



The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

NOVEL

8

WRITTEN BY
Honobonoru500
ILLUSTRATED BY
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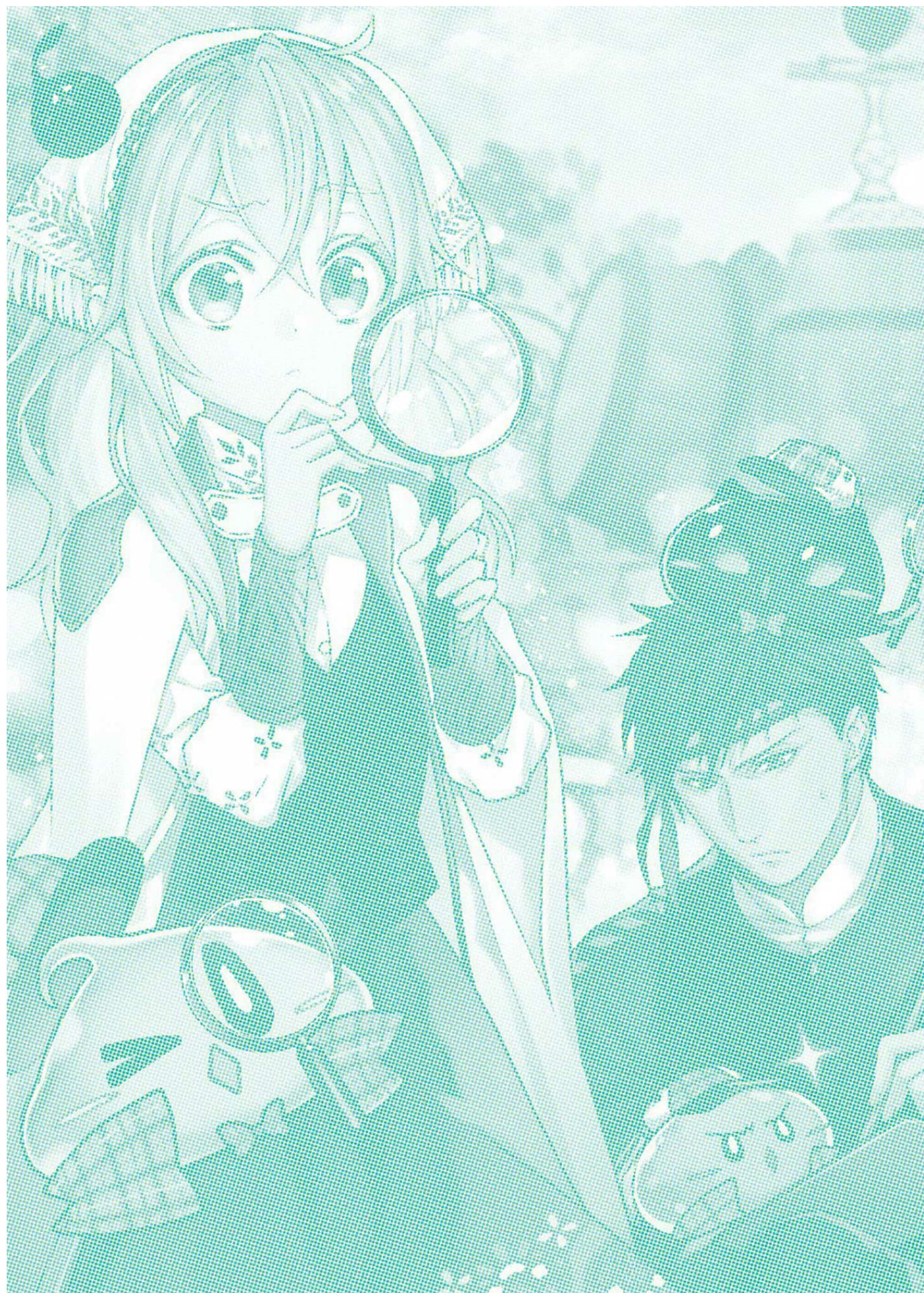
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**Weakest
Tamer** Began
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Pick Up Trash

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Let's hunt obitsune!
Go forward 1 square

Is it just me, or is
Druid fired up?!
DIY? What's that?



START!
Off to the spring festival!

Welcomed by a colorful door! I'm getting really excited.

**New recipe in my repertoire?!
Rest one turn**

I think it's called "gyoza."
Maybe I made them too big... (eek)



Reunited with Lord Foronda!
Go forward 2 squares

He enjoyed the festivities with us! He was even more childlike than me.



**Strange things afoot in the next village...?
But I'll be okay—my dad is with me!**

To be continued.....

...I have a family now.
Proceed to final square

Thank you all so much...
Now we'll be together forever.



Could this be... a new drinking buddy?
Go back 1 square

Are they friends now?
What an odd pairing.



Druid

An adventurer who lost his right arm. Sora brought him back from the brink of death. He's joined Ivy's party and is often over-protective of her.

Ivy

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

Ciel

An adandara (catlike monster) that Ivy met during her travels. For some reason, it's taken a liking to her. Often cuddles. It shapeshifts into a slime using the power of a magic stone.

TRUE FORM

Flame

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

Flame

A slime birthed by Flame. It's pocket-sized and often does its own thing.

Sora

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

✿ CHARACTERS ✿

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Illustrations by Nama

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PART 8 * The Monsters in Hataka Village



THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

Chapter 368:

Soothing Our Weary Bones

JUST AS MY FATHER PREDICTED, our neighbors were a family with two children and a trio of women. At first, the three women cast doubtful glances at my father, but they seemed reassured by the sight of me. I guess when everyone in your group is a woman, you have to be vigilant in a lot of ways.

“Ivy, you’ve gotten even better at cooking your stews, haven’t you?”

“Mr. Chikar gave me some good tips.”

“Well, I’m impressed.”

My father’s praise brought a smile to my lips. Dinner tasted so much better when you shared it with someone who said it was delicious.

“So, what’s the plan for tomorrow?” I asked.

“We’ll sit back and see what this town is like. I’m still worried about that strange feeling in the forest, though.”

“Yeah, me too. Think we can go to the dump?”

“Of course.”

That was a relief. I wanted to restock Sora’s and Flame’s potions, and I was even more eager to make sure Sol had magic energy to eat. There weren’t any illegal dumps outside this village, so we hadn’t been able to get any food for Sol. This was technically a good thing, but we were surprised by the lack of illegal dumps; we’d assumed there would be some. So I absolutely wanted to go to the dump the next day to let Sol eat its fill since that would be its fifth day without food. As far as I could tell, it didn’t look any weaker, so I was glad we weren’t too late.

“Let’s go to the dump tomorrow morning, then spend the afternoon exploring around town. They said something about forming a survey team, so maybe we should hold off on hunting in the forest until they report back.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and let’s also go to the merchant guild tomorrow to sell the stuff we foraged in the forest. Then we’ll need to get some faax papers after that.”

“That’s right, when’s the last time we sent a fax? Twenty days ago?”

“Yeah, they’re probably starting to worry about us.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, because he was right. They’d definitely be worried. “True. We’ll have to drop them a line and say we’re having a fun trip.”

It’s been a little while since our last message in Hatahi Village. Oh, they said some mid-level monsters were discovered nearby and they might put together a party to get rid of them. I wonder how that turned out? I’ll have to ask them if everyone’s okay.

“Guess our schedule for tomorrow is pretty full now,” my father said.

“Yeah.”

We cleared the table and went to the nearby bathhouse. Now that I had discovered how good a proper inn bath felt, I just had to take one after supper. My father had assured me, “It can’t be helped—once you get a taste of it, you just can’t get enough of that good feeling.”

“That must be it.” He pointed at a sign over the building that said *Ahhh*. “What a funny name.”

I nodded. “I think that’s supposed to be the sound you make when you get in a bath.”

“Aha, that makes sense.”

We stepped into the bathhouse and parted ways. Since my father was always faster than I was, I decided to take a shorter bath so he wouldn’t get cold waiting for me. But despite my best intentions, I wound up staying much longer. It had been too long, and the bath just felt so good.

“I’m sorry, Dad.” When I got out of my bath, I found my father seated in front of the bathhouse, waiting for me. He told me it was okay, but I wondered if he should’ve gone back without me. “Are you cold?”

“I’m okay, I just got out a couple minutes ago. I stayed in the tub longer than usual because it’s been so long.”

“Oh, really? Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

I decided everything was okay, then.

“Okay, we should head back and go to bed. Tomorrow’s a busy day.”

“Yeah. I can’t wait to finally have a long, deep sleep.”

“Well, we did have to cut our sleep time short the past few days.”

“Uh-huh, I know we have a lot to do tomorrow, so let’s make sure we get plenty of sleep, okay?”

We chatted as we strolled back to the plaza. I was delighted that the bathhouse was only a minute’s walk away from camp. Back at the tent, we drank some hot tea, then got into our beds. The proper bedding felt so good after all those days without it. I glanced at my feet and saw that my creatures were all fast asleep.

With a yawn, I said, “G’night, Dad.”

“Good night. Sweet dreams.”

“Hm? Mmm... Boy, did I sleep.”

I stretched my arms and legs under the covers. It felt so good. All my fatigue from the journey was gone, and for the first time in a long while, I woke fully rested. I looked around the tent. Everything seemed normal and my dad was still asleep. Feeling a rustling at my feet, I glanced down to see that Sora was up and doing its vertical stretches. I stared at the slime, feeling like it had been some time since I’d seen those exercises. And after a while, our gazes suddenly met. Sora froze for an instant...then it jiggled and jumped right at me.

“Good morning, Sora.”

Sora jiggled hello in reply.

“You’re so cute.”

“Puuu?” Sora’s face tilted to the side.

God, you’re adorable.

As Sora and I had a little morning playtime in bed, I heard a faint moan beside me.

“Dad?”

“Mm...yeah?”

“Ha ha! Good morning, Dad.”

“Ohh... G’morning. Wow, I haven’t slept that deep in ages.”

I looked over and saw that my dad’s eyes were bright, all traces of fatigue gone. He was sitting up and stretching toward the ceiling. He had spent the last few days anxious over the strange feeling in the forest, so it was a relief to know he’d slept well and wasn’t tired anymore.

“I’ll go make us some breakfast, okay?”

“I’ll help.”

“No need, I’m just heating up some soup.”

I just had to add some vegetables to the leftover soup and breakfast would be done. Though the weather had gotten warmer, mornings were still chilly, so a hot soup was just the thing.

We dipped black bread into our soup and ate it. *Mmm, it’s so good.*

When we were almost finished with breakfast, I took out one of our foraged fruits and peeled it.

“You really do like abbles, don’t you, Ivy?”

“Well, they’re delicious! I just love how crisp, sweet, and juicy they are!”

They were crisp when you bit into them, and then your mouth would fill with an intense, sweet juice right away. But they had a refreshing aftertaste. They were just the best! Also, most fruit in the forest was completely ripe, and my father said that made it tastier than the stuff you could buy in towns and villages. It was just such a good feeling eating yummy fruit at its most delicious. After a thoroughly enjoyable after-breakfast fruit fest, we cleared the dishes and went back into our tent.

“Okay, kids! Let’s go to the dump.”

All four creatures happily wiggled in reply. I put the fruits, nuts, and magic stones we were going to sell at the merchant guild into my magic bag.

“Since abbles are premium fruit, let’s only sell half of them,” my father said.

They’re premium? Yeah, I did hear him say that when we were picking them... I was so excited by how good they tasted that I totally forgot.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I quickly shook my head.

My father smiled at my behavior. “Let me guess, you forgot abbles were premium.”

How does he always see right through me?

“Well, they were good. I did hear you say they were premium...but I forgot.”

“Ha ha ha ha! Well, it’s okay, no harm done. We can probably get a great price for them.”

“Okay... I think I’ll take out some more.”

I took some abbles out of the magic bag and put them in a different one. I checked with my father before I put more tree nuts in. When he saw what type they were, he said it should be okay, but since he wasn’t familiar with either kind of tree nut, he suggested we only sell half. Then I put the creatures in my bag, and we walked out of our tent.

“All right, first stop: the merchant guild.”

“Okay. Oh, good morning, ma’am!”

Just as we were about to leave the plaza, we bumped into Puffy, who was checking permits at the entrance.

“Good morning. Going out?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“Scout Puffy,” my father greeted her.

For some reason, she stood straight and tall. That confused me a little.

“Do you have any confidential information you can give us?”

“Confidential information? No, sir. None at all.”

“All right... Thanks.”

“No problem. Have a nice day.”

I understood my father was asking about the weirdness in the forest. *I guess he's still pretty worried about it, probably because I didn't sense it. I'm a little worried about this, too...*

Chapter 369:

The Survey Team

I HAD A GOOD STRETCH and yawn after we left the merchant guild. We had sold goods at many merchant guilds by now, but I still got nervous every time. Would I ever get used to it?

“Tired?”

“Yeah, a little. You were right, Dad, the abbles were expensive.”

“They sure were. But they did say they were a bit cheaper than they used to be.”

The abbles had fetched a high price, just like my father had said. But the crop was much bigger this year than the last, so they were sold more cheaply than before.

“Even if they cost less, they still seemed plenty expensive to me,” I said.

“Well, that checks out. You only find them a long way into the forest.”

There were many powerful monsters deep in the forest, which made foraged goods from that area more valuable. So all fruits that were foraged from deep in the forest were expensive, regardless of how delicious they were.

We headed for the village gate, eyeing the shops on Main Street as we went.

“Want to buy lunch before we head out?”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

“We’ve got plenty of room in our budget for it.”

Though we’d imagined we would get a high price for our abbles, one of our items sold for even more money than we’d anticipated: the tree nuts we had foraged deep in Hatahi’s forest. My father and I both thought they were typical tree nuts when we picked them, but it turned out that we’d foraged rare medicinal nuts that only looked similar to the normal ones, so we sold them at twenty times our expected price. What’s more, we had brought quite the stash

to sell since we'd assumed they were just normal nuts.

"What do you want to eat?"

"Bread. It's been ages since I had white bread."

"Ha ha! Yeah. Let's find something to go with it, too."

We eyed the food stalls as we headed for the gate. Along the way, my dad found the skewered meat he had been looking for, and I found what I had been looking for: *sand-thingies*. It was a pleasant surprise to see that the sandwich-like "sand-thingies" with white bread had made it all the way to this village.

"Hm? That looks like..." My dad stopped in his tracks and stared at the gate. I followed his gaze to see about a dozen adventurers gathered there.

"What's going on?"

"Probably the survey team."

Yeah, the gatekeeper mentioned yesterday that a survey team would be formed today. I gave the adventurers a quick look. They all seemed to be about my father's age; none of them were young. There weren't many of them, either. *Since they're just a survey team, maybe it's okay to only have a few people? I dunno, they're investigating something unusual. I feel like it's dangerous to go in such a small group.*

"Isn't that survey team a bit small?" I asked.

"Yeah, too small. And they all look like elite adventurers."

Wow, he can really tell just by looking at them. "How do you know?"

"Well...by their weapons and their build. Also, the general atmosphere. I guess it's a big picture thing. Sorry, it's hard to explain."

I guess they have the atmosphere of years of experience? Maybe that's it. "I hope they find out what's going on."

"Me, too."

We watched the adventurers walk out of the gate, hoping the survey would end uneventfully and provide some answers.

"Let's go."

“Okay.”

We greeted the gatekeeper as we walked out. It was a different person than the one who had welcomed us the day before. He was a surly man, the complete opposite of the calm, cheerful gatekeeper from earlier.

“Okay, which way’s the dump?” My dad took a look at the ground just outside the gate. Since most people used a cart when they went to the dump, all you had to do was look for grooves in the dirt from the cart wheels to find your way. Sometimes grass and fallen leaves covered the tracks, but the dirt around Hataka was all sandy, so we knew we should be able to see the tracks easily.

“Found it. It’s that way.”

We took off in the direction my father was pointing. “Do you sense anything?” I asked him as he gazed out into the forest.

He looked back at me and shook his head. “No, not a thing. It was just too creepy for it to be my imagination.”

“I highly doubt you imagined it. The veteran adventurers here sensed it, too.”

My dad rested a hand on my head. “Quite right. But I kind of wish it *was* just my imagination.”

He has a point there. Wait a minute...

“Agh!”

“Yikes, this doesn’t look good.”

After following the cart tracks for a while, we had arrived at the dump, but the sight we saw made us recoil a little. All village dumps were taken care of to some degree so that tamers could do their jobs more easily, but the dump before us showed no signs of human maintenance. It was a horrible mess.

Most dangerous of all were the magic items and swords. Magic items still had a little magic energy left in them even after they were used up, so you had to be careful when disposing of them. But in this village, they’d been roughly tossed around the dump. What’s more, they were piled up so carelessly that they had developed peaks that could avalanche at any minute.

“Yeah, this is dangerous.”

I nodded in agreement. This was a bit of a problem. The trash piles might collapse while my slimes were trying to eat.

“What should we do?”

“We can pick up Sora’s and Flame’s potions ourselves, but I’m not sure about Sol,” my dad answered. “We could try gathering the magic items and take them outside the dump, but I don’t think Sol could get its fill that way.”

“Yeah, I was hoping to let it eat as much as it wanted.”

Clank, clank, clank, clank.

I looked to the top of the mountain of garbage and saw a tiny piece of trash rolling around with each gust of wind. It was just too dangerous.

“Should we ask the slimes?” my dad suggested.

“Good idea. Sit tight.”

I opened the lid of their bag. They immediately jumped out and bounced merrily around my feet.

“Sora, Flame, Sol, we’re in the dump now, but it might turn into an avalanche at any minute. Want to go in and have lunch?”

The trio stared hard at the dump. *Uh-oh, is it such a sight that they’ve frozen in shock?*

“If it looks too dangerous, Dad and I can always go grab some trash for you.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, we can pick up lots of it.”

When they heard this, the three slimes bounded off toward the trash. Assuming that meant they would fend for themselves, I gave the three a curious look.

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora sang. Flame and Sol followed, bouncing off into the dump.

“Think they’ll be okay?” I asked.

“Well...let’s just keep an eye on them.”

I nodded and approached the dump. I was going to make sure I was close

enough to step in at a moment's notice if something happened.

"Since there aren't any illegal dumps in the forest around here, I assumed this dump would be well maintained...but it definitely doesn't look that way."

"Yeah. Do you think any tamers in Hataka come here for work?"

"They're supposed to," my father frowned. I felt a little upset by the whole thing, too. I was appalled that tamers would bring their precious companions to work in such a dangerous place.

"It's awful. All they need to do is give it some basic maintenance."

Maybe the tamers in Hataka didn't care about their monsters? Back in Hatahi Village, I'd learned that not many tamers cared for their monsters like family, which made me feel very sad.

"I wish everyone would hurry up and learn that their way of thinking is wrong."

I looked at my slimes. To be honest, I was terrified to see them wiggling on top of the piles of trash, but the sight of them enjoying themselves lifted my spirits a little.

"Is it just me, or are the three of them having a blast here?"

I gave the trio a scrutinizing stare. They did seem to be going out of their way to jiggle unusually hard on the precarious piles of trash.

"I wish they realize I'm worried sick."

"Well, they are special, you know."

His words were oddly convincing, and I felt bad for letting things slide so easily.

"Be careful, you guys! It's dangerous out there."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu! Pefu!"

"Please! Stop jumping around!"

“Ha ha ha ha!” My dad burst out laughing over my nervous scream.

The three slimes dodged the falling piles of trash as they merrily enjoyed their meal.

Oh...I guess there was no reason for me to worry after all.

Chapter 370:

“Zephyr”

“ARE YOU DONE EATING?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

The three slimes smiled contentedly. Sol looked particularly satisfied after eating its fill.

“I’m glad you guys didn’t get hurt, but you were way too reckless up there! You really scared me, you know?”

The three had seemed amused by the shaking and falling of the trash on the piles, so they’d tumbled and bounced around during their meal. I was exhausted from the stress of watching them.

Mrrrow.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

I’d had Ciel stand by in case anything happened, and I was truly relieved that the adandara hadn’t needed to step in. After their feast and big playtime, the three slimes were in a better mood than usual.

“I’m exhausted,” my father remarked.

“Me, too.”

We were utterly burned out.

“Okay, let’s head back. Are you hungry, Ciel?” my father asked.

Ciel only purred in response. That didn’t mean much of anything, so it probably wasn’t all that hungry. The slimes took the lead as we headed back to the village.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Sora and Flame playfully bounced off each other as they went, repeating the motion over and over. When Ciel noticed, it shapeshifted into a slime and charged into the pair. Meanwhile, Sol discreetly shrank back from the others and hopped to my side. It gave me a meaningful stare, so I picked it up, and it jiggled happily.

“Wait!” my father suddenly boomed.

Shivering all over at the tone of his voice, I looked over to find him scanning the area around us.

“Puuu?”

“Ryu?”

Silence hung over us.

Mew?

Not even Ciel, who had a keen sense for auras, seemed to know what was going on as it checked our surroundings. I also searched for auras to see if I sensed anything amiss, but nothing struck me as odd.

“Dad, are you okay?”

“Yeah...sorry. I thought I sensed something.”

“Sora, Flame, Ciel, come here a minute.”

Everyone immediately huddled around us, sensing something was different with my father.

He sighed heavily. “I just don’t get it. Sorry I worried you all.”

“Don’t feel bad. I’m sure there’s something out there.”

Ciel was sensitive to auras and magic energy, yet it hadn’t sensed what my father had. Was it a monster with an undetectable aura or energy? Did such terrifyingly powerful creatures really exist?

“Dad, is there a monster that can mask its aura or magic energy?”

“I was just thinking about that.”

“Yeah.”

“If such a monster existed, I would’ve learned about it during my adventurer training, but I didn’t.”

“Huh. Guess that means there isn’t one.”

“In the past, I would’ve agreed with you. But now...” His gaze suddenly shifted to my creatures. I followed suit and looked at them. “Now, I think such a monster might exist. Maybe there’s a monster we already know about that has different powers.”

He had a point. Even slimes had a variety of powers, and it was dangerous to assume you knew everything about them. Besides, we had been hearing rumors about new types of monsters being discovered.

“Yeah, we don’t know everything there is to know about monsters.”

“Well, if it *is* a monster, that’ll be a big mess to deal with.”

He was absolutely right. Most adventurers relied on their ability to sense a monster’s magic energy or aura. If they couldn’t do that anymore, they would be a step behind on defense if they were attacked. That was incredibly dangerous. One wrong move, and people could get seriously wounded...or killed.

“Let’s go back to the village. I think we should stay out of the forest until the survey team finishes.”

“You’re right. Think we won’t be able to hunt at all?”

We’d heard that there were monsters similar to wild rabbits near this village and that they were very tasty. I think they were called lappos. My father and I were hoping to figure out a way to trap them because we really wanted to hunt them. But given the current conditions, it looked like hunting was out of the question.

“I don’t think we can. Sorry.”

“I get it.”

But seriously, what was going on? Was it a monster with an undetectable aura and magic energy? Or was it an animal?

“We should put the creatures back in the bag.”

“Yeah. Sora, Flame, Ciel, can you guys get back in the bag? You too, Sol?” I asked the slime in my arms. It chirped *Pefu!* back at me. I gave its head a little pat and put it back in the bag.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mrrrow.

The others raced over to my feet and jumped into my arms, one after another. I tried my best not to drop them as I set them into the bag.

“Sorry, guys. Be good until we get back to the tent, okay?”

The bag jostled a little in reply, slightly harder than it usually did.

“If some random person saw your shoulder bag, they’d be terrified.”

“Yeah, it does tend to move an awful lot.”

We walked back to the village, discussing hunting and dinner plans as we went. But when the gate came into view, we stopped in our tracks. Right at the gate before us, some bodies were keeled over on the ground, and there were village watchmen frantically moving around them.

“They’re hurt.”

I nodded in reply. The people on the ground looked like adventurers.

“Think they’re badly injured?”

“No, they’re probably okay. I think they’re conscious.”

I took a closer look and saw that the people on the ground were indeed awake and talking. After a while, more watchmen came out from the village and handed the fallen adventurers some potions.

“Looks like they’ll be okay now.”

“Uh-huh. Will they pay for the potions later?”

“Yeah, and if they can’t afford to pay, they can work for it.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Well, I’m glad they’re all right.”

I looked around and noticed some other people were waiting to enter the village just like us. They were a trio of rather brawny men, probably in their forties and dressed like adventurers. As I stared at them, one of them made eye contact with me. I didn't want to seem rude by looking away, so I gave a light nod. Then I turned my attention back to the wounded and noticed they would let us back into the village soon. As I heaved a little sigh of relief, I heard footsteps coming our way. *Wait...should I not have nodded to him?*

"Hello there."

"Hello."

One of the three adventurers approached us with a friendly smile. "Is that your daughter?"

"Yes. And who are you?" my father asked warily, scooting me closer to him.

The adventurer moved back a step when he saw this. "I'm sorry, sir. I assure you, I'm not suspicious."

"No, you're definitely suspicious. Who walks up to a guy and asks, 'Is that your daughter?'"

The adventurer's two companions walked up after him. My father stepped completely in front of me, hiding me behind him.

"I apologize for my companion. I am Zinal of the Hatahaf Village elite adventurer party, *Zephyr*."

"I'm Garitt of Zephyr. And the guy who came up to you like some creepy old pervert is my buddy Fische. He's not a bad guy, I swear, he's just a little dumb. He tends to act before he thinks, so he causes a lot of misunderstandings, but he's just an idiot."

Huh?

"Yeah, he meant no harm. He just doesn't think things through."

They're standing up for their friend, right? They're not making fun of him, are they?

"Uh-huh. I promise you, he's not a pervert."



Why are they focusing on that?

“Zephyr of Hatahaf? *The Zephyr?*” My father’s jaw dropped a little as he stared at the men. Apparently, their adventure party was quite famous.

“Ooh, you’ve heard of us? I’m flattered!” Fische gave my father’s shoulder a hearty slap. Zinal and Garitt exchanged looks and sighed. That seemed to lower my father’s guard a little, and he positioned himself next to me.

“Nice to meet you all. I’m Druid, and this is my daughter Ivy.”

“Nice to meet you.”

When I greeted the men, a smile bloomed on Fische’s face.

Chapter 371: That Happened Before!

“MR. DRUID AND SWEET IVY, EH?”

Sweet Ivy? The nickname sounded so weird to me that all I could do was stare dumbly at Fische in reply.

“Sorry, he has a daughter the same age as Ivy,” Garitt explained apologetically. “He calls her *Sweet-this* and *Sweet-that* all the time, so he probably did it without thinking.”

I smiled and nodded in understanding. I didn’t mind being called sweet; I just wasn’t used to it. Besides, I had been called sweet in the past.

“It’s okay, I don’t mind.”

Garitt smiled in relief. He must have been worried about his companion getting in trouble.

“So, any idea what happened here?” my father asked.

Garitt looked off into the forest and said, “Mr. Druid, did you sense anything out in the woods?”

“I did. It wasn’t an aura or magic energy, but something’s out there.”

Zinal nodded. “We think the same thing. What about you, Miss Ivy?”

“I didn’t sense anything, sir.”

“Aha. I guess it’s only the elite adventurers who can sense it.” Zinal let out a tiny sigh. His hair was light blue and fell to his shoulders, and his eyes were a brilliant blue.

“Only the elite adventurers, you say?”

“Yeah, we asked a few mid-level ones, and none of them knew what we were talking about.” Garitt’s short hair was green, and his eyes were black. Both men looked like they were in their forties, and they had a calm aura about them.

Fische, the one who had called me *sweet*, was probably their age, but his flippant personality made him look a bit younger than the other two. He might have been the youngest, actually. His most prominent features were his long silvery hair and his green eyes.

“What does it feel like to you all?” I asked the trio.

After a moment’s thought, Zinal answered, “It’s like a chill... I sense something scary and eerie.”

Garitt nodded. “Same here. I always look around whenever I feel it, but I never see anything. There aren’t any auras or even a quiver of magic energy, either.”

“Oh dear.”

“It’s a bit different for me. I feel like a presence is there, watching me.”

Watching him? Does that mean whatever this thing is gets close to people?

“What? Fische, you should’ve said something sooner!”

Uh-oh, he didn’t tell them?

My father chuckled softly as he watched the three bicker. Garitt and Zinal both heaved loud sighs of frustration.

“You don’t sense an aura, and you don’t sense magic energy... Wait a minute...” I felt like I’d said that phrase once before. *Where was it? I think it was at that dump in the forest...when that monster attacked me.* “Oh! It was that monster that attacked me in the forest!”

“What?!” all four men gasped.

I was so scared from the attack that I forgot about it, but it was that monster! It happened at the illegal dump we found in the forest on the way to Hatahi Village. The monster that attacked me then had no aura and no magic energy. Oh, but I was able to sense something out there that day, and Ciel could spot where it was when it got close enough. So it was similar, but maybe not quite the same?

“Ivy, what’s on your mind?”

The voice calling my name snapped me out of my thought spiral. I looked around to see four pairs of worried eyes staring at me.

“You okay?” My father looked worried.

But I couldn’t be bothered with that now. There was something I needed to know. “Dad, remember how we found that illegal dump in the forest on our way to Hatahi Village? The really big one.”

“Yeah... Yeah, I remember. It was big for an illegal dump, too... Oh, it was that monster!”

Oh, good. He remembers.

“Exactly! Remember how we got attacked by monsters over and over when we were near that dump? I feel like those monsters are a lot like whatever we’re dealing with right now.”

Though there were some differences, of course.

“Mr. Druid, Miss Ivy, can you tell us more?” Zinal looked grim.

“We were attacked by some monsters on the way to Hatahi Village,” my father explained. “And we didn’t sense any auras or magic energy coming from them. The only difference was that we could sense their presence if we got close enough.”

“I could tell there was something there, too, once it got near me,” I added. “So I don’t think we can say it’s exactly the same thing.”

You know, what did I sense back then? It wasn’t magic energy, it wasn’t an aura... Wait, maybe it actually was magic energy?

“Do you know what breed of monster it was?”

“I don’t think the breed matters... I think it went through a sudden change from the magic energy at the illegal dump.”

“From the magic energy in the trash, then...” Garitt got a sour look on his face.

“Yeah, we just might be in the middle of a worst-case scenario.” Zinal sighed and scratched his head.

I gave him a funny look. Why was magic energy in trash such a big problem?

“Is there something special about magic energy from trash, sir?”

“Did you know that trash-disposal powers have decreased quite a lot in the past few years?” Fische asked.

My father and I nodded yes. We knew that problems had started cropping up a little while earlier.

Zinal looked at us and continued, “Monsters in Kashime, the town near the capital, have eaten magic energy from the trash and are going berserk.”

“They have?”

But I thought there were lots of tamers around the capital. Was I wrong?

“There are a lot of tamers around there, but their waste-disposal powers have gone way downhill over the years. Meanwhile, there are more and more people living in the capital and its surrounding areas. Well, I think you know how that’s turned out. And it all happened because we didn’t put restrictions on the people.”

Now it made sense.

“Sometimes monsters eat magic energy and go berserk, but this particular monster possessed an unusually powerful kind of magic.”

“An unusually powerful kind?” my father asked.

Garitt nodded. “That’s right. It was fire magic. It turned several adventurers to ash in the blink of an eye.”

To ash? But isn’t it incredibly hard for even the highest-level monsters to vaporize a person that quickly?

“Is it on the level of a fire dragon, then?”

“Sounds like it, yeah.”

A fire dragon was a high-level monster that specialized in fire magic. Could a monster really get that powerful just from eating magic energy at a dump?

“Um, I have a question...”

Garitt looked at me. “What is it?”

“Isn’t the magic energy at dumps incredibly weak? It’s hard to believe that a monster could collect enough of it to get as powerful as a fire dragon.”

Unless there was just that much trash? In a way, that would be the most frightening thing of all.

“The inspectors from the capital had similar doubts, but there have been several cases of these abnormally powerful monsters going berserk now. So they’ve formed a theory that eating magic energy from dumps might infuse monsters with large amounts of powerful magic.”

“The investigation isn’t finished yet, so we don’t know for sure, but that’s what the scientists are saying.” Fische shrugged his shoulders.

“Looks like they’re done,” Zinal said.

I looked toward the gate and saw that the wounded adventurers and the watchmen were headed back into the village.

“Let’s go back to the village. It might be dangerous out here.”

I looked to the gate. *Oh, look. There’re more gatekeepers now.*

“They beefed up security. That’s three times as many as usual, I think.” Zinal took off for the gate, and Garitt gestured to me and my father that we should go ahead. With a little bow, we followed after Zinal.

“We were right. It looks like the adventurers were wounded by some unknown monster,” Fische said.

Zinal and Garitt nodded. I remembered the pile of injured people on the ground and thought back to the time when I was attacked. I’d really been scared then.

“It’ll all be okay,” my dad said.

I looked up at him, and he gently patted my head. “Yes, it will,” I answered. As his hand lightly stroked my head, I felt the pent-up tension I’d unknowingly been keeping there melt away. “I’m glad I remembered.”

“Hm?” My dad peered into my face, overhearing my little remark to myself. I gave him a reassuring smile, and he gave my head another pat.

Chapter 372: High-Level? Mid-Level?

WHEN WE GOT CLOSER to the village, the gatekeepers looked a bit relieved to see us.

“What’s this all about?”

“Dunno.”

Zinal and Garitt exchanged confused glances.

“Welcome back, folks.”

“Hi there. Do you know what happened to those wounded adventurers?”

“They were ambushed, apparently. They said they didn’t notice the monsters at all until they were right in front of their noses.”

So we were right.

“Thanks for the information,” Garitt said. “If you hear anything else, give us a yell. We’re staying at the inn Michelle, near the plaza.”

The gatekeepers looked relieved to hear that. Zinal smiled as he stepped through the gate. “I really wish they wouldn’t be so happy to have us here.”

Garitt smirked back at him. “That’s right. This village has its own elite adventurers, and we don’t want to steal their thunder. That’ll only bring a fight our way.”

Wait, don’t they know about the survey team? “Um, I think they’re worried because their elite adventurers are out of town now,” I told them.

The three men gave me strange looks. *So I guess they didn’t know.*

“They put together a survey team to look into the situation in the forest, and a bunch of elite adventurers are in the mix.”

“Oh, now that makes sense. Wait! Does that mean *he* went with them?” Zinal looked a bit disappointed.

I gave him a look as if to say, “Who’s *he*?”

Zinal looked a bit embarrassed and said, “My son recently got promoted to an elite adventurer in this village. That’s why I came here—to celebrate. We went over our schedules and decided to throw him a party in a couple of days...”

Zinal’s son was an elite adventurer! Since he was only in his forties, his son must have reached that rank at an awfully young age. *Guess that means they’re a father-son adventurer powerhouse. I’m impressed.*

“Wait, does that mean if there’s trouble, we’ll get roped into it? How annoying.” Fische sounded a little upset.

Barely a second later, Zinal sighed and gave his head a whack.

“Ouch! What was that for?”

“Just got a little miffed.”

As I smiled at their banter, Zinal gave me a conflicted look.

“So, where are you both staying?” Garitt asked my father.

“The plaza.”

“That’s not far from here,” Garitt remarked.

“Hey, we never finished talking. What’s the plan?” Zinal asked Garitt.

“We’ll stay here until the survey team gets back. I don’t see what else we can do.”

So they’re going to wait it out here.

“Guess we might as well pay our respects to the guild master,” Garitt said.

“Yeah, we’ll have to help out if something goes wrong. Arrgh, so much for my vacation.” Fische looked utterly annoyed. It was too bad: If he kept his mouth shut, he was a very handsome man—dashing, even. But the things he said and the faces he made ruined everything. A shame, really. He was working with such good ingredients.

“What a waste of a silver fox!”

“Huh?” all the men grunted in unison.

“Uh...never mind.”

Um, Past Me! Why did you have to blurt that out? And what’s a “silver fox” anyway? Uh, you thought Fische was one of them, right? And you said “what a waste”...

“You okay?” my father asked, poking between my eyebrows.

My eyes darted up to see him smiling down at me.

“That’s some wrinkle.”

“Ack!”

I guess that thought spiral gave me a big wrinkle between my brows. I smoothed it out with my finger.

“What did that mean?” my father whispered in my ear.

I shook my head. “It’s a mystery to us all.”

“Oh.” He looked a bit disappointed.

I wanted to explain it to him, but I really had no idea what I’d just said. If Past Me remembered words, I wished she would remember what they meant, too. *You know, it’s been a while since that happened. For a second there, I had no idea what was going on.*

“You’ve got a nice relationship with your daughter, Mr. Druid. Meanwhile, on my end, things’ve been a little, how should I put it...ahh...” Fische took another look at us and heaved a big sigh.

I wonder what’s weighing on his mind. Is his daughter acting up because he has to be away for work all the time?

“It’s just a little rebel phase. Don’t be so bummed about it.”

Aha. A rebel phase.

“Yeah, I know. And my wife keeps telling me not to be too clingy, but...ahhh.”

Wow, he’s just dripping with melancholy. He must really love his daughter.

“Mr. Druid, want us to tell you if we hear anything about the monsters?”

“Oh, would you?”

“Sure. Where’s your tent, by the way?” Garitt took a look into the plaza from its entrance. My dad pointed, and he nodded. “Okay, the survey team should be back in a day or two. We’ll come around to visit sometime in the evening.”

“Okay. We’ll be in our tent. See you then.”

“Yes, we’ll be there.”

My father bowed lightly, then Garitt and Zinal did the same. And Fische gave me an indescribable stare...the sort a protective father would give his baby.

“Bye, then.” Fische waved.

I smiled and waved back.

Once we were back in the plaza, I noticed the air was a bit tense.

“Guess news of the monster attack spread fast.”

Aha. That’s why everyone seems so nervous here.

Back inside our tent, I opened my bag and my creatures eagerly bounded out of it.

“Hey, Sora. Garitt, Zinal, and Fische...they were all safe people, right?”

I said each of the Zephyr adventurers’ names one by one and checked Sora’s reaction. None of the names got a negative response; Sora just sat and stared at me. In other words, they were no threat to us. I gave Sora a gentle pat, then reached into my bag for some potions...but I stopped myself when I remembered we had just come from a big meal at the dump. Instead, I gave Sora another pat and thanked it.

“What do you want for supper?” my dad asked.

“Are you cooking?”

“Yeah, I’m in the mood.”

“Then I want gyuu-don.”

My father had already taken the ingredients and cooking equipment out of the magic bag. He replied, “Okay. You just sit and relax,” and walked out of the tent.

“I hope he’s not worried about me.”

I did get a little shaken up when I remembered being attacked by those monsters. I’d thought I was okay, but the fear I felt that day was still alive inside of me. *Oh, right, I remember my dad always says I should let him take care of me more now that he’s my father.*

“Guess it’s time to be taken care of!”

Sora and the other creatures all bounded over to my feet.

“Whoa, that was quick. Oh, did you want me to take care of you?”

The four creatures looked up at me and jiggled. They were cute...too cute. I gave them all a big hug and felt warmth surge through my heart. *Huh? Wait a minute, my dad says he’s a mid-level adventurer. Was it really okay for him to say he sensed something in the forest?*

ZINAL OF ZEPHYR’S PERSPECTIVE

“**G**ARITT, DOES THE NAME Druid ring a bell?”

“Nope.” Garitt shook his head.

“Wait, neither of you have heard of them?” Fische asked us, sipping his wine.

“No.”

“But he’s an elite adventurer, isn’t he? He’d have to be, to notice the anomaly in the forest.”

Fische was right. To be able to pick up on that, he’d have to be a high-level adventurer. But we had never heard of a man named Druid. We knew the name of every high-ranking adventurer, including the new ones this year, yet we hadn’t heard of him. What was going on?

“Maybe he’s good enough to be elite, but they wouldn’t make it official because he’s only got one arm?”

“Would they do that, though?”

Adventurer guilds would promote any adventurer as long as they had the skill.

Then there was that incredibly powerful sword of his. He hid it with his belt, but I caught a glimpse of the magic stone embedded in it. Even from a quick glance, I could tell it held extraordinary power.

“Maybe he’s got *circumstances*,” Garitt said.

“What kind of circumstances?” Fische gave him a look.

Sometimes, being a high-level adventurer meant your life got complicated. What with the temples, the nobility, and a lot of other things, some adventurers hid their true level so they wouldn’t have to get involved with all that. The only problem was that there was a huge gap between high and mid-level adventurers, so hardly anyone took that step. But I could think of one other reason he might want to hide his higher status.

“He’s not a criminal, I hope?” Garitt and I both spoke at once.

That’s right. A criminal would want to hide it. I thought of Ivy. *Maybe I should look into this...*

“That bloodlust I sensed from him...it really freaked me out,” Fische said.

That reminded me of the death glare Druid shot at us. It had definitely been terrifying.

