



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

WRITTEN BY
Honobonoru500
ILLUSTRATED BY Nama

NOVEL
3!

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*Weakest
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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IVY'S JOURNEY THUS FAR:

START!

Left Ratomi
Village for good!

Parting ways with the fortune-teller was sad, but I've gotta push through!

I made friends
with an Adandara?
Move forward
two squares.

Hey, sweetie, wanna
join us?



Met Sora.
Move forward
one square.♪

PU, PU!

Us weakest-level
creatures gotta stick
together.



Helped two
adventurer teams—the
Sword of Flames and the
Lightning Royals—look
for some bad guys!
Stop and rest here
for one turn.

Let's all share
a meal!



It's time to
say goodbye to
the adventurers...

To be continued..... ||

SORA AND I
SAVE THE DAY!
Rounded up all
the kidnappers!
Move forward
2 squares.

Sora helped us unmask
a lot of traitors!

Commence
Operation Bait
the Kidnappers!

Go back one square.

You gain one important clue!
But it's too dangerous, so you
have to stay behind.

CHARACTERS



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.

Sora

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

ciel

An adandara (catlike monster) that Ivy keeps running into. For some reason, it's taken a liking to her. Often cuddles up to friends.

Sword of Flames

Seizerk

Leader of the veteran adventurer group Sword of Flames. Firm and strong, but often makes bone-headed decisions.

Sifar

A carefree young man with dark blue hair. He usually has a smile on his face, but when he doesn't, it's often terrifying...

Rattloore

A cheerful man with woolen hair. Cares a lot about his friends, but his mood often changes on a dime.

Gnouga

A wild-looking man with black hair. Loves meat so much that he basically eats nothing else.

Verdant Wind

Mira

Tamer of the team Verdant Wind. In spite of her mature appearance, she's rather gullible and aided an evil organization of kidnappers.

Marm

He and Tort are twins, so they're often mistaken for each other.

Tort

He and Marm are twins, so they're often mistaken for each other.



Ratome Village Residents

Oght

Captain of Ratome Village's gatekeeping and patrolling police force. Often acts before thinking.

Velivera

Vice-captain of Ratome Village's gatekeeping and patrolling police force. Since he's so caring, he's often stuck cleaning up the captain's messes.

Lightning Royals

Bolorda

Leader of the veteran Lightning Royals. He's a little careless, but thanks to his kind appearance, his team often comes to him for advice.

Lowcreek

Even though his name resembles Marcreek's, the two are not brothers. Often ends up struggling thanks to Bolorda's sloppy nature.

Rickbert

Has an appetite that rivals Gnouga's. Often ends up looking really mad thanks to the shape of his eyes.

Marcreek

Even though his name resembles Lowcreek's, the two are not brothers. Since he has angry eyes, he often looks glum.

The Weakest Tamer
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The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 3

Story by Honobonoru500

Illustrations by Nama

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PART 4 * My Companions in the Town of Oll - 1



Chapter 127:

Departure

“ALL SET!”

I rolled up my tent and put it in my magic bag. I had six magic bags in total: three from Bolorda, two from Lowcreek, and one from Gnouga. They all seemed to have plenty of bags to spare. I guess that's inevitable when you're a veteran adventurer. Common magic bags had lots of space and were easy to use. I was shocked to discover that all my possessions could fit neatly into just two of them.

The best part of all was their time-stopping feature—say goodbye to rotten food! I just had to be careful not to accidentally put Sora in one of the magic bags, like I had before. *Come to think of it, what would happen to Sora if I did that?* I remembered hearing once that Sora would be repelled out of it. *Anyway, I'd better be extra careful when I'm in a hurry or half-asleep.*

“Look, Mr. Rattloore! All my stuff fit into just two magic bags!”

“Well, those bags are high capacity. Go ahead and keep the extras with you as spares. That's what the boys would've done with 'em.”

“Thank you. I love them! I can move so freely now... It's perfect!”

I'd been carrying five lesser magic bags including the one on my back, so switching to three common magic bags plus Sora's bag lightened my load quite a bit. I tried tying the magic bag with the most important items around my waist and hanging the other two from my shoulders. It was really easy to walk that way.

As I gleefully marched about with my bags, Rattloore picked up the trash around my tent. When I noticed this, I scrambled over to him. “Sorry! I should be doing that.”

“Don't sweat it, kid. I'm happy to help.”

Rattloore, with his unceasing kindness, had also given me a magic light so I

could explore caves where I couldn't set fires. I was hesitant to accept such valuable items from the adventurers at first, but they could easily get replacements by clearing monsters out of the caves near this town, so everyone told me not to worry about it and I gratefully accepted their gifts. After all, we were talking about powerful monsters here, so it would have been impossible for me to score those items on my own.

"Thank you so much," I said.

Like I mentioned, when I'd first arrived in this town, I'd had five bags. Now, I had two magic bags hanging off my shoulders and one exclusively for Sora. The lesser magic bag for important items that I kept tied around my waist had been upgraded to a common magic bag, which made everything much more secure. I'd gotten more camping supplies and total belongings, but I was carrying less bulk and I felt so much lighter. I was astounded by how different it felt—and I owed everything to the good people I'd met.

Once we'd dumped the trash at the designated spot, our work in the plaza was done.

"Thanks for all your help, Mr. Rattloore!" He obviously had his own packing to do, yet he'd stayed and helped me clean up. I truly was in his debt. "Things got so chaotic, but I really had a lot of fun."

Rattloore gently patted my head. I looked up at him, and he softly smiled as he looked into my eyes. Seeing the smile that had given me courage time after time broke my heart a little.



“So...” I hesitated, not knowing what to say.

“See ya later,” Rattloore said. “Have a good journey.”

“I will.”

“Just promise me you’ll go easy on yourself. And take care of your health!”

“You, too, Mr. Rattloore.”

“We’ll see each other again...I just know it.”

“Yes...I promise I’ll come back and see you.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Rattloore said.

I felt something surging deep inside of me. I bowed quickly to push the feeling back down and left the plaza. This was goodbye for Rattloore and me, since he had work to do. But just as he was leaving, he turned back and waved at me. I waved back, then headed for the gate. Rattloore truly was a great person to the very end.

The scenery blurred around me. I swallowed my tears and kept moving forward.

I’ll definitely come back to visit him.

For some reason, the guards at the gate stopped me to say goodbye, which caught me a little off guard. I’d only taken a few steps down the road when they called out to me, “Come back soon!” I was so happy I spun around and waved back at them with a huge smile on my face.

A couple of minutes into the forest, I took stock of my surroundings. I didn’t sense any human auras around, so I took Sora out of its bag.

“Okay, Sora. We’re back to our travels today. I’m so glad you’re my companion.”

“Pu, pu!”

“He he he, yeah! You, too, Ciel!” I called out, sensing the adandara’s aura. It jumped down gracefully from a tree and landed right in front of me. *Aw, you’re so majestic and graceful.*

“Okay, let’s go! Um...Sora? That path will take us back to Ratome Village. Please come back here.”

“Puuu!”

Er, you don’t have to make a scene about it. Seriously...

Sora boisterously bounced toward us—so boisterously, in fact, that it slammed right into Ciel. But the adandara didn’t seem to mind. *Maybe Ciel just has a really tough body? Sora’s body slams have started to really hurt recently.*

“Come on, Sora, let’s go before it gets late.”

“Puuu...”

Ah. It’s sulking. Come to think of it, Sora’s been sulking a lot lately. It seems to get angry over the most trivial things, too. Is Sora going through a rebellious phase...? Wait. Do slimes go through puberty?

“Ciel, starting today, you’ll get to travel with us the whole way to Oll, the next town. I’m looking forward to traveling with you.”

Mrrrow, Ciel purred sweetly, rubbing its face against mine. It was terribly cute.

“Puuuuu!” Sora wailed loudly.

I looked at Sora in surprise, and it eagerly lunged at me. I fumbled to catch it, then sighed in relief when it was safely in my arms. *Thank goodness I didn’t drop it.*

I looked at Sora, who looked right back at me and wiggled. That was the way it acted when it wanted attention. Maybe it was lonely because I’d let it stew when it was sulking?

“I’m looking forward to traveling with you, too, Sora.”

“Pu, pu, puuu!” it sang, in a tone it used when it was in a good mood.

I smiled at Sora and started walking again. We had to hurry if we wanted to meet our travel goal for the day. Sora jumped down to the ground and bounced in a circle around me. Its mood had been changing like the wind lately. It didn’t seem like Sora was going though growing pains, so...what was it?

“Let’s stop here for the day and rest.” I searched for tracks around us, looking for big claw marks in high places or large paw prints on the ground. If I found either, there were most likely big animals or monsters nearby. I found some small tracks but nothing major.

“Looks all clear to me.”

Mrrrow.

“Okay! Let’s look for a place to make camp!”

“Puuu, pu-puuu,” Sora sang. Its voice sounded far away.

I nervously looked around and couldn’t find Sora. “Aw, come on! You were right next to me a minute ago...” I’d been so focused on searching the area for tracks that I hadn’t noticed Sora had run off. “Sora?” I called, listening for its voice as I searched.

“Pu, puuu!”

I found Sora quickly...right next to the mouth of a cave. I ran up to it nervously—animals and monsters usually hung out in caves. A cautious peek inside revealed no signs of life.

“Oh, thank goodness! Sora, you need to be careful around caves. They’re dangerous.”

“Pu!” Sora snapped sassily in reply.

Was it looking for a place for us to sleep? This cave was an ideal place to spend the night, what with its large opening. I stepped inside and looked for tracks—monsters would likely be glad to sleep in a cave like this, too.

“Looks safe to me. Well spotted, Sora!”

“Puuu!”

Yeah, Sora is definitely getting sassy. I could sort of make out a puffed chest in my slime’s silhouette. Sora was being so adorable that I just had to pat its head.

“Let’s camp here tonight. Okay, Ciel?” Since Ciel had been wandering around the mouth of the cave, I was sure it would tell me if something was wrong.

Mrrrow.



Guess that means we're safe. What a relief! We found a great place to sleep tonight, thanks to Sora.

"Thanks, Sora," I told the slime. "I think we're going to get some great rest here tonight."

Sora jiggled in reply.

Okay, let's eat dinner before it gets dark. As I took some potions out of my bag for Sora's dinner, Ciel purred. I looked over and noticed that it was about to leave the cave. We stared at each other.

"Are you hungry?"

Mrrrow.

That makes sense. It's been a while since it last hunted.

"Okay, Ciel. Have a safe hunting trip!"

Purrr, it replied, dashing out of the cave. Instead of having its meal in front of us, Ciel always ate before coming back from hunting. It really was a smart, sweet creature.

"Okay, Sora, let's also—annnd you're already eating." Sora was halfway through the potions I'd retrieved from my bag. *I don't recall telling you it was okay to eat yet... Well, whatever.*

I took out some dried meat and the fruit I'd picked in the forest out of my bag and ate it. Since I had time-freezing bags now, I'd gathered a little more than I needed. *Oh well, I guess having too much to eat isn't really a problem. Maybe this will finally help me grow!* I looked really young for my age, and that bothered me quite a bit.

I can't put some muscle on these bones unless I eat a lot. I looked at my arms—they were wire thin. I tried to flex my muscles, but

the lack of any tone only made me more insecure about my body. I'd seen other kids my age, and they were all much bigger and stronger than me. *Maybe I should start eating a little bit more every day...*

Purrr.

"Hm? Oh, welcome back, Ciel."

A satisfied-looking Ciel strutted into the cave. It must have been full from a good hunt. Thank goodness. *Hey, this dried meat is really good.* Dried meat had a different taste depending on where you bought it, and that particular butcher was one of the best ones around. I had a feeling he was actually the reason it had gotten so popular.

I wish I'd bought a little more meat for the journey...

Chapter 128: Sora's Mood Swings?

“PU, PU-PUUU!” Sora sang, jumping to and fro.

“C’mom, Sora, this way! You’re going the wrong way!”

Sora’s moods had been getting even stranger over the past couple of days. Why did it always body slam me? Whenever it did that, I thought through everything that happened before and afterward, but I still couldn’t figure out why.

I’d wondered if Sora was trying to tell me it was feeling ill, but it was devouring its potions just as quickly as ever. I took a closer look at its movements, but it seemed to be moving normally with no pain at all. I tried asking Sora what was wrong many times, but I couldn’t understand its answers. The only thing I did notice was that Sora seemed to jiggle with irritation more often than before. I thought this might be a sign of emotional instability, but I had no idea what I should do about it.

“Puuu.”

“Are you okay, Sora?”

My one consolation was that Sora’s mood swings didn’t last long. It would jump around and slam into me to express its irritation, but that would only last for about five minutes. Once its anger had passed, it would jiggle over to me, same as always. Still, I couldn’t shake the sense that it was trying to complain about something...

I picked Sora up and hugged it tight. Ciel peered at the little slime in concern with me. *Seriously, what should I do? I have no idea, and that worries me a little.*

We were on the seventh day of our resumed journey, about halfway to Oll. Should we keep going, or should we turn back? It was a tough decision.

“Pu, puuu,” said Sora listlessly. I looked at its face, but it didn’t seem tired.

Maybe it really was just irritated.

“I’m sorry I can’t do anything for you.”

“Puuu.” Sora wiggled for a little while, then closed its eyes. It had fallen asleep right there in my arms. I gently put it into its bag. I wanted to do something to help it, but I couldn’t. It was so frustrating.

“Maybe if we try we can get to Oll ahead of schedule.”

I wouldn’t be able to ask anyone in Oll about Sora directly, but someone there might know a thing or two about slimes. And if there was a bookstore, maybe I could find a book about them. Best case scenario, I might meet a tamer I could talk to. According to Bolorda, there weren’t many books written about slimes, but they did exist. But if the books I’d seen so far were any indication...well, I wasn’t holding my breath.

Mrrrow.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Ciel?”

Ciel kept glancing behind us. I thought maybe it had seen something, but it didn’t seem worried. What could it be?

“Umm, what is it?”

Ciel stared into my eyes and lay down in front of me with its body turned sideways. Then it swatted my back with its tail.

“Wait...are you trying to tell me to get on your back?”

Mrrrow, it answered.

Can you even ride an adandara? I don’t want to hurt its back. “Thanks...but are you sure you can support my weight?”

Mrrrow.

I guess that means yes. Ciel does walk a lot faster than me, and I’m worried about Sora...so I guess I’ll accept the ride.

“Don’t hurt yourself, okay? If I get too heavy, make me get off.”

Purr, purr.

I carefully climbed onto Ciel's back, shifting my belongings so I wouldn't hurt it. *There, that should be okay.*

When it sensed I was ready, Ciel began to walk slowly. My heart raced a little, but its faint vibrations thrummed rhythmically in my chest. My only fear was that I would fall off if Ciel walked too quickly, since there was no place to grab.

Ciel walked slowly for a while, then quickened its pace some when it decided it was safe. I got jostled a little, but I still stayed on okay. If I tightened up my core, Ciel might even be able to run.

I admired the view from atop Ciel. It definitely moved faster than I could. *Are my legs just abnormally short? I looked down at them. Well, I'm a kid, of course my legs are short. But I'm gonna grow more. I'll be fine...I know it.*

My bag started to wiggle a little. I looked inside and found Sora, its eyes slightly open. When our eyes met, it stared hard at me for a while before falling asleep again for a few seconds. *Really, what's wrong? I hope it isn't sick...*

"Pu, puuu," Sora chirped, then jumped from its bag to the ground. Well, it seemed healthy enough now.

Still, I can't believe it... I looked at our surroundings to see where we were on the map. Yeah, I must have short legs. It would have taken me two days to walk here, but it only took Ciel one day.

Why do I feel so bitter? If I massaged my legs...would that make them grow?

"Pu-puuu," Sora said, its pitch rising at the end.

I looked at it and it stared right back at me. Then it bounced all around, looking happy this time. *What a relief.*

"Let's have dinner." I'll worry about my legs later. I'll be fine... I'm about to have a growth spurt!

As soon as I took the potions out of my bag, Sora immediately started chowing down. I guess it was hungry. The potions disappeared into Sora the same way they always did. *Okay, it's eating just as well and as quickly as usual.*

"I wonder what the problem is, then?" I asked Ciel, but the slime just stared sideways at me.

“Pu, puuu,” Sora trilled after its meal, cheerfully bouncing and spinning around us.

Maybe I had nothing to worry about all along. Or maybe it comes in waves? Urrrgh, I don't get it. “Well, I guess it's a good thing you're feeling okay for now, right?”

Mrrrow, the adandara chimed in.

I'd better keep an eye on Sora's behavior. But at least right now it seems all right.

I took some dried meat and fruit out of my bag. The fruit I chose for my meal today was rather rare. In town, it was considered a luxury and sold at a high price. Ciel scouted out the trees for edible fruit as it walked, and when it spotted something, it let me know. I looked for fruit, too, but my eyes weren't as sharp as Ciel's. I was fighting a little battle with myself over it. *Mark my words: Someday, I will spot the fruit before Ciel!*

I ate my dried meat and peeled the fruit. An intoxicatingly sweet aroma hit my nose. It smelled delicious, but sadly, I couldn't remember the name of this fruit. Since it was usually so hard to get, I thought it was pointless to learn its name. Past Me, however, remembered the name “mango.”

“Mango...I'd better be sure not to call it that by mistake.” I took a bite, and its sweet juices flooded my mouth. No wonder it was considered a luxury! It was good—so good. And it had a unique flavor, too. It was tender yet sturdy. It had substance. It was mysterious in every way.

I looked at the magic bag on the ground beside me. I'd actually picked way too many of the fruit. But because of the time-freezing feature, I didn't need to worry about them spoiling. *Gee, maybe I should sell these when I get to Oll.*

Even though I'd gotten a lot of reward money, it did tend to disappear quickly. I needed to be proactive and get myself a steady source of income. When I thought about what else I could sell besides the meat I'd hunted, I remembered the fruit and nuts I'd gathered from trees in the forest. If I could pick more as I traveled and sell them in town, I could increase my income.

My only concern was whether merchants would let me sell them my fruit the

same way butchers let me sell them my meat. I'd heard that many merchants wouldn't let you sell them foraged fruit without certification from the adventurers' guild. All the hard work I spent on foraging would go to waste if I couldn't sell anything.

"The adventurers' guild, eh? It'd be really handy if I could register with them, but that's definitely out of the question since they'd need to know my skill level. The merchant guild doesn't need to know my skill level to register me, but that's a guild for people who run shops... Too bad."

Run a shop... I couldn't do that while I'm traveling, could I? I guess Sifar and the others were right. Maybe I need to find someone nice and trustworthy and have them register me with the adventurers' guild.

"Puuu."

My head spun in the direction of Sora's voice.

"Puuu."

"Huh?"

"Puuu."

Is it talking in its sleep? I stared hard at Sora, and it definitely looked like it was asleep. I petted it gently, but its eyes stayed closed. It looked neither tired nor in pain. It really was just sleeping.

"What a relief. You were just sleep-talking." But now I'm wondering...is sleep-talking one of Sora's recent changes? I'd better make a mental note of it.

Purr, Ciel hummed, smelling Sora to make sure it was okay. The adandara cradled the slime in its paws, curled up, and closed its eyes...so I guess it was okay.

"Thanks for all your help today, Ciel."

Ciel purred, its eyes still closed.

Are you sleepy? Well, I wouldn't blame you, since you had to carry me on your back all day. I'm sorry, buddy. I softly petted Ciel's head, and it smiled contentedly.

We were spending the night at the foot of a big tree, using its thick, sprawling roots as a bed. I looked up and saw the tree's massive branches spreading over us like a roof. I squinted my eyes and stared up at the sky. Dense clouds veiled the moon. *Looks like it might rain.*

I glanced around. Since I was on the tree's roots, I was raised a little higher than the surrounding ground. *If it's just a little rain, we should be fine.* Rain was not a traveler's friend. *If it rains hard, we'll have to wait it out here for a while.*

Chapter 129: Thunderstorms Are Scary

I LOOKED UP at the sky. “Good. It’s not raining.”

The thick clouds the night before had worried me, but it was still dry. However, the clouds were blanketing the entire sky. The air also felt damp, so there was a good chance it would rain. A little drizzle wouldn’t be a problem, but a proper storm would be a disaster. Since rain masked the scent of animals and monsters, it made the forest much more dangerous. Then there was the lightning to deal with.

“Pu, puuu,” Sora sang, bouncing merrily around.

Ciel turned its attention from Sora to the sky. Did it sense something?

“Hey, Ciel, can you tell if it’s going to rain?”

Meow?

I think that meant “I dunno yet.” I looked up again. The thick blanket over the sky definitely looked like thunderclouds now.

“Well, that’s a problem.”

If lightning struck, it would be dangerous to be near the trees. Seeking out a cave or a den for shelter would be ideal, but there was no guarantee I’d find one on our path. I pulled my map out of my bag and scanned the area. *Aren’t there any caves marked on the map?*

“There aren’t any. Well, let’s hope it’s just rain. If it’s thunder and lightning...”

“Pu-pu-puuh, pu-pu, pu-puuh,” Sora chirped, jumping onto the map.

“Sora, we have to make a plan to stay safe from the storm, don’t we?” I looked at our path to civilization on the map... There was nothing but forest between us and the next town. If only there were some rocky hills, then there might be a cave we could hide in if things got bad.

“Let’s veer off course to the rocky hills. Thunderstorms are just too scary. I’d

rather be safe than sorry.”

When it was still just me and Sora, we ran into a thunderstorm once. We'd frantically looked for shelter but couldn't find a cave or a den to hide in. We had resorted to huddling at the foot of a tiny tree out of necessity. As I lay there, terrified of the incoming thunder, a giant tree nearby was struck by lightning and fell to the ground. Luckily, we were far enough away from the tree that it hadn't hurt us, but Sora and I both jumped in terror. I never wanted to experience a fright like that again.

“Puuu,” Sora trembled. Perhaps it had recognized the word “thunderstorm.”

I couldn't tell if lightning would strike, but I had to make a plan in case it did. We would arrive in town a little behind schedule, but safety came first.

“Okay, we'll have to go out of our way, but let's head toward the town through these rocky hills. We're probably just an hour's walk away from them.”

There was no guarantee that we'd find a cave in the rocky hills, but that was out of our control. We'd just have to pray that there was some shelter for us when we got there. Or that lightning didn't strike in the first place—that would be my first choice.

I packed up my gear and set off quickly. After just a couple minutes of walking, little raindrops started to fall.

“There's the rain. Sora, you should get back in your bag.” I put Sora in and took out my waterproof cloak. It was enough to keep me dry from a light rain like this.

“Are you doing okay, Ciel?”

Ciel didn't seem to mind the light rain; its expression was aloof. *What a strong creature you are.*

A bit further into our trek, the rain started coming down harder, and I could hear the faint rumble of thunder. It was still quite distant, but unfortunately for us, it was definitely there.

“Whew, d'you think we'll find a cave? I sure hope we do.”

We'd somehow managed to arrive at the rocky hills before the thunderstorm

caught up to us. However, whether or not we'd actually find a place to hide was in fate's hands. I studied the rocks as we walked.

“Aha!” I found a tiny den! “Oh, thank goodness!”

I approached the cave and scanned the area around it. There were no animal or monster auras. I searched for traces of monsters or large animals, but everything I found was quite old. That gave me a moment's relief. The next hurdle was what the inside of the cave looked like. I hoped it was empty.

I surveyed carefully inside the cave. There were no signs of life, so we could use it without any problems. I crawled into the den and lit my magic light. The space was deeper than I'd thought—there was even plenty of room for Ciel, too.

“Looks like we found ourselves a good den.”

Mrrrow.

Sora was wriggling inside its bag, so I let it out.

“I guess we'll wait out the thunderstorm in here.”

Sora bounced around the den curiously. It made louder noises than usual, seeming to enjoy the way its voice echoed off the walls.

“Pu, puuu... Pu, pu, puuu.”

Ciel shook itself over and over by the den's entrance. Tiny rain droplets hit me with each shake. *Well, we did walk an awfully long time in that rain.* My cloak wasn't enough to shield me completely, and my clothes were soaked. *If I stay in these wet things, I might catch cold. I'd love to build a fire and dry off, but that's too dangerous without proper ventilation by the den's entrance.*

I stuck my wet arm out and waited a few moments. I felt a breeze. *There must be a wind current around here, so it should be safe to build a fire.*

By the glow of my magic light, I collected twigs and leaves from the corners of the den. There were also some thicker logs, which would definitely be useful. Thin sticks burned out too quickly. I piled up the leaves and stacked the sticks on top. *All set!*

I took my flint out of my bag and made some sparks. The sound of the stones

striking together echoed through the den.

Crackle! Crackle!

Thankfully, the leaves and sticks I'd gathered were completely dry, and they caught fire after only a few attempts. We were good to go!

"Fire is dangerous, so be careful, Sora. You, too, Ciel."

"Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

The fire licked up the sticks and burned brighter. I watched it for a few minutes, then added a log when I was sure it was safe.

"That looks pretty sturdy."

I pulled some dry clothes and a cloth out of my magic bag and started toweling off my hair and body. I laid out my wet clothes on a nearby boulder to dry.

"Ciel, would you like me to rub you dry?" I asked, approaching the adandara with a large cloth. I touched its fur—it was still a little wet. I slowly dried its fur with my cloth...which was a very strenuous undertaking since Ciel was so big.

Mrrrow. There was worry in Ciel's eyes.

"Don't worry, it's okay... There. Feel better now?"

I was pretty sure I'd dried the wettest spots. Ciel looked satisfied.

"Puuu!" Sora seemed angry that Ciel was getting all the attention.

Gee, somebody's gotten clingy. I gently wiped Sora with my cloth, too. The little slime didn't really need a wipe-down—it wasn't wet—but its content expression was just so adorable. "There. You're good to go!"

"Pu, puuu."

I placed a pot of water on the fire to boil, adjusting the flame as needed. After a while, I heard some very loud thunder outside.

"Puuu!!!" Sora squealed, burrowing beneath Ciel's belly. Our last encounter with a thunderstorm seemed to have left quite an impression. To be honest, I

was also scared to death. My body trembled lightly. The thunder was booming pretty loud and hard. The rain was coming down in sheets now, too. It was deafening.

Mrrrow. Ciel seemed to be thinking the same thing. It was gently licking Sora to soothe the slime cowering beneath its furry belly.

This storm really is wild. The sound of the rain and lightning above echoed within our little den. It sounded so intense out there that I was worried what it looked like outside.

“I hope there’s no major damage.” Sometimes roads got blocked after a heavy storm. And if a lightning strike caused a forest fire, we’d have to get out of here fast or we’d be in danger. *This is really scary.*

“Pu, puuu,” Sora whimpered meekly. I looked toward the slime and saw it was still hiding under Ciel’s belly. *You poor thing... I wish I could hide, too.*

As the crashing thunder and lightning echoed all around us, I caught myself envying Sora just a little.

Chapter 130:

Damage in the Forest

I STEPPED OUT OF THE DEN and looked up. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. It was hard to believe we'd had that horrible thunderstorm just last night.

"Phew! Boy, that storm really was intense!" It had poured all night, and the thunder and lightning were unrelenting. Sora and I shivered every time lightning struck and thunder shook the ground around us. Ciel had cuddled with us while we slept, but we just couldn't stomach that thunder and lightning.

"Sleepy...so sleepy."

"Puuu." Even Sora's voice sounded weak.

Ciel, unbothered by everything, was doing its usual morning stretches. *I feel safe with you, Ciel.* The trip to our rocky hill camp had taken us on quite a detour on our path to Oll. *We'll try our best to get to town today.*

"Okay, let's go!"

We left our hillside camp and walked back into the forest that led to Oll...but when I saw what lay around me, I stopped in my tracks. The rain and wind had been so powerful the night before that all the smaller trees had been snapped to the ground.

"Oh dear. This is bad." The fallen trees were blocking the path into town; we would have to cross over them one by one. And from what I could see, there were an awful lot of fallen trees.

"Well, let's push on." *We can't let ourselves get held up here.* I stepped carefully, taking care not to trip as I slowly stepped over each tree.

"Oh no! We can't possibly cross over this..." There were so many broken trunks and branches piled in front of us that they basically formed a wall. It would be impossible to climb over, so I resigned myself to walking around the tangle of fallen trees. There were a lot of them, so I wound up walking quite a

distance.

“I’m beat... Let’s take a little break.” I sat on a downed tree and drank some water. I looked at Sora, who was wobbling a little listlessly. The sleepless night had taken its toll.

“Sora, want to go back in your bag?”

“Fuuu.”

Huh? Is it just me, or did Sora make a noise it’s never made before...?

I scooped up my aimlessly bouncing slime and saw that it was a little dirty, probably from jumping around on the rain-soaked earth. I gently wiped the mud off Sora, and it smiled contentedly.

“Have a nice rest.” *Okay. Break time is over. Let’s get back in the saddle.*

Purrr. Ciel approached me as I tried to stand up. Then it turned to the side and slapped its own back lightly with its tail.

“Thanks, Ciel, but the ground is really muddy. It’ll be a lot more tiring for you this time.”

Meow!

I got the feeling this meant “I’ll be fine!” Ciel had that look in its eyes, anyway.

Hmmm...will Ciel really be okay? “If you get tired, you should stop. Promise me, okay? I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

Mrrrow.

“Thanks, Ciel.” I hugged the adandara. I hadn’t slept much and was pushing my limits, too.

Mrrrow.

I clambered up on Ciel’s back and shifted the position of my bags. The most important thing was to make sure I wasn’t crushing the bag that held Sora.

“Okay, we’re all ready to go. When you’re ready, Ciel.” I realized I was bowing respectfully, even though I knew Ciel couldn’t see me. *Why do I bow like that? Is it a nervous tic?*

Slowly, Ciel began to move. Each time we climbed over a tree, it was just as bumpy as you'd expect. Compared to my last adandara-back ride, this felt like a full-body workout. *Riding like this is...pretty hard in its own way.*

The farther Ciel carried us, the more the air began to smell like smoke. Maybe the lightning had started a forest fire.

"Ciel, can we stop for a minute?" From my perch atop Ciel's back, I looked around us but saw no flames. *I hope all the fire burned out already. Since the rain got the trees so wet, I don't think it could have spread very far.*

"It sure smells smoky."

Ciel let out a *mrrrow* and resumed its steady pace. I kept my eyes peeled as we watched for any sign of fire. *Maybe all that's left is the smell?*

Even at our slow pace, we covered a lot of ground. I really did owe Ciel all my gratitude. But there was still one thing that bothered me...

"No matter how far we travel...everything looks the same." I looked ahead and saw only an endless sea of fallen trees. *How much of this forest is damaged? I also don't see any place for us to spend the night. That's our biggest problem of all. I need to find somewhere to make camp.*

I looked around, but even the trees that still stood were tangled up with branches and twigs that had flown off the other ones in the storm. Wet leaves were everywhere on the ground. No way could we sleep there. *Honestly, I don't know what to do...*

"Thanks, Ciel. I'm getting off now."

Mew.

I got off Ciel and stretched a little. All my muscles screamed in protest. My inner thighs in particular were in terrible shape. *Guess I have muscle soreness to look forward to tomorrow.*

"Aren't you tired, Ciel?"

Meowww. Ciel rubbed its face against my hand as I petted it, and it squinted its eyes in pleasure. *You are just too cute.*

After a little playtime with Ciel, I set off to find a place for us to sleep. *I never*

dreamed the storm damage would cover such a huge area. Guess I misread the situation. I looked at the ground. It was muddy with rainwater. I couldn't possibly pitch a tent here.

"I guess we'll only be taking little breaks today." *This is going to be tough on our bodies since we're already sleep deprived.* I stood still for a moment and looked around again...but I still couldn't find a place where we could sleep. As I heaved a sigh, my bag started to wiggle.

"Good morning, Sora."

Sora, revived after its nap, sprung out of its bag and peered around. "Pu, puuu." There was a strange tone in Sora's voice as it looked at me.

Huh? Are you surprised the scenery hasn't changed at all? "Sora, it looks like there were a lot of trees knocked down in the storm. Ciel has been carrying us as quickly as possible ever since you fell asleep."

"Puuu," Sora said, bouncing around in circles. As I watched, suddenly it stopped. Then after a few seconds, it bounded off again.

"Huh?! Sora, where are you going?" Ciel and I chased after Sora. The slime seemed to have a specific destination in mind. *Sora, I thought you had a horrible sense of direction! Are you gonna be okay?*

We followed Sora for a while until I heard a cry out in the forest. Whatever was making it definitely wasn't human. It sounded like an animal. Cautiously and quietly, I approached the source of the noise. Then I saw it—I stared, wondering what it was up to. The creature suddenly looked up, and our eyes met.

"Oh!" It wasn't a very large animal. I thought it would run away when it saw Ciel, but it stayed still. It was cautious, but something was keeping it from moving. "Umm, don't worry, it's okay. I'm just going to come a little closer."

I was curious what the creature was doing, so I approached slowly so as not to scare it. I had Ciel wait where it was. When I got closer, I noticed another animal like it stuck beneath a fallen tree. It seemed to be trapped there, and it looked like it was in pain.

"You were trying to dig your friend free." *I've seen this animal in a book*

before. What's it called again? Hm...I can't remember... Agh! You don't have time to sit and ponder this mystery, Ivy. We've got to save it!

"I'm going to get you out of there. I'm here to help, okay?" I can get its name later! I need to get it out from under that tree as soon as possible. But...how can I do that? It's buried pretty deep in the mud.

If I could lift the tree up a little, I could get it out safely. But it might be wounded... Oh! I don't have to worry about that, since I've got Sora. My first move should be figuring out how to get it out from under there. Let's see. How do I move the tree? Maybe I could use a lever? I looked around and happened to see a sturdy branch with just the right thickness lying nearby.

"I'll just move this branch and...urk. It's heavy." I pushed as hard as I could on the thick branch, but it wouldn't budge.

Mrrrow. I heard Ciel's voice, and the heavy branch suddenly shifted. Ciel was using its front paws to push it. What a hero!

"Thanks. Um, could you push here, please?" Ciel shoved the tree branch over to where I'd pointed. What a reliable creature. Okay, now I need to find another long branch. Are there any the right size lying around? Yeah, there's plenty today. They're all mine for the taking.

I easily found the perfect branch, just long enough and light enough to carry. I placed the middle of the branch on top of the thick one Ciel had moved and wedged the other end beneath the tree that was trapping the animal. Since its friend had dug up so much earth around it, it was easy to slide the branch all the way under the trunk. The free animal looked confused, like it didn't know what was happening. Meanwhile, its trapped friend was clearly pretty exhausted. I was worried, but I knew if I could just get it out from under the tree, Sora could help save it. The slime was the one who had guided us here, after all.

All set! ...Yeah, no, I can't do this alone. "Ciel? Sorry, but can you lend me a hand?" I put all my weight onto the end of the lever that wasn't buried under the tree. Yup. My body weight is barely making it budge. Somehow understanding what I needed, Ciel gently leaned its weight on the branch with me. The fallen tree lifted a little. The free animal, who had been fidgeting with

worry, realized what we were doing and rushed in to save its friend.

“There!”

Squeee!

I turned my gaze toward the unfamiliar sound, and there was Sora, enveloping the animal we’d rescued from the tree. Its friend was making quite a fuss nearby. Well, of course it was... It looked like its friend was being eaten alive by a slime.

“Don’t worry. Sora’s just healing your friend.”

Chapter 131: The Mysteries of Sora

SQUEEE, the animal squeaked, nervously jumping in circles around Sora as the slime enveloped its friend. I wanted to tell it everything would be okay, but I didn't speak its language. The anguish and worry in its little voice made my heart break a little, but I had to make it wait. Hopefully it would understand once it saw its friend's wounds had been healed.

Squeee.

Oh, you poor thing. It's okay. Sora's almost done...

Squeee.

You can do this, Sora! You're almost done... Just a bit more... I whispered in my mind as I waited for Sora to finish healing the creature.

"Puuu," Sora said, hopping away from the animal. It was finished healing.

What a relief.

The healed animal was frozen in place. It must have been so confused about what just happened. The other animal was stiff in shock as well at the sight of its healthy and whole friend. It seemed it really thought its friend was being eaten alive. *I don't blame you, buddy. It definitely looked like your friend was getting dissolved. I thought Sora was eating me that one time, too...*

"Pu, puuu," Sora chirped proudly. *Actually, it's been a while since you've healed anyone. Ciel was your last patient.* I looked at Sora, who seemed enormously pleased. I hadn't seen the little slime this happy in a long time.

Could it be...that Sora needs to heal other creatures? Was it cranky earlier because it had nobody to heal? I'm crazy, right?

"If that's true, we've got kind of a big problem." Would we have to seek out wounded creatures during our travels? What's more, since humans would talk if they were suddenly healed by a mysterious slime, we'd be limited to healing animals and monsters... *The problems just won't stop coming, will they? Ha ha*

ha. Then again, it's not a sure thing that Sora needs to heal others! My tired brain's just playing tricks on me. That's got to be it. I need to sleep on this.

Squeee.

Cooo.

The two little friends seemed to finally understand what had happened. They were licking each other for reassurance. I smiled at the sight. It looked like they were going to be okay.

“Good job, Sora.”

Sora bounced happily at my praise.

Huh? It's still bubbling, even though it's been a little while since it finished the healing. Come to think of it, there was a stretch of time where Sora would bubble extra-long after meals, too, although it went back to normal at some point. Is this that same thing again?

Squeee! I turned to look in the direction of the cute little voice and saw the two animals staring up at me and Sora. We all sat there, gazing at each other for a while...and then with another little squeak, the pair took off running. They were probably looking for a safe place to get some sleep now that the danger had passed. I was so happy for them.

“Bye! Safe travels!”

“Pu, pu, puuu!”

Mrrrow.

It feels like we're all giving them a big sendoff. Things sure were tense there for a bit...but looking back now, the whole scene was so adorable. I only wish I could have made them understand that everything was going to be okay... Come to think of it, neither Sora nor Ciel could understand me when we first met. Why, when I first met Sora, I remember it couldn't understand me at all and kept acting so weird.

“Hey, Sora. Can you speak for me?”

Sora gave a curious “Pu?” in reply.

Ciel also seemed to get the gist of what I tried to communicate, but I was pretty sure it couldn't understand anything really complicated.

"Hey, Ciel, you too. Can you say something short?"

Mew.

Yeah, they both seem to understand me perfectly. I wonder when they learned that? Wait, I remember reading in a book that once you tame a creature, you develop a mutual understanding. But our understanding...is definitely not mutual. I can't understand what Sora's saying. I'm not sure why, but I feel like I don't hold a candle to Sora...

Mrrrow, Ciel trilled, resting its chin on my shoulder and pulling me out of my tangled thoughts. I looked at the adandara in curiosity and found that it was focused on something in the distance. I followed its gaze. *The sun is so red. It's going to set pretty soon... Oh! Right. Camp.*

"Thanks, Ciel. Let's go find a place to camp."

"Pu, puuu," Sora replied. Then it dashed off gallantly. *You're doing it again... Well, the last time you acted like this, you found us a place to sleep.*

"Let's follow Sora."

Ciel and I chased after the slime. *Gee, Sora, you seem awfully confident in where you're going... Are you familiar with this area? Wait, that would be really weird. Collapsed slimes are supposed to disappear within a day. Judging by Sora's condition when we first met, this has to be its first time here. But its showing no hesitation or confusion at all.*

We followed Sora for a while until we came upon a big rocky area. "Wow, I didn't realize we were so close to a place like this."

I looked over to where Sora was sitting and saw the entrance to a den. "Sora, did you know about this place?"

"Puuu."

Sora's probably answering me. I just can't understand it. Yeah, I really don't hold a candle to Sora... No. Stop that, Ivy. You've got to check the den to make sure it's safe.

I psyched myself up to go in...only to find that Ciel had already started the search without me. It looked back at me, and with a satisfied *mrrrow*, promptly entered the den. We were in the clear. Sora bounced into the den after Ciel, and I followed. The space wasn't that big, but there was just enough room for us to sleep. There was no sign of any other animals around, either, so we would be able to use it without worrying.

"Thanks, Ciel. Thanks, Sora."

Mrrrow.

"Pu, puuu."

I need to learn to read the sounds and expressions they make. Then I'll be able to understand what they're trying to tell me...I hope.

"Okay, let's all wipe our feet."

Over the course of the day, we'd all gotten muddy. I pulled a large bucket and the pot Sifar gave me out of my bag. I used the pot to produce water which I poured into the bucket. When the bucket was full, I soaked a cloth in it and used it to wipe the mud off myself. I was pretty filthy, so it was no easy task.

After I somehow got myself clean, I changed the water and started washing Ciel. After two more changes of fresh water, I finally got most of the muck off. Sora was pretty quick to clean, thanks to its slippery body. Slimes were handy that way.

"Puuu!" It seemed like Sora had heard my thoughts and took offense. It's not like I thought there was anything wrong with having a slippery body.

"Sorry," I apologized, petting Sora gently. It closed its eyes in contentment. *Good. Looks like it's in a good mood again.*

"Okay, let's eat dinner and go straight to bed. Today was brutal."

"Puuu," Sora sang, devouring the potions before I could even finish taking them all out. *It must be really hungry. Maybe healing creatures gives it an appetite.*

I took out some fruit Ciel liked. It looked so cute as it happily chomped them. I retrieved some dried meat and more fruit from my bag for my own dinner.

I'm just...so tired. Ciel may have given me a ride, but the lack of sleep last night really took its toll. I caught myself yawning mid-bite—if I didn't hurry up, I would fall asleep in the middle of dinner. By the time I finished, I looked over at Sora and saw it was already sound asleep.

“We should turn in, too. Gosh, I’m so sleepy...”

I spread a blanket over the mat I’d rolled out after our baths and lay down. I could feel Ciel settling down next to me. I reached out and petted its head. It purred back at me.

“Thank you for everything today. We’ve got another long day ahead of us tomorrow.” *I need to work on building up my endurance, too.* “Good night, Ciel. Good night, Sora.”

Mrrrow.

Chapter 132: Don't Get Too Dirty

BATHING IN THE WARMTH of a new day's sunlight, I raised my arms up toward the sky. *This feels so good...but the sun seems higher than usual.*

"Oops...I overslept." I must have been really tired. By the time I got up, it was already high noon. I broke my early morning streak. *Oh well, I couldn't help it. We're in a bit of a hurry because of Sora, but this isn't exactly a journey with a time limit. A lazy day now and then won't hurt.*

"Pu, puuu," Sora sang, cheerful as ever as it bounced around. All traces of its recent moodiness were gone, which was a relief...but it worried me that Sora might need to heal others to stay healthy itself. If that were the case, I would have to completely rethink our plans for this journey. *I guess I'll keep an eye on Sora and make a decision later.*

"Okay, let's head out."

We left the rocky area and returned to the forest, which was in exactly the same storm-tossed shape as yesterday. But there was one difference: We were all well rested. Jumping over the trees felt light and easy now. Still, a vast sea of fallen trees lay ahead of us. We'd have to proceed slowly and carefully so we wouldn't wear ourselves out halfway.

After a few hours, the fallen trees started to thin out. A wave of relief washed over me when I realized we were almost clear of the area that had been devastated by the storm. My legs were about to give out—I'd lost count of how many trees I'd jumped over that day.

"Okay, looks like we'll be back in a regular forest again pretty soon."

Mrrrow.

"Puuu," Sora croaked, bobbing over to me. It looked sleepy rather than exhausted. I picked up Sora and put it in its bag. After a little rustling, the bag stopped moving. Sora must have fallen asleep. So healing others cured Sora's

mood swings, but not its sleepiness.

“Does this mean healing has nothing to do with Sora’s condition? Or does it need to do *more* healing?” *Maybe I should look for a wounded animal. There’s still a ways left until we get to town, so we could take a little detour.*

“Hey, Ciel, is it okay if we take the long way to town?” Ciel gave me a strange look. Since we had been trying to get to Oll as quickly as possible before this, the change of plans must have been confusing.

“I was thinking maybe Sora needs to heal others. And since it’ll be a while before we get a chance to heal humans, maybe we could find a wounded animal for it to heal first. What do you think?”

Miii. Ciel made a sound I’d never heard before. I looked at it in surprise. Ciel didn’t look bothered, so I supposed it wasn’t a particularly special meow. But it definitely did not sound like a “yes.”

“You disagree with me, don’t you?” Ciel knew Sora better than I did, so maybe hurrying to town was the right choice after all? I looked at Ciel, and it stared back at me. *Yeah, we should probably hurry to town.*

“Okay, scratch the detour. Let’s go straight to town.”

Mrrrow, Ciel agreed. Even so, due to the unexpected weather, we wouldn’t be able to get there as soon as we’d anticipated. We were originally supposed to arrive at Oll tomorrow. I checked the map. Even if we traveled at our normal speed, it would still take us three days. That storm really was a doozy.

“Okay, let’s go just a bit farther.” After a little break, we walked through the forest, keeping our eyes out for a place to make camp. Since there wasn’t as much storm damage here, we could even sleep up in a tree if we wanted. *Let’s find a really comfortable spot if we can.*

Mrrrow.

I glanced toward Ciel, who was looking at a big tree. Maybe it was a good place to sleep? I gave Ciel’s head a soft pat and approached the giant tree.

“Gosh, that’s humongous.” It was the biggest tree I’d seen in this forest. Its branches were also unbelievably thick. “Okay, let’s call this home for the night.”

Mrrrow.

I walked all the way around the tree's trunk and stopped beneath one of its branches. It was so broad and sturdy that we could hide beneath it and not have to worry much about attacks from above. I thought about sleeping right on the branch itself but decided we'd be safer underneath. I checked the tree for animal markings and found nothing dangerous, just some little claw marks from tiny animals.

I took my mat out of my bag and unrolled it on the ground. I touched the dirt—it was dry, so I didn't need to make any special preparations. I rolled out another mat on top of the first and spread a big blanket over both.

“There. I’ll just have a little bath before I turn in.”

I wiped all the dirt off my feet and legs. If I didn't do at least this much, it would be a real ordeal washing up later. After I finished cleaning myself, I helped Ciel with its grooming.

“Okay, all done.” I climbed on top of the blanket and got to work cleaning my chest, back, and arms. The cold, wet cloth felt wonderful on my skin, which was hot and sweaty from all that walking.

“If we find a river, I’ll have to do our laundry. We’ve got lots of dirty things.”

So many of my blankets and clothes were dirty from the rain. Even the cloth I'd been using as a rug was quite dirty, now that I got a good look at it. I longed to get in the water and have a proper, refreshing bath. No amount of careful wiping could prevent the dirt from building up on me.

I opened up Sora's bag and called in, “Sora, wanna have some dinner?”

“Pu-u-u?” it asked sleepily.

“Sora, dinnertime,” I said again. But it was in a daze. *Will wonders never cease?* The word “dinnertime” always woke up Sora; the little slime loved to eat. “Sora? Are you okay?”

“Puuu... Pu, pu-puuu!” Energy returned to its voice as it jumped out of the bag.

“Are you awake now?”

“Pu, puuu,” Sora replied, glancing around. It seemed to be looking for its potions.

Yeah, you really do love to eat. “Sit tight, okay?” I pulled the potions I’d collected for Sora out of my bag. The moment I finished lining them up, Sora began to eat. Good. It’s eating normally. Though I wouldn’t mind if it slowed down a little.

“Okay, time for me to eat, too.” I was eating my usual dried meat, nuts, and fruit. We were all out of Ciel’s favorite fruit, but it was probably already full. During a break in the forest earlier that day, it had slipped away for a bit and returned looking very satisfied with its belly protruding, so I figured it must have had a good hunt.

Sora finished its potions and began its daily stretches. *Come to think of it, Sora hasn’t been doing these stretches since we left Otolwa.* I’d been so preoccupied with its strange mood swings that I hadn’t noticed.

“Good to see you’re exercising again.”

“Pu, pu-puuh.” It sounded cheerful, too. *Hmm, maybe it’s*

because it healed that animal? If I could get Sora to heal someone again, I might be able to figure a few things out.

“Okay, I’m all full.” Dinner was over, so it was time to get ready for bed. “I need to be sure I wake up nice and early tomorrow morning.”

I brushed my teeth and rinsed my mouth. Then I pulled my blanket out of my bag. *I really should wash this, too. Ooh, I know, I’ll buy another blanket at the next town. I need a spare for when this one gets dirty. I probably have enough room in my magic bag for two more.*

“Whew, okay. Teeth brushed! Let’s go to bed.” I lay down next to Ciel. When I looked over at Sora, I noticed the slime was already asleep. It always seemed to nod off when I wasn’t looking. I rolled over to find a comfortable sleeping position. *Huh, I smell kind of dusty. Come to think of it, it was pretty windy today, and there was a lot of dirt blowing around.* I touched my hair. I’d tried combing the dust and dirt out of it, but it was quite rough.

