



The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

WRITTEN BY
Honobonoru500
ILLUSTRATED BY
Nama

NOVEL

6

Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Ivy's Journey Thus Far:](#)

[Characters](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Part 6: Daily Life in Hatow Village](#)

[Chapter 276: Is Something Amiss?](#)

[Chapter 277: Let's Check In](#)

[Chapter 278: I Have a Weakness for Rarities](#)

[Chapter 279: A Very Loose Conversation](#)

[Chapter 280: Differences in Memory](#)

[Chapter 281: But Slimes Can Create, Too!](#)

[Chapter 282: Excuse Me, Are You a Guardian Deity?](#)

[Chapter 283: Sorry to Be a Bother](#)

[Chapter 284: Still So Small](#)

[Chapter 285: A Different Kind of Companion](#)

[Chapter 286: Sol Food](#)

[Chapter 287: Magic Energy?](#)

[Chapter 288: "Miracle" Is a Bit Extreme](#)

[Chapter 289: Let's Try Contacting Them](#)

[Chapter 290: My First Fax](#)

[Chapter 291: A Safe Way of Hunting](#)

[Chapter 292: No Solutions Come to Mind](#)

[Chapter 293: Land Management](#)

[Chapter 294: What's a Fan?](#)

[Chapter 295: My Current Status?](#)

[Chapter 296: Nothing to Worry About](#)

[Chapter 297: Too Bad It's Cold](#)

[Chapter 298: Please Let It Go](#)

[Chapter 299: Feeding Sol](#)

[Chapter 300: Scared?](#)

[Chapter 301: My Lips Are Sealed!](#)

[Chapter 302: Careful; It's Slippery!](#)

[Side: The End - An Account of a Woman of Ratomi Village](#)

[Chapter 303: Nostalgia](#)

[Chapter 304: Closer and Closer to Springtime](#)

[Chapter 305: He Snapped!](#)

[Chapter 306: Baths Are Essential](#)

[Chapter 307: The Forest of Light](#)

[Chapter 308: Getting Ready for Spring](#)

[Chapter 309: Spring Things](#)

[Side: Father and Daughter - Tableau's Perspective](#)

[Chapter 310: A Grateful Realization](#)

[Chapter 311: Departure](#)

[Chapter 312: Many Snakeys](#)

[Chapter 313: Purple Magic Stones](#)

[Chapter 314: Our Plans in Hatata Village?](#)

[Chapter 315: An Eerie Noise](#)

[Chapter 316: Hatada Village](#)

[Chapter 317: Sister Villages](#)

[Chapter 318: A New Monster Species?](#)

[Chapter 319: A Dump in the Forest](#)

[Chapter 320: Just the Magic Energy!](#)

[Chapter 321: Food for Everyone](#)

[Chapter 322: Roly-Poly](#)

[Chapter 323: Dropped Loot](#)

[Chapter 324: My Eyes Hurt](#)

[Extra: Special Delivery for Lord Foronda!](#)

[Bonus: What Captain Tableau Was Searching For](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About the Creators](#)

[Newsletter](#)







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Seven Seas Entertainment

Table of Contents

PART 6 Daily Life in Hatow Village.....	290 My First Fax.....	304 Closer and Closer to Springtime.....	318 A New Monster Species?.....
276 Is Something Amiss?.....	291 A Safe Way of Hunting.....	305 He Snapped!.....	319 A Dump in the Forest.....
277 Let's Check In.....	292 No Solutions come to Mind.....	306 Baths Are Essential.....	320 Just the Magic Energy!.....
278 I Have a Weakness for Rarities.....	293 Land Management.....	307 The Forest of Light.....	321 Food for Everyone.....
279 A Very Loose Conversation.....	294 What's a Fan?.....	308 Getting Ready for Spring.....	322 Roily-Poly.....
280 Differences in Memory.....	295 My Current Status?.....	309 Spring Things.....	323 Dropped Loot.....
281 But Slimes Can Create, Too!.....	296 Nothing to Worry About.....	SIDE Father and Daughter.....	324 My Eyes Hurt.....
282 Excuse Me, Are You a Guardian Deity?.....	297 Too Bad It's Cold.....	310 A Grateful Realization.....	EXTRA Special Delivery for Lord Forondal.....
283 Sorry to Be a Bother.....	298 Please Let It Go.....	311 Departure.....	BONUS What Captain Tableau Was Searching For.....
284 Still So Small.....	299 Feeding Sol.....	312 Many Snakeys.....	✱ Afterword.....
285 A Different Kind of Companion.....	300 Scared?.....	313 Purple Magic Stones.....	
286 Sol Food.....	301 My Lips Are Sealed!.....	314 Our Plans in Hatata Village?.....	
287 Magic Energy?.....	302 Careful: It's Slippery!.....	315 An Eerie Noise.....	
288 "Miracle" Is a Bit Extreme.....	SIDE The End.....	316 Hatada Village.....	
289 Let's Try Contacting Them.....	303 Nostalgia.....	317 Sister Villages.....	

START!

Arrival in Hatow Village!

How shall we spend the winter? ♪



Let's buy ALL THE FOOD together!

Rest one turn

There are so many flavors, it's hard to choose... (happy)

An Extra-Cold Winter This Year?! All hands on deck to prepare for it!

Go forward two squares

Flame made lots of magic stones for everyone to power their stoves!



A Brief Rest...?

Go forward one square

I tried to make omurice! And I couldn't roll it nicely...



Snakey's Big Rescue!

Go forward two squares

Smash up the creepy summoning circle!

Winter is here at last!

Now we can finally take it easy!

To be continued ||



It's Not Snowing. Is There a Reason for That?

Go back two squares

Unlucky Flowers
This field is full of snow blooms...

✿ CHARACTERS ✿



Druid

An adventurer who lost his right arm. Sora brought him back from the brink of death. He's joined Ivy's party and is becoming a bit of a father figure to her.



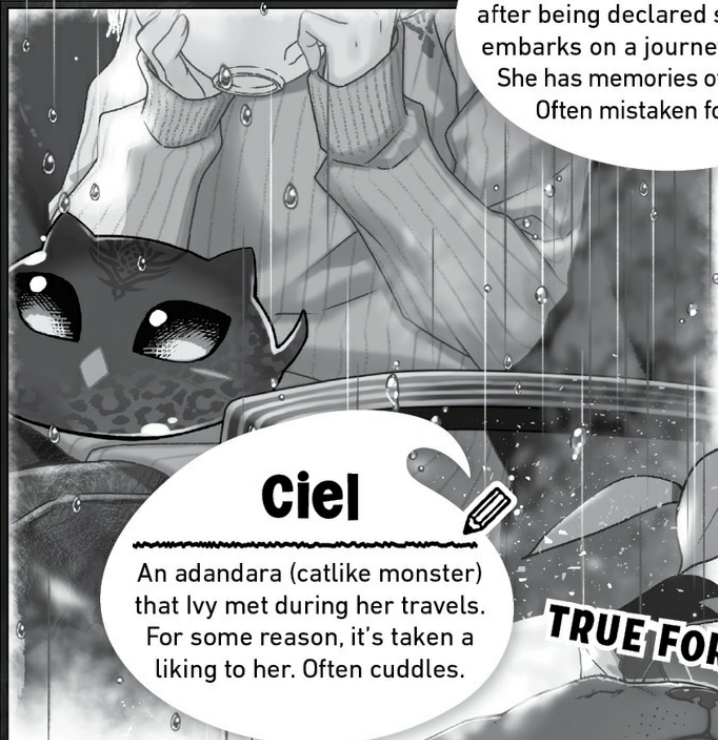
Sora

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



Flame

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



Ciel

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

Ivy

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

TRUE FORM



The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 6

Story by Honobonoru500

Illustrations by Nama

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

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ISBN: 979-8-88843-442-0

Printed in Canada

First Printing: April 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



PART 6 * Daily Life in Hatow Village



THE WEAKEST TAMER
Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

Chapter 276: Is Something Amiss?

WHEN THE VILLAGE GATE came into view, the many gatekeepers inside popped their heads out.

“Oh, thank goodness! We were so worried when it started raining and you didn’t come back. Are you both okay?”

“You must be chilled to the bone. Here, have some hot tea.”

“Oh, what a relief. We were so worried about you both.”

I was a bit taken aback by the words that were being hurled at us. I hadn’t thought they would worry about us *this* much.

“Sorry we scared you,” Druid apologized. “We found a big hole we could pop into for shelter from the rain, so we stayed there for a while.”

Druid was bowing, so I did the same.

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

Wait, is that... Yes, it’s the same lady gatekeeper who greeted us when we first arrived in Hatow. I thanked her for the tea and took a sip. My body throbbed with warmth. Mmm, I must’ve gotten really chilled without realizing it. That’s odd, since we weren’t in the forest that long. Ahh, I feel like I’m coming back to life.

After warming ourselves a little by the station where the gatekeepers took their breaks, we headed the rest of the way back into town. The cold air felt extra chilly this time since we’d warmed up our bodies again. Maybe I was just imagining it...

“Ivy, are you doing okay? I’d like to go straight to the guild to see Captain Tableau, if it won’t be too much of a strain.”

“Sure...”

We walked along Main Street, which was sparsely dotted with people. They were talking in loud, excited voices, so I was able to hear bits of their conversations. They all seemed happy that it was finally snowing. *Gee, I sure hope things stay calm like this for a while.*

The guild was mostly empty, but we did see some adventurers getting ready to go out on a mission. It was a sight I hadn't seen much of when it was raining, so it made me a little excited.

“I'll go ask to speak with Captain Tableau. You wait here, okay?” Druid headed to the front desk.

Hm? Why has my bag been rustling so much...? Is it Sora?

“Sorry, guys. We have to talk with Captain Tableau at the...guild...”

Wait... Huh? Something's not right. The guild? Captain Tableau? What's strange about that? I took a look around me. *We're at the adventurer guild, and we're here to speak with Captain Tableau... Oh!*

“Mr. Druid, wait!”

That's right! This is the adventurer guild. Tableau is captain of the village watch, so he wouldn't be here! I ran to the front desk and tugged on Druid's arm just as he was about to talk to someone.

“What's wrong?” Druid looked quite surprised, but I knew we couldn't discuss it right there.

“We have to talk about something. Um, excuse us, we'll come back later!” With a bow to the startled man behind the counter, I dragged Druid over to an empty part of the room. *I don't know why, but my head has been throbbing since we got here. Well, anyway, I need to tell Druid about what's so strange.*

“Are you okay, Ivy? Your face is so pale.”

“It doesn't matter. I have to tell you something, Mr. Druid.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter? Are you really—”

“I’m fine for now! So, um, let me ask you something. Just who were you going to talk with at the adventurer guild?”

“Captain Tableau. Is there a problem?”

As far as I could tell from Druid’s expression, he had no doubts about the situation. I was right. Something was off here. Druid would have noticed a mistake like this by now.

“Mr. Druid, this is the adventurer guild. Tableau is captain of the village watch.”

“Hm? The adventurer guild? Village watch?”

Druid tilted his head in confusion. It looked like he didn’t understand. *Oh dear. What should I do?*

“Ow! My head!” Druid pressed his hand to his head in pain. Was he feeling the same way as I was?

“Ack...okay, wait a minute. Let me figure this out.”

“Okay.”

“It got us... It’s that summoning circle.”

“The summoning circle?” Did he mean the one that trapped Snakey?

“I’ve felt this headache before. You get it whenever you stop a summoning circle’s magic by erasing it.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is.”

But since we stopped the summoning circle’s magic...can I assume that means everything’s fine now?

“Ivy, check your bag to make sure all three are still there.”

“Huh?!”

“We don’t technically know when the summoning circle’s magic started

affecting us.”

Does he mean we might have accidentally left Sora or the others behind? But I know I felt my bag jiggling earlier. I looked around to make sure the coast was clear before I opened it.

“Oh, good... Everyone’s here.”

Druid and I heaved a huge sigh of relief together.

“Okay, at least for now, we can be pretty confident we’re not in the worst possible condition.”

I wasn’t sure what Druid meant by “the worst possible condition,” but I knew we’d be all right as long as the trio was with us.

“Okay.”

So...did we really free Snakey from the summoning circle? And were those black orbs actually there? No, stop that. Once you start questioning reality, there’s no end to it.

“Anyway, let’s go to the village watch. This definitely isn’t normal.”

“Yeah. Do you think Snakey is okay?” I was worried it might get captured again.

“Well, one thing is clear: Something’s changed.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because the adventurers are happy that it’s snowing.”

I followed Druid’s gaze and saw some adventurers merrily talking about the snow. *Oh, so that means I didn’t just imagine the rain changing into snow.*

“Well, it’s still too early to completely put our minds at ease.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

Druid and I turned to leave the adventurer guild. *Boy, I'm sure glad we figured that out before he asked the front desk if we could speak with Captain Tableau. Urrrgh, my head hurts so bad.*

"Druid? Ivy?"

"Huh?!"

I turned around at the sound of my name to see Guild Master Priya looking anxiously at us. It made me feel a little uncomfortable.

"Um, I'm terribly sorry for being so rude to you the other day."

Rude? The other day? What is he talking about? I looked at Druid, but he seemed just as confused as I was. When Priya saw our reactions, he looked bewildered in turn.

"We have a problem," Druid said.

I looked at him and saw that he was pressing his hand to his head. What was wrong?

"Ivy...remind me who he is?"

"Huh?! Why, he's Guild Master Priya..."

"Ohh...right. So he is."

"Mr. Druid?"

What's going on...? This is scary. I mean, why would Druid forget who Guild Master Priya is?

"Please forgive us, Guild Master. Our memories are a little wonky."

"Oh dear, are you all right? You both look awfully pale."

"We're fine, sir. And no need to apologize. It's water under the bridge. Anyway, please excuse us. We're in a hurry."

And with that, Druid took my hand and we scurried away. His forceful behavior worried me. *Um...this is my Mr. Druid, right?*

“Mr. Druid...”

“That summoning circle...it’s really dangerous.”

“Huh?!”

“I might be missing some of my memories. Are you okay, Ivy?”

Oh no! His memories are missing? Are mine missing, too? Um...I’m not sure.

“Ivy, stay calm. Take your time to think it over.”

I retraced our steps over the last few days and didn’t find anything that seemed odd in my memory. “I think I’m all right, but I’m not sure.”

“Okay... Well, let’s go see Captain Tableau for now.”

We quickly headed out onto Main Street to head to the village watch—only to stop in our tracks. *Ahhh, I don’t know how to get there.* Druid looked equally confused.

“Ha ha ha...where is it again?”

“I don’t think it’s very funny...but I just have to laugh.”

Apparently, I was also missing some of my memory. Our situation was so absurd that all we could do was laugh. But we had to calm down and find a way to look for the village watch headquarters.

“Hey, you two! Are you okay?” Priya asked.

I looked at him with a start. He was so worried that he’d followed us out of the adventurer guild.

“Should we let him help us?” Druid asked.

“Yeah. I think we need to solve this problem quickly, for more reasons than one.”

Chapter 277: Let's Check In

“YOU TWO may use this room.”

When we explained the basics of our situation to Guild Master Priya, he was quite startled. After Druid calmed him down, he took us to the village watch station, and we asked Captain Tableau to give us some time alone.

“Thank you, sir. Don’t worry, we’ll explain everything to you later.”

“It’s quite all right, Druid, Ivy. I know what kind of people you are, and I can tell this is a very serious matter. Take as long as you need; I’ll be nearby waiting for you once you’re ready to talk.”

Captain Tableau was acting completely differently than he had the first time we met him. He exuded a dignity befitting of a captain of the watch. It’s amazing how quickly people can grow.

Druid slumped into a chair with a heavy sigh. “This is just too much for my brain to handle now.”

“Are you all right, Mr. Druid?” Unless I was mistaken, he looked even worse than before.

“You’ve sure got grit, Ivy.”

I’ve got grit? I don’t really think so.

“I mean because you’re so calm, even at a time like this.”

“Well, that’s only because you’re here with me. And my creatures. Oh, I’d better take them out!”

“Sure. I’ll turn on the magic item.”

“Yes, thank you.”

At least we both remembered all of our safety procedures. I opened the lid to my bag.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Sora.

Mrrrow.

Ciel.

“Teryuuu.”

And Flame...is asleep. Okay, I know all their names. I looked at Druid. He nodded, showing me that he remembered them, too.

“Kuryu.”

And Number Four...Number Four? I peeked in the bag, and inside was a tiny little pitch-black slime!

“Ivy? I just heard a voice. Did I imagine it?”

“Where did you come from, little one?”

I reached into the bag and gently put the slime on the palm of my hand. Then I carried it over to show Druid. It was so tiny that it completely fit in my palm. And it was pitch-black to boot.



...It's just one problem after another, isn't it...?

"All right, let's start with the basics... Is this slime okay?"

I showed Sora and the others the new slime. Sora and Ciel jiggled, signaling that it was safe. *Okay, now that that's clear, one more push. Let's focus on the summoning circle now.*

"Fine, then we'll get back to this little one later. For now, we have to deal with the harmful effects of the summoning circle."

"I'll say it again: You've got grit, Ivy."

There was a deep respect in Druid's gaze... *Why, though? Was it something I did or said just now?* All I'd done was suggest we deal with our other problems later.

"Okay, what do we need to talk about right now...?"

"Our memories, right?"

"Huh?!"

"Hm? Was I wrong?"

I didn't think we needed to get into that at the moment. I glanced curiously at Druid, and he gave me the same expression right back. Silence fell between us for a while...then Druid chuckled softly and gave my head a little pat.

"What were you planning on doing, Ivy?"

"I was going to check in with Sora and the others to see what they know."

Druid nodded in reply.

"What were *you* planning on doing, Mr. Druid?"

"I thought we should talk over a few things, to find out just how much of our memories have changed and what parts are missing."

I think that's plenty important in its own right... "But if we both forgot the same things, how would we find out?"

“Ah, you have a point.”

First, let's ask Sora if we're safe. The slime jiggled in reply to both of us, signaling we were both safe, so the next step was to ask Sora and Ciel to join in our conversation. “Um... So, Sora, Ciel, I'd like to ask if you... Oh! Good morning, Flame.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

It's actually perfect timing that Flame's awake. Phew... I'm kinda nervous. It feels like the questions I'm about to ask them are incredibly important.

“I need to ask you something very serious, so please answer me, okay? Do you remember how we went deep into the forest a little while ago?”

They responded that they did remember. Druid, catching on to what I was trying to do, stared intently at the three creatures.

“Do you remember seeing Snakey?”

They answered that they did.

“Do you remember Snakey being trapped inside the summoning circle?”

They remembered.

“Was Snakey freed from the summoning circle?”

They said yes. *Thank goodness.*

“Oh no! I forgot about something really important.”

“What is it?” Druid asked.

“Do you think it's possible the creatures were also affected by the summoning circle?”

“Yeah, it is. Summoning circles can work on all living beings. Do you guys feel weird in any way? Like, do your heads hurt?”

The creatures answered that they didn't.

“Did that summoning circle affect everyone?”

They jiggled...meaning everyone was affected. But *how* were they affected? If they didn't feel anything wrong in their bodies, what if their memories were messed up like ours were...?

"Did it do anything to your memories?"

They didn't jiggle, meaning their memories were okay.

"Are you still under the summoning circle's effects?"

They answered "No." *So whatever the summoning circle did to my creatures isn't a problem anymore?*

Mrrrow.

"Ciel?"

Ciel hopped onto my lap and jiggled.

"Do you think maybe that big burst of magic energy from Ciel was what saved us?" Druid asked. That reminded me of the unusually powerful magic energy I'd sensed in the hole. "Come to think of it, there's no way Ciel would attack you with a huge surge of magic energy like that, Ivy. If Ciel possessed that much magic power, it would definitely be able to control it."

"Pu! Pu, puuu," Sora sang, bouncing around in agreement.

Oh, I see... So Ciel's magic energy must have ended the summoning circle's effects.

"Without Ciel's magic, I don't think we would have made it out of that hole."

Right. That hole... Wait, wasn't it a cave?

"Mr. Druid...did we find the summoning circle in a hole? Or in a cave?"

"Oh...yeah, it was a cave."

Right... It was a cave. At some point, it had become a hole in our minds. Yeah, a summoning circle that big couldn't fit in a hole; it would have to be a cave. Ugh, having my memory tampered with feels so icky.

“Anyway, let’s get Captain Tableau in here so we can talk it over with him.”

“Sure. Can we keep the creatures out of the bag?”

“Yeah...I’m sure we can. I think.”

When we opened the door to call Captain Tableau, we saw that Guild Master Priya and Vice-Captain Pith were with him. Considering the challenges that lay ahead, it would indeed be better to tell them, too.

“Mr. Druid, is it all right if Guild Master Priya and Vice-Captain Pith join us?”

“Yeah, they should probably know about this as well.”

Hearing Druid’s words, the other two followed Captain Tableau into the room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen. Come on in, we have a few things we need to discuss.”

Pith and Priya entered with Captain Tableau, only to turn to stone the moment they saw my creatures.

“What’s wrong, sir?”

I wish they’d hurry up and sit down already.

Captain Tableau took one look at my creatures, then stared at me. “Miss Ivy... you’ve forgotten to hide them.”

“Oh, no. I was thinking of introducing them.”

The words were barely out of my mouth before Pith scurried over to my creatures, looking incredibly excited.

“Rare slimes? Wow, I’ve never seen slimes like these before. Huh? These markings... I have a feeling I’ve seen them somewhere else... And what’s with this shifty-eyed slime?”

Hey. Rude. Flame’s eyes aren’t shifty; they’re sharp. Well, I guess when you add the sleepiness to it, Flame’s eyes are a little shiftier than most. Pity, it’s so cute otherwise.

“Easy now, Vice-Captain Pith.”

“But wow, *three* rare slimes all together at once. It’s just unheard of!”

Well, they are here, though. And there might even be four slimes, by the way, if you count the one in my bag.

“Never mind that. Just calm down!” Captain Tableau yanked on Pith’s arm and sat him down in a chair.

The last time I saw him, I thought Pith was the calmer one. This is getting kind of funny. Does Vice-Captain Pith have a weakness for rare things?

I let out a little giggle. Noticing this, Vice-Captain Pith cleared his throat several times and looked away.

Chapter 278:

I Have a Weakness for Rarities

VICE-CAPTAIN PITH, overcome with embarrassment over losing his composure, immediately got up from his seat. He stole a glance at Ciel, then quickly looked away and walked out of the room. Captain Tableau smirked at the sight. After a while, Vice-Captain Pith returned, in a relaxed state closer to the way he behaved at Rose's shop, with some tea for all of us.

"Do forgive me."

"It's all right," Druid said. This time it was his turn to be a little startled.

Guild Master Priya was averting his eyes...and from the shaking of his shoulders, it was clear he was trying his best not to laugh.

"Um, okay... The guild master told me a little about what's going on. He mentioned that your memories are hazy."

Captain Tableau cleared away the awkward feeling in the room by addressing Druid. Druid nodded and explained everything that had happened that day.

"First, I ask that you please hold your questions until the end. There might be parts of the story where my memories and Ivy's differ, but please don't worry about that for now."

Noticing the several cups of tea on the table, Druid nodded appreciatively to Pith, who smiled in reply and stole another glance at Ciel. He really did seem quite preoccupied with the creature. Since he'd mentioned that Ciel's markings looked familiar, maybe a part of him recognized it as an adandara.

"We went out into the forest today. This all happened in a spot about thirty minutes out of town."

Huh? Was it really that close? "Mr. Druid, it was actually an hour and a half away."

“Was it?”

“Yeah.”

Druid made a face. “I’m sorry, we’ll clarify where this happened later. Okay, so, we found this cave deep in the forest. Its entrance used to be caved in and nobody could get into it, but we found a new opening that had recently been made.”

“A cave?” Guild Master Priya reacted when he heard the word. Since he had said earlier that the cave where they used to mine magic stones had collapsed and was no longer accessible, he was probably happy to hear about the new discovery. *And that cave did have magic stones...I think...or maybe it didn’t... which was it?*

“And inside that cave, we found what we believe to be the guardian deity of this village: a giant serpent lying on its side.”

“What?!” All three men gasped in shock. I supposed none of them were expecting their guardian deity would come up in our story.

“But it was unconscious. We were worried about it, so we tried to get a closer look and... What happened after that?”

He knew something was wrong, but he couldn’t remember what it was. *Let me think...* “There was this creepy gray-colored... Yeah, I think it was this gray magic energy that was covering Snakey.” *Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s what happened.* “Sora, is that correct?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Oh, good. I’m right. “We couldn’t get close because of that magic, and poor Snakey looked awfully hurt as well.”

“That’s right. We had no idea what to do. But that’s when Ciel used its own magic energy to extinguish the energy that was causing the problems.”

As we took turns telling the story, deep creases formed in the foreheads of the three men.

“Then, after the creepy gray magic energy disappeared, Snakey went back to normal... Wait, I think something else happened before that.”

As I sat there, trying to remember, Druid thought of it first. “It was Flame’s magic stone. Flame made a new magic stone, and we used it to wake up the serpent.”

Ohh, that’s right. Flame made that beautiful, clear magic stone which woke up Snakey. “Okay, and then...”

“Please, wait a minute.”

“Yes, sir?”

Captain Tableau suddenly got up and left the room. I stared at the door, wondering what could possibly be going on. Then he returned a few minutes later, holding two sets of three kinds of magic paper, six in total. Then he wrote something on the papers and handed them to Priya and Pith. They read them, wrote something down, and gave them back to Tableau.

“Um, could we maybe get back to our story?” Druid asked.

“Mr. Druid, your memory loss seems to have dampened your vigilance,” Captain Tableau explained.

His vigilance has dampened? Druid and I exchanged glances.

“So, I’ve drawn up some nondisclosure agreements, stating that no one will repeat what is spoken in this room. Please sign.”

That meant the papers Captain Tableau had brought in were contracts. Druid looked over them, and I was also handed a copy.

PROVISION I: I will not repeat anything that Druid or Ivy say.

PROVISION II: I will not tell anyone about the rare slimes.

PROVISION III: If I break either of the above provisions, I will become a slave.

Moreover, I will pay damages, the amount of which to be determined by the party I’ve harmed.

Furthermore, if any information I obtain will be useful for the village, I may use it so as long as I hide my source for said information.

Is this agreement fair? It seems to weigh heavily in our favor. Well, they already wrote down their names, so I guess it's fine. Druid thanked Tableau, took his paper, and signed his name. As I was the last to receive a copy of the contract, I was the last to sign and hand it back to Captain Tableau. After checking over the signatures, Tableau handed Druid his copy.

“Captain Tableau...thank you. You were right to do this; we didn’t need to tell you about Flame’s magic stone.”

Is that really true, though?

“Okay, back to our story... So anyway, we found this giant summoning circle that appeared to be trapping the serpent... The next thing I remember, the rain turned into snow and we hurried back to the village to tell you about the summoning circle. Did I get that right?” Druid asked, looking at me for confirmation. It was correct as far as I could recall, so I nodded. But I had the feeling he was forgetting something... What was it?

“When we got back to the village, we noticed some of our memories had changed or were missing... Then Guild Master Priya found us and helped bring us here.”

When Druid finished the story, silence filled the room. The trio sitting across from us fell deep into thought, severe frowns on their faces. There was a heaviness in the air.

“Is everything okay, sirs?” I asked, worried by how long the silence was lasting.

Guild Master Priya smiled reassuringly at me. “Everything’s all right, thank you. It just took us a while to sort through everything. It was a lot to take in at once.” Priya had a sip of cold tea, then took a deep breath. “May I ask a

question?”

“Go ahead.”

Priya looked at Druid, his eyes dark and somber. “Could you please tell us the exact location of that cave? Naturally, as you were the ones who discovered it, we will give you a cut of any of the magic stones mined there.”

I figured that Priya would be quite interested in the cave because he was the guild master, but what did he mean by giving us a cut of the magic stones?

“I’m sorry, but based on what Ivy said earlier, I don’t think I could take you to that cave. My memory of it is very hazy.”

“Oh dear, that’s too bad.” Priya looked disappointed.

“But Ivy or her creatures might know where the cave is,” Druid added.

I didn’t think I could remember, either, so I awkwardly avoided all the hopeful pairs of eyes that were darting toward me.

“Do you know where the cave is, Miss Ivy?” Priya asked.

I shook my head no. “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure if I can trust my memory, either. Ciel, could you take us to the cave?”

Mrrrow.

Ciel’s cheerful reply was a relief to hear. “It can take us there. Thank goodness.”

I knew my adandara could guide us there without any problems. I looked at Priya, and for some reason he was eyeing Ciel and me in surprise.

“May I ask a question, too?” Vice-Captain Pith asked, raising a hand.

Druid nodded yes.

“About this slime named Ciel...is it really a slime? Those markings strike me as quite odd. Now, I’ve only seen them in books, so I don’t know what the real thing looks like, but those patterns are identical to the ones on adandaras.”

“Vice-Captain Pith, is that really the question to ask right now?” Captain Tableau sounded annoyed.

“Well, I just have a weakness for rarities!”

Come on, you don't have to announce it like that. See? You've embarrassed Captain Tableau and Guild Master Priya.

Druid, who was fighting back laughter, looked at me. I guess he was leaving whether to tell them or not up to me. *Hmmm...well, Sora did say they were safe, so I might as well.*

“You're right. Ciel isn't a slime. It's an adandara.”

“Wha?! Er... I mean...!”

Yup, a major overreaction from Vice-Captain Pith. I have no idea what he's even trying to say.

“Phew... Sorry about that. Let's take a little break. I'll go get some tea. Pith, pull yourself together before I get back, got it? I don't care what it takes, just *chill!*” Captain Tableau rose to his feet and gave his vice-captain's shoulder a firm slap.

“Ouch!”

“Cool it, man. We won't get anywhere if you don't snap out of it.”

Chapter 279:

A Very Loose Conversation

“I’M SO SORRY I keep doing this,” Vice-Captain Pith apologized, calmly bowing his head. He told us that he’d been a rare monster specialist when he was in his twenties. I didn’t know what that was, so he explained that he used to be an adventurer who was hired by tamers to find and catch rare monsters in the forest. I was surprised to hear that adventurers even had areas of specialization.

“But is it even possible to catch rare monsters, sir?”

“It’s easy as long as they’re weaker than you, but legendary monsters like adandaras are completely out of the question. They’ll kill you. And I said I was a *specialist*, but most of us caught simple creatures like common slimes and small monsters. Those who could catch rare monsters were rewarded handsomely, but you don’t come by those so easily.”

“Wow, that sounds like quite a career.”

“Um, I’m not sure how I feel hearing that from you, Ivy. You’re taking care of three rare creatures... But to be honest, I sort of stumbled into the job because I was just so obsessed with rare monsters to begin with.”

Vice-Captain Pith stole a glance at the creatures in my lap. They were all creeped out...er, I mean *scared* by Pith’s outburst, and they huddled up by Druid and me.

“Pith, can we get back to business now?” Captain Tableau asked.

“Yes, sir.” Pith’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. *He really must love rare monsters.*

“So, where were we?” Tableau asked.

The conversation had gone so far off the rails that everyone fell silent.

I finally answered, “I think we left off with Guild Master Priya...when he asked us where we found the cave?”

Everyone nodded slowly in agreement. Why was this conversation going slow as molasses? What happened to all that tension in the air from earlier?

“Right, that’s where we left off,” Captain Tableau said. “Okay, well, there are quite a few details I’d like to double-check. First, that giant serpent. Are you sure it’s the guardian deity of this village?”

I pictured Snakey in my mind...but I still couldn’t give him a confident answer because both Druid and I had only heard rumors about the guardian deity. We had no way to confirm if what we’d found was the real thing.

“Since we have no way of telling whether it’s real or not, we can’t say for sure that it was your guardian deity. But we’ve met that serpent several times already, and I’m quite certain that’s what it is,” Druid said.

It was especially likely because the serpent could understand us.

“Several times?! You’ve met it more than once?” Captain Tableau lifted his bottom off his chair and leaned forward.

“Yes,” Druid answered. “The first time we met was on our way to this village.”

Right, that’s where we met Snakey’s babies, too. Oh, that’s right! There must have been lots of those little black orb creatures in the cave as well. Yeah, I’m sure they were there.

“Not many adventurers here have met our guardian deity even once, let alone multiple times...” Vice-Captain Pith looked at us with envy.

Er, c’mon, get those sparkles out of your eyes... Wait, he said the adventurers at the guild have never met the guardian deity. Huh? But if hardly anyone has ever seen it, how can they figure out whether it’s the real thing?

“I guess we’ll have to go to the cave and see from the tracks it left behind if it was the actual deity or not.”

“Yes, I suppose so. The tracks will stay visible inside the cave, but they’ll still

be gone in a few days. We'd better hurry."

From what Tableau and Pith were saying, I understood that they did have a way to identify the real deity. But could they really tell? If there were two big serpents, I didn't think they'd be able to distinguish between the two. Unless the real serpent deity left behind a special sort of trail?

"I also need to ask what you can and can't remember. Just how much of your memory is missing?" Tableau asked, full of worry.

"We don't know for sure. Also, some patches of our memory feel strange, as if they've been warped."

"In what way?" Pith asked.

Druid thought for a moment. "That's a good question... Well, take the distance to the cave. Now, I remember it as being thirty minutes away, but Ivy says it's an hour and a half. We were traveling together, so our memories shouldn't be this different. That leads me to believe they were tampered with somehow."

He's right. An hour's discrepancy is quite extreme, especially since we were with each other the whole time.

"It might cause problems in your day-to-day life, too," Priya said.

Druid gave him a strange look. "Oh, no, I don't think our memories are that bad. Don't worry, we'll be fine."

Yeah, I don't know just how badly our memories were messed up, but I do feel like we'll be okay. Ciel got rid of that weird gray magic in a flash, after all.

"Got it. Since we can't do anything about your warped memories from the summoning circle, we'll contact the innkeepers where you're staying. We'll explain the basics to them and have them get in touch with us if anything happens to you."

"Thank you very much for that." Druid bowed to Captain Tableau, so I did the same. Now we would be okay if we forgot anything about our inn.

“And what about the gray magic energy?” Priya asked.

“We know absolutely nothing about it,” Druid answered.

The three men nodded. “I guess we’ll just have to go to the cave and examine that summoning circle ourselves. What do you think, Pith?”

“Yes, seeing it with our own eyes would be best. And that’ll mean going to the cave with as small a party as possible.”

It sounded like Tableau and Pith were going to go to the cave right away.

“I’m so sorry to pressure you, but could you please come with us?” Pith asked.

Druid nodded. He understood that we needed to work quickly, seeing as there was a memory-tampering summoning circle on the loose.

“Would you be willing to join us as well, Miss Ivy?”

I nodded.

Captain Tableau smiled and said, “It’s an honor to work with you, Miss Ivy.”

Hm? What’s going on? That sounded really strange to me.

“Also, you mentioned that you made a magic stone... Could you please tell us more?” Pith asked.

Captain Tableau looked uncomfortable. Since he knew that Flame could regenerate magic stones, he’d probably figured out that it had made this one. He looked like he was struggling for a way to explain it to Pith. But I was the one who leaked the information, so Tableau didn’t need to worry about it.

“Um, it was my tamed slime, Flame. It made the magic stone.”

“You mean to say your slime does more than digest things?” Priya looked at Flame in surprise. And no wonder, seeing as most slimes were used only for daily waste disposal. Even among rare slimes, there hasn’t been a single report of one having created anything. So Priya looked a bit perturbed by my explanation.

“Priya, Pith, you know all those red magic stones I’ve been giving you lately? Well, they came from these two.”

“What?!” Both men gasped, shooting doubtful stares at Flame. Pith even made a weird motion with his hands. Perhaps because it noticed this, Flame slinked behind Druid to hide.

“Pith, stop flailing your hands around! You’re scaring them!” Captain Tableau gave his assistant’s hands a slap. He looked down at his own fists and grimaced. Had he done it unconsciously? That made it even scarier...

“Sorry about that. Anyway, could you at least take us to the cave?” Captain Tableau asked, bowing deeply again.

“Yes, sir. Ivy, can you walk?”

“I can.”

When I knew we’d have to talk about the summoning circle and our lost memories, I’d been afraid we were in for a tense conversation...but with Pith’s jumpy antics, the discussion had felt quite loose from start to finish. Maybe the vice-captain had acted like that on purpose to relieve the tension in the air?

“Te! Ryu!”

I looked over to see that Pith was staring at Flame’s face at point-blank range. The slime looked anything but comfortable.

“Pith! We’re going!” Captain Tableau marched out of the room, dragging the vice-captain behind him.

I guess he really was just a jumpy guy after all.

Chapter 280:

Differences in Memory

WHEN WE WALKED OUT of the village, the gatekeepers gave us quite the array of bewildered looks. And it was to be expected, when you thought about it. We were just two average travelers, walking chummily into the forest with a guild master and the heads of the village watch. It was a little worrying when a gatekeeper asked me quietly if everything was all right. What could they have possibly imagined that would lead them to ask such a question?

“I think we ought to be okay now that we’re out here.”

“Yeah, I don’t see anybody around. It should be all clear.”

The three men with us listened to our conversation in bewildered confusion. I opened my bag, and three slimes bounded eagerly out of it. But since Pith was right in Flame’s way, it excitedly jumped right back into my arms. It seemed the vice-captain had made a bad impression on the poor slime.

Wow, Flame, you’ve gotten a lot stronger. I felt it for the first time then. I carefully peered into the bag they were all in... *There you are.* The tiny black slime was sitting completely still in the bag, probably asleep. I was curious about it for a number of reasons, but I quietly closed the lid and let it sleep for the time being.

“It’s okay, Ciel, you can return to normal.”

The three men—especially Vice-Captain Pith—had begged to see Ciel in adandara form, so I’d agreed on the condition that Ciel could veto the idea. At my signal, Ciel’s body became covered in a soft light as it returned to its adandara form. You could feel the excitement and fear from Tableau and Priya. And as for Pith...well, he just stood and stared. I’d imagined he would be the most excited of the three, but maybe I was wrong?

“Um, Vice-Captain Pith?”

“Wow... In my adventurer days, I once caught a glimpse of an adandara from very far away. But that really is an adandara, isn't it? Right before my very eyes... What a beautiful creature.”

Rather than excitement, he was in awe; I could see it in his eyes. Adandaras truly were rare monsters. I remembered that Druid's mentor was deeply moved when he met Ciel, too.

“Okay, let's do what we came here for first,” Captain Tableau said.

Pith sighed heavily in reply. He shook off his reverent emotions and walked through the forest, making marks on his map as he went. Ciel led us deep into the woods. We followed, taking note of the landmarks along the way, until Druid suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“What's wrong?”

Druid shrugged his shoulders. “I remember the cave being around here somewhere.”

I still didn't see anything that looked like boulders nearby. I guessed that meant our memories really were warped.

Mewww? Ciel asked, worried.

“Oh, sorry. It's okay, let's go,” Druid answered, waving a hand.

We walked for about another hour until we came upon the hill of boulders. Near them was the fallen entrance to the cave, and several meters away was the newly opened entrance. There was no mistaking it: This was the cave in our memories.

“This cave was recorded as being closed to mining about twenty years ago, due to a collapsed entrance,” Priya said.

That felt odd to me. A collapsed entrance could have easily been dug back out, so why didn't they do that?

“Um, sir, didn’t anyone think to just dig the entrance out again?”

It seemed to me like they could just move the boulders out of the way. Come to think of it, the cave they’d described as recently collapsed when we first arrived in town had showed no signs of human tampering, either.

“This hill has a mysterious energy to it.”

“Energy, sir?”

“Yes. With normal caves, you can dig out a collapsed opening, reinforce the boulders on the sides, and rebuild the entrance. But if you do that with this hill, the magic stones disappear.”

“What?!” Druid and I both gasped.

“We’ve studied this hill for years and still have no answer as to why that happens,” Priya answered. “All we know is that if a human hand tries to make an entrance to the cave, the magic stones disappear. So, we had to just surrender this one to nature.”

Surprised by his answer, I looked at the hill again. It was the kind of hill you’d see anywhere: a brown, rocky mass with plants ranging from yellow to blue mixed in here and there. I didn’t sense anything unusual about it—it was just a normal rocky mound. *Wait a minute, Druid said he’s been to this village many times before...*

“Mr. Druid, did you know about this hill?”

“No, and I don’t think I even heard rumors about it.”

So I guess he didn’t know about it after all.

“Oh, by the way, this information is a secret among the village leaders, so please don’t tell anyone.”

Guild Master Priya...please don’t be so careless. Well, I’m one to talk. We’ve got our own share of secrets.

“I think you should be a little more careful,” Druid warned the group, pressing

a hand to his forehead.

Priya and Tableau shrugged their shoulders, and Pith said, “I just get the sense that we don’t need to hide that information from you two.” Now Pith seemed fully on board with his logic, and he showed no signs of getting off that train.

Uh, please don’t think that way, you guys. Wow, we seem to have earned a lot of trust with these people without even realizing it. But seriously, what exactly did we do to make them so confident about us?

“Well, should we examine the inside? Oh, wait! Be sure to take one of these first.” Captain Tableau stopped on his way to the cave, suddenly remembering something. He pulled five blue magic stones with white lines out of his magic bag. “Hold one of these when you go into the cave.”

What beautiful magic stones... But what are they for?

“Ivy, these stones protect you from summoning circles,” Druid explained. “Hold it tight—don’t ever let it go, okay?”

The seriousness in Druid’s voice prompted me to squeeze the magic stone tight in my fist. I looked up at him and nodded firmly. *I promise I’ll never let go.*

“You sure have some rare magic stones in your collection, Captain,” Druid said, marveling over the blue stone.

“It was mined from the collapsed cave, actually.” Captain Tableau held his magic stone tight and cast his gaze into the cavern. “I’ll be the vanguard. Ivy, Druid, please follow behind me. Priya and Pith, take up the rear.”

Wait, what about my monsters? I want them to come with us, but we only have five magic stones, and Druid said monsters are also affected by summoning circles. Which means they’ll have to stay outside the cave for a while to be safe.

“Ciel, Sora, Flame, wait out here, okay? I don’t want the summoning circle to hurt you.”

“...Pu! Pu, puuu.”

...Mrrrow.

“...Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

There was a bit of a pause before their answers, but they all seemed to understand. I waved goodbye to the trio as I entered the cave. Since Captain Tableau was using a magic torch to light our way, I could see quite well.

“Huh?” I grunted.

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked.

“I think I remember we could see just fine without a magic item last time.”

“Hm? Oh...yeah, I don’t remember using a magic torch, but then again, I’m not that confident in my memory right now.”

He was right. Our memories were untrustworthy, so we couldn’t say for sure, but I really didn’t think we used a magic torch.

Captain Tableau guided us deeper into the cave. After a little while, we found ourselves in an open space. The summoning circle ought to come into view very soon.

“This is it!” Captain Tableau cried out from the open area that he had spotted the circle. Vice-Captain Pith and Guild Master Priya snapped to attention and checked it out. And by the looks of it, their prediction was right: Snakey had moved. I couldn’t see any traces of it being on top of the summoning circle like before, but now I was able to clearly see the circle in the wide, empty room.

“This doesn’t look exactly like it did last time, but what a disturbing impression it gives off,” Druid said.

I nodded in reply. The gray magic energy was gone, but the summoning circle was indeed there.

And it had a vibe that was nothing short of ominous.

Chapter 281: But Slimes Can Create, Too!

TABLEAU AND PITH sketched drawings of the summoning circle on pieces of paper while Priya activated a magic item and began doing something with it. I was a little surprised by this, since I'd just assumed they would return to the village for reinforcements right away. I never thought they'd actually start the work by themselves. Druid and I scooted back so as not to bother them while they worked.

Captain Tableau came over to us and said, "Thank you so much for bringing us here."

"No problem. Did you realize something when you looked at the summoning circle? I noticed you seemed quite shocked earlier."

Huh? Were they shocked? I hadn't noticed.

"Yes, we tried to hide our shock, but...you see, long ago, some people tried to capture our guardian deity. And this summoning circle resembles the one they used back then. But I've only seen drawings of it in the records passed down from the former captain, so I can't rely entirely on my memory. I'll have to check the documents later. But to be honest...I hope I'm *wrong*."

Huh? Wait, wouldn't what you just said fall into the category of information Druid and I shouldn't know about? I mean, it looks just like the summoning circle someone used to try to capture the guardian deity, right? I know we're still not sure if this circle was being used for the same reason...but it's definitely possible. So I really don't think he should tell people like Druid and me who saw the thing clearly.

"Captain Tableau, you trust us way too much," Druid said.

Aha, so he agrees with me!

“Huh?! Oh!” Tableau looked horrified. *I guess that means he ran his mouth without thinking? Well, it’s okay. We can always pretend we didn’t hear that.*

“I’m so sorry. I guess I got a little ahead of myself there. Honestly, if you’ll pardon my brashness, I’d like you to tell me if there’s *anything* about this situation that strikes you as odd.”

What does he mean by that?

“You see, the matter between us and the merchant guild’s former master still hasn’t been resolved yet. And I’m worried it’ll cause me to make a fatal mistake somewhere down the line.”

Yeah, I seem to remember hearing the merchant guild master was caught doing something wrong. Is that problem still going on?

“Are you worried that the former guild master’s accomplices have infiltrated the village watch?”

“Yes. That’s why I haven’t been calling for very much backup, especially with this summoning circle. If word of this leaks out, we could put our guardian deity in danger.”

Now it was all clear. So that was why the three men had investigated this on their own. Things can get rather stressful when you can’t trust your comrades—I remembered Bolorda saying something like that.

“Okay, now all of this makes more sense,” Druid said, nodding in understanding.

“I’m so sorry.” Captain Tableau bowed his head to the two of us. “This is going to put a burden on you both.”

“But we’ll help out however we can, right, Mr. Druid?”

“Yes, of course we will.”

Captain Tableau was clearly relieved to hear us say that. It looked like he was wound up pretty tight over this.

Then Priya's voice echoed through the cave. "This is going to take a while longer. Do you want to go back to the village?"

"No, we can wait here," Druid said. "That okay with you, Ivy?"

"Sure."

I watched as Captain Tableau ran back over to Priya and Pith, who had finished sketching the summoning circle and moved on to something else.

"Oh yeah! Mr. Druid, I just remembered something. May I ask, do most people assume that slimes only perform the task of waste disposal?" *Ack! There I go again, talking all polite to him.* "Y'know, what Priya said made me wonder."

The things we'd talked about back at the village watch headquarters just wouldn't leave my restless mind. I mean, there were slimes like Flame who also had the power to create things!

"*Average* and *rare* is a strange way to put it, but did you know that there are some slimes in the 'rare' category that are comparatively easier to find?"

"Yeah."

I did remember reading about rare slimes with extra-powerful digestive abilities and ones that specialized in disposing of unique items. And both of those types were easier to find and tame than other rare slimes.

"Right now, I think we only know about ten types of slime, and all of them are skilled at digesting things. In fact, digesting things is the only ability they have."

Are there really ten whole kinds of slime that are easy to trap? I had no idea there were that many.

"And most of the slimes that are difficult to find have nothing other than digestive abilities. Lately, more and more adventurers have started thinking that slimes *only* have the power of digestion."

So that's what everyone believes... Well, they really are good at digesting things. Sora can down an entire longsword in a matter of minutes, and Flame's potion-digesting powers are on par with Sora's.

“It’s definitely true that some slimes have other powers, but during the past several decades, not so much as a rumor of them has popped up.”

I guess that makes sense. If nobody sees those rare slimes or hears any rumors about them, people are bound to forget about them over time.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Huh?!” I spun around at the sound of Sora’s voice to see the face of a giant serpent right in front of my eyes.

“Whoa!” Druid yelped, also taken by surprise.

“Ergh!” My shock made me grunt in the weirdest way.

Snakey just stared back at us.

“Pu pu?”

“Teryu?”

Mew?

Hearing voices, I looked on top of Snakey’s head...and saw three slimes and the black orbs herded together. They’d all come in here to see what was taking us so long.

Should I introduce all the creatures to Captain Tableau’s party? Well, I guess I should ask the creatures in question first.

“Hey, Snakey, do you mind if I introduce you to those three men over there? They’re the captain and vice-captain of the village watch and the guild master.”

Snakey stared hard at the three men around the summoning circle. Then it looked at me and trilled “Krrr-rr!” with a single nod of its head.

“Thanks.” I gave Snakey’s nose a little pat. The way it narrowed its eyes to slits was so cute.

“Oh, Ivy, true to form as ever.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wouldn’t most people feel a little nervous if a giant monster appeared right in front of their face?”

Nervous? I stole a soft glance at my monsters playing atop the deity’s head. I didn’t think I could possibly feel nervous in the presence of that. I looked at Druid to find that he was also watching the little creatures. Sora and Ciel were bouncing freely on Snakey’s head. The black orbs were frolicking as well, so there was quite the party atop the giant serpent’s noggin.

Meanwhile, Flame looked like it was chewing on Snakey’s head for some reason. I gave the deity a worried glance, but it didn’t seem to mind. It even rubbed its nose against my hand. Maybe it felt good?

“Is it okay that Flame’s doing that?”

“It doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Huh. Yeah, I get it now... It would be impossible to feel nervous, looking at them.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the tired edge in Druid’s tone. *I guess we should ask the three men to come over here for introductions.*

“Captain Tableau, Snakey is here to check in on us.”

The three looked up at me from their work...and froze. Epically so. Pith even let the papers he was holding flutter to the floor.

“It’s quite all right, sirs. Snakey is very sweet. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

I tried to tell them they were overreacting, but for some reason, they still didn’t budge. I glanced at Druid to find that he was having a laughing fit. But why?

Chapter 282:

Excuse Me, Are You a Guardian Deity?

SILENCE HUNG IN THE AIR for several minutes. I finally got so worried that I called the three by name.

“Captain Tableau! Vice-Captain Pith! Guild Master Priya!”

They flinched at the sound of their names, but at least I got them to move. *Thank goodness. We can't have a conversation if they're frozen stiff.* I stole a glance at Druid. He had settled down quite a bit, but he was laughing again.

“Mr. Druid, it's not funny!”

“Sorry, my bad. It's just that they reacted exactly as I'd imagined.”

Exactly as he'd imagined? Does he mean he knew specifically how they'd react?

“Ivy, you look confused. Let me tell you, their reactions were quite normal.”

Normal?

“Is it really that shocking, though? Oh, was it because it came without warning?”

“Well...that's part of it, yes. It's just that it's terrifying for most people if a super-powerful monster suddenly appears in front of them.”

Terrifying? I looked at Snakey, who was a little ways behind me. *When I first met it...I guess I was a little scared. No, yeah, I was definitely scared.*

“You're right. I remember now. I was scared stiff the first time I saw it.”

“Uh-huh. Well, then again, you got over your fear very quickly and started talking to it.”

Did I? I probably decided Snakey was safe to talk to when I saw how

comfortable Sora and the others were around it.

“I have my creatures to thank for that.”

“No, Ivy, you have your carefree personality to thank, too.”

