go look for him.”

“Don’t put yourself through that torture. I asked the staff to let you know when they see him.”

“Er, are you sure that’s all right, sir? I need to get my daily task...”

“Don’t worry. When his desk starts to get buried in paperwork, we’ll tie him to his chair.”

I smiled, amused that he’d made a joke. The man was usually so solemn.

It was five days later that I learned Vice-Captain Velivera was not joking.

When the mountain of paperwork had piled quite high on Captain Oght's desk, Velivera rounded up as many trainees as he could and conducted a thorough search of Ratome Village. An hour later, Vice-Captain Velivera had successfully - apprehended Captain Oght. When I finally saw the captain again after all that time, he greeted me as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

"Hey there," he said.

"Er...good morning, sir. Um, so..." My eyes wandered; I didn't know how to address him. I'd never dreamed his vice-captain would literally tie him up with rope. Velivera expertly bound the captain to his chair and set the documents in front of him. Captain Oght grimaced at the sight of the mountain of work, but when he saw the look on Vice-Captain Velivera's face, he sobered up and got to it. I was dying of curiosity to see what sort of menacing expression could possibly scare the aloof Oght straight...but I was too terrified to look.

After ten hours under Vice-Captain Velivera's strict surveillance, Captain Oght finally finished his paperwork.

During my two months here, Captain Oght was tied to his chair seven times... yet he never seemed to learn his lesson. I came to realize what Velivera meant when he said "I only fight battles I can win." When I explained to Head Watchman Abira that I now understood what Velivera had meant, he gave me a whole basket of cookies. They were delicious.

On another morning, I was alone in Captain Oght's office tidying up. As I was organizing his papers and doing some cleaning, one of the staff brought in a document with the word *urgent* written on it. Figuring I should try to find him, I started my search at the station. After I quickly found him napping in the break room, I told him about the urgent document, and he immediately took care of it. Then the next day, I found myself once again searching for Captain Oght to deal with an urgent document.

That time, I found him snacking in the canteen. I handed him the document and a pen. After this situation repeated itself countless times, I noticed that he would play hooky in the station in the mornings, so whenever there was an urgent document or a pile of neglected papers to attend to, I would spend the

beginning of the day flying around the station looking for him. Since he always left the station after noon, finding him after that would be hell. In the end, I came to spend most of my mornings searching for Captain Oght. Thanks to that, I became better acquainted with the staff who looked on as I worked.

“Aha... I spy a Captain Oght!”

Today, he was sipping tea on a bench in the garden.

“Morning. Have some tea.”

“Oh, thank you, sir, don’t mind if I... Now hold it right there! Check over this document first.”

If I let Captain Oght steer the conversation his way, he would escape me before I realized it, so I always made sure to take care of business first. That was very important.

Captain Oght swept his eyes over the urgent document, scribbled something onto it, and handed it back to me.

“There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” All the day’s documents were taken care of now. “Captain Oght, Vice-Captain Velivera was looking everywhere for you yesterday.”

Oght’s face twisted in discomfort. “Agggh... Well, it’s probably okay.” From the way his eyes wandered as he sipped his tea, I figured he must have been naughty again.

“You know how harsh he is when he gets angry.”

“Eh, I’ll be fine.”

“Ack!” I yelped, my eyes meeting with a certain someone. Seeing who it was, Captain Oght stared intently at me. The vice-captain was marching over to us, a tight smile plastered on his face. He followed my gaze and looked past me...and smiled as Captain Oght made a strange yelp.

“Now, I believe you owe me an explanation for yesterday. What do you have to say, sir?”

Now that Vice-Captain Velivera was certifiably infuriated, I tactfully avoided his gaze. Working alongside Captain Oght had taught me that Velivera was unbelievably terrifying when he had snapped.

“Ha ha ha! Well, I’d better get back to work.”

Vice-Captain Velivera answered Captain Oght with a silent stare.

I’d never known the sheer spine-freezing terror that silence could evoke until Velivera taught it to me. *I had him sign the urgent document already...so maybe I should get back to work. Yeah, that’s a good idea.* I quietly, slowly moved my feet in an attempt to get away from them.

“Hey, Fecilla!”

“Eek!”

Vice-Captain Velivera’s commanding voice made me overreact and bite my tongue. I could hear Captain Oght trying to cover his laughter and failing miserably. I was so embarrassed.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have been so loud.”

“No, sir, it’s all right. Was there something you wanted?”

“The head watchman says he’s glad that the documents are much easier to read now.”

Ooh, that’s flattering to hear! Sometimes the documents from the staff had illegible words in them. Whenever I noticed that, I’d have the staff rewrite them.

“Some of these bastards really do have sloppy handwriting...” Captain Oght sighed. Velivera smiled back at him in agreement. And they were right: sometimes the scribbles didn’t even look like words at all.

“All right, Captain. Let’s get you back to work.” Velivera grabbed Captain Oght by the collar and dragged him toward the station. It was impressive how Velivera paid no mind to Oght as he griped all the way.

“You come, too, Fecilla.”

“Yes, sir.”