“But that was because we reminded Ivy of the time she was attacked,” Garitt suggested.

“No, no, that wasn’t our fault, though,” Fische protested.

“Sure, but we probably triggered it.”

Argh...why did we have to get roped into this? I just wanted to have a nice party with my son.

“Let’s keep an eye on them. Even if he is a criminal, we can’t exactly do anything to him as long as Ivy’s in the picture.”

It was obvious just how deeply he cared for her. The moment her face turned pale and she shivered with fear, he shot a furious glare at all of us. I’m sure he did it without realizing, but still...

Chapter 373:

Mr. Zinal?

“HELLO, THERE.”

While I was cooking dinner, I heard a voice behind me. I turned around to see Zinal, walking toward me with a basket in hand.

“Hello, sir. I guess my father was right.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Zinal asked.

The village had been bustling ever since lunchtime that day because the survey team had returned from their investigation in the forest.

“The survey team came back,” I said.

“Oh, right. Sounds like it’s been the talk of the town.”

“It has. So my dad said you would probably come by today with some information, and he thought we should cook an extra portion for you...or have you eaten already?”

“Dinner? No, not yet. I just got back from the guild.”

That’s good to hear. Well, I decided to cook the kinds of dishes where it wouldn’t matter if he didn’t want any, but I’m happy to serve him.

“Would you like to join us, sir?”

“Could I?”

“Sure, I made extra.”

I’d thrown together a soup of meat and vegetables and also marinated some meat. We had an extra salad, too, so everything was all set.

“Well, thanks, I’ll take you up on that offer. Sooo...there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you. That okay?”

“Um, sir?” I looked at Zinal, who seemed quite nervous for some reason.

“Er, it’s just that you and Mr. Druid don’t look much alike, so... Sorry.”

“Oh, well, that’s because we’re not blood-related.”

“You’re not?”

Huh? Why is he confused?

“Yes. Oh, but we became a family a little while ago.”

“You did?”

“Uh-huh. We filed the paperwork in Hatahi Village.”

The memory made me grin ear to ear. *Stop it, face. Don’t smile.* I squished my cheeks back in place. Zinal wasn’t saying anything, so I gave him a curious look.

“Hm?”

He was deep in solemn thought—but what about? Did it have something to do with me and Druid becoming family?

“Your witness... Never mind. Good for you.”

“Thanks.”

I think he was about to say something, but it was too quiet to hear. I wonder what it was.

My father came over to us, carrying some meat wrapped in bana leaves. “Ivy, is this enough meat?”

I checked it over. “Yup. Thanks.”

Hmm, I only see Zinal here. I wonder if his two friends are with my father?

“Where are Mr. Garitt and Mr. Fische?”

“In front of our tent. I set up the table there.”

I checked the amount of meat my father had brought to show me. It was enough for about six people, not two, so I assumed they were all staying for dinner.

“For the marinade, you used that papashi fruit we bought here, right?” he asked me.

“Yup, and I can’t wait to see what it tastes like!”

I was a little nervous to be cooking with the fruit for the first time, but it had tasted very good when I ate it on its own. The other variable was how tender the meat had gotten. Some fruits tenderized meat while others didn't, so it was always a gamble the first time you used them. I'd never encountered a fruit that toughened meat, but it was bound to happen eventually. When I'd tested the papashi fruit on a small batch of meat earlier, it had made the meat more tender, so I was looking forward to seeing how it would work when it was properly marinated.

"Mr. Zinal, go ahead and sit with your friends. The meat will be done shortly."

"Okay, thanks. Oh, and this is for you." Zinal offered me the basket he was carrying. When I took it from him, a sweet smell filled my nose.

"Is it a dessert?"

"It's a popular type of sweet from the capital called *feena*. We found some for sale at a booth here."

Feena? I lifted the white cloth in the basket to take a peek and saw baked pastries, shaped beautifully and lined up neatly.

"Thanks, they look delicious."

"No problem... Oh, can I carry anything for you?"

"Um, sure. Could you please carry the plates and cups?"

"Sure thing. I'm excited for dinner."

"Me, too."

After I sent Zinal over to his companions, I turned my attention back to finishing the cooking. The meat wasn't sliced very thickly, so it cooked up quickly. The soup was ready except for some final seasoning, and I had the salad already arranged on a big plate. All I had to do was take it out of the magic bag.

"I'll carry that," my dad said.

"Thanks."

"Ivy, did Zinal ask you something?"

"Huh? Oh, not really. He just said we don't look that much alike, so I told him

we became a family a little while ago. Was that okay?”

“Uh, yeah, it’s fine... Huh. We don’t look alike.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing. I’ll carry this for you.”

My father took the salad plate back to our tent. *What did he just mutter under his breath? My dad and Zinal have both been acting strange. I wonder what’s going on.*

“I’m here to help,” Garitt said, coming up beside me.

“Oh, it’s okay, I’ve got everything covered. Well...how about you carry the pot of soup for me?”

I was going to pour the soup into individual bowls and carry it over that way, but now that Garitt was there, I decided to have him take the whole pot. That way, everyone could get as much as they liked.

“Okay, I’ve got it.”

I was a little impressed by the way Garitt hoisted the pot of soup and carried it. I mean, it was hot and heavy!

“Are you okay, sir? I hope it’s not too hot.”

“I’m fine. I’ll just carry it at a bit of a distance.”

But that’s hard to do.

“Thank you very much.”

“No problem. It sure smells good.”

I finished up by putting the grilled meat on a plate, which I then carried over to the tent.

“Dinner is served!”

I set the plate of grilled meat onto the table. My father had already gotten out the bread, and we had enough plates. We also had the right number of spoons and forks for everyone, and my father had served the soup, so... *Okay, everything’s all set!*

“Let’s eat.”

“Yes, you can give us your news later on.”

“Good, this smell is making me impatient,” Fische said, grabbing a spoon.

His two companions nodded in agreement.

“Bless this food,” my father and I said.

“Hm? Oh! Um, bless this food,” Fische copied us, spoon in hand.

“Bless this food,” Zinal and Garitt said solemnly.

These three were so funny to watch.

“This is great. Whoa! Wow, it really is delicious,” Fische marveled with his spoon in his mouth.

I stole a discreet glance at his two companions, and they both looked pleased as well. As I cheered silently to myself, my father whispered “Good job” to me. I smiled and nodded.

“This meat is so tender. What is it?”

“Baaba, the cheapest meat they had.”

“Baaba?! That tough meat?”

Baaba was the most common type of livestock kept in Hataka Village. These animals were covered head to toe in a white, fluffy pelt. They were comparatively easier to raise than other livestock, so they were the main animal bred to be eaten there, but their meat was a little tough. The flavor was particularly savory and delicious, though.

“Yes, it’s baaba.”

“No, no, it couldn’t be...that meat’s so tough!”

“I know, it is tough.” Unless there was some other baaba I didn’t know about... “Um, it’s the baaba they raise as livestock, sir,” I clarified, a bit nervously.

Garitt got a bit flustered. “No, baaba meat is very tough. When it’s this tender, it just seems like a completely different animal.”

Now everything made sense. In fact, even I'd had no idea that the meat would turn out like it did. The baaba meat in the soup was spoon-tender, and the grilled portion was soft and juicy. When I did my initial taste test of the baaba meat by grilling a little bit of it on its own, it was quite tough, to be honest.

"I don't think anyone would believe this was baaba meat if you told them," Garitt said.

His two companions nodded in agreement.

Chapter 374:

No Answers

THE MEAT AND SALAD disappeared from their plates in a matter of minutes, and the soup was gone before I knew it. I hadn't even noticed anyone helping themselves to seconds.

"Here you go."

My father made us some tea and set out the pastries Zinal brought on a plate. When he carried them over to the table, Garitt was all smiles.

"Thanks, Mr. Zinal."

"You're welcome."

I took a bite of feena, and its soft flavor filled my mouth. It was a delicate, delicious taste, and not too sweet. It was so calming.

"That look on your face made buying those sweets worth it."

Wh-what kind of look am I making? I got a little self-conscious and averted my eyes.

"Mmm, these are just so good!" Garitt reached for a second feena, but Zinal slapped his hand.

"Take it easy, you."

"C'mon, you didn't have to hit me." Garitt rubbed his hand and glared at Zinal, who ignored him and happily ate his feena. Seeing he was no match for Zinal, Garitt reached for the tea instead.

"Go ahead, sir." There were still some feena on the plate, so I offered Garitt one, but Zinal shook his head.

"No, I bought those for you, Miss Ivy. Garitt can buy his own."

Even though his expression was easygoing, Zinal had an inexplicably scary aura about him. He must have had a mean streak.

“I’ll just get things ready,” my father said.

Garitt gave him a curious look. My father walked into the tent, then came out carrying the magic item that muted your conversations to outsiders. The trio looked a bit startled at the sight of it.

Huh? Weren’t they going to tell us something sensitive?

“Don’t you need it?” my father asked.

Zinal shook his head. “Actually, it would be a big help. This information isn’t public yet.”

My father activated the item and set it in the center of the table. The table we were using didn’t have any functions that would aid in secret conversations. Our sound-canceling table that we normally used was being repaired at the moment, so we had to use this item instead, which was a little inconvenient.

“Quite right. Okay, I’ve activated the item, so you’re good to talk now.”

“All right. Well, let me cut to the chase: The survey team cut their investigation short.”

“What?!”

They cut it short? The village buzz seemed to be that the investigation was complete, but some problems came up... I guess that wasn’t quite right, then. But why did they stop their investigation? Was it because everyone on the team was bad at the job? No, probably not. They were all elite adventurers.

“Why would they do that?”

“Well, they were able to go pretty far into the forest.”

“Yes...”

“And once they were there, they looked for monster tracks or any other traces of the problem, but they couldn’t find evidence of either.”

Neither one? Does that mean they didn’t find any illegal dumps? Then that would mean the monsters causing these problems aren’t mutations...

“If they couldn’t find evidence of either thing, then I guess we’d have to say their investigation was inconclusive.”

“Yeah... Well, they had to cut it short when they were attacked in the middle of their survey and people got hurt,” Zinal said.

My father nodded in understanding.

In other words, the survey isn't finished yet?

“So they have to keep going with the survey, but they'll need some bodyguards with them for protection,” my father said.

Zinal shook his head. “That won't work. These are monsters only top-level adventurers can sense. The bodyguards would need to be high-level adventurers, and we don't have the numbers. Even if we call in the adventurers on the road, we still won't have enough.”

It did sound like they didn't have enough people to investigate and fight the monsters. High-level adventures were few and far between, after all.

“They might have to recruit mid-level adventurers who are almost ready for promotion and fill the ranks with high-level adventurers they find along the way,” Fische said. Zinal nodded in agreement.

So we had unidentified monsters...and we weren't completely sure there were no illegal dumps around, but none had been found so far. That would mean it was a monster that had been there all along, but the residents of Hataka Village didn't know about it. Could it be a monster that traveled to Hataka Village for some reason, then?

“Um, excuse me...” When I spoke up, my father's eyes darted over to me. “Do monsters ever change where they live?”

I'd learned that monsters rarely left the environments they were used to, but what if there was an exception? Such an exception might be the monster we were looking for. Maybe it was a creature from the deepest reaches of the forest.

“I haven't really heard of monsters moving... They have their territories, you know.”

Right. I wonder if monsters have territorial disputes?

“Have you noticed any changes in the monsters around the village?”

Garitt glanced at Fische.

“They looked into it but couldn’t find any issues. There’ve been no reports of monster populations dropping dramatically, and no word of monsters getting riled up over intruders in their territory.”

Wow, they’ve checked everything out.

“So it’s hard to imagine that they migrated from other territories.”

“Yeah...”

Then I guess it has to be a sudden mutation brought on by magic? But nobody found any illegal dumps around here. I wonder where they were looking? All the illegal dumps I’ve found so far have been in caves or other places monsters like to show up. They were in fairly easy-to-find places, but what if they were in hard-to-find ones this time?

“Do you think there might be illegal dumps in places that are hard to find?” I asked.

“Hard to find? Well, if there were dumps like that, I don’t think they’d be very large.”

Of course they wouldn’t. If they were hard to find, adventurers wouldn’t use them. And if they weren’t used, they’d stay small. I guess they wouldn’t gather enough magic energy to make monsters mutate, then.

Fische sighed. “It’s gonna be more meetings tomorrow, huh? I want my vacation back!”

Garitt nodded in agreement. “There’s no time for rest now. Besides, our troublesome monsters might have multiplied, too.”

The monsters multiplied?

“What do you mean?” my father asked.

Garitt frowned hard. “When the survey team went into the forest, they immediately sensed something nearby. The number of monsters they sensed had nearly doubled by the time they came back from the forest. Depending on which adventurer you asked, the number was different. Then again, since it’s all a matter of senses anyway, you can’t say for certain.”

But this was something high-level adventurers had sensed, so this information shouldn't be dismissed. And monsters multiplying was a bad thing. If there were more of them, it was highly likely they would attack the village. *Now I see, this village is in danger.*

The reality stirred a little fear in my soul. My father suddenly took my hand and squeezed it. I looked at him, and he gave me a reassuring nod.

"There's one more thing: These monsters are a little more intelligent than usual."

They're more intelligent? I wonder how they know that.

"What makes them think that?"

"Because the monsters attacked the adventurers' weak spots many times. They probably scouted them out and followed them around to learn more about them."

Wow, so they tracked and studied their weaknesses...

"This is a real mess," my father muttered bluntly beside me. That's just how sticky the situation was.

Wait a minute, just how much magic energy would induce a sudden mutation anyway? The amount of magic energy needed to enhance a monster's pre-existing powers and make it go berserk is high enough already, isn't it?

"Um, what amount of magic energy is needed to cause a sudden mutation?" I asked.

"Hm? Amount has nothing to do with it," Zinal said.

I gave him a questioning look. *Amount has nothing to do with it?*

"It's well known that you need a great amount of magic energy to turn a monster berserk. But a sudden mutation doesn't need that much magic energy. All you need is the energy left behind in magic items."

The energy left behind in magic items... Wait a minute, if they don't need that much magic energy, then wouldn't smaller dumps be more than enough?

"The guild master and captain of the watch are going to ask the neighboring

village for help.”

“But that won’t be easy.”

“I know.”

Why? Won’t they be able to help?

“Okay, we have an early start tomorrow, so we’d better head back.”

Oh no. They’re leaving.

“Yes, we don’t want to outstay our welcome.” Garitt rose from his seat and stretched his arms.

“You’re welcome anytime. And thanks for the information.”

All three of them said it was their pleasure. Then Zinal deactivated the magic item and gave it a long, critical stare.

“Something wrong, sir?”

“No, no, I’m just impressed that your item is in such good shape.”

“Well, it’s very important to us,” I explained. “We always take it in to the tool shop when it needs to be fixed.”

“It’s important... I see. Miss Ivy, if you ever need help, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Huh? Why would I need help?

Chapter 375: Rumors, Rumors, Rumors!

I WAS IN THE MIDDLE of making my bed for the night when my father asked, “So, Ivy...what did you think of Zinal?”

What did I think of Zinal? How should I put it...

“He’s mysterious...with a bit of a wicked streak?”

“A wicked streak... Yeah, I guess I did get that impression.”

I mean, the way he stared at Garitt when he was angry could only be described as amused. He laughed it off when he noticed me looking at him, but Zinal was definitely like Sifar—the kind of guy who gets a kick out of eloquently cornering his victims with choice words. Unlike Rattloore, he wasn’t the type of person who patiently lured his victims into a corner with a smile on his face.

“Um, but that wasn’t what I meant, Ivy...” my father continued. “Did he seem strange to you?”

“Huh?”

Did he seem strange? Well, he did ask some odd questions, and he said that weird thing when he was leaving that took me by surprise, but he wasn’t exactly strange.

“I didn’t get any bad vibes from him.”

“Okay.”

“Did you notice something, Dad?”

“Well, I was just a little worried because he was acting like he wanted to be alone with you.”

He wanted to be alone with me? Yeah, he did come to talk to me instead of my father while I was cooking dinner, but that was so he could give me the dessert. And as for that cryptic thing he said when he was leaving... Huh, come to think of it, Dad wasn’t around then, either.

“Something coming to mind?” my father asked.

Was that really enough to make my father suspect him of foul play? After all, Sora had told us he was safe.

“When Garitt and Fische showed up at our tent, Zinal wasn’t with them. I was going to go check on you, but they both acted like they didn’t want me to.”

What?!

“Anyway, I know Sora says he’s safe, but be careful.”

“Okay, I will.”

I slid under the covers and thought about Zinal. *Why would he want to be alone with me? Yikes, my mind just went to a bad place.* When that crime organization was after me, I’d learned that some people *liked* children...in many different ways. When I was attacked in the forest that one time, my attacker was hoping to sell me to people like that. But even though I didn’t know Zinal that well yet, he didn’t seem like someone I should be scared of. If anything, he seemed worried about me. I had no idea what would make him worry, though.

Well, I’m sure to see him again, so I’ll just be extra cautious around him.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” I dipped some black bread into my breakfast soup and took a bite. To make the soup, I’d added milk to last night’s leftovers. It was gentle on the stomach and perfect for breakfast.

“Why don’t we go into town and see what the gossips have to say?”

“Okay. Sounds like fun.”

Rumors couldn’t be taken lightly. Whenever there was a problem, we were supposed to report it to the village watch or the guild, but nobody called attention to little changes in the day-to-day life of a town. If every tiny detail were reported, the guilds and watch stations would be overwhelmed. And yet, sometimes those little changes snowballed into bigger problems.

“Okay, after we relax a bit, we’ll head into town.”

“Good. Oh, wait! I wanted to do our laundry.”

I totally forgot. We've got dirty clothes and towels piling up.

"We can do that first, then."

I nodded in agreement and gulped down the rest of my soup. It was delicious.

We cleared the breakfast dishes, and then I grabbed the bag with our dirty laundry. Then, with my bag of creatures on my other shoulder, we left the plaza in search of the village washing center. After a bit of walking, a bustling area came into view. This village, just like any other, had a lively wash station.

"Actually, the laundry area might be the best place to overhear some good village gossip," my father whispered.

"You're right," I answered. The laundry area was a gathering spot for villagers and adventurers alike. It just might be the best place for overhearing all sorts of rumors (though most of them were groundless). I found a spot somebody had just vacated, so I secured it quickly and greeted the people doing their laundry on either side of me.

"Good morning, ma'am."

On my right was a woman with a hefty build, and on my left was an elderly lady. Both of them smiled at us. I started with our biggest blankets—you had to wash the heaviest items first or else your arms would be too tired to do them later. And since my father was helping with his one arm, the job was a lot easier than it was alone. We strained our ears as we washed.

"You know that new shop on Main Street? Well, they're selling some unique stuff there, so I'm going to check it out later."

I wonder what kind of unique things they're selling?

"I hear they might form another survey team."

"Whoa, really? That has to mean something's wrong, huh?"

"Yeah, that's my guess."

Now, how in the world did they hear about that before it was made public? Villagers are kind of extraordinary that way, aren't they?

"Something's wrong with the trash at the dump, you say?"

Huh? The trash at the dump? I started paying attention to a conversation happening a few feet away and saw a woman scrubbing a giant cloth as she spoke to another woman.

“That’s right. My son said so.”

“Ohh, he’s the one who takes your trash to the dump, right?”

“Yep. Anyway, the last time he went there, he noticed the amount of trash was odd.”

My father and I exchanged glances and slowed down our washing a little.

“See, my son goes once a week to take our trash to the dump.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And he says there’s the same amount of trash there as always.”

“Well, why wouldn’t there be? The tamers always go there to dispose of the trash.”

“Don’t be silly! Haven’t you heard the rumors? Ever since Marsha passed away, our village’s been having a hard time getting rid of the trash.”



“Ohh, right, I did hear something like that. Maybe the village watch hired a good tamer?”

“Ya think so?”

The trash levels at the dump are staying the same? As in, there's never any more or less? Yeah, that is a little strange. I looked at my father and saw he was deep in thought.

“By the way, have you seen sharmy lately?”

“Y'know, I haven't. A shame, really. Spring is here, so sharmy should already be around.”

Sharmy? What's that? I've never heard of it.

“Just so cute. And so friendly, too.”

“You know it! I love sharmy so much. The sight always makes me think of springtime. Think sharmy might not come around this year?”

“I'll be sad if they don't.”

They're friendly...and you see them in the springtime... Maybe they're animals? I looked at the people talking. Their faces lit up with joy as they talked about this “sharmy.” *Are they really that cute? Now I'm curious.*

“Okay, all done.”

I piled our finished laundry into a basket. We would then take it back to the plaza and hang it to dry near our tent.

“I'll carry that.”

“Thanks. Have a nice day, ladies,” I said my goodbyes to the people on my left and right—even though they weren't the same ones as before—and left the wash area. Once we were a few paces away, I took a deep breath in and out.

“So, the dump... Now I'm curious,” my father said.

“Me, too.”

We should tell the gentlemen of Zephyr about it next time we see them.

I strained my ears to hear the chatter around us as we walked back to the

plaza.

“What do ya think happened to that new kind of monster that showed up in the forest?”

A new kind of monster? That...can't be what I'm thinking of. It's something different, right? I carefully turned toward the sound of the conversation to see three adventurers.

“Oh, you mean that band of monsters somebody spotted deep in the forest near Hatada Village?”

Urk! They are talking about us. I looked at my father and smiled sheepishly.

“Right, I did hear about a new breed of monster there.”

“I heard it retreated back into the forest. A survey team went out to look into it, but they couldn't find a trace of 'em.”

They sent out a survey team? Yikes, I'm so sorry. I scurried away from the gossiping adventurers.

“Sounds like that rumor still hasn't gone away,” my father remarked.

I sighed and nodded. Why did they have to send out a survey team, of all things?

“We'll have to be more careful when we travel,” my father said.

“Yeah.”

I like to think we already are being careful, though...

Chapter 376:

A Bag for Four

WE TOOK OUR TIME strolling down Main Street to have a look around. It was crowded, probably because it was lunchtime. We listened for rumors but heard nothing new as most people were just talking about the survey team.

“What do you want to do for lunch?” my father asked. “It’ll take a while to go back to the plaza and cook something.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Do you know what kind of street food this village is known for?”

At first, I’d thought this village was known for baaba, but it wasn’t all that popular due to its particularly gamey flavor and tough texture. The flavor could be taken care of with a little parboiling in medicinal herbs and the tough meat was easily tenderized with a papashi marinade, so it was a shame that people let such delicious meat go to waste. But thanks to its lack of popularity, baaba meat was cheap. Its price was so tempting, I was even considering buying it in bulk. Then there was that papashi sauce I’d made to go with it. It was so much tastier than I’d thought it would be, and I really wanted to try it again. *Maybe I should play with the flavors a bit.*

“Seems like the wrapped lappo is a popular item.”

I looked around and the signs for wrapped lappo indeed stood out. Lappos were monsters that lived around the outskirts of Hataka. They were similar to wild rabbits, the main difference being their body size and the horns on their foreheads. They were also a little more violent than wild rabbits.

“Sure does. Think that refreshing smell in the air is the wrapped lappo?”

There was an aroma that intrigued me as we walked down Main Street. It was a combination of rich meat and another invigorating smell. I tried to figure out its source, and all signs pointed to the wrapped lappo.

“Maybe you’re smelling the herbs they wrap the lappo in?”

I glanced at a nearby stall that sold wrapped meats. The cook was slathering

meat and vegetables in sauce and wrapping them in big leaves. Then the bundles were placed in a wire net and grilled, sending the soft, refreshing scent through the air.

“It smells so good.”

“Want to have wrapped lappo for lunch, then?”

“Could we?”

“Yeah, I’m curious to see what they taste like. Doesn’t the smell make your mouth water?”

He was right. My appetite was thoroughly tantalized. We walked away from the stall we were closest to and tried to figure out which one was the best.

“Looks like they all wrap the meat in the same leaves. I guess the only difference is the vegetables and flavorings.”

“Guess so,” I agreed. “Let’s pick based off the vegetables, then.”

“Okay.”

After walking and looking for a while, we found a stall that used the kabo vegetable we both liked. Most of the people in line were locals, so we had high hopes as we got in the back of the line. We listened to the villagers talking in front of us.

“So I hear the guild master and the captain went at it again.”

“*Again?* What the hell is wrong with them?”

“Seriously.”

That’s right, the guild master and the captain of the village watch don’t get along. Do all the locals know about that? Between that and the danger in the forest, is this place really going to be okay?

“Hi! What’ll ya have?”

“Two wrapped lappos, please.”

“Coming right up. Thanks for your patience.”

A man and woman in their forties were hard at work behind the counter. The

man was at the fire, roasting the wrapped meats, and the woman was putting the packages together and selling them at the same time. She placed two finished meat packages into a basket and slid it onto the counter in front of us.

“Here ya go. That’ll be one hundred dal in all.”

We paid her and took our lunch. The refreshing smell of meat and herbs hit our noses.

“Thanks, Dad. They look delicious.”

“They sure do smell good. Let’s get back to the plaza quick. I want to eat these before they get cold.”

“Good idea. My creatures probably want to get out of the bag anyway.”

Once we were back in our tent at the plaza, I let my creatures out of their bag. They bounced around the inside of the tent, stretching and playing. That bag must have been uncomfortable for them since it was different from their usual one. I used to have two bags reserved for my creatures, but one of them got epically destroyed in the forest and we had to throw it away. Then the previously mended bag I’d been using up until yesterday finally gave out completely. I was using three temporary bags now, but my creatures didn’t like going into any of them, so they must not have felt right.

“Let’s go shopping for bags after lunch,” my dad suggested.

“Huh?”

“A new bag for your creatures. They need one, don’t they?”

“Yeah, they do. We need to find a nice comfortable bag for them.”

The quartet jiggled happily in reply, which must have meant the bags really were uncomfortable for them. But we had to eat lunch first, so we stepped out of the tent, and...

“Oh, the laundry!”

“Right, we forgot about that.”

When we stepped out of the tent to sit at the table, the laundry basket came into view. We had completely forgotten about it.

“Hey, Dad, can you make tea? I’m just gonna go dry the laundry.” There were clotheslines not too far away, so it wouldn’t take long.

“Want some help?”

“It’s okay, I just want to eat as soon as possible.”

I’m sooo hungry!

“Ha ha, got it.”

I quickly hung the laundry to dry, then went back to the tent to find our wrapped meats on plates along with some salad and tea. Everything was ready for me. I had a good dad.

We sank our teeth into the wrapped lappo. The meat was pleasantly toothsome, and the vegetables were saturated with its juices. It had a sauce with a little kick to it, and the effect was delicious. It was definitely something I would want to eat again.

“Once they figure out what’s wrong in the forest, we should definitely go lappo hunting,” I said. I wanted to try lappo on skewers, too.

“Absolutely. We’ve already made the traps, after all.”

That was the whole reason why we came to Hataka Village in the first place: to hunt the tasty lappos that lived on the outskirts of the village. *Gee, I hope the problem in the forest gets taken care of quickly.*

We cleared the table and asked the creatures if they wanted to come with us. They said no, so we activated the magic item that would hide them and carefully locked up our tent.

“Okay, let’s go look at bags first.”

“Yeah, think I should buy three? I want some spares for when they break.” Three would probably be enough.

“Of course.”

We discussed sizes and materials while we looked for a shop that sold bags. We carefully checked each sign on the street as we went.

“Think that’s our place?”

I looked where my father was pointing and saw a sign labeled “Bags” down a little alley off Main Street.

“Looks like it. Let’s go.”

“All right.”

We turned off Main Street and walked to the shop, passing by two people working at another store along the way.

“Won’t you give it a rest? There’re no such things as specters!”

Specters? My ears perked up at the strange word. I sneaked a peek at the pair and slowed way down.

“But I saw it again three days ago! It was a ghost, carrying a dead body!”

“You just won’t give it a rest, will you?”

“That’s because it’s true! I didn’t believe my eyes when I saw it the first time, but I really did see it!”

“You first saw it two months ago, right? And it was at night, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, the day you came screaming to me about it, I went to the village watch to ask if somebody had died the day before.”

“Yeah, I know. I went with you.”

“And nobody died, remember? There weren’t even any missing persons.”

“Well, yeah, but I swear I saw it! There was a ghost carrying a dead body!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. How could you even tell it *was* a dead body?”

“Well, I couldn’t, but it was on the cart they use for corpses, so I know I was right! And it was a black specter pushing the cart... I’m serious!”

“Sure...”

I don’t know why...but something’s nagging at the back of my mind. Is it the specter? No...it’s something else.

“What’s up?”

My father's voice yanked me out of my thoughts. I looked up and realized I'd stopped in my tracks and worried him.

"It's nothing."

I'll have a nice, long think about this later and figure out what I was trying to remember.

After a short walk, we made it to the shop. It was called "Tefure." It looked a bit posh, and I wondered if we could afford it.

"Hello, sir. Hello, Miss."

The shop was very well organized, and the shelves were lined neatly with bags. Each one looked finer than the last, and their prices reflected that. *I think we picked the wrong store...*

"Looking for anything in particular?" asked the lady who'd greeted us with a warm smile.

"Do you have any bags for tamers?" my father answered.

She quickly took us to the area with bags. There were rows of them, both quaint and majestic in design. Unlike all the bags I'd ever used before, these were produced with incredible care.

"Wow, they're so cute!"

I checked the price tag, convinced it would be quite high. *Huh? It's cheaper than a magic bag.* Tamer bags were woven with magic fibers, and their interiors were larger and more comfortable than they appeared, since they were meant to hold small monsters and animals.

"They're reasonably priced," said my father. "Want to pick one?"

"Could I?"

"Of course. Nothing's too good for our family."

"Thanks."

Okay, if I'm going for comfort, I should make sure it's well padded. It also needs to be big. And since summer's just around the corner, I need to think about breathability...

Chapter 377:

Not for Young Ears!

AFTER A LOT of back-and-forth with my father, we chose three bags. Since our different heights meant our bags had to be different sizes, we each bought our own bag: one exclusively for me and another exclusively for him. The third bag was between the other two in size, so either of us could use it if one of our bags broke. Our personal bags had fabric designs to our tastes, and the shared bag was chosen with both our preferences in mind. This meant we had to take a little extra time, but it was such a good feeling to buy things that truly satisfied us.

“Think the creatures will like these bags?” I asked.

“I’m sure they will.”

“Is our budget okay, though? All three of them are more expensive than the first.”

“Don’t worry. We’ve got more than enough funds, what with all the hard work Sora, Ciel, Flame, and Sol have been doing. We still have plenty of things to sell, too.”



He's right, our magic box is still quite full of goodies. Yeah, the bags were a little more expensive than I'd hoped because we factored in things like padding and breathability, but no regrets here! I hope they like the bags. I'm sure they will; they're all so easygoing.

"Okay, why don't we take a leisurely stroll down the back alley and keep our ears open for fresh gossip?"

"Aye-aye, sir!"

There were much fewer people in the back alley than on Main Street, but there was still quite a crowd. There were shops there, too, so it was ideal for a slow-paced walk.

"Oh, look. That new shop already went under."

"Really? Well, their food was terrible."

Yikes, that's harsh.

"Look at all that booze."

I followed my father's gaze to a liquor store. A peek inside the window revealed many different types of alcohol for sale. As my father stood next to me and peered inside, I heard him mutter, "Ooh, they have *that!*"

"Wanna have a look?" I asked.

"Could I?"

"Of course. I'll make something for dinner that goes well with wine."

"Thanks." My father entered the store with a merry grin on his face.

What should I cook for dinner tonight? We still have some marinated baaba left. I could add some spice to it, then mix it with some leafy vegetables that won't weigh it down. I think I'll make a soup, too, so we can have the leftovers for breakfast tomorrow. I guess Dad won't need any soup since he'll be drinking. Ooh, I know! It's been a while, so I'll make some grilled onigiri as well.

"My neighbor got arrested last night."

"Oh dear, *again?*"

What a disturbing thing to have happen “again.” I stole a careful glance and saw three women chatting nearby. I assumed from their bags of groceries that they were on their way home from a shopping trip.

“Why does he keep getting arrested?”

“Oh, didn’t you know? He gets awfully violent when he drinks.”

Yikes, that’s terrible.

“Oh dear, does he? I’ve only met him in passing, but he seems so nice.”

“Well, you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

You can say that again. If you judge a book by its cover, that book might hurt you. I found myself nodding eagerly in agreement.

“Is his wife okay?”

That’s right. His wife is probably a victim of his abuse.

“Oh, she’ll be just fine. She’s probably got another man over there as we speak.”

Huh?

“She what now?”

“Oh, I saw them sneaking out when I left the house today. They were hand in hand, all lovey-dovey.”

“Ooooh!”

Yikes, that’s quite a story. Is that why he’s so mad? Because his wife’s cheating on him? Or did she hook up with another guy because her raging husband disgusts her? As I stood there and wondered, I felt a firm yank on my clothes, followed by a hand clamping over my ear.

“Huh?” I was startled at first, but I looked up when I realized it was my father. When our eyes met, he had the most conflicted expression. He held me like that as he stared at the three gossiping ladies and sighed quietly. I couldn’t help but chuckle a little over the sight.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

I tried my best to ignore the gossiping women as we walked through the back alley over to the plaza. I stole a glance at my father to see he still had that conflicted look in his eyes.

“Hey, Dad, their conversation could’ve been a lot worse. Adventurers are much more crass.”

Adventurers’ nighttime conversations were downright obscene most of the time. Adventurer parties made of all men or all women were particularly hardcore. The women probably took the prize for crassness, but it was all talk with them. Male parties, on the other hand, sometimes escalated into foul play. And they were all eager to teach a kid like me the ways of the world. Since I had been masquerading as a boy until just recently, I almost got roped into their shenanigans a number of times. Naturally, I ran for it every time.

“Yeah...I guess I’m not one to talk. Back in the day, I sure ran my mouth off without thinking of how it made other people feel...”

I grinned at the somber look on my dad’s face. He really didn’t have to worry so hard about it.

“It’s okay. It doesn’t bother me.”

I was embarrassed at first, but I got used to it. If I prickled at every little lewd remark, I wouldn’t be able to handle living in the plaza.

“But if you’re not bothered by it, that has to mean you’ve heard a lot of bad conversations.”

Yeah...I guess it does mean that. I shrugged my shoulders, and my dad sighed heavily.

“Oh well... I can’t change the past.”

“Yeah. Anyway, I was thinking of making grilled onigiri for dinner. Sound good?”

“Oh, nice. It’s been a while.”

“Uh-huh, and I’m in a cooking mood today.”

“Well, I’m excited. Let’s head back to Main Street. There aren’t any shops around here anyway.”

He’s right, there aren’t any shops... Wait, what about that one?

“Dad, isn’t that a shop?”

There was a tiny store up ahead. On its old, beat-up sign was the word “Meat,” along with a drawing of just that.

“A butcher?”

“Can we swing by?”

“Sure, let’s see what they’ve got.”

And so, we found ourselves lured into a butcher’s shop. It was small, and from what we could see through the window by the door, they only sold one type of meat. That red flesh looked familiar... Was it baaba?

“Do they specialize in baaba?”

For a specialty shop, they had a pitiful selection of meat for sale. It did look like good meat, though.

“Hey, Dad, I wanted to stock up on baaba. Is that okay?”

“Sure, I don’t mind. That marinated baaba was really good.”

“Yeah, I was thinking of using that marinade as a base for trying out other flavors.”

“Aha, well, I can’t wait to taste it all. That reminds me, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you, Ivy.”

“What’s up?”

“We still have some of that first batch of marinated baaba, don’t we? Could you turn that into snacks to pair with the wine?”

“That was the plan. I’m gonna change up the flavor a little to go with your wine.”

My dad grinned ear to ear when I said that. I just loved little interactions like those.

When we opened the door of the butcher shop, it made a cute ringing noise. I looked up to see it had a little doorbell attached at the top.

“Hullo there.” A young man stepped out from the back to greet us. When he saw who we were, he looked surprised...and confused. *I wonder why?*

“Is this baaba meat?” I asked.

“That’s right. Umm...” He looked even more surprised by my question. Seriously, what was wrong?

“I’d like twenty kilograms of it, please.”

Maybe that’s too much? Then again, I want to try a bunch of different flavors: sweet, herby, with soy sauce... I really do need twenty kilograms, don’t I?

“Twenty...kilograms? Er, have you mistaken my meat for something else? You do know it’s baaba, right?”

Huh? Why would I mistake it for another meat? What is he talking about?

“Yes, sir, we know it’s baaba. That’s what we want. Twenty kilograms of baaba.” My father spoke slowly but firmly to the butcher.

The butcher got a glazed look in his eyes for a few seconds, then quickly shook his head and got to work packing our meat. “Forgive me, it’s just that baaba isn’t all that popular. Are you really sure you want to buy this much?”

“Oh, it’s quite all right. It’s not at all expensive.”

It really was cheap, because so few people wanted to buy it.

“Um, that’s not what I meant. Can you actually use it all up? Twenty whole kilograms?”

“It’s so delicious that we’ll gobble up the twenty kilograms before we even know it,” I assured him.

“It’s...*delicious*? Um...are your taste buds oka... Er, never mind.”

Now I get it. People in this village think baaba is tough and gamey.

“It’s delicious if you parboil it in herbs and marinate it in a papashi sauce, sir,” I said.

The butcher got a thoughtful look on his face. “Yeah, I did try to tenderize it with papashi a few times...”

That’s right, the first time I used the papashi marinade and nothing else, it was still gamey and not all that great. That’s why I started parboiling it with herbs beforehand.

“I think the secret is parboiling it in herbs first.”

“Um, pardon me, but could I try just a little of your meat? And please, sell me the recipe while you’re at it!”

The butcher bowed with such vigor that I almost heard the gust of wind his head made. The situation was just so surreal that all I could do was stare dumbly at the top of his head.

Chapter 378: Marinated Baaba

THE BUTCHER'S NAME was Kohl. He was twenty-two years old, and his wife Lizzy was the same age, as they were childhood friends. They ran their baaba butcher shop together, and both sets of their parents were baaba ranchers. Due to concerns over the growing population and the lack of food, Hataka's village chief decreed many years ago that the village should focus on baaba as its main food source. But its toughness and gamey flavor made it unpopular with the villagers, so much so that it was now considered a liability to Hataka. This was definitely worrisome for Kohl's family.

Kohl's and Lizzy's parents were both in the baaba ranching business because the village chief's wife had asked them to go into it. Lizzy's mother owed a debt to the chief's wife, and the chief himself had run many experiments trying to make baaba meat more palatable with no success. Some baaba ranchers quit, but most of them were trapped because of the booming population. The story poured out of Kohl like a raging river. I was impressed at how quickly his mouth could move.

"Okay, so to sum it up..." my father began. "You want to know how to make baaba meat taste good so you can help feed Hataka Village. Is that right?"

Maybe that was too simple? There was a lot more to his explanation. I kind of tuned out halfway through, but I think he raved about his wife for a while.

"Yes, sir, that's right. We can't afford to pay much, but please, we need your recipe."

I guess he didn't mind his story getting shortened. Well, maybe it doesn't matter since Dad covered all the major points? My father gave me a hinting look. *Um...right, he wanted that recipe.* But I didn't feel right making him buy it from me.

"Um...Kohl?"

I looked in the direction of the woman's voice to see the mistress of the shop pop her head out from the back. Was it Kohl's wife?

"Hello, ma'am."

"Oh, um...yes?"

The confused woman was probably Lizzy. I glanced at my father, trying to figure out the best way to explain everything to her, and he looked just as lost as I was. *Maybe we should just let her husband tell her?* I looked at Kohl, and for some reason, he was giving me the most desperate look imaginable. *Huh? Hasn't he noticed she's in the room?*

"Um, may we call you Lizzy?" my father asked the woman.

She looked at him in surprise and nodded. So she was Kohl's wife Lizzy. My father told her the gist of our conversation with Kohl, and she gave her husband a tired look. Kohl, finally noticing his wife was in the room, stared sheepishly down at his feet.

"Sorry about my husband. He can be a little spacey at times, but he's a good man."

I glanced at Kohl to see his eyes were swimming. From the look of him, he would rattle off all sorts of other requests to me if I didn't stop him, so I decided it was best to set the record straight.

"Mr. Kohl, I'll teach you how to cook the baaba, but I insist on doing it for free."

"What?! Are you sure?" Lizzy stared at me in disbelief. Either she was worried about the flavor or afraid we were deceiving Kohl. I hoped I could quell her worries.

"I have an idea. It's short notice, but are you available to come to the plaza for dinner tonight?"

If I asked whether we could stay for dinner, Lizzy would definitely be wary about it even if Kohl wouldn't mind. But if anything went wrong at the plaza, they could easily call a watchman for help, so I figured that would put Lizzy's mind at ease.

