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029
12
novel
KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

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Let's picnic!
KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

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KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

NOVEL 12

WRITTEN BY
Kumanano

ILLUSTRATED BY
029

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Name: Yuna
Age: 15
Gender: Female

▶ Yuna's Status_

▶ BEAR HOOD (NONTRANSFERABLE)
Can see the effects of weapons and tools through the beary good eyes of the hood.

▶ BLACK BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)
Attack glove, increases power based on the user's level. Can summon the black bear Kumayuru.

▶ WHITE BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)
Defense glove, increases defense based on the user's level. Can summon the white bear Kumakyu.

▶ BLACK AND WHITE BEAR CLOTHES (NONTRANSFERABLE)
Appears to be a onesie. Reversible.
Front: Black Bear Clothes
Increases physical and magic resistance based on the user's level.
Gives heat and cold resistance.
Reverse: White Bear Clothes
Automatically restores health and mana while worn.
Restoration amount and speed is based on the user's level.
Gives heat and cold resistance.

▶ BLACK BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)
▶ WHITE BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)
Increases speed based on the user's level.
Prevents fatigue walking long distances based on the user's level.
Gives heat and cold resistance.

◀ KUMAYURU (CUB FORM)
▼ KUMAKYU

▶ BEAR UNDERWEAR (NONTRANSFERABLE)
Won't get dirty no matter how much they're used.
An excellent item that won't retain sweat or smells.
Will grow with the user.

▶ BEAR SUMMONS
Can be summoned from the bear gloves.
Can be changed into cub forms.

Skills

FANTASY WORLD LANGUAGE
The fantasy world's language will sound like Japanese.
Spoken words are conveyed to the other party in the fantasy world language.

FANTASY WORLD LITERACY
The ability to read the fantasy world writing.
Written words become the fantasy world's words.

BEAR EXTRADIMENSIONAL STORAGE
The white bear's mouth opens into infinite space. It can hold (eat) anything.
However, it cannot hold (eat) living things.
Time will stop for objects that are inside of it.
Anything that is put into the extradimensional storage can be pulled out at any time.

BEAR IDENTIFICATION
By looking through the bear eyes on the Bear Clothes' hood, one can see the effects of a weapon or tool.
Doesn't work without wearing the hood.

BEAR DETECTION
Using the wild abilities of bears, can detect monsters or people.

BEAR MAP 2.0
Any area looked at by the bear eyes can be made into a map.

BEAR SUMMONING
Bears can be summoned from the bear gloves.
A black bear can be summoned from the black glove.
A white bear can be summoned from the white glove.
Summons, Beast Cubification: The bear summons can be transformed into bear cubs.

BEAR TRANSPORTER GATE
By setting up a gate, can move between gates.
When more than three gates are in place, can travel to a location by picturing it.
This gate can only be opened with the bear hand.

BEAR PHONE
Can have long-distance conversations with others.
Phone persists until caster dispels it. Physically indestructible.
Can call people a bear phone is given to by picturing the person.
Incoming call is announced by the sound of a bear's cry. By using mana to turn the phone on or off, user can make calls.

BEAR WATER WALKING
Gain the ability to traverse water.
Summons gain the ability to travel on water.

BEAR TELEPATHIC COMMUNICATION
You can call your summoned beasts from a distance.

Magic

BEAR LIGHT
Mana collected in the bear glove creates a light in the shape of a bear.

BEAR PHYSICAL ENHANCEMENT
Routing mana through the bear gear allows for physical enhancement.

BEAR FIRE MAGIC
Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use fire elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

BEAR WATER MAGIC
Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use water elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

BEAR WIND MAGIC
Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use wind elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

BEAR EARTH MAGIC
Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use earth elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

BEAR ELECTRICITY MAGIC
Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use electricity elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

BEAR HEALING MAGIC
Can give treatment by means of the bear's kind heart.

CRIMONIA

FINA

A ten-year-old girl. The first person Yuna met when she came to the other world. Yuna saved her mother. She harvests the monsters Yuna defeats. Yuna likes bringing her along and she meets nobles a lot.

SHURI

Seven years old. Little sister of Fina. An admirable young girl who sticks by her mother, Tiermina, and helps her with the Bear's Lounge. Loves bears.

NOIRE FOCHROSÉ

Nicknamed Noa. Ten years old. Second daughter of the Fochrosé family. A cheerful girl who loves bears. Gets to know Fina through her connection to Yuna. Has a sister five years older than her in the capital named Shia.

CLIFF FOCHROSÉ

Noa's father. Feudal lord of Crimonia. An unfortunate man who often is caught up in Yuna's off-the-wall activities. Amicable and direct with Yuna.

TIERMINA

Fina's and Shuri's mother. Yuna cured her illness. After that she married Gentz. Yuna entrusts the management of the Bear's Lounge to her, among other things.

CAPITAL

SHIA FOCHROSÉ

Noa's older sister, fifteen years old. Wears pigtails. Attends the capital academy. Yuna met her while escorting Noa to the capital. After that, Yuna guards her during her practical training for the academy.

ELLELAURA FOCHROSÉ

Thirty-five years old. Her husband is the feudal lord of Crimonia. Ordinarily lives in the capital and works for the king. Is very well connected and helps Yuna with a lot of things but can be a bit pushy.

TEILIA

Elfanica Kingdom's princess. Flora's older sister. Shia's classmate at the academy. Was looking forward to meeting Yuna after Princess Flora told her all about the "Bear."

MISANA FAHRENGRAM

Also known as Misa. On the way to the king's birthday festival, Yuna saves her from a monster attack. She invites Yuna to her tenth birthday party.

PRINCESS FLORA

Princess of Elfanica. She adores Yuna and calls her "bear." Yuna takes a liking to her and gifts her things like picture books.

MARICKS, CATTLEYA, TIMOL

Shia's classmates. Along with Shia, they formed a party for the academy's practical training, during which Yuna saved them from a monster attack. They idolize Yuna.

QUEEN KITEIA

Princess Flora's mother and queen of Elfanica. Loves Kumayuru and Kumakyu just as much as Princess Flora. She also received stuffed animals from Yuna.

Chapter 286:
The Bear Wears a Uniform

FINA, SHURI, NOA, and I had been invited by Shia and her mom, Ellelaura, to come along with Shia to visit her academy's festival. On the first day, we were shocked to find out Princess Flora had an older sister named Teilia. We'd also participated in a ton of fun festival programs they were offering, and we won some prizes to boot. A few too many prizes, actually—Shia had been upset with us for that. Still, it was a fun start to the festival.

And now here we were on the second day. Shia had left earlier that morning to get her cotton candy stall ready. While the rest of us were prepping to head out, Surilina came by to tell us we had visitors waiting for us in the drawing room. As a matter of fact, it was Misa and Gran.

"Noa, Yuna, Fina," said Misa, "it's been such a long time."

"Wonderful to see you all," Gran greeted us.

"What are you two doing here?"

"I had some matters to attend to in the capital," Gran explained. "We had a spare moment to go to the festival yesterday and—wouldn't you know it?—we just so happened to hear that there was a certain girl in bear clothes running around."

"So we thought you must be here," said Misa, "and we came to see you."

I knew it. The "bears = Yuna" formula had proved them right once again. Guess I shouldn't have been *too* surprised; Shia had already made sure I knew how much attention I'd drawn the other day.

"I'm surprised you knew to find me at Ellelaura's house," I said.

"I heard you were with girls around my age, so I thought you had to be with Noa and Fina. That's why we decided to visit here."

Fair enough.

“If you happen to be going to the festival again,” said Gran, “I was hoping you could take Misa with you.”

Couldn’t think of any reason to refuse. “I don’t mind.”

Misa broke out into a full smile. “Thank you so very much!”

Shuri, however, hid behind Fina. She was the only one who hadn’t met Misa before. Fina introduced the two of them.

Gran watched the whole exchange with a smile, then started talking to me. “Miss, please let me thank you again. I am eternally grateful that you saved Misa. Even now, I cannot help but tremble simply thinking back to the incident. You’re the reason I can still see her smile.” Gran glanced at Misa, who was happily talking with all the other girls now.

“I told you already, don’t worry about it,” I said. “I did the whole rescue thing because I wanted to. You really don’t have to keep thanking me for it.” Still, thinking about what could have happened to Misa sent a shiver down my spine. He might’ve been thankful to me, but I was just thankful I’d been able to do something to help.

“Ha ha, yes, I know your reasons. However, should you need my help with anything at all, my offer still stands. Admittedly, I passed down my title, so I’m afraid I have little influence these days,” Gran added with a chuckle.

Ellelaura had told me that Gran had given up his status to his son, Leonardo, because of the incident. Seeing him now, though, made it really, finally sink in.

“Now I’m free to go anywhere I please,” Gran continued. “It’s quite pleasant.”

He almost seemed like an elderly man just enjoying his golden years.

Gran turned his eyes to a woman standing beside the wall. “Also, I’d like to formally introduce you to someone. This is Lufaa, who has been assisting me of late.”

She made her way to Gran’s side and bowed politely. “My name is Lufaa. Thank you for everything you did back then.”

Wait… I knew that face. “You were at the mansion back when Misa was kidnapped.”

“Yes. I was under Lord Gajurdo’s employ at the time.”

Right, she was the servant who’d led us to all the kidnapped kids.

“She now works for me,” Gran said.

“I see,” I replied. “So, um. Should I congratulate you, Lufaa, or…?” After all, the family she’d been serving was gone because of the crimes they’d committed.

She nodded. “Yes, Miss Yuna. Thanks to you, I was released from my post. And now I know where my father is too. I’m ever so happy that I can now serve Lord Gran.”

“Cool, glad to hear it,” I said. If she was happy, I was happy. And I knew Gran would be able to take care of her.

“But we must be taking our leave,” said Gran. “Take care of Misa, now.”

After entrusting me with Misa, Gran and Lufaa headed out. Shuri and Misa seemed to have hit it off, talking each other’s ears off now. Looked like things would be all right.

We started getting ready to head back to the academy. Everyone was wearing the clothes Teilia had bought them yesterday. They’d decided only to accessorize with small pieces instead of wearing the eye-catching hair decorations or necklaces…so not one of them was wearing any of the cool stuff I’d won for them. (Oh, well.) Since Misa was with us now, the average age of our group had lowered.

Ready to go, we told Surilina we were heading out.

“Are you going to be in the capital for a while, Misa?” I asked.

“Grandfather said we would be leaving tomorrow,” she replied.

“That soon?”

“Yes. I think that’s why he let me spend the day with you, Yuna.”

Seeing Misa smile put me at ease. What with her having been kidnapped, I

was afraid she'd develop some kind of fear of even leaving the house—I hear that can happen. But when I saw that smile on her face, I knew she was doing fine.

Misa was talking excitedly with Fina and Noa after not seeing them for a while, and Shuri was joining in like the group had all known each other for ages.

"Ha ha, I've never been the older one before," Misa said, seeming happy with how deferential Shuri was.

Shuri had started out calling her Lady Misa at first, just like Fina. But when Misa found out Shuri had dropped the honorifics for Noa, she asked Shuri to do the same for her.

I saw the color drain from Fina's face a little when she overheard that conversation. Well, Misa was the one asking Shuri to do that, so I didn't think it was such a big deal. Still, we needed Shuri to understand that not all nobles were as nice as Noa or Misa. Making that mistake with someone else could be a whole heap of trouble…

Once we got to the academy, we got a survey that asked us what our favorite attraction was, just like last time. Yesterday, I'd given three votes to the shop that'd supplied the girls with cute outfits. Teilia had told me that I could fill in the same number for all three of my choices, so that was exactly what I'd done. If we came back here next year, I hoped I'd be able to buy them outfits the next time. If my vote made that happen, awesome.

There just so happened to be ballot boxes all over the academy too, so anyone could vote whenever they wanted to.

After we reached the school grounds, we made a beeline for the stalls. The students passing by stared at me, but not any more than most people do. The only difference was what they were saying about me.

"Is that the bear from the rumors?" "It's the bear from yesterday." "What's this about a bear?" "You didn't hear? It happened yesterday. It was just ridiculous!" "Oh, but Teilia isn't with her today." I was hearing all kinds of

things...

Wait, had word really spread about yesterday? I mean, some of these students *were* talking now and kinda following me, but that was it. Except…the further into the academy we headed, the more that crowd seemed to grow.

Uh… It's all in my head, right?

Right?

Shia broke me out of that when we got to our destination, yelling out loud, "Yuna, what's going on?!" She stared at the gathering behind me. "I thought I told you to keep a low profile today."

"But I haven't done anything yet." All I did was walk over here. The rubberneckers had followed *me*.

"What's this shop supposed to be?" "A bear?" "Are they related somehow?" "They've got something interesting they're selling." The crowd that had tagged along started losing interest in me when they saw the giant bear statue and cotton candy.

Shia grabbed my onesie and dragged me behind the stall. "You're telling the truth? *All* you did was walk here from the gate?"

I nodded. I really hadn't done anything but walk.

Shia thought for a bit then grabbed my hand. "Yuna, come with me for a bit. The rest of you can have cotton candy while you wait!"

"Shia?" Noa said.

"We'll be right back," Shia said to Noa, and then she grabbed my hand and dashed off.

"Uh, Shia?" I said. "Shia?"

"Yuna, this way."

I followed like she asked. "Where are we going? What about everyone else?"

"We'll come right back, don't you worry."

Shia kept a tight hold of my bear puppet like she was afraid of losing me as she pulled me over to the closest building. Then she looked around as she

walked until we made our way in front of a door, where she stopped.

“I guess this’ll work.” She opened the door and looked inside as though she were checking for something. “Nobody here.” Once she’d confirmed that, she dragged me into the room with her.

“A changing room?” At least, it sure looked like one now that we were inside.

Shia pulled something out of her item bag. “Yuna, change into this.” She handed me a uniform.

“Uh. What’s this for?”

“It’s the academy’s uniform. If you stay dressed like—” she gestured at my bear-puppet hands “—*that*, everyone is going to notice you. I know how much you love that outfit, but it won’t work.”

Love it? I didn’t even *like* it. I only wore the thing because it guaranteed my safety. Wait, did she seriously think I was wearing this because I *wanted* to? I mean, sure, otherworld cheat powers are great, but I’d much rather they’d been given to *me* and not to my gear. Then I wouldn’t have to wear this thing.

“That bear outfit will draw eyes if you keep it on during the festival,” Shia insisted, pushing the clothes toward me, “so please, change into these. It’s my spare uniform so it might be a little too big, but at least it’s not too small.”

I wasn’t concerned about the sizing so much as changing clothes.

“Everyone’s waiting,” she said, “so please hurry.” She pushed the uniform toward me again like she wasn’t going to take no for an answer…not that I even had a chance to refuse in the first place.

Still, we were at a festival. It wasn’t like we’d run into monsters or bandits here. Plus, they were checking IDs at the entrance, so no shady sorts were getting in either. The only people I had to be concerned about were the nobles who might try to pester Noa, but it’d been smooth sailing yesterday and I’d be able to deal with them as long as I had my bear gloves and bear feet. Plus, as a last resort, I could always summon Kumayuru and Kumakyu if we were really in trouble.

Finally, I knew I couldn’t say no to Shia with the way she was acting.

“Okay, okay. I’ll change.” And so, left with no other options, that was how I was convinced into wearing a school uniform. “Look away now.”

“But I’m a girl too,” Shia shot back.

That was kind of beside the point.

So there I was, taking off that bear onesie and changing into a school uniform, of all things. Never would’ve expected that after getting pulled into this world. Back in my home world, I only ever wore a uniform a few times before I withdrew from middle school and became a recluse. Honestly, there was a teensy little part of me that was happy to get another chance to wear one.

Maybe that was actually why I so readily went along with Shia’s demands.

“Yuna, that’s not how that works. You need to put this here and do this with that part.” Shia showed me how to put the uniform on. Ah, yep, that made sense.

After we tied the necktie on me, my outfit was complete. I checked myself out in my new clothes. They were a tad too large. The waist was a little baggy. And my chest, uh…felt a little tight? No, really. Cross my heart.

Anyway, this seemed like it could work.

“Now that I’m getting a good look at you, you really do look cute, Yuna. Why do you always cover yourself up in that outfit?”

You can never believe a girl when she calls another girl cute, so I just assumed Shia was being polite. But she kept talking. “You should really put yourself out there more. I mean, you really are pretty.”

“You don’t have to flatter me,” I replied. “Besides, you’re way cuter, Shia.”

More importantly, I was kind of preoccupied with the skirt I was wearing. I didn’t like the feel of air on my bear legs—I mean *bare* legs. I decided to put on my bear gloves and shoes again.

“You’re wearing those?” Shia asked dubiously.

“They’re my item bags,” I explained. I wouldn’t be able to use my bear storage or my magic without my puppets, and I wouldn’t be able to summon Kumayuru or Kumakyu either.

“Well, no one would notice them from far away, so I guess that’d work?”

I put my bear onesie into bear storage, then Shia led me back to everyone else.

The skirt shifted as I walked. Wasn’t it a tad short? No, I guess it didn’t look all that much shorter than Shia’s. Maybe I was just feeling self-conscious because I hadn’t worn a skirt all that often. I hadn’t worn them in my old world much, and I’d basically kept to my onesie outfit since coming here, so wearing this now kinda gave me the heebie-jeebies.

I kept holding the hem of the skirt down as we made our way back. When we arrived, we were met with a long line of customers.

“You’re late, Shia,” said Maricks.

“Sorry.” Shia headed off to join Maricks and company, and I went back to rejoin Fina and the others.

“Sorry for the wait,” I told them.

“…?” Noa tilted her head quizzically.

“…?” Misa’s gears were turning in her mind.

“…?!” Fina seemed pretty surprised.

“Bear hands…” Shuri said, as though she’d realized something.

“What’s wrong?” They all were looking at me and brooding.

“Um, Yuna, what are you wearing?” Fina was the first to question me.

“Shia forced me to change because of all the attention I was getting,” I told her. “Think it looks bad on me?”

She glanced over my new clothes. Okay, maybe it did look a little odd? Everyone else still seemed taken aback as they looked me over.

“No, I think they look great on you,” Fina offered.

“Thank you.” I gave her a pat on the head in response. It was empty flattery, but I was still happy to hear it.

“Wait, Yuna…is that you?!” Noa gasped.

“Yuna…?” Misa stared.

“Uh, yeah, it *is* me,” I replied. “Wait, don’t tell me you didn’t recognize me.”

Noa had taken baths with me before! Misa had literally seen me wear a dress at her birthday party!

“O-of course I did…” Noa’s eyes slid back and forth suspiciously.

I turned to Misa.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

They really hadn’t known it was me?!

“I figured it out because of your hands,” Shuri said.

Okay, now that was kind of a shocker. Apparently, Fina was the only person who recognized me out of my bear onesie. I guess I’d gotten some insight into exactly how they saw me.

Chapter 287:
The Bear Enjoys the Second Day of the Academy Festival

"I'M SO SORRY, Yuna," Noa said. "I didn't realize it was you right away without the bear outfit."

Yeesh, Noa, that just makes it worse! Every time somebody mentioned my bear outfit, it was chipping away a little bit more of my soul. The only person I had faith in now was Fina. I hugged her from behind.

In an attempt to placate me, they were saying things they definitely didn't mean…

"I think your usual bear outfit is cute, but you look good in a uniform too."

"Yuna, you look cute."

"Yes, it looks great on you," said Shia.

Sorry, Shia, but I think I might change back into my onesie. At this rate, I'd live out the rest of my life in that bear outfit…

"Yuna, you really do look good in it," Fina said, trying to be nice when she noticed I was sulking.

In the end, it *was* all kind of my fault. I mean, I'd chosen to wear the bear suit this entire time. When I put on my hood, people couldn't even look me in the eye unless they saw me from the front. They probably didn't even get a glimpse of my face if they were walking beside me. That wasn't something *they* could do anything about.

Plus, if Noa and the others didn't recognize me, that meant strangers wouldn't figure out I was the bear from yesterday. I had proof now that no one could recognize me in this disguise (or rather, in this perfectly normal outfit), which was something I could think of as more a blessing than a curse. Finally, I didn't want to worry everybody by glooming it up all day, so I decided to consciously shift my mood.

This was all thanks to that god giving me an OP bear onesie. In fact, this whole *situation* was the god's fault! Ugh. Thanks, god.

“It looks like the stall’s going well,” I said, trying to change the subject. Looking over at the shop, you could see a huge line of customers even though they were barely even open yet.

“The people who followed you started buying cotton candy,” said Fina. “Then other people wondered what this treat was, which brought in even more customers.”

“Come to think of it,” I said, “what happened to all those people who followed me?” I didn’t see any of them around.

“When Shia led you away, they bought cotton candy and left, since you weren’t here anymore,” Noa answered.

So Shia had taken care of my would-be stalkers then. They probably would’ve kept hounding me if I’d come back out wearing the bear onesie, so I guess I could mark this as another point in favor of the school uniform. I was supposed to be guarding the girls after all, which meant I couldn’t make them *more* likely to get into trouble.

“Oh—is Teilia not around today?” Now that I thought about it, hadn’t she mentioned helping around the stall today? I really wanted to thank her again for all she did yesterday too.

“She had to finish something up this morning, so she’s coming by to help after that’s over. We asked a few other friends to help too, so things shouldn’t end up like yesterday.”

“Thanks to Yuna, we’ve got a whole second machine too.”

Maricks and Timol were making the cotton candy while Shia was working behind the scenes. Apparently, Cattleya was taking her turn to go around the festival with some friends right now.

“I actually wanted to go with you, Yuna,” she told me. “However, I already promised them.”

“No worries. Teilia already showed me around plenty yesterday, so we’re good. Well, let’s head out. Thanks for letting me borrow the uniform, Shia.”

“Is it me, or does it feel like she’s going to get in trouble because of that outfit

too?” Shia murmured, looking at my uniform.

Hey, what was *that* all about? I wasn’t in my bear onesie anymore, which meant I wouldn’t attract any more trouble. To everyone else, I was just your standard student. As long as none of the teachers nabbed me *because* they didn’t recognize me, I’d be fine. And if that happened, I’d just mention Shia. She was the one who forced me to change into this, after all.

I left the group to their cotton candy making and headed off to see the festival with Fina and the others in tow.

“Misa, is there anything you’d like to see or stuff you want to eat?” I asked as she nibbled happily at some cotton candy. Misa was the only one eating it, though. Well, I guess the other three had some yesterday, and sampled it before too.

“I don’t mind where we go,” said Misa, “as long as we’re together.”

Noa’s hand shot up. “Then let’s try the knife throwing again! I want to win this time.”

“What about the rest of you?” I asked, turning to Fina and Shuri.

Fina shrugged. “I don’t mind wherever we go.”

“I want to try the knife throwing again too,” said Shuri.

I didn’t really mind going anywhere either, so when Shuri agreed with Noa, we decided to head over to the exhibit.

“Shia told me not to do anything that’d attract attention,” I said, “so I won’t be able to get you prizes even if you miss, okay?”

If I gathered attention, my disguise (if you could call it that) would’ve been for nothing. Plus, a school uniform wouldn’t help if someone asked me which class I was from. For now, I decided to stick to just cheering everyone else on.

Some time after I made sure Noa and Shuri understood I wouldn’t be helping, we got to the same exhibit that had been doing the knife throwing yesterday. There were a lot of couples and girls around, just like yesterday. They were all probably there to win hair ornaments.

“Did you get your ornament from here, Noa?”

“Yes! It’s small, but this time, I’m going to get one of the big ones.”

Noa showed off the hair ornament she was wearing to Misa. Misa looked at Fina’s hair, then Shuri’s.

“You’re not wearing one, Shuri?”

“Yuna got one for me yesterday, but it’s too big and fancy, so I’m not supposed to wear it today.”

“Really?”

“But I’m going to try my very best to get one on my own today,” she said firmly.

Shuri was just as gung ho as Noa. I hoped they’d hit their targets. The three of them headed over to line up, and—wait. Three of them?

“Aren’t you going to play?” I asked Fina, who was still next to me.

“No, I already have one. I’m going to wait with you.”

“But you could try getting an even better one, right?”

Fina smiled and brushed her fingers against her hair ornament. “I already like the one I have plenty.”

“Then I guess we’ll just need to cheer them on together.”

“Uh-huh!”

We got a little closer to cheer, and—wouldn’t you know it?—not a single person said the word “bear” as we walked. The girl at the exhibit was the same person as yesterday too, and she hadn’t even recognized me after looking me straight in the eyes. My clothes were different, and Teilia, the princess, wasn’t with us, so I guess that kind of contributed to me not standing out much.

It felt kind of nice not to be at the center of attention for once.

“Yuna, over there.”

While I was relishing in my newfound anonymity, Fina pointed over to where the prizes were displayed. I looked over and saw the same hair ornaments from yesterday there. They looked identical to the ones we’d won.

So they did have more.

“What’s that written underneath the prizes…?” asked Fina.

“There’s something written over there?”

I looked at the text.

“Bear-level prizes,” it said. Bear *what*? That wasn’t there before.

“That must be about you, Yuna.”

I really wanted to deny it, but after yesterday? Not an option.

While I was thinking things over, one of the boys in front of Noa tried his hand at the bear-level prize. A really pretty girl cheered him on… His girlfriend, maybe? Apparently, he was trying to show off by landing her the bear prize. Could he pull it off?

Then one of the students in charge headed to the back and threw a ton of targets into the air. The boy whiffed every throw.

They needed to hit moving targets now? Wasn’t that a bit much? It was hard enough hitting targets that were far away, so obviously, it’d take some real skill to hit them if they moved too.

So yeah, the guy used every one of his knives without hitting a single target. The girl who’d been cheering him on looked disappointed, but how else was this going to turn out? He hadn’t really thought it through when he decided to try it out. I mean, even adventurers have trouble hitting a monster in midair.

Then it was Noa’s turn. She was eyeing the bear prizes, but…no way, right? She’d *never* be able to do that. Noa glanced at me and I shook my head, trying to tell her with my eyes not to do it.

But I hadn’t gotten through to her, I guess, because I heard Noa say to the attendant, “I’d like the bear level, please.”

Come on...

Naturally, she didn’t hit any of the targets either.

Shuri and Misa *did* successfully hit the two closest targets, though, and won themselves two small prizes. Noa looked frustrated, but Shuri and Misa sure

were happy when they came back.

“It’s impossible,” Noa groaned.

That should’ve been obvious to just about anyone. She shouldn’t have tried the bear challenge from the start. On the other hand, Shuri and Misa seemed perfectly happy with their small prizes.

“Yuna, will you help me?” Shuri passed the prize she won to me, and I helped her put the hair ornament on to match Fina.

“You look cute,” I said, which made Shuri happy.

Misa had asked Noa to help with her tiny ornament. Soon enough, everyone had one in their hair.

“If you had one, Yuna, we’d match,” said Noa.

“Want to put on the big one you got me, Yuna?” Shuri suggested.

I politely turned down Shuri’s suggestion. If I did that, I might as well just put on the bear onesie while I was at it.

Chapter 288:
The Bear Joins Teilia

UNLIKE YESTERDAY, I was walking around the festival without anyone staring at me weirdly at all. This time, though, there were bear-level prizes everywhere I went, along with vague conversation everywhere about that mystery bear from yesterday. It really made me glad that I had my little “disguise.”

We wandered until the afternoon came, and then we headed over to Shia and the others to see how they were doing. We brought them food too—Morin’s bread, as usual. We thought about bringing them stuff from the stalls, but Teilia was going to be there with some of their other friends and we didn’t know how much to bring. Still, I had plenty of bread in my bear storage, just in case.

As we approached Shia’s stall, we started seeing people happily eating cotton candy as they walked. It was nice, seeing that. I knew how hard Shia’s group was working, so I really wanted them to sell a lot.

Once we caught sight of the stand, I saw some students I didn’t recognize advertising their hearts out to get customers. They must’ve been the friends Shia’d been talking about, I guessed.

“Looks like things are going smoothly?” I asked as Shia handed a kid some cotton candy.

“Yuna?! We had our friends come by; they’ve been helping us.”

“We’re going to treat them to food as thanks,” Maricks explained. So *that* was why they were helping—a typical schoolyard swap.

I looked over at their friends, but I didn’t see Teilia among them. Wasn’t she supposed to stop by after that morning business of hers? Or was she not done yet?

“Shia, where’s Teilia?” At the very least, I’d wanted to thank her for yesterday.

“Lady Teilia is inside the stall.”

“Behind the scenes?”

I peeked in and spotted Teilia, looking sulky for some reason. I don’t mean a crouched on the ground, wallowing-in-her-self-pity level of sulk, but I could still feel melancholy rolling off of her.

“What’s wrong with Teilia?” I asked.

“Uh, well, we told her we didn’t need her help,” said Shia. “She’s been like that since.”

“You didn’t want her help? But why?”

According to Shia, Teilia had started trying to gather customers, but when she’d smiled and told all the gathered students she knew how good the cotton candy was, they’d been flooded with orders.

That crowd had gathered even more people, and Teilia kept advertising even as things spiraled into a chaotic frenzy of orders. It had become, according to Shia, a whole *thing.* The two cotton candy makers hadn’t been able to keep up, so Shia had quickly taken Teilia into the stall. Since then, things had calmed down to the point I was seeing now.

Celebrity endorsements can do that, I suppose. Honestly, was there a student who wouldn’t stop by if a princess was calling them? This was Teilia we were talking about, recommending cotton candy. No normal person would turn down such a pretty princess smile. That was the kind of look that could knock a boy out cold.

It seemed that the princess was way more effective than the bear statue.

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I headed over to Teilia and tried talking to her slumped form. “Teilia, are you okay?”

“Yuna? Let me tell you what happened.” Teilia turned toward me, paused, then glanced around as though checking her surroundings. What was *that* about?

“Didn’t I just hear Yuna?” *Uh, yeah. Obviously.* “Where is she…?” *Right in front*

of you?

Teilia looked at me, then to Fina and the other two girls next to me. “Really, where’s Yuna?”

“She’s right here.” They all looked at me, and now Teilia was looking at me too. She shook her head slightly. “Yuna?”

“Yes, I’m Yuna,” I introduced myself again.

Teilia really looked like she didn’t believe me, but…what else could I say? This is who I was outside of the bear onesie. Jeez, was she disappointed or something?

“I suppose those do look like Yuna’s bear feet and hands…” That was the giveaway? I guess that’s what people needed to know it was me. “But why are you wearing that?”

“Shia made me change because I was attracting too much attention,” I summarized offhandedly.

“She’s right,” said Teilia. “Also, I had no idea how cute you were, Yuna.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. Hearing that I’m cute in the bear onesie was one thing, but this seemed like a stretch.

“I never would have expected this,” said Shia. “I can’t believe there’d be such a cute girl under all that bear.”

“Seriously?” My jaw dropped. “You too?”

Teilia looked at Shia as though she’d recalled something. “Oh, right. Yuna, Shia told me to stop helping. I was working so hard to get more customers too!”

“You got us too many people with your advertising. It’s not that you’re bad at this, Lady Teilia. It’s more that we can’t keep up with you.”

Every establishment had a cap on what they could handle based on how big their store was, how many employees they had, and how fast they could make whatever they were serving.

Teilia sighed. “But I worked so hard because I was paying you back. You introduced me to Yuna, after all.”

Huh. Now that I thought about it, I did remember Teilia saying something like that. Still, I could barely believe she'd use her valuable festival time in a deal to meet me. Didn't she realize how valuable her time was?

"You've already helped more than enough," Shia said, but it seemed like Teilia still wanted to chip in.

Teilia was a princess, though, and it didn't really seem proper to have a princess helping out. It felt like a celebrity in my old world promoting a lemonade stand.

Shia explained it wasn't Teilia's fault, but the princess still wasn't having any of it. Maybe Teilia had actually been looking forward to helping out? I hadn't ever gone to a school festival either, so I guess I could relate. Helping Shia's group made me feel like I was participating too. In fact, that was probably why I lent them the cotton candy machine and made the bear statue for them.

It made me super happy just thinking that I was helping them sell the cotton candy, so I kind of felt like I understood. That's why I decided to comfort her.

"All right, I'm fine now," said Teilia. "I won't sulk anymore."

Just as the business with Teilia wrapped up, we heard someone's stomach rumble. That made me remember why I came here in the first place.

"Have you all eaten yet?" I asked.

"Not yet. We were thinking of trading off so we could grab some food."

I had caught them just in time. "I brought some bread for you," I said. "Would you like it?"

"Is it the same bread we had during the practical training?"

"It is," I replied.

"Then, yes!" called Maricks as he spun more cotton candy.

Timol nodded. "Me too."

Apparently, they remembered the bread from all the way back then. Morin's bread was just that delicious, you know?

"In that case, I'll leave it here, so eat it whenever you have time."

I made sure to leave enough for the other students helping out too.

“So what are you all doing next, Yuna?”

“We’re going to see the rest of the festival,” I said. “Why?”

There were tons of things we hadn’t seen yet. Since we’d spent this morning letting Noa and Shuri challenge all the places from yesterday, we’d only visited places we’d already seen. This afternoon, though, we were going to check out some new ones—didn’t want to waste our second day, after all.

“In that case,” said Shia, “why don’t you join her, Lady Teilia?”

“Shia?” Teilia seemed surprised by that new proposal. “If I can’t help with advertising, I’d still like to help with something else.”

Shia shook her head. “Thanks to you, we’ve already had plenty of customers. And they’re spreading the word, so we should do fine.”

She was right. There was no end in sight to the crowds coming by.

“Also, if you keep helping us,” Shia continued, “the other stalls will start to complain.”

It *was* basically cheating to have a princess help out, after all.

“You should go have fun with Yuna and the others,” Shia concluded.

Maricks and Timol agreed with Shia. Even the other students who were helping out began to pipe up.

“We can handle the rest. You should have fun, Lady Teilia.”

“Thank you so much, all of you,” Teilia said.

They seemed to have gotten through to her, so she decided to join us.

Our group headed out, joined now by Teilia.

“Hee hee!” Teilia, who had been down in the dumps until a moment ago, was thoroughly enjoying the attention. She walked jauntily between Shuri and Misa, and Noa and Fina trailed behind her. “If I’d been a boy, I would have been so popular with the girls!”

“So popular with the other kids, you mean.” Seven-to ten-year-old kids, to be exact. I mean, I was here too, I guess, but I was fifteen though.

“Despite their demure stature, they’re charming little ladies nevertheless.”

Well, couldn’t deny that.

When I introduced Misa to Teilia, she seemed to be aware of Gran but not of his granddaughter.

“You’re all wearing the clothes I gave you, then,” said Teilia. “I’m so happy.”

Noa, Fina, and Shuri were, in fact, wearing those very outfits. They were presents from Teilia, so she *would* be happy to see people making use of them.

“Would you like an outfit as well, Misana?” she asked.

“No, um, I—”

“Don’t be shy, now.” Teilia grasped Misa’s hand as a burst of self-consciousness hit her, dragging the girl over to the clothing store from yesterday. We all chose Misa’s outfit together and Teilia ended up buying it. She tried to buy me clothes like yesterday, too, but I politely turned her down.

After that we left the building. Misa walked in front of us and twirled happily. Turned out she was over the moon about the princess buying her clothes after all.

“That’s one more bride for me,” said Teilia.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, again, she’s literally not even ten.” As I joked around with Teilia, I caught sight of a crowd forming up ahead.

“What could that be?” Teilia squinted at them.

“I’ll take a look,” Noa said and ran off with Misa following after her. Shuri tried to run too, but Fina latched onto her hand and stopped her.

“Fina?!” Shuri stammered.

“Nope.”

“Aww...”

We slowly made our way to the crowd. Students were doing something there

with…swords?

“Looks like a sword dance.”

Six students were participating, all of them with their own blades. They skillfully wielded their weapons, swinging them to the right and left. Each swing seemed to barely miss, and not once did their blades clash.

“Wow…”

“It’s so pretty…”

Noa and the others seemed enthralled by the movements of the students. Personally, I’d seen something like this on TV before, but this was my first time seeing it in person. The blades careened to the left and right, but all of them were gloriously in sync.

There wasn’t a hair out of place as they all moved their bodies and their blades together. Then all of them raised their swords up into the air and brought them down as one, rushing into a relentless dance. Their speed now put their previous dancing to shame, and yet they still did not clash. Then, at the very end, they all twisted their swords around beautifully and sheathed them. Applause rang out from all around. Fina and the others started clapping too. I smacked my soft bear puppets together in awe.

According to Teilia, this was an event at the festival that only allowed the best of the best students to participate.

“Can you do that too, Princess?”

“Me? I’m rather terrible at coordinating with a group. I think I could do a sword dance on my own, but I likely couldn’t do one in sync with several others,” Teilia answered Shuri’s question.

I suppose dancing like that would require mutual trust. Plus a lot of practice too. There was no way I’d be able to attempt that. Especially not me, since I was probably just as bad at coordinating with other people as Teilia.

Chapter 289:
The Bear Watches the Performance

“THAT WAS AMAZING.”

“Yeah. It was so cool when they twirled the swords at the end and went, like, ka-shwoosh!” Shuri twirled her arms round and round, reenacting the pose from when the swords had been sheathed.

A sword dance. That was exactly the kind of thing I wanted to see in this world.

“Can you do that too, Yuna?” Teilia asked me the same question Shuri had posed to her earlier.

I shook my head. “They had plenty of training for that. I think I might be able to wave the sword around and sheathe it like they did in the end, at least.”

Back in my gamer days, I was *way* too happy to play with swords. It was a little embarrassing how much I practiced drawing one, pretending I took out a ton of

monsters, and then sliding my “sword” back into its sheath.

It wasn’t too far off from sword dancing, right? I could probably manage it if I really wanted to.

“I’d like to see that.”

“If the opportunity presents itself,” I said. Which was a roundabout way of saying no, like when you promise you’d go to something when you have the time.

“Right now would work.” But apparently Teilia hadn’t gotten the hint. I made another excuse, telling her I couldn’t just wave a sword around in a place like this.

Teilia seemed let down, but I didn’t want to stand out when I was in a student uniform. It’d be such a chore if one of the teachers caught me.

“Where should we go next?”

“Right,” said Teilia. “It looks like everyone was impressed by the sword dance, so let’s find something just as impressive. We should be able to make it in time.” Teilia grabbed Noa and Misa’s hands and started to run.