I still made so many mistakes at my job, but I was proud that I was getting better and better at it.

Chapter 366:

First Time Fishing

“Is this good?”

“Yeah, just put the bait on the hook and you’re ready. Go ahead and toss it into the river somewhere.”

I baited my hook while my father looked on. *Just toss it into the river somewhere...* I imagined myself casting the line over and over. *Okay, I think I’ve got this.*

“Yah! Um...huh?”

My hook fell much closer to me than I’d wanted it to...but it would have to do. I’d just wait and see if any fish bit it there. It was my first time fishing, so of course I was bad at it. Too bad it wasn’t going as well as I’d thought it would, though.

“If you flick your wrist more, your line will sink further out into the river.”

“My wrist? Okay, I’ll try that next time.” I watched my dad cast his line, and sure enough, his flick of the wrist made it soar farther.

“Once you get the hang of it, you’ll be a good fisher,” he said.

I nodded and looked at my line. Apparently I was supposed to feel the fish tugging at it, but...nothing was happening yet.

A big river ran between Hatahi and Hataka villages, and my father said it had some very tasty fish. The more I heard him rave about them, the more I wanted to have a taste, so we decided to go fishing...but how long was this going to take? I looked at my father, who didn’t look particularly impatient. *I guess it’s good form to stare mindlessly into the distance.*

“Hm? Ivy, is something tugging on your line?”

“Huh?!”

He was right. I could feel a little pressure on my pole. Did that mean I had a

bite, even though I was barely feeling any resistance? I turned the reel in surprise, bringing the line in and coiling it round and round on the gear attached to my wooden fishing pole.

“Steady...steady... Take your time so it doesn’t get away.”

Take my time? Am I winding the line in too fast? Steady...steady... I felt a firm tug on the line, and I peered into the river.

“Ooh, I actually got one!”

There was a fish on my line, desperately swimming with all its might. Flustered at the sight, I yanked my pole up into the air.

“No, not yet!”

“Huh?!”

Splash!

Hm?

“Agggh, it got away.”

“It got away?”

I looked at the end of my line, and I could see that the hook had no fish on it. *No way...but it was there a second ago!*

“Arrrgh... Fishing’s hard.”

“I’d say the key is to be patient while waiting and reeling them in.”

Okay, next time for sure! I put some more bait on my hook and tossed my line into the river. *Huh? Now it went in a completely different spot than before. And I flicked my wrist just like Dad did... What did I do wrong?* I looked where my hook had hit the water, and it seemed to be in an even worse location than before. *Well...the river’s all connected anyway, so it should be fine. Okay, now we wait.*

“...I believe you when you say patience is important, but I’m getting really antsy,” I said. It was hard sitting still and waiting.

Splash, splash.

I looked toward the sound of the lapping waters and saw my dad lifting a fish out of the river.

“Wow, what a big one!”

“It’s actually on the small side.”

“Really? But it’s the size of both my hands.”

“I think it’s a little smaller than that, Ivy.” He put the fish in a net which he then placed in the water so we could keep the fish alive while we looked it over.

“Keep at it, Ivy.”

“Yeaaah... It’s too hard.”

And it had sounded so easy when he explained the process to me. You know, when I had to catch a snake with just my hands and a net, that was also really hard. Sitting still for so long made me want to move, and I felt like I was wasting my time.

“Maybe patience just isn’t one of your virtues, Ivy.”

He might be right. Sitting still made me feel like I was missing out on something. I kept thinking about all the things I could be doing instead.

“I think you’re right.”

“Well, you’ll just need to be mindful of that and practice waiting. At least try to catch one fish.”

“Practice waiting, huh...? Okay, I’m catching at least one fish!”

Which was easier said than done. My line wasn’t budging. *Maybe the fish ate the bait and left? Should I take the line out and see if the bait’s still on it? But what if they try to eat it while I’m reeling it in? No, wait, they wouldn’t do that. Is my hook in the wrong part of the river? That would mean I should definitely move it, huh? Errrgh, what should I do?*

“If they’re not biting, you can always move your line.”

“Aha, I thought so!”

Okay, I’ll move my line. I’ll just reel it in and check whether the bait’s still there.

“Is the bait still there?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Then maybe you just had it in a bad spot. You’ll catch a lot more fish where there are rocks.”

“Really? How about over there?”

There was a formation of boulders a bit away. When I pointed at it, my father nodded and said, “That should be good. Ah, I got a bite!”

I looked in the direction of his happy voice to see him reeling in his second fish.

He’s so good at this... Okay, this time I’m getting one!

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

I flicked my wrist over and over, imagining my line flying where I wanted it to go. I gripped my pole, willing the line to land where I wanted it to this time, and then I heard Sora’s voice. I looked over to see it was bouncing toward my feet.

“Good morning. You sure slept late.”

Tired from the journey, my creatures had crashed hard after their lunch. I looked over at the tree in the distance and saw Ciel, Flame, and Sol asleep in a cuddle pile. We’d held them back quite a bit during winter and spring until the festival was over, so now that we were finally letting them play to their hearts’ content, they were exhausted.