“Huh? Why don’t you just come over here?” Kohl said.

“No! Yes, please, we’ll join you in the plaza.”

Come on, Kohl, notice how your wife’s feeling. She’s obviously worried sick.

After I shot a few stolen glances at Lizzy, her eyes met mine. She stared critically at me...then, for some reason, a mirthful smile grew on her face.

“Tee-hee!”

“Huh?”

With a little giggle, all the fear in Lizzy’s face melted away. *Could it be that she finally gets what’s on my mind?*

“All right, then, um, we’ll be honored to join you in the plaza this evening,” Lizzy continued politely. Kohl looked terribly confused.

“You’re a real trouper, Lizzy,” my father said softly.

Lizzy smiled sheepishly. She definitely had some stories to tell.

“Well, see you in the plaza.”

We gave them directions to our tent, then they told us what time the shop closed and we left.

“Will you be able to cook it on time? Should I help?” my father asked. Since we had stayed at Kohl’s butcher shop a little longer than intended, it had gotten late. But marinated baaba meat needed only a little time on the grill, and as long as I chopped the vegetables finely, the soup wouldn’t take long, either. For the salad, all I needed was to cut the lettuce and add a little dressing.

“I’ll be okay, thanks. By the way, sorry I invited Kohl and Lizzy over to supper without asking you.”

“Oh, it’s all right. I had a feeling that was where the conversation was headed.”

Am I really that easy to read?

“You can never resist helping someone in need, Ivy.”

“Oh, that’s not true. If there’s nothing I can do to help, I don’t bother.”

That would only give them false hope. And I'm not a jack of all trades, so there were plenty of things I couldn't do. That's why I wanted to do everything in my power to help whenever I *could* contribute something. I was only helping out this time because it was an area I was well versed in.

"You're a kind daughter, and I couldn't be prouder."

I looked at him in surprise.

"You're blushing," he said, poking my cheek.

"Oh, let's just get back home so I can cook!"

As I quickened my pace back to the plaza, I pressed my hands to my cheeks. They did feel a little hot.

I gave a satisfied nod to the food on the table. Once I grilled the onigiri, everything would be all set. Between that, the meat, and the soup, we'd have more than enough to eat.

"Miss Ivy?"

When I heard my name, I turned around to see Lizzy carrying a basket. Kohl was beside her, staring at the food.

"Thank you for inviting us to dinner tonight. Here, I've brought you some knutzen."

Knutzen? The fragrant smell of tree nuts wafted from her basket. I took it from her and peeled back the cloth to have a look. There were cookies inside, packed with tree nuts.

"Thank you very much. We'll have these for dessert."

Lizzy beamed joyfully when I bowed to her, but her fist was turning white at the knuckles as she gripped the sleeve of Kohl, who was trying to stray from her to look at the food. *You really are a trouper, Lizzy.*

"Dinner is served." My father set the platter of grilled onigiri onto the table where Lizzy and Kohl had just sat. They had looks of wonder and curiosity in their eyes as they stared at the food.

Oh, right, I'd better tell them about rice. Since it was an easy crop to grow, that ought to help with Hataka's food insecurity issues, too.

"So, um, this is marinated baaba, grilled onigiri, and soup. Help yourselves."

"Thank you so much!"

Kohl took a piece of baaba, sniffed it, and looked at it in shock. "Wow, it really doesn't have a trace of that gamey smell."

"You're right... How incredible." Lizzy sounded a little excited.

My heart raced as I watched them take their first bites. My father and the gentlemen of Zephyr had all said it tasted great, but it was nerve-racking showing off for some new guests.

"It's tender...and tasty, too. It's got a bit of a twang to it, but in a good way," Lizzy exclaimed, slapping Kohl on the shoulder.

Oh, good. I think she likes it.

"It really is incredible. I didn't think you could get flavor like this out of baaba meat." Kohl happily took another bite of it while Lizzy merrily ate hers beside him. My father and I both grinned at what a cute couple they were. The way they smiled and ate so vigorously was identical.

"They're fun to watch."

"I know, I've never seen people so in sync with each other. Think it's because they're old friends?"

"Could be. They've been close all their lives."

That makes sense. But wow...they're sure eating a lot.

"Think we'll have enough food?"

"Did you cook all of it?" my dad asked, putting another piece of baaba onto my plate.

"I've still got about three portions left."

"Okay."

I looked at our two guests. *I think I'd better cook the rest of it.*

Chapter 379:

Safety First

“I’M SORRY.”

“Please forgive me.”

Kohl and Lizzy bowed to me and my father. On the table were a bunch of plates, licked clean. They’d eaten and loved the grilled onigiri, too. Lizzy needed a courage boost to eat them when I told her they were made of rice, but Kohl just said, “Oh, that’s interesting,” and promptly ate it. I wished he’d be a little more cautious—just not as much as Lizzy. When I told my father that, he shook his head at me for some reason.

“Oh, it’s all right,” I assured them. “It was a pleasure watching you two eat my cooking so enthusiastically.”

They’d even polished off the second batch of baaba meat I cooked. Their faces showed pure ecstasy as they ate. The only mystery was Lizzy: How could she eat so much and still be thin as a rail?

“I have a confession...” Kohl said solemnly, standing up straight. I got the idea he was about to talk about something heavy... Was he okay? “We’ve been really stressed out recently because it looked like we were all going to have to become slaves.”

“What?!” my father gasped. I was just as shocked—so much that I couldn’t even gasp. *They were going to become slaves?*

“The ranch and the butcher shop are both covered by a loan.”

Ah, now that makes sense. But wait a minute, didn’t the village chief make them raise baaba in the first place? He wasn’t helping them?

“But the village chief ordered you to raise baaba. Why didn’t he help you?”

My father was no longer speaking eloquently or politely. I guess he was exasperated.

“Well, he’s in a sticky situation, too, with the ranches...” Kohl explained.

My father sighed loudly. “Is there still time?”

His question made me confused. *Still time* for what?

“Probably. That’s where you come in, Mr. Druid and Miss Ivy. Please teach us how to cook this baaba dish. Tomorrow.”

Lizzy and Kohl rose from their seats and bowed. I could feel the eyes of the adventurers in the plaza shooting at us.

“Please, don’t bow. It’s all right, I’ll teach you.”

The couple’s faces lit up. “Um, so, we talked over a lot of ideas on the way to visit you two. We thought that if your baaba meat really was that delicious, we wanted to sign a proper contract with you.”

A contract?

“Could you register your marinade with the merchant guild? We would love to be your sole distributors!”

They want to be my sole distributors? Does that mean they’d sell my marinade all by themselves? But isn’t this getting a bit complicated?

“Ah, that makes sense,” my father said. “If we register our marinade with the guild, they can check and see if anything else like it already exists.”

That made sense to me. I remembered how we registered my grilled onigiri sauce with the merchant guild and they checked to see if there were any similar types of sauce. *But this is the first time somebody will be our sole distributor. It is the first time, right? Our onigiri sauce wasn’t for a sole distributor, was it? Um...y’know, I can’t remember. Things escalated pretty quickly, and we were talking about registering with the merchant guild... Oh! That’s right, they’ve been making decisions while I was lost in thought. I feel like I said something, but I forget what it was.*

“So, um, we don’t doubt you, Miss Ivy, I promise.”

Huh?

“It’s just, when we opened our baaba butcher shop, let’s just say, we went

through a lot...”

Uh-oh. Were they tricked into it or something?

“Oh, I think it’s a good idea to register it with the merchant guild so they can look into it.”

“What?!” the couple gasped.

Had I really said something that shocking? If they were going to sell a product, it was only natural that they’d want to make sure it was genuinely *safe*. If registering my marinade with the merchant guild would give them that safety they needed, their request was entirely reasonable.

“Doesn’t it rub you the wrong way?” Lizzy asked.

I shook my head no. Lizzy glanced at my father and sighed in relief when he shook his head, too. *I hope all that worrying right after eating such a big meal didn’t give her indigestion. We already have tea, but maybe I should get her some water...*

“Would you like some water?”

“Water? Oh, no, I’m fine, thank you.”

So Lizzy’s stomach was okay, then. “All right.”

“Mr. Kohl, would you like to hash out the details?” My father came out of the tent with his noise-canceling item in hand. He activated it and set it down on the table so nobody nearby could hear our conversation. *Boy, it sure is inconvenient not having the table with that magic item attachment that my father’s mentor gave him. I hope it gets fixed and comes back to us soon.*

“Um, yes, please.”

I listened to my father, Lizzy, and Kohl talk things through. We would register the recipe and the marinade as a sauce with the guild, who would check to see if similar sauces already existed. Then, if it was successfully registered, we would draw up a sole distributor contract with Kohl and Lizzy. Whenever Kohl used the marinade, he would have a transaction with us. *Wait a minute...is this the same deal we had with our grilled onigiri sauce? Well, whatever.*

We finished talking business for the day and settled down to have some tea. It

was a big relief to see my father deactivate the magic item.

“How are we going to advertise?”

“We’ll borrow my friend’s food stall. They’re out with an injury at the moment.”

Kohl really sounded confident that the plan would succeed.

“But I’m afraid it won’t go well. Everyone here already knows what baaba tastes like.”

Lizzy sounded worried, and for good reason. In Hataka, baaba was infamous for tasting bad. Even if you borrowed a friend’s food stall and made a big sign that said “It Tastes *Good* Now!” it wasn’t like anybody would believe you. People needed a reason to try it. With the grilled onigiri, the children were lured to the shop by the smell. Would the smell bring customers to us this time? *No, it won’t. We’ve got a powerful enemy now: the wrapped lappo. It really smells amazing. They need a push... If everyone just had a bite, I’m sure they would change their minds about baaba.*

“Oh, that’s it! A bite...”

“A bite?” Lizzy gave me a curious look.

“Yes, we’ll give out bite-sized samples of the baaba for free.”

“Free samples?”

“That’s right. We’ll get people to take just a bite of the baaba at no charge. Some people are bound to try it that way since they’ve got nothing to lose.”

Word of mouth was a powerful tool—it had been quite a force with our grilled onigiri.

“I like that idea,” my father said. “Seeing the way you two gobbled up the baaba tonight, I have a feeling just one bite can win this battle for us.”

Uh, Dad, this isn’t a battle. I glanced at Lizzy and Kohl and noticed they both looked embarrassed. They were probably remembering how messily they’d eaten dinner that night.

“I swear, we don’t always eat like slobs!” Lizzy insisted desperately when my

eyes met hers. Kohl burst out laughing, and my father and I followed suit.

Wait a minute, isn't that too many laughing voices? I looked around and noticed that the group of women nearby were shaking with laughter. Apparently, they had tried to hold it in and failed. Lizzy's face turned bright red, and she sank her head down on the table.

"I'm sorry we overheard," one of the women apologized.

"It's all right, ma'am. I'm fine, ma'am," Lizzy answered shakily...which only brought on more laughter.

"Where are you going to set up the food stall?" one of the ladies asked.

"Oh, um, the fifth corner off Main Street."

"Okay. When will it be open?"

Wait a minute, are they going to be our first customers?

"Let's see, we'll register it at the merchant guild tomorrow, then we'll have to get permission first, so...I think starting tomorrow?"

"Miss Lizzy, the meat is best if you marinade it for twenty-four hours, so the day after tomorrow would be better," I said.

"Oh, okay. The day after tomorrow it is."

Hm? Is Lizzy's face a bit red? Oh, right, she's been sipping on the wine my dad bought earlier today.

"We'll come eat some to apologize," the lady said.

"It's a promise!" Lizzy said urgently. "A promise, okay?! You'd better be there!"

Is she drunk? I glanced at my father, who smiled sheepishly back at me. "Is Miss Lizzy drunk?"

"Yeah, probably. So's that group over there." My father pointed at the group of ladies. At a closer look, they had a pile of empty bottles in front of them.

"Think they'll remember any of this tomorrow morning?"

Too bad. They were going to be our first customers.

Chapter 380: Good Neighbors

LIZZY WAS PACING AROUND the food stall, her face tense with worry. “Okay, we’ve written down the prices, now all we need to do is cook them... Everything’s okay, right? Yeah...yeah, we’re good.”

“Please, Miss Lizzy, try to relax.”

“I’ll be okay... Yeah, I’m fine.”

You don’t look okay to me at all. Oh, now you’re quadruple-checking the prices.

The day after our talk, we went straight to the merchant guild to register our marinade with them. Next, we asked if we could use it before its verification and got special permission to do so. My father said that each merchant guild seemed to have little differences in their rules, but since I couldn’t remember a thing about the last time we’d done this, I had no idea what those differences were. The food stall Kohl borrowed from a friend was well maintained and ready to use without any fuss, so we were opening shop today.

Kohl entered the food stall with my father, carrying bags filled with marinated baaba meat hanging off their shoulders.

“Yikes, Lizzy is a nervous wreck.”

“Ivy, you okay?”

“I’m fine. Everything’s ready—all we need to do is cook the meat.”

I took the bags from them and took out the marinated baaba meat from inside. Once everything I needed was out, I shut the other items back in my food-grade magic box, which was equipped with time-stopping and chilling functions.

Kohl lit the grill. After adjusting the fire levels, he turned to me and my father and bowed humbly.

“Miss Ivy, Mr. Druid, thank you so much.”

“No problem! We really enjoyed ourselves,” my father said.

“We sure did! And our task ends here.”

Everything was prepped, so the baaba meat would probably be good to go. It was all up to Kohl’s and Lizzy’s skill with a grill. The only hurdle that remained was baaba’s bad reputation, but if people would take just one bite, I was sure their opinion of it would change for the better.

“Ivy, we should head out.”

“Yeah. Good luck, you two.”

We stepped away from the food stall.

“Oh, please wait! Could you just stay until we’ve cooked our first batch so you can give it a final taste test?”

A final taste test? But it’s very easy to make after it’s been prepped, so there shouldn’t be anything wrong with it. We’ve mixed the marinade together and already taste-tested it, too, so I don’t think we need to do any more taste-testing... I wonder what’s wrong?

“Thanks, I’ll take a piece,” my dad said, flashing a smile at Kohl. “Hey, Ivy, we’re the first customers.”

Oh, that’s right! We’re this food stall’s first customers. Gee...now I’m getting excited!

“Yeah, I’m excited!”

This sort of thing doesn’t happen often in life.

“Er, but you aren’t exactly customers...” Kohl stammered, a look of confusion on his face. I couldn’t help but laugh at his flustered demeanor.

“Mr. Kohl, you don’t often get the chance to be somebody’s first customer. It’s an honor.”

“Oh, really?” Kohl scratched his head.

“Well, I’m flattered that our special first customers are Miss Ivy and Mr. Druid,” Lizzy said, handing Kohl some raw baaba. Kohl put it on the wire grilling

net and nodded, muttering, “You have a point.” As he grilled the baaba, a savory aroma spread through the air. Since we’d added a little extra fruit to this marinade, it had a floral note to it as well.

“What a beautiful smell,” said someone passing by.

“It sure is. But it’s baaba,” someone else observed.

“Huh? Ugh, now I’m not so sure...”

Baaba really isn’t that popular, is it? I guess we’ll just have to be patient as we spread the gospel.

“Here you go, Miss.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I took the leaf-wrapped package from Kohl. Since he had placed some root vegetables beneath the meat, it was just the right temperature... Actually, it was a bit hot, but not too hot to eat. Still, I thought maybe it should be a little cooler.

“Maybe you should put a few more vegetables at the base.”

“Is it too hot?” my father asked, setting the parcel of meat on his hand. Then he got a strange look on his face and said, “Kohl, you *are* putting a wooden board under the vegetables, aren’t you?”

To stop things from overheating, you’re supposed to put a thin wooden board between the leaf and the vegetables. Kohl’s eyes darted around in reply to my father’s question.

“Oh no! They’re in the cupboard!”

Noticing the awkward exchange between my father and Kohl, Lizzy quickly flung the cupboard door open. Inside was a stack of thin wooden boards. *Wait, last time I checked, those were next to the stack of leaves on the table.*

“I’m so sorry, I accidentally put these in the cupboard when we were taking inventory earlier...”

“Lizzy, it’s okay, just calm down,” Kohl said.

Lizzy’s head bobbed up and down in a lengthy nod. She was usually the

levelheaded one, so it was a surprise seeing her get so worked up at a time like this. My father and I were going to head back to the plaza after they set up, but we decided to watch over them from a distance for a little while instead.

They're opening just before lunchtime. If things go well, they should have a few customers. But thinking back on the conversation of those ladies earlier, it might end up being pretty hard. I sighed nervously.

"Worrying won't help, Ivy. It all comes down to their skill and luck now."

"I know. But I really am glad they managed to get extensions on their loans."

Lizzy and Kohl had loans from the merchant guild. We'd brought a little of the marinated baaba to them while they negotiated, and we were all thrilled when they received a year-long extension on their loans. If they worked hard for the next year, they could save both themselves and their parents from slavery. And if the baaba meat sold well, that would help other ranchers, too.

"If only people would just try the baaba, I know it'll sell well."

It was now lunchtime, and Main Street was bustling with people. Some were lured to the food stall by the smell, but they passed once they found out it was baaba. I couldn't believe people would turn down free samples. *Well, yeah actually, I can believe it. When I grilled a plain piece of baaba that one time, it did taste pretty gross.*

"Ooh, there you are!"

Huh? That lady's voice sounds familiar...

"Aha! It's our neighbors!"

Our lady neighbors from the plaza had come to Main Street...and they'd brought a giant herd of their friends with them. Since they'd been so drunk the night we were eating the baaba meat, I doubted if they would actually show up.

"Wow, they really came." My father looked just as surprised as I was.

"Are you *sure* about this? It's *baaba*."

"Wow, it really is a baaba food stall. Is this a joke?" the newcomers asked their friends with concern.

“I dunno, but it smelled so good, and that lady behind the grill scarfed it down like a pig—I just *had* to see what the hype was all about!”

Lizzy, the “lady who scarfed it down like a pig,” turned bright red. “Yeah, well, it was much yummier than I could have imagined. I normally eat daintily, I swear! I mean it!”

But the lady only chuckled and said, “Don’t worry, it’s okay for a lady to eat a lot. A lot of us do.”

Between Lizzy’s beet-red face and Kohl’s nervousness about the crashing wave of women, I wondered if they were going to be okay.

“Anyway, *I’m* gonna try some. What about you girls?”

“Er, what do you think?”

“Hmm...”

The curious lady was excited to eat, but the other ones still weren’t on board with the idea.

“Um, we do have free samples, if you’d like to try some.”

“Thanks.”

The lady who was going to buy some anyway took a bite of the free sample, but her friends still looked like they were on the fence.

“Whoa, how is this... *What?!* This *can’t* be baaba. It *isn’t* baaba, right?”

As she marveled over her morsel, the other ladies’ curiosity was piqued.

“Oh, so it’s *not* baaba?”

“If it’s not baaba, why does your sign say it is?”

“Um, this really is baaba meat,” Lizzy explained, her voice cracking a little. “We marinate it overnight and slather it in the marinade, too.” Lizzy was almost shouting now—that was the only way she could be heard over the gabbing gang of ladies. Her voice was so loud that it boomed throughout the area, making people other than the group of ladies notice the food cart.

“So, um, I’ll take three, please,” the first lady told Kohl, holding up three fingers.

“Thank you, Miss. I’ll get them grilled for you right away.”

The other ladies flocked around Lizzy to get their free samples. The passersby who happened to see this got curious and took some samples as well.

“Wow, this is great! This would pair wonderfully with that wine I bought today.”

“Oh, there you go again with the wine! But yeah, it is awfully tender. Can you believe a tough meat like that being this tender?”

“I think I need another taste.”

“Idiot, one bite is more than enough to know it’s good. Excuse me, I’ll take two, please!”

“Two for me as well!”

People quickly flocked to the food stall. The original group of ladies formed a line, and the next people to get free samples queued up behind them.

“I think they’re going to be okay,” I said.

“Yeah. That lady is a powerhouse.”

“That’s for sure.”

Chapter 381: Sold Out!

KOHL SAT IN HIS CHAIR and bowed his head to us. “I’m so sorry.”

“Again, it’s okay. Just take it easy,” I called out to Kohl as I washed the grilling nets that were caked with ash and marinade. Lizzy was seated beside him, flopped over on the table. She was too tired to even speak.

“Okay, all finished.” My father stretched his arm as he finished cleaning the grill.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“How’re the dishes?”

“Almost done!” I showed him the clean grilling net, and he nodded in approval. He joined me at the sink to wash his hand, then he looked behind us and let out a chuckle. As I wiped his hand dry with a towel, I turned around to see Kohl and Lizzy, their right cheeks pressed to the tabletop, muttering incoherently.

“They’re beat,” my dad laughed.

“Go easy on them. They got so many customers!”

Thanks to the enthusiastic cheers of our lady neighbors in front of the food stall, they’d gotten quite a line of customers. Figuring things would settle down later in the afternoon, we went back to the plaza after lunch. But after a while, we started to hear chatter: *Did you hear about the food stall with baaba that actually tastes good?!* With a sense of trepidation, we returned to the stall and found that the line of customers had grown even longer since lunch. When we asked Lizzy if she was doing okay, she just stared at us with exhausted eyes and shook her head.

“I really panicked a little at that point,” my father said. “She looked exhausted.”

“I know. Good thing we went back.”

It was lucky we got there to help out before she collapsed from exhaustion.

“That’s for sure.”

I boiled some water and made tea. We set the table with the tea and the feena my father had bought after we closed the food stall.

“Mr. Kohl, Miss Lizzy, won’t you come join us for some celebratory dessert?”

The pair dragged their faces off the table. It was a little scary how slowly they were moving.

“Thanks...” Lizzy took a bite of feena and sighed dreamily.

Yeah, nothing is more soothing than dessert. I took a bite of my own. *Mm, so good.*

“We’d better take tomorrow off,” my father said.

“Uh-huh.”

Our magic box had become empty before we knew it. We had grilled all the meat meant for the next day without noticing. I guess it was inevitable, what with the chaos of the day and all.

“I’m actually a little relieved to hear that.” Lizzy took a long sip of her tea.

“Yeah, we get to sleep,” Kohl said.

Lizzy frowned at him. “Not *that*. I meant I’m relieved we sold out.”

“Ohh, right. Yeah, I’m happy about that, too. I just need to take it easy tomorrow. My arms are killing me.”

Kohl had worked his arms to their limits at the grill that day. They were giving him a lot of pain.

“I’m sorry, Kohl. You okay?” Lizzy gently rubbed his arm.

“If I drink one of the potions we’ve got at home, I should be fine.”

If they had potions, they ought to be all right. But I was impressed he had worked so hard at the grill that his arms hurt. My father had jumped in to help halfway through, but Kohl did spend almost the whole day grilling.

“You should probably stock up on potions until the rush calms down,” my father suggested.

“We will, sir.” Lizzy looked at my father with a bit of strain in her face.

Kohl looked back and forth between them. “Is something wrong?”

“He just said ‘until the rush calms down.’ Does that mean we’re going to keep having big, pushy crowds of customers for a while?”

My father thought for a moment, then nodded. “Since you’re taking tomorrow off, it’ll be even more crowded the next day. You might even have more customers than you did today.”

He had a point. The adventurers were already gossiping about the unique new food stall. There would surely be more locals in line the next day, but the stall would be closed. That meant those people who couldn’t get served then would be back the day after that. Word of mouth really does bring crowds to eating establishments.

“If we’re going to have more customers than we did today, how much meat should we prep?”

“I’d say three times as much, just to be safe,” my father said.

Lizzy and Kohl looked at him in shock.

“Um...do you know anybody who could help you with the stall? Things will probably settle down in a week or so; it would only need to be for that long.”

Lizzy and Kohl seemed in over their heads. There was no guarantee my father or I would have spare time to help out like we did today, so they could use a few more hands.

Knock, knock.

Oh, somebody’s here.

“Yes? Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Aba. That you, Kohl?”

Aba?

“Dad! What is it? Did something happen?” Kohl jumped out of his chair and

ran to open the food stall's front door. Four middle-aged people, two men and two women, were standing there with worried looks on their faces.

"You're the something that happened! We heard the rumors. You opened a *baaba* food stall? We had a sinking feeling that might happen since you were talking about it yesterday, but what the hell do you think you're doing?! What's the point of getting us even deeper in debt?!"

Could it be...that the *Did you hear about the food stall with baaba that actually tastes good?!* rumor had mutated a little?

"Oh, no, the debt is no longer an issue."

Kohl was right. If things went well, they would be able to pay off their parents' debt as well as their own.

"No longer an issue, my foot! Why are you closed this early? Must be because you couldn't sell anything!"

Wow, now I'm really curious about what kind of rumors he's been hearing.

"No..."

"Look, we put you kids between a rock and a hard place. We finally get it now."

Aba must have a lot of regrets, to say he did that to his kids.

"That's right. We've been talking, and we've decided we're going to pay back your debt for you."

This lady looks a lot like Kohl. Maybe she's his mom?

"Please, just *listen!*" Kohl's voice boomed through the stall. It actually made me shake. He sighed and continued, "We closed shop early because we *sold out.*"

"*You sold out?!*" the quartet gasped, eyes wide. I guess that's just how shocking the idea of selling out of *baaba* meat was.

"Kohl, did you *really* sell out? Of *baaba*?" The woman who seemed to be Kohl's mother stared at him, her eyes brimming with hope.

"Yeah, really."

A proud smile filled her face.

"I'm sorry about the noise," Lizzy apologized to me and my father.

Their parents finally noticed we were there and looked a bit flustered. "Sorry, um, nice to meet you. I'm Kohl's father, Aba. And this is..."

"His mother, Licore. So sorry to barge in on you like this."

So she is his mother. Yeah, I thought their eyes and nose looked alike.

"I'm Lizzy's father, Michal, and this is my wife, Chaile. Um, and you are...?"

"I'm Druid, and this is my daughter Ivy. We're travelers."

"Nice to meet you all," I got up from my chair and headed to my father's side to greet everyone. For some reason, Licore and Chaile smiled warmly at me.

"Dad, these are the people who taught us how to make baaba taste good."

"Oh, are they? Well, thank you both very much." Aba gripped my father's hand and shook it firmly.

"Don't thank me. Ivy was the one who came up with the recipe."

"Oh, my goodness! Did your daughter really do that?"

All four pairs of eyes fell on me. *Gee, this is awkward... Oh, I should ask them what rumors they heard about the baaba.*

"Um, sorry, but would you mind telling me what exactly you heard about the baaba?"

I thought maybe this would give us a better idea of how many customers to expect the day after tomorrow.

"We heard three rumors: 'Somebody started a baaba stall,' 'Some idiots think they can sell baaba at a food stall,' and 'Did you hear about the food stall with baaba that actually tastes good?!'"

The second rumor, I can do without. But if those rumors spread over the next day...yeah, I think we'll definitely have to prep three times as much meat for the day after tomorrow.

"Dad, I think we'll need three times the stock."

“Yeah.”

The two sets of parents got strange looks in their eyes when we said that. Meanwhile, Kohl and Lizzy smiled sheepishly.

“So do you have any of this delicious baaba meat?” Chaile asked Kohl. “I’d love to try some.”

But Kohl shook his head. “Sorry. We made enough for two days, but we sold out. There’s not a single piece left.”

When he said this, not only Chaile but every parent had a mixed look of pride and disappointment appear in their eyes. It was a complicated sight.

Chapter 382:

I Think They've Multiplied

“EXCUSE ME, Miss Ivy, Mr. Druid, are you home?”

Just as we returned from prepping baaba meat at Kohl’s house for the food stall, we saw the familiar backsides of a trio waiting for us in front of our tent.

“It’s the gentlemen of Zephyr,” I told my father. The conflicted look in his eyes made me feel like we really needed to sit down and talk it out. “Hello, gentlemen. What brings you here?” I called out to the trio.

“Huh?! Ah, good thing we caught you. We came here to tell you something, but we didn’t realize you were out.”

“Yes, sir, we were at a friend’s house.”

Zinal gave me a hard stare in reply. I answered with a curious look, then felt a sharp tug at my back. I looked up at my father, a little surprised.

“And what did you want to talk about?” My father’s brow was slightly furrowed. Zinal looked equally disgruntled, but he quickly hid it.

“Oh, we just got some news.”

“News?”

Were we expecting news? If we were, would it be about the problem in the forest?

“Well, it’s more like we wanted to pick your brains about something. Could you hear us out?”

If they wanted us to hear them out...that meant this might take a while. And they might not want what they asked us to be overheard.

“Um, I’ll just go make some tea. Sit tight.”

I hurried back to the tent and opened the front door. My creatures had come with us that day, so they eagerly bounded out of their bag.

“Sorry, guys, we have company. I’ll just get your potions out,” I whispered to them.

Sora and Flame jiggled in reply. I took their potions out of the bag along with some spent magic items for Sol. I gave the three a satisfied nod, and they jiggled back at me.

“Have a nice supper. I’ll be back soon. Ciel, hold down the fort for me, okay?”

I waved goodbye to the quartet, grabbed enough tea leaves and cups for the five of us, and left the tent.

“I’m gonna go make us some tea, Dad!”

I grabbed the pot on top of our table and headed to the cooking area. *Oh, we still haven’t picked up our table from the repair shop yet. I hope we manage to get it tomorrow.*

I returned with the tea to find the mood inexplicably gloomy. Was there bad news?

“Here you go.”

After I set cups of tea in front of everyone, I sat in my chair and my father activated the magic item on the table.

“So, what did you want to tell us?”

“Our rampaging monsters in the forest have multiplied. Quite suddenly, in fact.”

What? They’ve multiplied?

“Explain.”

“The elite adventurers who make up the survey team are patrolling the village every day, close enough that you can see them from the gate. We’ve gotten more and more reports from those surveyors that the unusual feeling in the forest was getting stronger and stronger. We went to see for ourselves and, sure enough, it had increased dramatically in the span of just a day. So we talked it over and decided that the monsters had to be multiplying.”

“So you sensed the anomaly, sir?” I asked.

“We think it’s easier to sense now that there are more monsters.”

I get it. So if the monsters multiplied that quickly, does that mean the village is more likely to get attacked? I did hear that monsters tend to expand their circle of attack when they ran out of things to eat, but then how did they multiply so suddenly? Something’s definitely off.

“Are there really more monsters?”

“Mr. Druid, you are a traveling adventurer. Have you heard any news during your travels that might be relevant?” Garitt looked my father dead in the eye. He shook his head no in reply, and Garitt said, “I see.”

Hmmm...I can’t quite put my finger on it, but aren’t they overlooking something? No, that’s not it. I feel like I’m so close to the answer...but what is it? It’s a monster that’s good at blending in with its surroundings, and it can multiply suddenly... Ah, it’s no use. I’ve got nothing.

“By the way, did you folks help out with a baaba food stall?”

“Huh?” We looked at Fische, startled by the sudden change of subject.

“Oh, am I wrong? Sorry, it’s just that I had some, and it tasted a lot like the stuff you cooked us for dinner.”

“Oh! Yes, we did help out. So you ate some, sir?”

“Yes, Zinal smelled it and realized it smelled an awful lot like the food we ate here, so we lined up to get some.”

So they came to the stall. And they said it’s because it smelled like the food I cooked here, so I guess that means people can’t resist the flavor. Eeee, I’m so honored!

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“Oh, no, I should be thanking you,” Zinal insisted. “A recipe that makes baaba edible is good news for Hataka. My son lives here, so I’ve been worried. Thanks, Miss Ivy.”

“I’m just glad you like it.”

Zinal really is a great dad. I don’t sense any reason why my father should be

suspicious of him. I stole a glance at my father, and I could tell he was staring at Zinal. *Does he still not trust him?*

“Yeah, well, we had one other bit of news. They’re going to put together a new survey team.”

Oops, we’ve changed the subject again. A new survey team? Are they really going to head into a forest where there’s probably way more monsters?

“This time, the survey will only cover the outskirts of Hataka. You can’t fight your enemy unless you know it first.”

Okay, I guess this means it’s still safe enough. Oh, I wonder if this information is a secret from other villages?

“Excuse me, sir, but is it all right if other villages know about Hataka’s problem?” I asked.

The gentlemen of Zephyr gave me confused looks, and my father looked startled.

“Village news does spread, albeit slowly. Nobody keeps anything secret. But why do you ask?”

“Your mentor lives in the town of Oll, Dad. He knows about all kinds of things, so he might have some information for us. Could we ask him?”

“You’re right, my mentor has wasted a lot of time traveling everywhere.”

Wasted a lot of time? I shot my dad a disapproving look, and he shrugged his shoulders sheepishly in reply.

“A mentor in Oll...are you talking about Monz?” Garitt asked my father eagerly.

Monz? Who’s Monz?

“Oh, you know him?”

Huh? Know who?

“Yes, he helped me out of a tight spot once. So you’re an apprentice of his, Mr. Druid?”

“Yeah, you might say that.”

If my father is his apprentice, then...

“Dad, is Monz your mentor?”

My father looked surprised by my question. “Huh? Didn’t you know?”

“Well, you always just call him *Master* and everyone else only calls him *Mentor*, even all the villagers. I don’t think I ever actually got his name.”

I didn’t forget it, did I? I just never learned it...I hope.

“So you’re an apprentice of his. Yeah, I heard Monz stopped the monster attacks in Oll last year. He’s still in action, then.”

Garitt sounded particularly proud of the old mentor. *I guess he must really like him a lot.*

“Ohh, right, he did solve that problem. He got a lot of help, though.”

“Did you help him, Mr. Druid?”

“No, not directly. I lost my arm a little while before that, and I hadn’t gotten used to the change yet.”

My father’s tone was casual, but the men of Zephyr looked horrified. My father just laughed it off, though.

Things have gotten kind of awkward... Well, I’d better just ask what I wanted to ask.

“So, um, is it okay if I tell your mentor about our problem in Hataka?”

“Of course. I’d feel very reassured to hear Mr. Monz’s opinion.”

Mr. Monz... Yeah, it just doesn’t feel right.

“So should we send a faax tomorrow?” my father asked.

“Good idea. You know, we might’ve gotten a reply by now anyway,” I said.

“Sure, we sent faaxes to everybody. I completely forgot.” My father smiled sheepishly.

“Wow, so you communicate with people by faax?” Zinal leaned forward, looking a bit surprised.

I leaned back, also in surprise. “Yes, sir. Everyone worries about me, you see.”

“Everyone?” Zinal gave me a curious look.

“Well, never mind that,” my father said, placing a hand behind my back so I wouldn’t fall over. “Anyway, how much should we tell him? Should we say that the members of Zephyr are involved?”

The trio nodded in reply. That must have meant they were fine with us letting him know everything.

“Got it. We’ll send the fax first thing tomorrow. Think we should wake up early?” I asked my father.

“Yeah. The sooner we take care of this, the better.”

Yes, I’m always eager to fix problems as quickly as possible. I only hope my father’s mentor does know something that might help us.

Chapter 383:

Who Was It?

“YOU OKAY?” my father asked worriedly.

“Yeah, I’m just a little sleepy.”

We had decided to wake up early the next day and send the fax to my father’s mentor, but there was so much on my mind that

I had a hard time falling asleep. Between the lack of sleep and the overthinking, my head hurt.

“You should drink a potion just in case.”

“I will.”

“So, what happened? You didn’t sleep much last night.”

He must have known I wasn’t asleep, since he asked me several times in the middle of the night if I was okay.

“I had so much on my mind, I just couldn’t sleep. Even when I did fall asleep, I’d just wake right up again.”

“I’m sorry. Well, after we send our faax, let’s head straight back to the tent for a nap.”

A nap, huh? That might be just what I need.

We went into the merchant guild and looked around, but there weren’t many people there. Ordinarily, the place would be packed this time of day with merchants from this and other villages running around.

“This silence is a little weird, isn’t it?” I remarked.

“Well, nobody can enter or leave Hataka right now.”

There was a faxing area tucked away and out of sight from the building’s entrance. We went over there to find a man at work.

“Excuse me, sir, we’d like to see if we’ve received any faaxes.”

“Certainly. Aha, it’s you two. Please place your guild card on the board on the table.”

My father put our guild card on that spot, and one of the shelves faintly glowed. The man took several sheets of paper off the shelf and handed them to us.

“Please check them to make sure they’re in order.”

We looked over the senders’ names. We had faxes from Gnouga and Lord Foronda. *Oh, there’s one from Vice-Captain Velivera, too. That’s odd, usually Captain Oght sends the faxes. I hope everything’s okay over there.*

“Everything fine on your end?” my father asked. “I got a faax from Bolorda.”

“Uh-huh. Everything’s fine, thanks.” I looked up at my father and noticed he was staring at one of his pieces of fax paper with a very strange look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Uhh...I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay.”

I wonder what it is? It’s probably from his family. I hope nothing’s wrong.

“Everything all right?” the man asked us. My father answered that everything was fine.

“We want to send some faaxes of our own. Could we use your table? We’ll also need three pieces of paper, please.”

“Here you go. Not many people send faaxes around here, so take all the time you need.” The man handed my father three sheets of paper.

“Is business always slow here?” my father asked.

The man nodded. “It sure is. Nobody really uses faaxes except merchants.”

Huh. I didn’t know people don’t use faxes much. I guess that explains why we’ve been getting ours so promptly, no matter where we are. Yeah, now that I think about it, we’ve never really bumped into anyone else using faxes anywhere.

I sat down at the nearby table with my father.

“So we’ll tell him there’s a monster with an undetectable magic energy and aura. Anything else?”

“We should probably tell him the number of monsters has suddenly increased.”

I watched as my father wrote the fax next to me.

“Good idea. Anything else we should say?”

Is there anything else?

“Oh! We’d better tell him we couldn’t find any illegal dumps in the forest, either.”

“Right, that’s important.”

Are there any other things we need to let him know?

“Ivy?”

“What is it?”

My father looked up from his fax and stared at the ceiling. “Do you really think there aren’t any illegal dumps?”

I hadn’t been so sure about that myself. Between the rumors and what we knew about the monster in question, it was impossible to say for certain that there *weren’t* any illegal dumps. First, there was the rumor at the wash area. That lady’s son felt something was wrong when he went to the dump he always used. I thought that was a pretty crucial piece of the puzzle. Then, there was that monster with special powers that showed up on the outskirts of Hataka. They said that a monster’s amount of magic energy was unrelated to its level of power, but a little digging later revealed that monsters really did need a certain level of magic energy in order to go berserk or be powerful.

The monster that was prowling around Hataka was good at masking its aura, so that must have been its special power. And if that’s all it was, maybe there was a special magic item hidden in a little pile of trash somewhere. But our monster was powerful enough to wound elite-level adventurers. In other words, there had to be a big pile of trash somewhere that was making monsters more powerful.

“I think one must be out there somewhere,” I said.

It was a place that couldn't be found by normal means. In other words, it was a hidden illegal dump. And since it was hidden, it was not a dump for adventurers. Then whose dump was it? Judging by the rumors, it was probably intended to dispose of huge amounts of trash from the village, so it was most likely a dump meant for Hataka. But if it was meant for Hataka, then why was it hidden? Therein lay the problem: Why did it need to be hidden? When the village's renowned tamer passed away, waste disposal had gone way down in Hataka. Did they want to keep that information hidden from the villagers?

I couldn't understand why anyone would need to do that, though. All I did know was that it wasn't the sort of dump adventurers would pass by and use. The trash from the village had to be well maintained, and the list of people able to do that was very short.

“You think so, too?”

“Yeah, there has to be a hidden illegal dump. And it's probably got a lot of trash in it.”

I looked at my father, and he sighed quietly with a smile. “What a big hassle. Do you think Hataka's leadership is behind this? Or maybe one of the villagers acting on their own?”

Oh! Yeah, maybe the village leaders are responsible. I never thought of that before.

“It really is a hassle.”

That was actually why I'd had a hard time sleeping the night before. No doubt about it, we were in the middle of a giant plot. I looked around. The man who'd helped us earlier was gone, which was probably why my father had taken the opportunity to talk about this with me.

“Oh, by the way, I'm wearing this. Sorry I didn't tell you.” My father showed me a sound-canceling magic item hanging from his neck.

“Gee, all that worrying for nothing!” The sight of the item made the tension melt from my shoulders. When had he even bought such an item? “So, when did you realize that, Dad?”

“About yesterday. I thought over all the rumors and everything we knew about the monster and it made me go *huh?*”

“Me, too.”

“Now our real ordeal begins...” My father sighed heavily, and I followed suit.

“You mean figuring out who knows and who doesn’t?”

“Yeah...”

I wonder how Zephyr fits into all of this? Those men are full of mysteries.

“Oh, want to ask your mentor about the gentlemen of Zephyr?”

“Good idea. I’ll ask him if he knows them.”

I think they’re good people. And Sora said they were safe. But there is something about them, something besides the thing that’s making my father worry.

“All done. Want to read it?”