“Okay, I don’t care how far a detour we take. We *need* to get to a river.” Yeah,

now that it's on my mind, I can't stop thinking about it. I'll be obsessing over how dirty I am until I can get clean. We're definitely finding a river. And it's good timing. I was running out of clean clothes anyway.

Chapter 133:

A Perfect Day for Laundry

“WHEW, OKAY, down to the last one!” I hung the wrung-out blanket on a nearby tree. The weather was really nice

today, so my laundry would dry quickly in the sun. I checked the sun’s position and saw that it was noon. The sky was clear and blue as far as the eye could see, with no signs of rain. Days like this were made for doing laundry.

“I sure am tired, though.” I had my dirty clothes and five mats to wash as well as three large cloths I’d put down over my mats as rugs. They were big, so they were much harder to wash than I’d expected. I also had a blanket that got so heavy when it was wet that Ciel had to help me halfway through.

When I started this chore, Sora had bounced around me with glee, but after a while, it got tired. Now it was asleep. When I’d suggested that morning that we seek out a river before going the rest of the way to Oll, my two companions had agreed. Sora especially got so excited about it that it made me think even the slime didn’t like how dirty the blanket had gotten.

While I was there, I took a bath in the river. My hair was dirtier than I’d thought, and it took several washes to finally get it clean. Summer traveling always got me sweaty. Even if I wiped myself down every day, it just didn’t compare to a real bath in water. I felt clean and refreshed all over.

I towed my hair and body off with a clean, dry cloth and pulled my clothes back on. Then I washed the cloth I’d used and hung it on a tree. Now the laundry was all done!

Ciel didn’t seem to mind the water—it also took a bath in the river. Perhaps feeling inspired, Sora jumped in the river after it, which gave me a fright. Thankfully, Ciel rescued the slime right away. Sora sure did some reckless things sometimes. In case you’re curious, slimes didn’t float—Sora had slowly sunk into the water until Ciel snatched it out.

I went back to the tree where the two creatures were resting in the shade.

Ciel's fur was already mostly clean and dry. I settled down beside them and ate my lunch, which was a soup of dried meat and vegetables that I'd made before I started the laundry. I'd gotten the vegetables as a gift from the guild master before I left on my travels. He said something about them being really nutritious.

"This is so good!" This was the first soup I'd eaten since leaving Otolwa. It was a bit hot, but in a good way. As I slurped the scalding broth, I complained about how hot the weather was. That recent storm might have been a prelude to the midsummer torrents to come. If so, that meant summer was halfway over. And *that* meant I had to start thinking about winter.

"Where should we spend the winter? Maybe we should stay put for a couple of months, since I'm not used to traveling at that time of year."

When traveling in the winter, giving yourself a lot of leeway was key. Since you could never predict how much snowfall there'd be, one wrong move could prove very dangerous, especially for novice travelers like myself. It was not uncommon for travelers to die during our first winter on the road. In fact, the number one cause of death for any adventurer in the wintertime was freezing, so if you felt a chill in the air, you needed to wait it out in a town or village.

If it's midsummer right now, that means I've got about another two months left to travel. I wonder how far I can travel from Oll? I pulled my map out of my bag. There were two villages and one big town. Those're probably the only places I can get to. And since I might run into trouble like I did in Otolwa, I'd better give myself a cushion of a few weeks. Winter can come early sometimes, so I need to be extra careful. Wait a minute...does Ciel hibernate?

"Hey, Ciel?" Ciel's eyes opened at the sound of my voice. "Do you hibernate in the winter?"

Mii! That meant "no."

"Sora and I will probably stay in a village or town during the winter. Are you going to stay in a forest nearby?"

Mrrrow.

"I won't be able to come check on you if there's a lot of snow. Will you be

okay?" I'd heard that sometimes there was so much snow that people got trapped inside their houses. If that happened, I wouldn't be able to visit Ciel.

Mrrrow.

I'm a little worried to leave Ciel all alone, but I guess I have no choice. Ciel says it'll be okay, so I'll have to trust it. Urrrg... If I stay in a big village or town, I would need to travel pretty far to visit Ciel, since I don't want anyone to see us. So maybe I should go for a medium-sized village? Oh, but that'll mean my lodging will be more expensive.

I had looked into the inns I'd passed during my travels. There was more affordable lodging for lower-level adventurers in the bigger towns and villages, so my original plan had been to stay in a big town. In smaller villages, there were fewer inns and they were also more expensive. I had more than enough money to spare this year, but if I was going to have any stability going forward, I needed to save.

I guess I'll have to talk with some fellow travelers and get registered with the merchant guild. That way, I'll be able to safely sell anything I hunt or forage in the forest. All the butchers I'd encountered so far were good people, but the guild master had warned me that I'd been lucky. If you didn't go through the merchant guild, butchers would swindle you; everyone knew that.

I also heard that prices for guild members were half off, especially with meat. Freshness was important, so the price got lower the older the meat was. That's another way they take advantage of you—wait a minute, I'm supposed to be thinking about winter. Gee, I've got a lot of things on my mind right now.

"Pu, pu, puuu."

When I heard Sora, I looked over at Ciel's belly. Sora had been sleeping snuggled up in its belly fur, but now it was staring up at me.

"Good morning, Sora."

"Puuu, puuu."

Sora's voice sounds kind of flat. I took a closer look. It wiggled for a little while, then it slowly closed its eyes... Was it talking in its sleep again just now?

“Sora?”

Ciel was also staring hard at Sora. Sora’s eyes remained closed, and it went back to sleep. I guess it really was sleep-talking.

“Sora fell asleep.”

Mrrrow.

We were both whispering, but knowing Sora, we could have talked at a normal volume and it wouldn’t have woken up.

“Ahhh, the warm sun feels so good.” I stretched my arms up to the sky. It was a hot day, but since we were sitting close to the river, there was a nice cool breeze. I had to wait for the laundry to dry, but it was so comfortable I could fall asleep... *No, Ivy, don’t. If you fall asleep now, you’ll regret it later.*

“I think I’ll put away the clothes that are already dry. Ciel, can you babysit Sora for me?”

Mrrrow.

“Thanks.” I gave its head a few pats before I left our cozy spot in the shade. As soon as I stepped out into the sunlight, I instantly felt a drastic temperature change.

“Whew, it’s hot!” I felt the drying laundry as I walked. My clothes were already dry. The summer sun sure did the job quickly. The blanket was still a little damp, so I decided to come back for it later. The mats and the cloths laid on top of it were dry. I checked each item to make sure it was clean before I put it away in my magic bag. My efforts had been rewarded: Everything was nice and clean.

“All right, only the blanket is left now.” It would only take another hour or so to dry. I returned to the shade and found two happy sleeping faces. *Gee, I wish I could join their cuddle pile. Well, I don’t think that would fly.*

“Ciel, Sora, please start getting ready. We’re going to leave for town soon.”

Ciel opened its eyes and nudged Sora—who was sleeping against its belly—with its nose. Sora opened its eyes as it jiggled awake.

“Good morning, Sora...again. Could you please get yourself ready to go?”

Ciel stretched its front legs out and loosened up. After watching the adandara, Sora wiggled to...loosen up, too? That was probably its intention. *Huh, maybe it really is loosening itself up. It does tend to wiggle a lot when it wakes up.*

I washed the dirty dishes and pot and packed them away in my bag. By the time everything was ready to go, the blanket had finished drying.

"Okay, let's head out." Judging by the sun's position, we won't get much closer to town today. Oh well, that's the kind of day it is. I'm really glad I got to do laundry, though. I feel so much better now. I just love making dirty things nice and clean again.

Chapter 134: Sora and Sora?

WE WOULD ARRIVE in the town of Oll soon. If my map was accurate, we would probably reach the front gate after about a half-day's walk. I'd heard that Oll was just as large a town as Otolwa, so I was getting excited to finally get there. The only drawback was that I couldn't have Ciel at my side while I was in town.

"Ciel, once we arrive in Oll, we'll have to spend most of our time away from each other. Will you be okay?"

Mrrrow.

Well, I'm glad it's okay with you, but I wish there were some way we could get around this. Then again, I've thought about it a lot and still haven't come up with any ideas. "Just be careful not to let any humans see you, okay?"

Adandaras apparently weren't often targeted by humans, but I was still so worried! *Oh, that's right, when we get to Oll, I need to find a slave trader. Gosh...now I feel kind of nervous.*

"Puuu!" Sora's voice echoing through the forest snapped me out of my spiraling thoughts.

"Huh?! Sora?" I dropped everything and looked around for Sora. I caught a glimpse of it from behind, bouncing off somewhere at tremendous speed. "Agggh, wait up, Sora!"

I took off after the slime, but it really was quite fast. Ciel probably could have cut Sora off immediately...but the adandara didn't seem to want to. For some reason, it was keeping pace with me instead of running ahead.

"Ciel?"

It glanced back at me, and I could see it had no intention of stopping Sora. *Does Ciel know something I don't, and that's why it's not stopping Sora? Anyway...*

“Sora, since when were you such a fast runner?”

I’m not sure if you could exactly call the way Sora was bouncing “running,” but it was easier to describe it that way. I was sprinting after it with all my might and couldn’t catch up. What’s more, it seemed like Sora was getting farther and farther away.

I chased Sora until I started to smell something burning. Judging by the strength of the spell, it wasn’t a bonfire. It smelled like something else was burning. Something big. *Oh no...am I walking into yet another catastrophe?*

“Sora! We can’t deal with big problems!” My voice echoed through the forest, but Sora showed no signs of stopping. “Ciel, please stop Sora!” I begged the adandara as we ran.

Mii! it refused.

I feel so...sad all of a sudden. And the smell is getting stronger. And I think I see blood on the ground... I just hate running into trouble! I screamed silently as I desperately chased after Sora, who was disappearing into the distance. I almost felt spiteful toward Ciel for loping along right next to me when it could have run much faster.

Arrrgh! I’m gonna put on some muscle if it kills me... Hm? The smell of smoke and the way Sora is speeding ahead...could someone be hurt?

“Sora, please! Wounded humans are a no-no!” Huh? I’m in such a panic that I think I just said something really ridiculous. Cool it, Ivy. You’ve gotta stop Sora! Agh! I’m stumbling!

“Ouch! Oh no...it’s a person.” By the time I finally caught up with Sora, it was already enveloping a bleeding person lying on the ground. “Um, are you trying to save this man?”

I looked at the person inside Sora. One of his arms was gone—it seemed like it had been bitten clean off. He also had horrible gashes in his abdomen... I could see all the way down to his heart. He didn’t look like he was dying; he looked dead. But when I peered closer, I noticed that his heart was still beating faintly.

“He’s alive. But...” *What will happen to his missing arm? Will it grow back?* “Huh?! Impossible.” That would be absurd. I shook my head to exorcise the

image.

Anyway, what's done is done. I can't stop Sora now. But I need to make sure we're safe... I looked around, and my jaw dropped. I was so flustered about Sora that it took me until now to notice the line of four horse-drawn carriages in the clearing, three of which had rolled over and burned.

Two of the burned carriages were no longer smoldering, but one was still engulfed in tiny flames. The ground around them was littered with people—what appeared to be a band of burly adventurers, eighteen in all. There were also three people who seemed to be merchants. It was a pretty horrific scene. Some of them were clearly dead even from a distance, with big gashes in their chests.

“How awful...” Judging by the carriages and the corpses, the group must have been attacked by a giant animal or monster. There were huge claw marks in the dirt. It might have even been more than one. I checked for signs of life, but every single one of them was dead. The man Sora was treating was the sole survivor.

“What’s that funny smell...?” As I assessed the damages, I started to notice another scent mixed in with the smoke. It was something I’d smelled somewhere before.

Meowww.

I turned at the sound of Ciel’s voice, but I couldn’t see the adandara. I walked cautiously in the direction of the meow just in time to see Ciel emerge from the carriage with something in its mouth.

“Ciel, watch out! What is that thing? Oh! That smell...” The mysterious smell suddenly got much stronger, and I realized that it was coming from the thing in Ciel’s mouth. Ciel must have noticed it.

“Huh? But what is this doing here? Wait...water!” I quickly retrieved my water-producing pot from my magic bag. I filled it with water and splashed it on the blessed balm once Ciel released it from its mouth. It didn’t smell as strong anymore, but it still smelled.

I looked around and found a large bucket on the ground. I filled it with water

and submerged the blessed balm completely in it. *What was blessed balm doing in that carriage?* To humans, it was nothing more than a strange smell, but its scent lured monsters.

“Whew, that gave me quite a scare. I think we’ll be okay now, at least.” *Did the blessed balm lure monsters to attack the caravan? I’ve got a really bad feeling about this. Why do we keep running into danger?*

“Oh! Sora!” I’d completely forgotten about the slime. I ran over to it, hoping it was okay. “Ciel, are there any monsters nearby?” I hadn’t found any when I was searching for auras, at least.

Mii, it replied.

Okay, “mrrrow” means “yes,” so I guess there aren’t any.

“Thanks.” I kept watch while Sora finished healing the survivor. And it was a long wait, longer even than it had taken to heal Ciel. What’s more, Sora was producing so many bubbles that I couldn’t even see the man inside anymore.

“Do you think they’ll be okay?” The more time passed, the more anxious I felt. I was pacing around Sora in circles, even though I knew it wouldn’t help anything. *Oh dear...what will I do if something goes wrong?*

“Calm down, Ivy. Breathe in...breathe out...” I repeated the mantra over and over to calm myself.

“Puuu.”

“Sora!” I stopped in my tracks and looked over just in time to see it pulling away from the wounded man.

“Oh, thank goodness! Sora, are you okay?” I approached the slime...but before I reached it, for some reason, it began a hearty stretching routine.

“Mm! Nngh...”

Oh no! That wounded man is waking up. What do we do now? Make a run for it? But he might remember Sora anyway.

“Um...huh?”

Oh no! I met his gaze! Ah...his arm didn’t grow back after all. Will he be okay?

Wait, Ivy, no. Oh, what do I do? Soraaa!

“Pu, puuu!”

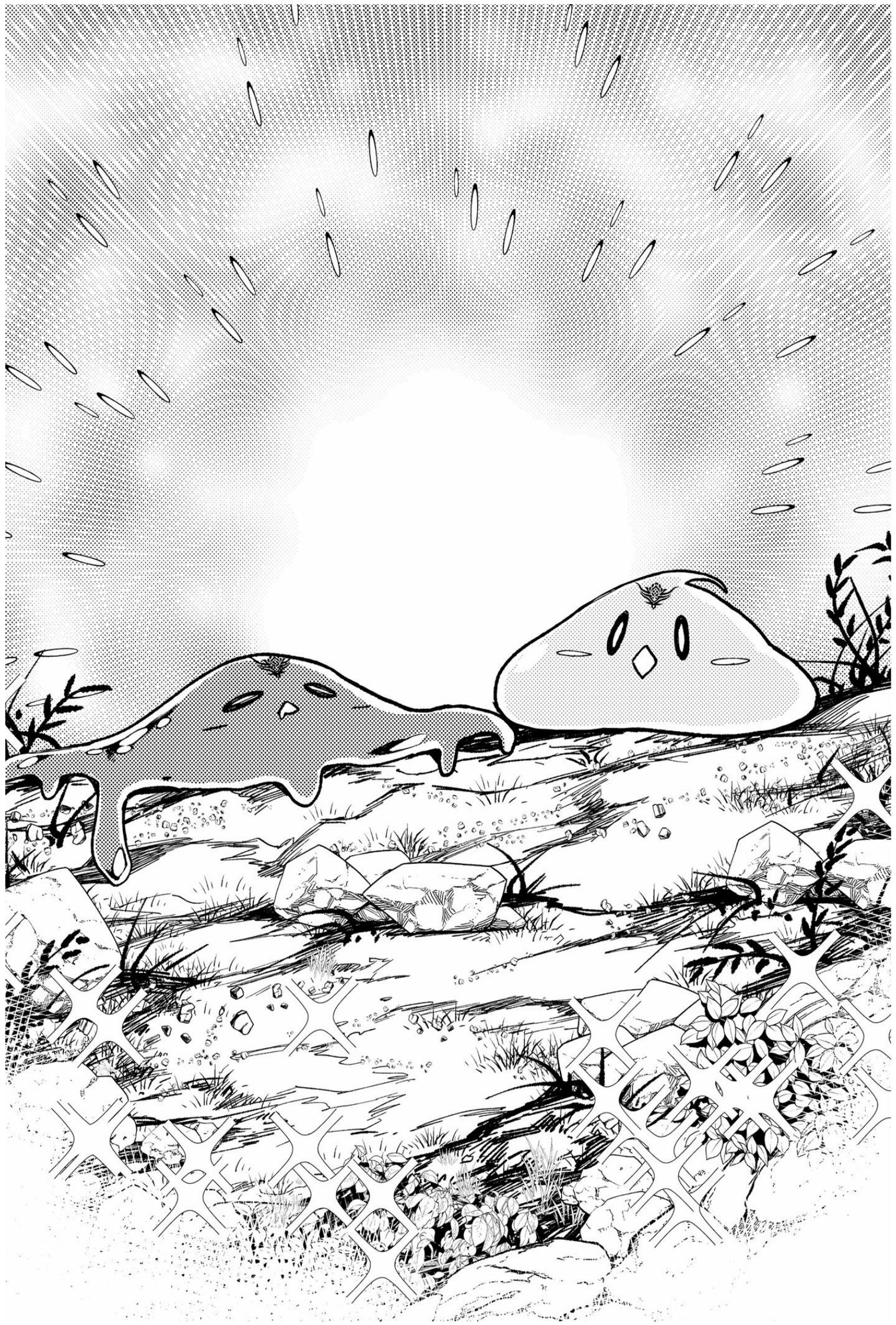
“Te-ryuuu!”

Huh? I looked toward the strange noise and... What's going on here? “Um... Sora?”

“Pu, puuu!”

“Te-ryuuu!”

Before my eyes was Sora, exactly as it was the day I first encountered it. It was an all-blue, half-transparent slime. It was spread out a bit to the sides, but not as badly as it had been the first time we met. *So wait, who's that next to it?* It was a flat, collapsed slime, just as Sora was when I first met it. It was all red and half-transparent. *These slimes each have one of Sora's colors. Oh! Did Sora split into two?!*



“Oh, oh, um, stay calm! Sora just split in two, that’s all! That’s right, it just multiplied...it multiplied! Oh, what should I do?”

My brain was a jumbled mess—I had no idea what to do. *Umm, so the first thing I should do is...what? What am I supposed to do?*

“Well, I’d sure like to stay calm,” a deep voice said, “but are you sure those monsters are safe?”

The man’s even voice snapped me back to my senses. *That’s right...the man Sora was healing is still right here.*

“Pu, puuu.”

“Te-ryuuu.”

Why...why do my problems keep multiplying? I could just cry.

Chapter 135: Confusion...and Grasping the Situation

THE MAN SAT in front of me, and next to him were Ciel, Sora...and Sora? *What should I even do?*

Mrrrow.

Ciel's familiar meow made my muscles relax. *That's right. I'm already in this mess, so I'd better suck it up and face the music. First things first...*

"This big creature is called Ciel. It's my friend, so you don't need to worry."

"I see... Um, an adandara...wait, did you rescue me? No...the one who rescued me was that slime over there? Huh?"

Aha. So this guy is just as confused as I am. This is his first time meeting us, so it makes sense that he's confused... I guess I'll have to explain what happened. It's all you, Ivy!

"Uh, so it's like this, you see. Sora has the power to heal." *Huh? You're done already, Ivy?*

"Um...thanks."

Okay...part two! "Oh, don't mention it, sir. I'm afraid your arm couldn't be saved."

"Yeah...looks like it. Well, no wonder—a gurbar bit it off and ate it. It's a miracle I'm alive at all."

"A...gurbar?" Was that one of the monsters that attacked them? Was it in any of my books? I don't remember a monster with that name.

"So, kid."

"Yes, sir?"

"Which one of those slimes is Sora?"

I followed the man's gaze to Sora and...Sora? *Which was which?*

“They’re...both Sora?”

“Hm? They both are?”

“Hmmm, it’s Half-Sora and Half-Sora.”

The man fell silent. It wasn’t like I was lying, though. One Sora split into two, so they’re each Half-Sora... *Okay, Ivy, so far, the only thing you’ve managed to communicate to him is that you’re freaking out.* I took several deep breaths. *Don’t panic!*

“Pu, puuu.”

“Te-ryuuu.”

Their voices were still weak, and it was hard to figure out the emotional tone of the red one’s cries.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard slimes speak. And the healing, too... These monsters are quite rare.”

Oh no! That’s right, I’d forgotten it was unusual for slimes to speak! Oh, what should I say? What should I even do now? I’m completely in the dark here.

“Are you okay?” the man suddenly asked.

“Huh?!”

“Oh, you just looked like you were about to cry... Is it because of me? Sorry. I’m a little out of sorts.”

I’m not sure why...but he seems really nice. Maybe I should ask him for help... No, first I need to make him give me his word.

“Um, I have a request for you, sir! Could you please not tell anyone about Ciel or Sora?”

“Hm...? Why, yes, of course! Having all these rare creatures in your care is pretty dangerous. And you saved my life. You have my word. I won’t tell a soul.”

What a relief. I pretty much just have to trust him because of the situation, but I wish I didn’t have to...

“Phew. Anyway...what a tragedy,” the man sighed, looking around the clearing with a growing sorrow in his eyes. No wonder he was sad. He’d just lost

his companions.

“Did anyone else survive?” he asked.

“No, sir. All twenty-one were dead.”

“Twenty-one? Not thirty-five?”

Thirty-five? Some of the bodies were a little difficult to identify, but there were definitely twenty-one of them.

“Well, um, the way some of them died, it was a little hard to tell, but I do think there were twenty-one bodies.”

“I see... I guess that means some of them might have escaped.”

So there were thirty-five in the party... If some of them escaped, they probably would have run for Oll. It would take me half a day to walk there, but adults fleeing danger would make it there faster. Even if they stopped and hid from monsters along the way, a rescue party from Oll would probably be here in a few hours—which was bad news for us. There were the Soras to deal with, and Ciel would need to hide somewhere, too.

Mew!

I turned toward Ciel and saw it was pointing its nose toward the forest. *Is the rescue party already here?* I focused and searched for human auras...and found several coming toward us at incredible speed.

“Ciel, I want you to take the Soras with you and hide somewhere. Can you do that?”

Mrrrow.

I shoved Blue Sora and Red Sora into the Sora Bag. When I lifted Red Sora, I felt my heart race. It reminded me too much of the collapsed slime I’d met on that fateful day. It would be horrible if I messed up and let it die. I lowered it slowly into the bag, worrying all the while. I’d never put two slimes in the bag before.

“Are you okay, Sora?”

“Pu, puuu.”

“Te-ryuuu.”

I guess they both really are Sora? Gosh, this is confusing. I hung the bag around Ciel’s neck. Ciel gently sealed the opening with its mouth and bounded carefully off. The man watched the whole exchange with wide eyes. Did we do something strange?

“Wow, kid, you’re an amazing tamer!”

“Huh?! Oh, no, no, don’t say that.” He probably thinks I tamed the adandara. Maybe I should just let him believe that? It’s so difficult to explain.

As Ciel disappeared into the forest, I caught myself staring longingly after them. I was suddenly alone, and I was scared.

“Oh, that’s right. I didn’t thank you yet. Thanks for saving me,” the man said, looking me in the eye and bowing deeply.

“Oh, no, sir! Um...” As I stood there stuttering, he smiled with a twinkle in his eye... *I’m so glad I was able to save him.*

“By the way, why did those creatures leave?”

“Oh yeah! Well, a rescue party will be here any minute.”

“A rescue party?”

“Yes, sir. I can sense human auras approaching us.”

“I see. Sorry about that, I’m not very good at sensing auras.”

I remember Rattloore saying some of the adventurers in his party couldn’t read auras. Oh right, we need to get our story straight. I can’t possibly tell the rescue party I saved this man from death’s door.

“Um, sorry, sir, but I have one more request.”

“I’ll just tell them a monster bit my arm off, and I lost consciousness. Then you happened to come upon me and helped revive me.”

“Huh?” I looked sharply at the man. He nodded and smiled gently back. He seemed to have gathered that I wanted him to keep quiet about Ciel and the Soras.

“Thank you so much, sir,” I bowed. *I’m really glad he was the one we found.*

Maybe Sora knew he was a good person and that's why it rescued him.

“No, I should be the one thanking you. But how will we explain my healed arm wound?”

“Ohhh, you’re right, that is a good question. Do you think they’d believe I healed you with a potion?”

“Well, the stub is incredibly clean, considering a monster ripped my arm off. Maybe we can say we used several potions.”

The whole lower half of the man’s arm was missing. I looked at the wound and agreed—it was very clean. I was relieved for his sake...but it was a little too clean for someone who had been viciously maimed just hours ago.

“Well, it’s the only idea I’ve got. Can we use it?”

“Yes, sir. If they ask, we’ll say we poured several blue potions directly on the wound.”

“It wouldn’t get this clean from blue potions alone, so we should probably say we poured all sorts of potions on it in the heat of the moment.”

Aha! That way, they’ll think it was some unknown combination of potions that healed him so well. Maybe they’ll buy that? Well, I guess it’ll have to do since we can’t think of anything else.

“Understood, sir.”

“Oh, right. I’ve forgotten something.”

What did he forget?

The man stood up straight and met my eyes. For some reason, he looked quite solemn. It scared me a little.

“I am Druid, a mid-level adventurer from the town of Oll.”

“I’m...Ivy. Nice to meet you.” My heart was racing so much that I was a bit slow to respond. I had a feeling that this was the start of something. I wasn’t expecting us to exchange names.

“Ahhh, but I failed my mission and lost all my money. Guess I’ll have to be a slave?”

“A slave?”

“Hm? Ha ha ha! Don’t worry about it. This’ll be my second time.”

Druid’s seemingly carefree attitude calmed my nerves a little, but there was still something that concerned me.

“Um, you should know that there was blessed balm in one of the carriages.”

“What?! No...there couldn’t be.”

“No, sir, Ciel found it and carried it out of that burning carriage.”

“The one who assigned me this mission was riding in that carriage.”

Blessed balm...in the carriage of the person who sent Druid on this mission. I had a *really* bad feeling about this.

Chapter 136: Blessed Balm

I BROUGHT THE BUCKET over to where Druid was sitting. His face clouded with worry, and he fell heavily down onto his knee when he saw the blessed balm inside. His missing arm probably messed up his sense of balance and caused him to fall when he tried to stand up in surprise.

He looked up at me apologetically. “Sorry about that. I didn’t think I’d actually fall over.”

“Oh, no, sir. Are you okay?” He looked like he’d had a hard time catching himself from his tumble.

“I’ll be okay. I may not look it right now, but I’m pretty strong.”

Is this guy really gonna be okay?

“Really, you don’t need to worry about me. I’ll be fine. Don’t give me those wide eyes.”

I guess my thoughts were clear on my face. “Yes, sir. Please excuse me.”

Druid smirked and nodded at me. Then he turned his attention back to the bucket and frowned. He was probably concerned by the amount of blessed balm in there.

Blessed balm was made from the fruit of the blessed tree, but you couldn’t just pick the fruit and take it home with you. It was so large that its smell was quite strong. So strong, in fact, that it lured monsters to it without fail.

If you wanted to transport blessed balm, you’d put a small amount into a magic item box. Magic item boxes were enchanted with a seal that kept smells from escaping. But what we were looking at here was the fruit itself. It had sunk down to the bottom of the bucket and wasn’t emitting a scent anymore, but...it was still worrisome.

“What were they thinking when they packed a thing like this...?”

"I heard it's safe as long as you submerge it in water. Do you think it's safe like this?" I asked.

"Yeah, I suppose it'll be all right for now. But the blessed balm's smell does leech into the water, so it'll only keep this way for a day or two."

"Is that so? How do we dispose of it?"

"Burn it in the forest—that's the only way I know. You clear an area so flames won't spread to the trees, light it on fire, and then run like hell. Well, you keep an eye on it from a safe distance. But it's pretty dangerous since it's likely to attract monsters to it."

Wow, that sounds intense. Wait a minute, does this mean blessed trees are always surrounded by monsters? I've always wondered about that.

"Um, sir...?"

"Blessed trees themselves are toxic to monsters, so you'll never find them nearby," Druid answered with a chuckle before I could voice my question. I was a little taken aback, but maybe he was used to people asking that whenever he explained how blessed balm worked.

But that was a surprise. *Blessed trees are toxic to monsters? That's the first I've heard of it. The fruit lures monsters, but the tree itself is toxic to them. What a thoroughly mysterious organism.*

A few minutes later, we heard frantic footsteps and human voices in the distance. The people we'd been waiting for had arrived.

"Hellooo? Is anybody there?" It was the rescue party, searching for survivors.

"Over here!" Druid shouted. We heard a low but joyful holler through the trees. I guess they were excited to find that it wasn't total annihilation...

"Oops, I think we gave them false hope."

"I think so, too."

Druid looked sheepish...but what's done is done.

When the rescue party of adventurers arrived on the scene, their faces froze in shock at the sight of the carnage before them. Yet something about there

appearance was odd to me—why weren’t they veteran adventurers? Everyone always told me only veteran adventurers went on rescue missions.

“Hey now, don’t let something like this get you all in a tizzy,” came a thick, gravelly voice from behind the first arrivals. Its owner sounded awfully calm... though it was difficult to tell since his voice was so rough. He was probably a veteran adventurer.

“Hm? That you, Druid?”

“Hello there, Guild Master.”

So this was the guild master. He was a tall man with a sturdy frame, but his most distinguishing feature had to be that gravelly voice of his. You’d recognize it anywhere.

“What a terrible tragedy. And who is this boy?”

“Yes, it was horrible—a gurbar attack. This boy saved my life.”

Is that the story we settled on? Umm... I didn’t want to risk saying the wrong thing, so I just kept quiet and nodded.

“A gurbar? I’m surprised you survived at all.”

“It bit my arm off, and then I suppose I lost consciousness. Ivy here happened to pass by and saved me.”

“It bit your arm off? My...so cleanly, too,” the guild master mused in awe as he looked at the stump on Druid’s lower arm.

“He says he used every single potion he had on me, regardless of type.”

“Every single potion? Any type, too?”

“That’s right.”

“So that’s why your stump looks so immaculate? Our ancestors did say that using potions in certain combinations can produce unexpected results, but this is the first time I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Oh, really? I’ve never heard that before. But sorry, sir. The source of his clean stump is a lie, I apologized in my head. The guild master picked up the empty potion bottles on the ground, looked at them, and nodded. Druid had thrown

some bottles on the ground to add validity to our story. There were twenty-two of them in all.

The guild master's brow furrowed as he counted the bottles. "That's quite a load." He glanced at me.

I tensed up. "Sorry, I panicked," I squeaked. *You'll be okay, Ivy. Just don't freak out...stay calm.*

"That so? Well, thanks."

He believed me? Hmm...I get the sense he has some doubts. Well, I don't blame him.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Gotos, the Guild Master of Oll."

"I'm Ivy. Nice to meet you, sir."

"Ivy...? Did you come here from Otolwa?"

"Yes, sir."

"Aha, so you're Ivy. Well...in that case, there's no problem."

But there is a problem—a huge problem. Why did you emphasize my name just now? And for a guy with a rough voice, you said it awfully loud. I glanced nervously about, worried his adventurer companions had overheard my name.

"Do you know him, Guild Master?" Druid asked.

"No, but I do know of him. He's quite famous."

I'm famous? Why?!

"You know how that kidnapping organization that had royalty and nobles mixed up in it got crushed? Well, someone named Ivy was a key player in taking them down. It's not verified information, but I did hear that he was just a kid, so I figure it must be you. Am I right?"

Well, he was right about me being a kid. I nodded reluctantly. But...was I a key player? A key player was someone who was at the center of an event and played a very important role in it. Since when did I become so important?! Agh! Druid looks stunned. I'm not sure why, but...I've got a bad feeling about this.

"So that's why you were able to discover this," Druid said.

Hm? Discover what?

“Here.” He showed the guild master the bucket with the blessed balm fruit.

The guild master’s expression changed in a flash. “What?! Kid, you found this?!”

No, sir, it was Ciel who discovered it! I wanted to tell him that so bad...but I couldn’t. I’d have to clear up the misunderstanding later.

“Who’s the idiot who brought blessed balm along?!” His voice boomed throughout the area, creating a terribly intimidating echo. The adventurers, who were already uneasy in the face of the carnage from the gurbar attack, jumped a little at the sound of it. I flinched, too, but nowhere near as hard as the men.

Was I right? Are they really not veteran adventurers? They were worlds apart from Bolorda’s party of adventurers I knew.

“Guild Master, please stay calm,” said Druid.

“How can I possibly stay calm, man?!” the guild master asked. “What if this cursed object had made it all the way to town?!”

“I understand, but what’s done is done. Shouting about it won’t do any good.”

The guild master glared at the bucket containing the blessed balm and sighed. “Sorry. You’re right.”

“As the guild master, you have every right to be angry,” Druid told him calmly. He’d said he was a mid-level adventurer, but his temperament seemed a lot more like a veteran’s to me.

“Ah...” the guild master sighed. “Well, lucky for us, you survived.”

“Ha ha ha, a minute longer and I wouldn’t have.”

The two men began a discussion of their next moves, so I gave them some space. They probably didn’t want an outsider listening in. Besides, I wanted to reduce my chances of getting caught up in anything.

I glanced around the clearing. The rescue party had begun to take stock of the destruction. *I guess my work here is done.* I walked back over to one of the

fallen trees to sit down. Now that the tense situation was finally over...I felt all my muscles give out as I plunked down in relief.

Chapter 137: I'm Not Little!

“**A**RE YOU OKAY?”

I looked up to see the gravelly-voiced guild master right in front of me. I guess I'd spaced out a little. With Ciel and the Soras gone, I really needed to pull myself together.

“Yes, sir! I'm okay.” I looked around, assuming the rescue party had wrapped things up, but they were still hard at work. I guess cleaning up after a massacre was something you didn't want to rush... *Oh! That's right!*

“Excuse me, sir?”

“What is it?”

“Just how...widely...have rumors about me spread?” If lots of people knew about me, I'd need to be more careful about a few things.

“Hmm? Ohh, you mean what I was talking about earlier. Uh, you aren't exactly what I'd call widely known, Ivy.”

“Huh?! But you said I was famous.”

“Sorry, I should've been more specific. You're famous among the guild masters and the people whose villages were affected by that organization. See, the guild masters received intelligence about the criminal organization and a list of the brave souls who worked to crush them. And there was a name on that list I didn't recognize. What's more, all the information about you besides your name was completely redacted, so that's why the rumors spread.”

“Rumors, sir?”

“Well, yeah, it's unusual for intelligence to be redacted, so we all developed lots of theories about your age and gender and such. And one of the most believable theories was that maybe you were a minor. Sorry about my behavior earlier; I lost my composure a little there.”

What a relief... Looks like I don't need to take any special precautions after all. But wow, I'm a household name among guild masters? There must have been victims in quite a few towns and villages... And the rumor about me being a child seems to have stuck. Mmmrrrggg. I think it would be naive of me to take this as good news... Wait a minute...

“Mr. Guild Master, how did you know me?—wait, that’s right, you didn’t know me—what made you guess it was me?” Was I really so obvious that he would know who I was by name and age alone?

“I received intel that some veteran adventurers were in cahoots with the kidnappers. I couldn’t believe it, so I went to Otolwa personally to get the story directly from the source. And I happened to catch a glimpse of a little kid standing with a group of veteran adventurers. At the time, I thought you fit the description of the rumored child. I almost asked for your name.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” He had probably seen me with Bolorda and his party. *Okay, so that’s how he recognized me. I guess that means he won’t be a problem after all.*

The guild master’s solemn eyes met mine. “Ivy, thank you so much for taking down that organization,” he said with a bow. I froze completely in surprise. I couldn’t believe he’d actually bowed to me.

“Ha ha ha, you sure look shocked!”

“Yes, sir...I am.” Oops, that answer was a little more awkward than I’d intended.

“Sorry about that.”

“Oh, no problem, sir. But why did you thank me?”

“Everyone who fell victim to that organization would love to thank you.”

“Oh, really, sir? Well, thank you for telling me.” *I guess that means there were a lot of victims.* But I was still surprised. As far as I was concerned, that organization was all in the past now.

“You’re a good kid, Ivy,” he said, looking me square in the eye.

I was more embarrassed than I ever thought possible. *Oh no...my face is so*

hot. I'm probably bright red right now.

"Ha ha ha, yeah, you're definitely still just a little kid."

I'm a little kid? Hmm, I wonder how old the guild master thinks I am. Come to think of it, if I'm not mistaken, I heard him describe me as a "little kid" earlier, too... I've got a really bad feeling.

"Hey, don't tease the kid," Druid cut in. I looked over and saw that, though still a little wobbly, he was standing upright on his own two feet. It seemed he was gradually adjusting to his missing arm.

"Sorry, my bad. Yeah, if my wife found out I was teasing a little kid, she'd give me an earful."

Oh, I didn't know he was married...wait, no! I was right! He called me "little"!

"Um, sir, I'm nine years old, so while I am a child, I don't think it's necessary to call me little!" Yikes! That was a bit too stern. Well, he just kept calling me "little"! That word makes my ears bleed!

"What?! You're nine?!" Druid and the guild master said in unison.

Not you, too, Druid... "Yes, I may not look it, but I am definitely nine years old." The fact that I had to say so myself was the most pathetic part about all of this. I've been eating more...but I guess growth takes time. Every day, I wonder if my legs have grown longer at all. And I exercise, too... Don't panic. You'll be okay. You'll grow in due time.

"Ack, I'm sorry. But I guess that makes sense. To defeat a big organization like that, you couldn't have been a really tiny kid!" The guild master looked flustered; I must have had quite the look on my face. *I'm so sorry, sir, I'm just a little sensitive about this.*

"Sorry, kid," Druid apologized awkwardly.

"Oh, no, sir, it's all right." *I'm about to have a growth spurt anyway, I'm sure of it. Maybe I should eat more meat to grow taller?*

"Um, excuse me..." Two of the adventurers in the rescue party, their brows furrowed with worry, approached the guild master. They'd probably just finished their work. Surveying the scene of a massacre must have been pretty

traumatizing. But even so...why did they look more concerned than you'd expect them to be?

"Hey, there. Good work, men," the guild master said.

The two men bowed and handed him a piece of paper. He scanned it quickly and nodded a few times. "No problems here. Did you finish retrieving all the dead?"

"Yes, sir. As much as we could, that is."

Well, yeah, some of them were mutilated pretty badly.

"And the carriages?"

"We'll have some horses brought back to retrieve them, sir."

"Good. Anything else?"

"Well, um..." The men looked quite torn. They were definitely not veteran adventurers. Why was that? Seizerk told me that rescue parties were always made up of veteran adventurers. That was because intelligence wasn't always entirely accurate, or sometimes the situation could worsen by the time the rescue party arrived.

"We have a report for the neighborhood watch, sir."

"Ahh, right. Well, that can wait. Good work, men. Let's head on back," the guild master said.

"Yes, sir!" the men replied, the tension now gone from their faces. Druid and the guild master exchanged chuckles when they saw that. *I...don't know what just happened. Was it some sort of test?*

The guild master barked out orders as the adventurers prepared to head back to town. He frowned a little when he saw how Druid was walking.

"We have to go now. Gotta dispose of the mess."

"Don't worry about me," Druid assured him. "I can walk back by myself."

"Ahh," the guild master sighed. "Want me to call someone? I could get you a carriage."

"No, no, I really will be fine walking back. I need to get used to walking like

this anyway. It's only about six hours from here."

Six hours? I thought we were only a half-day's walk from town. Maybe I read the map wrong. I need to be more careful.

The guild master, though clearly worried about Druid, left to take care of his work. He had his own challenges, too.

"Mr. Druid, may I travel with you back to town?"

"Well, sure, I don't mind...but are you okay with it? You don't have to do it on my account. I've got them," he said, glancing at three adventurers who'd arrived on the scene after the rescue party. The guild master was worried about Druid, so he'd ordered them to escort the injured man back to town.

"I don't think I'll be able to keep up with the guild master," I explained.

"That makes sense. Well then, welcome aboard."

Druid and I walked toward the adventurers together. When they saw us approaching, they came over to meet us.

"I'm sorry, sir, about your..." It seemed like these adventurers were Druid's juniors.

"Don't worry about it," Druid said. "I'm sorry you guys had to come all the way out here on your day off."

One of the adventurers spat out, "You're telling me! Just when I finally had a break... That guild master has become a real pain in the you-know-what now that we're short on staff! It's been ages since I've been able to get a day off."

It sounds like Oll has its fair share of problems. Let's hope I don't get caught up in them this time! Oh...that's right! The blessed balm. I get the feeling I've already been caught up in something though...

"No, I'm sure I'll be okay. I hope."

Chapter 138: They're Multiplying!

“FORGIVE ME. I took way too long,” Druid apologized. We were almost at the town of Oll, but since Druid had to walk slowly, it was taking us much longer to arrive than expected.

“Not a problem, sir!”

Druid’s juniors had met him when they first became adventurers. He taught them everything they needed to know about adventuring, so they really respected him. The juniors insisted on telling me stories of all his heroic exploits during the walk to Oll.

Druid tried to stop them, but one of the men was a huge chatterbox. His name was Erid, and he talked the whole time. The other men seemed unfazed by it, so it must have been a regular occurrence. Since it was my first time meeting him, though, I was really taken aback by it.

Most of the stories were about Druid at first, but then Erid proceeded to tell me tales of his own victories and failures, one after another. I was impressed that someone could talk for so long and not run out of things to say.

“Erid, we’re almost to town,” said Doro, the leader of the trio.

“Hmm? Ohh, so we are.” Erid fumbled around in his bag to pull something out...though the bag was putting up quite a fight.

“Erid?”

“No, I’m okay. I know I packed it.” Erid stopped in his tracks to rummage through his bag. Doro sighed heavily.

“What’s wrong, sir?” I asked.

“I think he’s looking for his adventurer’s permit. Erid tends to lose things easily,” Druid said.

“Oh dear.”

Adventurers who established home bases in towns received permits from the adventurers' guild. That must be what Druid meant. Erid was still looking. *But wait a minute, if Erid always loses things, then why is he the one carrying it in the first place? Oh! Doro just snatched the bag from him.*

"Argh, *this* is exactly what I was worried would happen. It was my fault for letting you carry it in the first place, but...I can't believe you actually dropped it."

"I didn't drop it! I have it. I just *know* it!"

Doro was going through each individual item in the bag...but he couldn't find it. *Hm? I can see Oll's main gate from here...and someone's standing in front of it waving. Are they trying to get our attention?*

"Excuse me, but is somebody over there calling you?"

"Huh?!" All the men turned their eyes toward the gate, and the waving got more intense. So I was right.

"Let's go to the gate for now," Druid suggested. Doro, his hands still fumbling in Erid's bag, began to walk. It looked like he had mostly given up, though. I remember someone telling me you needed to pay more money for a replacement permit.

"He lost it again, didn't he?"

"Ha ha ha, that's our Erid!" Druid chuckled. It was clear from the looks on everyone's faces that this was probably not the first—or the second—time it had happened.

"Are you all right, Druid?" one of the men by the gate asked, walking over. *He looks like a bear. Agh! What's a bear? He looks like a big, black animal, but I've never seen such an animal in a book. This must be Past Me's memories. Argh, thank goodness I didn't say any of that out loud.*

I took another good look at the man. He was massive, with a thick beard. At a glance, he looked quite strong... *No, even after a very long stare, he still looks quite strong.* His sharp, beady eyes probably scared people.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Druid replied. "What brings you all the way out here?"

"See for yourself," the man said, showing Doro and his men a green card. Doro's face darkened the moment he saw it. *Is that...a permit?*

"Thank you so much. We were just looking for that," Doro said, reaching out.

The man placed the permit in Doro's hand. "It was on the ground just outside the gate. How many does that make this year so far?"

Everyone laughed at the tired sarcasm in the man's voice except Erid, who looked rather bitter. *Well, I'd feel bitter, too. What a pretty permit that is, though.*

"Oh! Is this the kid?"

"The kid"? He probably means me. Wait, what did the guild master tell them about me?

"Nice to meet you," I greeted him with a bow. He smiled and bowed back at me. *Well, that's surprising. He gives off a completely different impression when he smiles. He's totally adorable...er, maybe that's going too far. He's just a tiny bit adorable.*

"The guild master told me everything. Erid, come over here, and I'll give you back your permit."

Yeah, I thought so. I'm kind of worried about what the guild master told him. Is it okay if I ask directly?

"What did the guild master tell you?" Druid asked for me. *Thank you, sir.*

"Hmm? He told me the kid who saved Druid's life would be with him, so I shouldn't scare him."

Don't scare me?

"Ah, that makes sense. But Ivy wasn't even scared when he saw you."

"I know! That gave me a start."

Hm? The bear-man scares people? Oh no, Ivy. Don't slip into your subconscious. You need to be more careful.

"Yeah, you always make the young'uns cry. Well...I mean, look at you."

Young'uns. As I stood there gloomily, I met Druid's gaze.

“Oops! Sorry, I mean, um...”

“No, it’s okay, sir.”

As Druid frantically apologized, the man looked back with a curious smile on his face. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, um, nothing’s wrong, sir,” I replied.

“Oh? Well, c’mere then. The guild master did tell me about’cha, but let me see your papers anyway.”

“Yes, sir.”

I followed him into a room near the gate. As we entered, I noticed it was a simple space, with only a table and a shelf. It reminded me of Otolwa. Then again, I suppose any room that’s designed for people to have quick conversations and store some of their belongings would look like that.

He handed me a sheet of paper. It had “Name,” “Hometown,” and “Destination” written on it. *Can I just write the same things I put down in Otolwa?* I wrote my name and filled in my destination, too. But I left the “Hometown” area blank and took out my white bank plate. The man looked a bit surprised to see it, but after a moment he took some stones off the shelf and brought them close to my plate.

“Good. No problems here... Hm? Wow, your list of guarantors is long.”

My list of guarantors? I was told people couldn’t see the contents of my account, but maybe he can see who my guarantor is? I forgot to ask about that.

“Let’s see... Do you mean Captain Oght of Ratome Village?”

“Hm? He ain’t the only one, kid. There’s also Otolwa’s Guild Master Lowgriff and Police Captain Barxby on the list.”

What in the world were you guys thinking?! Come on, I told you I didn’t want to stand out.

“Wow, that’s quite a list...” Druid, who had come along with me, was also surprised.

“All right, here’s your permit. Make sure you don’t lose it; you’ll need to turn

it in when you leave this town.”

“Of course, sir. Thank you very much.”

The man patted my head in reply. He was definitely treating me like a little kid. But for some reason, this behavior didn’t anger me when it came from Mr. Bear. I wondered why. Was it the way he looked?

I took my permit and left with Druid. His three juniors were waiting for us outside.

“Oh, you’re still here? It’s all right, you can go home now.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay, sir? You know, can you take care of yourself?”

“I’ll be fine. Well...I guess my lifestyle will have to change a little, but I can handle it. Your task is done, though, isn’t it? Rest up—now that’s an order.”

“Yes, sir...” his junior sighed. “Let us know if you need anything. We’re here to help.”

“You have my gratitude.”

The trio shot concerned looks at Druid as they walked away. They really thought the world of him. I was so glad this was the man Sora saved.

Chapter 139:

Monster Metamorphosis?

WHEN WE ENTERED the town proper, the entire place was bustling. I looked around, wondering what was going on. Druid explained, “Word got out about our monster attack.”

“So that’s why...”

Whenever anyone was attacked close to town, all sorts of rumors would spread like wildfire. Some were born from worries about the monster attacking town, others from worries about family members traveling outside the gate. And some rumors were different theories about *what* exactly the attacker might be.

“That reminds me, you know some pretty powerful people, kid. Oh, wait! You must have met them while you were all taking down that kidnapping organization.”

“Well, yes, that was part of it.” *Yeah, I can’t help but stand out, can I? But I wonder why they became my guarantors without telling me.*

“Are you trying to get to the imperial capital or one of the surrounding towns?”