My carefree personality? “But I’m very cautious.”

“No, you’re not.”

Wow, he didn’t skip a beat to correct me. That kind of hurts. Wait, I am cautious, aren’t I? Do I have myself all wrong?!

“Miss Ivy...”

A soft voice yanked me out of my existential crisis. I looked toward it to find an incredibly nervous Captain Tableau with his equally frightened companions.

“Um, you don’t need to be so scared, trust me. Snakey is very kind.”

“Oh! Um, yes. It would seem so.”

The eyes of the trio all turned to the top of Snakey’s head. I followed their gaze to see Sora, Ciel, and the black orbs disappear from that spot, one after another. Wondering what was happening, I moved a little so I could see Snakey from the side...and found they had all slid down. They were using Snakey’s neck as a slide to get from its head to its trunk.

“Snakey, please do tell them to stop if they’re bothering you.”

Snakey gave a little nod in reply. It seemed to be paying mind to its head’s position so the creatures could keep sliding. *What a sweet deity. But wait, if it really is a deity, are we sure it’s okay for my creatures to use it like a playground?*

“So, um, is Snakey really your guardian deity?”

Vice-Captain Pith, who was slowly slinking up closer to Snakey, blushed a little and nodded dumbly. “From the markings, I’m almost certain it is.”

So it actually is the guardian deity. I stole a glance at my creatures. *Maybe I should stop them?* But Snakey looked like it was enjoying the attention. *Well,*

whatever. I'll only call them off if Snakey looks upset.

"I never dreamed I would ever see our guardian deity up close like this," Pith said. "Miss Ivy...I cannot thank you enough."

"Huh?! Oh, no, no, I didn't do anything."

Why is he thanking me? I glanced at Druid beside me...to see he wasn't there anymore. My eyes wandered in search of him, and I finally found him putting the overly eager black orbs that had fallen off Snakey back onto its body.

Oh, look! There's a bunch of black orbs on Druid's head now. Was there something about the top of his head that just attracted monsters to it?

"I feel like I'm staring through a window into a surreal dimension." Captain Tableau's bewildered eyes wandered from Snakey to Druid, then to Sora, and finally to me. Apparently, I was part of this bizarre world. *Funny he feels that way; I'm a little separated from them.*

"It doesn't bite, does it?" Priya asked.

I told him it didn't. Now that he knew it was safe, Priya slowly unfroze from his calcified state and cautiously approached Snakey. The only problem was that Snakey cast a glance at him with every step he took, which made him flinch. Finding the whole routine hilarious, Druid and Pith were both laughing into their hands. Since their shaking shoulders were a dead giveaway, I was sure Priya would notice them, but he had bigger things on his mind.

"So, this is Snakey, the summoning circle escapee I told you about. And these are its children."

I thought I'd start by properly introducing everyone, although it was a shame that I didn't know Snakey's real name.

"Children? You mean those black orbs?" Pith looked shocked.

Well, yeah. I know those black orbs seem way too tiny to be a giant serpent's children. Especially when they look completely different. But Snakey said they were its children when I asked about it earlier, so I know I'm not wrong.

“How do you know those black orbs are its children?”

“I asked Snakey, of course.”

“You can communicate with it?!” the childhood friends asked in impressive unison.

Wait a minute, haven't they noticed I've been talking to it this whole time?

“If I ask it yes or no questions, it nods. So, yeah, we can communicate.” I directed the statement at Snakey, who nodded delicately to confirm it. I guess it still had to be careful with the creatures using its neck as a slide. *It's at such a strange angle. Is it really okay?*

“Wow, that's amazing. Do you think it would answer me if I asked it questions?” Captain Tableau asked me as if I knew the answer. I gave him a strange look, and he made the same face in return.

“Um, why don't you just ask Snakey yourself, sir?”

“Oh, quite right. Sorry about that.” Tableau took a shallow breath and walked over to Snakey. “It is an honor to meet thee. I am Tableau, a lowly captain of the Hatow Village Watch. Pardon my asking, but might thou be the guardian deity of our village?”

Wooow, talk about polite. Maybe I should speak to Snakey with more respect? Wait, no. After the way I've behaved around it before, it'll know I'm putting on an act. Wait a minute...why isn't Snakey reacting?

“Oh dear...I don't think it'll answer me.”

Captain Tableau's voice sounded terribly disappointed. I could tell even from behind just how upset he was.

“Snakey, aren't you Hatow's guardian deity?” I asked.

It tilted its head at me in confusion. That meant it didn't know.

“Ohh, now I get it! The villagers just decided Snakey was a guardian deity all on their own! So maybe Snakey doesn't even know that's what you guys call it.”

“Without knowing for sure...” Captain Tableau muttered.

Now I can see why Snakey looked so confused. It didn't know how to answer when it didn't have an answer for me. Hm? I thought I heard Captain Tableau say something just now. I looked over at him to find him even more disappointed than before. Wh-what happened?

“You might be right,” Pith said, smiling cynically. “The people of Hatow probably just started referring to it as our guardian deity until it basically became true.”

Umm...this all feels very awkward. Is it my fault? Was it something I said? Oh well, I'd better give up. I just don't get it.

“Um, Snakey, the people of Hatow have been calling you their guardian deity, just so you know.”

And Snakey nodded gently in reply. That must have meant it understood.

Chapter 283:

Sorry to Be a Bother

I WATCHED FROM A BIT of a distance as Captain Tableau and his party interacted with Snakey. I didn't know what they were saying, but they looked much more comfortable now.

I was sitting on one of the many boulders that jutted out of the cave walls, and it was freezing my butt. I was starting to regret my choice of seating. I glanced at Druid beside me to see that the black orbs were still perched on his head. They seemed to really like him, and it looked like they had no plans of leaving. Sora and Flame were taking a little break from playing on my lap, and at my feet was Ciel, back in adandara form and sleeping soundly.

"Mr. Druid, they sure have taken a liking to you."

"Yeah, why is that? I've been taking them off of me, but they just keep happily climbing back up."

The black orbs couldn't jump, so they used their mouths to expertly crawl up Druid's body. It looked like quite the task to me, but they were enjoying themselves.



“It sure is a funny sight, isn’t it?”

I followed Druid’s gaze to see the three men, just as jittery as before, talking with Snakey.

“They all look like they’re having fun.”

“They do. That serpent is smart, and it’s been around for a very long time, so it must know quite a lot about the world. I’m sure this village considers it a treasure.”

I get it... It’s as though Snakey is a sort of witness to the history of this place.

“Pu! Puuu.”

“What is it, Sora?”

Sora looked at me, then in another direction. I looked over to see that darkness was gathering outside the cave.

“Oh! Mr. Druid, it’s getting dark outside.”

“Looks like it, yeah. We’d better head back before the sun sets.” Druid got to his feet, and the little black orbs all fell off him, plopping onto the ground like raindrops. “Agh, sorry! Are you guys okay?”

Druid looked worried, but the little orbs just merrily started climbing up him again.

“No, you guys, I’m sorry, but we have to go home. I can’t play anymore.”

They all froze in their tracks. Several pairs of eyes turned on Druid and stared hard.

“Wow...I feel incredibly guilty for some reason...”

I would feel guilty, too. Thank goodness they hadn’t chosen me. I left Druid to explain things to the little orbs while I spoke with Snakey and the others.

“Captain Tableau, we need to head back soon. It’s getting dark.”

The sun set so early in the winter. There was still a faint light in the sky, but it

would be gone before we knew it. And nights were dangerous in the forest, so we needed to get back to the village as soon as we could.

“It’s already that late?” Priya moaned, casting a glance at the cave entrance. Then, seeing how dark it was, he heaved a heavy sigh.

“Thanks for visiting with us today, Snakey,” I said.

It nudged its nose close to me, so I gave it a pat, and it nuzzled in even closer. *I just realized something: Snakey really knows how to control its own strength. Ciel used to come at me as hard as it could when we first met. I remember it would always knock me down.*

“Thank you, Guardian Deity. I swear to thee, we shall find the nefarious people who put this summoning circle here.” Captain Tableau bowed to Snakey. Priya and Pith followed suit.

We all gathered up our things. Before we left, Pith smashed a magic stone into the summoning circle. As I stared with rapt excitement, wondering what would happen, the stone split in two and a white light shot out of it. The light got sucked into the summoning circle, lifting it into the air and making it vanish.

“Wow, that’s impressive.”

“It’s one way of destroying harmful summoning circles. Even if you erase them, traces of them still remain.”

Since he said it was “one way,” there must have been other ways. Still, the way the circle had floated up into the air was nothing short of fantastical.

The sky was already dark when we left the cave, so we hurried back to the village. Captain Tableau’s party was worried about me, but I was good at power walking. Still, it was just too dangerous at night for me to walk alone, so Ciel let me ride on its back. I noticed the most envious look I’d ever seen on Pith’s face as we zipped past him.

When the village gate came into view, I got off Ciel’s back and returned everyone to their bag. The gatekeepers were all waiting with anxious looks on

their faces. At first, Priya was worried that something had happened in town while all the village leaders were gone, but it turned out they were only scared because we had all taken too long to come back. Captain Tableau and his party had to apologize several times for that.

“Let’s get back to the inn. We don’t want to worry Salifa,” Druid said.

“Okay.”

We said goodbye to Tableau’s party and hurried back to the inn. It turned out they were very worried about us, too, since it was supper time. It would be quite the ordeal for us to start cooking dinner so late, so we let the inn provide our meals.

Back in our room, I took my creatures out of their bag, lined up the potions for their supper, and headed back down to the dining hall. Dola, who must have had a spare moment, came over to talk as I sat to eat my dinner.

“What happened to you both? Weren’t you paying attention so you wouldn’t come back so late?”

He really was worried about us being gone as long as we were. Knowing it really was wrong of us to keep the inn staff in the dark on so many things, we defused the situation by promising to explain everything later.

After supper was over and the other patrons had gone back to their rooms or the game room, Dola came back over to talk with us.

“So? Did you folks get caught up in something horrible? If you’re in any trouble, please let me know.”

“Thanks, Dola.”

“Thank you, Dola.”

“I assume Captain Tableau will send over a full explanation soon, but we’ll give you the short version now.” Druid proceeded to explain to Dola everything that had happened that day. Of course, he left out the parts of the story he wasn’t at liberty to tell.

“Your memories are missing? Do you know who I am?” Dola asked.

Druid and I both stared blankly at him. Hadn’t he heard us both thank him by name a few minutes earlier?

“We remember. I mean, Ivy and I both said your name just a little while ago, Dola.”

“Hm? Ohh...right, that you did. Sorry, I’ve just never dealt with anyone who’s lost their memory, so I don’t know how to act.”

It certainly would be hard to deal with.

“I’m so sorry, Dola. But only some of our memories are missing, and it shouldn’t impact our day-to-day lives in any way.”

If anything did affect our lives... No, not if, *when*. Everything was just such a jumbled mess right now that thinking about it wouldn’t solve anything, because we didn’t know exactly *what* we had forgotten in the first place.

“Ah, I see,” Dola said, “Hmm... I guess the most troublesome things to forget would be money-related, or the things that can be the difference between life and death, like important potions and magic stones. Everything else, you can survive without remembering.”

Druid agreed with a little chuckle. I felt the same way, but that was quite the sweeping generalization there. Still, I supposed Druid and I ought to have a little talk about our money and our magic stones. You could never be too careful.

“You both must be exhausted. Take a nice hot bath and turn in early tonight, okay?”

“You’re right, we are pretty tired. Come on, Ivy.”

Yes, Druid and I both had sleepy eyes. All those trips in and out of the forest were bound to take their toll, especially with the memory loss halfway through.

“Thank you for supper, Mr. Dola. Please tell Salifa I said thanks, too.”

They might have had a hard time suddenly finding two extra plates of dinner

for us. I was too tired to thank Salifa in person that day, but I would make time to do it tomorrow.

Now that supper was safely in our bellies, exhaustion hit us like a brick. I guess the fear we'd both felt when we discovered we'd lost our memories was much bigger than we knew at the time. And even though talking things through with Druid had calmed me down and assured me that I'd be okay in spite of my missing memories, the original shock was still in my weary bones. Now that I was back at the inn and my belly was full, the fatigue of the day washed over me in an instant.

I managed to get myself into the bath on sheer willpower alone, then I wandered back to bed and flopped straight down on it. I didn't want to move anymore.

"Sora...Flame...Ciel...good night. Um, and Black Slime. Sit tight until morning, all right? I'm sleepy... We'll talk tomorrow...okay..."

I somehow managed to pry my heavy eyelids open to speak to the tiny black slime. It looked like it was jiggling in reply.

"Good night, Ivy... Good night, everyone. Sleep well, okay?"

I felt my head slowly being rubbed. As I lay there, thinking about how good it felt, all the sounds around me vanished into the darkness.

Chapter 284: Still So Small

I SLEPT WONDERFULLY, like a log. As I sat up in bed and stretched my arms, I noticed the sunlight peeking through the cracks in the curtains. Since the sky had been gray every day since the rains started, this seemed a little odd. I parted the drapes and...

“Ooh, it’s a winter wonderland!”

When we got back from the forest the previous day, the snow had stopped. I’d been dreading that this meant it would rain again, but my fears were all for naught. Before my eyes lay a town blanketed in white. *So I guess this means we’re back to a normal winter? Gee, I sure hope so.*

“Morning, Ivy.”

“Good morning, Mr. Druid. It snowed!”

“Yeah, looks like it.” Druid got out of bed to go to the window and look outside. Unlike other towns I’d been in, snowy Hatow had windows that were small and double-paned. When you had two panes of glass, the space between them created a good insulation against the cold.

“Ivy, we can go hunting now that it’s snowed.”

“You mean for the monsters that only come out in the snow, right? Yeah, I’m excited. Oh, wait! We’ll need to go to the dump and get the stuff to make traps first.”

“You get materials for your traps at the dump?”

“Huh?! Um, yeah, of course I do.” *Why did he look so confused to hear me say that?*

“Well...I guess it doesn’t matter. Okay, how about we go to the dump after

lunch?”

“Sure.”

Okay, so today’s plan is: Go to the dump to get materials for traps. Oh, but what about the new slime? I looked over at my bed. Everyone was still asleep on it, tired from all that playing the day before. *There’s Sora, Flame, and Ciel... Wait, it’s not there?* I couldn’t see the tiny black slime. Was it sandwiched between the other creatures?

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find the black slime.”

Druid helped me look around and under the bed for it, but it was nowhere to be found. I looked at the clock and saw it was already time for breakfast.

“Let’s have a good look for it after we eat. We owe it to Dola and Salifa to show them we’re doing okay now after all that worrying we made them do yesterday.”

“Oh, good idea. Right, the creatures! Good morning, guys, I’ll just put your potions here. Eat them whenever you want, all right?”

“We’ll be right back after breakfast, okay?” Druid waited at the door while I gave everyone a goodbye pat on the head. Then I walked over to join him and...

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Pefu!”

“Hm?” Druid and I mumbled at the strange noise. It was quieter than the others, but we definitely heard it. We scanned the room but still couldn’t see where it had come from.

“Let’s go eat first.”

“Okay.”

We left our room and locked the door behind us. The quiet little voice was concerning, but first we had to make an appearance at breakfast so our hosts wouldn't worry about us. I also wanted to thank Salifa for the special dinner.

"Good morning...good morning..." We greeted the other guests as we walked through the dining hall. Since we had seen one another around for several days by then, we were all quite friendly with each other. Our breakfast arrived as soon as we sat at the table.

"Are you two feeling better today?" Dola asked with a look of relief in his eyes at the sight of us.

"Yes, thank you," Druid said. "And sorry we worried you yesterday."

"I'm just glad you're okay. Oh, by the way, the village watch sent me some information about your memory loss. Salifa was really worried. She'll probably pop in to check on you later, so please put her mind at ease, okay?"

"Of course. Sorry about everything..."

We watched Dola scurry back to work, and then we started our breakfast. Salifa's handmade bread was delicious as ever, and I couldn't stop eating it. As we sipped our after-breakfast tea to settle our stuffed stomachs, Salifa walked into the dining hall. She marched straight over to us, gave us both a hard looking over, then smiled and said "Oh, thank goodness you're okay" with a sigh of relief. I felt just awful to see how worried she'd been about us.

"I'm so sorry we caused such a scare, ma'am. But don't worry, the memory loss hasn't affected our ability to function in our day-to-day lives."

"But you still don't know for sure, do you? That's just a *little* scary. Oh, I know! Why don't you have supper in the dining hall again tonight? I'll feel much better if I see you two are eating well."

Druid looked at me for my opinion, and I gave him a questioning look right back. Salifa giggled over the similarity of our actions.

"Should we take her up on the offer?" Druid asked.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

“Wonderful! I’ll make an extra-good supper for you both tonight.”

“But your cooking is always excellent, ma’am,” I said.

Salifa’s face softened into a proud smile. “Oh, Ivy, you are such a charmer.”

But I really meant it. This bread alone was excellent, and her soup was always delicious because of the way the vegetables changed up its flavor. *Not a day passes where I’m not grateful that we found this inn.*

“Oh, could I trouble you to teach me how to cook something else, Ivy?” Salifa said.

“Are you sure, ma’am? If anything, I’d love for *you* to teach *me* how to cook.”

“Aww, you’re so sweet. How about we teach each other?”

Gee, Salifa’s smile sure is therapeutic. We set a date to teach each other some recipes, then she returned to the kitchen to get back to work.

“Wanna head back to our room?” Druid asked.

“Yeah. I think my stomach’s settled enough to walk now.”

“I noticed you’ve been eating a lot more since we came to this inn, Ivy. You even have bigger lunches now, too.”

Druid sounded happy about that, but I was a little worried. *I really shouldn’t be overeating.*

“I’d feel a little better if you’d eat just a bit more.”

“Huh?!” *Eat a bit more?!*

“You’ve been having bigger portions, but you still don’t eat as much as normal nine-year-olds, Ivy.”

“You mean they eat more than I do?”

“Um, yes? Do you see the girl at that table over there?”

“Yeah, the redhead, right?”

“Right. She’s only seven, but she eats more than you do.”

She’s seven? Huh? Wait, we’re the same height, aren’t we? But she’s two whole years younger?

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking she looks awfully big for a seven-year-old.”

“Hmmm...well, you’re right, she is a little on the big side. She’s not that much bigger than other seven-year-olds, though.”

Oh, that’s interesting. Maybe I’ve been thinking all the kids I meet are a little older than they really are.

“I’m still small, aren’t I?”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll grow.” Druid gave my head a couple gentle pats, and the weight in my heart floated away.

“Hiii, we’re back,” Druid and I called out as we entered the room. The potions were all gone.

“Ciel, are you sure you don’t need to go hunting yet? Are you hungry?”

Mrrrow.

I guess it’s okay. “Let me know if you get hungry, all right? Promise me.”

Mrrrow.

Okay, now let’s find that black slime. Druid was already checking around our beds. I looked for a little while, too, but I didn’t see it.

“Black slime...where are you?”

“Pefu!”

That voice...I think it came from the part of the room where we keep our stuff...

“Please come out.”

“Pehhh.”

I'm not sure why, but that sounded like a whiny "nooo."

"It sounds like a very interesting little friend has joined our party," Druid observed.

"Yeah."

"You know, I just realized that black stain on Flame is gone now."

I looked at Flame, who jiggled happily back at me. Druid was right. The black stain it'd had for a while was no longer there. It really was gone.

How funny would it be...if the black stain had turned into the same black slime we're looking for right now... Come to think of it, when Flame was born, that red patch on Sora vanished completely, too.

Chapter 285:

A Different Kind of Companion

“FOUND YOUUU!”

When my search with Druid yielded no results, we asked Sora and Flame where the black slime was. Sora bounced on top of our travel bag, and one moment later...

“Pu!”

I quickly removed Sora from the bag and checked inside...where I saw the little black slime staring up at me. *I guess I should've asked Sora first. We would have saved a lot of time.*

“Sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk yesterday,” I said.

“Pefu!”

“Can you come out of there for me? Let’s have a chat.”

Unlike Sora and Flame, this little black slime’s body was already quite sturdy. When it came out of the bag, it jumped normally. The only difference was that it was too small to cover much distance. Watching the little thing hop with all its might just made you want to cheer.

“Pefu?” The black slime, now out of the bag, looked up at me.

“I’ve made us some tea. Why don’t we drink it while we talk?” said Druid.

He’d made the tea while I wasn’t looking. I thanked him, then extended my hand to the little black slime. It understood what I wanted and bounced into my palm.

“Thanks,” I said.

“We have plenty of time to talk before we need to go to the dump,” Druid said.

“Okay.”

After setting the black slime onto the table, I sat in a chair and studied it. It seemed quite interested in my cup of tea.

“Be careful, it’s hot.”

It glanced at me for a moment, but its eyes quickly returned to the tea. Then something long and thin squigged out of its body and plopped gently into the tea.

“Peh!”

Guess it was too hot. The slime yanked its appendage out of the tea and flapped it in the air to cool it off. I was worried it had burned itself, but I was even more concerned about the thing it was waving around.

“Is that...an arm?” I wondered.

“Or maybe...a tentacle?” Druid speculated.

But slimes don’t have arms or tentacles, right? Wait, do they?

“Mr. Druid, do you know of any types of slimes that have tentacles?”

“Umm...I feel like I read something a long time ago about slimes with tentacles...”

A long time ago?

“Might I ask how big those slimes were?”

“I don’t remember that much. I wasn’t all that interested in slimes back then.”

Too bad. But there’s an old record about it, eh? I wonder if we can research this slime somewhere. Well, anyway, this slime is definitely rare. Especially with the tentacles.

“Um...are you okay?” I asked it.

“Pefu!”

Huh? I stared hard at the black slime. It was missing something that Sora and

Flame had.

“It doesn’t have a taming symbol.”

“Of course it doesn’t. You haven’t tamed it yet.”

“Hm?”

“Huh?!”

Oh, right. I don’t think I’ve told him yet. “Um, so I think this slime is probably Flame’s baby.”

“Really? You mean the same way Sora gave birth to Flame?”

“Probably, yes. I can tell because Flame’s black stain is gone now.”

“Pefu!” the black slime answered me. It looked quite pleased with itself.

“Is that the slime’s way of saying you’re right?”

“Yeah, I think it is.”

“Wow. So you’re that black stain on Flame...” Druid leaned in close to get a good look at the black slime. Then he looked at Flame, who was asleep on the bed. “How do you think the black stain turned into a slime?”

“I dunno... I never really thought about it. I just figured that was how it’s done.”

After Sora split in two and Flame was born, I simply assumed that was how slimes reproduced. I remember being startled when I told Druid my theory and he said I was wrong... Well, let’s get back on topic.

“So anyway, Flame already had the taming symbol when it was born.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So I just assumed that a tamed slime’s symbol would be passed down naturally when it gave birth...”

I checked over the black slime again and again, and still no taming symbol.

“You’re right, I don’t see a symbol. Maybe because it’s second generation?”

Aha...that's definitely possible. To test that theory, we'd have to make Flame have another... No, let's drop that thought.

"So, little black slime...is it okay if I tame you?"

It stared back blankly in response.

Does that mean no? If it would rather be independent, I'm fine with that.

"I don't think it wants to be tamed," I said.

"Are you okay with that?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I mean, couldn't you just tame it by force?"

"Why would I ever do that?"

If I forcibly tamed that slime, I didn't think we could share the same connection that I had with Sora and my other creatures. And anyway, I didn't have enough magic to do it.

"Well, I guess that is something you'd say, Ivy."

I gave Druid a funny look, then turned back to the black slime and said, "Would you like us to set you free in the forest?"

Another blank stare.

Huh? It doesn't want that, either?

"Would you rather stay with us?"

"Pefu!"

"Umm... So, do you want to travel with us, too?"

"Pefu!"

It didn't want to be tamed, but it did want to travel with us. It seemed like we'd just made a different kind of friend. *Oh, right, if we're going to be travel companions, we'll need to give it a name.*

“Is it all right if I give you a name?”

“Pefu!”

Ooh, it's okay with that!

“Mr. Druid, can you help me think of a name?”

“That’s our Ivy being Ivy.”

I’m being me? Um, isn’t that redundant?

“C’mon, don’t make that weird face. I meant that you’re very kind.”

“Am I?”

Druid called me things like “kind” and “gentle” and “sweet” a lot...but all of those words applied to him, too.

“A name for the black slime... I wonder what would be good?”

I looked at the black slime, which was reaching its tentacle into the tea again. It was cooler now, so I didn’t have to worry about it getting burned. *Does it like water? Stop that, Ivy, you need to think of a name. Umm, black, black... Blackie? I’m sure that came from Past Me’s memories. I dunno, I don’t think I really like that name... The only other one I can think of is “Sol.” What does that mean again...? Earth? Sun?* Since it came from the memories of my past life, it was all a little hazy. *But Sol...huh... I think Earth or Sun would work... A slime that fits in the palm of my hand named Earth? Or Sun? You know, I think I like it.*

“What do you think of Sol? I think it means either Earth or Sun.”

“Sol? Earth? Sun? Oh, are those from your past life memories?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s quite a name for such a tiny slime.”

“I know, but what do you think of Sol as a name?”

“Pefu!” it jiggled, waving its wet tentacle around.

“Agh!”

“No! Don’t flap at us!”

“Peh?”

“The liquid on your tentacles gets everywhere, so don’t flap them when they’re wet, okay?”

“Um, Ivy, don’t you think you shouldn’t let it put its tentacles in your tea in the first place?”

“Er...heh heh heh!”

He’s right. He’s absolutely right.

“Anyway, since you like the name, welcome to the family, Sol!”

“Glad to have you with us, Sol,” Druid added.

“Pefu!” Sol raised a tentacle straight and high. I got the sense it was giving us a very favorable answer.

“Sol, I also don’t want you putting your tentacles in my tea, okay?”

There was that blank stare again.

“I don’t think it’ll go along with that one.”

“It didn’t have to get so upset about it. You know, Sol has quite the range of expressions.”

“It sure does. Hey, Sol, are you going to grow at all?”

Sol had nothing to say to that, either.

Since it didn’t answer, I guess that means it’s already fully grown. We’ll have to be careful not to lose track of it; it could easily worm its way into all sorts of hard-to-reach places. And there’s one more thing...

“What do you eat, Sol? Potions?” I’d never seen black potions before.

Silence.

“You don’t eat those?”

I guess we'll have to show it a lot of different pieces of trash at the dump and see how it reacts. I suggested a bunch of items but got no reaction to any of them.

"What *do* you eat?" Druid was starting to look worried.

"You do need to eat, right?"

"Pefu!"

Since nothing was coming to mind, I confirmed that it needed to eat in the first place. And it answered that it did, though I guess I should have known that.

"Oh dear. What should we do, Mr. Druid? Can you think of anything else?"

Druid heaved an exasperated sigh. "Let's just go to the dump and see what Sol does."

Yeahhh...I guess we'll have to go with that. Gee, I'm thirsty.

"Oh, Ivy, look! Your tea!"

"Agh! It's all gone!"

Sol had drunk up all the tea. *Oh well...I think it'll be okay.*

Chapter 286:

Sol Food

WE TROMPED OFF TO THE DUMP, leaving fresh footprints in the snow. Ciel was back in its true form, frolicking mightily in the drifts. Sora was also merrily body-slammng the adandara as it played. It was their usual way of having fun, but since Ciel was in particularly high spirits today, it was much more intense. Sora was bouncing in every direction.

“I feel like Sora is treating Ciel kind of ridiculously... Oh, it jumped away.”

I watched Sora fly straight into a tree. A big pile of snow landed on it.

“Ahh! Sora!” I ran over to dig it out of the snow, but the pile jiggled and Sora jumped right out. Its momentum carried it all the way back to Ciel.

“I guess it’s okay,” Druid observed.

“Yeah, Sora seems to be getting stronger every day from playing like that.”

“You can say that again. Well, I guess if that’s the way you play all the time, you’ve got no choice but to toughen up.”

He was right: That was quite a violent way to have fun. Sometimes their playing got so intense that I wondered whether it was only a game. That was just how much their playing had gone berserk...*evolved*, rather. It was hard to believe that Ciel used to do nothing more than toss Sora around with its front paws.

“Looks like Flame and Sol don’t want to come out of the bag,” Druid said.

“Yeah. I checked on them, and neither of them has even the slightest desire to come out. Do you think they don’t like the cold?”

“Hmm...slimes are supposedly resistant to both heat and cold, but then again, we can’t rely on conventional slime knowledge with these guys, can we?”

I chuckled.

No, we can't. No matter how much research I've done on slimes, I've never found anything that applied to Sora and Flame. Maybe we really should check out older records.

"Mr. Druid, where could we find some older records?"

"Libraries in big cities ought to have them, especially the capital. We won't be able to access the classified documents, though."

Oh, so they have libraries here. I guess smaller towns wouldn't have those records, though. And for that matter, isn't the area around the capital the only place where you can even find big cities? I guess our search lies in the future, then.

"What are the classified documents like?" *Do they have anything on rare slimes in them?*

"Well, take this village's guardian deity. It's a giant serpent monster, but since the villagers think of it as their guardian and it's become very important to them, all documents pertaining to it are probably classified and hidden from the public. It's true with other villages, too. Any documents about monsters that are considered very important tend to have their access restricted."

Aha. So, if a slime were significant to a certain village, I guess you'd have to go to that village to read the documents about it. Actually, no, even if you did go there, you probably still wouldn't be allowed to see the documents.

"Wow, look at the dump. It's pure white."

Oh, wow! Yeah, the blanket of snow is making it impossible to see anything. For that matter, the dump looks so different with snow on it that I didn't even notice where we were.

"Wow, even the dump is pretty when it's covered in snow."

It looked like a giant white plaza.

"It's weird, though, knowing what's under all the snow."

“Hahaha! Yeah, true.”

My, how white everything is. It's going to be quite the task finding everything we need in these conditions, but we've just gotta do it!

I checked over my list of items I'd need to make the traps. They were all things I always saw at dumps, so all I had to do was find them.

Okay, let's do this! I stepped into the dump and was about to scoop the snow out of the way with my hands when Druid stopped me.

“No! Wait! If you dig like that, you'll definitely catch cold. Let's use an item.”

An item? I gave Druid a curious look and ran back over to him to find he'd pulled a stick out of his magic bag. He set it on top of the biggest drift of snow covering the dump. After a while, the snow began to melt around the stick.

“Wow! It's melting the snow!”

“This is the magic item they use to clear snow off the roads in villages and towns. Well, it's a miniature version of it, of course.”

I stood there and watched...and after a while, I could start to see the trash under the melting snow. Noting this, Druid moved the stick to a different position to dissolve more snow.

“The sticks they use to clear the streets are much longer, and they can melt much wider areas of snow. This item's range is limited, as you can see.”

The melted area was about the size of an adult's arm span.

“Oh, no, I think it's more than adequate. In fact, it's a lifesaver.”

“You really gave me a scare when you tried to scoop the snow with your hands.”

“Well, I didn't know you had such a handy item in your bag.”

In my birth village of Ratomi, I'd never seen a magic item like that. It never snowed enough there to even call for such an item.

Druid moved the magic item again and again until all sorts of trash peeked out from under the snow. I was a little sad to see the pretty snow go, but I shook off my blues and started looking for what I needed.

“The thing we need the most is rope, I assume,” Druid said.

“Yeah.”

The monsters Druid told me about that only came out in the winter were much bigger than any I’d trapped before, so I needed stronger rope, too.

“I can’t find any long pieces.”

“They don’t have to be long,” I told him. “We can always tie them together.”

“But wouldn’t that weaken it?”

Weaken the rope? I dunno, I think I tie them together pretty tightly.

“If the rope is weaker, couldn’t we always double it up or something?”

“I guess that would work for the traps we have in mind.”

We collected the things we needed: rope, baskets, and mesh bags.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Um...huh? When did I take the slimes out of their bag? I looked under the tree where I’d left our things and saw that the slime bag’s mouth was wide open. I looked in the direction where I’d heard their voices. I didn’t see Ciel, but I spotted the three slimes right away.

“Ivy, did you leave the bag open?”

“No, I didn’t. That wouldn’t be fair to Flame, since the cold would wake it up from its nap.”

“Yeah, I thought so.”

And yet the bag’s mouth was opened wide. *Come to think of it, Sol also got*

into the bag this morning...

“Do you think...maybe Sol opened the bag?”

“Probably, yeah. So I guess our new friend is a bag-opening slime.”

If Sol ever goes missing, will we need to check all our bags to find it? That sounds like a hassle. I'd better tell it which bags it's okay to be in up front. Now, where did Ciel run off to? I know it should be okay out there, but I still worry...

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Pong.

I glanced over at the familiar sounds. Flame was merrily regenerating magic stones. Sora was grandly swallowing swords for lunch. And Sol was... *Huh?*

“Mr. Druid...what...is *that*?”

“What’s up? Um...er, yeah, even I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Not far away from Sora and Flame sat Sol. All sorts of black fuzzy things were floating around it. Druid and I stared in silence at the surreal sight for a while until one of Sol’s tentacles suddenly grabbed one of the black fuzzies and ate it.

It was just such a shocking sight that we forgot how to speak for a few moments. But when we saw Sol chomp on another one of the black things, we realized it was having its lunch.

“Is that its food?”

“Looks like it.”

Okay, so those black fuzzy things are food. Sol swallowed all the black fuzzies floating around it, then bounced over to a different spot. The slime sat there for a while until another big bunch of the fuzzies appeared out of thin air all around it. Then Sol used its tentacles to eat them.

“Those black thingies...how do you think we’re supposed to take them back with us?”

“Maybe...a bottle?” Druid suggested. “Wait, we need to find out what those things are first.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Well, at least we found out Sol gets its food at the dump. That's good news... or is it?

Chapter 287: Magic Energy?

“HEY, SOL, is it okay if I touch these things?” Druid asked, pointing at the black fuzzies floating around the slime.

“Pefu!”

That meant it was fine. Druid also seemed to understand what Sol was saying. He carefully reached out to grab one of the black fuzzies, but he couldn’t catch it. The moment it touched his hand, it vanished into thin air.

“Huh? This sensation...is it magic energy? Hm? Wait, *are* these things magic energy?”

Magic energy? Oh! Now I remember Druid telling me that the older texts described magic energy as being like a black haze. I didn’t pay attention to it back then, but they said magic energy was black in color. I wonder if there are people out there who can see the color of magic? Or maybe magic used to have a visible color but doesn’t anymore?

“No mistaking it...this is magic energy.” After he had made several of the black fuzzies disappear, Druid was sure of it.

“Pefu!” Sol sounded a little upset, probably because Druid had made its lunch vanish.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Druid apologized. “I was just trying to see what they were.”

“Sorry about that, Sol,” I chimed in. I’d be upset if somebody stole my lunch, too. Sol jiggled a bunch, materialized more black fuzzies out of thin air, and started chowing down again. “Mr. Druid...where do you think it’s getting that magic energy from?”

“Probably the trash.”

That's right; trash has magic. That was another thing Druid told me before. Okay, so it's gathering the leftover magic energy from all this trash.

"How do you think it does it?"

"Um...I dunno?"

As I stood there, watching the bizarre feast, a shiver ran through my body. "Mr. Druid, let's just get the rest of what we need and head back. I'm cold."

"Yeah, good idea. By the way, where did Ciel go?"

"I'm not sure. I've been looking, but I don't see it anywhere."

Druid helped me scan the area, but we couldn't see the creature from where we were standing. Our eyes landed on Sora and Flame, who were both eating their lunch like nothing was wrong. And Flame had regenerated a huge number of magic stones, even more than usual.

"It looks like everything's fine, at least," Druid said.

"Yeah."

"Let's just finish up our errands for the day."

We picked up the things we needed, talking about them as we went. After we were done with that, we gathered potions for Sora and Flame. We had already collected enough to last the winter, but we wanted some extra ones for insurance.

"Should we call it a day?"

"Yes, sireeeee!" I stood up and stretched my hunched back. Boy, did it feel so good. "Hey, guys, we're leaving the dump soon, okay? Wow, Flame, look at you!"

There was a huge pile of red magic stones with Flame at its center. My jaw dropped a little at the massive amount.

"Wow, Flame...you've outdone yourself." Druid held back a laugh as he took two sacks out of his bag and handed one to me. I filled it with magic stones, and

I kept finding more... *Just how many stones did Flame regenerate, anyway?*

"How many did you find?" Druid asked.

"Thirty-eight. And you?"

"Thirty-two."

So, all together, that's sixty-ten? But doesn't Flame need a lot of magic energy to regenerate magic stones?

"Flame, are you feeling all right? I hope you didn't tire yourself out."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Yeah, sounds okay to me. I guess regenerating magic stones isn't a strain on Flame at all. If anything, it seems to energize it.

"As long as you're okay, then I'm fine with it. Just don't overwork yourself, got it?"

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu!"

Ugh, you're so cute. It was jiggling and bouncing with even more vigor than usual, probably trying to show us just how healthy it was. I put Sora, Flame, and Sol into their bag, then we stepped out of the dump. After walking a few meters away, we stopped and I scanned the area for auras.

"So? Are you sensing Ciel's aura anywhere around here?"

"I don't feel any auras."

"Oh dear."

I hope nothing happened to it. I opened my bag and looked at the slimes. "Do you know where Ciel went?" There was no reaction from any of them. *I guess they don't know.* "Ciel is coming back, right?"

A worrying thought had been gnawing at me: *What if Ciel's run off for good?* But all the slimes jiggled right after I asked my last question. I sighed in relief. *Oh, good. Ciel is coming back. I guess that means we should wait here a while longer until... Oh!*

“Mr. Druid, I sense Ciel’s aura coming toward us. It’s almost...” Just after I said that, I heard something very large fall to the ground behind me. I whirled around to see Ciel holding a white object in its mouth. At a closer glance, the white thing had legs...

It was a monster.

“Oh, were you off hunting? You had me worried sick, you big silly!” It was a relief to see it was okay.

“Oh, look at that!” Druid cried when he saw the prey Ciel had in its teeth.

“Mr. Druid, do you know what this monster is?”

“Yes, it’s a type that only come out when it snows.”

“Is it one of the monsters we’re trying to hunt?”

“No, the monsters we’re after are more like rabbits. This isn’t one of them. It’s called, uh...I think it’s a bearth.”

I looked at Ciel. It set its kill down by my feet and rubbed its nose in my face, just like it did the first time we met.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

That was its way of telling me it was a gift. If I rejected it, Ciel would be heartbroken, so I had to take it. I was honored to get the present from the adandara, anyway.

“Wow, Ciel, you’re a wonderful hunter.”

Mewww.

Ciel, you look so pleased with yourself. Just look at all the snow your tail is stirring up. Well, at least it’s not a dust cloud.

“Okay, now that we know the winter monsters are out, wanna try to get those traps set up tomorrow?”

“Sure, but we have to butcher this first.”

“No, let’s take it to the adventurer guild as is.”

“We’re not butchering it?”

“This kind of monster’s pelt and organs are valuable, so the guild actually wants to get the carcass as fresh as possible.”

“Oh, interesting. Okay, let’s hurry back to the village, then.”

Druid was about to pick up the bearth, but Ciel whisked it back into its mouth and started marching ahead.

“Thanks, Ciel.”

Ciel happily wagged its tail in reply. Once we were close to the village, the adandara gave the bearth back to us.

“Thanks.”

Mrrrow.

Ciel shapeshifted back into a slime, and I put it back in the bag with the others. Since Druid was carrying the bearth, I took his gear.

“Is that too heavy for you?”

“Oh, please, I’m fine. It’s nothing.” *I do daily exercises, you know!*

When we reached the gatekeepers, they gasped in shock at the sight of the monster on Druid’s shoulder. *I wonder why?*

“Are bearth rare monsters?” I asked him.

“I don’t think so...” Druid looked just as confused as I was.

“Um, that’s a bearth, isn’t it?” one of the startled gatekeepers asked Druid, approaching him eagerly.

Druid looked a bit uncomfortable. “Uh, yes, it is... They aren’t that uncommon in Hatow, are they?”

“Well, adventurers overhunted the young bearth population about seven or eight years ago. Nobody’s seen any bearth for four or five years.”

Apparently, Ciel had hunted us quite the monster.

“Wow, we didn’t know that. Oh, by the way, could you please send word to the adventurer guild for us? We’d better bring it in through the back entrance to the butchering area since we don’t want to cause a ruckus with a rare catch, and because freshness is important!”

“Yes, of course! If the adventurers get too excited and put their grubby paws all over it, that alone will make it a little less fresh. Understood. Tatath, could you send word to the adventurer guild master and let him know they’re getting a delivery to the butchering area? I’ll take them straight there.”

Since the white bearth stood out, we borrowed a large cloth to cover it. Then the gatekeeper, whose name was Kari, took us to the butchering area.

“This errand just got much bigger than we intended, huh?” I said to Druid.

“It sure did. Good job, Ciel!”

Druid...please don't encourage it!

Chapter 288:

“Miracle” Is a Bit Extreme

“HELLOOO! We’ve brought something to butcher.”

When Kari cheerfully entered what I assumed was the adventurer guild’s butchering building, the people working there stopped and stared in confusion.

“Huh? Why’d you use the back entrance?” The man closest to us fixed a hardened glare on us.

“C’mon, just look at it! We’ve brought bearth, you guys! *Bearth!*” Kari, who didn’t seem easily fazed by others, excitedly ignored the man who asked the question. The gatekeeper was in quite the eager state.

The man sighed loudly. “Bearth, my foot! *Nobody* can hunt ’em nowadays!”

“If you’d just listen, I was going to say I’ve brought the people who *did* hunt one! But we didn’t want to cause a ruckus, so we came in the back.”

“Is it really true? They’ve got bearth?” A different voice spoke up. I looked up to see an elderly man frantically running over to us. Then he looked at the bearth Druid was holding. “Whoaaa, is that it? Lemme see it! Hey, you! Wipe down that butchering table!”

At the man’s order, the table was promptly cleared off. Druid set the bearth carcass on it and the workmen gathered around.

“Yeah, it’s the real deal, all right. That’s a bearth.”

“I haven’t seen one in ages!”

“Based on its size and the way its pelt, claws, and nose look, I’d say it’s a two-year-old adult.”

“So the entire population wasn’t wiped out after all. Thank goodness.”

Everyone was elated to see a bearth after a five-year absence, and some of

the men even teared up a little. Druid was just as surprised by their reactions as I was.

“Is it true somebody hunted a bearth?” A clear voice rang through the butchering area.

Oh, I know that voice! It's Guild Master Priya.

Priya approached the table with the bearth carcass, looked it over, and then ordered it butchered at once. Kari was about to introduce us to the guild master when he suddenly greeted us.

“Why, hello there, Druid and Ivy!”

Kari looked quite startled. “Guild Master, are you acquainted with them?”

Kari hadn't been there when we'd talked our way through the gates to go to the cave the other day.

“Yeah, I suppose we're acquainted... Actually, they've done a great deal to help me.” Priya looked a bit awkward saying this. And, well, I didn't blame him. Between the cave and the guardian deity and everything that had happened between us, it was awkward to be asked how we knew each other.

“Come this way. I'd like to hear all about your hunting trip.”

“Of course, sir. Well, thanks for taking care of the butchering,” Druid called out to the workers. They cheerfully thanked him in return. They reminded me of a bunch of kids, excited by a new toy.

“Thank you for walking with us all the way here, Kari,” Druid said.

“Yes, we appreciate it,” I added.

“Oh, no, it was my pleasure! It was an honor to get to see a bearth.”

We followed Guild Master Priya into a room with rather ornate sofas. The door had the word “Master” written on it, so I guessed it was the guild master's study. He gestured for us to sit, so Druid and I settled next to each other on a sofa. The guild master sat across from us on the side of a table.

“I was surprised to see it was you who brought the bearth.”

“Hahaha, sorry about that,” Druid said. “We didn’t realize just how rare they were.”

“Well, I don’t blame you for not knowing. It’s been many years since bearth were hunted here. And since the adventurers can still go after shiusa and hatsuri this time of year, some of them hadn’t even noticed that bearth was no longer on the menu.”

Those monsters must only come out in the snow since he said they could be hunted “this time of year.” I wonder if they both have white fur like the bearth Ciel caught. Now I’m getting really excited about hunting them.

“Sorry to pry, but could you please tell me where you found the bearth? You don’t have to, of course.”

Druid and I exchanged looks. We had a little problem. We wanted to tell him... but we didn’t know the answer.

“I’m sorry, sir, but even we don’t know,” Druid said truthfully.

Priya gave him a peculiar look, and I didn’t blame him. Here we were, saying we didn’t know where we’d hunted something.

“It was Ciel...the bearth was a present for Ivy.”

“Ciel? Oh, it was the *adandara*! Oops, pardon me.” Priya apologized in a hushed whisper as he pulled a magic item out of his desk drawer and switched it on. It was that voice-muting device I’d been seeing a lot of. “There. Now nobody will hear us.”

“Sorry we keep burdening you like this,” Druid said.

“Oh, it’s quite all right. But my, you two are quite the extraordinary pair.”

We’re extraordinary?

“You showed us a cave where we could mine magic stones, you built a bridge between us and our guardian deity, and you brought us a bearth, a species we

thought had gone extinct. You are beyond extraordinary. Come to think of it, you also gave us all those magic stones.”

Oh, right! The magic stones. “By the way, does the village have enough of them now?”

“You mean the red magic stones?” Priya said in a surprised tone.

I nodded.

“To be honest, we actually still need more. But we’ve gathered enough to avoid the worst-case scenario, at least. All we can do now is pray that this snow will fall peacefully for us.”

The snow will fall peacefully? I gave Druid a questioning look at the odd phrase.

“Snow can cause a great deal of harm, depending on how it falls,” Druid explained. “If there’s a blizzard or a heavy snowfall, things can get rather dangerous, can’t they?”

“That’s right,” Priya nodded. “So we’re hoping that the snow will continue to fall peacefully, as it’s doing right now. However, even a peaceful snowfall like this will cause some harm if it continues *too* long.”

I’d only experienced the snowfall in my home village, so I couldn’t exactly imagine it. But I had heard from adventurers just how dangerous a heavy snowfall could be. I seemed to remember them saying heavy snowfalls could trap you in one place and make it impossible to go anywhere. And even light, fluffy snow could be quite hard to deal with if there was a lot of it.

Oh, that’s right! Speaking of magic stones, we brought a bunch of regenerated ones today. We’ll need to swing by Rose’s shop on the way back. Wait a minute... Priya already knows we’re the ones giving the stones to the village, right? In that case, maybe we can just hand them over to him right now? Or would that be wrong because we already promised to give them out through Captain Tableau?

“Mr. Druid, is it okay if we give our magic stones to somebody besides Captain Tableau?” I whispered.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I guess it would be okay to leave them here. Want to ask him?”

“Yeah.”

Priya gave us a strange look. Even though we were talking in hushed voices, he could probably still hear us since he was sitting right across from us.

“It should be fine,” Druid said. “We’re doing the deal with them together, after all.”

I nodded at Druid and turned to Priya. “Excuse me, sir, but you’ve heard about the regenerated magic stones, haven’t you?”

“Yes, um, it was your slime...Flame, was it? I think I heard something about it putting magic energy into spent magic stones and regenerating them. Also, it seems that you’re providing them to the village.”

“Yes. So, we have today’s supply with us. Can we leave them here with you? And could you please tell Captain Tableau about it?”

“*Today’s supply?* Er, what do you mean?”

Huh? “We’ve been giving Captain Tableau the stones Flame regenerates every day, sir.”

“Wait a minute, I didn’t hear anything about that. Can your slime really regenerate them daily? Wouldn’t it need a few days to recharge its own magic each time? Wait a minute...does your slime not need to recharge?”

“Um...no, sir.”

“Ah, I see... Wow, Tableau did call your slime a miracle, Ivy, and now I see why.”

A miracle? I feel like the pedestal everybody puts my creatures on is getting taller and taller. Unless everybody’s opinion of them is actually correct? I dunno

if I like that...

“My slimes are rare, sir, but they’re not miracles.”

Priya looked a bit taken aback by that. I gave him a confused look in return. Had I said something strange?

“So, can we leave the magic stones here?” Druid asked again.

“Yes, of course you can. Actually, I’d be delighted if you would.”

With that, I took the sack of stones Flame had regenerated that day out of my magic bag. Guild Master Priya’s eyes opened wide in shock at the loud noise the sack made on the table.

“All of this...is *today’s* supply?”

“Yes, sir. Today’s supply.”

Priya cautiously peeked into the sack. I didn’t understand why he looked so baffled. They were just red magic stones.

“Yes, Ivy, I was certainly right to call your slime a miracle.”

Chapter 289:

Let's Try Contacting Them

SINCE WE'D HANDED OVER the magic stones directly to Guild Master Priya, we headed straight back to the inn.

With a little sigh, I sat in my chair.

"Are you okay? You seem tired."

"I guess I was just a little surprised by the guild master calling Flame a 'miracle.' I'm...kind of weirded out by the idea of people seeing us that way..." I wasn't really sure what to say. I couldn't put my feelings into words.

"Yeah, that was a bit of a shock to hear, since we see Flame's usual antics every day."

Flame's usual antics...that would be copious sleep-drooling. Though Flame had recently stepped up its magic stone regeneration game, it otherwise mostly slept all the time. It would sleep anywhere. Anytime we looked, it was asleep. And with a pool of drool beneath its mouth, at that. Looking at Flame now, it felt incredibly odd to hear someone call it a *miracle*. Maybe that was why I felt so uneasy... It was a strange sensation, not being able to understand my own feelings.

Oh, right! I need to wash Flame's drool towels. I've run out of clean ones.

"I just remembered something. There was something we needed to check last night, but we went right to bed."

Something we needed to check? Oh, he means our memories.

"Our memories, right? But what do we do if there are parts of them that we both forgot?"

"I don't think we need to focus too much on specifics. I was thinking we'd just

make sure we remembered day-to-day stuff and important information for travel.”

That made sense. We could always fill in the gaps with what we did know. I guess the most important thing we needed to know on an everyday level would be money.

“Is money the main priority for our day-to-day lives?”

“Yeah. Do you remember having a joint bank account that we both oversee?”

“Yeah, the family account we have with the guild, right?”

“Right. As long as we know about that, our money should be fine. Oh, and do you remember everything about your personal account?”

“Yeah, I haven’t forgotten that.”

Money had the biggest impact on our lives. As long as we remembered that, we could survive any minor lapse in memory.

“The other most important thing to remember is...my creatures. And I remember everything about them, so that’s okay. Oh, right! There’s also the potions and magic stones.”

“They’re in the magic box, aren’t they?”

“Ohhh...yes, I just remembered. The thing on top of the nightstand between our beds, right?”

Thank goodness. I got a chill there for a second. Druid looked scared, too. Oh, wait, but we remembered about it just now.

“Do you think our memories will return naturally if they’re triggered?” I asked.

Druid made a face and said, “No...when we both forgot where the village watch headquarters was, somebody had to take us there. And even when we set foot inside, I still didn’t remember anything. What about you, Ivy?”