“Lady Teilia!”

“The rest of you must hurry along too!” Teilia shouted, ignoring Noa’s cry as we ran after them.

We followed Teilia all the way to a large building.

What *was* this? It looked a lot like a gym. Or no, maybe a bit more like a theater? Regular people and students headed into the building one after another.

“Is there something in there?”

“You’ll understand once we’re inside. I’m sure that you’ll all enjoy it.” Teilia still wouldn’t tell us what we were about to see, just leading us into the theater-like building without another word.

Inside, we saw crowds entering through a giant open door in the front room. I thought we’d head in through the same door, but Teilia took us down a hallway to the left.

We followed her upstairs to a series of doors. Teilia didn’t hesitate, walking to a door near the middle and stopping in front of it. It was slightly larger than all the others. She touched a mana-gem thing near the door, which clicked as though it’d been unlocked. Then she opened the door.

“Please, come inside.”

We did as she asked. Several fancy-looking chairs were set up in the room, which looked a little like a balcony. When I looked out over that balcony, I immediately saw something that looked like a dark stage. Chairs sat in front of the stage, facing toward it.

This wasn’t *like* a theater; it *was* a theater.

The rest of the doors on this floor were probably balconies just like this one. This balcony seemed to be at the center of everything.

“Teilia, is this room what I think it is, is it?”

“Is it the royal family’s balcony? It is. We don’t use it very often, but it’s always reserved for when the royal family wants to watch a play.”

In other words, this was the royal family’s exclusive balcony box. “Are we allowed in here?”

Noa and Misa nodded as I spoke, seeming to share my concern. Aristocrats like Noa and Misa probably understood what it meant to be in this place, at least more than peasants.

“It should be fine,” said Teilia. “I’m here with you and I haven’t heard that anyone else is using the room. Don’t worry.”

That…wasn’t super reassuring. Fina was so nervous that she froze up. Even Noa and Misa, both aristocrats, seemed not just worried but totally at a loss for what to do. Only Shuri looked at the stage with a twinkle in her eyes.

Noa and Misa were one thing, but it was out of the question for ordinary people to be in a place like this. These fancy seats were meant for the king and queen, after all. Even a bear with an untrained eye for this kind of thing could see that the sofa—because there was a sofa too—was very expensive.

But Teilia paid us no mind. “You can sit anywhere you’d like.”

Even after her invitation, none of us could sit. Shuri tried, but Fina grabbed her hand to stop her. While I doubted the king or queen would complain, that didn’t mean Fina wanted to risk her little sister taking the king’s seat. I didn’t want to sit there either, honestly.

So, all of us politely declined and just accepted being in the room.

“What’s about to start?” I asked. The audience seemed to be gathering, so I suspected something was going to happen onstage.

“There’s supposed to be a concert around this time. They’re really amazing, so I think you’ll enjoy it.”

I was looking forward to it. We all watched the stage from the balcony as

students carrying instruments filed onto the stage.

They all bowed in unison, and then the concert started. The harmony of the assorted instruments flowed out into the theater, and before long, it touched my heart as well. Even I could tell they were amazing, and I didn't know much about music. Shuri and Fina's eyes opened wide as they experienced their first concert. Noa and Misa seemed enthralled as they listened too, of course.

They played several songs, each one was more captivating than the last. None of them were familiar to me, but every song resonated with me regardless.

Once they were done with all their setlist, the students bowed and left the stage. Everyone clapped for them. (I clapped too, but it wasn't much use—my bear puppets turned my applause into nothing but a soft fabric patter.)

"That was amazing. I've never heard a concert like that before," said Fina.

Teilia looked happy to hear it. "I'm so glad you enjoyed it." Even though it was a student concert, it really had been an amazing performance. I felt just as satisfied as Fina.

"I wonder if Shia could do this too," Noa said.

Shia played an instrument? It wasn't like I didn't think it was *possible,* just never really thought about it. But maybe aristocrats were required to pick one up?

"Is the concert over?" I'd wanted to listen to more songs, but the students had already disappeared from the stage.

"I think there's a play coming up next. Do you want to watch it?"

I *did*. If the play was as good as the concert, it was something to look forward to. "What do you all feel like doing?" I asked.

"I wanna see!"

"I wouldn't mind watching it."

"I'd like to see it too."

"Well, I guess I could too," I said. "If that's what you guys want to do, I mean."

No one seemed to object, so we decided to stay.

While the students were setting up, I brought out drinks from my bear puppet to share with everyone…and then, suddenly, the door behind us opened.

"What? Who's here?" I asked.

"Father?"

"Is that you, Teilia? What are you doing here?" The king himself had entered

the room…

…followed by Princess Flora and the queen.

“Teiwia?” Princess Flora latched onto Teilia as soon as she saw her sister.

The queen smiled as she looked at us. “Oh, my, it seems we have quite a few guests.”

“Father, what are you doing here?”

“Flora told us she wanted to come to the academy festival. I was fine enough with coming, but it wasn’t as though we could walk around outside without attracting attention. We came here because we’re less likely to cause a ruckus.”

I suppose he had a point, them being the royal family and all. Plus, they’d probably attract more attention because of the guards that had to follow them around.

The queen broke in. “Hee hee, what are you talking about? You simply used Flora as a pretext for skipping out on your work.”

“But Flora, uh, *did* want to go.” With his true intentions exposed, the king seemed flustered.

“We have a guard, so Flora and I would have managed quite fine alone.”

The king seemed like he had something he wanted to say, but he kept his mouth shut.

Jeez, what a guy to have for a king. Almost makes you worry, you know? Then again, the prince seemed serious enough, even if he didn’t have a perfect personality. The kingdom’s future seemed in fine hands, probably. It must’ve been tough having such a wildly unrestrained father though. I sympathized with the prince.

How did *that* guy produce such an upstanding son? Guess he was just one of the seven mysteries of the capital.

The king gave me a glance before shifting to Noa.

“You’re Noire, aren’t you? Ellelaura’s girl?” From there, he looked to Fina and

Shuri.

The queen looked the two over as well, seeming to remember them from their encounter the other day. “And you were Fina and Shuri?”

“You know them?” the king asked as he looked at Shuri.

“Shuri is Fina’s little sister. I walked with her when she stopped by the castle last time.”

“Ah, yes, that must have been the time Ellelaura neglected to inform me of Yuna’s arrival. And I heard she even brought you food to eat.”

“Indeed she did. And it was so sweet and delicious.”

“Sweet and fwuffy!”

She must have meant the time we’d been given a tour of the castle. But that wasn’t *my* fault; Ellelaura had stopped anyone from telling him.

“So, you’re Fina? If you see Yuna, tell her to prepare a treat for me too next time she goes to the castle.”

Uh, I was right in front of him. Why was he telling Fina to pass along a message to me? Wait, had he not noticed me?

Fina gave me an anxious look. What was I supposed to do, though, tell him myself? It would’ve been weird. Teilia kept mum and smiled slightly. Noa and Misa didn’t say anything either.

Then the king looked at Misa, who promptly greeted the king.

“And you’re the Fahrengram’s girl,” he said with a nod. “Now, what has brought this group together?”

“You wouldn’t introduce me to Yuna, Father,” said Teilia. “I had my friends do it for me. That was how I met everyone.”

The king looked around the room. He glanced at me and then seemed to go into thought.

I’d been ordered to pull off my hood when I’d first met the king. It’d been a while since then, but I was sure he’d seen my face. Was it the bear thing? Ugh, please don’t tell me he hadn’t recognized me without the bear body…

“Have we met somewhere before?” he asked me.

Yes! Many times! He really *hadn’t* recognized me.

“What are talking about? That’s Yuna.” The queen grinned as she looked at me.

“That’s…?!” Dubious, the king did a double take. “Ah! I thought I recognized you from somewhere. So it *is* you, Yuna.”

Wow. He really hadn’t recognized me. “You’ve seen my face before, though…”

“I-I didn’t forget what you look like. I just didn’t recognize you right away because you’re not dressed like a bear.” In other words, he only knew me as a bear. “Why are you in such a strange outfit?”

Did he just call this outfit strange? What made a school uniform strange? If a bear outfit was strange, and a school uniform too, was there anything I could wear that *wasn’t* strange?!

“It was Ellelaura’s daughter, Shia,” I explained. “She told me I’d stand out too much in my bear outfit, so she forced me to wear this.”

The king looked me over.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Oh, well, it’s just that you look like a rather normal girl when you dress in a normal outfit.”

Well, that was rude. Despite my ursine exterior, I was a normal girl at heart. And didn’t he literally just call my uniform weird?

As I sulked, Princess Flora approached me. “Are you Bear?”

I crouched down to get on her level. Then I opened and closed the mouth of my bear puppet in front of her. Would this help her believe it was me? She didn’t react too much to that. Still, she was always calling me “Bear,” so even Princess Flora probably associated me with my clothes.

I patted her on the head. Then Princess Flora’s smile bloomed over her face.

“That’s how Bear pats my head!” She knew it was me from the headpats?!

“Yuna is very gentle when she pats people on the head, after all.”

The other girls started nodding in agreement immediately.

“Uh-huh! When Yuna pats my head, it feels so nice and fluffy.”

“I know exactly what you mean! There’s so much affection in the way Yuna pats heads!”

“Yuna pats my head weally gently.” Even Princess Flora had joined in. I was starting to feel embarrassed.

Chapter 290:
The Bear Watches a Play

THE KING AND QUEEN were now here, and I was beginning to wonder if we needed to get out. I tried to propose that we leave, but…

"You can stay here as long as you're not rowdy," said the king.

"Are you sure?"

"I couldn't shoo you out after seeing Flora like that." The corners of the king's eyes crinkled. He was looking at Princess Flora, who was happily hugging me as I gently stroked her hair.

"I wanna be with Bear," she said, even though I wasn't currently a bear. I guess that was just my name, as far as she was concerned.

"And it's not as though I could shoo out Teilia's guests," the king continued. Thanks to the king and queen's kindness, we were allowed to stay to watch the play.

This was a valuable experience, so I was grateful to be watching. Still, it seemed like everyone other than me was nervous. Misa stood behind Noa as if hiding. Even Noa was standing stick-straight as though she was protecting Misa from the king. Fina had grabbed Shuri's hand so her sister couldn't go off on her own. Only Shuri seemed anywhere close to relaxed.

"You may sit on those chairs, if you wish," he said, pointing at the fancy seats. Was he joking? Just in case, I politely turned him down. "Still, I couldn't recognize you at first because your clothes are different." He turned to the queen. "How could you tell who she was, Kiteia?"

"Why, I'd always be able to recognize a charming young lady, regardless of how she's dressed. I think you ought to pay more attention when you're interacting with others."

My image of the queen completely shifted. Apparently. she hadn't been as nonchalant as I'd thought. I hadn't expected her to recognize me, especially since I'd never taken my bear hood off in front of her.

“I just didn’t think she’d look so different,” he said.

“Well, that’s your failure as a king.”

“I know, I know…and next time, I’ll remember this. No matter what outrageous outfit Yuna wears next, I’ll be able to recognize her.”

Outrageous? Couldn’t he see that I was wearing normal clothes? A normal uniform?! If this uniform was outrageous, then all the students were dressed outlandishly too.

I wanted to tell him all that, but I held my tongue.

As we watched the stage, a bell chimed, signaling the start of the play. School festival or not, I was excited to finally see a real play for the first time in my life.

The curtain rose. It was a love story between a knight and a princess. Despite their love for one another, their different social statuses stood in the way. Yeah, it seemed pretty standard.

The king wanted to let the daughter do what she liked, but an advisor was intent on getting in the way and was hoping to marry her to his son as part of a political ploy. Apparently, the king really loved his daughter in this play. But then again, there was a chance the real king would watch the play, so I suppose they couldn’t make him out to be a villain.

The play continued and the advisor’s son made an appearance. I’d thought the son would be a terrible guy too, but it turned out he was a friend of the knight and sympathized. But the advisor still pressured his son into the marriage, and even hired an assassin to kill the knight. But once the son found that out, he saved his friend, the knight, just in the nick of time and helped him fight back the assassin.

The knight and princess had to overcome a ton of obstacles, but the advisor’s son kept them safe from the shadows.

And you know what? The advisor’s son was kind of hot. Wait, was the son the actual lead?

In the end, the son exposed all of his father’s nefarious deeds and reported

them to the king. Once the advisor found out about that, he went mad with rage and tried to have one of his subordinates kill his son. The knight came to the rescue and a scene started where they both battled alongside each other. The knight successfully saved the son.

The advisor ended up being stripped of his position and the knight and princess married. Then, after watching the two's wedding, the son headed off on his own solo adventure.

To me, the son was the real main character. The son even showed hints of liking the princess in some scenes. It was like he'd sacrificed his own love for the people important to him.

It was a lot of fun overall, though I wished the son could've had a happy ending too. At the very least, they could've made him the main character or something. He worked so hard for his friend, even going as far as exposing his own father's crimes. Couldn't they write a love interest for him, like the princess's younger sister or something? It would've left a better aftertaste.

Even with the disappointing ending, I still had a great time.

"What did you all think of it?" Teilia asked us.

"The advisor's son was very cool," said Fina.

"The princess was pretty," said Shuri.

"I'm glad they defeated the corrupt advisor," said Noa. "But I felt bad for the son."

"I'm glad the princess married the knight," said Misa.

It seemed like they mostly had gotten the same impression as me.

While everyone was talking about their opinions of the play, the king chimed in with something outrageous, "It wasn't too bad, but I think Yuna's picture books might be more moving."

Whoa, what was this guy blurting out?! Immediately, everyone else started chiming in.

"You're right," said the queen. "The way the bear worked so hard for the girl nearly brought me to tears. It would be even more accessible to children if it

were made into a play.” Even she was agreeing.

Princess Flora did look a little bored, now that I thought about it. At Princess Flora’s age, a romance like this might’ve been beyond her. But would they stop all this talk about making my books into a play? Even if they did, it didn’t seem like something any adult would want to see.

“All right, then how about we make a play based on the books?”

“Please, no!” I pleaded. I was already a little embarrassed about the books as it was. I didn’t know what I’d do if they made them into a play. Even Fina was trembling.

“I see. I personally thought it was a good idea, though.”

“If you go through with it,” I said, “I’ll never bring you food again.”

“Oh, my...” The moment I brought food into this, they stopped teasing me. “Even for Flora?”

I shook my head. “I’ll only bring food for her. I won’t give you a crumb, even if you come to her room.”

But if they forbade me from entering the castle, that’d put an end to that. The king thought for a bit. “All right. I won’t do it.”

“Sorry.”

Apparently, food had won out. I guess food was not just the way to a man’s heart, but the way to victory…seriously, it could pack some real power.

Fina looked relieved by the conclusion. I guess anyone would feel weird about having a book modeled after their own life turned into a play. And who was even going to play the bear? Not me, that’s for sure.

The king and queen seemed disappointed, but I wasn’t going to give this my blessing. We’d successfully blocked the play, so I asked Teilia what was on next.

“Next up is the school’s song princess.”

They were closing out with a song by a…“song princess?” The nickname sounded like something out of a manga.

“But you’re a real princess, Teilia,” I said. “Are you the one who’s going to

sing?”

“I don’t think I’m bad at singing, but she’s on another level. She really has earned her nickname.”

Fair enough. If Teilia was saying it, I knew I could get my hopes up.

While I was watching the stage, a girl in a gorgeous white dress came out. She was a student, right? She looked like she was almost too old to be one. She bowed and then burst into song like she was singing in an opera.

As soon as she started, everyone’s eyes were on her as we all listened. Mine, too, of course. Her voice carried all around and felt like it was resonating in my chest. If I could have, I would have recorded it. Unfortunately, my bear phone didn’t have an app for that.

After the song was over, she received the most applause out of all of the shows.

“She had such a pretty voice…” Fina whispered.

Even the young ones were moved. The king and queen had seemed enthralled.

The song princess did a few more pieces after her opener. I wanted to listen to her forever, but it wasn’t long before the ending.

“Mm-hmm, that was lovely to listen to as a closing act.”

“Yes, she has a wonderful singing voice. Teilia, you must practice more as well.”

“Mother, please don’t expect me to reach that level.”

Seriously, that seemed like too much pressure. The song princess was just different from others. It took a mix of talent and work to get that good.

The show seemed over, so the audience started leaving the building. I thanked Teilia for taking us here.

“I’m glad you liked it,” she said, “but I didn’t expect my parents to show up.”

“I didn’t expect you to be here either,” the king said.

“All the same,” said the queen, “it was such a fun time together. Thank you, everyone.”

Everyone let out their strained and nervous replies, and our group started trying to leave.

But Princess Flora gave me a forlorn look as she latched onto my uniform. “You’re leaving, Bear?”

“I’ll be back,” I told her.

“Okay.”

Once I promised that, Princess Flora let me go. I’d need to bring the king some cotton candy before heading back home to Crimonia…

Once we left the balcony box, we were met with several guards on standby, which surprised them. I suppose that was unavoidable, considering they’d only seen the royal family head through the door. But then the king came out too and gave them a quick explanation, so we were allowed to leave without incident.

“Um, Yuna,” Noa said, as we were walking out of the academy at the end of the second day of the festival.

“What is it?”

“What was that about a book you wrote that the king mentioned?”

Now that I thought about it, Noa didn’t know about the picture books. I thought Ellelaura would have told her.

“It’s a book I made for Princess Flora.”

“What’s it about? His Majesty said it was about a bear?”

“I guess it’s about a bear that works really hard for a girl.”

Specifically, it was about me (the bear) helping Fina. I’d taken some creative liberties, but it was inspired by a true story.

“Oooh, I want to see the book too. But Princess Flora has it?”

Right, most people wouldn't assume someone had multiple copies of a book they wrote. I had some of the reprintings, so I could show it to her, but Fina would likely be upset when Noa found out the girl was based on her. It'd be better to ask Fina if she was okay with me showing it to Noa first.

"You're so accomplished, Yuna," said Noa. "You're a powerful adventurer, you're good enough at cooking to open your own restaurant, and you can even draw picture books."

Ehh… The only reason I could be an adventurer was because the god had given me OP powers, and I learned to cook because my parents had abandoned me at home. That was all. As for drawing, I could draw because of the muscle memory I'd developed practicing when I was younger, and that was only a few years ago.

In the end, I voted for the sword dance, concert, and song princess for the second day of the festival. I'd liked the play, but there were some parts of it I just wasn't so crazy about.

Chapter 291:
The Bear Wears Bear Clothes Again

ONCE WE WERE BACK at the mansion, Surilina came to greet us. She seemed surprised by my outfit. “When you’re dressed like that, why, you look like a normal student, Mademoiselle Yuna.”

Finally, someone called me normal for once. No way did my uniform look weird!

“Although,” Surilina continued, “I suppose it might be rude of me to say your bear outfit suits you better.”

That’s right, it *was* rude. I was still a young fifteen-year-old girl. What kind of teenager would be excited to hear that she looked better in a bear onesie?

I headed back to my room and set out to change back.

“Are you changing clothes, Yuna?”

“Yeah, since we’re back home.” I wanted to wear something I could relax in. Plus, I couldn’t wear a uniform forever. I produced my bear onesie from my bear storage, stripped off my uniform, and put my bear outfit back on.

The softness and warmth immediately brought back my sense of security again. Mmm, now *this* was relaxing. This outfit made me feel the most at home. And this onesie, which gave me a comforting safety-blanket-like feeling, also protected me from outside threats.

Ugh, this had to be some kind of curse from the god.

“I like your bear outfit, but I wish you would have stayed in the uniform longer,” Surilina admitted.

I wouldn’t have minded wearing it for longer either, but it just didn’t feel right. Plus, I’d have to wear it tomorrow too, so I didn’t think she needed to look so disappointed. I’d promised Shia I’d wear it again after all, and I intended to keep my word.

After a day of wearing a uniform, I’d learned some things: no one called me “bear,” no one pointed at me, kids stopped approaching me, and people

stopped laughing at me. But for some reason, I still felt like there were a lot of guys looking at me. Maybe I was just still self-conscious because of how people stared at me in my bear outfit though.

I was pretty sure they were actually staring at Teilia, but…it *also* kind of felt like their eyes had been on me too. But…no, I was just some random student and Teilia was the princess.

I was just wrong and thought they were looking at me because I was so self-conscious.

I'd finished changing. When I looked around, I found the kids playing cards. We still had some time until Gran came by to collect Misa.

"Okay, I have the threes." Fina placed two three cards in the center. It looked like they were playing old maid.

"It's the bear card. Normally, I'd be happy about getting the bear card, but for a game, it would mean that I've lost."

Everyone had started calling the joker the bear card. I'd also learned they'd recently started calling the king the bear king, the queen the bear princess, and the jack the bear knight.

They weren't quite right, but the cards were based around bears, so it wasn't exactly a normal pack to begin with. And it wasn't like I could explain a regular playing card to them, so we were here now with those names left uncorrected.

While they were playing, the adventurer Marina came by for Misa.

"I didn't know you were here too, Marina," I said.

"Yes, I'm Lord Gran and Lady Misana's guard. Lady Misana, did you enjoy your day?" Marina asked Misa after exchanging pleasantries with me.

"Yes, it was so fun."

"I'm pleased to hear that. Thank you for taking her around today, Yuna. I wish we could let Lady Misana continue to enjoy herself, but it seems we need to leave tomorrow."

That was too bad. I had been told Gran was at the capital for business. Misa seemed to understand though, so she didn't complain as she said goodbye to everyone.

"Noa," Misa said, "I will make sure to visit Crimonia. Please show me around while I'm there."

"I'll show you all sorts of places," Noa replied.

"I hope we'll see each other again too, Fina, Shuri."

"Yes, please visit us too if you come to Crimonia."

"Misa," Shuri said. "See you later."

They'd all finished making their promises to meet again in Crimonia.

"In that case, if you stop by Crimonia, I'll invite you to my shops," I said.

"Yes, I'll definitely come."

After Misa happily promised me that, she left for home with Marina.

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After Misa left, we joined Shia and Ellelaura on their way home.

"You wouldn't believe it. His Majesty abandoned his work and left with Princess Flora to see the academy festival. Then all his work came to me instead! It was such an ordeal. I wanted to go to the festival too," Ellelaura complained over dinner.

The queen had mentioned the king slipping away. It looked like the serious prince hadn't been the only one who suffered in the collateral damage. Another casualty of the king's negligence…

When Noa told Ellelaura about seeing the king, Ellelaura pouted.

"How sneaky he is! In that case, I should have stolen Princess Flora from him and left for the festival myself."

I knew what she was trying to say, but she couldn't just steal a princess. Jeez, couldn't she pick her words more carefully?

"So, are you and Shuri enjoying the festival?" Ellelaura asked Fina.

“Yes, it has been very fun. There was this wonderful concert we enjoyed today, and a cool play too.”

“The song princess’s song was really pretty,” added Shuri.

Fina and Shuri seemed excited to talk about everything.

“We had special seats to view it from because Lady Teilia took us. But what surprised me the most was Yuna’s uniform. She looked so cute in it!” Noa blurted. Why did she have to mention that?

Ellelaura raised an eyebrow. “Uniform?”

“Yes! Yuna wore Shia’s uniform around the festival today. I like her bear outfit very much, but she wore the uniform well too.”

“Shia told me I was attracting too much attention with my bear outfit,” I explained begrudgingly, “so she made me wear it.” And the outfit kept the usual crowds from pointing me out or calling me a bear.

“But Yuna still caught quite a few stares,” said Shia.

“I think they were looking at Teilia because she’s the princess.” Even if I’d felt like people were watching me, there was no reason for anything like that. I mean, I wasn’t even wearing my bear ensemble! It had to be Teilia’s fault.

“They were staring at Lady Teilia,” said Noa, looking to Fina and Shuri for support, “but they were also looking at you.”

“I doubt it.” Still, now I was looking at them for support too. Because there wasn’t any reason for anyone to stare at me, right?

“Um, I think they were looking at both of you.”

“Wait, what? I mean, Teilia’s a princess so of course they’d stare at her. But I wasn’t—my bear outfit was—look, there was no way they’d stare at me.”

“I…think it’s because you’re pretty, Yuna,” said Fina.

“Pssht! At the age already where you know how to humor people, huh? C’mon, you don’t have to flatter me like that. They were absolutely, definitely, for *sure* just staring because I happened to be with Teilia.”

Fina and Noa seemed exasperated when I said that. But why?

“A uniformed Yuna, eh?” Ellelaura mused. “How I wish I could have seen that.”

“She’s wearing it tomorrow too, so you can see it then,” Noa said, completely unnecessarily.

“Really, now? Then I’m looking forward to tomorrow.”

Right, I couldn’t get out of that. At this rate, she really would end up seeing me in it.

After that, the three others told Ellelaura about the things we saw at the festival and the events we participated in. It seemed Shuri had gotten used to Ellelaura over the past few days. At first she was nervous, but now seemed able to have a normal conversation with her.

That wasn’t too surprising, I guess. I mean, Ellelaura’s a nice person. Still, sometimes she says or does the most ridiculous things. If it weren’t for that, she really would’ve been great.

“I see. I’m glad you’re all enjoying yourselves then.”

We’d been part of lots of events, ate stuff, and watched things. We’d all had fun, me included, and we had to be grateful for Ellelaura inviting us over to the festival in the first place.

“So, how about you, Shia?”

“Thanks to the bear statues Yuna made, we had a lot of customers and sold a lot of cotton candy. And Lady Teilia also helped us today.” Shia also told Ellelaura about the commotion that had been caused by all the advertisement.

“Ha ha! What else would you expect? Of course everyone would come if Lady Teilia told them to.”

Shia sighed. “I just didn’t think it would be that many people.”

I mean, just walking with Teilia attracted stares. The princess had serious influence.

“Do you have work tomorrow as well, Mother?” asked Shia.

“I’m going to the academy with His Majesty tomorrow. I might see you there.”

So His Majesty was attending the festival two days in a row. I’d avoid approaching him tomorrow even if I saw him, though. If anyone saw me being chummy with the king, I’d attract even more attention, which I wanted to be careful to avoid.

Chapter 292:
The Bear Sees the Students' Magic

ON THE THIRD DAY of the festival, I changed into the uniform I borrowed from Shia and finished off the look with my bear feet and hand puppets. After that, I headed over to see Ellelaura. Ellelaura had claimed she wouldn't go to work until she saw me in the uniform, so I promised to show her just that.

"It's just like when you wore that dress. A change of clothes can make a world of difference," Ellelaura said, letting her thoughts slip straight out of her mouth as she looked at me. In other words, the clothes make the woman.

"Not that you're cuter than my own daughters," continued Ellelaura, her parental pride coming in again. She was right, though—Noa and Shia were cute. Still, I wish she wouldn't compare me to them.

After she was satisfied with my outfit, Ellelaura headed out to work and we left the house, although we were a little late.

"I'm going to be with Shia today at the festival." Noa happily walked alongside her sister—they were going to walk around together until the afternoon.

If Ellelaura had been there too, it would have looked like three sisters were going to the festival. Ellelaura looked so young that you would never know that she was thirty-five.

Once we got to the academy, we headed to Shia's stall. As we approached, we saw Maricks and the others prepping.

After chipping in a bit, Shia gave them a nod. "All right. I'll be back after lunch then."

Shia had been so busy the first day that none of them had had a chance to see the festival. On the second day, they'd gotten friends to help, so Cattleya and Timol had taken turns walking around. Today, Shia and Maricks were getting to see the festival.

"Leave the stall to us and have a good time," said Maricks. He saw Shia off,

and our group headed out to walk around.

Shia was showing us around this time, so we headed to the places she wanted to see. We already had plenty of fun, so today we were more just accompanying Shia.

“So, where to?” I asked.

“I was planning on going to the food stalls. But after you left yesterday, some friends came by with food instead.” She told us she’d been so busy the first day that her friends had brought her things the next day. Unlike me, Shia had tons of friends. One of the benefits of a large social circle, I guess. So she wanted to go to places other than the food stalls today.

“The friends who helped from yesterday are having a match with the castle’s knights, so I was hoping to see that. Would you be all right with that?”

We didn’t have any reason to say no, of course, so we headed over to watch the matches.

“It kind of seems like an uneven fight having students fight knights,” I commented. Seemed to me it was obvious who’d win.

“It’s not exactly a real match. The students who are hoping to become knights are using the actual knights as sparring partners for training. But the students are trying to figure out how much they can do, so they’ll actually fight as well as they can.”

I didn’t know that was a thing. It kind of sounded interesting. I usually liked to be the one fighting, but I was looking forward to seeing these matches.

“Oh—it might be a letdown for you, Yuna, but they’re also going to do a magical demonstration before the matches.”

“Shia, are they really?!” Noa chimed in.

“Yes, Noa. I know how you wanted to see magic.”

“Thank you so much, Shia,” Noa said. “I’m so happy.”

We walked for a bit until we reached the field. The academy was pretty big, so this was just one of multiple fields they had. The students there were already casting spells.

“Noa, I’ve never asked, but can you use magic?” It hadn’t crossed my mind to ask until now, so I was curious. I knew Shia could.

“No one’s taught me yet, so I can’t.”

Uh-huh. “So you learn how to at the academy?”

“The academy teaches magic, but some people learn from their parents first.”

“And you haven’t learned it from Cliff or Ellelaura?”

“I’m going to learn before I go to the academy, but they haven’t started teaching me yet.”

“I see. I would’ve thought it’d be better to learn when you’re young.”

In otherworld reincarnation stories, it was pretty common for people to become OP by practicing magic at a young age. They’d end up with more mana or more types of magic that way. If that was the case in this world, it seemed like it’d be better to learn early.

Noa shook her head. “What are you talking about, Yuna? If anyone uses magic when they’re young, it’ll put such a strain on their body, they won’t be able to use magic later.”

“Really?”

“You use magic and you don’t know this?” Noa gave me a dubious look.

Well, it wasn’t like I could use magic in my original world. I only started slinging spells after coming here. Not like I could tell them that though.

Noa started up an explanation for me, “Fundamentally, magic puts a strain on the body, so it’s believed that it’s better to not use magic until one is ten years of age. The earliest anyone learns magic is between the ages of ten and twelve. That’s why it’s so amazing that you can use such powerful magic at your age, Yuna.”

I see. That was why people looked down on me as “some kid” when I went to the adventurer guild…kind of. Okay, the *real* number one reason I got into fights at the guild was because of my outfit.

Still, that explained why no one started up adventuring until they were

thirteen at the earliest. Which meant that there weren't any genius children around using magic in this world. I felt a little disappointed by that. For a world straight out of a fantasy novel, that aspect didn't seem all that fantastical.

Still, Noa's explanation told me why I never saw little kids using magic, or why Noa had never even once asked me to teach her magic. That's one mystery down.

As it began to sink in, though, I started to wonder *why* using magic was bad for kids. Was mana to blame in some way? I couldn't really apply scientific hypotheses to something like mana, of course, so I just left it at that.

"Also," said Noa, "I'm not even sure whether I have enough mana to even use magic yet."

Now that part I had read in my books before. Someone without much mana wouldn't be able to use magic. The people in this world all had mana and used that to activate mana gems. Those with more mana than usual could use magic.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," said Shia, trying to reassure Noa. "Mother and Father and I can use it, so I'm sure you'll be able to too." I had seen Ellelaura use magic back when Misa had been kidnapped, but I didn't know that Cliff could use it too.

Did that make it genetic? Could Tiermina, who used to be an adventurer, use magic too?

"Fina, can Tiermina also use magic?" I asked.

"Yes, she said she can use a little."

"Then there's a chance you and Shuri can too?"

Did I hope they could use magic? I wasn't so sure. I mean, what if Fina and Shuri decided to become adventurers or something? They were like little sisters to me, so I wanted to keep them out of harm's way. Even if magical abilities didn't figure into it, Fina worked as a harvester at the guild, so she already *was* almost one. If she suddenly said she wanted to become an adventurer, I hoped Tiermina and Gentz would stop her.

I placed a hand on Fina's head.

“Yuna?” She looked at me quizzically since I’d done that out of nowhere.

“It’s nothing.” I smiled, which made Fina even more dubious.

While I was worrying about Fina and Shuri’s futures, I turned to look at the field and saw students casting spells at targets. Fireballs shot out from their hands and burned the targets. Others shot off clods of earth to break them. An audience had gathered around them and applauded whenever they hit the targets.

“People who can’t use magic don’t have many opportunities to see it, so this is pretty popular.”

No one was using really flashy magical displays though, probably because it would have been dangerous, or possibly because they couldn’t pull it off yet.

“I’d like to learn magic soon too,” said Noa.

Shia shook her head. “You can’t until you have permission from our parents.”

“I know. I wouldn’t without permission.”

Soon enough, the students who could use wind and water magic arrived and the field was astir. I didn’t see anyone who could use ice magic though. Maybe it was hard?

While we were watching the students, we saw some of them make a commotion.

“Wonder what’s going on?” I looked over at the commotion and—wouldn’t you know it?—there was the king. Teilia was with him, wearing her uniform. Guards surrounded the pair. I’d thought Princess Flora would be there, but I didn’t see her or the queen.

“Mother?” said Shia.

“Oh, guess so.” I saw Ellelaura standing a short distance away from the king. She noticed us, smiled, and waved. Shia and the others waved back, and Ellelaura seemed happy to see it.

I knew she’d be at the festival with the king, but I hadn’t thought we’d run into them in the middle of such a bustling event. I thought Ellelaura would head over to the king, but she came to us instead.

“What a coincidence! Looks like my love for my daughters led me right to you.” Ellelaura looked pleased with herself. “Why are you all at this particular event, hm?”

“I came to cheer one of my friends who’s hoping to become a knight,” said Shia.

“Oh, that sounds delightful.” She looked at Shia with suspicion in her eyes.

“Deli—oh, Mother, I think you’ve gotten the wrong idea. My friend is a girl.”

“Oh, is she?” Ellelaura looked disappointed.

Right. I also assumed Shia was talking about a boy when she mentioned her friend wanted to be a knight.

“Come to think of it, isn’t Maricks trying to become a knight too? I think you mentioned that his dad is one.” At least, that’s kind of how he acted.

“Maricks was debating whether to enter or not, but he chose cotton candy instead.”

Wait, seriously? Maricks?

“And since his father is in the Order of Chivalry,” Shia continued, “he can have a match with a knight anytime he’d like. Or so he claims.”

Well, it made sense that he could spar with his dad whenever he wanted.

“But I think he’d regret his decision if he knew the king was here. There aren’t many opportunities to be seen by the king like this.”

It did seem like a good opportunity for the students to catch the king’s eye. When I thought of it that way, I wondered whether Maricks would be jealous if he knew the king recognized me…or recognized me as a bear, at the very least.

Not that I felt all that blessed to be recognized by the king, personally.

Chapter 293:
The Bear Hears More about Nobles from Ellelaura

"YOU DON'T NEED to go back, Ellelaura?"

Ellelaura had sat down next to us instead of returning to the king's side. "It's all right. He has knights as guards and I'm just accompanying them. My job is to just stop him if he tries to do anything reckless."

Hold up, Ellelaura was supposed to be *stopping* him? They seemed way too similar in personality for that to work. "Mix one reckless person with another, grill for five minutes, and you've just whipped up a recipe for disaster!" I hoped she wouldn't fan the flames, so to speak.

The king was probably also the only person who could stop Ellelaura from being too reckless. In a way, they might have been each other's deterrents.

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While we were watching the magic practice, the students realized that the king had made an appearance and started to try showing off to him. Some of the students tried to use flashier spells, but the teacher came to the rescue and stopped them. I'd wanted to see that kind of stuff, but the teacher knew it'd be too dangerous.

Instead, then the students tried to show off with quantity…which meant that their aim deteriorated, and they actually started missing more. Finally, you had students who just sat down, as though they had run out of mana.

I couldn't tell whether they didn't have much mana to begin with or if they'd just used it all up doing a whole lot of nothing. Either way, it seemed to me like they should have been more thoughtful with their spells.

"Do you want to try too, Yuna?" Ellelaura asked as I watched the students.

"I think I'm all right," I answered. "I'm not a student, after all." Plus, if I used magic in front of everyone, I'd stick out like a sore thumb. That'd be a pain.

"No one will be any the wiser while you're dressed like that," Ellelaura said.

"No, thank you."

“Oh, now that’s too bad.”

I decided to change the subject. “How powerful are they all, anyway?”

“Hmm…I think they’re a little above average, as far as students here go. The truly powerful students wouldn’t sign up for a display like this.”

So about average then, give-or-take. How powerful were the top students?

After a while, the magic demonstration wrapped up and the students stood in front of the king to bow. The king replied to them with a standard “I hope you continue to strive for excellence.” Still, they seemed happy that the king had addressed them as they left.

Guess hearing from the king made people happy like that, even though he was really just a normal guy who’d skip out on work and clamor on about food. Not one of these students had witnessed that, so he probably seemed like a dignified king. Then again, I thought the same thing the first time I met him too. The more I talked to him, the more that dignified image crumbled.

Once the students had filed out after their magic demonstration, a new crop of students made their way onto the field, carrying swords. Maybe the friend Shia had talked about was among them?

All of the students seemed nervous, probably because of the whole “the reigning monarch is watching us” thing. They all bowed to the king and started up their one-on-one matches with each other. Apparently, they were doing that in smaller groups rather than all at once. After that, they began their matches with the actual knights.

I looked at the waiting students and saw three girls among them.

“There aren’t many girls,” I said. On the other hand, there were about twenty boys.

“Not many young women try to become knights. The male knights discourage them until they quit,” Ellelaura told me.

“Then why are they still trying to become knights?”

“Well, when the queen married His Majesty, she needed knights as guards and preferred to have women. Until then, only men had become protector

knights. But because of the queen's request, women now guard her."

I guess the argument was that male knights were more powerful when it came to physical strength. But guards follow someone around in all sorts of situations, so it kind of sent a shiver through my spine when I imagined the kinds of situations they might sit in on.

Yeah, I got where the queen was coming from here.

"Also, with Lady Teilia's birth, they began to anticipate the need for more female guards. Those very girls—right over there—hope to serve Lady Teilia."

Protector knights for Teilia. I could understand why they were there now. I'd only met Teilia two days ago, but she seemed innocent and kind to her people. Whenever Teilia had made her way to anyone's stall, they all seemed ecstatic. Everyone loved her, and it was no surprise that some students wanted to stand beside Teilia and help her.