“Puuu?”

“Hm? Oh, this is a fishing rod. You put bait on the hook, toss it into the river, and fish eat it.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora playfully jiggled and bounced onto my head in understanding.

“Agh! You wanna be on *my* head today?”

The weight on my head made me wobble a little. Sora wasn’t heavy, but the extra weight did slightly throw me off.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Oh, I can’t say no to you.”

Well, Sora should be fine up there while I’m waiting. Okay, I’m gonna toss my hook all the way over to those rocks! Hm? Huh? Sora’s getting in the way... No, wait...I think it’s helping? It’s stopping me from moving my head...only my wrist...

Shoooooot!

“Whoa...I did a good job?” I was a little dazed when I saw that my line really had gone exactly where I wanted it to. I’d been preoccupied with making sure Sora didn’t fall off my head, so the sensation was just a little different from before. Could it be...that not being able to move my head was *good*? I had only moved my wrist, after all.

“Puuu?”

“Sora, I think you helped! Thanks.”

Next time, I’ll be careful to keep my head still while I cast.

“Hey, that was a good cast! Did you get the hang of it?”

“Well... A little, I guess?”

“Okay. Well, once you’ve got the basics down, it gets easier and easier.”

I nodded in reply and sat down on a nearby boulder to wait for a bite. Sora was wiggling softly atop my head. Was it asleep? Sensing that it was, I brought my hand up to my head. I slowly petted Sora, and sure enough, it was sleeping.

“You still tired? Sleep well, okay?”

Ahh...now I’m sleepy. All this sitting still...is making my eyelids... But this sure does feel good. The walking made me sweaty, but the breeze by the water was so nice. Makes the sunlight just about perfect.

I began to drift off...

“Puuu!”

“Hm? Sora? Huh?! Augh!”

Sora’s loud cry snapped me awake. As I fumbled to sit up, I noticed that something was yanking on my fishing pole.

“Thanks, Sora.”

Okay...this one's pulling much harder than the other one, but I won't let it win.
I slowly reeled it in. *Steady...steady...*

“I did it, Sora! I caught a fish! I caught a fish!”

“Pu! Pu! Pu! Puuu!”

The next thing I knew, Sora was bouncing happily around me. I smiled and thanked it.

Okay, now I take the fish off my hook and put it in a net. Where's my net...?

“Here.”

I took the net from my father. “Thanks, Dad.”

“For a first catch, that's a real beauty.”

The fish was bigger than both my hands. It was the only one I caught on my first fishing trip, but I had so much fun. My father caught six whole fish. He really was good at it.

Chapter 367:

Something Doesn't Feel Right?

We would arrive in Hataka Village in two or three days...or at least that was the plan. But my father had been acting a little strange lately, and Ciel's head had been in the clouds, too.

"What's up?" I asked. "You've been acting weird the last couple of days."

"Huh? Oh, sorry. I was just thinking this forest doesn't feel right."

The forest doesn't feel right? I looked around. Spring buds were popping out, and the creatures of the woods were on the move, bursting back to life. I didn't understand why my dad would say it "didn't feel right."

"I don't feel anything."

I scanned the area for auras, but no matter how hard I focused, nothing struck me as odd. I sensed monsters in the distance and smaller animals close by, but I didn't notice anything that felt amiss.

"I'm sorry, I hope I didn't worry you."

"Oh, I'm okay. But what feels strange? Ciel seems to be noticing it, too, whatever it is."

Mrrrow.

My dad looked at Ciel, who had been on edge all day.

"I'm not sure how to put it. Everything looks normal...but I *feel* something."

Huh? He feels something?

"Do you know what it is, Ciel?" It didn't answer, meaning it didn't know. "Is it because you and Dad are alike?"

Mrrrow.

Maybe all the years adventuring and living in the forest had given my dad and Ciel a shared understanding.

“Do you think it’s safe for us to keep heading toward Hataka?”

“The only rumors I heard about Hataka back in Hatahi were that their guild master and head watchman don’t get along. But other than that, nothing’s wrong.”

So there’s some trouble between the guild master and the head watchman. All the town and village leaders I’d met during my travels up till now had been good friends, so this was a new idea for me... Wait a minute, the leaders not liking each other can’t be good!

“Do you think Hataka’s doing okay?”

“Well...probably, yeah. Let’s see how things feel when we get there, and then we can decide if we want to stay.”

“Okay.”

After that conversation, my dad and I decided to shorten our sleeping time so we could get to Hataka sooner. We took turns sleeping to make that happen.

“Are you okay?” my dad asked. “You’ve only been sleeping two hours a night for the past three days.”

“I’m fine. I’ve walked for five days straight without sleeping before.”

My memories of those days were so hazy, though, that I wasn’t sure if it had really been five days. The fifth day was probably the day I finally collapsed. Or was it the sixth day?

“Five days? Don’t do that, Ivy. You’ve put way too much strain on your health.”

“But I’d never do that now that I’ve got you and Ciel. This was back when I was traveling alone.”

“I guess you couldn’t have helped it back then. Aha, I see the gate!”