Hmm...even when I saw the building, I didn’t recognize it. Nothing rang a bell

when I stepped inside, either.

“I didn’t remember it at all.”

“So, since we did eventually remember the magic box, the way our memories were erased must have been kind of half-baked.”

That made sense. Our memories probably remained dormant somewhere in our minds because Ciel stopped the magic spell quickly enough.

“Well, we should be fine. We haven’t forgotten anything vitally important. All that remains now is remembering the people we know.”

The people we know... Okay, so there’s Captain Oght and Vice-Captain Velivera of Ratome Village. I wonder if Captain Oght is still giving Velivera a hard time? Then I met a lot of nice people in Otolwa. There was Seizerk, leader of the Sword of Flames, along with Rattloore, Sifar, and Gnouga. Then there was Bolorda, Rickbert, Lowcreek, and Marcreek of the Lightning Royals. Then there’s the master of the adventurer guild...wait...what was his name again? Okay, let’s move on... There’s Captain Barxby and Vice-Captain Agrop, and Rosé—I remember being a bit scared when I first met him. His gruff face broke the mold. Then there was Lord Foronda...I think I remember he packed a basket full of yummy treats for me. And then Makasha and Callua...I wonder how they’re all doing?

“What’s up?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if all the people I’ve met on my travels were doing well.”

“Why don’t you try contacting them?”

“Contacting them?”

“Yeah, remember how I told you about that faax device at the guild that lets you send messages to people?”

Oh, that’s right! They’ve got faxes here. But would it really be okay to get in touch with them? I wasn’t with them all that long.

“I think I know what you’re worried about, Ivy, but they’d all love to hear from you. I know it.” Druid gave my head some gentle pats.

I was a little nervous about contacting them, but I did want to let them know I was alive and well on my travels. *Maybe I ought to try out that fax.*

“Mr. Druid?”

“What is it?”

“How much does it cost?”

“That’s my Ivy... You only need to pay when you send the message, and it’s five hundred dal for each transmission.”

Five hundred dal... That’s a bit pricey. But I do want to know how everyone is doing. And I want them to know I’m okay, too.

“Oh! I just remembered something,” said Druid.

“What is it?”

“I sent a faax to Gotos, remember? I need to check with the guild to see if he wrote back. I’d completely forgotten about that.”

Y’know, I totally forgot about it, too.

“Well, let’s go tomorrow to see if I got a reply,” Druid said. “And while we’re there, do you want to send some faaxes to the friends you made on your travels?”

“Sure.”

Agonizing over it in my room won’t get me anywhere. I should just fax them and tell them I’m doing well. And then they might even fax me back. Wow, now I’m starting to feel excited about it.

Urrrgh...my mind was so full with our plans for today that I had trouble sleeping. Oh well, I can’t help it. It’s an exciting new experience. So, what should I write? Should I just tell them what’s going on in my life right now? Anything

else?

“Ivy, it’s okay. You don’t have to take it so seriously. Just relax.”

“But it’s my first time sending a fax. A bunch of things just keep popping into my mind.”

“I know. You were tossing and turning all night.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I must have kept you awake.”

Nobody can sleep soundly if someone is tossing and turning in the bed next to them. I messed up bad.

“No, I managed to sleep okay. But why are you so nervous about this anyway?”

“Wellll...I keep getting scared that they’ve forgotten all about me or that they won’t fax me back. Then my worries just keep piling on top of each other.”

“Don’t worry about it. From what I’ve heard of your friends, they would never forget you.”

I gave Druid a strange look. How could he be so sure about something like that? I supposed they couldn’t have forgotten about me after everything we went through together, but a part of me still couldn’t help but worry I would be bothering them...

“Ivy, these are the same people who became your guarantors, right? They were the ones who helped you gain your ability to trust. These are the kind of people they are, Ivy. So please, have more faith. It would be unfair to them not to.”

He’s right... I’m being unfair to them when I feel anxious. Looking back now, they all truly did care about me.

“Yeah...you’re right, they care about me. I do need to trust them more.”

I looked up at Druid, who was still gently caressing my hair. His eyes were filled with joy as he looked back down at me. I returned his smile.

I'm okay now.

When we walked into the adventurer guild, Druid headed straight to a table in the corner of the room and spoke to the man sitting in front of it. "I've come to see if I got a reply to my faax."

"Do you have your guild card, sir?"

"Here it is."

"Wait just a moment." The man pressed Druid's card to a magic item, and a box-shaped device behind him switched itself on. After a while, the man handed two sheets of paper to Druid.

"Thank you. Also, we'd like to send faaxes to a few different places. Could we please have some paper?"

"Sure. Over here, please." The man handed Druid the paper.

"Thank you. Here, Ivy. Faaxes use special paper."

I took the papers from him and walked to a desk nearby. *Okay, um...what should I write first? Should I start with "Long time no see"? Or should I ask them how they are?*

"What should I write...?"

My insecurities over sending a fax in the first place are mostly gone, but...I don't actually know how to write a letter. What do I do now?

Chapter 290:

My First Fax

“I...I’M ALL DONE!”

My letter was three pages long. It was addressed to Captain Oght of Ratome Village, and I asked that it be sent through Vice-Captain Velivera. Apparently, it was common practice to address your fax to a representative and have them share it with a number of other people.

“Do you think it’s weird? Do you think I rambled too much?”

When I first got the blank papers, I stared at them, agonizing over what I should write. Then, when I finally started writing, there were so many things I wanted to say that I confused myself. I had to ask Druid for help along the way. If I’d been alone, I’m sure I wouldn’t have been able to get my thoughts together.

“Did you finish your letter?”

“Yeah. I somehow managed it.”

In my letter to Captain Oght, I told him vaguely that I was a tamer and I’d tamed some slimes. It was a shame I couldn’t be more specific, but I wanted to introduce my family to him the next time I saw him.

“Is it all right if I add a few words to Captain Oght?” Druid asked.

I don’t see why it would be a problem...but it’s strange. They don’t even know each other.

“I want to pay my respects to him as your current guardian,” he explained.

Aww, that’s so sweet of him!

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Here’s some more paper. You wanted to write to the

people of Otolwa next, right? Do you think two pages will be enough?"

"Yeah, I think it will."

Before I set out to write the letters, the only thing I could think of writing was "How've you all been?" so I'd just assumed a single page would be enough for each one. But when I actually sat down and started writing, I wanted to tell everyone all about the people I'd met and the friends I'd made on my travels. And the next thing I knew, the amount of paper I was originally given was nowhere near enough. With each fax you sent, the first five pieces of paper were free. You had to pay for anything beyond that, so most people kept their messages to five pages or less.

"Good luck, Ivy."

Hmm...who should I address it to? "I guess it should go to Mr. Rattloore. He really did worry a lot about me."

Yeah, I'll address it to him. Okay, first I'll write a basic greeting and explain where I am right now. Then I'll tell him that I never got a slave, since he was worried about how that would play out. Then I think I'll say a little about how Druid came to be my travel companion. Hmmm...yeah, I'd better let him know that I got taller. He really was nervous about how far behind my development was. I remember he almost took me to see a doctor once, even though I felt perfectly fine. Oh! I think I'll tell him my hair got longer. As I wrote, a bunch of things came to mind and I had filled two pages in no time.

"Okay, all done."

Just as with the first letter, I found so many things I wanted to say once I started writing.

"All right, let me add a greeting of my own on that letter, too."

"Sure."

After Druid put in a final greeting, the letter was finished. We wound up using three whole pieces of paper for it. But truth be told, there were so many more

things I wished I could have said. I just shortened it so I wouldn't annoy him.

"Excuse me, but could you please faax these letters for me?"

"Sure thing. Write in your recipients here."

"Ivy?"

"Um, these three papers should go to Captain Oght of Ratome Village, and these three are going to Rattloore of the Sword of Flames in Otolwa, please."

"What?! To Captain Oght, you say?"

Huh? Why is he so surprised?

"Yes, that's right. Is there some sort of problem with that, sir?"

"Oh, no, I was just surprised to hear the name of one of my idols come up."

That's right, I forgot Captain Oght was a famous adventurer.

"Do excuse me," the man said. "All right...so this one is to Sir Rattloore of the Sword of Flames. Please press your guild card here."

"Yes, sir."

Druid handed me his guild card. When the man set it on the box-shaped item, a part of it glowed a little. Then I put the three-page letter on top of the board sticking out of the item.

"Since you're sending faaxes to two different places, that will be one thousand dal."

Druid reached for his wallet, but I handed him the thousand dal. *Since they're my letters, I should be the one to pay. Why do you look so upset about that, Mr. Druid?*

"Okay, everything's all set and ready to go. Your letters will be sent momentarily." As the man said this, the magic item made a sound, and with it the papers on the board were sucked into the box one by one. And in just a few seconds, the three papers that had been sucked in were sent to a single address. The batch sent to the second address was faxed in the same way.

“All right, would you like to take the originals home with you?” He was holding the six pieces of paper that my letters were written on. I felt a little embarrassed by the sentimentality of it all, but I did want to keep them all the same.

“I’ll take them with me, please. And thank you very much. You’ve been a great help.”

“Not a problem. We hope to see you again very soon.”

As he handed me the papers, there was a terribly warm sparkle in his eyes. I was confused by it, but I gave him a polite nod and walked out of the guild with Druid.

“Ivy...were you doing that without realizing it?”

“Doing what?”

Druid sighed awkwardly and said, “Halfway through writing your letters, you started saying what you were writing out loud.”

“What?! No way!”

No, no, no, that can’t be true, can it? I looked at Druid and saw an indescribably apologetic look in his eyes.

“Sorry I didn’t stop you...I just assumed it was easier for you to write if you thought out loud.”

Agggh, how embarrassing. Oh, that must be why the man at the fax looked at me like that!

“Please stop me next time.”

I could just cry. I didn’t write anything that embarrassing, did I? Nothing too attention-grabbing, right? At least Druid warned me not to give away sensitive information about my creatures. I just gave their names and said how they liked to play, so I don’t think that’s an issue.

“You don’t need to worry about it, Ivy. You didn’t say anything that would be

a problem for us.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

I wanted to get their replies if they wrote back, but the thought of facing that man who worked the fax again made me feel quite embarrassed. I pressed my hands to my hot cheeks. *What’s done is done, Ivy. Cheer up.*

“Oh, by the way, Mr. Druid, didn’t Mr. Gotos write back to you? Is everyone doing well?”

I’d noticed he’d received a reply before I wrote my letters, so I was curious. *I wonder what it said?*

“He was ridiculously angry.”

He’s angry?

“He said I took way too long to send a letter. And not just Gotos; my family and mentor felt the same way. I think I gave them all quite a scare.”

“Yeah, we did let an awful lot of time go by after we got here before we sent word to them.”

“Guess so...but they all sound well. Ryce has really taken off, too. People are making new recipes with it. People from other towns and villages are even starting to trickle in to have a taste.”

“Wow, that’s impressive.”

I can’t wait until the next time we visit Oll. I wonder how many rice dishes they’ll have by then?

“Also, my brother Dolgas has a fiancée now.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, he said the whole family was really surprised about it.”

I understand that... But a bigger family is a good thing.

“They’re getting married next spring.”

“That’s great news.”

“And Alizé, Dolgas’s fiancée, really hit it off with Shurila. Doluka and Dolgas don’t really like that, though.”

Why don’t they like it? I would think their wives getting along would be a good thing.

“You know how stubborn my brothers are, right?”

“Ah...yes, I see what you mean.”

Maybe just a little?

“Shurila, Alizé, and my mother scolded them about it.”

Ahh, now I get it. I guess it’s a safe bet that Alizé has a strong personality just like the other two women.

“As Gotos put it, those women are an unstoppable force when they work together. He didn’t write exactly what they did to him, though.”

“Ha ha ha, well, I’m looking forward to the next time we visit everyone.”

“I think...I’d better write letters more often,” Druid muttered, a deep set of creases forming between his eyebrows.

What sort of horrific scene is he imagining?

I stared hard at him, and he explained, “They were hard enough to deal with when there were only two of them. Now that there’s three, they’re impossible to defy.”

So apparently Druid’s reason for writing more letters was to dial down the scolding he was bound to get the next time he saw them.

Chapter 291:

A Safe Way of Hunting

WE WALKED THROUGH THE GATE and headed toward the places where we'd set our traps. I took my creatures out of their bag along the way, and they happily frolicked in the snow. Even though it was now noon, last night's snow hadn't melted—in fact, it had piled up all the way to our calves. According to Druid, more and more snow would fall in the weeks to come.

"If it keeps snowing like this, we might not be able to go hunting anymore."

"Why?"

"If the snow gets too deep, you can't even walk in it."

That made sense. *So I guess snow any deeper than this would be a problem. Maybe we should just give up on our winter hunting plans?* That would be a pity, seeing as the monsters we wanted to hunt only came out in the snow.

"Well, if it only snows like it did yesterday, we'll still be able to set traps for a few more days, so let's keep at it for now."

I nodded in reply. "Sora, Ciel, let's go to our traps!" I called out to my creatures as they merrily buried themselves in the snowdrifts. Ciel, who was still in slime form, didn't seem to be in an adandara kind of mood today. Flame and Sol were resisting leaving their bag, either due to the cold or because it was too much of a hassle. Knowing them, I was sure it was the latter.

And even though I was being careful, I went and did exactly what I didn't want to do.

"My hands are throbbing..."

I'd fallen on my face. Because of the snow, I hadn't noticed a root sticking up in my path, and I'd done an epic face-plant as a result. *Arrrrgh, my hands hurt.*

“How are your wounds? Do they still hurt?”

“They’re fine; I cured them with a potion. My hands are just throbbing a little from the way they hit the ground.”

“I’m sorry... Yeah, potions can’t really do much for that kind of pain.”

I’d shot my hands out to break the fall, which was a good thing, but I’d placed them badly. They landed square on the roots I couldn’t see under the snow. My gloves ripped and I ended up with deep cuts on my palms. I used a potion right away, but the impact was still making my hands throb. I opened and closed them over and over, but the pain wouldn’t go away. One of Sora’s potions might have completely cured me, but I’d taken a normal potion instead, so I was stuck with it.

“Want to drink another potion for good measure?” Druid suggested.

“I’ll be okay. The wounds are all healed.”

“But your hands still hurt, right? Maybe we should take a few of Sora’s potions with us when we go out from now on. They could completely cure you of the throbbing pain from the impact as well, right?”

Even Druid was thinking Sora’s potions would be more effective.

“Mr. Druid, I’m fine, really. Besides, we can’t risk getting caught carrying even a few of Sora’s sparkly potions.”

I looked at him and saw that his eyes were filled with worry as he stared at my hands. I wasn’t sure why, but he had a very guilty aura about him.

“Ivy, we should still take tiny bottles of Sora’s and Flame’s potions with us just in case. I know we would be much safer that way. Okay?”

“Okay... Yeah, you’re right. We’ll take a little bottle of each.”

Druid looked relieved by my answer. He must have really been quite nervous about it. When I fell, he’d probably tried to catch me, but with one arm missing, he didn’t get there in time. He looked a bit stunned by the whole ordeal. It didn’t bother me, really. It was my fault for tripping and falling in the first place,

but I'm sure a part of Druid hadn't sorted his feelings yet.

"Pu! Pu!"

Hm? Sora sounds mad. "What's wrong?" I picked up the slime, and it swallowed my hands whole.

"Oh, right!" Druid and I gasped in unison.

Of course! I shouldn't have taken Sora's potion; I should've just let it heal me directly. Druid and I looked at each other and laughed.

"That must've been why Sora was circling around you earlier, Ivy. It wanted you to notice."

That's right. Sora was moving around me all this time instead of running off to play.

"Pu!" Sora bounced away from my hands...and they no longer hurt.

"Thanks, Sora. And sorry I didn't notice you sooner."

"Pu!" Sora sassed me. I apologized again, and it replied with "Pu! Pu, puuu."

Okay, it forgave me. Thank goodness. I watched Sora as it tumbled away to play with Ciel.

"Are you all right now?"

"Yeah, the throbbing is completely gone."

Druid gently took my hand, then smiled in relief, which was comforting for me to see. *Okay, now that my hands don't hurt anymore, let's go check on those traps.*

"Mr. Druid, hurry up! I wanna see if we caught anything!"

"Ahh, sure thing." Druid looked a little surprised to see how eager I was, but he smiled, got his bearings, and we took off.

When we arrived where our traps were, we took a look around. We'd set the traps in places where we'd thought the snow wouldn't cover them, such as

under the trees. Druid had chosen the spots, but unfortunately, they'd all gotten buried under the snow. We decided to check on the traps closest to us first.

"Oh! Is this what we're looking for?" The first trap I checked had a bright-white monster in it that looked like a wild rabbit. The only differences were the color and the fangs in its mouth.

"Ah, yes. This is a little monster called a shiusa. Watch out for the fangs. They bite."

"Okay."

So it's called a shiusa. But wow, it really does look just like a wild rabbit. It's got the same long ears and big eyes. Well, wild rabbits don't have fangs, though. Anyway, I'll just knock it out and put it in my bag. Gee, I'm a well-seasoned trapper, aren't I?

We checked all our traps and found we had six shiusa in all. It was a decent catch. Too bad we didn't get any hatsuri.

"It's been a while since I've hunted with traps like this. It's fun," Druid said.

"Why haven't you done it lately?"

"Well, the last time I hunted with traps was when I first became an adventurer. One of the senior adventurers taught me. So this is probably only my second or third time trapping, I think?"

That's right, I remember he said adventurers don't usually hunt with traps. I wonder why that is? It's a pretty good way of hunting, if you know how to do it.

"Why don't adventurers set traps, sir?"

"Well...I'm sure they used to in the past, but using a sword to hunt eventually just became common practice."

"Huh. Well, that's a shame. Trapping is a safe and effective way to hunt if you're just starting out as an adventurer."

“I won’t argue with you there. Oh!” Druid looked at me. “The adventurer who taught me how to trap was around the same age as my mentor. Maybe trapping is something only adventurers in that generation know about? The younger ones can’t teach anyone a skill they don’t have.”

“Oh, okay.”

So I guess nobody’s around to teach trapping. But I really do think it’s a great beginner-level skill for new adventurers. As long as you do a good job setting your traps, your prey does all the work for you. It’d be a shame for the art to die.

“Okay, let’s butcher our monsters and get back to the village.”

“Good idea. Butchering meat in this weather sure is tough.”

It was cold, to put it mildly. I usually rinsed my meat in the river, and that was the hardest part about it. In summer, though, it was a welcome chore.

“Since washing the meat is just about all I’m good for, let me handle that,” Druid said.

“But it’s the hardest part of the job.”

“I’ll be fine.”

We let Ciel guide us to the river, then got to work butchering. All I had to do was cut the meat, so I felt like I had a rather easy job.

“Does this look good?” Druid asked, handing me the thoroughly washed carcasses.

“It’s perfect.” I wrapped the meat in bana leaves and put it in my magic bag. Our tasks for the day were now completed.

“Okay, as much as I’d love to take a break, wanna go to town and sell this meat?”

“Sure.”

Oh, wait! Sol needs to go to the dump to eat. Can we just come back later?

“What’s wrong?”

“I want to go to the dump so Sol can eat, but shouldn’t we go to the butcher first?”

“Huh?! Err, well...”

“Pefu! Pefu!”

I heard a muffled cry from my bag made by somebody who was probably listening in on our conversation. It seemed upset, but it was also so tiny that it sounded adorable. Druid and I found ourselves laughing over it.

“Pefu! Pefu! Pefu!”

Which only made it angrier.

“Sorry, Sol. Is it okay if we sell the meat first, then come back?”

“Ivy, can’t we just go to the dump first?”

Huh? But the meat... Oh, that’s right! We put it in a common magic bag, so it won’t go bad. I still couldn’t shake the conventional but incorrect wisdom I’d heard at the start of my journey that meat could still go bad in common magic bags.

“Sorry, Sol. I let the wrong information about the common magic bag fool me.”

“Pehhh.” It sounded annoyed.

I almost laughed again, but I managed to restrain myself. Druid also had a hand to his mouth and was somehow keeping it together. After we saved ourselves from the brink of a laughing fit, we headed for the dump.

“Common ones sure do make life easier,” I said.

“Hm? Oh, you mean common magic bags?”

“Yeah. All these years, I’d always go straight to the butcher after hunting to keep the meat fresh.”

“That makes sense. Common magic bags are the only kind that stop time.”

Now that our meat worries were over, it was time to go to the dump and feed our slimes. And in the meantime, we would need to figure out how we were going to handle Sol's meals moving forward.

Chapter 292:

No Solutions Come to Mind

WE ARRIVED AT THE DUMP and watched Sol feed. Those same black orbs of magic energy were floating above the trash, and just like the day before, Sol was eating them with its tentacles.

“I’m really not sure how we should handle this...” I said.

“Neither can I.”

We were in a pickle. Try as we might to think of a solution for Sol’s meal needs, nothing was coming to mind. How would we even go about collecting magic energy anyway? I supposed we’d just have to ask Sol a bunch of yes or no questions and go from there.

“Sol, sorry to bother you during your lunch, but can we ask you some questions?” *We probably should have waited until after it was done.*

“Pefu!”

Oh, it answered me! So I guess that means it’s okay? But what should I even ask? Umm...I guess I should find out if it can eat anything other than magic energy. Something other than trash might work, too. If Sol can eat something that we don’t have to go out of our way to find, I’d much rather it eat that.

“Sol, are there other things you can eat besides magic energy? If the answer is yes, make a noise so I’ll know.”

It stayed silent.

Too bad, guess that’s a no. So it eats nothing but magic, eh? I looked at Druid, and he shrugged his shoulders back at me.

“You only eat magic energy, right?”

“Pefu!”

Mmmrrrrgggh... As I feared. Okay, one more question.

“Does the magic have to come from trash?” Druid asked.

“Pefu!”

So it needed the leftover magic energy to be from trash.

“Sol, do you pull the energy out of the trash yourself?” Druid asked, picking up a piece of trash and walking up to Sol.

“Pefu!” Sol chirped, and black magic energy immediately wafted up from the trash Druid was holding.

It's an amazing sight...even though it's a black mist. Oh! Well, if Sol can extract the magic energy itself, then...

“Sol, could we transfer the magic energy you extract into something else?”

Sol's silence told us that was a no.

So it can extract the magic, but it can't put it into a different object.

“Arrrgh, another dead end.” Druid clutched his head in agony.

“Magic energy disappears when we touch it, right?” I asked.

“Right. It vanished into thin air the last time we tried to get our hands on it.”

Magic energy was sort of like air, and only Sol could actually touch it. I had the feeling that we wouldn't be able to collect it no matter what methods we tried...unless we could solidify it into some sort of tangible shape?

“Sol, is there a way we could turn magic energy solid?”

Sol was silent. It stopped eating and looked bewildered.

Huh? Did it not understand the question?

“Um, if you could just squeeze the magic energy into a solid piece, we could carry it and keep it for you.”

No response.

“Is that a no?”

“Pefu!”

No, huh?

“I can’t say I’ve ever thought about solidifying magic energy before,” Druid said.

“You haven’t?”

“No, I haven’t.”

I guess that’s just what magic is like...

“Well, what should we do?”

“I don’t know.”

Druid and I looked at each other and sighed quietly. We really couldn’t think of anything. *Oh, wait! Maybe there’s a magic item that can gather and store energy.*

“Mr. Druid, is there an item that can collect magic energy?”

“An item that can collect magic energy? Hmm...not to my knowledge, no.”

If only we could collect magic energy, then we’d be able to store up meals for Sol. Oh, but that’s not right. Just collecting it isn’t enough. We’d need an item that can both store and release the energy.

“If something like that exists, Rose would know...” Druid said. “But we’d have to tell her why we need it.”

Huh? Does he not want to tell Rose about this?

“Wouldn’t it be okay to tell Rose about Sol, since she already knows about the others?”

“Knowing Rose, I trust that she wouldn’t tell anybody else about Sol. It’s just, first we’ve got three rare slimes, and now we want an item that collects magic... I’m just worried the shock might be too much for her.”

Yeah, it definitely would be a surprise.

“Since we’ll be stopping by her shop to drop off magic stones anyway, want to ask her about the item then?”

“Sure. Though I do feel bad that we keep asking her for so many favors.”

“Me, too.”

It would be great if she did have an item like that...but if she didn’t, we would have a lot to worry about.

“Pefu!”

I turned to look at Sol, who was gazing curiously at us.

“Sorry about that, Sol. We’re done asking you questions, so you can get back to your lunch. Thanks.”

“Pefu! Pefu!” Sol spun around and started eating again.

We didn’t want to bother it, so we wandered away to keep an eye on it from a distance. Meanwhile, Sora and Flame were eating at their own pace.

“Looks like I’ll have to melt some more snow off soon.”

“Yes, they all have incredible appetites, don’t they?”

They were all eating so quickly that day. Unless I was imagining things...

“Puuu,” Sora cried loudly.

I looked at the slime, and it was stretching its body vertically and horizontally. It had started its after-lunch exercises... *Hm? Is it stretching out to the side?* I stared hard at Sora, noticing something odd about its movements.

“It always stretched up and down before...but I guess it can stretch sideways, too.”

It was doing its usual vertical stretches before my very eyes, but it had added some sideways stretching to the mix. It kept switching back and forth between them, too, so it was difficult to describe the state Sora was in.

“The up-and-down stretches were already odd as it is, but those side stretches make it look kind of pitiful,” Druid said.

When Sora stretched sideways, its eyes and mouth got slanted, so it looked sadder than it did when it stretched vertically. But it looked like it was enjoying itself, so it was hard to describe.

“Well, I think it’s kind of cute, in its own way.”

“You think it’s cute?”

“Yeah. It’s so sad that it’s cute.”

Druid gave me a strange look. He didn’t seem to understand what I meant.

We waited for Sora and Flame to finish their lunch, then we gathered the magic stones Flame had regenerated. It had produced another huge load today.

“I’m always impressed by how many Flame regenerates. It’s so obviously making more and more each time.”

“Yeah, I wonder what we’ll do when Hatow no longer needs these stones?”

“Well...there’ll always be a need.”

He was right, but I was still worried. Ciel, who had wandered off in adandara form, joined us again.

“Hi, Ciel. Did you have fun out there?”

Mrrrow.

Perhaps it had found a playmate in the forest; it sounded incredibly happy. Sora, meanwhile, looked upset.

“We’re going back to the village, so everyone who can get in the bag, go on in,” I said.

Flame and Sol bounced over to me. Those two never showed any desire to travel back on their own. Their laziness was almost admirable.

“Hang on a second, I just have to wipe you down. You’re wet from playing in

the snow.”

I took a towel out of my magic bag, wiped Flame, and put it in the bag. Next came Sol. I was a little scared to wipe the new slime, since it was so tiny. It was sturdy, though. After I finished wiping Sol, I added it to the bag. I snuck a peek at Flame then and saw it was already fast asleep. Even though they were a familiar sight, I still always laughed at Flame’s sleepy antics.

When we got back to the village, it was starting to snow lightly.

“It’s snowing. We’d better hurry,” Druid said.

When we were almost in view of the gatekeepers, I put Sora and Ciel in slime form into the bag. We greeted the gatekeepers and entered the village to see that Main Street was quite lively.

“Do you think something happened?” I asked.

“Yeah, there’s a lot of adventurers here.”

I followed Druid’s gaze and saw that there were indeed more adventurers than usual. Maybe they were about to go on a hunt? The sun was about to set, though. Curiosity tugging on us, we made our way to Rose’s shop.

“I hear somebody hunted a bearth.”

When I heard those words, my feet stopped in their tracks. As I looked toward the voice, I noticed Druid had stopped beside me and turned in the same direction. It was four ladies, engrossed in an excited conversation.

“Yes, I caught a glimpse of it. It was a nice big adult bearth.”

“Well, I can certainly see why the adventurers would get excited.”

“Of course they would! We haven’t seen bearth in years. They’re sure to get a good price for it.”

Apparently, they’d finished butchering the bearth, and its discovery had been made public.

“Aha. I guess we’ll have to be more careful going into the forest from now

on,” Druid said.

“Yeah.”

A bunch of adventurers were sure to come into the woods looking for bearth to hunt. We’d have to stay on our toes to make sure Sora and my other monsters weren’t seen.

Chapter 293:

Land Management

“YOUR SLIME eats magic?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rose stared critically at Sol, the tiny black slime sitting in front of her. “Um...I don’t see a taming symbol.”

“Sol didn’t want to be tamed, so I didn’t do it,” I explained.

“You didn’t tame it...yet it doesn’t attack humans? And you named it, too?”

Huh?! Why would Sol attack people? And why wouldn’t I name it? “Oh, of course! Slimes are monsters, huh?”

It took a comment from Rose to make me remember that slimes were monsters and that they attacked people, too. After I met Sora, I’d completely forgotten about that.

“So, um...about my slime, Sol. It’s really smart, so it doesn’t want to hurt humans. And I named it Sol because it wanted me to.”

It was natural for monsters of low intelligence to attack humans. Slimes were no different; the wild ones you encountered in the forest lacked brainpower and fought humans on sight. However, slimes were so weak that it was easy to kill them with a little magic. Since I couldn’t use magic, I used to run and hide from slimes whenever I came across them at the start of my travels. *And now that I think about it, I haven’t met many slimes since I tamed Sora. I wonder why that is?*

“Okay, now I see. Sol is a lovely name. It has a nice ring to it.”

“Pefu!” Sol squeaked and jiggled happily in reply.

“Ivy...your friends all have very *unique* ways of talking.”

I wish you wouldn't remind me, ma'am. It's not like that's why I've been gathering them.

"Pefu! Pefu!"

"Hm? Did I make ya angry, hon? Sorry about that; I wasn't making fun. I think the way ya talk is really cute."

"Pefuuu!"

"Ha ha ha! Yeah, ya are a smart little bugger. Well, all of Ivy's monster friends are pretty brainy, so one more smart slime fits right in."

That was true: I could carry on conversations with Flame and Sora with no problems. I remembered Druid being surprised by that when we first met. *I see...so being able to talk with your tamed creatures must be rare. Since I've been carrying on all this time like it's normal, I've gradually forgotten that my situation is anything but ordinary.* Not only were the things my slimes digested abnormal; the way they communicated was abnormal, too. I would have to try extra hard to remember that.

"Well, eating magic is weird as it is, but that coloring is odd, too. If ya look closer, you'll see it's not all black. It looks half-transparent to me, maybe?"

Rose was right. At a glance, Sol looked black, but you could see it was partially transparent on closer examination. Just like Sora and Flame, its body was a bit see-through.

"And you're quite tiny, aren't ya? Are ya gonna grow any bigger, hon?"

"No, ma'am, it says it's already fully grown."

"Okay. Wow, I didn't know slimes could be so teeny. You'd better be careful nobody else sees it, hon."

"Yes, ma'am." *Oh dear. She sounded quite earnest there.*

"So, y'all were looking for an item that can collect, store, and release magic energy at will, right?"

“Yes, ma’am. Do you have anything like that?” Druid asked.

A troubled look filled Rose’s face. “If we did, I wouldn’t sell it. That’s an item for land management.”

Land management?

“Collecting magic is a very dangerous endeavor. Magic energy tends to lose control when ya gather it up.”

Druid sighed, “Yeah, that’s what we were worried about.” It sounded like he’d already been thinking about that problem.

“Magic energy loses control, ma’am?”

“Yeah, magic energies get unstable when they collide. There’re records of a village that once got completely destroyed because magic energy went out of control there. That’s why they’ve got such strict rules about magic items that collect energy. I hear most of them are kept locked up.”

It doesn’t sound like we can rely on a magic item. I guess we’ll have to find a different way.

“But my goodness, what a fine kettle of fish. Magic energy, indeed!”

It was nice to have Rose struggling right along with us, but no solutions were coming to mind yet. It looked like we’d just have to suck it up and go to the dump regularly. We handed her the day’s magic stones, thanked her, and started back to the inn.

“We’ll just have to keep going to the dump until the forest gets too snowed over,” Druid said.

“Yeah, we’ll make it work.”

“Maybe when we get back to the inn, we should talk with Sol about what we should do when we can’t go there anymore.”

“Uh-huh, we should definitely figure out those details,” I agreed. “I don’t want to make the poor thing go hungry.”

If we can't find a way to store food for Sol, will it decide to go live in the forest? If it's what Sol wants, I'd love to let it have its way...but I would be so worried. Then again, if I can't feed it, we'll have no other choice.

"Aha! There you are! Mr. Druid! Miss Ivy!"

When we arrived at the inn's steps, we heard a voice call out. We turned to see Guild Master Priya waving and running over to us.

"Good evening, sir," we both said.

"Good evening. Sorry, can I have a word with you both for a minute?"

That confused me. Priya was the head of the guild. If he wanted to speak with us, he could just send word and we would come see him. Why had he come out personally like this? We might not have even been at the inn.

"Should we head over to the guild?" Druid asked.

"Oh, no need. So, um...are you planning on going into the forest tomorrow?"

Tomorrow? We were thinking we'd go to the dump to feed Sol, but why is he asking?

"Yes, we are...why do you ask?" Druid sounded just as confused as I was.

"Might I join you? If possible, I would like to borrow Ciel the Great."

Ciel the Great...? When did he start calling my creature that?

"Sure. Would you like to talk more about this in our room?" Druid suggested.

Priya nodded. "Oh, could I? I wouldn't want to impose."

For some reason, there was a *huge* smile on Priya's face.

"No problem. It's all right with you, too, Ivy?"

"Yeah. We should take as long as we need to talk it over."

I was curious to know why he was calling Ciel "the Great" and why he wanted to come into the forest with us, and those questions couldn't easily be answered standing out in the open.

“Thank you very much,” Priya said.

His gratitude made me pause for a second. What was it? There was something different about him, like a heavy burden had just been lifted off his shoulders. Had something happened to him? While these questions swam in my mind, the three of us walked into the inn. Dola also looked surprised to see us.

“First the captain of the watch, now the guild master?” he asked.

That’s right, Captain Tableau was here to see us earlier.

Druid smiled awkwardly at Dola.

“So sorry to be a bother.” Guild Master Priya bowed to Dola. “I have a matter to discuss with them.”

“Oh, it’s not a bother at all. Er, would you like to have dinner here, Guild Master?”

“I’d like to, but I have some tasks to attend to.”

He had taken time out of his busy schedule to see us, apparently.

“Okay, then.”

We took some freshly baked sweets from Salifa up to our room. When we entered, Priya took an excited look around. *I can just feel the giddiness wafting from you, sir... What’s up?*

“Please, have a seat. I’ll go make us some tea,” I said.

“Thank you very much.”

Since Priya already knew about my creatures, I let them out of their bag. I took Sol out last of all and then tossed the dirty drool towel into the laundry basket.

“Huh? Who’s that?”

“Agh!” Druid and I gasped.

I messed up. I forgot he didn’t know about Sol.

“Um, it’s the newest addition to our party. Its name is Sol.”

“A black slime, I see. And quite small, too. Is it a baby?”

“No, sir. It’s an adult.”

“Ah... I see.”

Priya stared hard at Sol. It worried me a little, but I got the tea and set it on the table.

“Thanks. So, I see it doesn’t have a taming symbol...”

“Yes, um, we talked it over, and I decided not to tame it.”

“You talked it over... I see... Well, that does sound like you, Ivy.”

Huh? Why are his eyes sparkling like that? I looked at Druid, confused by this new side of the guild master. He took one look at Priya and laughed. *I wonder why...*

Chapter 294: What's a Fan?

WITH A QUIET SIGH, Druid sipped his tea. When he caught me staring, he gave my head a couple of pats.

"Why were you laughing earlier?" I'd racked my brain, but I couldn't think of a reason.

"Oh, Priya was just acting so funny."

"I was?" Priya asked in confusion. *I'll admit he was behaving strangely today, but did he really do anything that funny?*

"You're not hiding it very well," Druid told Priya.

"Huh?! Oh!"

Why is he acting like that? Hiding what? As my eyes darted back and forth between the two, Priya's cheeks turned bright red.

"It seems like he's become a fan of yours, Ivy. Actually, would it be more correct to say he was always your fan?"

"Huh?! My...fan?"

What's a fan again? I think it's when you worship a person who's special to you. So, wait, Guild Master Priya is my fan?

"Um, that can't be true, Mr. Druid."

"Hm? You don't think so?"

"No."

"But his eyes sparkle whenever he looks at you, and his head's in the clouds. He can't sit still!"

Well, I'll admit that's all true. But...he's my fan?

“He already took a great liking to you when he learned how you helped crush that crime organization, Ivy. Then when you add the stuff that happened in the cave and your adandara and everything, I think it was an emotional overload.”

Druid glanced at Guild Master Priya and saw that the man’s face was bright red. *Don’t tell me he was dead-on?*

“Um...do forgive me. Was I really being that obvious?”

“Er, if you said you were trying to hide it, I wouldn’t believe you,” Druid answered.

“Ha ha! I’m not sure if it was obvious from how I acted the first time we met, but I’ve always had a lot of respect for Miss Ivy here. And then, you know, after talking to her and so on, I learned what an incredible person she is.”

Who’s he talking about? Wait, he can’t mean me, can he?

“Not only did she find the cave, but she helped us meet our guardian deity, tamed an adandara...”

I found the cave and the guardian deity by accident, and whether I actually tamed Ciel or not remains a mystery to this day. Errr...why did this happen to me? I looked at Druid, but he only smiled awkwardly back.

“I was drinking with Captain Tableau last night, and we started talking about Miss Ivy. It just made me realize all over again what an extraordinary person is in our midst, and I guess I had a hard time hiding that. Do forgive me. And don’t worry, I’m just a typical fan.”

I sighed. *Oh dear...my face feels hot. I’m sure it’s red. Wait, how am I supposed to deal with this situation?* I looked at Druid, but he just laughed again. “Mr. *Druid!*”

“Sorry. It’s okay, calm down. Guild Master Priya, you wanted to discuss something with us?”

“Er, yes.”

“Then let’s talk about that instead.”

I poured some more tea so that we could start over. We all took a sip in silence. *I'm not sure why, but...I'm exhausted. Guild Master Priya looks much more relaxed now that he's gotten that off his chest. His gaze...it's scaring me. He shouldn't be my fan; I'm really not that great.*

"It's okay if he comes to the forest with us tomorrow, right, Ivy?"

"Yes, that shouldn't be a problem. But why do you need to borrow Ciel, sir?"
Ciel isn't a thing! The word "borrow" really irks me.

"Oh, sorry about that!" Guild Master Priya was shrinking back a little; he'd probably caught the annoyance in my voice. "You see, it's like this: Yesterday, we took another look at the cave and found no problems with it, so I announced to the guild that it was safe to start mining magic stones again."

Oh, okay. I didn't know that.

"And then, we also told them today that an adventurer had hunted bearth."

We aren't exactly adventurers, but we did ask for our identities to be kept secret.

"And the adventurers got excited about it, which is great! But some of them were worried."

Worried?

"The cave is still safe and all, but they were afraid that the adventurers might get too reckless going after bearth."

"Well, yes, it's dangerous in the winter," Druid chimed in. "If you ignore the changes in the weather and find yourself in the middle of a blizzard, you could die."

A light sprinkle of snow like the one today wasn't a problem, but blizzards were apparently quite dangerous. I'd never seen one before, but Druid said that they made you lose all sense of direction. Some people even got stuck in place and froze to death. That's why you always had to look out for changes in the weather if you wanted to go out into the forest in wintertime.

“Yes, sir,” Priya agreed. “We lost some of our high and mid-level adventurers who were involved with the criminal organization, so we don’t have enough experienced hands to mentor the newer ones.”

There was that organization again, all the way out here. Its influence sure spread far and wide.

“I get what you’re saying,” Druid replied. “There were victims in my town, too, but you guys got hurt out here as well?”

“Yes, sir. When we got the information via faax, it had us in a panic because a bunch of our children had just gone missing.”

“Oh no! Hatow’s children were kidnapped, too, sir?” Druid and I both shot astonished looks at Priya.

“Sadly, yes. We used the information from your team to catch the traitors in our midst and bring our children home. Miss Ivy, I truly cannot thank you enough for that.”

“Oh, no, sir. I wasn’t the one who got the intel out of the kidnappers.” *Please, stop looking at me like I’m a golden idol. I’m not used to it.*

“That’s quite a story,” Druid said.

Um, aren’t we getting off track here? “So, why do you need Ciel’s help, sir?”

“Er...? Oh, right! That’s what we were talking about.”

You mean you completely forgot?

“I was thinking this could be a perfect teaching moment for our younger adventurers who have never hunted bearth before.”

A teaching moment?

“Do the veteran adventurers usually teach the novices how to hunt in the winter?” Druid asked.

“Yes. We’re actually setting up a schedule for that right now.”

“Okay, so that’s why you need to know where to find the bearth.”

“Yes, sir. Even though you found that one bearth, there still probably aren’t too many of them around. We thought those monsters had gone extinct.”

Yeah, I remember they said the bearth disappeared more than five years ago. If everyone starts hunting them again, they might really go extinct this time.

“Hey, Ciel, are there not many bearth monsters out there?”

Mrrrow.

“Okay, there aren’t. So, if the adventurers try too hard, they might hunt them to extinction?”

Mrrrow.

“You’re right, Guild Master Priya. If too many bearth are hunted, we may lose them for good this time.”

When I turned my gaze from Ciel to Priya, the guild master’s eyes sparkled at me again. Druid clamped a hand over his mouth, but his shoulders were shaking. *I know you’re laughing! You’re not fooling anyone.*

“Wow, I see your mind link with Ciel the Great is perfect. Truly extraordinary.”

Again, why are you calling it Ciel the Great? I’d love to ask...but I’d better not. I don’t want to get him too worked up.

“Um, so, Ciel...could you take Guild Master Priya to the spot where you found the bearth?”

Mrrrow.

“That’s a yes. Would tomorrow around noon work for you, sir?”

“Yes, ma’am. I can make time.”

“Is that good for you, too, Mr. Druid?”

“Yeah, I’m fine with it. But wow, winter hunting training... There’s a memory I’d rather forget.”

“Did something bad happen to you before?” Priya asked.

Deep creases formed between Druid’s brows.

“Let me guess... Was it your mentor?” I asked.

“Your mentor?” Priya wondered.

“Mr. Druid’s mentor is, um...a very foolhardy person.”

“No, foolhardy barely scratches the surface. He’s a *fool* who gets a kick out of giving people a *hard* time.”

Perhaps recognizing something in Druid’s annoyed tone, Priya gave him a sympathetic smile. “He sounds like our last guild master. That guy liked to give me a hard time, too.”

Druid and Priya sighed in unison. *What are they both remembering, I wonder?*

Chapter 295: My Current Status?

DRUID AND PRIYA were having a wild time exchanging stories about Druid's mentor and Priya's former guild master. Some of their tales were bone-chilling and made me wonder how either of them were still alive, but I supposed adventurers just had to be tough like that. If that were true, then I definitely wasn't cut out to be an adventurer and grateful that Druid had registered us with the merchant guild instead. As I sat there, petting Sora and Ciel on my lap, tales of their cruel...adventures? trials?...made me do some introspection.

"By the way, did your problem with the merchant guild master get resolved?" Druid asked.

Oh, right, that was a thing. The guild master...stole magic stones from adventurers, or something like that? And lots of his crimes were exposed, too? Huh? Wait, what exactly happened?

"Oh, that's right, we didn't make that public yet."

"It's not public? Then you don't need to tell us," Druid said.

I nodded in agreement. If they had some reason to keep the information secret, there was no need for outsiders like us to know about it.

"Oh, I think it's all right for me to tell you both."

Uh, but we really don't need to know.

"Our suspicions turned out to be true, and he was convicted."

Oh, okay.

"Well, that's good to hear. Congratulations," Druid said.

Yeah, at least that means one of the problems in this village has gone away.

"Actually, that summoning circle you found was an important piece of

evidence against him.”

Summoning circle? Does he mean the one in the cave?

“Was that summoning circle there before the merchant guild master was caught?”

“Oh, no. After he was caught, somebody who was trying to take over his gang cast that circle. They had already drawn up a plan, and he was just carrying it out.”

“Oh, interesting. If it’s classified, you don’t need to tell me, but what exactly was that summoning circle supposed to do?”

“It forced those affected by it to obey orders. If our guardian deity had stayed in that circle much longer, I fear it would have become enslaved by those villains. It is truly a blessing that Ciel the Great was there. If our guardian deity had fallen into the hands of criminals, we would have had a crisis on our hands.”

That...isn’t exactly something we should know about? Huh. Poor Druid is so uncomfortable. Er, don’t look at me, Druid, I can’t help you. I think I’ll just avoid eye contact...

“Wow, that’s a lot... Well, I’m glad you got everything under control,” Druid said.

Yikes, look at how tense his face is. Hey, don’t glare at me, Druid. You’re the one who asked him.

“Oh!” Priya gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked.

“That was...classified information.”

“Yeah, *we know*,” Druid and I sighed in unison. Priya really was just too easygoing around us.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Hm? Hee hee, oh, I’m okay. Thanks, guys.”

In addition to Ciel and Sora, Flame was awake, staring at me from the bed. *Did they notice how exhausted I look? It’s sure sweet of them to worry about me like that.*

“Pefu!” Next thing I knew, Sol had woken up from its nap on the table and joined in on the staring.

“Thanks to you, too, Sol.” I gave Sol a few pats, and it jiggled happily and softened its eyes. *Huh? Is this the first time Sol has looked happy like that? Behold! A new Sol emotion!* I looked up abruptly to see the guild master and Druid staring at me with inscrutable expressions.

“She really is extraordinary.”

“Ha ha ha!”

I just know my face is tense as a board right now.

“Oh dear, would you look at the time? I have to get back to work,” Priya stammered, looking nervously at the clock. It was indeed dinnertime. After thanking us over and over and shaking our hands for some reason, Guild Master Priya finally went on his way.

I sighed heavily, not from physical fatigue but from mental exhaustion.

“Are you tired, Ivy? Are you okay?”

“Finding out he’s my fan out of nowhere made me so nervous. And then he had to go and blab secret intel to us... I’m beat.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“It’s not funny! I was freaked out.”

“Hmm...well, it’s just a hunch, but I’m pretty sure Captain Tableau is a fan of yours, too.”

“What?!”

“Adventurers tend to look up to people who are incredibly strong or who’ve tamed monsters they admire. Most of them don’t become such rabid fans, but some of them do tend to get quite enamored.”

“Like the captain and the guild master?” I was hoping he would say no.

“Yeah, they’re pretty close to that level.”

Arrrgh.

“Well, when you look at all your accomplishments, you’ve done some pretty extraordinary things, Ivy.”

Extraordinary things? I thought about it, but nothing was coming to mind. Even the stuff Priya had been talking about earlier was just a string of good luck on my part. And I owed most of it to Ciel and Sora, anyway. I hadn’t really done anything.

“From your face, it looks like you don’t get it,” Druid said.

“Yeah.”

“Well, this is going to be important for you in the future, so let’s talk about it over dinner.”

“Yes, let’s. I’m starving.”

I really want to have time for a long talk tonight, so I’ll cook a simple rice bowl dish. Maybe I’ll add some braised root vegetables, too.

We got to work cooking, and dinner was done in no time. I’d gotten used to cooking together with Druid by then, even though it had been so clunky at first.

Then we sat down to eat and marveled over how rice bowls worked well with any kind of meat. I’d experimented a lot, and everything was a winner so far. We finished eating and washed the dishes, yet another thing I was now used to doing with a partner.

“Okay, let’s make some tea and take it back to our room,” Druid said.

“Aren’t you drinking wine tonight?”

“I don’t need it every night like I used to. Now I have something else that fills my heart with joy.”

“Hm?” Druid had added something at the end, but I hadn’t heard it. I looked at him and saw he was smiling. I assumed it was nothing I needed to worry about.

“Okay, Ivy, first I’ll talk you through all the things you’ve done.”

It’s weird that he has to tell me about things I did myself for me to understand his point... Am I really that dense?

“When you helped take down that crime organization, Ivy, you cleared the names of Hatow’s former guild master and captain of the watch. And as we learned today, you also helped the kidnapped children get home safe. Your involvement must have given you a huge place in Priya’s and Tableau’s hearts, Ivy.”

“But what about the other heroes who were involved?” *I didn’t take down the organization on my own. I mean, all I did was help.*

“All the other heroes involved were just that: famous adventurers who were already thought of as heroes. Do you see what I mean, Ivy?”

I nodded in reply. He did have a point.

“So, when you—an unknown person working in secret—joined those heroes, you stood out. And with a little digging, they found out you’re still a child. A *child* helped save them and theirs. It was kind of a shock to them. And why wouldn’t it be? In one fell swoop, you solved two big problems they couldn’t handle on their own.”

Hearing him say it like that made me start to understand why Hatow’s leaders idolized me.

“Then when they met you in person, you turned out to be even littler than they’d imagined.”

All I could do was stare.

“Ivy, I’d appreciate it if you stopped glaring at me.”

“Sorry.” *C’mon, you called me “little”!*

“And even though you look little, you talk like a mature adult. What’s more, you happened to give them affordably priced magic stones they could use to solve Hatow’s energy crisis before it started. On top of everything else, you’ve tamed rare monsters they could only dream of—even an *adandara*, for crying out loud. Furthermore, you found a cave where they could mine the magic stones that power this village, and *you rescued their guardian deity*. And as the cherry on top, you helped them solve the problem with their corrupt merchant guild master.”

Umm...hm? But Druid was with me when I found the cave and the guardian deity! So I think it would make just as much sense for them to be his fans.

“And no, they wouldn’t be my fans. Sora, Ciel, Flame... *You* were the one who tamed them, Ivy.”

All I could do was sigh. I understood what he was saying, but a part of me wished I didn’t.

“Now, what I’m about to say is the most important part.”

“There’s more?”

“I’m pretty sure you have fans in the other towns and villages—not as extreme as Tableau and Priya—but you have them. I was a little worried about it before, but after the latest happenings, I’ve decided everything is okay.”

“I...have other fans?”

“Yes. Bolorda and the others you worked with all got huge boosts to their reputations because they helped crush that crime organization. That nobleman who aided you... What was his name again?”

“Lord Foronda?”

“Right. I heard rumors about him. The king has really taken a liking to him and offered to let him court the princess.”

Whoa, now that's impressive.

“He turned down the offer, apparently; didn’t want to leave town. But the princess really fancies him and is trying to win him over. At least, that’s the rumor.”

Even for a rumor, it's still impressive.

“Since you share a space with such big names, the heads of towns and villages all over are bound to notice you. The common townsfolk won’t, though, since a lot of this information is classified. We really have to thank that head watchman who kept it under wraps.”

Argh... Can somebody please give me a moment to breathe?

Chapter 296:

Nothing to Worry About

A CUP OF TEA calmed me right down.

“Are you okay? Your face is kind of green.”

“It’s just, hearing all those unexpected things...it’s put my brain in a whirl.”

“Don’t think too deeply about it, okay? Just understand that there are people out there who worship you. It’s nothing special; there are plenty of adventurers who have fans, so you don’t need to worry about it.”