"So is your friend trying to become one of Teilia's knights too, Shia?"

"She spoke once with Lady Teilia and she's been smitten ever since. Since they first met, she's trained with her sword until her hands were covered in blisters. I think she's likely more excited about Lady Teilia coming to see them than His Majesty."

Actually, all the girls here had been excitedly looking at Teilia rather than the king.

"Are there mages who act as guards too?" I thought mages might make good protectors.

"There are. Her Majesty's initial guards were female mages, after all. But those who can't use magic can only become knights. It's much quicker, though, to use swords for dealing with an approaching enemy rather than spells. Still, both mages and knights usually guard the royal family."

Did that mean Shia's friend couldn't use magic?

The first match ended. Next up was one of the girls.

"Yuna, that's my friend Linea."

Linea, a short-haired girl who was about to start her match, readied her narrow sword. With that, the match began.

She swung her sword as hard as she could in a clash with one of the male students. Their swords clanged together again and again. Each time, Linea was pushed back. When I looked more carefully, I noticed there was a difference in their statures. Maybe the boys really were better suited to being knights and soldiers.

Linea spent the entire match getting pushed back. The moment they finished, the next one started.

"Is that you, Madame Ellelaura? What are you doing in a place like this?" As we watched the matches, a man in his forties dressed in armor addressed Ellelaura. She seemed peeved. When the man saw Ellelaura's expression, he smirked.

I recognized that grin. He looked at Ellelaura and Noa with that exact same expression the other day, when we ran into him during the knights' practice at the castle.

"Lord Lutum. What are you doing here?"

"The third-order knights I oversee are here to act as sparring partners for the students aspiring to knighthood."

"Odd. I heard that the fourth order was doing that."

"Is that so? I suppose there must have been some…*misunderstanding*." His lips twisted up into a mockery of a smile.

"I suppose this must be your daughter, Mademoiselle Shia?" Lutum looked her over. I noticed Shia shudder.

"What's it to you?" Ellelaura said. She stepped in front of Shia, who seemed to slink back a little behind her mother. "Why did you come all the way here? Not particularly commendable, being absent when you ought to be leading your knights."

"You're hardly one to talk, Madame Ellelaura. I have fine knights who can manage without me. I've made my way here because I saw you and your

daughter. Once again, I'd like to ask for your blessing in the matter of the betrothal between Mademoiselle Shia and my son..."

Everyone was stunned into shocked silence. It was simply that absurd. The other girls were so taken aback that they'd frozen on the spot.

Betrothal? He wanted to marry them off?

"I do recall we already declined your offer."

"I thought it was a most excellent proposal," said Lutum.

"Yes, I'm sure you would. I'm sure you're aware of the great problem that would stand in the way of any nuptials."

"And what would that be?"

"Oh, you didn't know? You see, Lutum, I despise you."

I sympathized, but Ellelaura was being way too direct.

"What a coincidence. I despise you as well."

"I'm glad our feelings are mutual."

They both broke out into laughter. What was up with them…?

"Well, as fellow enemies, I'm sure we can put all this talk of marriage behind us."

"Mm. You know, I've heard a strange rumor as of late," Lutum said, changing the subject. "It seems a tunnel was discovered in Crimonia, and that you've begun trading with the seaport on the other side."

"Oh? Where could you have heard of that?"

"Anyone would, of course, look into the town where their son's future bride resides."

"When did she become his fiancée? And Shia's husband would be adopted into our estate. She would not join any other family."

"Then we have no issues. I would allow my son to join your family. The family of Roland gladly offers him as your son-in-law."

"No, thank you." I could practically hear the sparks of anger flying.

“But I do wonder how you made the tunnel…? Rumor has it you discovered a cave.”

“I hardly think I’d tell you.”

I made it. If he didn’t know that, then they’d been successful with their cover story.

“It’ll be between you and me. You can tell me.”

“And here I was, thinking we were hardly on amicable terms.”

“We are close enough I would be willing to part with my next-of-kin.”

“The orphanage was…an unfortunate incident.”

“That it was, considering that an intruder brought about their deaths.”

They both laughed. I couldn’t take it anymore.

Shia and Noa were hiding behind Ellelaura, and Fina and Shuri were both clutching my uniform. The dark, adult conversation they were having was not a good influence on the kids.

“I would like to make sure such a thing never happens again. To that end, here I am, offering my son.”

“I accept your sentiments, but only that. And Cliff has strengthened security in order to prevent such an incident from happening again.”

They both smiled—scarily.

“Why don’t we ask Mademoiselle Shia herself? It may change your mind somewhat if she desires the union?” Lutum smiled as he looked at Shia, who was still behind Ellelaura. “Would you marry my boy? He is a strong knight and would protect you your whole life.”

“I-I must decline.” Shia seemed scared, but she still worked up the courage to talk.

“Please don’t be so hasty. Meet the lad, at the very least.”

“If you could please stop?” Ellelaura stood to block him from Shia again. “You’re frightening her.”

Lutum instead looked out at the field.

“It appears that the matches with my knights will be starting soon. Perhaps you will change your mind after seeing those.”

On the field, the students were bowing to the knights and beginning the matches. The knights readied themselves, but none attacked. Only the students went on the offensive. The knights did, however, counterattack when they saw an opening. The difference between them was stark.

As I watched, I remembered what it was like when I was playing PVP games. If you specialized in offense, getting hit was a scary thing. But if you were a tank, you didn’t take much damage. Then there were also those with low offense who were still quick on their feet. I’d seen plenty of people who balanced their stats and just as many who used specialized fighting styles.

Depending on the range of your stats and equipment, there were a ton of ways to fight, which made things interesting. The memories took me back.

Chapter 294:
The Bear Fights for the Fochrosé Family

THE MATCHES BETWEEN the knights and students ended. They exchanged pleasantries, and then left. The next competitors appeared. Shia's friend was one of them.

"And now the female students will have their turn." Lutum smiled unpleasantly. "One can only hope they escape injury."

"You mustn't have…"

"Now, this isn't happening because you turned down the proposal. I only took up the job because I heard that girls were trying to become knights. Knighting is, as we all know, a man's game."

"You still really are going on about that? We already have female knights."

"And most of them are just knights in name. They'll never amount to anything. I cannot have them defiling the good name of knighthood."

Yeesh. This Lutum guy wasn't exactly into equal rights for lady knights.

"We need female knights for Lady Teilia and Lady Flora's sakes. Do you really intend to go against His Majesty's own wishes?"

Hm. I had to admit, I did sort of get where Lutum was coming from. Just watching the matches, the guys had been able to hold their own, but the girls hadn't exactly shown their stuff as knights. That said, even though they weren't as physically powerful, the girls were fast. There were ways to fight to compensate for a lack of strength, and it definitely wasn't true that only guys made good knights.

"But what would His Majesty think," he said, "if he witnessed all the female knight hopefuls get crushed before his eyes?"

"Lord Lutum…"

"Why, if they were injured, I'm sure we would no longer have any girls hoping to become knights at all."

"Linea!" Shia yelled toward Linea in the field, who was already lifting her

sword to face off against a knight.

“I do hope your friend doesn’t suffer from any grave injuries.”

“Is this a threat?”

Lutum smiled. “It wasn’t intended to be. I simply am making His Majesty aware of the current state of affairs.”

“If they’re injured, the blame will all fall on you though.”

“And I will apologize very sincerely. But they were so weak, you see, that the knights had trouble holding back. Someone seeking to become a knight ought to be a bit more powerful, after all. In such an unfortunate time, I’m sure that His Majesty will be in need of counsel, and I shall offer my opinion: that we should leave knighting to the men. If women wish to become guards, let them become mages.”

Linea’s sword had been flung away by a swipe from the knight she faced. She held her arm now, gritting her teeth in pain. Still, she lifted her sword once again.

“I wonder how long she will last,” said Lutum.

“You…”

“By the end of the match, she might never be able to hold a sword again.” He flashed Ellelaura that slimy smile of his.

I really wanted to punch that grin off his face. Was that allowed? No, I’d probably put Ellelaura in a bad position. Hmm…I didn’t know what to do. I tried to think of a good way to let off some steam.

Since I was immobilized by Fina and Shuri, who were clutching my uniform, I asked them to move back so I could move freely.

“Then what would you say to a deal?” Lutum said in an oily voice. “If you accept the proposal, I will give the signal for him to stop. What do you say?”

“You think we would accept such unreasonable demands?”

“Why don’t we ask her daughter for her opinion?”

Shia was still staring at Linea. With every attack from Linea, the knight would

act like he was blocking it…and then firmly swing his sword at her. Then, he raised his blade and brought it down right on her. Linea blocked, and he'd go in for another swing. Another block, another swing, and she couldn't stand it anymore—her sword went flying from her hands. She rubbed her arm. It looked painful.

Still, she picked up her sword through the pain. The match started up again. This time the knight body-slammed into her and tried to push her down by brute force. Linea was being cornered. I was getting pretty close to my limit.

"Would you like to take her place, Mademoiselle Shia? If you win, I promise not to interfere with the young women seeking to become knights. But should you lose, you will marry my son. What do you say?"

She couldn't agree to it. Shia wouldn't have been able to win. "I…"

"And how about I throw in my youngest for Mademoiselle Noire? I think it's a splendid idea to have all the siblings marry, don't you think?" The moment he said Noa's name, she shuddered.

This conversation was going down a dangerous route. That was it. Couldn't take it anymore.

"If I win against that knight," said Shia, "would you promise to stop interfering with the female knights?"

"Shia!" Ellelaura yelled.

"I'll promise. But if you lose, we'll see to that marriage."

Dirty. It was like he'd taken a hostage.

"If I fight in Linea's place..." Shia started. I tugged at her arm and stopped her.

"Shia, I'll fight in your place."

"Yuna?"

I had seen enough. There was no way I could let him force Shia or Noa to get married.

"And who would you be, miss? This is a matter between the Fochrosés and the Rolands. I must ask that you refrain from interjecting, miss."

I wasn't going to listen to him, of course. "Ellelaura, would you let me handle this?"

"Yuna…"

I didn't even want to imagine Shia marrying this toad's spawn. Or Noa either. If Shia married this man's son, Crimonia would basically be his. My house and shops were in that town. The orphans lived there too. I couldn't let this guy have his way with my town. With my home.

Ellelaura looked at the girl in the match, then me, then Shia and Noa.

"All right. We're counting on you, Yuna." Ellelaura stood in front of Lutum. "We will take you up on that match. But I'd like to change the conditions. If she loses, I will quit my job."

Lutum's eyes went wide from disbelief as he stared at Ellelaura.

"You hate that I'm by His Majesty's side, isn't that right?" asked Ellelaura. "If she loses, I'll return to Crimonia. That's more than enough for you, isn't it?"

Lutum smiled. "You really mean that? You'll leave your own social standing in the hands of this little girl?" The longer he looked me over, the bigger his vile smile grew.

"I will," said Ellelaura. "If she loses, I'll leave my post. But why don't we raise the stakes? Bet your job too. If she wins, why don't you leave your job in the Order of Chivalry?"

"Ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha! Fine by me. Then I accept. Don't you forget what you said here."

"And you as well."

Lutum cackled. This was really getting out of hand.

"Rotas! That's enough!" Lutum roared. The knight who was fighting Linea stopped. A weight seemed to drop from Shia's shoulders.

"I can't hold you to your word if it's just an oral arrangement," said Lutum, "so I'd like to ask His Majesty to be a witness." Lutum walked away with a smug

expression plastered on his face.

“I’m sorry for getting you involved in this,” said Ellelaura. “I really should have dealt with it. But Lutum has his own sway on things.”

“I’m all right with this. But how far can I take the fight?” I pretended to shadowbox.

“You can fight as you like,” said Ellelaura, managing to look fairly cheerful. “If you lose, I’ll only forfeit my job. Then I’d be able to help Cliff out in Crimonia.”

“No,” said Shia sadly. “I’d end up in the capital all alone.” Shia appealed sadly to Ellelaura, who was upbeat about this whole thing.

“Then I really will need to win then.” I smiled reassuringly at Shia.

“But you can’t let your guard down. He is an excellent knight as well.”

Of course I wouldn’t. Without my bear onesie, I basically had no defense. I wasn’t planning on letting my guard down though, especially when Ellelaura’s job was on the line. Losing wasn’t an option.

We followed Lutum to the king.

“What? Why are you two both here?”

“We have a request for you, Your Majesty.” Lutum looked respectful as he addressed the king. “Madame Ellelaura and I would like to have a match in which we have staked our jobs. We would like to ask you to observe it.”

The king scowled. “You’ve staked your *jobs*?”

“Indeed. If my knight wins, Madame Ellelaura will withdraw from her position. If my knight loses, I shall withdraw from mine.”

“I’ll go home to Cliff if I lose,” said Ellelaura chipperly. “We’re counting on you.” Maybe Ellelaura actually wanted to go back to Crimonia?

“As your king, I can’t allow you to go around deciding something like this.”

Hmm. Fair enough.

“I believe we’re free to leave our jobs as we like.”

That *also* seemed plausible.

The king looked over at me. “And you’re the one who’s fighting?” I nodded slightly. “And who is fighting against whom?”

“I offer my knight, Figo.”

“And I’ll have her fight for me.” Ellelaura looked at me.

The king looked me in the eyes, his expression positively screaming *Of course it’s you.*

Ellelaura gave him a look back, as if to ask *Do you doubt she could do it, Your Majesty?* It was like a conversation of pure expression.

But the conversation was done, now, and they were looking at me.

“And what,” said the king after a moment of silent consideration, “is your name?”

My name? But he knew who I was. Was he going senile?

“His Majesty is being considerate,” Ellelaura whispered to me. “It would be an issue if we used your real name, of course.”

Oh, right. That made sense. I tried to think of a name…but I couldn’t think one up so quickly.

“It’s, ah. Yu…una. Yu’una!”

The king looked completely exasperated by my “fake” name. Hey, that’s what you get when you put somebody on the spot!

“Yu’una, then. You truly intend to fight a knight?”

“For my friend, Lady Shia, I will fight.” Since there were other people around watching us, I made sure to call Shia a lady. She *was* a noble, after all.

“All right. Then I will witness the match.”

“Thank you.” Smiling, Lutum bowed his head.

Hmm, I didn’t feel like this would make me feel better. If I was stuck fighting the knight, I wouldn’t get to punch Lutum. “Your Majesty, if I may?”

“What’s that?”

When I addressed the king directly, everyone seemed surprised.

“It seems like Lut—*Lord* Lutum—doesn’t care for women much and doesn’t want any to become knights.” I didn’t want to call him a lord, but I was in front of the king, so…

“Why, of course!” Lutum broke in. “Knighting is a man’s occupation. The fairer sex is weak by nature and therefore ill-suited to the task. It was plain to see in the earlier match that the women were clearly inferior compared to the men. Those tasked with protecting Your Majesty—as well as Lady Teilia and Princess Flora—deserve only the mightiest, most manly knights in the land.”

“I’ve told you many a time that I will only allow male knights to serve my daughters if they demand it.”

“But it is their lives on the line.”

“I have a proposal to make about that,” I chimed in, and both the king and Lutum whirled around to face me. “If I win against the knight you’ve selected, why don’t you also fight me, Lut—Lord Lutum? And if I win, you are to never speak about women that way again.”

Somehow, I managed to call him a lord again without losing my lunch. The king and other people were around, so I couldn’t get all disrespectful. Still, I wasn’t used to it.

“You mean to say you want to battle a captain of the knights? You? A student?”

I ignored him and addressed the king. “He thinks women are weak, but there are those of us who will grow stronger with training. It’s a mistake to abandon them before they even get a chance to develop their talents.”

“Unlike male knights, it would take effort and labor to train female knights,” Lutum argued. “It’s a waste of valuable time.”

Sure, there were jobs that were easier for men and jobs easier for women, but that didn’t limit those jobs to one sex or the other. Some people had natural talent, and some needed to be trained. And sure, the former would have an easier time at first.

Even in games, some players are quick on the uptake and others can’t learn something new even after they do it a hundred times. If someone’s making a

party, they'd want the former. If there were a choice between getting a player with high starting stats or low, you'd pick the former.

I knew what he was trying to say, but I didn't like the idea of dismissing people from the start. Sure, some people were slow and others fast, but others could learn and even thrive if they got the chance. I didn't want women to lose their path to knighthood.

I turned to the king. "If I win, I'd like Lord Lutum to reconsider his position on women. And I'd like him to acknowledge women can be knights. I believe that if Lord Lutum revises his viewpoint, others will too. If he just continues to look down on women, I'd like to ask that you punish him."

When I, a peasant, asked him to punish a noble, murmurs ran through the crowd.

"Lutum, what say you to Yu'una's request?" he asked.

"Ha ha ha! I'm sorry, Your Highness, it's just… Why, what can one do in the face of something so preposterous but laugh? Of course I accept the conditions, but what happens if you lose?"

"Are you really going to make demands of a girl, who's just a student, in a duel she has no chances of winning?" I said, with a smidge of fragility in my voice.

Lutum looked at the king and the people around him. Whatever he wanted to reply with, he didn't seem able to say it in front of the king. He already looked like he had an unfair advantage, making me fight a knight before I could *even* get to him.

"You're right. Since you have no hopes of winning this challenge, in homage to you, I won't request a thing from you when you lose. Not that you'd be able to win against Figo in the first place." He smiled again. The smarmy jerk was positively walking on sunshine.

"I hope you won't forget you said that."

As soon as Lutum accepted the conditions, the king and Ellelaura, who knew how strong I really was, seemed exasperated. The people who didn't know who I was looked troubled for different reasons.

Still, everyone here would act as witnesses. I'd crush this annoying middle-aged man right in front of everyone.

Chapter 295:
The Bear Prepares for the Match

AFTER I FINISHED TALKING with the king, I headed back over to Shia.

She came over to us, her head turned down. “Yuna, um, I’m sorry. You got into this mess because of me.”

“It’s not your fault.” The only one to blame here was Lutum, the grown-up who couldn’t think about how the kids would feel.

Noa, Fina, and Shuri looked just as anxious as Shia.

“But…”

“You and I are friends, aren’t we?” I phrased it as a question, but now I was overthinking that a little. Man, what if she said no? Or worse yet, what if she said she’d never be friends with an embarrassing person who dresses as a bear!

“I respect you as a person, Yuna.” That…wasn’t exactly what I was hoping for. “You’re powerful and good at cooking, you know so many things, and you protect me. I’m happy to be your friend.”

Phew! Bullet dodged. We really were friends. “In that case,” I said, “of course I’d want to protect you, just like you wanted to protect Linea.”

“Oh, Yuna… I’m so grateful.” Shia gave me a full smile.

“Sh-Shia, that’s not fair.” Noa latched onto my arm and looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes. “You’re my friend too, aren’t you?”

I didn’t know how to respond when she looked at me like that.

“I-I suppose you’re something like a sister to me.”

“A sister?”

“Yeah, a slightly stubborn but cute little sister.”

“Stubborn…? Am not! Yuna, that’s so mean!” Noa pouted and protested, but she couldn’t hide her smile. At that moment, Shia hugged Noa as though she were trying to keep her from getting taken away.

“Noa is my little sister. Even if you’re my friend, Yuna, I won’t let you have Noa.”

“Shia… You’re…crushing me…”

Shia and I looked at Noa, who seemed very uncomfortable being squeezed. We both laughed.

“Well, I’ve lost Noa, but I still have two adorable little sisters.” I grabbed Fina and Shuri.

“Yuna?”

“Yuna!”

The two of them looked very uncomfortable being hugged by me too.

But with that conversation, all their anxiety disappeared the moment they smiled. If I lost the match, I’d make them sad again. Yeah, I absolutely had to win.

When I turned to the place where we would be battling, I found Lutum instructing all of the knights except for one to withdraw.

The crowd was abuzz now, watching the new event take shape. We hid the fact that it was a bet, opting instead to tell the audience and students that it was a special match. Because of that, even the people who were about to leave decided to hang around.

Lutum was telling something to the knight he had asked to stay. Was I going to be up against that guy?

“Is that knight very powerful, Ellelaura?”

“He is. He might be the most powerful in Lutum’s order. It seems he’s not holding back in the slightest.”

Even if he was the top knight in Lutum’s order, he still wasn’t the top knight in the country. But if he was choosing the strongest knight from his order, he sure wasn’t letting his guard down even up against someone who looked weak like me. Of course, I wasn’t going to let my guard down either, no matter who he put against me.

“So, what were you discussing with His Majesty?” I asked Ellelaura. After she’d finished talking with Lutum, the king had signaled with his eyes for her to stay behind and they’d had a conversation.

“He scolded me and told me not to do anything reckless. ‘Think of who you’d inconvenience by quitting!’ That sort of thing.”

Well, yeah, I suppose he would get mad that she’d bet her resignation. Even Ellelaura, who was always running out on her work, was an important asset to the king. When all was said and done, the two were actually a great match.

“Personally, I wouldn’t mind going home to Crimonia. Then I’d be able to eat your food, Yuna.”

My food wasn’t the actual reason she was heading back to Crimonia, was it? I felt bad for Cliff if that were the case.

“Also, His Majesty asked if I thought you could win.”

“The only way to know is to try. If that knight is stronger than a wyrm or a black viper, then all bets are off.” I hadn’t fought with him before, so what else could I say?

“Yuna, I think you’re comparing mira berries to orans…” Did she have to look at me like that? She seemed exasperated. Come on, I had no idea how powerful people could get in this world.

Hm. It looked like the knight was armed. “Ellelaura, are we using swords for the match?”

The only thing resembling a sword I had was the cypress stick I’d picked up at the beginning outside of some cheap swords. I had my mithril knives too, but it wasn’t like I could fight off a knight with those things.

“This is a training match, so yes, he would be using training swords. Shia, could you go borrow one?”

Shia nodded and headed off to get a sword for me. There wouldn’t be a difference in our equipment, then.

Before long, Shia was back. “Yuna, here’s a training sword. This is Linea’s, so I think you’ll be able to use it. She’s got a frame like yours.”

“Thank you.”

I took the sword from Shia and unsheathed it. It seemed shorter and thinner than the other knights’ swords—a girl’s sword, maybe. As such, it was the perfect size for someone as short as me.

I swung the sword lightly to test it out. To the right, then the left. A swing, a thrust. I practiced those a few more times and finally twirled the sword around before sheathing it. Yeah, seemed fine. I’d gotten the hang of it. It’d been a while, but I still had that muscle memory.

“You’re amazing, Yuna,” said Noa.

“You’re so spiffy, Yuna,” said Ellelaura.

The girls looked at me reverently. It made me feel kinda awkward.

“Yuna, will you be ready soon? Lutum seems to be waiting,” asked Shia.

I nodded, then gave each of the girls a light pat on the head. “All right, I’m going up.”

With the preparations out of the way, the knight had also made his way to the center of the field. The audience went into a frenzy when I appeared.

I was introduced as the representative of the girls at the academy, and the audience started saying all kinds of things: “Who is that?” “I’ve never seen her in my life.” “That little girl is representing all of them?”

Ugh. Lutum had been hoping to degrade women even further and had told everyone I was representing the girls on purpose. If I lost horribly, the audience would assume girls were weak, which I guess he thought would be good publicity for him. Though I doubted that a knight defeating someone as small (by this world’s standards) as me would really be all that convincing. I mean, if I *did* lose, people would probably think it was all a matter of course.

But…I didn’t plan on losing.

I stood in front of the knight. My head came up to his chest. He was a big enough guy that I had to crane my neck to see his face. He seemed like he was in his mid-twenties, maybe? He wore armor and held a shield in his left hand, though he kept his sword sheathed.

I heard the audience of students worrying about me.

“C’mon, is that little waif going to be all right out there?”

“Just look at them. With that big of a difference, this isn’t even a fair match.”

“And she hasn’t even got anything to protect herself with!”

My opponent was wearing protective gear, but all I had was a school uniform. The only protection I had was my bear onesie, but I couldn’t wear that.

“Miss, where’s your armor?” the knight asked.

“You won’t hit me, so I don’t need any. Are you going to be okay wearing such heavy armor?” A shield plus metal armor seemed pretty clunky, but it also meant he was well defended. I’d need to aim for his joints or his feet then, I guess.

The knight looked me over, thought for a bit, then said, “You’re right. I can’t have anyone pinning the loss on the armor, so I’ll fight under the same conditions.”

Now *that* surprised me.

“Figo!” Lutum shouted when he heard the knight say that. “You lunk! Do you understand how important this match is?!”

“I am well aware, Captain Lutum, which is precisely why I’ve made this proposition. Madame Ellelaura has sent this girl out. Therefore, she cannot be weak. No, I believe that she must be quick based on how slight she is. In that case, I should also allow myself to be nimble. If I wear armor, I might not be able to respond in kind.”

Lutum looked to me now. “I suppose you’re right, Figo. Ellelaura seems to trust her enough to put her in this match, so that’s a safe assumption. Don’t let your guard down.”

Once he had permission from Lutum, the knight called over his companions, handed them the shield, and started taking off his armor.

He stripped down to his casual clothing, and his muscular body was plain to see. It was the kind of body a guy like Lutum would just love to show off as “proof” that knights should be men. But muscles weren’t the only thing that can

determine the outcome of a battle, even if they could really help.

“You shouldn’t assume that I’m slow,” he said.

“Armor or no, I don’t think you’ll be able to keep up with me,” I gave the knight advice, just like he’d given some to me.

All he replied with was a “Got it.” Unlike Lutum, this guy seemed to act like a real knight…but he also didn’t seem like he was going to hold back. Maybe that’s why he wanted to fight under the same conditions.

If he’d made fun of me or been a little ruder, I could’ve just let off some steam by fighting him…not that I planned on holding back. I’d *never* planned on holding back, because I knew well that it wasn’t going to be easy.

“Miss, I’m sorry, but Captain Lutum instructed me not to hold back,” he said, as if reading my mind. “I ask you to please consider losing before I injure you.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Now this reminded me of my gaming days. Back when I played my game, I’d fought burly men like him. Sorry, Ellelaura, but I was planning on enjoying this.

“You’re an odd girl. Most would be frightened at this point. Or starting to shake, at least.”

I let a smile slip onto my face. “I can’t lose here.”

“I can’t either.”

We both had too much to lose in this match. I needed to win for Ellelaura and Shia. He needed to win to defend the dignity of knighthood, so he couldn’t lose to a girl like me.

“All right. We will begin the match. Face attacks are off-limits.”

I guess that also meant no kneeing him in the groin—that was supposed to be the absolute worst place to get hit for a guy. Obviously, I didn’t know from personal experience, but you pick stuff up.

“And we can also call an end to the match.”

“Then let’s begin,” I answered, and the two of us took our distance from each other.

Lutum and Ellelaura, who were both referees to make sure the fight was fair, also moved away. We couldn't have Lutum making biased judgments, and there was a chance Ellelaura would be too soft as well. If the two of them both judged, though, it would be fair.

"You stop her in her tracks before she gets injured."

"That's what *I* should be saying. You could let her have the win and lose on purpose."

The two referees were at each other's throats. They'd already started their own brawl of words before we'd started our match.

"But Yuna, don't push yourself too hard," said Ellelaura. "Even if you lose, I'd just go home to Crimonia, so don't worry about it. And don't forget that there are people worried about you."

"Figo, you don't need to hold back," said Lutum. "Prove that only men should be knights."

And the knight and I readied our swords.

Chapter 296:
The Bear Fights the Knights

THE MOMENT THE SIGNAL for the match went off, the knight ran at me. I hadn't been planning to just watch him, but he ended up being faster than I expected.

Once he closed the distance between us, he flourished his sword. Because we were different heights, it felt like the sword was coming down on me from overhead. I brought my blade up to block him. The sound of clashing metal echoed throughout the place, a sign that we were both serious about this fight. Neither of us were holding back.

But yes, I could block this. I would be fine. I had always planned on blocking the first blow and adjusting my fighting style after seeing how it went.

"Miss, this cannot be true," said Figo. "You should not have been able to easily parry my blade. It wasn't that weak of a swing. What is happening?"

The knight looked alarmed that I'd been able to meet his blow. What, did he think he could end this with one strike?

He tried to push me even harder, but no dice. Instead, I pushed back very slightly using my sword. The knight hopped back to get away, and in that moment, the crowd cheered.

Still, all I did was block his blow. It wasn't anything to cheer about. What mattered was that I knew now that I could stop his strike, at least while I wore the bear puppets.

Next, I just needed to fend off the knight's attacks and try swinging at him.

Slowly, the knight approached again.

This time I tried attacking him. I thrust my sword up from below, but he easily parried that and didn't hesitate to counter. I twisted to dodge and used the momentum to swing my sword to the side. The knight retreated and my sword cut through the air.

We'd only traded blows for a moment, but I knew from the exchange that he

might really be strong.

“Ha ha…ah ha ha ha!” The knight started to laugh. “I knew Madame Ellelaura would find an opponent like you. Just who are you, miss? A mere student couldn’t block one of my swings, let alone dodge me.”

“You also blocked my attack.” I should have been able to land it on him normally, but he’d dodged it. His sword fighting was likely on par with the top players of the game.

“I wouldn’t have been able to dodge it if I had my armor and shield.”

“But you could have blocked it with your shield, right?” Yeah, he definitely would’ve been able to.

“Figo! Why are you having so much trouble with that little girl? Hurry up and finish this!”

“He can say what he wishes. Just know that I’m not going down that easily, miss.”

I readied my sword again. “Then can you stop this strike as well?” I moved back in order to get enough distance to parry, but the knight moved in closer. I ran to the right and the knight chased me.

Hmm…maybe he really *was* more agile with his armor off. If I ran as fast as I could with my bear shoes, I’d be able to gain some distance pretty easily, but there wouldn’t be any point to that. I stopped and decided to meet him.

He thrust his sword. I dodged, but he attacked again, again, and once more. Each time, I watched his blade’s movements and dodged.

If he showed any opening, I was planning to attack. We kept attacking each other and parrying. I was assaulted by his quick strikes. I parried his sword to the side and as he lost his balance, I kicked his legs. But then the knight twisted and dodged.

“This can’t be real,” he said. “You block everything. You’re not just dodging either. You’re also countering my attacks.”

I was only able to stop his sword because of the bear puppet’s abilities, but everything else—from my techniques to knock his sword aside to knowing just

where and when to kick him—I'd gained from my experience in the game.

But did he really dodge my kick? I was sure I got him with that one.

"I was so close to getting a kick from one of those cute shoes of yours."

"Let it happen next time. If you just let me knock you out, we can put this whole thing to bed."

"Perhaps I imagined it, but…your kick looked frightening."

Maybe he'd noticed that I was aiming for his crotch? I guess aiming for a guy's weak point was too obvious.

Deep breaths, Yuna. I made my move to attack first this time, running at him and swinging my sword from below. He blocked it from above. I attacked again and again, but he blocked each and every one.

I was tempted to use my bear puppet's abilities to send him flying, but I stopped myself. I couldn't stop him from parrying, but it'd be useless if I didn't defeat him properly in this arena.

He blocked me and tried to hit me with another savage swing of his blade. If I could block this, I'd have an opening. I held my sword at a diagonal and fended off his attack. His sword swept down, and I brought down my blade in the opening.

There we go now—

Or not. The knight's hand whipped out, grabbed my arm, and tossed me across the arena like a ragdoll. Now I saw what happened: the moment I parried, he took a hand off his two-handed sword and used his free right hand to throw me away.

I twisted in midair, landed, and ran right back at him. Having tossed me away, his balance was off. He was too slow to respond since he assumed I wouldn't be able to land safely. I thrust my sword—another parry, even though he was off-balance. He stepped toward me then and brought his sword down.

I took a half-step to dodge. He tried to swing his sword back again, but suddenly realized…it wasn't moving? He checked and saw my leg—I had

stepped on his sword to immobilize it.

I brought my own sword down on him and he let go of his hilt, rushing back to retreat. Wasn't gonna happen.

I let go of my own sword and grabbed the knight with my bear puppet. He tried to shake me off, but I threw him. He pulled himself into a somersault…and landed on his back.

"Looks like I won."

"I lost," said the knight. At that moment, the silent audience roared with applause.

"Figo! How dare you lose to such a little girl! You're a disgrace as a knight!" Lutum stormed over to his knight and started screaming.

"I'm very sorry. However, as you witnessed, Lord Lutum, she is formidable. You must be aware of that by now."

"Did I not tell you to win, no matter what it took?"

"I used everything I had in me, but she was still stronger. She blocked all my attacks. Dodged them too. And her reflexes were incredible. Her abilities as a warrior are top-notch."

"Rubbish!" Lutum formed his hands into fists and tried to punch the knight, so I gave Lutum a light kick to the rear end. He lost his balance and fell down face-first. "What?!"

"You remember our promise, don't you?" I asked.

Lutum glared at me, loathing in his eyes, face red with humiliation.

"You're up next," I reminded him.

"Girl…"

"You're not going to try getting out of this, are you? What? Are you scared of losing to a little girl like me in front of everyone?"

"You're getting ahead of yourself, little girl. All right. I'll fight you just as promised."

We decided to have the match after a short break.

“Can’t have you claiming that you only lost because you were tired,” Lutum had said. I couldn’t tell if he was being kind, being prideful, or just buying time to make his own plan. But hey, at least I got a break out of it.

“Yuna, be careful,” Ellelaura warned me. “Lutum is an unpleasant man, but he is actually very strong.”

“If that’s true, why didn’t he fight me instead of sending his knight earlier?” That would have increased his odds of winning. It was an important match, and he even bet his job on it. If he was the strongest, then he should have fought me himself. Why did he leave this up to another person?

“That’s because Figo is strong as well. More importantly, he didn’t think a girl could actually beat his knight. Really, I *do* wonder how many people here legitimately believed you could have won.”

So basically, he thought he didn’t need to make an entrance against someone like me. Looks like somebody never learned that appearances can be deceiving.

While I was watching Lutum, the knight I’d just fought made his way over to us.

“Madame Ellelaura, who is this girl?” he asked as he looked at me.

“She’s a very important friend to my daughters.”

“That’s not what I mean. To be direct, I just can’t help but wonder how she stopped my blade with those thin arms of hers.”

That was all thanks to my bear puppets.

He continued. “And she used sword fighting techniques one after another, as though she’d seen true combat. She wouldn’t have been able to learn that without quite a lot of experience.”

I had battled tons of people during my gamer days, with all sorts of different fighting styles. Sometimes I won, and sometimes I lost. Those experiences lived on in me and I used them in the earlier match.

“I was surprised by the way she moved as well,” Ellelaura admitted.

“Miss, it was an enjoyable match. But you should be careful when you face up against Lord Lutum. If you can, I recommend abstaining…”

“The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind,” I told him.

“I thought you might say that. I pray that you’re not injured,” he warned me, then left.

Chapter 297:
The Bear Fights Lutum

"YUNA, LUTUM is calling you. Have you had a long enough break? If you need more time, I can tell him that," Ellelaura told me.

"I'm all right," I answered.

I hadn't used any magic and I wasn't tired from holding the sword thanks to my bear gloves. Thanks to my bear shoes, my legs weren't tired either. My exhaustion was only mental. It'd been a while since I fought someone and I was enjoying it…but I didn't have my bear onesie to defend me this time. I couldn't be reckless. Every one of my opponent's attacks was a threat, and it was more mentally draining than I'd anticipated. But there weren't any other issues with me, so I made my way over to Lutum.

Like the knight from earlier, Lutum took off his armor to lighten himself. It seemed that he realized the heavy equipment put him at a disadvantage.

"Are you ready, girl?"

"Anytime, anywhere."

"I'll wipe that self-confidence off your face in the blink of an eye."

"Then if I win, I get to punch you in the face."

"If you *can* win. I'll give you some advice. You've got a weakness. It seems that Figo was holding back, but I won't be so kind."

Holding back? Had he really been holding back on me? I looked at the knight. I was a little disappointed thinking that he might not have been fighting to his full abilities. Maybe he did it because I was a girl.

"Then if I win against you and you're not holding back, you won't have any issues with me punching you?"

"If you can defeat me, I'll acknowledge women can be knights and I'll allow you to marry my son."

Uh, excuse me? The winner wasn't supposed to be punished! Winners are supposed to get a *prize*. If I won a punishment, I'd rather not play at all.

"No thanks."

"You, a peasant, would have the opportunity to marry my son, a noble. That should be an honor!"

I sure didn't consider it one. And didn't he just try to marry his sons off to Shia and Noa? My mental anguish amounted to nothing as Ellelaura signaled for the fight to begin.

We went into it right away, exchanging blows.

I used the power of my bear puppets and shoes to parry Lutum's sword. I warded his blade off and twisted to dodge him. I'd been parrying attacks like this for years.

Back when I was just playing video games, I played a magic swordsman. That wasn't the kind of class that does well against beefy, brawny opponents. Naturally, I gravitated toward a style based on evasion and parries.

"Are you going to dodge this one too?!" Lutum smiled.

If I hadn't fought the knight earlier, I might not have been able to fend him off at all. Lutum really *was* stronger than the knight.

"I could tell from your earlier match that you're powerful, but I never imagined a little girl like you could put up such a fight." Lutum just kept smirking. Was this guy a combat-crazy berserker or something?

We kept dodging, parrying, and blocking each other. Whenever one of us showed an opening, the other would try to use our hands or feet to attack. This stalemate seemed to last an eternity.

The king, Ellelaura, and the entire crowd had gone silent as they watched the match.

When I dodged his blade, Lutum kicked me. I warded him off with my white bear puppet and tipped his center of gravity. I went in for a kick then, but I caught nothing but air. My legs weren't that short! I mean, maybe they were a

little…?

“Keeping things interesting, girl, are we?”

I didn’t want to agree with him, but I couldn’t pretend like I wasn’t enjoying this too.

“But as I said earlier, you have a weakness.” Lutum attacked and kept talking. Thanks to my bear gloves, my weakness wasn’t my physical abilities. Lutum had to have realized that from having to block my sword again and again. And I wasn’t losing out to him on speed or sword technique.

Then just what was this weakness of mine that he saw?

As I thought it over, I wondered what felt *off* about Lutum right now. He switched from holding his sword with a two-handed grip to just holding it up with one. A current of air began to gather in Lutum’s left hand that he had freed from the sword.