“It’s all right, I read it over your shoulder.”

And there isn’t anything worth reading a second time, right? I mean, all there is to it is “Monster that can mask its aura and magic energy discovered in Hataka Village, numbers multiplying over the past several days. We’re stuck here. Do you know the men in Zephyr? Write back with everything you know.” It was just too simple. Come to think of it, why did he get three sheets of fax paper?

“Okay. I’ll turn off my magic item, then.”

“Sounds good. What are you going to use the other sheets for?”

“Ahh, yes... I was thinking of writing my family.”

“Oh. I assumed you were gonna use all three sheets for your mentor.”

“I’d never do that.”

“Ha ha ha ha! You don’t have to be so stern about it.”

The man at the faxing station had returned, so we sent our messages. We would probably receive replies in the next couple days. I hoped we would get

something good.

Chapter 384: A Maintained Dump

WE LEFT THE MERCHANT GUILD and made our way to the plaza. *You know, the dump in Hataka did seem kind of unattended. The trash was all piled up. Would that dump even count as “maintained”?*



“Hey, Dad, the dump in Hataka doesn’t seem to be taken care of that well. Would we even call it a maintained dump?”

“Village and town-sanctioned dumps have magic items buried in the ground that decompose magic energy. As long as a dump has that, it counts as official, even if it’s not well maintained.”

Huh. I guess it’s still technically maintained, then.

“They decompose magic energy? But Sol eats magic energy, right?”

How does all that work? If the magic items decompose magic energy, there shouldn’t have been any left.

“The energy-decomposing magic items are buried in the ground so monsters can’t feed on the magic energy that couldn’t be removed from the trash. Magic energy used to be completely cleaned out, but that was long ago. Now, there’s too much trash to be cleaned by magic items alone, so I’m sure the stuff Sol eats *is* magic energy.”

“Oh.”

“And even though not all the magic energy is fully cleaned out, no monsters have ever gone berserk from a maintained dump as far as we know. In a way, that means those magic items are extraordinary.”

So I guess it’s managed, even though the magic energy can’t be entirely cleaned out.

“People say it’s also those magic items that keep monsters away from maintained dumps. Then again, there’s no telling if that’s true or not. But rumors like that were common in the past.”

If those rumors are true, then those items really are extraordinary.

“Having said that, if the trash keeps piling up like this, there’s no telling what will happen.”

“Can’t they make more of those magic items?” I asked. “That way, they could clean up the magic energy.”

“There’s a rumor going around that there was some kind of accident and the

cave where monsters dropped those magic items collapsed. Right after that, there was a survey of all the caves in the area, but there've been no reports of anything new being found."

So they can't make more of those magic items? What a shame. I guess the problems we're having with waste disposal affect a lot of other things, too.

"I hope we solve the waste disposal problem soon," I said.

"I guess it's an issue with the collective consciousness of the tamers."

I'm a tamer... Is it really okay for me to be traveling, then?

"Aren't you tired? You barely slept." My dad's hand rested on my head.

His gentle touch brought a smile to my face. "I'm fine. Talking made my headache go away a little."

"Overwork is against the rules, all right?"

"Okay, I know."

I looked around as we walked down Main Street. Since it was early in the morning, the shops were getting ready to open and most of the food stalls were still prepping for service.

"Life still goes on as usual, I guess," I remarked.

The oddness in the forest worried everyone a little, but it hadn't affected their daily lives. The situation was perhaps a little unique that way. The other villages and towns I'd visited were hypersensitive to any changes in the forest. I was really expecting the mood in Hataka to get tense with worry at any moment.

"You're right. Now that I think about it, everyone here is quite relaxed," my father agreed.

"Yeah."

It's actually a bit disturbing. Unless the village watch captain and adventurer guild master are just that capable? But they don't get along, right?

"Are Hakata's guild masters and captain of the watch really good at their jobs?"

“The guild masters and the captain of the watch? Hmm...I can’t say I’ve heard they are.”

I guess that means no other rumors will come from outside Hataka. But the relaxed mood of this village... Is it okay for me to just trust it’s because their leaders are doing a good job?

“Oh!”

“Déjà vu.”

My dad’s reaction made me laugh. Standing ahead of us, at the entrance to the plaza, was a trio of men who turned out to be Zephyr. Fische saw us and waved, which prompted the other two to look our way.

“Good morning. What brings you gentlemen here so early in the day?”

“When you said you were going to send Monz a faax, we couldn’t get it off our minds,” Garitt said, sounding a little embarrassed. He really did have a thing for my father’s mentor, didn’t he? I wondered if we should have mentioned Garitt in the fax.

“We just sent the faax, actually, so we should hear back in the next couple days. Unless something happens on his end, that is.”

“I see...” Garitt seemed a little disappointed by my father’s answer. Maybe he had hoped to be included in the errand? If so, I wished he’d said so the previous day.

“You’re such a fool, you should’ve asked them yesterday.” Fische gave Garitt’s shoulder a slap. Garitt swatted his hand away and glared at him. But that didn’t seem to have much of an effect on Fische, who just laughed while Zinal sighed in frustration at their banter. I wondered if they were always like that.

“You two are such great friends,” I said.

“Yes, we’re great friends.”

“No, we are most certainly *not* friends.”

Fische and Garitt gave the exact opposite answers at the same time. They were entertaining to watch.

“It’s not that we have a bad relationship,” Zinal said, glancing at the two as they spiraled into an argument. “But it’s a problem that Fische loves to drive us crazy for fun.”

“You’re a real trouper,” my father said.

Zinal nodded firmly in reply. “You’re speaking from experience?”

“Yeah. My mentor always drove me crazy, so I know the feeling well.”

Zinal cast him a sympathetic glance. “You can never take your eyes off him, because you never know what crazy thing he’ll do next.”

My father nodded. “Exactly. Just when you think he’s behaving himself, he’ll suddenly do something off the wall.”

“Yes, yes. And by the time you realize it, you’re already in too deep yourself, and then he’ll run away, leaving you to clean up the mess he put you in.”

It sounded like Zinal was having quite a hard time, too, especially with his two Zephyr comrades.

“In my case, he causes problems with the intention of shoving everything on me all along.”

The two heaved heavy sighs. In a way, I was glad they’d found common ground. Up until quite recently, there had been sparks flying between the two. I guess we had my father’s mentor, Garitt, and Fische to thank?

“Um, did you gentlemen come here for anything besides the fax?” I asked.

Zinal nodded yes. Then a solemn look filled his eyes as he faced us directly. “I needed to ask you a question, Mr. Druid...and I have to pick your and Miss Ivy’s brains about something, too.”

What could it be? He looks much more serious about this than anything before.

“All right. Can we talk in the plaza?”

“If possible, I’d like you to come to the inn where we’re staying.”

When Zinal said that, Fische and Garitt quietly looked over at us. My father stole a glance back at them.

“Ivy...that okay with you?” My father looked at me. He was probably worried about my sleep-deprived headache.

“I’m fine, don’t worry.”

He nodded and turned back to Zinal. “All right. Did you want us to come over right now?”

“Yes, if you can.” Zinal looked faintly relieved by my father’s answer.

I’m nervous about what they’re going to ask us. Oh, Zephyr’s members don’t live in Hataka. Could my father and I ask them about the stuff we were just talking about? Since they’re from different places and have different points of view, maybe we can get some different answers out of them.

SIDE: Zinal's Confusion

ZINAL OF ZEPHYR'S PERSPECTIVE

I LOOKED BACK AT DRUID and Ivy walking behind us. They really were close. It was clear how much they cared about each other, and *that* was why I needed to set the record straight.

I had no negative impressions of them whatsoever. Ivy's rational approach to the anomaly in the forest was beyond her years. And since her maturity seemed natural, not forced, Garitt and I were both impressed by it. I also got the feeling that Druid was a good father from the way he supported her. After seeing them together like this, I was honestly surprised to hear they weren't related by blood. Even though they clearly looked different on the outside, their auras didn't give me that sense. That was why I had associated with them without much hesitation.

But the more I saw of them, the more my suspicions of Druid himself deepened. Based on his aura and the way he picked up on the anomaly in the forest, he had to be an elite-level adventurer. At first, I thought it was odd that there was such a high-ranking adventurer I'd never heard of, so I consulted my comrades to make sure my memory wasn't just playing tricks on me. Neither of them had heard of Druid, either, yet I still thought that perhaps we had all just forgotten about him. When I first met Druid, I assumed he was an elite-level adventurer. Simply put, he had the skill level for it. So when I found out he might not be one, I was honestly shocked. I thought it was impossible.

"Mr. Zinal, is something wrong?" Ivy asked.

"Oh, everything's okay. Sorry I worried you."

She was probably concerned by all my staring. Druid cast a wary glance at me. Even though his facial expression was calm, there was an iciness in his eyes. I'd noticed it the second time we met.

I discovered that Druid was not an elite-level adventurer when I realized he hadn't delivered an obligatory report to the adventurer guild. Since breaking that rule resulted in a string of fines to pay, everybody made sure to follow it. But even with all these problems in Hataka Village, Druid didn't make a report. If he didn't need to do so, that had to mean he was not an elite-level adventurer. Garitt had casually suggested they go to the guild together to report, but Druid answered it wasn't his job.

But he was so strong. Surely the guild master of any town or village would have set their sights on him. He was missing an arm, but from the way he wielded his sword, it clearly wasn't a handicap. There was another possibility: Sometimes a guild master might erase the name of a registered elite adventurer from the record due to injury or age. Thinking I might have overlooked this, I looked it up after I returned to the inn that night, but the name Druid had never been in the records.

"Right over there. We have a room on the first floor."

We entered our inn, Michelle, and escorted our guests to our room. Druid quickly examined his surroundings and then sat down in a chair. Meanwhile, Ivy took her time having a leisurely look around the room before sitting beside him.

"Here you go." Garitt set out some tea and snacks on the table.

"Thank you." Druid reached for the plate of snacks in the middle of the table and gently pushed it toward Ivy, who was still glancing around the room and didn't notice. I looked at Druid, and our eyes met. Again, not a bit of warmth from him.

Sometimes criminals stole an adventurer's identity to hide. If they were successful, it was the perfect cover. But if they tried to masquerade as elite-level adventurers, they were always exposed. People like us would sniff them out. That was why people with sketchy pasts tended to hide their powers and stay inconspicuous. But Druid didn't conceal his powers, and that was the source of my suspicions. He didn't attempt to hide his superior abilities, yet he wasn't an elite-level adventurer. Hadn't anybody ever offered to promote him? Or had he declined a promotion? Did he have more than enough money already? But with Ivy in his life, he shouldn't mind having too much money.

Besides, if he became an elite-level adventurer, he would be better equipped to take care of her. The more I thought about it, the less sense everything made.

But one thing was clear: If he was a criminal, we would need to protect Ivy. Or at least that was what I thought, but from the look of them, it didn't seem like that would be necessary.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Druid looked at each of us one by one. He was wary of us, especially me. That confused me a little. *What did I ever do to him?*

"I want you to answer my question honestly."

"If it's within reason, sure."

Yeah, I guess that's a perfectly normal reaction to have...

"Dad, I think we should just tell them," Ivy said. "It's probably okay."

Druid sighed in reply, which confused me once again. *Does Ivy know Druid's secret? Does that mean it's not that serious of a problem?*

"Druid, you are clearly powerful enough to be an elite-level adventurer. Has anyone wanted to promote you before?"

"Yes, but I declined."

So I was right. That must mean he's always been open about his powers.

"Why did you do that?"

"My skill...there's a problem with it."

"What?!"

His skill? There's a problem with his skill? I was so confused. I hadn't even considered that answer. *Does he have some sort of new skill? One that he doesn't want anybody to know about? No, then he wouldn't register as an adventurer to begin with. If he did, the guild master in the town or village where he registered would have to know about his skill.*

"Explain yourself."

"Uhh, yeah, before I do that, I think *you* need to answer *my* question."

Druid's tone took on a sharp edge. He almost looked like he was suppressing a chuckle, even. What was so funny?

"What's your question?"

"Zinal..."

Now there's no "Mister"?

"Zinal...are you interested in Ivy in a *deviant* way?"

"Bffft!"

"What?!"

Fische spat out a mouthful of tea next to me. Ivy jumped out of her seat with a gasp. And since Fische had been sitting in front of Ivy, he probably spilled tea on her. The poor girl.

"Whoa...no! Me? And Ivy? What?!"

"Easy, Zinal. Druid, what gave you that impression?"

"He always wants to be alone with Ivy, so I just assumed he had his eye on her."

"No! In the name of all that is holy, you're *wrong*!"



I felt dizzy. *Is that what he thought about me all this time? Could it be...that's why his gaze was so cold? Wait a minute...the first time we visited them in the plaza, I had Fische and Garitt distract Druid so I could get some answers from Ivy alone. Is that what did it? Was that wrong of me?*

"Thought so. See, Dad? I told you he was safe."

Wait a minute. The way Ivy just reacted...did she also think I was a pedophile? No, she just said, "I thought so." In other words, she didn't think I was a pedophile. Right...? I'm right, right? Ugh, I am so confused.

"Ack, ya know, Zinal, based on how you've been acting, I don't blame them for thinking that. The way you prowl around an innocent child like a—"

"Shut up!"

Fische, you bastard, what are you even saying?! Wait a minute...did it really look like that? I'm starting to think it did...

"Agh, sorry, Zinal. You okay, buddy?"

"Do I look okay?"

"Ha ha ha! Well, can you really blame them? Even though you barely know her, you were really clinging to Ivy there."

"Clinging..." I murmured pitifully.

Fische burst out laughing, and Garitt followed suit. Druid, who was sitting in front of them, clamped a hand over his mouth and started staring at the wall. Ivy looked at the three and heaved a little tired sigh. Then she glanced over at me, her eyes full of guilt.

"I'm so sorry, sir."

"No, I'm sorry. I hope I didn't scare you."

"Oh, no, sir, it's okay."

Aaagh. If my son hears about this, he'll laugh at me for days... Wait a minute, what were we talking about before?

Chapter 385: Cooperation

I MADE ANOTHER POT OF TEA and set a fresh cup in front of everyone. I stole a glance at Zinal to find him sighing quietly to himself. He looked quite glum. I looked at my father, and he smiled uncomfortably back at me. *This is just so indescribably awkward. What do I even do?*

“Y’know, from an outsider’s perspective, Zinal really *would* look like a pedophile,” Fische remarked. Garitt nodded in agreement.

You guys are Zinal’s friends, right? Why kick him when he’s down?

“Gentlemen...” Zinal’s voice was terrifyingly low.

“But I’m not wrong, am I?”

Fische, for the love of peace, don’t look at me. I picked up my cup and took a slow sip of tea. *Ahh, so good. So soothing. Yeah. I’m just gonna forget about what I should say and have a nice, entertaining stare at my tea.*

“By the way, what were we talking about again?” Garitt asked everyone at the table as he took a bite of pastry.

Right. What were we talking about?

“Huh?” Fische looked at the ceiling.

Zinal sighed loudly in exasperation. “We were trying to figure out why Druid hasn’t become an elite-level adventurer.”

Oh, that’s right. And the room was filled with the tensest air I’d ever breathed.

“Riiight, that’s what we were talking about. So you said there was a problem with your skill?”

Nothing ever seems to faze Fische, does it? And he’s sort of a peacemaker that way? Actually, no, looking back on his actions so far, I think he’s only made things worse.

“Yes, I told you that I didn’t become an elite adventurer because of a problem with my skill.”

“Yes, about that... Wouldn’t registering as an adventurer in the first place give away your skill?” Garitt asked.

My father nodded. “Yes, but as long as I never become an elite adventurer, the information would go no further than the town it was recorded in.”

“Oh! Now that makes sense. Yes, all the towns and villages in the country are notified when someone becomes an elite adventurer.” Zinal nodded in approval.

“Yes, and I wanted to avoid that at any cost. And since the guild master in my hometown is a friend of mine, he let me stay below elite level.”

“Aha, that makes sense,” Fische said. “Too bad you didn’t ask him that in the first place—then he wouldn’t’ve thought you were a pedophile.”

Electricity shot through Zinal’s spine, and Fische grinned wickedly in reply. Garitt just looked at them both with a tired frown.

“Err...” As I sat there, wondering if I should stop them, Garitt looked at me and shook his head.

“Don’t mind them; they’re always like that.”

“Are they, sir? I always thought Mr. Zinal was more levelheaded than that. I guess looks can be deceiving.”

“You just twisted the knife, didn’t you...?”

“Huh?! ”

I twisted the knife? I gave Garitt a confused look, but he just smirked back at me. *Uh-oh, did I say something wrong? Oh! Looks can be deceiving...* I looked at Zinal, who responded with an innocent smile. *I’d better just smile back. Oh, drat. My tea’s gotten cold*

“By the way, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.” My father faced the three men across from us solemnly. Garitt munched on the last pastry and gestured for him to speak. “Zephyr...your party...are you investigators?”

Investigators? As I looked up at my father in confusion, the trio exchanged looks.

“How did you know?”

“You seemed to know an unusual amount about elite-level adventurers, and you all act a bit different from others of that rank as well.”

The only elite-level adventurers I knew were Rattloore and his party. Did they really act differently? I didn’t see it.

“Druid, you’ve clearly been through hell. Most people wouldn’t notice.” Zinal frowned critically at my father.

Hell, huh... I looked at my father, who had a sheepish expression on his face. As somebody who’d lived a negligent life, he’d definitely been through all sorts of hellish experiences.

“Well, it’s in the past now. So?”

“Yeah, you’re right. We’re hired investigators. We keep tabs on elite adventurers.”

Elite-adventurer investigators? I gave Zinal a confused look, so he explained that elite adventurers were respected simply for having the title. However, there was no guarantee that all of them deserved that respect. Some elite adventurers took advantage of their positions to do bad things, and Zinal and his party investigated them. His explanation was rough, but it seemed like they were character evaluators. That sounded like a really tough job.

“Is it okay for us to know about this?” my father asked.

Zinal awkwardly scratched the back of his neck. That meant it was supposed to be a secret.

“Don’t worry, we won’t tell anyone. Right, Dad?”

“Yeah.”

“That certainly sounds like a hard job,” I said. Investigating a person’s character felt like it would be a daunting task.

“You think so? But it’s fun to find faults in people, right?” Garitt asked. Zinal

and Fische nodded in agreement.

Wait a minute, does Garitt have a wicked streak like Zinal? Are they all a bit sadistic at heart? I glanced at my dad, and he slowly nodded back at me. *I see. Zephyr is a force to be feared.*

“Hm? Something wrong?” Zinal asked innocently.

We shook our heads no.

First impressions really are unreliable. You know, I just noticed everyone’s much more relaxed now. Even Dad has let his rigid guard down. I guess these guys are good at bringing out people’s true colors, huh? Maybe that’s why they’re investigators.

“You’ve got a sharp mind, Ivy.”

Ah, they stopped calling me “Miss!” And no, Zinal, you’re the sharp one. I didn’t even say anything.

“Why d’ya think he couldn’t figure these people out?” Garitt asked.

“Yeah, usually he can read a person like a book,” Fische agreed, giving me a curious look.

“Maybe because Ivy’s cute? And that dampened his judgment?”

“Ah, then that would have to mean he’s...”

“Give it a rest! Everyone makes mistakes!”

Garitt and Fische both seemed to get a kick out of pushing Zinal’s buttons, and he didn’t come across as too terribly angry about it, either. They had a really laid-back vibe about them. Completely the opposite of the way they’d been when we first entered their room.

“So, was there anything else?” my father asked.

Zinal and his men gave him a strange look.

Wait a minute... Yeah, they did say there was something they wanted to ask us and something they wanted our help with, right? I think the question they wanted to ask was about my father being an adventurer, so they still wanted to ask for our help with something, yeah?

“Didn’t you say you wanted our help with something?”

“Oh, that’s right! We wanted to pick your brains about this.”

So they wanted to pick our brains, not get our help... What could it be about?

Zinal cleared his throat, then looked us both in the eye. “Listening to the village chatter and what the guild masters have been saying has raised many concerns for us. Druid, since you’ve got abundant experience and knowledge, we’d like to ask if you’d help us.”

My father looked at the three men one at a time and nodded. “If it’s something within my power, I will help you.”

“Thanks. Um, as for Ivy...”

“I’ll help you only if she’s included,” my father said. Zinal fell into thought, and even Fische looked a bit uncomfortable by the proposal. “Ivy is only nine years old, but she’s had a lot of life experience, so it’s okay to include her.”

Well, yeah, I definitely have had a lot of experience. I guess you’d describe me as “worldly” for my age? Not that I’m happy about it, though!

“What?!” Zephyr gasped.

“Well, it’s a long story...” my father said.

“Aha, got it.” Garitt nodded, sensing something in my father’s tone. There was a look in his eyes that I couldn’t put my finger on, though.

“Sooo...first, about the village gossip. There’s the one about the trash levels at the dump and the one about the adventurer carrying dead bodies in the middle of the night. Either of those rumors ring any bells?”

Zinal stared at my father. We’d heard about the trash levels...but an adventurer carrying dead bodies?

“We heard it was a specter, not an adventurer, sir,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s right. We heard the rumor about the trash level, too,” my father said.

Where along the line did the specter change into an adventurer? When we heard the rumor, the person it happened to was telling it. So the “specter” was

just how that person interpreted it, right? I think it was a black specter?

“So you heard.”

“Yes, we wandered around the village to listen in on gossip, too.”

“Of course you did.” Garitt and Fische both looked impressed.

Come to think of it...what does a specter even look like? It's a black... No, a white-sheeted thing with no feet and... Huh?

Chapter 386: Too Many Problems!

“SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK of that rumor?” Garitt asked my father.

My father sighed quietly. “The ‘dead body’ was probably just trash. Put a sheet over anything and people will perceive it how they want. Maybe they deliberately made it look like a dead body. As for the trash, it was probably thrown away somewhere other than the village dump, and so the trash levels have stayed the same. That’s what clued the tamers in on something being amiss.”

When my father gave his answer, Zinal smiled and Fische seemed disappointed. *I recognize those looks...* “Did you gentlemen make a bet?”

The men of Zephyr smiled awkwardly and let their eyes wander. I’d *thought* their faces looked like the adventurers I’d seen placing bets in the plaza, and I was right.

“Agh, you’re the worst!”

“Seriously, the worst,” I echoed my father.

“Sorry, they’re always like this.”

I giggled uncontrollably because I could tell he was right. *Wow, these men are really good at getting people to let their guards down. In a way, that makes them even more menacing.*

“Anyway! What do you all think, Zinal?”

“We had the same opinion,” Zinal answered my father. I guess it was a logical conclusion.

“Excuse me, sir, but there’s something I’ve been wanting to know.” I looked Zinal right in the eye and asked, “The guild master and head watchman of Hataka...what are they like?”

Hataka was facing a crisis, yet the two heads of the village were rumored to

be bickering. I wanted to know if there was some reason behind it or if they just didn't get along.

"Ah, that..." Zinal frowned sternly and shook his head. I gave him a questioning look. "Two years ago, Hataka got a new guild master."

"And, how should I put it...?" Garitt stuttered just as badly as Zinal.

My father gave the three men a strange look.

"He's an acquaintance of mine. I've known him for a very long time," Fische said.

Aha. So Fische knows him.

"He was very skilled and principled. He had the level of commitment a good guild master needs."

Is it just me...or does Fische sound incredibly bitter?

"But when I saw him again after two years away, he'd turned into the worst guy you could imagine. He doesn't care at all about the problems Hataka is facing."

It looked like Fische was holding back some emotions behind his eyes. Zinal and Garitt both seemed a bit defeated.

"He doesn't care?"

Is it just me...or does something feel a little off here?

"But if the monsters keep going berserk, at this rate..." my father said. Zinal nodded.

That's right. If we don't do anything, the monsters will certainly attack Hataka. That might put the whole village's continued existence in jeopardy.

"I'm sure he knows about the trash, too, but he's not doing anything about it." Garitt rolled his empty cup around on the table.

"I want to get the guild master's privileges taken away, but we can't do that unless we go to the guild headquarters in the capital," Zinal said. Fische sighed quietly in reply.

"The guild headquarters?"

“Haven’t you heard of it, Ivy?”

“No, sir.”

“They make the rules for the adventurer and merchant guilds. If you tell them that a guild master is causing trouble, they’ll investigate them. Then, if the headquarters concludes that they’re a problem, they can strip them of their title. But since Hataka is on lockdown, nobody can go to the capital to make the report.”

“Can’t they just send a fax?”

“We used to do that, but somebody exploited the system once, so now face-to-face reports are required.”

I guess every era has its own share of people doing foolish things.

“Oh dear, that’s too bad,” I said.

“And what about the captain of the watch?” my father asked.

The gentlemen of Zephyr shrugged their shoulders.

“He’s been sick, so we haven’t been able to see him.”

“Sick? Then what about the second-in-command?”

“He’s...not here,” Zinal said indecisively.

“Not here?” My father got a look on his face that was hard to place, and I didn’t blame him. The vice-captain was supposed to be available to act in case something happened, but she wasn’t there?

“He disappeared somewhere.”

Ah, so he went away. First the guild master started acting strange, then the captain of the watch got sick, and now his second-in-command is MIA? I have a really bad feeling about all of this. What do they say? Oh yeah, it’s like a web of intrigue. Or somebody’s pulling the strings behind the curtain? Stop it, Ivy, you read too many detective novels. Huh? But I don’t read novels. Come to think of it, I haven’t read a single one, have I?

“Does Zephyr investigate people other than elite-level adventurers?” my father asked, zapping me out of my thought spiral. What was he getting at?

“You’ve got good instincts,” Zinal said. “Once he found out we were going to Hataka anyway to celebrate my son’s promotion, he pushed the investigation on us... That rotten old fart,” he added grumpily.

I see, so Zephyr investigates entire villages, too.

“Oh, I think it’s a good thing. If somebody didn’t step in, your son might have fallen victim as well. But as long as we’re here, everything should work out okay.”

He’s right. If nobody steps up, it’s highly likely monsters will attack this village. And since Zinal’s son just became an elite adventurer, he would almost certainly be on the front lines.

“Too bad we’re not making any breakthroughs.” Zinal’s expression turned stern. It was clear from the look in his eyes that Hataka was in grave danger. I realized this might be even more serious than we’d thought.

“Now I see. So that’s why you wanted some outside opinions,” my father said.

“That’s right. We came up with a lot of theories, but they all hit dead ends.” Garitt kept staring at my father. “We have absolutely no clue what kind of monster we’re dealing with. According to recent research, monsters’ dislikes and weaknesses stay the same even if they go berserk, so if we could just know which type of monster it is, we could find some way of fighting it. But this one’s identity is an utter mystery. It also seems, well, impossible. What kind of monster doesn’t have an aura when you approach it?”

An impossible monster... Come to think of it, where has all the trash been going?

“Excuse me, sir, but have they found the missing trash?”

“What?” All three men gave me blank stares.

What’s wrong? Did I ask something strange?

“Ivy, you sure are calm,” Fische said.

“Calm, sir?” I didn’t *feel* particularly calm.

“You do realize this village is in danger, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

How could anyone not be afraid when there are monsters closing in? Wait a minute, surely the guild master feels a sense of danger. I mean, whenever there's a problem, he's always on the front lines dealing with it. And if nobody steps in, something bad will almost certainly happen. How can he not care when his life is in danger? Are people even like that? Is he really not doing anything? Unless...he wants to do something, but he can't...?

“Ivy?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Um...have you been paying attention?”

Ack! Should I just be honest and say no? Well, um, I'll try laughing it off.

“Hee hee!”

“You're cute, I'll give you that,” Fische smiled.

“We were just saying you're calm even with all this danger because we're trying to figure out what's going to happen,” my father explained.

“Aha, that makes sense.”

I guess I'm managing to handle it by staying calm?

“I think it just hasn't quite hit me yet how much danger we're in,” I replied. “My head understands everything, but my heart keeps telling me that we'll be okay somehow, and we'll be protected. That's why I can remain calm while we face this problem.”

Yeah, I know we're in danger, but it just hasn't sunk in. I really do need better instincts for danger.

“So calm.”

“I know, so calm.”

Zinal and Garitt both stared hard at me, and even Fische seemed a bit impressed. My father looked pretty pleased about it, though.

Chapter 387:

Conspiracy or Coincidence?

“BACK TO WHAT we were originally talking about... Druid, has anything been tugging at your mind?” Zinal asked.

My father shook his head no. “Sorry, but nothing in particular.”

“Okay...” Fische looked a bit disappointed. They must have been hoping for a lead from us.

“Ivy, do you have anything?” my father asked me gently. Maybe he could read in my eyes that there *was* something in the back of my mind? But I wasn’t sure if it was okay for me to bring it up in front of the gentlemen of Zephyr. They were asking me if I had any ideas about the monster, but...my thoughts were elsewhere.

“Is there something on your mind? It’s okay, you can tell us anything,” Zinal said.

If he says so, then I guess it is okay? “It’s about the guild master.”

The trio smiled awkwardly at my answer. They were probably hoping it was about the monster. *Sorry to disappoint.*

“Okay...what about him?”

“Is the guild master in debt? Or has a family member or loved one gotten sick or been killed? Or maybe *he’s* sick and doesn’t have much time left?”

“Hm?” Zinal gave me a curious look. Fische also had a strange expression.

“*That’s* what you’re thinking?” Garitt asked.

“Yes, sir,” I nodded. I didn’t know what sort of person the guild master was. But from what I’d heard, I got the sense that he wasn’t particularly invested in living. It was like he’d just given up on life, and I thought maybe that was why he didn’t care about any of the problems. And when I wondered why that might be, I came up with my questions to Zinal. What would the answers be?

“Fische, what do you think?”

“His only family is his wife...and they have a good relationship. I haven’t heard anything about them struggling with money, and I don’t think he’s sick, either.”

They have a good relationship? I guess that means he at least cares about his wife.

“Is that so? Then do you think somebody has done something to the guild master?”

Fische frowned thoughtfully at my question. *He sure has intense eyes when he gets serious.* The moment our eyes met, I almost shivered.

“Are you really that curious about the guild master’s attitude?”

“Yes, very. You said he was acting perfectly normal when you last saw him two years ago, right?” Something must have happened to him during those two years.

“I did look into how he’s acted the past couple of years, but I found nothing. It just seemed like a different person took over his body.”

A different person took over his body... Fische is a seasoned investigator, so I’m sure he wouldn’t have overlooked any clues.

“And he has a good relationship with his wife, right?”

“Yeah... I ate dinner with both of them and there weren’t any problems in particular. I’m sure his wife isn’t sick, either. They both had a great appetite, too.”

“In other words...he’s only a different person regarding work. Were you able to have normal conversations about other topics?” I asked.

“Yeah, he did seem pretty normal, huh?” Garitt said. “He even complained that the restaurant’s new menu wasn’t that great.”

Fische nodded in agreement.

So he’s only apathetic when it comes to his job? That doesn’t make sense. Does he just not want to do it? But two years ago, he was deeply committed to becoming the guild master. This...doesn’t make sense.

“Didn’t you talk about work when you were drinking after dinner?” I asked.

Garitt and Fische smiled sheepishly. “Nah...we didn’t. Well, we tried to bring it up, but he got really grumpy.”

“Yeah, and we didn’t want to make the situation more awkward, so we changed the subject.”

Does he detest his job so much that he hates talking about it?

“How exactly did he get grumpy?” I asked.

“How? Well...he just lost all expression. It was like his face went blank.”

He lost all expression? But when most people are upset, they’ll frown or purse their lips or something. So why no expression at all?

“Surely you’ve spoken with him in his office. What was he like then?” my father asked.

Fische shrugged his shoulders. “We only met with him in his office once. We’ve asked to see him again, but he just ignored us. We talk with his assistant a lot, though. The one time we did get to see him in his office, it was only because we forced our way in. And when we asked him what the hell was going on, he just said, ‘It doesn’t matter.’ Ever since then, he’s only spoken about work through an assistant.”

So he was just utterly disinterested in work. This was weird. *Hmm... I wonder when exactly he becomes expressionless? Whenever you feel something, you always have some sort of expression. Is it when he’s not feeling anything? Does that even happen? It’s not like he’s a slave or anything. Wait...a slave? Oh! Could it be...?*

“Has his consciousness or his feelings been stolen?” Zinal muttered, voicing the exact question that had just popped into my head. My father nodded meekly.

“What?!” Garitt and Fische looked a bit perplexed. But then, with a gasp, they quickly realized how Zinal had reached his conclusion.

“Are you saying somebody’s made the guild master a slave?” Fische raised his voice. “Who the hell would do such a thing?! Besides, he’s not wearing a slave

band. How could somebody command him without it?"

"I heard a rumor about a summoning circle that can enslave anybody, human or monster, but there's no telling if it's true."

"A summoning circle... Yes, I've heard a lot about those," Zinal said.

I remembered the trouble that Snakey had gotten into before. Was that the kind of summoning circle they were talking about?

"It *is* possible to enslave somebody with a summoning circle," my father said.

The trio looked shocked. "How do you know that?"

My father took a shallow breath in and out, then looked at Zinal. "I'm not at liberty to tell you the details, but I have encountered a summoning circle that took control of a monster. I doubt it would've been much different had it targeted a human."

The trio still looked a bit perplexed.

"But summoning circles are heavily regulated."

"Yes, but not perfectly," my father said.

Fische sighed. "You're right."

"If the guild master is somehow being prevented from acting, we'll need to help him as quickly as possible."

"But it's still speculation."

If the guild master had really been forced under somebody's control, it had to be connected to the mystery at the dump. Or maybe it involved the captain's sickness? It could also have something to do with the vice-captain's disappearance... Or maybe the same person was behind all of it? I mean, was it really possible to have all those different problems just happen to spring up at exactly the same time and place? Anyway, it seemed more reasonable to believe that everything was connected.

"First, the guild master found out about the problem at the dump, so somebody used a summoning circle to shut him up. Then the captain of the watch learned about that, so he was poisoned. And as for the vice-captain..."

Huh, I wonder why she went missing? No, wait, unless *she's* the mastermind?"

Hey, why is everyone so quiet? I looked up from the floor to see them all staring at me. "What's wrong, everybody?" *You're starting to scare me.*

My father smiled sheepishly at me. "Ivy, you were thinking out loud again."

I was?

"Oh, I'm sorry! It's only speculation anyway."

"Er, I was just surprised by the connections you were making," Zinal sighed.

"In other words, we should start with the mystery at the dump?" Garitt asked.

Fische nodded. "Sounds like it."

Huh. Is it just me, or are my theories moving this conversation forward?

"I'm only guessing, sir."

"I know. I just think your speculations can't be overlooked, so we're going to look into them."

"Be careful. If Ivy's theory is correct, our opponent is cunning enough to trick the guild master," my father said.

That gave me pause. *Is our opponent really smart, though? If you neglect trash, you'll definitely have to deal with a huge number of problems. What's more, if you get the guild master or captain of the watch in trouble, that trouble will surely come out in the open. Wait a minute... Why don't people know about the trouble yet? That's right, there've been rumors that the guild master and captain are bickering... Did somebody start those rumors on purpose to make it look like everything's normal?*

"Ivy, if there's something on your mind, tell us what it is. It seems like we've overlooked too many possibilities. And Garitt and Fische are still struggling to catch up." Zinal bowed humbly to me. That embarrassed me a little, but I told everyone what was on my mind. It was a problem too big for me to solve on my own.

"Um, is there anybody who would benefit from trash being thrown away somewhere other than a dump?"

That got to the heart of the issue: Why did somebody throw away trash outside of a dump?

Chapter 388:

For What Purpose?

“WOULD ANYBODY BENEFIT, you say?”

“That’s right, sir. If I’m on the right track, the mystery at the dump is where we should start. I was just wondering why anybody would dump trash somewhere other than a dump.”

It wasn’t like there was money to be made from it. If it was to hide the fact that the dump was overflowing with trash, a tamer would have to be in on it, but I don’t see why you’d even have to conceal that fact in the first place. The dump was cleared by more than one tamer. And if all the tamers were in on the conspiracy, then there wouldn’t be any rumors about trash levels in the first place. Which then raised the question: Why would you need to prevent people from realizing that the dump was overflowing with trash?

“That’s a good question. If everything started with the problem at the dump, I can’t see the reason behind it.” Garitt looked quizzically at the ceiling. Zinal fell into thought as well, but neither could come up with a good explanation.

“Say...is anybody hungry?” Fische asked me, pressing a hand to his tummy.

You know...I think I am hungry. Is it almost lunchtime?

“Is it time for lunch?”

“Ivy, want to go back to the plaza? You didn’t sleep well, remember?” My father gave my head a worried pat.

You know, he’s right. I’ve had so much on my mind that I forgot.

“I’m okay now.”

“You sure?”

Maybe he won’t stop worrying until I go back to the plaza and take a nap.

“You didn’t sleep well?” Zinal asked apologetically.

“No, sir, but I’m all right. No need to worry,” I assured him with a smile.

Garitt reached out and gave my head a little pat. “Don’t you work too hard, Ivy?”

I don’t think I do.

“She sure does. That’s why I always have to keep an eye on her,” my father said, looking a bit troubled.

I really don’t think it’s that bad... I silently shook my head at him, but he just sighed back at me.

“You know, Ivy, why haven’t *you* registered with the adventurer guild?”

“Err...” *I guess it’s okay to tell them since Sora says they’re safe.* “There’s a problem with my skill, too, so I’m not going to register. My father and I registered together with the merchant guild.”

“You have a problem, too, Ivy? It’s just one surprise after another...”

“Boy, am I hungry!”

“Shut up, Fische! Learn some patience!”

“But you talk *forever*, Zinal. Anyway, I’m hungry, so I’m gonna go buy something! The food stalls get crowded at lunchtime.”

Zinal sighed at Fische and got up from his chair. “Sorry about that. We did have an early start, so you both must be very hungry.”

“Oh, it’s okay, sir. We’ll just go back to the plaza to eat.”

“Okay. I’ll look into your theories, Ivy. We’ve been checking out the other angles, too, but we aren’t getting any results.”

We all left the room at Michelle together. The inn’s dining hall was a bit noisy, probably because it was the lunch rush. I eyed the crowd as we walked out of the inn.

“Thanks for seeing us today. We had a lovely time,” Zinal said.

“Oh, the pleasure was all ours,” my father replied.

“We’ll come visit you in the plaza in two or three days.”

“Sounds good.”

As I watched my father and Zinal talk, I started to feel really sluggish. *Why is that? Am I tired? Well, I guess anybody would be tired after all that talking on no sleep. Oh, wait! Maybe Fische picked up on it.*

“What do you want to do for lunch?” my father asked.

I looked up at him with a start. Zinal and his party had walked off to the food stalls while I wasn’t paying attention. I really must have been tired.

“You look a bit pale,” he said. “Want to go back to the plaza and take a nap?”

“I think I’d better. I need a nap. I was going to cook something from the leftovers for lunch. That okay?”

“Of course. I’ll help, so take it easy.”

“Oh, I’m okay.”

“Ivy, your definition of ‘okay’ isn’t always reliable.”

“Oh, come on, that’s not true.”

But I think I will cook something simple for lunch. I’m starting to get a headache. A rice bowl would probably be easiest. Oh, come to think of it, I just remembered fried rice exists. You can put anything in it, so as far as I can remember, it’s very easy. Okay, I think I’ll try it out for the first time today.

As we walked down Main Street, rows of bustling food stalls lined the way. Every place was packed beyond capacity. Even though nobody could go into the forest, it was business as usual.

“Since we can’t go into the forest, we can’t see sharmy, can we?” I heard someone saying.

“True. But I wonder what happened this year?” said someone else. “I haven’t even seen our friend from the front gate.”

“Really? What a shame. Sharmy is such a comfort to the people of Hataka.”

Sharmy? I think I heard that name before somewhere... That’s right, it came up when we were keeping our ears open for rumors. I got the sense that it was a cute, friendly animal. So it’s a comfort to them... I’d sure love to see it.

“Want to buy something to take back?” my father asked.

“Nah, not today. Let’s just go home.”

“Okay.”

Back in the plaza, we found most of the adventurers carrying on as usual. I didn’t blame them for getting restless; they’d had to sit out in the plaza all this time since they couldn’t go into the forest.

“We’re home. Sorry we’re late,” I apologized to my creatures as we entered the tent. Since we’d left in the early morning, everyone had been home alone the entire day. All the potions I’d set out for them were gone, so they had already finished their lunch.

“Here, Ivy.” My father gave me one of the red potions Flame had made. I poured it into a little cup and drank it down, and the pain in my head instantly vanished. I wasn’t sick, but the potion still seemed to be effective. “You okay? Didn’t you have a little headache?”

Busted.

“Can’t put anything past you. I’m fine now, though.” I felt a little lighter, meaning the potion had worked.