“Yes. The plan for now is to go to a town neighboring the capital. How did you know that, sir?”

I’d never told him where I was headed. And I hadn’t told him anything that might have given him a clue...or had I?

“It’s your guarantors.”

“Huh?!”

My guarantors. You mean those entities that multiplied against my will?

“If you want to enter the capital or any of the neighboring towns, you have to undergo a thorough background check. Depending on who you are, well...you

sometimes have to go through a lot of trouble.”

What does he mean, a lot of trouble?

“But with all those people vouching for you, you should have no problems. They’ll let you right in.”

A lot of trouble...does he mean, like...false accusations? Do gatekeepers do things like that?

“You seem confused, so let me explain: The closer you get to the capital, the more strict the gatekeepers are.”

“Oh...I don’t like that.”

“Ha ha ha! You’ll be okay, Ivy.”

I’ll be okay? Oh! Because of my guarantors.

“Captain Oght alone is a living legend among adventurers.”

Wow, I didn’t realize he was that amazing.

“And since he brought down the criminal organization, I’m sure Police Captain Barxby has a pretty good relationship with the royal family now.”

Wow, I didn’t know... Oh! Come to think of it, when he saw that ornately decorated letter, he heaved the most disgusted sigh I’d ever heard. Is that a good relationship...? Well, I guess the police captain will be okay.

“And Guild Master Lowgriff has accomplished many great things. A lot of his fellow adventurers really look up to him.”

Wow, I didn’t realize that guild master who blushed whenever he talked about his wife was such a hero.

“Nobody is dumb enough to pick a fight with any of those three. So, yeah...as long as you don’t encounter a gatekeeper with a screw loose, you’ll be okay.”

A screw loose...what a colorful way to explain it. But is that why those men signed off on me? If so, they could have at least told me...and I might have turned them down. I mean, I’d feel really guilty about it. Bolorda and his men sussed out who I really was...but the guild master and police captain might have seen through me, too. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have bothered becoming my

guarantors. Next time I see them, I need to give them both some very sincere thank-yous.

Druid jolted me out of my thoughts. “Don’t worry, you’ll be okay,” he assured me. He looked a bit flustered. Maybe I looked concerned? “Most of the gatekeepers are good people.”

“Don’t worry about me. By the way, Mr. Druid, where are you headed now?”

“Oh! That’s right...I have to go to the guild and let them know what happened to me.”

The guild? Didn’t we just pass by it a bit ago?

“I wound up following you without meaning to, Ivy.”

“Huh?! Oh...you must be tired, sir. That’s all.”

“Ha ha ha! Yes, let’s go with that. So, Ivy, are you going to the plaza?”

“Yes, that’s the plan. I’m going to claim myself a spot before I go back to the forest.”

“The forest, eh... I’m sure you’ll be okay, but be careful just the same. The gurbars might still be around.”

That’s right, the gurbars! “Um, what are gurbars like, sir?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?”

“No, I’ve never seen them in my books.”

“Aha. Well, they’ve been getting stronger and more vicious the last couple of years, probably because lots of adventurers don’t know any better.”

So monsters can evolve. I guess I need to learn more about them. I’ll be sure to remember this.

“Gurbars have big horns on their noses. They can’t move all that fast, but they’re strong. When we ran into them, they had us surrounded so there was nowhere to run.”

A giant horn on the nose. And if they surrounded Druid’s party, does this mean they usually travel in packs? Or did the scent of the blessed balm lure many of them in at once?

“Do they travel in packs, sir?”

“Well, since their ecosystem has changed a little, we don’t really know. They didn’t used to move in packs, though.”

“I see. Thank you for the information.”

“Well, at any rate, they’re not as strong as your friend.”

By “your friend,” I guess he means Ciel. Even so, gurbars would be dangerous to encounter if there were a lot of them. And since I have Ciel protecting the Soras right now, it can’t move about freely.

“Understood, sir. But I’m still worried.”

“I understand. Oh! Here, take these,” Druid said, pulling out three tiny pouches from his bag. I took them without thinking. What could they be?

“These are shock pouches. Have you heard of them?”

“Yes, sir, I do know about shock pouches.” If you throw them at your target’s head, powder comes out—and different types of powder would create different effects. I brought my nose closer to the pouch’s opening.

“Oh, I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Druid warned. “Even the slightest whiff will make your nose hurt.”

I froze. Thank goodness he told me. I was just about to sniff it. I wonder if it hurts like chili powder.

“If you hit your opponent in the head with one of those, that’ll buy you time to escape. Though it doesn’t work if you’re attacked by a bunch at once.”

“Thank you, sir. But are you sure I can keep these?”

“No problem, kid. I can easily make some more.”

I had also made some of my own at one point, but I’d used them up. I resolved to always have a few on hand from now on.

“Okay, thanks for the pouches, sir.”

“Sure thing. Well, see ya later. Be careful out there, kid.”

“I will, sir. And thanks again.” With a final bow goodbye to Druid, I headed to

the plaza. I turned around after a few paces to check on him. I was happy to see that he was walking very smoothly now.

I was worried at first because Druid had lost his right arm, but luckily, he was left-handed. If he'd lost his dominant hand, that would have had a huge impact on his lifestyle. The guild master was also a little relieved about that.

"Okay, I'll go to the plaza and snag a spot. Then, back to the forest." I'm a little scared of the gurbars, but I have to check in on Ciel and Sora. Oh right, I have to figure out what's going on with Sora...and Sora? Maybe I'll ask them if they want new names. I still can't believe Sora split in two...

So Sora splits. Is Sora going to keep splitting like that? And wait, are the new Soras also going to split? Ha ha ha, yeah, I'm gonna stop thinking about Sora's future. It's too scary.

"Here we are." *Plaza spotted ahead!* The plaza in Oll was as big as any I'd encountered. Though I wondered why there were two entrances and exits.

"Something wrong, kid?" a man asked me as I peered inside the plaza from the entrance.

"No, sir, I was just wondering why there were two entrances."

"We've got larger parties of four or more adventurers staying on this side here. That side has smaller parties."

"Oh, that makes sense. Thank you, sir."

"Whoa there, son, you can still come in this way if you want."

"Thank you, sir," I bowed to the man and headed to the other plaza entrance. Big adventurer parties tended to be rowdy, especially when they got drunk and started singing.

I entered the plaza and looked around. Interesting. Oll doesn't seem to have supervisors in its plaza. Nobody's guarding the entrances. Oh! But there's a little building over there, so I guess there's a neighborhood watch group? That's a relief. After my incident with the tent, I do feel much safer having someone like that around.

I strolled around the plaza a little to familiarize myself with the tents and the

people around me. I wanted to take Sora out of its bag once I got in my tent—and to take out its twin, too, of course—so I needed to make sure I pitched my tent in a safe place for that. I found two tents with a large gap between them. One had a solo male traveler, the other a solo female traveler. I asked them if I could pitch my tent in the middle and they agreed, so I did just that.

“There. All set.” I got inside and put all my most important items into one bag. Then I moved the shock pouches to somewhere they’d be easy to grab. *Let’s just hope I don’t encounter any gurbars.*

Chapter 140:

Let's Get Him Involved!

REMEMBER HOW I said I had planned to head to the forest? Well, I was stopped at the gate. And I don't blame them, since there were gurbars near the town. When I promised the gatekeeper I would run away at the first sign of danger, he let me pass, but he looked very stern. In moments like this, I could easily get people to understand if they knew about Ciel...but of course I couldn't tell them.

I paid close attention to my surroundings as I reentered the forest. I walked for a while, but there was no sign of Ciel. Usually it would have shown up by now.

"I wonder if something happened to them?" I searched further, on high alert the whole time for any auras around me. I sensed one aura deeper into the forest, but it was too far away to tell if it was Ciel or not. Still, I knew just staying where I was would accomplish nothing, so I trekked further in.

"Oh! There's Ciel." I finally sensed the adandara. It was a big relief—my mind had been racing, imagining all sorts of things that might have happened to my friends.

I ran toward Ciel's aura. "Ciel! Thank goodness you're... Yikes!"

A heap of corpses.

...That's how I would describe Ciel's immediate surroundings. The dead animals were really big, too. I looked closer and saw...horned noses? Their legs weren't all that long. Their bodies were stocky as well. Were they...gurbars?

"Um, Ciel, are you okay—yeah, looks like you are." Ciel was seated elegantly next to the pile of dead monsters. And if I'm not mistaken, it was smiling pretty smugly. I could practically hear it saying, "There. I killed 'em all just for you."

"Good work, Ciel. That was very brave." *I think I remember that you train cats using positive reinforcement. Wait, "train cats"? Oh bother, there's the*

knowledge from my past life again... Well, it's okay. Ciel isn't hurt, so no harm done.

"Gee, I wonder how many there are?" I counted the toppled corpses. There were eight. But I spotted tracks leading deeper into the forest, so some of them must have gotten away. "Wait, what am I even supposed to do with all of these?" *I can't just leave them, can I?* The rules say you're supposed to notify any nearby towns and villages when there's been a monster or animal attack.

I can tell them about the corpses without mentioning Ciel, right? Or maybe I should ask Druid for help? But I don't want to bother him.

"Oh, right! Sora!"

Mrrrow.

When I looked back at Ciel, it was climbing up a tree. It gracefully jumped to the ground with Sora's bag in its mouth. It must have put the bag up there for safekeeping.

"Thanks, Ciel." I took it and quietly peeked inside. The two slimes were snuggled up against each other, asleep. They were so cute. "Well, let's move someplace else, okay?"

I couldn't relax around a pile of gurbar corpses. They might draw other animals or monsters. I grabbed the bag with the Soras and started off into the woods.

Mrrrow, Ciel said, blocking my path.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

Ciel looked over at the dead gurbars. I followed its gaze. What was it trying to tell me? *Gurbars? Dead monsters...what could I possibly—oh!*

"Do you want me to butcher and sell them?"

Mrrrow.

"Um, I'm sorry, Ciel. But I don't think anyone wants to buy gurbar meat." I'd never even butchered any monster that large. I guess it *was* possible, but probably a very daunting task...and there were eight of them, too! Besides, even if I could butcher them, I don't think I could find a buyer. And finally, it

would be hard to explain to the butcher how I managed to kill all those gurbars in the first place.

Mew! Ciel meowed sharply.

It sounds angry. Urrrg, what should I do?

Mewww?

Please...don't look so sad. You'll make me want to do something to help. "Ciel, you wait here. I'll go get Druid to help us."

Druid and the guild master were the only people I'd really spoken to around here, and Druid was the only one who knew about Ciel. It might be a big imposition, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to ask for one favor.

Mew.

After receiving Ciel's "blessing," I hurried back to town. I remembered that Druid said he had to talk to the guild master. Maybe he was still there? *If he's not...I'll give up.*

The gatekeeper saw me hurrying back to town and was really worried about me. I felt horrible about it. I told him I was okay and I hadn't been attacked...but did he believe me? When the guild building came into sight, I saw that Druid was just leaving. He looked surprised to see me.

"Um, sorry, sir, but I was wondering if you could help me with something."

"Sure thing. Anything in my power."

"Well...Ciel kind of killed a bunch of gurbars."

"Um...for real?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well...I guess I should at least go have a look."

"Thanks. I know it's a lot."

"Oh, no, I'm glad you told me. The town is still pretty frazzled about the gurbar attack."

Druid and I walked back out toward the forest. The gatekeeper looked pretty

confused to see me with him as I went through the gate again. It was hard not to laugh. As we walked toward the spot where Ciel was, I wasn't sure why—maybe because he was a seasoned adventurer?—but Druid was striding along at a much faster pace than when we walked back to town earlier. I was impressed.

“It’s over there, sir.”

“Yikes...” Druid stopped in his tracks when he saw the carnage around Ciel. I’d had the exact same reaction...and no wonder. Anyone would.

“How many are there?” he asked.

“Eight, sir.”

“Eight, eh? We should probably bring some people here to clean up the area.”

“Yes, but, um, how should we explain what happened here?”

“Yeah, that’s the problem... Maybe we should get the guild master involved.”

The guild master... From what I saw of him, he didn’t seem like a bad person. But will it be okay to let him in on this secret?

“The guild master can be a bit scatterbrained, but he’s a kind man. I think we can trust him.”

Okay...he’s safe! “You’re right. Let’s bring him in, then.” No amount of worrying would solve our problem, so we had to take the leap and trust the guild master.

“Okay, we’ll head back to town and...Ivy, are you okay with that?”

“Oh, no problem. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you’ve walked an awful lot today.”

Have I? I don’t know; I think I only walked nine hours total today. I should be okay. “I’m fine. Let’s go back to town.”

“Okay.”

I told Ciel we were going back to town again to get more help. Ciel seemed to approve of this plan, so I figured we were good to go. We set off at a rather quick pace.

“So, Ivy, how much do you usually walk in a day?”

“Let me think... I start at sunup and finish at sundown, so in the summer, that’s about fourteen to fifteen hours.”

“Wow, that’s quite a walk.”

“Is it? Hmm... I guess it was a bit of a strain when I first set out, but I’m used to it now.”

At the start of my travels, it really had been a struggle. After just six hours of walking, my muscles would start giving out, but I’d still push through it. I was desperate to escape at the beginning, so I would drag myself from town to town. I walked on sheer willpower.

I guess, over time, it became normal to me to walk ten hours in a day. A few times, I even walked a whole twenty-four-hour cycle because I was in monster-infested areas where it would be dangerous to stop and sleep. Come to think of it, those twenty-four-hour travel days stopped entirely after I met Ciel.

The gatekeeper gave us another strange look when we returned to town yet again. I wondered how he would react if we showed up with the guild master next time...

The guild’s lodge was overflowing with adventurers...and they all seemed aggravated. *I’m kinda scared.*

“This way, Ivy.”

“Yes, sir.” I followed Druid up the stairs. We came to the guild master’s room on the second floor, where we found him talking with another man. He was a bit surprised to see us but quickly offered us a couple of chairs.

“We’ll make this quick,” Druid said.

“Understood. You’ve really had a hard day, Druid.”

The other man and Druid seemed to know each other. The new man glanced at me, so I gave him a little nod.

“Ha ha ha, well, sit tight there,” he said, “I need to talk to the guild master a bit.”

“Please, wait. We’ve come about the gurbars—”

“Yes, that’s why I’m here.”

“—so that he’ll...hm?”

Is that why all the adventurers are here? To clear out the gurbars?

“Guild Master, sorry to interrupt, but it’s important,” Druid insisted.

The guild master gave Druid a once-over, then nodded. He asked the other man to leave the room and gave him a message to pass on: “Tell the other adventurers to wait there a minute.”

“Understood, sir. If you’ll excuse me,” he said.

Wow, he’s really polite. Is he the guild master’s assistant?

“Well?” There was a sharpness in the guild master’s voice. It was easy to see how he’d made it to the top of this organization.

“The gurbars have already been exterminated,” Druid said.

“Um...by whom?”

“By Ciel—oh right, Ciel is an adandara that Ivy here tamed.”

An intimidating silence fell over the room. I sneaked a glance at the guild master, whose eyes were wide open in shock. I felt a little guilty about that.

After several long seconds, the guild master looked at Druid and said slowly, “Did you say...an adandara?”

Druid nodded in reply.

“Wow...an adandara... Really?” the guild master asked Druid once more. Again, Druid nodded silently in reply. It all felt very awkward.

“You’ll probably have to see it to believe it,” Druid said. “Come with us.”

“Ah?! Well...yes, I suppose you’re right. Guess I’ll come along.” While Druid was eager, the guild master was hesitant. I got the sense we’d won him over, but was taking him out to the forest really the only way for us to make any progress with him?

Chapter 141: My Personality?

“Wow...an honest-to-goodness adandara...”

Ciel was still sitting daintily atop the stack of gurbar corpses. The guild master could only stare blankly at it. The sight was so out of the ordinary that Druid was holding back laughter.

“That’s incredible. It’s the real thing!”

I guess adandaras really were rare monsters. The guild master’s fixed stare and repeated gasps of amazement confirmed that, at least. But if you asked me, the pile of gurbar corpses was much more impressive.

Druid broke the silence. “Um, so the gurbars...”

“Oh! Right, yes, the gurbars.”

Wait a minute, did he forget about them?

“What should we do?” Druid asked. “Tell everyone an adandara hunted them?”

“Ooh, no, that won’t fly. Adventurers are really fascinated with adandaras. They’d want to see it, even if they were afraid.”

“You’re right. I could definitely see the younger ones marching into the forest to try to catch a glimpse.”

“Yeah, and some of ‘em wouldn’t listen even if you expressly forbade it. Sit tight, I’m just gonna look ‘em over.” The guild master checked out the gurbar bodies. What was he looking for?

“Yeah, I suppose we can just say ‘some monster’ killed them. All they’ve got are claw and fang wounds, nothing else that distinguishing. I don’t think anyone will be able to tell how they died specifically.”

“And you think they’ll just accept that and move on?”

“If I tell ‘em I made the discovery myself, nobody will make a fuss.”

Hmm... Will that really work, though? I thought.

“Ivy, the guild master is trusted...in his own way.”

“Druid. ‘In his own way’ is a little unnecessary.”

“Hm? Oh, whoops. Didn’t mean to say that part out loud.”

For someone who claims to be a mid-level adventurer, Druid seems awfully friendly with the guild master. It’s like he doesn’t hold back at all. I guess that’s a sign of closeness with someone. I’m kind of jealous.

“Now look what you’ve done, Druid. Ivy’ll be suspecting me.”

“Huh?!”

I’ll suspect him? Of what?

“I think you’re off there. He was thinking about our relationship, right?”

“Right,” I said.

“The guild master and I both learned the fundamentals of this job from the same person,” Druid explained. “We’ve got history, so I still respect him as my senior.”

“That’s true, though...from the way you behave around me, Druid, I doubt a single person thinks you respect me.”

The guild master has a point. Druid does look like he never takes anything this guy says seriously.

“Ha ha ha! Anyway, now that we have a plan, let’s go back and tell everyone the gurbar threat is taken care of. The townspeople will be relieved to hear it.”

That’s right. We originally brought the guild master here to help us decide how to handle the gurbar corpses. Whenever Druid and the guild master are together, everything always seems to go off track.

“Good idea. I’ll leave the rest to you, Druid. All right, sooo...I’ll tell everyone that Ivy found the gurbar corpses and told Druid, who then told me. They were already like this when we found them. Sound good?”

Wow, that’s incredibly...sloppy! Will that really be enough?

"Understood. But break the news carefully, okay? Don't draw attention to Ivy."

"Why not?" the guild master asked.

"Well, Ivy doesn't want to stand out."

The guild master nodded. "All right. But traveling alone, he already stands out plenty."

He did have a point there. I hadn't noticed it myself, but Rattloore had also told me as much. Being alone and looking so...young...drew attention. And really, he was absolutely right. He was actually shocked I hadn't noticed it on my own.

"Well, please try to make it so Ivy doesn't stand out so much this time," Druid said.

"Got it."

Since all loose ends were now tied up, we returned to town. But before we left, I went over to Ciel and grabbed the Sora bag, then slung it over my shoulder. I'd let Ciel look after the Soras while Druid and the guild master talked, since they rattled around a lot in the bag. In a whisper, so the guild master wouldn't hear me, I thanked Ciel and told it to get far away from the gurbar corpses. The adandara purred in reply and bounded deeper into the forest.

"So majestic..." The guild master sighed.

I could only bob my head awkwardly many times in response.

Due to the guild master's absence, the lodge of the adventurers' guild was in a bit of chaos when we returned. But everybody calmed down when the guild master explained that he had been called away to confirm that the gurbars had already been cleared out.

That gave me pause. I'd have thought it would have taken more time for the guild master to step in. Didn't anyone think it was odd that he'd acted so quickly?

"Um, Mr. Druid?"

“What’s up?”

“Aren’t there any veteran adventurers here? It just seems a little strange that the guild master stepped in personally.”

The adventurers in the rescue party were clearly not veterans either. Something felt off to me.

“Wow, Ivy, you really are a perceptive kid.”

“Huh?!”

“Well it’s like this. Oll used to have about five teams of veteran adventurers, but, well...” He trailed off uncomfortably.

“Sir, if it’s something difficult for you to talk about, you don’t...”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. So, two of the veteran adventurer parties...a little while ago, we found out they were in cahoots with the human traffickers, so they were sentenced to slavery.”

So it was that organization again. Their rot really did run deep. “Wow, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, well, me too. And as for the other three teams of veterans, they were sent into the forest to scout the gurbars and bring back information...but they never returned. That’s why the guild master has his hands full.”

Oh! So it’s because they’re all gone. I did wonder why everyone looked a little on edge when I first entered the plaza. It was because there were no veteran adventurers in town. I couldn’t blame everyone for being scared when there was nobody here to protect them.

Wait... When Ciel hunted all those gurbars, did it actually do the townsfolk a really big favor?

“Looks like they’re done talking,” Druid said.

I glanced over at the guild master. Everyone around him looked cheerful. *So I was right. Ciel did a very good deed.*

“Ivy, I just remembered—are you registered with a guild? Sorry, I guess if you were registered, you’d have shown the gatekeeper your permit.”

“That’s okay. No, I’m not registered.”

“All right. Well, I’ll tell the guild master to give you a special quota for your gratuity.”

A special quota for my gratuity? Wait, I’m getting another reward? “Um, but... a gratuity for what? And what’s a special quota?”

“The gratuity is for finding the gurbars. And a special quota is like a request to not charge a processing fee.”

A processing fee? Do I have to pay a processing fee if I’m not registered with a guild? Nobody ever said anything about this the last time I was given a reward. I wonder if I was charged?

“Something wrong?”

“Oh, no, sir. It’s nothing.”

Was I given a special quota all the other times? That’s right, Rattloore did ask me what the sum total of my gratuity was. Bolorda and Seizerk asked me, too. I did think it was strange at the time, but I told them anyway since we were all receiving the same reward. Come to think of it, I remember they all looked happy when I told them. And Rattloore even replied “Same as me.” I didn’t understand what they’d meant at the time, but I guess they were making sure I wasn’t being charged a processing fee. *I get the feeling I’ve been receiving preferential treatment...*

“Don’t worry about it, okay?”

“Huh?”

“It’s just, you seem not to like the idea of special treatment, Ivy.”

Was that true? Well, a part of me did feel like I was an adventurer just like the rest of them. But I was much younger—a fledgling. So while I appreciated help from everyone, I couldn’t help but feel a little guilty about it.

“Oh! I just remembered,” I said, “I wanted to thank you, Druid. Would you like to come for dinner in the plaza sometime? What do you think?”

I wanted to thank him for all his help today. But maybe taking him out to dinner at a restaurant would have been better than offering to cook for him?

“Ivy. What did I just say about special treatment?”

“Huh?”

“Well, I guess it’s just your personality. And things have been hectic all day...”

My personality? Ohhh, that’s right. My aversion to being treated differently made me scramble to repay someone for helping me out. I guess my personality type is a bit of a hassle?

“What’s wrong?”

When I heard the worry in his voice, I looked up and nervously shook my head. “Oh, I’m okay. I’d just like to make you dinner...if you don’t mind, that is.”

“Of course I don’t mind. In fact, as a bachelor, that would help me out a lot. I’ll take you up on that offer soon. Thanks.”

His bright smile made me sigh in relief. “Are there any foods you dislike or any ones you especially like?”

“I don’t like vegetables much, but I really like meat.”

“What?!” That sounded like something a child would say.

“Whoa! Just kidding,” Druid quickly backpedaled...but what he’d originally said was probably the honest truth. He *had* seemed serious. I looked him up and down. Since he was an adventurer, he did have a rather brawny physique. He was heavily muscled and quite tall. So I guess you *could* grow up nice and strong even if you didn’t eat your veggies.

I looked down at my own body...*what am I doing wrong? No, no, you’re going to hit a growth spurt any day now. Definitely.*

Chapter 142: Sora's Baby?

DRUID AND I left the guild master to handle the gurbar situation and headed out of the lodge. Otolwa had been buzzing when I first arrived there, and it was hard to believe I'd run into trouble my first day in Oll, too. *That's right, they also formed a task force to look into the blessed balm. I hope I don't get drawn in any further...* I'd made that wish many times, but I still always seemed to find myself right smack in the middle of trouble.

"By the way, Ivy, what are your plans in Oll?"

Druid's question jogged my memory—I had to go see a slave trader. "I came here to get a slave."

"A slave? Oh, you mean as a travel companion?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. Well, Oll does have a very large slave market. One of the traders was busted recently, though."

Was busted? I looked at Druid, and he smirked in reply.

"Let me guess...were they involved with the human traffickers?" From Druid's body language, it seemed I'd hit the nail on the head.

"Bingo. It was a real scandal. The parents of the lost children stormed his business. The boss and the guild master somehow managed to calm things down, but things were pretty awkward around here until the criminals finally left town as slaves."

I would imagine so. And I couldn't blame the families for acting that way when their beloved children were stolen from them. *Oh, wait! Which slave trader was it? I hope it's not the one I was going to.*

"Um, was Golga the one who got busted?" *I sure hope not. I have a referral for him...*

“Oh, no. It was Murlar’s Slave Trade. Is Golga the one you’re hoping to see?”

“Yes, an adventurer I know wrote me a referral.”

“Oh, okay. If you want to go there now, I can take you.”

I would love that, but I’m kind of wiped out. “No, thanks. I’ll go tomorrow. I’m a little tired.” I thought Druid would probably be tired, too, but he sure looked chipper.

“I understand. I’m not sure why, but I’m not tired.”

He’s not tired? Even though he lost an arm today?

“Maybe it’s because of what your friends did to me.”

Does he mean Sora? Does Sora’s healing also cure tiredness? Is that what happened when Sora healed me? My memories of that day are pretty hazy, what with the shock of being attacked and then healed. Hmm... Come to think of it, I was pretty active right afterward, considering I’d just been nearly killed. But that still doesn’t change the fact that Druid was heavily wounded earlier today.

“Please, take it easy the rest of the day, sir. You might really be fatigued and you just don’t notice it. But...I know it’s a bit hypocritical for me to lecture you when I was the one who asked for your help with the gurbars.”

“Ha ha ha, don’t worry. I suppose you’re right, though. I should probably spend the rest of the day taking it easy at home.”

“Yes, please do.”

After I parted ways with Druid, I took a look around the marketplace before heading back to the plaza. I wanted to see what kinds of vegetables, fruits, and nuts were for sale here. I was also scouting the shops to see if any of them would buy the fruit I’d foraged and stored in my magic bags. But all the shops had the guild’s seal on them, meaning the produce sold there was guild certified. In other words, unless I was offering some pretty rare items, my goods would be difficult to sell. Well—that was a problem.

“And is it just me...or are all these prices a bit high?”

All of the produce in the market was just a touch more expensive than in Otolwa. Maybe it was because of the gurbars. The guild master *had* implied it

was dangerous to venture into the forest. And the gatekeeper was rather stern with me, too.

I strolled around the market, taking a close look at the sellers and their goods. As I walked, I overheard lots of people talking about the gurbars and the monster who killed them. *News sure travels fast around here. But why is everyone saying the monster was over three meters tall? I doubt the guild master's report said anything like that. Hm? The monster had giant fangs? It stood on its hind legs?*

The longer I listened to the chatter, the further away this mystery monster got from Ciel's actual description. *Wow, gossip sure is something. I'm actually kind of looking forward to seeing how this monster's described tomorrow.*

After I had a look around all the shops, I headed back to the plaza. All the items for sale were expensive but very fresh. The guild was most likely doing some pretty thorough quality control. That meant they'd probably lowball me if I wanted to sell anything independently...or they might not even buy from me to begin with. If I managed to meet a friendly shopkeeper, they might give me a good price, but I really wasn't sure.

Back at the plaza, I went inside my tent and sealed the entrance up tight. When I peeked outside, it looked safe enough. *Okay then.* I carefully eased the bag off my shoulder and placed it in the middle of the tent. When I opened it up, I found the two little slimes asleep inside. I gently picked up Blue Sora.

“Rise and shine, Sora.”

“Puuu.”

“We’re in an adventurers’ plaza, so be quiet, okay?”

Sora jiggled in my arms in response. I set it down softly beside the bag. Then I took out the red slime, a bit more cautiously than the first one. It was softer than the Sora I was used to. I very carefully and deliberately set it down atop the blanket. *This sure brings back memories—it’s just like the day I first met Sora.*

“Well, good morning, I guess. Please don’t make any loud noises, okay?”

The new slime opened its eyes and looked around. Sora stared at it, too. That

made me wonder, what memories did each of these slimes carry with them?

I figured I would try addressing them both. “Sora?” The blue slime jumped in the air once and jiggled at me, but the red slime just sat and stared.

Does the red one not have Sora’s memories? But I thought it reacted when I called it Sora back in the forest. And look, both Soras have the same taming mark in the same spot. Does that mean the second one copied all its taming from the original Sora?

Well, let’s set that aside for now. It’s important to make a good first impression. “Nice to meet you. I’m Ivy. Is it all right if I name you?”

Wait a minute...isn’t it impossible to tame a creature without naming it first? I looked at the red slime’s taming mark again. There was no mistake: It was the same symbol as Sora’s. It seemed pretty clear that the two slimes were connected.

“Well, just sitting here wondering about it won’t give me any answers. Hmm, what should I name you...?” *Come to think of it, I got both Sora’s and Ciel’s name from Past Me’s memories. Let’s see, for the new slime, since it’s red... Tomato? Huh, that’s strange. The word popped into my head, but it didn’t have the same impact as Ciel’s and Sora’s names. Tomato, huh... What else is there... Flame?* I looked at the new slime. *Flame...* I stared at it, and it stared right back.

“Flame... Your name is Flame.”

Flame jiggled back at me. My heart jumped at the sight. If it was as weak as Sora was when I first met it, this new slime was in danger.

“Flame, don’t jiggle so hard! You’ll die.”

Flame stopped jiggling and looked up at me. *Oh, good. It stopped. Oh, wait! That means it understands me, so it’s a little different than Sora was at the start. Sora didn’t understand anything I was saying at first. Huh? Wait, the taming symbol is a little different now.*

“A tamer is only supposed to have one taming mark, right?”

I looked at Sora again. *Oh! Sora’s symbol also changed a little. Does the symbol change each time you tame another creature? I’ve never heard of that*

happening before... I'd better go visit Ciel tomorrow and see if its symbol changed, too.

Sora bounced around and landed right next to the bag that contained its meal potions.

“Sorry, Sora, dinner’s a little late today.”

I got to work lining up the potions in front of Sora. I had blue and red potions. *Oh! That's right, what does Flame eat?*

Shu-waaa...shu-waaa...shu-waaa...

That was the sound of two sets of potions being dissolved. I looked over and saw that Sora was eating the blue potions, and Flame was eating the red ones. *Oh, good. Flame eats red potions.* I lined the red potions up in front of Flame. *I'd better start collecting extra red potions from now on.*

After watching them eat for a while, I noticed Sora wasn’t eating any of the red potions. “You don’t want red ones?” I asked Sora. It wouldn’t even look at them. *That’s strange. Was Sora eating the red potions for Flame? Is that even a thing? Come to think of it, it was right around the time Sora got a red patch that it started eating red potions. Was it eating red potions to help the red slime grow?*

“When you think of it like that, I guess that means Flame is Sora’s baby?” *Do slimes give birth? Is this the sort of question I’m allowed to ask?* “You know what—forget it. I have a feeling nobody would be able to answer that anyway.”

Once the two slimes finished their meal, they snuggled up against each other and fell asleep. They were so cute to watch. But Flame...was it *drooling*? Flame seemed like a bit of a disappointment compared to Sora.

This makes me think. Sora is a blue slime that eats blue potions. Flame is a red slime that eats red potions. But...there are two more colors of potions left: green and purple.

“Really though, it’s no good to make your brain work so hard when you’re tired. Let’s just go to sleep.”

So many things had happened today. I’d better not let myself get

overwhelmed!

Chapter 143: Sora...and Sword?

WHEN I TRIED to leave for the forest the next morning, I got a different gatekeeper...and boy, did he block my way. I told him I would be okay, but he kept scolding me, saying a child couldn't go out there alone. It was only after I promised him that I would keep my senses open for strange auras and run at the first sign of danger that he finally let me go. I guess I do look like I'm asking for trouble. Still, it was surprising how overprotective the gatekeepers in Oll were. I guess it was in part because of the gurbar threat, but I hoped I wouldn't have to go through the same ordeal every time I wanted to visit the forest. That would get old real fast.

Argh... Well, anyway, I headed for the dump. My mission: to collect food for Sora and Flame! At first I was afraid I would need to collect twice the potions to feed two slimes, but my worries were in vain. Sora was eating half of what it usually ate, and Flame would eat the other half. In other words, the two slimes ate about the same amount as Sora did before the split. I guess that meant Sora was eating extra for Flame all that time. It was just one mystery after another.

“Found it! Wow, it’s just as big as I’d hoped, too.”

A giant dump lay spread out before my eyes. Even at a brief glance, I could tell it was filled with many different kinds of trash. I saw an unsheathed, broken sword, and I was extra careful not to cut my feet as I approached it. As I surveyed the area around the dump, I looked for a spot with little to no breeze. Something about scavenging at a dump felt so warm and cozy to me.

I carefully set the bag containing Flame down in a depression in the ground at the base of a lone tree. Then I opened the bag, gently lifted Flame out, and set it down in a spot with no draft.

“Wait here, okay? I’m going to go collect some potions. Make sure you don’t let the breeze carry you away.”

Sora would often get tumbled around by the wind. I wasn’t sure about Flame

yet, but I still had to be careful. If I let a strong gust blow on the new slime, who knew where it might end up?

“I’ll be right back, Flame.” I was here for the sole purpose of collecting potions for Sora and Flame. Since I was using my new magic bag, the potions would deteriorate much more slowly, and I would have plenty of time to use them. I entered the dump with Sora bouncing along beside me. The little slime seemed in much higher spirits today.

“Be careful, Sora. You could get hurt.”

Okay. I don’t want to stray too far or it’ll be a pain walking back, so I’ll stay in this area. Wow, there’s a lot of trash here. But, oh dear...the potion quality doesn’t look too good.

“Pu, pu, puuu.”

Sora is sure in a good mood. Did something nice happen? I turned to look at Sora...and found it impaled by a sword.

“Huh?! Whaaat?! Whoa, Sora! Are you okay?”

I ran over to Sora to get the sword out of it, and...hm?

Khee-shuwaaa, khee-shuwawaaa, khee-shuwaaa, khee-shuwawaaa.

An indescribable noise came faintly from Sora’s mouth as the sword got smaller and smaller. Was Sora eating it? Sora kept making the sound, and the sword sank further and further inside. Now Sora was about to swallow the hilt. The slime was definitely eating it.

Um, wait...Sora only ate blue potions at first, right? Then, when Sora ate red potions, it created a red slime. So what will Sora give birth to from eating a sword? Wait, stop that! That’s not the issue here, Ivy. Huh? I watched closely as Sora ate.

Khee-shuwaaa, khee-shuwawaaa, khee-shuwaaa, khee-shuwawaaa.



Sora was now swallowing a second sword with unbelievable energy. I had seen a sword-eating slime once, but its tamer told me it took half a day to eat just one sword.

Khee-shuwaaa, khee-shuwawaaa, khee-shuwaaa, khee-shuwawaaa.

Yet here was Sora, about to swallow two sword hilts at once. It looked pretty satisfied, so I figured there was nothing wrong. And this digestion rate *was* Sora-specific. *I guess it's okay. Yeah, let's go with that. Gee, this is really throwing all my conclusions from yesterday out the window.*

“Ha ha ha, c’mom, Sora, you’re going outside the normal range of human comprehension.”

Who exactly am I making excuses for here? Argh...I'll look for more potions. Oh! If Sora eats swords now, does that mean Flame also eats things other than potions? Well, I'll gather some potions first, then I'll check on Flame. And wow—there really is a lot of trash.

“Oh, wait! Do I have to start collecting swords now, too?”

I looked at Sora. It was jiggling very contentedly. Just how many swords did it eat? All the swords around it had disappeared before my eyes. Thank goodness I had a magic bag. Otherwise, we’d be in real trouble here.

“Okay, all done.” I stashed the potions in one magic bag, then pulled out a new one and packed some swords into it. I was really glad I’d brought the spare bag. I returned to the tree where I’d left Flame and found it had fallen over, pretty much as I’d anticipated. Flame was just as vulnerable to wind as Sora was, even though there wasn’t much wind today.

“Are you okay, Flame?”

“Teryuuu.”

I hope it expands its vocabulary a little. Flame seems even more disappointing than Sora...

“Puuu!”

I was only asking questions, yet Sora sounded angry. How did it know what I was thinking?

“Flame, is there anything else you want to eat besides red potions?”

“Teryuuu.”

I don’t understand you! Oh well, I’ll just put some different things in front of Flame and see what happens.

I returned to the dump, picked up a variety of items, and lined them up in front of Flame. Some cotton clothes, a bamboo basket, a wooden basket, a sword, and a shield. I also found some arrows, and there were even several pieces of cookware, from pots and pans to dishes and bottles.

“There. Okay, Flame, what are you hungry for?”

Please...at least give me some reaction, or I’ll feel really pathetic. And as for you, Sora, you’d better not eat the swords I brought for Flame. You had one just a few seconds ago, remember?

“Not hungry?”

It’s not moving... Does that mean it’s not interested? Well, when I first met Sora, it only ate potions, too.

“I’ll assume this means you’re not hungry right now.”

“Teryuuu.”

I’ll take that as a “yes.” Well, now I better return all this stuff to the dump.

“Okay, once I’ve brought everything back to the dump, let’s go visit Ciel.”

“Pu! Puuu!”

“Teryuuu.”

You guys sure do tire me out... Flame still couldn’t move on its own, so I had to carry it in the bag. And since I had to handle it so delicately to avoid destroying it, the task was very nerve-racking. Carefully, carefully...gently, gently... Just performing this simple act for the first time in a while was exhausting.

“Okay, Flame, we’re leaving. Sorry in advance for the turbulence.”

We left the dump and headed for the forest. I checked for the auras of monsters and animals but didn’t sense any coming toward us. After a while, I caught Ciel’s aura on a gust of wind. I stopped in my tracks and looked up. I

knew it. I locked eyes with Ciel, who was perched up in a tree.

“Good morning, Ciel. Sorry I’m late.”

Mrrrow, Ciel trilled, gracefully leaping down from the tree. It went straight to purring and nuzzling against me.

Things were so hectic yesterday, I never got a chance to thank you. “Ciel, thanks for protecting the slimes and hunting the gurbars yesterday.”

Mrrrow.

“The people of Oll have been on edge because there’s no veteran adventurers here. But I think they feel safer now that you’ve hunted those gurbars. Seriously, thank you.”

Purr, purr, purr.

I slowly petted its head. Ciel closed its eyes and purred euphorically. It was the cutest thing ever.

“Pu! Pu-puuu,” Sora sang, gleefully bouncing around us.

Come to think of it, Sora’s been in a great mood ever since yesterday. I hope it stays content like this for a while.

“Oh, I almost forgot! Ciel, my taming mark changed slightly. Can you come a little closer?”

“Pu! Puuu.” Sora leaped into my arms. Thankfully, I’d anticipated it this time and was prepared. *Phew.*

“Pu! Pu, puuu, pu.”

“Yes,” I sighed, “I can’t explain it in words. So, Ciel, this is what the symbol looks like now.”

I showed Sora’s symbol to Ciel, who took a good look at it. Then the symbol on its forehead disappeared and a new one appeared. *Yep. Every time I see this adandara, it does something extraordinary.* I touched the symbol on its forehead softly. *I hope I can tame you for real someday.*

Chapter 144: Slave Shopping Is Exhausting

“SO...I HAVE TO BUY a slave now. I'm a little nervous.”

After playing with Ciel and introducing it to the newly named Flame, I was about ready to head back to town.

Mrrrow.

Are you trying to give me a pep talk? “Thanks. I promise I'll find us a good travel companion.” For Ciel's, Sora's, and Flame's sakes, it was absolutely vital that I find someone nice. “Okay, let's try it and see how it goes.”

Stressing over what might happen wouldn't help me. I needed to go there and weigh my options. When I was nearing the edge of the forest, I paused to say goodbye to Ciel.

“Ciel, thanks for walking me back. See you tomorrow.”

Mrrrow, Ciel said. After licking Sora goodbye, it vanished gracefully into the trees.

Huh? Wait, Ciel never licked Sora before. I looked at Sora. It was staring into the forest, completely still. Maybe it was surprised. So this *was* the first time. *Well, it's probably nothing to worry about.*

“Sora, let's go back.”

Sora looked up at me. Then it began its vertical stretching exercises at a ridiculous speed. *Um...does this mean you're happy or angry? Well, guess I'll let you get it out of your system.*

“Feel better now?”

“Pu! Puuu.”

Oh, good. That's the Sora I know. I put Sora back in its bag and returned to town. I wondered if I should ask how the little slime felt about Ciel licking it, but I decided not to. I didn't want Sora to get...excited...again. *I'll give it some space.*

The gatekeeper looked relieved to see me. *Did I worry him that much? Now I feel kind of bad about it. I hope I find a travel companion soon.*

A little off the main street, there were three slave trading shops, but one of their doors was boarded up. That must have been the rogue slave trader Druid mentioned yesterday. I approached the door of one of the remaining two establishments: Golga's Slave Trade. After a little breath to steady myself, I stepped inside.

Everything looked...pretty normal. I hadn't had any particular mental image of what a slave trader's shop might look like, but it seemed to be a fairly unremarkable store. The only strange thing was that there were no products displayed on the shelves.

"Oh, hello there! I'm Golga, the owner of this shop. How may I help you today?" Despite the cheerful greeting, he looked hesitant for a moment. I guess I stood out even here. But he was obviously a seasoned businessman; he'd wiped any confusion off his face and was now beaming warmly at me.

"Well, um...I'm looking for a travel companion—oh! I have a letter—I mean, a referral." Gosh, I really was nervous. What was I even saying?

"It's all right, son. Take your time," the shopkeeper said slowly. He had to have noticed I was on edge. He must be a nice guy, since Sifar had recommended him.

"Here's my referral." I handed it to him along with the itemized list of instructions Rattloore and Sifar had written out for me. Sifar said he would write a letter to a friend, but it looked like an ordinary letter of referral to me.

The shopkeeper looked over the referral and the list. His eyes widened for a moment, but he quickly evened out his expression once again.

"I currently have two slaves who fit the requirements on your list. One of them is a woman, though..."

I'd been advised that a lady travel companion would be a liability—she'd only make my trip more dangerous. "I would like a male slave, please."

"Yes, excellent choice. I have a forty-year-old man available. Would you like to speak to him now?"

“Um, can I have a look at him first?”

“A look? Yes, of course. Right this way.”

The shop owner led me into a room filled with slaves. It looked like they were all living together in there. It was totally not what I expected.

“Who’s the kid? New blood?”

“No.”

“Awww, that means he’s a buyer... Whoa! Really?!” One of the younger women was very excited. She looked to be in her early twenties. There was also a man in his late twenties and a man and woman in their forties. The older man was probably the one the shopkeeper had in mind. I was hoping to just sneak a peek at him, but I accidentally made eye contact.

Hmmm? Something seemed off about him. I discreetly touched the bag Sora and Flame were in. I couldn’t imagine this man being anywhere near them.

“What do you think, young sir?” Golga beamed at me. I could sense he genuinely thought the forty-year-old man met all my parameters. Was it okay to say no? Rattloore and Sifar had cautioned me to only choose a slave I felt was “the one.” If I sensed anything was amiss or something made me nervous, I should say no.

“I’m sorry, but he won’t do,” I said, shaking my head at the slave trader.

“Oh dear, I’m sorry to hear that. Would you like to look at some others here?”

“No, I’m pretty set on what I’m looking for. Thank you for your time.”

“Understood. You’re a friend of Sifar’s, so no hard feelings.”

“Sorry to be a bother.”

“Oh, no, you’re looking for a travel companion, after all. It’s understandable to be extra cautious.”

Thank goodness... I’d been worried about what I would do if he pressured me to buy, but it looked like everything was going to be okay. It was a good thing I had Sifar write me the referral. I apologized and thanked Golga one more time, and then I left.

“Phew...”

Golga said he would send word to me if he acquired a slave that fit my needs. He also offered to check with the other trader to see if that shop had what I was looking for. He was much nicer than I’d expected. But it was still mentally exhausting... *Now I’m in the mood for something sweet.*

“Maybe I should go to the food carts? Or I could make something.”

If I dug into Past Me’s memories, I could probably come up with something good. But the day had really taken a toll on my mental wellness. Buying a person...just didn’t sit right with me.

“I’ll go to the carts.” *I’ll treat myself to something sweet to feel better. I wonder what they have?* As I got closer, my excitement grew. I couldn’t wait. I walked around the carts to see what was available. I saw some grilled gurbar skewers which looked kind of hefty. *Hm? And there’s whole-roasted field mouse... I wonder what that tastes like? I don’t think I want to look at it, though.*

“Huh?” I stopped in front of a cart selling a confectionary I thought was called “donuts.” *I wonder what they’re like?* Past Me had a memory of something similar, but these looked a bit different. *It’s a fried pastry. Could they coincidentally have the same name?* I had to know.

“Excuse me, I’d like some of these pastries, please.”

“Sure thing. How many?”

“I’ll take fifty dal worth, please.”

“Okay, that’ll get you...seven.”

“That’ll do nicely, thank you.” The donuts were little sugar-dusted balls that could be eaten in two bites.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

I handed the baker fifty dal and took the bag of donuts. They smelled so nice and sweet. *There’s a park nearby. I’ll find an empty spot to sit and enjoy these there.*

“Oh? Mr. Druid?”

As I walked toward the park through the plaza to look for a seat, I caught sight of Druid and another man talking on the main road. It didn’t look like a friendly conversation. They weren’t fighting, but Druid looked angry. Or maybe bitter. I found myself staring a little too long—but I was worried about him. I felt bad watching from the side, but I didn’t know what to do.

As I stood there hesitating, the man gave Druid’s shoulder a hard shove. And it was on the side with his injured arm, too. *How horrible. What’s that guy’s deal? I don’t know what’s going on between you, but civil people shouldn’t act like that!*

Blood rushed to my head, but I knew I shouldn’t stick my nose into other people’s affairs. As I was calming myself down, the man hurled an insult at Druid before storming off.

“Wow. That’s so not cool,” I couldn’t help but comment.

Ooh, I know what to do. I left the plaza and approached Druid. His head was hanging, and his eyes had a blank look.

“Good morning, sir.”

“What?! Oh...Ivy. Um...”

“Good morning. Would you like to have a tea break with me?”

“A...tea break?”

“I was at the slave trader’s this morning. My soul felt all exhausted, so I was about to take a little rest with something sweet. Won’t you join me, sir... please?” I’m so nervous that it’s making me talk weird. Oh well, don’t worry about it. You’re fine, Ivy.

“Pfft! Ha ha ha. Ah, a tea break. You want me to join you?”

“Yes, sir. I thought two would be better than one.”

I was relieved to see Druid’s shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

“There’s one condition though,” I said. “It’s BYOD. Bring Your Own Dessert.”

“Ha ha ha! So you’re not treating me, then? Understood. I’ll go buy

something. What do you recommend?"

"I just bought some donuts, but the pastries from the cart next to them also looked good."

Druid laughed and nodded. I'd only spent a little time with him, but I got the impression he enjoyed helping people. Or rather, helping people made him feel comfortable. So I couldn't help but take advantage of his kindness. If anything, that alone would turn his frown upside down. It's just...I really wasn't used to special treatment, so it made me a little nervous.

Chapter 145: Taking a Tea Break

ODDLY ENOUGH, the donuts tasted exactly how I imagined they would. It confused me a little, but coincidences like this just happen...I think. Oh, but they were so delicious. The pastries Druid bought resembled donuts, too, but they were coated with a hard candy shell. They were called lolidrops, and they were yummy as well.

“These are delicious,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve had these, but they are good.”

“Do you not eat sweet things often?”

“Hm? Well, the parties I was involved with weren’t really into them.”

That’s right. Druid just lost a lot of comrades. I already made him do so much for me yesterday, and now I’m making him have tea with me. Maybe I’m being too pushy. But this time, my motives really are pure...

“Hm? Is something wrong?” Druid asked with concern. My worry must have shown on my face.

“Oh, no, sir. I’m fine.”

Wait...huh? He said “the parties I was involved with.” ...That’s kind of an odd way to word it.

“Excuse me, sir, but what do you mean by the parties you were involved with?”