Oh, no. Did I have time to—?!

“It’s that you can’t use magic!”

Lutum thrust out his left hand. I bent away and dodged the gust of wind magic coming from Lutum’s left hand. I stepped back and stole some distance.

“You dodged it again?” Lutum said as though he couldn’t believe it. I should have been the one who was shocked.

“W-w-wait, I thought magic was off limits?” Wasn’t it cheating for a knight to use magic? It made no sense in a swordfight either.

Lutum shot my objection down. “What are you talking about? Any great knight can use magic. That’s what a knight is.”

“Really?” I checked in with Ellelaura.

“Yes, you can use magic. When they’re able to do so, knights will cast spells.” Ellelaura was giving me a look that just screamed, *you should know this already!*

Maybe if I grew up in this world, I would, but I didn’t know what common sense in this world even was. I just thought knights were supposed to use

swords and mages used magic. Did I really say something that weird? It wasn't too strange, right? Maybe I was being silly, working so hard to fight with just my sword?

"Your swordplay is praiseworthy. However, magic is another skill in the toolset of any decent knight. Magic isn't a bad thing to have in your pocket…and your weakness is that you have none at all." Lutum pointed at me.

"Uh, but I can use magic."

"Then why didn't you use it in your match against Figo? You didn't use magic, so Figo didn't either. That's Figo's softness."

Was that what Lutum had hinted Figo was holding back? It made sense that he'd assume that, especially if magic had been allowed all this time. Man, it would have probably been fun if we used spells. Kind of a bummer to think about.

"I was wondering why you hadn't used magic too," Ellelaura said, as if finally putting a worry to rest. "It was because you thought you weren't allowed to…" And I was the only one who thought that, apparently.

"If we're allowed to use magic," I said, "I'd be at an advantage. Are you sure about this?"

"Ha ha. Sounds interesting. I'd like to see your true abilities."

"Just to warn you, this is a *match*," said Ellelaura. "Nothing too dangerous, please."

"Good for you, girl," Lutum sneered. "I can't use dangerous magic when we're in front of so many people."

"Neither can I." If I could use bear magic, I'd have this thing in the bag. Would've been a pitiful spectacle for sure, seeing Lutum get so thoroughly owned. Personally, I thought a swordfight would've been fun, but we were now going to allow magic too.

I waited for Ellelaura's signal to restart the match. Then, right as she signaled, I ran and let an air shot loose to see what would happen. Lutum used his sword to slice through it. I unleashed a few more, one after the other.

“That’s all you’ve got?!” Lutum sliced through all of them. I couldn’t go all out since there was a crowd, but I didn’t like that smug look on his face.

We kept going with using our restrained magic on each other. Lutum flourished his sword. I dodged and parried. He kept attacking, with every hit faster than the last. It was easier to attack more by swiping at each other than by casting spells at close quarters.

“Too slow!” Lutum yelled.

I couldn’t dodge, so I decided to block his sword. We clashed, the sounds ringing out in the arena.

“Blocking again? How long can you hold out?” Lutum enveloped his sword with fire.

Magic?! I used magic to envelope my own sword with water, and the blades exploded with steam. Blinded for a moment, Lutum and I both leapt back. Then, struck with the same idea, we both cleared the field with wind magic.

I remembered my days as a magical swordsman when I was a gamer. I used magic and my sword in alternation too. He wasn’t a nice guy, but Lutum still led an order of knights.

“You’re truly made things interesting, girl!”

How nice of him to say so. I agreed, but I wasn’t about to say that out loud.

We canceled out each other’s magic and the deadlock continued. We kept exchanging blows for a while when Lutum dashed at me…just as I’d been hoping.

See, Lutum wasn’t paying attention to what was happening below his feet. He was only looking at the magic I unleashed through my hands. He didn’t notice as I deformed the ground beneath him using earth magic. The key was to distract your opponent and to do it covertly. During my gamer days, I did this to limit my opponent’s mobility.

He was so focused on me he hadn’t realized what was happening to the ground below him and he lost his balance. “What?!”

That’s when I brought my sword down. He blocked, even as he tried to regain

his footing.

“Lost your balance? Maybe old age is getting to your legs?”

“You dare mock me?!” Lutum heaved his sword and sent mine flying back, then leapt back to gain distance once more. “To think a mere girl could be this powerful. I’m ending this. I cannot lose to you.”

Lutum unleashed gusts of wind from both sides of him. I realized he was trying to limit my range of movement. I canceled the magic out with wind magic of my own and ran to the right around it.

“Shrewish whelp!”

I couldn’t lose either.

Lutum unleashed wind magic as he tried to restrict my movements. I knew he was leading me somewhere. I kept heading down the route he was taking me, approaching him.

“This ends it.” Lutum swung his sword down on me. I didn’t try to block. I didn’t try to dodge. My swing was slower than Lutum’s, and his sword should have taken me out.

But instead, he connected with a bear statue that had appeared right in front of me.

“What?!”

This was my cheat move—earth bear magic. The statue had repelled his sword. Lutum was slow to respond to the unexpected obstacle. I used that opening to bring my sword to his neck.

“Looks like I won. Or do you want to go another round?”

“No. I lost.”

“You’re quick to admit that. I was convinced you’d claim you hadn’t lost.”

“There’s no point in denying such a thing.” Lutum looked around him. There were students, knights, the king, and the guards. So many people were watching. “And I can’t move anymore.”

When I looked closely, I realized Lutum’s legs were quivering.

“So you won,” he declared, and the audience around us erupted into cheers. Lutum crumpled and sat on the ground. He looked kind of relieved for some reason.

Why? Why did he look so satisfied?

“Who are you?”

“Just your run-of-the-mill student.” That was a lie.

“Not any kind of student I know.” Lutum smiled. “Anyway, you won, so I’ll do good on my promise.”

That was why I’d fought in the first place.

“Yes, we’ll get you married to my son.”

“No!” I shouted.

Chapter 298:
The Bear Gets a Royal Scolding

“OH, RIGHT. I get to punch you since I won, just like you promised.”

I stood in front of Lutum and landed a bear punch right on his face. He somersaulted into the air then landed on the ground very loudly. After that, he didn’t so much as twitch.

At which point, seemingly out of nowhere, the crowd stopped cheering and went totally silent. Uh…he wasn’t dead, was he? Oh, his leg twitched a little. Hooray.

I approached Lutum and sprayed him with water magic. “Hunh?!”

It would have been better if he just stayed unconscious, but he had made a promise, and it was time for him to go before the king and follow through with it.

“What just happened?” Lutum looked around, looked at me, and finally realized he’d been punched. “You dare lay a hand on me? Do you have no sense of self-preservation?”

“You promised that you’d let me punch you if I won.”

“Heh. Funny girl. Well, Ellelaura staked her own job on how you’d do in a fight. Just means I didn’t judge you right.” Lutum looked over at Ellelaura, who was approaching us.

“I’d heard she was powerful,” she said, “but this was my first time seeing it.”

Now that she mentioned it, Ellelaura really had never seen me fight for herself, even after hearing all kinds of things about me from Cliff. It was a wonder she trusted me, then.

“You merely convinced me more that I want you as my son’s bride,” he said to me.

“Nah, I’m good.” Besides, didn’t he want Shia and Noa to marry his sons? I bit those words back. Whatever happened, I didn’t want him trying to marry me off.

After I turned him down, we all headed over to the king. I cleaned up the bear statue first, of course.

“You both fought a good match. I believe that made for a rousing example for the students.”

Lutum bowed his head deep and low to the king. “Nay, I only made a mockery of myself.”

“Lutum.”

“Yes.”

“As agreed upon, you will leave your post as the captain of the third order. We shall give you a new post. You will become the academy’s instructor and you will train the female knights.”

“Your…Majesty?”

“I understand where you are coming from. In the past, we made do with only male knights. But we are in an era of peace now. We have no need to trifle over the differences of whether someone is a man or woman. Teilia and Flora require women to protect them, and so you shall train women alongside men.”

“Your Majesty…”

“However, you must not disparage women or attempt to injure them as you have today.” The king had noticed, then.

“All right,” Luimin said with an obedient bow. “I shall do as you ask, Your Majesty.”

“However, we can’t allow the students’ joyous day to be ruined. They were looking forward to battling the knights, after all. You are to battle them all, as the head of knights.”

“Yes, then if you will excuse me.” Lutum looked at me, but didn’t say anything as he left.

His face was swollen from where I’d hit it, but…it wasn’t like this situation was my fault, really. Besides, he scared Shia and Noa earlier. He definitely made himself a little punch-worthy, if I say so myself.

Anyway, it seemed about time for me to leave…but the king addressed me next,

“I will return to the castle. Ellelaura, Yu’una, you will come with me.”

“Me too?” But it was still morning and the festival was still going on. I still had time to look around. Why was the king dragging *me* along with him when I still had things to see?

“Look behind you.”

I did. The students and the rest of the audience were staring. “They’re looking at you, Your Majesty.”

“No,” he said. “They’re looking at you.”

Were they?

“If I let you go, I see disaster brewing. And I have plenty to say to you two.”

Was it me or did he seem upset? I didn’t really want to go with him…but when I looked behind us, I was more frightened of the audience and the staring knights.

But…I had other stuff I needed to do! “I promised to watch after Noa and the others.”

“Exactly,” Ellelaura agreed. “And I would like precious time with my daughters.” I had someone on my side, but I realized it’d be better to sacrifice Ellelaura in this situation.

“I’ll watch over Noa and Shia, Ellelaura, so you don’t need to worry.” I took a step back and pushed Ellelaura forward from behind.

“Why—thank you, Yu’una, but that’s quite all right. I can take care of Noa and the others while *you* head over with His Majesty.” Ellelaura took two steps back.

“Oh, both of you…” The king seemed appalled by our mutual shirking of responsibility.

“Ha ha, then I’ll go with Noa and the others.”

“Te—Lady Teilia.”

I quickly corrected myself when I realized there were eyes all around. Teilia, who had been silently standing by the king's side, jumped in.

Teilia smiled. "I'll stay with Noa and the others, so neither of you will have anything to worry about. Please go with Father."

Ugh, I wished Teilia hadn't said that.

"To clarify, you have no right of refusal," said the king. He looked over at Fina and the others. "You could even bring the girls with you if you'd like."

A little further away, they looked worriedly at me. But c'mon, we were at the festival! I wanted the rest of them to have fun, at least. I guess if Teilia was around, they'd be fine. I gave in and decided to let Teilia take care of them.

"I'm going to make a little stop at the castle with His Majesty," I said. "You all enjoy the festival with Teilia." I looked over to her. "Lady Teilia, please take good care of them."

"I'll watch over them very carefully, so don't you worry."

Then I headed off with Ellelaura and the king. We got into a carriage with him and found him glaring as he sat across from us.

"Ahh…" He sighed as he looked us over. It was just the three of us in the carriage—a larger carriage than the one I'd been in with Gran before too. Comfier and more luxurious.

Once the carriage got moving, the king started to talk.

"What do you think you two were doing?! Especially you, Ellelaura! Do you understand what position you're in?!"

"But…"

The king shook his head and continued to scold her. "What were you going to do if Yuna lost?!"

"Then I would have returned to Crimonia as promised."

"That might work well for *you*, but what of the people you'd be leaving behind here!"

"Well, he tried to force my daughter into marriage, and things just got carried

away…”

“Then find her a fiancé! This only happened because *you* won’t choose one quickly! And more opportunities are open to you now, thanks to a certain *someone* who granted Crimonia access to the sea. Crimonia is going to become a profitable town now. Just imagine—there are going to be plenty more offers for your daughters’ hands in marriage.”

Wait, did that mean that Shia and Noa were being cornered by marriage proposals because I made that tunnel? They were both cute though, so they probably would’ve gotten lots of marriage proposals anyway…

“Cliff and I will put a stop to that, so it should be fine. I can at least guarantee my daughters’ happiness.”

“Then I’m sure you could have taken care of that issue without making that wager.” The king let out another sigh. “And you, Yuna. There’s the matter of you.”

“Me?” Why was I getting in trouble? I was basically the lead who’d saved the heroine from the clutches of evil! I could see him praising me, but…scolding me?

“Don’t pick fights like that anymore. You were putting yourself in danger.”

“But that old guy was annoying me.”

“Listen here, now…”

I shook my head. “He kept saying he wanted to make Shia marry his son. He was even trying to force Noa into an engagement, *and* he tried to injure the girls so they couldn’t become knights. I have no regrets.”

“Ellelaura is more than capable of handling her daughters’ personal affairs. They can’t marry if both families don’t consent. And as for the female knights, that is an issue, but the women truly are physically weaker, as Lutum has said. Lutum’s methods of handling such matters is far from ideal, but that doesn’t mean you should go challenging him to duels.”

But if I hadn’t, I would’ve exploded from the stress.

“Also,” he continued, “think about the people you worry by doing things like

that.”

“Wait, were you worried about me?”

“Would it be so bad if I had been?”

I was joking, but he answered seriously. It made me feel self-conscious.

“The children who accompanied you also seemed quite worried. Don’t give them anything to fret about.”

I didn’t look at the girls while the fight had been going on. If I scared them, I’d need to apologize later.

“Teilia was worried as well,” he continued. “I’m glad I hadn’t brought Flora along.”

Huh. I really did worry everyone. The king knew I was strong, but this had been the first time he actually saw me fight, so apparently he’d been anxious. It made me glad that Princess Flora hadn’t been there too—she might’ve even cried. I’d need to be more aware of the people around me next time I went on a rampage.

“But I am grateful to you.”

“Huh…?”

“After all, you’ve proven there are strong women as well. There are many people in the castle who believe knights should only be men. Because you won against Lutum, people should become more open to changing that belief.”

“It’s a common belief, then?”

“It used to be far more prevalent than it is today, but yes. Many hold those opinions, especially nobles who have had knights in their family for generations.”

This could be said about any male-dominated occupation—when people give a job to men or to women, they make it hard for others to cross that boundary.

“Are you sure about letting Lutum be head of the knights’ education?” I was worried he’d be really hard on the women.

“I’ll assign an assistant to watch over him. If Lutum supports women

becoming knights, there will be fewer people who oppose the idea. If I abandon him, that would only antagonize people. So no, we should try to win him over in the public eye. He lost against you, Yuna, but he is a powerful knight in his own right and he's more than capable at his job."

Sounded good to me, then. It wasn't really my business, so I decided to take the king's word for it.

"And…I'm sorry Ellelaura, but I may reinstate him as a captain depending on his attitude."

"I can live with that."

"But that does depend on his conduct at the academy, so I'll need time to evaluate before I make that decision."

Didn't that make my match a little less meaningful? I guess I could be fine with that if Ellelaura was.

By the time the carriage reached the castle grounds, the king was done scolding us.

"So can I go home now?" I asked.

"Please don't go back to the academy. I intend on instating a gag order on the events that occurred, but please refrain from going back today nevertheless."

"But today's the last day of the festival."

"You may go back if you wish, but I can't help you if you're cornered in a crowd and get those girls into trouble with you."

"Ugh." When he put it that way, I didn't have a choice at all. "Maybe I'll just head home ahead of everyone."

"If you have nothing to do, then you can go see Flora. I couldn't bring her to the festival today, after all. I'm sure she'll be happy if you paid her a visit. Ah, and yes, if you do, could you do so in your usual outfit?"

Did he mean my bear onesie? Well, all right.

"Then I'll go with you to Princess Flora," said Ellelaura.

The king shook his head. "I have plenty more I have to say to you. After you

have Yuna change, you come straight back to me!”

“Aw, but…”

“Whose fault was it that we had to come all the way back to the castle? I have many things to say to you, and not just about the matter of your work. And you know what’ll happen if you try to get out of it.”

After the king had his say, he got out of the carriage and left. Ellelaura took me to an empty room, and I started to change out of the school uniform.

“Yuna, thank you again,” she said, bowing her head seriously.

“He just got me so worked up that I couldn’t help but get involved,” I told her.

“But you also did it for Shia and Noa’s sakes, didn’t you? Thank you.” She bowed again, still perfectly serious, which made me feel self-conscious. “But Yuna, you did notice that Lutum has taken a liking to you, didn’t you?”

“Please, just stop.” Even remembering it sent a chill through me.

“If you marry Lutum’s son, you would be a noble.”

“I’d politely decline.”

“Then how about you become one of my daughters? Cliff would be so happy.”

Me? One of Cliff’s daughters? I tried imagining it, but the only image I got was of Cliff clutching at his head.

Yeah, that didn’t seem like it’d work out.

Chapter 299:
Worrying about the Bear
Fina's Chronicles

YUNA WAS GOING to have a match with a grown-up.

He was a noble, and he was trying to make Lady Shia and Lady Noa get married. Lady Ellelaura said no, but he threatened to hurt Lady Shia's friend. Yuna got mad and ended up saying she would fight a knight.

I knew Yuna was strong, but the knight seemed like a very large man and like he would be *very* strong. I was worried, but I knew Yuna could win. She's fought strong monsters before.

The match started. Their swords hit each other, and they were really, really fast.

"Yuna, be careful!" Shuri yelled next to me. Shuri had never seen Yuna fight before, so she looked worried. I was worried too, of course, and I held onto Shuri's hand tight.

Yuna dodged the knight's sword. Even if they were supposed to be practice swords, they were so frightening. But Yuna was smiling like she was having fun. As for who was doing better, I couldn't tell. At least Yuna was smiling though. That made me feel a little better.

"Yuna, you can do it," Shuri said, squeezing my hand. It would be all right. Yuna wouldn't lose.

But why wasn't Yuna using magic? Was she not allowed? Or maybe it was because the knight wasn't using any?

In the very end, Yuna grabbed the knight's arm and threw him, so she won. Thank goodness it turned out well. Lady Shia and Lady Noa were happy too.

I thought that was the end of the match, but it turned out there was supposed to be one more. This time she was fighting the noble who wanted Lady Shia to marry his son. Not only that, but he was supposed to be the

captain of the knight from earlier! Was he going to be even stronger than his knight?

Soon enough, the match started—my worries couldn't change that.

Yuna looked very small, but she was very fast, just like she'd been while fighting the knight. She went to the right, then left, then behind to dodge, waving her sword all the while.

When the noble swung his sword down, it fell very heavily. Yuna dodged it and moved away.

Everybody in the crowd was buzzing by then about the match…

"Wait a sec there, she's dodging Lord Lutum's swings."

"If she doesn't parry right, she'll lose her balance and he'll get her with a heavy swing of his blade right after."

"Well, I think it's amazing that she's just parrying those swings. Lord Lutum's second one ended up following too slowly because of that."

"Regardless of all that, don't you think Lord Lutum's having a hard time? Seems like it to me."

"The girl's quick on her feet and she knows how to shift her weight too."

"But why does she have those black and white shoes?"

From here, they could only see the color of Yuna's shoes, so they couldn't see that they were bear feet.

You can do it, Yuna. Everyone swallowed their breaths as they watched. No one made a commotion. All the while, the two of them kept swinging their swords at each other.

It looked like they were both just as good as each other at fighting. But then the noble used magic. Yuna looked surprised, but she dodged it.

Then she seemed to be mad that he used magic. Apparently, Yuna hadn't known that was allowed.

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They started the match again. This time they were going to fight with both swords and magic…which meant we had to worry about magic hitting *us.* Still, at least Yuna was smiling and seemed to be having fun?

I couldn't tell who was winning, though, and everyone was worried.

"You can do it, Yuna!" I shouted, and we all cheered her name. "Yuna!"

The noble was attacking her real fast now. Someone in the crowd said that Lord Lutum was "using wind magic to restrict the girl's movements and lead her around," and they were right—more and more, Yuna was being chased into a corner. The noble swung his sword down on her, and I thought that was going to be it! But right then, a bear statue appeared, and his sword bounced right off of it! For a second, he looked surprised.

And then Yuna brought her sword to his neck.

She won. Yuna had won!

"Yayyy!" Shuri let go of my hand and raised her arms. Lady Shia and Lady Noa were happy too.

The crowd was roaring cheers now. "Whoa!" "Who is that girl?" "Who's the cutie?" "Which class is she from?" "And what school year?" "I don't remember a girl that cute going to the academy." "She's so cool." "Who was it again who called her weak?" "I saw her talking directly with the king." "The way she worked that sword was amazing." "White undies, huh?" "She was so great with that sword." "The knight must've been holding back." "Have you even got eyes? After seeing that match, there's no way he was." "I don't think even I'd be able to block that." "I'm pretty sure she was talking to that one girl."

Everyone was saying all kinds of things about the match now, mostly about Yuna. Sometimes they looked over at us, especially at Lady Shia.

"She beat Lord Lutum."

"What? That little girl?"

"Whoa."

That was from some of the other people talking nearby. When they said nice things about Yuna, it kind of made me happy too.

Yuna talked to the noble…and then she punched him. He went flying through the air. It was all so sudden that everyone went silent.

The mouths of the people hung open in shock. Then Yuna went over to the noble and sprayed him with water magic. Surprised shouts traveled through the crowd.

“She sprayed Lord Lutum with water!”

“Did she just punch Lord Lutum even after he said he lost?!”

Yuna, what are you doing?! Right as I thought that, the noble stood up and headed over to the king with Yuna.

I got a little closer to them and listened in.

“I will return to the castle. Ellelaura, Yu’una, you will come with me.”

The king was taking Yuna away. Yuna and Lady Ellelaura tried to say no, but they couldn’t. Lady Teilia was going to watch over us though, so I felt better. But Yuna gave us all a very sad look.

“I’m going to make a little stop at the castle with His Majesty,” she said. “You all enjoy the festival with Teilia.”

She wanted us to enjoy ourselves, but I didn’t know whether we could. Yuna and Lady Ellelaura went off with the king, along with the knight nearby.

Lady Teilia came over to us after we were left behind. “Yuna’s match was amazing.”

Yes, it was amazing. Could I be like Yuna if I worked really hard? I tried to imagine it, but it didn’t feel possible.

“Shia!” A girl rushed over to Lady Shia. “What was with that girl? How was she so strong?” Oh, I remembered her now—she was Lady Shia’s friend who was in a match earlier. “What’s her name? Which class is she from?” She grabbed Lady Shia’s shoulders and started shaking her.

“Uh, well…” Lady Shia couldn’t answer. People started to gather around her, all asking about Yuna. She looked at us like she wanted help. But I couldn’t help her…

The crowd kept buzzing. “Which class is she from?” “I don’t remember a girl that cute going to the academy.” “Shia, could you introduce me to her?”

There were so many people around her, I couldn’t even see Lady Shia anymore.

“Shia?” Lady Noa said, looking nervous. Maybe Yuna or Lady Ellelaura could’ve helped, but they left already.

While I was fretting about what to do, Lady Teilia turned to Noa. “It’s okay,” she said, and looked at the crowd. “Everyone, you’re putting Shia in a difficult position.”

“Lady Teilia?!” the crowd gasped.

“The girl is Shia’s friend,” said Teilia. “She doesn’t go to our school.”

“But she was wearing a uniform.”

Lady Shia shook her head. “She had to borrow that because of something.”

“Then at least give us her name.”

“It’s Yu’una. But other people can’t know about her, so don’t spread it around.”

“So she’s Yu’una? Thank you, Lady Teilia. But I won’t be able to thank her with just that,” said one of the girls in the crowd.

“Father just took her away, so I think it’ll be hard to meet her.”

“That’s a shame. In that case, Lady Teilia, would you be kind enough to tell Yu’una that I’m very grateful?”

“Yes, I can do that.”

Another girl nodded. “Yeah! After seeing her in action, I feel like we can really do it, you know?”

I knew Yuna could fight monsters, but most people couldn’t beat the kind of things she could. Getting stronger was one thing, but could anyone ever become as strong as Yuna?

After Lady Teilia talked to them, the crowd went away. I was glad it didn't turn into a big deal.

"Thank you very much, Lady Teilia," Lady Shia said.

"It's all right. Yuna asked me to look out for you, after all. Plus, Yuna is my friend too."

Even a princess was saying she was friends with Yuna. I was so impressed. It was odd for a commoner like me to even meet a king or a princess face-to-face, let alone to talk to them. Lately, a lot of amazing things like that had been happening, all thanks to Yuna.

I really hoped Shuri wouldn't think this was normal. Once we were home in Crimonia, I would need to talk to mom so that we could tell her about what was normal and what wasn't.

After that, Lady Teilia watched over us and we left. We went to Lady Shia's stall. There were lots of customers there, so they seemed like they were doing really well.

"You're early, Shia," Maricks said.

"Yes, some things came up."

"What? Anything interesting?"

"Uhh…" Lady Shia paused thoughtfully. "I guess I should tell you…"

"What is it?"

"If anyone asks about Yuna, don't tell them anything."

"Did Yuna do something?" Maricks and Cattleya came over to us.

Timol was the only one left making cotton candy now. "Hey!" he shouted as the rest started heading behind the stall.

Maricks just shrugged. "There aren't a lot of customers. You'll be fine. So, Shia, what happened?"

Lady Shia told them very quickly about Yuna's fight with the knight and about her new fake name.

Maricks blinked. “You got to see Yuna fight a match?”

“Oh, I *so* wish I could have been there,” said Cattleya.

“And she beat Lord Lutum? Then she’s ridiculously strong! Darn it. Wish I could’ve seen it.” Maricks looked upset.

“Anyway, if anyone asks about Yuna, please don’t tell them anything.”

Maricks and Cattleya nodded. When Timol switched with them later, Lady Shia caught him up on what happened too, including Yuna’s fake name.

After everything was explained, Lady Shia switched places with Maricks.

“All right, so where shall we go next?” asked Lady Shia. “Yuna asked me to take care of you, after all. It’s also the last day of the festival, so we need to have some fun.”

We decided to follow Yuna’s instructions to have fun at the festival. While we were walking around, we kept hearing people talk about her.

“A really pretty girl apparently beat up all the knights.”

No, it was only two knights.

“I heard this pretty girl killed Lord Lutum.”

Yuna didn’t kill anyone.

“This gorgeous girl cast a bunch of magic with her super-pretty fingers.”

Huh?! Yuna had bears on her hands…

“Apparently she’s involved with His Majesty in some way.”

I guess that one was true.

“I heard the girls with her were really cute too.”

They must’ve meant Lady Noa and Lady Shia.

Most of the rumors didn’t seem right, other than Yuna being pretty, but I guess that’s how rumors spread. If Yuna heard them, she probably would’ve gone pale.

Then, suddenly, the people who were spreading rumors glanced at us.

“It looks like they’re staring because I’m with you,” said Lady Shia. “Shall we go to the same place as yesterday? We could watch the concert and play again. We won’t need to worry about anyone around us that way.”

I liked that. I wanted to see the show again. I mean, the concert and play from yesterday were just amazing. Shuri and Lady Noa seemed okay with it, even excited. We all went back to the very big building.

Still, I felt weird having fun after the king took Yuna away from us.

Chapter 300:
The Bear Learns What Happens After

AFTER CHANGING INTO MY BEAR ONESIE and leaving Ellelaura, I headed off to Princess Flora's room on my own.

Once I got to Princess Flora's room, she didn't hesitate to come over to me. "Bear!" Yeah, she really did associate me with this outfit.

The day had been mentally exhausting, so I decided to have her play with my bears instead of me. Princess Flora beamed when I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu, Ange served me tea, and I sipped it while watching Princess Flora.

Princess Flora hopped onto Kumayuru's back, rode across the room for a while, and then went to hug Kumakyu. All tuckered out, she hugged Kumayuru and fell right to sleep. Ange took her to the bed, careful not to wake her.

"Kumayuru and Kumakyu, thank you," I said.

"Thank you, Yuna. Thank you, bears. And what gentle bears they are," Ange said, patting the two of them.

"They're both really good bears," I said, like they were my own children. In a way, they kinda *were* my family.

While I was coddling my furbabies, Ellelaura came by to get me. "Let's head home, Yuna."

Wow, it was already that late? Time flew with my bears, I guess.

"Ellelaura, you look tired." I couldn't tell if it was a lack of energy, exactly, or if she was just feeling a little off, but exhaustion positively wafted off of her.

"After what happened earlier, I was given a scolding not only by His Majesty but also by the chancellor, Zhang. And they made sure to dig deep where it would hurt. I apologized so many times, but they simply weren't having it. Don't you think they're being terrible to me?"

For…offering up her prestigious job as part of a bet? No, I kinda thought she

was getting her just deserts, to be honest. They were scolding her for her own good and her own future.

“That just goes to show how much they care about you, Ellelaura,” I said.

“Do you think so? It seemed like they were having too much fun picking on me.”

And it seemed to *me* that this was pretty in line with her usual behavior. “If they’re worried about you and scolding you, that just shows how essential you are to them.”

The opposite of liking someone is indifference. If they’d been indifferent toward her, they wouldn’t have cared if she quit. If they weren’t telling her off, that’d mean they didn’t care about what she did at all. That’s how it was in my old world, at least. Honestly, I remember getting a little jealous when other people got scolded.

It didn’t seem like Ellelaura really accepted my explanation, but I guess it’s hard to see that kind of thing when you’re at the center of it.

Sometimes you don’t see something until it’s gone.

Once an especially exhausted Ellelaura and I got home, Noa and the others greeted us.

“I see you all got here earlier than me,” Ellelaura said.

“Mother! Yuna! Are you all right?!”

“Yuna, are you okay?”

“How are you, Yuna?”

All three of them had apparently been worried about the two of us. I didn’t have people in the same way as Ellelaura, but people did care about me.

It was nice. “The king scolded us a little, but we’re all right.”

Suddenly, everyone looked worried. It wasn’t such a big deal to me to get told off by the king, but the girls begged to differ. Made sense, though. Being scolded by the most important person in the country was the equivalent of—in

terms of my world—a reprimand from your CEO or the school principal laying into you. Or maybe this was worse. I mean, this was the king, so maybe it'd be more like the prime minister of Japan giving me a stern, personal talking-to? I guess?

When you put it that way…yeah, maybe it *was* a little frightening.

"He wasn't that mad, so it was all right," I said. "He was mostly mad at Ellelaura."

"At *Mother*?!" Noa shouted.

Oops. I'd meant to make her feel *less* anxious, but now she was worried about her own mom getting black-balled by the king.

"Ha ha, it's all right. I'm always getting into some kind of trouble with him anyway."

Uh. That was all right? Was it *really?*

"Do you really mean it?" See? Even Noa was still worried!

"You don't have to worry so much, Noa. The king only told Ellelaura off because he worries about her. If he didn't care, he wouldn't have bothered." I repeated to Noa the same thing I'd told Ellelaura.

Noa didn't quite seem to understand.

"Umm…" How could I put it? "For example, let's say Lala bet her job as a maid in a game of cards. If she lost, she'd quit. Would you be upset, Noa?"

"Yes… I think I would," said Noa after a moment of thought. "I wouldn't want her deciding to leave like that."

"But if someone you *didn't* like did the same thing, you wouldn't care, right?"

"I think? Maybe…"

"Since he was mad at Ellelaura, that means he just cares that much about having her at the castle."

Noa nodded, seeming to get it now.

"You're so good at explaining things, Yuna," Ellelaura said.

Oh, thanks! I'm just cleaning up your mess, Ellelaura! I thought with a sigh.

After we were done talking, Ellelaura went to her own room. I headed up as well, with the girls.

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"Thank you so much, Yuna. Now Mother won't have to quit her job."

"Please don't worry about it," I said. "I'm glad that Ellelaura doesn't have to quit, and you and Shia aren't being married off anymore."

Ugh, he really wanted Noa and Shia to marry his sons. Who *wouldn't* get annoyed enough at that to have a trial by combat, you know?

"Yuna, you looked so cool."

"Yes, you looked so impressive!"

"Mmhm! Everyone who saw the match said nice things about you, Yuna."

I was glad that I could show a little proof that girls could be strong too. The crowd was extra fired up after I'd defeated Lutum, apparently, and I do think I remember them yelling a lot after that.

"Whoa!" "Who is that girl?" "Who's the cutie?" "Which class is she from?" "And what school year?" "I don't remember a girl that cute going to the academy." "She's so cool." "Who was it again who called her weak?" "I saw her talking directly with the king." "The way she worked that sword was amazing." "White undies, huh." "She was so great with that sword." "The knight must've been holding back." "Have you even got eyes? After seeing that match, there's no way he was!" "I don't think even I'd be able to block that."

Noa and the others regaled me with everything that had been said after I'd won, which were…mostly good? But what was that thing about the underwear? You know what, I probably misheard that. And if not, I'll just repress that one real quick.

Also, was the crowd seriously talking about me like I was a pretty or cute girl? Maybe they meant someone else. Or were these three making stuff up?

I could see people thinking I was cute if I'd been wearing my bear onesie, at least, but this time I was in a school uniform. Yeah…I'd take all of these as half-

truths.

After that, Shia had apparently been surrounded by students when Ellelaura and I had been whisked away by the king.

“Were you all okay?” I asked.

“Yes, Lady Teilia protected us.” A whole bunch of students had crowded Shia to ask about me, but Teilia had come to the rescue. “Lady Teilia was so cool. She explained a few things and then they stopped trying to come near us.”

Well, they couldn’t exactly insist on questioning Shia when the princess herself was asking them to stop. Teilia had said some stuff she shouldn’t have, though. Apparently, she’d called me an “important friend.”

Still, it’d settled things down, even if now people thought I was besties with the princess.

“So, did you have fun at the festival?” I asked.

“Yes, we went to see the concert and play from yesterday again,” said Noa. “It was fun.”

“I think I’d enjoy it no matter how many times we see it,” said Fina.

Shuri nodded. “Yeah. It was fun.”

Fina and Shuri agreed with Noa. I wish I could’ve seen the concert and song princess again. If I’d just had a way to record it on my bear phone, I could have listened to it anytime.

Hmm. Could I make a magical tool like that…?

While I was listening to Noa and the others talk about the festival, Shia walked in through the door, looking just as haggard as Ellelaura did. “I’m home,” she said, and immediately slumped onto the sofa.

“Shia, what’s wrong?” Noa offered Shia a cup of water that had been on the table.

Shia sipped from the cup and sighed. “Thank you.”

“So, what happened, Shia?” Noa asked again.

“There were so many people asking about Yuna. I’m a little tired from that is all.”

Noa had already told me that I’d created some trouble for Shia. “I’m sorry.”

Shia shook her head. “You don’t need to apologize, Yuna. You were fighting for my sake, as well as Noa’s and my mother’s. We should be grateful to you, so you shouldn’t apologize,” she said firmly. “Thank you so much, Yuna. Seeing you get so upset about what Lutum was trying to do… It was good.” Shia gave me a full smile. “Oh, and I have a message to pass along, though I think Lady Teilia will tell you as well. Linea had something she wanted me to tell you. She said she was truly very grateful.”

Linea? That was the name of Shia’s friend, if I was remembering correctly. “Was she all right in the end?”

“Yes, she wasn’t injured, so she’ll be fine.”

I was glad to hear that.

“She also said she wanted to become just like you.” I was flattered about that one, but I didn’t know about her trying to become like me. Most of my power came from my cheat abilities.

Shia grinned. “Also, people were making a huge deal about you being the mysterious pretty girl.”

Noa had also been saying something about a pretty girl. Was that…really true? Maybe they hadn’t gotten a good look at my face since they were so far away.

“There are rumors spreading?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“I think anyone who didn’t see the match doesn’t believe them. Besides, some people can’t believe a student could win against Lord Lutum.”

Then maybe the rumors hadn’t spread as far as I’d worried.

But then Shia blew that belief out of the water. “Also, Yuna, you should be

really careful next time you try to fight. People, uh…" She coughed. "They saw your underwear."

"You're kidding?" Agh! I hadn't misheard after all.

"I mean, you were jumping around and moving a bunch, so, you know. There were glimpses. But the boys…" Shia paused as though it were too awkward to say.

Nope. Nope nope nope. I could never in a million years approach the academy ever again. I couldn't show my face outside anymore! Not that there was anything pretty to show, even after all the rumors. My only option was to wear my bear onesie for the rest of my life and live in hiding.

The four of them tried to comfort me, but my underwear had been bared for the world to see. Bared, bear-themed panties!

Everyone believed that some pretty girl had beaten those guys.

I pulled the bear hood low over my head, trying to sink through the floor and hopefully out of the universe.

Chapter 301:
The Bear Shuts Herself in the Room

WHILE I WAS STILL DOWN in the dumps, Surilina came by the room to call us down for dinner.

"Mademoiselle Yuna, what is the matter?" Surilina asked out of concern when she saw how upset I was. I couldn't tell her it was because people had seen my underwear or that there was a rumor going around about me being gorgeous. The latter would just sound like I was boasting, and the underwear thing?

I'd never get over it if I told anyone about the crowd seeing my underwear!

The girls pulled me out to the dining hall, where Ellelaura was waiting.

"You're all late." Ellelaura was that special kind of chipper that makes miserable people feel even worse. Just a little bit ago, she looked like a living corpse, but here she was, fully recovered. She was quick to change her mood, and right now, I hated her for it.

"Oh, my, Yuna. You look wretched."

"Thanks, Ellelaura," I grumbled. "You're radiant."

"I got some rest. Also, I've made up my mind to quit if anyone complains about me more."

That sounded a bit like a threat, and Ellelaura seemed like the type who'd follow through on it. It was a little frightening. "So, Yuna, why are you looking so down?"

"My dreams of womanhood are shattered."

"Hm...?" Ellelaura didn't seem to understand what I was trying to say.

"Um, so what Yuna means to say is…" I was almost grateful that Shia and Noa took over then and explained it all to Ellelaura.

"Ha ha! Well, seems like some boys got a lucky sight today, hm?"

Yes, and their luck spelled my misfortune. "If I figure out who they were, I'll gouge their eyes out and pummel their brains till they forget my face." That'd

probably make me feel better too.

“Yuna, you’re being scary,” said Fina, covering her eyes.

“Scary.” Shuri followed suit.

“I’m kidding. I wouldn’t do that.” Even I couldn’t gouge someone’s eyes out. Pummeling a memory out of somebody’s head, though…well, who could say! Ugh, I wanted to take out the frustration rising in me on something. It was all Lutum’s fault. If I saw him again, I’d give him another punch.

I sighed softly. “Shia, when do you have a day off from the academy?”

“A day off?”