I saw his point, but still... I felt like the “me” that existed in Priya’s mind was leagues apart from the real me. And the thought that there were other people out there who thought the same way about me was a little unnerving.

“Well, I think your fans tend to be the top dogs of villages and towns, not the other adventurers.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“Well, most of the intel about you is classified, Ivy. Why would anyone else but the highest brass know about you?”

Ah, right. I forgot.

“So in a way, Ivy, your fans are somewhat extraordinary people themselves.”

“Why’re you saying that? You’re scaring me! But then again, how do we know I have fans other than Captain Tableau and Guild Master Priya anyway?”

“Well...maybe not. Why don’t you ask Otolwa’s guild master?”

“Ask him what?”

“If there are people asking about you. If people want to know about you, that means you’re the talk of the town.”

That made sense. But if I found out I was the talk of the town, that would confirm my worst fear: I had fans. *Well, no, I guess not necessarily. All it would mean is that I'm getting people's attention.*

"Guild masters and head watchmen are pretty good at sniffing out fans by the way they act and talk. We might be able to find out from them just how many fans you've got."

Village leaders really are extraordinary people. Imagine being able to notice things like that. I remember the guild master and head watchman of Otolwa did understand me and help me a lot, even when I didn't say that much to them. I don't exactly need to find out how many fans I have, though...

"But you know, it really was the right call to include your name on the list of persons of merit. That way, if you ever got caught up in any trouble, the worst-case scenario would never happen to you."

"What's the worst-case scenario?"

"Like, if you got into some kind of jam and the blame was placed on you, your investigation would be handled with care, since you're listed as a person of merit."

"Oh, is that how it works?" Had my whole position in life really changed that dramatically just because my name was put on a list?

"That's right. Also, the investigators would want to contact the people on that list to find out what kind of person you are."

"I wouldn't want to drag them into it."

"Actually, I think the people who put their names on that list were specifically thinking that it might come to something like that someday."

Wait...what does he mean by that? They put down their names knowing something might happen?

"If they get contacted because of you, that would mean you'd gotten into some sort of trouble. That way, even if you were imprisoned, they could come

to your rescue. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah...but wouldn't they be too busy working?" *I doubt they could just show up to help at a moment's notice.*

"I think if something were to happen to you, they would drop everything and come running. At least, that's the impression I get from the way you've talked about them."

Is that really true?

"Wouldn't you do the same for them, Ivy?"

"Huh?!"

"If any of your fellow heroes were in trouble, what would you do?"

What would I do if Druid or Rattloore or any of the other people I've met were imprisoned?

"There wouldn't be much I *could* do...but I'd drop everything and go to them."

"They feel the same way about you."

Oh... Hee hee, that's so sweet... Wait, huh? We were talking about fans. How did we end up here?

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just thinking we got off topic there."

"Hm? Oh, right...we were talking about fans. Well, they're harmless, Ivy. Not many of them get as excited as Guild Master Priya."

He said "not many" rather than "none"... Well, as long as they're harmless, I guess it's fine. Okay, I think I've calmed down now.

"I guess you're right. And there's no point in imagining a bunch of doom and gloom, either."

"Exactly. Just remember that you probably have some fans out there."

I was so shocked by the news that I had fans that my bewildered brain

thought it was a problem, but it really was nothing to worry about. People like Guild Master Priya were apparently a special case. So even though I might have fans, I decided not to worry about it any further.

“Mr. Druid, are you a fan of anyone?”

“Me? I don’t think I am. Oh, now that you mention it, Captain Oght, that man who signed off as your guarantor, has quite a few fans.”

“What?! He does? I mean, I knew he was a famous adventurer, but still...”

“Yeah, he led the party that successfully defeated the berserk dragon. Younger adventurers became his fans for that.”

“Woow...wait a minute, I have a truly extraordinary person as my guarantor, don’t I?”

Defeating a berserk dragon, huh? It’s hard to imagine that from the guy who kept running away from his work.

“Ha ha ha. Ivy?”

“Yes?”

“Er, please don’t tell me you haven’t noticed this...”

“Um, haven’t noticed what, sir?”

“Basically, everyone you know has been on a list of persons of merit once or twice. That includes Captain Oght, too.”

Wow. I had no idea. All the people on those persons of merit lists are my friends and acquaintances. And Captain Oght is one of them as well.

“It seems like everyone I touch is extraordinary.”

“You’re blessed with that quality, Ivy.”

None of it feels real to me, though.

“Okay, let’s take our baths and get to bed.”

“Sure. Oh, wait! We were still going to talk about Sol’s problem.”

“Oh, no...it can wait for tomorrow, right?”

“Good idea.”

My brain is just exhausted from all the thinking it had to do today. What're we doing tomorrow? Oh, that's right, we're going to the forest with Priya and showing him where Ciel found the bearth. Then we're going to the dump to get Sol its food.

I yawned loudly.

“You sound sleepy.”

“Yeah, I'm a little tired.”

“Be careful not to nod off in the bath. You'll drown.”

And in spite of Druid's warning, I did nod off a little in the bath. Thank goodness there was someone in there with me to wake me up.

“Good morning!”

“Guild Master Priya...good morning.”

“Morning. Um, we were supposed to meet at the gate, right?”

As soon as we stepped out of our inn's front door, we came face-to-face with Priya, who we were expecting to find at the village gate, with a huge smile on his face. Druid's expression, meanwhile, was quite stiff.

“Yes, I'm sorry,” Priya nodded in reply. “I just got so excited thinking about spending time with Ciel the Great!”

It seemed that Vice-Captain Pith wasn't the only man with a weakness for rarities. As we walked toward the gate, Druid and I exchanged a chuckle over the happy humming noise our companion was making. We greeted the gatekeepers and headed into the forest. As we got closer to our destination, I searched for human auras. Based on the conversations we'd had the previous day, there might be other adventurers nearby.

“I think we’re safe here. The path that leads to the cave is a little out of the way.”

I could sense many adventurer auras on the road to the cave, so I figured we should probably put a little more distance between us and them before taking my creatures out of their bag.

“I think you’re right,” Priya agreed.

“Once we go a little farther, I’ll take out my creatures.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” Druid agreed.

We walked to a safe spot, scanning for auras as we went.

“And without further ado...”

I opened the lid of my bag, and they sprang out of it. As soon as Ciel emerged, it shapeshifted into its adandara form and began to stretch. Sora was right beside it, doing the same thing. And Flame was, as usual, sound asleep inside the bag. Sol had jumped out and was leaping straight toward Ciel’s head. It landed gracefully and jiggled with glee.

“It really is an extraordinary sight.” Guild Master Priya murmured, staring dreamily at the three creatures.

“It sure is. Well, let’s not stand around here,” Druid said. “We have places to go. Lead the way, Ciel.”

Mrrrow.

Ciel meowed happily at Druid and jumped to the helm. Ciel had told me the night before that the spot where it found the bearth was about a three to four hour walk away from the village. But Druid pointed out that it might take longer since there was a lot of snow.

Okay, let’s go see those bearth! I sure would love to see a living one if I could.

Chapter 297:

Too Bad It's Cold

WE WHISKED THROUGH the woods, cutting through the wind as we went. On this winter day, it was quite cold...yet also thrilling. I wondered if it would have felt as nice in the springtime.

“Guild Master Priya, are we going too fast for you?”

“Not a problem, Miss. I am already quite familiar with this part of the forest, so I don't need to linger. But my, I am quite impressed!”

I smiled at the excitement in his voice. And, well, of course he was excited. After all, we were riding the back of this village's guardian deity.



“Thanks,” I told Snakey.

It spun its head around and smiled softly at me. I wished it would keep its eyes on where we were going, but it had such a cute smile. Still, I was astounded. I never thought I’d see the day when I would be riding Snakey. When we were walking through the forest on our way to hunt bearth, Snakey had appeared out of nowhere to greet us. When we apologized that we had an errand to run that day and couldn’t visit, Snakey suddenly yanked me off the ground with its nose and set me on its back. And while I was sitting there, stiff with shock, Sora and Ciel in slime form jumped on with me. Then it looked back at Druid and Priya to tell them they were also welcome to ride, so the two men climbed onto Snakey’s back.

“I never dreamed our guardian deity would let me ride its back! Miss Ivy, being near you always brings me such extraordinary experiences.”

I smiled awkwardly in reply. I was pretty sure Snakey was allowing us on its back not because of me but because of Ciel.

“Hey, Ciel, are we almost at the spot where you found the bearth?”

Would Ciel still be able to tell where we were when we were riding on Snakey’s back? The adandara looked around and then jiggled.

“Are we almost there?”

No answer.

“A little farther?”

Mrrrow.

A bit farther, then. After a little more distance, Ciel suddenly started to mew. Snakey stopped at the sound of it. *That’s impressive. We got to our destination in half the time.*

“Thanks,” I told Snakey while getting off its back. Druid and Priya said the same as they slid off and took in their surroundings.

“Do you know about where we are?” Druid asked.

“Yes, this is one of the places where bearth used to herd. Oh! Look at that!”

We looked where Priya was pointing and saw sharp claw marks that had cut through the tree bark.

“These marks definitely came from bearth. They have sharp, retractable claws, you see.”

So they're retractable. That made sense as the bearth corpse didn't appear to have sharp claws.

“This spot is four or five hours away from the village. This will be great practice for the novice adventurers. They could learn how to hunt and survive overnight in the winter here.”

Priya looked rather giddy. Teaching the next generation of adventurers was one of his jobs as the guild master. He had to teach them well or else they would die. A lot of younger adventurers thought it was okay to push themselves beyond their limits, but the forest was not to be taken lightly. An unguarded moment could get you killed; that's the sort of place it was. That was why younger adventurers were always paired off with the veterans for missions, so they could gain the necessary experience to survive. And these learning missions were particularly popular among the novices. Priya told us that many of them had signed up for this bearth expedition.

“I hope it goes well,” Druid said.

“Me, too. I'm just concerned about the winter weather.”

I glanced around as I listened to the adults talk. “Huh, I don't see any.” I strained my eyes as far as they could see, but there was no sign of bearth. I guess that made sense since they would never come anywhere near Snakey or Ciel. I had wanted to see a bearth on its feet, but I guessed it wasn't meant to be.

Mrrrow?

“Hm? Oh, I was just thinking it would be nice to see a bearth moving around.”

I looked at Ciel, curious about the slight change in its voice, and saw it had returned to adandara form. Our eyes met, and it gave a short meow before darting off into the distance.

“Huh?! Ciel?”

“Pu! Puuu?” Sora, equally confused, stared at Ciel as it ran off.

“It’s gone, isn’t it?”

“Pu! Pu, pu.”

Huh? Come to think of it, where did Sol go? I thought it was stuck to Ciel’s head like glue even after Ciel shapeshifted into a slime.

“Sol?”

“Pefu!”

Huh? The voice sounded close to my ear. I quickly looked at my right shoulder...and there was Sol, perched on top of it. “When did you get there?”

“Pefu-*fu*!” Sol looked a bit proud, like it was happy it had surprised me.

“Oh, *you*!” I gave Sol a couple of pokes, and it jiggled with glee. Actually, I was glad it was on my shoulder. I was worried we’d dropped it somewhere.

“What’s going on?” Druid, who’d finished talking with Priya, looked around as he approached us. “Where’s Ciel?”

“It ran off.”

“What?!” Druid looked startled.

Yeah, I’d be shocked, too. Ciel had stayed close by us when we entered the forest. It had probably run away to ensure our safety.

“What’s wrong?”

Wait a minute...Ciel ran off right after I said I wished I could see a bearth moving around. It didn’t... No, it wouldn’t...

“I sense something approaching us,” Priya said, drawing his sword and taking a defensive stance. Ciel being gone certainly made a big difference. Druid drew his sword, too.

“Sss...”

I suddenly felt a giant shadow looming behind me and heard a hissing sound above my head. I spun around to see Snakey standing tall and looking menacingly about in all directions. Just as it did that, I sensed an aura darting away from us.

“Now I get it. Ciel ran off because we had someone else here to protect us,” Druid said.

“Looks like it. Thanks, Snakey.”

Snakey lowered its head and nuzzled its nose against my belly. It was so cute when it was affectionate like that. I gave its nose a couple of pats, and it smiled softly up at me.

“Snakey sure is good at masking its aura, huh?” I said.

“Hm?”

“Well, until that other monster’s aura got close to us, I didn’t sense Snakey’s aura at all.”

Even now, its aura was faint, unlike when it was intimidating our would-be attacker. Maybe that’s why it was so good at staying hidden in the forest: It could mask its aura really well.

“Mr. Druid! Would you show me your sword? That’s a magic stone, isn’t it?” Priya’s eyes were glued to Druid’s sword, and he seemed quite taken with the stone Flame had made. It certainly was an impressive one.

“Sure, I don’t mind...just don’t tell anyone about it, okay?”

“Of course! Ah, so this really must be a high-level magic stone, eh?” Priya was giddy with excitement as he stared at the stone.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Probably?”

“Uh-huh. We didn’t have it checked.”

“But what a waste! If you found out this sword’s level, its value would shoot up and you could really make a name for yourself.”

Make a name for himself?

“Uh, it’s okay. I don’t want to draw attention to myself.”

“Oh, too bad. Where did you find this magic stone? Or wait, did a monster drop it?”

Druid looked at me for help. Priya knew that Flame could regenerate magic stones and that it had made one to save Snakey, so it should be okay to tell him.

“Flame made this magic stone, sir. We didn’t find it in a cave or by killing a monster.”

When I said this, Priya froze. Then he sharply turned his eyes on me. I recoiled a little under his intense gaze. Why... *Why* did he have such a big smile on his face?

Chapter 298:

Please Let It Go

“**M**R. DRUID, Guild Master Priya is scaring me,” I muttered quietly as I watched the guild master gleefully stare at Druid’s sword.

“I’d give up if I were you, Ivy. He seems to think of you as sort of...god-tier,” Druid answered in an equally quiet murmur. I wasn’t at all happy with what he said, though.

“Please...can’t it be springtime already?”

I wanted to go someplace far from Priya’s adoring gaze.

“Sorry, don’t think that’s possible.”

“Do you think Snakey could take us all the way to the next village if I asked it to?”

We were about to enter a true snowy season, so traveling seemed like it would be impossible. But I had the feeling we could do it if Snakey helped us... *Stop it, Ivy, you know that’s not happening.*

“I do get the feeling that it would take us away if you asked nicely,” Druid replied.

“Huh?!” His answer startled me. Would it really take us far away? But wouldn’t that be asking too much of it?

“You shouldn’t be so shocked. What did it do earlier today? It put your needs first and let you ride on its back.”

Come to think of it, he’s right. But I still think the next village over would be asking too much.

“If you did ask the serpent deity to take us to the next village, Priya would probably make you a legend in his circle.”

“Eeek...” I sighed louder than I meant to.

“Is something wrong?” Priya asked, looking over at the sound of my voice.

“Uh, everything’s fine, thanks.”

If only he could act normal all the time, like he’s doing just now. I sighed quietly and felt a soft weight on my head. I reached up and gave Snakey’s face a few pats. Well, I say “face,” but my hands couldn’t reach that far, so it was more like its jaw.

“Ciel sure is taking a long time.”

“Yeah.”

“Pu! Pu, pu.”

“Pefu!”

Ten minutes had passed since Ciel had gone on its little outing, and I still couldn’t sense its aura. Where in the world had it run off to?

“Oh!”

Then I suddenly felt Ciel’s aura coming toward us. It was still quite a ways away, but it was definitely the adandara.

“Pu! Puuu.” Sora happily bounced around, also sensing Ciel’s aura. And although Sol didn’t bounce, it did jiggle happily on my shoulder.

“Oh, Sol! That feels really nice.”

“Pefu!”

Sol’s vibrations were going through my shoulder, and it felt inexplicably good.

“Thanks, buddy.”

“Ciel’s back.” Druid drew his sword and cast his eyes toward the trees. The sound of Ciel approaching was getting louder and louder.

“Hi, Ciel... Oh, it’s got something in its—wait, that’s a bearth.”

Ciel was carrying a bearth in its mouth. It must have gone hunting. After I said

I wished I could see a bearth moving around, a crazy thought had occurred to me. But apparently Ciel had just gone off on a normal hunt.

“Good to have you back, Ciel.”

Ciel walked over to me and gently lowered its catch at my feet, but there was something different about the way it was moving. It sent shivers down my spine.

“Wait a minute...is this bearth still breathing?” Druid asked.

I stared at the bearth. Then it jumped to its feet, looked at us, and froze on the spot. Its face was only a few meters away from Ciel and Snakey.

“Ivy...don’t tell me you gave Ciel a special request?”

“No, sir, I most certainly didn’t. I just...said it would be nice if I could see a living bearth.”

I’d never dreamed Ciel would catch one and bring it back to me alive.

“Now I get it,” Druid said. “Ciel must have brought it back to make you happy, Ivy.”

I had to admit I was pleased to see a living bearth...but still.

“That bearth...I feel kind of sorry for it.”

“Yeah, it’s in quite a tragic situation.”

Ciel was poking the bearth, probably trying to get it to move, but it still stayed completely motionless. And Snakey was even worse; it was knocking over the bearth with its nose.

“Um...er...what exactly are they doing?” Priya wore a look of utter bewilderment as he watched Ciel and Snakey play with the bearth.

“Um...it’s all my fault, sir.”

“What?!”

“Mr. Druid...I’m gonna go make them stop.”

“Yeah, thanks. This is a bit beyond me...”

Ciel, Snakey, you should both know better than to play with a poor bearth when it's frozen in terror.

“Ciel, Snakey, please give it a rest.”

The two creatures stopped and stared at me. *Ciel, I know you brought it as a present.*

“Thanks for doing this for me, Ciel. I'm so happy I get to see a living bearth.”

Mrrrow.

“Well, I've had enough now. Could you please let it go?”

And you both liked teasing the bearth, didn't you? I saw how you were pawing at it faster and faster.

“Pu, puuu.” Sora sounded a bit upset by my order.

“Sora, the bearth isn't having a good time. It's scared.”

Sora, who loved being poked around by Ciel, was eyeing the bearth with envy.

“It doesn't think this is a game at all, understand? Just look how it's shaking.”

“Puuu?” Sora gave me a strange look.

Come on, Sora, are you really that desperate to get pushed around by Ciel? It makes me worry for your future.

The bearth, now freed from its playmates, was jerkily darting its eyes back and forth. It couldn't move freely, since Ciel and Snakey were still nearby.

“Ciel, Snakey, come over here. The poor thing is petrified.”

Mew?

“Ohhh, wait, were you trying to hunt it? Please don't. It's had enough.”

As soon as the two monsters moved over to me, the bearth jumped up and ran away. It wobbled a little as it ran, so that probably wasn't how it normally moved.

“Oh, why did you let it escape?” Guild Master Priya pointed at the fleeing bearth.

“I just felt sorry for the poor thing.”

“Ah, yes. I can see why.” Priya smiled.

“Have you finished looking over this area, sir?” I asked.

It was definitely a treacherous place to explore, especially with the deep snow.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s an area I already knew pretty well, so all it needed was a quick once-over.”

Wow, he sure knows a lot about this forest.

“Do you want to head back, then?” Druid asked. “Or is there anything else you wanted to do while we’re here?”

“Oh, no, I’m fine, thank you.”

Since the guild master had finished his task, we decided to head back to the village.

“Would you please take us back, too?” I asked, petting Snakey’s nose.

It nuzzled its nose in my belly, then hoisted me up onto its back, just like before.

“See, Ivy? If you ask, I think it would take us to that place we were talking about earlier.”

“Take you where?” Priya gave us a strange look.

“Nowhere, sir. *Honestly*, Mr. Druid!”

“Ha ha ha, sorry. Come on, Guild Master, better get on or we’ll leave you behind. It’s okay for us to ride, too, right?”

Snakey nodded, then quickly brought its face close to mine.

“Thanks.” I petted its nose, and it smiled softly at me.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

Sora and Sol also must have been thanking Snakey, because its eyes narrowed into an even softer smile. Ciel was still in adandara form, which meant it would probably run alongside us. Its tail was spinning in circles, so it must have been enjoying itself.

“Wow, you didn’t wake up all day, did you?” I opened the lid of the bag Flame was in and took a little peek.

“Hm?”

“I’m talking to Flame. I’ve been checking on it in the bag all day, but it’s showing no signs of waking up.”

“Ha ha ha! Classic Flame,” Druid chuckled.

It was classic Flame behavior...but had it ever slept *that* long before?

Chapter 299:

Feeding Sol

I LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW, and a bright white world expanded before my eyes. The strong winds rattled the windows, and it was dim outside despite it being the middle of the day. Yesterday, the village watch had issued a warning around lunchtime for a blizzard that would begin today and last two to four days, so Salifa and Dola had had their hands full last night preparing for it.

“Wow, it’s true...you really can’t see more than a meter or so away.”

I pressed my hands to the window glass, leaned in close, and tried to see outside...but I couldn’t tell what it was like at all. It really was a bright white world. As I sat there, staring outside, I heard a knock at the door. I said “Come in” without taking my eyes off the snowy scene, and Druid entered soon after.

“The way this is coming down, we’ll be dealing with its aftermath even after it stops snowing.”

“Its aftermath?”

“Yeah, it’s going to snow for a few days straight, so there’s no telling how high it’ll pile up.”

“Oh, wow.”

I remember Druid saying that you couldn’t even move if the snow piled up too high. We might end up trapped inside this inn even after the snow stops.

Seven days had passed since we went into the forest with Guild Master Priya. Since then, we’d hunted as many shiusa and hatsuri as we could. Druid and I had a fun time changing up how and where we set our traps, and with a little help from Ciel, we successfully caught a large number of both kinds of monster.

We were about to sell them to the butcher, but Druid stopped me. “We registered with the merchant guild, remember? It’s safer to sell our meat

there.” Then when I told Druid that I didn’t remember registering with the merchant guild at all, he had a little panic attack. He explained to me that we’d registered before we set out, but I still couldn’t remember it in the slightest. It was a good thing that I recalled our family account, though. We couldn’t have one without registering with the merchant guild first, which gave me the first clue something was wrong with my memory. Anyway, we sold our meat to the guild, so all’s well that ends well.

“Huh?” I turned my eyes away from the window to see that Druid was holding a red magic stone.

“What’s wrong?”

“What are you doing with that?” I asked.

We’d told Dola that we didn’t need any magic stones because we’d made our own arrangements. But for some reason, there Druid was, returning to our room with a red magic stone in his hand.

“I told him we didn’t need any, but he insisted we take one just in case.”

It was supposed to get bitterly cold for the next few days, meaning the red magic stones would use up all their magic much more quickly than normal. That was probably why Dola had set aside extra stones for everyone. Druid’s eyes shifted over to the bag on top of the table. I looked at it, too. It held a large stash of red magic stones.

“I told him we didn’t need any, I swear. But I just couldn’t explain why.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Pong!

Even as we spoke, Flame was sitting on the bed and regenerating magic stones. A pile of the red gems glistened on the covers.

We both stared at the scene in silence.

“Well, when this cold snap is over, I’ll give it back,” Druid said.

“Please do.”

“We’ve got problems of our own to deal with.”

“I know. How are we going to feed Sol?”

We’d gone over a bunch of possibilities, but we just couldn’t find a way to gather the magic energy from the dump and bring it back with us. So, for the time being, we had picked up a bunch of discarded magic items from the dump that contained relatively large levels of magic. I wasn’t a big fan of the idea, but we had to do it for Sol’s sake. There wasn’t that much magic energy in the amount of trash we’d collected—it would only last about a day. Yet we might not be able to go back to the dump for the next several days.

“How’s Sol doing?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s been playing around Flame this whole time.” I looked over at the bed, but Sol was nowhere to be seen. “Sol?”

“Pefu!”

I looked toward the sound of its voice...and saw it by the foot of the bed. Had it fallen off?

“What’re you doing? Somebody’ll step on you, you know!”

“Pefu!”

I gently set Sol atop the bed. “Sorry, Sol. We couldn’t get enough food for you.”

“Peh?”

“We put some trash in our magic bag, but I don’t think there’s enough.”

“Pefu!” Sol nodded in understanding.

“When do you think we’ll be able to go back into the forest?” I asked Druid.

“With this snow, it’s hard to tell... Worst-case scenario, we might have to wait

until spring.”

That long? Well, now we have a real problem. Isn't springtime still a month away?

“Oh, wait! What do people do with their trash during the winter?” I asked.

I doubted people would just stash a month's worth of trash in their houses all winter. There had to be someplace they could dump it.

“They do make temporary dumps in the middle of towns and villages, but those are right out in public.”

Oh, that's right! Too bad. I got my hopes up, but I guess that won't work. There's no way we could let anybody see our magic-eating slime. Do we just have to pray for the snow to stop? Is that all we can do? I looked out the window... *I don't think my prayers would even reach God in this weather.*

“Sol, you're going to run out of food soon... Will you be okay?” Druid asked.

“Pefu!” Sol answered that it would be fine. Its tone was so nonchalant that my neck bent in confusion. I was expecting the creature to freak out. And judging by its behavior, it seemed to understand our conversations just fine. So why had it so calmly said that it would be okay?

“Um...Sol? You might not be able to eat any magic for a whole month. Are you sure you'll be all right?”

“Pefu!”

That was a yes.

“Let me guess...you can go for long periods of time without eating?”

“Pefu!”

Wait...did we just solve the problem?

“We've really been stressing out about this for a long time...was it all for nothing?”

“Yes, Sol, are you sure nothing's wrong?”

Sol answered with silence.

Hm? It didn't say anything, so that must mean there is still something wrong.

"Um, do you mean to say that you can survive for a long time without eating but that it might cause you some problems?"

"Pefu!"

So our problem wasn't solved after all.

"How long can you go without eating before something goes wrong?"

Sol once again went silent.

Apparently not even Sol knew the answer to that.

"Do you know what kinds of problems would come up?"

"Pefu!"

It was probably something that a slime would consider problematic.

"Would you get sick?"

No reaction, so that was a no.

What else is there? Well, Sol said it could survive without eating for the next month, so at least it won't die... But what could it be? I can't think of anything.

"Well, we'll just have to keep an eye on Sol," Druid said. "So, let's keep looking for a way to store magic energy."

"Does that work for you, Sol?"

"Pefu! Pefu!"

It looked like Sol's problem was not going to solve itself anytime soon. But at least for now, we knew that it would survive, even if it wasn't able to eat. We would just have to keep a close eye on Sol to see what kinds of problems that would cause...

“Ah, it finally stopped snowing.”

It was the third morning after the blizzard came. At last, the sun’s warm light pierced through the sky. One look out the window revealed that the snow had piled quite high. We decided to head downstairs to see just how deep it was.

“Oh! Good morning, you two.” Just as we reached the bottom of the stairs, we ran into Dola, who was wearing heavy winter clothing.

“Good morning. About to go out?” Druid asked.

“Good morning, Mr. Dola,” I said.

“Yes, I was going to melt the snow by the front door since the blizzard finally stopped, but unfortunately, I wasn’t able to get outside through there.”

Dola was pointing at the front door. I gave him a curious look, so he opened the door to show me. The entrance was completely blocked by a thick wall of snow.

“Woow, it sure did pile up.”

“Yes, they did say we’d have extra snow this year, but I wasn’t imagining *this* much of it. Especially when you realize winter’s just getting started.”

Dola heaved a hearty sigh. He was right, winter had only just begun. We were about to enter the worst of it.

“Would you like some help?” Druid offered.

“I hate to ask, but could you please help? I’d love to at least get the front door ready.”

“Sure...but where will we even get out from?”

“We’ll go out from a window on the second floor and melt the snow with a magic item. Then, once a fair amount of it has melted away, we’ll make a path people can walk on.”

Druid and Dola were about to get straight to work on clearing the snow outside.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

“No, Ivy, I’d hate for you to catch cold.” Druid shook his head firmly.

“Oh, hey, if you want to help, could you join Salifa in the kitchen?” Dola asked. “She has to make breakfast, and I can’t help her.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll give you both complimentary meals today and tomorrow, dinner included.”

When I smiled and nodded, Druid gave my head a couple of pats, and Dola did the same. After seeing them off, I went to the kitchen to help Salifa.

Chapter 300: Scared?

IT WAS THE NINTH DAY since the blizzard stopped. But as the snow hadn't stopped falling entirely, it was still piling up little by little. Meanwhile, we went to the village watch headquarters to ask an important favor of Captain Tableau. We asked a clerk if we could meet with him, and soon after, a very flustered Captain Tableau came running out to see us.

"Yikes...he already stands out too much as it is," Druid muttered.

Sure enough, all of Captain Tableau's subordinates stared at the frazzled man. Noticing this, the captain greeted us with an apologetic look on his face.

"Sorry about all that."

"Oh, no, we're sorry we came unannounced," Druid said. "We had a small favor to ask."

"All right...um, follow me." Captain Tableau led us to the captain's office. Vice-Captain Pith was also there.

"Hello, sir," we both greeted him.

"Hello, Mr. Druid, Miss Ivy."

We were offered the sofa. I sat next to Druid, while Captain Tableau and Vice-Captain Pith sat across from us. *Wait a minute, why is Pith here with us?*

"Pith?"

"What is it, sir?"

"You can get back to work."

"No, thank you. So, what brings you two here today?"

Captain Tableau sighed loudly. Well, Pith knew many of our secrets, so it was

safe to include him. And as soon as we sat on the sofa, he activated the magic item that would prevent our voices from being heard outside the room. I was actually quite grateful. He understood.

“We’re sorry to bother you, but we need to go into the forest and we’ve come to ask for your permission.”

“What?!”

The village gates were temporarily closed due to the dangerous levels of snow, meaning that people couldn’t enter the forest. But we simply had to go because of Sol. It did not actually need to eat to stay alive, but it had grown smaller. And though it looked healthy enough, it was clearly losing strength. When we asked Sol how it was doing, it paused for a moment and answered it was okay. But we were still worried, so we decided to get the captain to make an exception and allow us into the forest.

“Um...is it all right if I ask why you want to go?” Captain Tableau asked.

We had them lock the door, then we took Sol out of the bag and set it on the table in front of the sofa. As soon as we opened the bag, Sora and the others cheerfully bounded out of it. Flame was awake that day.

“Um...and who might this little fellow be?”

“This is Sol, a new member of our party.”

“It...doesn’t seem to have a taming symbol.”

“Well, yes, I haven’t tamed it.”

Both men fell silent. I’d figured they would be confused by that. Was it simply unheard of to have an untamed monster in your party? Anyway, I decided to explain Sol’s situation to them. When I told them it ate magic energy, they both got the most interesting expressions on their faces—they were astonished. When I finished explaining everything, Pith’s hands started fidgeting in a peculiar way. A slap from Captain Tableau stopped him. Sol, perhaps wary of Pith’s strange hand movements, had shrunk back a little from the Vice-Captain.

Yeah, I don't blame ya, buddy. The way he moves his fingers is creepy.

"Ivy, you've surprised us in many ways before, but...a slime that can solidify magic energy? Now that truly is too extraordinary for words!"

Pith was so worked up that Sol's little body quivered.

"Agreed. But what surprises me more is that a slime with such powers exists in the first place," Captain Tableau said. "Have you ever heard of such a thing, Mr. Druid?" He gently touched Sol, who didn't seem to mind the feeling.

"No, never," Druid answered. "When we first saw the creature feeding, it was quite a shock."

"Yes, it had a sort of divine quality," I said.

Druid smiled at me. I gave him a questioning look, and he patted my head.

"Weren't you scared?" Captain Tableau asked.

I stared at him doubtfully, surprised by the question. *Scared?* "Um, why would I be scared, sir?"

"What?! But didn't you say just a minute ago that black balls of magic energy popped up all around Sol?" Tableau asked.

I nodded.

"And didn't you wonder if those energy balls might attack you?"

"No, it never occurred to me."

Both men were startled by my answer. I didn't understand what was so shocking about it.

"Neither Sora nor Ciel were afraid of Sol, so there was no need for me to be scared. Besides, if you spend only a minute with Sol, you'll realize it's a very gentle creature."

Sometimes Sol's behavior was a little strange, but it was a kind creature at heart. It didn't even pull any pranks on us unless we weren't paying enough attention, and the same went for the other creatures.

“I see...so you trust it.”

“Of course we do. It’s one of us.”

Tableau smiled merrily at my response. “To add more members to your party without even using your skill—you truly are a wonder, Ivy.”

Without using my skill? Oh, right. Because Sol joined our party even though I didn’t tame it. I’ve never thought of it that way. I looked at Sol, who kept stealing wary glances at Vice-Captain Pith. The man had given up on touching the slime, but now he was giving it a thorough looking over, back and forth. I could see a tenseness in Sol’s face at the awkward motions. Finally, unable to stand Pith’s staring any longer, Sol retreated onto my lap with a big bounce.

“Pith, it doesn’t like you,” said Captain Tableau.

“Ah! I’m sorry, Sol. You’re just so unique that I wanted to have a good look at you.”

Pith earnestly apologized to Sol, but it only pressed itself firmly against me in defense. Feeling sorry for the poor creature, I covered it with my hand. And then I felt Sol relax, safe at last. Pith’s eyes shifted over to me, so I awkwardly moved my focus over to Druid.

“You bumbling fool,” Tableau sighed. “Now it completely hates you.”

Pith sulked a little at the rebuke.

“So, is it all right if we go into the forest?” Druid asked.

“Since you have a good reason, I don’t mind. Be careful, though. It’s quite dangerous out there.”

Captain Tableau rose to his feet, went over to the stack of documents on his desk, and scribbled something on a piece of paper that he brought back to the seating area. “Take this.”

“Thanks.” Druid took the travel permit from him. Now we could go to the forest. Captain Tableau’s eyes met mine, so I bowed to him in thanks.

“Say...I’m finished with my day’s work, aren’t I...?” Tableau muttered quietly, looking around the room. He stared at the pile of papers on his desk, nodded several times, and then looked at Druid and me. “Um, might I join you on your excursion into the forest?”

“What?!” Druid yelped in surprise. He was holding the magic stones regenerated by Flame that we were going to donate. As it was several days’ worth, it was quite a huge amount.

“If you’re going, Captain, then I’d like to come along, too,” Vice-Captain Pith said with a bow.

Druid and I exchanged glances. Since there wasn’t anything wrong with it, we nodded.

“We don’t mind if you come along, but are you sure you don’t have work to do? Also, here, we brought these magic stones.”

“Oh, work can wait... Wow, that’s a lot of stones.”

Both men were startled by the size of the bag. We had no response but to laugh. It was about ten days’ worth of magic stones, and there were so many of them because Flame’s yield was growing larger every day. That was why we’d asked Flame to slow things down the past couple of days.

“With this many stones...”

“Yeah.”

The captain and vice-captain studied the bag of magic stones and nodded.

“Um, I think we have enough now. Thank you very much, truly.”

Both men bowed deeply to us. After my moment of bewilderment passed, I looked at Flame on Druid’s lap. Its eyes got round and big for a second...then it squidged itself into a tired puddle.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” Druid said.

The men looked up at the sound of his voice. Then, when they saw the puddle

of a slime on Druid's lap, surreal bewilderment filled their faces.

“Oh, it's all right. Flame was just having so much fun regenerating the magic stones, and now that it's over, it's coming back down to earth.”

Captain Tableau only nodded and murmured tentatively in reply. Meanwhile, Vice-Captain Pith was brimming with excitement over Flame's change of shape. For all the excitement it caused, Squidgy Flame sure was cute.

Chapter 301:

My Lips Are Sealed!

GUILT WELLED UP INSIDE ME when I saw the worried look on the gatekeeper's face, but we headed out to the dump all the same, melting the snow as we went. Captain Tableau had loaned us a snow-melting magic item so we could get there faster, but it was still taking longer than usual. Sora and Ciel were happily burying themselves in the snow... No, actually, Ciel was rescuing Sora from the snow. Naturally, Flame was asleep in the bag. Since Sol weighed so little, it was tumbling along the top of the snowdrifts. It had noticed that jumping led to getting buried in the snow, so it rolled and rolled until it got dizzy instead. It had gotten dizzier than I thought, in fact, for it fell straight into one of the holes Sora had made. Then Ciel had to rescue Sol as well. In the end, Sora and Sol both decided to hang on to Ciel's neck as it walked.

"Ciel certainly is quite the jumper," Druid said.

The other men nodded in reply. Even though Ciel would disappear completely into the snow, it would mightily spring back out after only a few seconds. And its fur was dry, too, probably from magic. Back when I was trying to learn more about adandaras, all the books ever said was that the creatures could use magic. They never explained how or in what way.

"Mr. Druid, do you know what kind of magic adandaras can use?"

"I don't know much about adandaras... Can either of you gentlemen tell us?"

"We only know what's written down in the books, so we have no idea what type of magic they favor."

Oh dear. That's too bad. "Ciel, aren't you cold?"

I was worried about the creature burying itself in the snow so much, but it didn't answer me. I assumed that meant it wasn't cold.

“Are you okay?”

Mrrrow.

Ciel’s voice was a bit muffled, being that it was under the snow and all, but it said it was all right. Even though we had a magic item to melt the snow, there sure was a lot of it, and after spending so much time outside, my body was starting to feel chilled to the bone.

“Agh! Sora?” Druid yelped.

I looked in his direction to see that Sora was dangling by its mouth from the hilt of Druid’s sword. It had separated from Ciel and Sol while we weren’t paying attention.

“Sora?”

I called out to it, but it wouldn’t open its mouth to let go of the sword hilt. What had come over it? It had never bothered us like that before.

“Sora? Hey! It’s no use, I can’t get it off.”

Vice-Captain Pith picked up the snow-melting item from Druid and took over the job. Considering everything that had happened so far, it didn’t make sense for Sora to want to stop Druid from melting the snow. Which meant it was trying to stop Druid from doing something else.

“Mr. Druid, are you feeling sick?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Then what could it be? I looked at the weapon in Sora’s mouth. “Sora, do you need that sword for something?”

Sora jumped from the sword to the top of Druid’s head and said, “Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“The sword?”

Both Tableau and Pith stopped what they were doing and looked over at us. Druid gripped the sword and lifted it to eye level.

“What’s wrong with it?” he asked.

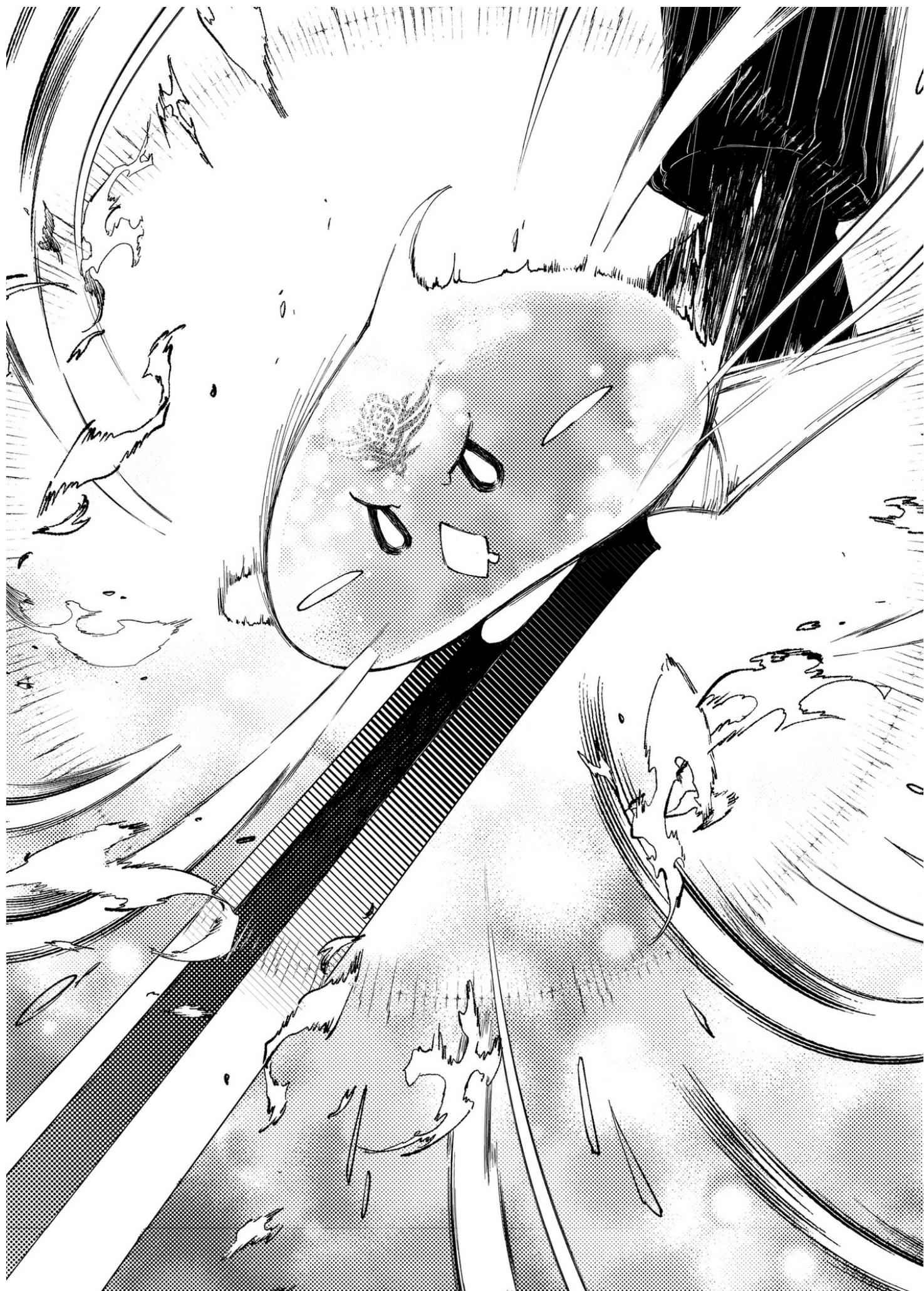
We all looked at the sword in confusion. It was a bit different from a normal blade, but it was just a sword with a magic stone embedded in it. It didn’t seem like we needed it at the moment.

“What do you want to do with it?” I asked.

Sora bounced off Druid’s head and flew at the sword again.

“That’s dangerous, Sora,” Druid said.

Sora, showing no reaction to Druid’s warning, landed on the magic stone embedded in the sword’s hilt. Then the stone glowed red.



“What’s it doing?”

“The magic stone seems to glow like that when you use the sword to attack,” Tableau said. “I’ve never seen one shine so strongly before, though.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora cried, bouncing on the magic stone.

“Attack? What if I attack the snow with my sword...?”

I was just as tired from the struggle of melting all this snow as he was, but that just seemed too good to be true.

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora answered my skepticism.

Wait a minute...it actually is true. Then I got quite giddy, excited to see a sword used like that.

“Mr. Druid, swing your sword at the snow! Attack the snow!”

Catching the gleeful tone in my voice, Druid excitedly pulled his sword from its sheath. Sora bounced back onto the top of his head.

“Er...?! Okay...but how exactly am I supposed to do this?”

“Why don’t you try swinging it down at the snow drifts?” I asked.

That was the only thing I could think to do, anyway, especially seeing as I didn’t know the first thing about using magic attacks. *But since the magic stone is glowing red, that means it’s...fire magic? So, if it makes fire magic attacks, then... Yeah, I don’t have a clue.*

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Sora says go ahead,” I told him.

“Yeah...” With a look of confusion on his face, Druid raised his sword high above a snowdrift. When he swung it downward, the red magic stone stopped glowing. We all stared at the snow at the tip of the sword and...nothing.

“Nothing’s happening, huh?” Captain Tableau said.

“Yeah. Wait, look! It’s started glowing red again.” Druid knitted his brows

together.

“Oh, look! The snow...it’s melting!” Pith cried.

We turned our attention back to the snow...and saw that Druid’s sword was melting it at a rate many times greater than the magic item had.

“Wow, would you look at that, Mr. Druid!”

The snow at the sword’s point was melting with an incredible vigor.

“Now we can get to the dump much faster,” I said.

“Ha ha ha, we sure can,” Druid’s frown softened into laughter.

While the scene before us was surreal, it was also terribly thrilling. I had no idea Druid’s sword with the magic stone had such an amazing power. *That’s incredible. I always assumed the magic stone just made his attacks stronger. Maybe it can do all sorts of other things, too?*

“Mr. Druid, could you please let me try out your sword just once?” Captain Tableau pleaded, just when we were about to set off on the freshly melted path. His eyes were glued on the blade. He reminded me of a little boy.

“I don’t mind. Are you okay with it, Ivy?”

I had no clue why he was asking my permission, but I didn’t mind, so I nodded. Captain Tableau eagerly took the sword and gave it a big swing toward a drift that hadn’t melted yet. And in mostly the same way as before, the snow melted before our very eyes. From a distance, it was an amusing sight, as it looked like it was vanishing into thin air. Next, Pith stepped up to give it a go.

“They sure are enjoying themselves,” I told Druid.

“Indeed, they are.”

After each man gave the sword a swing, they both looked a bit disappointed to give it up.

“Should we let them keep at it?” I asked Druid.

“Yeah, that’s a great idea. You two, keep using the sword all you want,” Druid

told the men.

The duo beamed radiantly as they ran toward a new snowdrift. After a little while, I heard their voices.

“This would be a great way to blow off some steam from work,” one of them said.

“That’s for sure.”

Druid and I shared a chuckle over that. At first, a flurry of names bellowed angrily from the men with each swing, but after a while, they both settled on one name. It was the former merchant guild master.

“It sounds like that guild master was pretty corrupt,” Druid murmured.

“Yes, indeed.”

I hope the watchmen get out all their frustration over him.

“We’re finally here!”

We arrived at the dump well ahead of schedule. The power of magic stones was incredible.

“Thank you very much. I feel like there’s a big weight off my back now,” Captain Tableau said, handing Druid the sword. Both men looked quite happy; apparently, they had blown off quite a bit of steam. Leaders sure had to keep a lot of their troubles to themselves. *Anyway, I’ll just make sure I forget all those names they were screaming earlier.*

“Okay, let’s use the magic items to melt the snow off the trash.”

“Sure.”

Pith and Tableau went to different parts of the dump and set down their magic items on top of the snow. After a while, the snow slowly began to melt. When the trash beneath it started to appear, Sol happily jumped onto the pile. It was, as we had thought, quite hungry. It was definitely a good thing that we’d braved the snow to come out here.

“Whoa...” Tableau and Pith gasped in wonder as they watched the black orbs of magic energy float up from the trash. Sol ignored their voices and eagerly began to devour the magic.

“I wish we could have come here earlier,” I told Druid.

“We couldn’t help it. Let’s be more mindful from now on, okay?”

“Okay.”

We really did need to find a way to store magic energy for Sol, and the sooner the better.

Chapter 302: Careful; It's Slippery!

WE STARTED COLLECTING trash, focusing on the items that had the most magic left in them. After we'd collected quite a stash in our magic bags, I checked on Sol and was relieved to see that it had returned to its former size.

"Well, we're out of the woods for now," Druid said, looking up from his collection of magic items.

"Yeah."

He looked just as relieved as I was. We hadn't quite solved the underlying problem, but we had managed to avert the crisis for the moment.

"How is Sol doing?" Captain Tableau asked as he and Pith approached us, carrying bags of spent magic items they had helped us collect on their backs.

"It's doing okay."

"Glad to hear it." Captain Tableau watched Sol enjoying its lunch a few paces away. It was eating much more slowly now than when it had started. It must have been quite hungry when we first arrived at the dump.

"Captain Tableau, could we use the permit you gave us today again tomorrow?"

"Yes, you can. I didn't specify a date on it. Just please don't go out during a blizzard or when there will be people around."

"Oh, of course we won't."

Go into the forest during a blizzard? I couldn't think of anything scarier. I'd watched the last blizzard from behind a window, and it was a terrifying sight. I couldn't even see the lamp posts that were right outside the window. If we went out into the forest when the weather was like that, we might not be able

to tell where we were... In fact, I was absolutely sure we would get lost. We would never try anything so dangerous. Besides, it would surely be freezing cold.

“Let’s head back,” Druid said.

We all packed our things and set off toward the village. As they walked, Pith and Tableau excitedly gabbed about the way the slimes ate their food. The scene seemed to have left quite an impression on them.

“Their jaws literally dropped,” Druid muttered in my ear.

He was probably talking about how they’d looked when they saw Sora eating the sword. I remembered and smiled.

“Hey, now,” Vice-Captain Pith called out to us while we were having our little chuckle. “You guys are laughing at us, aren’t you?”

“Oh, no, sir,” Druid answered, a wide smile glued on his face.

“Oh dear, I think we’ve embarrassed ourselves quite thoroughly in front of you both today,” Captain Tableau said with an awkward grin.

“Not just today, sir,” Pith corrected him. Tableau frowned, prompting Pith to tease him for sulking. Then Druid joined in, and the men all hooted and hollered.

Come to think of it, that tension I sensed between the captain and vice-captain is gone now... I wonder what was going on?

We were close to the village gate, so I had Ciel shapeshift into slime form, and I put it and Sora into their bag. Flame and Sol had been resting in there since we left the dump. Those two were kindred spirits when it came to laziness.

We greeted the gatekeeper as we walked through, and we took the magic bags back from Pith and Tableau. They were heavier than usual, even with weight-reducing spells cast on them. The two men must have really gone above and beyond to collect trash. I was truly grateful.

“I’ll carry that,” Druid said, yanking the magic bag right out of my hands.

“Huh?! Come on, can’t I hold just one?”

“Don’t worry, I can easily carry this much on my own.”

Druid really did look unfazed. But would he actually be okay? We had three magic bags crammed full of trash. And despite the weight-reducing spell cast on them, they were still rather burdensome.

“Well, thank you both for your help today,” Druid told the captain and vice-captain.

They gave a couple of clumsy bows. “Oh, no, thank *you*! We had quite a fun time,” Captain Tableau said. Pith nodded in agreement. They should have been quite tired from picking up all that trash, but their smiles were brighter than usual. I supposed that steam they blew off halfway through had something to do with it.

“Goodbye!” We waved to them and set off for our inn. Main Street was cleared of snow, thanks to the hard work of the villagers with magic items. The only problem was that the melted snow made the walk quite slippery.

“We’ll have to be careful not to slip,” Druid remarked.

“Yeah. I’m kind of scared.”

The melted snow had turned to ice in places. Because of that, you could easily go sliding if you didn’t watch your step. I hunched my back a little as I walked.

Hm? Mr. Druid...are you laughing at the way I’m walking?

“Hee hee hee...sorry.”

I knew it!



“We’re back!” Druid called out.

“We’re back from our trip... Ahhh, I’m so tired.”

“Hello, you two. What’s this? You look exhausted... Are you okay?” Dola stopped what he was doing to come greet us at the inn’s front door.

“I almost slipped on the ice, and it was so scary to walk.”

Dola nodded in understanding, grabbed a pair of objects from the shelf by the front door, and handed them to me. I took them without even looking at them... *Wait, what are these things?*

“If you put these on your shoes, you won’t slip on the ice.”

I won’t slip on the ice?