“Oh, that. I don’t belong to any party.”

“Huh? But you just said—”

“Ack, sorry. Let me explain: I always join a new party with each new assignment. That’s why I don’t belong to any specific party.”

“Oh, really?” I’d never heard of adventurers changing parties like that. “Um, are there many others like you in Oll?”

“Others like me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Not really, no. Belonging to a party increases your chances of getting job offers, after all.”

I can't believe he doesn't have a permanent party. He's so helpful, and I'm sure he'd be a great leader, too. No, scratch that, he'd do better as the leader's right-hand man, to calm him down. Is there some reason why he hasn't joined a party? I guess asking wouldn't be polite...

“I see, sir.”

Oh! My last donut. I popped the final one into my mouth. It was soft and sweet. Gee, even after years of eating these, I still love them... Agh! Past Me and Current Me's thoughts are all mixed up. This is the first time Current Me has had donuts!

“Ha ha ha, you sure like those donuts. Want me to buy you some more?”

“Oh, no, sir, but thank you for the offer. I have to go to the forest right after this and tell Ciel what happened.”

“You report back to Ciel?”

“Yes, sir. It looked a bit worried when I mentioned I'd be shopping for a slave today.”

“Oh, that's right. By the way, did you find what you were looking for?”

“I did, but I didn't buy him.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Something just didn't feel right.”

“Ah. Well, that's a shame.”

“I have no problem with it. I'll take all the time I need to find the right fit.”

“That makes sense. Sooo...listen, if you're going to the forest, can I come with you?”

Druid wants to come with me? I'm not sure why, but he looks really eager...

Could it be... “Do you want to see Ciel?”

“Urk! Sorry, yeah, I do. What with everything that happened yesterday, I didn’t get a really good look at it. I’d love to pet Ciel...with permission, of course! Would that be all right?”

Aha. So Druid *was* interested in Ciel. He was surprised by the adandara at first, but he hadn’t seemed all that interested after that. Well, he *had* just lost an arm. How could he have room in his brain to think about anything else?

“Yes, you can come with me! I have a feeling the gatekeeper would prefer that anyway.” I thought back to the hard time I’d had with the gatekeeper just that morning. Even though I appreciated his concern, I dreaded going through the same ordeal every time I wanted to pass. For that reason alone, I was grateful to have Druid with me.

“The gatekeeper, eh? Ha ha ha! Those guys feel like it’s their duty to protect all the children in town, so if there’s a kid they like, they sometimes don’t let him through.”

“Oh, really? Yes, I had a really tough time this morning.”

“Ha ha ha ha! Yeah, well, even when some kids reach the age of adulthood—fifteen—the gatekeepers still worry about them.”

“Oh no, really?”

“Accident-prone kids, kids who look young for their age, and I guess any kid who looks like they might do something reckless. This town is infamous for having big shouting matches between gatekeepers and youngsters at least once or twice a year. ‘I’m going to the forest!’ and ‘Not without your guardian, young man!’ Stuff like that.”

“That sounds like quite the scene.”

“It really is. But thanks to the overprotective gatekeepers, adventurer deaths among minors have gone way down.”

Wow, I didn’t realize how amazing the gatekeepers here really were. Now I’m surprised I was allowed into the forest at all. According to Druid, I’m the exact type of kid they shouldn’t let pass.

Oh! Was it because I told them I'd been traveling solo all my life? That seemed likely. "Well, shall we go?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm excited." And Druid really *was* excited, judging by the way he was fidgeting. Since I saw Ciel all the time, it was hard to understand his feelings. It was easy for me to forget that Ciel was a rare monster.

We left the plaza and headed toward the town gate. The gatekeeper let me pass without a peep since Druid was with me. It sure was a nice feeling, just walking through. We trekked into the forest for a while. When I looked up at Druid, I noticed that his eyes were darting to and fro, looking for Ciel. But he wouldn't find Ciel looking around like that.

"Um, sir?"

"Oh, sorry. What is it?"

"Ciel's right here."

"What?!" he gasped, whirling around.

I chuckled. "Um...look up."

"Up?"

"Yes. Ciel? Come on down."

At my command, Ciel leapt from the tree and landed soundlessly before us.

"Whoa! It really was above me." Druid looked up at the branch where Ciel had been waiting. *Was it really that strange?* "How majestic."

"I know!" *Oh no! I was a little too eager in my response.* Well, I really wanted someone else to see how amazing Ciel was. I was so proud to have Ciel as a friend that I almost felt it was a waste that only I knew about the adandara.

"Oops! The slimes." I opened the bag on my shoulder and found Sora staring up at me. It looked cross, and I had no excuse. I'd simply forgotten. "Aww, I'm so sorry. Do you want out?"

Sora bounced eagerly out of the bag in response. I clamped a nervous hand over the opening and peeked in. *Oh, good. Flame is still okay.* As I peered in, Flame's eyes slowly opened and met mine. *Wow...you look awfully sleepy there.*

“Flame, do you want to snooze some more?”

The slime wiggled a little and slowly closed its eyes. It was asleep. This little slime slept a lot more than Sora did at the start—and it was drooling again, too.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes, Flame just fell asleep.”

“Flame?”

Oh, that's right. He's met Flame, but I was such a confused mess at the time... and Flame didn't have a name back then, either.

“My other slime.”

“Oh, so you named it Flame... Is it *drooling*?” Druid asked curiously, peeking into the bag.

“Yes, that would be drool.” I mean, how else was I supposed to answer? Anyone would be curious about it. To see a thick trail of drool oozing out of a sleeping slime’s mouth... *Wow, that's a lot. Sora never drooled like this. Whoa! I just noticed it's leaving drool stains on the bag!*

“This is the first time I’ve seen a slime sleeping,” Druid said.

Sifar and the others had said the same. I guess only tamers got to see that sort of thing.

Mrrrow.

“Oops, sorry, Ciel. I couldn’t find us a travel companion. There are some people who are helping us get one, though.”

Mrrrow. Druid looked at Ciel in shock.

“Pu-puuu, pu-pu, puuu, pu, pu, pu, pu, puuu!” Druid’s eyes widened again at Sora’s singing. Sora looked quite smug about it.

“Sora, don’t tease him.” Sora tended to make fun of people when they had strong reactions to it.

“Wow! I’ve seen a tamed slime before, but I’ve *never* seen one like Sora,” Druid exclaimed, suddenly very enthusiastic. It was so unlike him that I flinched away on instinct. Noticing he’d startled me, Druid coughed several times.

“Sorry. I got a little overexcited there.”

“Oh, it’s all right, sir. Is Sora really that extraordinary?” Well, I already knew Sora was extraordinary enough to bring someone back from death’s door. But I felt like “extraordinary” wasn’t exactly the right word for that.

“This is the first time I’ve seen a slime express its feelings so clearly.”

Express its feelings? I looked at Sora, who was puffing its chest out proudly. *Yeah, he’s right. You sure are a rarity.*

Chapter 146: The Guild Master

“SORRY TO ASK YOU HERE so early in the morning.”

“It’s all right, sir,” I said. “What was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Well, it’s a difficult question...”

The guild master had a question for me, so I’d arrived at the lodge early that morning. I’d already had time for breakfast and a little nap before I arrived, but the guild master looked sleepy. He seemed to be dealing with some sort of dilemma.

“Ivy...you’re the one who found the blessed balm, right?”

“That’s right, sir. Well, technically, Ciel found it.”

“Ah, I see.” His distinct gravelly voice was awfully soft today. I had a bad feeling. “I’m really sorry,” he sighed, “but the client claims he didn’t ask for any blessed balm. He said it must’ve been planted there by whoever found it.”

“What?!” This was the worst possible turn of events for me. And it was completely unexpected. I wasn’t sure what to do... *Oh, right! I need to refute it, at least.* “Um, but I didn’t do it, sir.”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to alarm you. I know it wasn’t you; Druid confirmed as much. So don’t you worry. I called you here so I could tell them I asked you and you denied the allegations. Argh...I really don’t do well with this sort of thing.”

What a relief. Thanks, Mr. Druid. I’d better thank him properly later. I do feel sorry for the guild master, though.

“Um, the people who accused me of planting the blessed balm... Did they have some idea of why I would have done it?”

“They suggested you were after money.”

“Money?”

“Yeah.”

“Umm...but how would that even work?” *How would planting blessed balm in a carriage get me money? By summoning monsters and killing them?* “Um, does this person know about Ciel?”

“That’s highly unlikely. They don’t even know what you look like, Ivy. All they know about you is that you’re a very young traveler. They said, ‘That kid must’ve planted the blessed balm there as a threat.’”

As a threat? Umm...if it was a threat then why would I have told people I found the blessed balm?

“I know, it’s absurd.”

“Yes, it is, sir. If someone wanted to threaten them, they’d keep the blessed balm a secret.”

“Exactly. They probably panicked because there were way more casualties than expected. That’s why they tried to pin it on a traveler who was strapped for cash.”

“But it just feels so...”

“Foolish?”

My eyes met the guild master’s...and we both smirked. Traveling adventurers tended to earn more than ones who lived in villages or towns, since they could go where the money was. I must have been one of the few adventurers traveling for reasons other than money.

That did bring up a good point, though: money. Winter was coming, and I could never have too much saved up for that. To be honest, I did want money, but on the other hand, I wasn’t really in any financial trouble. I had my reward money, of course, and I also had many treasures that my friend found for me, so I knew I’d be okay.

I looked at the magic bag sitting next to me. Unlike the one I kept the slimes in, it contained lots of fruit and nuts. Ciel foraged these valuable items for me in the forest. I knew they would fetch a good price at the shops, so I didn’t exactly have money problems. My real issue was that not many shops were willing to

buy my merchandise. *Wait...does that mean I actually do have money problems?*

I looked searchingly at the guild master. *I wonder if he would put in a good word for me?* I took some fruit and nuts from my magic bag and set them on the table. The guild master was surprised at the sight of them, and I couldn't blame him. I had some rare fruit you could only find deep in the forest as well as tree nuts that were highly coveted among pharmacists. They were medicinal...but I didn't remember what they did, exactly.

"That's an incredible haul you have there."

"Ciel foraged these for me."

"The adandara, eh? Well, I'm impressed."

"You see, sir? I don't have any money problems."

"Ha ha ha! Don't worry. I don't suspect you. Say, aren't you going to sell these?"

"I'm currently looking for somewhere to sell these without going through the adventurers' guild. Do you know of any places?"

"The adventurers' guild? You're not selling them to the merchant guild?"

"Hm? No, sir." *The merchant guild? Huh? I can sell them to the merchant guild, too? Oh! Does that mean a merchant would sell my stuff? I'm not a merchant, after all. But why did the guild master ask me about that?*

"Then would you like to sell them through me to the adventurers' guild?"

"Huh?!"

"If you sell these, your money problems will essentially be nil. Problem solved."

So...he wants me to sell my fruit and nuts through the adventurers' guild, right? And that if I do it through him, the guild master, I won't have to register?

"Make no mistake, those fruit and the medicinal nuts will bring in a hefty sum. They're pricey goods even in normal times, but what with the gurbar scare, they're even more expensive now."

Does this mean that if I raise enough money and enough people know about it, they can vouch for me? If that will solve the problem, then I don't see any issue with it. I guess going through the adventurers' guild is my best bet.

"Um, but will I need to register with the guild, sir?"

"Ah. You have a reason not to, I assume? Wait, don't answer that. Sorry, forget I asked," he apologized, bowing his head.

I frantically shook my head. "It's not a problem, sir. It's just that I can't register for personal reasons I'd rather not go into."

"Thanks. Well, if you won't register, then this will be a special one-time deal. Hmm...you're on your way to the capital after this, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"How about buying a slave as a travel companion? You can have your slave register with the adventurers' guild for you. Besides, the area around the capital is a lot more populous. You'll be an easy mark. If you need a referral, I can write you one."

Gee, everyone has the same idea. "Thank you, sir, but I already have a letter of referral."

"Hm? Oh, for a slave trader?"

"Yes, sir. Sifar, an adventurer in Otolwa, wrote me one."

"Oh, *that* guy! I've worked with him before, but he'd always give me sass."

"Sass, sir?"

"Yeah, he'd say I was too long-winded or a blabbermouth—all sorts of rude things."

Well...the guild master does talk a lot, and he does seem to have a loose tongue. But is that his real personality? The more we talk, the more I feel like there's something a tad off about him. Besides, wouldn't it be unusual for a gossipy person to be made guild master? It's hard to imagine...

"What's wrong? Oh! Ivy, you don't think I'm a blabbermouth, too, do you?"

"Well, you do seem like one, but I was actually just thinking that you're

probably not.”

“What?”

The guild master barely knew me, yet he was being so kind and thoughtful for my sake—that much was clear. But something about him was hard to read. Come to think of it, my impression of Otolwa’s guild master was also changing the more I talked to him.

“Oh, Ivy. You really are a wonder.”

“A wonder, sir?”

“Yes. Most people don’t notice.”

Don’t notice what? What does he mean?

“Becoming a guild master comes with a lot of baggage, you know.”

Baggage...so that’s why he acts a bit careless? I stared hard at the guild master, which made him laugh.

“I suppose guild master is a difficult position to hold.”

“Hmf! Well, yeah, you’re right. You’re a good kid, Ivy.”

Hm? Um...that has nothing to do with it, does it? Why did he say I was a good kid?

“So, are you going to sell your foraged goods?”

Huh? He changed the subject. Does that mean the conversation is over? Well, I guess that’s for the best.

“Yes, please. I hope it won’t be any trouble?”

“Don’t worry. We get a lot of requests for those medicinal nuts, but I haven’t been able to fill them because I was missing my top adventurers. Those trees are only found deep in the forest, you see. If I sent unskilled men out to look for them, it’d be suicide. Is the merchandise all inside that bag?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Could I keep it here for you?”

“Um, sure.”

The guild master pulled out a piece of paper from his desk drawer. “Write down everything you have in that bag on this sheet.”

“All right, sir. I do have other fruit besides the two I showed you. Could I ask you to sell those for me, too?”

“Sure, I’ll sell everything through the adventurers’ guild.”

“Thank you very much.”

I took the paper and looked it over. There was a line to write my name and a table for the name and amount of each item. Once I filled everything out, I handed it back to the guild master.

When he saw my list, he muttered, “Incredible...” Was there something else exceptional besides the two things I already showed him?

The guild master signed and stamped the paper. “Thank you, and here’s your receipt. Now that’s two problems solved.”

I guess he means the blessed balm problem and the medicinal nut problem. I’m just glad I could help out. But even though the medicinal nut supply issue is basically solved...will the accusations really go away if I just earn some money?

“Are you sure I’ll be all right, sir?”

“Yeah, I am Oll’s guild master, after all. You can trust me.”

Hmmm...can I, though? Even if his careless personality is just an act, why am I still worried?

The guild master caught me staring. “Ivy, I know I may not look it, but I do get the job done,” he pouted, giving my head a little poke.

“I know, sir.” *I’m still a little anxious, but I’ll just keep that to myself.*

Chapter 147: I'll Be the Judge!

WHEN I STEPPED OUT of the guild lodge, I did a big stretch. “Well, what now?”

I had planned to look for a place to sell my fruit that day, but now I didn’t need to. It was still hard to believe I’d managed to get the adventurers’ guild to help me out. I knew they thoroughly inspected everything that was brought to them. That concerned me a little—but if my fruit made it through, it would certainly be sold at a fair price. After all the trouble Ciel went through to forage the fruit for me, I wanted to get as much advantage from it as I possibly could. I did have my reward money, but I also needed to save. There was no telling what the future might hold for me. A lot had already happened in the few days since I arrived in Oll. *I think I’m getting used to trouble following me wherever I go...and I don’t know if that’s a good thing.*

That reminds me—I didn’t know you could sell things through the merchant guild. I figured from the name that you could register merchandise there, but I didn’t think about trying to sell anything. At this rate, maybe I should just register as a merchant? I don’t need any skills to register, and I could safely sell anything I caught in the forest without worry. How does someone go about becoming a merchant, anyway?

“Oh! I forgot to ask where Druid was!”

I wanted to thank him for his help today, so I was going to ask where he was on my way out, but I forgot. I could always go back and ask the guild master... but I didn’t want to bother him while he was working.

I wonder where Druid might be? A tavern? Hmm, no, he doesn’t seem like the type who drinks in the morning. Would the gatekeeper know? The only people I’ve spoken to in this town so far are the guild master, Druid, and the gatekeepers. So I guess the only person I could ask right now is a gatekeeper. If he looks busy, I’ll just wander around the town and look for Druid myself.

Where’s the gatekeeper...aha. Arguing with some kids. The kids seemed to

want to go into the forest alone, but the gatekeeper wasn't having it. *Come to think of it, I heard some adventurers talking this morning about seeing some gurbar tracks near town. I eavesdropped on their conversation.*

"What if you run into a gurbar?"

"We'll fight it. We're not scared of gurbars!"

I looked at the kids and saw they were carrying swords that looked way too big for them.

"You're not scared of a gurbar that killed a whole party of mid-level adventurers? Anyone that stupid doesn't have the right to go into the forest."

"Oh, come on. We're adventurers, too, ya know! We even formed a party!"

Oh, so those kids are a party, eh? Wow. They're a bit bigger than I am, but they don't look grown-up. They're probably around thirteen or fourteen?

"Being in a party's got nothing to do with it. Are you that eager to get yourselves killed?"

"O-of course we—"

"Hills! You took my sword, didn't you?!"

"Urk! Yikes, he caught me. Run for it!"

What's going on? The kid who'd been complaining the loudest ran off in a hurry. And an older kid who looked a lot more grown-up was chasing after him... I guess the kid stole his big brother's sword. That's why it's too big for him.

After the boys had run off and everything was quiet again, I approached the gatekeeper. It was the same man who'd been there when I first arrived in Oll.

"Excuse me, sir, may I ask you a question?"

"Hm? Oh, you're Ivy, right?"

"Yes, sir." *Wow, he's got a good memory. Or maybe I'm just memorable?*

"What's wrong?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Druid. Do you know where I might find him?"

"Druid, eh? Well, today, he's—"

“If you hang around that bastard, you’ll wind up dead,” a scary-sounding voice interrupted the gatekeeper.

“Hey! What are you saying?!”

I turned toward the voice in surprise. *Oh! It’s him. The man who pushed Druid’s shoulder.* He’d seemed really nasty then, too, but it was even clearer now that I could see him up close. His eyes were filled with malice. I knew those eyes. Eyes like that had looked at me before.

“That monster tried to kill my comrades!”

“Hey, pal, knock it off! Druid had nothing to do with it.”

“No, it’s all that bastard’s fault. He’s a bad seed!”

How cruel.

“Dolgas! Enough!” The gatekeeper’s demeanor changed at once. I shivered at the sight. The man named Dolgas also turned green for an instant. “I’m telling you to drop it.”

“You would never understand. I’m just—”

“Did I stutter?”

Yikes! Now the gatekeeper is seriously angry. And scary, too... I’d better be careful not to make him angry. But what about this Dol...what was his name again? Funny, I just heard it. Um, well, that guy. He seems really aggressive...but maybe he’s actually not too strong?

“Shut up and get out of here,” the gatekeeper growled. “This doesn’t concern scum like you.”

“I just felt sorry for the kid. I was only trying to explain—”

“Please, don’t worry about me.” I said.

“—so that...huh?!”

Oops! I shouldn’t have said anything. I just didn’t have time to waste talking to strangers right now. Besides, I’ll be the judge of Druid’s character. And if my judgment is wrong and Druid ends up causing trouble, then that will be my burden to bear. Even if it’s something I regret.

"I don't know who you are. I appreciate your concern, but I am not so foolish that I require the opinions of strangers. So please don't worry about me, *sir*."

Huh? I meant to say that diplomatically, but that felt a little harsh... I honestly didn't mean it that way...but it's okay, right? Dol...what was his name again? I looked at the man standing in front of me. Yikes! He's scary... He had the most intense death glare I'd ever seen. Oh, nuh-uh. Get me away from this close-minded person. Agh! Now I'm starting to feel angry, too. Stay calm, Ivy. Whew... I took a tiny breath in and out.

"What?! You little brat!"

Huh?! Why does he...look even more frightening than before? I shot a panicked glance at the gatekeeper for help; when our eyes met, he only smirked.



“Humph! Well, *excuse me* for caring. You’re just a disrespectful little brat like the rest of ‘em!”

Dol-something-or-other screamed his vague insult in my direction and ran away. *I guess I poured oil on the fire. Argh, and I’ve been trying so hard to keep myself out of other people’s messes. What are you even doing, Ivy?!* I shook my head as I thought over everything that had just gone wrong.

“Are you okay?” the gatekeeper asked gently. He was worried about me.

“Yes, I’m fine. I was just scolding myself for my behavior.”

“Yeah...that was some epic back talk there.”

“Yeah...that’s not what I’d intended to say, though.”

“Ha ha ha!”

He laughed at me!

“Sorry about that,” the gatekeeper apologized. “That was Druid’s big brother.”

“It’s okay, I’m not that bothered by it. It doesn’t really matter to me at all.”

“Huh? It doesn’t matter to you?”

“No, sir. I have no interest in Mr. Druid’s family dynamics. The only thing I’m interested in right now is where I can find him.”

“I see...”

“I mean it. His family has nothing to do with me and him. Anyway, I just wanted to thank him for his help, so do you know where I might find him?”

That’s right. It doesn’t matter at all what sort of environment he was raised in. I was abandoned by my own family, after all. Of course a person’s family does affect one to some extent, but it’s definitely not everything.

“Ha ha ha, you’ve sure seen a lot of the world, eh, Ivy?”

“Oh, yes, I *have...*” I’d only been alive for nine years, but I’d had all sort of experiences. If I ever met God, I’d curse Him for creating me with no stars.

The gatekeeper looked at me in amusement. Maybe this sort of spat had

happened before. And maybe when it did, it scared people away from Druid. Well, that was just my speculation.

I got the sense that the gatekeeper forgot I'd asked him a question, so I tried again. "Um, sir...could you please tell me where he is?"

"Oh! That's right. He didn't go into the forest, so he's most likely at home. I don't think anyone will be hiring him with his arm in that state."

That's right. Can he still hunt with only one arm? "Do you think he'll be able to continue being an adventurer?"

"Hmm...it'll be tough. He could get used to his missing arm while leaning on those around him for help, but...he's not really that kind of guy."

Yeah, he does seem to hate getting help from others.

"His family said all sorts of terrible things to him when he was young. That's one reason he tends to keep people at a distance."

His family was terrible to him? So it wasn't just that big brother of his.

"I'll tell you where his house is. Usually he wouldn't like that, but he's probably okay with you knowing, Ivy." The gatekeeper shrugged his shoulders with a little laugh.

"Thank you very much."

Thank goodness I got on the gatekeeper's good side. If not for that, I'd still be wandering aimlessly around Oll right now.

Chapter 148:

The Guild Master Is a Little Disappointing

“THERE IT IS.”

Druid's house was far from the center of town. I looked at the neighborhood I was standing in. There were just a smattering of houses, and the whole area looked a bit melancholy.

I knocked on the door. “Excuse me, is Mr. Druid home?” I asked, just to make sure I had the right place. I waited for a while, but there was no answer. *Maybe he's not home? Hmm, I didn't consider what I should do if he's not here. Well, now that I know where he lives, I can always come by and thank him later.*

“Ivy?”

I jumped when I heard a voice right beside me. I turned...and there was Druid, holding a bag. *How could I not notice him when he was this close to me...* I drooped my head in shame.

“Ivy?”

“Oh! Good morning, sir. I mean, good afternoon.”

“Ha ha ha! Fair point. Good afternoon.”

He looked a bit confused by my behavior. But explaining it to him would only further complicate things, so I decided to sweep it under the rug.

“I wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me?”

“Yes, sir. The guild master said you told him I had nothing to do with the attack.”

“Oh, you don't need to thank me for that. All I did was tell the truth.”

“I know, but thanks to you, I'm free from all suspicion.”

“The guild master is a good judge of character, too.”

“And yet...he doesn’t give that impression. In a way, that’s a talent in itself.”

“Heh?! Pfft...ha ha ha.”

“Now I understand why you act the way you do around him. He’s just kind of a disappointment all around,” I said. If he *had* to give himself a false persona, he could have at least gone with a better one than that!

“In his defense, that’s not how he really is.”

“Yes, I noticed that. But I wish he wouldn’t make himself look so bad on purpose. He could be a lot more personable. And when I think of it that way, it makes me wonder if that really *is* part of the guild master’s true personality.”

“Ha ha ha! Ha...ha ha ha! Ivy...stop...I can’t breathe...”

“So, which is it, really?”

“Well...yeah, he’s been a bit of a letdown as long as I’ve known him. Though he did change quite a bit after he became the guild master... I guess that goes to show his essence hasn’t changed. Pfft! Hm hm hm... Ha ha ha!” Druid clutched his stomach and guffawed; this all seemed very funny to him. So I guess I was right. That disappointing impression the guild master gave off *was* partly genuine.

“Ahhh, that was hilarious. My belly hurts.”

“Don’t laugh, Mr. Druid, it’s unfair to the guild master.”

“Oh no, Ivy, it’s *you* I’m laughing at.”

“But I was just giving you my honest impressions!” Our eyes met...and then we both burst into uncontrolled laughter.

“Oh man, that’s too much. Wanna come in for a cup of tea? I’m afraid tea’s all I’ve got right now.”

“I couldn’t; I just wanted to say thank you. Oh! That’s right, would you like me to cook you that dinner I mentioned sometime?” He really had helped me a lot, and I wanted to take my time to cook a good meal for him.

“Well, I don’t want to trouble you.”

“It’s no trouble, sir. I love cooking.”

“You do?”

“Yes, sir. But it feels like something’s missing when I just cook for myself. So if you joined me, I’d enjoy it even more.”

“Woo, nice. I’d better make sure I’m good and hungry when the time comes.”

“Ha ha! Oh, that’s right, are there any foods you particularly like? When I asked you before, you said you disliked vegetables and liked meat. But you also said you were joking.” It was important that I knew the truth.

“Sorry, that really was a joke.”

I thought he’d meant it...but I guess I was wrong. Druid sure is good at deceiving people. Wait, that’s not a very nice way to put it. He’s good at trickery?

“Huh?! Oh yeah, I should give you a proper answer. I’d never really thought about it before. There aren’t any foods I don’t like, really.”

So I guess some people really don’t know what they do and don’t like. I always thought everyone had preferences, though. Maybe when he says there aren’t any foods he doesn’t like, what he really means is he’ll still eat the foods he dislikes.

“So, um, is there any food you’re especially craving right now?”

“Food, you say? Hmm...chelnuts, I guess.”

Chelnuts are tree nuts, I think. I remember them being starchy and tasty when you boil them. It’s not quite the right season for chelnuts, but I think I saw a shop selling them. Maybe I should cook something with them?

“Oh, right! Are there any flavors you’d rather not have with chelnuts?”

“Probably anything bitter, I guess. Anything sour, too.”

Aha. So he seems to dislike harsh flavors. In that case, I should probably season everything on the mild side and stay away from anything too astringent or gamey.

“Sorry, am I being too difficult?”

“Not at all. In fact, you’ve made everything much easier now that I know what

type of flavor to go for.”

“Wow. I’m a bad cook, so I have a great deal of respect for people who can do it.”

“Heh heh, well, does the day after tomorrow work for you? Around six in the evening?”

“Sure, that’ll do. In the plaza?”

“Yes, please.”

“Aye, sir. Wow, I’m already looking forward to it.”

“Um, I appreciate your excitement, but I apologize in advance if I let you down.”

“Ha ha ha!” Druid threw up his arm and laughed. He had looked kind of down when I’d first seen him that day. *Maybe I lifted his spirits a little?*

“Well, I’ll see you in two days,” I said.

“Sure thing. I can’t wait.”

“Thanks.” With a wave, I turned to walk back to the plaza. *I think I’ll buy a bunch of ingredients on the way back to my tent.* I was still a little concerned about Druid’s brother, but I told myself I shouldn’t think about it. One look at his older brother’s behavior and it was pretty clear what Druid’s upbringing had been like. But it had nothing to do with me.

“To me, Mr. Druid is like a reliable big brother, I think.” Then again, if anyone saw us together, they’d probably assume he was my father.

Hmm, chetnuts, eh? That’s a tough ingredient to work with. The only thing I can think of is to boil them in syrup. I could also make snacks with them. Like sweet chestnut paste or candied chestnuts with their skins...on...huh? Chestnuts? Chest nuts? But they’re chetnuts, right? ...My memory is a bit jumbled. Wait...huh? Could it be...that I’ve never actually eaten chetnuts before? That’s right...it was Past Me who ate them. And they were called “chestnuts,” not “chetnuts.” The me now has seen chetnuts before, but I’ve never eaten them. Argh... I hope Druid didn’t think anything I said was weird. I feel like my memories keep betraying me.

“Whenever my memories come to the surface on their own, it’s hard to tell which life they came from.”

Well, I’m going to be stuck with my memories for the rest of my life, so I’d better get used to it. That brings up a good question, though... Should I tell my future travel companion about it? I don’t know why, but I’m starting to feel sorry for whoever I wind up choosing.

Well, let’s turn things around and figure out how to cook chetnuts. If they’re similar to chestnuts, I could serve them over rice. Wait, “rice”? Come to think of it, I’ve never seen rice here. Does it not exist? Black bread is a meal staple around these parts. Only the wealthy get fluffy white bread. Maybe I should look for some rice. Someone might actually have it. And if they do, I’ll cook chestnut rice! I’ve never eaten it, but I know it tastes good.

Now that I had rice on the brain, I really wanted to eat it. I went around all the shops but couldn’t find anything that resembled the rice in my memory. *I guess that means this world doesn’t have it.* That kind of gutted me. Well, at least this world had other grains. There was a noodle that resembled pasta. It was a bit thicker and shorter than spaghetti, but from what I’ve heard, it was used much the same way pasta was. The only problem was that it was a bit pricey. So I guess people only ate it on special occasions.

“Argh...I wanna eat rice!” Past Me’s memories seemed to be taking over; I was craving rice really badly! But I couldn’t find it anywhere...which only made me crave it more. I proceeded to check literally every store, but I still came up empty-handed.

I was in probably my thirtieth store, looking over the merchandise and heaving a sigh, when the shopkeeper asked me, “Are you looking for something specific?” I’d told the shopkeepers I was fine all the other times, but it occurred to me now that maybe I should actually ask for help.

“Um, yes...do you have a hard, white grain for sale?” *That was a close call. I almost called it “rice.” If this world does have rice, it’s almost certainly not called that. I hope my description made sense, though.*

“Hard, white grain?”

“Yes. Um, it’s about this size and there’s this brownish skin around each

kernel and the inside is white.” I made gestures with my hands as I described the rice. I hoped it made sense.

“Um...I think you’re describing a kind of livestock feed.”

“Livestock feed? Huh... *Oh!*” As soon as the shopkeeper said this, Past Me screamed “*By George, they’ve got it!*” inside my head. Thank goodness I didn’t say that out loud. They’d think I was crazy. *It sure has been a while since I’ve felt this way, though. But I wonder who “George” is...*

“Yes, that’s right. Livestock feed.”

Livestock feed... Well, I won’t know for sure unless I see it myself. “Do you know where I might find some?”

“The borley seller ought to have some.”

“Thank you very much. By the way, what is this livestock feed called?”

“It’s *bazmati*.”

“Huh?! *Oh!* Thank you so much!”

Bazmati? Past Me knew that meant “rice.” Did coincidences like this really exist? Come to think of it...a lot of food and other things in this world had very similar names to their counterparts in my past life. How funny would it be if they were named by other people like me who had memories of their own past lives?

Chapter 149: Bazmati...Ryce?

“Bazmati...?” I double-checked the name, and sure enough, “bazmati” was written on the bag. But it was quite different from the white rice I’d imagined. What I saw on the shelf was more like whole grains of wheat with the husk still attached, except it was all white. Maybe I hadn’t done a good job describing what I was looking for. I’d made the mistake of saying it resembled wheat. But I had no idea that all-white wheat was an actual thing here.

There was another interesting product next to it. This had to be another type of livestock feed, since that was the only thing this store sold. It wasn’t like the white rice I was thinking of, but it was rice with its husks on. It was light brown in color, and get this...it was called “ryce.”

“Bazmati and ryce...” They both really caught my interest. I wondered who came up with those names.

“Is something wrong, kid?” asked the concerned shopkeeper from across the room. The way I was obsessively studying the grains probably seemed really weird. I wanted to explain the passionate feelings that were surging inside me... but there was no way I could.

“No, I’m fine, thanks.”

“You sure? I’m surprised to see a kid like you so interested in livestock feed.”

Oh, gosh...how can I explain myself in a way that won’t look suspicious? Um... yeah, I can’t. I’m drawing a blank. Well, whatever. I don’t care how weird people think I am—I just have to have some rice!

“Excuse me, but could you please polish this ryce for me?”

“Polish? Do you mean de-husk? Well, I suppose I could do that. But why are you so finicky about your livestock feed?”

“Oh, um, it’s not for livestock...I wanted to try eating it myself.”

“You want to...eat it?”

Argh...now this shopkeeper definitely thinks I'm a weirdo. But I'll let it go. It's all for you, rice! I don't care what people think of me. I just wanna eat you!

"Yes, I do."

"Are you sure you don't mean borley?"

"Yes."

Wait...huh? "Borley?" I walked around the store looking for borley. Found it. And this is barley? This is just so confusing! Wait, these shelves contain human food, right? Oh! There's some "weet" next to it. Come to think of it, since they do have pasta here, it would make sense for them to have wheat.

Still, between the ryce, bazmati, borley, and weet, there's no mistaking it. Somebody else with memories of a past life like mine has influenced this world, right? Though I'm not sure why the words got skewed in such minor ways like that... Still, this is giving me a headache. I'll have to be careful not to call anything the wrong name when I buy it.

"Well, I don't suppose it's inedible, but are you seriously going to eat ryce?"

"Yes."

Oh! But I'm also interested in this bazmati grain, too. Though I'm not sure I'm brave enough to buy both. Okay, I'll try out the ryce for today. Next time, I'll try the bazmati.

"About how much do you need?"

"Just a little bag, please."

I wasn't sure how much was in a little bag, but based on its size, it looked like I could get about three servings of rice out of it. I was a little nervous that I might have miscalculated, but if it wasn't enough, I could always come back and buy more later.

"Okay, sit tight. I'll just de-husk...er, polish...the ryce for you."

"Thank you very much."

Aha. If I just act confident, I can actually get away with a lot around here. Well, I'll probably get a reputation for being that kid who does weird things.

Come to think of it, how do you even polish rice? I was too curious to just stand and wait, so I followed the shopkeeper into the next room. The rice went into a boxy sort of thing, which he then shook from side to side. *Huh? What's he doing?*

“Hm? Something wrong, kid?”

“Oh, no. I was just wondering how polishing worked.”

“This box I’m using is a magic item. It’s great for borley, since it doesn’t produce heat and therefore doesn’t take away any of its flavor. Now for ryce... I’m not sure if it will work.”

If this was anything like the rice I was imagining, this was a pretty ideal polishing method. At least that’s what Past Me was thinking. Anyway, I figured there would be no problems.

“Sorry for the wait. Here ya go.”

“Thank you very much.” *Uh-oh. I bought it without even asking the price. What'll I do if it's really expensive?*

“That’ll be twenty-five dal.”

“Huh? Oh, um, sure! Here you go.” I was startled by how cheap it was. Maybe that meant it tasted really bad? I was starting to get a little nervous.

“Ummm...” The shopkeeper looked unsure of what to say.

“Yes?” I just stared for a while as his mouth opened and closed.

“Er, it’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?” I asked again. “Well, thank you.”

Step one was to just give it a try. If this grain tasted good, that would make me seriously happy. It would also lower my grocery bill... But if it tasted horrible, well, I guess I’d give up on ryce and give bazmati a try.

I returned to the plaza and started prep for tomorrow’s feast. For meat, I’d purchased a gurbar roast that I planned to braise. I chopped some vegetables and put them in a pot. Then I poured in some water and lit a fire. I seared the outside of the roast first to get it ready for braising.

Before putting the roast in the liquid, I cut off a little piece of the meat and ate it to see what it tasted like. The butcher was right; this meat was a little tough. But its flavor, unlike the monster from which it came, was very delicate. It was really savory, too, so I had high hopes for it. I lowered the roast into the pot. *Oh my, this giant four-serving pot is so easy to use.* All that remained at that point was to let it simmer slowly. I seasoned it with just a little salt. I would adjust the seasoning later after the meat and vegetables had added their flavors to the pot roast. *Ooh, I can't wait!*

"Okay. Now for the rice." *Let's see...Past Me remembers washing rice, then soaking it in water...and boiling it? No, you start it on high, then you put it on low...then you steam it?* It seemed like I had a pretty epic struggle ahead of me. *Well, I'll wash the rice first, then I'll soak it. How long am I supposed to soak it, I wonder?*

I soaked the rice for about an hour, hoping that would be enough. Next, I have to boil it. Okay, first it needs a strong flame... Am I supposed to put a lid on it? And for the water...I guess I'll use just enough to submerge the rice. Well...it'll probably work out. I think I'll make today's meal while the rice is cooking. Oh no! It's boiling over. Should I have used a weaker flame? The lid...maybe I should leave it on? Since I already have rice, maybe all I need on the side is some sauteed meat trimmings and vegetables.

"Yeah...that's a fail." The pot was filled with some very mushy rice. *I think I used too much water. Or maybe I soaked it too long? Anyway, I just wanted to taste it, so I guess it doesn't matter. If it tastes okay, I'll figure out how to steam it properly later. It's probably something I'll have to figure out through trial and error.*

"Okay, let's try this." *I'm a little nervous. I mean, this was alarmingly cheap.*

I took a bite... Huh? It actually tastes good. It's just much softer than it looks. I definitely added too much water. But still, it does resemble the flavor from my past-life memories. I...think it worked. Awww, man, I wanna eat onigiri! Rice bowls would be great, too! Urk! All these images are popping up in my head... I think tasting rice triggered something in Past Me, and now she's running wild. I'm a little scared. This has never happened before... I guess I'll just have to wait it out until it goes away.

"Whew, I think it passed. Thank goodness." *Wow, Past Me really loves rice. Well, I agree, it's tasty. "My compliments to the chef."*

Gee, rice sure is nice. What was that image that popped into my mind earlier... onigiri? That might make a good lunch.

"Well, before I can make onigiri, I need to learn how to steam rice properly." One thing I'd already learned from eating the rice was that the amount of water one added was pretty crucial. Up until then, I'd never needed to measure the water I put into things, so it was a bit of a surprise.

Rice sure is delicate! Maybe I should use a special cup to measure the water so I'll be sure to get it right. I need to figure out the best ratio of rice to water, too. I'll just have to try different ratios and go by feel. It might be a long, hard road to reach rice perfection. I think I'm going to be a regular at that livestock feed store.

"That reminds me, ryce, bazmati, borley, flauer... I wonder if I can find more things in this world that match with words from Past Me's memory?"

Once I thought about it, the idea that someone else like me used to exist here wasn't all that farfetched. After all, the fortune-teller hadn't seemed that surprised when I told her who I was, though she told me I'd better keep it a secret.

Still, even if it were true, it didn't concern me now. The fact that these names were well established implied this person lived in the distant past. Unless they were alive now, it wasn't anything I could confirm.

Okay, I think I'll go set some traps in the forest tomorrow. There was a good chance the gurbars would destroy them, but I felt really bad relying solely on Ciel to hunt for me. I caught myself praying that my traps would be full...but, well, I couldn't blame myself for that.

Chapter 150: Oh, I Just *Hate* Gurbars!

“**G**OOD MORNING, CIEL.”

I was able to make a trip to the forest the next day...though, yes, it did take a little while to get past the gatekeeper. He seemed to be getting tired of hearing the same explanation from me over and over. *It's all the gurbars' fault!*

The previous night, another pack of gurbars had been spotted not too far from the gate. But they seemed to be spooked by something and had quickly retreated into the forest. I wondered what was scaring them. The gatekeepers kept saying there might be another monster even more dangerous than gurbars out there.

I worried about Ciel as I wandered deep into the forest looking for my friend, but the adandara and I reconnected without a hitch. It was a huge relief.

“Hey, Ciel, I heard there might be monsters around here more dangerous than the gurbars, so be careful, okay?”

...Mrrrow.

Huh? Did I imagine it or was there kind of a long pause before that answer.
“Are you okay?”

Mrrrow.

Ciel was saying it was okay, so it was probably okay. *But I wonder what that pause was all about? Well, worrying won't give me any answers.*

“Okay! I think I'll set a bunch of traps. Oh, Ciel, please don't chase prey into the traps.”

Mew! Ciel protested.

I shouldn't be surprised... Ciel never likes it when I refuse its help. I think my technique has gotten a bit better, but in Ciel's eyes, I'm probably still an amateur. When will Ciel finally trust me enough to take care of my own

hunting?

“Maybe I’ll look for a new place to set the traps. That’ll turn things around.”

I wandered around the forest, looking for small animal tracks. But as I’d anticipated, the gurbar patrols made finding a likely spot quite difficult.

“Is this a good place?”

The animal tracks were more plentiful here than other parts of the woods, so ordinarily I’d set my traps here without question...but there were also gurbar tracks on the ground. It seemed like gurbars ran all over the place—no matter where I went, there were tracks. If I set traps here today, they might just get smashed.

“There aren’t many smaller animal tracks either. Maybe they’re all hiding.”

But this spot with little animal tracks did have some promise. I had ten traps today, and I set them all a bit apart from each other. Ordinarily, I’d set traps in three different locations, but today I was putting everything I had in one spot. I didn’t exactly have a choice, since this was the only one that looked any good.

“Okay. All done.” I stood up from my crouched position and raised my arms high in a stretch. *Oooh, that feels so good. All that bending hurt my back.*

“Pu-puuu, pu-puuu.”

“Turyu! Turyuuu.”

Oh! Flame made two chirps this time. But...there’s something I want to know.
“Are you going to keep making only those same sounds forever?”

Flame stared back at me. I was worried I might have asked it an extremely difficult question.

“Sorry, forget I asked.”

Sora bounced around me in reply. Flame just jiggled where it was. Did I make it angry?

“Tuchu! Tuchuuu!”

“Pu-pyu-puuu!”

Flame’s noises changed. But they changed in such a way that I wasn’t sure

which sounds I liked better. And for some reason, Sora had taken on the challenge, too.

"It's okay, you don't have to try so hard. Just make the same sounds you always do." *Yep. You shouldn't force anything. Natural is the way to go.*

"Puushuuu, puryu-ryuuu."

"Sora, wanna go back to the way you were before? It sounds much cooler."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Yep. That's the best." And I really did think those were the best sounds for Sora.

I walked a little through the forest with Ciel, Sora, and Flame. Ciel and I were competing to see which of us could forage more edible fruit... Well, I'd just decided by myself that it was a competition. ...I was losing, by the way.

"Sora, Flame, I think we should head back to town. Ciel, the forest is dangerous, so be careful, okay?"

Mrrrow.

"If you see any scary monsters, run away, you hear?"

Mrrow.

I stroked Ciel's head. It really was adorable when it closed its eyes contentedly like that.

"See you tomorrow."

Meowww. Ciel licked Sora just like before, but this time it also licked Flame goodbye too before it bounded off. Sora still looked a bit nervous, but Flame perked up and jiggled happily.

"Well, let's head back. I'll come here tomorrow morning at dawn to check the traps, and then I'll start dinner around noon."

Druid had joked that he disliked vegetables, and even now, I still wasn't sure if he really was joking. Maybe he was letting his subconscious speak, or maybe he really disliked vegetables but said it was a joke because he didn't want to inconvenience me. Either way, it seemed like he wasn't that fond of them.

When I put the roast in to braise, I'd added extra vegetables. It was partly for nutrition, but also for flavor, so it killed two birds with one stone.

But the real question was, what should I serve for side dishes: greens or root vegetables? Since the meat was hearty, I figured some lighter greens would work well, but I'd seen some people complain that greens were too bitter. Maybe a salad of root vegetables would be easier for him? *Oh! If I mash some tubers and mix in a light sauce, that might go down easily. Also, I should probably have some fruit for dessert. Okay, it's all coming together. Now I really can't wait for tomorrow.*

"Good morning, Ciel. Um...what's wrong?"

Something looked off about Ciel. *Meow.*

"Um, are you feeling sick?"

Mewww.

Was I wrong? "Are you feeling well?"

Mrrrow.

I guess that means it's healthy. Oh, maybe it's upset? But...why? I should go check on my traps first. I have a time limit today, after all.

"Um, let's go see about those traps, okay?"

Mewww!

Huh?! That sounded really menacing... Ah. I think I know why Ciel's upset. I looked down and saw quite a few broken traps. The tracks around them probably belonged to gurbars.

"Don't worry, Ciel. I knew it was a possibility when I set them here."

Mewww!

"Um, please don't be so upset." Argh, it sounds really mad. Oh, I just hate gurbars! "Next time, Ciel! Next time, I know you'll protect the traps."

Telling Ciel to protect the traps might get it a little too excited, but I didn't know what else to say.

Mrrrow!

Oh dear. Now I've really gotten Ciel fired up. But I wasn't planning on setting any traps today. For that matter, I don't even have any more traps with me to set!.

"I'll come back tomorrow with more traps, I promise. I'll count on you then, okay, Ciel?"

Mrrrow!

Guess I'll need to make a bunch of traps today. But I'm supposed to cook Druid a thank-you dinner tonight...

"I'm going to be a little busy today...I hope you don't mind."

Ciel gave me a curious look. Sora was bouncing around it, and Flame had burrowed its way between Ciel's front paws and was wiggling. Flame was so carefree...*too* carefree... It definitely got that part of its personality from Sora. If Sora were to split again... *I hope the next slime is a bit more pragmatic.*

"Pu-pu, puuu."

"Turyu! Ryu-ryuuu."

"Argh..."

Mrrrow. I could have sworn Ciel was saying "Hang in there, kid." Was it just my imagination?

I collected my broken traps. Boy, were they destroyed. I guess it *was* a bit reckless of me to set traps when there were big animals traipsing around. But there was no telling when the gurbars would finally settle down. *That reminds me, I think the adventurers are supposed to come back right pretty soon. I hope they'll bring good news.*

"Ciel, sorry things didn't work out today. I have to head back early, okay?"

Mrrrow.

"Thank you!"

I parted ways with Ciel and trudged back to town. Flame still couldn't move freely on its own, so I picked it up and placed it in its bag. Sora was gleefully

jumping all around me. *You really are a lively little thing, aren't you?*

I checked the sun's position through the trees. I was a bit behind schedule, but all I needed to do was warm up the pot roast I'd made and plate it up, so I should have plenty of time. Still, it was hard seeing Ciel looking so agitated. I needed to be more mindful from now on.

The gate was in sight, so I put Sora in its bag. "Stay still, okay?"

I waved to the gatekeeper and hurried toward the plaza. When I got close to my tent, a faint aroma hit my nose. I had been slowly warming up the meat since early this morning. I checked my pot. If it had burned, I probably would've cried, but thankfully it was okay. All that remained was to make the salad.

I ducked back into my tent and took Sora and Flame out of their bag. "I probably won't come back in here until late, so I'll leave out some potions for you. Eat them when you get hungry, okay?"

I took the potions out of my bag and lined them up in the center of the tent. I moved Flame closer so it could eat the potions if they were knocked over a little.

"There. I'll come back to check in on you guys later. Be good, okay?"

Sora and Flame jiggled—eagerly and softly. I figured they would be okay. *Now, let's finish dinner!*

Chapter 151: A Major Bum?

OH NO! I totally forgot! I looked around, but of course it wasn't there. I hadn't put it there.

"Oh, what do I do?"

I'd finished cooking dinner, so I was going to plate everything up and put it on the table...but I had no table. Usually, I'd cook dinner out in the plaza and eat it inside my tent. Solo travelers were just fine with that. That's why I only had a little table that was just big enough for me. I had completely forgotten that I needed a bigger table.

"Something wrong?"

I looked up at the sound of a man's voice. It was the adventurer whose tent was next to mine. He was about ten years younger than Druid. A quick look at my face seemed to tell him all he needed to know.

"You need a table? Want to borrow mine?"

"Oh, could I? It just needs to have room for two people."

"Two people? Um, how many people did you cook for?"

I looked at my braising pot. Then there was the salad and the soup and...ack! That was not a little meal for two, no matter how you sliced it. I'd cooked way too much out of habit.