“I wanted to thank Teilia before going back to Crimonia.” I had gone to the castle a ton of times, but I never ran into her there. If she had a break from the academy, she’d probably be at the castle.

“Um, tomorrow we’re doing the survey results announcement and cleanup, so we’ll have a break the next day.”

In that case, I could see Teilia the day after tomorrow. Then I could go home to Crimonia, where nobody knew what my underwear looked like.

“Yuna, are you planning on going home?” asked Lady Shia.

“I have to. If we don’t go home after the festival, Fina and Shuri’s parents will be worried.”

“Then could I have some time with you the day after next? Maricks and the others wanted to thank you before you go home.”

Specifically, they wanted to thank me for the cotton candy machine and for helping with advertising. I didn’t need that from them, but it felt hypocritical not to let them thank me when I wanted to thank Teilia myself, so I agreed.

After all, I could just see Teilia afterward.

“By the way, what should I do about the uniform? Should I wash it and give it back to you?” I needed to return it since it wasn’t mine.

“You can have it. I think you might need it in the future.” What was that, a

prediction or something? I wasn't planning on wearing a uniform or showing off my underwear again anytime soon. "Actually, would you like to join the academy? Then you would need the uniform."

"Oh, what a wonderful idea," said Ellelaura.

Noa spoke up at once. "No. Yuna will go home with me to Crimonia."

"I'd be so sad if Yuna left, so she can't," said Shuri.

"It would be bad if Yuna wasn't around," agreed Fina.

There were three votes against the proposal, all from Crimonia residents. It was nice, feeling needed by others.

I hadn't planned on going to the academy anyway, so I had to refuse Shia's proposal. School would be like a personal hell for a former shut-in. Also, even with the bear gate, I wouldn't be able to see Fina and the others easily. I was feeling a little lonely, too.

I still accepted the uniform, but I prayed I'd never need to wear it again.

The next day, I shut myself in the room.

"Yuna, let's go out. Especially since we're going back to Crimonia soon."

"Nuh-uh."

"But no one will realize it's you if you're in your bear outfit."

I didn't have the courage to go out the day after I'd exposed my unmentionables for all to see.

Noa and Shuri grabbed my bear puppets on either side of me and tried to drag me out of the room, but I refused to budge. As long as I was wearing my god-given OP bear gear, not a soul alive could make me go outside.

After a while, people would begin to forget everything from yesterday…but it was too soon.

"Also, the students are all at the academy, so you should be fine." Noa tried to pull me by the hand and arms, but I wouldn't move.

Besides, there had been other people watching the matches, not just the students. There were some everyday people in attendance, and what if one of them spotted me?

“Yuna, are you really that embarrassed by people seeing your underwear? I wouldn’t care.” Shuri let go of my hand and tried to pull up her own skirt, but Fina grabbed her hands from next to her, stopping Shuri.

Not that there would’ve been anything to be that embarrassed about, considering. I mean, we were all girls here, and Shuri was just a little kid. Still, she couldn’t just go around flipping up her skirt wherever she was, so Fina warned her, “When you grow up, it’s embarrassing for people to see your underwear.”

I shook off Noa’s hand and leapt onto the bed behind me. Then I summoned my bears at their standard size.

“Kumayuru! Kumakyu! Protect me! But make sure you don’t hurt them.” I’d created the ultimate impenetrable bear defense. No one could overcome this wall of cuddly fur and deadly muscle.

But my bears looked worried. Someone had come to challenge the ultimate bear defense. Shuri and Noa charged the bear bulwark and dived happily in.

“It’s giant Kumayuru!”

“They’re so fluffy!”

The two of them hugged my bears. Even Fina joined in, happily hugging Kumakyu. Then the three of them started playing with my bears and stopped talking about going out.

The bulwark was protecting me, but not the way I intended.

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While we were holed up in the room, Ellelaura came back from work. “Looks like you’re all having fun.”

“Mother, welcome home.”

“Yuna, we’ve finished the picture book.” Ellelaura handed me a book. It was the third volume of *The Bear and the Girl*.

Come to think of it, I’d given Princess Flora the third volume before the festival had started. Apparently they finished doing the reprinting. Seeing it bound like a real book made me happy. She handed me ten copies, just as promised.

“Thank you, Ellelaura.”

“What is that?” Noa came over too from playing with Kumayuru.

“It’s a book Yuna drew,” Ellelaura said.

“Is that the picture book Yuna made for Princess Flora?! Why are there so many of them here?”

“Why? Well, because we’ve done a print run of Yuna’s book.”

Noa looked at me. “Then Yuna had these books?”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Yuna! You kept quiet about having copies of the book? You’re so mean! I thought that Princess Flora was the only one who had a copy and gave up on

reading it.” Noa pouted.

“Well, I’m embarrassed that a bunch of people are reading a book I wrote.”

“Then why do you have so many copies?” She pointed at the ten copies.

“Because Ellelaura told me she wanted to print the books, so I asked her to make enough for the orphans too.”

“Princess Flora would carry the book around with her all over the castle,” said Ellelaura. “And the people who saw that really wanted copies themselves, so I asked Yuna for permission to print more.”

“I understand that, but you didn’t have to keep it from me. Don’t you agree, Fina, Shuri?”

“Um, well…” Fina looked a little put on the spot, but Shuri had a different reaction.

“We have picture books at home.”

“You had your own copies?”

“Uh-huh, Yuna gave them to us,” Shuri replied with a giant smile.

Noa was the only one who didn’t know about the books. Her cheeks pouted out even further.

“I can’t believe you’d betray me too, Fina. And remember the incident with the stuffed animals? You’re so mean, keeping everything from me.” Noa scrunched up her mouth and sulked a bit.

Fina looked like she didn’t know how to handle this, so I came in to save her. “I wasn’t trying to betray you…” I didn’t want them having a falling out over this.

“Fina didn’t know about the books until recently either,” said Ellelaura. “She just happened to see them at the orphanage. That was how she found out.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, well, I suppose you couldn’t help it,” said Noa, and Fina looked relieved at once. “Mother, please give me a book too.”

“And here I thought you were too old for picture books.”

“It’s different when it’s one that Yuna wrote. Of course I’d want an adorable book like that.” Noa looked at the girl and the bear drawn on the book.

Ellelaura smiled as she produced three volumes from her item bag and handed them over.

“Thank you,” said Noa, gleefully taking them. “You’ve drawn three volumes already…” Noa looked over the three books, each with their own unique covers.

Fina, on the other hand, looked kind of conflicted.

Ellelaura headed back to her room and Noa headed over to a chair to read the books.

“Lady Noa, you’re going to look at those right now?” asked Fina.

“Yes, I am.”

“You could look at them once you’re back in Crimonia.”

“Why would I do that?

“Not for any particular reason,” Fina said, a little too cheerfully.

It seemed that Fina didn’t want Noa reading the book about her, not that Noa had any idea what was going on. “*The Bear and the Girl*,” she said, reading the cover of the first volume.

There was indeed a bear and a girl on the cover.

“The drawings are so cute.”

Fina reacted to that. Noa tilted her head to the side as she looked at the girl in the book, but then she kept on flipping through the pages. There was the scene where the little girl headed out to the woods to collect herbs on her own. Noa glanced at Fina. Then she returned her eyes to the book. She flipped the page, then looked at Fina again.

“Doesn’t the girl look a little like Fina?”

“Absolutely not,” said Fina immediately. “You’re imagining it.”

“I see. I thought she rather looked like you, personally,” said Noa.

Fina had thought she'd gotten Noa off her trail and looked relieved. But that changed as Noa read the second and third volumes on the desk.

She narrowed her eyes at Fina suspiciously. "*This* is definitely Fina. And *this* is Shuri." She pointed at the other little girl that turned up in the third volume. "And *these* bears are Kumayuru and Kumakyu. And *this* is Yuna!"

Noa had guessed right on all counts. Fina looked exasperated.

I decided to explain everything. "That book is based on when I came to Crimonia. The girl is modeled after Fina."

"Is she really?"

"But not all of it is based on real events, of course."

"Come to think of it, your mom was sick wasn't she, Fina?" Noa looked at the book again, starting to compare what she had heard to the stories in the books.

"Yes, but Yuna saved her."

Noa took a deep breath. "It's such a good story. It's so heartwarming! I hope the girls live happily ever after."

"Lady Noa…"

"But if this bear is Yuna and if it's based on Yuna coming to Crimonia, then that means I'll eventually appear too, right?"

"If I keep doing them," I said. "But I haven't thought up the rest of the story. Do you want to show up in the book?"

"Why, of course. I'd like you to draw me too."

Looks like things had gone exactly like Fina had predicted. Noa wanted to show up in the book, then. But…how would I get Noa into the story? Because I was the bear, I couldn't exactly have the main character accept a quest to guard Noa, and a regular girl like Fina was really unlikely to meet a noble like her.

What kind of story would I write?

Anyway, I told Noa I'd think about it to buy myself some time.

Chapter 302:
The Bear Is Thanked by Maricks and the Others

THE NEXT DAY—after I finished breakfast and took some time to chill—I headed over to Maricks and the others like promised.

"We're so grateful for what you did, Yuna." Maricks thanked me, then Timol and Cattleya did so as well.

They gave me back the cotton candy machine. They'd even cleaned it so the raw sugar wouldn't gunk it up. Come to think of it, I remembered I promised the king cotton candy. If I headed back home to Crimonia without bringing some, he'd probably make a whole thing out of it next time I saw him. Maybe I could bring some along when I went to see Teilia?

"Thanks to you, we got third place in the food division," Shia told me.

Come to think of it, I hadn't been able to vote on the third day since I'd been whisked away.

Maricks didn't seem satisfied. "But why did we get third place? I was sure we'd get first."

"You're not happy with third?"

"Yeah, third is all right. There were lots of food stalls, so third is pretty good."

Maricks shook his head. "But we sold so much. We could've ranked higher."

Cattleya told him off. "Maricks, you're too fixated on this. According to our classmates who did vote for us, there were many others who passed because they didn't feel the cotton candy was filling enough, even though it was delicious and novel."

"But everyone ate so much of it," Maricks grumbled.

"I agree, but it's still amazing we got third place."

"Yeah, I get ya."

"Besides," said Timol, "if we got those invalid votes, we might have gone up a place." Suddenly, everyone looked conflicted.

“Invalid votes?”

“Yes. It seems that there were many votes where people didn’t write a number and simply wrote ‘bear’ instead. We think those might have been people who had seen the bear statue you made, but the judges disagreed.”

Maricks looked at me now. “Apparently, most of those votes came in on the first day. So even I know those weren’t for us.”

“You were the talk of the festival, after all.” And now Cattleya was looking at me too.

“Yeah, that’s true.” Plus Timol.

“The first day did have a bear, after all.” And Shia.

Fina, Shia, and Noa stared at me too, now, because everyone else was.

According to Shia, there’d been a lot of people who wrote in “bear” as their vote for the first day. There were only a couple of votes that said the same on the second and third days. Soon enough, the judges learned about a girl walking around dressed as a bear on the first day. A lot of those sightings also happened near voting boxes, which likely influenced the votes. The acting committee had concluded that all votes reading “bear” were for this mysterious wandering bear girl, instead of for the cotton candy.

“They probably were voting for you because they saw you in your bear suit, Yuna,” said Shia. “If you had come on the second and third days dressed as a bear, you might have won the contest.”

No, thank you. Man, what a pain…now I couldn’t go near the academy in my uniform *or* in my bear outfit. At the very least, I’d have to stay away until the rumors died down.

They thanked me one more time, then we got to talking about the festival. All the bear stuff on the first day and Teilia helping out had made it really hectic. Maricks told me that he was really disappointed that he hadn’t seen me fight the knights.

“You gotta have a match with me next time, okay?” he said.

“All right, next time.”

The conversation was exhausting, so I just gave him a wishy-washy answer.

From there, we started talking about how they would thank the friends who had helped them.

“Which place should it be?” asked Shia. They were going to treat their classmates out to eat, but there were so many choices.

“There were a lot more people than we expected,” said Cattleya.

“I wonder if we could ask a place to help us?” Maricks said, which made Cattleya and Timol look worried.

“How many was it again?” wondered Timol.

“I think sixteen.”

“With us, it’d be twenty in total. That’s a lot.”

“Well, we’re also inviting people who didn’t help out.”

Unlike me, Shia and Maricks apparently had a ton of friends to come to their aid. In my old world, not a single person would have helped me out…not that I would’ve had anyone to *try* to call on, now that I thought about it. Nah, there was no point in this comparison at all.

“Would you all like to come too?” Shia asked.

I frowned. “It’s going to be students?”

“Yes, Linea will be there too.”

In other words, people who had seen my underwear would be there. I stayed in all day yesterday and felt better, but I wasn’t about to forget about the perils of the panty peek.

If I went in my bear onesie, it’d be a big deal. If I went in my uniform, Shia’s friend would *also* make it a big deal.

I decided to politely decline. “You should have fun with your friends. Besides, we need to get back to Crimonia soon.”

We needed to head home now that the festival was over. Otherwise, Cliff,

Tiermina, and Gentz would be worried. Shia and the others looked disappointed, but I had to turn them down regardless.

“Things’ll definitely get rowdy because of the number of people going.”

“We need a place big enough that they won’t mind if they’re loud, but we want the food to be good too.”

“Even if we could find a big place with good food, I don’t think anyone would be okay with us being loud.”

“Then what should we do?”

Well, with twenty school kids, it seemed like it would be really loud. If we were in Crimonia, I would have offered up one of my restaurants. Since we had a party room, they would have been able to get a little rowdy without causing any trouble. But I couldn’t just invite all of them to Crimonia. Then again, there was a certain place in the capital that was similar to my establishments.

“Shia, I know the perfect place.”

“Do you really, Yuna?”

“Yeah. And there won’t be any customers, so you wouldn’t be causing trouble. Also, the food is delicious. It’s a great place.”

No way it wouldn’t be with the head chef of the castle, Zelef, overseeing the food. It wasn’t open yet either, so other customers wouldn’t be a problem.

“A place like that seriously exists?” asked Shia.

Cattleya seemed doubtful. “You’re telling us there’s a place that serves good food, but that doesn’t have customers?”

“That’s because the place hasn’t officially opened yet.” I told them about the king-mandated restaurant that was being built. The only issue was that we’d need Ellelaura and Zelef to both be on board. But I was sure Ellelaura would be fine with it if we asked.

It didn’t go as well as I’d hoped—

“His Majesty mandated a restaurant to be built…?”

“No, I don’t think we could go there.”

“And we wouldn’t be able to even afford the food.”

Just like that, they dismissed my idea. Money would be an issue, I guess, and it didn’t feel like a situation where I could just cover them myself. Unless…

“If I talked to Ellelaura, she might be able to arrange for it.”

“Me?” someone said from the door. Speak of the devil…

“Mother?!”

Everyone stood up and greeted her.

“Why are you at home, Mother?” asked Shia. “What happened to your work?”

“I’m more wondering when you managed to get into the room,” I said.

“I forgot something and came back to get it,” Ellelaura replied to me, then turned to Shia. “Then I heard that your friends were here, so I decided to sneak in and give you a little surprise.”

Wow! What a perfect way to annoy your kid!

“Ha!” Ellelaura smiled. “So, what were you talking about? I heard you say my name.”

“We wanted to ask you about something.”

“Oh, has my daughter entered her rebellious stage…” Ellelaura looked woebegone and stole a glance at Shia. Jeez, Ellelaura always loves to ham it up…

“No,” said Shia. “We’re planning on inviting friends to eat—the ones who helped us at the festival. But there are so many people that we’re still trying to figure out where to do it.”

Then I told her how I’d proposed the Bear’s Lounge Restaurant.

“Oh, that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“Mother?”

“But isn’t this a restaurant that His Majesty himself ordered to be made?”

“Yeah, people like us couldn’t go to a place like that.”

“Plus, we wouldn’t have the money to pay for it.”

“Ha ha! Then we’ll have it double as a menu tasting,” said Ellelaura. “But you’ll need to give us your reviews as part of the deal.”

Even though the four of them were hesitant, they asked Ellelaura to arrange it in the end.

Chapter 303:
The Bear Goes to Thank Teilia

ELLELAURA STARTED TALKING about the meal with Shia and her friends. Since I'd seen them as promised, I decided to head over to meet Teilia.

"What would the rest of you like to do?" I asked Noa and the others.

"I'd like to thank Teilia again," said Noa.

Fina nodded. "Are we seeing the princess? I wanna see her too."

"Me too!" said Shuri.

"Mother, shouldn't you head back to work?"

"I should be fine if I'm just gone for a bit."

Then the four of us headed to the castle, including Noa—she was still worried for her mother, who had stayed behind.

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Once we got to the castle, I was allowed in because they recognized my face (or rather, my bear gear), but they checked Fina's and everyone else's IDs.

"I'd like to see Lady Teilia. Is she available?"

"Yes, Lady Ellelaura informed us. She said if the bear…I mean, if you, Mademoiselle Yuna, arrived, we should inform her."

Apparently Ellelaura had already told the guards we were coming. Good, that made things easier. I was grateful that she paid attention to small details like that. Even though she looked like she was never working, she really did get the job done…although remembering what she did earlier, it *also* seemed like she managed to skip out on work pretty often.

One of the guards took us to Teilia's room. Once we were in front of her door, he knocked and informed her we'd arrived.

"Please come in," I heard Teilia say from within the room.

The guard bowed and left us. When we opened the door and went in, we

found Teilia sitting with Princess Flora on chairs.

“Bear!”

I didn’t think I’d see Princess Flora again after the other day. Princess Flora hopped off the chair and made her way over to me.

“What is Princess Flora doing here?”

“I heard from Ellelaura yesterday that you were stopping by and knew I couldn’t leave,” said Teilia. “I decided to play with Flora in my room.”

Maybe I inconvenienced her then? “Were you planning on going out?” I asked.

“I didn’t have any plans, so it was fine.”

Well, that was good. I didn’t even think of asking Teilia whether a visit was convenient for her.

“Teilia, thank you for the last three days,” I said. “It was a lot of fun.” One by one, Noa and the others thanked her after me.

“It’s all right. I had fun as well,” said Teilia. “And I finally got to meet the infamous bear girl, along with wonderful people like Noa and the others.”

Noa and Fina seemed embarrassed when Teilia said that, but Shuri was happy.

“But I do have something to say,” said Teilia. “I was genuinely surprised when you challenged Lutum to a match so suddenly. Father didn’t stop you, and Ellelaura was allowing you to fight. Do you know how I felt back then?”

Teilia pointed straight at my face. I didn’t know what to say in response. It was that middle-aged man’s fault for provoking my wrath.

“I was so very anxious,” said Teilia. “Do you understand just how worried I was watching you fight?” Noa and the others nodded in agreement. “I was thinking of stopping everything so many times whenever they swung their swords at you.” Jeez, I’d really worried everyone. “But then you beat that knight and even Lutum himself. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.”

Teilia looked at the others as though looking for agreement. They all nodded.

Yep, I'd caused a *lot* of anxiety.

Then she told me about Linea's message, just like Shia had.

"So, uh," I said, changing the subject on the fly, "I'd like to thank you for everything you did for us during the academy festival."

"But you already *did* thank me." Teilia looked at the bed. The teddy bears I'd given her the first day of the festival were sitting on the pillow. "If I could ask you for something, though, I do have a request. I'd like to see your bear summons."

"My summons?"

"Yes, well, Flora and Mother have been so cheerily saying how cute and soft they are. Flora even said she played with them yesterday."

"Bear? I did pway with them, it's twoo!"

"I don't really mind. You just want me to summon them?"

"Father and Mother said they're gentle bears and Flora's told me about them too, so you can summon them."

Teilia confirmed it was okay, so I held my bear puppets out in front of me and summoned my bears in their standard size.

"They really are genuine bears," Teilia marveled. "May I touch them?"

But Princess Flora didn't even give me a chance to reply. "Bear!" she shouted as she hugged Kumakyu.

"It seems that I may, then," said Teilia. She looked at how happy Princess Flora was and, even though she seemed a little scared, she touched Kumayuru. "It really is soft."

Once she confirmed Kumayuru wasn't going to do anything to her, she hugged the bear just like Princess Flora. Shuri joined her and hugged Kumakyu too.

"Yuna, may I ride on your bear?" asked Teilia.

"Sure," I said. "But don't fidget too much once you're on top."

“I wouldn’t do that,” Teilia said. She climbed onto Kumayuru. Since the room was large, she didn’t have any trouble doing it. Princess Flora also got on Kumakyu’s back and the sisters rode in circles around the room.

Then Shuri and Noa joined in and the four of them started playing with my bears.

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With that, I decided to fulfill one more promise.

“Teilia, is the king available to meet?” I asked Teilia while she was still having a high time riding on Kumayuru. It would be such a pain, but I needed to see the king and give him some cotton candy. That was one of the reasons I was at the castle in the first place.

“You want to see Father?”

I only said I was seeing Teilia today, so it didn’t seem like the guard had gone to get the king. Ellelaura had made that decision, probably.

“I promised him I’d bring him cotton candy. If I can’t, could you relay a message for me?” I didn’t want to deal with some complaint later about how I went back to Crimonia without bringing candy. “If you could let him know I’ll give it to him next time I come, that’ll help a ton.” Even if I couldn’t give him candy, I could at least get on his good side by promising some later.

“Hmm… Wait just a moment,” said Teilia. She got off Kumayuru, left the room, and came back pretty quickly. “I asked for him to come right now, so I think he’ll be here soon.”

She summoned the king, just like that? I really hoped she didn’t call him using my name.

“I could go to him though,” I offered.

“It should be fine. If he can’t come, someone will let us know.”

I wasn’t so sure about summoning the king just to eat cotton candy. It seemed to run counter to any logic I knew.

But then, the king himself actually came to the room. “I see you’re in Teilia’s room today.”

“Teilia helped me out so much at the festival that I wanted to come thank her.”

“But I must ask, what is going on in here?”

Teilia, Princess Flora, Shuri, and Noa were all playing and riding on my bears. It really didn’t seem like something that would happen in a princess’s room.

“I told Yuna I wanted to see her summons,” Teilia explained from atop Kumayuru’s back. The king gave Teilia an exasperated glance, then looked at me. “What is it now? I heard you had business with me?”

“The other day, I promised that I’d bring you cotton candy to eat. Would you like to try it?”

“Ah yes, that. You called me just for that?”

“Yep…” No one had told him about the cotton candy, it seemed. Still, the king still sat down on a chair and told me he’d have some.

I started prepping to make the cotton candy. I set the machine on a table and brought out some sugar. The king looked curiously at the machine. “What is this?”

“It’s a machine to make it.” I turned it on as the king watched. After a while, thin strings started to form, and I caught them on a stick. The cotton candy was done in no time.

“You made this with nothing but sugar?”

“It’s sweet so you should have it with something to drink.” I pulled out some tea from my bear storage.

“You really have everything in your item bag.” He said it like I was a certain blue cartoon robot cat from my old life, but my bear storage was totally different. I mean, I didn’t have *everything* in my storage, just the stuff I stuck in there myself.

“You have knowledge of the strangest things,” he said as he heartily devoured the cotton candy. “It’s sweet.”

“I should hope so. It’s sugar.”

“The way it melts in my mouth is quite intriguing.”

“Fawther,” Princess Flora said, “I want some too.” The king handed Princess Flora the cotton candy and she started munching on it happily.

With that, I’d fulfilled my promise…and now he couldn’t complain about it.

“Come to think of it, Ellelaura isn’t around, is she?” asked the king.

“She headed home to pick up documents for work.” I left out the part about how she promptly ditched said work to talk the restaurant stuff over with Shia, all because of my suggestion.

After I finished thanking Teilia and fulfilled my promise to the king, I decided to leave the castle.

“Yuna, please make sure you come again when I’m around,” said Teilia.

I only really came to the castle when I felt like it, so all I could do was pray she happened to be there when I did. Thinking back on the other times I came by, though, I never bumped into her until recently.

“I don’t know when I’ll be here again,” I said, “so no promises.”

“Come back, Bear,” Princess Flora said.

“Yes, I’ll be back,” I promised.

“You treat me and Flora so differently.”

“You have school, Teilia, so I’m not sure whether I can see you, but Princess Flora is always at the castle. I can always see her.”

“You’re so mean, Yuna,” Teilia huffed.

Well, what else could I do about it? I always came to the castle on a whim. But next time, maybe I’d prep something for her to eat.

***

That night, Ellelaura came back from work and told us the king had really laid into her.

“I don’t get it,” she groaned. “All I did was have a short chat with Shia and her

friends, and then went and talked with Zelef before returning to work."

I had some blame this time around, but she still should've stuck to her priorities. She was the adult here after all, and I told her just that.

"Well, my daughter is obviously most important to me," Ellelaura answered. How very Ellelaura of her. A model parent who didn't even hesitate. But this hadn't exactly been a life-or-death issue and it wouldn't have affected Shia's future, so I really wish she would've just prioritized her work.

"Yuna, you're heading home tomorrow?" Ellelaura asked.

"I mean, I can't stick around the capital forever," I said.

And I sure couldn't keep dragging around Noa, Fina, and Shuri forever either. They needed to go home to Crimonia sometime, and tomorrow morning seemed good enough. If we used the bear gate, we could get home right away, but I'd be strict and say that we couldn't use it again immediately after.

"Then I'll prepare a carriage to take you to the capital gates."

"We're going on Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Shuri, we're riding together."

"Okay!"

Shuri and Noa had become fast friends the last few days. It made me happy to see a noble and peasant getting so close.

"Maricks and the others said they're going to be here to see you off tomorrow morning," said Ellelaura.

I really didn't think any of that stuff was necessary. On top of that, Noa and Shuri were looking forward to riding on my bears. No, I guess using my bear gate wasn't a good idea this time. We'd just ride the bears back to Crimonia.

"Fina, Shuri, you two can come again anytime you'd like."

"Thank you."

"Okay."

"And Noa, make sure you listen to anything Cliff says."

"I know."

“Yuna, you tell me if she’s stubborn, won’t you?”

“Mother!”

That night, after finalizing our plans to leave, we had a luxurious meal.

Chapter 304:
Festival Thank-You
Maricks' Chronicles

YUNA HEADED HOME to Crimonia and things settled down after the festival.

We had a break today from the academy, so we'd invited the friends who had helped us with the festival to a restaurant meal. Lady Ellelaura had arranged the place for us, this new restaurant that had only just showed up. Only Shia knew where the place even was, so we met up in front of the academy to head out as a group.

"Looks like we've got everyone." They all came right on time so we were ready to go.

"Maricks, I'm looking forward to this meal."

"Me too! I even skipped a meal earlier to make room."

This place had been created according to His Majesty's orders, so the food had to be good.

"Lady Teilia is joining us, isn't she?"

"She's supposed to know where it is already," I said, "so she's coming later."

Shia was the only person in the group who knew where it was because Lady Ellelaura gave her directions. I tried asking Shia where it was earlier, but she just laughed and shrugged me off. She was definitely hiding something…you could see it on her face.

Anyway, Shia led us to the place. Hungry and hyped up, we finally caught sight of the building.

"Shia, is this it?"

As we stood out front, something at the entrance immediately grabbed our attention.

"Yeah."

It was a giant, grand building, but that wasn't what really grabbed us. Nah, it

was the two bear statues in front of it. One of them held a giant spoon, and the other one a ginormous fork.

“Oh, I heard about this place from my parents.”

“I heard about the bear statues too.”

A few people knew about this place apparently, but Timol and Cattleya seemed as in the dark as I’d been.

“Shia, is this place…” Timol started.

“Yeah,” said Cattleya. “Yuna was involved with it somehow.”

“Yuna was definitely here…” I couldn’t believe she was somehow involved with a restaurant managed by the castle. What a weird girl. I mean, she dressed like a bear, she was stronger than me *and* Lord Lutum—a knight captain!—and according to Shia, Yuna was even personal acquaintances with the king! But she was also just an everyday citizen. I really didn’t understand her.

“Anyway, let’s go in,” Shia said, so we did just that.

Inside, a girl in a chef’s uniform greeted us. “We were waiting for your arrival. You are the group of students from the academy?”

“Yeah. We might get a little rowdy, but I hope that’s okay.”

“It should be fine. Lady Ellelaura informed us of everything beforehand. Please have a seat.”

The place seemed really fancy, but it was also brimming with bears. Just how far did Yuna’s influence reach?

Everyone was checking out the place as we sat down. They’d already set the table with some delish-looking bread.

“We’ll bring you the rest of the food soon,” the woman said as she bowed her head and went into a back room. Then they brought out dishes one after another.

I stood up to draw everyone’s attention.

“Uh…everyone, I wanted to thank you for helping us with the stall. I know it was kinda last minute. But thanks to all of you, we got third place in the food

division. And we appreciate it—eat a ton, guys!”

We lifted our cups, clinked them together, and started to dig in. Just like Lady Ellelaura had said, I couldn’t get enough of it. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying the food just as much as me.

“Maricks, everything’s really good.”

“What will we do about the bill though?”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about that, just eat as much as you want.”

The last worries faded after that, and everyone started to really chow down. Lady Ellelaura had told us we didn’t need to pay for anything, but we paid some of our own money to make sure we thanked the classmates who’d helped us.

Then again, I don’t think the money we paid actually covered everything. Still, Lady Ellelaura took the money.

Everyone ate as they got excited talking about the festival.

“A lot happened during this festival.”

“You mean that whole bear-prize debacle?”

“Right, that.”

“I saw it. A girl dressed as a bear tossed those knives around, and *whoosh!* She hit the targets like it was a piece of cake.”

“I only saw her in passing. She sure was cute in her outfit, right?”

“Don’t you know her, Shia?”

“Well, kind of. But I can’t say much about her.”

Right. Even if she did tell them anything about Yuna, none of them would believe her. Besides, Lady Ellelaura had told us not to talk about Yuna.

“And the cotton candy stall was popular. People were saying it was an interesting type of food.”

“I was convinced you’d get first place.”

“Problem was, cotton candy wasn’t too filling,” I said. “It’s easy to get sick of it too. I think if we had another flavor though, we might’ve gotten first place.”

I ate a ton of cotton candy while we were practicing making it and got fed up with it halfway through practice. I wondered if we even *could* flavor it. But if we could, there was a good chance we'd nab first next year.

Then we started talking about what we had the most fun with at the festival.

"That match between Lord Lutum and that girl was amazing!" one of my classmates said. I'd wanted to see it too, but I was still eager to hear what he had to say about it. "I couldn't believe it when she blocked Lord Lutum's sword, kept dodging him, and even won! She was such an adorable girl."

"I know what you mean. The way she sorta slowed as she moved was really beautiful too. Also, when she moved, her hair would sway with her. It looked really pretty." Yuna's hair was pretty long, now that I thought about it.

Linea also started talking about Yuna. "Now that I know girls can become as strong as her, I feel super motivated to work hard."

Everyone who saw the match seemed to be ecstatic about it. Ugh, lame. I wish I could've gone. Still, Yuna promised she'd have a match with me sometime, and isn't it better to actually fight a match than to just stand by and watch one?

None of the students outside of our little group knew the truth: that the bear and the girl who fought Lord Lutum were one and the same.

While we were chatting away, enjoying our meal, we heard the door open. I looked over and saw Lady Teilia there along with someone else.

"Father, I've asked you several times not to cause any trouble."

"I know," the person next to her said. "Once I inspect the restaurant, I'll leave."

Lady Teilia's father? As in, the *king*? What was he doing here? I hadn't been the only one to connect the dots. Everyone seemed to realize at once, and they all turned to stare at me and Shia.

Shia shook her head. *Of course I hadn't known His Majesty was going to make an appearance. If we had known, we would've told everyone.*

His Majesty and Lady Teilia made their way over to us. You could practically hear everybody clenching up from nerves.

“Easy now,” said His Majesty. “I’m just here to inspect the restaurant.”

Teilia looked at His Majesty with exasperation. “You’re just using me as an excuse to get out of work.”

“Quiet now, you’ll ruin my dignified reputation. I’ve only come to inspect the restaurant because it’s opening soon.”

He didn’t have to choose today to come though. It seemed like Lady Teilia’s claim had some credence and he actually might’ve been skipping out on work, but no one was going to point that out. Not that we could’ve tried to bring it up even if we wanted to. He was the king, after all.

His Majesty was taking a look around at the bear decorations. “Looks like Ellelaura really did have all those bear statues made.”

“Ellelaura made these?” Lady Teilia also took a look at the bears.

“Well, she’s got some bears in her Crimonia restaurant, so Ellelaura got it into her head to copy her. I gave her permission.”

Bears in her restaurant? Wait, was he talking about Yuna’s restaurant? Now that I thought about it, Shia had mentioned that Yuna owned a restaurant in their hometown. Yuna’s restaurant had bear decorations, and this one did too. That clenched it…Yuna really *was* involved with this place somehow.

Those of us who’d been with her during the practical training knew some stuff about Yuna, but everyone else had been left in the dark. They were looking pretty puzzled.

His Majesty took a seat and ordered some food. Lady Teilia sure didn’t look happy about that.

“Once you’ve eaten,” she said, “please go home.”

“All right, all right. I won’t get in the way of all of your fun.”

We were now eating in the presence of His Majesty, so we couldn’t exactly be

rowdy anymore. Everyone ate in silence. I was so worried about His Majesty being there that I couldn't even taste the food.

Then, our savior appeared. Shia's mom, Lady Ellelaura, stepped into the restaurant. She basically dragged him away, arguing the entire time they went. We all had a new respect for Lady Ellelaura.

"Shia's mom is amazing."

"Lady Ellelaura is so cool."

"She's not that cool," Shia countered. I thought she was amazing too, considering she wasn't scared of saying all that stuff to the king as she dragged him out of the restaurant. Lady Ellelaura wasn't around anymore, so we all just decided to thank Shia.

"Also, she's so young and pretty."

For real. The first time I'd met Lady Ellelaura, I'd actually thought she was Shia's sister.

After that, the meal was basically a success (I hoped) and the chefs asked us for our impressions of the meal. I couldn't really remember what anything had tasted like while the king was around, so I only had vague answers for those parts. What I knew for sure was that everything I did remember tasted great.

At the very end, when they served pudding, everyone was happily eating away. Yuna had probably come up with the recipe for this too.

She really was a strange one.

Chapter 305:
The Bear Distributes Picture Books

AFTER SAYING OUR GOODBYES, we took a carriage to the capital's gate. From there, we rode home on my bears. In the end, I didn't even get the chance to ask Noa and Shuri if they wanted to use the bear gate.

I delivered the girls back to their parents. With their precious children back in custody, and my work was done.

I had a lot of fun at the festival, but I decided I needed to take a break from the capital for a while. They say that rumors only run for seventy-five days or so. Still, two and a half months seemed like a long time to wait.

Still, I didn't have any reason to go to the capital for a while, so I decided to relax in Crimonia while I passed the time.

Soon enough, I was heading over to deliver the newest volume of my picture books to the orphans.

"Thank you, bear girl."

"Yeah, thank you."

The gang of little kids happily took the books off my paws. I gave them three copies like last time and told them to share.

After that, I talked with the headmistress and checked on the kids who were taking care of the birds. They all looked like they were taking the job seriously. I spotted Tiermina and Liz working, so I asked how things were going.

"Everyone's very good about their jobs," said Tiermina.

"We've gotten more birds and things have been going swimmingly."

"And things have been so much easier since Neaf started looking after the kids."

Neaf, who came from Mileela, seemed to enjoy the work too. She was surrounded by those rambunctious kids. I spotted her telling them off from

time to time. It seemed like she was making sure to keep the kids on the right track.

Even with Neaf there as well, three people still didn't seem like enough to manage the whole orphanage. I asked about that, but Liz just told me that they were fine because they didn't have to worry about money or food anymore.

I'd thought they'd get tired of dealing with energetic kids all the time, but I guess they were fine?

While I was talking to Tiermina and Liz, several kids came into the room we were in.

"Ms. Liz, may I have some water?"

"Make sure you wash up before you drink it," she answered.

"Yes, ma'am!"

I'd told the kids they had to make sure to wash their hands and gargle so they didn't end up catching something and getting sick. It looked like they were keeping up with it.

The room that Tiermina used as a kind of office had a water fountain and refrigerator so the kids could get something to drink as they worked. They seemed to really enjoy drinking that water. I could see from their foreheads that they were a little sweaty.

Come to think of it, it had started to get a little warmer lately. Everyone working the hen houses seemed to be sweating. My bear gear thermoregulates, so I hadn't noticed it myself. It seemed like it'd be getting pretty hot soon.

After I left the orphanage and headed home to my bear house, I used my bear gate to visit my small house in Laluz, the one Retbelle had given me. It felt like it'd been forever since I paid it a visit, but it hadn't really been all that long.

I headed outside and was met with blue skies, which was a huge change from the gloomy weather I saw last time. I started to walk to Retbelle's shop under the blue skies.

Passersby kept looking at me, talking to each other. "A bear?" "A bear!" It was

just the usual though. I didn't get nearly as much of that in Crimonia these days, but that's how it went whenever I visited a new town. You'd get the good ol' Bear Stares. I pulled my bear hood low over my face so they couldn't see me.

Once I got to Retbelle's shop, I headed right inside. The clerk gave me a surprised look.

"Is Mr. Retbelle in? I think he'll know who I am if you tell him Yuna is here to see him."

The clerk told me to wait as he headed up the stairs in the back of the shop. I was left alone with the other customer in the shop. I got another stare, but at least nobody said anything.

While I was waiting for the clerk to come back, I perused the shop's offerings. There were a whole lot of antiques and paintings. I wondered if he had anything interesting I could get, maybe something to display at home. Then again, what did people think looked good in this world? Maybe something bear-themed would be nice, the kind of thing Noa would enjoy.

"When it comes to paintings…"

As I was looking at the art, I remembered the drawing we made at the festival. I could hang that up once I got home.

I had been walking around for a while when the clerk came back, with Retbelle behind him.

"You've come at a splendid time, bear girl," he said. "What brings you here?"

"I finished another picture book, so I brought it over for Alka."

I produced a copy of the third volume from my bear puppet.

"My, Alka will be thrilled."

"If you could give this to her," I said.

"Oh, no, you should give it to her yourself, miss. I think she'd like that much better."

We headed up the stairs to Retbelle's home. Alka and her mom, Seffle, were both there. Alka was cradling the Kumayuru stuffed animal I gave her in her

arms. I was glad to see she was taking good care of it, but where was Kumakyu?