I followed his gaze and saw a wooden gate. Hatahi’s entrance was so flashy that Hataka’s looked extremely plain in comparison, even though it was technically a regular gate.

“Huh?” My dad suddenly stopped in his tracks, then turned around and stared

critically back into the forest. I turned around with him...but I felt nothing. No monster auras, either. Seriously, what was wrong?

“What?” My bag started to wiggle. The slimes had probably noticed I was acting strangely. “Don’t worry, I’m okay.”

“For the life of me, I can’t figure it out.” With a loud sigh, my dad softly put his hand on my back. “Let’s keep going. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

We quickened our pace to Hataka’s front gate. The gatekeeper smiled at the sight of us.

“Hello, folks. May I see your papers?”

We showed our guild cards and got permission to enter.

“Here’s a village permit. If you lose it, you’ll need to pay to replace it.”

We took the permit and thanked the gatekeeper.

“Pardon me for asking, but has anything unusual been going on recently?”

The gatekeeper’s eyes lowered cryptically at my father’s question. *Was* there something wrong?

“I don’t know anything about it...but the veteran adventurers have told the guild master that there’s an anomaly in the forest.”

So something *was* wrong. I looked at my father, and he was deep in thought.

“Any idea what it might be?”

“No, not a clue. Rumor has it they’re sending out a scouting party tomorrow.”

“Okay. Thanks for telling us.”

My father thanked the gatekeeper and walked through the gate into Hataka Village. I followed. Just like all the other villages, Hataka had a Main Street that stretched out immediately from the front gate, with shops lining both sides.

“It feels a bit quiet here,” I said.

“Maybe it’s because we were just in a livelier village, but it does seem a bit empty.”

We watched the people working in shops and on the street as we headed for

the plaza. We'd decided that the adventurer brawls had finally settled down enough for us to pitch a tent in the plaza. My dad said he'd make a final decision when we got there, but I was sure we would be fine.

"That's the place," he said.

The plaza wasn't that large, but it was well maintained. It had a cooking area and free water for all campers.

"The adventurers do look like they've settled down." My dad paused at the plaza entrance and had a good look around.

"Hello there, will you be camping in the plaza?"

I turned at the sound of the voice to see a lady dressed in the same uniform as the gatekeeper.

"Hello, Miss. How are things going in the plaza right now?"

"Quite calm, sir. Since we had such a harsh winter, most adventurers left to towns and villages with more opportunities as soon as springtime came. We have a drunken brawl every once in a while, but we break them up right away, so nobody ever gets hurt."

"Thanks. All right, we'll stay here if we may."

"Of course, sir. May I see your permit? I'll have to add it there."

Add what, where? We took out the permit we got from the gatekeeper and handed it to the lady. She put it into a magic box and pushed a button. In a few seconds, the box popped open and revealed a black sheet of paper along with our permit.

"This black paper will serve as your plaza camping permit."

"I've never seen that item before."

She giggled, "Yes, I'm quite proud of it. It's rather rare."

So it was rare. I definitely hadn't seen anything like it before.

"Oh, and if you ever need anything, give me a yell. My name is Puffy."

"Thanks. I'm Druid, and this is my daughter Ivy."

“We won’t be here long, Miss Puffy, but I hope we’ll be good friends,” I said.

“Same here! Call me anytime, okay? Well, hope you settle in okay.”

We parted ways with Puffy and looked around the plaza. I wanted to pitch our tent close to the cooking area.

“Would that be a good place?” I asked my father, noticing a fairly empty area.

“Hmm... No, let’s not. Let’s go over there instead.”

I looked where he was pointing. It was a bit farther away from the cooking area than the spot I’d suggested.

“Why over there?”

“Because the tents next to it are a family and a group of women.”

I gave my father a funny look because both tents were empty. All that was in front of them were tables, chairs, and other little things. How did he know what kind of people they belonged to?

“How do you know who’s using those tents?” I asked my father as we pitched our tent. He discreetly pointed to the one next to ours. I followed his finger and saw some washed dishes drying.

“They have kids’ forks and spoons,” he said.

And sure enough, there were two sets of child-sized eating utensils and dishes. I’d noticed they had dishes drying, but I hadn’t paid any specific attention to what they were. Besides, children’s dishes weren’t that much smaller than adult dishes. I didn’t think anyone would notice unless they got really close.

I gave my father a nod of understanding, and then he pointed to our other neighboring tent. On the table in front of it was...a basket? When I looked closer, it was filled with a tangled mass of ribbons, hair clips, and all sorts of beauty items.

“I didn’t see a single men’s item there. Well, it’s only conjecture, so I’m not a hundred percent certain.”

Now that made sense. The basket was indeed filled with the sort of items

women liked, and I couldn't see any masculine ones. I looked back to where we'd been standing when Druid had decided to move here. It was hard to believe he could have noticed the dishes and the basket from so far away.

"Dad, you've got eyes like a hawk."

"Come on, I'm just average."

I can guarantee you're not.



EXTRA * Let's Give Gyoza Another Try!



THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

EXTRA:

Let's Give Gyoza Another Try!

I looked over the gyoza recipe my dad had written down on a piece of paper. He'd transcribed this recipe while I described my memories to him. Since it was hard for me to write down the cooking directions while searching my memories, it was very helpful that my dad had done it for me.

"So I was right: We really did underestimate just how thin we needed to make those wrappers."

Last time we made gyoza, they came out three times as big as the ones in my memory, and they were too thick as well. They were still pleasant enough to eat, but they were a far cry from what I wanted. Ideally, the wrappers would be as thin as I remembered, and they could be eaten in just two bites. The thin skin was especially important; I absolutely longed to eat gyoza like that! Also, the gyoza wrappers in my memory had a crispness to them—that was the goal!

My dad and I stood side by side in the kitchen as we got to work on some gyoza. While I thinly minced the vegetables, I had my father knead the minced meat until it was sticky.

"I think the meat's ready. Can I add the vegetables now?" I asked.

"Yes, please."

I dumped the vegetables into the meat bowl. Now they just needed to be mixed, and my father would take care of that.

Meanwhile, I was making the wrappers. I added some hot water to my flour and whisked the mixture together with a pair of chopsticks, then I added some salt and swirled it around and around. When the dough got cool enough to touch, I kneaded it well. Once I was finished with that, I let the dough rest for thirty minutes. I covered the bowl with a damp towel to make sure the dough didn't dry out.

"Hey, Ivy, do gyoza only come in one flavor?"

The flavor... I'd been so obsessed over the wrapper thinness and the dumpling size that I'd almost forgotten about the flavor. My father did love his food on the spicy side.

"I think it'll still be good with a little heat powder mixed in."

Heat powder was a dried and powdered medicinal herb that was easy to mix into food. And since it was powdered, it was easy to measure, too. We had five different kinds of heat powder at the moment. Whichever one we used would greatly affect the spiciness of the gyoza, but I'd let my father take care of that. I had a feeling that any of the powders mixed into the gyoza would go perfectly with some liquor.

"Sounds good. Let's put the filling into a few different bowls and try some seasonings." My dad got out five little bowls.

"Are we really going to make five flavors?"

"Yeah, I think it'll be more fun that way."

He had a point.

"How about this?" he said, holding up a tangy fruit. *Fruit in gyoza?*

"It might work."

"Fruity sauce tastes good on meat, right? So I figure it'll go well in gyoza, too."

He was right: Tangy fruit sauce was delicious with meat. The sweet and sour flavors of the fruit were a refreshing contrast to the fatty meat. The fruit my father was holding up was *especially* tangy, though. Would it really work?

"This is just a test, so we'll make a small batch of this one."

"Yeah, I guess that'll be okay," I agreed.

It might taste super good. I took the fruit from my father, peeled it, and cut it into slightly bigger pieces than the vegetables. I handed it to my dad, and he mixed it into one of the small bowls of gyoza filling.

After the time was up, I checked on my rested dough. I remembered letting the dough rest in my past life, but I didn't see much of a difference in it afterward, so I really had no idea how long I was supposed to let it lie there.

Still, our timing seemed to be okay, so it would probably work out.

I rolled the dough into a long snake and cut it into smaller balls than last time.
Okay, let's roll these out as thin as humanly possible!

Um... Huh?

"Dad... That filling on the left...isn't it a bit red?"

I looked over at his finished gyoza fillings, and one of them had a very peculiar color. It was bright red, probably from an obscene amount of heat powder. I looked at my dad, and he gazed pitifully back at me.

"Yeaah... I was thinking I'd make some super-spicy gyoza..."

"Will they be edible?"

"Probably. They'll be spicy, but not so spicy we can't eat them."

Really? But the bright-red heat powder is the same stuff they use in the shock pouches you throw at monsters to make them retreat. Still...I guess he can't unmix the filling now.

"I'm a little nervous," I admitted. Just how spicy would it be?

"Me, too."

My father and I looked at each other and laughed. We'd just have to have extra water on standby when we ate them.

I rolled the tiny dough balls out with a rolling pin and, just like last time, it was tough to roll them into perfect circles. I looked at my rolled-out wrappers. They were much thinner than the ones from last time...I hoped.

After I made all the wrappers, we got to work filling them. We put in less filling than last time and pinched them together with a gentle touch.

"Ack, I broke it!"

And yet, since the wrappers were so thin, they broke easily.

"Argh! I hate this!" I growled.

"Relax, Ivy. It's just a little tear."

He was right. If I didn't relax, I'd just break more wrappers. I shook the

tension out of my shoulders and filled more of the wrappers. After I pinched the last one shut, I sighed in relief.

“All done!”

I smiled at the sight of the tidy rows of gyoza. It gave me a sense of accomplishment.

“Okay, let’s cook ’em.” My dad got out a large frying pan. It was usually too big for me to use, but it was going to come in handy today.

We wound up with four flavors in all. Most of them were gyoza seasoned with ponzu. The slightly spicy gyoza was the second-biggest batch since we knew that one would be delicious. The super-spicy kind and the fruity gyoza batches were small since they were just tests.