“You slide this part over your toes, and then you fasten it so this part sticking out is on the sole of your shoe. Then you tie it tightly with these belts. These babies make walking in wintertime quite a bit easier.”

I followed his directions and fastened the devices on my shoes. They were a bit cumbersome to walk in... Would they really help me walk on icy roads? I was quite skeptical.

“Go ahead and use them whenever you need to.”

“I will...thank you.” *I guess I might as well try them out. I might not need to walk all hunched over after all.*

“Could I use them as well?” Druid asked.

“Yeah, feel free to take any of the pairs on that shelf.”

“Mr. Druid, have you used these before?”

“Yeah, they’re actually quite useful. Also, whenever you walk on the snow, you have to shorten your gait and put the whole sole of your foot on the ground at once.”

Shorten my gait and walk on my whole sole. That’s going to be hard to get

used to; I always walk heel-toe.

“And if you lean forward a little, it’s harder to slip and fall.”

“Okay. I’ll keep that in mind next time I walk outside.”

Can I manage it, though? I’ve never walked that way before, and it sounds like an ordeal. Well, forget about that. For now, I just want to take a nice, hot bath.

We thanked Dola and returned to our room.

The next day, I fastened the thingies Dola had loaned me to my feet (I forgot to ask what they were called) and practiced walking the way Druid told me to. Or at least that was the plan...

“This sure is difficult,” I said.

“I know. You just have to get used to it.”

I tried leaning forward a little...but everything just felt so *wrong* to me. Walking by planting my whole sole on the ground was also hard to maintain. If I lost focus for a moment, I was back to walking heel-toe like I always did.

“Hey, Ivy...that’s a pretty funny walk you’ve got there.”

I knew that without Druid telling me so. It hadn’t snowed the night before, but it was so cold that most of the melted snow had frozen solid. What’s more, the clouds were so thick today that the ice probably wouldn’t melt at all. Between the bent-over way I was walking yesterday and the way I was walking today, I honestly couldn’t tell you which was better.

“Let me point out it’s a lot slipperier today,” I told Druid.

“Yeah, the roads are in pretty bad shape.”

I could tell that Druid was walking extra carefully, too. By the time we arrived at the village gate, I had somehow managed to get used to this new way of walking.

“I don’t know why, but I’m exhausted,” I sighed.

“Using all your muscles like that, you’re bound to get wiped out.”

“Yeah.”

I had been tensing up all my muscles in an effort to keep from slipping, draining all my energy, but we still had to go all the way to the dump... *You can do this, Ivy. Just relax a little and...*

“Agh!”

Eee, I’m so scared. Why does the dump have to be so far away?

Side: The End

An Account of a Woman of Ratomi Village

I STEP OUTSIDE of the village chief's house. It's snowing—the first snow of the year. I hear voices shouting inside the house I just left. Lots of people yelling.

“Why did it have to come to this?”

My village was not wealthy, but every year, we had a good harvest of our unique crop: zaro. That was why we always managed to make it through the winter. But this year, our zaro crop failed.

“No...it wasn't because of the zaro failure.”

Everything went downhill when Ruba, our fortune-teller, passed away. Actually, that's not quite true, either. Ruba was murdered by our village chief.

I breathe on my cold fingertips to warm them. They're red. Since food stores are low, I venture into the forest to forage for something to eat, even in the wintertime. Pickings are slim, making my days a harsh struggle.

“What if she's out there right now...in a winter like this...?”

I used to have a little sister. A cute little sister, younger than four. I thought our lives would be the same forever. Then our parents changed abruptly. That was when everything ended. I had no idea what had happened. I was just...scared. Scared that my parents would reject me, too. So, I retreated into myself.

“I'm such a fool.”

One day, somebody threw something at my little sister. When it hit her, I felt a sting in my heart. But it lasted only a moment. I convinced myself that I was in the right...that my family was in the right.

“Our whole family is made up of fools.”

My mother and father are devout followers of the church. I thought they

were a little abnormal, but I should have known better. My younger sister was a strange little girl. Sometimes she would murmur in a mysterious language I couldn't understand in the slightest.

“She was there for me... She was the only one who was.”

My father and mother only loved our big brother since he had good skills. My skill is nothing special, so I always came last. Since all priority went to my big brother, a cherished promise was forgotten. When I was hiding alone, crying with grief, she silently stayed by my side. She was so kind. How could I betray her...?

CRASH!

A loud noise thunders from within the village chief's house. I can hear sounds of people scuffling. The sound of feet, running. Screaming voices. Somebody is crying, too.

“It's much colder today.” Maybe the snow will stick. If it does, it will be even harder to forage in the forest than it is now. “Ha ha, it'll be hard, but there's nothing else I can do.”

I remember the words the fortune-teller Ruba said to me: *Do you honestly think that God would allow a worthless life to be born?* The words she quietly told our family.

“I wonder if she really died?”

The village chief submitted a search request to the adventurer guild asking them to find missing villagers. But aside from one of them, they didn't know which direction they'd run.

“The look on that village chief's face when he read the report sure was funny.”

He threw a tantrum, red in the face.

“It was really painful to watch.”

The person whose escape route was known—that would be my little sister.

The report signed by the head watchman at Ratome Village said, “The remains of a girl of that description were found.” A man named Captain Oght had written down the details: “The emaciated remains of a little girl were discovered in the dense part of the forest.” Watchmen Velivera and Roygurt were also on the scene. There were signs that she had been eaten by a beast. Since the wounds were grotesque, they had burned the corpse where it lay. The village chief didn’t seem to care and had nothing much to say about it. Which was rich, seeing as how he had tried to murder her.

“I’m just as evil as him, though.”

My own father had tried to kill my sister. My mother gave her blessing, knowing full well what he was going to do. My brother accepted it all without question. I turned a blind eye. We all killed her.

BANG!

The front door is right next to me, so I flinch when it slams open. I look toward the noise to see the village chief storm out, covered in blood.

“You’re not getting away! This is all your fault!”

The village chief takes off running. Several villagers follow behind. The chief is caught a few doors down from his house.

“If they beat him that much, he’ll die.”

The villagers’ anger had reached its peak, yet the chief still ordered them to gather food each and every day. He threw tantrums, threatening to raise taxes the next year. And in the end, the villagers snapped.

“There you are.”

I look toward the voice. It’s my father. Behind him are my mother and brother.

“What damn fool would ever let a bastard like *you* be chief?” my father growls.

The villagers cackle. My family looks on in bewilderment.

“Do you have a right to judge him when you let him order you to kill your own daughter?” I ask.

My father glares at me. All color drains from my mother’s face.

“All you villagers who stayed behind are all the same. You killed Ruba the fortune-teller.”

“N-no, we didn’t,” my mother protests, shivering.

“Yes, you did. You turned a blind eye and let it happen. Then you blamed it on my little sister.”

“We ain’t got a little sister!” my brother yells.

“We used to, remember? A beautiful, sweet little sister. We all drove her out of the house. We killed her, our own flesh and blood.”

“Shut up!” my father screams, his face red.

I hold my hard gaze. “Why did you do it? Our church teaches us to *be kind to others*. Did you know that?”

“I said shut up!” My father looks like he’s about to pounce on me.

“What if I don’t shut up? Oh, you’re gonna kill me, too?”

“Stop it!” my mom screams. “How dare you make your family cry when we’re in crisis!”

“In a crisis that you brought upon yourselves, right? You all sowed your seeds, so it’s time to reap them.”

The village chief isn’t the only one in the wrong. Every single person in this village bears the same sin on their back. My family and I carry not only that sin but also the sin of leaving the smallest member of our own family for dead.

“It’s impressive, isn’t it? That little girl survived three whole years all by herself, in a land where there’s nothing to eat in the wintertime.”

Three years had passed since we drove her away and she disappeared, and

she survived those three years. So, a part of me still has hope. Hope that the little girl they found in the forest wasn't my little sister after all. But the adventurer who discovered her was known to be quite a hero.

"Huh? Is he dead?"

I can't hear the beating sounds I heard before. I look over to where the village chief had been earlier...and I see several villagers standing still in his place. Their anger has made them take things too far.

"Now you all have another sin to carry."

"We had nothing to do with it," my brother insists, his voice shivering. What does he even think he's saying?

"But we saw it happen. We watched our village chief get beaten to death. How can we possibly have nothing to do with it?"

Everybody should know better. They know that kind of beating will kill a person, because this isn't the first time it's happened. Ratomi Village isn't running very smoothly anymore. There isn't much to eat, so the villagers kill the weakest among us.

"But we do it so we can survive."

So we can survive?

"Then we should have left home earlier to earn some money."

When our zaro sales plummeted, some of us thought of going to other towns and villages where we could earn money and send it home. The chief was strongly opposed to it. He was probably afraid his own crimes would get exposed.

"You're all such fools."

The truth always comes out in the end. Has the letter I wrote arrived by now? The letter I gave a traveler to bring to Captain Oght. Once it reaches him, I just know people will come to our village. Come here to arrest us all. We covered up a multitude of our chief's crimes, after all. I wrote down every crime our

villagers committed, omitting nothing.

“Wild, isn’t it? Every single person in this village is going to be sentenced to slavery,” I say.

My family’s faces stiffen with fear. I won’t have to spend much more time with them. The world would be better off with this village wiped off the map.

“I really miss you...”

I have faith that you’re out there somewhere, still alive.

Chapter 303:

Nostalgia

“EXCUSE ME, I’ve come to see if I have any faxes.”

Eight days had passed since I sent my faxes, so I came to see if I’d gotten any replies. I’d been so preoccupied with the blizzard and Sol’s problem that I’d forgotten about them, but now I remembered and figured eight days wasn’t too late to look at my replies.

“Ooh, it’s *you*. Please wait just a moment.” The moment the man saw my face, he began pulling out some faxes. Druid and I exchanged confused looks. His reaction was different from before. Last time, he had to check our guild cards first. I hadn’t thought we made that big of an impression on him...unless it was because I thought out loud while I wrote my letters? Was that why he remembered me? I didn’t know...but if that *was* the reason why, it was awfully embarrassing.

“Here they are, Miss,” the man said, bringing out the papers in question.

“Erm...*all* of these, sir?” There was way more than I’d expected.

“Yes, that’s right. We don’t normally get this many faaxes for one person, you know.”

“That’s incredible,” Druid remarked.

I gave the man a bewildered “thank you” and took the stack of papers from him. *Wait a minute... Doesn’t one person usually write a reply on behalf of everyone? Um, well, I guess I’ll just see who wrote these. There’s one from Captain Oght with a separate reply from Vice-Captain Velivera. Then there’s replies from Seizerk and Gnouga... Wow, it looks like everybody wrote separately. Well, maybe they did it that way since it costs money to have somebody write for the whole group. Then again, none of them are hurting for*

money...

“Wow, what a great surprise. I’m gonna read them all right away!”

But since I had so many letters to read, I decided to look them over back at the inn. I went ahead and preemptively grabbed ten pieces of fax paper for myself. *Will that be enough, I hope?*

We went back to the inn, and I got some tea ready because I knew those letters would take a while to read.

Okay, I think I’ll start with the ones from Captain Oght and Velivera.

After I finished reading their letters, a smile bloomed on my face. They both said they were happy to hear from me because they’d been worried. They were also happy that I’d acquired a travel companion. From what I could tell in their letters, everything was the same on their end. Captain Oght was still giving Velivera a hard time. He said that recently, it’d been extra trying for him, since the captain had gotten to be a good escape artist. Roygurt also got caught up in their shenanigans. At the end of Velivera’s letter, Roygurt had added a list of his struggles. And Captain Oght complained that Vice-Captain Velivera had started bringing helpers to chase him around. *But that’s Oght’s fault for slacking on the job in the first place. Maybe I should give him a little scolding in the next fax I send him. Velivera did beg me to do that, after all.*

“Wait a minute... Um, Mr. Druid?”

“What’s wrong?”

The last page of Captain Oght’s fax confused me. It was addressed to Druid.

“Um, so Captain Oght and Vice-Captain Velivera sent you a...questionnaire?” *Why did they write it out like a numbered list? “Name...age...occupation...work history...family situation...marital status? Quirks? Er, do they really need to know all this? Income...and hobbies? What in the world are they trying to find out about you, Druid? Like, everything?”*

“Let me see.” Druid took the page from me and read it over.

“I’m sorry. That’s really weird, isn’t it?” Just what were the captain and vice-captain trying to do?

“No, no, it’s okay. I’ll send them a reply.”

“What?! Really?”

“Yeah, it’s all good.”

Um, why is he being so understanding?

“They’re probably worried about what kind of person you’re traveling with. Oh, and why don’t you look through all the other faaxes you haven’t read yet? I’m sure some of them have questions like this, too.”

Druid pointed at the pile of faxes I had yet to read. I gave him a strange look but checked them just the same...and he was right. There was a questionnaire signed by the Sword of Flames and the Lightning Royals together. When I showed it to Druid, he laughed and wandered off with it. Was all of this really okay?

“I’m sorry about that,” I said.

They really were worrying too much. *I mean, I’m a good judge of people...and Sora always helps me out, so they should know I’m okay.*

“It’s fine, Ivy. If our roles were reversed, I’d be sending them questionnaires, too.”

“Oh, that’s interes—wait, you would?”

“Yeah.”

Was that really a reasonable thing to do?

Well, anyway, I’ll take a look at the next letter. Okay, good. Seizerk and Bolorda and the others all sound like they’re doing well.

I was surprised to hear that Seizerk had gotten a girlfriend, only to be promptly dumped. Rattloore said this was the fourth time it had happened to

him. Maybe it was an issue with his personality?

Oh! Speaking of Rattloore, Gnouga told me that he went to work with a hangover and almost fell off a cliff. I'd better warn him to be careful in the next fax I send him.

And as for Gnouga, he and his girlfriend had had a big fight in the plaza. It was apparently about whether or not he would eat her cooking, since her flavors were catastrophically bad. Seizerk had had a little taste of it, and he described her cooking as "extraordinary." Hang in there, Gnouga!

Sifar had a new girlfriend. Rickbert remarked, "It's crazy how some women are fear chasers"...but I thought that was uncalled for. Sifar's fax even said, "Rickbert's foolishness knows no bounds. *Fear chaser* my foot," which caused quite the chill to run down my spine. *I'd better tell them both to go easy on each other...though I doubt my fax will reach them in time.*

Rickbert got caught up in a quarrel with his childhood friend and his girlfriend, and she gave him a serious whooping. She was an adventurer, by the way, and a pretty strong one at that. Lowcreek said, "Rickbert's face was white as a sheet," in his fax...

Which brings us to the man with the most interesting update: Bolorda. Get this: A lady adventurer asked him to marry her! In the plaza, in front of everyone at that! Rattloore said poor Bolorda acted a little nervous over it. Sifar's fax read, "Bolorda's behavior was a riot! I wish you could've seen it." I'm sure he teased Bolorda relentlessly about it afterward. Well, that's Sifar for you. Anyway, Bolorda turned her down, but she was a stubborn lady, so she'd been chasing him around and driving him crazy. The only thing Bolorda said about the matter in his fax was, "Women sure are scary when they're angry." I wonder what happened?

I also got a fax from Lord Foronda, which definitely caught me by surprise. He even listed the names of some aristocrats I should contact if I ever needed help in the capital. He said he'd drop them a line and tell them about me. I

appreciated the gesture, but I hoped I wouldn't ever need their help in the first place. *Huh, I wonder if it's okay for me to ask him how things are going with the princess. Would that be inappropriate? No, it should be okay if I ask him casually how things are going with her. Yeah.*

Otolwa's guild master, who knew what was going on in Hatow, asked me if I was having any trouble here. He sounded worried. Being a young guild master, he said he didn't mind if I asked him for help. *I think I'd better let him know that Hatow's guild master is doing just fine now.*

Captain Barxbby wrote that he was already training his potential successors. I was surprised to hear he was already showing them the ropes so soon. *Maybe I'd better drop a word of encouragement to his successors-in-training.*

"Wow, I only knew them for a few months, but they all feel like old friends to me."

Maybe it was because those few months were so intense... *Okay, now it's time to write them all back. Wait...should I respond to each of them individually? Or should I just put everything in the care of one person, like most people do? Do I actually want to write that many letters...?*

"I think I'll use Sifar as my representative and write just to him. That should be okay. I should definitely write Lord Foronda separately, though. Captain Oght, too. Yeah, that should be fine."

I'm finally finished. Ahhh, my hand is so tired. I wish I'd gotten more fax paper. I really struggled to fit everything onto just ten pages.

"Here you go," Druid said, handing me a cup.

As I took it, a sweet smell filled my nose. When I took a sip, the heat of the fruit tea warmed my muscles.

"Thanks. It's delicious."

I looked out the window to see it was snowing. It had started just a little while ago. I took another sip of hot fruit tea, and it filled my heart with nostalgia.

“Oh! I’ve tasted this tea before...”

When I went to live in the woods, I spent my whole first winter shivering in a cave. Then one day, the fortune-teller brought me some hot fruit tea. I remembered how I cried the first time I drank it, feeling the tea warm my cold muscles. Then the fortune-teller held me and smoothed my hair. After that, she would bring me the same hot tea every cold day.

I remembered how the fortune-teller’s eyes sometimes looked so pained when she was with me. Whenever I asked her why, she would just shake her head sadly in silence. Was she sad because I was shivering with cold? But looking back on it, I got the feeling it wasn’t that. I just couldn’t tell what exactly it was... *That’s right. She told me once that she was sorry. But it was when I was falling asleep, so I couldn’t ask her why... Is that how it happened? Was I able to ask her later why she’d apologized? Wait...huh? If I can’t remember, does that mean I forgot all about it when I woke up?*

“Ivy...don’t you like the tea?”

Huh?!

“Um, no, it’s tasty.”

“Well, you had such a solemn look in your eyes that I thought you didn’t like it.”

I guess my thoughts put a strange look on my face.

“No, this tea has a very nostalgic flavor.”

“Aha.” Druid reached out and smoothed my hair gently.

This feels so nice...

I closed my eyes, and I thought I heard Druid chuckling softly.

Fortune-Teller...are you there? I did it. I met somebody I can trust.

Chapter 304:

Closer and Closer to Springtime

“MR. DRUID, look at that!”

I spotted some flower buds on our way to the dump to gather food for Sol. The ground was still covered in snow and the winds were still chilly, but there were clear signs of springtime appearing all around us.

“Wow, how about that? I guess winter is finally coming to an end.”

“Yeah.”

“I could sure do without snow for a while.”

“Me, too.”

It truly was an ordeal. If there were a blizzard, being stranded for only three days was a treat. Sometimes we were stuck at home for seven days straight. The snow would pile higher and higher until it almost covered the second-floor windows. And Sol would get so small! Oh, I panicked whenever that happened.

I'd pray day after day, “Stupid snow, just go away!” And when the snow finally did stop on the eighth day, we'd go to the dump, trembling at the height of the drifts as we went. I didn't think I'd ever felt a greater rush of relief than the times when I'd see Sol start eating on those days. I'd truly lived through a harsh winter.

There was so much snow in the village that I heard some houses had been crushed by it. Some people had even died. But there were much fewer deaths than previously forecasted, and Captain Tableau and Guild Master Priya's reputations were boosted as a result. Yes, fewer deaths was definitely a good thing.

“We'll have to start getting ready to move on to the next village,” Druid remarked.

“Oh! Yes, that’s right.”

Yeah...when the snow melts, it will be easier for us to travel. The next village... I wonder what it’ll be like.

“Ivy, is there anything in particular you need to do in the next village?”

“Not really. Why do you ask?”

The next village over from Hatow is Hatata, I think. Right, and the next village over from that is Hatada. Since the names were all so similar, I’d memorized them in a chunk.

“In the third village from here, there’s a festival in April called the Festival of Colors where you pray for good health. Do you want to go? People come from all the surrounding villages, so it’s a pretty big event.”

“The third village from here? Festival of Colors?”

What is the third village from here...? Huh, I don’t remember. Maybe I forgot it because Hatata and Hatada stood out so much to me.

“What’s that village called?” I asked.

“Hatahi Village.”

Oh, that’s right! It’s Hatahi. If my map is correct, it’s a big enough village that you could just call it a town. You know, I don’t think I’ve ever been to a festival. Ratomi Village didn’t exactly have them. We all just got together and had a little party when it was spring or fall.

“Do you like festivals, Ivy?”

“I’ve never actually been to one. What’s this Festival of Colors like?”

“People make little cakes of powdered dye and throw them at each other. It’s a really lively event.”

People throw little cakes at each other? Sounds like a painful festival to me.

“Does this festival hurt?”

“What? Does it hurt...? *Ohh!* No, no, it doesn’t hurt. When the cake hits you, powdered dye explodes out of it and colors your clothes. It doesn’t hurt, but it can get pretty intense, since your clothes get colors all over them.”

I’m not sure why...but I have a feeling I’ve seen a festival like that before. It’s probably one of Past Me’s memories. I can’t quite remember the name of that festival, but...it does sound like I’d enjoy it.

“I think that’d be a lot of fun.”

“Yeah. I’ve been to it twice before, and I was covered in powdered dye all over, even on my face.”

It really did sound like a good time.

“Can anyone come to the festival?”

“Yeah...my only worry is the snow.”

“The snow?”

“Well, we can’t hit the road until it melts a little, and the festival is in April.”

Was Hatahi Village really that far away? From the map, it looked like we could make it there in about two months.

“I think we could leave as late as February and still make it by April,” I said.
“Unless the map is wrong?”

“No, we would definitely make it on time for the festival. But I want to make sure we have a place to sleep first; that’s why we need to get there a month before April.”

“A whole month before April? Are there really that many people there?”

I supposed that meant Hatahi got so crowded in April that it was impossible to get an inn.

“Yeah, people travel from all the nearby towns and villages. This festival is more popular than any of the other ones in the area, so it’s heavily attended.”

Yikes...this sure sounds like quite a big festival. Now I really wanna go.

“Ooh, I want to go so bad now!”

“Okay...in that case, we’ll have to think of a way to reach Hatahi by March.”

“Yeah.”

I’m not sure why, but I feel very giddy.

“Oh, look!” Druid said. “The snow we melted yesterday is still gone.”

I followed his gaze and saw the part of the dump we’d melted the previous day. Even though new snow had been piling up every single day thus far, none was there that day. Spring truly was coming, little by little.

“Okay then, how about we make some travel plans while we try for another hunt?” Druid suggested.

“Good idea. It should be safe by now.”

Hunting in the winter just didn’t work. Any traps we set would get buried in the snow and it was impossible to catch any shiusa, so we’d been waiting until the snow let up a little. After I made sure that Sol had started feeding, I went off to find the things I’d need to make traps.

“People sure throw away a lot of useful stuff,” Druid remarked.

“Huh?”

“Well, I always just assumed you had to buy the things you need to make traps.”

You know, I’m sure that’s what most people do. I just got used to going straight to the dump because I never had any money. Come to think of it, we do have money now.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Druid.”

“Hm?”

“For making you pick up trash.”

Druid was a strong adventurer. He would have definitely bought his trap

supplies at shops... *Wait a minute, he didn't hunt with traps before he met me anyway.*

"No, no, don't sweat it. It's actually fun looking for treasures and making our own traps."

"It is?"

"Uh-huh...since lots of the things here are broken, they're all unique in their own way, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

You didn't usually find intact goods mixed in with the trash, so you needed quite a bit of ingenuity.

"It's fun to think up a trap, build it, and then have your prey fall into it," Druid said as he tested the strength of a broken basket. "I'm having a lot of fun with this, so don't worry about me."

"I think you've gotten the hang of it, too. You have a better catch rate than me now."

The first time we set traps, Druid had been so bad at it that I caught more prey than he did. But he must have learned some tricks that first time, because his traps had evolved with each passing hunting trip until he became more successful than I was. In fact, after our third day hunting together, I never beat him once. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was still a little bitter about it.

"It's because of those books you let me borrow, Ivy. They're quite impressive."

"Yeah, the fortune-teller gave them to me."

Those books were still helping me out after all this time.

"Puuu!" Sora suddenly cried.

My eyes darted in the direction of the voice, and there was Sora, casting its

gaze outside the dump. Ciel, who was off hunting, wasn't there. I searched for auras, but I didn't sense anything coming toward us.

"Sora, what's wrong?"

I looked at Druid, but he only shook his head back at me. He didn't know, either. But his hand was already on his sword, just in case.

I turned to check on Flame and Sol, only to discover they were already by my feet. I was worried that something was wrong, so I quickly put them in their bag. Then I picked up on an aura. It was still distant, but it was approaching us.

"Mr. Druid, it must be a monster! I don't know what it is, but it's awfully fast! I don't think we can outrun it!"

Watching our feet on the treacherous terrain, we monitored the aura as we fled the dump in a hurry. The quickly approaching creature sent shivers down my spine. It was fast—too fast. I hadn't thought there were any monsters that fast around these parts.

"Sora!" I called the slime over to me and swooped it into the bag. Now we should be a bit safer. In less than a minute, the monster had come very close to us.

"Grrr!"

A low voice rumbled through the trees. We were definitely in danger. Druid stepped in front of me, sword at the ready. Footsteps crunched in the snow. I heard snow falling from the trees, agitated by the monster's swift approach. The noises were all so new to me that my heart banged in my ears.

"Garr!"

Then I saw a giant monster running at us from the woods with tremendous speed. My eyes darted around, looking for a tree we could scurry up.

"Ivy, don't. This monster can climb trees."

I frowned. There really was nowhere to run, and the monster was closing in on us so quickly that I had no time to think. How could it possibly be so fast? It

just wasn't normal. Spotting us, the creature bared its fangs.

"Ivy...stay back."

The magic stone in Druid's sword gleamed white.

Chapter 305: He Snapped!

I SHIFTED MY POSITION over a little...and the monster mirrored my movement. It was definitely targeting me.

“Ivy, get away from me! I’ll distract it!” Druid yelled, charging at the monster. The beast’s gaze shifted from me to him. I had no way of fighting, so I would only get in the way. I somehow managed to move out of their path. I quietly hid myself in the shadows of the trees as I began to run away...then I saw the monster open its mouth wide and pounce at Druid.

“It’s so fast!”

Wait, it already ran all the way over here? I clamped my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming. I slipped behind a tree and stole a quick glance at Druid and the monster. He had just brought his sword down upon it. I could see blood—whose blood, I did not know—spurting every which way around them.

“Damn it, I missed!”

I stared at Druid’s back. From the way he was moving, it didn’t look like a serious wound. The monster was a few paces away from him. Taking a closer look, I could see blood was flowing from its chest. *Oh, good. That means the blood I saw spraying out belonged to the monster.*

“Grrr.”

“What’s wrong with you? Most monsters would run away with a wound like that.” Druid gripped his sword again. It was then that I noticed his arm was injured.

“Grrr.”

The monster hunched close to the ground, getting ready to pounce. But the next thing I knew, it was flung hard against a tree.

“Grah!”

“What?!”

“Huh?!”

I was trying to keep quiet, but a shriek escaped me. Well, I had no idea that Snakey was going to body-slam the monster against a tree! For that matter, I hadn't sensed Snakey's aura at all. *When did it even get here? Wait, I've got more important things to think about!*

“Mr. Druid, are you okay?” Remembering that he was hurt, I ran over to him. I looked at his arm and saw that it was gashed and bloody. I tried to stop the bleeding...and then I remembered Sora. I opened my bag, and the slime sprang out of it, leaping onto Druid's arm and stretching itself wide to swallow it whole.

“Wow, that's impressive. So this is how it works...”

Wait...this isn't Druid's first time seeing Sora heal someone, right? Or is it? As I watched Sora heal Druid's arm, I felt someone poking my back. I looked around and saw that Snakey was booping my back with its nose.

“Oh! Thanks, Snakey.”

“Yes, thank you. You really saved my hide,” said Druid.

Snakey smiled softly and nuzzled its nose against me. I smiled and gave its nose a pat, and it nuzzled even harder.

“It really has taken a liking to you, Ivy.”

“I know, it's so cute.”

“Uh, I'm not sure if that's the word I'd use...”

Aw, but it is cute. Oh no, I almost forgot! The monster that attacked us...is it dead? I turned to walk toward it, but Druid stopped me.

“I'll go check on it.”

“But you're wounded.”

“It doesn’t hurt. I’m okay now; Sora’s a powerful healer.”

He could say that again. Sora was powerful enough to bring both Ciel and Druid back from the brink of death. It stayed wrapped around Druid’s arm as he approached the monster. Then I sensed a familiar aura approaching us and suddenly remembered something.

“Hey, Mr. Druid, Ciel is going to be back very soon.”

I didn’t know why, but Ciel’s aura felt very flustered. It was running back toward us much faster than usual. Just as the sounds of the rustling trees and falling chunks of snow got closer, Druid picked up on the adandara’s presence as well.

“I’m not sure why, but Ciel seems kind of rattled, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, the rattling trees sound different than usual.”

Druid and I stood side by side, looking off toward the noises. Then there was a rustling. And as a big clump of snow fell from the trees, out leapt Ciel. I quickly looked it over and saw it wasn’t wounded.

“Ciel, are you okay?”

Mew? Ciel replied, its eyes darting around the area.

Oh no! Are there still other monsters nearby? I glanced around, but I sensed no auras.

Meow! Ciel growled, approaching the monster that had smashed against a tree and suddenly chomping on its neck.

“Grr!”

Huh? It’s still alive? It hit that tree so hard, I was sure it was dead.

“Thanks, Ciel. Hey, Mr. Druid, do you think this monster is edible?”

“Oh, Ivy...even in a crisis, you never stop being you.”

Huh? What’s that supposed to mean? Of course I’m being me. I gave Druid a confused look, and he laughed in reply. *What’s going on? Is he making fun of*

me?

“Ha ha ha, c’mon, don’t sulk. Anyway, edibility aside, that monster was behaving abnormally, so we’ll have to report it to the guild.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, it was acting weird.”

“Yes, as far as I know, that kind of monster moves more slowly. I hope we aren’t getting a repeat of what happened in Oll over here.”

Did he mean monsters going berserk from eating too much magic energy? *Yikes, that would be terrible.* We approached the dead monster and checked it to see if anything was amiss. We didn’t notice any peculiarities to it, but we looked at its feet and noticed there was a leather string tied to one of them.

“What do you think this is?” I asked.

“Let me see.”

I pointed at the monster’s foot, and Druid checked it out. Then he removed the leather string to find a magic item attached to it, affixed with a small magic stone.

“Oh, *that’s* what it is,” Druid said.

“You recognize it?”

“Yeah, it’s an item that strengthens you for a short time. If you use it, your attack speed and intensity increase.”

Wow, a magic item that powerful was being used by a monster? Wait...a magic stone? How did it activate that? Did it press it by accident or something?

I took the item from Druid and examined it. The magic stone was transparent with a little blue mixed in. It was quite pretty. The string it was attached to was just a normal leather band, nothing special.

“I think an adventurer messed up.”

“Hm?”

“It happens sometimes. Adventurers try to defeat a monster by using a magic

item, but they fail.”

How could they fail so badly that a monster stole their magic item?

“Do you throw this magic item, sir?”

“No, you’re supposed to wear it around your neck.”

Oh, that makes sense. So... “Does that mean the adventurer who tried to use this item...has already passed away?”

Druid frowned solemnly at my question, so I supposed that meant it was possible. As I examined the magic item, I felt human auras approaching.

“Somebody’s coming this way,” I said.

Druid looked at me, and I pointed toward the auras. They were coming from the same direction as the monster had.

“Snakey, Ciel, could you please go hide? And thank you, Sora, I see you’ve finished healing him. Anyway, it’ll be a big hassle if you’re seen, so can you all go back into the bag for me?”

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Snakey and Ciel scurried up some trees. The snow didn’t fall from the treetops like it had before. Ciel really must have been panicked earlier. I grabbed Sora, who was contentedly sitting on Druid’s head after successfully healing him, and returned it to the bag.

“Mr. Druid, how’s your arm?”

“Healed perfectly. There’s not even a scar.”

He showed me his arm, and sure enough, there wasn’t any trace of a scar under the ripped fabric of his sleeve.

“Does it feel strange at all?”

“No, not a bit.”

“Oh, good. Thanks for saving me, Mr. Druid.”

Druid beamed proudly in reply. I felt a little funny since his smile was much gentler than usual, but I had no problem with it as long as he was happy. After a little while, a party of five young adventurers appeared before us.

“Excuse me...”

“Is this yours?” Druid asked, holding up the magic item we’d found tied around the monster’s foot. The young adventurers looked uncomfortable when they saw it.

Druid sighed and asked, “What happened?”

“Well...”

Simply put, they’d tried to activate the magic item without learning how it was supposed to be used first. That was one cause of the disaster. The other reason was their deadly mistake of thinking they could defeat a monster more powerful than them in the first place.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t learning the extent of a magic item’s powers *basic Adventuring 101 stuff*?” Druid’s voice was terribly deep. He had snapped.

“We did know that the magic item increased one’s powers, sir.”

“And?”

Uh-oh. Druid’s scaring me. That look in his eyes...it’s like he’s possessed by a demon...

The adventurers froze, their eyes glued on Druid. Maybe they had fallen victim to that common affliction of young adventurers: cockiness after a string of successful missions.

Druid sighed again and said, “I’m telling the adventurer guild everything.”



The adventurers protested, but one glare from Druid shut them right up.
Yeah, it's probably best for them all to stay quiet. This new side of Druid is so chilling that even my spine is frozen solid.

That day, I discovered for the first time just how terrifying Druid could be when he snapped.

Chapter 306: Baths Are Essential

WE WERE AT the adventurer guild to submit our report...but Druid was still in a terrible mood. He was doing a fine job of giving the young party of adventurers a good tongue-lashing with a kind voice. The poor adventurers got paler and paler as a result. *Are they going to be okay?*

“Mr. Druid, maybe it’s time we just let it go?”

“No, I have to drill the message into their brains so they won’t make the same mistake again.”

Uh, I think they got the message loud and clear. They were trying so hard not to look at each other that some of them were even on the verge of tears. Oh, Guild Master Priya is here now! That’s reassuring.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

We explained everything that had happened, including the fact that there was a dead monster at the dump. We could let him handle the rest.

“Aha. So *that’s* what happened.”

Wait a minute...Guild Master Priya’s aura looks like it’s on fire. Is it really okay to leave the adventurers with him? No, no, they probably all come from Hatow, so they must know him. They’ll be okay...I hope.

“Mr. Druid, let’s leave the rest to the guild master.”

I was worried about Ciel’s strange behavior. It wasn’t wounded or anything, but I wouldn’t feel better until I was back by its side.

“Yeah...I guess we should. All right, Guild Master, take *good* care of these boys.”

“Oh, I *will*.”

The menacing way Druid asked the guild master to “take good care of” the adventurers didn’t exactly calm my nerves. *I hope they’ll be all right.*

“Don’t worry, Miss Ivy, I’ll give them a *stern* warning.”

“Er, a mild warning is fine, sir. A *mild* warning.”

He smiled nicely back at me, so I would just have to trust him. *Yeah, I’m sure they’ll be fine.*

We left the adventurer guild and hurried back to the dump. It wouldn’t be long before some adventurers would come by to haul off the monster’s corpse, so we needed to get deep into the forest before they arrived.

We met back up with Ciel and Snakey on our way to the dump. They had stationed themselves near the village to wait for us. When we explained that some adventurers would be along soon, Snakey let us ride into the forest on its back. I checked in on Ciel, and I didn’t sense any of the strangeness I’d felt from it earlier. Just what was wrong with it?

We had Snakey drop us off deep in the forest. I looked it in the eye and said, “Thank you. I didn’t get a chance to properly say that when you saved us. Also, it’s nice seeing you again. It’s been a while.” The last time we’d seen Snakey was when Ciel showed us where the bearth lived, so it had been about a month.

“It really has been nice.”

Oh, good! Druid’s foul mood is gone. As I stood there, sighing in relief, Druid softly tousled my hair.

“You okay?”

He was probably worried I was hurt or frazzled from the attack. His gentle tousling made my cheeks soften into a smile.

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

Mrrrow. Ciel, equally concerned, nuzzled against me.

“Thanks.” I gave Ciel’s head some gentle pats. The creature’s warmth made

me smile again. Then Snakey popped up right in front of my face and peered into my eyes. Was it worried about me, too? “I’m all right, Snakey. Thank you.”

Snakey smiled softly and rubbed its nose against me. I gave it plenty of pats, and it replied with a content smile. I took Sora out of the bag, and it began to play with Snakey. Flame and Sol were...well, they were napping, like they always were. I watched the three creatures play for a bit. It was still quite cold out and I was starting to shiver, so I called out to Sora and Ciel.

“Let’s go, guys, it’s getting cold.”

At my command, Sora jumped right onto my chest from far away.

“Agh!”

Sora jiggled in my arms, happy that I’d caught it. It was very cute, but my rib cage hurt a little. *I think it jumped too hard.*

“Sora...”

“Pu! Puuu...”

Argh...Sora really does love catching people unawares.

Snakey escorted us to the outskirts of the village. We thanked it and said our goodbyes.

“Thanks for everything, Snakey. See you later.”

We watched Snakey disappear into the forest, then headed back to the village. When we greeted the gatekeeper, he gave us a message from the guild master. The monster corpse was safe, so they’d had it butchered and wanted us to come by the guild to pick up our payment for the meat.

“Are you sure we can take money for it?” I asked. We weren’t the ones who had transported or butchered the meat, so it didn’t feel right to take any payment for ourselves.

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Okay.”

If Druid says it's all right, then I guess we'll take the money. It was a relief to hear that the monster hadn't gone berserk and there was nothing else wrong with it. I'd been incredibly nervous that I was about to get myself caught up in some more trouble.

"Want to go get our money now?" Druid asked.

"Sure."

When we arrived at the adventurer guild, Priya was there to greet us. The troublesome party of young adventurers had been ordered to spend a year of close study with some senior adventurers. When Priya mentioned the veterans, the look on his face sent shivers down my spine. I went ahead and asked him to tell the younger adventurers I wished them luck.

We took our payment for the monster meat, wrote our names on the document, and the deal was done. We also got a sample of the meat. I was curious to try it, since it was a creature I'd never encountered before.

As we were walking toward the inn, I suddenly realized I didn't know anything about the monster. "By the way, what is this monster called?"

"It's a sheepe."

"Does it taste good?"

"Well...their meat is a bit tough."

Their meat is tough? In that case, I don't think I'll grill it. How should I cook it, then? If I give it a long, slow braise, maybe that'll make it more tender? I think I'll cook a little of it when we get home, just to check the flavor, then I'll decide how to cook the rest of it. But before that, I'll need a bath. It's freezing.

"Hello!"

"We're back from our trip!"

As soon as we walked through the inn's front door, warmth tingled through our bodies. We'd been chilled to the bone yet again.

“Let’s take a bath and warm up before we do anything else,” Druid said.

“Agreed.”

Over the past several weeks, we’d made it a habit to take a bath as soon as we returned to the inn. In moments like this, I was always grateful that we’d picked an inn with a bath. Back when Druid told me a bath was nonnegotiable, I hadn’t thought it would be all that necessary. But now that I was experiencing a bath’s blessings firsthand, I realized I could never live without one again. Especially when I was contentedly floating in a bath’s warm water during wintertime, I was so grateful I could cry. When I told all of this to Druid, he gave me a satisfied “Glad you’ve come around.”

I stepped out of the bath and got to work on cooking the sheepe meat. I grilled a little piece of it to have a taste...and it was definitely tough and gamey. I decided to add extra medicinal herbs to mask its flavor and to give it a low and slow braise.

“So, think you can use it?” Druid asked with a bit of concern. He probably knew the challenges that sheepe meat posed.

“Yeah, I can.”

“That’s good to hear. Oh, by the way, the next time you send out some faaxes, you should tell everybody we’re hitting the road soon.”

“Why?” I cut the meat into extra-large (but still bite-sized) pieces and chopped the vegetables into equally big chunks.

“If faaxes addressed to you come to Hatow after we’ve left, things will get awfully complicated.”

That made sense.

“What do they do with faxes that arrive after the person has left?”

While we talked, I filled a pot with meat and water and brought it to a simmer. Then I simmered it a bit longer and tossed out the water. Now that the impurities were cleaned off the meat, I put it in a larger pot with some

vegetables. I added some water, put in five types of medicinal herbs, and then lit the fire under it to bring everything to a boil.

“You pay them to forward the faax to a place where the recipient can pick it up.”

So you had to pay more money. *I’d better write all my faxes today so I don’t forget.* “Do you think I should say where our next destination is?” *Hatahi Village, if I recall correctly.*

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

When the pot started boiling, I skimmed the scum off the top. After another three minutes at that temperature, I lowered the heat to begin the braise.

“Roger that. Okay, I’m all done here.”

“You’re done? That was awfully quick.” Druid peered inside the pot.

“I’m going to simmer it slowly over the next twenty-four hours.”

“Ohh, okay. I’m excited to eat it tomorrow.”

The stew just needed to be checked occasionally to make sure its water levels were good.

Okay, let’s write some faxes!

Chapter 307:

The Forest of Light

AS WE WENT DOWNSTAIRS to go to the dump, Salifa peeked out from the dining hall.

“Good morning. Captain Tableau sent word that he wanted you both to swing by the branch today; think you can do that?”

Captain Tableau wants to see us? I wonder if he has a job for us. I looked at Druid, and he looked curious, too.

“Sure. We’ll swing by once we finish our errands,” Druid answered.

Salifa happily nodded and said, “Okay, thanks. Have a nice day.”

“You, too!” we both called out as we left the inn and headed for the dump.

“What do you think he needs us for?” I asked.

“Not sure. He didn’t mention anything yesterday.”

The previous day, we’d swung by Rose’s shop to see if she had the item we’d requested. Captain Tableau happened to return home from work while we were there, so we said hi, but he didn’t have anything to tell us then, so whatever it was must have happened after that.

“Do you think it’s because we told him we were going to hit the road soon?” I asked.

Druid pondered my question for a moment and said, “I don’t think that should matter, though.”

I supposed he was right. “Maybe we’re forgetting something?”

What could we possibly be forgetting about Captain Tableau? The feeling that something had slipped my mind was starting to annoy me. *Wait a minute...*

“Ah! The magic stones!” we gasped in unison. We were so frazzled with other worries that we had totally forgotten about them.

“That’s right, we never got our payment for all those magic stones we provided,” I said.

“Yeah, I completely forgot.”

Come to think of it, how many magic stones did we wind up donating in all? I’d been keeping track of it on a piece of paper, but I realized halfway through that there was a gap with several days missing. And after that, my records were a little disorganized.

“Do you remember about how many we gave them?” I asked.

“No, do you?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, knowing Captain Tableau, he’s probably got it covered.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s a good thing we remember now. Too bad about that magic item, though.”

We’d used Rose’s connections to do all kinds of investigating, but we just couldn’t find a magic item that stored magic energy. She did have one that could help us do laundry, though, so Druid bought that on the spot.

“Yeah, it really is too bad.”

The towns near the capital were much larger and more densely populated than the ones in these parts. That meant that even though the dumps were much bigger, they were also visited by more people and we would run a higher risk of being seen. We could get away with gathering swords and potions for Sora and Flame by ourselves, but Sol could only get its magic energy by being at the dump, making it incredibly inconvenient.

“I guess we’ll just have to find a way,” Druid said.

We’d already tried—and failed—everything we could think of. Even though

we still had some time before we would reach the capital, I was scared that we wouldn't come up with a plan by the time we got there. So far, we knew that Sol could do just fine without food for three days. Starting on the fourth day, it would get smaller and smaller, but that was the limit of our understanding. There was much more we didn't know.

We greeted the gatekeepers on duty for the day and passed through the gate.

"Bye, Druid; bye, sweet Ivy. Be careful out there."

We had gotten awfully friendly with the gatekeepers during the winter. *Well, I guess that's inevitable when you go into the forest every day like we do.* They all knew us by name.

"Thanks, have a nice day."

"Oh, I almost forgot! We got a report that a large animal was seen out there, so be careful."

Were the big animals already waking up from their hibernation? But there was still snow on the ground and the winds were still freezing. It felt a bit early to me.

"Was it a fock?" Druid asked.

The gatekeeper nodded.

"Roger that," said Druid. "Do you know where it was spotted?"

"Near the cave where the magic stones were discovered."

That's far from the dump. Thank goodness.

"Got it. Thank you."

The gatekeepers waved goodbye to us. We waved back and headed into the forest.

"Isn't it a bit early for animals to be waking up from hibernation?" I asked.

"Sometimes you can see focks even in the winter. This one has probably been covering more territory since the weather started warming up."

If they could be seen in the wintertime, did that mean they didn't hibernate? I didn't even know there were animals like that. I had read up on the kinds of monsters that attacked humans, but I hadn't really looked into harmless animals much, only dangerous ones.

"What kind of animals are focks?"

"You don't know?"

I shook my head no, and he told me they were large animals with long tails and hatchet faces. *Hatchet faces?* I couldn't picture it one bit.

"Are they dangerous?"

"A little. Their tails are poisonous."

Poisonous?

"Doesn't that make them more than a little dangerous?"

"They don't attack you unless you attack them, so they're mostly harmless."

So I guess they're okay, then.

By now we were quite far away from the gate, so I opened my bag. Flame and Sol were both awake today, and they jumped out as soon as I opened it.

"The gang's all here today, I see," Druid said.

"Yeah. Okay, let's get to the dump!"

I searched the area for auras as we made our way there. We would need to gather enough potions to last us for our trip. Since Sora and Flame made blue and red potions, we no longer needed those, but we did need the other two kinds: green and purple. We also needed to gather potions and swords for Sora's and Flame's meals.

"Hey, there's something I've been meaning to ask for a while," Druid said.

"Yes?"

"Your final destination is the capital, right?"

“Uh-huh.”

Ciel returned to adandara form, and the three slimes jumped onto its back. Ciel sure did baby them all.

“There are three towns connected to the capital... Which one are you going to?”

“Well...I don’t know.”

“What?! Why not?”

Well, I asked the fortune-teller several times, but she never told me the name of the town.

“The fortune-teller told me to go to either the town next to the capital or one of the ones nearby. She said I would understand when I got there.”

Now that I thought about it, when I asked her what it was like there, she said she didn’t know because she had never been there herself.

“You’ll understand when you get there? Wait a minute...maybe she meant the Forest of Light?”

“The Forest of Light?”

“Yeah, people say it’s the place where this world began.”

Why do I need to go somewhere like that?

“It’s a very mysterious spot. Then again, I’ve only heard stories about it. I’ve never been there myself.”

“What’s so mysterious about it?”

“There’s a tiny church deep in the forest. The chosen ones can enter just once and have their wishes granted.”

A church? Then I don’t really want to go there.

“And that church is different from the other ones in this land. It apparently has no members.”

“What?! Then who manages it and cleans it?”

“Nobody, but it’s always clean. Well, the roof is, anyway.”

“The roof?”

“Yes. Since nobody goes into the Forest of Light, all you can see of the church is the roof, peeking out from among the trees.”

A church in a deserted forest... A place where the chosen ones can enter only once... It reminds me of a fantasy novel.

“It sounds just like a fantasy story.”

“Huh? What’s a fan-tuh-see?”

Huh? Oh, maybe that word belongs to my past life.

“Um, I guess it’s a word from my past life.”

“I see.”

So nobody here knows what a fantasy is...

This world really was full of mysteries. Sometimes, things from my former world existed here. Some of the foods were the same, and some of the items had similar names to the ones in my past life. It really did make me think that there were other people like me in this world.

“So, do you think we should head for the town of Kashime in the Forest of Light?” Druid asked.

The Forest of Light... It definitely piqued my curiosity, even though I wasn’t sure whether that was the place the fortune-teller was talking about.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

“Kashime, huh? I’ve never been there, either.”

“You haven’t?”

“Yeah. I’ve avoided it since I don’t have a great history with churches.”

That’s right. Druid has had a troubled past because of his skills, too.

“Are you okay now?” I asked.

“Of course.”

I stared hard into Druid’s eyes. He didn’t look like he was lying, so I supposed he really was okay. I still had complicated feelings about my past, but I no longer felt disdain for the church. I used to hate just the sight of one. *Hmm... maybe that’s not the right way to describe my feelings. It wasn’t hate. It was fear.*

“There’s a lot of new trash here, huh?” Druid said.

I looked at the dump and saw that he was right. There was a huge new pile of trash.

“It looks like the village dumped all the winter trash they were storing.”

The trash from the whole village is here, eh? That means it’s an all-you-can-dumpster-dive! Ooh, look how excited the slimes are.

“Let’s grab as much as we can.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Chapter 308:

Getting Ready for Spring

“OKAY, LET’S HEAD BACK!” Druid said.

I stretched my frozen back muscles. Boooy, did that feel good.

“I sure feel better now that we’ve picked up more than enough green and purple potions,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m really happy about that. We got quite a bit of food for the slimes.”

We still didn’t have enough for our trip, but we had some time left before we were planning to leave this village, so we would probably be fine.

“But are you really okay with it?” I asked.

“With what?”

“With the green and purple potions. You always used to buy them, remember? Now that we have money to spare, we could have just gotten them from a store.”

I felt like Druid was accommodating me. After all, most people would just buy genuine versions of the potions.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve actually come to enjoy trash-collecting; it’s like a treasure hunt. Besides, I already have regular kinds of each potion on hand.”

He was right. We did have some genuine potions just in case the degraded ones we gathered at the dump didn’t work. But it really didn’t sit right with me that someone of Druid’s stature was using old potions from the dump.

“Hm? Ha ha! Ivy, look. Sora and Flame are packing for the trip, too.”

We looked at Sora and Flame. Each of them had made three blue and red potions, respectively.

“Aww, is that what you guys were doing?” I giggled.

Sora and Flame were bouncing up and down next to the potions they’d made. When we approached them, they smiled smugly beside their work. *They’re so cute.*

“Hee hee! Well, thank you. Now we’re all ready for our trip.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

I sure have gotten comfortable letting my slimes take care of potions for me. I used to shudder every winter over the prices of potions, but now it wasn’t a problem. I had come to think of my creatures as essential: I could depend on them whenever I had a problem. Of course, I knew I had to keep them out of sight, which was unfortunate, but living through this winter had imprinted a lesson into my very bones: Preparation is vital. Whenever I felt even slightly under the weather, I would take a spoonful of red potion. Whenever I tripped in the snow and hurt myself, I would take a spoonful of blue potion. I owed my slimes a lot of gratitude. I’d never known just how difficult it was to walk on snowy roads.

“Okay, let’s head over to see Captain Tableau now,” Druid said.

“Good idea.”

I put Sora’s and Flame’s potions in my magic bag, and we all headed back toward the village. Flame and Sol, tired from the excursion, were napping inside the bag. Sora and Ciel were playing their who-can-jump-the-highest game again, after a long hiatus.

“When they’re on the snow, Ciel has Sora beat,” Druid remarked.

Ciel seemed a bit more stable in this environment than Sora, who looked quite bitter about it.

“It sure does.”

CRACK!