"Umm, could I offer you some dinner as a token of my appreciation?"

"Heh heh heh! Thanks. I've been wondering what that delicious smell was. Should I set up the table in front of your tent?"

"Yes, thank you very much."

I'm saved! The man produced a folding table and chairs from his magic bag and placed them in front of my tent.

"These aren't magic, so they might rattle a little."

“Oh, that’s quite all right. Thank you so much.”

I set the food on the table, then I made up a plate for the man and handed it to him.

“Wow, this looks really good. Thanks.”

“No, thank you. You really saved me there.”

The helpful adventurer took his food into his tent. *Phew... I freaked out there for a second. I'm really lucky I have a good neighbor. I was this close to serving Druid dinner in a one-person tent.*

I looked at the table. All the food was laid out. I’d given up on rice for now and settled on some store-bought bread. I’d splurged a little and gotten the white stuff. I really wanted to show him how grateful I was.

“Oh. *There* you are.”

“Huh?!”

I had sensed an aura approaching me, but it wasn’t Druid’s, so I hadn’t paid much attention. But whoever it was seemed to want to talk to me. I turned around and found Druid’s big brother, Dol...Dol-something-or-other. Actually, the gatekeeper had asked me this morning if he’d been giving me any trouble—he seemed worried. And the gatekeeper said the man’s name then, but I forgot it again. How strange. *Was I always this forgetful?*

“Wow, he deceived a poor, naive child... That’s very in-character for him.”

Druid’s brother looked grumpier than ever. If those frown lines became permanent as he aged, he would have quite the face.

“If you spend time with that jerk, he’ll mess up your life. I feel sorry for you, so let me give you a little advice, kid.”

I didn’t ask you for any advice. Funny how you’re so talkative. Do you like chatting? Well, it’s annoying.

“He enjoys destroying other people’s lives!”

For starters, I doubt Druid is deceiving me. Though from the way this guy hollers all the time, it’s clear Druid is struggling with something. I’d had plenty

of opportunities to use my encounter with his brother as a pretext to ask Druid what was wrong, but I'd decided it was best not to.

So Druid messes up people's lives, huh? That sure sounds terrible. But doesn't this guy have himself to thank for messing up his own life? Sure, it's possible Druid lit the fuse that started it, but everything that happened after that was up to his brother. Druid destroys people's lives? Aren't you just talking about yourself there?

Maybe this guy just has nothing better to do? Yeah, he must be bored. After all, he bothered to come all the way out to the plaza looking for me. He must be a major bum!

"Hey. Are you listening to me?!"

"Nope, I'm not." *I know you were yammering on this whole time, but it didn't sound important, so I ignored you.*

"Pfft!" In the next tent over, I could faintly hear the sound of someone trying to hold back a laugh. All the other people around my tent were covering their mouths and their shoulders were shaking...although I didn't think what I said was particularly funny.

"Wha—?! You... I was just trying to be nice!"

Nice? I have a feeling this guy's definition of nice is way different from mine. And boy, does he have a temper. What causes that again? Umm...calcium! That's right, does he have a calcium deficiency? Where do you get calcium...fish? Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen any fish in this world yet.

"You little bastard!"

Oops! I was ignoring him again.

"Listen, you. That bastard made me lose my stars! You'll meet the same fate if you're not careful!"

He lost his stars? Does he mean his skill stars?

"Now do you get it? I'm a nice guy!"

"No, you really aren't."

“Pfft!”

I’m sure my neighbor is really laughing in there now. He’s been doing nothing but spit takes in his tent this whole time. Huh? Is it just me, or are everyone’s shoulders shaking even harder now...?

“Wha—?! If he ruins your life, don’t blame—”

“Brother!”

My head shot up at the sound of Druid’s voice. There he was, standing there with his jaw dropped. His face was pale.

“You don’t deserve to call me your brother! And now you’re here to destroy this poor kid’s life? You’re the worst.”

He came to destroy my life? This wasn’t making any sense. And now the atmosphere was getting tense. Druid was hanging his head in shame.

What do I do? I...I should just be myself. I don’t want to waste my time scolding someone who came here to chew me out. And besides, Druid is the one I trust, not this guy.

“Good evening, Mr. Druid. What lovely weather we’re having, eh?”

“WHAT?!” said half the people in the plaza.

Huh? That reaction was awfully loud... Well, whatever. “Thank you for coming to dinner. Perfect timing—I’ve just finished setting the table.”

“Ivy, I think we should probably—”

“Mr. Druid.”

“...Yes?” Druid’s face was quite tense. The expression didn’t suit him at all.

“Hurry up and sit or the food will get cold.”

“HUH?!” said everyone in the crowd.

Again? Eavesdropping is wrong, people.

“Um...Ivy?”

“I made a lot because you said you would make yourself hungry today. So if you don’t eat all the food, it will get cold and then spoil. That will put all my

hard work cooking it to waste. Don't you think that would be a terrible shame?"

"Uhhh...hm? I think you're worried about the wrong thing..."

"I am *not* wrong! I cooked this dinner especially for you, Mr. Druid. If you don't eat it, it will all go to waste."

I could always serve it to other people, but I hated the idea. I mean, I really did pour my heart into this meal for Druid. If he didn't eat it, it would all have been for nothing.

"Hey!" Dol-something-or-other barked.

"Sir, are you okay? You've been yelling a lot ever since you got here."

"What?"

"I'm asking, are you all right?" I wanted to add *in the head*...but of course I couldn't.

"I'm just trying to be considerate and give you some important advice—"

"Thank you so much for worrying about a total stranger's life. But I didn't ask for your help. It's my life. I will make my own choices, thank you."

"I'm telling you, you won't have the freedom to make choices anymore! He'll steal your stars!"

Well, I've got no stars to steal, so no worries there! Yeah...I can't say that. But even if that weren't the case, you're still way out of line, pal.

"You're way out of line, pal." *Oops! I actually said it.*

"You little bastard!" Dol-something-or-other yelled, lunging forward.

"What are you doing?! Wait, you again, Dolgas?!"

Dolgas! *That's* what his name was!

When he saw the expression of the man who'd stepped in to stop him, Dolgas suddenly looked sober.

"That's *enough*, Dolgas!" Druid said.

"Tsk! Don't think you've won!" And after spitting that final insult at Druid, Do...Doldol? *Huh? I just heard his name a second ago... This is a little odd. Well,*

whatever.

I looked around the plaza. All the bystanders quickly looked away to avoid meeting my eyes. *Guys, you eavesdrop way too much! Well, I guess I don't blame them for wondering about the raised voices. Anyway, it's dinnertime!*

"Heh heh heh," came muffled laughter from the tent next door. Yeah, my neighbor was definitely yukking it up.

"Hey, are you okay, kid?" asked the guard who'd interrupted. "Druid, don't let him get to you."

"Umm...sure..." Druid looked at me. For some reason, he looked kind of stunned.

"Are you okay, sir?" I asked?

Druid nodded faintly in reply. He didn't *look* okay. But we had more important matters to see to.

"Should we start dinner?"

"...Sure."

"Good. I'm famished," I said.

Druid gave me a hesitant smile. *Oh, good. I think he's going to stay for dinner.* At the sight of the guard, the other adventurers scattered away.

"Thank you very much for your help, sir." I bowed to the guard. Druid hastily bowed after me. *He's been out of it since he got here. Is he really okay?*

"No problem, kid. If anything happens, you just call me."

"Yes, sir."

After we said goodbye to the guard, I offered Druid a chair. I was really proud of the feast I'd put together. *I hope he smiles and tells me it tastes good.*

Chapter 152: Happy Tummy!

DINNER WAS FANTASTIC! I know, it's a little egotistical to praise your own cooking, but it really was delicious.

"This's really good."

"Thank you, sir. I think so, too."

Since I'd decided that gurbar meat would be perfect for pot roast and committed hard to that with a low and slow braise, the meat was tender, but it still had a little texture to it. It had that exquisite, savory taste that can only be attained through patience.

Druid had given me a concerned look when we started dinner, but when he saw that I wasn't at all fazed by what had just happened, the tension left his shoulders. Now he had a somewhat pitiful smile on his face.

But having said all that...I cooked way too much. No matter how much we ate, there was still meat in the pot. *How many people did I cook for anyway? Oh well, maybe I should get a favor out of Druid tomorrow, too.*

"Ivy, don't you think you made a little too much?"

"Yeah, you think so, too? Well, I'll just have to ask for your help again tomorrow, then."

Druid looked startled by my request. "So you did cook too much. I have to say, I thought it was a little strange that you filled such a big pot for just two people."

"Hee hee, yeah, I think I went just a *little* overboard."

"Just a little?" Druid asked, pointing at the big pot.

I looked inside and saw that there was more than two meals' worth left in it. "Umm..."

"Ha ha ha ha! Understood. I'll give you all the help you need. That food's for

me, right?"

Oh! Druid is back to normal now. Yeah, he really does look the most like himself with that smile.

We finished our dinner at a leisurely pace. Afterward, I brought out the fruit and tea for dessert.

"Oops! I almost forgot. Here you go." Druid pulled a box out of his bag and set it on the table next to me. I opened it up and found pastries inside. "A little housewarming gift."

"Thank you, they look delicious. I'll get some plates and—"

"Whoa, not now. If I eat another bite, I'll never get up again."

"Ah. Touché."

We'd both stuffed ourselves so full that neither of us felt like moving. I really did cook too much. And we also ate too much. I'd need to take it easy in the future.

"I'll eat these tomorrow," I said.

"Sure... So, Ivy, what's on the itinerary for tomorrow?"

"I'm going to set some stuff up in the forest."

"Do you mean traps?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wow, I don't know many people who hunt with traps. Isn't it hard to catch animals in these conditions?"

"Yes, sir. My last batch of traps all got totally destroyed by gurbars. For something that tastes so good, they really are a nuisance."

"Um, I don't think those two things have anything to do with each other, Ivy."

"But, sir, it's very important that they taste good." I meant it in earnest, but Druid burst into laughter. A voice behind me joined in. It was the adventurer who'd let me borrow his table. He was holding the plate I'd served him dinner on.

“Hm? Oh! Thank you very much, sir.”

“Don’t mention it. You provided me with some great tableside entertainment.”

Entertainment? What’s he talking about?

“Uh, don’t look so baffled,” the adventurer said. “You’re making this awkward.”

Oh! Dol...? He’s talking about Dol-something-or-other! Wow, why can’t I ever remember that guy’s name? Is my brain just rejecting it?

“That’s right! You laughed way too loudly, sir! I could hear everything!”

“Hey, I tried to hold it in...but it was impossible. Long time no see, Druid.”

Huh? They know each other?

“Hi there...Mathewla, right?”

“Oh, you remembered! Thanks, you’re so kind.”

“Ha ha ha, that’s an overstatement. So, are you and Ivy here close?” Druid asked.

“Oh, no, we only met each other today.”

“I borrowed his table,” I explained to Druid, pointing at our chairs. “I’d completely forgotten I didn’t have one.”

“Well, that was lucky,” Druid said.

“Yes, I got a great meal out of it, so I consider myself very fortunate,” Mathewla said, staring at his plate. It had been licked clean.

“Did you like the food?”

“Oh yes, it was delicious. Give me a holler if you ever need anything else like this. I have most of the basics, and I accept payment in the form of *home cooking!*” He emphasized the last two words. I guess he really did like it.

“Hey, I just noticed,” Druid said, giving the area around Mathewla a curious look. “You used to be in a four-person party. Are you working alone now?”

“Yeah. One of my party members got married, and another one left to pursue

a different line of work. The third guy is off courting some girl. Depending on how that all turns out, I'm thinking of retiring from adventuring, too."

"Oh, really?" Druid looked surprised, and I didn't blame him. Mathewla was still quite young. It seemed too early for him to retire.

"Yes. I've saved up enough money, so I was thinking of returning to my home village."

Home village... It must have been nice to have somewhere that feels like home.

"I see," Druid said. "Well, no matter which path you choose, make sure you don't have any regrets."

"I will. All those times we talked about the future when we worked together still stick with me to this day. Thank you for that."

Druid really is good at taking care of people. It's the little things—he always tells you what's most important. I took the plate from Mathewla and asked him where I should return his table.

"Just fold it up and leave it in front of my tent when you're all done. Good night."

"I will. Good night."

"Night."

After Mathewla went back to his tent, Druid and I sat and digested for a while.

"Well, I'd better head home. Thanks again for the meal."

"It was my pleasure. And thank you in advance for helping me out tomorrow." I bowed, which made Druid laugh. But from the look of the food left in the pot, Druid would *need* to help me out tomorrow. *Maybe I should rope Mathewla into it, too. I'm sure he wouldn't mind.*

"Understood. Well...see you tomorrow." From the lilt in his voice, it sounded like Druid had something else he wanted to say.

Oh well, I'll see him tomorrow anyway, so he'll probably be fine. "Yes, see you

tomorrow.”

After I said goodbye to Druid, I folded up the table and left it where Mathewla had directed. Then I returned to my own tent with some hot water. Flame and Sora were already sleeping together. The potions were all gone, so they must have had their own dinner before dropping off.

I wiped myself clean with the hot water and changed into some fresh clothes. *Boy, that pot roast sure was good. The gurbar meat was so unique! I think I want to try preparing it again but in a different way. Oh, I know! Maybe I'll try some different seasonings with the leftover meat. It's a bit boring having the same dish two days in a row. Hm, how should I season it? Um...it's no use. I can't think of anything.*

“Okay, let’s just turn in. Good night, Sora. Good night, Flame.”

Huh? I feel like I’m forgetting something... Oh! I need to make traps! I promised Ciel I would. I have all the materials I need, so I’ll start with three traps!

“Good morning,” I greeted the gatekeeper.

“Why hello there. I see Druid’s with you today.”

“Huh?!”

I’d psyched myself up to duke it out with the gatekeeper today, but I hadn’t expected him to start the conversation that way. *Druid is with me?*

“Morning.”

“Oh...! Good morning, Mr. Druid. Are you coming out with me?”

Druid had emerged from the gatekeeper’s break room. *Huh? Did we plan to meet up here?*

“Sorry if I startled you. Can I tag along?”

Oh good. I was worried we’d arranged this and I’d forgotten. “Of course you can, sir.”

“You mean you *didn’t* promise to meet Ivy here?” The gatekeeper looked

confused.

“I never *said* I promised. I just said I was waiting for Ivy.”

“Right, you did. Well, be careful—they found tracks to the west.”

So they’d found gurbar tracks to the west of the town this time. That was a ways from where I was planning to set my traps. This time, I wanted them to work for sure.

“Understood, sir. We’ll see you later.”

“Sure thing. Have a safe trip.”

We said our goodbyes to the gatekeeper and walked through the gate.

“Sorry I barged in on you like that.”

“Oh, it’s no problem, sir. It’s much easier to get through the gate when you’re with me anyway.”

“Ha ha ha! I see. Well then, glad I could help.” Druid was smiling, but something about him seemed a bit melancholy.

I wonder if that loudmouth jerk said something to him again. I don’t do well with drama, but maybe I should have a talk with Druid about his family. And today just might be the perfect opportunity.

Chapter 153: Killing Them Was Nice and All...

“**W**OW, THAT’S AMAZING. There are tracks over here, too.” Druid looked very serious as he searched for gurbar tracks.

“Is it that amazing?” There had been gurbars in this forest as long as I’d been here, so I didn’t understand what was so amazing about seeing their tracks.

We hiked deeper into the forest, met up with Ciel, and headed off to the spot where I wanted to set my traps. Druid kept glancing at our surroundings and tilting his head in confusion. About thirty minutes into the thickest part of the forest, we came to some big trees. When Druid discovered gurbar tracks by them as well, he sighed loudly.

“Gurbars are highly territorial. They rarely travel outside their home turf. It’s very uncommon for them to wander around such a big area like this.”

“Oh, really? But I’ve seen gurbar tracks everywhere in the forest, not just here.”

“This isn’t the only place?”

“No, sir. There were gurbar tracks in the forest on the other side of town, too.”

“I’ve looked into gurbar territories before, but they’ve never been spread across such a huge area.” There were deep creases between Druid’s eyebrows. “That reminds me, somebody I know just got in a request for a survey of the area.”

Sora, who had been bouncing around us, suddenly jumped high into the air and screamed, “Pu! Pu-puuu!”

“Oh!” I cried.

“Hm?!”

Sora landed right on Druid’s head, which has been bowed as he examined the

gurbar tracks. Slime and man both fell silent and stood still in bewilderment.

“Sorry about that,” I said.

“No no, it was probably upset that I was getting so carried away with my own thoughts. We came here to set traps, remember?”

“Puuu!” Sora cried, in a way that strongly suggested “*Yeah! That’s what I’m sayin’!*”

“Sorry, Sora,” Druid said. “Let’s find a good place for those traps.”

“Pu, pu! Pu, puuu.”

“But before that,” I said, “Sora—could you please get off of Mr. Druid’s head?”

“Puuu! Puuu!”

Oh, it’s not a fan of that idea. What should I do? If I pull it off, it’ll probably just jump right back up.

“I think Sora’s saying it wants to stay up here?”

“I’m so sorry. I’ll get it down right away.”

“Buuu!”

That totally felt like Sora was chewing me out. Wait a minute, don’t do your exercises on top of Druid’s head!

“It’s okay. Sora doesn’t weigh a thing.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

No, Druid! Don’t say “it’s okay”! Now Sora’s gone completely into lounge-mode. “Well, if your neck starts to hurt, please don’t hesitate to take Sora off.” It looked like Sora wouldn’t be leaving Druid’s head without a fight. Sorry about that.

“Understood. Sora, be careful not to fall off, okay?”

“Pu, puuu!”

Well, somebody’s in a great mood again. Come to think of it, Sora hasn’t been in a bad mood at all the past few days. I guess that means everything’s okay

now?

“Right, let’s find a place to set those traps,” Druid said.

“Yes, let’s. Only thing is, it’s hard to find a place where there’s no gurbar tracks.”

“After all the walking around we’ve done, I’d say you’re right. What sort of place are you looking for?”

Mrrrow.

“Hm? What’s up?” Druid asked, gently patting Ciel’s head.

That’s right. I promised Ciel we’d set the traps together today. Maybe I should have it show me a spot that would be easy for it to guard.

“Well, um, Ciel is going to guard the traps, so we should find a spot where it can be comfortable.”

“Hm? What do you mean by that?”

I explained my history with Ciel to Druid. After I was done, he looked at the adandara with eyes full of admiration.

“I’d heard adandaras were intelligent, but I had no idea they were *this* smart.”

Mrrrow. Ciel meowed proudly. For some reason, Sora was puffing its chest out from atop Druid’s head, too.

Wow, Druid looks really silly right now...

“Ivy, could you cool it with the smirking? I can imagine how silly I look right now, and I’m about to wrench my neck.”

He didn’t know that Sora was puffing out its chest, but just having a slime on his head was probably making him feel pretty self-conscious. I mean, most people wouldn’t think twice about a slime sitting on a child’s head. But on the head of a man in his forties? *Hee hee...ha ha ha...*

“Ivy, your shoulders are shaking...what are you thinking about?”

“Oh, nothing, sir. Let’s find a place to set those traps!”

We wandered through the forest while Ciel looked for a place where it could

be comfortable standing guard. After a while, we came upon a big tree with thick branches spreading wide in every direction.

“Do you think this is a good place?” I asked. “I see some gurbar tracks but also plenty of smaller animal ones.”

“I like it,” said Druid. “We might as well give up on the idea of finding a spot with no gurbar tracks at all.”

He was right. There were gurbar tracks in so many places that it was a real ordeal finding even a tiny area without any. In fact, it seemed like this area had more gurbar tracks than it had the day before.

Mew! Ciel cried loudly.

“Whoa there, Ciel!” Druid exclaimed. “You’re sure enthusiastic, aren’t ya?”

The adandara had been pretty excited ever since I made the promise to set traps. *I only hope it doesn’t get so excited it gets itself hurt.*

“Ciel, if a pack approaches you, you run away, okay?”

...*Mewww.* It sounded terribly displeased.

“Don’t worry, Ivy. Gurbars could never outfight an adandara.”

Druid had a lot more experience in these matters than I did, so he was probably right. But Ciel was my dear friend, so I couldn’t help but worry.

I set the traps and checked them over with Ciel. We had five in total. Ciel looked really pleased.

“Wanna take a little break?”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a lake a bit deeper into the forest. I had Ciel lead the way there.

“By the way, where’s your other friend?” asked Druid.

“My other friend? You mean Flame?”

“That’s right.”

“Flame is still quite weak, so I’ve been leaving it in its bag.”

“It’s weak? Oh, that’s right, you said they were collapsed slimes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When I look at Sora now, it’s hard to believe it was a collapsed slime, so it totally slipped my mind.”

I looked at Sora. He was right—Sora looked very strong. It could slam into anything and still be fine.

“Oh! There it is.”

I followed Druid’s gaze and saw the lake, filled with sparkling sunlight...and with gurbars. We quickly ducked behind a big tree. Ciel wanted to chase after them right away, but I managed to hold the adandara back somehow.

“I didn’t notice them,” Druid admitted.

“Neither did I.” I carefully leaned out from behind the tree to look at the herd of gurbars. *Wait, huh?* “Something’s strange.”

“Strange?”

“Yes, the gurbars’ auras are very weak.” While we were in the forest, I had been constantly vigilant for gurbars’ auras. That was the only way to stay out of danger. Maybe having Druid with me made me let down my guard down a little...but with this many gurbars this close, there’s no way we *wouldn’t* have sensed their auras. I looked curiously at the gurbars. Something had to be wrong with them.

“Sorry, I can’t sense auras,” Druid said. “Are they very weak?”

“Yeah. Even though they’re right there, I can’t pick up how many there are by their auras.”

“Really?”

“This is actually the first time I’ve seen live gurbars. Do they normally have such weak auras?”

“I’ve never heard that.”

We both stared at the gurbars in confusion. Was this somehow connected to the creatures’ strange activity lately?

After only a few minutes of hiding behind the tree, Ciel’s yowl suddenly

boomed out across the lake. *Mee-yaaa!*

“Huh?!” Druid and I both gasped, peeking out from behind the tree and searching for the source of the noise.

“Ah!”

“Whoa, amazing!”

Before our very eyes, Ciel was attacking the gurbar pack. The moment after Ciel killed one gurbar, it pounced on the next, and in a matter of seconds, it pounced on yet another.

“Wow, you really are fierce!” Druid marveled at the adandara...but I wasn’t in a marveling mood. I was stunned. I’d never seen Ciel like this before. I had heard time and time again that adandaras were vicious, but I had no idea they were *this* powerful.

I couldn’t exactly count them, but there had to be more than thirty gurbars out there. I saw a few making a break for it, but most of the pack was annihilated in just a few minutes. Ciel looked pretty satisfied.

“Wow, your adandara really is amazing. What incredible strength.”

“I know... Mr. Druid, you don’t suppose the guild master will help us out again?”

Ciel was really powerful. But there were just way too many gurbar corpses. If Druid and I worked together, we could probably only handle one between us. We looked at the area around Ciel. There were over twenty dead gurbars.

“Wowww...so many,” Druid gasped. “What are we going to do with them all?”

“Gosh. That’s a very good question.”

Chapter 154:

The Guild Master Has a Problem

YIkes...the guild master's face is twitching. And Druid definitely noticed, but he's pretending not to... I wish I could just run away.

Druid and I had gone to see the guild master, figuring we should tell him about the gurbars. But when I saw the look on the guild master's face, I felt really guilty about it. Still, he was the only person we could rely on in this situation, so we had no choice but to come to him for help.

"Thanks for the report. But...this is a literal mountain of corpses. It's a huge problem!"

"It'll be fine."

"Fine, my foot!"

"We can just give the same excuse as last time," Druid assured him casually.

The guild master's eyebrows rose to his hairline. *Oh wow, an Oni-face.* "Oni face? What's an *Oni*?"

"Hm? Something wrong, Ivy? Don't worry, we'll get this all sorted out. Nothing bad will come from killing a bunch of gurbars."

Oh no. I think I accidentally said what I was thinking out loud. "Yes, um, well, I'm sorry, Mr. Guild Master, but we'll have to rely on your help again."

The guild master sighed. "Well, I admit, I'm grateful we no longer have these gurbars wandering so close to town... But people *will* start asking who killed them all. And that's the problem."

I felt so bad coming to the guild master with yet another sticky situation.

"We haven't even finished cleaning up after the last gurbar incident..."

The last gurbar incident? He must mean the pack that attacked Druid's caravan. That reminds me, there was talk of reward money for that.

"Man..." the guild master sighed. "At this rate, maybe I should just tell

everyone I asked a top-secret agent for help.”

“A top-secret what?”

“It’s just an idea that popped into my head just now. Oh! By the way, I asked some adventurers from the next town over to come.”

“Guild master...please finish your first thought before you move on to the next one. Why did you ask them to come here?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? We’re shorthanded. The veteran adventurers left in this town can’t handle it alone.”

“Yeah, you aren’t wrong there. So, who all’s coming?”

“Dunno.”

“You...didn’t ask?”

“That town’s guild master knows about gurbars, so don’t you worry. He’ll send over some sturdy adventurers.”

Druid sighed softly in reply. “Well, I guess I’ll trust your judgment. So, what are we going to do about all the gurbar corpses?”

“Argh...I was trying to get my mind off them!”

“Um, you really shouldn’t, though.”

The guild master’s head drooped feebly. “Yeah, I guess the top-secret agent idea won’t fly...”

After some discussion, we decided to recycle the same excuse as last time. The gurbars were probably killed by some powerful monster—except this time there wasn’t a witness. Druid just happened upon the dead gurbars when he was taking a walk through the forest to get used to moving with only one arm.

Once the conversation was over, I bent in a deep bow. “I’m so, so sorry about all of this!”

Ping!

“Eep!”

Hm? Did I hear a weird sound just now? I looked up.

"You've got nothing to apologize for, Ivy. The townsfolk want us to get rid of these gurbars as quickly as possible. Reducing their numbers even a little will settle the people down a bit."

For some reason, the guild master sounded very eager to change the subject. I thought it was a little odd, but since Druid wasn't saying anything, maybe everything was okay?

"Well, I'm just glad I could help."

Ever since the gurbar sighting outside town two days ago, the people had been getting more and more anxious. Easing everyone's worries, even just a little, made me feel good, too.

After the guild master promised to send some adventurers to the lake in the next hour or so, Druid and I left the lodge.

"Mr. Druid, I'm causing so much trouble for you and the guild master," I sighed as we walked back toward the forest. *Maybe I should just register with the guild... No, I can't. I'd have to tell them about Ciel.*

"Don't worry about it, Ivy. You haven't done anything wrong."

"I know, but I keep pushing all kinds of annoying things onto him."

"Ha ha ha! Well, that's his job."

"I think it's not quite like that."

"You do? Well, as far as most of us are concerned, guild masters exist to solve all of a town's most annoying problems."

I guess...in a way, he was right. Being a guild master seemed like a really stressful job.

When we got back to the lake, Ciel, Sora, and Flame were all asleep in a big cuddle pile. They looked so happy, bathing in the sunshine. If I looked just a bit to the side, I could see the piles of gurbar corpses...but I ignored that. *I can't let myself obsess over it.*

"Thanks, Ciel. The guild master is going to send some adventurers here in a little bit." I felt bad for disturbing their slumber—but I needed to explain what was coming, so I woke Ciel and laid out the details. Ciel purred in reply and

stretched its back, which woke Sora and Flame.

“Pu, puuu.”

“Tu-yu-yuuu.” Flame’s voice was even more pitiful than usual; it must have been half-asleep still.

“Sorry I woke you guys. Let’s wait until the others get here before we move.”

Sora bounced around us, twirling and whirling. Up until just a few days ago, something like this would have put it in a grumpy mood, but it seemed fine now. *I guess the change happened right around when Flame was born? Maybe Sora was experiencing some sort of pre-birth anxiety? Wait, is Sora female?*

“Um, Mr. Druid?”

“What’s up?”

“Do slimes have sexes?”

“Sexes?”

“Yes, since Sora...gave birth?...to Flame, I was wondering if it’s female.”

“Hm...I’ve never heard of slimes having a sex.”

So they don’t? Or maybe it’s just not common knowledge? “I see.”

Did something else happen besides Flame being born? Oh! Maybe healing Druid’s mortal wounds was what settled Sora. That could be it, too. I guess as long as Sora’s doing okay, I shouldn’t worry about it? But Sora might go through something similar in the future... Then again, going out of my way to avoid offending Sora is the wrong move. For now, if Sora has more mood swings, I’ll just have to try to do the same things that helped this time around. I have way too little information right now.

“We’d better get moving.”

As soon the words were out of Druid’s mouth, Sora eagerly leapt on top of his head. I guess we couldn’t stop Sora even if we tried. And Druid kind of seemed to like it... But was it really okay to let Sora keep doing this?

“Let’s go,” Druid said, taking the lead. Sora rode on his head, and I held Flame in my arms. *Wait...huh?*

“Um, don’t you need to stay near the gurbars?”

“Hm? Oh! Right... I’ll go back.”

Druid did need to be there as a witness to meet the adventurers when they arrived. I lifted Sora off his head and parted ways with him for the time being.

“Will you be okay... No, wait, Ciel’s with you, of course you’ll be okay. See you later then,” said Druid.

“I’ll be waiting for you around the dump.”

“Sure. No more hunting for you today, Ciel, okay?”

Mrrrow.

“You’re a good kid,” said Druid, giving Ciel’s head a flurry of pats before turning back to the lake.

Sora jumped out of my arms and started bounding off in the opposite direction from Druid. The slime was going in the correct direction this time, but did *it* know that? Sora took the lead as we hiked over to the dump.

I still couldn’t believe how fierce Ciel was back then. It had killed all those gurbars in just a few minutes. I looked at Ciel, who was padding along next to me. *You were so majestic... Though, to be honest, you really frightened me at first.* Ciel’s fur had been soaked in gurbar blood. I’d never seen anything like that before.

Mew? Ciel asked, looking up at me curiously.

“I was just thinking about how magnificent you were back there.”

Mrrrow. Ciel was twirling its tail, clearly in a very good mood. Its tail-twirling stirred up a little breeze and sent a few leaves flying.

“Ciel...could you maybe tone it down a little?”

Mrrrow. Ciel slowed down the tail-twirling and the leaves fluttered gently to the ground. Ciel’s tail truly was a formidable weapon.

Come to think of it, Ciel fought with just its fangs today. People probably won’t be able to tell what sort of monster killed the gurbars. Did Ciel do that on purpose? Judging by its behavior thus far, it was entirely within the realm of

possibility. Ciel *was* very smart, after all.

Chapter 155: Plus? Minus?

WHEN DRUID GOT BACK to us, he looked a bit tired.

"Hi. Is everything okay?" I asked. I hoped there hadn't been a problem.

"Yeah, they just kept asking me what kind of monster killed the gurbars, even though I told them I didn't see it." Druid's smile was a little forced—he was frustrated. It was clear the adventurer party the guild master sent was a bit too nosy.

"I'm just making some tea. Would you like a cup?"

"Sure, thanks."

As I steeped Druid's tea, he filled me in on what happened. The adventurers had been shocked when they saw how many dead gurbars there were, and they were incredibly curious about what kind of monster had killed them. It didn't matter how many times Druid explained that he wasn't there when it happened; they kept insisting he tell them what the monster looked like. It was natural for adventurers to be curious, but it was a huge hassle for Druid.

"I'm really sorry I made you deal with all that. Thank you, though."

"You have nothing to apologize for. I'm not sure any of the adventurers in Oll right now could have handled that many gurbars."

Were gurbars really that formidable? From the way Ciel utterly destroyed them today, it was hard to tell. The ones that got away did seem to be quite fast, though. I would be terrified to see something like that running *toward* me.

"You couldn't get a good read on how strong gurbars are since Ciel shredded them up like tissue paper?"

"That's right. It was obvious how powerful *Ciel* was, though. The one thing that surprised me was their speed. Gurbars don't look like fast runners."

"Yeah, they're faster than humans. And they can slam with those big bodies

of theirs... A kid like you could die instantly from the impact."

He was right; those gurbar corpses were awfully large. If one of those creatures came charging at me...no mistaking it, I would be dead as a doornail.

"They're really scary, aren't they?"

"You need to be careful when Ciel isn't with you."

"I will."

We sipped our tea. *I just realized, my plans for the day got thrown way off track. I was going to ask Druid about his life. Should I ask him now?*

"Ivy?"

"Yes?" My heart jumped when Druid called my name—I was just about to ask him a question.

Druid had a determined look in his eyes. "I need to tell you something. And I hope you'll wait until I'm finished before you make any judgments."

I nodded once in reply.

"First, let me apologize for my brother. It's my fault he ended up like that.... I have three skills."

Three skills? Wow, most people have two at most.

"My first skill is swordcraft. My second is martial arts. But my third skill is where the problem lies. It's not a word—it's a symbol."

A symbol?

"I tried to have someone look it up for me, but no one could figure out what it means."

A mysterious skill... Someone did tell me once that new skills continue to be discovered from time to time. Is that what happened to Druid?

"My parents were thrilled that I had a brand new skill. But this new skill of mine stole my older brothers' stars before I realized it."

It stole stars? Like, if someone had three stars, then they'd have two? "Um..."

"What?" Druid's voice was strained—he was clearly tense.

"This skill symbol...um, what does it look like?"

"Like this."

Druid drew some marks on the ground with a stick. I looked at it... "+/-"?

"Plus...slash...minus?"

"Huh?! Ivy, do you know what this symbol means?"

No, I don't. It's just some symbols that Past Me knows. She just said "plus-slash-minus," so I guess that's what it's called. The words that come to mind now are "add or subtract."

"Ivy?"

The "-" symbol is probably what stole the stars. But the "+" symbol has the opposite meaning. So if my theory is right, Druid's symbol can add or subtract skill stars from people. That's...a really powerful skill, isn't it?

I've never heard of stars being added before. If you're born with only one star, you have one star for life. But Druid's skill makes adding more stars possible. But...why did he take away his brothers' stars? From the way he told the story, it sounded like it happened unconsciously. I want to ask him more...but I won't. From the way he's acting, I don't think it's the sort of thing I can casually talk to him about.

Druid said he had "brothers," right? That means he has more besides the one I met. Are all his other big brothers like that, too? If they are, Druid must have had a really hard time at home.

"Ivy?" Druid asked with worry in his voice.

Oops. I got lost in my thoughts. That's a bad habit of mine. "I'm sorry. Umm, the first symbol is a plus. The middle symbol is a slash. And the last symbol is a minus."

"Plus-slash-minus?"

"Plus means to add, minus means to subtract, and slash means... alternatively?"

"What do you mean, alternatively?"

How could I explain “alternatively” to him? Let’s see...hm? What’s that? Something’s popping into my brain. “Alt.” I tilted my head in confusion at the new word. I figured Past Me put it there because she thought it would help explain things, but “alt” just made no sense to me. *Argh, this is so confusing! Forget it.*

“It means ‘add or subtract’...um, in other words, I think it’s a skill that can give or take away stars.”

“What?! It can add stars?”

“Yes. Judging by the symbol, I would assume so.”

“Add stars... My brothers’ stars...”

Something had tugged at my conscience when Druid told me his story. Skills only work if you focus on them. I wasn’t able to tame for the first time until I really focused on it. If I’d been able to tame things without thinking, we’d have a big problem. In my case, I’d probably die from lack of magic.

“When your brothers’ stars disappeared...did it catch you totally unawares?”

“Yeah, I didn’t even know how to use my skill.”

Of course he didn’t. He was taking and giving without even knowing it... Come to think of it, where did stolen stars go? Does Druid have them?

“You said you ‘stole’ stars, right?”

“Yeah, in the coming-of-age ceremony, we all have our stars displayed. It was then that we found out my eldest brother had fewer stars. My parents freaked out and had my stars checked, as well as my middle brother. It turned out he was also missing some stars. Meanwhile, my ‘plus-slash-minus’ symbol had some brackets beside it, and there was a little number four in the middle of them.”

Hmm... From the way Druid described it, he really did steal the stars. But the “brackets with the number four” part didn’t make sense.

“After their stars were stolen, did your stars change somehow, Mr. Druid? Like, did you have more of them?”

“No, there were no changes at all.”

That means Druid didn't get any power from the stars he stole. The stars just got transferred. Well, the power, really, not the stars. Putting myself in the shoes of the people whose power was stolen, I can understand why they were so angry.

But even though I hadn't spent much time with Druid yet, one thing about him was clear: He was a very kind person. A very kind person who accidentally stole his brothers' stars. *That must have been pretty traumatic for him.*

Since I only just met him, I wasn't sure it was okay to pry, so I didn't. *Come to think of it, he said there was an "eldest brother" and "middle brother." Does he only have two brothers? Are there no others?*

"How many big brothers do you have?"

"Two. Guess I didn't say," Druid smiled wanly, taking a sip of tea. It must have taken a lot courage for him to tell me all this. "My brothers each had two skills, one star in each—all of which I stole."

Stars... Druid steals stars. I have no stars. Is this what you'd call fate?

"Pu! Puuu," Sora suddenly chirped. I looked over to the tree and saw Ciel curled up at its base with Sora asleep, snuggled deep in its belly fur. *Oh! No, it wasn't fate at all. The one who guided me to him was Sora.*

"Mr. Druid."

"Yes, Ivy?"

He sounded unusually formal. I looked at him. His face was tense with worry. News of his skill had spread fast, and lots of people probably said some really heartless things to him. But it was worse than that... Some people probably walked out of his life forever. Druid must have been terrified to share this. His mysterious skill stole his brothers' stars before he knew it. Anyone close to him might have their stars stolen, too...

Ohh...so that's why he never joined a party. The one who was the most scared of getting close to others was Druid himself.

"Thank you for sharing your story with me."

"No...I should have told you everything sooner. There's a chance I might steal

your stars, Ivy."

Steal my stars? I glanced over at the snoozing Sora again. My slime was strong-willed and sassy. It ate potions and could heal fatal wounds... It was a special slime. And it had helped me meet so many dear friends and companions. Druid stole people's stars without meaning to. But I had no stars to steal... *You've formed a dream team, Sora.*

"Don't worry. I'll be okay."

"Huh?!" Druid's concern turned into confusion.

Okay...now it's my turn. Gee, I feel really nervous. But I need to tell him everything. Then I'll ask him...will you please join me on my travels?

Chapter 156: Jack-in-the-Box

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH—in and out. The thought of telling him my secret was making my heart race at an astounding speed.

“Mr. Druid, there’s something I need to tell you, too.” My mouth was really dry, so I gulped down the rest of my tea. “So, um, I’m a tamer. But...I don’t have any stars.”

“What?!” he gasped quietly.

“I think that’s how I was able to tame Sora, because it’s a collapsed slime.”

“Oh! *Ohh...wait, huh?*”

“I didn’t tame Ciel. I don’t have enough magic for that.”

Having no stars meant you had very little magic. Since adandaras store massive amounts of magic, there was no way I could tame one. *Hm? What’s up with Druid? He keeps looking back and forth between Sora and Ciel.*

“But surely you tamed it? I mean, come on...” he said, pointing at his own forehead. Right, the taming symbol.

Ohh, so that’s why he’s confused. “No, *Ciel* made that mark, not me. That’s why you won’t sense any of my magic coming from it.”

“Huh?! Is that even possible? What? Um...Ivy...”

“Yes?”

“But I *did* feel your magic coming from that symbol.”

“Huh?!”

That was impossible. I didn’t tame Ciel—Ciel made that mark on its own. We exchanged confused looks. We both got up and quietly approached the sleeping Ciel, then peered down at its symbol.

How is this even possible?

“See? That’s your magic, Ivy.”

“Yes, it seems like it.”

It was faint, but the energy I felt coming from Ciel’s forehead was identical to my magic. Every person’s magic was different, and there was no way I would mistake my own. *Um...huh?*

Mrrrow.

“Oops! Sorry, did I wake you?”

Mrrrow.

Not wanting to disturb the sleeping creatures, we tiptoed away. *What’s going on? We were talking and... Huh? It’s no use. I’m just so confused.*

“Are you okay?” Druid asked with concern.

To be honest, I wasn’t. The shocking truth I’d just learned was phasing me in and out of reality. My brain was a jumbled mess. *Okay, Ivy. Just breathe.*

“Yes, sir. Um, I’ll just get back to telling my story, then.”

“Wait...there’s more?”

“Hm? Um, uh, yes. You see, I’ve also got memories of my past life.”

Well, this conversation’s gone way off the rails. I’ve never told anybody about this before, right? Was there anything else I forgot to mention?

“Memories of a past life?”

“Yes.”

Huh? Now I’m getting confused about what I’ve revealed and what I haven’t. Let’s see, I don’t have any stars and I have memories from my past life... Those are all the things I needed to tell him, right? As for Ciel...well, I’ll save that for later.

“Wow, Ivy...you’re pretty amazing.”

“Amazing? Me? “Really?”

“Yeah, you’re like a jack-in-the-box.”

That’s...not very flattering. “Mr. Druid.”

"Ha ha ha! Sorry. It's just that I feel a little silly now for preparing myself for the worst."

Preparing for the worst? Oh, right. Because he told me about the star-stealing.

"I didn't get a wink of sleep last night because I was planning on spilling my guts today, Ivy."

He *had* looked a little off yesterday when we'd said goodbye. Maybe that was when he decided he would tell me everything.

"It's funny...I'd totally given up on anyone accepting me because of who I am. But when I decided to tell you about my skill, for the first time in a long time, I was terrified of seeing *that look* all over again."

That look... He must have meant a look of fear and hatred. I was scared of *that look*, too.

"I really had to psych myself up to tell you, Ivy... But it turns out *you* were the bigger jack-in-the-box than me. It's kind of anticlimactic."

"I'm really sorry!"

"Pfft!" Druid started laughing...and I soon joined him.

"The truth is, when my brothers said I stole their stars, I had a little idea of what had happened."

Huh?!

"See, I come from a family of merchants. My father didn't have a very valuable skill, but he was a hard worker. He built up his business from nothing."

It sounds like he's really proud of his dad. I'm a little envious.

"As for my two older brothers, they had good skills and stars in both of them. Because of that, they looked down on our father. When I was a little boy, I remember wishing they would lose their stars so they would appreciate our father more."

Now I get it. It sounds like Druid's big brother always had a rotten personality. Well, I kind of got that impression anyway.

"So when I saw them both panicking over their lost stars, I was scared. I

thought it was my fault for wishing for it. But at the same time, a part of me was excited. I hoped this would bring my family closer together. Well...that didn't work out, of course."

No kidding it didn't work out. I saw firsthand how that guy wouldn't shut up about how everything was Druid's fault.

"Mr. Druid?"

"Hm?"

"I've been looking for someone to join me on my travels."

"Yeah, you said you were planning to buy a slave."

"Yes, but it doesn't have to be a slave. I want whoever it is to be someone I can trust and who I like being around. The only reason I wanted them to be a slave was because of the big secret I just told you."

I thought there was no way I could find anyone who would keep my secrets about Sora, Flame, Ciel, and my lack of stars. That's why I wanted a slave who could be firmly bound to secrecy. But if I found someone whom I could trust with all my heart...well, I would much rather travel with that person.

"I see. Yeah, your jack-in-the-box *is* definitely a whopper, Ivy."

"I know, I have way too many secrets. But—so do you. You'd be in big trouble if people found out about your skill, right?"

"I'm mostly all right there. Most of the village adventurers know about my star-stealing skill. I've got nothing to hide."

Druid looked sad. I guess it was inevitable that the village adventurers would know out about his star-stealing skill by now. He didn't seem to hide it, after all. But there was still his "+" to consider. *That* might actually be the bigger problem. Had Druid not made that connection?

"I wasn't talking about the star-stealing. I was talking about star—*adding*."

"Huh?"

"Have you heard any news of people gaining stars?"

"But you can't gain stars...oh! That's right, my skill could supposedly give

people stars, too..."

It seemed like he finally realized what might happen if people found out his skill could break the rules of our reality.

"Mr. Druid...will you join me on my travels?"

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes. If you're very attached to Oll, then I get it. But if you're not, then please join me on my travels."

I was hoping to ask him in a more serious, well-considered way, but I was being awfully blunt. Then again, that was probably more authentically me.

"But, Ivy, if people find out that my skill can give people stars, I'll become a huge target. If you want to travel in peace, I'm exactly the companion you *don't* want to have."

Druid was right. If people found out about his skill, things might get pretty crazy. People would probably come after us. But with Sora, Flame, and Ciel as my travel companions, I was a walking target anyway. I didn't think another secret or two would make much difference.

"Mr. Druid, have you forgotten? Sora is no ordinary slime. It not only eats potions, it heals people, too. And it gave birth to Flame as well. Between your skill and Sora's powers, I think we'd have a fighting chance."

I wasn't sure which power was more extraordinary—if people found out about Sora's healing, we'd never know peace. *That reminds me... Sifar mentioned that Sora had a light skill more powerful than the royal family's Grandmaster of Magic... Should I keep that part to myself? Yeah, Druid doesn't need to know that right now. I'm not even totally sure it's true. I'd better forget about it, too, for my own sanity.*

"Oh, right!" said Druid, "Sora's a pretty special little slime, isn't it? Ha ha ha! I'm not sure which is more impressive, my skill or Sora's powers."

"Sora's not the only one, you know. Ciel is a high-level adandara, even for a monster. And a creature like *that* is traveling with a no-star tamer? I've gotten used to it, but wouldn't most people think that's yet another thing that makes

me exceptional?"

"You're right. You're traveling with an adandara, a monster of legend. If anyone found out, you would *definitely* become a target, Ivy. Especially since you've tamed it."

Well, we're still not technically sure I tamed it. "I'm not happy about it, but I've got my fair share of secrets. Adding your secret to my pile is hardly a problem."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I see. It's just, I think you'd be targeted more for taming an adandara than I ever would for my skill. You've turned everything we know about taming on its head. Up until now, everyone believed you needed a lot of magic to tame powerful monsters."

He was right—if that got out, it would make me a target. But I felt like Ciel was even more extraordinary than me. It mimicked my taming mark, after all.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, "I just had a thought. Maybe Ciel mimicked my magic and copied it over into the symbol on its forehead."

"No, Ivy, that's not possible. Magic like that can't be mimicked."

"But it's the same with taming symbols, right?"

"Oh, now I get it. So you're saying Ciel saw the symbol you put on Sora and mimicked that. You probably need magic to mimic symbols...but maybe it's a lot easier to do than we think it is?"

"Um, what? What did you say?" *His voice was so quiet just now I couldn't hear him.*

"Oh, I was just thinking about how powerful Ciel is."

"That's for sure!" *There're so many powerful companions in my life that I've got my hands full.*

"Ha ha! And you love them all, don't you, Ivy?"

"Yes, I do! They're family to me."

“And if I join you on your travels, could I fit in your jack-in-the-box... Would I be family, too?”

“Does this mean you’re coming along?”

Druid looked down at the ground in thought. “I...I don’t know.” His voice was a little weak. He was probably thinking about his own family. The guilt from stealing his brothers’ stars still had a tight hold on him.

“Mr. Druid, I believe it’s up to you how you want to live your life. Even if something unexpected happens along the way and you’re forced to give up on one path, it’s still up to you how you live your life from that point on.”

“Ivy...”

I’d certainly been tempted at times to blame my lack of stars on someone else, but I couldn’t change reality. It was a waste of time sitting on the sidelines, wondering what I should do. I needed to live in a way that was true to myself.

“What do you want to do, Mr. Druid? That’s the most important thing of all.”

Chapter 157:

The Best Possible Answer

VERY FEW PEOPLE live their lives exactly the way they planned. Most people make a lot of sacrifices along the way—they give up some things and make the best possible choices they can from there.

Druid stole his brothers' stars. Even though he hadn't done it on purpose, he was still angry with himself. He probably cursed his life. But holding on to that pain wouldn't change anything. No matter how much pain, bitterness, and hatred he felt, the only thing he could do was keep putting one foot in front of the other.

In the past, I had cursed my parents. But it was different now. To be honest, I was grateful. Grateful they had me. And the reason I was able to see things this way was because of all the wonderful people I'd met who supported me. And yet, if you asked me if I ever wanted to see my parents again, the answer would be a firm no.

"Sometimes a little distance helps," I explained. "Well, then again, for some people, it only makes things worse."

The one who cursed Druid for his misfortune had to see Druid every day, and this was almost certainly keeping him from moving on.

"But my very existence..."

"Well, I think that's for you to decide, too."