I arranged the gyoza in the pan and lit the flame. Once they were browned, I added water to steam-sauté them. When it had evaporated, I removed the lid and added some oil to crisp up the wrappers, then I put our cooked gyoza onto plates and carried them to the table.

“One of these gyoza looks quite a bit different from the others,” my dad observed.

“Ha ha! It sure does.”

Since the filling was bright red, it looked a bit pink through the thin wrapper. It looked kind of tasty, but I knew it would be fiery hot. It was the kind of gyoza you needed to psych yourself up to eat.

“Okay, let’s dig in.”

“Yeah.”

We had steamed rice and a big supply of water at the ready.

First, we tried the gyoza seasoned with ponzu. They were small enough to be eaten in two bites, just like I’d hoped. And since I’d taken the time to roll the wrappers thin, I was immensely satisfied.

“Let’s just see if they taste good.”

I took a bite... The browned wrapper crunched against my teeth, and then the

hot meat juices flooded into my mouth.

“Ah! This is it!”

The parts of the gyoza where I’d repaired the ripped wrapper with extra dough were different in texture, but it was so good.

“Yeah, the wrapper is much thinner this time. These are amazing.”

My dad must have really liked them, too—we devoured the first plate in a flash. I could have easily wolfed down another three plates of the same flavor.

“Next are the fruity ones.” My dad moved the plate of fruity gyoza to the center of the table.

“Are we eating the spicy ones last?” I asked.

“I think that would be best...unless you want to eat the spicy gyoza first?”

If they were too spicy, I might lose my sense of taste, so I decided it would be a good idea to have the super-spicy ones last.

“Yeah, let’s leave the spicy ones for the end and eat the fruity ones first.”

I grabbed a fruity gyoza from the plate and took a bite. *Mm?! Um...this is way too tangy!*

“I can’t taste the meat...the fruit is too heavy.”

My dad looked just as conflicted as I was when he tasted it himself. “Yeah, it’s really tangy. It’s not quite what I thought it would be.”

I nodded. I’d thought it would be refreshing, but I couldn’t get the tangy taste out of my mouth.

“Guess I picked the wrong fruit,” my dad said.

I laughed. “You sure did.”

After we somehow managed to get the rest of the fruity gyoza down, my dad reached for the spicy gyoza. “Now, I *know* the slightly spicy gyoza will be good.”

After he ate one, I took a bite of slightly spicy gyoza. It burned my mouth a little at first, but the flavors of meat and vegetables quickly filled my mouth afterward. He had added just the right amount of heat powder.

“It’s great. It goes really well with rice.”

“Goes great with liquor, too.” My dad ate another spicy gyoza and followed it up with a gulp of alcohol. “A match made in heaven.”

He was hitting the sauce awfully fast today... I’d have to keep an eye on him.

“All right, last but not least...”

My dad and I stared at the final plate. There were ten gyoza in all, so we’d each get five.

“Let’s eat it at the same time.”

“Okay.”

My dad and I each popped a pinkish gyoza into our mouths.

It’s...not spicy? Huh... Mm?!

“H-hot! Wh-what the... Aaaagh, my tongue!”

Even though the first thing I tasted was the meat juice, now my tongue was on fire.

“Agh, my tongue is tingling! Uh-oh...this stuff’s dangerous.” My dad gulped down his entire glass of water. “It’s no use...the fire’s still there.”

I drank some water, too, but my tongue still burned. “Dad...we can’t eat this.”

“Yeah.”

No wonder this stuff was used in shock pouches. It was extremely spicy.
Aghhh, my whole mouth is tingling!

“So...what do we do with the rest of them?” My dad stared down at the remaining gyoza on the plate. Since we couldn’t eat them as they were, maybe we could mix them into something else.

“I’ll try putting them in soup.” One gyoza couldn’t make a pot of soup too spicy.

“Soup, eh? Yeah, that might work.”

“Uh-huh. We were right to leave these gyoza for the end.”

“Agreed.”

Our second batch of gyoza was a success...but the flavors were a mixed bag. Next time, we would have to try to get our flavors perfect, too. I'd also need to study up on how to roll the wrappers thin without breaking them.



BONUS * The Little Girl, Pretty in Pink



THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

BONUS:

The Little Girl, Pretty in Pink

“Hey!” a girl cried, waving at me.

I tilted my head in curiosity. *Where have I seen her before...? Oh! Right, she’s the girl I gave pink dye to during the festival.*

“Hi again! Look at me! Look at meeee!” She ran over to me, did a twirl, and flashed a smile.

Let’s see, what am I looking for... Oh! Those pink clothes she’s wearing...

“Are those your festival clothes?” I asked her.

“They are! I had my mom make them extra pretty for me.”

Her clothes had indeed changed their look quite a bit. They were still a vibrant pink from the dye I gave her, but they now had dainty flower patterns embroidered on the collar and sleeves as well.

“They’re very pretty, and you look wonderful in them.”

She squealed and jumped for joy. *What an incredibly cute little girl.*

“Where’s your mother, little one?” Druid asked her.