“I’m making lunch, okay?” my father insisted.

“I’ll help... There’s something I’ve been wanting to try.”

“Boy, you’re stubborn.”

“Well, it’s been on my mind, and now I really want to eat it.”

Maybe it was because I’d remembered how to cook it, but I wanted to eat fried rice...very badly. Besides, it was easy, so I should be okay.

We took all the necessary ingredients to the cooking area, where we found some adventurers already making food. Luckily, one of the stations was open. I explained the recipe to my father while we cooked it together.

When the dish was finished, I gave it a skeptical look. I thought I remembered that the grains of rice were supposed to be more separated.

“Is something wrong? It tastes good to me,” my father said.

"I think the rice should be a bit less sticky."

"Did we use too much water, then? Or was the fire not hot enough?"

Next time, I'll turn the heat up a little. Too bad it's easy to burn things that way.

We stacked our plates and picked up our tableware.

"Ivy, you go to bed. I'll do the dishes."

"You sure?"

"I can wash the plates with one hand just fine. It'll just be a bit hard, that's all." And with a little laugh, he marched off to the wash area without me. And maybe it was because I had a full belly, but I was pooped. *I guess I'll let my father take care of me and go to bed.*

I went back to the tent and got ready for bed. As soon as I lay down, I could feel my consciousness drifting far away. I must have been incredibly sleepy.

"Hm? Mmm?" I opened my eyes. It was a bit dark. I looked around inside the tent and found my creatures all snuggled up asleep against me. My head felt crystal-clear after a good sleep. I sat up and stretched my arms. It felt so good to stretch my back. "I guess Dad's outside?"

I got up and stretched my arms again. I twisted my waist side to side and loosened my joints before stepping outside the tent.

"Huh? He's gone."

Where did he go? But wow, it's already evening, isn't it? I sure did sleep a lot.

I looked around our tent. The lady adventurers next door were drinking and partying as usual. On the other side, the children were busy with something at the table.

"What's wrong?"

It was a sight I had seen every day for the past few days, but something about it felt off. I took another look around.

"Yeah, it's really scary. I wonder what's going to happen?"

"I know."

I started to hear the children's voices. Of course they were scared, considering what was going on in the forest.

"Wait a minute... Even though there's an anomaly in the forest..." *Why is everything the same in this village?*

Hataka was a little less animated than the other villages I'd been to, but the past several days had felt exactly the same. I looked around the plaza. Even though the adventurers couldn't travel into the forest, they were drinking and partying, as if they weren't at all scared or restless.

"Good *evening*, Ivy. You were sleeping so soundly I didn't want to wake you. What's up?"

I looked up at the sound of my father's voice. He was carrying a pot. He had been cooking dinner while I was asleep.

"Oh, this? Yeah, our ladies next door helped me make dinner."

"Hey, Dad, don't you think it's weird?"

"Agh! You mean the food?" My father nervously took the lid off the pot and looked inside.

"No, this village. When the forest is in such a mess, how can this village and this plaza be so normal?"

"What?!" My father's eyes darted around the plaza, a look of shocked realization on his face.

Chapter 389: Summoning Circles Are Terrifying

“YOU’RE RIGHT. Everyone knows about what’s happening in the forest, but they don’t seem at all alarmed by it.”

Whenever something was wrong, you could immediately tell by the way adventurers acted. The bigger the problem, the more at risk their lives were. And this problem was unmistakably a tremendous danger to them. The monsters were already quite close to this village, after all.

“Even you and I haven’t felt scared enough, huh?” my father said.

“Yeah, looking back on it now, we’ve been way too relaxed about the whole thing.”

“Does this mean you and I are under some spell as well?”

“I think so. Hearing the kids’ conversation just now and sensing something wrong with it finally made me notice.”

I still don’t know why I felt something was off, but I’m glad I did. Wait a minute, are my creatures okay? “I’m gonna go back in the tent for a bit.”

My father began to clear the table for dinner, just like he always did. “Okay, I’ll get our dinner ready.” Then he leaned in and whispered a little warning to me. “Somebody might be watching us, you know.”

I gave a discreet nod, then entered the tent. “Sora, Flame, Ciel, Sol, have you guys...um...how should I even ask this? Have you guys been under somebody’s control?”

No, that’s not a good question, is it? But I have no clue what else to ask... I looked at the four for a bit, but they only stared right back at me. *I guess this means they’re okay? No, I think I was phrasing the question wrong.*

“Um...did you guys know I was under somebody’s control?”

What kind of question is that, Ivy?! I shook my head from side to side, trying

to clear the cobwebs out of my brain...and the quartet shook side to side in reply. *Huh?*

“Wait a minute...*did* you guys know?”

Shake, shake.

Wow, they really did know. “Okay. Sorry I worried you.”

Shake, shake.

I petted each creature one by one. *Seriously, thank goodness I snapped out of it.* Sol bounced up in front of me. “What’s wrong?” I asked, and it responded by lunging at my face. “Agh!”

I fell back in surprise. I managed to catch myself with my hands, but the next thing I knew, my head was wrapped up in something. I felt like I was underwater... *Wait, what’s happening?!* I stopped breathing for a moment, but then I gasped in shock. I briefly panicked until I realized I could breathe. I could also move my head, so I took a look around. My vision was dark and a little blurred, but I could see Sora, Flame, and Ciel, and none of them looked worried. *Is Sol wrapped around my head? But...why?* As I sat there, rooted to the spot, I could feel something floating out of my brain.

“Fuuu...”



I looked down to see Sol sitting on my lap. I stared intently at it, and it answered with the same expression. I had no idea what had just happened. Sol must have done that for some reason, but...what could it be?

“Pefu?”

The shock of finding out everyone knew I was under a spell made me freak out. I must’ve worried them. I’d better apologize...

“Oh! Sol, did you release me from the spell that was controlling me?”

Can Sol even do that? Well, then again, Sol is special.

“Pefu!”

That means yes. Wow, so Sol broke the spell’s control of me. Did it do that while I was taking my nap? Yeah, my father immediately noticed what was wrong, too. Was it because of Sol’s power? Or does it take a special trigger to break someone free from the spell?

“Sol, did you free my father from the spell’s control, too?”

“Pefu!”

So Sol did free him. I guess there isn’t a trigger, then? Hmm... I did sense something was wrong, but I didn’t completely break free from the spell until I heard the children talking, right?

“Ivy, is everything okay? Can I come in?” I heard a voice outside the tent.

“Yes.” *Wait a minute, when did Sol break the spell on my father?*

The tent door opened, and my father popped his face in. “Dinner’s ready. What’s going on?”

“Um, there’s something I want to ask you. Did you take a nap, too?”

“Yeah, I kind of drifted off without meaning to.”

Aha... So we were both freed from the spell during our naps. “Sol was the one who got us out from under the spell’s control.”

“Huh? Really? Well...Sol is special. I’m not at all surprised it could do something like that. Sol...thanks, buddy.”

“Pefu! Pefu!”

“That’s right, Sol *is* a slime that can absorb magic energy.” My father nodded in approval.

So, does the magic energy of the spell need to be absorbed for it to be broken?

As I sat there, mid-ponder, my father said, “Let’s eat first. Sol, will the spell affect us again?”

We looked at Sol, but it just stared at us with no reaction. That meant we wouldn’t fall under the spell’s control again. I exhaled in relief, and my father also looked reassured. I took Sora’s and Flame’s potions and Sol’s magic items out of my bag, then left the tent.

“Okay, I’m ready,” I announced.

“Good. I’m hungry, so let’s eat.”

“Okay. Whoa, that smells great! You’re a good cook, Dad.”

“Well, I lived alone for a long time, and an adventurer’s health is his biggest asset.”

My father may have lived a carefree life, but he did always make sure to eat well. I remember him saying his mentor pounded that lesson into him.

I dug in to the meal. The vegetables and meat had been simmered low and slow, so they were delicious.

“Dad, this is so good!”

“Glad to hear it.”

After a leisurely dinner, we cleared the dishes together. We relaxed for a little while with our customary after-dinner tea before returning to the tent. Having to act normal now that our eyes were opened was a little annoying. Once we were back in the tent, I let out a big sigh.

“Nice acting out there, Ivy. I didn’t feel any eyes on us, so I don’t *think* we were being watched, but better safe than sorry.”

“Yeah, I didn’t sense anyone watching us, either.”

But we still needed to stay alert. It’s a shame I wasn’t able to just relax and

enjoy my father's cooking.

"Hey, Dad...*is* there a spell that lets down people's guards?"

I'd realized that was probably the case, since everybody was relaxed in the face of impending doom, but I'd never heard of such a spell existing.

"I've never heard of it, no. But from the look of things, there might really be magic like that."

So my father hasn't heard of it, either. Come to think of it, how does a summoning circle even work anyway?

"How do summoning circles control people?"

Typically, slaves were controlled by slave bands imbued with exclusive-use magic. These bands drew from the enslaved person's magic energy to activate their magic indefinitely. Exclusive-use magic... Were summoning circles the same?

"I don't really know much about summoning circles," my father admitted. "But I have heard they have the power to forcibly distort the victim's magic energy."

"Um...huh?"

What does that mean? Summoning circles can forcibly distort my magic energy? Does that really give someone the power to control me? Wait a minute, what does "distorting magic energy" even mean? I... I haven't the foggiest clue.

"You know how our magic energy keeps our bodies and minds protected?" my father asked.

"Yeah. Our magic energy can't be invaded by anyone, and we can't even meddle with it ourselves."

I'm only able to be myself because my magic energy is protecting me.

"Exactly. But summoning circles *can* meddle with your magic energy. In other words, they might even be able to overwrite a person's character."

"What?!"

"Not even slave bands can interfere with magic energy to that degree. All

they can do is forcibly send commands to their wearer's consciousness. That's why people with strong magic energy have energy-suppressing magic embedded in their slave bands. Otherwise, they would be able to repel commands by force. However, summoning circles change a person fundamentally, so with them there's no need to worry about repelling commands. Well, this is all hearsay, and I'm not sure if it's true or not."

Things have gotten really complicated, haven't they? But boy, summoning circles are terrifying.

"Why not?"

"Because summoning circles are forbidden."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Making, using, or researching them is against the law."

I guess we *would* be in big trouble if summoning circles popped up all over the place.

"Wait a minute... How were summoning circles first invented?"

Who would create such dangerous magic anyway?

"Legend has it that summoning circles are ancient magic created in the distant past."

Ancient magic? As in, the source of the magic we use today?

"Good evening. Got a minute?"

Oh! Is that Zinal?

"Yes. Just a moment, please."

The gentlemen of Zephyr must be under the spell's control, too. What do we do?

Chapter 390: Cursed Relics

“DAD...what should we do?”

If they're under a spell, we should free them from it, but how?

“Hmm... Well, let's at least step out of the tent and talk to them.”

“Okay.”

Only Zinal was waiting for us as we got out of the tent, which we thought was strange.

“The other two are out on survey or drinking, probably,” Zinal said.

“I see,” I replied.

Yeah, they barely have any sense of danger.

“So what brings you here?”

“Uhh... Well, I made you both very uncomfortable over the past few days, and I missed my chance to apologize earlier today, so I came to say I'm sorry.”

Zinal bowed to me and my father. *Strange, I felt like he did apologize earlier today.*

“It's okay, sir. We're well aware how remorseful you are. And I'm sorry, too, for not noticing how worried I was making you.”

“Oh, no, Ivy, you don't need to apologize.”

My father offered Zinal a seat, and I started to get out the tea things, but he shook his head and said he had to leave because it was getting late. *Hmm... I kinda get the feeling this is our perfect chance, now that he's alone. Maybe we should just drag him into the tent and put Sol on his head?*

“Ivy, are you plotting something cruel right now?” My father frowned hard, and I awkwardly looked away. I didn't think it was cruel.

“C'mon, let's just go for it.”

My father sighed. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I know what you're thinking, Ivy."

"A perfect opportunity like this won't fall in our laps again."

I mean, Zinal was there, alone, right before our eyes. We wouldn't get another great chance like this one, so it would be a shame to waste it.

"What's going on?" Zinal asked.

"Uhh, Zinal...you know there's a problem in the forest right now, right?"

"Well, yes."

"So, considering that, doesn't everyone else's behavior seem a little odd to you?"

Zinal gave my father a strange look, then glanced around the plaza. We watched him hard for any changes, but he just seemed confused. He hadn't noticed anything, so I decided it took more than a trigger to break the spell.

"What am I supposed to see?"

"Aha. Well, it was worth a try." My father sighed quietly while Zinal's eyes darted between us in confusion.

"Mr. Zinal, could you please wait there a minute? We have a very important favor to ask of you."

We needed more allies if we wanted to fight back, so I would have my father and Sol do the hardest part. If we took Zinal by surprise, we could probably overpower him. I slipped back into the tent and whispered to Sol.

"Sol, I have a little favor to ask. Somebody under the spell is going to come in the tent. Can you free him from it?"

Sol chirped a quiet "Pefu!" in reply. *Wait a minute, I asked everyone not to talk inside the tent, and Sol has been talking. When did that start? Ack, get your mind on the task at hand, Ivy.*

"Um, if you jump on his head, he'll fight back, won't he? What should we do about that...?"

Will my father hold him back? That's probably what he's going to do. Gee, it's hard not being able to go over our strategy beforehand.

Mrrrow.

Huh? Ciel?

“Ciel, are you going to help us, too?”

Mrrrow.

The two jiggled in reply. I petted each of their heads in turn, then took a determined breath and called out to Zinal. “Mr. Zinal?” I popped just my head out of the tent. Zinal gave me a strange look. “My request is a bit complicated, so please come in here.”

My father smiled a little at my choice of words. Zinal faltered for a moment, but when my father opened the tent door for him, he cautiously stepped inside.

Okay, now what do we do?

“Wow, it’s much bigger on the inside.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu!”

“Pu! Pu, puuu!”

“Huh?! Ack! Ivy, are these rare slimes *yours?*”

When Sora and Flame suddenly jumped at him, Zinal fell to his knees in surprise and gave them a hard stare. Sora and Flame glared back up at him.

“Zinal, sorry about this. I promise we don’t mean you any harm. We’ll make it up to you later.”

Then my father whisked a rope around Zinal...with frightening precision!

“Ah?! Hey! Mmf!”

Meanwhile, Sol had approached Zinal. My father now had him securely tied up, head to toe. He struggled for a moment, but then he fell motionless. My father frantically caught him and gently laid him down.



“I feel like we’re doing something terrible,” I said.

My father smiled sheepishly back at me.

What’s this? I looked at Zinal’s thighs and noticed Ciel wrapped around them. I was so impressed by the grip that I caught myself clapping. “Oh, Sora, Flame, thank you both! That was perfect.”

Sora and Flame happily jiggled in reply. Ciel carefully detached itself from Zinal’s thighs and stretched itself high.

“You sure don’t waste time, Ivy.”

“Well, he’s always with his companions, so I knew we couldn’t let a chance like this pass us by.”

“I mean, yes, but...”

“Come on, Dad, you had the *exact* same plan in mind.”

My father smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, we didn’t have time to think about our options. I was just a little hesitant given he’s an investigator and all. They’ve got connections with the crown, which means they’d most likely find out about you, Ivy.”

Ah, so that’s what he was worried about. If the crown learned about me, they would probably learn about my creatures, too.

“But if we died here, your worry would’ve been for nothing.”

“Fair point. The monsters are right outside the village now, and we still don’t know what they are.”

I guess my father really does have a lot more on his mind than I do. I focus way too much on what’s right in front of me. I need to be more careful.

Sol jumped up high. “Pefu!”

I looked up to see the slime leave Zinal’s head. That meant the spell was already broken.

“That was fast.”

“I know. Good work, Sol.”

My father and I watched Zinal closely. After a while, his eyes snapped open and he sat up quickly, his hand jumping to the sword at his belt.

Dang, he moves fast. And he untied himself in a flash! Wow.

“What did you do to me?” Zinal’s voice was colored with malice. It was a little terrifying.

“I’m going to ask you one more time...” my father said, quickly stepping in front of me.

“Answer me first!”

“There’s a problem in the forest right now. And considering that, didn’t everyone’s behavior in the plaza just now seem a little strange to you?”

My father’s disregard of Zinal’s question made his death glare only got stronger. *Yikes, I hope we didn’t mess this up.*

“Zinal, this is very important. Please, just think about it for a moment.”

Zinal spat bitterly, but then silence fell over us for a few moments. Finally, he said, “Oh... What?! Why did they... No...I went along with them, too, didn’t I?”

When I heard the confusion in Zinal’s voice, I cautiously peeked out from behind my father. As I stared at him, his eyes met mine. They were filled with confusion and embarrassment.

“What’s going on?”

“Okay, stay calm and have a seat,” my father said.

Zinal let go of his sword and sat on the floor. I left the tent to get us some tea. When I returned, Zinal was green in the face. I set some tea before him. “Here you go, sir. This’ll calm you down.”

“Ahh...thanks.” Zinal slowly sipped his tea. Soothed a little by the hot beverage, he took a deep breath in and out and looked at my father. “Now I understand what you were trying to tell me. I see just what incredible danger we’re all in.”

“Yeah... So now I have a question for you. How much does Zephyr know about summoning circles?”

“Sorry, but we don’t know much. Many decades ago, there were summoning circle researchers under the crown’s command, but everyone involved died tragically, so their work was halted. The royal family and people in their circle say that summoning circles are cursed relics.”

Cursed relics, huh...

“They’re sometimes discovered in villages and towns, but all the records related to them have been rounded up and labeled as classified.”

Does that mean the paper with the sketch of the summoning circle that trapped Snakey was also taken and classified? If that symbol is cursed, it definitely would make everyone safer if it were made a secret.

“The only problem is, as long as a summoning circle goes unreported, we have no idea it’s there.” Zinal took a somber sip of tea, then looked around our tent. He stared at Sol, Sora, Flame, and Ciel in turn before looking back at my father. “Rare slimes?”

“Yeah. Ivy’s a tamer.”

Zinal looked at me, then he looked up with determination. “Thanks. You’ve saved me.”

Chapter 391:

Because Sora's Special

“OH, NO PROBLEM. It was fun... Er, I mean, I'm glad you're free of the spell, sir.”

Oops. My true colors came out there... Well, it was just so funny to watch how everyone moved like they were doing a coordinated dance... Nope, it's wrong to even have that thought. Everyone cooperated like that because there was no other way to break the spell.

My father patted my head with a smile. “Ivy, you'd better keep that thought to yourself.”

I had made Zinal stare, so I awkwardly avoided his gaze. “Anyway, how are we going to deal with the other members of your party, sir?”

“Either punch them out or drug them...”

Those were terrifying things coming from Zinal's mouth just now... Um, sir, don't you think that's a bit extreme?

“Um, couldn't we just bring Sol over to them while they're asleep?”

“Hey! Why the normal suggestion after the abuse I just went through?”

Just what did you want me to do, Zinal?! I sighed out loud without meaning to. “We had no time to think, so we just had to wing it, sir.”

“Yeah, I figured as much...but I'm still kinda sore about it.” Zinal looked a little disgruntled.

“Zinal, has your personality changed?”

Zinal smiled sheepishly. “It probably has. I must've made a fool of myself under that spell. You're probably sick of the inspector side of me by now.”

Aha, so he really was in inspector mode the whole time. Maybe that's why there was always something about his personality that I couldn't quite grasp.

“You’re good at winning people over. Is that something you learned with practice?”

“Oh, no. I’ve always been good at building a rapport with others; that’s probably why they picked me to be an investigator.”

Ah, so he leaned into the personality he was born with. Yes, all three men in Zinal’s party are good at figuring out how friendly or how distant to act with people.

“You know, Ivy...how should I put this...you’re kind of mysterious in a lot of ways.”

“I am, sir?”

How am I mysterious? I can’t think of anything. Is it because I have memories of my past life?

“You are. And that mysteriousness really pulls people in and makes them want to take care of you.”

What is he talking about? I looked up at Zinal in confusion. He smiled and gave my head a pat.

“So, what are we going to do with your friends?” my father asked.

“That’s a good question. We need to get them back to reality, and fast.”

Zinal sighed deeply, and stern creases appeared on his face. *Huh... Why is he acting so much grimmer about the situation than I am?*

“I’ll be frank: I want to borrow your slime Sol to help my friends. If that worries you, you can come with me back to the inn. I’m sure they’ll get drunk, come back to the room, and sleep until morning.”

I looked at my dad, and he gave me a nod. That meant it was my decision to make. We needed more people on our side, so I was on board with the idea of freeing Garitt and Fische from the spell. And Zinal was right: Catching them when they were asleep after an evening of drinking was ideal. If they woke up while we were curing them, things could get dicey. But I was worried about sending Sol off alone, so that was out of the question.

“It’s okay if my father and I join you, right, sir?”

“Of course.”

Then I had no problems with the plan. “All right, we’ll help.”

“Thanks, I mean it. Oh, and can I add one more person to the list? My son?”

“Your son, sir? The one who just got promoted?”

“Yeah, there’s no telling how long he’s been under the spell’s influence, so I’m worried he won’t be able to return to normal. But if there’s a chance to save him, I want to try.”

Of course he would want to save his son. Any father would. “Could we, Dad?”

“Yeah... Just brace yourself, Zinal.”

“I know.”

He knows what? Brace himself for what? Oh, that’s right, he said he wasn’t sure his son could be saved. Maybe if you were under the spell for too long, you could never return to normal?

“Hey, Dad, does something happen if someone’s under a summoning circle’s spell for a long time?”

“The magic of a summoning circle sometimes changes a person. After all, it meddles with a person’s magic energy—something that should never be touched. I’ve never seen it myself, but there’ve been documented cases of people becoming empty shells of themselves or violent beyond help... Some reports have even talked about people getting so aggressive that they had to be killed.”

Oh my God... I looked at Zinal. His eyes met mine, and he smiled faintly. He had come here to celebrate his son’s promotion, but now...

“What happens if we don’t break the spell?”

If breaking the spell would break a person’s mind, what if we just left them alone?

“They wouldn’t last long. Their forcibly warped magic energy takes a toll on their body.”

It had been naive of me to think that simply breaking the spell would solve

everything. I'd had no idea a summoning spell's magic was that serious.

"It was smart of you to break the spell on me. Didn't you worry things might go south?"

Zinal's question made me gasp softly. *That's right. We might've been in grave danger.*

"We figured we were early enough to save you, since your party got here only a few days before we did."

Wow, my father's amazing. He always thinks everything over before he acts, unlike me. It's embarrassing that I just do stuff on impulse.

"Hey, Dad? Thanks for everything."

"Huh? Hey, don't sweat it, Ivy. If you weren't so impulsive, Zinal would probably still be under that spell."

Well, I'm pretty sure you would have managed some other way, Dad...

"For the record, I couldn't have handled this alone."

"Really? Huh, wait... Why?!"

"I overthink things, and sometimes that stops me from doing what I need to."

Really? I don't think it's like that at all.

"What a sweet family you are."

Oh no! Poor Zinal is about to face what might be the worst tragedy imaginable, so why am I acting like this? Isn't there anything I can do to help?

"Sol?"

"Pefu?"

"I want to break the spell on three men. Can you help? Also, one of them might've been under it for a very long time. Will he be okay?"

"Pefu!"

"Pu! Pu, puuu!"

Hm? Sora?

“Pu! Pu?”

What’s going on? I feel like Sora’s trying to tell me something.

“Do you want to come with us?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu!”

I was right.

“Pu! Pu?”

It’s still trying to tell me something. Why does it want to join us in the first place?

“Is there something you need to do at the inn?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu!”

I asked the question on a whim, but it turned out I was right. Sora has business at the inn? With Garitt and Fische?

“Do you need to see Mr. Garitt? Or Mr. Fische?”

No reaction... Maybe Zinal’s son? But why would Sora need to see him? I’m gonna backtrack a little... Let’s see, what were we talking about before Sora spoke up? I think I’d just asked Sol if somebody who was under the spell for a long time would still be okay. Then Sol and Sora both answered... Huh? In other words, both of the slimes said he would be all right. It makes sense Sol wants to come because it can break the spell, but Sora? What did Sora realize it could do to help?

“Sora, can you save Mr. Zinal’s son?”

“Huh?!”

“Pu! Pu, puuu!”

My father and I stared at each other.

“Hey, what do you mean? Can my son be saved...?”

Oops, I need to explain things to him! But can we really save his son? What if we can’t?

“Druid, Ivy, don’t look at me like that. The day I heard my son would be an

elite adventurer, I made peace with what that might mean someday.”

My heart ached hearing him say those words.

“Pu, puuu,” Sora’s sad voice reached my ear. I looked at it, and it stared back at me.

Oh no! I just hurt Sora’s feelings. Sora knows it can save Zinal’s son, and I doubted it. And I’m underestimating Zinal’s grit, too.

“I don’t know what condition your son is in, Mr. Zinal, but Sora will save him. I know Sora can save him.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

It’s okay. I’m sure Sora can do it.

“Um, Ivy? I know what slimes can do...” Zinal’s voice sounded doubtful.

I looked at Sora again, and it looked back at me and jiggled. *Yes, everything will be fine. Sora’s special!*

“Everything will be okay, sir, because Sora’s special.”

“That’s right. If Sora says he can be saved, then he can be saved,” my father said.

Zinal looked conflicted.

“Zinal, Sora isn’t an ordinary slime,” my father said.

“I can tell by looking at it. You communicate flawlessly with it, and it seems to have a good read on me, too. But, you know, slimes are monsters that clean up *trash*. Just how is a *slime* supposed to save my son’s wounded magic energy?!” Zinal howled grimly.

My father opened our magic box and took something out of it. Then he set it in front of Zinal.

“What’s this...a potion? Wait, why is it sparkling blue?”

“This is a wound-curing potion Sora made. It can even bring someone back from the brink of death.”

“What?!”

Chapter 392: Secret Weapon

“**W**AIT A MINUTE, a potion that brings people back from the brink...like the potion of legend? No, it can't be...”

“This is the one,” my father said. “As long as a person isn't maimed like I was, it can cure even the most fatal wounds. It's already been tested in the town of Oll on the adventurers who fought the berserk monsters.”

Zinal just stared at Sora, awestruck.

That's right, Zinal just said his son's magic energy was “wounded.” If a summoning circle's magic can forcibly alter a person's magic energy, does that mean the energy itself is wounded? If we're dealing with wounds, that's definitely a job for Sora. After all, Sora brought Ciel and my father back from the brink when they were heavily wounded. I don't know if wounded magic energy can be healed, but if Sora says it can, then it must be possible.

“That's my Sora. So amazing!”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

As Sora and I talked quietly together, I heard a sigh from Zinal, who had been talking with my father. I looked over and saw he was clutching his head in his hands. *Did something happen to him?*

“My brain is still a jumbled mess from that summoning circle... Is that really the best thing to tell me right now?”

What kind of explanation did my father just give him?

“But isn't it easiest to understand if I tell you about something that actually happened?”

“Well, sure, but if you're gonna tell me a story like that, at least find a secure spot and draw up a contract first! What if I were a bad person?”

Aw, Zinal is definitely a guy we can trust. I'm glad we're becoming friends.

“Sora knew you were trustworthy, and that meant we all did.”

“You’re missing the point! Agh...fine. So Sora’s going to save my son, eh? Okay, I’ll trust you. By the way, Druid, you’re the Secret Weapon of Oll, aren’t you?”

Secret weapon? Agh, yikes! My father looks really upset.

“By the look on your face, I guess I’m right. From the way you carry yourself and think, I could tell you were no ordinary man, but wow. To think I’ve been talking with the adventurer they call the *Secret Weapon*.”

“Mr. Zinal, what do you mean by ‘secret weapon’?”

“There’re rumors of an adventurer from Oll who’s not elite, but who’s more than powerful enough to qualify. We call him the Secret Weapon of the Adventurer Guild. To think, it’s been Druid all along. We went to Oll plenty of times to see if the rumor was true or not, but we never got a chance to meet you. The guild master figured out what we were trying to do as well. We had a hell of a time.”

The guild master of Oll is my father’s best friend, Gotos. He was probably hiding Druid to protect him, but I’m sure he had fun with it, too. A lot of fun. But seriously...secret weapon?

“Ivy, your face is twitching. If you want to laugh, go right ahead. Even I didn’t know they called me that. Stupid Gotos, he never tells me anything!”

“Pfft! Ha ha ha ha!” Unable to stand it anymore, I burst out laughing. I mean, my father had *two whole names*!

“I didn’t think you’d have left Oll.”

“Well...a lot happened.”

“And you’ve got a daughter who’s tamed *four* rare slimes? It’s just too bizarre.” Zinal looked at my creatures one after another.

I guess it’s safe to tell him?

“I’ve only tamed three of them, sir. The black slime, Sol, is not tamed. Also, the creature with the strange markings on its skin is actually an adandara, not a slime.”

The more I talked, the stiffer Zinal's smile got. Then he looked at Sora...then Flame...then Ciel...then Sol...and lastly, he cast a glance at my father, who met his gaze and shrugged.

"Ha ha ha! Aha, I see. Anyway, after all this is over, I'll sign a contract swearing myself to secrecy. So please, don't make me any more confused than I already am."

"Got it. Yes, we need to solve the problem at our doorstep first," my father agreed with an awkward smile. And he was right: Unless we solved Hataka's looming crisis, there would be no tomorrow.

"The first thing we can do is bring Garitt, Fische, and my son back to our side."

"Yeah, the sooner we can free them from the spell, the better," my father said.

I nodded earnestly. Gaining allies was one thing, but it also sounded like being under the spell for too long was dangerous, so we needed to free them from it that very day.

"How about tonight? If they're coming home from a night of drinking, they'll be easy to pin down."

"I'm fine with that. What about you, Ivy?"

"Yeah, I'm okay with it. Sol, Sora, does that work for you?"

Both slimes jiggled in reply. Seeing that, my father nodded at Zinal. "Are you feeling okay, Zinal? Especially with your son being involved..."

"A little while ago, I felt like my sadness would crush me. I thought I might have to kill my own son. But now, I'm not sure why, but..." Zinal looked at me and smiled softly. I gave him a curious look, and he said, "You speak so confidently that it makes me want to believe in you. You really are a mysterious girl."

Zinal patted my head and my father smiled. *So he believes in me and Sora. I need to work hard to live up to his... Wait, I'm not actually going to do anything. But I'm surprised... He said he felt like his sadness would crush him, but he didn't act that way. Zinal, you are far too good at masking your feelings. Is that a*

downside of being an investigator?

“My son is in your hands.”

“Yes, sir. Sora will do everything to save him.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora bounced between me and Zinal. It seemed happy to have gained his trust.

“Okay, we’re handling Garitt and Fische tonight...and your son, too?”

“No, let’s take care of him another day.”

“Got it. Make sure they won’t wake up on us, okay?”

“Sure, I’ll give them some sleeping medicine or something.”

“Huh?!”

But I thought he said they’d get drunk and go to sleep.

“We’ve gone through all sorts of training, you see. If someone outside our party enters the room, they might sense their aura and wake up, no matter what state they’re in.”

Wheew, that’s incredible. They must be really sensitive to auras. They’d probably have a terrible time sleeping in the plaza.

“Oh, okay.”

“Well, I’d better head back. I’ll see you later tonight.”

“All right.”

“Search for auras on your way back to the inn. We don’t know how we were put under the spell in the first place.”

How we were put under the spell... That’s right, the kids next door were scared just like they should be, but their parents didn’t seem at all afraid, just like the other adults around. I wonder why that is?

“Will do. You and Ivy be careful, too, Druid.”

“We will.”

As I watched Zinal leave the plaza, I heaved a little sigh and felt a hand on my head. “Tired?”

“I’m okay.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard, young lady. And let’s get some rest. We have a few hours before midnight.”

“All right.”

We went back to the tent and prepared for bed. We washed our faces, brushed our teeth, and got in our beds.

“Good night,” we both said.

We’d learned so many new things all at once and encountered just as many mysteries in the process. My heart and my head were having a hard time keeping up with it all. I knew we had to focus on doing what was in our power first, but when I thought about the monsters in the forest, I got the sense we were running out of time. What would happen to this village if the monsters attacked right now? Come to think of it, the gatekeepers had added more people on patrol. Did that mean they still had a sense of danger?

“Ivy, I know there’s a lot on your mind, but you need to sleep right now.”

“Sorry...”

“It’s okay. So many complicated things happened all at once, and I know it’s hard to make sense of it all. But lack of sleep is bad for your health, and we don’t know where whoever drew that summoning circle is, so it’s important to keep up your strength.”

“Okay. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Chapter 393: Stealthily...

ZINAL WAVED SILENTLY when he spotted us at the entrance to the inn.

“Good evening,” we whispered, quietly approaching him.

“Hi. Thanks for coming. This way.”

We followed Zinal into the inn called Michelle and quietly tiptoed up to the third floor.

“I feel like I’m committing a crime or something,” I said. We weren’t exactly doing anything wrong, but our stealthy movements made it feel that way.

“You think so?”

“Bah, not at all.”

Between my father’s curious expression and Zinal’s not-even-slightly remorseful attitude, I was a little stunned. Was I looking at this the wrong way?

“It just feels like we’re thieves.”

“Ahh, well, I do this all the time,” Zinal answered.

He does this all the time? Does he mean for work? I don’t really understand what an investigator’s job even is. I looked at my father, and he just smiled back at me.

“It doesn’t bother me, since our mission is to break a spell,” my father said.

This was a relief to hear. If my father had said he “does this all the time,” too, that would raise some serious doubts about the right and wrong of an adventurer’s job.

“We’re here.”

We followed Zinal into the room and immediately spotted Fische and Garitt asleep in their beds. Thinking it unusual that there were only two beds, we looked around the room, but there seemed to be no others.

“Don’t you sleep in this room, Mr. Zinal?”

“I do. Fische normally sleeps in the room next door, but I thought it would be better for them to be in the same room tonight, so I put him to bed in here.”

He was right: Our task would be tricky if they were in separate rooms. We approached the next bed to find Garitt sound asleep. He didn’t even flinch when we approached.

“He’s out cold.” My father gave Zinal a bewildered look. Perhaps he thought that since Garitt was sensitive to auras, he would at least flinch a little even if he was drugged.

“Ahh, well, here’s the thing...” Zinal trailed off, his eyes darting around. I stared at him, sensing I was about to hear something unpleasant.

“What happened, sir?”

“It’s the sleeping medicine, you see. When I was mixing it in their water, a bunch spilled in. I was going to start over, but then they yelled out, ‘*Wateeeer, gimme wateeeer!*’ and before I could stop them, they both gulped it all down... Sorry. They probably won’t wake up until lunchtime tomorrow.”

It was just so ridiculous that my father and I fell silent. Zinal frantically waved his hands. “Hey, I didn’t know they were going to slurp it up like that! I even told them to stop, but those drunkards just gulped everything down... Agh, I’m sorry.”

I stifled my laughter before it could escape. If I laughed, it was sure to reach the next room over.

“Well, we’ll just wait here until they wake up.”

“Thanks, I’d appreciate it.”

I looked at Garitt again. Sleeping so deeply, he surely wouldn’t wake up any time soon. I opened the bag containing my creatures and set Sol next to him, then I scooted a little away from the bed and let Sora, Flame, and Ciel out of the bag.

“Huh? You brought everyone?”

“Yeah, they all said they wanted to come.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks in advance, Sol,” Zinal said.

Sol jiggled at him, then hopped right next to Garitt and swallowed his head whole.

“It’s an amazing sight to see. Looks like he’s being eaten up.”

“He’ll have to stay like that for a while,” I explained with a giggle.

Zinal offered us some seats. Drinks and snacks were set out on the table. “I could only get basic things, but these snacks are really good, so have some.”

“Thank you, sir.” I quietly ate one. The snacks were bite-sized and rather fluffy. Mine was filled with a tangy fruit flavor. They were well balanced and quite nice to eat. “These are delicious. What are they called?”

“They’re called napple. They eat them a lot in the next village over.”

“I like how tangy they are. Nice and balanced.”

“Glad you like them.” Zinal beamed happily back at me.

My father took a good look at Garitt, then sat down and had a napple. “They really do go down easily.”

“Pefu!” Sol chirped quietly from the bed. We looked over and saw it had already let go of Garitt’s head.

“Thanks, Sol. Could you take care of Fische next?” I walked over to Garitt’s bed, picked up Sol, and carried it over to Fische’s bed. It bounced over to Fische’s head and swallowed it whole, just like it had done with Garitt.

“Dang, that’s fast. Was it like that with me?”

“Yeah, I think it took the same amount of time.”

“Huh.”

Sora and Flame were playfully bouncing on top of Garitt.

“Hey! No roughhousing!” *I have no sense of authority when I whisper... Well, I never had much authority to begin with.*

“It’s okay, let them have their fun.” Zinal seemed amused by the three creatures playing. They showed no signs of stopping. And my father was

smiling, yet silent...

Oh well, I'll just eat some more snacks.

"They won't hurt him, so it's not a problem. Besides, look how much they're enjoying themselves."

He was right: A well-muscled adventurer's body wouldn't be hurt so easily from a little slime bouncing. But was it really okay to let them play on top of a sleeping person?

"They're so cute."

"I know, right?"

I smiled sheepishly at the two men. They were right: My creatures were very cute.

"Pefu!"

I looked over at Fische's bed to see Sol had let go of the man's head. It was probably finished.

"Good work, Sol. Are they both free from the spell now?"

"Pefu!"

"Thanks, Sol." Zinal walked over to Fische's bed and picked up Sol. He gave the slime a gentle pat, and it stared up at him, its eyes narrowed contentedly. "Ivy, you can go sleep in the room next door. There's an empty bed you can use."

Should I? I would like to sleep when it's my bedtime. Not to mention my father gets worried if I don't sleep enough. I guess I'll take him up on the offer.

"I accept your gracious offer, sir."

"Oh, Ivy, you're way too stiff. Loosen up around me, will ya?"

I smiled awkwardly. I always put others at a distance, didn't I?

"Well, I guess it's too much to ask when we barely know each other. I'll do what I can to make you feel more comfortable around me. The room is this way."

When I got up from my chair, my creatures came bounding over to me. “Want to go to bed?” The four of them jiggled in reply.

“That looks like a yes.”

“Yup. What are you going to do, Dad?”

There were still a few hours before daybreak. Would he stay up the whole time?

“Zinal and I have a lot of things to talk over. We need to find a way to get his son under control, for one thing.”

That’s right...we still need to save his son. But I won’t be much help when I’m practically sleepwalking. I should just go to bed and stay out of their way.

“Okay, just take it easy. Good night.”

“I will. Good night, everyone.”

The four slimes at my feet jiggled in reply. I smiled at their cuteness as I put them all into the bag slung over my shoulder.

“Okay, Mr. Zinal, lead the way.”

Zinal escorted me into the next room over. “This is also a double room, so there’s a spare bed. Feel free to use it.”

“I will, sir. Good night.”

“Good night. I’ll lock the door and give the key to Druid.”

“Thanks.”

After Zinal closed the door, I opened the bag and let everyone out. I lay down in bed, and a huge yawn escaped my mouth. The creatures had already settled down at my feet.

“Good night, everyone.”

Chapter 394:

Our Treat, We Insist!

“**I**VY, THINK YOU CAN GET UP?”

My father’s voice jolted me awake.

“G’morning... Huh? Why’m I in a bed?”

I thought we were staying in a tent. But this place is... Oh! Yeah, I fell asleep in one of Zephyr’s rooms last night.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Wait, what time is it?”

An unusual amount of sunlight was streaming through the window. There was no way it could be morning.

“It’s noon. You were so tired yesterday I didn’t wake you. I even took a little nap myself.”

“Oh, wow.”

It’s been a while since I slept in, but this has totally cleared up my head. Lack of sleep really is a bad thing.

“Thanks. I feel all better now—probably because of all that sleep. Good morning, everyone.”

My slimes looked at me and jiggled. *Oh, right! I need to feed them.*

“Glad to hear it. The slimes already had their breakfast, and Garitt and Fische woke up. Zinal’s explaining everything to them right now.”

Oh, good. I was worried they were hungry. “Thanks for taking care of the slimes. Are Garitt and Fische okay?” *I wonder how Zinal managed to snap them out of it?*

“I talked with both of them a little, and everything seemed okay. Oh, and Zinal used the fact that they got so drunk that they didn’t wake up in the morning as

the trigger to bring them back to normal.”

That made sense; they would never drink so much that they couldn't wake the next morning. For that matter, I didn't think they'd get drunk in the first place. *Wait a minute... Didn't they oversleep because Zinal gave them too much sleep medicine?*

“Well, don't fret over the details,” my dad said with an awkward smile. Zinal was a pro all right. He knew how to hide his failures.

“Let's head over next door; they should be finished talking by now. I know, let's have Garitt, Fische, and Zinal treat us to lunch.”