Druid seemed quite torn. Well, he didn't have to give an answer right away. I doubt he could leave Oll anyway until the gurbar problem was resolved.

Which reminds me... We still haven't figured out what was going on with the blessed balm. What happened with that?

"Mr. Druid, think about it as long as you need to. You don't have to give me an answer yet."

"How much longer are you planning to stay in Oll, Ivy?"

"Wellll...until the blessed balm issue is resolved, I don't think I *can* leave. There're also the gurbars to deal with. I think I'll be here for a while."

The guild master would probably say he was okay with me leaving, but he might not actually feel that way—especially since trouble seemed to follow me wherever I went. If I resumed my travels now, he'd probably think I was running away.

It's as I feared...I always seem to find myself in the middle of some sort of catastrophe. Those gurbars worry me, too. I can't start traveling again if we haven't taken care of them first. The forest would be too dangerous.

"Ohh, right, the blessed balm. I hear there's a rumor going around that I planted it myself to murder my comrades and blame it on monsters. You're in on it, too, apparently."

"Ha...ha ha ha! Gosh, I don't even know what to say anymore." Why did I even bother.

"You said it, Ivy. Well, about your offer...I'd like a little more time."

"Of course! I want you to give me your best possible answer, Mr. Druid."

"Thanks for that. Oh!" Druid looked at me and clapped his hands. "So that's why..." He stared hard at me.

"Um...that's why what?"

"Well, whenever I talk with you, this strange feeling comes over me. Even though you're a kid, I feel like I'm talking to someone my own age. Maybe that's because of the memories from your past life?"

"Hmm...you're probably right." I guess my past life *would* heavily influence how I spoke. *My knowledge is all mixed up, and sometimes it feels like I'm very much in tune with my feelings. From an outsider's perspective, I might seem mysterious...or even creepy... Wow, I know I just thought of the word "creepy" myself, but that kind of hurts.*

"Ivy?"

"Pu, pu, puuu," Sora chirped, jumping onto Druid's head.

What are you doing up there?! "I'm so sorry." All I can do at this point is

apologize.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Maybe it understands that our conversation is over?”

Something rang true in Druid’s words. Sora was awfully perceptive...except when it came to which roads to take.

“Pu, puuu.”

“Tei-ryuuu.”

Now Flame was awake, too. It sure did sleep a lot.

“Good morning, Flame.”

Purrr.

“Good morning to you, too, Ciel.”

Mrrrow, Ciel trilled, tilting its head to the side and looking at me with big eyes. My gaze wandered to its forehead. There was my taming symbol, and I could faintly sense my magic coming from it. It really was a mystery. When exactly did I tame Ciel? It should’ve been impossible for me, given my limited magic.

“Mr. Druid, have you ever heard of a tamer with very little magic taming a high-level monster?”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing happening, no. I don’t think it’s in any books, either. That’s why I was shocked when I saw that you tamed Ciel.”

“Ha ha ha ha! I was just as shocked as you, Mr. Druid.”

At this point, all I could do was laugh about it. I looked at Ciel again. I still felt my magic coming from the symbol on its forehead. How did this all work, anyway?

“Ivy, did you not know you’d tamed Ciel?” Druid looked a little uncomfortable.

“I didn’t, sir.” My only choice was to tell the truth. After all, I really hadn’t noticed.

“I see... So that’s why you were acting so shocked earlier. I thought it was a little odd the way you talked about Ciel. You acted like that was the first time

you realized you tamed Ciel.”

Well, it *was* the first time. “I thought taming a creature like Ciel was out of the question, because of my weak magic.”

“I see.”

“So I was really surprised when I felt some of my own magic coming from the mark on Ciel’s forehead.”

“Well, I’d be surprised, too.”

“Right.”

Druid and I looked at Ciel, who noticed our gazes and looked back at us. *Oh, that’s it! Why don’t we just ask Ciel how it happened?*

“Hey, Ciel, can I ask you a question?”

Mrrrow.

Oh, good. That means yes. “I can sense my own magic coming from the symbol on your forehead. Did you do that?” If it could mimic a symbol, then surely it could give that symbol magic, too.

Mew! Ciel yipped.

Huh? I was wrong? “Oh. It wasn’t you, Ciel?” Then does that mean I really did tame an adandara? Mmmrrrrggg...but how?

“Um, Ivy...what just happened?” Druid asked. He was glancing back and forth between me and Ciel with a look of total confusion.

“Ciel answered my question. The way it said ‘mew!’ just now means ‘no.’ Ciel says it didn’t fake the magic in the symbol to make it look like I’d tamed it.”

“Wow...it can answer yes or no questions? That sure makes things easier.”

“I know. Sometimes its answers are still hard to figure out, but that one was very clear.”

“I’m impressed.”

Was it really that impressive? I couldn’t say—I just thought mind-to-mind connections were very important. But still, did I *really* tame Ciel? The magic

coming from the symbol definitely belonged to me. So if Ciel didn't do it...then did that mean my magic imbued itself in the symbol naturally?

"Do you really think I tamed Ciel?"

"I think you did. Well, maybe the methods you used were unorthodox, but I do feel your magic coming from the symbol. Plus, this is *you* we're talking about, Ivy."

That wasn't exactly the explanation I was hoping for—I didn't want to think I was special somehow. Still, even though I didn't know how I'd done it, I was very happy I'd tamed Ciel.

"Oh, Ciel! Do you hear that? I tamed you! Are you okay with that? Are you sure you're fine with me being your tamer?"

Mrrrow.

Well, as long as Ciel said it was okay, I guess it was okay. "I look forward to a long partnership with you."

Mrrrow! Ciel's pitch was a bit higher that time. I guess it was really happy, and that made me happy, too. But...

"You should learn to control that tail of yours before somebody gets hurt."

Ciel's tail was as wild as ever. The breeze it stirred up from swishing back and forth sent a bunch of sticks and leaves dancing in the air.

"Looks like your jack-in-the-box collection is getting filled with more and more surprises, Ivy."

Mr. Druid, are you sure you want to keep using that expression? If you join me on my travels, won't you also be part of the jack-in-the-box? Come to think of it, he's been talking about jack-in-the-boxes a lot today. Jack-in-the-box, eh... No, wait, I'm not trying to collect anything, I promise!

"I'm not a collector!"

"I know—it's more like some unseen magnetism drew all these oddities to you, right?"

Unseen magnetism? Hmm... I started with Sora, the collapsed slime, then I

added Ciel the adandara. Sora happened to be on the path I was walking on, but Ciel was found by Sora, not me, so I wasn't the one who collected my companions. And Flame was birthed by Sora, too. Yep. It's not quite the same thing. But if some force did draw them to me, I wonder what kind of creatures I'll attract in the future?

“Something wrong?”

“No, I was just thinking...if interesting creatures are drawn to me, what kind of creature will show up next?”

“Probably the rarest of the rare.”

“Ha ha ha ha! I'd be fine with something average for once.”

“Ha ha! I think you're the only person I've met who *doesn't* like rare things. Okay, we've been chatting for ages. We'd better head back to town.”

“Yeah, you're right.”

We *had* been sitting here and talking an awfully long time.

“Mind if I come to the plaza with you for dinner again?”

Oh! That's right, I promised him dinner tonight in exchange for his help. It totally slipped my mind.

“Of course. Thanks for everything today.”

Oops! Sora's still on his head. I got so used to the sight I didn't notice.

“Puuu?”

“Sora, get down. We can't show up at the town gate with you riding on top of somebody's head.”

If Druid showed up with a slime on his head, his reputation would be ruined... He'd start to be known as something like “that weird uncle.” Pfft!



“Ivy, what in the world were you imagining just now?”

“Oh, nothing.” *Uh-oh. I let it show in my face.* “Let’s head back!”

I stowed Sora and Flame in their bag and waved goodbye to Ciel. For some reason, it looked really pleased as it bounded off into the forest.

“Is it just me, or is Ciel in an unusually good mood?” Druid asked.

“Yes, sir. Oh! Maybe it’s looking forward to guarding the traps I set?” It sure did look energized.

“Yeah, Ciel was really excited about that.”

“I just hope it doesn’t exhaust itself.” I knew the adandara was strong, but I still worried.

“It’ll be all right. Ciel is smart as well as strong.”

What he said was true—Ciel *was* quite intelligent. It always seemed to understand exactly what I was saying. The more I thought about it, the more I marveled over how I managed to tame such an amazing creature.

Chapter 158:

Druid and the Guild Master

SIDE: DRUID

“HEY THERE! Fancy seeing you here so late.”

Someone tapped me on the back. I looked up from my drinking to find the guild master. I checked the time—sure enough, it was getting close to midnight. I guess I’d been drinking quite a long time.

“There’s nothing to it, really.”

“You sure about that? It looked to me like you were thinking pretty deep there.”

Ah...I guess he's worried about me. He probably heard about my brother dragging Ivy into our family drama. Well, he is a bit of a worrywart.

“It’s nothing, really.”

After I saw my brother talking to Ivy a couple nights ago, I figured I couldn’t hide my secret from the kid anymore. I’d planned to tell him everything and let him decide what to do about it. And if his decision was to never see me again, then so be it.

But after I settled on telling Ivy, my heart wouldn’t stop racing. For some reason, I was terrified...terrified of Ivy rejecting me. I hadn’t felt that way in a very long time.

I screwed up my courage yesterday and told him everything. Who could have known that I would end up finding out what my skill meant and even learning about Ivy’s secrets on top of that. Hearing about the heavy weight Ivy had been carrying was a real shock. I already knew that Sora, Flame, and Ciel were secrets. They were obviously all rare creatures. But I never imagined that Ivy had no stars. He was just like the cursed child from that myth—abandoned by God. I never thought such a child might actually exist.

“Seriously, what’s wrong?” the guild master pressed.

“Oh. You’re still here.” *Whoops. I got wrapped up in my thoughts again.*

“Say, did something happen with Ivy?” The guild master had animal instincts—he could be weirdly perceptive at the strangest moments.

So he *did* come to ask about what happened with Ivy and my brother. “Ha ha. Nah, it’s fine.” I thought back to the inexplicable conversation—*maybe it was more of a non-versation?*—that had taken place yesterday and chuckled.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Ivy’s okay, really.”

“Really?” The guild master craned his neck.

He sure does know me inside and out. He probably already figured out that my brother’s outburst made me decide to tell the kid my secret. Then he thought that would probably cause tension between Ivy and me, so he looked for me and found me just where he expected.

“Fancy seeing you here” was pretty damn contrived.

“As I’m sure you’ve guessed, I told Ivy everything. And it’s all good.”

He looked a bit taken aback at first, but the catlike grin quickly spread across his face. *Damn, that smile grinds my gears.* My next drink arrived—although, I didn’t remember ordering it.

“This one’s on me,” the guild master said.

“So I could drink away my sorrows?”

“Ha ha ha! Looks like you didn’t need it after all. Boy, that Ivy sure shows a lot of promise!”

Ivy would probably make a face if he heard the guild master say that. After all, the kid referred to him as the “slightly disappointing guild master.”

“You know, you’re really showing your true colors around Ivy, aren’t you?” I said.

The guild master looked a bit uncomfortable. *Odd. I don’t usually see him looking like that.* Ever since he became the guild master, he’d gotten pretty

good at hiding those disappointing traits of his that Ivy had picked up on. Most of the time, people saw him just the way he wanted them to. He showed even me his guild master facade more often than not these days. I stole a glance at him. He noticed and smirked back at me.

“Ivy is a very strange kid,” he said. “He’s very...accepting, you might say? No matter what you do, he won’t reject you. It makes you just want to treat the kid like a king.”

The guild master hit the nail on the head. Ivy was accepting...to a fault.

“Oh, by the way, did Ivy find a slave yet?”

“Huh?! Oh...no, he didn’t mention it. I don’t think he’s looking anymore, though.”

He probably wouldn’t start searching again until he got an answer from me. *Travel with Ivy, eh... I have no idea what I should do.* All these years, I never once considered leaving town. Whenever I saw Doluka and Dolgas, I felt too guilty to leave them.

“It’s up to me, eh...?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Really? I’m surprised Ivy gave up on looking for a slave, though.” The guild master sounded a bit disappointed, which made me curious.

“Something wrong?”

“Yeah, see, somebody I know just got sold into slavery. I was going to introduce her to Ivy.”

“Who is it?”

“A female adventurer in her twenties.”

“I’m not sure having her meet Ivy would do any good. Ivy’s looking for a male adventurer in his forties.”

“Oh, right! I forgot.”

“Whoa, now. Ivy’s just as busy as you are. Don’t waste everyone’s time.”

Wait, why is he sulking? His lips are all pursed. That's not even a good look for a jolly old man. It's creepy, actually.

“Who are you calling creepy?!”

“What? Did I say that out loud?” *Odd. I was sure I only thought that.*

“You slimy guy, you!”

“Ha ha ha. Say, if I were to...no, never mind.” *Why bother asking him? Get your head on straight, Druid. You've got to make this decision on your own.*

“If you ask me, I think you should do whatever it is that you want to do.”

“Huh?!”

“I don’t know what you’re holding back from telling me, but you should do what you want, Druid.”

“I got...invited to go on a journey,” I said. I left it at that.

“I see. Well, we’ll all sure miss you.” For some reason, it sounded like the guild master had already decided I was going.

“I’m not sure if I’m gonna accept yet...”

“Really? Well, I think acting on your genuine feelings is a good thing.”

“Huh?”

“When you said someone invited you on a journey...you looked happy.”

I looked happy? Really?

“You’ve been through a lot, Druid, and you’ve kept it all stuffed inside, haven’t you? Well, it’s time for you to choose your own path for once!” The guild master downed his entire drink in one gulp.

My own path... Ivy had said something similar.

“Look at the time. I’d better be on my way,” said the guild master. “Don’t want to keep the wife waiting up.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re such lovebirds.”

“Of course we are!” The guild master then lowered his voice and spoke seriously. “Druid.”

My heart jumped. “What?”

“Seeing you with Ivy puts my heart at ease. You smile for real when you’re with that kid.”

Do I? I hadn’t noticed it at all. I watched the guild master walk out of the bar while sipping the drink he’d paid for... He bought me a drink out of pity, but why’d it have to be a sweet liquor? He knows I hate this stuff! Wait, maybe that was on purpose.

“For crying out loud... Well, that’s the guild master for you.” I gave my own cheek a light punch. *I smile for real, huh...*

I left the bar and headed home. The cool breeze felt good against my flushed cheeks as I slowly walked down the road. When my house came into view, I suddenly stopped in my tracks. Someone was waiting outside my house, and it seemed they noticed me, too. They waved at me.

“Doluka...”

“Long time no see. How’ve you been?”

“Uh, good... What brings you here today?”

My brother approached me as I stood there, frozen to the pavers. “I’m sorry about how Dolgas behaved.”

My eyes opened wide in surprise. Those words hit me like a ton of bricks. My older brothers hated me. Neither of them would say anything like this...

“Also, I wanted to apologize for how we’ve treated you all these years.”

Is this...the real Doluka?

As I stood there with my jaw hanging, my brother smiled weakly at me, which only surprised me further. The last time he’d smiled at me was before he knew his stars had been stolen. That was a very long time ago.

“The old me was quite an idiot.”

When I saw the sheepish grin on my brother’s face, the muscles in my body finally relaxed.

Chapter 159: Druid and Doluka

SIDE: DRUID

“ARE YOU OKAY?”

He was acting so different from before—I had no idea what to say to him. Not to mention, “before” was many years ago.

“I saw you with a kid adventurer. It’s Ivy, right? The kid everyone’s been talking about.”

Damn it. I’ve made Ivy the center of attention by hanging around him. Why do I have to be so... I clenched my fist.

“Druid?”

“Oh, sorry... Yeah, that’s right.”

“It’s been years since I’ve seen you looking like...that.”

The guild master said the same thing. He was talking about me smiling. Have I really changed so much?

“It made me remember the past. And when I told Shurila about it, she said that up until a little while ago, I was scum for stealing your smile away.”

Huh...?! I’ve only met my brother’s wife once, but she seemed like such a kind woman.

“Humph! I guess I don’t blame her for calling me scum. I really did steal your smile.”

“Brother...”

What is going on here? He’s not the sort of man who would own up to a mistake. Is this really my brother?

“So, I had a serious talk with Father a little while ago. I told him he couldn’t handle the shop by himself much longer.”

He changed the subject? Now we're talking shop? Well, Father is getting on in years. It's about time he left the shop to his firstborn.

"And here's what Father said: 'Give it a month. Run the shop yourself and face reality.'"

Face reality? What did he mean? Is the shop going under? I never heard anything about that.

"My original plan was to win Father over during that month and then take over the shop. But the thing about customers is...they're brutally honest."

"The customers?"

"Yeah, when it was just me running the shop, we barely got any customers. But if Shurila or Mother were there, the normal amount would come in."

Well...his personality was to blame. He probably never noticed, but he tended to say really cruel and condescending things without thinking. And he used to be much worse, too. Well, making an effort to hold his tongue wouldn't necessarily be enough; people could still tell by looking at him what he was really thinking.

"I managed to make it through somehow, but it was a disaster. I lost my temper and took it out on Shurila."

Yikes...his poor wife.

"And, well, Shurila said I should have known this would happen."

It seemed like anyone who underestimated Shurila would pay for it later. I recalled how she went out of her way to come and tell me she was marrying my brother, even though she knew he hated me. Most people wouldn't do something like that, no matter how nice they were. I remember making Shurila leave right away because I was worried my brother would find out and get angry with her. Now I really felt bad about that.

"I must have looked shocked, because she said, 'You mean you didn't notice? Everyone thinks you're not only the worst merchant but the worst man in the world'...all with a big smile on her face. As you can imagine, it took a minute for me to actually register what she said."

The worst man in the world... Didn't she take that a little too far?

"Ha ha ha, and even when I finally did understand what she meant, I had no idea how to respond. And when Mother overheard, instead of leaping to my defense, she told Shurila, 'You're a saint for marrying my deadbeat son.'"

Um...was that really the best move, Mom?

"It was way too much to process—I just shut down."

Well, I'd shut down too if I were him. I guess he'd grown up a little. When we were kids, he'd always blow his top if anyone made him look foolish.

"The next day, I must've showed up to work with a real sour expression on my face, because Tokihi took one look at me and sighed so loud you could probably hear him across the street."

Oh, Tokihi. He was one of our regulars, and he was always really nice to me. I hope he's doing well.

"He said, 'This shop gets more uncomfortable for customers every time I come here. Are you trying to put your father out of business?' Well, that made the blood rush to my head, especially after what happened the day before. And I just exploded... I laid out everything that was on my mind."

Oh, brother...what a way to treat a customer.

"I told him how Father never acknowledges my hard work and that it's all because I lost my stars."

Ahh...yeah, like I figured, he was still angry about that. My gaze fell to my feet, and I could see my clenched fists. I hadn't noticed, but I'd been squeezing them pretty hard for a while. My nails were starting to disappear into the palms of my hands. Now I remembered—whenever my brothers talked to me, I always had puncture wounds in my hands afterward.

"I really gave him an earful...I think."

What is he trying to say? That he still hasn't forgiven me?

"Then he said, 'I'd hoped losing your stars would make you grow up a little... but you're still holding on to such a stupid grudge? Pathetic. The only son from this family worth a damn is the youngest!'"

“Huh?!”

“You think you got like this because you lost your stars? You’re wrong. You and your other brother were scum from the start, and Druid gave you an opportunity to grow into better people. Well, ask anybody and they’ll say you’re the worst.’...That’s what Tokihi told me.”

Now I remember...Tokihi was always very kind. He would let my brothers take his orders, even if he sighed the whole time.

“And there was something about the way he said it. I remember being called things like ‘scum’ and ‘the worst man in the world’ many times, but I always brushed it off. I thought people were just jealous that I had what they didn’t. But...when Tokihi said it then...I had no idea how to respond. I was utterly gutted.”

“Brother...”

“I couldn’t get my mind off Tokihi’s words, so I asked Dad. I said, ‘What would you say if Druid offered to take over the business?’ and he said, ‘I’d hand it over to him tomorrow. *He* actually respects people.’”

Wow...it's been years since I've spoken with Father.

“After my trial month was over, Father said to me, ‘There. Now do you understand why you can’t do this job? Being a merchant is more than just selling goods to customers. Making a connection with people is extremely important, especially for sales clerks. Customers always come in asking for advice about something. You not only have to listen to their every word and try to help solve their problems, you have to empathize with them. You’ve made some progress over the years, but you still look down on others. I can’t entrust my business to someone like that. I’ll leave my shop to Shurila instead.’”

Advice... It was true, lots of Father’s customers would come in asking him for advice about something. And even if it had nothing to do with what they were buying, my father and mother would lend an ear and commiserate with them.

“Well, I was knocked sideways. I never dreamed he would leave the business to Shurila. But apparently, Mother and Shurila both knew about it before I did. Did you know, Druid?”

“No, it’s news to me.”

“Huh.”

Doluka had always bragged about how he would take over the family business, so Father’s decision must have really been a shock. *But it’s nice to hear that Shurila will take it over. That’s very reassuring.*

“Mother always used to say, ‘Skills and stars are just bonuses. You must never forget that.’”

She’d said something similar to me: “It’s true that skills can help you do your job more easily. And if you have a good number of stars, you’ll probably do the job a little better than most people. But there’s no substitute for hard work, so you should always think of your stars and skills as a bonus, nothing more.” And she meant every word. She’d have to, after seeing how hard Father worked all his life.

“This past month, I’ve done a lot of thinking. I guess that’s why I always took the wrong lessons away from the things Mother and Father told us. Though to be honest, I’m still a little hung up on skills and stars. But I know that’s not enough...I finally realized that something needs to change.”

I see... So he noticed. All of Mother and Father’s hard work finally paid off. What a relief.

“Shurila told me that losing my stars made me grow a little as a person. And that I’d done a little more growing over the last month...and that if things had stayed the same much longer, she’d have divorced me.”

Shurila...I knew it was wrong to judge a book by its cover, but she proved it. She really did look like the meekest little lady...

“Druid...I’m so sorry. I was so fixated on stars that I treated you horribly. I finally understand how that makes me the worst man alive.”

“No, the one who caused all the suffering was—”

“Me and Dolgas.”

“Huh?!”

I looked sharply at my brother. He smiled awkwardly back at me.

“The horrible way Dolgas and I behaved...you were the one who was hurt most by it. You must have wanted to do something to help us. You were always nice to us, even though we were hateful toward you. And when our stars disappeared, we were even crueler.”

But that's not true.

“I tried to keep the peace for Father’s sake. I felt like our family was falling apart. So I didn’t just do it for you and Dolgas.”

“Don’t you remember?”

“What?”

“You asked me a question. You said, ‘If you didn’t have your stars...then would you be nicer to people?’ I don’t remember what answer I gave you. But I do remember you asking.”

Did I really ask him that...? I don’t know...but if he says I did, then I guess it’s true?

“I know it’s too little too late, but I still had to apologize.”

As I watched my brother bow in remorse, my heart swelled with an indescribable feeling. I’d always wished we could patch things up. But those feelings were all way in the past... *What is it that I want from my brothers now?*

Chapter 160: It's Decided!

“HEY, IVY! Good morning.”

“Huh?! Oh! Good morning. Why so chipper, sir?”

I was about to leave the plaza to head into the forest when I found Druid waiting for me. *Hm, what's he been up to?* Something about his expression looked different today. Had something happened to him?

“Is something wrong, sir?”

“Huh?!” Druid’s eyes darted to and fro in surprise, but he shook his head. “It’s nothing. Yeah, it’s fine. Let’s go to the forest.”

I kept pace alongside Druid and stared up at him as we walked. He looked a bit flustered when he felt my gaze.

“Well...some things did happen,” Druid said, scratching his head and averting his eyes. Was he in some kind of trouble?

“I probably can’t solve whatever problem you’re dealing with, but I can listen.”

I didn’t know what was going on with Druid. But talking usually helps a person sort out their feelings, so I wanted to at least help him do that much.

“Ha ha ha! Don’t worry about me. Sorry.”

Is there nothing I can do? Well, I’m still just a kid. “No, I want to help.”

“Ivy...”

“Yes?”

Druid stopped in his tracks and looked at me. I looked back up at him in confusion. He slowly began explaining—how his eldest brother Doluka had found him last night, and how he had apologized.

“I knew that forgiving him would be the right thing to do, but for some

reason, I couldn't give him an answer."

Druid was truly kind. That's why he wanted to forgive his brother when he apologized. But all those years of pain were too insurmountable.

"You don't need to give him an answer right away."

"Huh?!"

Considering their history, he really didn't need to forgive his brother so quickly. "Why don't you try starting your relationship fresh with him first?"

"Start fresh?"

"That's right. You'll never be able to put your old relationship with him behind you, so you'll need to build a new one. Then, if the day ever comes when you can truly forgive him, that's when you'll tell him."

It was my belief that when somebody wronged you, you were under no obligation to forgive them the second they apologize. You only tell them you forgive them when you truly mean it. That's for the best.

And if you apologize for hurting someone and expect them to forgive you right away, that's not a true apology. It's a lot of empty words meant to satisfy your own ego. If you really care about the person you've wronged, you needed to put in the work to make it right until they offered you forgiveness.

"I see...so it doesn't have to be now."

What Druid needed was time. "Yes. He can wait until you're ready."

"Wow, Ivy, you give some pretty scary advice."

"Do I? But I mean it, I swear!"

"Ha ha ha ha! Ivy...thanks."

Oh. He's back to the Druid I know. I'm so glad I could help him.

"Okay, let's go to the forest. I want to see how our work yesterday turned out."

He meant the traps. Though the forest was in pretty bad shape right now, unless the traps had been totally destroyed, we still might have caught something.

"I just hope my traps weren't smashed by gurbars again," I said.

That seemed to give Druid an idea. "With Ciel guarding them, I'm sure they're fine. Except..." he paused, cocking his head in worry. "Maybe we'll find a big pile of gurbar corpses under Ciel again."

"Ha ha ha...I hope not." Druid's words conjured up an image I didn't want to think about. I definitely wouldn't put it past Ciel. In fact, such a thing would probably please the adandara very much.

"Did you ask Ciel not to hunt gurbars?"

Wait a minute, did I? Things were so hectic yesterday, what with Ciel's gurbar massacre. Right after that happened, Druid and I had that deep conversation... then we went straight back to the plaza...

"I forgot."

"Ha ha ha! D'you think we'll have to ask the guild master for help again today?"

"I...can't say we won't have to." Urrrg, I'm begging you, Ciel! I know praying after the fact is pointless, but dear God, please don't let there be a mountain of dead gurbars when we arrive!

After we were in the forest, I let Sora and Flame out of their bag. Sora immediately went for its designated spot on top of Druid's head. The sight was starting to look normal to me. And maybe Druid was coming around to it, too. Since Flame was still pretty fragile, it stayed in my arms. I had to be very careful not to trip and fall.

After trekking through the forest for a while, I suddenly heard snickering coming from the man next to me. "Huh?!"

"Sorry. Ha ha ha... I was just remembering what happened yesterday."

I looked at Druid. He was trying his best to hold in his laughter...and failing miserably.

"I was up all night drinking, and when I got back home, my eldest brother Doluka was there waiting for me."

He was up all night? Did he even sleep?

"Just seeing him at my house unannounced was surprising enough, but then he apologized. It was all so shocking that for a little while, I wasn't sure it was really him."

I would be shocked, too. From the way Druid talked about his brothers, it sounded like they'd hated him for as long as he could remember.

"Things were so emotional yesterday that I hadn't noticed, but looking back now, my brother and I were both so awkward. Our eyes were darting all over the place and our conversation was so stiff. Ha ha ha! It all seems so silly now."

There was a peace in Druid's eyes that I'd never seen before. I could feel a smile spreading across my own face.

"Thank you, Ivy. I never thought I'd be able to laugh over this kind of memory."

"Glad I could help."

"Ivy?"

"Yes?"

"Now that I've lost an arm, I can't be an adventurer anymore. And if the worst happened, I can't guarantee I'd be able to rescue you. But I still want to travel with you. All my life, I've been paralyzed by my family and my home. It's about time for me to finally break free and move on with my life." His eyes were focused and clear—there wasn't a bit of insecurity to be found in them.

"Thank you so much. I'm really happy for you."

"But are you sure about this? I might fail you."

"Ciel and I can handle any dangers in the forest on our own... Actually, no, Ciel's got that covered by itself! Besides, Mr. Druid, you're not exactly helpless either, are you?"

"Well, yeah, I *can* do the basics. And you're right, we have Ciel."

"Exactly. I don't want to rely entirely on Ciel, but knowing someone that powerful has my back helps me keep moving forward."

"Ha ha ha! Ivy, you really are amazing."

At what?

“You could just let Ciel handle everything.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t! Ciel is my travel companion. I have to take care of as much as I can by myself.”

“Understood,” Druid said, looking somewhat amused.

“There’s so many things I’d love for you to teach me, especially how to judge people’s character.”

“How to judge character?”

“That’s right. I’ve met my fair share of problems on my journey so far, so I think it’s an important skill that will help me steer clear of danger.”

There really have been way too many problems. I want to learn how to size up a person better so I can avoid the dangerous ones.

“I see. Now I understand. Well, I’m glad you chose me.”

“I’m glad, too! Thanks for joining me.” I stopped walking and turned to bow to Druid. He hastily bowed back—dropping Sora right onto the ground between us.

“Puuu!!!”

“Agh! Sorry, Sora!” Druid cried, quickly scooping Sora off the ground. Sora jiggled fiercely in his arms. It looked pretty angry.

“I’m sorry, Sora.”

“Puuu, puuu!”



Before we knew it, our serious conversation had taken a turn. I wonder why?

“Pfft! Ha ha ha. Looks like you and I can never talk seriously, Ivy.”

I guess he was thinking the same thing. “I know. It’s very strange.”

“Well, I’m happy to be part of your journey. Um, since I can’t exactly be an adventurer anymore, do you think I should register with the merchant guild?”

“Um, I’d appreciate that if it works for you. But would that really be okay? You’re not even a merchant.”

If Druid joined the merchant guild, I could easily sell the things I trapped and foraged in the forest. Druid wouldn’t earn nearly as much as he could have as an adventurer, but it would definitely help. Still, *could* he register with the merchant guild if he wasn’t a merchant?

“If you make at least thirty sales a year through the merchant guild, you can register.”

“Huh?! Can you really?” I didn’t know that...

“Yeah, they changed up their rules a little just this year. In our case, we could easily get the required thirty sales from the things we trap and forage in the forest.”

“What happens if you don’t make the thirty sales?”

“You’ll be fined. And if you fail to make thirty sales for three years in a row, your registration is revoked.”

A fine and a registry revocation... Thirty sales. Druid’s right. We could easily make the thirty required sales from things we find in the forest. So I guess it wouldn’t be a problem for him to register after all?

“You don’t need any skills to register with the merchant guild,” he said. “Then again, it doesn’t matter in my case since everyone knows what my skills are anyway.”

“Ha ha! Okay, Mr. Druid...can I ask you to register for me? I promise I’ll do a good job trapping and foraging.”

“Ivy, you should say *we* there, not *I*. Please don’t carry the burden all by

yourself—we're a team. I feel left out."

"Hm? A team?"

That's right... We're not a master and a slave. Druid is my companion, so we can work together as a team. Gosh, my cheeks are gonna hurt from smiling so much today.

"Let's make this the best team we can, Ivy."

"Yes, sir! Thanks in advance for all your help. Oh! I think Ciel is nearby."

"Where? By the way, I think it's pretty obvious now that you've tamed Ciel. You naturally know where that adandara is since you two are bonded."

Druid's words were flattering but a bit concerning, too. I wish I at least knew how I'd tamed Ciel.

"Wouldn't it be funny if it was something only people with no stars could accomplish?"

"Huh?!" I hadn't considered that.

Ciel's aura was quite strong by then, so I stopped walking.

"Good morning, Ciel."

At the sound of my voice, Ciel jumped down from the tree. *Mrrrow.*

Ciel was in a good mood; its tail was swishing back and forth. My heart raced a little at the sight. *I sure hope I'm not about to walk into a pile of gurbar corpses...*

"Oh, thank goodness!" When we arrived at the site where I'd set the traps, a wave of relief washed over me. There were no dead gurbars in sight. Apparently, Ciel had only chased them away this time.

"Thank goodness," Druid sighed. He looked relieved, too. We both felt guilty about asking the guild master for help so many days in a row.

"I can't wait to see what we caught."

"Me too. I've never seen anyone hunt with traps before."

Adventurers tended to rely on their swords and fighting skills to get by. And it

was faster to hunt than to set traps, so why would they bother?

“Here’s the spot. Umm...wow, good job, Ciel.”

“Dang...that’s amazing.”

There were four wild rabbits in the trap in front of us. How could *four* have possibly fit into a trap meant for one? Ciel must have chased them into it.

Mrrrow.

I looked up at the sound of Ciel’s voice. It looked very proud of itself. Druid’s shoulders shook at the sight.

“Thanks, Ciel. You’re amazing.”

“Yeah, Ciel! You’re very amazing.”

Mrrrow. Ciel’s tone was higher. And the look on its face was totally smug.

“Pfft! Ha ha hah ha! Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I chuckled. Druid’s laughter was contagious.

Ciel stared at him curiously. And for some reason, Sora was doing its vertical stretches on top of his head. There might be a word for the general mood...but I don’t know what it would be.

Chapter 161: Divvying Up the Tasks, Little by Little

“THIS IS VERY IMPRESSIVE... Is it always like this?” Druid was in awe at the number of rabbits I’d caught. I had set five traps. Usually, you’d get two or three animals out of that, maybe four if you were lucky. But there were fifteen wild rabbits laid out at our feet.

“Yes, I always get a big catch. I think Ciel chases animals into my traps.”

“Wow, Ciel, you’re so helpful!”

Mrrrow.

“Oh! Mr. Druid, don’t!”

“Huh? Wait...did I say something wrong?”

I looked over at Ciel...and sure enough, its tail was swishing up a storm. It was really flattered by what Druid had said. Its tail was kicking up a huge whirlwind of dust.

“Ciel? Let’s calm down, okay? At least stop whipping your tail around!”

Mewww. Ciel whimpered, looking back and drooping its ears. I felt sorry for the creature, but this was just something I couldn’t allow.

“Sorry, Ivy. What exactly did Ciel do wrong?”

“Ha ha ha. Well, I appreciate Ciel’s help, but now I have no idea if I’m doing a good job with my traps or not.”

Druid looked at my traps, then at the pile of wild rabbits, and that seemed to make him understand. With a big kill every time

no matter what, it *would* be difficult to tell which traps you’d set well.

“You’re right. It’s pretty hard to tell from this.”

“Exactly. Ciel always helps me no matter what, so I’m worried it thinks my traps are faulty. And you can see the results of Ciel’s help with your own eyes.”

"I'm sure Ciel only does that because it cares about you, Ivy."

"I know, that's why it's hard to ask it to stop."

I decided to find a spot near water to butcher the animals so we could sell the meat. This was my usual routine. I found a bana tree along the way and gathered some of its leaves. The leaves were antiseptic, so they were often used to wrap meat.

When we arrived at the river, we looked around for any sign of danger. We'd be in big trouble if there was another gurbar pack like the day before. There'd be no time for butchering, and we'd have to ask the guild master for help again, too. We really wanted to avoid doing that too many days in a row.

"Looks like the coast is clear," Druid said.

"Yes, indeed."

Mewww. Ciel sounded a bit disappointed.

Did you want to go hunting? You know...maybe I should just let Ciel hunt as much as it wants? The only problem is, I'm not sure what I would do with all those gurbar corpses.

I got to work butchering the rabbits. Druid helped out, but he seemed a little miffed that he wasn't as skilled at the task as he ought to be. I wasn't sure if I should say something consoling or just wait for him to feel better on his own... So confusing!

"Um, okay, we're all done. Shall we head back to town?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Argh, I'm sorry. I really wish I could have helped more."

He's more than a little upset...let's say VERY upset. I guess it would be really hard to have to relearn something you used to be good at... What should I tell him?

"Umm..." *Come on, Ivy. Consoling someone isn't a high-level skill.* "I think it would be best if you found ways of doing things with just one arm, or better still, if you looked for things that you can already do with one arm." *Agh! That sounded really patronizing...*

"You've got a point there. I guess I'll just have to slowly find the new things

I'm good at. Thanks."

"Um, no problem." I wrapped my meat in bana leaves. "Thanks, Ciel."

Mrrrow.

"Pu! Puuu."

"Teryu-ryuuu"

Guys, I was talking to Ciel.

"Hey now, Sora. I was nice enough to let you spend the whole day on my head," Druid grumbled.

"Puuu," Sora jiggled.

Oh no! It's about to fall off. "Sora, don't move! You'll fall."

"Puuu, puuu."

My eyes darted down to Ciel's feet, where Flame was sitting. Flame was also doing the vertical stretch exercises. However, Flame's movements were much slower than Sora's. As I compared the two slimes, I got the sense that Flame was just a bit more easygoing. There were qualities about it that I wished Sora had. *I guess there's a lot of different personalities to be found in slimes.*

"Should we go back?" Druid asked, hoisting the bag with the meat onto his shoulder. For a moment, I was about to offer to help, but I decided to let him handle it. I had butchered the meat, so Druid could be the one to carry it.

"Ciel, thanks for all your help today. And you don't need to hunt gurbars. Understand?"

Mrrrow!

...Why do I have an extra-bad feeling about this? Also, is it just me, or was Ciel's meow just now much more spunky than usual? Umm...

"I mean it. If you hunt gurbars, you'll be in trouble."

Mrrrow. Its tone was a little lower... I guess I'll just have to trust that it'll be okay.

"Bye, Ciel. See you tomorrow." Druid waved.

Ciel stretched its neck toward the top of his head to give Sora a lick. Then it bent down and licked Flame before making a graceful exit.

“Whoa! What’s going on?”

Sora had started a round of very intense stretching exercises on Druid’s head. And his head wasn’t a stable surface; it fell to the ground. Druid was flustered, but Sora seemed to be more affected by the licking than falling off Druid’s head. It proceeded to bounce wildly around us.

“Sora?” *That’s odd. I thought Sora had gotten used to the licking by now.*

“What’s wrong?”

“Sora’s reacting to Ciel licking it. I thought it was accustomed to it, though.”

Druid followed Sora with his eyes. It was bouncing around...a bit indiscriminately. It even hit a couple trees. Well, knowing Sora, there was nothing to worry about.

“Maybe Sora thought it wouldn’t get licked if it was on my head.”

That makes sense. I guess the sudden licking startled it. I still think it should be used to it at this point.

“Come on, Sora. We’re going back.”

Sora suddenly stopped its bouncing...then, with a huge leap, it returned to its favorite perch.

“I guess the top of my head is Sora’s spot now.”

I think it’s been Sora’s spot for a while... “Yes, it is. If you don’t like it, let Sora know.”

“It’s all right.”

I scooped up Flame, who was already in dreamland, and gently set it into its bag. This slime seemed to enjoy sleeping much more than Sora did. I wasn’t sure yet if it was a biological need or a personal preference.

We walked back to town, putting Sora in the bag along the way. Druid has a butcher in mind, so I let him introduce me. The shop was run by a man named Tokihi, a longtime customer of Druid’s father. Which reminded me, I never

asked Druid exactly what his family business was.

“Hey, Mr. Druid, what does your father sell at his shop?”

“We’re a general goods store. We thrive on our borley and weet sales in particular; our varieties are famous for being very good quality. We also sell livestock feed, I think.”

Wait a minute... Was the person who sold me rice Druid’s father? I did sense a familiar aura from him...

“Um, just a guess, but is his shop near the food carts, on the left side of the main street?”

“Huh? How did you know?”

“Wow, I’ve already met Druid’s father! “I went there to buy some rice.”

“Ryce? As in feed for animals?”

Oh, that’s right. It’s livestock feed in this world. I know! I’ll pretend I didn’t know ryce was livestock feed.

“Yes. It was delicious.”

“Huh? It was...delicious? But livestock...wait, did my father explain it to you? Ryce is for domestic animals, Ivy.”

Uh-oh. He’s much more upset than I expected. “It’s okay, please stay calm.”

“I never thought my father would do such shady business—”

“It’s not what you think!”

“Hm?”

I should’ve kept quiet. I didn’t think he’d get this worked up. “I’m sorry, he did tell me it was livestock feed. But in my memories, rice is a diet staple. It’s delicious.”

“Oh...! So that’s why.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d be that angry.”

“Well, I thought he’d sold livestock feed to an innocent child... Yeah...I know my father wouldn’t do that.” Druid chuckled and shook his head.

I apologized and described rice to him in more detail.

“Wow...that’s really interesting.”

“Thanks... But there’s just one problem: I still haven’t been able to cook it very well. It’s hard to get the water-to-rice ratio just right.”

I’d tried to make rice four times by now and still hadn’t succeeded. Past Me remembered the heat should be low, so I was pretty confident that part was right. The only problem was the water level, which was really tricky. I was still experimenting with it.

Oh, that’s a good idea. I’ll buy some rice on the way home.

Chapter 162: Getting Better, Little by Little

DRUID'S EXPRESSION was tense as we entered the butcher shop. "Hello. It's been a while."

Yikes! His voice is so stiff. This's actually kind of funny.

"Well, hello there, Druid. It really has been ages. I was sorry to hear about your arm. Are you all right?"

I followed Druid into the butcher shop and looked at the man behind the counter, who was obviously Tokihi. Every other butcher I'd met thus far had been quite portly, but this man was rail thin.

"I'm doing fine, thank you."

"By the way, don't worry if you can't be an adventurer anymore. I could find you a job."

Tokihi seems like a really nice guy.

"I'm all right. Um, there's someone I'd like you to meet. Ivy, over here," Druid called to me. There was an edge in his voice, and his cheeks were a little pink. I couldn't tell if he was worried or embarrassed.

"Oh?! Aha, yes. *That* kid."

That kid? Does he...know me? I looked at Druid, whose eyes were saying *uh-oh*. I guess he realized why the butcher knew me. I'd have to ask him about it later.

"Nice to meet you, sir. My name is Ivy."

"My, how polite! I'm Tokihi. Nice to meet you." Tokihi's hand shot out. I thought it was a little strange, but I gripped his hand firmly.

"Nice to meet you, too, sir." I bowed a little deeper than usual. When I looked up, Tokihi's surprised gaze met mine... *Did I do something wrong?*

"Wow, You've got an awfully sturdy head on your shoulders for someone so

little."

Wait a minute... Druid, you look like you're trying really hard, but I can still see your shoulders quivering. Your mouth is twitching, too.

"Um, sir. I'm Ivy and I'm *nine years old*. Nice to meet you!" I repeated, emphasizing the "nine years old" part.

"Huh?! Oh, wow... Sorry about that. I thought you were six or seven."

This guy...there's probably not a dishonest bone in his body. "It's all right, sir. Could I sell some meat to you?"

"Meat?"

"Yes, I have wild rabbit meat for sale."

"Did you get this in the forest? That's way too dangerous, even if Druid was with you."

I was a bit startled by how harsh his tone was. Was everyone in this town a worrywart? "I'm quite all right, sir. So, um..." *Oops! Now my tone's gotten all harsh, too.*

With a laugh, Druid stepped between us. "Don't worry. Whenever we visit the forest, we go in prepared. We're always ready to run at a moment's notice."

We go in prepared? What did he mean by that...? Oh! The shock pouches, maybe?

"Well, good. Make sure you're ready for anything. Something about those gurbars out there has really been off lately."

"Yeah. Well, anyway, do you think you can sell our game?"

Huh? I guess Druid relaxed while I wasn't looking. Too bad. Nervous Druid was pretty entertaining.

"Shouldn't be a problem. I appreciate it, actually. I know our hands are kind of tied, but it's just really hard to get game from the forest these days."

"Glad we can help. We just butchered it a little while ago." Druid pulled the wild rabbit meat out of our bag. We were selling the meat from thirteen of the rabbits, and we would eat the other two for dinner that night. I planned to

make grilled rabbit with herbs.

“Sure, let’s see what you’ve got.” Tokihi looked solemn as he unwrapped the meat from the bana leaves to have a look at it. Once he was done inspecting it all, he nodded silently over and over. “It’s in great condition. It’s fresh, too.”

“Hear that, Ivy? That’s great news.”

“It is, sir. Thank you very much.” Meat really was so much fresher when you cleaned and butchered it right after you caught it.

“Sit tight, I’ll just go get your money.” Tokihi slipped into the back briefly and returned with a little basket. “It’s 130 dal per rabbit, so that makes 1,690 dal in all. Will that do?”

“Whoa, 130 dal?! Isn’t that a bit generous?” Druid gasped in surprise. I was surprised, too. Wild rabbits usually went for 100 to one 110 dal at the most. A price of 130 dal was unheard of.

“Didn’t I tell you? Fresh meat’s hard to come by.”

“I know, but *that* hard?”

“Not many adventurers will go into the forest now, what with the gurbars and all. And no adventurers means no game. As you can see, my shelves are empty.”

I looked at Tokihi’s shelves, and sure enough, there wasn’t much there.

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” Druid murmured.

I looked up at him. I suddenly realized usually when I went to a butcher shop, the shelves were the first thing I checked—but Druid’s nervous faces were so funny I’d gotten distracted.

“Aren’t they a little *too* empty, sir? Don’t you raise any livestock?”

“My herd isn’t big enough yet to sustain the entire town. I’m still growing it, increasing my numbers little by little.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Wow, I had no idea. I always assumed you raised enough to supply all of Oll.”

“Not with all these monsters around, you see. I can try to increase my herds all I want, but it’s no good if I don’t have enough hands to protect them from

monster attacks.”

“Ah, that does make sense.”

“I was doing well enough until a little while ago. But you know how we had an influx of people moving here from the next village over? That threw off my calculations.”

So is he saying he can't raise enough livestock to feed the people in this town? Well, I heard that many villages and towns rely on game hunted by adventurers for meat, so I guess that's not so unusual. But I wonder why so many people migrated here all of a sudden?

“You’re right, this town did grow an awful lot. And now there’s also the gurbars on top of that.”

“I feel sorry for the top dogs in this town. So, are you okay with the price for the wild rabbits?”

“Yes, I think it’s fine. What about you, Ivy?”

“Yes, sir! Um, it’s fine.” I was right in the middle of a battle with my brain trying to understand what they were talking about, so I was caught off guard by the question.

“What’s wrong, kid? You okay?” Tokihi sounded worried.

“I’m fine, sir. My mind just wandered off a bit, that’s all.”

“I see. You must be exhausted from that scary trip to the forest.”

Scary trip to the forest? Huh?

“Here’s your money.”

“Oh! Thank you, sir.” I took the money and put it safely into the small magic bag I used as a purse.

“So, what’re your plans for the rest of the day?” Tokihi asked.

Druid started, “Well, we’re about to go to the plaza and—”

“We’re going to go to Mr. Druid’s father’s store to buy some rice!”

“Huh?!”

Wait...what? Why is Druid so shocked? I told him we were... No, wait, I didn't tell him! I think I forgot to tell Druid where we were going.

"Ryce? That's a peculiar thing to buy. Well, I guess this time of day, your pops ought to be around. Go see him now!"

A crease formed between Druid's eyebrows. Oops, I messed up. I blurted out the plan to see Druid's father without consulting him first. What do I do now?

"Druid, it's time you had a nice long talk with your pops."

Druid sighed heavily in reply.

"Um, it's my shopping trip, Mr. Druid. You don't need to come." I did rope him in without asking, after all. That wasn't fair of me.

"No, I'll come with you."

"Oh?! Go, you will?" I was so startled I worded my answer a little weirdly. Well, I'm sure he still understood me.

"Yeah, well...I really shouldn't keep avoiding my father. Besides, now I've got some news for him."

"You mean it?!" Tokihi sounded stunned.

"Hey, you advised me to do it, Tokihi."

"Well, yeah, but...I didn't think you actually would. Wow, that's great. Why the change of heart?"

Druid smiled awkwardly in response... There was a touch of shyness in his eyes. Tokihi looked surprised for a moment, but then a smile lit up his face.

"Well, I dunno what happened, but I'm happy for you."

"I actually partly have you to thank for it, Tokihi. Seriously, thank you."

"I don't really get it, but no worries."

Tokihi sure was a good person.

As we were leaving the shop, Druid turned and told Tokihi he wanted to meet and catch up sometime soon. It sounded like things were headed in a good direction.

“Thanks,” Druid told me on our way to our next stop.

“But I didn’t do anything.”