“Oh, um, she’s behind...me...” The girl turned around and made a face.

“Are you lost?”

“Oh no.”

The girl, noticing her mother was gone, looked up at us anxiously.

“Don’t worry. We’ll help you find your mother,” Druid said, crouching down to her height and nodding with a smile.

“Yeah, Mom’s probably scared because she’s lost. Let’s go find her!”

Uh, her mom’s the one who’s lost?

“Er... Oh, okay. Yes, your mother must be very scared, so let’s go find her.”

Druid faltered a little from what the girl said, but he quickly smiled again and tousled her hair.

“Okay.”

“By the way, we haven’t introduced ourselves yet. I’m Druid.”

“And I’m Ivy. Nice to meet you.”

The girl looked back and forth between us, repeating our names under her breath and nodding. “I’m Mimi. I’m four!”

So she’s four. And she showed us on her fingers... Gosh, she’s so cute.

“Look at you, introducing yourself like a pro,” Druid praised her. “Okay, let’s go find your mom! Do you remember what she’s wearing?”

“Huh?” Mimi gave him a strange look.

“Do you know what color her clothes are today?” Druid was completely unfazed by the little girl’s reactions. I hadn’t known he was so good with kids.

“Well...she was wearing colors just like me.”

I looked at Mimi’s clothes. They were such a vibrant, bold pink that it was hard to believe they were colored with leftover dye. So her mother was wearing clothes the same shade of pink? That was difficult to imagine; the last time I saw her mother, she’d been dressed in subdued colors. Maybe she was just wearing pink tones rather than the same shade.

“Okay. And what does her hair look like?”

“Umm...it’s all tight like this,” Mimi demonstrated by pulling her hair behind her in her fist. She probably meant her mother was sporting a ponytail in the back.

“Okay. Thanks, Mimi. You described her really well,” Druid said. Mimi smiled proudly in reply. “All right, let’s go find your mom.”

But where were we going to look?

“Mr. Druid, where should we start?”

“Let’s go tell someone at the village watch station first. Mimi’s mother might’ve already been there to report Mimi is missing.”

Ah, right, the station. Going by Main Street would probably be the shortest route, but there's a lot of people.

"Is Main Street okay?" I asked Druid. Since Mimi was so small, I thought a less crowded street might be better for her.

"Yeah, let's do that. If Mimi's mother already went to the station, a watchman might see Mimi and flag us down."

"Okay. Um, Mimi?"

"What's up, Auntie Ivy?"

Hearing her call me "Auntie Ivy" gave me a funny feeling, but it was flattering. "We're gonna walk through a crowded street... Wanna hold hands? Is that okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Mimi and I held hands and walked next to Druid. Since I was keeping pace with her, we went much slower than usual.

"Ooh, Auntie Ivy, look at the pretty flowers!"

"Yes, Mimi, that's nice. Let's find your mom first, okay?"

"Oooh, they're so pretty! Oh, look! More flowers!"

The easily distracted Mimi was pointing and giggling here, there, and everywhere. This was risky behavior. If we let our guards down for a second, she might run off somewhere.

"I think I know how she got lost," Druid murmured.

I nodded, trying not to laugh. No mistaking it, Mimi must have chased after something that caught her eye and gotten lost.

"Mimi, please don't let go of my hand!"

That was a close call. She almost slipped away from me.

"I'm sorry, Auntie Ivy."

She did seem genuinely remorseful, but her curiosity was overpowering. I felt sorry for her poor mother.

“Mimi, I just know your mom is very worried about you.”

“Oh no!”

Uh...did she forget about her mother?

“Hee hee!”

Wow... Did she actually forget?

“How about we go looking for pretty things *after* we find your mom? I’m sure she wants to look at pretty things just as much as you do, Mimi.”

“Okay...yeah. If I get to see all the pretty things all by myself, Mom’ll get jealous.”

“Yes! That’s right, Mimi. And you don’t want her to feel like that, so let’s find her, okay?”

“Okay.”

Mimi’s brain worked in a funny way.

“Hey, Auntie Ivy?”

“What’s up?”

“Your dad... He’s really strong.”

My dad? Mimi was looking at Druid.

“Hee hee! I know, he is strong, isn’t he?”

We weren’t related by blood, but he was like a father to me now, so it made me happy to hear somebody else call him strong.

“I’ve got a strong dad, too, you know,” Mimi said.

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Yeah. All his friends are strong, too. They wear matching clothes, and they protect the village.”

Huh? They protect the village? Could it be...that Mimi’s father is a village watchman or a guild employee?

“Mimi, what kind of clothes does your dad wear when he goes to work?”

Druid asked.

Mimi's eyes darted back and forth for a moment, then she said, "Like that."

So Mimi's father worked with the village watch. That meant we would certainly find her father, if not her mother, at the station. And if he wasn't there, somebody would at least know who Mimi was.

"Your father is a village watchman, isn't he? Well, we're going where he works right now."

"I love Dad's work! Everybody loves it when I play with them."