“What for?”

“As an inconvenience fee.”

“Ha ha ha! Nice, I like it!”

I got up, made the bed, and prepared to leave. My mind felt so clear now. Had I really been that tired? I put the slimes in their bag and left the room with my father. We walked over to the next room, and he knocked on the door.

“Are you done talking?”

I thought it was wrong to open the door before we got an answer, but Zinal didn't seem to mind. He happily waved us in when he saw me. Fische and Garitt were in the room with him, and their complexions were horrible. Either it was from too much drinking or from the nature of the conversation... *Which one made their faces so brilliantly green, I wonder? I hope it wasn't from drinking too much sleep medicine.* I stared hard at them, trying to figure out the cause. Then, when they looked back at me, I gave them a flustered greeting.

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Hi. So, sorry for everything. Sounds like we gave you a lot of trouble.” Garitt looked genuinely remorseful. He was clearly upset about it, and his face turned even greener at the sight of me. Was he going to be okay?

“Oh, it's fine, sir. Are you all right?”

“I don't think we are. I've never messed up so bad before. Ivy, I'm sorry, too.” Fische joined his companion and bowed to me.

Er, aren't you both taking this a bit too hard? Just what did Zinal tell you? I gave Zinal a questioning look, but he shrugged his shoulders.

"I only told them the truth. Hey, pull yourselves together! We have to talk about what our next move is going to be, and I need you to be sharp for it."

Zinal gave them both a pep talk, but they were still overwhelmed. It looked like it would take us a while to be able to have a proper conversation. They might need a little change of scenery. *Maybe I'll actually make that suggestion my dad and I were joking about earlier. After all, they must be hungry, too, and you can't think on an empty stomach. And I'm hungry anyway.*

"Mr. Garitt, Mr. Fische, please treat us to an expensive lunch."

"Yes. Please and thank you," my dad said, playing along.

Garitt and Fische gave my father and me a stare.

"Call it an inconvenience fee. So it's settled: You're taking us to Hataka's most expensive restaurant for lunch," my father explained with a devilish twinkle in his eye.

"Treat me, too," Zinal chimed in, making Garitt freeze mid-nod. *Yeah, I'd feel suspicious about that as well.*

"Why do we have to treat you, too, Zinal? You also inconvenienced them, so you should help us pay!"

"Now, now, let's not dwell on semantics."

Garitt glared at Zinal, but it was having no effect on him. If anything, it earned him a condescending chuckle.

"Bad form, Zinal. You're not getting any."

Have they gone back to their old dynamic? No, I'm not sure why, but they seem even more unruly than before. Is this the true face of the investigator trio?

"Looks like our first impression of them deceived us," my father said.

You can say that again. Why are they being so childish? Wait, it's not quite that. It's like they're a mix of a bunch of personalities, and it's hard to get a handle on them.

“Sorry, all three of us are going to treat you now. The best restaurant in Hataka would have to be Yanpo on Main Street. They’re famous for their meat. Sound good? If you don’t want to gorge yourself on meat in the middle of the day, we can always wait until suppertime.” Directing a sigh at his bickering companions, Fische described the restaurant to us. I was fine with eating meat for lunch, and my father was clearly salivating at the idea already.

“Meat sounds good to me. What about you, Ivy?”

“Yup. Can’t wait.”

Truth be told, I’d been a little hesitant to make them treat us to lunch, but one look at them now and I wasn’t bothered one bit. They were competing to see who would have to pay the most. And Fische, despite his sighing, had joined in their antics. He was super into it, too. Why didn’t they all just split the bill evenly? Fische ended up losing, which meant he would pay the most.

“They’re fun to watch,” my father remarked.

“They sure are.”

Since they were finished talking, my father and I left their room. Once we were outside the inn, we had a look around while we waited for the trio to get ready and join us.

“Everybody looks calm.”

All the people passing by the inn looked the same as they had the past several days. And up until yesterday, we’d been just like them, but now was different.

“They do. I’ve never been so terrified of *calm* as I am now.”

I nodded in agreement. It was definitely scary.

“We’re here. Hmm? What’s up?” Zinal opened the door of the inn, and Fische and Garitt followed behind him.

“Oh, we were just noticing how nobody’s changed.”

“True. It looks like any other day in a village.”

Strange, when the real danger of monsters was just outside the walls. What was the mastermind trying to do with this village? What was their goal? For that

matter, was the mastermind still in the village? As I watched the villagers go about their day, I could just imagine what it would be like if monsters attacked the place when it wasn't prepared. I doubt the mastermind would want to stick around when they knew how much trouble the area was in. Did they want to destroy the village? If so, I'd say their plan was going quite well.

"Can we come back here after lunch?" Zinal said. "I asked the innkeeper if we could use a room."

My father nodded. It was definitely safer than our tent. "Are you two going to be okay?"

"We've been through our fair share of mayhem. Give us a little time and we'll be fine. Well...then again, we've never messed up as badly as we did this time around."

Garitt sighed heavily, but his eyes were a little brighter now. *Oh, good. I think they came to an agreement.*

As we walked toward the restaurant Yanpo, Zinal came over to me and my father. "Ivy, Druid, did you sense anything wrong when you woke up this morning?"

"What?!"

Was anything wrong? Well, I remember feeling clearheaded, but that was just because I finally got a good night's sleep.

"You mean that clearheaded feeling?"

What?! Dad felt it, too?

"So you felt it as well. And you, Ivy?"

"I did."

"Aha. So did I. At first, I thought it was just because I got a good night's sleep, but it felt different somehow, so it kept tugging at the back of my mind. Maybe it's because I was freed from the spell, or maybe there's some other reason behind it. It's just one mystery after another."

"That's true. Is there anybody we can ask about summoning circles?"

“It’d have to be a noble or someone in the royal circle. But if they find out we’ve been under the influence of a summoning circle, they might not allow us to leave town.”

The nobility? Would Lord Foronda know anything, then? But...having to stay in town? I want to avoid that at any cost... Maybe we should prepare ourselves a little. I’ll bring it up when we have our meeting later.

Chapter 395:

Zinal's Son

OOOH, THAT WAS SO YUMMY! *I've never had meat so soft and tender.* It was a slightly different kind of tenderness than what you get from a slow braise. It was so good that I even asked for seconds... Maybe that was why Fische's complexion looked even worse than it had before lunch? *I'll just assume I'm right.*

"Was it good?" Garitt asked.

"Oh, delicious, sir! Thank you all for the treat," I answered, my face all smiles.

"I'm surprised you asked for seconds..."

I can't heeear you... Yeah, Dad, I see you laughing, but you were the one who encouraged me to get seconds! I know, I didn't have to go along with it, but...

"Okay, now that we've reset our brains a little, let's go back to the inn and get down to business. Fische, if you don't get over yourself soon, you're going to annoy us all to death." Zinal gave Fische's slumped shoulder a light slap.

"I'm not annoying. Argh, I played that game in the first place because I hoped it'd make you pay for lunch, Zinal!"

Fische was whining so loudly that the passersby stopped and stared. It was just a little embarrassing.

"Oh, shut up. It was your choice to bet, and you lost. Just accept it already."

Dang, Zinal, you're merciless. Look at how poor Fische is sulking.

"Is there anything you need?" Garitt asked, pointing at the stores.

I didn't think so, so I answered, "No thanks."

"Okay. Are you sure you don't want dessert?"

Huh? Does Garitt want dessert? When he set up the snacks for us in their room earlier, he spent the whole time munching on them by himself. Right, then

Fische gave him an earful for it afterward.

“It’s all right, Mr. Garitt, I’m full. But if you want something, should we stop and buy some?”

“Oh, if you don’t need anything, then I’ll pass. You look like you got your fill anyway.”

“Oh, yes, sir. I sure did!”

Garitt patted my head with an amused smile. *Hmm, Fische and Zinal have children, but what about Garitt?*

“Mr. Garitt, do you have any kids?”

“Yeah, I do. A fledgling adventurer, in fact.”

Oh, so they’re an adventurer. I guess Garitt is prepared for the worst just like Zinal, then. Mad respect to them both. Wait a minute, I never caught Zinal’s son’s name, did I? Huh... He never mentioned his son’s name at all.

“Y’knooow...I think I’ll go get something to snack on after all,” said Garitt as soon as we arrived at the inn. He turned around and hurried back along the path we’d just come on. *Something to snack on? We ate an awfully big lunch—was it still not enough?*

“Huh? Where’d Garitt run off to?”

“To buy a snack, sir.”

Zinal smirked. “Ha ha! Guess he couldn’t resist it.”

Resist what?

“Garitt has a terrible sweet tooth. I have a hunch he’s going to buy a sweet snack.”

Aha. Well, they do say we’ve got a separate stomach for dessert.

“Is that...?”

I followed Fische’s gaze to see a young adventurer glaring at us as he walked in our direction. He had a hostile aura which I couldn’t quite describe.

“Nalgath...” Zinal muttered. There was a deep crease between his frowning

brows. He seemed to know the man, but it didn't look like they got along.

"Long time no see."

"What are you doing here?"

"I told the guild master we were here. Didn't he tell you?" Zinal asked.

Nalgath's eyes filled with anger. Bloodlust, even. It made my skin crawl a little. My father gently put a hand on my back, its warmth releasing the tension from my body.

"What are you doing in this village?"

"Well, *my son* got promoted to elite adventurer. I'm here to celebrate."

"Celebrate? Who cares?! Just go away!"

Could this be...Zinal's son? But judging by the tension between them, they don't seem to have a good relationship. When Zinal said his son had become an elite adventurer, he looked so happy... What a shock. Boy, their expressions are both so stiff. And Zinal seems resigned to it... So, um, how much longer is this staring contest gonna last, guys? We've got stuff to do. Do we really have time to waste on family squabbles? Didn't you want to break the spell on your son? You shouldn't say things that'll just get him upset. C'mon, Nalgath is standing right here... Why aren't we taking advantage of that?!

"Zinal, Nalgath, just stop talking, both of you."

More than ten minutes have gone by since you started bickering. Garitt's come back from buying snacks, so it's time to reel it in, gentlemen!

"What?!"

"You little brat!"

Eek, they're scaring me. But I'll be okay. Dad has my back. "You're getting too upset. Mr. Zinal, didn't you have something you wanted to tell Mr. Nalgath? You'll never get anywhere at this rate."

"I'm not listening to anything this jackass has to say!"

"Mr. Nalgath, please, just listen for a minute. If you won't listen to Mr. Zinal, then let me and my father talk."

“Huh?!”

Oh! He looks just like Zinal when he’s shocked. Better not tell him; he’ll get mad.

“Mr. Nalgath, you’re an elite adventurer. You need to control your emotions better, or it could spell disaster for you out in the field,” my father warned him.

Nalgath sneered, but then he managed to calm himself down enough to address me and my father. “I’m sorry. By the way, who are you?”

“I’m Druid, and this is my daughter Ivy. Nice to meet you.”

“Very nice to meet you, sir.”

“Nice to meet you,” Nalgath said politely. Maybe he took the chip off his shoulder when he wasn’t dealing with his father? He looked a bit baffled, but at least he was politely answering us.

“Mr. Nalgath, we have something complicated to talk about. Won’t you come with us for a little while?”

“Something complicated, you say? What’s this all about?”

“We can’t say it out here. There’s no telling who might be listening.”

Nalgath’s eyes grew stern as he stared at my father. Then he turned his focus on me. His gaze was so grim that I felt my spine tingling.

“Is it serious?”

“Yes. It’s about what’s happening to Hataka,” my father answered.

Nalgath was at a loss for words for a moment. As I watched him, I thought I saw a dark fog appear in his eyes, which had been a clear, brilliant blue just a minute earlier. *Come to think of it, Zinal’s eyes are the same color.*

“Are you *sure* it’s serious?”

“Well, there’re monsters just outside the village...”

“Oh! Right, there are. Wait a minute... Huh? Um...”

Zinal was standing right behind Nalgath, but there was something off about him. His eyes were wandering a little in shock. His face was quite pale and filled

with sadness. When our eyes met, I could see his lips were pursed. He was stopping himself from doing or saying something. *I don't know why, but I've got a bad feeling about this. We should work as quickly as possible.*

"Let's go, Mr. Nalgath. We've borrowed a room where we can talk."

"Huh?! Er, but I..."

"Just hear us out first, please. Then you can decide what to do about it, okay?" I would just have to play the stubborn child card and make him give up. I grabbed him by the hand and began to walk. I stole a glance at him, and it was clear how confused he was. *Oh, what a mess...* I could hear footsteps behind us, so I knew Zinal and the others were following. That reassured me a little.

"Ivy, wanna use the Zinal Method from yesterday?"

The Zinal Method? Oh, he means the sneak attack! Yeah, that's probably our best bet. We wouldn't get anywhere if we tried to explain everything to him; that much had just been made perfectly clear, and he was starting to act even stranger now.

"Yes, let's go with the Zinal Method."

I was scared that Nalgath's odd behavior was caused by the summoning circle. And judging by Zinal's reactions, I had a sinking feeling I was right.

Chapter 396:

Wait, You Meet All of the Requirements?

“TERRIFYING...” I recoiled a little from the teamwork before me. Zinal had picked up on my father’s and my idea, so he helped out. And in a moment, Garitt and Fische caught on as well. Their teamwork was like a well-oiled machine.

“I don’t think he’ll be able to escape now.”

I thought back on what had just happened. The moment we entered the room Zephyr had reserved for the meeting, my father bound Nalgath from behind with his one arm. When Nalgath tried to scream, Zinal clamped a hand over his mouth, and then Fische pulled out a rope from who knows where and tied Nalgath up. Meanwhile, Zinal stuffed a cloth into Nalgath’s mouth and Garitt bound his feet.

Just where were they keeping all those ropes and cloths? I’m scared!

“What’s wrong, Ivy?” Fische asked with concern. I appreciated it, but shouldn’t he have been more worried about the grunting and writhing Nalgath? I was starting to get anxious about a lot of things now...

“I’m fine, sir.” I had to do what I could to help. I opened the lid of the bag on my shoulder, then set my slimes out on the nearby table. “Be quiet, everyone.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve switched on a noise-canceling magic item. And wow, what incredible slimes.”

When did he have time to do that? Well, I’m grateful he did, though...

“Okay, guys, he says you can make all the noise you want. Sol, Sora, can you free Nalgath from the spell?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

They both bounced over to the gagged and bound Nalgath. Sol flew right onto his shoulder, then its body expanded until it swallowed his head whole.

“He’s freaked out.”

“Is this how we all looked yesterday? That’s a little, er... I mean, I’m glad you saved us.”

Fische appeared fascinated by the sight, but Garitt seemed confounded.

“That was really impressive, the way you all started working together like that in a split second,” my father marveled, looking at Zinal and his party.

Zinal smiled sheepishly. “Well, it’s vital for our job.”

“Being investigators must be hard.”

“Yeah, I guess.” For some reason, there was a self-deprecating smile on Zinal’s face. My father stared at him.

“Pefu!”

At the sound of Sol’s voice, Zinal turned his attention to Nalgath. I looked at him, too, but there was something off about him. He was just staring at the floor, motionless. Garitt looked at Nalgath and immediately shook his head.

“It didn’t work, Zinal.”

Their worries about the summoning circle’s long-term effects had been proven true, but there was still hope. Sora was bouncing eagerly around Nalgath.

“Mr. Garitt, please step back.”

“Huh?”

Sora jumped onto Nalgath’s shoulder and pulled at the cloth binding his mouth. Was the cloth in Sora’s way? I walked over to Nalgath and took it off. Next, Sora jiggled at the ropes binding him. Apparently, those were in the way, too.

“Could you untie Nalgath and lay him down? Sora will take care of everything else.”

Garitt and Fische looked a bit conflicted by my request as Zinal just stared at

his son. When he realized that nobody was doing anything, my father ordered Garitt to untie Nalgath. Once all his ropes were undone, Nalgath began to keel over. Zinal caught him quickly and gently laid him down on the floor. Then Sora got on top of Nalgath, puffed itself up, and swallowed the man's body whole. After a while, Sora's shooshing sounds filled the room.

"What's it doing?" Fische asked uncomfortably. Hadn't he been paying attention?

"Weren't you paying attention, sir?"

"Well, I was, but...can your slime really heal psychological magic damage?"

"Yes, sir. Sora said it was possible, so it is." I had faith in Sora. Still, I understood how difficult it would be for those who didn't know about Sora's incredible talents to have faith. But my father and I knew. Sora was special, so everything would be okay. I was surprised, though, to see Sora had enveloped not just Nalgath's head but his entire body. Sora only enveloped the area that was causing the person's problems, so that meant that the summoning circle must have damaged his entire body.

Summoning circles truly were terrifying.

"Good job, Sol. You okay?"

"Pefu!"

Okay, now how much time is Sora going to take? Since this is a first for all of us, we have no idea. But it didn't take too long to bring Druid back from the brink of death, so it shouldn't take too long this time, either.

"Let's have some tea while we wait," I suggested. I looked around the room and noticed a tea set on a shelf in the corner. Everything was ready to go: It just needed hot water, and that was already available as well. Magic items sure came in handy at a time like this. Hot water that never got cold! I poured it into the pot and got out cups for everyone while I waited for it to steep.

"Here you go, Mr. Zinal."

He looked at me with a start, then looked back at Nalgath.

"Come on, Zinal, you might as well sit down."

“Yeah...you’re right.”

But Zinal still didn’t want to leave his son’s side. With a quiet sigh, Fische dragged him into a chair and put a cup of tea in his hand.

“Sorry.”

“Damn, Zinal, I thought you didn’t even like the guy.”

“I didn’t want us to drift apart, but Nalgath...” Zinal stopped and shook his head. There was a look of defeat in his eyes.

“How did your relationship get so strained, sir?”

I thought back to the way Nalgath was acting. It was clear he hated his father, but there was something funny about the impression he gave off. I didn’t know what it was, though.

“It’s because of our line of work. I wouldn’t be surprised if the same thing happened to us with our kids someday,” Garitt muttered self-deprecatingly.

Does he mean their work as investigators? Do they have to keep all sorts of secrets from their own families? I guess that would make their families feel a little left out. Does Nalgath feel that way but is fooling himself because he doesn’t want to admit it? Well...this is all just my speculation, so it doesn’t mean anything.

“Oh! Right, here you go.” Garitt suddenly pulled out two pieces of paper from his bag and handed them to my father, who took them and read them with an awkward smile on his face. Then he looked a bit startled.

“Here you go, Ivy.” He handed one of the papers to me. When I saw the first word, I chuckled.

“I thought so.”

The document my father gave me was a contract on magic paper. Simply put, it was an “*I’m sworn to secrecy*” contract. I’ve lost track of how many people we’d exchanged such a contract with by that point. I noticed that this paper already had Zinal’s, Garitt’s, and Fische’s signatures. I was a little curious what had startled my father so much, so I carefully read over all the provisions. When I got to the last one, I looked at Garitt.

“Um, do you really mean this, sir?”

All the contracts we’d encountered before had similar contents, but there was one major difference here: This contract stated that once the problem was resolved, they would help us secretly flee from Hataka. That was because anyone who was under a summoning circle’s influence would usually be prevented from leaving the area. So they were only doing this to protect us, but would it really be okay?

“You both said you had issues with your skills, but I imagine Ivy’s problem is more significant? You have a skill you don’t want anybody to know about. Do I have that right?”

Fische’s question surprised me. *How did he know? Dang, he’s sharp.*

“Yes, sir.”

“Then it’s best that nobody knows you two were involved with this problem. If you were friends with any nobles or distinguished persons, they could help you, of course...but Druid’s title of ‘Secret Weapon’ is just a nickname. It’s not quite powerful enough. Then again, if you or Druid were distinguished persons yourselves, that would be best.”

Garitt’s words confused me a little. Noble friends? Distinguished person-friends? Distinguished persons?

“Uhh, so, Garitt...Ivy actually meets *all* of those requirements,” my father said.

Fische frowned deeply. So did Garitt.

“How is that possible? Don’t tell me you have a noble friend?” Fische leaned forward eagerly.

“And a friend who’s a distinguished person? Wait, if you meet all the requirements, that means *you* are also distinguished...” Garitt looked back and forth between my father and me in a daze. Maybe it would be best to just tell him the truth.

“Umm, it’s a long story, sir...”

Chapter 397:

Contracts

“HOLD UP!” Garitt stopped me before I could talk. “First, let’s sign that contract. Whatever you have to say is probably important.”

He wanted me to sign the contract first, but its final provision had piqued my curiosity.

“As for that final provision, we would do everything in our power to help you flee in secret only if you asked us to, so there’s no need to erase that provision,” Fische explained, handing me a pen. I decided that meant it was okay to sign the contract. I looked at it nervously, but my father gave my head a gentle pat.

“It’s all right, Ivy.”

“Okay.”

I reread the contract. Aside from that final provision, it was the usual stuff. Maybe there was some template for contracts like this? With this question lingering in my mind, I signed both sheets of paper. One was for Garitt and his party, and the other was for my father and me.

“All right, now we’re all safe. It sure is strange for us to feel nervous about this—we’re just hearing your story.” Fische gave us a tired look, but I still didn’t like being talked to like that. “Okay, Ivy. What are you hiding?”

Since I had other things to tell them, I decided to just stick to the basics. “I’ll explain as simply as I can... I was recorded as a distinguished person—a person of merit—when I helped bring down a human trafficking organization in the town of Otolwa, where a nobleman was almost a victim. That was how I befriended that nobleman and some other distinguished persons. We’re all still good friends, sir.”

“What?!” all three men gasped.

Ah, Zinal is back to normal! Was my story really that shocking? Well, I guess it would be a big surprise to hear that a kid like me helped bring down a big crime

organization and was named a person of merit.

“That story was short and sweet,” my father said, equally impressed.

Well, if you condensed down all the real details, my story works, doesn't it? I looked back into my memory again and... *Yeah, I covered everything.*

“So you're one of the people who brought down that crime organization that had its claws all the way to the royal family... That nobleman you mentioned, was it the honorable Lord Foronda?”

“Yes, sir. It was Lord Foronda.”

Oops! I should have added “the honorable” like he did. Between Rattloore and his party calling him “Lord Foronda,” and my earlier experience with the nobility being the village chief, I had been calling him just plain “Lord Foronda” without meaning to. I didn't even notice I was doing it at first, and nobody corrected me, either... Well, it was still my fault. And after the crime organization was brought down, I was horrified to realize I had been talking to him so disrespectfully, but when I tried to address him with more formal language, Lord Foronda looked so heartbroken. He asked me if I didn't like him anymore, and said he was sad that there was a wall between us, so I went back to the way I used to address him. And looking back on it, I didn't even know if the village chief was a nobleman anyway. Maybe I only thought he was since he was the leader of the village.

“So you're friends with his lordship? That is impressive.” Zinal's eyes sparkled a little. I could have sworn I'd seen that look before, although I wasn't sure where.

“Ivy, would he come to your aid if you needed him? We can help you get in touch with him somehow if you need it.”

“Oh, that won't be necessary,” my father said. “Ivy and Lord Foronda are faax pals, and she also writes regularly to all the other distinguished persons who were involved in that situation.”

“Really?” Fische looked shocked. Was it really that unusual? Everyone seemed perfectly casual about sending me faaxes.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Oh!” we all gasped.

I’d completely forgotten about Nalgath. Zinal hurried over to check on him. On the surface, he didn’t look any different from before.

“Sora, is Mr. Nalgath all right now?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Oh, good. Thank you. Great job, Sora.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Since Sora said he was all right, he would wake up soon. But my goodness, it seemed like the summoning circle’s damage ran deep. It had taken longer to heal him than it had for Ciel, Zinal, or my father.

“Mm!”

Nalgath’s grunt brought silence to the room. I looked over and saw his eyes were faintly open...but then I couldn’t see him anymore because Zinal had flung his arms around him.

“Huh?! Wha...huh?” Nalgath murmured in confusion, then he frowned when he realized his father was hugging him...and then he looked bewildered. I could faintly hear Zinal crying. Nalgath didn’t know how to handle it.

“Nalgath, you were turned into an empty shell by a summoning circle’s magic,” Garitt explained. “Do you remember anything?”

“Summoning circle? Empty shell?” Nalgath shook his head.

“Do you know what’s happening to this village right now?” Fische asked.

Nalgath became lost in thought for a little while, then his eyes popped open and his face turned pale. “Yeah...I do know. We’re in a lot of danger. Why aren’t I doing anything about it?”

“Because you were under a spell that suppressed your sense of fear.”

Nalgath tried to sit up with Zinal’s arms still around him. With a start, Zinal released him. Then, after an embarrassed pause, Nalgath took his father’s hands to help himself get up.

“Are you okay? Do you feel unusual at all?” Zinal asked, carefully scrutinizing

Nalgath's face.

Nalgath looked slightly embarrassed as he finally shook his head. "I think I'm okay. Um, so...thanks."

"Oh, I'm just glad you're okay. Ivy, I cannot thank you enough." Zinal bowed deeply to me.

"Mr. Zinal, please don't bow. You've already thanked me more than I deserve."

When Zinal looked up, his eyes were a little red. It was then that I realized just how scared he had been. Even though he trusted us, his fear for his son's life would never completely go away. Zinal hid his emotions far too much. It was obvious from the way he looked now just how wrought with worry he had been. Garitt and Fische had probably known about it all along, though.

"Mr. Nalgath, can you sit down? We'll tell you everything that's happened."

Come to think of it, does he remember what happened while he was under the spell?

"All right. And you are...um...oh! That's right, you're Mr. Druid and his daughter Ivy. I remember."

So even if a person was under the spell long enough to be a shell of themselves, they still retained their memories.

"Nalgath, we need you to answer some questions honestly. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Garitt sat across from Nalgath and began to question him. "Did you know that you were under the control of a summoning circle?"

"No, sir, I didn't. All I remember is...feeling a sense that something was wrong all the time."

"Do you remember seeing a summoning circle anywhere?"

"Um...no, sir."

"Okay. Do you remember how long ago you started feeling something was wrong?"

“I think...it was about a year and a half ago. I remember that was when the guild master started acting strange...”

So that means the guild master has been under the summoning circle's spell for a year and a half.

“Do you know anything about the captain of the watch?”

“The captain? I remember going to talk to him when I noticed something was off about the guild master. Then a little while later, I heard he had gotten sick.”

Was he really sick, though? After all that had happened, everything sounded suspicious to me.

“Um, sorry to be a bother, but I have some questions I'd like to ask, too...”
Nalgath said.

Is it just me, or has Nalgath's personality done a complete 180? Did the spell make him different? Or did the sight of Zinal's tears change him? Hmm... Well, I only hope the two of them can patch things up.

“I've heard that if a person is under a summoning circle's magic for too long, they lose their sense of self. And you said that I was a shell of myself earlier. So how did you bring me back?”

“Oh! Well, that's because...”

“Stop there!”

Garitt stopped me.

“Nalgath, what you're about to hear is top secret. We'll need you to sign a contract. Are you all right with that?”

“I'll sign. I'll sign any contract you want me to. You saved my life. I'll do anything you wish of me.”

Whoa, whoa, what's this? He'll do anything we wish of him? What exactly does he mean by that? Am I the only one who's kind of freaked out by his train of thought?

“Sir, why do you already have a contract ready?!”

“I made one for my son and for his friends, too. They're a bit standard,

though, since I made them in a rush.”

I was right! There is a template!

“But why do you walk around with contracts in the first place?”

“We need them for work, you know.”

“Oh, now I get it. Goodness, you have quite a hard job.”

I guess that means not signing a contract while they're on the job can get them in big trouble. Zephyr really does have a tough job.

“Okay, all signed.”

Agh...Nalgath already signed it. Just how many contracts am I gonna have to sign before the crisis in Hataka is over with?

Chapter 398:

A Little Break

AFTER WE EXCHANGED CONTRACTS, I had my father and Zinal explain everything to Nalgath. They walked him through everything from how we met to how we freed everyone from the spell, and then they told him how his wounded magic energy had been healed.

“This slime healed me?” Nalgath stared hard at Sora, who was smiling proudly. I sighed over how cute it was, and Fische seemed equally enamored.

“Sora really is so precious, Ivy! Could I pet your slimes later? Please? Just a little pat or two?”

“If they all give you permission, you may. Just be gentle with them, okay?”

Fische looked a bit startled by my answer, which confused me.

“You mean...I can just pet all of them?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Er, well, it’s just that...don’t slimes refuse to be touched unless their tamer orders them to? I assumed they’d run away if I tried to touch them.”

Fische’s questions made me think of the normal slimes I’d met. He was right: They were awfully standoffish.

“Well, my slimes are okay with it. Hey, guys, come here.”

All the slimes came bouncing over to me. *Huh, I wonder if it’s okay for them to be jumping up and down on the table?* I stole a glance at Zinal and Garitt, but they didn’t look upset by it, so I decided it was all right.

“Go ahead, Mr. Fische.”

“Seriously?” Fische looked quite conflicted, but I knew from experience that it was faster to just show him than to explain everything to him.

“Yes, sir. It’s fine, I promise.”

“Ummm...er, is it okay if I pet you?” Fische asked the slimes embarrassedly. He was entertaining to watch.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Pefu!”

Fische gave me a baffled stare when he heard the four singing.

“They say it’s all right for you to pet them, sir.”

“*Ohh*, okay. Wow, you and your creatures understand each other really well. Okay...I’m gonna pet you now.”

Fische cautiously reached out. After a couple of slow pets, the slimes jiggled and squinted their eyes.

“Huh? Oh, Ivy, why doesn’t this one have a taming symbol?”

“Because I haven’t tamed Sol, sir.”

“What?!” the trio gasped.

Huh? Did I forget to mention that? Hmm, with everything that’s happened, it’s hard for me to remember what I did and didn’t tell them. But judging by their reactions, I guess I didn’t...

“Um, so, when I asked Sol if it was okay with being tamed, it said no, so I didn’t. But Sol’s a sweet little thing; it’s helped me out of so many scrapes.”

“Ohh, so that’s why. Well, I can understand, since it was okay with me touching it, too. Wow, I didn’t even know that was a thing...” Fische gave Sol a troubled look, then followed it up with a timid pat. I can’t quite describe it, but he seemed stiffer than before.

“Oh, wait a minute... Untamed slimes attack people, don’t they?”

“Ha ha ha! Yes, they do... Or at least, they usually do.”

“But it’s not attacking you.” Garitt stepped up beside me and cautiously peered at Sol.

“Sol would never do that. Right, Sol?”

“Pefu!”

“Ivy, can I ask you something?”

“What is it, sir?” I looked up at Garitt beside me.

“The noises they make...why do they sound that way?”

Their noises? What does he mean by “Why do they sound that way”?

“They’ve made those sounds ever since the day I met them... Is there something strange about them, sir?”

“Not *strange*, exactly. It’s just...maybe we just never knew they made sounds like that?” Garitt mumbled. He was too quiet to understand, even though he was right next to me. I stared up at him, but it seemed like he’d found his own answer. He was nodding to himself. “Well, I guess it is possible.”

I don’t get it.

“Well, unique noises aside, your slime named Ciel has a very strange design on its skin.”

“Oh, that’s because Ciel is an adandara. I think you’ll find it doesn’t look or sound exactly like a slime.”

And Ciel made the same sounds it did as an adandara.

“Oh, I see, that’s... Huh? Um, what?”

“Did you just hear that strange sound?”

Fische and Garitt stared intently at Ciel. No matter how closely they examined it, the only thing that looked like an adandara to them was the skin pattern and the noise it made.

“An adandara?”

“Come here, you two, we’re starting the meeting,” Zinal called out to the pair. “You can talk about her monsters after we’re done.” At last, they were going to talk about something that made sense to them.

“Aye aye, sir,” Fische sighed. “Let’s get this settled quickly—I need to know

what's up with her monsters."

"Me, too."

Fische gave each slime's head a final gentle pat and smiled contentedly. Garitt only watched instead of touching them. Maybe he wasn't a slime person.

"Okay, now that everyone's here, Ivy, Nalgath has a request for you."

A request for me? It must be about his friends. Well, I can help out, as long as Sora and Sol say it's okay.

"Please save my friends. You're our only hope." Nalgath bowed, his face motionless with worry.

"Sol, Sora, I want to help Mr. Nalgath's friends. Can you do that?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

Oh, good. They can help.

"They say yes."

"Thank you. Sora, Sol, thank you so much." The nervousness about the slimes melted away from Nalgath's eyes. Had he been worried they would say no?

"Will your slimes be okay, though? It must take quite a lot of magic energy to cure the magic wounds. Nalgath has three friends, so we understand if not all of them can be saved."

Huh? Zinal sounded really worried, but do they even need magic energy to heal magic wounds? Doesn't Sora just use the same stuff it uses to make potions? Come to think of it, I've been meaning to study magic energy, but I still haven't gotten around to it yet.

"Sol, Sora, can you save all three of them?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

"They say they can."

"Really? But do you have to give them some of your magic energy halfway

through, Ivy? If you do, I don't want you to hurt yourself saving them."

"Oh, I couldn't do that anyway, sir. I don't have much magic energy."

"Oh, that's interes—what?! You don't have much magic energy? But then, how did you manage to tame rare slimes?" Zinal gave me a blank stare.

I hope I can explain this easily...

"I don't have any stars, so I have less magic energy than the average person. Sora was a collapsed slime, so I was able to tame it. Flame was born from Sora, and it had its taming symbol from the beginning. And Ciel got tamed when I wasn't paying attention. Sol is not tamed, so my energy level doesn't matter."

The four men just stared, and the room got very quiet. My father sipping tea was the only sound that echoed through it. I cast my father a sheepish glance to say, *Oops, I messed that up.*

My father cleared his throat. "Well, Ivy's a complicated person, but she's special."

"She sure is."

Er, Dad, what kind of explanation was that?! And Zinal, why did you accept it so readily? I looked at the two in surprise. I got the sense they had become very good friends. *How odd.*

"I understand *exactly* what you're saying, Druid."

"Right?"

"Yeah."

Seriously, what's going on? I strained my ears, but nothing made sense. I looked at Zinal, feeling something was off, and he smiled back at me.

"Sorry. Take good care of Nalgath's friends."

I nodded earnestly. Sora and Sol were confident in themselves, so I was confident in them, too.

"Now the real question is, how do we make those boys cooperate?" Fische asked.

"I'll put them to sleep with some medicine first. Don't worry, I'll knock them

out if I have to.”

Ah. Nalgath was, without a doubt, Zinal’s son.

Chapter 399:

What a Pitiful Man!

PERHAPS *strike while the iron is hot* was an investigator's motto. Barely two hours after the talk with Nalgath, his three friends had been knocked out with a sleep aid. And unless I was mistaken, the man on the right had a bit of red in his face... *It must be my imagination. Definitely.*

"Miss Ivy, are you sure you can do this? Please don't hurt yourself. If you can't do it, just say so. It's my fault they got like this in the first place." Nalgath gripped the hands of one of his friends. These were his comrades who had been to hell and back with him. Of course he wanted to save them all.

"I understand, sir, but Sora and Sol say they can do it, and I trust them. Sol, Sora, do your thing!"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Pefu!"

Sol bounced onto one of the men in bed. Meanwhile, Sora jiggled up and down and looked on. It was really hard to explain this to Nalgath when he looked so worried, but the two slimes were thoroughly enjoying themselves. My father also noticed this and gave the two a bewildered look. Zinal and his party were away, gathering information on the village. They were worried they might fall under the summoning circle's spell again, even though Sora and Sol had said they were safe.

"Hey, Dad, I think Sora and Sol might know a thing or two about summoning circles."

"I'm sure they do."

"I was thinking the same thing," Nalgath said. "Do you think all slimes know about them?"

My father and I fell silent. To be honest, I was sure Sol and Sora were very different from ordinary slimes. The only similarity was the fact that they

disposed of trash. But then again, I wasn't sure we could say they even had *that* in common with ordinary slimes, since they digested both organic and inorganic matter.

"I'm not sure. Sol and Sora are both special."

"Is it a rare slime thing, then?"

"It's probably even more than that," my father said. I nodded in agreement.

"Do they have such a close relationship with you *because* they're rare slimes, Miss Ivy? I've seen many slimes in Hataka, but I've never, ever seen any of them snuggle up to their tamers."

"That's because they haven't forged a relationship with their tamers," I said.

Nalgath looked surprised to hear that. "Huh?! Is that so..."

"Yes, sir."

"You know, that reminds me of a tamer my father introduced me to when I was a little boy. That tamer had a very different aura than the ones in Hataka."

I gave Nalgath a discreet stare. He was talking about his father, but I didn't sense any animosity from him. Maybe it really was the sight of his father crying that had changed their relationship?

"Um, Miss Ivy..."

"Yes?"

Nalgath looked at his own hands and frowned critically. It seemed like he wanted to ask a question.

"What is it?" my father asked.

I saw Nalgath's lips tighten in determination. Then he looked at us both and said, "My father...what do you think of him?"

He looked so grim I was worried what he was going to ask. But it's just about Zinal...

"Well...he's hard to read. It's difficult to tell what he's thinking. And he loves teasing people. You'd better not show him your weakness, or he'll take advantage of it. Also...he's capable of doing things most people would consider

cruel.”

“Ivy...what makes you think that?” my father asked.

“Huh? Doesn’t he come off that way?”

“I guess so...” he conceded.

An investigator’s job must be grimmer than even I could imagine. People’s fates lay in their hands.

“I thought so...” Nalgath’s eyes darkened a little.

“But in spite of all that, he cares deeply for his friends and family, and he loves you, Mr. Nalgath.”

“What?!”

“But his work forces him to stay away from you sometimes. Oh, also, his pride as a father gets in the way. It hardens his heart and makes him speak clumsily.”

The two stared silently in reply.

“He’s also a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to work and family, so his standards are a little too high and he sabotages himself sometimes... Oh, how should I put it... He’s a pitiful man?”

“Er...a pitiful man?”

“Yes, that’s right. If I had to describe Mr. Zinal in one word, it wouldn’t be clumsy. It would be pitiful.”

Yes, I thought that word fit him perfectly. I got the sense from him that he felt a heavy weight of responsibility with his work. I also felt like it had strained his relationship with his son and although he wanted to do something about it, his pride as a father and as an investigator kept getting in the way. I wished Zinal would just take it easier, but I suppose that’s just how he was.

“You sure have a good eye for people, Ivy.”

That’s how I survived. I could only keep out of trouble if I stayed away from threatening people. It was the most important thing of all to me, and yet I got involved with a lot of trouble anyway. And recently, I even started feeling like there was a reason why I shouldn’t just run away. Come to think of it, Nalgath

sure has been awfully quiet.

“Mr. Nalgath?”

I looked over at Nalgath, sitting next to his sleeping friends. For some reason, his shoulders were shaking. Had I said something that upset him?

“Pfft! Hee hee hee!”

He’s laughing?

“My father...*pitiful*... Ha ha ha ha!”

I guess I said something funny. He was hunched over in his chair, holding his belly. *Was it really that ridiculous?*

“You’re the first person to ever describe my father that way.”

“Really? What do you think, Dad?”

“Hmmm... I got a similar vibe from him.”

I thought so. My father and I do tend to see things similarly.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah...”

“I think Mr. Garitt and Mr. Fische feel the same way, too. They might have even harsher things to say.” *I mean, this is Garitt and Fische we’re talking about.*

Nalgath heaved a long sigh. Sol had freed one of his friends from the spell and had now swallowed the second one’s head. Sora enveloped the first friend and began to heal his magic wounds. Everything was going well. *What a relief.*

“There was this elite adventurer who used to be friends with me, and I looked up to him completely. But for some reason, he was stripped of his title. He fell further and further into ruin after that. And I asked my father to help him, but he refused to lift a finger. In fact, he pushed my friend away. And I couldn’t forgive him for that. My friend left town, and after a while, I heard rumors that my father had been involved in stripping him of his title. When I confronted him about it, he said the rumors were true. He left town right after that.”

“Do you know what Zinal does for a living?” my father asked.

“I didn’t know at the time, but now I think I do.”

“Ah.”

A strange silence filled the room.

“Pefu!”

We looked over just in time to see Sol swallow the third person’s head. It was successfully absorbing all the magic energy. Sora was still working on the first person; it really did take quite a long time.

“It sure takes a while to heal them, doesn’t it?” my father remarked. “I noticed it with Nalgath, too.”

I nodded in agreement, then said, “Oh, wait a minute. Hey, Dad?”

“What’s up?”

“We should heal the guild master next, then the captain.”

We needed to get Hataka’s top dogs as our allies first. Otherwise, Zinal and his party wouldn’t be able to make any moves. And from what we’d heard, the guild master was almost certainly under a spell, so he was our top priority. Our other problem was the sick head watchman.