Druid chuckled softly and patted my head. He’d never done that to me before. It surprised me a little, but it made me smile, too. His hand was so warm.

“Phew... I’m even more nervous now than I was at Tokihi’s place.”

I glanced up at Druid. He looked like he was about to throw up. It was painfully obvious just how anxious he was about seeing his father. *He’s so silly... No, stop that. Good luck, Druid!*

Chapter 163: How Old Are You?

“WELCOME TO my sto...oh! Druid...”

The shopkeeper—Druid’s father—was stunned when he looked up to see us entering his store. Druid stiffened up at once. *Gee, what am I supposed to do about this?* I looked back and forth between Druid and the shopkeeper. They *did* look a little bit alike.

“Um, ah...been doing well? Wait, you just got maimed, of course you’re not doing well.” The shopkeeper was befuddled, but he was unmistakably concerned about Druid.

“I’m okay...Father. I don’t feel...any pain at all,” Druid quickly answered. His speech was quite stilted, and he sounded like he was speaking to a total stranger. If what I’d seen of Druid before was any indication, he was at peak nervousness right now. If I just stood there and watched on the side, he’d probably never calm down.

“Hello, sir.”

“Hm? Oh, it’s you again.”

“Yes, I was the one who bought the rice from you before. I came here to buy more, actually.”

“So...did you really eat it? Did it give you any problems?”

“No, sir, it was quite all right. Except I didn’t do a very good job steaming it.”

“You steamed it? You can steam ryce?”

“Oh yes, sir, you can. Is something the matter?”

“Oh, well...I did try boiling some ryce a little while ago, but it was a soggy mess and it didn’t taste great either.”

He boiled it? If you boil rice, it becomes like a porridge, I think. Though, according to Past Me’s memories, “soggy” would be a fair word to describe it.

But...it “didn’t taste great”?

“I think it would taste pretty nice if you added a little salt and an egg.” I’d never eaten rice that way, but I did think it would have a nice homey flavor. *Ooh, now I’m curious. I think I should try cooking that sometime. But wait, people in this world tend to like bold flavors in their food. I have to take that into consideration.*

“Salt? Well, I did add some salt...”

“I think it would have a pretty simple flavor, so you might find it a little lacking.”

The shopkeeper tilted his head in thought. He must have been recalling the flavor in his mind. “I guess you’re right, you could call it rustic... But ryce...it’s kind of flavorless, isn’t it?”

Hmm...well, yeah, rice does have a sweetness to it, but it’s very subtle. It might be difficult to notice. Maybe it would be better steamed in dashi and turned into a savory porridge.

“Um, so...do you still have rice for sale?”

According to Tokihi, Oll’s population had experienced a sudden boom. There might be a rice shortage.

“Oh, sure, we’ve got plenty. Do you want the same amount you bought last time?”

“Yes, please.”

I guess that meant people weren’t hoarding rice—maybe because they thought of it as livestock feed instead of people food. The shopkeeper fetched some rice and took it into the back to polish.

“Phew...” I heard a gusty sigh beside me as the shopkeeper disappeared into the back. Druid must have been a nervous wreck—the fatigue on his face was stark.

“Are you okay, sir?”

“Ha ha ha...do I *look* okay?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“I didn’t think I’d be so nervous.”

What happened between them? I guess that’s not something I can casually ask about.

“How long has it been since you last saw each other?”

“Well...that would be when I moved out, so...over twenty years, I guess.”

Over twenty years?! For two people who lived in the same town, not seeing each other for twenty years was insanely long. They must have at least caught glimpses of each other around town... But now it made sense. That’s why both Druid and his dad acted so awkward with each other. Wait...huh? I never asked Druid how old he was. I always imagined he was in his early forties. I could ask him, Hey, are you about forty years ol—no, don’t ask him that.

“Mr. Druid...how old were you when you left home?”

“I was twelve.”

Hm? Twelve? Which means he’s about thirty-two right now? What?! He’s only thirty-two years old!!!

“Mr. Druid...are you thirty-two?”

“Thirty-three.”

Thirty-three! I stared hard at Druid. “Wow...you must’ve been through hell.”

“Ivy...what’s that supposed to mean? Mind elaborating on that?”

“Urrrm, well...” Oops. I said too much. Agh! His eyes are glazed over! What do I do?

“Ha ha ha!” a voice boomed.

Huh? I looked up, wondering if I’d imagined that laughter—there was the shopkeeper, holding out my bag of newly polished rice and chuckling. I guess he’d overheard our conversation.

“I’m glad to see you looking so well, Druid,” he said, walking back over to the counter. “I haven’t seen you this happy in ages.”

“Dad...”

Ooh! This is a good atmosphere, and Druid looks much more relaxed now... Hopefully that means he'll forget the whole how-old-are-you fiasco.

“Did you try the ryce, too?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Too bad. I wanted to hear your opinion.”

He wants to hear Druid’s opinion? In that case... “Um, if you’re free, sir, would you like to come over and try some with us? Druid and I were planning to have dinner together in the plaza.”

Druid’s father seemed interested in rice, so why not offer him some? Even if I messed it up, tasting it would give him a much better understanding of its potential than hearing someone else’s opinion.

“Huh?!” Both men gasped.

Hm? Why’re you both so surprised? I don’t think I said anything weird... “I figured tasting the rice would help you make up your mind about it.”

“Ah, that’s true. It’s true, but...” the shopkeeper trailed off uncomfortably and glanced at Druid.

Oh! Maybe Druid didn’t want me to invite his father. Right. That was a little insensitive of me. “Mr. Druid...um, I’m sorry.”

“Ha ha ha! Don’t worry about it, it’s all right. What do you think, Dad? Ivy’s cooking is a bit unusual, but it tastes great.” All traces of stiffness were gone from Druid’s voice. He was going to be okay. But did he *have* to describe my cooking as “unusual”? Well...I couldn’t deny that allegation.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Fair warning, though, even I don’t know exactly what ryce tastes like, so I can’t guarantee it’ll be any good,” Druid said, throwing me a smirk.

Aha! That’s payback for the age thing. Aww, come on, that wasn’t on purpose, I swear... I’ll ask Ciel to hunt some wild pigeons, and I’ll make some savory rice porridge with the stock! That’ll definitely taste great. Wild pigeon does make

excellent stock. I feel a little bad asking Ciel for help...but I wanna eat it!

“Ivy?”

“Oops! Sorry. I was just thinking about what I wanted to cook.”

“Hah! Ivy, if anyone can make a good meal out of ryce, it’s you,” Druid said, giving my hair a rough tousle.

Ahh, now my hair’s all messed up. I reflexively slapped his hand away.

“Ha ha ha! Your head looks like a bramble.”

“Come on...”

Druid chuckled and neatened my hair for me.

“Thank you.”

“Well, I was the one who messed it up. But seriously, I’m not at all worried about how dinner will taste. It just feels a little strange hearing the word ‘ryce’ with dinner.”

Why did everyone have such bad reactions to rice? Was there some bigger reason behind it?

“Is rice really that bad?” It was a bit strange to use the word “bad.” But how else could I have asked?

“It’s not *bad*...it’s just the image of ‘livestock feed’ runs deep,” Druid’s explained. “It’s strange, picturing yourself eating what animals eat.”

That made sense. It was a prejudice shared by the whole society.

“Yeah, it’s always just been sort of a given not to eat animal feed,” Druid confirmed.

So even Druid had the same bias. I looked at the shelf that held the rice. It was sold in small bags, large bags, and even very large sacks. The butcher had mentioned they were adding more livestock, but did that mean they were also growing more feed? It seemed unlikely, since the shelf next to it labeled “bazmati” had very little on it. Were livestock also picky eaters?

“Umm, Dad? What’ll it be?”

“I’m not sure. I’m curious about this ryce meal, too, but I wouldn’t want to impose.” From the way he said it, it sounded like he was more curious about Druid than the rice.

“Oh, it’s no imposition. And I’ll make a very flavorful rice bowl for you.”

An image of a bowl of rice popped into my head. If I couldn’t steam it properly, the meal would most likely be a disaster...but I decided to have faith in myself. I knew I was inches away from making the perfect steamed rice!

“Rice bowl?” they asked in unison.

What kind of meat should I put on it? Wild rabbit wouldn’t work very well. Oh! I just remembered I have some wild pigeon meat in my magic bag. Too bad I already used up the bones, but I could buy some eggs on the way back. Although I don’t have soy sauce... Does it even exist here? There’s ryce and bazmati, so maybe they do have it. I should see if I can find something similar.

“Ivy?”

“I promise I’ll make something tasty.”

“Ack! Ivy wasn’t listening.”

Huh? To what? I looked at Druid and his father in confusion, and they chuckled back at me.

“Well, I looking forward to it,” the shopkeeper said.

I nodded confidently in response... *But gosh, the flavor’ll be completely different if I can’t find any soy sauce.*

Chapter 164:

They Exist! But They're Swapped?

I DIDN'T THINK they'd actually have it. But! Not only was there shoyu soy sauce, I was shocked to find there was tangy ponzu sauce in this world as well. Yet something seemed a little off. In my memory, ponzu was a thin, darkish liquid, but the substance I saw before my eyes was black. The soy sauce also looked a bit lighter. Was it really shoyu? Was it really ponzu?

"I'm not sure about this at all, but I guess I'll just have to buy them and test them out," I said. I held up the two bottles and frowned, my eyebrows tightly knitted together.

"Um, Ivy? Are you okay?" Druid sounded concerned.

I didn't blame him. To outsiders, I probably looked like a pretty sketchy kid. But this was serious: Both bottles were pretty expensive. Each was only around one and a half liters, but they cost 300 dal apiece. If they didn't work out, the pain would just be too much.

What should I do? I want to buy them...but if this big bottle turns out not to be soy sauce, will I still have a use for it? Well, yeah, of course I'd have to find some way of using it up. But it'll still set me back a whole 300 dal!

"I'm going to make it work."

"Huh?" Druid gave me a confused look, but I ignored it. I needed to act quickly, before I lost my nerve.

"Oh, it's nothing," I told Druid. I turned to the shopkeeper. "I'll take both of these, please."

"Are you sure, kid? You were staring at them for so long I was starting to worry about you."

"Well, I'm just not sure what they taste like." And I was definitely embarrassed to admit it.

"Then...why don't you have a taste?"

“Huh? Is that...okay?”

“Of course. We have some set aside for tasting.”

Gee, Shopkeeper, you could have told me earlier. No, Ivy—you should have just asked... Ack! Druid’s trying not to laugh again. When I glared at him, he promptly looked away, but his entire body was still shaking. From the way Druid was acting, I was tempted to turn down the shopkeeper’s offer, but...

“Thanks, I’d love to have a taste.”

“Pfft! Ha ha ha...” Druid burst out snickering.

Curse you, Druid. That’s it, you’re having nothing but plain rice tonight!

“Here’s your showyu and ponzoo.”

“Thank you very much.” I dabbed my index finger into the showyu on the saucer and licked it. Huh? It had a tart, citrusy flavor, not what I was expecting at all... Was this ponzu? I stuck my index finger in the liquid in the other saucer and gave it a lick...and the savory flavor of soy sauce filled my mouth. I looked at the names written on the bottles. The “showyu” was actually ponzu, and the “ponzoo” was actually shoyu?

“Um, are these sauces in the correct bottles?” They must have been, since I saw him pour the sauce onto the saucers.

“Hm?” The shopkeeper brought the ponzu saucer to his nose and sniffed it just to make sure. “Yes, they’re correct. This is showyu.”

So I was right. The names of the sauces in my memory are swapped... God, this is so confusing!

“So, what’ll it be? Are you buying these?”

“Yes, sir! I’ll take both the showyu and the ponzoo, please.”

“This may sound strange coming from me since I sell them, but you have unusual taste, kid. These sauces aren’t very popular.”

They’re unusual? Well, yeah, this world’s cuisine did have a universally recognized mother sauce. Each village and town would use the mother sauce as a base and add their own local ingredients to create new salad dressings and

meat sauces. That was probably why not very many people bought soy sauce and ponzu.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think these flavors would go well with all sorts of foods.”

“Oooh, I can see you’ve got a knack for cooking, don’t ya, kid?”

“Yes, sir... I love to cook.” *I’ll just ignore what the sauces look like.*

“Yes, our Ivy is quite the chef,” Druid said, still struggling to hold in his laughter. That was a really sweet thing to say...too bad he ruined it by laughing.

“Well, I’m impressed. Here you go, kid.” The shopkeeper handed me my two bottles.

“Oh! Your money...” I dug into my magic bag for the 600 dal.

“Here you go,” I heard Druid say.

“Thanks,” said the shopkeeper.

Hm? By the time I looked up, the sauces had already been paid for.

“Huh?! Um, sir?”

“C’mon, let’s go!”

“Huh? But Mr. Druid, the money—”

“Let’s goooo!” Druid whisked the bag with the soy sauce and ponzu off the counter and waltzed out of the shop.

“Do come again if there’s anything else you need.”

“We will! Thanks for the sauces.”

The shopkeeper smiled and waved at me. I bowed back and scurried to catch up with Druid.

“Druid, your money—”

“Forget it. This is nothing.”

“But...” Was this really okay? *Hmm... No, it would be wrong to just let him pay for me. This is something we need to decide together.* “Mr. Druid, let’s make some rules for how we’ll handle this sort of thing moving forward.”

“Rules?”

“Yes. Um, like how we’ll divide the profits from our hunting and gathering sales and how we’ll split expenses.”

“Ivy...I think it’s okay if you lean on me a little.”

Lean on him? “But I already do lean on you, Mr. Druid.”

“Huh? Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, a great deal, actually—for emotional support.” Just knowing there was someone in my life I could rely on was a huge weight off my mind. Without even realizing it, Druid made me feel like I had a safe and warm home.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. But money is another thing entirely. Bickering over money can ruin relationships down the line. That’s why we need some solid rules in place up front.”

“I wish the guild master could hear that...”

What does this have to do with the guild master? I must have looked confused. Druid explained that the guild master was pretty sloppy with money. Before he got his current job, he’d gone into debt from gambling. His then-girlfriend, now wife, even chased him around the town for it once.

“Wow, that’s heavy.”

“Yeah, and there’s more...” He said whenever the guild master had a lot of money, he got so generous that he’d splurge and spend it on everyone. He once loaned a lot of money to a friend who then bailed on him.

“His wife keeps a tight grip on his purse now, so it’s not a problem anymore... but he was terrible when he was younger.”

The guild master did give off the impression of being a little loose with money. Then again, the gambling aside, if all his splurges were for other people...well, that felt very in character for him.

“I guess you’re right, though. We’ve got a long journey ahead of us, so we should set some ground rules.”

“That’s right.”

“The only issue is, I don’t have any income.”

“What are you saying? You’re going to register with the guild for me, so that’ll take care of both our incomes.”

“No, it would be wrong for me to take half. I’ll barely be doing any work.”

“But you *will* be doing work. You’ll have to help me carry the game I hunt and the fruit and nuts I gather. Only what you can manage, of course, and I’ll help out wherever I can.”

For some reason, Druid looked surprised by what I said. “Oh...my job is to carry things...”

“Of course. And I know you’ll be great at it.” *Oh, wait! What if he hates the idea of carrying things? I sort of made that decision without even asking him... Hm? Then again, I don’t really feel like I’m doing any “work” either... I mean, Ciel does most of the work.*

“Okay, I’ll gladly haul the stuff. I *am* pretty strong. I’m gonna carry so many things!” Grinning, he lifted the bag with the sauce bottles high. “Wow...I have a job!”

I wasn’t sure why, but he looked overjoyed. Did carrying stuff around really make him that happy? *I...I don’t get it.*

“Um, good. Thanks.” *I’ll have to think more about what my jobs will be later.*

“Sure thing. Well, let’s go to the plaza. I’ll help you out today—as much as I can, of course.”

“Thank you.” *Huh? I don’t think we set any rules yet, and the conversation feels like it’s already over. Well, we’ve still got time, so it doesn’t have to be now.*

We returned to the plaza and got to work prepping dinner before Druid’s father arrived.

First, there was the rice. This time, I paid close attention to the amount of water and gave it another try. While the rice was steaming, I braised the wild pigeon in some vegetable broth seasoned with soy sauce and sugar. I gave it a

taste and...oh wow, that's delicious. Its flavor was a bit strong, but according to my memories, that was okay since it would be served over plain rice. All I needed to do was crack in some eggs right before serving and we would be good to go.

"It came together really easily...too easily." The rice wasn't done yet, and Druid's father hadn't arrived either. *Oyako-don is actually a much easier dish to make than I thought. Well, whether it actually tastes good or not is all riding on the rice. Please, God, make it turn out tasty this time!*

Chapter 165: A Family in a Stew

MY HEART WAS RACING. If I'd messed up the rice, dinner would be ruined.

Dear rice, please turn out good!

"Ivy...why are you praying to your stew pot? Is that part of the recipe?"

Druid's puzzled voice faintly reached my ears. I glanced at him and met a pair of deeply troubled eyes... *Oh no, I'm embarrassing myself.*

"Um, since I messed it up so many times before, I was kind of giving it a little prayer...you might say..."

"Oh, so that's all." Druid looked relieved to hear that...which made me feel even more anxious. Just how long had he been watching me? "It's just, I wondered if your memories from the past were influencing you right now."

My memories from the past? Oh! He means Past Me. I suppose it's safe for us to talk about my past life like this when nobody's around. Okay, yes. That was an astute observation, Druid. Hm? Wait, I was under Past Me's influence just now? Does that mean in my past life, I used to pray to the rice whenever I cooked it? Um...isn't that kind of creepy?

"Mr. Druid, that's a little..."

"You know...I sometimes feel a little anxious when I watch you, Ivy."

I know. Who prays to a pot? But now that I think about it, I might've prayed to yesterday's meal, too... Wait a minute, was that why everyone avoided me yesterday while I was cooking?

"Ha ha ha... Well, do you think the ryce turned out well this time?"

I won't dwell on the past! All those people yesterday were just in a hurry. They definitely did NOT run away because I creeped them out! I hope...

"Or maybe you already screwed it up?"

La la la! I can't hear you! I shook my head from side to side and lifted the lid

off the pot. *Please be good, please be good...* “Ooh! I think this is the best attempt yet.”

It looked *very* nice. The rice wasn’t sticky and soggy; the kernels were nice and plump. It really resembled the freshly steamed rice I remembered. *I think I may have cracked it!*

I used a big spoon to fluff the rice. It looked perfect. I scooped up a bit with a smaller spoon. *Okay, how does it taste? What’s the texture like?*

“I...I did it! Success! I was right; the amount of water *was* really important. Now the only question is, can I cook it this well every time?”

“It doesn’t look like anything I’ve ever seen before,” Druid said, knitting his brows as he stared into the pot. I guess it did look foreign to him. But nothing seemed amiss to me—it was exactly like the rice in my memories.

“Can I have a taste?” he asked.

“Sure, go ahead.” I scooped up a little spoonful and handed it to him. This would be Druid’s first bite of rice. And, well, I kind of already knew what his reaction would be.

“It...tastes like nothing?”

Called it. “It does have a subtle sweetness to it, but it’s a little hard to pick up on.”

“A sweetness? Hmm...I don’t taste it...”

All that strongly seasoned food people in this world preferred seemed to make it hard for him to pick up on rice’s more subtle qualities. My only hope was that he would like the stew I served on top of it.

“Don’t worry, I’m cooking something called a donburi tonight. The rice will have a really flavorful stew on top of it.”

I wanted to try making onigiri, too, but I figured Druid wouldn’t like it. I seemed to remember that over-salting rice makes it lose some of its subtle flavors.

“Stew, huh...you mean what’s in that pot?”

"Yes." Oh! I think I see Druid's father at the entrance. "Mr. Druid, he's here."

"Hm? Oh! So he is."

Huh...? Isn't he going to go greet his father? I don't think he knows where we are. As I looked at Druid, wondering why he wasn't getting up, I noticed his face had grown tense as he stared at his father.

"Um...why are you still nervous?"

"W-well, just because, I guess."

"You've got this! Remember, you guys were able to speak normally earlier."

"Aye."

Aye? He's doomed. He's nervous to the max. Well, at least he finally got up to greet his father... I hope he'll be okay?

"Oops! I still have to finish dinner."

I carried the pot of hot rice back to the tent and set up the table. I had also put the stew back on the fire to warm it up, so I returned to my cooking area and cracked a bunch of eggs directly into the bubbling mixture. Then I put the lid on, turned down the flame, and went over to the tent to finish getting ready. The eggs would cook to just the right consistency by the time I got back to them.

Oh dear...now Druid's father looks nervous, too. Hee hee hee... Aww, they sure are family. They fidget exactly the same way.

"Hi, Ivy, sorry it took so long... What?" Druid stopped, perplexed by my suppressed laughter.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just thinking about how you two are so alike."

"Huh?!" they gasped in perfect unison.

"Ha ha ha ha! Come on, take a seat."

My neighbor Mathewla had let me borrow his table and chairs again, so I'd cooked an extra portion for him. Since it was a rice dish and I didn't know how it'd turn out, I suggested he eat his portion the next day. But he was eager to try it, so I heaped some rice onto a large plate and topped it with the eggy poultry

stew. The eggs had turned out just as I hoped—they were soft and tender. After I served up another three portions, I walked the big plate over to Mathewla's tent.

"Here you go, sir! Mock oyako-don."

"Ooh, dinner at last! It smells great. So this white stuff is ryce?"

"Yes, I hope you like it."

"Thanks."

I returned to Druid and his father. They were in the middle of a staring contest with the oyako-don. Just like I'd noticed earlier, their mannerisms were so similar. Even after spending years apart, there was no doubt they were father and son.

"Dinner is served, gentlemen."

"So, uh, is this oyako-don?"

"The closest I can get to it, yes."

We all grabbed our spoons and took a bite. *Ahhh, the broth-soaked rice is so good! And I like the pigeon, too. It's got a bit of a bite to it, and it's really tasty.*

"So...*this* is ryce? It tastes quite different from before... It's good." Druid seemed to like it. Dousing the rice with plenty of savory broth was the right move.

"I made the broth even stronger than usual to punch up the flavor."

"I'm impressed. It *is* really good." Druid's father seemed to enjoy it, too. He took big bites, nodding after each one.



"Do you have any plain steamed ryce left?" Druid's father asked.

I gave him a curious look. *Why does he want that?* "Yes...but it's unseasoned."

"I'm interested in tasting it...may I?"

"Um, sure... Sit tight, sir."

I'd planned to use some of rice in the pot for onigiri the next day, but...oh well. I consulted Past Me's memories and squeezed some rice into a ball. I assumed it would be easy enough for me to make...but it was hard. I couldn't get it to form into a neat triangle no matter what I did! My onigiri wound up a misshapen triangular lump, but, well...it was the best I could do.

"Here you go. Sorry it's cold."

"Oh, thanks. ...What is this, exactly?"

"It's...an onigiri. You're supposed to wrap it in nori, but I don't have any right now."

"In *nori*?"

Huh? But I thought this world had... No, I've never seen it. "Uh, never mind. It's seasoned with salt." Did I throw him off the scent? Come on, Druid, stop laughing and help me out here! Oh, see? Now you've got rice stuck in your windpipe. That's what you get for laughing too hard. Good grief! I poured him a cup of tea and plunked it down in front of him.

"Thank...hack hack...you," he sputtered, taking a sip of tea and breathing deeply.

His father took a bite of the onigiri and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Dad...what's wrong?" asked Druid. "I know it has something to do with rice."

"Hm? Well, yeah. It's our food supplies in this town...they're getting awfully low."

"The butcher said the same thing. Is it a crop failure?"

"Well, we can't get any shipments in from the next town over because of the gurbars."

“Really?”

“Yeah, a team was attacked by a pack of gurbars on the road between the towns. Ever since that news came in, the supply chain has ground to a complete halt.”

A food shortage... Given the recent influx of migrants from other villages, that could turn into a pretty serious problem.

“Ryce is a crop that grows like a weed. So I was thinking that if it tasted good, maybe it could be useful to us.”

Ryce grows like a weed? Huh? But I thought rice took a lot of time and labor to grow. “Is it really that easy to grow rice, sir?”

“Hm? You didn’t know? Yeah, all you need to do is plow your field and scatter the ryce seed, and it practically grows on its own. It’s easy to harvest, too.”

“Wow, really?”

That was completely unlike the rice in my memories. The rice I knew had to be grown over a long period of time in flooded fields. Rice in this world sure was a cinch.

“Do you think people would eat rice bowls like this?”

“Yeah, probably... I was thinking it might be easy to convince the public to eat ryce, but the flavor of the onigiri gave me second thoughts...”

I don’t know, I think onigiri is really easy to like. Oh, wait...what about onigiri coated in soy sauce and grilled? Apparently that was also a thing in my past life. But soy sauce is so expensive... I wonder if I could use this world’s mother sauce instead? I could sweeten it a little.

“Um, what if I coated the onigiri in a slightly sweet sauce and grilled them?”

“Grilled onigiri? Grilled, eh... Yeah, grilled onigiri. With sauce...” Druid’s father muttered, looking down at the half-eaten onigiri in his hand. He seemed to be imagining how it would taste. It was a rather odd sight. “Yeah, that might be good. Even though it’s only a temporary solution to the food problem, I’m sure I could sell it if it tastes all right.”

Spoken like a true merchant.

“Ivy, could you help me with this project?”

Help him?

“I want you to create a sauce for the onigiri.”

Me? Create a sauce? Well, that shouldn’t be a problem. Actually, it sounds like fun.

“Sure thing, sir. Thank you for the opportunity. Oh, wait! Is this all right with you, Mr. Druid?”

I’d just been talking about how important it was for us to make decisions together, and now here I was, going off on my own.

“I’m fine with it. Actually, I’d like to help, too, if that’s all right.”

“Of course it is!” *Oh, thank goodness. Wow, I get to make a sauce! I’m so excited.*

Chapter 166: The Weakest Man...

“Wow, things have escalated really quickly, haven’t they?” Druid said.

Is it “escalating” to talk about making a sauce? “You think so? But are you sure you’re okay with it? I suggested it without asking you.”

“Oh, I have no problem with it. And I wouldn’t mind doing my part to help alleviate the food shortage.”

After dinner, Druid’s father left right away, saying he had some preparations to make. I didn’t know what those preparations were, but I’m sure he had a lot on his plate. *But wow, I get to develop a recipe for my own sauce! What kind of flavors should I use?*

“So what did you think of the oyako-don?”

“It was good, but I wished it had a little more meat in it.”

I sighed. *Yeah, I didn’t have much meat on hand since I was using up a bunch of leftover ingredients. Wait a minute, if this world has eggs, then it must have chickens. Couldn’t I get my hands on some chicken meat?*

“Sorry about that. The meat you’re supposed to use in oyako-don is chicken.”

“Chi-ken?” Druid slowly sounded out the name.

Wait, am I wrong? Could it be...all this knowledge is coming from Past Me?
“Um, what’s the name of the bird that lays eggs?”

“There’s an...animal that lays eggs?” Druid gave me a confused look.

Could it be...I’m wrong on a basic level here? I pulled an egg out of my magic bag. It was sold to me earlier in the day as Fresh hexa, gathered this morning. It cost fifty dal per half dozen. It was a little expensive, but since they were a must for oyako-don, I bought them anyway.

“What is this?” I asked him.

“That’s hexa fruit. Um, it’s the fruit of the hexa tree.”

Hexa tree fruit? Wait, eggs grow on trees here? And for that matter, they aren't even eggs?! I looked down at the hexa fruit. Everything in my memories told me they were just like eggs. I'd had them when I was with Rattloore's party, too, but it never occurred to me to ask "by the way, are these things eggs?"

"Maybe they were called 'eggs' in the past?" By *the past*, Druid meant my past life.

"Yes. I did think the sign at the store was strange. I just assumed 'hexa' meant they were selling them by the half dozen."

"The only animal I know of that produces anything like a hexa would be a wild pigeon. They lay kodama. Dragons lay them, too. I'm sure there are some other creatures as well."

Okay...so the things animals lay are called kodama here... I can't. My brain is so mixed up now.

"It must be hell having memories from a past life," Druid said, gently poking the wrinkle between my furrowed eyebrows.

He was right. It was hell. "I'm so glad you were the one I asked, Mr. Druid."

"Ha ha ha. Me too."

"Wait...huh? I don't remember your father reacting at all when I said 'eggs' earlier, though..."

"He was probably just preoccupied. My father is a bit awkward. Once he gets focused on something, he has a hard time paying attention to anything else."

That's right, he was thinking pretty deeply about the whole rice-flavoring thing... Oh! "Mr. Druid, you didn't flinch when I said 'eggs' either."

"Huh?! Was I there when you said it?"

"Yes, we bought them together at your father's store today."

"Oh, I don't remember at all. I guess my brain was a mess then."

Yes, I know. You were making the funniest face ever. Just picturing Druid's expression back then made my lips twitch with laughter. I managed to hold it in,

but my shoulders still shook a little.

Druid sighed. "Go ahead, laugh it up. Even I think my behavior this morning was unreal."

"Ha ha ha! Your behavior at dinner, too."

"How am I supposed to feel when you're laughing so hard like that..."

We washed the dinner dishes and headed back to my tent. I saw a basket had been left in front of it, and when I looked inside there was a little thank-you note from Mathewla along with his washed dinner plate and a little gift. I felt sort of bad getting a gift when he was the one who did me a favor by loaning me his table. I definitely needed to thank him tomorrow.

"I'd better be on my way. Are we going back to my father's shop again tomorrow?"

"Well, I'm going to the forest in the morning, so it wouldn't be until after that." I needed to restock Sora's and Flame's potions soon. *I think I'll go to the dump tomorrow, too.*

"Hmm... If you're going to the forest, maybe I should come along. It would give the gatekeeper some peace of mind at least."

"Are you sure? It's going to take a while."

"Not a problem. I want to visit your friends, too."

After saying goodbye to Druid, I returned to my tent. I checked on Sora and Flame and found them fast asleep. *Phew... I think I'll turn in, too. Oops! I forgot about the hot water!*

"The whole egg debacle threw me way off..." Sometimes my past-life memories and my current-life memories got mashed up into an indistinguishable mess... *Oh well, guess I'll get the hot water ready now.*

I slipped out of my tent and took a bucket to the cooking area. I washed the pot, filled it with water, and put it on the flame. I looked up at the sky... The moon and stars were so bright and clear. Past Me had memories of the night sky, too, but for some reason, they were very dim. It seemed like technology was a lot more advanced in my past life, which was probably why the starry sky

in this world was much prettier.

I heard footsteps approaching and turned around. It was Druid's brother... I forgot his name again... He had a pretty stern look on his face.

"It's all your fault!" he shouted, staring right at me.

To be honest, I was really scared—but I hated the idea of running away. Besides, I saw that the guild master just so happened to be walking into the plaza right at that moment. He would probably come to my aid.

"What's my fault?" I finally managed to squeeze the words out, even if they did come out pretty quiet. I had to stay calm if I wanted to keep things from getting worse. I clenched my fists firmly.

"You have no idea just how much Druid messed up my life!"

"Even a messed-up life can be put back on track if you'd just try."

"If I'd just *what*!?"

I couldn't claim that anyone who tried hard would make it in life. But his father was a successful shopkeeper. Tokihi probably cared about him, too. He had enough good people in his life that he could have opened up all sorts of possibilities for himself with a bit of earnest effort.

He just didn't get it. He had no idea how blessed he was just to have people who helped him. People who cared about him.

"Well, what do *you* know anyway?! I was supposed to have a great life. But that all went up in smoke the day my stars disappeared."

"Even if you had stars, you'd still have to put in the work to achieve a great life. Stars are only there to give you that first step."

The guild master came up behind Druid's brother. He looked like he was about to say something, but he stopped himself. I wondered why.

"If I had my stars, I could do anything!"

"No, you couldn't."

"You little bastard!" he raged.

I just stared at him. This was starting to feel really silly. Why was he so fixated

on his stars? Having none myself, it was difficult for me to understand.

“Were people cruel to you because your stars disappeared?” I asked softly. Druid’s brother caught his breath. *Wait, they really were?*

“Oh, shut up! It’s all because I lost my stars. That’s when all those feeble-minded bastards started trying to make a fool of me!”

“Um, have you ever considered that maybe they just disliked you?” *Oops, I didn’t mean to say that out loud.* Druid’s brother’s eyes flashed red in a matter of seconds. *Yeah, I goofed.*

“What would a stupid brat like *you* know about anything?!”

You’re picking a fight with a stupid brat, so what does that make you? Also, come on, Guild Master, stop laughing and come tell him off already.

“That’s enough, Dolgas. Don’t fight with a child.”

Right! It’s Dolgas. His name really is impossible to remember.

“Wha! What are you doing here?” When Dolgas heard the voice behind him, he flinched. The color drained from his face.

Wait a minute...is this guy a coward? I just remembered an interesting saying. “The weakest dog always barks the loudest”? Is that something from Past Me’s memories? I wonder what a “dog” is? A kind of person? In other words...

“The weakest man always barks the loudest, I think?” *Gee, Past Me knows some pretty fun sayings.*

“Wha...?!”

“Ha ha ha ha!”

“Huh?!” Dolgas’s face turned bright red, and the guild master exploded with laughter.

Wait a minute...did I say that out loud? I seem to be a loose cannon whenever I’m around this guy. I need to be more careful...although it’s too late this time.

Chapter 167: White Bread!

DOLGAS'S FACE turned redder and redder before my very eyes. He was probably both furious and embarrassed. I thought about asking him if he was okay, but if he knew I was worried about him, that'd probably just add fuel to the fire. Whenever I spoke to Dolgas, I was always tempted to make quips. Why was that?

"Ha ha ha ha! Oh, Ivy, you're the best!"

To make matters worse, this person standing next to me was fanning the flames. *Ohhh, there he goes again, saying the worst possible thing.*

"Guild Master!"

"What's wrong, Dolgas?" the guild master asked. "Ivy's uncanny powers of observation make you nervous? Or angry, perhaps?"

Dolgas's entire body shivered faintly with fury. "What is *wrong* with you guys? I'm a *victim*. My stars were stolen."

Oh, a victim, are you?

The guild master sighed. "Dolgas, how much longer are you going to play the victim card?"

Dolgas looked surprised.

"Yes, Druid technically did steal your stars. But that happened over twenty years ago now."

"Shut up!" Dolgas barked at the guild master as he turned and ran out of the plaza. He sure was a turbulent fellow.

"Sorry about that. Everything's okay now, so you can go to bed," the guild master called out to the tents around the cooking area. Dolgas's loud accusations had attracted quite the crowd of onlookers, and some people had been woken from their sleep. I apologized, too. There was a bit of a stir in the

plaza, but it returned to normal in no time.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, sir, thank you. Sorry you had to help me.”

“Ivy, don’t apologize. You did nothing wrong. It was all the fault of Dolgas and everyone in his life who neglected to kick his ass back on track.”

Kick his... Isn’t there a gentler way of...wait, I don’t know the details of what happened in his life, so I probably shouldn’t stick my nose into it. Besides, the time for giving him gentle advice is long gone by now.

“It sounds like a tough situation.”

“Ha ha ha. Yeah, well... By the way, why was he that angry with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hm? You don’t know?” the guild master asked, confused.

My hot water was ready, so I carried it back to my tent. The guild master followed behind. “Ever since he showed up here,” I explained, “he’s been like that. He never said why he was angry, so I’m still not sure.” I did have an idea what it might be, but it was pure speculation, so I could be wrong.

“I see. I really like that proverb you said just now, ‘the weakest man always barks the loudest.’ A pitch-perfect description of Dolgas.”

“I didn’t mean to say that out loud, actually. Is he really a coward, sir?” *Oops! Wow, what an extra-rude question I just asked.*

“Yes, he probably is.”

Hmmm, the guild master’s a pretty good judge of character, huh? The look in his eyes is a bit different right now.

“Hm? Something wrong?”

Oops, he changed back. The guild master’s gravelly voice really holds him back. If he ditches the goofy look in his eyes, he can look pretty intimidating... I guess he’d have to be, to work his way up the ladder and become guild master.

“Ivy?”

"Er, it's nothing, sir. Thanks for walking me back to my tent." *There's more than meets the eye with this guild master.*

"Well, I'm just glad nothing came of it. If something happened to you, Druid would've given me hell for it."

Hm? His voice was so quiet that I missed the last part. "What did you say, sir?"

"Oh, nothing. I think that's the end of it, but I'll tell everyone to keep their eyes and ears open."

"Thank you."

"Sure thing. Well, good night."

"Good night, sir."

I saw the guild master off and returned to my tent. *Gee, I dunno why, but I'm exhausted. I'll just wash and get right to bed.*

"Good morning, Sora, Flame."

The two slimes jiggled their morning greeting in unison. Sora was a bit wild, but Flame was kind of...how should I put it...floaty? And slow. Was that another difference in personality?

"Ivy, are you awake?"

Hm? That's Druid's voice. "Yes. Just a minute, I'll be right out."

"It's okay, take your time."

I thought he was going to meet me at the gate. Change of plans? I stepped out of my tent to find Druid looking a bit uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, the neighborhood watch told me everything. I can't believe my brother came here last night and yelled at you, Ivy. My apologies." Druid bowed to me.

I was a bit flustered. "Oh, you don't need to apologize, Mr. Druid. It doesn't bother me at all." I really meant it. Even the worried look on Druid's face didn't really make me upset about what happened the night before. I'd mentally

dismissed the whole ordeal as insignificant. I mean, mood-wise the whole scene basically felt like a drunk guy ranting in a room. You run into that sort of thing sometimes when you're an adventurer, so you can't let it get to you.

"Maybe so, but..." Druid clearly felt responsible for his brother's rotten personality. That's why he couldn't help but worry.

Oh dear, what should I say... Ooh, I know! "If you want to make it up to me, treat me to some white bread and we'll call it even." This early in the morning, I bet we can still get our hands on some freshly baked loaves!

"Huh?! Wightbred... Oh! White bread. You've got it."

Oh, good, he feels better. And I get white bread, too! "I'll have to thank Dolgas later."

"Thank him? Why?" Druid looked thoroughly perplexed.

"I mean, I'm getting free white bread."

Druid stared blankly at me for a few seconds...then burst out laughing. "Ha ha ha ha! Ivy...ha ha ha ha!"

"Come on, it's not *that* funny..."

"Sorry...pff! Hm hm...hee hee..."

Looks like I gave him the giggles. Guess I'll wait till he stops. Just please pull yourself together before they sell out of white bread, okay?

After Druid finally stopped laughing, I finished getting ready, and we left the plaza. *White! Bread!* I was just a little excited.

"Since white bread is expensive, it's like a special treat to me. So I really do want to thank Dolgas."

"You're pretty amazing, Ivy."

What's so amazing about me? I gave Druid a curious look, but he just smiled quietly back.

After buying our white bread, we headed into the forest. I was hungry, but I figured it wouldn't be a great idea to eat the bread while walking. I sure wanted to eat it though...

“By the way, what’s the plan today? Setting more traps?”

“Nope, today I’m going to the dump.” *Oh, right, I don’t think I filled him in on the itinerary.*

“The dump?”

“Yes, to get food for Sora and Flame.”

“Oh! Right. They’re both slimes. So they’re the heroes of the dump?”

Could you really call them “heroes”? Well, I guess they *did* do a big service, eating up the trash. Except they were different from normal slimes. *I should probably let him know about that.*

“Um...I’ll tell you after we leave the forest.”

“Whoa...if it’s anything like what you’ve told me so far, I’m a little scared.”

What I’ve told him so far? “Did something else I said scare you?”

“I guess it’s normal for you, Ivy. That’s partly what’s so shocking about it.”

Hm? Normal for me? Is he talking about Ciel? Well, yeah, Ciel is anything but normal. I tamed it without even realizing. And then on the other hand, Flame was born with my taming symbol.

“Normal... What exactly *is* normal, anyway?”

“Coming from you, Ivy, that sounds really deep.”

Please, don’t go all sentimental on me...

We gave our regards to the gatekeeper and passed through into the forest. After a short hike, I sensed Ciel’s aura.

“We’re here,” I announced, standing still and waiting for Ciel. Not long after, Ciel made its grand entrance.

“Good morning...oops! I forgot to take Sora out.” I carefully opened the bag... *Is Sora a bit bigger than usual?*

“Huh? Sora’s gotten bigger?”

“Huh!?” Druid was just as surprised.

Sora stretched itself out of the bag. When it landed on the ground, it was back

to its usual size.

“Um? Maybe I was seeing things?” I stared hard at Sora... Yep, that was Sora all right. My mistake. “Sorry it took me so long.” I apologized.

Sora bounced high, landing atop Druid’s head in a single bound. Druid was completely unfazed by it—apparently he was used to it by now. I guess this is what you’d call a dynamic duo.

Chapter 168: Because Sora's Special

SORA, PERHAPS FEELING particularly good now that it was perched atop Druid's head, was wiggling left and right as it went through its vertical stretches. *Dang... kid's got talent.*

"So, what is it that Sora and Flame eat?"

"Potions." Wait, that probably made him think I meant the liquid inside the bottles.

"Let me guess...Sora drinks the blue potions? Those heal wounds... Then again, I've never heard of a slime eating a blue potion and then healing wounds."

"Yes, Sora eats the blue potions, and Flame eats the red ones...um, but they eat the whole thing, flask and all." *There. I hope he got it.*

"Wow, so Flame eats the red ones... Red potions cure illness, so...huh? *Flask and all?*" Druid's tone of voice quickly changed as he realized how strange that was. "They eat...the potions *and* the bottles they're in? Not just the potions?"

Some slimes were able to digest potions, but only the actual liquid, not the bottles. Out of concern for Sora's health, I had done a little research, but I'd found no instances of slimes eating potion bottles.

"That's right. They devour everything completely, right down to the bottles."

Sora puffed out its chest, maybe out of pride. Druid couldn't see, since it was on top of his head...but since I could see everything, the whole scene looked really goofy to me. *Still, maybe I should give Sora a little praise?*

"Well, I already knew your slimes were unique from the way you talked about them. But I never would have dreamed they ate both organic and inorganic matter."

Oh, there's more... "Well..."

“Is there...more?”

“Yes. Sora recently took up sword eating. It eats them up very quickly, too.”

It was yet another one of Sora’s endless mysteries. And boy, was it getting fast. Only this morning, it gulped down a little knife in one second flat. That *really* startled me. So much so that I thought I dropped the knife and ended up frantically searching the ground for it.

“Um...swords?”

“Yes.”

Druid’s eyes were as big as saucers. *Whoa! That’s even more of a reaction than I was expecting.* Was sword eating more unusual than I thought?

“Ivy, I think that’s a really extraordinary feat, so you shouldn’t tell just anybody... No, eating inorganic and organic matter is already an extraordinary feat...”

“Is it really that rare?”

“Slimes that can dissolve swords are *quite* rare. Also, you said it was fast. How fast are we talking?”

“Well, I’ve seen one other slime eat a sword before, but I’d say it was about ten times slower than Sora.”

“Now that’s something I’d like to see. So, what kind of swords does Sora eat?”

“What do you mean, what kind of swords?” Druid’s question genuinely confused me. I didn’t know what he meant.

“Oh man, sorry. I guess you wouldn’t know. Okay, well, there are true swords —those require skills to use. And then there are the multi-swords that monsters and such drop.”

There are two kinds of swords? I’ve never heard of that.

“Wait, have you never heard of true swords and multi-swords?”

“No, this is the first I’ve heard of either one.”

“I see. Well, in a nutshell, true swords can only be crafted by people with blacksmith, alchemy, or swordsmith skills. Nobody else can make them.”

"I have heard of sword crafting skills. Can people with the weapon crafting skill make true swords?"

"No. They can make weapons other than true swords, but they can't craft swords with the weapon crafting skill alone."

"Well, I didn't know that. Actually, I don't really know anything about swords at all."

"Some swords are dropped by monsters, but aside from the few that come from high-level ones, most aren't any good. So we usually take the swords monsters drop over to blacksmiths to get upgraded."

"Ooh, wow. Blacksmiths sound pretty cool."

"The swords blacksmiths make don't break or chip easily. Well, they will chip on you if you don't do regular maintenance, but they're still in a different league than freshly dropped swords."

"Oh, how interesting. I had no idea."

"Well, I wouldn't expect you to, since you don't carry a sword."

"I do have a little knife in my magic bag."

"Oh, really? So...which kind of sword does Sora eat?"

"Now I understand what he meant...but I still don't know the answer. I didn't even know there were two types of swords until one second ago."

Druid continued. "You won't find blacksmiths just anywhere, you see. There are many adventurers who just use dropped multi-swords as is."

Now it all made sense.

"I was wondering if Sora ate true swords because it's so special. Most slimes that eat swords only dispose of multi-swords, and even *they* are pretty rare."

"Are there any slimes who eat true swords?"

"Well, not that I know of. True swords are upgraded by skills, so I heard slimes can't eat them."

"Wow, I had no idea they were so different. So you think Sora probably eats multi-swords?"

“Yeah, probably.”

I agreed. The swords Sora ate were chipped, so they had to be multi-swords. *But wait... I could have sworn I'd seen one really shiny sword mixed in with the others.*

“You know, Ivy, sometimes the most unlikely things can happen. Why don’t we see if we can find a true sword at the dump and feed it to Sora?”

“Yes...I’d like to try it out.”

He was right, sometimes the unlikely could really happen. Sometimes the impossible could happen. Experimentation is important.

“Hey, Sora, please don’t be any more extraordinary than you already are, okay?”

“Puuu, pu, puuu,” Sora chirped goofily at me. Some things never changed.

When the dump came into view, my heart started to race. Just imagine, feeling excited at a *dump* of all places.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s look for some multi-swords and see if Sora will eat those first, I guess?”

“Sora, can you eat those?” asked Druid.

“Pu! Pu, pu, pu, pu, puuu.” Sora was chirping up a storm now.

Wow, are you really that hungry? You just ate breakfast.

“Ha ha ha, you’re a lively little thing, Sora.”

As I watched Druid go off to look for multi-swords in the dump, I gently took Flame out of its bag. As usual, it had been snoozing the whole time. I had been a little worried that Flame was sick, but Sora never seemed to think so when I asked. I figured Flame was probably okay...but if the little slime was asleep all the time just because it enjoyed it, that was way too much sleep.

I asked Ciel to keep an eye on Flame for me. “Thanks, Ciel. I’ll be right back.”

Mrrrow.

I collected blue and red potions and stowed them in my bag. The quality of the potions had clearly dropped since the last time I’d come here, probably

because fewer adventurers were passing through. I filled my bag with as many as I could and returned to where Ciel was waiting.

When I got back, I saw Druid returning with a bundle of swords slung over his shoulder. I glanced up at Sora, who was still riding on his head, and saw it was already busy devouring the swords. Since Sora liked to start with the tip of the sword, it looked from a distance like there was a sword sticking straight down through Druid's head. As Druid approached with his new headgear, I surveyed our surroundings. Good. Nobody there. I'd been checking for auras all along, but I still couldn't help but look.

"Okay, Sora," Druid said. "You've got a big meal to look forward to."

"Um, but Sora's already eating."

"What?! Sora's eating... Wait, right now? On top of my head?"

When I told him yes, a crease formed between Druid's eyebrows. "For how long?"

"Well, I couldn't really say, but Sora was already eating swords by the time you walked over here."

"Wow. How long ago did I get these swords from the dump?"

Sora was smiling smugly from her perch atop the confused Druid.

"Sora, get down from there."

Sora wiggled in reply, then bounced down to the ground.

"Sora, were you already eating the swords?"

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Do you have room for more?" *Though I highly doubt that's a problem.*

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Told you so. I mean, it's been eyeing the pile of swords beside Druid ever since he set it down.

"Good," said Druid. "Okay, which sword shall we offer you first... How about this one?" He pulled a sword out of the pile and handed it to Sora. I still couldn't tell what kind of sword it was.

“Is that sword different from the others?”

“All but one of these swords were dropped by monsters, so they each have unique magical properties. I also collected swords of varying strengths.”

“There’s magic in those swords?”

“Yeah, see these little stones in them? These let you use magic.”

He showed me a sword, and sure enough, it had little magic stones in it. *Aha, so this is how you do it.*

“Since this magic stone is red, you can use fire magic with this sword.” Druid gripped the sword, and it lit up with fire.

“Wow!” *This is the first time I’ve seen a flaming sword up close. It’s so pretty.*

“If you look at the glyphs and patterns at the hilt, you can tell what kind of monster dropped it.”