I heard the splintering of wood. Sora must have slammed eagerly into a branch.

“Oh, no!” we gasped.

“Pu!”

Crunch, crunch, crunch...

Before our very eyes, Sora fell from the branch and got buried under a huge pile of snow.

“Sora!”

Ciel was strong enough to jump out of the pile, but Sora wasn't. As I sped over to rescue the slime from the snow, Ciel, already in adandara form, dove into the pile after it. After a few seconds, Ciel's head popped out of the snow with Sora in its mouth.

“Oh, thank goodness!”

I knew monsters were good at tolerating the cold, but it was still a relief to see Sora was okay.

“All right, you two: No jumping contests when the snow is this high.”

“Puuu...”

Mewww...

The creatures whined in reply.

“Please. I worry about you both.”

“...Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

Oh, good. They understand how I feel. Boy, Sora sure gets buried in the snow way too much. Whenever it happens, my heart pounds out of my chest.

As we walked back to the village, I sensed human auras. “Sora, Ciel, somebody's coming. Get in the bag.”

Sora jumped toward my chest. I caught it and put it in its bag. Ciel had already returned to slime form and approached my feet, so I picked it up and added it to the bag as well.

“It looks like a fairly big group of people.”

“Seems like it, yeah.”

There were so many people approaching that I felt a bit wary. I knew they were probably safe, but still... When the group got closer, I saw that Vice-Captain Pith was in the lead.

“Vice-Captain Pith?” Druid called out to him.

He smiled and said, “Good afternoon, Mr. Druid! Miss Ivy!”

“Good afternoon, sir.” I stood straight and gave a shallow bow. I looked at the people behind him and didn’t recognize a single face. They were all quite young, too.

“Is everything okay?” Druid asked.

Pith laughed and nodded his head. “Yes, everything’s fine. There’s nothing to worry about. They’re training to be watchmen.”

Oh, so that’s why so many of them are young. They’re trainees.

“We were about to go on patrol. They need to see treacherous terrain and the dwellings of dangerous monsters in person, so I’m taking them there.”

Vice-Captains sure had tough jobs. “Good luck out there, sir.”

“Thank you very much. All I have to do is show them around, so it’s not hard work...but it’s a real hassle.”

“You shouldn’t say that in front of them,” Druid laughed nervously.

He was right. Calling his job a “hassle” was a bad move. I could see that Pith’s men were also chuckling awkwardly behind him.

“Ha ha! So are you folks headed back to the village?”

“Yes, we’re done with our work out here for the day.”

“I see. Well, we’d best be on our way, then.”

“Goodbye! Be careful out there.”

We parted ways with Pith and headed back to the village, where the gatekeepers greeted us with smiles. We said hi and headed for the village watch headquarters. As we walked, we noticed that the outdoor stalls were open again.

“Mr. Druid, look! It’s a soup stall.”

“So it is. I guess people have decided to open shop now that the snow’s calmed down a bit.”

Shopkeepers couldn’t do business when it was snowing heavily, so we hadn’t seen any stalls during the wintertime. But now, the ones on Main Street were open for business. It made me feel giddy inside, knowing spring was almost here. *This would be a good time to try that crazy soup... No, actually, I’d rather not. Yeah, not trying that again.*

“What’s wrong?”

“I was just remembering that soup we had.”

“Ooh, yeah...” Druid’s forehead filled with deep creases as he also thought about it. Well, no wonder. We’d had to struggle together just to finish one bowl of the stuff. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t want any soup.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Druid looked so visibly relieved that I had to laugh. That soup had been so terrible that even I couldn’t eat it. We looked at the open stalls as we made our way to the village watch headquarters. When we went inside, we told a nearby watchman we were there to see Captain Tableau. Shortly after, the captain came out to see us, which attracted a lot of attention.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

“Sorry to call you all the way out here like this,” he said.

“Oh, it’s quite all right.”

I eyed the staff as we followed Captain Tableau to his office. The air had been tense the last time we were here, but things felt a bit different now.

Noticing my curiosity, Captain Tableau explained, “Everyone is relieved that spring is almost here. We had a really tough winter this year.”

“So that’s why everyone looks so light and floaty. I was wondering why that was.” It was hard to express in words, but everyone was acting like they were floating on air.

“Between the heavy snow and the extreme cold, we had a lot of winter weather advisories to send out this year. Now that everything’s settled down, I’m sure everyone’s tight balls of nerves have unraveled a little.”

Yeah, I guess they can finally take things easy for a while now. Winter really was quite an ordeal this year.

Once we were in Tableau’s office, he had us sit on the sofa and handed us a sheet of paper.

“I had you come here today to confirm the quantity and price of the magic stones you provided. Please look over this statement and let me know if there are any errors.”

Druid and I checked the statement together. It listed the levels, quantities, and price totals of the magic stones we’d supplied.

“So, we provided nine hundred fifty-three magic stones in all,” I said.

Wow, Flame regenerated that many magic stones? That’s quite a feat.

“What?! You mean you didn’t know?”

“We lost track along the way,” I said. Druid supported me with a nod.

“Oh dear. Well, I’m a little surprised to hear that.”

“Why’s that, sir?”

“Well, because you’re both so conscientious.”

Druid and I exchanged glances. *Us? Conscientious?*

“We’re actually quite careless,” Druid said.

I nodded in agreement. We did tend to forget important things, even without a summoning circle to influence us.

Chapter 309:

Spring Things

NOW THAT WE HAD the payment for the magic stones all sorted out, we could fully focus on preparing for our travels. Since it still snowed a little at night, we decided to wait until the weather was more springlike before we departed.

“Okay, we’re gonna go look at some spring and summer clothes now.”

Druid declared this after some post-breakfast deliberation. He said it as if the decision were as good as made, so I stared at him blankly.

“Um, is this set in stone?”

“Of course it is.”

I see... It’s set in stone, then... Wait, when did we set it in stone? When I just kept staring at Druid, he laughed and stood up.

“Ivy, can you come stand a little closer to me?”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

I stood next to Druid and looked up at him.

“Do you notice anything different?”

Notice what? I kept staring up at Druid, still confused. *Wait a minute...*

“Let me guess...did I grow taller?”

“Yes, you did. So, I’m pretty sure the pants you used to wear are too short for you now.”

He was right. I had grown since the summer, and my pants were already a little short when we bought them. That meant they were probably way too short by now.

“Haven’t you been feeling any joint pain this winter?” he asked.

Joint pain? Yeah, my joints do feel a little stiff first thing in the morning. "I have, but I always thought it was just soreness from bumping into so many things."

"Ah, yes, you and the snow aren't that compatible, Ivy."

He sure was right about that. Even those shoe thingies I'd borrowed from Dola that were supposed to keep you from slipping didn't help much. For some reason, whenever I walked on a road where the snow was a bit deep, I would fall constantly, usually because my foot would get caught in the snow and pitch me forward. I got a lot of scrapes and bruises from rocks and stumps on the road that were hidden by the snow. Thanks to the blue potions, I was able to heal my wounds right away, but the areas that got hit still hurt afterward. And since I was such a klutz, whenever we were in the forest, I would only walk along paths that Druid had melted first. But that wouldn't work in town, so it really was harsh. *I hope we get to spend next winter someplace where there's less snow.*

"On that note, let's get you some new clothes. We have all that magic stone money to spend, after all."

Since we had supplied a lot more magic stones than we thought, we had a startling amount of money, meaning there was plenty to spare. But I remembered how our shopping trip for winter clothing had gone down. Would I be able to assert myself this time?

"Okay, let's get going. What do you want to do with the slimes? Take them with us?"

The creatures reacted positively when Druid said "take them with us," so I put them all in their bag and we headed over to Modd, the clothing shop that Baluka ran. We hadn't been there for a while, and we were surprised to see that the place's design had changed quite a bit.

"Hello! Come on in," Baluka said, opening the door for us.

"It's good to see you again, sir. How did the winter treat you?"

“Pretty well. I was able to get some high-level magic stones from the guild, so all my employees were safe and warm through the winter. The current guild master and head watchmen sure are great at their jobs. There were rumors earlier that they weren’t up to the task, but now we know we’re in good hands.”

A smile spread over my face. I was so happy to hear that Captain Tableau and Guild Master Priya had done their jobs so well that the villagers were put at ease.

“We came here to get some spring and summer clothes. And we’ll be on the road, so we’ll need them sturdily made, please.”

“Of course, sir. By the way, Miss Ivy, have you grown a little taller?” Baluka looked me over with a pensive gleam in his eyes.

Why is he looking at me like that? Do I look weird? He knows the clothes I’m wearing are from this shop, right?

“Yes, you might want to order your trousers a little on the long side, with an adjustable hem. It looks like you’re bound to grow even more.”

“An adjustable hem, sir?”

“Yes, we roll the hem over a few times instead of cutting the fabric. That way, you can unroll it to make the trousers longer as needed.”

Aha, that sounds like it could work well for me. It was such a waste to have to buy new pants every time I grew a little taller.

“I’ll take a rolled hem, then, please. You wanted to buy some pants, too, Mr. Druid?”

“Yeah, I’ll need to get three pairs of pants and a coat.”

I guess I’ll browse for my own clothes for now, then...

“Ivy, don’t go for the cheap stuff. Pick clothes that are built to last.”

He’s on to me. I stole a glance at Druid and saw that he was staring critically at

me. “Ha ha ha! Okay, I get it.”

I’ll find some clothes that’ll last. Hmmm...y’know, looking at clothes is quite a thrill. Okay, let’s start with some pants! I chose three pairs of pants, selecting them based on color and embroidery designs. *These three ought to do it.*

“Don’t you think you should have some more pairs of pants?” Druid asked from behind me, eyeing the ones I’d selected.

“You think so?”

“Yeah, you have to think about the times you won’t be able to do laundry, like when it’s raining. It rains a lot in the spring.”

Taking that into consideration, I supposed I was a little short on pants.

“How about these? The fabric on them is quite sturdy.” Druid brought six pairs of pants for me to look at. I chose two of them, which gave me five pairs in all. *That should be enough.*

“Hey, Ivy, how about a spring coat?” Druid held up a coat with beautiful embroidery. I had looked at it earlier, but it was too expensive, so I’d discreetly put it back on the rack.

“No, it costs way too much.”

Druid looked upset. He walked off to return the coat...only to return with a different one. “How about this?”

He was holding a coat of a different color, with less lavish embroidery. I checked the price out of concern and saw that it was within our budget. I really wanted it...but I didn’t exactly need it.

“Isn’t it a bit pricey?”

“You think so? I think it’s fine.”

I was concerned about the price...but more importantly, I wanted it. But if I bought it right when I was going through a growth spurt, I would surely regret it later. I didn’t know how long I would be able to wear it, so I decided I should

pass it up.

“If you buy the next size up, you’ll be able to wear it much longer. And this style has an adjustable pleat at the back, so you can easily adjust it to your current size. It will be a little long for you, but there should be no problems with the design. I can also roll the hems in the sleeves just like your trousers.”

Baluka brought over the same coat in a larger size and pinned it up to fit me.

“Wow...it looks a bit different, but I think it’ll work. Wouldn’t you say so, Ivy?”

The design did change a little...but it was so cute. I really felt like I needed to have it. But...

“Then it’s settled.”

“Hey!”

The sale was made.

“I let Mr. Druid have his way yet again...”

He chose my clothing not only this time but on our winter shopping trip, too. And every item he’d selected for me was something with beautiful colors or embroidery that I had wanted but put back because it was too expensive. It was probably because I was so used to settling for clothes that were “good enough.” I’d never been able to buy clothes of my own volition. So whenever Druid insisted on buying clothes because they were pretty, I found it hard to agree. I also complained out of embarrassment whenever he said I looked good in something.

“He probably sees right through me...”

Druid was so forceful when we bought clothing because I was too timid to admit that I wanted something. It was strange, since I never hesitated to buy food or magic items that interested me.

“Ivy, we’ll need to buy some tops for you, too.”

“Got it.”

Okay, Ivy, it's time to be assertive and pick out some pretty clothes for yourself that you truly want! Ahh...but will I really be able to do it?

Side: Father and Daughter Tableau's Perspective

"HEY THERE, TROOPER," I called out to Priya when I spotted him walking on Main Street.

"Hi..." he sighed.

"Are you tired?"

"Oh, you know youngsters. They just keep causing trouble. What about you?"

"Pith started to whip the trainees into shape."

Priya made a sour face, but I couldn't blame him. Whenever Pith got in a mood, half the trainees would quit. I could sympathize with their impulse to run away, but I wished they'd give it a chance. *Priya's training is nothing to be... Well, yeah, it's intense enough to make anyone want to quit. Maybe I should tell him to ease up a bit. We'd be in trouble if all our trainees dropped out.*

"I heard Miss Ivy and Mr. Druid are getting ready to hit the road again."

"Yeah, I paid them for all the magic stones they gave us."

"Without a hitch?"

Priya's question made me laugh. "Yes, I finished the deal without a hitch. Would you believe those two? They lost track of how many magic stones they'd provided."

Priya just stared dubiously at me—my words must have come as a shock to him. And the way he stares at people is rather unsettling.

"Stop staring. It's creepy."

"Hey, *rude*. Wait, what am I saying...? Did they *really* not know how many stones they gave us?"

“Yeah, when they came to the station today to look over the receipt, they were both stunned to see the total. Like they didn’t even realize how many magic stones they’d donated.”

Priya was in a daze, and I didn’t blame him. Who in the world gives so many high-level magic stones to somebody and then doesn’t keep track of how many there were? I was a bit taken aback by their attitude as well. If it had been anyone other than those two, I would have assumed they’d kept strict records of the transaction. I wouldn’t even be surprised if they tried to convince me they’d provided more than they actually had. Then again, nobody would ever give such high-level magic stones to a struggling village in the first place. Those two were the exceptions.

“Do you think Mr. Druid and Miss Ivy will, um...be okay?”

Yeah, the way they act does make me worry somebody will swindle them. I understood Priya’s concerns.

“I think they weren’t too worried about the transaction because I was the one they were dealing with.”

“Yikes, what a thing to say! You’re making me jealous.”

“Ha ha ha! Oh, I think it’s a fair assumption to make.”

Priya’s face twisted with scorn. He was Ivy’s fan, after all. He probably did feel genuine jealousy. Then again, since I’m also a fan of Ivy’s, I could have screamed with joy when he said that. I suppressed the urge, though, not wanting to start a fight.

“But they’re leaving now... It’s going to get awfully lonely around here,” I said.

“It sure will,” Priya sighed.

“So much happened this winter.”

“Yeah...”

Thinking back, the time between autumn and winter was full of nothing but shameful moments for me. I was inundated with various problems all at once,

and I just didn't have the emotional strength to deal with them all. I hated myself for being so helpless, but I had no choice but to keep pushing—that was the position I was in. When all the reports of the snow blooms arrived, I thought Hatow was doomed. The cave had collapsed, so we couldn't mine new magic stones, and we didn't have enough in reserve to make it through the winter. The more my mind raced, the more trapped I felt. I even indulged in the foolish thought that my becoming head watchman was what had doomed this village. That negative thinking gave me tunnel vision. I even took out my frustrations on Ivy and Druid, and yet they provided Hatow with all those magic stones.

"They sure are a mysterious pair."

"Huh?"

"Their first impression of me must have been terrible. I was sour and passive-aggressive."

Priya gave me a pat on the shoulder. "Well, you could say the same of me, buddy."

Whenever I remembered how poorly I'd treated Ivy and Druid in the past, my head ached. I'd had no right to act that way.

"After all that, they still gave us magic stones. The first time I saw how high-level they were, I was honestly terrified. I was worried they came with strings attached."

"Yeah, when you first told me about the stones, I was sure they were playing us."

Our worries really were all for nothing. If only we had seen their true selves, we could have realized sooner just how foolish our worries were. But in my line of work, I had to consider all sides of a situation, so I guess suspecting them was something I just couldn't have avoided.

"I'm really grateful we met them."

"Yeah. If we hadn't met them, we'd have been sunk," Priya said.

I nodded in agreement. We truly owed our lives to them.

“Say, do you wanna go have a drink?” Priya asked. “It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

Winter was not yet over, but there wasn’t as much snow anymore. That alone gave us such a delightfully dramatic decrease in work.

“The usual place good for you?”

We usually went to a tavern that was considered the best or second-best in Hatow. It was known for its cheap yet tasty drinks. Since it faced Main Street, it was only a stone’s throw away.

“Come on in, boys!” somebody called out as soon as we set foot in the tavern.

We looked around to see the place was packed with people.

“Hey! Wait a minute, isn’t that Mr. Druid over there?” Priya cried out.

I looked over to where he was pointing. Sure enough, there was Druid, drinking alone. I glanced around the area near him, but there was no sign of Ivy.

“It’s okay if we go say hi to him, right?” Priya sounded genuinely concerned, which was understandable. If Druid wanted to drink alone, we would be imposing. While we were stuck at the tavern entrance, our eyes met with Druid’s by accident, and he smiled and waved. With a little sigh of relief, I lifted my hand to wave back...only to see that Priya had already started eagerly running toward him. Druid looked a bit startled, but he welcomed Priya with a smile. He even pulled out a chair beside him.

I have a feeling the drinks are going to taste extra good tonight.

“Sorry to intrude...” The seat opposite Priya was empty, so I sat there. Now Druid was sandwiched between us at the bar.

“Oh, it’s no intrusion. It’s lonely drinking by yourself. It’s more fun with a couple of friends.”

I didn’t know if Druid was sincere in calling us “friends,” but I was still

flattered.

“So, where’s Miss Ivy?”

“Sorry you missed her. She’s back at the inn, probably asleep by now. She was quite tired.”

“Did you do something particularly exhausting today?” I asked worriedly.

Druid shook his head. So why exactly was she tired, then?

“We went shopping for her spring wardrobe. That seemed to wear her out.”

She’s tired from clothes shopping?

“Miss Ivy has grown into a stylish young lady,” Priya observed.

Druid smiled awkwardly, and the two of us sensed something was amiss. Or were we mistaken? It did take women an awfully long time to select clothes, to be sure.

“It’s not quite what you think,” Druid said. “Ivy has a hard time buying anything that isn’t a necessity.”

I gave Druid a confused look. What he was saying made no sense.

“Ivy has had to do without for most of her life, as a matter of survival.” Sadness filled Druid’s eyes.

“Survival, you say?” Stern lines formed on Priya’s face.

“Yes, survival. She’s had to fight all her life, since she was a baby, just to survive.”

She’s had to fight to survive since she was a baby? Was she an orphan? But the guild or the church would help her out if that were the case.

“Um, is Ivy perhaps...?” Priya cut himself off. He wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to ask anything further.

“I can’t give you the specific details without Ivy’s permission, but anyway, because of how she’s had to live her life, she has a hard time speaking up when

she wants something.”

“But you folks do have enough money, right?”

What with the payment from those magic stones, they were sure to have more than enough. And there was also Ivy’s reward money from helping take down the crime organization.

“It’s not her wallet that’s the problem, it’s her heart.”

“I see...” Priya frowned, deep in thought.

“Ha ha!” Druid laughed out of nowhere.

That startled me. I didn’t see what could possibly be so funny.

“But Ivy was able to pick out and buy her own spring outfit today. They were beautiful clothes, too, heavy with embroidery. The kind of clothes she never could have chosen for herself before. Well, I say *clothes*, but it was just one item. I only hope she’s finally learned that it’s okay for her to treat herself now and then. It’s hard for her to change her behavior since she’s not really aware of it. But I want her to learn to depend on others more.”

Druid said there was no blood relation between them, but he really did feel like Ivy’s father. And I’d heard Ivy describe him once as the perfect father. Those two really had forged a wonderful relationship.

Chapter 310: A Grateful Realization

“GOOD MORNING.”

“Hm? Oh, hi. Glad you’re here.”

When we set foot into Rose’s shop, she and Delos greeted us with smiles. We were all packed for our trip and scheduled to leave in five days, so we were making the rounds to say goodbye to everyone we’d met in Hatow.

“We’re really gonna miss you, hon. When are ya leaving again?”

“In five days, ma’am,” I answered.

“Oh, how time does fly!” Rose exclaimed with tears in her voice.

Hearing her made me feel melancholic. She’d really helped us out a lot with our magic items.

“Say, I have a little somethin’ for ya. This is the addresses of all the items dealers I know in and around the capital.”

Rose handed us two sheets of paper. On them were written the names of all the shopkeepers she knew, plus the locations and names of their stores.

“If ya ever need anything, go to one of ’em. They all know me. They ain’t perfect, but rest assured, they’ll never sell ya useless items.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Druid bowed. I hastily did the same. We really had made some wonderful connections here.

“That reminds me, I heard Priya asked ya to keep in touch by faax?”

“He asked Ivy specifically,” Druid clarified.

When we were making our rounds thanking everyone and saying goodbye before our departure, Priya shook my hand hard and begged me to write to

him. His eagerness made me a little nervous, but luckily we finally got him to calm down.

“Then Tableau complained that she liked Priya better than him.”

“Um...so I’m going to include letters to Captain Tableau in my faxes to Guild Master Priya, so that should be enough.”

I guess I’ll also send letters to Rose and Delos through Priya.

“Oh, by the way, is it okay if I send letters to you and Mr. Delos through the guild master, ma’am?” I asked. If she wanted me to do it a different way, I’d be happy to.

“You wanna write to us, too, hon? Aw, that’s so sweet. It’ll probably ruffle Priya’s feathers, but I don’t mind.”

Ruffle his feathers? But when I ran the idea by him earlier, his feathers didn’t seem that ruffled.

“I think it’ll be okay. When I asked him about it, he said we could.”

Rose and Delos exchanged sly grins when I said that. *Why? Did I say something funny?* I looked at Druid, but he just smiled gently back at me. No matter what was happening around me, Druid’s smile was always so reassuring.

“Don’t worry, Ivy. It’s nothing you should be concerned about.”

“Okay.”

Still, it was impressive how long my fax list had gotten. I was happy to have more friends. I was a little troubled because none of them were my age, but I couldn’t help that I didn’t meet any other children. I had exchanged a few words with the other kids at the inn, but something always felt a little off to me about it. I’d talked it over with Druid and he said it probably had something to do with Past Me. My manner of thinking implied that I was an adult. And if that were the case, then I just had to let it go. If it weren’t for Past Me, I wouldn’t even be here today. The person I used to be in my past life was another precious member of my family.

"I think we'd better head out," Druid said.

"Yeah."

"Where're y'all headed next?" Rose asked, taking Flame off her lap and setting it on the table. Flame had come to know Rose as the nice person who let it play with magic stones to its heart's content, so whenever we came to visit, it immediately went over to play with her.

"Thanks... Flame, did you say goodbye?"

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu!"

All that tumbling and jiggling on the table showed Flame was happy. I gave its head a couple of pats before putting it into the bag.

"We're off to the clothing boutique, Modd. We bought some light coats for spring, so we're going in for a fitting."

"Ooh, Modd's got lots of great clothes. And you're pretty, Ivy, so you'd better dress up nice."

"Huh?! Um...thanks, ma'am."

The coat Druid had picked out for me was incredibly pretty, so I was quite excited to go try it on.

"Looks like ya got a good haul."

"Huh?" Druid said.

"Didn't ya notice, hon? Ivy's got a nice big smile on her face."

Am I really being that dramatic? I pressed my hands to my cheeks. I looked at Druid and saw that he was smiling earnestly.

"I'm glad you like it," he said.

Druid's smile made me smile back. It really was so soothing to my soul.

"Thanks for picking it out for me. Well, I'm going to go fetch Sora and Ciel."

I looked around Rose's shop and spotted the two in the corner of the room. I

curiously approached them, wondering what they were up to. As I peered at them from behind, I saw them staring at a tiny insect. That was all they were doing: staring. *Is it really that fun for them?*

“Can you guys wrap things up? We have to head to the next shop.”

They looked at me and promptly jumped back into their bag. Maybe their insect watching wasn’t all that exciting after all.

The day Druid picked out my spring coat, I also selected one spring item for myself. All my life, I’d always had to go without the things I wanted. A family, a warm home, a gentle touch, a cozy atmosphere, relationships, enough food to eat, new clothes, new shoes, safety. These were things that I’d never had, no matter how hard I wished for them. It hurt me badly for years and years.

Then one day...I realized something. I thought I’d stopped wishing for anything. But I hadn’t truly stopped; I’d given up on wishing for things to keep my heart from breaking. As long as I didn’t want anything, then my heart wouldn’t break when I didn’t get it. I wouldn’t get hurt. I convinced myself that I wasn’t going without—I simply didn’t wish for anything in the first place. And I needed that mindset at the time, so I don’t regret having it.

“Besides, it wasn’t until very recently that I even realized I’d given up on wishing.”

I muttered the words quietly, so nobody heard them. But Sora stared up at me from halfway inside the bag. I chuckled and gave its head a pat.

“I’m okay now.”

This winter, I realized that everything I had given up on was now in my grasp. Whenever I tripped and fell on the snowy roads and Druid picked me up, I felt how gentle his touch was. He’d been by my side for so long, but it wasn’t until then that I realized “This is the gentle touch I’ve wished for all my life.” And when those words popped into my head, I understood that I had wanted it all along. It wasn’t that I didn’t need it...I had just given up on it.

But the gentle touch I wished for all my life sometimes took the form of a worried hand squeezing mine. If I squeezed that hand, it squeezed back. At last, I realized that I finally had what I'd given up on. A family...our "warm home" was technically an inn, but still our home...a gentle touch...a cozy atmosphere...relationships...enough food to eat...new clothes...new shoes...safety. Druid gave me everything I ever wished for... No, it wasn't just him. Everyone I met...they gave me everything I ever wished for, again and again.

"It took me far too long to realize that."

Druid noticed just how all those years of doing without had warped my mind. Otherwise, someone as considerate as he was, someone who always put my feelings first, would never have chosen clothes for me without letting me give any input. Without knowing it, I probably did something in Baluka's shop that tipped him off. Or maybe in living with me all those months—or even before then—Druid noticed that tendency of mine.

"I never even thought he could look so happy."

The day we went shopping for my spring wardrobe, I tried to pick out something pretty for myself. But when I held the blouse in my hand, I felt uncomfortable for some reason even though I thought it was very pretty. So I convinced myself that I didn't need it and put it back on the shelf. But then...

"Gee, that's really pretty. I'd love to see you wear it, Ivy."

Druid handed his things to the shop clerk and came back to my side. I was a little startled. As I stared up blankly at him, he looked down at me in confusion and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing. You just came back sooner than I expected."

"Yeah, but it's been ten minutes since you... Never mind. Anyway, that blouse is beautiful. I think you'll look great in it, Ivy."



When I saw how happy Druid looked, I took another look at the item I'd put back. Its colors and the embroidery really were beautiful.

"Why don't you look at yourself with it in the mirror?" Druid asked, taking me by the hand and walking me over to the shop mirror. Then he took the blouse from my hands and held it up to me. I timidly took it back from him and held it up again.

"Yeah. You've been becoming a lot more ladylike lately, Ivy, so I know you'll look lovely in that."

I looked in the mirror...and a bewildered girl stared back at me.

"Come on, Ivy! Smile! That blouse looks much better with a smile to complement it."

Druid's gentle hand softly tousled my hair. I looked at myself in the mirror again...and now I was smiling happily.

"Think I can pull it off?"

"Oh, definitely. I guarantee it."

I had Druid's personal guarantee...and it *was* really pretty. I suddenly felt a desperate need for the blouse, so I decided to buy it. When I handed it to Baluka, Druid gave my hair a rough tousle. I whirled around, trying to resist him, but then I noticed the biggest, happiest smile I'd ever seen on his face. It was such a powerful expression that I felt a little embarrassed...but I caught myself smiling back.

"You know, this is the first time I've ever bought any clothes simply because I wanted them."

I'd always had to make excuses whenever I bought something before. That winter was the first time I'd ever even bought clothes, for a start. I didn't think it was warm enough to wear my new blouse just yet, but I couldn't wait to wear it for Druid.

Chapter 311:

Departure

“THANKS FOR EVERYTHING.”

“Thank you. Please, promise me you will absolutely come back to Hatow without fail!” Guild Master Priya begged, gripping both of my hands and squeezing them with a hard shake. I almost flinched, but I had to grit my teeth and bear it. *Come to think of it, I’ve been doing a lot of that lately around Priya.*

“Erm...yes, sir.”

The next time I see him, will he finally chill out a little? I hope he will... I know he will.

“Send me a faax anytime! Please!”

He always says the word “anytime” with such sparkles in his eyes... What exactly should I be doing here? I glanced around, and my eyes met Rose’s. She heaved a heavy sigh and trotted over to me.

“Just chill out, ya big fool!” Rose yanked Priya’s hand and dragged him away from me.

Salvation! I dunno why, but...Rose looks like a knight in shining armor right now.

“Hey, I was right in the middle of my last goodbye!”

“Goodbyes should be quick and not make the other person feel uncomfortable! Everybody knows that.”

Yup. You’re my knight in shining armor, Rose.

“But I was quick! I told Tableau what I wanted to say, and he thought it was way too gushy, so I barely said anything!”

Fans are scary people. Aha, Rose’s eyes are full of doubt! I wonder just what

he said to Captain Tableau? Should I apologize? That's right, when I saw him earlier today, he said, "Sorry about Priya." So this is what he meant!

Druid, now finished saying his goodbyes, returned to my side. He shot Priya an awkward smile, then gave my head a couple of gentle pats.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah. Goodbye, everyone. Thanks again for everything."

We said goodbye to the gatekeeper and returned the plates we'd borrowed. I looked back at all the people who had come to send us off. There was the master of the adventurer guild, the captain and vice-captain of the village watch, the power couple at the items shop, and even the head gatekeeper was there for some reason. To be honest, we were drawing quite a bit of attention. We had spent the last several days saying our goodbyes separately specifically so that this exact thing wouldn't happen. *But I guess it was all for nothing. How strange.*

"Have a safe trip. Come back soon, you hear?"

The lady gatekeeper who had greeted us when we first arrived in Hatow sent us off with a smile. Druid and I grinned in return.

"Goodbye! We'll be back someday."

"Goodbye."

We waved our hands and left Hatow behind us. The people of Hatow had had a very stressful and eventful winter, but I'd thankfully steered clear of any bad incidents. Actually, I almost got caught up in the scandal with the former merchant guild master, so maybe it would be more correct to say I *didn't* steer clear? *Well, not many people were hurt, so I shouldn't dwell on it.*

"Hatow sure was a fun village," I said.

"Yeah, it was."

"Do you think it's okay to let everyone out now?"

We had gone quite far into the forest. I didn't sense any human auras, so I figured it would be all right to let the creatures out of the bag. I searched again for auras, had a good look around, and then opened the bag. It was good that I'd found out there were people like Rose who could mask their auras. I still hadn't come up with a plan for dealing with that issue, but at least I knew about it.

"Now we're headed for Hatata Village. Oh, and right after Hatata, we're going straight to Hatada, huh? And our final destination is Hatahi."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

"Pefu!"

All the unique voices are here, I see. Ciel's "Mrrrow" is the most normal sounding of the bunch. Then again, it doesn't sound like a slime.

We slowly ventured off the village road and headed deep into the forest. Ciel took the lead.

"By the way, there's something I've been wondering about, sir."

Huh? Why did my way of talking to Druid go back to normal after all this time...?

"What's up?"

"About Snakey...do you think it's the only big serpent like that?"

Is it even right to call it a serpent, since it's that big? Shouldn't I call it a deity? But I guess no matter how big it is, it's still a serpent. So, I guess I should call it one?

"Sorry, I'm not following. What do you mean exactly?"

"Snakey has lots of babies, right?"

Those little babies didn't look like they could have been born from that giant

serpent at all. Even now, I couldn't believe that those little black orbs would someday grow up into huge creatures like Snakey.

"Yeah..."

"Well, I don't think all of those babies are going to get a chance to grow up, but I was just thinking it was weird that there was only one Snakey."

The world of monsters was a very harsh place, especially when you thought about what adandaras were like. So, unfortunately, those little black orbs would likely become somebody's prey. But it was hard to believe that every last one of them would be hunted down.

"You're right, it is weird that there's only one. By the way, Ivy, where exactly are we going?"

"To our first stop, Hatata Village, right? Ciel?"

Mrrrow.

"The adandara has spoken!"

"Okay." Druid nodded, and then a pensive look filled his eyes. "I'm pretty sure there are other serpents out there, but they're not as big as the one we know."

So it isn't one of a kind.

"Why are you so curious about it?" he asked.

"I was just worried that I wouldn't be able to tell Snakey apart from any other big serpent we meet."

"But that's... Yeah, it would be hard to tell."

We had a problem. Imagine not being able to tell the difference between friend and stranger... The next time we saw Snakey, I'd have to look more closely to see what was unique about it.

We had been walking away from Hatow for several hours and were quite deep into the forest now. We were standing in the midst of some thick growth. I sensed monsters in the distance, but they stayed put, probably because they

sensed Ciel's aura.

As I was sitting on a fallen tree to drink a little water, I felt an aura approaching us. "Oh?"

"What's wrong?"

"Something's coming."

"We're in the forest, so it's got to be a monster, right?"

"Right. That's definitely a monster's aura. Ciel, there's a monster coming toward us, right?"

Mrrrow.

If I noticed the aura, then surely Ciel did, too. But it didn't look worried. "Is the monster harmless?"

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Pu, puuu. Pu! Pu, puuu."

Ciel said we were safe, but then Sora cried out and bounced all around us in circles.

"Sora? What's wrong?" Druid also looked a bit startled.

Sora seems upset... Oh! No, it's excited. Maybe it has something to do with the aura coming toward us? It's definitely a fellow monster, since we're in the forest. And since Ciel says the monster is safe and Sora is excited about it, then maybe it's...

"Is it Snakey?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"That's a yes."

Now everything made sense. I was glad we would get to see Snakey here. We'd already looked around for it because we wanted to thank it, but we couldn't find it. And since we were so far into the forest, now it made sense

that we'd come up empty when we searched closer to the village.

Actually, I just realized that I'm sensing Snakey's aura for the first time now. It's probably decided not to mask it this time since it always startled me before. Truly a sweet creature.

"I'm happy for you guys." I was speaking not only to Sora and Ciel, but to Flame and Sol, who were fidgeting on top of Ciel's back.

Boy, Snakey sure is moving fast. Just as fast as Ciel. How can it possibly move its big, awkward body so quickly? It's a mystery.

"Huh?" I said.

"What's up?"

"Um, Snakey isn't alone."

The forest was so thick that I couldn't see any of them yet, but I could tell from the faint rustling of the trees that there were more creatures around. I searched for auras and picked up on some. There were three Snakey-esque auras in total.

"There's more auras?"

"Yeah. There are two other ones like Snakey's."

The other creatures were similar to Snakey because I couldn't sense their auras unless they were close by. There was a rustling in the brush. Then the nearby trees began to shake, and I was able to catch a glimpse of their heads through the branches.

"Ha ha! Well, this is a tough one," Druid laughed.

And indeed, Druid had an answer to the question he asked earlier. It really was quite hard to tell the difference between the serpents.

"Long time no see. Um..."

I looked at the three one by one...and I honestly couldn't tell them apart. *Hmm...which is the one we met in the cave? Huh, wait... Their auras are a little*

different. Oh! I looked at the serpent farthest to the right. *I know that aura! This is the Snakey we met in the cave!* I waved to the one on the right, and it happily slithered straight toward me.

“Huh?! Whoa, hold up!”

I braced myself so the serpent wouldn't knock me down. Then, when it was just a few centimeters away, it stopped abruptly and happily leaned its face toward mine. This was truly a near miss. If it had kept coming at me at that speed, I would've been in trouble. I noticed Druid was also sighing in relief beside me. He had probably positioned himself to catch me in case Snakey pushed me over.

“Krr-rr!” it trilled merrily.

I gave Snakey's head a couple of pats, and it rubbed its nose against my hand. *How are the other two serpents doing?* I looked to my left and watched in wonder as my companions gently rubbed the noses of the happy creatures.

Okay, first impressions are important.

“Nice to meet you. I'm Ivy.”

I greeted the other two serpents, who stared intensely at me in reply. I smiled and waved at them. They just stared at me like that for a while...then slowly approached me and gave me a good looking over, smelling me as they went. *Do snakes have a good sense of smell?* But my biggest reaction of all was...

“For such big creatures, they sure bob their heads daintily as they smell me. It's just so darned cute!” A smile filled my face.

“I don't think I'll ever get used to the way you see things, Ivy. I mean, how can you be so accepting of someone you barely know?”

Druid said something, but it was too quiet to hear. I glanced at him, and he gave me a slightly frustrated look in reply. *I don't get it. Did I do something to irritate him?*

Chapter 312:

Many Snakeys

“LONG TIME NO SEE.”

Nuzzle, nuzzle. Nuzzle, nuzzle. Bobbing head, up and down.

“Have you been doing well?”

Nuzzle, nuzzle. Nuzzle, nuzzle. Bobbing head, up and down.

“We looked all over for you because we wanted to say thank you, so I’m glad we got to see you again. Are they your family?”

Nuzzle, nuzzle. Nuzzle, nuzzle. Bob...

Huh? That last bob was so tiny I couldn’t tell if Snakey was shaking its head yes or no. It’s odd that it isn’t trilling today like it usually does. Too bad. Its voice is so cute. Well, I do like being nuzzled, though.

“Sorry, I didn’t get what you said. Am I right that they’re your family?”

I gave Snakey’s nose a little pat, and it nodded grandly in reply.

“Ivy, how exactly are you talking to it?” Druid asked, looking at us with an odd expression.

“Huh? Why, it’s nodding or shaking its head, of course.”

Is there something weird about that?

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

I gave Druid’s surprised eyes a curious look. Maybe Snakey’s head bobbing was too subtle for him to pick up on?

“Snakey, you’re shaking your head yes or no to answer my questions, right?”

“Krrr-rr!”

This time, it replied with its voice. Druid was sure to notice that. I looked at him and pointed at Snakey with a little “See?”

“Okay, yeah. It’s because you’re special, Ivy.”

He had a strange smile on his face when he said that. It didn’t feel like he was making fun of me, but he also didn’t seem to truly understand, either. As I stood there, giving Druid a funny look, the other two serpents came closer to peer into my face. I looked back at them and noticed sparkles of anticipation in their eyes. Since no amount of thinking would help me figure out what they wanted, I told them I was sorry and petted their noses instead. Then their eyes narrowed and their expressions softened. *I was right—they did want pats. You guys are just so darn cute!*

“Say, Flame?”

“Teryu?”

“I’m a little worried about Ivy’s future, based on how completely unfazed she is about being surrounded by three giant serpents. Will she be okay?”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

I looked up at the sound of Flame’s voice to see that Druid had picked up Flame and they were chatting.

“Mr. Druid, is something wrong with Flame?”

“Hm? Er, no. Everything’s okay.”

His response sounded a bit tired, but I didn’t have time to wonder why, as the three giant serpents were closing in on me.

“Sorry, can you let me through?”

The serpents made a path for me right away. *Gee, you guys are nice.* I gave each of their heads a soft pat and then walked over to Druid. I looked at Flame in his arms, but nothing seemed amiss to me. As I stared at Flame, Druid tousled

my hair. *What's going on?*

"Wanna head out?"

"Yeah, we do need to find ourselves a place to sleep for the night."

"Uh-huh."

We washed the dishes we'd used on our little break and put them back in the bag. When we were all ready to leave, we turned to say goodbye to the serpents.

"Thanks for everything. We have to go to the next village now, but we'll definitely come back to visit sometime."

When I started to walk away, something tugged on my clothes, and then I felt myself floating in midair.

"Huh?! Snakey?" I tried to look behind me, but since the backside of my coat was up in the air, I couldn't see very well. I remembered this happening before. I looked at Snakey and saw that it was staring intensely at Druid.

"Do you want to give us a ride?" Druid asked.

Snakey nodded yes. Druid looked over to me, so I gave him an awkward smile for good measure.

"Guess we have no choice, eh? By the way, we're heading for Hatata Village. Can you go that far?"

The three serpents all nodded in unison, so apparently our destination wasn't a problem for them. That was a big relief. Once Druid got on, Snakey slowly began to slither along.

"Thanks for the ride, Snakey."

We had been cutting through the woods for quite a long time by then...and no matter how you looked at it, we were definitely headed even deeper into the forest. *Will this really take us to Hatata Village? Well, Snakey did say it could bring us there. I guess we'll just have to trust it.*

“Are we going the right way?” Druid asked.

“We are... Probably?”

Oops, I didn't mean to turn my answer into a question. Boy, Snakey sure does move fast. I'd better be careful not to fall off... Huh?

“Mr. Druid...we're going really fast, but we're still sitting normally. That's weird, right?”

I'd only just realized it. The trees were zipping by us awfully fast, but it didn't feel at all like I was going to be flung into the air.

“It's probably magic.”

Magic?

“You mean Snakey is using magic to hold back the wind?”

“Probably, yeah. Neither you nor I are doing anything to keep us in place, Ivy.”

If Druid wasn't using magic, then it definitely had to be Snakey. I didn't have enough magic to use, anyway.

“Snakey, are you keeping us safe?” I asked, raising my voice so it could hear me. It did hear me. It turned its head around but didn't slow down at all, which made it terrifying. *I should have just asked it later.*

“Snakey, you can answer me later, but just please watch where you're going. You're scaring me, looking backward when you're moving so fast.”

Snakey's eyes narrowed to soft slits as it looked at me, almost like it was laughing. *I feel like you're messing with me, Snakey...*

Snakey finally turned back around to look ahead. With a little sigh of relief, I looked in the same direction. We had come quite a long way into the forest, so it was a complete mystery where we were. I looked at Ciel speeding alongside us. It looked so happy that it got to run at high speeds like that. The only problem was that the slimes on top of it had to hold on for dear life or else they'd get carried away by the wind. *Maybe they'd be safer on top of Snakey?* I

was about to call out to the guardian deity when an incredible sight entered my line of vision.

“Whoa! Mr. Druid, look at that! There’s so many Snakeys, and they’re all different sizes!”

“Agh, that can’t be good! Hey, Serpent, you’re not taking us *there*, are you?!”

Straight ahead of us, there was a large herd of serpents of varying sizes. The black orb babies were there, too. And since everyone was crammed into one spot, the sight was rather grotesque, depending on how you looked at it.

“Ooh, what’re they doing? It’s so cool!” The sight of the creatures tangling with each other was just so bizarre that I couldn’t help but get a little excited.

“Ivy, for the love of God, *please* be just a *little* careful when you see things like this.”

Be a little careful? I took another look at the giant mass of serpents. They really did come in all shapes and sizes.

“When do you think the black orbs grow up into snakes? I kinda wanna see that.”

“What’s that? What happened to being careful? And why is *growing up* the thing you’re focusing on?”

For some reason, Druid was drooping his head behind me. *Umm...oh! He was telling me I should be more cautious around these creatures.*

“Well, I just don’t feel like I need to be careful with them. How could I? Snakey brought us here, after all. And Sora and Ciel say it’s safe.”

“Yes, I don’t deny that’s all true...” Druid gave my head a pat. He sounded exhausted, even though he shouldn’t have been, riding on Snakey’s back.

Is he exhausted because I trust the serpents too much? Hmm...but I think it’s okay to trust them, so I’m gonna go ahead and have faith in my instincts.

“Still, it is quite a breathtaking sight indeed,” I said.

The serpents of different sizes were all staring intensely at me. I didn't find it particularly scary, though I guess it *was* a little creepy.

Chapter 313:

Purple Magic Stones

“I DON’T KNOW WHERE WE ARE...and I’m too scared to even think about it,”
Druid murmured.

I gave him a strange look. He didn’t know where we were?

“But we’re at the main cave of the Snakeys. It’s a very big, roomy cave.”

“Uh, yeah, I know that, Ivy. It’s okay...”

It seemed like a part of Druid was still uncomfortable being this up close and personal with monsters. Which was strange, since there was no need to fear the ones Sora and Ciel said were safe. I stretched my spine and leaned back against the serpent behind me. It wasn’t terribly big, so it was just the right size to lie against.

“I sure am stuffed,” Druid sighed, rubbing his stomach.

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah, it was all so yummy that I ate more than I should have.”

After we met up with the herd of serpents, they shared their catch with us. These monsters had extra-long legs, and we’d never encountered their kind before. I hadn’t even seen them in my books, so I asked Druid what they were, but even he didn’t know.

We asked the serpents if the food was safe to eat, and they said it was, so we went ahead and joined in the feast. It was quite a surprise, though, that we’d stumbled upon the serpents’ homeland on our way to Hatata Village. I turned my eyes forward and spotted the Snakey who had brought us there, contentedly lounging on the cave floor. I slightly lifted my gaze toward the wall behind it, where unfamiliar magic stones the size of human heads were embedded. They were quite transparent, and they had a beautiful purple color.

From where I was seated, I could see about three of them. From that, I could tell that the walls held many other magic stones. I wondered how many there were.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking that they never cease to amaze me every time I see them...”

Druid followed my gaze and nodded. Purple magic stones had the power to break curses. With the sheer number of them here, we could definitely overcome any curse thrown at us.

“If this many magic stones got out into the world, people would freak out,” Druid said.

“Well, they *are* huge. And so transparent, too.” They would certainly cause quite a fuss.

“That’s not the only thing.”

“Hm?”

“Purple magic stones can break curses, but they can also inflict them.”

Whoa, really? So he’s saying that anyone with purple magic stones this big could go on a cursing spree?

“Well, that’s terrifying.”

“Yeah, we’re lucky the serpents are guarding these stones.”

“Yes, we really are.”

As we stared at the magic stones, the lounging serpent stretched out its neck toward me and dropped something by my feet. It was a clear purple magic stone. And it was the size of a large fist to boot.

“Um...what is this for?”

I had a very bad feeling. I hoped I was mistaken. I cast a soft glance on the serpent in front of me, and it nudged the magic stone toward me with its nose.

It was making the same kind of movement Ciel did when it was giving me a present. What's more, the serpent's eyes were sparkling hopefully. Maybe it had mistaken our interest in the magic stones for a desire to have some.

"Um, I'm sorry, but we weren't staring at these because we wanted them. We were just thinking, gee, we've never seen magic stones like these before..."

Even as I was talking, the serpent continued to roll the stone toward me with its nose. I glanced at Druid next to me, and he nodded in defeat.

"Thanks."

When I held it in my hands, I could tell just how big it was. It was the largest magic stone I'd ever seen. It sure was pretty, though. As I looked inside the stone, I noticed that its center was colored a bit differently. *Is it white? No, silver?*

"Thanks, serpent," Druid said. "I promise we'll only use this to break curses."

Curses, huh...? What a scary and sad word.

I reached into my magic bag and took out the magic box where we kept our valuables. I opened the lid and... *Woow...* Before my eyes was a pile of sparkling potions, along with red and blue magic stones you could see right through. Each and every item was always so beautiful, no matter how many times I looked at them.

"Seeing all these rarities in one box...it's jaw-dropping," Druid said.

He was right, and it was about to get more impressive.

"And now, our latest addition..." I added our new magic stone to the collection and shut the lid. Would the day ever come when these magic stones would see some action?

"Oh! We still haven't researched this color of stone yet, huh?"

"That's right. Maybe we should have Sol see if it can extract magic energy from it? There's no reason not to."

“Sure. Hey, Sol, come over here.”

“Pefu?”

Sol stopped playing with the black orbs and toddled over to us.

“Sorry to interrupt your game, but I wanted you to test something out for us.”

I started to pull the purple stone out of our magic box when I felt a shadow appear in front of me. I looked up to see that a different serpent had brought over another purple magic stone in its mouth.

“What’s wrong?”

The serpent lowered its head and dropped the magic stone by my feet. It was smaller than the last, and it was a more opaque shade of purple. I picked up the stone and looked at the serpent.

“Are you letting me borrow this?”

The serpent nodded in reply. I thanked it and set the magic stone in front of Sol. The slime stared hard at the stone...then, after a while, it jiggled.

“Didn’t work?” Druid asked.

“No, I don’t think it did.”

Since magic stones filled magic items with energy, they definitely had magic energy inside of them. We had tried many times to see if Sol could extract the energy from them, and every experiment thus far had been a failure. It didn’t look like Sol would be able to do it. It was puzzling, since magic stones did have magic energy inside them...

“Thanks, Sol. Again, sorry I interrupted your playtime.”

“Pefu!” Sol cheerfully bounced back to the black orbs. I sighed a little as I watched it go.

“It’s too bad. We’re surrounded by all this magic energy...” Druid sounded quite vexed. “So, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking...” he continued, staring hard at the magic stone in my hand.

“Yeah?”

“Well, I was wondering if maybe Sol can’t extract the energy from magic stones because you need more than one element.”

More than one element? The purple magic stones we were looking at had the power to break or inflict curses. They had no other use besides that.

“But the magic energy that Sol eats is always, well, mixed in color,” Druid said.

Multicolored magic?

“So you’re saying if we mix the magic from red and blue stones...then Sol might be able to eat it?”

“Maybe. I just have a feeling that it would work if we mixed more than one kind of magic.”

Now I get it.

“Anyway, it’s a nice theory, but there are no magic stones like that.”

Huh?

“There aren’t?”

“If such a versatile magic stone existed, it would be a cultural phenomenon. It would be in the books, too.”

He was right.

“And in all the books I’ve read, there wasn’t a single entry about a magic stone that could be used for multiple purposes.”

“Maybe it does exist, but it’s just heavily guarded, like these big purple magic stones.”

“Even if that were true, we’d have a hell of a time finding it.”

That’s true. Even if such a stone were out there somewhere, it would be quite an ordeal to find it. Especially when we didn’t even know whether or not it existed in the first place.

“So, I guess extracting energy from magic stones is a dead end after all,” I sighed.

“Well, if we happen to find any other rare magic stones, we can still test them out. Besides, we can’t be sure that what I’m saying is correct. There might be other factors we don’t know about.”

“Yeah.”

We were still far from solving Sol’s food problems. I looked down at the magic stone in my hand. There wasn’t even a magic item that could extract energy from these stones. Too bad, when there was so much magic energy around us... It really was a shame.

Chapter 314:

Our Plans in Hatata Village?

“SORA, CIEL, be careful not to fall off!”

We were zipping through the forest on top of Snakey. When we’d gotten up that morning, had our breakfast, and started to head for Hatata Village on our own, Snakey grabbed me in its mouth and hoisted me up onto its back again. A different serpent put Druid on its back.

“Intense, isn’t it?” he remarked.

We were in a grand procession of serpents, slithering in twos and threes. We’d thought our serpent mounts were going to be our only companions, but the rest of the giant snakes followed after them. I turned around and saw a trail of serpents behind us. Incidentally, there were several normal-sized ones among them, but they’d stayed behind to look after the little black orb babies.

“It all feels so...majestic,” I replied.

“I see what you mean.”

Druid also turned around to marvel at the sight behind us. Sometimes, we could spot Sora and Ciel bouncing among them. They were making a game out of jumping from serpent to serpent. I was nervous they would fall off, but they wouldn’t stop doing it. They were really enjoying themselves.