Did she mean she loved it when the village watchmen played with her?

"Hey! Is that you, Mimi?"

I turned toward the nearby voice and saw three village watchmen looking at Mimi in surprise.

"What the hell are you doing to this poor girl..."

"Wait!"

Uh-oh. They got the wrong idea about Druid.

"My apologies. What is Mimi doing with you?"

"She spotted Ivy and called out to her," Druid explained.

The watchmen's gaze shifted over to me, and they nodded.

"She was with her mother during the festival, but we were worried when we saw Mimi by herself today, so we asked her where her mother was. She said her mother was lost, so we were going to the village watch station to tell you."

The watchmen smiled sheepishly at Druid's story.

"I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions earlier..." The watchman who mistook Druid for a kidnapper lowered his head apologetically.

"You saw a girl you know with a man you've never seen before; it was natural to worry," Druid said, nodding his head in understanding. The watchman sighed in relief. "Anyway, it sounds like Mimi's father is a village watchman. Will we find him at the station?"

“Yes, her parents are both there right now.”

So her mother did go to the station.

“Ooh, look, Auntie Ivy! Over there!”

Mimi’s hand almost slipped out of mine, so I squeezed it tight. “Yes, that’s very pretty. But, Mimi, I said not to let go of my hand.”

“Okay.”

One of the watchmen who overheard our little conversation heaved a sigh. “Mimi, what do we always tell you about your mom’s hand?”

“Don’t let go!”

“And if somebody talks to you when you’re by yourself?”

“Be careful! But Auntie Ivy didn’t talk to me...I talked to her! So it’s okay.”

The watchman sighed again at Mimi’s chipper reply. “That’s not quite what we meant...”

Ha ha ha ha! Good luck, guys.

“Mimi!”

Aha, that’s Mimi’s mother! And I think that guy behind her is her father?

“Ooh, it’s Mom! Dad’s there, too!”

We arrived at the village watch station just as Mimi’s mother was coming out of it. When she spotted Mimi, she frantically ran over to her. Her eyes were a little red, and I could tell she’d been worried sick.

“Silly Mom, don’t get lost.”

Mimi’s mother tried not to laugh as she squeezed her tight.

“I don’t envy them...” Druid said.

I giggled under my breath. Mimi was curious *and* a chatterbox. I thought it must be pretty challenging for her mother and father to raise her. *Uh-oh, her dad’s yelling at her now! Wait, is she standing her ground?*

“Mimi really is quite a girl,” Druid said.

“She sure is.”

Oh dear...now her father really is mad at her. Hee hee! Well, that chance encounter really made this a colorful day. It was a nice change...just for today, though.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. Long time no write. Honobonoru500 here. Thanks to all of you, *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*, Volume 7 has hit the shelves. Thank you to everyone who got yourself a copy. And to my illustrator Nama-sama, thank you for drawing a grown-up Ivy and a slightly diabolical Lord Foronda. And those wholesome scenes with Druid and Ivy are perfect, as always! Also, *The Weakest Tamer* has now broken a cumulative total of over 400,000 copies sold! I truly cannot thank you enough.

When I was planning Volume 7, I just wanted Ivy to have some fun experiences. She just had too many problems to deal with in the six previous volumes. So when I was thinking of what kind of fun experience to give her, I was basic and said, “Festival, I guess?” Then I had a lot of trouble coming up with what this festival would be like, until I happened to see a celebrity on TV wearing white clothes in the mud. It looked like fun. But since washing the mud out of the clothes would be a real drag, I changed that part. In the end, I settled on a festival where people dressed in white and threw colors at each other. But the thing I agonized the most over in Volume 7 was Ivy’s and Druid’s relationship. Up until now, I painted the picture of them slowly forging a bond together. But what should the next move be? Shouldn’t I finally make them officially father and daughter? Or was it too soon? It was quite the conundrum. But I wanted to give Ivy a dad! And I wanted to have Ivy call Druid “Dad”! So in the end, I followed my heart. Taking Druid’s personality into consideration, I knew I needed somebody to give him a push, so enter Lord Foronda. I was planning on bringing him back into the story anyway, so I had him make an appearance here.

Thank you to everyone at TO Books for your help with Volume 7. My editor K-sama, thank you for always putting up with me. With all your help, we managed to get Volume 7 published. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I’m going to continue being high-maintenance, so thank you all in advance.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who read this book with all my heart.

Also, I have some exciting news! Volume 8's release date has been set! In Volume 8, Ivy becomes a little acquainted with this world's dark side.

The comic book version of *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash* is also on sale. May we meet again in this "Isekai'ed into a world...where proper waste disposal rules!" light novel and manga series.

Honobonoru500

June 2022

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the seventh volume of Honobonoru500's second story, "Weakest Tamer"! The cold winter is over, and the warm spring has arrived! Druid and Ivy travel to the next village over to experience an exhilarating spring festival. And everything about that village is different—right down to the gate protecting it. When they walk through it, Ivy's eyes are bombarded with the colorful and powerful sights of the village. So get dressed; it's time to party at the spring festival!

Nama

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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