“Bear!” Alka ran over to me on her little feet as soon as she realized I was there.

“Hello,” I said. “I brought you a new book.” I handed her the book, which I had been snugly holding in my bear puppet’s mouth. Alka happily took it.

“All right, Alka, what do we say?” Seffle said to Alka, who was looking at the book with bright eyes.

“Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

Alka hopped onto the sofa and cracked open the book, her Kumayuru stuffed animal sitting right on her lap.

Seffle tried to get Alka to behave more politely, but the girl was already enthralled with it. Seffle apologized to me, told me she’d make tea, and left the room.

“You must forgive us,” Retbelle said. “Alka’s so smitten with the books you’ve written, she’s been looking forward to the next volume for some time.”

I was happy about that, but it also made me a little embarrassed.

“So, what brings you to our town? Was there something you needed?”

“I just came by to bring the book to her.”

“You don’t mean to say you came all the way out here just to deliver a book?” Retbelle looked shocked. He might have had a point. I just used the bear gate so it was no big deal. I didn’t even think about the distance.

“I apologize for taking you all the way from the capital.” Retbelle bowed his head.

After that, Seffle came back with the tea.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for my little one,” she said.

“Indeed,” said Retbelle. “I’d like to thank you in some way…”

“You gave me an entire house. I think you’re good.”

Thanks to him giving me that place, I had a bear gate set up and could come to this town whenever I wanted. It didn't seem like a fair trade for three books and some stuffed animals though, so I told him he didn't need to thank me.

"But you came all the way here to just bring us the book, didn't you?" he said.

"Well, I did…" I couldn't tell him about the bear gate, so I didn't have a good response.

Retbelle fell into a thoughtful silence. I had no idea what he had in mind, so I just sipped the chilled tea that Seffle had brought. It seemed like high-quality stuff. Yup, delicious.

I'd been drinking a lot of really good tea at the castle and with Cliff and Ellelaura, so I'd gotten better at judging the quality of these things.

"You did live in the capital, if I remember correctly?"

Not quite, but I'd come here with Sanya, the capital's guild master. It made sense for him to think I lived there too. It didn't seem worth it to clarify, so I just let it slide.

"Do you know the guild master of the capital's merchant guild?"

"She's an older woman, right?" I asked. I met her just once while buying some land.

"If you do, you can always give her my name if you run into any trouble. I'll ask her to help you out a little."

I already had connections through Ellelaura and Gran, so I probably wouldn't need to deal with the capital's merchant guild. Still, you never know what might happen, so I accepted his offer. You could never have too many connections.

"In that case, I'll drop your name when I need help," I said, which made Retbelle very happy.

As I was drinking my tea and talking with Retbelle, Alka came over to me. It looked like she finished the book.

"Bear, can bears shwink?"

"The bears in the book can, but not real ones," I said. Princess Flora had asked

me the same thing, so I told her the truth. I'd feel bad if they grew up and ended up embarrassed by anything later.

Alka seemed sad that I'd told her the truth, but I was just trying to consider her future. I couldn't just teach her a bunch of lies. She hadn't met Kumayuru or Kumakyu, so she accepted that more easily than Princess Flora had.

I finished my tea, thanked them, and left. As I was heading back to the house Retbelle had given to me, someone called me from behind.

"Is that you, Yuna?"

I turned around and found Miranda's group behind me. They were the adventurers I'd met when we were trying to get Luimin's bracelet back.

"It *is* you! And I didn't even need to see your face to know!"

"Miranda, anybody could tell that's Yuna."

"Right? Who wouldn't recognize that adorable little tail?"

Everyone seemed exasperated with Miranda. It…wasn't exactly impressive to recognize me from behind though. It's not like there were any other bears running around.

"What are you doing in town? Is Luimin with you too?"

"She's not here. I just stopped by Mr. Retbelle's place."

They asked me what had happened after we left them. I let them know Luimin arrived at the elves' village safely and that I left her there. Of course, I didn't tell them about the sacred tree—that was elf business.

"She got home safely, then. I'm glad."

"We were all a tad worried."

"Especially considering what she's like."

Well, Luimin *was* a little unreliable, so I got why they'd be worried.

"So, where are you off to now, Yuna?"

"I was just about to go back." I didn't say what I meant by that, though. I

could’ve been heading to an inn, a house, or even to Crimonia for all they knew.

“You are? Well, if you happen to see Luimin again, ask her to come by to visit us every once in a while.”

We talked for a little longer, then I headed back to Crimonia through the bear gate. Once there, I put up the drawing from the festival in my room. Everyone else seemed to be having fun, and there I was, hiding in my bear hood.

Still, it was a good picture.

Chapter 306:
The Bear Feels It Getting Warmer

AFTER WE GOT BACK from the capital, Fina and Shuri went back to work. They also studied and played with the kids at the orphanage. Noa went back to her own studies too. Sometimes, I saw her out with Fina.

I spent my days making new confectionaries and taking those over to Fina and Noa, along with the orphans.

Then, one day, a letter came from the palace for Noa. It was apparently from Shia, but she wrote it to me. It was all about how good the restaurant had been—the one she'd gone to with her classmates—and she thanked me again.

Apparently, the king had stopped by partway through their meal and stirred up some trouble. Man, what was the deal with that guy? He appeared randomly at my house back when he wanted pudding too. Didn't seem like very kingly behavior to me. Then again, he was the one letting me see Princess Flora anytime I wanted. If he was more formal and dignified, he might not have allowed me to make casual visits.

I just had to write it off as bad luck for Shia and the others.

When I went to Noa's house the other day, she told me she wanted to go out, and that's exactly what we were doing. I was taking her, Fina, and Shuri to the outskirts of town for a picnic. We got Cliff's permission before going, of course.

"It's been so long since I've been outside of town."

"Are you studying hard?"

"Yes, I promised Father I would in order to go to the capital. And I must study or who knows what he'll tell Mother."

Since Noa was being so studious, I chose a nice view on a hill near the town. We headed over on my bears, of course. They ran up the slope and we arrived on top of the hill.

“How about around here?” I got off Kumayuru. The breeze was nice and cool on the hilltop.

“It’s so nice,” Noa said as she got off Kumakyu, and took a deep breath. Shuri and Fina followed suit.

“I’ll stick around here,” I said, “so you three have at it.” They all got on my bears and started running around in the grass. I passed the time idly watching them. Peace and quiet. It was nice. Once I’d seen their happy faces, I knew the whole trip was worth it.

I splayed out on the ground and looked up. White clouds floated along in the blue sky. In my old world, I’d never had the chance to lie on the grass and watch the clouds go by like this.

I could hear the girls playing nearby. I closed my eyes and let the pleasant drowsiness wash over me.

……

…

Someone was shaking me.

“Yuna.”

“Yuna.”

“Yuna.”

“Cwoon.”

“Cwoon.”

“What?”

When I opened my eyes, I found five pairs of eyes (Kumayuru and Kumakyu included) staring back at me. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m hungry,” said Shuri.

“You were sleeping so peacefully that we didn’t want to wake you, but then we were just so famished…” Noa said, looking a little sheepish.

When I looked up, I noticed the sun had changed position in the sky. It hadn’t

been long, but I apparently dozed off. “Then how about some lunch?”

I got up and placed a picnic blanket down on the ground. Then I produced some rice balls I made that morning from my bear storage. The rice balls had various fillings inside them. I used the pickled plums Jeremo from Mileela had sent, along with some marinated meats and fish. I also added some bamboo shoots and sauteed mushrooms from the elves’ village to the rice. I made a little extra food just in case, and we could just store any leftovers in the bear storage. Also, I didn’t shape the rice balls into bear heads or anything like that—they were just plain old normal triangle shapes.

“They look so good.”

I had them all wash their hands before they got onto the picnic blanket. “Starting from this side, we’ve got pickled plum, meat, fish, and seasoned rice.”

“I like the seasoned ones.”

“I’ll have the one with meat in it.”

“I can’t *stand* the sour red thing…”

They each took their preferred rice balls while also telling me which ones they didn’t enjoy. I picked up the pickled plum rice ball that no one else had chosen and ate that. Delicious.

“It’s gotten so hot.” Noa leaned onto Kumayuru. Then she said, as though realizing for the first time, “Aren’t you hot dressed in that, Yuna?”

All three of them looked at me pitifully, like they thought I was sweating bullets in my bear onesie or something. I pinched the fabric. “I’m fine. I’m perfectly cool.”

“Y-you are?” They were all surprised now.

With how fluffy my outfit was, it must’ve seemed stuffy to everyone else. A onesie was one of those things you’d normally never want to wear in the summer, but it actually was really comfortable. Despite appearances, it protected me from the heat. I was really thankful for the cold and heat resistance gear that the god had given me, but…ugh, if only I just had those abilities myself instead of all that stuff being tied to this bear outfit!

The only way for me to keep cool was to wear my bear onesie. If things heated up even more, I really wouldn't be able to take the thing off. On one paw—I mean, hand—I was grateful. But on the other hand, ugh.

"Are you hot?" Noa asked my bears as she leaned onto Kumayuru and gave it a gentle pat.

"If you give their fur a trim, may I have it?"

"I wanna have some too!" Shuri raised her hand.

My bears both crooned quietly and pitifully and shifted behind Fina as though trying to hide from Noa. "They think you're going to pluck their fur off."

"I-I wouldn't do that. I just said that in case you were giving them a trim because it's so hot. Please don't run away from me like that."

Noa gave Kumakyu a hug as my bear tried to get away. It seemed that my bears also had heat and cold resistance like me, so they were fine in the heat. Could I even trim their fur at all?

But…oooh! If their fur regrew right away, what if I made a blanket from their fur scraps?

"Since it's hot," I said, "why don't you go for a swim in the river?"

The river near Crimonia wasn't as big as Laluz's, but we did have fields here that a river ran by.

"Um, I've never swam before," Fina answered, and she grew very quiet. "Because…Mom was sick."

Shuri also told me she didn't know how to swim either.

Right… Since I saw Tiermina so healthy every day now, I completely forgot how things used to be. She was so sick that she couldn't work. And because their father had also passed away, Fina used to spend her time working to support her family instead of playing. And Shuri hadn't been able to particularly enjoy her childhood either. She was always by her mother's side, taking care of her.

"I've been to the river several times, but I only went in to splash around in the water."

In the back of my head, I imagined Noa wearing a white dress and straw hat kicking around the water in her bare feet. It seemed like a picturesque summer scene.

But did that mean none of them had swam before? I mean, I hadn't swum in a river before either. The most I'd done was take swimming classes at the pool during elementary school.

"Well…it's not the river, but how about we go to the beach to swim sometime?"

"D-do you mean it?!" Noa was the first to respond.

"Yeah. Especially since the ocean is so close."

We could get straight to the blue ocean through the tunnel. In the past, it'd been hard to get to the sea, but after someone (read: me) had made a tunnel, getting to the beach was easy peasy.

"I haven't swum in the ocean before," said Noa, "so I'd like to go."

"Will you come too, Fina? Shuri?"

"But I can't swim."

"Me neither."

Honestly…I didn't know whether *I* could swim either. The last time I'd been in the water was in elementary school. Did I even have the muscle memory for it?

"Even if you can't swim, you can play around the waves. And the ocean is nice and cool," I said.

In my mind, I added a "probably" to that statement. I hadn't actually been to the beach in the summer before.

"Oh, do you have a kind of clothing you wear when you get into the river or ocean?" I asked.

"Um… Like something thin to wear?"

Fina didn't seem to understand, which made sense considering she hadn't been to the river much. I asked Noa too, but she didn't know either since she'd just splashed around in the water at most.

“Hmm. Basically, there’s this kind of clothing you wear to get into the water and then you swim while wearing it,” I said.

“I don’t have any clothes like that. Can we buy it somewhere?”

“They might not sell it in this town.” If there weren’t places to swim, they wouldn’t need swimsuits. They had a river, but it wasn’t really big enough to warrant a swimsuit. “If they don’t have any around, I can just have Sherry make some.”

Sherry was one of the orphans and she was a great seamstress. The tailors had seen her handiwork when we’d gotten the bear uniforms made for my shops and they’d hired her on. Sherry had also made the bear stuffed animals for me.

Still, I needed to ask Sherry what her schedule was like. I’d probably want to get the order in before it really got hot. “Also, if we’re going, we’ll need to get Tiermina and Cliff’s permission.”

“I can ask Father,” Noa offered.

“I’ll ask Mom and Dad,” Fina said.

“Me too!” Shuri chipped in.

They all looked pretty happy. I started to come up with a plan that’d get us to the ocean.

Chapter 307:
The Bear Asks Tiermina about Going to the Ocean

AFTER I GOT HOME from the picnic, I started to think about how we'd get to the ocean.

First, who would I take? There was Fina, Noa, and Shuri too. But if we were going to Mileela, I couldn't forget Anz's group. They'd probably like to visit home since it'd been so long. I also wanted to bring along Morin, Karin, and Nerin to thank them for all their hard work. Basically, it was a company retreat.

Oh, and there were the orphans—couldn't forget them either. I'd even made a giant bear house in Mileela specifically because I'd wanted to show the orphans the ocean.

But there was one problem with that. We could close the shops while we were out, but I needed a good way to take care of the kokekko. They were living, breathing animals, after all. If we didn't take care of them, things could get real bad.

Plus, we'd need swimsuits like I'd told Fina and the others.

Considering I'd need to get swimsuits for everyone, this seemed like it'd be a lot of work.

I waited until the afternoon, then headed over to Tiermina's house to ask her about what to do about the ocean. Around this time, she'd be done working with the eggs and would be home.

Fina and Shuri weren't around, but Tiermina was.

"So Fina and Shuri told me yesterday about that. You were serious?"

"Yeah, I meant it," I told her. "So I wanted to ask you for some advice."

"My advice?" Tiermina seemed to brace herself for me to say something ridiculous—at least, that's what the look on her face said. I wish she wouldn't give me that look…like, I don't *always* bring her trouble, you know…?

I told her about how I wanted to bring everyone with me to the ocean. She looked absolutely appalled by that.

“Everyone? You’re serious?”

“I just figured if we’re going, we might as well make it a company retreat.”

“A company *what*?” She didn’t seem to understand what that meant. Maybe the concept didn’t exist in this world.

“It’s a trip where you go and have fun in order to forget about work. Like a thank you for all the labor everyone puts in every day.” It would be refreshing too, and great for team-building.

“You’ve already given us jobs and more pay than average. We might thank you, but why would you thank us?”

“Why *wouldn’t* I thank you? Without you guys, I wouldn’t be able to manage the shops. I need to be grateful, especially to Morin, everyone at the shops, and all the kids taking care of the kokekko.”

I really meant it too. They were the whole reason I got to eat really good food.

“You’re so different, Yuna. All right. Then please tell me the details.”

I explained everything I’d come up with thus far to Tiermina.

“So we’ll close up the shops and all go to the ocean, but what about the kokekko? Who will take care of them? They lay eggs every day, and we have a contract with the merchant guild to provide them with daily eggs.”

Tiermina knew what the problem was right away. I’d been worried about that part too.

“Here’s what I’m thinking: could we use some people from the merchant guild?”

“The merchant guild?”

“I figured we could hire people to take care of the birds while we’re on the retreat.”

She thought about it.

“They need to come buy the eggs anyway,” I continued, “so we could have the merchant guild take care of the birds at the same time. Two kokkekos with one stone, you know? And if they take all the eggs to the guild, we’ll know none of them will go to waste.”

“How long will this ‘retreat’ last?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but maybe about a week?” That was how long I was planning for, more or less, but I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Right. I think the guild could handle a little cleaning, feeding, and egg gathering.”

“Do you think we’d need to show them how to take care of the birds, though?”

“They should be fine when it comes to that. There’s one guild worker who always comes by, so that employee has seen us work and helped us several times.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I think they do it just for fun. There are also other people who come in when that worker is on break. I think if we ask them to help, they’d be able to manage.”

I nodded. You know, maybe this could work!

“In that case,” she said, “I’ll check in with Milaine.”

“Yes, thank you,” I said. “And don’t worry about expenses. Tell them I’ll compensate them specifically for this.” It’d be bad if they said no because I skimped on paying them.

“So when do you think we would be going?”

“I need to get a few other things prepped. We’ll figure that out when it starts getting warmer.”

I needed to get swimsuits for everyone, after all. Plus, it needed to heat up a little before it’d even be worth it to visit the ocean.

“Then I’ll need to talk to Milaine about that too,” said Tiermina.

It looked like we'd figured out something for the birds. I'd be able to bring all the orphans then.

I was feeling relieved, but Tiermina had another question for me. "Yuna, have you figured out how we're going there and where we're staying? It's going to be a lot to think about, considering how many people are going."

Right, I hadn't thought of transportation yet. How many carriages would it take? Maybe I could make a carriage using earth magic and have bear golems carry us there, like I had back when I'd caught those bandits. But how comfortable would that be? I hadn't put much thought into last time, let alone rode along with the bandits, so I really had no idea. I'd need to try it out for myself to know then, I supposed.

"I'll figure out a way to get there," I replied. "Also, I've got a house in Mileela. We could stay there." I'd built the giant bear house for this in the first place, after all, so I was pretty sure we'd fit.

"Wait, we'd stay at your house? How big is it?"

"You can ask Fina and Shuri." They'd stayed over once.

"All right. Just let me know when you want to plan the trip. In the meantime, I'll check in with Milaine."

After giving Tiermina my request, I left her house.

I headed over to Anz's restaurant to have an early dinner. It was really early, so she didn't have any customers yet. I ordered the seafood bowl, which today featured some tasty-looking squid and octopus. Since no one else was around, Seno brought out my bowl. Then she called in Anz, and I asked her about swimsuits.

"An outfit just for swimming in the ocean?"

"Yeah, I was wondering what people wear to swim."

"I'm not sure how to answer that. Maybe a shirt? That would dry right away, at least." I worried about whether that'd end up being see-through, but she clarified that they'd wear a cotton binder below it or something. "Why do you

ask?”

“I was thinking we could all go to Mileela. I was planning on asking all you guys to come along, of course.”

“Us too?” They all seemed surprised.

“Yeah, I’m sure Deigha is worried about how you’re doing. How would you feel about getting back to your hometown? You haven’t been back since you got here, right?”

I didn’t want to bring back any unpleasant memories associated with the place—and some of them had plenty—so I wasn’t about to make the trip mandatory.

“I’d be really happy to go home to Mileela, but what about the restaurant?”

“We can close it for a break.” Why was she asking something so obvious?

“But then we wouldn’t be making any money.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not going to lower your wages just because we’re on break.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. Besides, you’re already paying us more than enough as it is.”

Tiermina had said profits were high right now, and that was all thanks to Anz and her employees’ work. Of course I’d be okay with them taking a couple days off.

“And you’re letting us live here for free too,” said Anz. “And that’s on top of giving us days off and letting us decide how we run the restaurant. I couldn’t accept a wage if we’re just going home to Mileela.”

It was basically a paid vacation, but she didn’t have the context for that.

“You’ll have to watch the kids and show them around town, so you can consider that work,” I said.

We’d have a lot of people around with the orphans coming. The headmistress and Liz wouldn’t be able to watch all of them—it’d be too hectic. Neaf was helping at the orphanage too, but it’d be better to have more people watching

the little ones. You'd never know what they'll get up to.

"I think Tiermina will tell you more about the details," I said, "so just make sure to get ready for it."

I finished my bowl and left. That night, I tried to remember what swimsuits from my old world looked like and drew a couple examples.

Chapter 308:
The Bear Goes to See Sherry

I WAS PLANNING on asking Sherry to make the swimsuits, so I spent the night remembering all the swimsuits I'd seen in manga, anime, games, and on TV so I could show her what I had in mind.

I drew pictures of school swimsuits, bikinis, and one-piece suits. Fina would look nice in a one-piece, probably. And Shuri might wear one of the school suits. I hadn't actually gone out to buy a swimsuit before or swam in the ocean. Outside of going to the elementary school pool, I didn't know much about swimsuits at all.

Also, just so you know, absolutely none of the swimsuits I drew were risqué. They were mostly for kids, so I focused on making them cute. I didn't draw anything I wouldn't wear myself. Like, maybe Atola would wear something that showed skin, but she'd probably be the one exception.

Hmm. I had a ton of drawings, but I kind of wanted Fina and Shuri's opinions. What if I got them made and they didn't like them? No, I wanted to make sure they got the kind of suit they preferred.

Then there was the question if Sherry could even make them in the first place. Maybe it'd be best if I asked her first, and then talked to Fina and the others?

I drew a few swimsuits for the boys too, I guess, but I didn't bother making much variety. I mean, there's not much you can do with boxers. Plus, it felt weird to be a girl sitting down and drawing detailed illustrations of what were basically underwear for boys. In the end, all the boy designs ended up looking pretty plain.

After I finished drawing the suits, I visited Fina and Noa's houses and asked them to visit me at my house tomorrow. Fina and Shuri told me "Yes, I think we're available" and "I'll be there." Noa said she'd "be there for absolute certain."

Finally, I headed over to Temoka's tailoring shop, where Sherry was working. It was time to talk to her.

When I headed inside, Nar noticed me. Nar was Temoka's wife, and they were taking care of Sherry.

"Yuna, welcome! You're cute as ever in that outfit of yours. How about you let me make you a duplicate sometime?" she joked as she greeted me.

"If you do, I'll bring down your shop," I answered. The mental trauma of seeing a crowd of people dressed exactly like me walking around town… Nope, I made sure my reply was firm and certain.

"Knowing you, I wouldn't be surprised if you actually *did*. All right, I'll let it go," said Nar. I didn't think she actually meant to make the outfits, but I couldn't let her make them, not even as a joke. "So, what brings you here today? Did you come for more stuffed animals?"

The stuffed animals of my bears were very popular, so tons of people wanted them. Sherry made them for me when she had the time.

"I'm here to ask Sherry for something else, not a stuffed animal. Could I borrow her for a bit?"

"I think you can, but I'll need to ask Temoka." Nar headed into a back room and immediately came back with Sherry and Temoka.

"Yuna, did you need more stuffed animals?" Sherry asked.

"No, I'm here on other business today. Temoka, could I borrow Sherry for a while?"

Temoka had taken Sherry under his wing, and Sherry was working hard to learn how to do the work. Taking Sherry was also taking some precious time from the two of them.

"I don't mind," Temoka said. "Also, what are you having Sherry make this time?" He seemed very interested.

"We're going on a little trip to Mileela, so I wanted to ask Sherry to make clothes for swimming. Basically, I was thinking of asking her to make

swimsuits.”

“Come to think of it, they did find a tunnel connecting us to Mileela,” he mused.

I nodded. “I was thinking of taking the orphans over.”

“Then of course you can borrow her. You can have Sherry do whatever you need. It’ll be an excellent way for her to learn something new.”

“Thank you. When I go to Mileela, could she have a break so she can go too?”

“Not a problem. If all the other orphans except Sherry were going, the poor thing would be left out, especially if she stayed behind to work.” Temoka was totally on board.

“Um, Yuna, are we really going to Mileela?”

“That’s what we’ve planned, but don’t tell anyone. I’m having Tiermina get things prepped so everyone can go, but I don’t know if it’ll work out yet.”

“Okay, got it.”

In my mind, I was basically convinced we were going. Still, we needed to make absolutely sure that the kokekko were taken care of first. Otherwise, we might need to split into two groups. Some people were probably friends, so I wanted to get everyone there together if I could.

“In that case, I’ll be borrowing Sherry for a while, starting tomorrow.”

“Make sure to let us have her back, though. She’s our dear daughter, after all.” Nar gave Sherry a hug.

“Nar?!”

“Hee hee! I mean, you’re basically a daughter to us.”

Sherry seemed embarrassed, but also kind of happy. She promised to come to my house the next day, so I left.

I also took stuffed animals of my bears that she’d finished making. Even more Kumayurus and Kumakyus for the pile in my bear storage…

Chapter 309:
The Bear's Top Secret Is Revealed to Sherry

THE NEXT DAY, Sherry came by the bear house.

"Welcome," I said.

But Sherry seemed a little nervous as she came in. "Fina and Shuri? And Lady Noire?" They were already gathered in the house, to Sherry's surprise, though the others had only just arrived.

"I called them here to pick out which suits you'll make."

Now that the four of them were here now, I showed off the illustrations I had drawn. They started picking up the drawings I'd spread on the table.

"Is this underwear?" asked Sherry.

"No, they're clothes for swimming in water," I said. Well, bikinis would look kind of like underwear to them…

"Why did you draw us?" asked Fina.

The orphans would be wearing the suits, so I'd used Fina, Shuri, and Noa as my models. I thought it'd be easier to imagine what they'd look like with people wearing them rather than just the swimsuits alone. Plus, it made drawing the suits easier.

"I thought it'd make it easier to imagine what they look like," I explained. I also had sketches of the backs of the swimsuits. It was a pain to draw all of them, but this made it easier to see what they'd look like, and they'd probably help Sherry with making them too.

I had made all kinds of designs too. Some had little ribbons, others had frills. People would pick their own favorites, and the details would matter a ton. Just changing the color of the swimsuit could totally change the feel.

"It's a little embarrassing, seeing myself in these drawings."

"Yuna, are we wearing these to swim?"

“They’ll make swimming easier. Also, it’s dangerous to wear regular clothes in the water. You might drown in them.” Admittedly, Anz had told me that she’d just wrap fabric around her body to swim, so there were other options too.

“But this floofy skirt thing looks a little short.” Fina looked at the bathing suit I’d drawn her wearing. She seemed pretty self-conscious about it.

“That’s an embellishment, I guess. It makes the suit look cuter. And you don’t have to have a skirt if you don’t want to.” I showed her some bikinis and one-pieces without frills.

“I wouldn’t be comfortable in any of these…”

Embarrassing or not, she wouldn’t be able to swim well without a swimsuit. “Then how about this one, Fina? I bet this one won’t make you feel embarrassed.”

Shuri shook her head. “You should wear this one.”

Noa pointed at her own favorite. “I think this one is much better.”

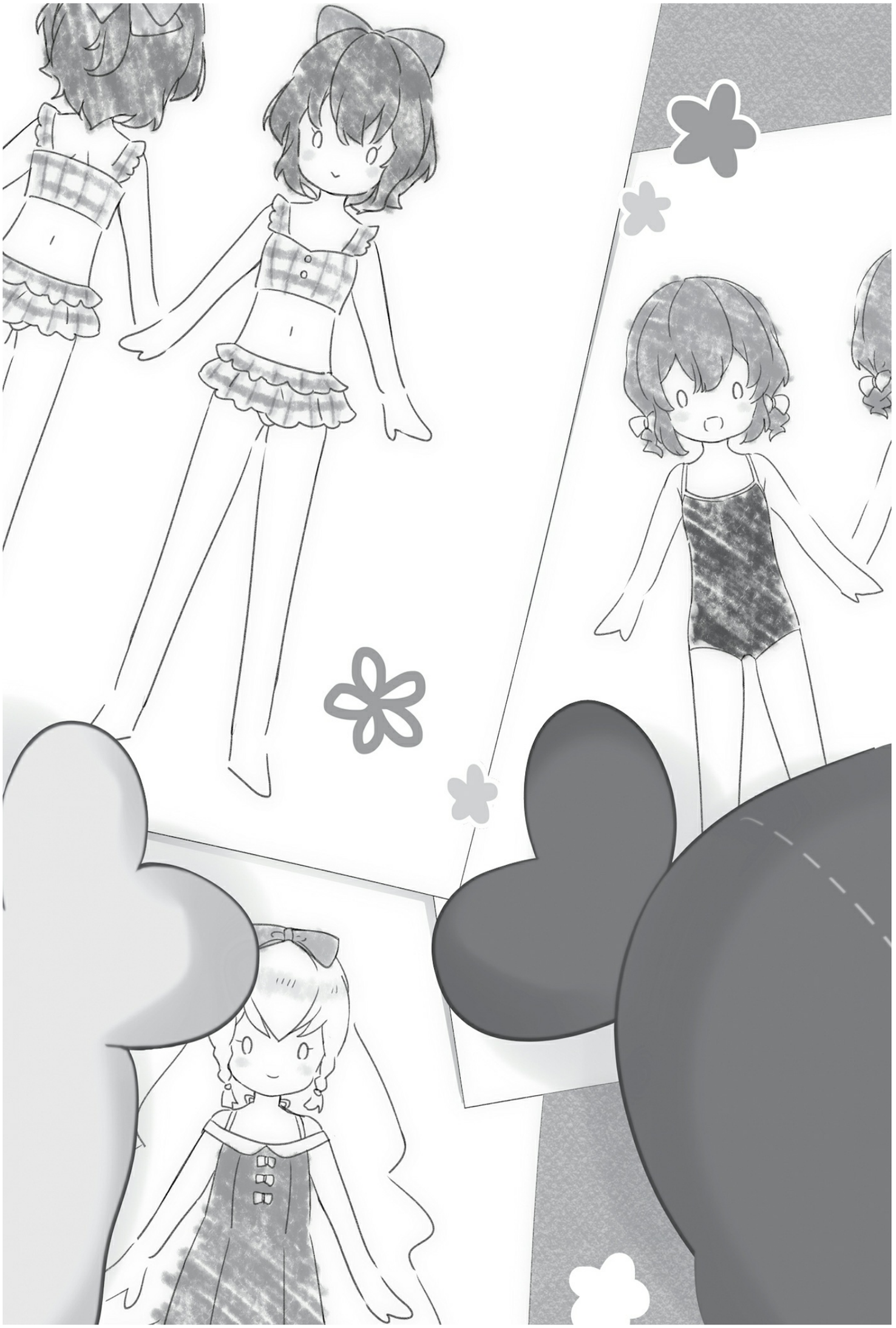
“This one’s nice too.”

“This looks sort of cute.”

Fina nodded along, going with the flow, and before long they were having a blast picking out their suits. The final girl, however, was staring at the illustrations with a very serious look on her face.

“This one with this color…it looks like it’d be difficult to make. On the other hand, that one looks much more simple.” Sherry was already thinking of how she’d make each suit.

“It takes good drawing abilities to make illustrations of clothes and to sew,” Shuri muttered to herself.



“Does it?” Fina echoed.

“Yeah. You start out making clothes by drawing a picture. Then the customer looks at that and then you make the clothes.”

“That’s right. I’ve been shown illustrations before when people made clothes for me,” Noa agreed. She really was a rich girl. I mean, even her clothes were made to order.

“Actually, Yuna, don’t you have any bear swimsuits?” Noa asked as she looked over the illustrations.

For a moment, I didn’t understand what Noa was asking. “Bear what?”

“Yes, I thought you’d make swimsuits that look bear-like.”

Never in a million years had I heard of such a thing in my old world. But—

“I’d like to wear one of those!” Now that Noa had asked such a weird question, even Shuri was shouting strange things.

“Bear swimsuits aren’t a thing,” I said. Not that I’d make them even if they were.

“But you could add a bear tail.”

No, nope. A bear tail did not a bear make. You’d need the bear feet and hands and ears to make something into a bear. Though I suppose a hat could work…?

Since we were talking about it, I started to imagine what a bear swimsuit would look like. Before I knew it, I was grabbing a pen and sketching up a bear swimsuit. It featured bear feet and paws, along with a swim cap with a bear face. I even added a round little bear tail to the back view. It’d become way too easy for me to imagine bears lately.

“Cute!” Noa cooed.

“It’s a bear!” Shuri squeaked.

Just then, I realized I had committed a sin. I quickly crushed the drawing into a ball and slam-dunked it into the trash can.

“Oh, why would you do that?!”

“It was so *cuuute*!”

The two of them stared at the trash can.

“Because that’s not a swimsuit,” I said.

“It’s a waste.”

Argh. I never planned on making a bear swimsuit in the first place! “Okay, just forget about the bear swimsuit and choose something already.”

“Uhh, all right,” Noa replied. She and Shuri went back to picking out swimsuit designs.

Leaving them to make their decisions, I asked Sherry if she thought she could make the suits. She was still examining the drawings seriously.

“Since you’ve drawn them so well,” she said, “I think I can do it.”

Okay, cool. Next up was an especially important question—if I got the wrong answer, I’d have to give up on making the bathing suits.

“About the material we’ll make these out of… We need material that won’t turn see-through when it’s wet. It’ll also need to dry quickly and be tear resistant, so it’d be nice if it were a little elastic. Does fabric like that exist?”

Sherry thought that over. If the fabric turned see-through, that was obviously not gonna fly. It couldn’t tear easily either, and I wanted it to dry easily too. If it could be a little elastic, the sizing could be a little off without causing problems.

“I’ll need to ask Temoka to see,” Sherry replied. “If there’s a fabric like that, it might be expensive.”

I wasn’t worried about the cost. As for the material…wait, I had something on me.

“Could you use this?” I brought out some fabric from my storage. Sherry felt the fabric.

As she touched it, the expression on her face changed right before my eyes. “Wh-what is this? This is such high-quality fabric!” As she touched the fabric, a

look not unlike infatuation crossed her face.

A little while ago, I escorted Shia's group to a village during their school's practical training exercise. A black tiger appeared near the village, I took care of it, and the village chief gifted me the fabric in return. The monstrous silkworms I'd seen back then had been pretty traumatic to witness, but Shia told me the silk they produced was high quality and would fetch a high price in a trade.

"This feels nicer than any fabric we have at the tailor shop," Sherry continued.

"I got it during a job a while back. What do you think?"

"Could I put this in a bit of water?"

I didn't mind, of course, so I brought her a cup. Sherry thanked me, dribbled water over the fabric, and watched it repel the droplets. Then Sherry checked how thick it was and whether light could penetrate it. As she did this, she looked dead serious. She was already a tradeswoman in her own right.

"It's sturdy and water resistant," she said. "Yes, I think this would work."

I handed off everything I had to her.

"That's a lot of fabric," she said.

"We need enough suits for all the orphans, Fina, Shuri, Noa, Anz and her employees, and Morin and her family."

"That many?"

"We won't be going any time soon, but please let me know if you can't do it." We could also ask Temoka to help.

"No, I'll do it. *Please* let me do it," Sherry answered firmly.

She then took a look at the papers strewn on the table with Fina and the others. She was really motivated. That was reassuring.

But we couldn't just choose swimsuits and leave it at that. "Okay, I want you three to let Sherry take your measurements."

"Our measurements?" Fina asked.

“Noa and Sherry probably already know this, but you need somebody’s measurements if you’re going to make clothes for them. Swimsuits are especially prone to ending up weird if they’re the wrong size, so Sherry’s going to take your measurements in the next room.”

We’d be able to make adjustments if needed to the finished suits, but an adult wouldn’t be able to wear a children’s swimsuit and vice versa. Even kids of the same age could be entirely different sizes.

“Then I’ll have my measurements taken first,” said Noa. “Sherry, please measure me.”

“Y-yes, Lady Noire.”

Noa took Sherry into the other room. She came back out right away, then Shuri went, and finally Fina headed in.

“I’m looking forward to going to the beach with everyone,” said Noa.

Shuri nodded. “Uh-huh, I wanna go soon.”

“We’ll go when it gets a little warmer,” I said.

Noa and Shuri had fun poring over the illustrations. Eventually, Fina came out of the room after her measurements were done…and said the unthinkable.

“Apparently you’re next, Yuna.”

“Me? I don’t need my measurements taken. I’m not swimming.”

“What…?” every single person in the room said the same thing at once. Even Sherry had poked her head in from the doorway to gawk at me. Had I really said anything that weird?

“Yuna, you’re not wearing one?”

“Really, Yuna?”

“I don’t plan on swimming,” I replied.

“No. You proposed this, so you have to wear one or none of us will,” said Noa.

“If you don’t wear it, I won’t either.” Et tu, Fina?

“But I can’t swim,” I said.

“Well, *I* can’t either.”

“Yeah! If you don’t swim, no one will.”

Really? In my mind, I could imagine everyone making a beeline for the water the moment they saw it, regular clothes or not.

“Anyway, if you don’t wear one, then we’re calling it off,” said Noa.

“Uh-huh, you gotta,” said Shuri.

Noa and Shuri inched closer to me. I got up from my chair and slowly backed away. But I was cornered from behind.

“Fina?” She wrapped her arms around me from behind. When did she get there?!

“I’m sorry, Yuna.”

I wish she’d let me go, not apologize to me. If I really wanted to, I could shake her off, but I wasn’t going to use force on her.

“Just give in, Yuna.”

“Yuna.” Sherry had come up to me while I was pinned. “I’m going to measure you, so please undress.” She produced a measuring tape out of nowhere. It made a sound like a cracking whip as she slowly approached.

“Hey, guys, c’mon. Let’s talk this over. I’m sure we can come to an understanding. You can’t resort to violence. Right?” I knew she was hearing me, but Sherry was getting closer by the second.

“If I don’t know your size,” she said, “I can’t make you a swimsuit.”

“Yuna, it’s time to give up.” Noa had latched onto me a while ago too.

“Okay, I get it, so just let go already.”

I put up my arms. I didn’t want anyone taking my measurements, but maybe I could make an excuse not to wear the swimsuit? I’d feel bad doing that to Sherry though…

“You can’t run, okay?” she said.

I nodded. Noa took me at my word and let go. Fina let go too when she saw

that.

The moment all three of them let go, I ran like a bat out of…okay, not really. But I sure thought about it. She could take my sizes and I'd be fine with it as long as no one else ever found out the numbers.

I gave in and headed to the next room, but then everyone followed me in.

I understood why Sherry was here, but what about the other three? "Why'd you guys follow?"

"Since you might run, we're guarding you," said Noa.

"Yeah, we're guards," said Shuri.

Really? *Both* of you? But even Fina was nodding along.

"I won't run," I insisted. If I wanted to, I really would have just shaken them off.

"Just in case," said Fina.

"But it's embarrassing."

"Why's that? We're all girls here. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

She…had a point, I guess. I was just with other girls, and they were still small. There really *wasn't* any issue. It was the same as changing for gym class or getting into a bathing suit at the pool. But I was older than them and didn't want them knowing my measurements. Plus, it'd affect how everyone would see me.

And, y'know—obviously, this is pretty far-fetched, ha ha, but. Uh. Hypothetically, if *perhaps* a certain specific one of my measurements was—and again, I'm just spitballing here, this is a thought exercise—*smaller* than everyone else's? I mean, I wouldn't be able to live with myself anymore.