“They’re taking years off my life...” I groaned.

“We’ll just have to trust them. I’m sure the serpents will save them if they fall off.”

He was right. All the serpents there were so kind. Whenever I almost tripped and fell, they would always slide under me to catch me. And when Flame started to fall asleep, they gently carried it to me. They were so affectionate and devoted.

“Why do you think they’re so sweet?” I asked.

“According to the books, serpents who reach a certain size are violent.”

Really? They’re violent? I stole a quiet glance at Snakey’s face. Noticing my gaze, it looked at me and flicked out its tongue.

“Do you think maybe whoever wrote that only judged them by appearances?”

I’ll admit that a serpent this size appeared quite intense when it opened its mouth. And depending on who you were, the sight of a bright-red tongue slithering out of the aforementioned intense mouth might strike terror in your heart. Personally, I thought their red tongues were cute when they slithered like that. But Druid had warned me the previous night that I should choose my words wisely around other people when it came to monsters. I had always thought that my definition of “cute” was a bit different from everyone else’s, but in fact it was *vastly* different. However, since I couldn’t tell firsthand just what about my perceptions was so unusual, I didn’t quite know how to choose my words wisely...

“It sure is warm today.”

Even in the forest, there was a springlike breeze flowing around. Although the winds were zipping past us as we rode on the serpents, it didn’t feel cold at all.

“Yes, spring is definitely here.”

The little patches of spring blooms in the forest would burst into color soon. Then, after they ripened into fruits in the summer, we would have a very fun season of all-you-can-pick sweet treats.

“Our trip to Hatata Village sure wound up being easy,” I remarked.

“Yeah, it was better than I expected. We might be able to make up all that lost time from leaving behind schedule, too.”

Though the snow had stopped accumulating, the weather just hadn’t warmed up enough for us to leave Hatow Village on time, so we were lucky to get a ride from the serpents all the way to Hatata Village. Based on the calculations we’d

made the previous day, we would arrive in Hatata before the day was over. The trip would have taken us at least nine days on foot, even if we hurried, so we were going to arrive much earlier than planned. When we checked the map to see just how fast we were traveling, we noticed that there was a big detour between Hatow and Hatata. But since we were riding on the serpents through the forest, we could cut straight through and bypass it. That was how we could arrive in Hatata at such an alarming speed.

“By the way, Mr. Druid...”

“Yes?”

“Is there any reason we need to go to Hatata?”

“Huh?”

Hatata Village was the first stop on our schedule, so we’d been heading there without a second thought. But when I thought about our plans in Hatata, I started to question why we were going in the first place.

“We were going to Hatata to look for food for Sol, right?”

If we were able to find illegal dumps in the forest, we could secure some food for Sol, but otherwise we would need to stop at Hatata to do so. After all, our original schedule required at least nine days to reach Hatata. But now, we would get there in just one day. We still had plenty of food stored for Sol in our magic bags.

“Now that you mention it, that was our only reason to stop by Hatata, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

And it was only a five-day trek from Hatata to Hatada. It was a mystery why there were two villages so close together. So, I felt like it would make sense to just skip past Hatata and go straight to Hatada instead.

“I think we just got the idea stuck in our heads that we *had* to go to Hatata.” Druid looked a bit sheepish. Snakey lifted its head and turned to look at us.

Since we were in an area thick with trees just then, I really wished the serpents would look straight ahead. I didn't want them to hurt themselves.

"What do you think we should do?" I asked.

"Well, if we don't have anything to do in Hatata, should we just go to Hatada?"

That would get us to Hatahi sooner. And the sooner we got there, the more time we would have to find a good inn. But then again, the sooner we got to the inn, the bigger our bill would be.

"No, Ivy, I'd like you to see both villages. They're interesting places."

They're interesting?

"What's so interesting about them?"

"You'll just have to wait and see. Oh, serpent, sorry to trouble you, but could you stay on course for Hatata after all?"

The serpent nodded and turned to look ahead again. Then it ramped up its speed.

"Whoa...you can go even faster? Amazing."

Since the serpents were protective of us, we didn't need to worry about falling off or getting knocked around by the wind. That meant we could sit naturally and enjoy the ride. I looked to the side and saw that Druid was having just as much fun as I was.

"Oh no! Sora and Ciel!" I looked over, worried that they had fallen off...only to see the two creatures in Snakey's mouth. I didn't know why it had needed to grab ahold of them, but at least they were safe. "If I didn't know better, I would think Snakey was eating them," I said.

Druid followed my gaze and then yelped in surprise. "What happened?"

"I dunno. I was worried about them since we were going so fast, so I looked over...and saw them in Snakey's mouth."

We kept an eye on them for a while. Even though they were inside a serpent's mouth, they were both quite relaxed, and the serpent doing the carrying didn't seem at all bothered by it.

"Looks like everything's okay," I said.

"I'm a little worried about that serpent keeping its mouth open...but it doesn't seem to mind."

I was concerned about that, too. I'd hate to run for a long time with my mouth open like that, but Snakey didn't seem bothered as far as I could tell. I took a deep breath in and out and turned my focus ahead. Gradually, the trees of the forest were changing. Soon, we would be out of the woods that the serpents had always guarded.

"Snakey, we're about to leave your forest. Can you slow down a little?"

The serpent kept its eyes forward and nodded before slowly lowering its speed. After a little while, we were in a section of forest where we could see the village road.

"Huh? Mr. Druid, is that a dump?"

Druid looked where I was pointing. "Serpent, I think that's the dump. Please stop there."

The serpent Druid was riding headed for the dump, and Snakey followed suit. When we arrived at the dump, the serpents let us climb off.

"Thank you. Sol, it's lunchtime."

Sol and Flame had spent the whole morning sleeping in their bag. When I looked inside, they were still asleep.

"Sol, wake up! Let's have lunch."

"Pefu?" Sol lazily lifted its little head to look at me. It was still half-asleep.

"Good morninnng."

"Pefuuu..."

Oh, don't go back to sleep!

Chapter 315: An Eerie Noise

AFTER CLIMBING DOWN from our serpents at the dump, I searched the area for auras but sensed no humans coming our way.

“So, first things first...where are we, exactly?”

“Judging by the kinds of trash here...the village dump?”

“What?! Are we already in Hatata?”

I looked at the types of trash. Sure enough, this couldn't have been the sort of improvised dump you'd find in the forest. There was a lot of household waste in the mix. So, did this mean we had really arrived in Hatata Village? I lowered Sol onto the top of a garbage pile.

“Be careful not to fall into the trash, okay?”

“Pefu!”

Sol bounced through the trash for a while, then stopped still and extracted magic energy from it. *Good. Sol has its food for the day.*

We left the dump and headed back to the herd of serpents waiting nearby. “Hey, Snakey, is this the Hatata Village dump?”

Snakey gave me a strange look. *Didn't it understand my question?*

“Is Hatata Village near here?”

“Krrr-rr!”

Okay, so the village is nearby. I gave Snakey's nose a little pat, then I looked around...and was faced with a sea of snake eyes. *Do they all want pats, too? I don't think I can manage that.*

“Mr. Druid?”

“Yes?”

“What do you think the villagers would do if they found a huge herd of snakes near their border?”

“...They’d panic, of course.”

Of course they would.

“Yeah, they’d probably come out to kill them.”

“No, I doubt that. No adventurer would be that reckless. Worst-case scenario, they’d abandon their village.”

What?! But that’s even worse!

“Snakey, could you please leave this area? The villagers will panic if they find you here.”

The serpent thought about my question for a while, then cried out to its family members with a shrill sound that echoed through the forest.

“Wow, Snakey, I didn’t know you made other sounds besides trilling. Just listen to how high you can sing.”

I was a little touched by hearing Snakey speak this way for the first time. When its voice stopped ringing through the woods, the huge herd of serpents began to move as one.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“Yeah, it can stop the whole group with one command. I think that serpent really must be their leader.”

The giant herd of serpents disappeared deep into the forest. We waved goodbye to them.

“I never could figure out why they all came with us together... Did you notice something I didn’t, Mr. Druid?”

“Nope, not at all.”

Well, it was fun, so I guess it doesn't really matter. But I wonder where their babies were headed.

"Snakey, are your babies going back home, too?"

"Krrr-rr!"

So, they are going home. But it doesn't seem like they needed to do anything in particular... Were they all going on a walk, then? Or is this just normal serpent behavior?

"Do you think it's just something serpents do?" I asked Druid.

"If it is, somebody surely would have noticed it before."

He has a point. Well, whatever. I don't need to worry about it. I do hope we see them again somewhere, though.

"What are you going to do, Snakey? Will you be staying here with us?"

Snakey nodded in reply, nuzzling its nose all over my shoulders.

I sure feel safer having it nearby.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

Ciel and Sora had finally returned. They bounded over to my feet.

"Hi, guys! Have a good time? Well, of course you did. You took forever to come back!"

I wasn't about to get jealous just because they hadn't listened to my warning. No, siree!

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

Their bouncy voices showed that they really must have enjoyed themselves. *So much so that they even forgot I existed... I'm not jealous, I swear!*

"Now, now..." Druid gave my head a little pat.

Arrrgh. I can't stay mad at those two.

"Did you thank the Snakeys for letting you play with them?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

"Good! That was very smart of you."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

They sure have a lot of energy...

"By the way, where's Flame?" Druid asked, looking around.

"It's been asleep all morning."

I opened the bag and peeked inside to see that Flame was still asleep. Druid looked in with me and smiled awkwardly.

"Flame, isn't it about time you got up?" Druid asked, but it wouldn't even budge. It showed no signs of waking up.

"Oh well. Sora, if you want to eat lunch, you can go on ahead," Druid said.

"Pu! Pu, puuu," Sora cried happily, bouncing off to the dump. *I wish it wouldn't rush like that. It'll get itself buried in the trash again.*

Sora returned quickly. It probably hadn't been that hungry. I looked at the dump and saw that all the magic energy fuzzies were gone, which meant that Sol had finished its meal, too. Both slimes had cut their lunchtime short that day. *Well, we did feed them extra at the dump before we left for our trip. I guess they wouldn't need to eat much the next day.*

I picked up Sol from the dump. Now it was time to head for the village.

"Snakey, we're going to stop by Hatata Village for a bit, okay? So, um, can you hide in the forest for a while?"

"Krrr-rr!"

“Thanks. We’ll see you later.”

“We’ll be right back,” Druid said.

Right back? But didn’t he say there was something interesting he wanted to show me?

“Mr. Druid, what’s that thing you were going to show me?”

“It’s not something I want to show you, exactly. It’s something I want you to remember.”

“Something you want me to remember?”

“Yeah, I want you to pay attention to the color and shape of the buildings on Main Street when we pass through the village gate. You don’t need to bother with the farmlands.”

What could it be? I don’t really get it, but I’ll do my best to remember what he shows me.

“Aye aye, captain!” I chirped excitedly.

Druid gave my head a light pat.

After a ten-minute walk from the dump, the village gate came into sight.

“Good morning. We wish to enter Hatata Village. Would that be okay?”

“Good morning,” said the gatekeeper. “What brings you to Hatata?”

“We’ve come to get food and information.”

Huh? What’s wrong? The gatekeeper looks really nervous.

“Will your stay be short-term or long-term?”

“Short-term.”

“Got it. Let me see your guild cards, please.”

Druid and I set our merchant guild cards down where we were instructed so the gatekeeper could confirm our identities.

“Uh-huh, thank you.” The gatekeeper sighed as he examined our guild cards.

“I’m sorry, is anything wrong?”

“Oh, excuse me. I’m just a little nervous since you came from the forest.” The poor gatekeeper looked so pitiful.

Nervous because we came from the forest? I wondered why he would feel that way, but nothing came to mind.

“You two *were* in the forest, right?”

“Yes,” we both answered.

“Was everything okay in there?”

Druid and I exchanged funny looks. What did the gatekeeper mean by “okay,” exactly?

“Huh? Didn’t you hear it? There was a weird noise echoing through the forest just a little while ago.”

A weird noise? We were in the forest, but I don’t remember hearing a weird noise.

“Oh!”

“Mr. Druid?”

“We did hear the noise, but nothing bad happened to us.”

Huh?! Did Druid hear the noise? Then why didn’t I hear it, too? I was with him the whole time.

“Oh, I see. Well, I’m glad about that. Here’s your permit.”

“Thanks. Let’s go, Ivy.”

“Okay. Thanks for letting us in.” I bowed to the gatekeeper and walked through the gate. There was a commotion in the streets when we arrived. Had something happened there?

“Wow, I didn’t think they’d be this upset over it.”

“Mr. Druid?”

“Oh, you know that strange noise the gatekeeper mentioned?”

“Yes?”

What could it be? What sort of sound would Druid be able to hear that I couldn't?

“I think it was the serpent singing to its friends.”

“What?!”

They think Snakey's singing was weird? Well...now that I think about it, I suppose some people might call that unique shrill voice kind of weird.

“We knew what that noise was, but it would've definitely sounded strange to those who didn't. It just echoed through the forest out of nowhere.”

Now I get it. We knew it was Snakey, so it didn't scare us.

“I hope Snakey's gonna be okay.”

“Don't worry. Even if somebody spotted it, they wouldn't do anything. It's not rampaging or anything, you know.”

If Druid said Snakey was going to be okay, then Snakey was going to be okay.

“It's a good thing we had all the other serpents go home, huh?” I said.

Between the weird noise and the massive herd of serpents...yeah, these people probably would have abandoned their village.

Chapter 316: Hatada Village

“U_M, MR. DRUID? This looks like a normal village to me.”

We were walking around Main Street in Hatata Village, but none of the buildings looked unusual to me. Druid had said he wanted me to see Main Street and “remember” it...but to be honest, nothing about it was out of the ordinary. Well, I guess you could say the bright-red window frames on the buildings were unique. Also, all the doors were a vibrant blue. But other than that, there was nothing special. All the buildings were the type you’d see in any town or village.

“Yeah, because it *is* normal.”

“Huh?” I stared blankly at Druid. I hadn’t been expecting that answer.

“If you’ve got that secured in your memory bank, let’s go to Hatada Village.”

“Huh?!”

Oh dear... I have no idea what Druid wants from me. Well, I guess it should be okay since I did memorize how these buildings look in general. But I haven’t the slightest clue what he’s trying to do. Maybe I’ll find out when we go to Hatada Village.

We had a light lunch in Hatata, then walked back down Main Street to go through the front gate so we could move on to Hatada. The whole time we were there, rumors of the strange voice echoing in the forest did not stop.

“I think we’d better ask Snakey not to make that shrill noise for a while.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. I get the feeling the serpent only sings that way in special situations.”

“Really?”

“It’s just a guess, but it probably sings like that to tell its companions far away that they need to move or to warn them of danger. In this forest, where there aren’t any other monsters on their level they shouldn’t need to make that noise very often.”

Oh, I see. So Snakey was singing shrilly like that to send a message to its friends far away. That makes sense, seeing as how the throaty trill I usually hear from Snakey can only be heard up close.

“Well, the villagers will settle down soon enough, so you don’t need to worry.”

I looked at the townspeople around me. Some of them looked awfully terrified, so I decided I should at least send a silent apology to them.

“Huh? Wait, are you leaving already?” The gatekeeper gave us a bewildered look when we handed in our permit. And I understood the confusion—we had only been in Hatata Village for an hour.

“We want to head on to Hatada Village,” Druid explained.

“Oh, okay. Bye, then.”

Er, that was enough to convince you? I studied the gatekeeper’s face and saw that he looked amused. *There’s gotta be something going on here. Now I really need to make sure I don’t forget what Hatata Village looks like.*

“We had a lovely time here,” I told him.

“Stay a bit longer next time. Oh, and be careful out there. We still don’t know who that strange voice belonged to.”

“We will, thank you.”

After thanking the gatekeeper, we started off toward the dump, but we stopped in our tracks. There were human auras scattered all over the forest.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“What’s wrong? Are you sensing human auras in the forest?”

“Yeah. Are they trying to find where the voice came from?”

“I guarantee it. If there’s going to be a lot of watchful eyes around, there’s no point in going to the dump.”

“Yeah.”

I doubt Snakey would be there, anyway.

“Let’s take the village road, then.”

We ditched our plan to go to the dump and took the road instead. I searched for human auras on that route. It felt like they had split into five-person teams for their search, and two of them were close to us.

“Mr. Druid, I sense some human auras a little ahead.”

“Got it. Let’s just walk all the way to Hatada on this road. There’s nothing else we can do, anyway.”

He was right. It wasn’t like we could have just told the villagers what that voice was. It would only send them into a bigger panic.

“Good afternoon,” we greeted a group of people we met on the road. From the way they were dressed, they looked like they were members of the village watch.

“On your way to Hatada?” one of them asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, please be careful. We still don’t know what made that noise.”

“Thank you,” Druid said. I gave a little bow beside him. As I watched the guards wander off, a quiet sigh escaped me. “Were you nervous?”

“A little, yeah.”

“I know, but if we told them about the serpents, we would only worry them more.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

Druid and I looked at each other and laughed. After we walked for a while, the human auras faded into the distance. We'd just decided it would be safe to slip into the forest and look for Snakey when Snakey's head suddenly popped down in front of our faces without a sound.

"Agh, you scared me!" I pressed a hand to my chest. Meanwhile, Snakey squinted its eyes and smiled. Druid was gasping for air next to me, too. I wasn't the only one who was scared.

"Did you manage to hide from them?"

"Krrr-rr!"

What a relief.

"The villagers are in a tizzy over that shrill noise you made earlier," I told Snakey as it fell to the ground with a loud thud. It had been coiled up in some tree branches. "Are you okay?"

"Kk-kk-kk!"

Ooh, I haven't heard it click like that in a while! It's so cute.

"Oh no! I forgot about the slimes."

"You're gonna get an earful."

I quickly opened my bag, and the slimes...didn't jump out. I peeked inside and saw that all four were sound asleep.

"They're sleeping."

"Sora and Ciel must be tired from all that playing earlier. And Flame and Sol... well, they're just being their usual selves."

Sora and Ciel had indeed done an awful lot of playing all morning. Playing for so long—and running such long distances on top of that—must have taken its toll. Flame and Sol were the same as always.

"Let's head on to Hatada," Druid said.

"Sure."

No sooner did Druid say the words than Snakey lifted me up. I was expecting it this time, so it didn't take me by surprise. Once I was on Snakey's back, Druid joined behind me.

"Thanks, Snakey. To Hatada Village, please."

"Kk-kk-kk-kk!"

Snakey began to glide smoothly over the ground. After a while, it increased its speed.

"At this rate, we'll probably get there before the day is over," Druid observed.

"Krrr-rr!"

"Yeah, we will," I replied.

"Looks like it."

We did end up making it there. I searched for auras and found human ones a little bit away. They were probably the gatekeepers.

"Thanks, Snakey."

"Krrr-rr!"

"What are your plans now? Are you going to still be here tomorrow?" Druid asked.

Snakey shook its head side to side, meaning it wouldn't be there the next day.

"Thanks for everything. You saved us a lot of time."

"Kk-kk!" Snakey chirped, lunging its head in close to my face. I petted its nose slowly, and it closed its eyes softly in contentment.

"We'll meet again someday, my friend. Thank you so much."

Snakey disappeared back in the direction of Hatata Village. I was starting to miss it already.

"It's gone."

“Yeah...but we’ll visit again someday.”

“Yeah.”

Before walking the rest of the way to Hatada Village, we did a little light stretching. Sitting for so long in the same position had made our legs and feet quite stiff. *Okay, stretching’s done! Let’s go to Hatada.* I was scared that I would forget what Hatata Village looked like if we took too long, and I was also really excited to see what was waiting for me in Hatada. I asked Druid for hints many times along the way, but he wouldn’t tell me anything.

“Huh?”

When we arrived at the front gate of Hatada Village, something felt off. What was it?

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, nothing.”

What was it? What felt so strange? I looked at the gate. It was the typical kind you’d see at the entrance to any town or village; there was nothing unique about it. After we handed the gatekeepers our guild cards and got our permits, we headed into Hatada Village.

Chapter 317:

Sister Villages

“HUH? What’s going on?”

I gave the scene in front of me a puzzled look. We were in Hatada, or so I thought. And yet the Main Street in Hatata lay before me.

“Um...this is Hatada, right?”

“Yeah, it’s Hatada.”

Of course it is. Yeah, we’re in Hatada. But the red window frames...and the vibrant blue doors... Arrrgh, my brain hurts! Okay, let’s think about this rationally. So, I remember as soon as you turn onto Main Street in Hatata Village, you see the big village watch station... And there’s one here, too. Okay, then behind it is the adventurer guild headquarters. Then, facing it on the other side of the street is the merchant guild. Oh! It’s the same here as well. And I remember back in Hatata, there were two bakeries side by side on the opposite side of the street from the village watch... Oooh, they’re there! And the shop next to them is the same...and the next shop, too...

“It’s all the same? Mr. Druid, Hatada is built exactly the same as Hatata!”

“Correct. Good job.”

Now I get it. Yeah, if I just think of them as the same, it’s no longer confusing. Oh, now I know why I felt like there was something unusual about the front gate! It had the exact same design carved onto it as the gate in Hatata.

“But why are they exactly the same?”

Whooooa, even the order of all the shops on Main Street is the same! There’s the butcher next to the clothing shop...which is only for women, too! Wow, everything’s the same here as well. I looked at the stores on the side street, and everything was also the same there. Why did Hatada have everything set up

exactly like Hatata? The more I looked, the funnier I thought it all was.

“The people who built Hatata and Hatada were sisters born one year apart.”

“Oh, neat! Were they really close? Yeah, that explains why the village names are so similar and easy to mix up.”

The village names were similar, and the shapes and locations of the buildings were the same. The sisters could’ve never done that if they weren’t friends at the time.

“Oh, no, they had such a bad relationship that it made everyone around them very uncomfortable. Every time they met, they had a scream-fight, sometimes even a fistfight.”

“What?! They didn’t get along? And they hit each other, too?” *How could sisters hit each other? Maybe the stories were just exaggerated since it happened so long ago.* “Why would they build the exact same village if they hated each other? Oh, wait! Unless one of the sisters died and her village was changed afterward?” *Hm? Why would anyone bother to do that? Seems like a pointless hassle to me.*

“No, they built them that way when they were both still alive. When the elder sister built her village watch station, the younger sister copied it. And when the younger sister built her guild lodge, the elder sister made an identical one. They each tried to one-up the other.”

Now it made sense.

“But why did they make all their buildings the same, then?”

“If one sister thought the other’s building was even slightly better than hers, she would have the whole thing rebuilt.”

Yikes, what a troublesome pair of sisters.

“And since it was a lot of hard work to keep remodeling the buildings, the carpenters started sharing notes with each other every time a new one was built, and they just constructed them exactly the same way. That’s how the

layout of both villages came to be identical.”

“Now I see.”

But wasn't it a good thing for them to have the exact same buildings and the same layout? I don't see how the sisters would have built their villages so close to each other if they really had a bad relationship. Maybe they didn't get along as badly as people thought.

“And now that lots of people visit these two villages just to see how much they look alike, they've kept constructing identical buildings. Everything is mostly the same, down to the little details. But I haven't looked it over that thoroughly, so I can't say for sure.”

“Er, you didn't look it over thoroughly...but you did look it over a little bit?”

I wonder why?

“...My mentor ordered me to. He was curious about it, so he sent me out to investigate.”

“Oh dear...my condolences.” *His mentor, eh? Well, I really can't blame him, then.* “But, um...are villages really that easy to build?” It sounded like a big undertaking to me.

“Anyone can build a village with permission from the government, but yeah, it's not that easy to do. This pair of sisters were real go-getters, though. They were business-savvy and natural leaders, so these villages shot up quickly during their time.”

Go-getters, huh... They sound like quite the pair.

“What's more, both places have a cave nearby where monsters come out. That alone was enough to bring a lot of adventurers to the villages. And if they predicted that would happen when they built them, that means they were quite extraordinary people.”

“Yes, they do sound quite extraordinary.”

“They've become legends, in many ways.”

And these are the villages they built... Now I want to come back someday and really take my time to spot all the differences.

“Okay, what do you want to do today?” Druid asked.

“Huh?”

“Should we stay at an inn or camp in the plaza? It might still be a little too cold for that, though.”

Oh, he’s wondering where I want to sleep tonight. Well, the breeze is pretty warm now, but the temperature still drops when the sun goes down. But then again, I’d like to get back to camping in the plaza as soon as possible. Hmmm, what should I do...?

“Why don’t we swing by the plaza first?” Druid suggested. “Some adventurers might have set up camp there since it’s warmed up. If it’s too crowded, we’ll go to an inn. Sound good?”

“Sure.”

Plaza camping was always scaled back in the wintertime to avoid people freezing to death. Only adventurers who simply could not afford an inn, and only those who had quality warming items, were allowed to camp. But it was actually cheaper to stay at an inn than it was to get the warming items in the first place, so plazas were basically deserted in the winter. Especially this past winter. With the bitter cold weather everywhere, we’d heard that camping was prohibited in most towns and villages. This village had been one of them, so the gatekeeper made a point of it to tell us that the plaza was now open for camping.

“Argh...I don’t think this’ll work,” Druid said.

The plaza was swarming with adventurers. Those who were short on cash had probably run here in droves when it opened.

“Yes, it’s packed.”

“Yeah...wanna go to an inn?”

“Sure. I think there’s not enough room between the plots anyway.”

The spaces between the tents were just too close for comfort.

“The inn it is, then. Where do you want to go?”

“How about the one you stayed at the last time you were here?”

“That place is no good,” Druid flatly rejected me. “It’s too cheap.” He took a look around, probably scanning the road for inn signs.

“I see one over there.”

I followed Druid’s gaze and saw a cute inn. It was a bit smaller than the one we’d stayed at in Hatow.

“Wanna stay there if it looks good?”

“Sure, fine by me.”

As Druid and I walked toward the inn, we heard a loud argument in the plaza. I looked over and saw several adventurers punching each other.

“Eek! I spy a brawl.”

“The damn fools,” Druid sighed loudly.

As we stared helplessly, several village watchmen showed up. As you’d expect, the village watch carried quite a lot of weight here. They immediately arrested the adventurers and took them away.

“Let’s not stay in any plazas until summertime,” Druid said.

“Huh?”

“In the spring, lots of jerks come out here to release their pent-up frustrations from the winter, and winter was much colder than usual this year.”

Their frustrations from the winter? Because they were cold?

“Do adventurers really get more violent in the springtime?”

“Oh, they sure do. A lot of them are desperate and penniless since they

weren't able to earn much in the winter and used up what money they did have to pay for lodgings."

If I hadn't met my slimes, I would probably be desperate and penniless, too.

"There is some aid available, but if an adventurer has an ego, having to get help will only make him angry. So, some guys don't even take it."

"Well, that's wasteful. You should use everything that's available to you."

Druid only stared at me in surprise. *I wonder why...* "What is it, sir?"

"Nothing. I was just surprised to hear you say that, Ivy."

"Really? But people go out of their way to give things to people who are struggling. If you're having problems, you should just say so."

Having said that, sometimes people aren't open to listening. And there are some people out there who have a hard time admitting when they're struggling.

"My mentor once said to me, 'A good adventurer doesn't have an ego.'"

I agree with his mentor.

"We'll keep an eye on how things are going in the plazas, but let's not camp there until the weather's gotten a bit warmer, okay?"

"That's a good idea. It would be hell to get caught up in adventurer drama."

As we walked toward the inn, we could hear yet another fight going on in the plaza. I guess we wouldn't be staying in one for a very long time yet.

Chapter 318:

A New Monster Species?

I STEPPED OUT OF THE INN and stretched my back. The inn where we were staying in Hatada was nice, but its breakfast didn't hold a candle to the bread in Hatow.

"I already miss Salifa's cooking."

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Salifa's bread...I'll never forget it."

Druid smiled and tousled my hair. "You'll probably have to make do with black bread for a while."

Black bread was tasty in its own way, especially when you dunked it in milky soup, but I really did love that fluffy white bread. Druid seemed to like black bread quite a bit, though.

"Shall we go?"

"Yeah. This is where we'll start to feel like we're really traveling."

We'd wound up only taking two days to get to Hatada. And we'd had a ride, too, so it felt like our real trip was only just starting. I needed to get my wits about me.

"They're at it again."

I followed Druid's gaze and saw another ruckus in the plaza. There really were way too many short-tempered people here. If they were worried about money, then they should just get to work and earn some. Were their egos getting in the way of that? If so, they really were a nuisance.

"After we leave Hatada, we'll be in the forest for about ten days. Do you have everything you need?"

“I’m still good. We only left Hatow two days ago.”

We cut through the plaza and headed toward Main Street. When we were almost there, we came upon a crowd of watchmen and adventurers. Something must have happened because they all looked a little nervous.

“Is there something going on?”

“Yeah, we should probably see what it is.” Druid called out to the adventurer closest to him. “Excuse me, but did something happen here?”

“What, ya don’t know?”

“No, I don’t...do you?”

The adventurers standing near the one Druid talked to turned and looked at us. Everyone’s faces were tense with worry. Something really had happened. Would we still be able to leave that day?

“Monsters are on the move?”

“Yeah. It wouldn’t matter if it were an ordinary type of monster, but this monster has a ton of magic energy, you see.”

Monsters with a lot of magic energy were on the loose? Maybe it would be too dangerous for us to leave on our trip. Druid looked just as worried as I was.

“What type of monster was it?”

“A very large serpent, from what I’ve heard.”

A very large serpent...hm?!

“The word is that a big herd of them is heading toward the capital.”

Umm... I looked at Druid. His lips were drawn into a tight line. Were they really talking about our friends?

“Now, those other monsters *with* the serpents? They’re the real problem.”

Other monsters? But there weren’t any other monsters with them...unless they’re talking about my slimes?

“Yeah, I heard they were giving orders to the giant serpents at the front of the line.”

Giant serpents...that sounds like the giant Snakeys Druid and I rode on. But giving orders? And other monsters? Wait a minute...do they think Druid and I are monster charmers?

“What’s more, those other monsters are completely different from any that’ve been spotted before.”

“So they’re unidentified monsters?”

Druid kept listening in on the adventurers’ conversation with an indescribable expression on his face.

“Yeah, these monsters had human torsos and snake bodies.”

“What?!” we both gasped.

Oops! I didn’t mean to say that.

“I know, shocking, right? Nobody’s ever seen monsters like ’em before, so we think either they’re a new species, or the lord of the serpents deep in the forest went on the move. They seemed like a joined pair, whatever they were.”

I don’t even know where to start... I guess we would have looked like monsters with human tops and serpent bottoms if somebody saw us rushing by. But a joined pair? If it’s me and Druid they’re talking about, I suppose we might have looked that way. It sounds like there must have been a witness, but I really wish they’d done a better job witnessing what was really happening. Wait, unless there’s something wrong with humans riding on serpents? Shouldn’t I just be grateful nobody discovered our secret and move on?

“That sounds terrifying,” Druid said. “Do you think they’re still nearby?” His voice was tinged with fear. I admired his acting skills, but I could tell from his twitching cheeks that he was barely holding it together.

“Somebody saw them last night, but they’re probably not around these parts anymore.”

“Oh, I see. Then it might still be safe for us to leave on our travels today after all. Thank you very much.”

“Whoa! You’re going traveling? That’s way too risky!”

“Thanks for your concern, but we’re in a hurry.”

With a quick bow, we headed for the village gate. The gatekeeper also stopped us with news of the unidentified monsters.

“Yes, we know about the monsters, but we absolutely must leave today if we’re going to make it to our destination on time,” Druid explained.

“Is that so?” The gatekeeper looked quite worried, and I felt so ashamed. “Well, please be careful out there,” he said. “They were spotted closer to Hatata, so they probably haven’t come by Hatada yet, but we can’t confirm that for sure.”

“We’ll be careful. Thank you.”

We somehow managed to talk our way out of the village. We thanked the gatekeepers over and over, and then we set off for Hatahi Village on the village road. As we walked along, we encountered quite a few village watchmen and adventurers on patrol. Each time, we had to explain to them that we had permission to pass. Finally, after an hour of walking, the human auras were far behind us.

“Mr. Druid...” I sighed.

“Yeah...?”

“They think we’re monsters...and a joined pair at that.”

“Pfft! Ha ha ha!” Druid burst out laughing. It sounded like holding it in for so long had made him weak.

“Hee hee hee! Mr. Druid, don’t laugh at them.”

I was pretty embarrassed about it, but I just couldn’t keep the laughter from bubbling up out of me. But I really did feel guilty that we’d not only been seen,

but we'd also brought terror upon a whole village. Still, a new species of monster or the lord of the serpents... I could see how somebody would jump to that conclusion if they saw us from far away, but I couldn't help but laugh since I knew the truth.

"I almost cracked up listening to their story," Druid said.

I'd noticed he'd had to stop himself from laughing several times. And it must have been extra hard for him since he had to look the adventurers in the eyes. I was able to just stare at the ground and hold it in. *I'm so happy nobody caught me snickering.*

"Boy, what a tall tale we turned into."

"I know. Do you think everything will be okay?"

"Wellll... First there was the weird noise echoing through the forest near Hatata Village, then there was the giant line of serpents and the new species of monster in Hatada..."

I wasn't sure why, but I felt like everything would *not* be okay. The villages would definitely swap information.

"Both places will probably be on high alert for a while," Druid said.

"I feel terribly guilty about all of this now."

"Yeah, me too."

Our eyes met, and we both smiled awkwardly.

"Well, everything will eventually calm down," Druid assured me.

Yeah, as long as there're no more sightings, we'll be okay.

"Still, it's too bad somebody spotted us."

"Uh-huh... Well, we did ride on the serpents awfully close to civilization."

"We sure did. Oh, let's head deeper into the forest now! I want to take the slimes out of their bag."

“Any human auras around?”

As we veered off the village road and into the forest, I searched for human auras. I didn’t sense any, but there were plenty of monster auras in the distance. None of them were coming toward us, though.

“It should be safe now. I’ll go ahead and take them out of their bag.”

I opened the bag’s lid, and all four came jumping out together. Even Flame was awake this time.

“Hi, everyone. Today is when the real traveling begins. We’re off to Hatahi Village!”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Pefu!”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Okay, let’s go.”

At Druid’s command, Sol and Flame jumped on top of Ciel.

“Hey, guys, try to walk on your own some of the way.”

“Peh!”

“Teryu!”

“Sorry, Ciel,” Druid sighed.

Mrrrow.

“Ha ha ha! Thanks, Ciel. Okay, everyone, let’s go!”

Chapter 319:

A Dump in the Forest

I LOOKED AT SOL in the palm of my hand. This was the eighth day since we'd left Hatata Village. Sol had shrunk to half its size, so I asked Ciel to look for an illegal dump in the forest. Would it be able to find one?

"Do you have any energy?"

"Pefu!"

Just like its size, its voice was also at half strength. It bounced a little in my hand, probably to show that it still had energy, but that didn't make me feel much better.

"Sol says it's doing okay..." I said.

"But from the look of it, Sol doesn't seem okay."

"I know."

Sol glared at us. I don't think it appreciated our conversation. But its eyes were so small that it looked nothing but cute to me.

"Oh, look! Ciel's back," Druid said.

I looked toward the trees to see Ciel running through them. *I hope it found us a dump.*

"Thanks, Ciel. Did you find a dump?"

Mrrrow.

I sighed in relief. *Oh, good, Ciel found one.* Truth be told, though, an illegal dump really wasn't anything we should celebrate.

"Thanks for doing that, Ciel."

Mrrrow.

“Is it close by?”

Mrrrow.

With Ciel leading the way, we headed for the dump it had discovered.

“Hey, Sol, good news! We found you some lunch.”

“Pefu! Pefu!” Sol, who had moved onto my shoulder, looked very happy. It must have been famished. We were saved this time, but we definitely needed to do something to solve this problem later.

“There’s the dump! Wow, it’s huge.”

We were startled by the sight of it. It was big, far too big to be an illegal dump. And most of the items in it were full of magic energy, too.

“Mr. Druid...isn’t this kinda dangerous?”

“Yeah.”

In the past, monsters had gone berserk and mutated from the magic energy left at dumps. And since we were in the middle of the forest, there were a lot of monsters around. Moreover, there was a towering pile of trash, filled with magic energy. I had a really bad feeling about it.

“Ivy, stay alert. You, too, Ciel.”

“Got it.”

Mrrrow.

“There are a lot of different monsters in this area. Some of them might be magic-eaters.”

I searched for auras but didn’t sense any monsters nearby.

“Well?”

“No monster auras.”

“Okay. Then I guess we’re safe?” Druid glanced around. *We should probably still stay on guard.*

“All right, Sol. You can eat now.”

I took the slime from my shoulder and placed it onto the pile of trash. Sora and Flame jumped straight in there, too.

“Now that we know it’s safe, we might as well look for potions for Sora and Flame while we’re here,” Druid said.

“Sure.”

Rustle, rustle! Rustle, rustle!

I suddenly heard a sound, like something stomping through the grass. I took a quick look around, scanning for auras, but couldn’t find any monsters.

“Huh?”

I sensed no auras, but I did realize that something was amiss. There was something out there. Something different from an aura...

Hissss!

Ciel, who was standing on guard next to me, hissed into the forest, its hair raised. Druid unsheathed his sword. I still didn’t sense any auras, but it felt like something was approaching us.

“Mr. Druid, there’s somebody near us!” I looked around intently, but I couldn’t figure out what it was.

“Ivy! Above you! Watch out!”

The moment I heard Druid’s voice, Ciel bit my clothes and yanked me away.

“Agh!” Ciel was so aggressive that I lost my footing.

Shoop! Bop!

Agh!

WHACK! SMACK!

AGH!

When I heard the ominous sounds behind me, I jumped to my feet to have a

look. And before my eyes, engulfed in flames, was a monster. By the root of a tree nearby, two other ones lay limply. Both were already dead.

KA-CHING! SHOOP!

I looked toward the sounds to see Druid fighting a monster. He had just blocked its bite-attack with his sword. Then the blade lit on fire as Druid struck back.

“Wow, this sword is great!” Druid cheered, slashing away at the burning monster.

Grah! Grah! The burning monster screeched, flailing around...but its movements got more and more listless until it died.

“What a relief. Where did Ciel go? And where are the slimes?”

We looked over at the dump to see the slimes huddling behind some trash. It was comforting to see they were all okay. I looked around for Ciel...and I heard fighting noises, though I didn’t know where they were coming from. It was probably Ciel, though. Sounds were echoing through the trees, so I couldn’t tell where the battle was happening. I scanned for auras and finally found Ciel’s, but I couldn’t sense the aura of the monster I knew it was fighting.

“Are we safe?”

“Yeah. Ciel led the others away from us.”

“I freaked out when I saw a monster suddenly appear over your head, Ivy. I’m so glad you’re safe.”

This is so strange. I was being hyper-vigilant and scanning for auras. Even now, the only aura I can sense out there is Ciel’s.

“Mr. Druid, these monsters... I can’t sense their auras.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Even now, I know Ciel is fighting at least one of them, but I can’t pick up on its aura at all.”

Druid frowned soberly. “They’re probably monsters that mutated.”

Mutated monsters...

“Ivy, they’re coming! Hide in the trash!”

The words were barely out of Druid’s mouth when two monsters came flying at us. I scampered into the trash to get out of the way. I happened to find a shield, so I hid myself behind it. I was worried about Druid, battling them with only one arm, but I didn’t know how to fight.

“I wish there were something I could do...”

Garr.

“Huh?!”

I whirled around at the sound of the voice behind me. It was a monster with bright-red eyes and a wide-open mouth. I had to run, but I couldn’t move...I couldn’t speak... All I could do was stare at the creature as it lunged in for the attack.

Chomp.

“Huh?!”

My brain couldn’t follow what was unfolding before me.



Umm, let's see, a monster suddenly appeared behind me, then it attacked me. Yes, it attacked me, and then...then I heard a "chomp" sound, and something covered the monster, and... The thing covering the monster was black and transparent...probably a slime. I lifted my gaze slightly upward...and met with a pair of eyes.

"Sol?"

Jiggle, jiggle, jiggle.

"Are you healing it? Or...eating it?"

I looked at the monster inside of Sol. It was struggling to get out, but it gradually melted and... *Yeah, I'm just gonna pretend I didn't see that.*

"Thanks, Sol. You saved my life."

I stared hard into Sol's eyes, trying my hardest not to look down by accident. Just then, I noticed that the fighting noises in the forest had stopped. Was Ciel okay?

"Ivy...that can't possibly be...Sol?"

I looked toward the voice to see Druid. His jaw dropped as he gawked at Sol.

"Yeah...I think it's having lunch," I pointed, trying not to look at its belly. Druid looked where I was gesturing and gasped in shock.

"Oh, wow...so it eats monsters now."

"Are monster-eating slimes rare?"

"No, slimes are omnivorous, so they do eat monsters. But they usually only go after the weak or tiny ones, since slimes themselves are very weak..."

Only weak and tiny monsters? But it's chowing down on the big, strong one that just attacked me.

"Okay...now this solves the problem of Sol's meals a little..." Druid's voice got softer and softer. I gave him a curious look. "Up until now, Sol acted normal around monsters, right?"

“Yeah. It didn’t even flinch.”

He had a point. We’d been around lots of monsters on our way here, yet Sol hadn’t tried to eat any of them.

“So, in what situations does Sol eat monsters?”

Mrrrow?

I looked in the direction of Ciel’s voice...to see that it was frozen like a statue at the sight of Sol eating.

“That’s Sol,” I told it.

Mrrrow.

“Oh, wait! Where are Sora and Flame?”

I forgot all about them. Are they okay? I looked for the two slimes that were hiding in the trash...and saw that both of them were eating.

“They look just fine to me,” Druid said.

I smiled awkwardly. “Yeah. Those two are extraordinary in more ways than one.”

They had nerves of steel, that was for sure. They could get right back to lunch on the heels of a brutal attack.

“Ciel, have all the monsters in this area retreated?”

Mrrrow.

Okay, so they’ve retreated. That must be why Ciel’s tail is wagging so happily. As I looked at Ciel, its spirits soaring thanks to the brutal brawl it had just fought, the word *battlemania* popped into my mind.

“Thanks for saving us, Ciel. And thank you, too, Druid. Good job with that sword.”

“I’m just glad everyone’s okay.”

Mrrrow.

Welp, we've averted the monster crisis for now. But we still have lots of other problems to deal with, I thought as I looked at Sol.

Chapter 320: Just the Magic Energy!

“I GUESS WE SHOULD just let Sol finish eating first,” Druid said.

“Yeah.”

We kept a cautious eye out as we gathered potions for the slimes. There sure was a remarkable amount of trash.

“Mr. Druid, is there a particular reason why so many adventurers come to this spot?”

“Hang on a second...” Druid opened his map and checked our location. “Huh? I thought this rocky hill was... Yeah, there should be a cave nearby. A famous one, in fact.”

“What? You know this area?”

“Yeah, I think so. That rocky hill over there looks a lot like the one I remember, so I’m pretty sure I’m right.”

Druid was pointing at a large rocky hill. To give you an idea of just how big it was, it sprung up high over the trees.

“So what’s in this famous cave?”

“Lots of monsters that drop rare items. Some of them are easy to kill, but others are quite powerful.”

Rare items...I can see why lots of adventurers come here. Wait, but I don’t sense human auras anywhere near us.

“Do a lot of people still go to that cave? I don’t sense any humans nearby.”

“The monsters only hang around there between the summer and winter. They’re still hibernating this time of year, so that’s why there’s no adventurers.”

So they're seasonal monsters...I can definitely imagine the cave filled with adventurers when summer rolls around.

"Having said that, I was last here four years ago, and there was no dump then."

"Oh, huh."

I looked at the dump. If we didn't do something about it, it would cause all sorts of problems. But in reality, it was out of our hands. The only option was to put in a report at the next village.

THUD.

"Huh?!"

"What's that?"

I heard something hit the ground. I looked toward the sound to see a monster I didn't recognize lying on the turf of the dump. And next to it was...Sol?

"Um...is that you, Sol?"

"Pefu!"

Sol was back to its usual size, which was a relief to see. But for some reason, there were symbols glowing all over its body.

"Mr. Druid...have you seen those symbols before?"

"No, but then again, Sol is also the only black slime I've ever seen."

Yeah, I guess he wouldn't know what they were, either. But what was that monster lying next to Sol? Since it wasn't moving, it seemed to be dead...but where had it come from? I looked up to see a clear blue sky unfurling in all directions. Were there monsters that could fly? I'd never heard of any. I looked back at Sol to see that it was bouncing on the fallen monster.

"Sol, do you know what that monster is?"

"Pefu!"

It does know.

“Could it be...?” Druid approached the monster, something piquing his interest. “I thought so. Remember how I said it was wrong to make a dump without permission?”

He’d told me that when we came across a dump on the way to Hatow Village.

“Yeah, you said it’s because some monsters suck up magic energy. And that’s dangerous because the energy can make them go berserk or mutate.”

“Correct. Well, *this* is the magic-sucking monster I was talking about.”

This is the monster?

“Wait a minute...”

A monster that sucks magic energy? But Sol also eats magic energy at dumps...right? Couldn’t that also be described as sucking magic? Which means... will Sol go berserk or mutate? Since Sora and the others had said Sol was safe, I’d never made the connection that it was a magic-sucking monster.

“Mr. Druid...I just thought of something.”

“What is it?”

“Could Sol go berserk or mutate?”

“What? You mean now?” Druid looked shocked, and I didn’t blame him. We definitely should’ve realized this problem much sooner.

“Yeah, right now. The thought never once crossed my mind before this moment.”

“I wonder if you’re right... Agh, to be honest, I was a little worried about Sol all this time.”

Of course he would worry. The possibility hadn’t even been a blip on my radar, though. *For somebody who spends so much time trekking through the forest, I really am way too oblivious of danger. I need to be more careful.*

“If Sol keeps eating too much magic energy, it might go berserk or mutate

someday,” Druid said.

“So, it *is* possible.”

“Yeah...watching the way Sol fed itself all this time was really disarming. How do I put it...?”

Ooh, yeah, I get what he’s talking about. Whenever Sol eats magic, it makes a lazy sort of grin. The sight of it would make anybody feel at ease.

“Besides, Sora and the others said Sol was safe,” Druid continued. “Also, slimes aren’t on any lists of monsters that suck up magic energy.”

Did Druid do some research on those monsters after Sol joined our party? If so, he really did some pesky work on my behalf. I definitely need to be more discerning when I add members to our party. Yeah, next time I add someone, I’ll check with Druid first.

“Also, we don’t know for sure whether monsters actually do suck magic energy from dumps.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, scientists have been studying it for years, but there is still so much that’s unknown or purely speculation. There are only two things they know for sure: Some monsters increase their magic energy at dumps, and sometimes this energy makes them go berserk or mutate suddenly.”

But isn’t that more than enough information to draw some conclusions?

“But the most important question is still unanswered: How is magic energy gathered and stored?”

“Huh? But don’t they just suck up the magic?”

“No, we still don’t know how they actually do it. It’s just that most scientists support the magic-sucking theory, so that’s why everyone phrases it that way when they explain the danger of dumps.”

Oh, I see. But there can’t be another way to increase magic energy besides

sucking it, can there? Wouldn't that be the answer we're looking for?

"Pefu!"

I looked in the direction of Sol's voice and saw the dead monster.

"So, where did this monster come from anyway?" I still didn't have an answer to that question.

"I think it was the one Sol ate earlier."

"What?! Really? You mean the monster that attacked me?"

"Pefu!"

Since Sol spoke...does that mean it really was the monster that attacked me? I approached Druid and looked at the monster's face. *No...that's not it.* "Its face looks completely different...and I think it's smaller, too."

"All the overflowing magic energy probably transformed it and made it go berserk," Druid explained.

The dead monster at our feet looked like a weaker type, but when that monster sprang at me, it was baring its fangs with clear intent to kill. I was terrified. The thought that this monster was the same as the other was unreal. Mutations caused by magic sure were frightening.

"So...would it be right to say that since the magic energy in its body is gone, it went back to its true form?"

That's correct, isn't it? If the magic energy inside their bodies was what transformed them, then they would return to their original forms when that energy was taken away. They'd be dead, too, though.

"Yeah, I think you're right. Why do you ask?"

"In other words, Sol was eating *just the magic energy*, right?"

When Sol enveloped the monster, it looked like it was eating its whole body, but the corpse we were looking at was not damaged anywhere. That would mean I'd misinterpreted what I saw. It only looked like Sol had eaten the

monster because sucking out its magic energy made it return to its original size.

“Yeah...it was just the magic energy.” Druid sounded disappointed.

“So, I was right.” The thought that Sol could eat something other than magic energy had been a fleeting joy. Too bad it wasn’t true.

“Pefu!”

Sol seemed confused by our reactions. Something about its behavior seemed odd, so I gave it a critical stare.

“Mr. Druid...”

“Yeah?”

“The symbols on Sol are gone now.”

“What?!”

Druid took Sol in his hands and looked it over.

“Pefuuu, pefuuu.”

Sol seemed fine, even without the symbols.

“Sol, has your body changed at all?”

Please don't mutate on me!

“Pefu!”

“I think it’s going to be okay,” Druid said.

I heaved a heavy sigh of relief.

Chapter 321:

Food for Everyone

THERE WERE TWENTY-ONE MONSTERS in total that had gone berserk from magic energy and attacked Ciel. I was a little shocked by the high number, but Ciel looked awfully proud as it piled the corpses into a heap. I checked to see if the adandara was hurt, and it wasn't. *That's my Ciel.*

"Sol...are you really okay?"

I looked back and forth between Sol and the pile of monster corpses. No matter how I looked at it, Sol really did seem to consume far too much magic energy, even though that was all it ate. It wouldn't accidentally go berserk, would it? Sol assured me that everything was fine, and Ciel and Sora backed it up, but I still couldn't shake my concern. Yet, whenever I saw the hungry look in Sol's eyes, I just couldn't say no. I felt sorry for the poor creature.

"Okay, Sol! Do your thing."

Since leaving the corpses with their magic energy at the scene would be dangerous, we had decided to burn them. If we just left them there, other monsters might suck up their energy and go berserk or mutate. But when we had Ciel heap the corpses into a pile so we could burn them, Sol stood in our way. It was still hungry.

"Pefu!"

Once I gave Sol permission, it lifted one of the monster corpses with a tentacle, moved it away from the pile, and swallowed the entire thing. Since I knew now that Sol was not actually eating the monster itself, I took a closer look at the process this time...but it really was hard to believe Sol was doing anything other than eating it whole.

Since I couldn't just stand there and watch Sol eat, no matter how fascinating

it was, I moved over a little bit to help Druid pitch our tent.

“It’s like a...mirage?” I tried to explain.

“You’re having Sol dispose of them all?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Well, since Sora and the others say Sol is safe, it shouldn’t go berserk or mutate.”

Druid’s opinion brought a smile to my face. He was a lot more trusting of my monsters’ judgment than he’d been when we first met. When we first set out on our travels, he was still full of insecurity. Well, not insecurity...more like bewilderment?