I looked at the hilt of the sword Druid was holding and there were indeed symbols I’d never seen carved into it. *Wow, I didn’t know about any of this.*

“Kyu-shuwaaa, kyu-shuwawaaa, kyu-shuwaaa, kyu-shuwawaaa.”

The indescribable sound echoed throughout the dump. With a little gasp, Druid watched Sora gulp down the sword.

“What an interesting noise... It wasn’t making that noise earlier, though. And isn’t it eating a bit *too* fast?” Druid stared in awe as Sora devoured the sword in seconds. I was also amazed by the sounds it was making, even though I’d heard them many times now.

Wait...huh? Why didn’t Sora make any sound when it was eating on top of Druid’s head? “Hey, Sora, can you eat quietly?”

As soon as I asked that, the noise of it eating stopped. But Sora looked a bit concerned.

“Does it taste better if you make the sound?”

“Kyu-shuwaaa, kyu-shuwawaaa, kyu-shuwaaa, kyu-shuwawaaa.”

I guess that meant “yes”? But did making noise really alter the eating experience that much? *Well, if it tastes better for Sora that way, I guess there’s*

nothing wrong with it.

“I don’t know what’s more shocking, Ivy: how quickly Sora’s eating or the fact that you’re not surprised by how quickly Sora’s eating.”

“I guess I’m just used to it... By the way, I just realized Sora ate the magic stones along with the sword.”

“That’s true. Which must mean the red magic stones are okay.”

“What do you mean?”

“I figured there would be some magic stones Sora can and can’t eat.”

Was that how it worked? I hadn’t really given it much thought...but then again, I hadn’t even noticed the magic stones in the first place. I looked at the swords next to Druid. Now that magic stones were on my mind, they were all I could see. I was almost shocked I hadn’t noticed them sooner.

“Are there any swords Sora *wouldn’t* eat?” asked Druid.

“No, Sora ate every sword I ever gave it.” And very happily, I might add.

“Huh? Every sword?” Druid sounded shocked.

“Yes. Oh, look! Sora already ate its third sword.”

“Yeah, I gathered a few different types of swords, so that proves it’s okay. Let’s try the blue magic stone next... Are you sure there hasn’t been any sword Sora couldn’t eat so far?”

“Yes. Hey, Sora, are there any magic stones you can’t eat?”

Sora stared silently back at me.

“Does that mean everything’s fair game?” I asked.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Sora says everything’s edible.”

“Yeah, sounds like it. Sora’s uniqueness never ceases to amaze.” There was a distant look in Druid’s eyes. Was he okay?

By the time I looked back at Sora, it was already eating a new sword. Was it really that hungry? I needed to be more mindful. *Still, I wonder how many*

swords Sora can eat in one sitting? I already give it as many as ten swords a day...

Chapter 169: Restrictions?

SORA KEPT EATING every sword Druid fed it. To be honest, its appetite tugged at my conscience a little. It had just polished off its eighth sword.

“Wow, Sora really did eat every kind of magic stone.” Druid’s voice was filled with awe, but there was a hint of concern in his face. As I sat there watching Sora eat, Druid turned that concerned expression on me.

Druid picked up the last sword left from the pile he’d gathered. I could tell just by looking that it was different from the rest. “*This* is a true sword. I didn’t think I’d actually find one here.”

Druid removed the sword from its sheath. A flowing design danced along the naked blade. I was entranced by the beautiful curves.

“It’s so pretty.”

“I know, right? True swords are very beautiful.”

“Why would anyone throw a true sword in the dump?”

I looked closer at the blade and noticed it was a bit chipped. Was that why it was thrown out? But why? A blacksmith could have easily repaired it. What a waste.

“If your sword deteriorates a little from neglecting proper maintenance, you can have a blacksmith repair it, but it will be more expensive than the first upgrade. Most people either have a new sword forged or have a dropped one upgraded. Well, if you ask me, since you’re putting all that money into your sword in the first place, you should just take good care of it. If you do, your sword will never chip.”

Druid sounded a bit frustrated. It certainly sounded like a waste of time and money. If I had a sword, I know I’d take very good care of it. Money is important!

“After watching Sora chow down on those other swords, I really want to see if

it'll eat this one."

I looked at Sora, who seemed pretty content from its long meal. But even after devouring most of Druid's pile, it was still staring eagerly at the true sword in his hand. I think we already had our answer...

"If you *don't* give Sora that sword, it'll probably attack you."

"True. That stare is really something."

Druid and I exchanged smirks. Then Druid handed Sora the final sword.

"Kyu-shuwaaa, kyu-shuwawaaa, kyu-shuwaaa, kyu-shuwawaaa."

"Wow," said Druid, a little breathlessly. "Sora's eating it. A slime is eating a true sword...and so quickly, too. This is rarer than rare, you know?"

"Are you sure there aren't any other slimes who eat true swords?"

"Come to think of it, maybe they do exist. Now I remember hearing of them, but they're quite rare."

Something about Druid's dreamy gaze was comical. As I held in my chuckles, the true sword gradually disappeared into Sora.

"Pu! Pu, puuu, pu, pu! Pu, puuu."

Sora was in a buoyant mood. It bounced all the way over to Ciel, then jumped onto the adandara's belly and jiggled excitedly, like it was trying to share its joy. It was a wholesome scene—but it was slightly eclipsed by the monumental fact that Sora had just eaten a true sword. A memory from Past Me's consciousness had been making me feel like something was strange here for quite a while now. I guess now was a good time to bring it up?

"Um...may I ask you a question?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Do people ever reuse old plates and bottles and stuff?"

"Some towns do."

"Huh?! Really?"

"Yeah, but you need someone with a scrapping skill to return the items to

their elements first, so it takes quite a while.”

Huh? You need to turn them into scraps first?

“Then, if you want to turn the scrapped materials back into usable products, you need skills like carpentry, masonry, or glasswork—and you need at least three stars in those skills.”

Finding people with so many stars sounded like a huge undertaking. But why were there such restrictions on it? Why did you need at least three stars in a scrapping skill? It was almost like whoever made these rules didn’t want people to recycle anything.

“Besides, monsters drop all sorts of materials that you can turn into items with just two stars. I guess that’s why, as a society, we tend to throw things away the minute they break.”

“But the dumps are getting bigger and bigger, and that’s a problem.”

“Yeah, the slimes can’t keep up with all the trash. In the capital, they’re trying to recycle items more, but it’s pretty difficult to assemble enough people for the job. Remember, you need someone with a scrapping skill and someone with three stars or more in item-crafting skills. That’s why the dumps just keep growing.”

It did make sense. “Can’t people without the scrapping skill dismantle trash?”

“When they do, it just makes a bunch of tiny pieces of trash. And if the trash is broken up too much, crafters can no longer fix it. They’re doing a lot of research in the capital, but I’m not sure how that’s going. We never get any news out here.”

Now that was interesting.

“Come to think of it, someone in the capital did find a way for people without crafting skills to make bottles a while ago.”

“Huh? You can make bottles without a skill?”

“Apparently, yes. But all the bottles they made cracked after only a week, so they were no good for practical use.”

If they figured that out, I guess they’re doing a lot of research.

“Well, wooden things like chests of drawers can be crafted without a skill. And you can always chop them into firewood when they break.”

Yeah, you wouldn’t need a skill for that.

“But if there were more slimes like Sora, this wouldn’t even be a problem.”

It was true. Slimes like Sora could do a lot of good for the world. Even Sora alone could greatly shrink the mountains of old swords along our travel route.

“Isn’t there a repairing skill or something?”

“A repairing skill? You mean a skill to repair magic tools?”

A skill to repair magic tools? “I don’t know what that is, but couldn’t somebody use that skill to repair items?”

“Hmm...I’ve never heard of that. Repairing skills are pretty rare.”

Oh, so they’re rare. I guess that won’t work, then. Suddenly I had another thought. “We rely on skills way too much.”

“You can say that again. Some people even go around saying skills are the only things of any worth.”

“Really? That’s...a pretty dangerous way of thinking.”

If this world turned into a place where only skills were valued, your skill would basically determine your job and the whole course of your life. People with many stars could thrive with minimal effort, and people with very few stars would probably lose their motivation to try.

“Does it scare you?”

“Yes. I’m scared of a world where people’s lives are ruled by skills. In a world like that, people would have no free will.”

“You’re right, it would come down to that.”

“Besides, if skills determined everything, don’t you think someone like me who could tame a high-level adandara and a super-rare slime would have more stars? But look at the facts: I have zero stars, less than anybody. So, in other words, I’m living proof that skills aren’t everything.”

“Pfft! You really are, yes. You are the walking proof that skills are not

absolute.”

“Ha ha ha ha! I sure am.”

Since I had memories of living in a world different from this one, something about this society ruled by skills and stars always seemed amiss to me. I felt like everyone was being forced onto certain paths in life just because of the skills they were born with.

But since I also lived in this world, I felt that the world in my past life was strange, too. It was strange to have *nothing* decided for you. It made me wonder how all the people in my past life managed to find jobs that were right for them. In this world, you knew there was a perfect job out there for your skill. That meant everyone was guaranteed a work that suited them. Sometimes there were more skilled people than jobs to go around, and people were asked to migrate to other towns or villages, but they would still be able to find work.

And since all of this was common knowledge in this world, nobody felt anything was weird about it. It was just the way things were. Even if it seemed strange to Past Me, it was normal here. And in the same way, Past Me’s world felt normal to its inhabitants, even though it felt strange to Current Me.

“Okay...” Druid paused thoughtfully. “Now that Sora’s gotten even more important, what should we do?”

“What do you think we should do?”

“Keep it a secret for now, I guess.”

That was probably for the best. As far as I could tell, this was not something we should tell just anybody. “Yet another secret to add to Sora’s stack.”

“It seems like it just keeps growing. Well, don’t worry, I’ll help you keep all those secrets.”

I nodded gratefully to Druid. “Thank you.”

Without Druid, I never would have learned about true swords and multi-swords. I looked at Sora, who was staring at the dump again. It couldn’t still be hungry...

“I kind of want to see how many swords Sora can eat in one sitting,” Druid

mused.

I quipped back, "You wanna see, my foot!" *Ack! I just said something weird.*

"Huh? I don't want to see your foot! Pfft! Hee hee hee."

"I just said the wrong word. I meant please don't keep feeding it!"

I was so embarrassed. I covered my face with my hands...it felt hot. I'm sure I was bright red, too.

Chapter 170: She Saw Right Through Me!

I HUGGED CIEL'S NECK and squeezed my eyes shut. *So soothing...* I thought Sora had been all done surprising me...but that was naive. *I really did tame myself an extraordinary slime. I wonder if all collapsed slimes are like that? Including... Flame, perhaps? I'd better not think about that too hard.*

"Sorry, Ivy, but can we get going?" Druid sounded a bit hesitant.

I slowly opened my eyes. *That's right. Today's the day I start working on a new sauce to go with onigiri. Okay, Ivy! You've got this.*

"Thanks, Ciel. Come on, Sora, back in your bag. Flame, you...need to start staying awake more, I think."

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Teryu-ryu, ryuuu."

I carefully picked up Flame, who was half-asleep, and placed it in the bag. It was still eating the same amount as before, so it seemed to be developing more slowly than Sora. Everybody grows at different rates, so I was going to watch patiently and let Flame grow at its own pace...but it sure was surprising how starkly different it was from Sora.

"We're all ready to go. Sorry, Ciel, but I have to leave early today. I'm gonna work real hard and make a tasty sauce, okay?"

Mrrrow.

Next time I visit, I want to stay until nightfall. But with all the gurbar activity, maybe I can't do that? Druid would probably agree to it, but it's the gatekeepers I'm worried about. If I didn't come back by sunset, it'd cause a big stir... I can imagine pretty well what would happen.

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. Just wishing I could stay and visit Ciel until nightfall."

“Why can’t you? Ciel can easily protect you from the gurbars.”

“But would the gatekeepers be okay with that?”

“Oops, I forgot about them. They don’t know about Ciel, either. I can imagine the chaos that would cause if you didn’t show up before dark.”

Ha ha ha! Looks like we reached the same conclusion. As we walked back to town, we discussed possible ways we could convince the gatekeepers to let me stay out.

“It’s just no good,” Druid sighed. “I never realized how stubborn those guys were.”

“Yes, they’re all nervous Nellies.”

I worried them quite a bit just by going into the forest every day. Though they seemed to be a little more lenient now that Druid was with me.

“Okay, Ciel, we’ll have to say goodbye here. Thanks for walking with us.”

Mrrrow. Ciel purred and rubbed its face all over me. Then it gave Sora its customary lick goodbye before bounding off into the trees.

“Huh? Sora didn’t put up a fight today,” Druid said.

I looked up at Sora balancing on Druid’s head, but it was only quivering a little. Usually, it bounced all around after getting licked by Ciel.

“I guess not. Maybe Sora’s finally used to it?” I’m kind of gonna miss seeing Sora’s reaction, though. It was so funny. “Come on, Sora, it’s time to get back in your bag.”

“Puuu.”

Hm? “Sora, are you sleepy?”

“Puuu.”

Well, it did eat a humongous meal, then played a lot with Ciel afterward. It probably was pretty tired. I had Druid crouch down so I could gently take it off his head and place it in its bag.

“Is that why Sora didn’t bounce around?” Druid asked. “Because it’s sleepy?”

“I imagine so.”

Once we were back in town, we headed straight for Druid’s father’s shop. I wondered if he was ready for us.

“Good morning.”

“Oh, hello there, Druid. Long time no see.” A woman greeted us when we entered the shop. She looked older, so maybe she was Druid’s mother?

“Mom... Ohh, wow. It has been a while.”

Druid sounded so nervous I almost squealed. I clapped a hand over my mouth, but I could feel a sharp gaze on me, so I turned and looked the other way.

“Oh, you must be the kid who’s been teaching my foolish sons a lesson. I hope they haven’t been too aggravating.”

I’d only met two of her three “foolish sons” so far, and one of them was angry at me for some strange reasons of his own. I guess it was aggravating, but so was dealing with drunk party members, so I didn’t dwell on it. And as for Druid, he’d already taught me so many useful things that I hoped I wasn’t aggravating *him* with my ignorance.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Ivy. Your son Druid has been very good to me.” *Let’s just forget about that other son of yours...*

“Hee hee hee, oh, what a pretty young lady you are.”

Huh?! This’s the first time someone guessed my gender correctly on first sight!

Druid’s mother looked a bit flustered by my shocked face. “Oops! I’m sorry, um...”

“No, it’s okay. It’s just, you’re the first person who’s ever realized right away that I’m a girl. It was just a bit surprising.”

“Oh, really? Well, at first glance, I did think you were a boy; my husband said so, too. But after I got a closer look, it was clear you were a sweet little girl. No mistaking it. Right, Druid?”

Oh, wait! When did Druid find out?

“Yeahhh...right.” His voice sounded very flat.

“Druid? Wait, did you not know Ivy’s a girl?”

“Well, uh...I know *now*.”

Druid’s mother sighed, while Druid nervously proceeded to defend himself. I’d never seen Druid like that. There was something refreshing about it.

“Why do men always have to be like this?”

“Again, Mom, I said I know *now*.”

I bit my lip hard. *Uh-oh...I’m gonna lose it any second.*

“Ivy, we can all see how hard your shoulders are shaking.”

“Ah! Ha ha ha! Mr. Druid, I was doing so well until you had to go and say something!” It was no use. I was cracking up.

“What’s so funny?” Druid’s father had entered the room.

I managed to stuff my chuckles back inside and put on a straight face. “Good morning, sir.”

“Hellooo, there. Ready to get to work?”

“Yes, sir. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Dad, don’t make any unreasonable demands.” Druid seemed nervous again, but thankfully the conversation from a minute ago had loosened him up a little.

“I know, I know. So then—sorry to ask right off the bat, but can you steam me some ryce?”

That’s right. I forgot I was going to teach him how to steam rice. “Sure. Um, where should I cook it?” Would I be able to do it here at the shop?

“We have a kitchen in the back. Would you mind teaching us while you cook?”

“I’d be happy to, sir.”

Druid’s father took us to the back of the shop where the kitchen was. It was much bigger than I’d expected.

“The fire is over there.”

I looked where he was pointing and saw a stove big enough to fit a huge pot. *It must be so nice to have a kitchen like this.*

“I’ll get right to work,” I told him.

“Yes, please.”

As I got everything ready, Druid’s father stood beside me and pulled out a notepad. He asked me questions as I went and I tried to answer them as best I could, but I wasn’t always sure if what I was saying was correct.

“I’m sorry, there’s still a lot I don’t know myself.”

“Oh, no problem. You’ve already been able to tell me more than I’d hoped.”

That was good to hear. The three of us waited for the rice to finish steaming. I was still playing the cooking time by ear, so I was a little anxious.

“I think it’ll be okay, but I’m a bit worried since I made more than I usually do.”

“Ha ha ha! If you mess up, you can always start over. Ryce is one thing we have more than enough of.” With a chuckle, Druid’s father took off the lid.

Urrrg, I’m so nervous. I took a big spoon from him and gave the rice a good fluff.

“Ooh! It’s looking good.” *Thank goodness.* I’d cooked way more than I did the previous day and his pot was bigger than mine, so I was really worried. But it turned out okay! *This is big... I’m really proud of myself.*

“So, are you going to make those grilled onigiri you told me about last night? We’ve got all kinds of ingredients here, and you’re free to use whatever you’d like,” he said, gesturing to a large assortment of bottles.

“Wow, you do have a lot. Are these all seasonings?”

“Yeah, they’re a bunch of sauces and spices from other towns and villages.”

He had quite the collection. He must have been as hard a worker as Druid said he was; you could see all the care he’d put into building his business. He’d even written descriptions of all the spices on the bottle labels.

So this is the man Druid respects the most...and I get to create a new recipe

with him. I'm so happy right now.

Chapter 171: Onigiri Are Hard to Make

PAST ME INSISTED that you seasoned grilled onigiri with soy sauce. And I agreed with her—soy sauce would give onigiri a savory, mouth-watering flavor. Adding a little sweetness would be a nice touch, too. But there was a major impediment: Soy sauce was expensive in this world.

We needed to convince people to eat ryce to solve the food shortage. That meant we had to sell it as something that was cheap, easy to make, and familiar in flavor. It would be best, then, to use a sauce people were used to as its foundation. That way, people would be more willing to try it.

I started off by tasting a little of this town's local sauce. It was very salty and hardly sweet at all. If I used it as is, it would overpower the rice. Druid tasted some of the sauce beside me.

"What do you think, Mr. Druid?"

"I think it tastes just right, but then again, I've been enjoying this flavor since I was a kid."

That's right. This flavor was the most accessible to the people of Oll. If I toned down the saltiness, it would taste bland to them.

"I think you should make whatever changes you want," Druid said.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, we're here to taste-test it for you, so you don't need to worry."

Right! I don't have to do this alone. We're all making it together. "Thanks. Keep those opinions coming, okay?"

"Understood."

Okay, now I feel a little more confident. Let's do this! "Mr. Shopkeeper, does this sauce use something as a base?"

"Yeah, it's built on this." He pulled out a large bottle of black liquid.

“What is that?”

“The mother sauce.”

Ohh, so this is it. “Can I taste a little? I want to see what it’s like.”

“Sure, here you go.”

I took a taste from a little saucer. Oh! It’s kind of like soy sauce. This ought to work. So what should I add to it? I guess I want it to be a little sweeter for a start. I also want to add some depth of flavor.

“I want to make it sweeter and give it a more complex flavor.”

“In that case, I think I have some honey and fruit syrup in that basket.”

I tasted each sweetener he brought out. My two partners also tasted them, and they gave me their opinions. Adding some fruit syrup did make the sauce’s flavor more complex, as Druid’s father had suggested. All those years as a shopkeeper and food connoisseur had really paid off—this man’s knowledge was incredible.

I then tried adding fruit juice, mixing in medicinal plants and such...and about an hour later, I had a sauce that was savory with a hint of sweetness.

“I’m impressed. I never would have thought to add medicinal plants.”

Druid’s father was impressed by a lot of the things I did while making the sauce. That made me a little uneasy. Was I in danger of blowing my cover again? I quietly asked Druid, who was working busily next to me, and he whispered back that I was doing great. That was a huge relief. He also said he’d make sure his father knew not to blab about me.

I nodded gratefully, but I cursed silently. *Arrrgh, I’ll bet I did blow my cover!* But I didn’t know what I’d done wrong, so there was no way I could fix it. I would just have to trust Druid, who knew all my secrets, to handle things for me.

“Okay, let’s grill some *onigiri*. Do you put the sauce on before you grill them?”

“Well, yes, you coat the rice balls in the sauce first and let it soak in a little. Then you slather them in sauce again after they’re grilled.”

How strange. Past Me has no memories of grilling onigiri. Why is that? Ack! I left the cooked rice in the pot. It's probably all cold and hard by now. I rushed to the pot to check on the rice...and sure enough, it was a bit dried out on the surface. I'd messed it up.

“What’s wrong?”

“The rice got dried out.”

Druid’s father joined me at the rice pot. “You can’t turn it into onigiri anymore?”

“No, I still can. It just might not taste quite as good.” If only I had a wooden ohitsu container for the rice. Did he have anything similar to that? “Um, do you have a wooden bowl or a round container? It helps control the rice’s moisture, so it’s pretty handy for this.”

“A wooden container? I have one made of bana wood, if that helps.”

Bana wood? Does it have antiseptic properties like bana leaves? If it does, that would actually be great. Druid’s father brought out a large wooden container that was not only circular but also had a lid. It actually wasn’t far from the ohitsu container in Past Me’s memories.

“Thank you very much. Ideally, you’d put the rice in here right after cooking it, but I forgot.”

I put the rice into the wooden container. It was still a bit warm, so it would probably be okay. I washed my hands in some water with bana leaves floating in it, and I started to form the onigiri. According to my memories, simply squeezing them hard wouldn’t work. I had to be careful, since I could tell I was prone to using too much force.

I somehow managed to make half a dozen onigiri. When I saw them all lined up in a row, I sighed a little. They were pretty lumpy. They seemed so easy to make, but they were actually quite difficult. I coated them in the sauce I’d made and cooked them over a mesh grill. Within just a few minutes, a savory aroma filled the kitchen.

“Wow, that’s a very enticing smell,” Druid’s father said.

That made me feel proud. Even if they got a little scorched, they would be ready soon as long as there were no other mishaps. It helped that the sauce's base was really similar to soy sauce. I'd have to ask about the ingredients in it later.

Just then, a woman stepped into the back kitchen. She was much younger than Druid's mom, whom I'd met earlier. "Hey, Father, is that the grilled onigiri I smell? It's really making my mouth water."

"Yes, that's the sauce on the onigiri that you're smelling there," said Druid. "Ivy, this is my brother's wife."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am. I'm Ivy."

The lady's eyes widened at my greeting. That made *me* a little surprised.

"So you're Ivy. I've been wanting to meet you. I'm so sorry about that idiot brother-in-law of mine. I hear he gave you a really hard time."

Dol...huh? Oops, I forgot his name again. Druid's big brother, her brother-in-law, apparently also known as "that idiot." Wow...does he need help?

"Oh, it's quite all right. The guild master and plaza supervisor were looking out for me. So I'm fine, thank you." *Oops! Did that sound passive-aggressive?*

"Yes, the guild master told me what happened. Even the neighborhood watch gave me a warning."

Oh dear. I feel sorry for his family.

"At least my husband finally opened his eyes, so there's some hope for him. But the middle child is a lost cause."

Gee, sister...you're spicy. And right in front of "that idiot's" father and little brother, too.

"Sad but true. Ooh, that really *does* smell good," Druid's mother said, entering the kitchen. Was anyone left out in the front of the shop?

"Girls, what about the customers?" Druid's father asked.

"Oh, don't worry," his wife replied. "It's always dead at this time of day. Besides, we'll hear if someone comes in."

Druid's mother and sister-in-law stared at the onigiri toasting on the little grill.
Maybe I should have made more...

"Can we try some? I was skeptical when I heard they were made with ryce, but this smell is killing me. I *must* taste it."

Druid's mother's praise made my heart sing. The aroma was enticing. If they grilled onigiri in front of their shop, it might be great advertising.

"Of course you can try some." I opened the wooden container and started to form more onigiri. I still had lots of sauce, so no problem there. I added my freshly shaped onigiri to the grill and painted on some sauce. While I was at it, I added another coat to the cooked onigiri, too. Druid brought me a plate, and I transferred the grilled onigiri to it one at a time.

"Um, I'd appreciate hearing everyone's thoughts," I said as I passed Druid's mother and sister-in-law the plate.

"Oh, you girls..." Druid's father sighed.

The ladies ignored him and bit into their onigiri. Druid's mother and sister-in-law resembled each other a lot somehow. Their faces were completely different, but their auras were alike.

"It's delicious. The sauce is a bit different than usual... It's a nice change."

"Yes, I really like how sweet it is. It's delicious."

A wave of relief washed over me as I heard their rave reviews. Had I received so much as a raised eyebrow, I'd resolved to start entirely from scratch. I handed the plate of grilled onigiri to Druid and his father.

"I feel bad tasting this before the chef, Ivy..." Neither Druid nor his father would take an onigiri.

"But they taste much better while they're warm. Please eat them! I can grill more in no time."

They both thanked me and bit into their onigiri. The two men were also so similar. *Oh wait, they're actually blood-related.*

"Now this is good eating—especially the parts where the sauce is slightly burnt. I think this flavor will do the trick!"

The onigiri were a success! I was truly, unbelievably happy.



EXTRA * A Subconscious Gift?



AS THE GATE came into view, I was suddenly filled with a feeling I couldn't describe. Between learning about Druid's secret skill and telling him about my own, today sure had been eventful. Back then, I told Rattloore and Sifar about my skill, too, but...this felt different somehow. Maybe it was because Druid was the first person I wanted to travel with? I looked quietly up at Druid as he walked beside me. I hadn't noticed before, but he was pretty dashing.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Hey, Druid, I bet you're a pretty popular guy."

"Huh?! Uh, no, I'm not. Not at all. I mean, I've been avoiding people most of my life."

Huh, so I was wrong. I think he has a pretty likable face, personally.

"Why do you ask?"

"I was just thinking you look really handsome."

"D...do I?"

"Yes." *Yup. He's totally dashing. Huh? Is Druid blushing?* I stared hard at Druid's face until he shyly looked away. "Hee hee hee!"

"Hey! Don't mock your elders!"

"I'm not mocking you. You're a real catch, Druid, I promise."

Druid gave me a strange look. All those years spent avoiding people probably deprived him of the chance to experience all sorts of emotions. What a waste.

"Welcome back, you two," the gatekeeper greeted us with a smile. There was something so nice about a village gatekeeper with a welcoming smile.

"It's good to be back. Thanks for everything."

I watched as Druid told the gatekeepers what was going on in the forest. Even though he'd spent his life avoiding people, it was obvious that Druid was a kind man at heart.

Druid returned to my side. "Okay, let's go."

"All right."

We strolled along the main road to the plaza.

"I know I've invited you to dinner two days in a row now," I said, "but are you sure you don't have other things you need to do?"

"It's all right. Ever since I lost my arm, cooking has been the hardest adjustment. It's actually a huge help having you cook for me."

I looked at the stump of Druid's right arm, which ended around his elbow.

"Does it ever hurt?"

"Not a bit. I really can't thank Sora enough. I hear most amputees have pain for a few years."

Oh wow, I didn't know that. I gave Sora's bag a gentle pat.

"I know," Druid said. "I'll get us some dessert to eat after dinner."

"Huh? But you already bought me dessert yesterday."

"That was yesterday. This is today."

But I still haven't even eaten the dessert he bought yesterday.

"Also...I want to make it up to you."

Make it up to me? I looked up at Druid. He seemed uncomfortable. *Hm? Oh... is this about his brother? Druid has nothing to be sorry for...but he probably feels guilty about it anyway.*

"Mr. Druid, you don't need to apologize."

"No, Ivy, I got you involved in my family drama."

If I really didn't want to get involved, I could have distanced myself from Druid. He really did have a good heart. I know he told me that he stole his brothers' stars...but I think there's more to the story than that. Besides, if you ask me, it was a good thing his brothers' stars got stolen. Well, I won't pry. As far as I'm concerned, none of that matters.

I stole a glance at Druid. He looked steadily back at me. I could always refuse the dessert, but... "Can we buy two types of dessert?" I *did* like sweets, so I decided to let him treat me.

Druid looked a bit surprised at first, but that gentle smile spread across his face again in no time. “Of course! What would you like?”

“Can we wander around the food carts a little and see what they’ve got?”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

“Yay!” *I don’t know why...but I’m having so much fun.* I stole another glance at Druid. Something about his smile was a bit different from before. *Did Druid and I grow a little closer? I’d really love that.*

“What about that bakery?” Druid asked.

I looked at the food cart he was pointing to. It was selling light pink...cakes?

“They’re a bit sweet, but I hear girls love them.”

“Hmm, yes, I’d like these cakes for one of the desserts.”

Druid promptly bought some of the pink cakes. According to the baker, they got their pink color from the fruit they were made with.

“Thanks, Mr. Druid.”

“You’re welcome. Now, what would you like for the second dessert?”

We examined each cart as we walked. Since it was just about dinnertime, the market was crowded with people, and the carts were rather busy.

“I don’t see many sweet things around here,” Druid said. “Want to go a bit further?”

We seemed to be in the wrong area of the market now. All of the carts here were selling meat dishes and soups—and they were awfully crowded, too.

“Sure. Are there any sweets you’d recommend, Mr. Druid?” He said he didn’t eat many, but maybe he still knew of some?

“There is this one that I really liked when I was a kid.”

“Then let’s get that one!”

“I remember it being really sweet. I wonder if it’ll be too much for me now.”

Oh right. Your tastes change when you grow up. “If you don’t want to, we can always get something else.”

"No, now I'm curious. Let's try it out," Druid said, turning off the main road and onto a little alleyway.

"Is this where the shop is?"

"It's technically on the main drag, but it's faster to get there the back way. Wow, it's been ages since I've been here at this time of day, but it's just as packed as ever."

I looked around as I followed Druid. The shops in this part of the market were vibrant and colorful, probably because many of them sold clothes and jewelry. It was fun just looking at them. It also wasn't as crowded as the main street, so there was more room to walk here.

"Oh, look!" I happened to glance into a shop. Right by the entrance, there was a collection of thin headbands for sale. One of them in particular caught my eye. As I stood there staring at it, Druid strolled into the store. I followed him in to get a closer look. The thin red leather strings and the tiny blue stone on the headband were really cool.

"You want this, Ivy? I don't know if it's really your style," Druid said, looking at the headband I was holding with a critical eye. "I think this one would be better." He held up another headband embellished with white strings and a tiny orange stone.

"Oh, it's not for me."

"Huh?!"

I held the headband up to Druid's face. *Yup. It totally looks good on him.*

"For me?"

"Yes. It really suits you."

Druid stared at the headband in my hand, then turned to the row of headbands lined up on the table. Did he dislike the one I picked?

"Welcome to my store!" the shopkeeper suddenly called to us.

We both flinched and turned toward the sound of the voice. A pretty young lady smiled at us.

“Are these all the headbands you have for sale?” I asked.

“Oh, no. If you’d like, we can even switch out the stones and the strings.”

I looked down at the headband I was still holding. I liked this color combination, but maybe a different stone would work better with it. “Could you replace the stone in this headband with one with a brighter color?”

“Sure we can. Would you like to choose the stone yourself?”

Ooh, what fun! Druid and I followed her to the back of the shop to have a look. There, we found many tiny plates lined up, each filled with all sorts of colors of stones.

“I think I like this one,” Druid said. He was holding up a pretty aquamarine stone. Something about the color was familiar to me... Where had I seen it before?

“Could you please use this one?” I asked the lady.

“This is the color you’d like?”

“Yes, ma’am. And please make the strings this color,” Druid said, handing the shopkeeper the headband I’d been holding.

“Right away, sir. Hee hee, this stone is the same color as your son’s hair.”

“That’s right,” Druid answered.

His son... Does she mean me? It's the color of my hair? I discreetly reached up and touched my bangs. *Oh! Of course I've seen that color. I see it in the mirror every day. How did I not realize it sooner.*

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” I asked Druid.

“Yes, I’m sure. It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

Well, it is a nice color. Does my hair look that pretty, too? Gosh...I feel kinda embarrassed. Wait a minute... Will Druid be able to put that headband on by himself?

“Mr. Druid, can you put on the headband with just one hand?”

“Hm? Oh, come to think of it, I probably can’t.”

I knew it. I shouldn't have called him dashing earlier—it gave him ideas.

“Since I can’t put it on by myself, I’d love it if you could help me, Ivy.”

Hm? He wants me to put the headband on for him? “Sure, I don’t mind...” He means while I’m still in town, right? He hasn’t given me an answer about coming with me on my travels yet.

“Thanks, Ivy. I’ll be counting on you to do it every day.”

Wait, huh? He hasn’t said he’s coming with me, right? Every day? Hm?

“Here you go, gentlemen,” said the shopkeeper.

“Thanks. Could you put it on me now, Ivy?”

“Sure.” I took the new headband with the stone in my own hair color and put it on Druid’s head. I took a step back to get a better look. Yup. I chose well. “It’s perfect!”

“Thanks. I love it.”

“Hee hee!” Wow, this is so much fun! I glanced at the headband on Druid again. Yup. It’s a perfect fit.

“I hope you’ll help me put it on from now on.”

“Of course.” From now on? Was this his way of telling me he decided to come with me? But I don’t remember him giving me a solid yes... How should I proceed here?

“Which headband would you like, Ivy?”

“Oh! No, thanks. I don’t need one.” My hair was too short for a headband anyway. I couldn’t pull it back dashingly like Druid could.

“But...”

“I mean it!”

“Oh...okay.” Druid looked a little disappointed. I hope I didn’t hurt his feelings.

“Mr. Druid, let’s go find that dessert.”

Druid smiled helplessly and patted my head. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Yay!” Gee, Druid looks much more official with his hair tied back. You know...I

think this is the first time I've ever picked out something like this for another person. Rattloore and the others gave me so much, but I never gave them anything in return.

"Thank you, do come again!" the shop lady waved to us as we left.

We made our way back to the main road with all the food carts and found the confection from Druid's childhood memory in no time.

"Is this it?" The dessert was a fruit encased in a clear, jiggly substance. It was so pretty I almost didn't want to eat it.

"It's been so long since I tried it...that now I'm pretty eager to taste it again," Druid admitted.

"Are you okay with this as the second dessert? I'm really interested now."

I wasn't sure if the clear coating would taste good or not...but it was so pretty, and seeing it made me *really* wonder what its texture was like.

"We'll take one, please," I told the shopkeeper, who put one of the confections in a basket and handed it to me. I couldn't help taking a peek inside. It looked so tasty!

Back at the plaza, I added some new seasonings to last night's dinner to change up the flavor a bit. With a little help from Mathewla next door, we took care of all the leftovers. The desserts were delicious, too.

"Thanks for your help today," I said to Druid and Mathewla as I cleared the dinner dishes. "Nothing went to waste."

"No problem," Mathewla said, smiling as he cleaned a plate. "I got some really tasty meals out of the deal."

"Your cooking is addictive, Ivy," Druid said. "I'm looking forward to eating more of it from now on."

Druid's remark made me think. *Had* he announced he planned to travel with me? I searched my memory, but I couldn't remember... *Did he tell me and I just forgot? That would be incredibly rude of me, wouldn't it? Oh dear...should I apologize? But did he even give me an actual answer yet?*

Druid, who had been busy wiping down the table and chairs, called out to Mathewla. “All done! Should I leave this in front of your tent?”

“Yes, please.”

“Thanks again, Mr. Mathewla,” I said. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“My pleasure! Any time. I hope you’ll treat me to dinner again when the opportunity arises,” Mathewla smiled.

“Hee hee. Understood.”

After we’d finished cleaning up after dinner, I walked with Druid to the plaza entrance to say good night.

“You didn’t have to come with me, Ivy.”

“Oh, I wanted to walk off some of this dinner anyway.” *I think I had one too many bites of dessert.* But Druid’s favorite childhood treat was so good. It was sweet and melted in the mouth.

“All right, then.”

When we reached the plaza entrance, Druid stopped and turned to face me. He looked awfully serious for some reason. As I looked up in confusion, he said solemnly, “Thanks for the offer to travel with you.”

“Uh, well...” *What should I say? Sorry I forgot you gave me an answer?*

“I’ll try to give you an answer as soon as I can.”

Hm?

“I need a little more time.”

That must mean...he hasn’t given me an answer yet after all. But then why did he say things like “I hope you’ll help me with my headband every day” and “I look forward to dinner with you from now on”?

Druid gave me a questioning look. I guess I’d been staring at him strangely.

“Sure,” I said, “take as long as you need to answer me.”

“Thanks. See you later.”

“Good night.”

Well...I'm glad he hadn't given me an answer and I forgot. But I'm still confused... Did Druid say those things without realizing? I wonder if he'll give me the answer I want? I sure can't wait to find out.



BONUS * Flame Sure Sleeps a Lot



“AHH, ALL DONE.”

I'd set five traps today. I *tried* to find a spot to set them where the gurbars hadn't been rampaging so I'd have at least a chance of a successful hunt...and it was a heck of a task. Still, I'd somehow found a clearing with lots of little animal tracks and not many gurbar tracks. Just setting the five traps took three times as long as usual. As you can imagine, I was wiped out.

“Does it usually take this long to find a place to set traps?” This was Druid's first time using traps...and I guess I'd given him some wrong ideas.

“Oh, no. Usually it goes much faster. It just took three times as long today to find a place where the gurbars hadn't been.”

I'd been hunched over while I was setting my traps, and now my back hurt. I lifted my arms in a big long stretch to crack out my back. I always loved taking a moment to stretch my stiff muscles.

“Ah, that makes sense. The gurbar tracks around the outskirts of town *are* a little concerning. They're much closer to town than they were yesterday, too.”

Druid's expression was stern as he looked around the forest. We both hoped that the scouting party would return soon with some sort of plan to resolve the gurbar problem.

“Would you like to take a little break?” Druid suggested. “Wait...isn't this spot a little dangerous?”

Mrrrow! Ciel meowed in reply. It was staring at Druid in concern.

“Um...was it something I said?” Druid asked, a bit flustered.

I looked at Ciel, and it stared back at me. When our eyes met, its tail swished, so I could tell it wasn't in a bad mood.

“Oh! Ciel, are you saying not to worry because you'll protect us?”

Mrrrow!

“Okay, thank goodness,” said Druid. “I was scared I'd said something to offend it.”

The relief in Druid's tone confused me a little. I looked at Ciel, who happily rubbed its face against mine. *What a sweetie.*

"But Ciel isn't scary at all. It's a big sweetie pie."

"Uhh, yeah. Ciel *is* sweet, I won't deny that..." Druid sounded uncomfortable. I looked at him in confusion, so he elaborated, "Just don't go thinking that all adandaras are like Ciel."

It's true, the adandaras I read about in books seemed terrifying. It was almost like they were a completely different species from Ciel.

"I'm sure each individual is unique. Right, Ciel?"

Mrrrow.

Awww, you're just so cuddly! I grabbed its face and tousled its fur, and it rubbed happily against my head in turn...and now my hair was all mussed, too.

"Puuu."

I turned to look at Sora. It was looking sleepily back at me. "Good morning, Sora."

"Pu! Pu, puuu," Sora sang, bouncing and looking at Ciel. It wanted to play. Ciel stared intently at it for a bit, then padded over to the slime. I guess it was up for a game. Ciel really was so kindhearted.

"This is still so weird to see—a high-level adandara playing with a low-level slime." Druid muttered something quietly as I watched Sora and Ciel play, but his voice was so quiet that I couldn't make out his words. I gave him a quizzical look, and he shook his head—*it's nothing.*

"Oh, right! Since Sora's awake, does that mean Flame is, too?"

I checked the bag, but Flame was still sound asleep. "This slime sure does sleep a lot."

"More than normal?"

I sat down next to Flame's bag, and Druid settled down near us.

"Yes, more than normal. Sora was a lot more energetic when it was Flame's age, but all Flame seems to do is nap."

I wonder if it was born with some sort of problem? Well, it has an appetite and it looks healthy when it is awake, so it's probably okay... And Sora doesn't look worried, either.

"Flame, you need to get your exercise. You don't want to stay a slugabed forever."

"Is...that what happens when a slime doesn't exercise?" Druid asked, looking at Flame in awe.

I quickly shook my head; I didn't want to mislead him. "No, as long as Flame eats and gets stronger, it should grow up just like Sora."

Druid chuckled and gave my shaking head a little pat. "So I guess you're saying Flame needs to eat."

"Yes. The more Sora ate, the less 'collapsed' its body became."

"That makes sense. Hear that, Flame? Rise and shine, you need to eat your breakfast." Druid poked Flame. There was no response. "Flame won't wake up. Still...it feels so soft and squishy."

Flame's body was a lot softer than Sora's. It felt nice to the touch. "I know, don't you wanna just keep poking it?"

"I do."

"Flame's really cute, too."

"Well...that, I'm not so sure about."

Hm?

"Teryu?!"

"Oh, good morning, Flame. Well, good *afternoon*, actually."

Flame's eyes opened to slits, and it looked at me and Druid. Then it kept staring. Hard. I stared back, wondering what was wrong.

Flame was silent for a few seconds, and then... *Thunk*.

"Huh?!"

"Don't tell me...it fell asleep again?" Druid poked Flame gently.

“...ryu...”

It really was asleep. I thought it was staring at us, but when it fell over I realized it had fallen asleep with its eyes open. *Do slimes actually fall asleep like that? It sure was a surprise. Oh! Now its eyes are closed... Oh, good.*

“Funny little creature, aren’t you?”

I smirked at Druid’s remark. I gently scooped up my mysterious sleeper and placed it on my lap. It was pretty surprising how it fell right back asleep after waking up... *I wish I could do that.*

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora bounced over to check on Flame. After a good look, it gave the sleeping slime a light bonk with its body.

“Hey, don’t do that. You’ll wake Flame.”

“Puuu,” Sora whined when I blocked its way.

Flame didn’t seem to wake up fully unless it received at least one strong body slam from Sora. In a way, that made the little slime quite remarkable in its own right. *Wait, would it have been better if I’d let Sora do its thing and wake up Flame? Oops. I messed that up.*

“Pu, puuu.” Sora nudged itself close to Flame and pouted.

“It’s in dreamland again.”

“Puuu,” Sora moaned, hopping back over to Ciel and then jumping in big leaps against the adandara.

“Sora’s sure got a lot of energy.”

“It’s been that way ever since I tamed it.”

Smack.

“Oh!”

“Hahaha. Poor thing.”

Sora had been rolling around by Ciel’s front paws. Just when it was about to reach Ciel, the adandara batted it and sent it rolling away. I was a bit concerned at first, but it looked like Sora was having fun rolling. *I guess there’s nothing to worry about.*

“I didn’t know adandaras played like that,” Druid marveled.

“Is it that unusual?”

“Well, it’s unusual to see an adandara up close like this in the first place. I don’t think it would occur to anyone to imagine them playing.”

Oh, right! Ciel’s a very rare high-level monster. I always forget how powerful it is when I’m with it like this.

“Teryu.”

I looked down at Flame on my lap. It was awake again and looking sleepily at its surroundings. *I guess it finally woke up for good.*

“Good morning, Flame. You slept through breakfast, you know? Want to eat some potions?”

Unlike Sora, Flame prioritized sleep most of all...or rather, once it fell asleep, waking it again was no easy task. It really did snooze all the time. It was almost Sora’s complete opposite, even seeming less sure of itself than the other slime.

“Teryu?”

“Hmm, you look awake, but is your little brain still sleeping?”

“Teeeryuuuu.”

“Are you...sleep-talking? Come on, wake up. You’ve got to eat. You don’t want to be a lazybones forever, do you? Come on, let’s eat.” Flame was abnormally sleepy today.

“Te! Ryuryuuu.”

Oh, did it finally snap itself out of it? “Oh, good. You’re awake. Want to eat?”

“Te! Ryuryu.”

I lined up five red potions in front of Flame, who slowly oozed over to them. It covered the potions one by one with its body and dissolved them, making the potions disappear before my very eyes.

“Are you going to feed it more?” Druid asked in confusion after I’d set out a tenth potion. “You don’t feed Sora extra, do you?”

"Well, Flame is often asleep during mealtimes, so whenever it does eat, I try to feed it extra."

Even if Sora was asleep, I knew it'd wake right up if I pulled potions out of the magic bag. But even when Flame was awake, it might miss a meal if sleepiness overtook it. I remember I was really scared the first time it fell asleep right after I'd lined up potions for its meal. Sora had given me the impression that slimes were gluttons. Now, whenever I fed Flame, I made sure to talk to it so it would stay awake. Then again, sometimes my efforts were in vain, and it fell asleep on me anyway.

"Interesting. Considering Sora gave birth to Flame, it sure has a very different personality."

"That's for sure," I nodded. "Flame and Sora are completely different." I looked over at Ciel, who was still playing with Sora. Sora loved both eating and playing. Even when its form wasn't fully set, I had been shocked at how active it was. And recently, Sora had also come to enjoy pranks.

Flame, on the other hand, was very mild mannered...and it just slept. A lot. And since it often slept through meals if I wasn't careful, taking care of Flame was challenging in a completely different way from Sora. Still, both were adorable.

"Huh? Flame...you okay?" I asked the slime. It was stuck on top of a potion, motionless.

"Did it...fall asleep while eating?" Druid asked.

Sure enough, I heard little slime snores. "Apparently... I wish it would at least finish its meal before falling asleep."

I lifted Flame off the half-eaten potion.

"Ah!" Druid yelped. "It's drooling again..."

I held Flame over my lap and peered into its face. Sure enough, there was a string of drool stretching from its mouth all the way to the ground.

"Pfft! Ha ha ha..." Druid burst out, unable to control his laughter anymore.

"Ha ha ha ha! Oh, *Flame*..."

I had Druid get a towel out of my magic bag. I set it on the ground and put Flame down on top of it. In this regard, Flame's mouth was certainly looser than Sora's, too.

Afterword

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone. Honobonoru500 here. Thank you for picking up a copy of *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*, Volume 3. And thank you to my illustrator, Nama, for once again drawing me such beautiful pictures. In July of 2020, Volume 1 of the manga version of this series is going to come out. This would not have been possible without the support of so many. Seriously, thank you all.

In Volume 3, I wanted to write about Ivy's new friends and a slightly more mature version of Ivy. I knew I just had to write a scene where she revealed the secret of her skill to somebody as part of her personal growth. But for that to happen, she needed to have someone in her life she could trust. I wasn't sure whether I should make this person an adventurer travel companion or a slave. After a lot of agonizing over this, Druid was born.

Now, there are two things I want to apologize to Druid about. The first is giving him one arm because I thought it would be fun. But then again, him missing an arm gave me the opportunity to bring him and Ivy closer together. The second thing I want to apologize for is his family. I didn't mean to give him such a traumatic past. Really! Writing Dolgas's tantrums was just so much fun that before I knew it, Druid had a strained relationship with his whole family. Even I was shocked by it! Most of all, I love the dynamic between Ivy and Dolgas. I also loved writing scenes where Ivy got mad on behalf of someone she cared about.

Also, Ivy acquired more companions. Flame was born! I had the idea that Sora would give birth to Flame ever since I started having Sora eat red potions. To be honest, I kept going back and forth in my mind about when I'd have Sora birth Flame. So I'm really happy Flame has finally joined the party in this book. I hope you have a good time traveling with Ivy now that her party is bigger and more lively.

As always, big thanks to TO Books for all their help. My wonderful editor K-

sama gave me all sorts of wonderful suggestions, which I really appreciate. And a big heartfelt thank-you to all my wonderful readers for making the publication of Volume 3 possible. I hope you'll stick around for the rest of the series. I'll do my best to make sure you do.

Lastly, I want to thank you with all my heart for reading this book. Thanks to so many people buying this book, we'll be able to meet again in Volume 4! I hope you'll check it and Volume 1 of the manga out soon. Thank you for your continuing support of my little light novel series (and now manga) about a wholesome girl who got isekai-ed.

Honobonoru500

October 2020

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the third volume of a web novel that began in August 2018. In Volume 3, Ivy gets some new companions! These will be very important relationships for her. There's a dangerous monster infestation just outside the town she's visiting. While newly astonished by Ciel's ferocity and soothed by Sora's free-spirited antics, Ivy continues to meet and help lots of people—it's a very busy time for her and her party!

Nama

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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