“Hm? He’s sick?” I muttered to myself. *Wait a minute, isn’t that Flame’s specialty? Flame’s potions can cure any illness.* “Maybe Flame’s potions can help him? It’s at least worth a try, right...?”

“Miss Ivy?”

“Hm? Is something wrong, sir?”

Nalgath was looking at me worriedly. My eyes darted over to my slimes, afraid something was wrong with them.

“Oh! I see Sora’s on the second one now.”

Sora had just enveloped the second adventurer, and my father was examining the first one.

“How’s he looking, Dad? Is he gonna be okay?”

“As far as I can tell... But we won’t know for sure until he wakes up. How

much sleeping medicine did you give them?”

My father’s words made me feel a little better for the time being. I decided we’d just have to wait for the medicine to wear off.

“Mr. Garitt said I didn’t need to knock them out for long, so I gave them a three-hour dose.”

“Okay.”

In other words, we would be able to tell how everyone was doing in another two hours.

“The only issue is that the first person you healed—Piarre—isn’t too easily affected by drugs, so it’s hard to figure out when he’ll wake up.”

So that means Piarre could wake at any moment. Gee, now I feel kinda nervous...

Chapter 400: Is He Being Devoured?

“**A**_{GH}!”

When I heard the scream, I paused mid-chomp on my snack and darted my eyes toward its source. Piarre was awake, looking at his companion inside of Sora and screaming. That meant the sleeping medicine had worn off quicker than we’d expected. Before Nalgath could get a word out, Piarre jumped at his friend in the next bed.

“Wha...?!”

“Stay calm, Piarre!”

Nalgath caught the charging Piarre, taking all the momentum of his weight into his arms. Now held completely still, Piarre let out a muffled yelp. My father and I decided to look on without saying anything. I couldn’t quite tell what had even happened. I chomped on the food stuffed in my cheeks. *Gee, this pastry is a bit tough.*

“Ah, now I get it, Ivy. Look at his hand.”

I looked where my father was pointing and saw a tiny knife in Piarre’s right hand. It had already been unsheathed. *Now I get it. He was trying to attack Sora.*

“Nalgath, what is going on?!”

“Piarre, just calm down and listen to me!” Nalgath’s voice boomed through the room. For a while, the only sound that could be heard was their heavy breathing.

“Okay, I promise I won’t go crazy. Just let me go.”

Nalgath showed no sign of letting go, and Piarre finally made peace with that.

“Listen to me. Don’t you dare stop Sora.”

“Sora?”

“The slime.”

“...Okay.” Piarre nodded meekly, pinned in Nalgath’s arms. Nalgath heaved a relieved sigh and gave Piarre’s shoulders two firm slaps before letting him go.

“Sorry, I grabbed you pretty hard there. You okay?”

“Yeah...just tell me one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Juggy... The slime isn’t eating him, is it?”

Juggy? I followed Piarre’s gaze to see that Sora was healing the last person. Apparently, his name was Juggy.

“He’s not being eaten, he’s being healed. I’ll explain everything, just drop the knife.”

I looked at Piarre’s hand and saw he was still gripping the knife. He didn’t feel safe yet. Then I turned to Sora...and to the untrained eye, it definitely did look like the slime was feeding on the man. If somebody woke to see one of his comrades like that, it was only natural he would try to save them. *Nalgath, thanks for noticing.*

“Um, and you are...?”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Druid, and this is my daughter Ivy.”

“Nice to meet you. And these are Ciel, Flame, and Sol. The slime who’s swallowing Juggy at the moment is Sora.”

A father and daughter were leisurely sipping tea at a table in Nalgath’s room while one of his friends was being devoured by a slime two beds over. I wonder what the scene looked like from Piarre’s point of view?

“Piarre, these people saved our lives.”

“What do you mean?”

Nalgath began to explain, so I decided to let him handle it and reached for another snack. Garitt had left them for us, and with so many varieties and flavors to choose from, it was a real joy.

“This one’s a bit on the sweet side,” my father said.

“Which one’s that?”

“The yellow one. Here, say ahh.”

My father held out the sweet yellow pastry for me and I took a bite. An intense sweetness filled my mouth. I swallowed it whole and gulped down some tea.

“Dad, this one’s a little *too* sweet.”

More than a little, actually...

“Really?”

“Are you sure you aren’t tired?”

“Ahh, yeah, I’ve been running around a lot the past few days. I haven’t slept much, even when I was in bed.”

It really was nerve-racking just walking around town when we didn’t know where the summoning circle was. And we had no clue who the mastermind was, either.

“Excuse me...” Piarre meandered over to us and bowed. “Please forgive me for being so rude earlier. Thank you so much for saving us.”

Nalgath’s little talk probably helped him notice all the inconsistencies in the last one and a half years of his life. Thank goodness.

“Does anything hurt?” I asked.

“I feel fine, thanks. You really have tamed quite the extraordinary group of slimes. Their powers are one thing, but I’ve never seen such a clear one or such a black one before. And this is the first time I’ve ever seen a slime with patterned skin, to boot!”

My slimes’ appearances were indeed unique. Even my father’s mentor, who knew quite a lot, had said they were rare, so they must have been quite uncommon. The patterned skin was that of an adandara, but of course Piarre wouldn’t have known that.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Looks like they’re all done now. Sora bounced away from Juggy’s bed.

“Thanks, Sora. You too, Sol.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

Sora and Sol jiggled proudly. As the relief of all Nalgath’s friends being saved washed over me, a sluggishness consumed my entire body. I hadn’t been doing anything, but I guess I was mentally exhausted.

“You okay?” my father asked.

“Yeah, I’m all right.”

He stroked my hair in concern, which only made me sleepier, of course.

“You can go to sleep if you want to,” my father said.

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

Bonnnng.

The sound of Nalgath’s doorbell echoed through the room. Nalgath put his hand on the sword at his hip and went to answer it. Piarre gripped his knife, too. Tension filled the air in the room.

“We’re coming in. It’s just my father and his party.”

When Nalgath returned, Piarre muttered in disbelief, “Your father...? Huh?”

“Oh! Um...don’t worry about it.”

“Um, but it’s your father, Nalgath. What the hell happened?!”

Huh? I thought Nalgath filled him in. Why doesn’t he know about Zinal? As I sat there in confusion, I heard my father snickering beside me. “What is it?”

“Nalgath was probably too shy to tell Piarre about his father.”

Ohh, now that makes sense. That must mean Nalgath’s friends know about his relationship with his father.

Piarre teased Nalgath for quite a while afterward. Just when he started to lose his temper, his other two friends woke up. One of them was Juggy, and the other was... *Who was the other one?*

“Where’s Zinal’s party?” my father asked Nalgath once his friends had finally

settled down. Nalgath shot him a bitter look. I even heard him mutter, “You should’ve stopped them.” But my father just shrugged his shoulders.

Nalgath sighed, “They’re all on the first floor, waiting for us to come down.”

“Okay. Ivy and I will go down ahead of you. Come down after you explain everything to your friends.” And with that, my father put Sora on his head and picked up Ciel in his arm. I quickly grabbed Sol and Flame in turn, and with a light bow to Nalgath’s freshly woken and confused friends, we scurried downstairs.

This was the house of Nalgath’s party, which was called Cobalt. It was about as big as my father’s old house that he sold. The room they were in was normally used for storing magic items, but Nalgath had quickly moved out the items and set up three cots in case something went wrong and he needed to act in a hurry.

“Thanks for everything, you two. And thank you, Sora and Sol.”

We came down the stairs to find a tired-looking trio sitting on the sofa. They looked right at home, even though this wasn’t their house. Were they shameless? Impudent? Which it was, I don’t know.

“Something wrong?”

“Er, no, sir. Anyway, did you gentlemen get any leads?” I asked.

The three shook their heads. “I thought we’d be able to find something now that we’re free from the spell, but it was no use. We haven’t come up with a single thing that could lead us to the mastermind.”

Maybe our theory was right and the mastermind is no longer in Hataka...

“Any leads on the summoning circle?” my father asked.

“We hit a dead end there, too. We don’t have the faintest clue where it is.”

Zinal’s party and my father heaved a collective sigh. Immediately after, we heard a ruckus upstairs. As we sat there, listening, we could tell Nalgath’s party members were making fun of him. I wondered if everything was okay, but then I heard them saying “What a relief” and “I’m so happy.”

“It sounds like Nalgath found himself some good companions.”

“He sure did. I’m happy for him,” Zinal smiled.

Chapter 401:

What's Our Next Move?

“SO, WHAT IN THE WORLD do we even do next?” my father asked Zinal’s and Nalgath’s parties.

The situation was bad. Very bad. According to Zephyr’s investigation, just about all the adventurers in Hataka were under the spell. And the summoning circle—the source of all the problems—had yet to be located. Since the guild master was under the spell, he wouldn’t be any help. In fact, he might be our enemy. The captain of the village watch was sick in bed at home, and the investigation had revealed that his second-in-command was also under the spell.

“Quite an interesting puzzle,” I agreed, feeling a little awestruck. When you’re surrounded by enemies, you can’t even lift a finger. We were, as they say, bogged down.

“Now’s no time to be impressed, but I do agree it’s a perfect predicament.” The last member of Cobalt whose name I hadn’t known earlier was called Arly. He was the oldest at thirty years old, and his long bright-red hair was his distinguishing feature.

“Should we start by splitting into two groups and gathering intel?” Fische suggested. Everyone nodded in agreement. We definitely didn’t have enough information, and that reminded me...

“So, um, we know that the adventurers are all under the spell, but what about the villagers?”

Monsters were just outside their village, yet there was no tension among them. Would it be safe to assume they were all under the spell, too?

“We don’t know that. Villagers tend to react less to news and more to the behavior of the adventurers around them. They probably don’t think they’re in danger simply because the adventurers are acting completely normal.”

So that's why. I guess the villagers would assume the adventurers had everything under control if they were acting confident. That's right, the townsfolk were a little nervous when the survey team came back, and they were all wondering what was going to happen next. So I guess when they saw that the adventurers just went back to life as usual, they thought everything was safe. But wait, the gatekeepers immediately amped up security when the adventurers were attacked. If they were under the spell, wouldn't they have left the village border alone?

"Are the gatekeepers under the spell?" I asked.

"The gatekeepers? You mean because of the way they behaved after the adventurers were attacked?" It looked like Garitt remembered the day we met.

"Yes, sir. I just figured they would have left the border alone if they were under the spell."

"They could have just been following procedure, but you're right, we should look into it." Zinal seemed to remember it, too.

Thank goodness I have them both on my side now.

"Did anyone here spot anything else worth checking?" Fische asked the group.

"I did notice something, but we can't look into it the way things are right now." Nalgath sighed. The other members of Cobalt nodded grimly.

"Our most important question of all is: Where is the summoning circle?" Fische said.

Everyone nodded. Unless we found the source of the problem, even if we freed everyone from the spell, they might fall under it again. But where could it be? Zephyr had found out that just about all the adventurers were under the spell, so the places where they usually gathered were key. The places adventurers always went were the front gate, Main Street, and...the inn? But there was also the plaza, so that wouldn't cover everyone. So maybe there were summoning circles at the plaza *and* at the inn? But surely somebody would notice them...

Come to think of it, why were the children in the tent next door the only

people in the plaza not under the spell? Do I remember anything that would help me? I heard them say a lot of things, but...oh, what could it be, I could have sworn I heard them say something... Oh! Yeah, while we were eating breakfast, they asked their father if they could come to the adventurer guild with him. But for some reason, their parents wouldn't agree to it. Then after a while, they sulkily stayed behind to hold down the fort while their parents left. If this was an example of people under the spell versus people not under it, wouldn't that mean the source of our problem is at the adventurer guild? But I'm sure Zephyr would have looked into that.

"What is it, Ivy? If you've thought of something, just tell us," Zinal said grimly.

I didn't know what would be our breakthrough and what wouldn't, so I figured I might as well say it. "Have you checked out the adventurer guild, sir?"

"The adventurer guild? That was the first place we looked. It was the most suspicious to all of us, you see. But we didn't find anything. What made you think the adventurer guild was a possibility, Ivy?" Zinal had a strange edge in his voice. I hoped I hadn't offended him, but I couldn't take back what I said, so I decided to tell them about the children in the plaza.

"Ivy's story definitely holds a clue if the parents were under the spell and their children weren't." I was relieved when Arly agreed with me.

"But we've already searched inside the adventurer guild," Zinal said, giving Garitt a look for backup. Garitt nodded in agreement.

"Surely you didn't give it a thorough search, though?" Nalgath asked.

"Well, I guess not. We used a magic item, but those things do have their limitations," Garitt agreed.

Wow, so they have magic items that can detect summoning circles? I didn't know that.

"I don't think we'd fare any better," Juggy said.

So not even Hataka's elite adventurers could find the summoning circle. Hmmm, I guess we just have to get someone powerful on our side. The guild master? No, maybe the sick captain would work out better for us. I heard he's at home trying to get better.

“Maybe we should all storm the captain’s house,” my father suggested.

Everyone other than me looked startled.

“I was thinking the same thing, Dad. He’d be easier than the guild master.”

“Yeah, and his house is far away from the village center.”

“Is it?”

“I looked into it already.”

“Smart man!”

If his house was far from the village center, it would be easy to breach. Even if somebody else was home, Zinal and his party could hold them off somehow. Then, while we had our window of opportunity, we’d force him to take one of Flame’s potions. The only concern was that we didn’t know what exactly his illness was. *I just hope Flame’s potion can cure him...*

“Wait just a minute! Why are we going that direction?”

My father and I gave the dissenter a curious look.

“Why? Because it will be easier for us to make a move if we have someone powerful on our side. Am I wrong?” My dad’s tone was matter of fact, but everyone sighed heavily. Was there a problem with his idea?

“Well, that is true, but the captain is sick. He’s bedridden at home. It’s a very serious illness!” Juggy said angrily.

“We know, but that’s not a problem,” my father said. “We can just cure his illness.”

For some reason, all seven men gasped and made the most amusing expressions. My father and I exchanged confused looks.

“Why are you so shocked?” my father frowned. “He can’t move around with us if he’s sick.”

“Um, were you listening? He’s *sick*. The doctor even said nothing can be done for him!” Juggy yelled, jumping out of his chair. We’d really made him mad...but why? If the captain was sick, all he needed was one of Flame’s...

“Oh!” my father and I both gasped.

Did we forget to tell them about Flame? Oh no... We didn't tell them? I don't remember. But judging by their reactions, I guess we didn't.

"Um, so you see, sir, there's a little something we forgot to tell you."

"Uh-oh... I'm almost scared to hear what it is." Piarre, one of our newest contract-signers from a little while ago, was visibly on edge.

"But we've never told you anything scary before, sir..."

What was he so afraid of?

"Ha ha ha ha..."

Aaand now he's laughing tiredly back at me. Well, whatever. I guess I'd better tell them about Flame.

"Oh, Flame, come here a sec."

At the sound of my voice, Flame stopped jumping around the house and came bouncing over to me. I picked it up and rested it in the palm of my hand.

"This slime can make disease-curing potions, so let's try one out on your captain of the watch."

"Ugh, I knew it..." With a heavy sigh, Piarre clutched his head in his hands.

Chapter 402: Flame's Potion

“OKAY...SO YOU'RE SAYING you want to test out Flame's potion on him?”

“Yes, sir.”



For some reason, Zinal's and Nalgath's parties looked exhausted after I told them about Flame. *Flame's potions cure fatigue, too, don't they? Maybe I should test that out on them later.*

"Sorry we just ran our mouths off there without explaining everything first. Anyway, I think storming the captain's house is our best bet; what about you?" my father asked.

Zinal's party gave him bitter stares in reply.

"Please, just slow down." Garitt stopped my father with a frustrated look in his eyes. Maybe storming the house was a bad idea? With a sigh, he continued, "I figured you two had a few secrets, but why does every new thing you tell us get more dangerous than the last?!"

"Er...yes, I understand your frustration, sir." It would be incredibly dangerous if the world found out what Flame and Sora could do. "Thank goodness you folks were the ones we met."

"Oh, you're so stinking cute... Wait, no, Ivy! Listen to me, you must *never* trust anyone so easily. Especially me—you only met me today! Don't you get it? If you trust strangers, you could put yourself in serious danger!" Piarre poked my forehead for emphasis. I smiled, once again glad that he was the one I met, but that only made him angrier.

"Ivy, I'm serious! Be more cautious," Nalgath said. "You're making us all worried. Mr. Druid, please, put your foot down."

"Well, I decided you kids were safe, and Sora said you weren't a threat, either," my father answered.

But everyone just shook their heads.

"Please, don't tell us anything else. I have a feeling we'll just hear more dangerous information."

Dangerous information? I scrutinized everyone, curious about that choice of words, but they just chuckled at me.

"Anyway, I want to make something clear first." Arly's serious tone made all eyes gather on him. "The potion that will cure the captain, how much does it

cost?”

How much does it cost? “It’s free, sir.”

“...Free?”

Arly, that’s quite a scary look in your eye!

“Ivy, listen to me,” Arly growled.

“Yes, sir?” My back shot up straight. I stole a glance at my father and saw he was trying not to laugh. Had I said something wrong?

“The head watchman is terribly sick. No potion has been able to cure him.”

Oh dear. Will Flame’s potion not work, then? Now I’m getting anxious... “If Flame’s potion doesn’t cure him, then I’m sorry.”

“No, that’s not the issue here—why is it free? Most people would ask for money. If you could cure the captain, you’d be well within your rights to seize his assets.”

Seize his assets? “Oh, no no no, why would we do that? The idea terrifies me.”

“But that’s the norm.”

It’s the norm? Ah, come to think of it, Sora’s potions and Flame’s magic stones were worth gold plates. And we could have gotten even more money for them. But we don’t even know if Flame’s potion will work yet. You could almost call it an experimental drug.

“Well, we’re fine with providing Flame’s potion free of charge—we want to find out how well it works. You okay with that, Dad?”

“You should do whatever you feel is best, Ivy.”

“Mr. Druid...” Arly sighed. “Fine, we’ll let you provide the potion for free then.” He sure was a stickler for the rules. “Ivy...you really are such a good girl. Mr. Druid, can I have her?”

“Drop dead.”

Wh-what’s going on? Why are Arly and my father suddenly at each other’s throats? And why are my father’s eyes so menacing...?

“Let’s get back on topic,” Garitt snapped.

My father’s death glare left Arly.

You know, “can I have her?” was a weird way to phrase it anyway. I’m not a thing.

“Anyway, the team going to the captain’s house will be Nalgath’s party, Druid, and Ivy. Nalgath, protect Ivy with your life.”

“Will do.”

Protect me? Well, yeah, I am pretty weak. “Thank you, sir.” I bowed at Garitt, and he gave my head a soft pat.

“No, Ivy, *you* deserve all the gratitude, not us.”

Really?

“Wait a minute. Druid, Ivy, you aren’t registered with the adventurer guild, are you?”

“We aren’t. What about it?”

Fische looked at me and my father. “If the summoning circle is at Hataka’s adventurer guild, then why did you two fall under its spell? Have you ever been to the adventurer guild?”

You know...I’m not sure we have?

“We haven’t. We’ve only been to the merchant guild.”

“Maybe we should investigate the merchant one again, then.”

Zinal and his party were thinking back on the places they had visited before. Nalgath and his colleagues were getting ready to go to the head watchman’s house.

“Sure is quiet...” I remarked.

My father and I were sipping tea and watching everyone else while the slimes bounced around the house in the background.

“Sure is. If Flame’s potion works, it’ll be mission accomplished. Then what?

The guild master?”

“Wouldn’t the head watchman’s second-in-command be easier? We could just have the head watchman bring him to us.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point.”

Piarre and his party were ready now. They approached us with slightly wary looks on their faces. “Watching the two of you makes me feel weak in the knees.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah...”

Piarre sat in the chair beside me. He looked around the room and laughed at something. I followed his gaze to see Zinal and Nalgath having a face-to-face conversation.

“Thanks for giving Nalgath the push he needed,” Piarre said.

I gave him a curious look. I didn’t remember doing anything like that.

“He’s always had a chip on his shoulder. He respects the hell out of Zinal, but he’d never admit it.” Piarre looked quite happy, and Nalgath and Zinal also had reserved but visible smiles on their faces. They were probably having a fun chat.

“By the way, where’s that potion? Do you have it with you?”

Oh, right! We have to go back to our tent in the plaza to fetch it. But it’s a bit far from Cobalt’s party headquarters, and they said the captain’s house is in the opposite direction from the plaza. Wait a minute, I remember seeing an empty bottle earlier...

“Hey, Flame? I have a little request for you.”

“Teryu?”

“I need one of your potions to cure a serious illness. Could you make me one right now?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Do you have an empty bottle, sir? Also, if you have any red or blue potions you were going to throw out, I’d like those, too, please.”

“Huh?! It’s going to make the potion right now?”

“Piarre, potions and a bottle.”

Piarre was muttering under his breath, so it was difficult to hear him.

“Ahh, right, right. I’ll go get them. How many empty bottles do you need?”

“Just one is fine, sir.”

Now we can go straight to the captain’s house from here.

“Here you go. What are you going to do with the discolored potions?”

I got eleven discolored red potions from Piarre. He had a lot more than I’d anticipated.

“I’m going to feed them to Flame.”

I lined the potions up in front of the red slime, and it got right to eating them.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Sora had wandered over to us, too, so I placed the nine blue potions I’d received in front of it.

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora sang merrily, getting right to work on the potions.

Everything’s been so hectic, we haven’t had a chance to go to the dump. Well, the gate’s closed, so we wouldn’t have been able to go anyway. We still have some potions to spare, but I really want to go get some more soon. We need magic items for Sol as well.

“Wow, I’ve never seen a slime eat the bottles, too.”

Nalgath, Arly, and Juggy, finished with their packing, had now joined Piarre in staring at Sora and Flame.

“Teryu.”

At Flame’s signal, I set the empty bottle in front of it. Then it swallowed the bottle whole and closed its eyes. Meanwhile, Sora finished eating and went back to play with Ciel and Sol.

“Whoa!!!” everyone gasped as Flame produced a sparkling red potion. It seemed especially sparkly this time. Was it just my imagination?

“Thanks, Flame. Will this cure the head watchman?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.” Flame sounded confident, so I was sure everything would be okay.

“Okay, since you gentlemen are all ready now, let’s make our way to the captain’s house.”

Everything was still quite unsettled, so our top priority was getting the captain of the watch on our side.

Chapter 403:

His Son!

NALGATH'S PARTY led us to the captain's home.

"Does the captain have any family in the house with him?" I asked.

"He has family, but he lives alone," Juggy said, glancing back as he spoke. I turned and looked behind me out of curiosity, but all I saw were Arly and Piarre. Nothing out of the ordinary. I gave Juggy an inquisitive look, and he smiled. "Oh, yeah, he does have two nurses with him right now, though."

Nurses, huh? So first we'll need to get them away from the captain.

"Nalgath, how are we going to get the nurses away from him?"

"Let's split into two groups once we get to his house. Arly and I will distract the nurses while you give him the potion."

Yeah, it won't take long for us to do that, so we won't rouse suspicion.

"What is the captain like? Think he'll hear us out?" my father asked.

Arly frowned. Noticing this, Juggy smiled.

"What is it, sir? Is there a problem?"

"Arly is the captain's son."

"What?!" my father and I gasped and turned to Arly, who looked very upset. Did they not get along?

"So...what's he like?" my father asked again.

Nalgath chuckled. "He's a funny guy. The way he messes with people is a little hard to put up with at times, though."

So maybe he's like my father's mentor? I looked at my father, who had a slightly sour look on his face. He was probably thinking the same thing. Our eyes met, and he sighed.

"Is something wrong?"

“No, it’s just that I know somebody who makes messing with people a way of life.”

Hey, I don’t think he’s that horrible! I looked at my dad in shock. His eyes were earnest. *Oh dear, Mr. Mentor, you really do need to reel it in.*

“Yeah, every town and village has at least a dozen guys like that.”

Wow, that many? I think one man like my father’s mentor is more than enough for the world.

“The house is over there.”

I wonder if we’ll be able to handle the nurses? If they’re our enemies, they might figure out what we’re trying to do.

“Hey, Dad, I’m just gonna ask Sora to judge the nurses for us.”

“Ah, good idea. Please do.”

“What’s she talking about, sir?” Piarre cut into our conversation with a bewildered look in his eyes.

“Sora has the ability to judge whether or not a person is safe for me, so I’m going to have it do that with the nurses. But in this case, Sora will tell us if they’re our enemies.”

“Oh...wow.”

“Here you go, Sora.”

I gave my slime bag a gentle pat and felt a faint jiggle in reply.

“We’re about to meet with the nurses looking after the captain of Hataka’s village watch. If they’re our enemies, give us a jiggle to let me know.”

The jiggling got a little more intense. I took my hand off of the bag and nodded at Piarre.

“Ha ha ha! Well, I’m getting even more doubtful about all this, but I’ll just concentrate on saving the captain first.”

“Huh?!”

“It’s nothing.”

“Whether the answers come a little at a time or all at once, I always regret asking her things.”

“Me, too. It all seems normal to her, but she has no idea just how impossible it all is. Argh... Let’s just focus on curing the captain first. Distract those nurses good for us.”

“I will.”

Piarre and Nalgath were whispering back and forth. I heard the word “captain,” so I assumed they were going over the battle plan. Then I wanted to be included! *Ah, they just finished. Wait a minute, was that a sigh? Is the captain so strong that we need to come up with an extra strategy to overpower him?*

“Is the captain really that hard to deal with, sir?” I asked.

“Heh?”

“Huh?”

“Er, weren’t you talking about the captain just now? I couldn’t hear you very well, but I heard you say *captain*, so I assumed...”

I looked from Nalgath to Piarre. For some reason, they both gave my head a pat.

“Don’t worry. If Arly’s there, the captain will definitely go after him first.”

“That’s for sure. Arly is the captain’s biggest target, after all. He told us once that Arly’s reactions are so cute he just can’t stop teasing him. If he had him around at home, that would probably spare everyone else his abuse.”

Err...but wouldn’t that be terrible for Arly? I sneaked closer to get a look at him. *Eeek, what an expression. He has the same look my father gets whenever his mentor torments him.* I tactfully looked away. It seemed the poor man had suffered quite a lot.

“Is everyone okay?” Nalgath asked us all as we stood in front of the captain’s house. Our eyes met, so I nodded, and he gave my head a pat.

Nalgath knocked at the door. “Good afternoon.”

“Coming!” came a shrill voice from inside the house. It sounded like a middle-aged woman.

“Oh, why hello there, Nalgath and Arly. And, um, who might you be?”

The nurse looked happy to see Arly, but when she saw me and my father, she looked to Nalgath for an explanation.

“Pardon my manners. I am Druid. I’m doing some work with Nalgath’s party at the moment. And this is my daughter Ivy.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” I bowed at the nurse, then got a good look at her. She was in her late forties, but she was slender and very pretty.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Melisa.”

Even after she properly introduced herself, the slime bag didn’t budge a bit. That meant Sora had decided she was not an enemy.

“Hello, Melisa. Pardon me for asking, but isn’t there another nurse with you? We’d like to meet them, too, if we can.”

“Yes, I’ll just fetch her now. Eche? Could you come here for a moment?”

“Just a minute...”

I heard another woman’s voice from inside the house. Judging from the tone of her voice, she was about the same age as Melisa. After a while, Eche emerged. She was a little younger and stouter than Melisa.

“Oh, why, Arly, so good to see you again! So glad you’re here.” Eche looked happy to see Arly, who looked uncomfortable while Nalgath smiled.

“This is Mr. Druid and his daughter Miss Ivy. He’s doing some work with Arly and his party right now.”

“It’s so good to meet you. I do hope you’re getting along well with our Arly. He can be a bit stubborn, but he’s a good boy.”

Arly put a hand on his forehead when he heard this. Based on the redness in his ears, he seemed embarrassed. As I watched everyone, I put my hand on the bag. And just like with Melisa, the bag didn’t even twitch.

“Ms. Melisa, Ms. Eche, it is a pleasure to meet you both.” I made a point to

say both of their names so the team could hear them. We had agreed that this would be the signal if they were both safe, and I could sense the relief in the air around me.

“Ms. Melisa, Ms. Eche, do pardon me, but we need to have a word with you. Do you have a minute?” Nalgath approached them with a grave look in his eyes. The nurses sensed it was serious, so they escorted Nalgath and Arly into the next room. Meanwhile, Piarre and Juggy said they wanted to visit with the captain, so they went a different way. I felt a little conflicted tricking the nurses like this, but we would just have to explain everything afterward and hope they forgave us.

“This is the place.” Piarre opened the door to the room where the captain was resting in bed. It was filled with the stench of disinfectant and medicine, and the table was covered with potions.

“How horrible...” Juggy muttered.

I looked over to the captain’s bed and saw a frail man asleep in it. From his rough skin and dry hair, I would have assumed he was dead at first glance. I sighed softly and pulled Flame’s potion out of my bag. I was about to hand it to my father when Sora’s bag began to rustle.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Sora?” I nervously opened the bag, and Flame shot out of it, right onto the captain’s bed. Then it swallowed the captain whole.

Um...what about the potion?

Chapter 404: False Rumors

“**E**R...WHAT SHOULD WE DO?” Piarre looked at my father and me in bewilderment.

“Flame is curing him, so we can’t move him,” my father explained.

Piarre nodded soberly and walked over to the bed to watch Flame cure the captain. Flame’s *shuwaaa-shuwaaa* noises echoed through the room. Juggy came out of his bewildered daze and paced around the bed, checking on the captain. I watched the two in amusement; it was a funny sight to see.

“Hey, Ivy, do you remember that rumor?”

“What rumor?”

I looked at my father and saw a grim crease between his brows. He seemed puzzled about something. *Rumor...he must mean one of the rumors that caught our interest. But which one?*

“You know, the one about the guild master and captain fighting? Don’t you remember?”

“Oh! I do remember. Wait...” I looked at the captain, enveloped inside Flame. He didn’t look like the sort of man who was healthy enough to get out of bed to fight with anybody, but that was a recent rumor. It didn’t make sense.

“The captain and the guild master are fighting? When did you hear people saying that?” Juggy asked us, looking worriedly at the captain.

“We heard it a little while ago when we were listening for rumors in the village.”

“So it’s pretty recent, then?”

“Yeah.”

Juggy frowned at the ceiling, and Piarre also fell into thought.

“That had to be a false rumor somebody planted.”

But who would even believe such a fake rumor? I mean, the villagers all knew the captain was sick. *Wait...did they know?* If they did, there was no way those ladies would have been spreading that made-up rumor. *Whoa! So, do the villagers not know their captain of the watch is sick?*

“Um, do the villagers know that the captain is sick, sir?”

“Of course they know... Wait a minute.” Piarre seemed a little distraught from my question.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just don’t remember what happened after we talked about announcing the news to the public. Why don’t I remember it?” Piarre looked at Juggy, but he only shook his head in response. Apparently, neither of them had any memory of making the news public.

“Summoning circles tone down any feelings of apprehension or danger. It’s possible that the summoning circle got rid of any anxiety people felt over the captain’s illness by making them forget about it,” my father said.

Piarre held his head in his hands. “How terrifying. How could it make us forget something that happened?”

“I know...” Juggy’s complexion was no better than Piarre’s. But then who leaked the rumor that the guild master and captain were fighting? And why did they do it?

“Um, sir, if you did hear that the guild master and captain were fighting—knowing full well that the captain was sick—what would you do?”

Is somebody trying to tell them something? No, maybe I’m overthinking things.

“Well, first of all, we’d ignore it,” Juggy said.

“Ignore it, sir?” I was surprised that they would do nothing.

“If we heard the rumor many more times, we would have to look into it, though. First, we’d find the source of the rumor. Then we’d find out whether or not the captain and guild master really were fighting. And in this case, since the

captain is sick, we would immediately decide it was a false rumor.”

Now I get it. In that case, they’d only get more suspicious. A rumor like that would be easily proved false with just a minor investigation. And if they looked into the source of the rumor, they would surely find the culprit right away. Why would this person put themselves in so much danger just to spread a rumor? There must be something to it. Hm? Wait a minute. The adventurers in this village are all under a spell, and Zinal thinks the entire village watch is under it, too. So who would be able to check if a rumor was true under those conditions? Even if the same rumor came up again and again, wouldn’t they just leave it be?

“What’s up, Ivy? Got a theory about the rumor?” my father asked.

“I do. Mr. Juggy said they would look into a rumor if it came up more than once, but I was just thinking they probably wouldn’t do that if they were under the spell’s influence.”

“Oh, that’s right! The village watch *and* the adventurers were all under the spell, so they probably wouldn’t care about any of the rumors anyway.”

I knew it. So was our mastermind the one who spread that false rumor? Did they just throw around whatever stories they wanted, knowing full well that they wouldn’t be investigated? The rumor is recent, meaning our mastermind might still be in Hataka. But why did they spread this rumor? To plant the suggestion that the guild master and captain didn’t like each other? But I’ve heard that village and town leaders often butt heads, so it seems pointless...

I glanced at the captain in bed. He looked dead.

“Maybe they wanted to make people think the captain was feeling well?”

“Hm? Ivy, what are you talking about?”

“The reason why they spread that rumor. Maybe they didn’t want people to know he was on his deathbed, so they sent around a story that would imply he was perfectly healthy...”

It’s far-fetched, I know.

“Miss Ivy, do you think our mastermind is the one who spread the rumor?” Juggy asked.

I nodded. It just didn't seem like the sort of story somebody would spread for the fun of it. Nobody wanted to be on the village watch's radar.

But it just seemed too sloppy for the mastermind, spell or not. Wouldn't they know the villagers would feel something was wrong? Would our mastermind, after such an intricately executed scheme, really make a careless error like that?

"Once the captain is cured, we'll look into that rumor," Piarre promised.

When I thanked him politely, he chuckled. I responded with a curious look, and he gave my hair a rough tousling.

"Dang, your hair's a mess."

"And whose fault is that?!" I glared at Piarre as I smoothed down my hair, but he just smiled back at me. "Oh, *honestly*."

Knock, knock.

Everyone's eyes shot to the door. Then we looked at the captain and realized how much trouble we were in. We were only supposed to feed him a potion; they couldn't see him like this. *What do we do?* I looked at my father, then at Piarre and Juggy.

"Okay!" Juggy pumped his fist and went to open the door. *An explanation would have been nice...*

"Er, what should we do, sir?"

"Don't worry, Juggy's going to explain everything. Those nurses used to be adventurers, so they'll probably understand."

"They used to be adventurers?"

"Yes, and famous ones at that."

"Sorry, they caught us in our lie, and I couldn't hold them back."

The door burst open and Nalgath came into the room apologizing. Then came Arly, a tired look on his face, followed by Juggy, smiling sheepishly. And lastly, the two nurses came into the room with angelic smiles. They approached the bed to check on the captain.

"Can you cure the captain?" Melisa asked my father worriedly.

“We think so.”

“I see.”

Melisa reached out toward the captain...then her hand stopped midair and returned to its former position. She probably wanted to hold his hand but couldn't because Flame was surrounding his whole body.

“It's all my fault. I didn't know it was poison.”

Poison? Wait, so it's not an illness?

“What's going on?” Piarre asked Nalgath and Arly. Arly explained quietly that his father had received a heavy dose of poison.

“If Eche weren't around, the poison would have killed him,” Nalgath said. Piarre froze stiff as stone.

The captain was almost poisoned to death? Flame can cure illness, but can it cure poison? Won't that hurt it? Starting to feel worried, I moved closer to the captain's bed. “Flame, are you okay?”

Flame's body jiggled around the captain. I wanted to be supportive, but I also didn't want my slime to get hurt.

“Don't worry, Ivy, everything will be okay,” my father said, squeezing my hand. “Flame would never do anything to make you sad.” His reassuring words made my hand relax in his. “Ms. Melisa, Ms. Eche, please tell us everything you know.”

The two women nodded.

Chapter 405: Just How Far Did the Spell's Damage Reach?

“THE CAPTAIN WAS FOUND unconscious in his study. His workers carried him out and gave him a potion right away. He regained consciousness at once, but he collapsed again the next day, and things repeated like that for a whole week. We thought it was odd, so we took him to a doctor, but they couldn't diagnose him. Then we set him up to convalesce at home, and it was around that time that potions stopped working on him.”

“The potions stopped working?” Juggy sounded shocked.

“Yes, sir.” Melisa's face shook with pain, and Eche squeezed her hand. “Since they stopped working, we started giving him the medicine the doctor prescribed, but his condition only worsened. There were more and more days when he simply wouldn't wake up. It was too much for me to handle alone, emotionally and physically, so I had Eche come to help me. On the first day, she noticed there was poison mixed in the medicine, so we gave him a detox potion immediately, but...” Melisa sadly shook her head.

“What happened to the doctor who prescribed that medicine?”

“We looked for him right away, but he had gone missing. The vice-captain we sent to search for him also disappeared.”

Hm? The vice-captain is missing? Not under the spell? Oh, that's right, I did hear that the vice-captain's whereabouts were unknown. But...that's strange, isn't it? Does this village have two vice-captains, then? I've never heard of anything like that.

“Um, excuse me, ma'am, but does Hataka have two vice-captains?”

“Er, no? We only have one.” Melisa looked bewildered by my question. So there was only one vice-captain...

“But you seem to have a missing vice-captain and a vice-captain who's under

the summoning circle's spell, right?"

Melisa gave me a curious look in reply. Maybe I had misheard something.

"Oh! Right, I'm sorry, when the vice-captain went missing, we had her assistant fill in for her as sub-vice-captain," Nalgath explained. "The village watch would fall apart with its captain and its vice-captain both out of commission."

Now that made sense. *So there's a sub-vice-captain.* I'd gotten nervous, thinking there was something wrong there. *I really hope things don't get more complicated than they already are.*

"There's a sub-vice-captain? That's news to us!" Eche told Nalgath, and Melisa nodded in support. Nalgath frowned deeply at the sight of it.

"Don't tell me we forgot to announce that we had a sub for the vice-captain?"

"From the looks on Melisa's and Eche's faces, I think we did," Arly said. "We were called away to the forest to search for the missing vice-captain at the time, so we didn't know."

Nalgath clutched his head in his hands.

"But we were under the spell, too, weren't we?" a tired-sounding Piarre asked. "When we got back from our mission, we were calling the sub-vice-captain just plain 'vice-captain,' and we didn't even notice. It just felt normal, right?"

Juggy nodded. As I sipped the tea Melisa brewed, I lamented that things had indeed gotten more complicated. So this meant the sub-vice-captain was under the spell and the real vice-captain was still missing. That much was clear. But the village watch was leaving a lot of things secret that should have been made public, so was it safe to assume *that* was why the villagers didn't think anything was wrong with the rumor of the captain and guild master fighting?

"Magic just complicates everything, doesn't it?" Juggy said. "We still haven't even found the summoning circle that put everyone under a spell in the first place."

Nalgath nodded. Melisa and Eche cast worried glances at the party.

“When did all of this start, I wonder?” my father asked.

“When did what start?” Nalgath repeated.

“This whole problem. Did something happen before the spell started making the guild master act strangely?”

That would be over two years ago. The only people who would know were the adventurers and villagers of Hataka. I looked at Nalgath’s party, and their faces got more and more serious. Were they remembering something?

“I don’t remember,” Juggy said.

My father and I gasped in unison. *He doesn’t remember? But...why? Could it be... Is this like the time my father and I lost our memories because of a summoning circle?*

“I feel like parts of my memory are missing,” Piarre echoed.

“Was it because it happened two years ago?”

“No, something just doesn’t add up. I remember some things clearly...and haven’t any of you experienced short-term memory loss recently, too?”

“Yeah...good point.” The blood drained from Arly’s and Nalgath’s faces.

“Maybe your memories were erased,” my father said.

“Erased? Can summoning circles even do that?” Nalgath snapped. The others gave my father stern stares as well.

“Yeah, summoning circles can take away people’s memories. Ivy and I were rescued before the spell could seriously affect us, but parts of our memories were still erased.”

Everyone was looking at me, so I nodded to back him up.

“Wow... So there really are summoning circles like that.” Piarre’s words hung in the air, and everyone fell silent. Each of us was lost in our own thoughts. Melisa and Eche left the room to get some more tea and some snacks. They both looked much more exhausted than they’d been when we first came in.

Now that the room was silent again, we heard Flame’s *shuwaaa, shuwaaa* healing noises in a steady rhythm. I looked over at the captain’s bed and saw

that Flame's eyes were tightly shut. It probably hadn't finished curing him yet. I looked at the captain's face. I couldn't see it clearly, since it was surrounded by Flame's clear red slime, but he did look a bit healthier than the first time I saw him. It might have been an empty hope, though.

"It'll be okay."

I looked at my father and noticed he was also watching Flame.

"I know, but it sure is taking forever."