“What is it?” he asked, noticing my hard stare.

“Oh, nothing.”

We set up some magic-repelling items that Rose had given us as a farewell present around our tent. These items were special in that you could register monsters you *didn’t* want them to repel. Druid had looked quite surprised when Rose gave the items to us, so they must have been incredible.

After we finished setting up camp, I took in our surroundings. Sora and Flame were merrily bouncing around the dump, while Ciel was helping move the monsters over to Sol.

“Ciel sure is a good helper,” I observed.

“Yeah, every time I look, it seems to be helping someone with something.”

Since we were done setting up camp, we started making supper.

“Mr. Druid, is it possible to eat those monsters?”

“You...want to eat monsters that went berserk from magic?”

“But Sol took the magic out of them, right?”

If you can eat it, eat it! I’d learned that lesson when I was very small.

“Umm...yeah, I guess we can eat them.”

“No, it’s okay. If you don’t want to eat them, we won’t.”

When there was that much dread in his eyes, there was no way I could force him to eat the monsters.

Mewww, Ciel called out to me.

I looked over and saw that the monsters were no longer in their changed forms. The corpses in the pile were now much smaller.

Gee, you’re fast. I looked at Sol and noticed it had those symbols glowing on its body again. These were clearly different than the ones from last time.

“Mr. Druid, Sol’s gotten...”

“Yeah, it’s gotten bigger.”

Sol was indeed a little larger than before. With all the shrinking and growing, it sure had a chaotic life.

“Sol, are you doing okay?”

“Pefu! Pefu!”

Oh, good. It’s feeling fine. It also looks extremely satisfied. I looked away from Sol and toward the twenty-one monster corpses.

“What do you want to do with them?” I asked. Even though they had gotten a lot smaller than before, there were still so many of them that the pile was quite eye-catching.

“Let’s burn them. That many corpses are bound to attract the unwanted attention of other monsters.”

Mrrrow.

Ciel licked its chops. It stared at me for a moment, then returned its gaze to the pile of corpses.

“Um, would you like to have those monsters, Ciel?”

Mrrrow.

I guess Ciel is hungry, too.

“Are they safe to eat?”

Mrrrow.

“See, Mr. Druid? They’re fine!”

“Hey, Ciel, don’t *you* be so hasty now!”

Mew! Ciel yipped in discontent.

Druid sighed. “I’m sorry. Are those monsters safe for *us* to eat?” he asked.

Ciel gave him a funny look. *I guess it doesn’t know.*

“Ivy, I don’t think we can eat them.”

“I guess not. Too bad.”

If not even Ciel knew the answer, we couldn’t risk eating them. Especially when Sora was sitting next to Ciel and giving off the same reactions.

“So, you don’t know about me and Mr. Druid, but they’re safe for you to eat, Ciel?”

Mrrrow.

“Urrrgh, well, if you say they’re okay to eat, then I guess it’s safe. Okay, Ciel, have as many of them as you’d like.”

We’ll just burn the rest of the... Annnd Ciel carried off six at once.

“Ciel sure is strong,” I observed.

“I think it’s using magic.”

Oh, really?

“Okay, let’s get these burned up.”

“I’ll help.”

I think we’ll have to dig a hole in the ground. Maybe they’ll burn better that

way...

“No, I’ll be fine alone. It’s easy.”

It’s easy? I looked at Druid. He unsheathed his sword and pointed it at the pile of corpses. Then the bodies burst into blue flames.

“Wow!”

“I had a hard time figuring out how to use the magic in this sword at first, but look at me now. I’m a natural, aren’t I?”

“Yeah! You look so dashing, Mr. Druid.”

“What?! Oh, uh, thanks.”

I looked at the blue flames. *If I recall correctly, blue fire burns hotter than red. But what a beautiful blue it is. Hm? Y’know, I don’t notice that peculiar smell that comes from burning monsters.* Before I could ponder this any further, the monsters all turned to ash.

“Wow, they burned up in the blink of an eye.”

I looked at Druid...and saw that his cheeks were a bit red. Maybe being so close to the fire had made him hot? But the flames from his sword were only hot if you got quite close to them, so it was hard to believe his face could have gotten hot that way.

“Yeah, the fire this sword makes is incredibly powerful. Anything you burn with it vaporizes in a matter of seconds.”

What a terrifyingly powerful sword Sora gave Druid. It had helped us out a great deal, though.

“Okay, should we get back to making supper?”

“Sure. Since it still gets cold at night, how about some nice, hot soup?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

I checked on my monsters as I cooked the soup. I could see Sora jumping around at the dump in the distance; it was probably still playing. Didn’t it ever

get tired of that?

“Sora, you should think about coming back soon!”

Come to think of it, where’s Flame? I looked around the dump but didn’t see it anywhere. Maybe it had fallen asleep somewhere. I checked on the soup. It needed just a little more time on the heat, then it would be done. I’d already finished making the salad and our meat was cooking over a low flame, so I could leave the cooking area for a little while.

“Sora, do you know where Flame is?” I asked as I walked toward the dump. Ciel darted off somewhere and returned with something in its mouth. Then it carried its catch to me. Was it Flame?

“Aha, so you did fall asleep. Thanks, Ciel.” I took Flame from Ciel and returned to our tent. Sora and Ciel trailed after me.

“Ciel, you’re like a big sister to the slimes, aren’t you?”

Mrrrow.

Ooh, its voice bounced! I guess it was happy to hear that. I was starting to worry that Ciel was overburdened, looking after everyone else...

“Ciel, thanks for always taking care of everyone.”

I needed to make sure it knew how grateful I felt. That was very important.

Mrrrow!

“Oh! Um, Ciel? Maybe don’t move your tail like that. Your happiness means a lot to me, but our supper means something, too, you know.”

It was important for me to tell Ciel how I felt...but I shouldn’t have done it right before suppertime. What if our soup got spilled on the ground?!

Chapter 322:

Roly-Poly

THIS WAS OUR THIRD DAY camping by the dump. We'd originally planned to stay only one night, but since we were worried about all the magic energy at the dump, we decided after much deliberation to stay for a while and let Sol gobble it up. When Druid asked Sol for help, it gleefully bounded off into the dump. It stayed there for two whole days, just eating all the magic energy. Understandably worried, Druid went to stop Sol from overeating, but the slime ran away from him. When he watched it continue to eat as it ran, Druid drooped his head in defeat. And now we were nearing our third evening at the dump.

"Look at Sol..."

Sol was in quite a good mood after eating to its heart's content. The symbols on its body were still there from the night before, but we still didn't know what they meant. We asked Sol if anything was wrong, but it indicated it was fine. It was also now twice the size it had been when it was first born. It was still smaller than Flame and Sora, though, but its size wasn't the problem—it was its roundness. After three solid days of eating, Sol was round enough to be a perfect sphere.

"It must have overeaten," Druid said.

"I know, right?"

"Pefu! Pefu! Pefu!" Sora cried loudly in protest.

But there was no getting around it. Sol had gotten quite fat...er, *round*.

"Well, I guess even slimes can get fat," Druid remarked.

"Pehhh!" Sol screamed in protest. It must have hated being called fat.

Um, sorry, sweetie, but you are quite round. You're roly-poly.

“Umm...how about we head out soon?” Druid had decided that we couldn’t stay there any longer, so we’d planned to leave for Hatahi Village the next morning. Neither of us imagined Sol would eat so much that its body shape would change. Sora and Flame’s physiques never altered, even when they gorged themselves. Maybe neither of them had ever really eaten until they were completely full...

“Sora, Flame, have you ever eaten until you were totally stuffed before?”

They stared at me in silence. I guessed they weren’t answering because they always got plenty to eat.

“Um, do slimes get fat?” I asked the two quietly, so nobody else could hear me.

They both sat in silence, meaning slimes did not get fat. *They don’t?*

“Are you sure? Just look at Sol...”

We all looked at Sol, who was moving itself by rolling along the ground. *I really wish it would jump a little and get some exercise in.*

“Sol got fat, right?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

So I was right. Even Sora and Flame have labeled Sol as fat.

“And Sol is a slime, right?”

“...Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“...Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Could the two of you please not be so cryptic? Sol is a proper slime. I hope...

Early the next morning, we packed up our tent and looked around the area. We hadn’t forgotten anything.

"All right, let's hit the road," Druid said.

"Okay."

I glanced at the dump. It looked the same as it had when we arrived. Sora and Flame had eaten the swords and potions, but the magic items were still undisturbed. The only difference was that there was much less monster-mutating magic energy stored up there now. I hoped that Sol's efforts had made the dump a little less dangerous.

"Where's Sol?" Druid asked.

"Asleep in the bag."

"I can see why... It did work awfully hard."

"Yeah, and it got awfully round."

This got a chuckle out of Druid. I checked in the bag and saw that Sol was sleeping soundly. *Oh, good. It didn't hear that.*

"Okay, want to go back to the village road?" Druid asked.

I gave him a confused look. I wasn't the right person to ask.

"What do you think, Ciel?"

Mrrrow. With a short reply, Ciel bounded off gracefully in the lead. Sora chased after it, and we hurried after them both.

"They're not headed for the village road," Druid observed.

"Are we going deeper into the forest, then?"

"No, they're taking us to that rocky hill I told you about, the one with the monsters that drop rare items."

So we were headed to that cave.

"But there aren't any monsters there this time of year, right?"

"Normally, there wouldn't be...but after seeing that dump, I'm not so sure anymore."

Does he mean there could be monsters that were affected by the magic energy? Mrrrgh, that's scary.

"Ciel, let's take a safe route, okay?"

...Mrrrow.

Hm? What was that pause for?

Druid was also worried. "Ciel?"

Mrrrow.

It says everything is okay...so I guess it is.

The thought had barely popped into my mind when we came upon a herd of the same monsters we'd encountered a few days ago. And they were berserk, too.

"They're already on the move, I see." Druid drew his sword and held it at the ready. I looked for a spot where I could stay out of the way, but there were boulders everywhere, leaving no easy nooks for me to hide in. As I glanced around, wondering what to do, Ciel pounced on the herd.

"You know, this path is probably plenty safe if Ciel's with us." With a little sigh, Druid sheathed his sword again.

There were three berserk monsters. And soon after Ciel pounced on them, there were three dead monsters. Since Ciel moved so quickly and everything happened so fast, what exactly happened was a mystery. All I knew was that the berserk monsters were dead in the blink of an eye.

"Okay, let's burn the corpses and move on," Druid said.

"All right. Oh! Mr. Druid, Sol woke up."

My shoulder bag had started to wiggle. Sora was on Druid's head and Flame was in my arms, so the source of the wiggling had to be Sol. Had it picked up on the magic energy?

"Should we feed it? It'll only get more..." Druid's worries had shifted from

berserk monsters to fat slimes. Well, I was also worried, to be sure. I didn't know if Sol could take any more. But...it was already awake anyway.

"Sorry, I'll let you out now." I opened the bag and let Sol out. Once it was outside, it spotted the dead monsters and gracefully rolled over to them.

"It rolls to get around now," Druid said.

"Ha ha ha!"

As I watched Sol swallow the monsters, I tried not to imagine it becoming any rounder.

"Well, as long as Sol says it's okay, we shouldn't have anything to worry about," Druid said.

I nodded in reply. Last night, Druid and I had asked Sol repeatedly just to be sure it was all right being that shape. It said everything was fine, so we'd decided to trust it.

"Ivy, is it just me, or are those symbols on Sol's body changing color?"

"You noticed it, too?"

At first, the symbols on Sol's body had been gray and faint. But they'd started getting whiter and whiter yesterday, and they were now quite visible against Sol's black body. Thinking we'd overlooked something, we pored over the books about slimes again, but there was not a single account of slimes having symbols on their bodies.

"I get the sense those symbols are here to stay. What do you think, Mr. Druid?"

"Yeah, I get that feeling, too."

At first, the symbols would glow faintly and then disappear. But now, there were no traces of faintness in the symbols—they were asserting themselves.

"There's a bookstore in the next village, right?"

"I think so...but why don't we faax our friends and ask them to do some

research for us?”

“Huh? But what if somebody else reads our faxes?”

I was okay with telling Rattloore and my other friends like him, but I didn’t like the idea of anybody else knowing about Sol.

“We don’t have to be specific. We can say something vague like, ‘We heard that some slimes have symbols on their bodies. Do you know anything about that?’ They’re pretty savvy; they’ll know we want them to look it up for us.”

He was right. Sifar, for one, would definitely pick up on what we were really asking.

“I think that would work better than checking a bookstore,” Druid continued.

He had a point there, too, but I felt bad making other people do our research for us.

“Ivy, remember how all your friends kept telling you ‘If there’s anything you ever need, don’t hesitate to ask’?”

We had faxed back and forth many times by then, and that was always how everyone had ended their letters to me.

“So, I won’t be a bother?”

“Don’t worry about that. They’ll be overjoyed, not bothered. I guarantee that.”

That was an awfully bold claim.

“We’ll be at the next village for quite a while, so go ahead and ask them for help.”

“Okay, I’ll do that. Oh, looks like Sol ate up all the magic energy!”

We walked over to Sol and saw something on the ground next to the monsters.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Wow, you don’t see many of these this time of year. It’s a magic item.”

Chapter 323: Dropped Loot

“I HAVEN’T SEEN ANY MORE of them, now that we’re all the way out here.”

“Me neither.”

It was the fourth day after we’d left the dump, and the monsters who had gone berserk from the magic energy were no longer around. The first day, there were an additional three after the trio that ambushed us, making six in total. On the second day, five of those monsters attacked us. Then yesterday, the third day, there were two. But today, we hadn’t encountered a single one. Normal monsters would keep their distance when they sensed Ciel’s aura, so the ones that attacked us had unmistakably been affected by the magic energy at the dump.

“Ciel really is a wonder, though,” Druid remarked.

“Yup.”

Ciel would elegantly slaughter any monsters that attacked us. In a word, its might was breathtaking. Ciel also looked so happy when it was fighting, like it was completely surrendering to its instincts.

“What should we do with the magic items, though?” Druid asked.

“We can probably just sell them.”

Even though it was the offseason, the monsters we killed near that rocky hill dropped magic items. There were seven items in total, and the first one was a magic ring. It was a popular item among adventurers, as you could wear it on your finger, and its magic stone would give you a boost of magic energy whenever you ran out of your own. There was also a magic box, a ring of protection, and others. The ring of protection was unfortunately not compatible with me or Druid. That was the first time I’d learned that some items required

compatibility. If I'd been able to use it, the ring could have protected me from surprise attacks. *What a pity.*

"Are you sure?" Druid asked.

"Yeah, there isn't anything in particular we can use, so it'll just take up too much space in our luggage otherwise."

"Good point. Let's sell them at the next village."

"Sure."

Ciel suddenly stopped in its tracks. Was it another monster attack? I looked around, scanning for auras, but I couldn't pick up on any berserk monsters. That situation had confused Druid. He hadn't read anything in his studies about berserk monsters being able to mask their auras, but since the inability to sense monster auras would be a big problem for adventurers, we decided to tell the guild at the next village.

"Ciel, is a monster coming?"

Mew!

That meant "no." Then what was it? Ciel made a sharp turn to the side, then stared intently at me.

"Do you want to go off the main road?"

Mrrrow.

I didn't know where we were or how close Hatahi Village was, but it sounded like a fun idea.

"Mr. Druid, is it okay if we take a detour?"

"Hmm...we do still have plenty of time to spare, so we might as well."

When Druid gave his blessing, the trees behind Ciel all began to swish. They were probably being assaulted by its tail. Even though they were quite thick, I noticed the trees were rocking from side to side. I could see how Ciel had been able to dispose of those monsters so handily with just its tail.

“Let’s go, Ciel. Is it close?”

Mrrrow.

We walked behind Ciel for about twenty minutes until we arrived at a big rocky hill.

“This rocky hill?”

“Why are these boulders all pitch-black?” I asked.

“There must be something going on, and I can’t wait to find out what it is.”

The past several days had been a constant stream of hyper-vigilance for surprise attacks from monsters. Even though I knew Ciel would protect us, my heart still constantly raced with worry. So there was a spring in my step now that I felt at ease for the first time in days...which also made me trip for the first time in days. Druid, who was right behind me, caught me before I could fall and get hurt, but it was still embarrassing.

“Ooh, that scared me.”

“Ivy, just relax. You scare too easily.”

“Sorry. Thanks for the save.”

I felt my foot catch on something, so I looked down, but even though we were on a rocky hill, there was nothing. Not even a small difference in ground level.

Mrrrow.

“Oh! Sorry, Ciel.”

Ciel was trying to tell us something. I walked up to it and followed its gaze.

“The cave?”

There was a hole nestled in the black boulders leading to a cave. Judging by sight alone, it was quite creepy, but Ciel happily bounded inside of it.

“Ciel looks excited, eh?” Druid said.

“Yeah.”

I had never seen Ciel so enthusiastic about a cave before. Was there something inside that was stirring its soul?

We stepped inside the cave but couldn't see anything. It was unusually dark, probably because of the black boulders. Druid lit his magic lantern and the area around us was illuminated in a soft light.

"It looks kinda sparkly, huh?"

The walls of the cave were twinkling, like some reflective material was embedded in them. I curiously approached the wall.

"They're tiny, but very pretty." Little stones, clear in color and about the size of my thumbnail, covered the wall. "D'ya think they're magic stones?" I touched the stones in the wall and sensed no magic from them. "I don't think they're magic..."

Then what are they? Stones... The only other valuable stones besides magic stones would be...gemstones? But I've never seen gemstones before, so I can't tell if that's what these are.

"Wow, Ivy, we've hit the jackpot. I think these are the most valuable of all the gemstones: diamonds."

Diamonds. That name sounded familiar.

"Are they really that valuable?"

"Yeah, even ones this size will fetch quite a nice price."

I looked at Druid's hand. On his palm was a gemstone about the same size as my thumbnail. Was a tiny stone like that really so valuable?

"What sort of power do these stones have?"

"None."

They have no power? Then why are they valuable?

"Do they protect people?"

"No, they're mostly used as decoration by aristocrats."

Decoration...for clothing?

“Yeah, diamonds are highly coveted gemstones among the aristocracy.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t sound all that interested.”

“Yeah, I’m not.”

I mean, why would I be? These gemstones have no use in fighting or protection. Oh, but he did say we could sell them. And if we’re going to the towns near the capital, I’d like to have a bigger buffer in our finances.

“If we’re gonna sell them...do you think we could take just a few of them?”

“It should be okay. I don’t think anybody is in charge of this cave.”

“Oh, good. Should we look for the bigger ones?”

“No, they care more about purity than size. Even the stones at this size go for two gold plates...sometimes even three or four.”

“What?! But they’re so small.”

I looked at the stone in Druid’s hand again. To be sure, it was no bigger than my thumb. And it was indeed quite transparent...but it had no magic. *The rich sure do love their useless decorations, don’t they? Wearing that would just give me a stiff neck.*

“But I’d definitely feel more secure if we had a little more money saved before we got to the capital. Prices are several times higher there and in the surrounding towns.”

Several times higher? Was the price difference actually that steep?

“Is it really that much more expensive?” I asked.

“Yeah. About how much have we been paying for dried meat all this time?”

“About a hundred dal for a pack of six to ten pieces. Some places were a hundred fifty dal, though.”

Actually, now that I thought about it, the prices had been steadily getting higher.

“In the capital, it’s five hundred dal for a pack of ten.”

“What?! It’s really that expensive? Isn’t that too much?”

“People are willing to pay the higher prices—they’re used to them by now. Besides, the prices have to be high in the capital since there aren’t many wild rabbits or field mice to hunt there.”

Oh, I didn’t know that. It sure sounds like you need a lot of money to get by in the capital. All this time, I thought one hundred fifty dal was a rip-off. But five hundred dal? Yeah...I could never ever live there.

“Let’s just get to the capital, do our business, and then get the heck out of there,” I said.

“Ha ha ha. Sounds like a plan.”

For a while, I had been thinking about spending some time in the capital, but that’s out. Oh, maybe we could camp in the plaza for a few days so we could take in everything the capital has to offer. But there’s still food to worry about...

“Oh, right, and the plazas in the capital and the surrounding towns cost money to stay in, too.”

Let’s make our stay in the capital as short as possible... Hm?

“There’s no need for us to stay there anyway, right? After all, it’s the neighboring town I have business with.”

“You don’t want to go? But we’ll be so close to it anyway.”

“Mmmrrrgggh...”

I did at least want to see the capital...but nothing was set in stone. And finding out I needed to pay a ridiculous amount of money to go there made my mind snap to the judgment: *You don’t need to go.* But I was still a little curious.

“Well, you can take your time to think it over before we get to the capital. All

right, let's take just a few of these diamonds with us."

"Okay."

Chapter 324:

My Eyes Hurt

“URRRGH, my eyes are so tired.”

I fell backward from my sitting position onto the cave floor. Since the cave was made of black rock, the ceiling was still dim even with the light of the lantern. And yet the sparkling gemstones looked infinite in the gloom.

“This cave really is covered all over with diamonds. I know you told me they’re valuable, but seeing them like this, I have no idea just how much money they would bring in.”

“I see what you mean,” Druid said. “I’ve never heard of a cave like this, so I’m sure nobody else knows about it, either.”

“Yeah, adventurers would be coming in droves if they did know.”

“They sure would. We’ll have to keep it secret...but then again, I don’t even know exactly where we are in the first place.”

“Ha ha ha, true.”

Ciel had guided us deep into the forest. We couldn’t pick out this cave on a map if we tried.

“But with so many diamonds, it’s difficult to pick which ones to take.”

The clearer and purer the diamonds were, the higher price they would fetch. So, we decided to mine a fair amount and then select the best ones from that pile, but we had a hard time choosing. Staring at nothing but diamonds for so long made them all look the same to me. And worst of all, my eyes were in pain.

“Well, we’ve got thirty diamonds for now,” Druid said.

“Yeah. But I’m not too confident in the ones I picked at the end.”

I tried my best all along, but my final choices were sort of random. I knew the

diamonds I'd selected were clear, but I was worried they weren't any good.

"I think it'll be okay." Druid yawned loudly. Our muscles were stiff from hunching over diamonds for the last hour. I sat up from my supine position and stretched my arms. I noticed Ciel next to me, lounging casually with its tail swishing from side to side.

"Ciel, thanks for taking us here. It's wonderful." I gave its head a gentle pat.

Mrrrow. Ciel closed its eyes and rubbed its head against my hand. Its tail also wagged happily, but with restraint.

"All right, let's head out." Druid put the diamonds into our magic bag.

"Okay. Sora, Flame, Sol, it's time to... Oh."

The three slimes were merrily rolling the diamonds around like balls. The gems were quite pretty when they were being played with.

"They're sure having fun...though I can't quite agree with their choice of toys."

"I know. Well, just this once."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

The trio came when I called, rolling their diamonds with them. *I hope they don't think they're going to keep those diamonds as toys...*

"You want to take those diamonds with you?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

"Pefu!"

They all stared up at me, their eyes filled with hope. But if somebody saw my slimes playing with diamonds... Yeah, we'd have a lot of trouble on our hands.

“Promise me you’ll never let anybody see you play with those diamonds, okay?”

I mean, if anybody saw my slimes *at all*, we’d be in big trouble anyway.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

I’d just have to trust that everything would be okay. I took the diamonds from my slimes. “Gosh, these are super transparent.”

“Wow, you’re right. They’re quite valuable.”

Well...I guess it’s fine. I put the diamonds into the bag I kept the slimes in. To the untrained eye, they looked like glass beads anyway. Nobody would ever dare to imagine that my slimes were playing with diamonds.

When we left the cave, the sun was directly overhead. It was just a little past lunchtime.

“Ciel, do you think we can get to Hatahi Village from here in, um...five days or less?”

Mrrrow.

“Okay. Thanks.”

Hatahi was less than a five-day walk from where we were. We would get there ahead of schedule.

“Ivy, look. It’s fruit.”

“This time of year?”

It was still early spring—winter was barely over—and there was already fruit? I went over to a tree and looked up. Sure enough, there was something growing on its branches—a bright-red fruit.

“Is it edible?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never seen it before.”

It was a fruit that even Druid didn’t know about. There were still so many fruits and nuts in the forest that humans had yet to discover. I supposed this was one of them.

“Hey, guys, is this fruit safe for us to eat?”

“Pu! Pu, puuuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

“Pefu!”

Mrrrow.

They answered “yes” in unison. Now that he had their blessing, Druid picked one of the bright-red fruits.

“It smells sweet.”

Druid held the fruit up to my nose. A delicious scent wafted through my nostrils.

“Ooh, you’re right. It does smell nice.”

I have high hopes for this fruit. I took out my pocketknife to cut some of it, and its sweet aroma filled the air.

“It smells good,” I said again.

I ate a big piece of fruit, and its juice squirted through my mouth. It was so sweet. I never had many chances to eat fresh fruit in the wintertime, so this was my first taste of it in a long time. It sank soothingly into my entire body.

“It’s so good.”

Since there were no problems with it, I cut another piece of fruit and handed it to Druid.

“Shouldn’t I have had the first bite? You know, to make sure it’s okay?” Druid

grumbled as he ate the fruit. "You're right, it is very good."

"Think we can take a moment to pick some? I want to eat it for dessert."

"That should be okay. Oh, I've got an item for that!" Druid pulled a pole-shaped device out of his magic bag.

"What's that?"

"A magic item that helps you pick fruit and nuts from trees. It looked useful, so I bought it for fun."

He bought it for fun... When did he find the time? I had no idea he got that. I stared at the magic item. It looked just like a normal pole with a button on its handle to me. Druid pressed the button and the staff stretched itself out, its tip changing into a net.

"The pole automatically grows to a certain length," Druid explained.

"Wow, that's awesome! Now we can easily reach fruit and nuts that are high up in the trees."

I used to climb trees to pick the highest fruits and nuts, but there were some heights I just couldn't get to. And it might have been my imagination, but it always seemed like the fruits and nuts that were out of reach were the tastiest. I would ask for Ciel's help if I simply had to have them, but I usually just gave up.

"Didn't you say you hurt yourself once climbing too high to pick fruit?" Druid asked.

"Yeah."

The branch had broken, and I fell. Ciel caught me, but I injured my leg anyway. I still remember how much that hurt.

"Well, this item should cut our risk of injury way down."

Is that why he bought it? Because of that story I told him?

"Thanks."

Druid gently tousled my hair. "Well, let's test it out." He positioned the net

over a fruit, which then fell right in.

“Wow, how did the net get the fruit off the tree?”

I had seen the fruit fall with my own eyes, but I couldn’t tell at all how it had been cut down.

“Maybe it’s magic? I don’t really know the finer points of it.”

He removed the fruit from the net, and it didn’t have even a single cut or blemish. The area where the fruit had been attached to the tree was cleanly cut, too.

“This is a great item, considering how cheap it was.” Druid nodded over and over in satisfaction.

“Can I try it out?”

“Of course.”

I took the magic item from Druid and put the net over one of the bright-red fruits, which quickly fell into it.

“Wow, this item really is awesome! I didn’t even feel the fruit hitting the net. Do you think this magic item makes the fruit lighter, too? It doesn’t feel heavy.”

“This item sure turned out to be more than we imagined.”

“I know! Thanks for buying it, Mr. Druid.”

We used the item to gather more fruit. It was incredibly handy using it to pick the highest fruit since we didn’t need to climb the trees to reach it.

“How many did we pick?”

“About twenty or thirty.”

“I guess that’s it?”

There were still more fruits on the tree, but they all looked a bit dull in color. It was really nice, being able to be choosier in the ones we picked.

“All right, Ivy. Let’s hit the road.”

“Okay.”

I think we'll have this fruit for supper tonight. Ooh, I can't wait.



EXTRA * Special Delivery for Lord Foronda!



Lord Foronda's Perspective

K*NOCK, KNOCK.*

"Come in."

Has even more work come my way? Ahh...I just want to relax.

"Pardon me, my lord, but you have just received a faax from Lady Ivy."

From Ivy? Ah, yes. I remember happening to bump into Rattloore and his party one day and hearing they'd received faaxes from her. So she dropped me a line as well, eh? I didn't imagine she would actually write back to me. What a good little girl. I wish I had a daughter like her.

"Thanks," I said, taking the faax from my butler. I was curious about the work I had to do, but I was far more intrigued by the message from Ivy. *Well, I can take just a moment to read it.*

"Now, let's just see how our Ivy is doing."

"If you wish to take a short break, shall I prepare some tea for you, my lord?"

"That does sound appealing...but I've got work piling up, so I'll pass on that."

Unfortunately, I didn't have time for a leisurely tea break that day.

"Very well, my lord."

After my butler left the room, I ran my eyes over the faax.

"Now, I seem to remember there was a problem connected with Hatow Village. I think I have an investigation report somewhere... Aha, found it."

I picked up the lengthy document from the pile of papers on my desk and read it over.

"Yes...so it was Hatow. When I saw the faax from Rattloore, something did ring a bell, but I didn't realize Ivy was in the same village that had that scandal.

What do we have here... Illegal magic stone trading, eh?"

About a month earlier, Hatow had investigated the activities of its merchant guild master. All the magic stones in the village had skyrocketed in price, and they wanted to know why. And the investigation unearthed a collapsed magic stone cave and illegal magic stone trading done by the guild master. The caves in Hatow were unique in that man-made entrances were impossible to create. Your only choice was to wait for nature to open a hole for you, so it was a tough place to live. Hatow's only export was magic stones, and their adventurer guild master and captain of the village watch were still rookies. I only hoped they would be no worse than the merchant guild master.

"I sure hope Ivy doesn't get herself involved in the merchant guild's scandals... then again, she does have a habit of getting caught up in trouble."

I'm worried. Maybe I should introduce her to somebody in Hatow who can help her. Well, I suppose I should at least read her faax first. Let's see...

"She sounds like she's doing well. Hm? Oh, so she's a tamer. I always wondered what she was. The Sword of Flames and Lightning Royals wouldn't tell me. But a tamer...interesting."

It didn't seem like a skill she would need to hide from people...so why didn't they tell me? Well, I suppose it's rude to just blab about people's skills without their permission.

"What?! She's friends with the guild master and captain of the village watch in Hatow? Do most travelers just get chummy with the top dogs of the village like that? Well, I am glad she's made some friends, but still..."

Ivy sure was a mysterious little girl. The only kid in the Sword of Flames and the Lightning Royals. Normally, I'd think something was quite amiss to see a child among their ranks, but oddly enough, I didn't have that sense with Ivy. And she blended in just fine with all those eccentric adventurers, too. I didn't let them see how shocked I was, but I certainly was startled.

"Hm? Oh, Ivy's thanking me for introducing her to a nobleman. She didn't

need to worry herself over that... Ha ha! Yes, I agree, an uneventful life is indeed a good one. It sounds like things are going well with Druid, her travel companion. I suppose he's trustworthy."

Druid...Druid...I had the feeling I'd heard the name before somewhere. Where was it? Was he involved in some sort of incident? I certainly hope he wasn't one of the culprits.

"Druid...Druid... Agh, it's no use. I can't remember."

If he was one of the perpetrators, I definitely would've remembered. Which means...he must not be. Maybe Sifar would know? Next time I see him, I'll have to ask.

"I know, I'll just ask Ivy. Now, what should I ask to learn more about Druid? If I knew his age and his birthplace, that might jog my memory. Also, there's...his hobbies? No, I think his quirks would be more important. So, I'll definitely ask about those and..."

"Isn't Ivy still only eight years old? Why are you asking so many personal questions?"

He has a point. It's not appropriate to ask a kid what a grown man's quirks are. Wait...is Ivy eight? No, I remember Rattloore saying Ivy is nine now.

"Ivy is nine years old."

"Even so, it's still inappropriate. You shouldn't ask those questions."

Yes, yes, no need to hammer it home.

"By the way, when did you get back?" I shifted my attention from the faax to my son. Why was he sighing so wearily at me?

"Several days ago, I sent you a faax saying I was coming home. Didn't you read it?"

He sent me a faax? Ah yes, I do remember my butler telling me my son sent a faax. But I had a pile of work to get to, so I saved it for later and...then I completely forgot about it.

“Sorry, I forgot to look at it.”

My son’s eyes fell on the pile of papers on my desk. “That’s odd, Father. I’ve never seen you fall so far behind on your work. Has something happened?” He gave me a curious stare. He even looked a bit worried.

“Unforeseen circumstances forced me to go away from home for a while. Believe it or not, I managed to cut things short and come back *early*.”

It was a matter my subordinates and servants could not deal with, so I had no choice but to handle it myself...but my, was it a bother. I suddenly remembered how I’d gotten the giant pile of documents on my desk to begin with. After the disappearance of the giant crime organization, a bunch of people had popped up out of the woodwork to fill the power vacuum. Thankfully, most of them bit off more crime than they could chew and self-destructed. But some of the others had begun to do well for themselves. And many of them were trying to expand their crime organizations by recruiting aristocrats. Because of this, we’d had to send spies to observe the shady noble families. Several days earlier, I’d received word from one of those spies that a top dog in one of the gangs had made contact with a noble family. Now that the aristocracy was involved, it was too much for adventurers and watchmen to handle on their own, so I’d had to step in myself.

“I see, unforeseen circumstances... Oh, I just remembered, Sifar said he would be visiting tonight.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

*So...he managed to get the proof we need to crush that noble family, eh?
Good. Now, I need to read this faax and get back to work right away.*

“Hm... What?!” I read the rest of Ivy’s faax, and its contents made me scratch my head. “Courting a princess? What’s that all about?”

“It says, ‘Was she pretty? I was shocked to hear you turned her down.’ Father, when did you start courting a princess?”

My son had crept to my side and read my faax without my realizing it.

“Princess, my foot! I would *never* court such a harpy!”

“Father, you’re showing your true colors. And don’t call her a harpy; she *is* technically a princess. That’s a bit rude.”

The way he called her “*technically* a princess” sounded just as rude to me...

“Besides, I also heard rumors about your courtship.”

“What?”

“When you caught Count Faltoria of Otolwa and shut down the gang whose claws were extended all the way to the capital, the king was terribly grateful and offered to let you court the princess as a reward.”

“Um... What the hell gave anybody that idea...?”

I knew word had spread that the king had taken a liking to me because I was involved in taking down the crime organization, but a courtship with the princess as a reward? That was no reward, that was a punishment.

“Just how far have these rumors spread?”

“Well, since it’s in Ivy’s faax, I’d assume rather far?”

I let it be, since I figured the rumor would fade quickly. I didn’t realize that it would do so much damage.

“Never mind that trivial matter, Father. Is there anything else of interest in the faax?”

“*Trivial*, my foot! Have you no compassion for your own father?”

Harsh words, my boy.

“I think there’s no use in worrying. A new rumor will quickly take its place.”

Well...my son certainly knows his old man. It does please me. However...

“You could show a little more concern, though.”

“Concern? For my cunning father? Hmm... I dunno, sounds like a waste of

time to me.”

“I’m cunning, eh?”

“I think it’s just the perfect word to describe you, Father. By the way, that reminds me of something Rattloore said to me.”

Oh, what did Rattloore tell him?

“What did he say?”

“*You’re the spitting image of Lord Foronda, especially your personality.* And all the Sword of Flames members nodded in agreement when he said that. Don’t you think that’s rude? I wouldn’t consider myself nearly as cunning as you are, Father.”

I feel conflicted saying so, but his cunningness does match up quite well against mine.

“Come now, we are quite alike, son.”

Hey, why do you have such a sour look on your face?

“I...was unaware, Father.”

“Oh, please. The way you’re talking right now is cunning.”

“The way a man talks affects the way others will treat him, Father. And I’ve learned that speaking in this polite manner makes life easier in many ways.”

Yeah, that’s textbook cunning right there.

“What’s this? Ivy’s travel companion Druid also wrote to you... Ha ha ha! It’s your lucky day, Father. You’ve been spared the embarrassment of asking Ivy prying questions.”

What’s this? I took the faax from my son. Druid wrote down his personal information? Let me see...he’s thirty-four years old, born in Oll, and his hobbies are...

“What?! Druid of the town of Oll?!”

“Father...isn’t he the guild’s secret weapon?”

Ah, that’s right! He’s a famous adventurer from Oll.

“Ivy certainly knows how to reel in the big fish. But is it really okay for her to travel with this guy?”

He really was a top adventurer in terms of skill, but he never rose from the mid-tier ranks, so an investigation was launched about it. Based on the reports I read from that investigation, he didn’t seem like the type of person who would become the travel companion of a child.

“I think he’s a fine travel companion, Father. Based on the faax, it sounds like they’re having a fun time together. He even helps with the cooking.”

My son was right: It was clear from the faax that they were enjoying their time together. But just think, the guild’s secret weapon. That meant he was more than capable, which put my mind at ease to some extent...but I was still a little worried. *Perhaps it would behoove me to find an excuse to go visit them.*



BONUS ✧ What Captain Tableau Was Searching For



Captain Tableau's Perspective

K*NOCK, KNOCK.*

"Tableau, it's me. Can I come in?"

I looked up from my documents at the sound of the familiar voice. "Sure, come in."

When I saw my old childhood friend in the doorway, I did a little stretch as I waved to him. My back was stiff from hunching over those documents for so long.

"Long time no see," Priya said.

His words reminded me of the day we met. "That's for sure. It's been a whole week, right?"

"Yeah, an entire week. And you know, the captain's office really has come to suit you."

I smiled cynically. *It's come to suit me, eh? If you ask me, I'm better suited to letting loose in the great outdoors.*

"You said you were going to go check on the cave, right? How did it go? I'm guessing you're here to give the report."

The last time we spoke, Priya had told me he was going to go investigate a cave that Druid and Ivy had discovered. I only hoped that it would give this poor village just a little more income.

"Tableau, this cave just might be even bigger than the last one we used to mine magic stones from."

"What?"

Bigger than the last cave? But when I saw the new one earlier, it only looked medium-sized.

"It's much deeper than it looks," Priya said.

"What?! Do you mean it has a tunnel inside?"

"Sounds like it. I sent a search party there three days ago, and they found a tunnel from the room with the summoning circle that goes even farther into the cave. They went into it without much preparation, since they figured it couldn't go that much deeper, but it wound up going deeper than they expected, so they had to turn around and come back partway."

"It was *that* deep?"

"Yeah. We're preparing for a more thorough investigation right now. From what we know so far, the tunnel diverges into two paths, and there's also another room. If we can mine magic stones, make no mistake: That cave will be a huge revenue stream for Hatow."

"Oh, wow...thank goodness."

Now we wouldn't need to borrow money to pay Ivy back for all those magic stones she provided. But Hatow still desperately needed to find a new source of revenue—and fast. *Just think, Ivy and Druid not only saved us from the winter, they found the very cave that can bring us the money we've been seeking.* I could never thank them enough.

"I'm still shocked that we missed that tunnel last time. What an utter failure."

I thought I'd checked every last inch of that cave...I need to shape up.

"Oh, no, we didn't miss it."

"How is that possible?"

"There were traces of a damaged wall near the entrance to that tunnel from the room with the summoning circle. I think that a part of that wall crumbled away after we left the cave and revealed the tunnel."

"The wall crumbled away? Did any other parts of the cave collapse?"

Are the walls in that cave fragile? If so, it would be far too dangerous to send

adventurers in there.

“No other areas of the cave were damaged. It was really just where the tunnel was.”

So it was only one part of the cave. But what state are the tunnel walls in? “Did you check on the stability of the tunnel walls?” If they were fragile, we would need to reinforce them before we sent a team in.

“Yes, I was worried about them, so I had them checked. I just gave them a basic once-over because I didn’t have the proper magic item with me, but the walls seemed rather sturdy from what I could tell.”

Priya knew firsthand just how terrifying caverns and their walls crumbling really were, so I trusted his judgment.

“Tableau, don’t you feel like some magic has been at work to make our village a better place?”

Priya’s question reminded me of the time we saw our guardian deity in that cave—that giant serpent that had taken a liking to Ivy.

“You may be right. Do you think Ivy and Druid were the reason for it?”

Priya chuckled at my question. But to be honest, a part of me believed it was true.

“If they had never come to our village...I suppose we never would have gained the status we did.”

“Yeah, I don’t think we would have,” I agreed, nodding solemnly. Seriously, if they had never come to Hatow...well, I didn’t even want to think about what might have happened. *Oh, that’s right!* “I wanted to get your opinion on something. Take a look at this.”

I handed Priya a document that was several pages long. He took it with a curious gaze. Then when he read the contents and looked a little shocked, I gave him a playful smile.

“Tableau, is this...”

“I just wanted Hatow to have a source of income other than magic stones.”

When the cave entrance collapsed and we were no longer able to mine magic stones, Hatow lost its source of revenue. Since our budget and magic stones for winter had already been acquired by other means, we had been spared tragedy this year. But if that cave hadn't been discovered, Hatow would have definitely become a ghost town in a few years.

But our crisis this winter had forced me to face a harsh truth: Having only one source of income was extremely dangerous. We needed at least two. If we wanted to ensure the longevity of Hatow, we had to find another way to make money.

“Now that we've found the cave, the matter is no longer as urgent. However, we can't put all our eggs in one basket or we'll just find ourselves in the same predicament again later. I want to take precautions.”

“You're absolutely right. So that's why you've come up with this scheme?” Priya asked.

I nodded. The document I'd found was a rather old one, so we needed to investigate it and it might not even work out for us. But we still had to try.

“Medicinal herbs, eh?”

There were two old documents that could prove useful for Hatow, and both of them involved medicinal herbs.

“According to this old record, it comes from a flower that blooms in early spring?”

“That's right. Have you ever seen it?”

The documents had detailed illustrations of the flower. But unfortunately, I had no interest whatsoever in plants, so the drawing didn't look at all familiar to me. However, I got the feeling that I had seen it somewhere before.

“A small yellow flower? But I've never seen one like that on the outskirts of the village.”

While Priya wasn't interested in plants, either, he did go out into the forest more than I did, so I thought it would be more likely that he had spotted it somewhere...but I was wrong. Perhaps it had gone extinct? But I could have sworn I'd seen that flower in the village somewhere...

"It says this flower stabilizes the effects of potions," Priya said, looking up from the document in surprise.

"That's right. If we could find this flower, don't you think that would all but guarantee another source of revenue for Hatow?"

"Of course it would. You can bet on it."

Now I *really* wanted to find that flower.

The deterioration rate of potions varied greatly depending on how they were made. If these documents were right...if we could stabilize potions and make them degrade much more slowly by adding flower powder to them...then they would sell well, no doubt about it. Growing the flowers in Hatow might become a great enterprise.

"And the other medicinal herb is...ah, monster repellent."

That's right. The other old document I found contained information about a medicinal herb that repelled monsters. If you burned its dried leaves, they emitted a smell that monsters didn't like.

The medicinal herbs currently used as monster repellent were not widely cultivated, which made monster repellent quite expensive. That meant only the rich could afford it. But if we were able to lower its price, we could greatly reduce the number of traveler and adventurer deaths caused by monsters. I wanted to find it not only so Hatow could have a good source of revenue but also so I could help adventurers.

"Blue leaves, huh? Yeah, I've never seen this one, either," Priya said.

"Too bad. Well, it is an awfully old document."

I had to consider the possibility that they no longer grew near Hatow, but we

needed to at least look for them first.

“Could you have the adventurer guild do a search?” I asked.

“Sure. I’ll put in a request for the lower-level adventurers to handle it.”

I hope we find it quickly...but there’s no telling what will happen.

“I hope we can locate it,” Priya said.

“Me, too.”

Knock, knock.

“It’s Pith.”

“Come in.”

“Hello, Captain. Oh, Guild Master Priya, so good to see you. Are you here on business?”

I set the stack of papers Pith was carrying on my desk. When I saw how thick it was, my face tensed up. Work just kept coming to me, didn’t it?

“Hello, Vice-Captain Pith. We were just discussing the cave investigation,” Priya said.

“How’s it going?”

“It’ll end up being quite lucrative for our village,” Priya said.

Pith’s eyes lit up.

“We found a path that leads deeper into the cave. We followed it for a little while, and it looks like we’ll be able to mine magic stones from this new cave just like we used to in the old one.”

“Well, that is exciting news.”

“Yes, indeed. We want to investigate it as soon as possible, so I’ll be requiring your assistance.”

Pith eagerly nodded in reply. He was probably happy that Hatow had a promising revenue source since he’d been quite worried about it before.

“Huh? What’s this? These papers look awfully old.” Pith picked them up from my desk and read them over. Maybe he knew something about the medicinal herbs. “Well, you’ve found some very promising documents, haven’t you? I’m in awe. This flower... Hmm?”

Pith praised people so infrequently that his casual compliments almost made me laugh.

“Vice-Captain Pith, do you know anything about the flower that document describes?”

Pith gave me a peculiar look. Had I said something strange?

“Isn’t that it?”

I looked at the windowsill Pith was pointing at. There were tiny yellow flowers blooming on it, but I didn’t understand what he was trying to tell me.

“The shape and the color are clear as day! Even if you’re not interested in flowers, you should have figured it out!”

Hmm?

“Ohhh, *that* flower!” Priya cried.

I covered my ears and glared at him in annoyance, but for some reason he glared right back at me.

“*Those* are the flowers! They’re just like the ones in the document!”

“What?!”

With a start, I turned my eyes to the windowsill and... *Oh! Yes, they’re exactly like the flowers in the document. So that’s why I thought I’d seen them before. I see them every day, so even a flower-dunce like me couldn’t help but recognize them.*

“But are you sure that’s the one in the records?”

“We’ll just have to test it out and see,” Priya said.

I nodded. “True.”

Testing things is definitely very important. But have we really found it that easily? And if it was growing under our noses all this time, why haven't we been using it to stabilize potions like it said in the document? Is there some major drawback to using this flower? Now I'm starting to worry.

"Well, I think I'll take this document and these flowers to a potion maker to test tomorrow. I bet we'll have some results in just a few days."

"All right. Make it so."

Three days later, Pith dashed into my office with a potion in hand. After seeing the results of the test, we quickly secured an area to farm the flowers. Why *hadn't* we already been using this flower all along? It was truly a mystery.

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 6 has hit the shelves. Thank you to everyone who got themselves a copy. And to my illustrator Nama-sama, thank you for all the cute drawings of Ivy. I always look forward to watching Ivy grow up in the illustrations. Also, in the same month, Volume 3 of the manga is going on sale! I truly am grateful to everyone. In Volume 6, a new friend joins the party...and makes waves right out of the gate.

In Volume 6, with the rescue of the serpent from the summoning circle and Ivy's interactions with her companions, I really struggled with how to express just how terrifying summoning circles could be. At first, I thought maybe they could get wounded or cursed when they broke the summoning circle, but I wondered if there were some way I could deliver a more psychological terror. And after a lot of mulling it over, I settled on them losing part of their memories. So as not to make it too terrifying, I had Ivy and Druid sort out everything through their conversations, but reading back on it now, I'm worried I went a little too easy on them. Well, I do think I wrote it mostly the way I intended. The truth is, I wanted to write about Ivy and Druid laughing and smiling their way through their problems.

And in Volume 6, we have a new addition to the party: Sol! What's more, we have scenes with Sol being a hero! At first, I was planning on making Sol a more subdued character. But the more I wrote about Sol, the more fun I had. And before I realized it, I had Sol going *chomp* on a rampaging monster. That was one of my favorite scenes. I plan on giving Sol plenty of cool things to do moving forward.

Thank you to everyone at TO Books for your help with Volume 6. My editor K-sama, thank you once again for putting up with me. With all your help, we managed to get Volume 6 published. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I'm going to continue being high-maintenance, so thank you all in advance.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who read this book with all my heart. Also, I have some exciting news. Volume 7's release date has been set! In Volume 7, keep an eye on Ivy's and Druid's relationship! And be sure to check out Volume 3 of the manga as well. May we meet again in this "Isekai'ed into a world...where proper waste disposal rules!" light novel and manga series.

Honobonoru500

February 2022

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the sixth volume of Honobonoru500's second story, *Weakest Tamer!* Ivy discovers a black slime in her bag! She worries over what she should feed it. And how should she carry it?! When they send faaxes to their friends, a bunch of questions come back for Druid! Their doting friends make them feel warm and fuzzy inside. They make it through the cold winter to welcome back the spring. Now, where will their travels take them next?

Nama

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Ivy's Journey Thus Far:](#)

[Characters](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Part 6: Daily Life in Hatow Village](#)

[Chapter 276: Is Something Amiss?](#)

[Chapter 277: Let's Check In](#)

[Chapter 278: I Have a Weakness for Rarities](#)

[Chapter 279: A Very Loose Conversation](#)

[Chapter 280: Differences in Memory](#)

[Chapter 281: But Slimes Can Create, Too!](#)

[Chapter 282: Excuse Me, Are You a Guardian Deity?](#)

[Chapter 283: Sorry to Be a Bother](#)

[Chapter 284: Still So Small](#)

[Chapter 285: A Different Kind of Companion](#)

[Chapter 286: Sol Food](#)

[Chapter 287: Magic Energy?](#)

[Chapter 288: "Miracle" Is a Bit Extreme](#)

[Chapter 289: Let's Try Contacting Them](#)

[Chapter 290: My First Fax](#)

[Chapter 291: A Safe Way of Hunting](#)

[Chapter 292: No Solutions Come to Mind](#)

[Chapter 293: Land Management](#)

[Chapter 294: What's a Fan?](#)

[Chapter 295: My Current Status?](#)

[Chapter 296: Nothing to Worry About](#)

[Chapter 297: Too Bad It's Cold](#)

[Chapter 298: Please Let It Go](#)

[Chapter 299: Feeding Sol](#)

[Chapter 300: Scared?](#)

[Chapter 301: My Lips Are Sealed!](#)

[Chapter 302: Careful; It's Slippery!](#)

[Side: The End - An Account of a Woman of Ratomi Village](#)

[Chapter 303: Nostalgia](#)

[Chapter 304: Closer and Closer to Springtime](#)

[Chapter 305: He Snapped!](#)

[Chapter 306: Baths Are Essential](#)

[Chapter 307: The Forest of Light](#)

[Chapter 308: Getting Ready for Spring](#)

[Chapter 309: Spring Things](#)

[Side: Father and Daughter - Tableau's Perspective](#)

[Chapter 310: A Grateful Realization](#)

[Chapter 311: Departure](#)

[Chapter 312: Many Snakeys](#)

[Chapter 313: Purple Magic Stones](#)

[Chapter 314: Our Plans in Hatata Village?](#)

[Chapter 315: An Eerie Noise](#)

[Chapter 316: Hatada Village](#)

[Chapter 317: Sister Villages](#)

[Chapter 318: A New Monster Species?](#)

[Chapter 319: A Dump in the Forest](#)

[Chapter 320: Just the Magic Energy!](#)

[Chapter 321: Food for Everyone](#)

[Chapter 322: Roly-Poly](#)

[Chapter 323: Dropped Loot](#)

[Chapter 324: My Eyes Hurt](#)

[Extra: Special Delivery for Lord Foronda!](#)

[Bonus: What Captain Tableau Was Searching For](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About the Creators](#)

[Newsletter](#)