Sherry would be taking the orphans' measurements too. Even the younger orphans were probably more developed than me in some ways…

I couldn't bear to be compared to them…

"Um, Yuna, this is a confidential matter. I promise not to tell anyone." Sherry must have picked up on something, because she looked at a very specific part of

my body as she spoke.

Why there? Who could say! Nobody knows. Shut up.

“Sherry is the only one who gets to measure me,” I said. “And she’ll treat it as top-secret information that even Nar and Temoka aren’t allowed to know. Otherwise, I’m not doing it.”

“Yes, I’ll protect your secret with my life!” she said.

Noa looked shocked. “Huh?”

“Don’t you ‘huh’ me. Why would you even need to know someone else’s measurements?”

“I want to grow up to be just like you,” said Noa, which seemed silly to me.

“You have an older sister, so you can use Shia as a role model for the future,” I said. “Anyway, out you go. If I have to, I’ll resort to force.”

“Are you threatening us with violence?”

“Nope.” I summoned my bears at their full size and ordered them to hold back the three girls. Kumayuru held Noa and Shuri back while Kumakyu took Fina up in a bear hug so she couldn’t move.

“Kumayuru, please let me go,” said Noa.

“You’re crushing me, Kumayuru,” Shuri squeaked.

“Kumakyu…” Fina trailed off, buried in the fuzziness.

“Take care of those three,” I said. I left them behind and took Sherry with me into the other room.

“Yuna—”

“Why am I also—”

After firmly closing the door, I turned to face Sherry head-on. “Sherry, if you even so much as breathe a word of this…”

“I would never. I promise.” She shook her head, clearly seeing how serious I was about this. Taking her at her word, I took off my bear gear. I hoped I hadn’t eaten too many chips or too much pizza recently. I was a little worried about

my tummy region, but…it wasn't too bad, right?

As for my chest, I…decided to not think about it.

Guh. So embarrassing…

Though she was younger than me, I still felt embarrassed she'd know my exact sizes. This must've been how my bears had felt when we'd measured them for the stuffed animals. If anyone found out about my measurements, I'd die.

How could this happen to me? Sure, I had made some mistakes, but I had nowhere to run…

"Okay, all done."

After enduring the shame of it all, I put my bear gear on right away. My gear apparently didn't just protect me from bodily harm—it was also the defense against anyone knowing what my body actually looked like. My bear gear: the almighty protector.

After that whole ordeal, I left the room to find the three of them still being held against their will by my bears.

"It's so hot, Kumayuru."

"You're too heavy!"

"Kumakyu…"

"You can let them go now," I said, so my bears did just that.

"You're too mean, Yuna," Noa said right away.

"It was heavy," Shuri complained.

"Why did you have them hold me down too…"

"This was all your fault, Noa," I told her.

"Aww! I just wanted to know your measurements, Yuna."

Uh, yeah? That was the problem! Can't go around invading others' privacy like that.

Sherry secreted away the paper that held the top-secret info into her item bag. Since I'd given her so much fabric, I lent the whole bag to her.

This whole experience had been kind of exhausting though…

Eventually, we finished up picking out swimsuits. I'd handed off the illustrations to Sherry, so I asked her to have everyone else pick out designs too. I was also having her take their measurements, of course. She'd gotten mine, after all, so I was going to have her get Anz and Karin's measurements for sure.

"Did you get Cliff's permission to go, Noa?" We'd just come back from the trip to the festival at the capital, so I didn't know whether he'd let her go out again so soon.

"It should be fine. That was why I studied very hard and did exactly as Father asked."

Hmm. I'd follow up with Cliff next time I saw him. I'd feel bad if Noa were left out.

All three of them headed home. As for me, I waited until the Bear's Lounge was closing for the day and then headed over there. I'd told Anz we were going to Mileela the other day, so I needed to go tell Morin next.

"Yuna?" Morin and the kids were cleaning up.

"Do you have a moment?"

"Yes. We're done with work today," she said. "I'll finish up in a sec, so just give me a bit."

I waited until she was done, then gathered Morin, Karin, and Nerin to tell them about closing the shop sometime soon to take a trip to the beach.

"The beach?"

"You've all worked so hard for the shop that I want to thank you," I explained.

"I've never been."

"I've only been in the capital too, so it'll be my first time."

Nerin and Karin both seemed excited.

Morin seemed a little reluctant. “Are you sure we can close the shop?”

“Yes, it should be fine,” I said. “Just think of it as me paying you back for everything you’ve done.”

“But you’ve already done so much for us. We can’t just pay you back.”

That wasn’t true. Thanks to Morin, I had delicious bread to eat. Plus, she took care of the kids.

I’d already decided we were going on the trip, so I really wanted Morin to come along. Then I told her that Sherry was going to stop by to get their measurements for the suits.

They all looked a little worried at that. It was nice to see people who understood where I was coming from, you know? I guess getting older also means you get more embarrassed about your measurements.

“Um, Yuna… When would we be going on this trip?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but I think we’ll go once it gets a little warmer.”

“I wonder if that’s enough time…” said Nerin.

“We can do it,” Karin replied. “Let’s both work toward it together.”

Karin and Nerin both held their stomachs self-consciously.

“I’ve just had to taste test so many cakes lately…” said Karin.

“Me too…”

Oh, *that’s* what they meant. I wished them good luck with their diets.

Chapter 310:
The Bear Is Summoned

WHILE I WAS GETTING READY to go on my beach trip, Cliff called for me.

I was just hanging around my house when one of Cliff's servants came by, completely out of breath, and told me to come to the mansion right away. I asked why, but apparently they didn't know.

Hm, what was that about? Did I do something to make him upset? I always asked for permission from Cliff whenever I took Noa anywhere. The only other thing I could think of was that this was about that sacred tree tea. But when I met with him last, I heard from Lala that he was keeping his promise to only have one cup of it per day. I was pretty sure he still had plenty of tea left, so… what was this about?

Once I got to the mansion (still in the dark), I was taken straight to Cliff.

"You're here. Please sit."

I did. He didn't look upset with me, so I guess he wasn't going to tell me off. So…then what?

"What was it you needed?" I asked, point blank.

"I received a letter from His Majesty. He's asked for you to come to the capital."

"Huh? So…basically, it's a summons from the king?" But why? This was the first time the king was calling me somewhere. He already lectured me about the festival, and I couldn't think of anything else that he would wanna chew me out for.

"There's something I need to ask you first," he said. "I can still hardly believe it, but you *did* defeat the kraken, is that right?"

"The kraken? Wait, is the king doubting it? It's been a while since then, why would he—oh, I guess it doesn't matter whether anyone else believes it."

"I'm just asking. I don't doubt that you actually did it." Then why was he asking now? "Did you?"

“I did,” I answered.

“And what did you do with the mana gem? The people in Mileela said they handed it off to you. Do you still have it?”

“You mean the kraken’s mana gem? Yeah, I’ve got it. The nice old guy who harvested it for me told me I should keep it.”

I was going to give it away to Mileela as a present so they could use it to help them rebuild, but Atola had told me that mana gems were proof of a slaying. That’s why I’d kept both the kraken and wyrm mana gems.

Not that I really had any use planned for them. They’d just been sitting in my bear storage, collecting dust, so to speak.

“Would you mind showing it to me?”

I brought out the gem and placed it on the table. It was blue and really pretty.

“So this is the kraken’s gem,” said Cliff. “It’s quite a hefty size.”

It was so big, you needed two hands to hold it.

“What about it?”

“Yuna, I’m sorry to ask this, but could you take this gem to His Majesty?” Cliff said and handed the gem back to me. “According to His Majesty’s letter, he wanted you to come to the castle immediately with the kraken’s gem.”

Wait, were they giving me work to do? Did they need the kraken’s gem for something specific?

“I’m sure you could get there right away with your bears,” he added.

Actually, it’d only take a second with the bear gates, but I just nodded along. “Did he say why he wanted me there?”

“His Majesty made no mention of it. He only wrote that I should reply back right away if you didn’t have the mana gem. I can only assume he needs the gem for some sort of emergency situation.”

I could imagine that was the case too, considering the king had gone through all that trouble just to find out whether I had the gem.

If he needed me right away, he was probably in a huge hurry. Yeah, I could go

to the capital easily. Besides, the beach trip was still a ways out. The only issue was that I'd pledged (to myself) that I'd avoid the capital for a while, but now I was having to take that back just days later.

"So, will you go to the capital?"

"It's not like I'm allowed to say no, am I? I'll go."

"You're a lifesaver." Cliff bowed his head.

"Why are you bowing to me?"

"Why wouldn't I? This is a letter from His Majesty. I can't refuse him. If you didn't go, I would have had to issue an apology to His Majesty myself."

"You wouldn't have tried to steal it from me?"

"Obviously not. I'm indebted to you. Noa likes you too. And if the townspeople so much as thought I hurt you, I would've been in hot water with them too."

That seemed way too overdramatic.

The townspeople would be enraged if Cliff hurt me? How'd he reach that conclusion? I didn't follow. I mean, maybe Milaine would complain, as the merchant guild's master.

"Also, it'd be easier to apologize to His Majesty the king than to try to steal something from someone who killed a kraken."

Cliff had already done a lot for me, so it wasn't like I'd refuse any reasonable request from the guy. "You're right. You know, if it'd been a little warmer, I might've said no because I already have plans to go to the beach."

"You're telling me that you'd put your own fun first, even if you had a royal order direct from the king?" Cliff burst out into laughter.

Uh, well, who *wouldn't* put playing kids first over a random summons from a middle-aged man, especially since I'd already made the plans? Now, if it was Princess Flora or Teilia calling me to the capital, I might've put a raincheck on my fun. A middle-aged man, on the other hand? Ehh.

Still, I had time right now. The real issue was that it hadn't been long since the

festival.

“I’ll get to it then,” I said.

I stored my kraken gem back in my bear storage and left Cliff’s house. I could have just gone through my bear gate straight to the capital, but that would’ve seemed suspicious. Instead, I headed out two days later after making sure to grab lunch.

Chapter 311:
The Bear Accepts the King's Quest

I WAS BACK AT THE CAPITAL (and not thrilled about it) just after the festival's end. If I kept clear of the academy, I'd probably be fine, right?

Still, I wondered what this summons was all about. I hurried over to the castle.

"Oh, well, if it isn't Mademoiselle Yuna," the guard in the front of the gate greeted me. "We've been expecting you."

Apparently, he was ordered to let me through right away. He led me into a room indoors. "Please wait in here," he said, so I headed right in. It seemed to be some sort of office. Now that I thought about it, I think it was the place I'd first met the king. There was no king in sight, but I was told to wait here and that was exactly what I'd do.

There was a sofa, so I produced some tea from my bear storage and sipped on it while I waited. Ah, that hit the spot. Lala had given me the tea, so it was really good.

Huh. Still no sign of the king.

Next, I got some of Nerin's taste tester cakes from my bear storage and munched away. It had just the right amount of acidity in it. Good stuff. I wondered what kind of fruit she'd used. Nerin had started experimenting on her own lately and was making cakes I didn't recognize. Then again, she made a few too many and now she seemed worried about her waistline. The more samples she ate, the more she'd gain weight.

Wow. The king sure was taking his royal time. All this waiting, and not a single crown in sight. I would've thought Ellelaura would pop in, but there was no sign of her either.

Kumayuru, Kumakyu, I summon you! My bear cubs appeared out of thin air. I was bored, so I started petting them and hugging them and giving them

piggyback rides to make me feel better. Every time I pet them, I was reminded of how fluffy they were.

In the middle of my bear therapy sesh (bearapy?), the door finally opened, and the king walked in. “I’m sorry for making you w—what on earth do you think you’re doing?”

I looked around. The table was cluttered with half-drunk tea and half-eaten cake, and I was horsing around with my bears. No matter how you looked at it, I had really made myself comfortable.

“You left me here alone,” I said, “so I started trying to figure out ways to pass the time.”

“My apologies. Still, this is the first I’ve seen someone so relaxed while waiting for me.” He gave me an exasperated look and his voice got a little quiet. “You *do* realize I am the king.”

“C’mon, Ellelaura’s a lot worse than me,” I replied.

“Yes, and you certainly are taking after her these days.”

What? I wasn’t nearly as bad as she was. “Why did you call me here, anyway?”

“Ah, yes.”

I cleaned the table and plopped my bears on either side of me to sit.

“I’m surprised you got here so soon,” the king said.

“Well, you did say to come right away in your letter. I came as fast as I could on my bears.” That was a lie. I’d spent two days luxuriating and doing nothing, and then teleported here instantly via bear gate.

“First, may I see the kraken’s mana gem?”

I took it out and placed it on the table.

“So, this is it… It’s very big. May I touch it?”

I nodded. He picked the gem up with both his hands and really scrutinized it. Maybe he really did need it?

“Yuna, I’m very sorry to ask, but may I have this?”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know that I’m asking for the impossible, but you see…”

“I said I don’t mind,” I repeated.

“Wait… Are you sure?” He seemed legitimately surprised.

“Yeah. You need it, right?”

And what was I going to do with the thing? He needed it so much that he’d called me here all the way from Crimonia. If I really needed it later, I’d figure something out. If I hadn’t been willing to give it to him, I never would have come here in the first place.

“But could I ask what you’re using it for?” I doubted it was for anything nefarious—not with what I knew about the king—but I did feel like giving him the gem gave me a right to know.

He stroked his chin. “Yes, yes. I’m sure you’re aware the kingdom of Trifolm lies to the south.”

He said it like it was obvious, but obviously I had no idea the kingdom existed, so I shook my head.

“Ah, well… All right. If you travel south of our capital, you’ll soon come upon a vast desert. If you’re able to cross that, you’ll come upon the Kingdom of Trifolm.”

Wow. A desert? I’d seen those on TV, but I’d obviously never been to one. Just how vast was this desert, I wondered?

“In other words, that kingdom wants the kraken’s mana gem?” I thought I figured it out, but the king shook his head.

“Ah, no. It’s a town in the very middle of that desert that needs it. The town goes by the name of Dezelt.” He was throwing new names all over the place. “Elfanica and Trifolm began to trade with each other, and the settlements eventually became the desert town of Dezelt.”

So, in a game, usually there’d be an oasis or something in the middle of the desert and a town on top of that. I wondered if that held true in this case too.

“The town is important for trade between our own country, the Kingdom of Elfanica, and Trifolm. But the water mana gem that served as the peoples’ precious water supply has broken. The water shortage has begun to affect the residents. At this rate, the desert town may become, ah, deserted. This cannot happen. When I remembered that you defeated a kraken, I had to call you here at once.”

“Okay, I understand why you called me, but don’t you have water mana gems in the castle already?” You’d think a castle would have a giant magical mana gem stashed somewhere or other.

“I’m not sure you understand. We don’t have nearly enough mana gems of the size required. Water gems are hard to come by as it is.”

That checked out. Fighting monsters on land was a lot easier than trying to fight anything on the open water. I remembered how hard fighting the kraken was too. If I was able to lure it out to fight it on land, it would’ve been a piece of cake. Land is our home turf, and we landlubbers are *always* better when we’re fighting on our home field.

But as big as the kraken’s gem was, I doubted it could support an entire town on its own. I asked about that.

“I heard that they use magic circles to amplify the gem’s effects. I don’t know the details though, since I’m no expert,” the king told me.

Amplification magic, huh? Yeah, that sounded like something that’d exist in a fantasy world. Well, I knew why they needed the kraken’s gem now.

“I’d like you to give us the gem,” said the king. “Of course, I would pay you back as well.”

Pay me back? As in, money? I really, *really* didn’t need money…not that I was about to use that as a reason to abandon the town to its fate, though.

“Yeah. In that case, you can have it,” I said. I wasn’t going to say no when it was going to help people. Besides, it’d just collect dust in my bear storage if I kept it.

“You have no idea how much help this will be,” he said. “Also, Yuna, there’s something I’d like to ask you. Do you and your bears fare well in the heat?” He

looked at Kumayuru and Kumakyu, who were still sitting on either side of me.

“I’m not a huge fan of heat, personally. I’m not sure about these two, though. I think they’ll be okay.” I just didn’t like it when it was too hot. When the summer hit, I would always blast the air conditioner.

I checked in with my bears just in case, and they both crooned, which meant… something, probably. I couldn’t glean a thing from their cherubic little faces.

“Sorry, I should have been clearer,” said the king. “Would you and your bears be able to travel through a desert?”

“A desert? I think we could do that.” I had my bear gear, so I was supposed to be able to withstand extreme heat and cold. Then again, I wouldn’t know for sure unless I gave it a shot. The same was true with my bears.

I withstood a blizzard on top of a mountain just fine, so I’d probably be all right out in a desert. Now, if it was *lava*, I was pretty sure I’d be a goner. Obviously.

“I’d like to offer you a quest, as an adventurer,” the king continued. “Would you take this gem to Dezelt?”

“Me?”

“Your bears are quick and you defeated an entire kraken. You’d be able to fend off any monsters that attack you on the way.”

Wait, was he seriously saying a fifteen-year-old girl would be fine getting assaulted by monsters? You’d think he’d show even a smidge of concern for me. Then again, I could deal with pretty much any monster as long as I had my bear gear.

I kind of did want to see a desert town, but… I also had plans to hit the beach. Maybe I could just make sure it was a tiny visit. Besides, I could come back through the bear gate to shave off some time.

“What kind of place is Dezelt?” I asked

“Ah, yes. As I said earlier, the town formed through people naturally gathering together, so the town has no national affiliation. It’s an independent town.”

“Since you were asking for a water gem, I thought it was one of yours.”

“There were some past skirmishes, but Elfanica and Trifolm have since formed a non-aggression treaty, so the region is now neutral. I believe both our nations have searched for a water gem for them. If possible, I’d like to get a gem to them before Trifolm does. It would be useful to have them in our debt.”

In their debt? I guess that was a thing kings had to consider. There was probably some sort of mucky battle going on behind the scenes between the countries.

“What are you making that face for?” the king said. “What’s gotten into your head now? I’ll have you know that we have a perfectly amicable relationship with Trifolm.”

“Do you?”

“As I said, the bad blood was in the past.”

“And you want the town indebted to you?”

“Peace is never a certainty. Something might happen a generation from now, perhaps. Can never have too much intel coming from the border areas.”

Uh-huh, so it was basically an investment for the future. If the town felt indebted, then they might give Elfanica information about any suspicious activity on the other side of the border.

A king needed to think about these things, I guess. Seemed like a pain in the butt to be in that position. I’d never be able to do it. Honestly, I’d probably just give all the work to someone else.

“Also, we’ll treat this as a B-rank quest.”

“B?!”

“You’re dealing with a giant mana gem, after all. That’d be the rank of the quest if we asked you to procure a gem of that size.”

He had a point. If they made a quest like this, the only way to get a mana gem this big would be to either slay a kraken or spend a fortune buying a gem. And good luck finding someone to buy from, let alone negotiating the huge sum of cash involved.

Thinking about it that way, it made sense that it was a B-rank quest.

“I just need to take the gem to them?” I confirmed.

“Yes, that’s all you need to do.”

“Then I accept.” Plus, I kind of wanted to go see the desert.

The king pulled something out of a drawer of his desk and held it out to me. “Here’s a letter. Hand it off to Barlimer, the lord of Dezelt. I’ve already written about you as well. Don’t want you making a ruckus as soon as you get to Dezelt, after all.”

“What ruckus?”

“I’m kidding. But there is a chance he might refuse to receive a girl dressed in a bear suit if you were to show up out of the blue. If you show them the crest on this letter, I believe they’ll receive you.”

It seemed to be the royal crest.

“You prepared that letter, so…I guess you expected me to agree from the start. Am I right?”

“I had two prepared in advance,” said the king, and showed me the second letter. He’d written it up just in case I’d refused.

I put the letter he gave me and the gem into my bear storage, then I returned my bears…but the moment I stood up from the sofa, I remembered something.

“Could I see Princess Flora before I head out?” I wanted to bring her some of the new cakes Nerin had worked on. Plus, I promised to stop by after the festival anyway.

“I don’t mind, but please make haste if you can.”

“Got it.” Since the king was allowing me to, I headed out of the office to go see Princess Flora. The king headed out with me—I guess he was heading back to work.

I started on that familiar path to Princess Flora’s room. The king followed close after me. Work was…probably in the same direction? I guess?

I stopped in front of Princess Flora’s room. The king stopped with me.

“Uh, why are you following me?”

“You’ve brought her the cake you were eating earlier, is that right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Naturally, I’m here to try it as well.”

Was it really natural? I sure didn’t think so. We were already here, though, so I just headed into Princess Flora’s room and didn’t linger on that thought.

“Flora, are you in?” the king asked.

“Fawther?” Princess Flora ran over to the king as soon as she realized it was him. He crouched down and opened his arms. Just as Princess Flora seemed right about to throw herself into his arms, she passed right by him and leapt on me instead, just like a scene from a goofy anime or something. “Bear!”

The king’s back quivered. He didn’t seem to know what to do with his arms, which were still flung open for Princess Flora. I pretended not to notice.

“Princess Flora, I brought you some cake. Would you like to try some?”

“Okay!”

“Then I shall prepare some tea.” Ange, ever-present, had decided not to say anything about the king either before leaving the room to make her preparations.

I took Princess Flora’s hand, led her to a chair at the table, and started bringing out the new cake for her. It didn’t take long for Ange to come back.

“Ange, I’ll give you some for Zelef too,” I said. “I’d like to hear his opinion on the cake when I come back later.”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Also, I prepped some for you too, so please try it later.”

“Thank you.”

Ange refused to eat in the king’s presence, so I handed off some cake for her for later.

The king stood up, came over to me and Flora, and took a seat. “I see you’re

ignoring me.”

“Now, give my slice.”

“Are you angwy, Fawther?”

“Who said I was angry?”

“I know your own daughter ignored you and everything,” I said, “but you could be more understanding about it.”

“Who wouldn’t feel upset losing to a bear?”

“Nobody’s stopping you from dressing as a bear too. I’m sure Princess Flora would love that.”

“Out of the question!”

I didn’t *really* want us wearing the same outfit, so I was kinda glad he’d reacted like that.

Anyway, I served him a slice of cake and hoped that’d improve his mood.

“Come to think of it,” I said, “where’s Ellelaura?” Normally, she’d sniff me out right away and come running.

“I had the guards only inform me you were here today,” the king explained. “She doesn’t know you came.”

So that’s why she hadn’t shown up. Still, she’d give me an earful if she found out later that I stopped by, so I decided to hand off a slice of cake for Ange to give to Ellelaura.

I asked about Teilia, but she was at school, which was too bad. I didn’t want her complaining at me either, so I left yet another slice of cake for her too.

Chapter 312:
The Bear Gets Lost

AFTER I PLAYED with Princess Flora, I headed back to my bear house in the capital, went straight to my room, and dove onto my bed.

While I was lying there face up, I pulled out my bear phone and thought of Fina as I routed mana into the phone. After a bit, it connected.

"Is this Yuna?" asked Fina.

"Yep. You free right now?"

"Yeah, Shuri is helping Mom with food, and Dad isn't home from work yet." I asked her to try not to use the bear phone around other people, so I previously let her know she didn't need to pick up when she was with others. *"Did something happen?"*

"I'm going to be out for a while on a job, so I wanted to just let you know."

"A job?"

"I got a quick job from the king. If anything happens with the beach trip or if something goes wrong at any of the shops, let me know, okay?"

Fina knew about the bear gate, so she understood what I meant.

"Oh, right, I had something I needed to ask you too, Yuna." She sounded like she just remembered something.

"What's that?" Fina never asked me for anything. On the rare occasion that she did, she was always kind of bashful about it.

"Dad said he wants to go to the beach too. He said it'd be dangerous if you only took the kids, so would it be all right if he comes? I told him I needed to ask you, but I think he wants to come either way."

I'd feel pretty bad leaving Gentz all by himself, considering he'd married Tiermina and was part of the family. "As long as he can get the days off at the guild."

“Do you mean it? Thank you, Yuna!”

She sounded really happy. And Gentz was right about there being a lot of kids going on this trip. They might do something to get themselves in trouble. The more adults around, the better. Even if my bear gear was all powerful, I couldn’t keep an eye on all the kids at once.

“But tell him that I’ll ask him to please watch over the orphans too, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll let him know.”

I wanted to talk with her some more, but Gentz was home from work and they were going to eat, so we had to hang up.

“I hope your job goes well, Yuna.”

After the call, I decided I’d leave the next day around sunrise, so I went to bed early.

The next morning, my bears woke me up. I rubbed my eyes and dragged myself out of bed.

It was still dark outside the window. The sun had only just begun to rise. My bear alarm clocks were the best for when I needed to wake up early, even if they sometimes plopped themselves on my face in order to wake me up. I wish they’d stop doing that and let me stay comfortable…

“Good morning, you two,” I said. They both crooned back at me.

After our morning greetings, I ate breakfast and left the bear house. I disappeared into the early morning crowd as I headed out of the capital.

When I got to a deserted place, I summoned Kumakyu. Kumakyu came up to me happily. Normally I’d summon Kumayuru first, but I’d decided to change it up today.

“All right, Kumakyu, I’m counting on you.”

I gave my bear a head pat, then hopped right on. Off we went, to unfamiliar lands! To the desert! Kumakyu crooned and launched off toward the south. I wondered what the desert would be like. Maybe there’d be monsters, just like

in my old game? And it'd be blazing hot for sure.

I remembered how I could see my HP bar lowering whenever I went to the desert or volcanoes without heat-resistant gear. I'd be fine here because of my bear gear, at least. My bear gear would've been awesome equipment even in the game, but I don't know if I would've worn it there. It was a game, sure, but I might've been a little too embarrassed to wear a bear onesie.

Kumakyu ran along the highroad. According to the king, this road would lead me to a town before we hit the desert. That was how you'd get to Dezelt, ultimately.

Since my bear map only showed me places I'd already been to, if I went down the wrong road, there was a chance I would lose sight of my destination. It was a useful skill, but not so much when I needed to go someplace new. Still, the automapping feature made things a breeze. And honestly, being able to see the whole map from the start would just suck the fun right out of things, you know? I was all right with this. I needed some adventure to look forward to, and some bright new frontiers to explore.

Every once and a while, I used my detection skill. When I detected people, I'd take the long way round to avoid them so they couldn't flip out about seeing Kumakyu.

We weren't around Crimonia anymore, so people would probably be pretty shocked to see either of my bears. Lately, adventurers and merchants around Crimonia had stopped looking surprised when they saw me riding along on my gigantic fluffy pets. Sometimes they'd even say hi to me. Of course, you still got a few people who were put off from seeing Kumayuru and Kumakyu, but most of them were out-of-towners. Not that I could blame them—seeing a real live bear should make just about anyone run in the opposite direction.

As I went down the highroad, my skill picked up more people. I headed off the road to make sure they wouldn't see us. This whole thing with having to go off-

roading whenever we saw people… I had to admit, it was getting old.

I stared at the road ahead. It turned slightly at a rock. Ahead of the rock was a forest. Maybe I could take a shortcut through there?

Carriages couldn't get through the trees, but my bears would have no problem. I looked at the road in front of me and the dark part of the map, trying to make an estimate.

I decided to go through it and switched out to ride on Kumayuru.

"Let's head out, big guy."

"Cwoon."

My bear dashed straight into the forest. There weren't people in the pathless woods, of course, so I could go on my way without worrying about awkward encounters. I did see some monsters using my detection skill, but that was fine. I could keep going as long as they didn't attack.

This…*was* the right way, right? It seemed like I was spending more time in the woods than I expected, and it didn't take me long to realize I had made a mistake. I guess that's why you try to do things the smart way instead of the easy way. I thought I could manage with my bear mapping skill and detection skill, but I was really lost now.

If I kept going straight, I assumed I'd hit the road eventually, but the trees showed no sign of thinning. Maybe the road had swerved off in another direction entirely? This was one hell of a road if it could swindle my bear skills.

Anyway, the sun was setting, so I pulled out my bear house to sleep for the night.

The next day, I would get on Kumakyu and head out with a fresh start.

I thought about going back the way I came, but I decided to keep pushing forward. This time, I'd run to the left. Since I'd gone straight based on the route I'd come, I could probably get back on the road if I went left, right?

(Maybe I should have looked at a map before leaving.)

The king had said I'd make it fine if I just stayed on the path. I bet he didn't think I'd run off course. To be honest, *I* hadn't thought about running off course either.

It was absolutely, totally, completely my fault for getting myself into this mess. But I sank way too much time into this by now, so there was no going back.

I took several breaks as I headed forward. Then, as I progressed, I detected giant hornet monsters on my map.

Wait. Giant killer hornets? They were a thing in my old world too and they were super dangerous.

But these were monsters? In my world, they were still pretty small despite their name. I'm not exactly a bug person, but now I was curious. I decided to go out to get a look at them.

I immediately came to regret that decision.

Thus, I learned a valuable lesson: don't go looking for monsters just because you're curious. The hornets buzzed as they flew around right in front of me. Also, they were huge. Like, wasps-as-big-as-crows huge. These were not the giant hornets I knew from my old world. Those things were supposed to be about the size of your thumb. I was pretty sure they didn't come in *crow* size. I was already scared of normal giant hornets as it is, no way I could handle these ginormous ones!

And now I wondered how big their nest was. I shuddered at the thought. Look, I really didn't like bugs, okay? And the jumbo size just increased the ick factor.

Another one went buzzing by, giving me the creeps. Maybe the best thing I could do was slay them? But I kind of didn't want to go anywhere near the things…

I used my detection skill and saw signals for dozens more up ahead. Was that a nest? The hornets were heading deeper into the trees too. Right into a cave, actually. So *that* was where they made their nest. While I was watching the

opening, even more hornets came buzzing out.

Blugh, nasty. I decided to slay them.

They were in a cave, so I'd be able to take care of them using the same method I'd used with the goblins.

I conjured up a giant flame bear where the hornets couldn't see, and then I launched it straight into the cave. Next, I closed off the opening with a giant bear using earth magic. Boom: there we go.

Now all I had to do was take care of the ones flying around outside the cave… or so I thought. Right then, a bunch of hornets flew out of a tunnel thingy on the side.

There was another opening?! And now they were flying straight at me! Oh, that was a whole lot of hornets. And they were so freaking loud, and chittery, and leggy, and *gross*.

I created a tornado around me that caught up all the hornets coming to attack. The tornado tore their wings away and they plummeted straight down. To be honest, they were even nastier without the wings.

I blocked off the hole they'd come from too, then used wind magic to defeat the rest of the buzzy bugs.

A couple of them flew up high and escaped. Ugh, they got away. It was only a couple, though, so it was fine. Besides, I'd gotten rid of quite a few of them using my bear flames and tornado.

Kumakyu watched the retreating hornets and crooned. It was pretty cute, actually.

Chapter 313:
The Bear Battles the Giant Hornets

KUMAKYU CONTINUED MAKING NOISES while watching the hornets fly away, so I looked over at them too. I didn't see anything strange going on in that direction.

"What's wrong?"

Another croon came from Kumakyu. My bear pushed my back.

"What is it? Are you saying to follow them?"

Kumakyu gave me another adorable croon in reply. Maybe my bear wanted me to go after the hornets that left?

I used my detection skill and realized there were people around.

"K-Kumakyu, that warning was a little too cute to warn me about people! Try to act a little more panicked!" I leapt onto Kumakyu and we headed off to chase the hornets.

I heard people shouting. "Ahhhhhh! Giant hornets!"

As you might expect, there were giant hornets. Several of them, in fact, and they were rushing at a man. He yelled, waving his knife wildly to fend them off. The hornets buzzed around him undeterred, whizzing and fluttering something awful.

I shot off some wind blades at the hornets and *woosh,* cut them right down the center. The man didn't even seem to notice me. He was still waving that knife around. I used magic to take care of the other hornets until I'd gotten rid of all of them.

The coast was clear now. I headed over to the man, who'd fallen down and was sitting on the ground. "You all right?"

"Ahhhhhh! A bear!"

The "Ahhhhhh! Giant hornets!" guy turned out to be a pretty timid-looking thirty-year-old. He yelled when he saw me and Kumakyu and started waving

that knife around, even though he was still sitting on the ground.

He started scooching away too. “G-get away!”

Yeesh. What a drama queen. “If you don’t keep it down, we’ll eat ya!” I said as Kumakyu loomed in closer to him.

“Ahhhhhhh! Please don’t eat me!”

“Did you not hear the part about keeping it down?”

“I swear, I taste horrible!” He didn’t even look at me as he waved his knife around some more. Yeah, this guy was a lost cause. He wasn’t listening to me at all.

I created an orb of water using magic and dropped it right over his head.

“Ahhhhh!!!”

“Could you stop and listen please?”

“Wait, you’re just a girl?” He blinked at me, then took a look at his surroundings. Looked like he’d finally come to his senses. Now he was actually seeing me.

“I saved you, so you could at least say thank you.” I glanced at the bisected hornets, which led the man to look at them too. He looked at the dead hornets, then at me, then back at the hornets a couple of times. Finally, his eyes stopped on me again. “Can you understand what I’m saying?”

“You defeated them, miss?”

“Do you need to ask? Is there anybody else around?” Admittedly, I was the reason the hornets had attacked him in the first place… But defeated them too.

The man stood up. I wasn’t sure if I was seeing things, but I think he backed away a little too. “That white bear…” he trailed off.

It seemed he was scared of Kumakyu, despite how adorable the bear was.

“This is my bear. It won’t attack as long as you don’t attack it with a knife. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Um. Some hornets attacked me out of nowhere. Thanks for saving me.” He put away his knife. He looked at me up and down, taking in my outfit. He

opened his mouth, paused, and decided not to say anything.

Smart. “So, mister, why are you in these woods all alone?”

“There’s a village nearby and hornets started to appear close to it. I came all the way out here trying to figure out where they were coming from so we could put a stop to them.”

Wait, was he looking for the nest I’d set on fire? According to him, the village had been split on whether they wanted to hire adventurers to take care of the hornets. They’d been planning to issue a quest if the nest was too big. If it turned out to be on the smaller side, they would’ve tried taking care of it as a village. The man had come all the way out here to determine that. I was kind of surprised he’d volunteer for that considering he’d panicked after running into just a couple of the buzzing freaks.

Apparently, the villagers had split up to go investigate, he explained. He just had bad luck.

“I’ve already set the nest and the hornets on fire,” I told him. “But a few got away from me. When I chased after them, I found them attacking you.”

“You lit the nest on fire, miss?”

“Yep. Despite my, uh, appearance, I’m actually an adventurer.”

The man took another good look at my outfit. Well, I was in the bear onesie, so of course he wouldn’t believe me. I didn’t care whether he thought it was true, but I at least wanted him to know the hornets were gone.

“I see. Well…you saved me in any case.”

I was also the one who’d let the hornets escape, though. He might’ve been in hot water if Kumakyu hadn’t warned me about him. I wouldn’t have been able to rest easy at night if I’d been the cause of his death. Thanks, Kumakyu.

“I’m sorry, miss, but could you take me to the nest? I’d like to take a look at it.”

I took him over just like he asked.

“Still though,” he said, glancing at Kumakyu as the three of us walked along, “I’ve never seen a white bear before, or anyone dressed like you for that

matter.”

White bears are pretty rare, aren’t they? Now that I thought about it, were white bears even a thing in this world? Did we have a North Pole-ish place here? Maybe if I tried heading north or up a mountain where there was snow, I’d find other white bears like Kumakyu. That’d be interesting, come to think of it…

“Miss, what’s brought you out here? I don’t suppose you came here to slay the hornets.”

“I ran into them accidentally. I figured it’d be better to take care of them, so I did.”

He looked completely taken aback by that. “For how wee you are, you’re quite the adventurer.”

“That’s because I can use magic.”

“That’s amazing in and of itself. I’m too afraid of monsters to ever become an adventurer.”

I’d just happened to gain experience by playing a realistic video game. Honestly, I’d even wondered if this world was a game for a while. Without that experience, I probably wouldn’t have been able to take out monsters either.

“I haven’t seen you around these parts before,” he said. “Where do you hail from?”

“The capital. I was headed south up to the desert, but I tried to take a shortcut and got lost in the woods.”

“You went into the woods? As a *shortcut*?” Now he looked beside himself from surprise. I knew what he was trying to say.

No sane person would wander straight into the woods to get someplace faster. It’d just make you more likely to get lost or merc-ed by monsters. If I didn’t have my mapping skill, I wouldn’t have even tried. I could tell where I was based on my map, so I legitimately hadn’t thought I could get lost.

“I heard there’s a town right in front of the desert,” I said. “Do you happen to know anything about that?”

“I think you must mean Kars.”

Oh, now that was useful info about the town. He knew about the town, then. “Do you know which direction it’s in?”

“Hmm, hard to say for sure from here. I’d be able to tell you once we get closer to the village.”

“Really?!” I guess it was kind of hard to tell where you were in a forest. I was grateful he’d be able to point me where we needed to go, even if it meant we had to go to the village first. Looks like I’d gotten myself unlost. “Is the village nearby?”

“It’s not too far from here.”

I’d need to ask him to take me there later then.

Conversation slowed as I led him to the nest. The hornets I’d taken care of with wind magic littered the ground.

“You really did slay them.”

“Looks like that cave was their nest,” I told him.

“Is that a bear?” The bear statue was sealing the hornet’s nest.

“Don’t worry about it.” I peeked at my detection skill before moving the bear statue and didn’t see any hornets. Looks like they were all dead inside too. I moved aside the statue and felt a gust of hot air come off the rock. This was the aftermath from the flame bear.

“Oof, it’s hot,” said the man, stepping away from the cave. I was fine with my onesie, so I barely felt it. “Miss, what happened here?”

“I launched some fire magic into the cave and sealed it off with that bear statue to take care of the hornets. You might want to wait for a while before you check it out.”

The cave was still sweltering with residual heat. You couldn’t go in there dressed in regular clothes. We’d have to either wait or cool it off with water.

The man peeked into the cave and gave up trying to get inside right away. Instead, we headed over to examine the hornets on the ground.

“Miss, may I take one of these? I’d like to take it back to the village to show everyone.”

“Take as many as you’d like.”

“You don’t want any, miss?”