An hour had already passed since Flame had gotten to work. I had never seen a curing session take so long, so I couldn't help but worry. My father's hand rested on my head, its warmth spreading through me.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Excuse me, but a man who says he's Nalgath's father is here," Eche said.

A flustered Nalgath flew out of the room, which lightened up the heavy mood a little. I sighed quietly. I never handled tense silence well.

"Er, what's going on over there?" Zinal asked me as soon as he entered the room and saw what was happening in the captain's bed. Fische's head turned sideways in confusion.

"We were going to cure him with a potion, but Flame decided it was best to do this instead," my father explained. "Also, the nurses say potions stopped working on him."

Zinal looked surprised at the news. Nalgath dragged out some chairs. "This is going to take a while, so have a seat."

Sighing quietly, Zinal said, "We're all very confused ourselves, what with all the rumors we've picked up. It'd help us out a lot if we could get your opinions."

Eche followed Nalgath's lead and brought out more chairs. Once we were all in the room, we sat wherever we wanted.

"I'll tell you what we've learned first," Nalgath said. "So, it seems like we've all lost parts of our memory."

"What?!" Zinal's party looked over Nalgath and his comrades one by one.

“Are you sure?” Garitt asked.

Nalgath’s party nodded.

“Wow... I guess the memory loss wasn’t bad enough to affect our daily lives, or else we would have noticed something was strange. Just how much of your memories are missing, anyway?” Fische asked uncomfortably.

“I can’t remember what the guild master or the captain were like two years ago,” Nalgath said. “And even recently, there are some strange gaps in my memory. I’m not sure how far back it goes, though it seems like I can speak and go about my daily tasks just fine.”

Juggy nodded. “It’s been the same for me as well.”

Arly and Piarre echoed that it was the same for them. Something must have happened two years ago, and if their memories were erased, it had to have been something significant. But if their memories were erased, that had to mean they would never come back again. I knew that because my father’s and my missing memories still hadn’t returned.

Chapter 406:

A Moment of Respite

“TE! RYU, RYUUU.”

Oh, Flame must be finished healing the captain! I looked over and saw that Sora had now enveloped him.

“Huh?” Melisa froze stiff as a statue when she tried to approach the bed only to see Sora had swallowed the captain.

“What’s going on?” Garitt asked. I wished he hadn’t asked me, though. I had no idea.

“Erm, do you think the captain’s magic energy was wounded by the summoning circle?” Since Sora was healing him, that was the only explanation I could come up with. *Unless...* Nope, that was the only thing I could think of.

“You think so?”

“I’m probably right.”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. So, um, can I call you Flame? Thanks, Flame,” Fische said, giving Flame’s head a gentle pat.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu,” Flame sang happily, and Fische’s smile softened. Piarre, Juggy, and Arly each petted Flame’s head in turn after they saw that.

“Gee, this is so soothing...” Juggy said as he gave Flame’s head a pat. Piarre added, “I’m especially grateful for it now.” Zinal and his party nodded.

“It sure is comforting.” Garitt looked down at his lap. He was petting Ciel, who had chosen to curl up there for some reason. Meanwhile, Sol was napping on my father’s head.

“Flame, come sit on my lap,” Nalgath said, tapping his knee. Flame looked at him, then jumped onto Piarre’s lap. “Why? You just looked at me, right? Didn’t you, Flame?”

“Looks like I win.”

Nalgath glared at Piarre. The dark cloud of gloom that was hanging in the room only a couple of minutes ago had disappeared, which relieved me a little. I couldn't come up with any good ideas if I was stuck in all that gloom. I really owed my creatures my gratitude.

"Ahh, thanks to your slimes, things have calmed down a bit," Fische said. Everyone smiled and nodded in agreement.

"Oh, I almost forgot! Here."

Melisa and Eche had returned to the room without my noticing. They set some fresh tea and snacks on the table, then handed my father four sheets of paper. When he saw what they were, he smiled, shook his head, and wrote something on them. Then he handed the papers to me.

"Again?"

They were contracts written on magic paper. Just how many times had I seen those buggers in the past few days? I scanned them quickly, then jotted my name down next to my father's. Two of the papers went back to Melisa and Eche, and I handed the other two back to my father.

"Looks like we might need a magic box just for contracts," my father said.

I made a face. He was right, we probably could use a box like that—that's just how many papers we had amassed.

"Want to go shopping for one after this is all over?" I asked.

"Why not? But this won't be over unless we talk over a lot of things," my father said.

The light mood tensed up again, but it wasn't as gloomy as before.

"Zinal, you said earlier that something had caught your attention. What is it?" My father looked at Zinal, who was staring at the captain on the bed.

"It's that rumor about the guild master and captain fighting. After I was freed from the spell, I checked up on the captain during my second investigation of this village and confirmed he was bedridden. So, I thought that rumor was strange and asked around. I learned there was a witness to one of their fights two days ago. I asked about the witness, but it was all quite vague. Everybody I

asked knew there was a witness, but no one knew who it was. That was one of the things that caught my attention.”

Two days ago? But I heard the rumor about five days ago. So does that mean a rumor different from the one I heard was already being spread? Then there was this witness to a fight that never happened, but we couldn’t get any information on them. Everything rubbed me the wrong way.

“Was there anything else?”

“Have you heard the rumor about somebody carrying dead bodies around at night?” Zinal asked.

Nalgath smiled cynically. “But that rumor started because of a misunderstanding. The witness only saw somebody illegally dumping trash.”

Piarre chimed in, “Yes, that’s right.” I had heard the same rumor and had reached the same conclusion as Nalgath.

“But there’s also rumors about dead bodies surfacing. People are even talking about a missing woman.”

There was a collective gasp.

First the fight, now this rumor? But when I heard the rumor, one of the ladies who was talking about it said nobody was missing. And from the way she was talking, it didn’t sound like she was making anything up. Sometimes rumors mutate well beyond their original form the more they’re spread around, but this change was just too much. Had somebody twisted it on purpose?

“Just how credible is that rumor, sir?”

“I did some digging, and it’s fair to assume both are mere rumors. But as for why somebody would spread such obvious lies—that I do not know. *That’s* what caught my attention.”

I could see why. The captain and guild master fighting, the person carrying dead bodies—both rumors were easy to unmask as lies. Then again, it would only be easy if the people investigating weren’t under a spell.

“Whoever did this must have put a lot of faith in the summoning circle,” I said. Everyone gave me a curious look. “I mean, both rumors were accepted as

fact while we were under the spell, remember? If nobody found them suspicious, they wouldn't be investigated."

"I see. Then whoever did this assumed we wouldn't break free from the summoning circle's spell." Fische showed that he understood what I was saying, and my father nodded, too.

"Everything comes back to the summoning circle..." Garitt looked tired.

"You still couldn't find it, I assume?" Arly asked. Garitt shook his head listlessly.

"We're so sorry. We marked several potential sites, but our magic items didn't react at any of them." Zinal bowed his head to the entire group, and Garitt and Fische followed suit.

"Please, don't be too hard on yourselves, gentlemen!" Piarre cried out nervously. "You don't need to do that."

The men looked up. "Thank you," Zinal said.

"Er, no problem..." Piarre had a shy grin on his face. Was he Zinal's secret fan? But it really was unnerving that the more information we gathered, the less we seemed to know about our mastermind.

"Anyway, let's do what we can first," my father said.

Everyone nodded and began to lay out all our objectives in order.

"Okay, to clarify, we're going to look into the summoning circle *and* the origins of the rumors at the same time, correct? We're also trying to find anybody who hasn't been affected by the spell."

It wasn't much different from what we were already doing. And did we even have that much time to spare?

"Um, excuse me, but do we have enough time for that?"

"What do you mean?" Nalgath was the one who asked the question, but everyone else stared intently at me like they were thinking the same thing. Could it be that they'd all forgotten?

"Monsters are threatening this village, remember? And everyone who's been

under the spell all this time is barely holding it together, right? We don't have time for a long investigation."

"Agh...you're right." Zinal and his party actually had forgotten. Fische looked quite confused. *I wonder if they usually don't make mistakes like that?* Well, Zinal and his party had been under the spell longer than I was. It might have had that effect on them.

"So what do we do then?" Juggy asked. Everyone turned toward him. His eyes were grim, and I could tell he had a lot of things on his mind.

Sol had woken up during our conversation, so I called out to it. "Sol?"

"Pefu?" It quickly looked up at me from my father's lap.

"There's still lots of people we want to free from the spell. Think you can do that for us?"

"Pefu! Pefu!"

Oh, good. The little slime's got a lot of pep left in it.

"Ivy, what are you suggesting?"

"We're going to get as many people over to our side as we can." I'd done a lot of thinking and realized we really just needed more information, but there weren't enough people free to help us collect it. "We simply don't have enough people to help gather information, so we need to get as many people on our side as possible."

Also, we would need to do something quickly about the monsters lurking near the village. After a bit of musing, I came up with the best solution. "Ciel? I have a little job for you."

Mew?

"Could you go rampage to your heart's content in the forest?"

Mrrrow.

"Oh, I see. To take away the monster threat?" my father asked.

I nodded. "Yes. I figured we could buy a little time by letting the adandara run loose."

All we needed was to push the monsters back a bit. If they were nervous because there was an adandara nearby, that would buy us some time. The only thing that concerned me was that we still didn't know what kind of monster we were dealing with.

"It would buy us more than just a *little* time. We might even be able to solve this problem by then."

"One can only hope."

Chapter 407: Let Me Brag!

“**N**OW WAIT JUST A MINUTE...did you just say *adandara*? But Ciel is a slime, right?” Melisa was staring at Ciel in bewilderment. I looked around to find Eche and Arly looking equally baffled. *Oh, right. I haven’t explained anything to the new people yet. Wait a minute, have I even told Arly and Nalgath about my situation? Oh dear. All this stress makes everything so hard to follow; I have no idea just how much I’ve told them. Okay, I’d better catch them up on all the most important points.*

“Ciel is actually an adandara. It’s shapeshifted into a slime right now by the power of a magic stone Flame made.”

Nine pairs of eyes just stared at me.

Huh? Why is nobody saying anything?

“The first part of that sentence wasn’t *too* terribly shocking, but she really just breezed through the ridiculous second half without batting an eye.”

“You heard it, too, Zinal? Guess my ears weren’t playing tricks, then.”

“Don’t worry, Fische, your ears are just fine.”

“In what universe *shouldn’t* I worry? Boy, am I glad we signed contracts!”

“I know. Huh? Garitt, why the grim face?”

“I’m with Fische—I was thanking my lucky stars for contracts. The type we drew up issues a warning whenever somebody might say something dicey. Good. Now nobody can say anything foolish by accident. But for that matter, does she even know how serious what she’s saying is?”

“I’m not sure, but now it’s crystal-clear why Druid is so hyper-vigilant. The way you were acting at the start, Zinal, that was sure to raise some red flags.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I really regret that now—I screwed up badly.”

Zinal and his party were whispering among themselves, but I couldn’t hear

what they were saying. They seemed calm enough, but was there some problem? I gave my father a concerned look, but he just smiled back at me, so I assumed there was nothing to worry about.

“I don’t know how to put this, but...this is incredible,” Melisa murmured, an indescribable expression on her face.

She’s right. My creatures really are incredible. Ooh, I know! I should introduce them all properly. Everyone’s signed contracts, so it’s safe for me to tell them about my creatures.

“So, um, let me just introduce everybody in order. Sora eats blue potions, bottle and all. It also eats old swords and turns them into new ones. Isn’t that awesome? Now, Flame eats red potions, also bottle and all, and it can make magic stones, too— isn’t that cool?”

“Wait...they eat organic *and* inorganic matter?”

Somebody said something...but I’m just dying to gush about my creatures, so I’m gonna ignore it. I mean, they’re so wonderful! And it’s sad that I never get to brag about them.

“Sora and Flame can both make potions, too. Now, Ciel’s true form is an adandara, and this kiddo is *very* powerful. I feel perfectly safe in the forest when I have it by my side. Ciel is also an expert on the forest—it tells us where all the best gemstone caves are. It’s super-sweet and super-skilled. Sol here can suck magic energy out of trash. A little while ago, I was surprised to learn it can also suck the magic energy out of the corpses of monsters who went berserk off the magic energy from trash. Then we also found out recently that it can free people from a summoning circle’s spell—Sol really is a wonder! Oops, I almost forgot, Sora can also...”

“Stop!”

“Is something wrong, Mr. Piarre?”

But I have so many more things to gush about... I mean, I want to share how wonderful my babies are!

Piarre looked incredibly tired as he stared at me. Then he exhaled loudly for some reason. “How should I put this... Hearing so much incredible news in one

sitting is a little disturbing—our brains can't keep up."

"Oh dear...I'm sorry about that, sir."

Maybe trying to tell them everything at once was a bad move, but I just wanted them to know how wonderful my creatures were. And knowing that they were all bound to secrecy by magic contracts, I just couldn't stop myself.

"Okay...well, this much is clear: You have some super-rare slimes—oh, sorry, one of them is an adandara," Piarre said.

I nodded. My creatures were indeed super rare. And Ciel was so unique that just being in its presence would shock a person.

"Miss Ivy..." Melisa walked over to me and gave me a hard stare. Her eyes were so harsh that it made me nervous.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You obviously wanted to be open with us since we signed magic contracts, but you shouldn't completely trust people just because they signed a contract. Contracts become null and void once either one of the parties dies or they've come to a mutual understanding. Right now, there's no magic item that can break magic contracts, but there's no guarantee such an item will never be invented. So even if somebody signs a magic contract with you, you need to know a lot about them before you trust them."

"Yes, ma'am..."

It's not so much that I was being open—I just wanted to brag. But I'm still sorry... In any case, I really have lucked out in meeting the right people all these years. Receiving such stern warnings from them just went to show how concerned they were for my well-being.

"Don't worry about that, ma'am," my father said. "Ivy instinctively chooses the right people."

I choose the right people? My father's wording confused me. I didn't recall ever doing that.

"Is that so?" Eche looked at me. I still didn't remember, so I just shook my head.

“As I said, it’s instinctive, so Ivy doesn’t notice she’s doing it.”

“Dad, do I really do that?”

“Yeah.”

I had no idea. When did I ever do that?

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora’s booming voice brought everyone’s eyes to it. The slime had just let go of the captain and was stretching vertically beside his head.

“Thanks, Sora! Is the captain all right now?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu!” Sora bounced right at me. Since I had been facing the creature, it sank safely into my arms. I looked down to see it was incredibly pleased with itself. I’d asked myself the same question with Sol, but why didn’t curing the heavy wounds inflicted by magic energy drain Sora’s own energy? Everyone seemed to be even more energized, Flame included.

“Oh, Dad! Look!”

“Captain!”

While I was petting Sora, the gentlemen of Cobalt looked at the captain and cried out. And then, the anxiety washed away from each of their faces.

Their captain had regained consciousness.

It was a relief for all of us. I smiled down at Sora to see it was pleased, too. *You guys really are incredible. I wish they’d let me brag more about you...*

“Thanks, kiddo.” My father patted Sora’s head.

Wait a minute, Sora cured the captain’s wounded magic energy, but didn’t he need to be freed from the spell? Sol did nothing to him, right? Does that mean he wasn’t under the spell? Which would then mean...the poison? Did Sora and Flame work together to cure him from the poison, then? It’s no use... All we can do is guess. Without better information about the summoning circle, we’re stuck. We need to know what the circle can and can’t do. Once we find that out, we might be able to fight it somehow...

“Miss Ivy?”

I looked up at the sound of my name. Arly was standing before me, his eyes

rimmed with red. "Thank you for helping us."

I examined him closely. The tenseness that had been in his face ever since we set foot in this house had melted away, and now he was smiling. The strain was gone from him, too.

"I'm just glad that my creatures could help and your father is awake."

Arly nodded a bit shyly in reply. Then his eyes got happier and happier. He reached over and gently patted Sora in my arms. "Thanks." When Arly spoke, there was a little quiver in his voice.

Chapter 408:

Like Father, Like Son

MELISA AND ECHE left the room to make dinner in a state of great excitement. They were extremely happy that the captain was awake. I didn't think he'd have much of an appetite right after waking up, though...

"Thanks," Nalgath said with a smile as he watched the captain and Arly talk.

"Oh, no problem, sir," I answered. "Mr. Arly and the captain sure look happy."

"They had a big fight before the captain collapsed. Then they tried to out-stubborn each other, and neither made an effort to patch things up. Even when the captain got sick, Arly wanted to run to his side, but his ego got in the way. And even though the captain surely wanted to see him, too, he acted like he didn't care. Then, in what seemed like no time at all, the captain fell unconscious. And Arly...that poor bastard felt incredibly guilty about it."

What a relief that the captain was all right now. I stole a glance at Nalgath, who noticed my attention and gave me a questioning look.

"Nalgath...have you and Mr. Zinal patched things up yet?"

"Agh...I don't think so?"

"I can talk to him whenever."

"Huh?"

"If that's what you're thinking, you've got it all wrong. There's no telling what will happen to any of us tomorrow."

Nalgath's eyes widened a little, and then his face creased with frustration. "I know that. It's just...hard."

"Why don't you just hit him with your feelings? You two are finally close enough to talk again, though you'd both have to be up for it."

Nalgath smiled faintly. "Ivy, have you ever been scared?"

“Of what, sir?”

“Hmm...of a relationship falling apart?”

“But Mr. Nalgath...your relationship with your father was already falling apart. *That* scares me.”

“You don’t mince words, do you, Ivy? Well, I don’t blame you—you were just telling the truth.”

Nalgath hung his head. Maybe I should have phrased it more gently. The thought of my relationship with my father collapsing...it terrified me. But that was why every day was a blessing. I wanted to talk with him about everything and make all sorts of memories with him. Then, if anything ever went wrong, those memories would be my strength. Not to help me take comfort in memories of the past but to have the power to face my father for a better future.

“When Mr. Zinal told us about you getting promoted to elite adventurer, he looked terribly proud. When Sol finished freeing you from the spell, you were completely unresponsive until Sora cured your wounded magic energy. And you know how your father reacted? He was stunned.”

“Stunned...?”

“That’s right. The brave, strong Zinal was stunned. While Sora was healing you, there was a vacant stare in his eyes. He didn’t want to accept the reality that was right in front of him. And when you went back to your normal self, he cried for joy and relief. You are very precious to him, Mr. Nalgath.”

Nalgath’s gaze wandered over to Zinal, who was explaining things to the captain. As he watched his father, his lips curved upward. Father and son were alike in every way. I wished he could have let his joy show more.

“Dinner’s ready, everyone! Let’s eat.” Eche came into the room just as Zinal and his party finished talking to the captain. The captain had a special meal prepared for him, and the rest of us were dazzled by Melisa’s specialty dishes. It felt like a little party, and even my creatures were excited. Rather, they were receiving a lot of love from everyone around them.

“They’re sure popular,” my father said.

I followed his gaze to find Sol sitting on the captain's shoulder. *Is that okay? He's still in recovery...*

"You know, the captain looks quite well," I remarked with a confused tilt of my head. He looked nothing like a man who'd just woken up from a coma.

"I'm sure we have Sora to thank for that. I thought the same thing when it healed me after I lost my arm; the recovery time was incredible."

"The recovery time?"

"That's right. Losing an arm and fainting definitely lost me a lot of blood, and yet I was able to walk all the way back to town on my own two feet that very day. That would never happen normally."

Oh, really? I guess Sora's powers don't stop at healing wounds.

"Oh!" Shifting my attention from the captain to the rest of the room, I saw Zinal and Nalgath seated on a sofa together, having a quiet conversation.

"That father-son pair are a lot alike," my father remarked. "Have you noticed how they're very competent with any problem outside the family, but hopeless when it comes to family drama?"

"Pfft! Hee hee hee..."

I had no idea what they were talking about, but even though they were both staring at the floor, their sullen faces slowly got softer and happier. *Okay, I guess things are at least a little steadier now. What a relief.*

Once dinner was mostly finished, we discussed our strategy moving forward.

"Mr. Druid, Miss Ivy, thank you so much for everything you've done to help us through this crisis." The captain bowed from his bed, and I pursed my lips a little at the sight. *Why is Sol on top of his head now? And leaning backward, at that?*

"Er, it's all right, sir—hee hee hee—we're just glad to see you're awake—pfft!" My father somehow managed to squeeze out a response, but it was peppered with pained laughter. Puzzled, the captain looked up, then got flustered when he realized Sol was falling off his head.

"Sorry, I can't—ah ha ha ha! Dad...Sol...on your head..." Arly joined in on the laughter.

“Huh?! *Ohh*, yes, the little fellow seemed to think my head was a bed.”

The tense room was softened by Sol’s antics. *Sol...did you do that on purpose?* I apologized and took the slime back from the captain. “Sol, behave yourself, okay?”

“Pefu?”

Zinal lightly clapped his hands together. “Let’s get back on topic. The captain and I have decided what we’ll need to do next, and we’ll require your help again, Ivy.”

“All right, sir.”

The captain handed two sheets of paper to my father—contracts, of course. We already had a huge stack from Hataka alone. My father and I wrote our names and took one copy of each paper for our records.

“Thanks. I hate to ask, but could you free the guild master and his assistant from the spell first?” the captain requested.

I looked at my creatures. Their eyes were sparkling as they stared at the captain.

“I think we can manage that. We’ll help with your plan.”

The captain looked relieved to hear that. “Also, I want to get some help from someone I know in the capital. I already talked it over with Zephyr, but I’ll need your permission as well, Mr. Druid and Miss Ivy.”

That confused me. Why would he need *our* permission? If the captain needed this person’s help, he should just contact them.

“Since we’re dealing with a summoning circle, we can’t take care of this alone. We need outside help to protect the adventurers in this village, too.”

“It’s okay. Go ahead and get in touch with them,” my father said.

The captain bowed humbly in reply. I was relieved to have a solution to a problem that had been worrying me for a little while. Sora and Sol could only rescue so many people. They couldn’t save every single adventurer in Hataka, and I’d been worried about what we were going to do. Now it sounded like somebody was going to come and solve the problem, though.

“How are you going to send the message? I wouldn’t advise going through the guild.”

True. We didn’t know who was an enemy and who wasn’t.

“The Captain of the Watch and the guild master both have their own faaxes just in case of a crisis like this, so I could send the faax from my home.”

Oh, good. That’s a relief. Somebody in the capital, huh...? Maybe I should send a message to Lord Foronda. Oh, that’s right, we asked my father’s mentor if he knew anything about the monster we’re dealing with. I want to go to the merchant guild to pick up our faxes, but would that be safe? I don’t think the enemy has noticed what we’re doing yet, but what if they catch on?

“Excuse me, but could I also use the fax here, sir?” I asked.

“Hm? Who do you want to contact?”

“We asked my father’s mentor if he could tell us anything about the monster, but I’m not sure it would be safe to go to the merchant guild to get his answer. Also, I want to get in touch with Lord Foronda.”

“The honorable Lord Foronda? Do you know him?”

“Yes, sir. Do you know him, too, Captain?”

That would sure speed things up.

“Er, well, he’s famous. He’s high on the royal family’s list of noteworthy nobles.”

Oh, he’s famous. I didn’t know that. Wait... Did he say something about the royal family? Oh well, it’s probably not important.

“The honorable Lord Foronda... If we could get his help, too... I’m terribly sorry to ask this, but could you introduce me to him?”

“Of course, sir.”

I’m sure that would be okay. Right, he gave me his contact information for emergencies, so should I use it now? Yeah, I think this definitely counts as an emergency.



EXTRA * Zinal's Dilemma



THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

EXTRA:

Zinal's Dilemma

GARITT OF ZEPHYR'S PERSPECTIVE

“HHEY.” I entered the room at our inn, and Fische lightly waved a hand in greeting. I looked around the room to find Zinal wasn't there. Had he gone out somewhere?

I've been a little worried about Zinal after the shocking thing Druid told him earlier today. He can be a bit fragile at times. But if he went out, I guess he's doing okay?

“Hey there. Any leads?”

“None whatsoever. I talked to some elite adventurers, but that was a dead end.”

What in the world *were* our rampaging monsters in the forest? And why hadn't anybody seen them? If people were being attacked, at least one of them should have gotten a good look at the monsters. *Well...I suppose somebody will eventually figure out what they are.*

“So, where's Zinal?” I just couldn't help but worry a little. Fische smiled and pointed at the dressing room. I gave it a curious glance and noticed the door was ajar, so I had a peek inside. *Zinal...why the hell are you staring in the mirror?*

I watched him for a while, but all he did was move his face to different angles, staring vacantly at his own reflection. To be honest, it was a bit unsettling. *Is he enamored by his own reflection? No, no, Zinal would never...*

I returned over to where Fische was sitting and sighed. “What's Zinal doing?”

“It's really eating at him,” Fische answered. I thought back to what happened at lunchtime. The word he'd been called was definitely shocking.

“Zinal...are you interested in Ivy in a deviant way?”

I'm sure that was difficult for him to process in the moment. He probably didn't understand what Druid was implying, so when he finally got it, he was stupefied. That's right, and Fische spat out his tea, didn't he? Ivy jumped back at the sight of it, too.

"So he really did let it get to him..."

I thought about the way Zinal looked in front of the mirror: completely emotionless.

"Looks like it, yeah. He's been staring at the mirror for like thirty minutes now," Fische said.

A chuckle escaped me. How could someone stare at themselves in the mirror for thirty whole minutes?

"Poor guy. Hee hee hee!"

"Garitt, just setting the record straight..."

What's this? I looked at Fische. For some reason, he had a wicked look in his eye.

"From Ivy's point of view, you and I are Zinal's accomplices."

What?!

"Remember how we arranged it so he could be alone with her?"

I don't remember tha... Oh! Right, when they asked us to dinner. He did say he wanted to check on Ivy, and he asked us to keep Druid busy.

"You're right... Ivy would've thought we were pedophile accomplices."

"Exactly."

Damn it! This is all Zinal's fault, isn't it? Wait... But Ivy didn't seem to suspect him of any ill will, right? So maybe she doesn't see us in a bad light, either?

"Oh, you're back."

I turned around at the sound of the voice to see a gloomy Zinal standing in the room.

"Hey. You look tired."

“Yeah, I’ve had a lot on my mind... Listen, from an outsider’s perspective, do I really look like I’m...*that* kind of guy?”

I studied his expression carefully.

“Don’t worry. You don’t look like one of *those* types,” Fische answered.

I nodded.

“Yeah...I thought not,” Zinal muttered.

“Yeah, but if I had to guess,” Fische continued, “it’s not so much how you *look*, but how you *act*. I don’t think your looks have anything to do with it.”

Damn it, Fische, why you gotta pour salt on the wound?

“How I *act*...”

Agh, now he’s depressed.

“Zinal, we got them both to realize it was all a misunderstanding. Don’t be so hard on yourself,” I said, glaring at Fische. He grinned back at me.

“You’re right... I know I shouldn’t be so upset...”

His head knows, but his heart probably can’t quite keep up.

Zinal sighed. “I just need to get over it. So, do you have any leads?”

I gave Zinal a curious look. He shot an exasperated glare back at me. *Hey, you were wallowing in self-pity a few seconds ago.*

“Find any witnesses?”

Oh, he’s asking about the forest. “Sadly, no.”

Zinal frowned thoughtfully, but he quickly snapped out of it and said, “Understood.”

“So what are we gonna do?” Fische looked at Zinal, who shook his head. He didn’t have any ideas, which was unusual for him.

“Guess we’ll just have to keep our eyes and ears open,” I said.

Fische and Zinal gave me a questioning look. *Why the confusion? If we don’t have any witnesses, there’s nothing we can do.*

“Guess you’re right. Yes...we’ll wait and see.” A mysterious look appeared in Zinal’s eye for a moment, but he snapped out of it and nodded.

“Say, wanna go out for a drink?” Fische asked. That brightened up the mood in a flash. After all, we hadn’t gone out drinking for days now.

“I like it. Let’s go get drunk.”

“I’ll pass. There’s somewhere I need to go.”

Booze-lover Zinal’s words shocked both me and Fische.

“Where the hell are you going?” Fische demanded.

Zinal looked a bit troubled. Was he going somewhere secret?

“To see Druid and Ivy.”

“Whoa, you mean Ivy actually makes you...”

“No. I was just so shocked earlier that I didn’t get a chance to apologize, so I want to do that,” he explained, glaring at me.

Okay, my bad!

“Got it. Well, get it over with quickly and join us. We’ll be at Drink-Drink over on Main Street.” That was a tavern I’d had my eye on. *Let’s see, what should I drink and eat...?*

We parted ways with Zinal and left the inn. I was a little confused as to why we hadn’t had a drink yet since we arrived in Hataka. *Well...I guess it’s nothing to worry about.*

“Let’s get smashed!” Fische and I cheered as we opened the door to the tavern.

“Hm?!”

Huh? Where...am I? The inn...right? Um...I had a few drinks and...then I came back here, and Zinal was there...

“What happened to me?”

“Ah, you’re awake. Do you feel like something’s wrong with your brain?”

Huh?! Wrong with my brain? I looked over at Zinal and saw a particularly sober look on his face. There was an unfamiliar presence, too. I jumped out of bed and swept my eyes around the room. Fische was asleep in the bed next to mine, and sitting in one of the chairs in the corner of the room was...Druid?

“What’s Druid doing here?”

“I’ll explain later. But tell me, do you feel like something’s wrong with your brain?”

“No...I feel fine.”

Zinal looked relieved to hear that, and I was relieved to see it. I wondered if he was worried about some problem that had come up while I was sleeping.

“Ahh, is something...hm?”

I went drinking last night...but why? Disaster is on Hataka’s doorstep. Wait a minute...

“Are you okay?” Zinal ran over to my bedside as I clutched my head.

“What happened? Why am I acting like this during a crisis?”

“Sounds like your memories are a little mixed up. Oh, Fische just woke up! Until I get a moment to explain, think hard about what happened to you. Got it?” he pressed.

I nodded. Fische also looked a little disoriented when he woke up, but Zinal was bringing him back to reality.

“They both look like they’ll be okay. I’m gonna go wake up Ivy. She’s probably ready by now.”

There was an odd feeling in my chest as I watched Druid leave the room.

“Garitt, Fische, just stay calm and listen to what I’m about to tell you, got it?”

Zinal’s tone and posture were so grim that we both sat up straight in bed. He only acted this way when there was a serious problem. But I never would have guessed in a million years that we’d been under a summoning circle’s spell or that Ivy and her monsters were the ones who broke it.

“Seriously?” Fische asked Zinal, unable to believe it. When Zinal nodded,

Fische sighed heavily. “Wow...we were under a summoning circle’s spell. It doesn’t seem possible.”

We were more cautious than the average person, so just like Fische, a part of me couldn’t believe it, either. But I remembered something... We’d gone out drinking last night, in spite of the looming crisis, and got black-out drunk. We never drank beyond our limits; that just wasn’t something we would ever do.

“We’ll have to thank her. If her monsters hadn’t been around...”

If we still couldn’t sense the danger...would we have just died? Or would we have broken free from the spell only when death was staring us in the face? How terrifying...

We owed our lives to Ivy. If she was ever in trouble, we would do everything in our power to save her.



BONUS * Amiche and Luffie's New Beginnings



THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

BONUS:

Amiche and Luffie's New Beginnings

AMICHE'S PERSPECTIVE

I LOOKED AT LULU, my tamed slime, and sighed quietly. It was clearly eating less than before. Even just three months ago, it had been eating a little more.

I scanned the other tamers and their slimes at the dump. Everyone else looked unchanged. The tamers weren't talking to the slimes, and the slimes were silently disposing of trash just like they always did. It upset me a little. It didn't seem like anybody was testing out *that theory* yet.

A rumor had been spreading recently about tamers and their relationships with their tamed monsters. I'd thought it was a joke at first, but I was wrong. At the council of lords, a famous lord gave a speech on what tamers could do. Truth be told, I thought it was an awfully pushy thing for someone who wasn't even a tamer to do. I thought he was just some entitled nobleman, running his mouth. But then I learned that this nobleman was actually quite the extraordinary fellow—even adventurers respected him. That was why, even in this village, booklets entitled *The Ideal Tamer* were being distributed to the tamers.

"I dunno about calling them *family*..."

The Ideal Tamer argued that tamers should rethink their relationships with their tamed monsters. We should talk to them, play with them, and forge bonds with them. We should treat them as family. It was so ridiculous that I laughed while reading it.

But this booklet also told the story of a particular tamer. It wrote, "Perhaps because this tamer loves her slimes like family, their disposal powers have remained just as strong as the slimes of yore." Truth be told, I was incredibly shocked by that. After all, the slimes I'd read about in the old texts had amazing disposal powers.

The disposal powers held by the slimes of bygone years truly were incredible. According to the old texts in this village, they could digest thirty times as much trash in a day as today's slimes. What's more, there were currently eighteen slimes in this village, yet in the past, there had been no more than ten. They had about half the number of slimes we have now, with thirty times the disposal powers. I thought the numbers might be a little exaggerated since they were from so long ago, but because these old texts were authenticated, that meant everything in them was the truth. It was crazy to believe that such extraordinary slimes existed to this very day.

"Would getting friendlier with my slime really make it eat that much more trash...?"

The tamer in the booklet must have tamed some rare slimes. My slime was average, so I was sure it wouldn't work, but I was still really curious about it.

"Hey, Amiche?" Luffie, one of the tamers I often spoke to, approached me with his slime in his arms. Luffie was two years younger than me at sixteen. As this was my fourth year working as a tamer, he was my junior. I'm a bit standoffish, so the other tamers usually kept their distance, but Luffie was undaunted, and he approached me on his very first day. He was my cherished taming buddy.

"What's up?"

"Well, I was thinking of putting *The Ideal Tamer* to the test. Whatcha think?"

Whoa!

"You want to try it out?"

"Yep, of course!" Luffie looked so confident that all I could do was stare. Noticing this, he gave me a confused look and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing. Just a little surprised, that's all."

I wasn't expecting Luffie to make the suggestion... Well, actually, he always loved to try anything that sounded good, so I guess it was only natural he'd think of that.

"Don't you wanna try it out, Amiche? Who knows, maybe your tamed slime

can work miracles.”

“Well, yeah...I am curious about it. But a *nobleman* said all this, you know.”

I *hated* nobles. They should never be trusted.

“Well, well, just don’t think about that. Besides, I heard this nobleman who gave that speech about tamers is a stand-up guy! So just ignore the fact that he’s a nobleman. Also, when you look at the future we’re facing, we kinda have to give everything a try.”

Yeah, he’s absolutely right. If our disposal power keeps going down, the trash will eventually pile up too high, and then the monsters might mutate. What if that actually happens? I heard that monsters mutated by trash had abnormal abilities. What would happen if those kinds of monsters attacked the village? Worst-case scenario, my loved ones might die. I can’t allow that future to - happen, no matter what it takes.

“You’re right. I guess we should at least try it first.”

“Yes, let’s! Lemme guess, you were gonna wait and see if any of the other tamers were changing up their relationships with their slimes before you tried it.”

You got me—right on the nose, Luffie. I’ve always hated being first, so I was waiting for somebody else to do it. I actually was going to give it a try... Lulu really hasn’t been disposing as much, after all.

“Well, I don’t really care about that anyway. So, the booklet said we had to *rethink our relationships*, but how d’ya think we actually do that?”

“Hmmm... Well, you know how our seniors told us we shouldn’t ever act weak in front of our monsters because it emboldens them and could get us hurt? So we should always show them that we’re strongest, right? Now, if you rethink that, that would mean all of that is wrong...wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, it would. If that book is true, that would mean everything our seniors ever told us is wrong.”

Were we doing it all wrong? If so, then how did that nobleman ever learn the right way of doing things? Well, I guess there’s no point in wondering about that

right now.

“Okay...so we’re supposed to *talk to* and *play with* them.”

That was what the booklet said: “You should talk to and play with your monsters to get closer to them.”

I guess we have to start somewhere...

“Okay... Maybe we should introduce ourselves first?”

“Like, our names and stuff?”

Luffie’s question made me wonder. They already knew us...but all we’d really done was tell them our names. That wasn’t so much a conversation—more like an announcement. Anyway, that wouldn’t be enough.

“Yeah, that should work. Okay, first we’ll... *Oh!*”

“What’s wrong?”

I looked at Luffie. He was looking at me with a little hesitation in his eyes. “Maybe before we introduce ourselves, we should apologize for how we’ve treated them all this time,” I said. *After all, we did treat them as objects, just like our seniors told us to.* I sighed quietly, looking back on the way I’d acted toward Lulu all those years.

“You’re right. We should probably say we’re sorry first,” Luffie agreed, smiling awkwardly. He was probably remembering a long list of uncomfortable moments with his slime, just like me. He lowered his slime to the ground. “So, um...Ponyu, I’m really sorry for how I’ve treated you.”

Silence.

Um, don’t look at me, Luffie. I don’t even know how to help you. Besides, I’m sure Lulu would do the same to me.

“Oh! Lulu’s finished eating! I’ll be right back.” I walked over to the trash pile several yards away to get Lulu. Would talking to it improve our relationship? “Um, Lulu...let’s go back.” Ugh, I couldn’t bring myself to apologize. I swooped Lulu into my arms and trotted back to Luffie. I felt Lulu shift in my arms and looked down to see it staring up at me. “That’s right... I haven’t held you much, have I?”

Lulu just stared silently back at me. It was...a little unsettling.

“Um, I’m really sorry for how I’ve behaved with you all this time. Also...”

What would even happen if I just said out of nowhere that I wanted to be friends? Lulu would know I was only doing it to increase its disposal powers. But I actually do want to make its powers better—that’s why I want to improve our relationship. This is tough.

“Argh, what am I even supposed to say?!” I looked at Luffie. His tamed slime Ponyu was also just staring intently at him in silence. They must have been keeping close watch on Luffie and me since we changed our behavior.

“I guess we can call this a new beginning?” Luffie suggested.

I shrugged my shoulders. *I guess we could call it that.* “Sure, why not?”

I wonder how long it will be before Lulu plays with me...

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 8 has hit the shelves. With all your support, we broke the 600,000 mark for cumulative sales! Thank you all, truly. And thank you to my illustrator Nama-sama for all the whimsical illustrations of the slimes playing together in Volume 8.

And now, a little news about *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*...it's going to be an anime! This wouldn't have been possible without all the fans who have supported Ivy. Truly, truly, thank you all so much.

In Volume 8, we take our story to Hataka Village. I really agonized over Hataka's setting. I wasn't sure just how far to expose this world's dark side. I didn't want to make it too dark, but I wanted to give you all a little glimpse of the problems this world is dealing with. At first, I was going to introduce it gradually...but before I knew it, I had written up a huge crisis that threatened the entire village. It felt a little strange initially, but once I got into it, I introduced all sorts of characters. I was only going to introduce the captain, but for some reason, I put the guild master in the story, too. I agonized later over the sheer number of characters I'd added. But because of that, I was finally able to write about the problems this world is dealing with. And in Volume 8, the adventure party Zephyr makes its grand entrance, and Zinal finds himself suspected of something awkward. It wasn't my intention at first, but his suspicion of Ivy and Druid did lead him to behave a little suspiciously himself. And I knew Druid would definitely be wary of him for that, so I whispered my apologies to Zinal as I had a rather enjoyable time writing those scenes. Don't worry, Volume 9 will feature a much cooler version of Zinal.

Thank you to everyone at TO Books for your help with Volume 8. My editor K-sama, thank you for always putting up with me. We managed to get Volume 8 published, and we're getting an anime adaptation—something that feels like a dream to me. Thank you all, truly. 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. I hope you'll give Volume 9 a read, too. The manga version of *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash* is also selling well. May we meet again in this "Isekai'ed into a world...where proper waste disposal rules!" light novel and manga series.

—Honobonoru500

November 2022



BLACK KITTY CIEL MYSTERY CREATURE SORA



DAD ISN'T IN THE SERIES AS OF YET.



THANK YOU FOR BUYING VOLUME 8 OF THE WEAKEST TAMER BEGAN A JOURNEY TO PICK UP TRASH!

HONOBONORU-SENSEI IS ALMOST TOO GENEROUS, LETTING ME TAKE SUCH LIBERTIES...

BUT THANK YOU SO MUCH! THIS MANGA IS TURNING INTO AN UNAPOLOGETIC LOVE LETTER TO IVY, SO I HOPE YOU ALL LIKE IT!

-AMEMORI
SEPT. 2022

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the eighth volume of Honobonoru500's second story, Weakest Tamer! Ivy's father senses a disturbance in the forest. Feeling nothing amiss herself, Ivy is a little worried. Meanwhile, they encounter Zephyr, a party of adventurers. Sora insists that they're safe, but Ivy's father has a bad feeling about Zinal. Just who is Zinal? And what of the disturbance in the forest? It's just one problem after another when you're Ivy.

NAMA

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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