Were they edible? I’d seen people eating hornets or something like them on TV before. But even if they were edible, I wasn’t planning on chowing down on bug meat. I didn’t even need them for their materials, so I generously let the guy have every single one of the awful things.

“But you’re an adventurer, aren’t you? Miss, aren’t you going to sell the materials? There’s the mana gems and the stingers. I’m sure you could make something off of those.”

I glanced at the hornets. The…giant…hornets...*ugh.* Even little hornets creep me out. No matter how much they were worth, I didn’t want them. They made my guts churn. Fina might’ve been able to use them for harvesting practice, but I didn’t want to have her dissect these things.

“I am 5,000% sure I don’t want them. You can take as many as you want,” I said, and Kumakyu crooned. At that moment, I heard the buzzing of wings…of very *loud* wings.

“What is it?”

I looked over to find a gargantuan hornet flying through the air. It was even bigger than all the ones I’d already defeated. Maybe even about the size of a wolf.

“AAHHHHHH!” The man fell over. I activated my detection skill. The display just said giant hornet. It wasn’t, like, a queen hornet or something like that, in the very least? This thing definitely wasn’t like the others.

“Mister, do you know what that thing is?”

“AAHHHHHH!” the man informed me.

Okay, I’d take that as a no. He was so shocked that he collapsed where he stood. For now, I decided to call this thing the queen hornet, just to keep it separate in my head from the others.

When the queen saw its fallen brethren, I heard its mouth clack and its wings started to quiver really fast. Gross…

But I could almost feel the anger—it knew we were enemies.

Chapter 314:
The Bear Gets Directions

SEVERAL MORE GIANT HORNETS appeared behind the queen.

"Kumakyu, you take care of him!" The guy would be safe with my bear.

"Miss?!"

"Keep close to Kumakyu, mister!" I told him, then I turned to face the queen. I led by blasting a wind blade at her. Four other giant hornets took the brunt of my attack and the queen dodged. She aimed her abdomen at me, and a giant stinger bulged out from her behind.

If she stuck me with that thing, I was a goner. I wasn't normally scared of needles, but this thing terrified me.

With her stinger still pointed straight at me, she soared down to strike in one fell swoop. I dodged to the right and stole a moment to land a bear punch right on her body. When I made contact, I felt something soft and squishy. I followed through with my bear punch, and she went tumbling to the ground.

Still, it didn't feel like I'd hit her where it hurt. She was kind of soft, especially compared to mammals or crustaceans.

But man, I *extremely* did not want to touch her more than I had to, and I *absolutely positively* did not want to see her face up-close. I hated bugs enough as it was and being so close to her face as she passed by was downright terrifying. I never ever wanted to see her that close from the front again. The thought of it made me shudder.

Yeah, I wanted to wrap this up as quickly as possible. Something in her mouth clicked as she laid there on the ground. Soon enough, her wings were moving, and she was starting to hover in the air once again. I tried to get in a surprise hit with wind magic to keep her from getting away, but she was faster and shot straight up into the air. The sheer grossness distracted me—I was too slow.

She got ready to launch another attack from above…when I heard a voice

from behind.

“Ahhhh! G-get away from me!”

Hornets were going after the guy again…or they were trying to. But Kumakyu was protecting him, just like I’d asked, landing perfectly timed, literal bear punches on the hornets just as they approached. When the hornets hit the ground, Kumakyu gave them the finisher.

Wow, Kumakyu was looking pretty rad. My bear’s flourish almost seemed to be a signal that things were going fine, so I went back to the queen.

I tossed more wind blades up at her, but she kept dodging them like they were nothing. She could move just as fast as any normal hornet…so I decided to hit her with something she couldn’t avoid. I blasted a ton of wind blades at once. There was nowhere to go—

—but then, suddenly, she disappeared.

What was that? Some kind of vibration from her wings? Had she really just canceled out my wind blades? Well, how about *this*?

I launched a clod of dirt at her. No way she’d be able to vibrate that one away. But she just did a little turn to avoid it and aimed her stinger at me again.

I dodged it, but she was so fast for something so gigantic. I really wanted to use fire magic on her, but I couldn’t risk setting the forest ablaze and making even more problems for myself.

If I couldn’t fight her with fire, I’d need to move on to plan B. I stopped my attacks and just waited for her to attack. She buzzed around me for a moment, aimed her stinger again, and descended on me. I bided my time, waiting for just the right moment, and then created a bear statue right in front of her. It was the same technique I’d used while fighting at the festival.

The queen’s giant stinger struck the stone bear and snapped clean in half. Instantly, she fell to the ground and began to make awful chittering noises.

Blugh. I *really* wish I hadn’t seen her face from so close. But this was it—my chance to beat her. As she writhed helplessly on the ground, I used wind magic to slice her head off.

With that, the bug was squished.

Just then, I remembered the man from the village and looked over to Kumakyu. A few giant hornets littered the ground around them. Kumakyu and the man seemed to be enjoying each other's company.

What had happened?

"Did you fight them all off?" he asked.

"Yeah." As he stroked Kumakyu's side, he looked over to the dead queen. "Miss, you're amazing."

I realized again just how huge the queen was. I'd thought giant bugs like this only existed in video games. Still, this *was* a fantasy world, so I guess I could buy it.

"Mister, do you know what this huge one is?" Even looking at the wolf-sized hornet made my stomach churn. I was already creeped out by the "normal" crow-sized ones as it was.

"No idea. First time seeing one of those. But knowing a hornet as big as this was near the village makes me shudder to even think of it. Really, miss, I'm so grateful. Thank you."

I only slayed the thing because I accidentally bumped into it. I was just going with the flow, nothing more.

"Also, miss, is your bear's name Kumakyu?"

"It is. Why?"

He looked at the bear. "Kumakyu, thanks for protecting me," he said, giving Kumakyu a gentle pat on the head.

"Cwoon," Kumakyu gave him a cute little croon. The guy's attitude had done a full one-eighty. It was hard to imagine that he was so freaked out at the sight of my bear just a short time ago. But who wouldn't be grateful to after getting saved from giant hornets?

"I had no idea bears could be this cute," he commented.

"My bear's special," I said. "So don't start approaching wild bears or

anything.” I didn’t want him putting himself in harm’s way. One wrong step, and he’d be a goner.

“I know, I know.” The man stroked Kumakyu’s head. “But now that I’ve met a bear like this, I can’t help but want to pet them.”

No, but…seriously, bears are dangerous. Don’t.

He thanked Kumakyu some more for protecting him from the hornets. Fair enough—

Kumakyu *had* protected him just now—but I was actually the one to kill most of them, including the queen. I guess this was better than him being scared of Kumakyu, but it still wasn’t exactly how I wanted things to pan out.

After that, I let the man have the queen’s remains.

“This’ll fetch quite a price,” he said. “Are you sure about this?”

“I don’t need it. I don’t even want to look at it. If you aren’t going to take the thing, I can just burn it to a crisp here and now.” I summoned up some fire in front of my bear puppet. This thing was *not* going into bear storage, thank you very much.

“Wait, all right, I got it. I’ll take it—gladly, in fact. So please, don’t burn it. It’d be such a waste.”

I let the flames go out. “If you can manage to sell it, use the money to hire an adventurer next time monsters appear.” There was a chance I hadn’t slain all the giant hornets, after all. I didn’t want normal people putting themselves in danger by going monster slaying just because they didn’t have enough cash to hire someone.

I doubted all the other villagers were quite as unreliable as this guy, but even imagining him having to fight a monster made me nervous. He wouldn’t be able to fight off a gerbil if he kept falling over onto his butt and thrashing around with that knife of his at random, let alone any monsters. It’d be way better to just have him hire an adventurer next time something came up.

“Thank you.”

The man started to harvest the hornet parts. As proof that he found the hornets' nest, he was going to bring back the stingers and wings. Once he was done with his harvest, we headed off toward the village.

"Still, can't believe it even after seeing it for myself. A sweet girl like you is an adventurer, and fighting giant hornets to boot. All with a trusty bear at your beck and call." He looked at Kumakyu, who I was currently riding. "Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Not really. It's not like your village asked me to help. Also, I'm in a hurry. If you just gave me directions, that'd help me out more than enough."

I got lost, killed some monsters I hadn't planned on killing, and basically just wasted a ton of time. If I could make up even a little bit of what I lost, that'd be nice.

I couldn't be late for the king's errand just because I'd gotten myself lost.

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After walking a while, we saw the village.

"Here we are," the man said. "If you keep going down this path, you'll get to an even larger road. Left heads to the capital, right gets you to where you're headed—to Kars."

So this was where the path had been all along. I'd been way, way off. If I kept going the way I was before, I would have ended up somewhere completely different.

"You can stop by the village any time, if you're ever passing through—you and Kumakyu, of course."

"Cwoon."

"Thank you. I'll take you up on that sometime," I said.

Kumakyu gave a happy little croon at that, and I had Kumakyu run down the road the man had told me about.

Now that I think about it, I hadn't even asked the guy his name. I hadn't told

him my name either. Actually, he only knew Kumakyu's name. I could ask him when I stopped by the village sometime, I guess.

"Kumakyu, we'll need to make up for the time we lost."

"Cwoon." Kumakyu answered by running faster.

Chapter 315:
The Bear Reunites with Rosa

THIS TIME, I STUCK TO THE PATH so I wouldn't get lost. I made sure to take a ton of breaks too, and to switch bears regularly.

"Thank you, Kumakyu. You take a nice rest now," I said, returning Kumakyu and summoning Kumayuru. "I'm counting on you, Kumayuru." I hopped onto the bear, and we were off again.

As we kept going, I noticed fewer and fewer plants. I guess this place really didn't get much rain. It really did feel like we were getting closer to the desert.

I stopped to sleep partway through my trip, and just past noon the next day, caught sight of a settlement. The town of Kars looked just like the man had described. Once I got past it and crossed the desert, I'd supposedly get to the town of Dezelt.

I rode Kumayuru until I was pretty close to Kars, but I couldn't just ride my bear all the way in. Making sure to return Kumayuru before somebody saw, I walked the rest of the way to the town's entrance. When the person standing there saw my outfit, I got a weird look. Business as usual.

"Miss, where are you coming from?" He was eyeing me like I was super suspicious.

I didn't know whether to say I'd come from the capital or to spit out a lie and say I was from a nearby village. I mean, it was already kind of suspicious for a girl to be walking around dressed as a bear. It would've been less suspicious if I'd been on a horse or in a carriage.

"Wait… Yuna, is that you?" As I was trying to figure out what to do, someone called my name. "Oh, it is! I knew it. It's Yuna."

A happy and familiar woman came up to me.

"Rosa? What are you doing here?" She was part of an adventurer harem party of a guy named Blitz and two other women. They'd really helped me out back in Mileela.

I only saw Rosa around right now though. Maybe she'd gotten sick of Blitz and left him?

Thanks to Rosa, I didn't even have to make up a lie. She helped me get right into the town. I sure was grateful.

"What brings you here, Yuna?"

"A job." It was easy to forget, but I *was* an adventurer. I took jobs too. Really, I did! "What about you, Rosa? I haven't seen you near Crimonia lately."

Rosa's party had come from Mileela over to Crimonia, and I thought they'd be working there for a while. I'd seen them around since they'd come by, but not recently. Then again, it wasn't like I was stopping by the adventurer guild much these days.

"Blitz said he wanted to travel around, so now we visit all sorts of places for work. A job brought us to this town too, actually."

Blitz was the swordsman and leader of Rosa's party, Ran was the mage, and Glimos was the swordswoman. Since there were three women and just one guy, I started calling it a harem party in my head. I didn't know for sure that it was a harem, but…come on, now.

"Is the rest of your party here too?" I asked.

"We have some free time right now, so everyone's off on their own," Rosa answered. "I was walking around town when I saw a girl dressed as a bear at the village entrance and thought it might be you. When I saw that it was, I had to go talk to you." She smiled cutely.

It was a mystery to me why such a cute girl had gotten herself involved in a harem. Was it Blitz's dashing good looks?

"Are you going to Dezelt for your job?" she asked.

"Yeah, I got a quest to bring them something." I thought about telling her more, but then I'd have to explain who had made the quest and what I was carrying, so I kept it vague.

"Oh, so you are. You're going to cross that desert? All I can say is good luck

out there. I've heard it's not easy." She had a faraway look in her eyes. Had something happened? "Yuna, are you staying overnight? Would you like me to take you to the inn we're staying at?"

Apparently, most people prepped for their journey across the desert before heading to Dezelt.

"First, I think I'm going to head to the adventurer guild to get directions to Dezelt," I said.

"You ought to get a room first," Rosa warned. "A lot of merchants come through and they have adventurers escorting them too, so it can get pretty crowded. I'm sure you wouldn't want to sleep in a room with a ton of other people."

Uhh, she had a point. I didn't want to share a room with strangers. I wouldn't be able to actually get rest at night.

If I really needed to, I could use my bear house. But then I'd have to leave town and figure out where to set it up, so it was kind of a pain in its own way. I took Rosa's advice and decided to get a room in the inn she'd mentioned.

As we walked to it, I decided to ask her about something I'd been noticing about the town.

Or rather, some *things.* "Rosa, what are those?" I was staring ahead at a giant lizard. The creature was fitted with reins, and someone was just casually riding it around town.

"That's a lagarut."

"The lizard's a lagarut?"

"Yes. They're monsters, but they're docile and can be ridden to cross the desert. I was surprised too when I first saw one."

Right—you couldn't travel across the desert on a horse, but you could go on a camel. In this world, they traveled on these lagarut things instead. Still, those things were monsters. I used my detection skill to take a look at it, and several monster signals showed up in the town—all of them lagarut. If I'd used my detection skill without realizing what they were, I'd probably have panicked

after seeing them.

“They’re not dangerous?” I asked.

“I don’t know much about them, but they seem to be safe. They’re gentle by nature and apparently have been historically used for transportation. I only just learned about them when I came here, so…”

Traveling across the desert on a giant lizard sure seemed like a fantasy world thing to do. I kind of wanted to try riding on one, but I couldn’t cheat on my bears.

“Not to change the subject,” said Rosa, “but it really feels like people are staring…”

Yeah, I could feel the eyes on me too. I just ignored them. As we passed by, peoples’ gaze followed us—okay, fine, they followed *me.*

“It’s because you’re so pretty, Rosa,” I said.

“Ha ha! Thank you. I think that they’re actually looking at you, though. Looks like they’re curious about your adorable bear outfit.”

She could’ve just been honest and called my outfit strange or weird. Anyway, whatever…I was used to this now.

“But aren’t you hot in that?” she asked. “Just seeing you makes me feel hot too.” Rosa brushed away the sweat on her forehead.

My bear onesie was actually the reason I was so comfortable. “These clothes are really special. I’m not hot at all, believe it or not.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I insisted. Still, I couldn’t blame her if she didn’t buy it.

As I walked to the inn, and as everybody stared at me, a familiar girl approached us from ahead.

“So it *is* you, Yuna.”

Ran, the mage and another member of Rosa’s harem party, had come to meet us. She was about eighteen, I think, and way cute. Another girl who’d fallen into Blitz’s clutches (probably).

“What are you doing here, Ran?” Rosa asked. “I thought you went shopping?”

“I did,” Ran replied. “But it was no fun going out alone, so I was heading back to the inn. That’s when I saw you two. What are you doing with Rosa, Yuna?”

I explained that I’d come to town for a job and had run into Rosa by coincidence.

“I was thinking of showing Yuna to the inn we’re staying at,” said Rosa. “We were just heading there.”

“I’ll come with you too.”

That’s how we ended up heading to the inn with Ran.

“You’re dressed in your usual, Yuna,” said Ran. “Isn’t it hot in that getup?” Since she’d asked the same thing as Rosa, I gave her the same explanation. “But Kumayuru’s not with you this time?” She looked around.

It wasn’t like I could go on a walk through an unfamiliar town with a full-blown bear. I wouldn’t have been able to stand it if they spooked someone and got attacked.

“Kumayuru’s inside here,” I said. I puppeteered my hand bears.

“Oh, right, your bear was a summon. I remember now,” said Rosa.

“Ah, it’s been so long since I’ve touched the fluff,” Ran said as she squished my fluffy onesie. “So soft.”

She definitely didn’t mean I was soft and squishy. It was just my bear onesie. That’s all.

Anyway, uh, Rosa tried to help get Ran off of me, but she wouldn’t budge. She only let go when I promised to let her pet Kumayuru later. (*Sorry, Kumayuru!* I apologized to the bear in my puppet hand.) “Hee hee. I get to see Kumayuru. I get to pet the bear!” Ran seemed pleased with herself.

Then we got to the inn, which seemed to have a saloon on the first floor. People were staring, but I ignored them and headed to the counter.

“Oh, you two are back?” A slightly plump middle-aged woman said to Rosa and Ran.

“We are.”

“Who’s the girl in that adorable outfit?” She was looking straight at me.

“She’s an adventurer, just the same as us. We bumped into her since she’s here for a job, so we brought her to your inn.”

“You mean to tell me this bear girl is an adventurer?” Now she was looking dubiously at me… Here we go again.

“She’s stronger than the adventurers over there,” said Rosa.

“I think we wouldn’t even be able to win against her if we ganged up on her,” added Ran.

“I’ve seen adventurers just as young as her in my day, but none that strong,” the woman said. If anything, the explanation seemed to leave her even more doubtful.

“It’s true, though.”

All three of them were all staring at me now, which I couldn’t stand. They seemed like they’d keep going on about me if I let them, so I used my signature move…Yuna Changing the Subject, Activate!

“Um, so about your rooms,” I said, trying to escape from the conversation at hand.

“Right, sorry. Would a single work?”

I nodded. My signature move never failed.

“I’m sorry, it looks like we don’t have any openings.”

“Do you have anything at all?” Rosa asked for me.

“Hmm, let’s see.”

“Rosa, I can find another inn,” I said. There had to be others. Worst case, I had my bear house.

“No, we had a promise.”

Right as I was about to give up and leave the inn, Ran grabbed onto my bear onesie. Oh, right… I promised she could pet Kumayuru.

At that moment, Ran said the unthinkable. “Why don’t you just stay in our room?”

“Your room…but wouldn’t Blitz be in there too?” Sharing a room with a guy? I wasn’t so sure about that.

“It’ll be fine. We’ll shoo him out.”

“You’re right. That’s a great idea,” Rosa agreed.

“Uh, I…don’t think it is, no,” I said.

“Ha ha, I’m kidding. We checked into separate rooms from the start. When we came in, they only had a three-person room and a single. One of the four-person rooms opened up later, but it would have been more work to move, so we stayed put.”

“But are you sure? It’s still a three-person room.”

“It’s all right. You’re tiny, so you’d fit in the bed with us.”

“N-no thank you. I can just find another inn.”

“Then would you prefer checking into the four-person?” the woman asked. “That’s still open.”

“But you just said you didn’t have openings,” I said.

“I said I didn’t have singles. I’ve got a four-person.”

“If we switch over, you wouldn’t have an issue staying with us, would you, Yuna?”

“Uh, why don’t I just check into the four-person room on my own?” I had the money. I’d feel more comfortable that way.

“No. If we’re not in the same room, I wouldn’t get to pet Kumayuru.” Was that her true motive?

“Ma’am,” Rosa said, “we’d like to move to the four-person room, please. We have the funds to cover it.” She was already getting the ball rolling to switch rooms.

“I’ll chip in too,” I said.

“It’s all right. You’ve helped us out in the past.”

But they’d also helped *me* out in the past. I hadn’t been able to help take care of the prisoners back then, for instance. Rosa’s party had talked to the kidnapping victims we’d saved from the robbers who’d killed the victims’ families. I was helpless back then. I’d gotten it into my head that the whole thing would be over once we dealt with the bandits, but I realized from the experience that this wasn’t some game where the quest ends, and you never have to think about the consequences again.

“All right, you’ll be in the very back room on the same floor you’re already on. Once you’ve cleared out your old room, bring me back the key.”

The lady gave Rosa the key to the new room.

Chapter 316:
The Bear Learns How to Get to Dezelt

ONCE SHE GOT THE KEY from the innkeeper, Rosa grabbed my bear puppet so I couldn't escape. "Yuna, let's get to the room."

Ran held me from behind. C'mon, couldn't they just let go of me? It wasn't like I was going to make a break for it. But they didn't seem to care, ushering me over to their room like I was some criminal being taken away. Once we got inside, we found Glimos taking care of her sword.

Glimos was a woman of few words. She was tall for a lady and her sword was kind of on the large side too. If Blitz was the leader, Rosa the mastermind behind the scenes, and Ran the life of the party, that made Glimos the party's unsung hero who carried them.

"We're switching rooms, Glimos, so pack up," Rosa said immediately upon entering the room. I thought Glimos would protest since Rosa hadn't given her warning, but Glimos replied with a "Roger that." She sheathed her sword and started cleaning up right away. Rosa and Ran joined her. Soon after, we headed to the four-person room, leaving the old room like nobody had even been in it. They seemed to know what they were doing.

When we got to the new room, we were met with four evenly spaced beds. I took the one furthest in the back.

"Looks like you've been doing well, Yuna?" Glimos greeted me as she put down the luggage. So she hadn't been ignoring me, then. It was hard for me to tell with her, considering how little she talked in the first place.

"You seem like you're well too, Glimos," I replied.

"That I am, usually. It's my one redeeming quality." She didn't say much more, but she flashed a smile, so I figure she must've been happy.

"All right, Yuna, will you let Kumayuru out?" Ran came over to the bed next to mine.

"Sorry. I have to go to the adventurer guild right now. Can we do this after I'm

back?”

“Aww. But why do I have to wait? Why are you going there? You already promised.”

I did, but I didn’t say I would let her have Kumayuru immediately. As far as I was concerned, we could do this tomorrow, or even next year.

“I want to head out tomorrow morning,” I said, “so I need to ask how to get to Dezelt.”

“I can tell you that,” Ran said. “So you don’t have to go, right?”

Well, it’d save me some trouble if she did give me directions…or rather, it’d save me *from* trouble. If I went to the adventurer guild, someone would try picking a fight with me or make fun of me—I was sure of it. If I could just get the directions from Ran, I could avoid all that.

“I think I’ll take you up on that,” I said. “What can you tell me?”

“There’s not that much *to* tell, really,” Ran said.

Rosa came over and sat down next to Ran. “You won’t get lost as long as you follow the fundamentals.” Getting lost, huh? I could only smile awkwardly seeing as how I already did that, just trying to get to *this* town.

“Anyway, when you leave town, you’ll see some pillars,” said Ran. “Follow them and you’ll get to Dezelt.”

“Pillars?” What an odd thing to say.

“There are pillars lining the route over,” Rosa told me. “They were built by people long ago so travelers bound for Dezelt wouldn’t get lost.”

“There aren’t any roads or anything else to use as a landmark out in the desert,” said Ran. “Those pillars are your only point of reference out there.”

“Yeah. To get to Dezelt, you follow the pillars. As long as you do that, you won’t get lost.”

Jeez, they were really driving their point home. Meanwhile, the king had told me a few days ago that I’d be able to get to this town without getting lost as long as I followed the road…which I immediately ignored and got myself lost.

“We’ve really got to hand it to whoever made those things,” Rosa continued. “There’s always another pillar to head toward, so even we got across without getting lost.”

“You’ve all been to Dezelt?” I asked.

“Just once while escorting some folks,” said Rosa.

“That was tough,” said Ran.

There was a faraway look in their eyes.

“Can you ride a lagarut, Yuna?” asked Rosa.

“You mean those big lizards in town?”

“Yeah, everyone rides those when they’re going to Dezelt. Ran doesn’t really like them,” Rosa told me.

“I can’t stand the way they flick those long tongues of theirs,” Ran clarified. “Brace yourself for that when you ride them, Yuna.”

I guess Ran didn’t do well with reptiles. As for me, I didn’t have as much of a problem with them—they sure weren’t as bad as bugs—but I preferred floofs like Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“I’ll ride Kumayuru, so I won’t need to take a lagarut.”

“You’re riding a bear across the desert!?”

“That’s the plan,” I said.

They both seemed flabbergasted. I guess it sounded pretty outlandish.

“I feel bad for Kumayuru.”

“That’s reckless.”

“It’ll be all right,” I told them both. “My bears are summons, after all.”

They were worried, but my babies (or rather, my cubs) were special. They could travel in the snow, and I was pretty sure they’d be able to handle the desert.

“Really?” Rosa said.

“I’m so jealous. I wish Kumayuru were mine.” Ran seemed envious, but too

bad. No way was she getting my bear.

“So if I just follow these pillars you guys are talking about, I’ll reach Dezelt?”

“Yes. If you went to the adventurer guild, I think they’d just tell you the same thing.”

“Mmhm. It’s really the only way to get there.”

So the only issue left was trying to figure out how to deal with any people I passed by on the way. The pillars were supposedly visible from a distance, so maybe I could just follow them from afar?

“Also, the pillars supposedly repel monsters, so you’ll want to take breaks near them. That’s what we heard at the guild, anyway. Everyone rests and sets up camp around the pillars,” said Rosa. “Though you should take that with a grain of salt. I’ve heard you can encounter monsters even if you’re near the pillars.”

“We made sure to do things right,” said Ran, sounding oddly proud, “so we didn’t see a single one.”

Even if the pillars only offered a small amount of protection, that probably did help with travel. Not to mention it was hard to travel across the desert, and it was hot. I wouldn’t want to fight monsters in those conditions.

“You’re more likely to come across monsters between the pillars, so be careful.”

With that, Rosa and Ran were done giving me advice. It sounded like it would be easier to get there than I thought. The only issue now was whether Kumayuru and Kumakyu would be all right in the desert.

“Thank you,” I said. “That helps a lot.”

“All right. Kumayuru. Right now,” Ran said, closing in on me, but just then we heard someone at the door.

Knock knock.

“Are you all in here?” a man asked from outside. He sounded oddly familiar…

“We’re in here! You can come in,” Rosa didn’t hesitate to shout. The door

swung open, and the party's leader, Blitz, came right on in.

"I heard you moved to a four-person room with a girl dressed as a bear. I knew it! It *was* you, Yuna." Blitz came into the room and looked over at me. "How'd you end up in a room with everyone?"

"Yuna came to town for a job," Rosa explained. "We showed her to the inn, but they were out of singles. Then we found out this room was available, so we all moved."

"Wait, are you jealous?" Ran smirked at the party leader. "We haven't got room for you anymore, Blitz."

"Course not," Blitz answered. "I just wanted to know what was going on. Anyway, Ms. Libelle wants you to hurry up and give her the key back."

"Oh, I forgot." Rosa rushed to stand up. Based on the conversation, I guess Libelle was the name of the lady from earlier.

"What are you doing for dinner?" he asked. "It's going to get busy soon."

"What? Is it already that late?" When I looked outside, I saw that it was starting to get dark. I guess a lot of time passed while we were chatting.

"What about Kumayuru?" Ran whined. "When do I get my fluff time?"

"After dinner, Ran."

Ran groaned. "Seriously?"

"Glimos, could you drag Ran over? And save us some seats too."

"You got it." Glimos effortlessly picked up the petite Ran.

"What are you?! I'm going, let go of me."

With that, the two of them left the room.

"Let's go, Yuna." Rosa latched onto my arm and pulled me along. I didn't have any reason not to go, so I joined everyone for dinner.

Rosa went down to the first floor to return the key to the lady. I went with Blitz and headed to where Glimos had saved some seats at a round table where she was already sitting with Ran.

I wasn't sure where to sit. I heard that harem parties sometimes had rankings where the women higher up the ladder would sit closer to the guy, which obviously ruled out me sitting next to Blitz.

Blitz sat down next to Glimos, which meant that the open seat beside him would go to Rosa. I followed the logical conclusion and sat next to Ran.

"You took an awful long time to sit down," said Blitz. "Were you thinking of something weird?"

"What, me? Nope." He read me like a book.

"Then why did you look at our faces before sitting?"

"Just your imagination," I glossed over his remark and avoided eye contact. Blitz looked at me suspiciously, but then my guardian angel arrived.

"Sorry for keeping everyone. I went ahead and ordered for us." Rosa took the seat between me and Blitz.

Right then, a guy also came over to the table. "This kiddo's a little young for ya, Blitz, ain't she?" he said as he looked at me. Kiddo? Where?

"You've got it wrong," said Blitz. "She's a friend. And a word of advice: don't make fun of her."

"Oh, so I was wrong? And here I was, convinced you picked up another gal. And a weirdly dressed one at that," the man said.

He'd called me a kiddo *and* said I dressed weird? Rude. Still, it wasn't enough to make me angry. Guess I had matured.

"Um…Yuna, this is Doran. He's an adventurer in this town. The guy has a foul mouth, but he's a decent sort and he goes around doing patrols."

"People get jealous of Blitz hogging these three beautiful gals to himself," said Doran, "so I stop by every now and then to check up. When I saw a girl dressed as a bear in his group, I knew I had to stop by before that invited trouble."

"You're making me sound like a real scoundrel," said Blitz. "Look, Yuna's a guest of Rosa's. I had nothing to do with it"

"My man, you gotta realize how this looks from an outside perspective.

You've practically surrounded yourself with gals."

Basically, he was saying he thought I was part of Blitz's harem. This guy just did not know when to stop, huh?

"Blitz is telling the truth," said Rosa. "We met up with her on a previous job and she really helped us out."

"She helped *you* out?" the man repeated incredulously. "You sure it's not the other way around?"

"You'd think so, but she's a stronger adventurer than I am."

"You're joking." Doran laughed. He wasn't buying a word of it. "Well, all right. This odd-looking girl's not one of yours then. Just don't take her up to your room, you hear?"

"Like I'd ever," Blitz said. "Get lost!"

"Yeah, yeah," Doran cackled as he left.

Chapter 317:
The Bear Relaxes with Everyone and Her Bears

"HA HA!" Rosa grinned. "I guess he was worried Yuna had fallen into Blitz's clutches or something."

"Can't believe he'd make that horrible false accusation," Blitz said.

Yeah, *horrible* was right. Blitz was free to collect all the ladies he liked, but that guy should've left me out of it. I couldn't bear anyone seeing me that way.

I caught Blitz mumbling softly that he wasn't interested in kids. He was trying to say it under his breath, but *I* could hear him. I wanted to smack the dude across the face, but you know what? I was mature now. I could tough it out.

Besides, Ran was pretty petite herself. Maybe not as much as me, but she was.

"What is it, Yuna?" Ran spoke up, suspicious because I was looking at her.

"I was just thinking you sure look young," I replied.

"Well, I *am* the youngest in the party."

"You're eighteen, right?"

"Sure am."

She didn't look eighteen at all, but I kept that to myself. I'd be her age in three years, and by then I'd be way taller than her. The same height as Rosa, even! I was sure of it.

"Ran, you can take pride in your youth all you want, but twenty'll come in the blink of an eye," said Rosa.

"That's two whole years away," Ran said.

While the two glared at each other, someone brought over our scrumptious-looking food. Come to think of it, I hadn't asked about how much it cost.

When I asked Rosa, she just told me not to worry about it. "It's our treat."

"That's right. Don't worry about it," Blitz said. "Besides, you're tiny, so I know

you won't eat a ton. We'd ask you to chip in if you ate several times more than us, but that's not like you."

"Sure isn't." I loved good food, but I had a standard-size stomach.

"Eat up so you'll grow big and strong."

Why were people talking to me like I was actually a little kid? I *was* grown up. It wasn't like I liked being tiny.

"If you don't eat and get big, you'll end up like Ran," said Blitz.

"Hey! I'm *not* small," Ran objected, but even from my perspective she was short. She was taller than me, but not so tall that I wouldn't overtake her someday. I was fifteen, with plenty of room to grow. On the other hand, Ran's window for getting taller was rapidly closing.

Ran stood up to punch Blitz, but he just held her back by her head.

"Ugh! Let go!" she said.

"If you don't want to end up like this," Blitz told me, "you need to eat up and grow big."

"Wait, do you have a grudge because of the rooms, Blitz?" asked Ran. "C'mon, grow up already." Ran cackled.

"Obviously not." Blitz pushed her further back by her head.

"Owww! Not so hard!"

Everyone got a good laugh from that. Blitz let go, and she seemed to calm down. I mean, she was still a bit pouty, but that vanished when she started digging in.

Ran and Rosa gave a brief summary of what happened over dinner. "So that's why I was telling Yuna how to get to Dezelt," Rosa concluded.

"So, Yuna, you're heading out tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm kind of in a hurry."

"We really would've liked to go with you." Rosa turned to face Ran. "But this one's not a fan of the lagarut."

“Well,” said Ran, “I seem to remember that *you* didn’t like the heat.”

“Ugh, the heat…”

“Those lagarut…”

They exchanged looks and pained smiles. So Ran didn’t like the method of transportation and Rosa wasn’t a fan of sweltering temps.

“What about you two?” I asked. “Blitz? Glimos?”

“It was a tough path,” said Blitz. “And the endless stretch of sand doesn’t make it any easier. I didn’t like wandering from pillar to pillar for hours and hours, I’ll tell you that.”

“You can tough it out with some patience,” Glimos said stoically, but she didn’t exactly seem enthused either.

I wanted to experience the desert, but I could say that because I had Kumayuru and Kumakyu, my bear gear, and my bear house. I never would’ve considered going without all my bear stuff. I wasn’t exactly built for desert travel, so I wouldn’t have been able to make it to the town. Despite how they looked, I was genuinely grateful for all my bear gear and my bears.

“Why are you guys in this town, Blitz? If you don’t like the heat, why haven’t you gone somewhere else?” I asked.

“Besides the escort jobs, there are a lot of monster extermination quests. It took a lot of effort to get here, so we’re getting some sightseeing in while working.”

“But I think we’ll head back in a few days,” said Rosa.

Ran nodded. “We can’t work here forever, of course, so we’re going to head back to the capital.”

“You’ll be working in the capital after this?” I asked.

Rosa shook her head. “We’re not really staying at a single location. We’ll move around and keep near the capital.”

“If we do guard quests, that also gets us traveling—two birds, one stone.”

“We like traveling to different towns, even if we might run into the occasional

troublemaker.”

Troublemakers, huh? Ellelaura and the king came to mind. Even if Ellelaura was a good person, every once in a while, she created trouble for me. I felt like I’d basically thought of the same person twice—must’ve been my imagination.

It was fun to visit new places, but the unknown could be dangerous. You could get lost, run into monsters… Those kinds of things were just going to happen when you headed out on new ventures.

Rosa’s party was basically living the sweet life, as far as adventuring went…at least, according to all the manga and light novels I’d read. They were nice people and I even met them in the first place because they went out of their way to get rid of some bandits. Blitz could easily have become the main character of a manga or novel.

Maybe the title would be something like *No OP Abilities, But I’ve Got My Adventurer Harem!* Harem stories always had a pretty big audience.

Still, I guess they’d need to make the trip back to the capital soon.

“Please be careful on your way back,” I told them.

“Hee hee, thanks,” Rosa answered. “But we’ll be okay. I’ve got Blitz, Ran, and Glimos with me, after all.”

“Obviously, I can’t beat any kraken,” said Blitz smoothly, “but I can protect my party in the very least.”

“I know we can rely on you,” said Rosa. Whew, they really seemed lovey-dovey.

I felt like I gained some insight into why they all stuck together. I guess Blitz really was keeping their interests at heart.

We finished eating before anybody could get too mushy and started heading back to the rooms. Good thing too—if it’d gone on any longer, I would’ve been forced to listen to their flirting. That was a close call.

By the by, Blitz didn’t come with us to our room. He retreated off to his lonely single, all on his own.

When we got back to our room, we wiped off our sweat with some damp towels. This inn didn't have an indoor bath, but there was a public one outside. Rosa and the others just stuck to towels today, though.

I didn't sweat much thanks to my bear onesie, so I just went along with everyone else instead of bathing. Once I felt refreshed and clean, I went to lie down on my bed.

"I've got an early day," I said, "so I'm going to bed."

I moved to the bed in the very back. I was going to sleep in my black bear clothes. This wasn't my bear house or Crimonia—I was in unfamiliar territory, so I didn't change this time just in case I needed my black bear abilities.

Ran tried to stop me as I tried to lie down on the bed. "Wait, what about Kumayuru?"

Drat, she remembered.

"C'mon, c'monnn! You promised."

Well, I guess it was fine since I was planning on summoning them to keep watch anyway. There was enough space to summon Kumayuru at full size, but it would have made the room feel cramped. I ended up summoning them in cub form.

Kumayuru appeared on top of my bed. Ran's eyes immediately went wide as she looked at Kumayuru in surprise. "Wh-wh-what is this adorable bear? Is this Kumayuru's baby?"

"No, no. This is Kumayuru," I told her.

"But it's so…itsy-bitsy!"

I explained how my bears had the ability to shrink down. Ran picked up Kumayuru and marveled.

"Cwoon."

"Oh. My. Gods. Did you *hear* that?!"

Well, yeah. A living animal's going to make some noise.

Ran hugged Kumayuru tightly and flopped onto her bed. "So fluffy. And soft.

Yup, bears are much better than any old lagarut.”

No, most bears are incredibly dangerous, I wanted to say. I felt an odd sense of déjà vu, like this had all happened the other day. Was I single-handedly changing the way people saw bears in this world? Ugh, what if someone tried petting a wild bear and ended up getting mauled? I hoped that wouldn’t happen.

“Let me see Kumayuru too, Ran,” said Rosa.

“Not yet. My fluff time isn’t over, thank you very much.”

Rosa watched Ran enviously. I guess I had no option. I summoned Kumakyu from my white bear puppet. Kumakyu wandered closer to me from on top of the bed.

“Wh-what? A white bear!?” Ran was looking at Kumakyu while still hugging Kumayuru.

“Now that you mention it, I heard a rumor in Crimonia that you had two bear summons.”

“She does?” Ran gasped.

“Yeah, I heard some adventurers talking about it.” Rosa came over to me. “Um, could I hold one?”

“Sure,” I said. That was why I’d summoned Kumakyu too.

Rosa embraced Kumakyu happily. “Heh heh! I’m not as obsessed as Ran, but they sure are cute.”

“Well, I’ve got Kumayuru. Isn’t that right, Kumayuru?” Ran gave Kumayuru a big hug. Kumayuru seemed to be a bit uncomfortable, but they’d manage. Probably.

“So, what’s this cub’s name?” Rosa asked.

“That’s Kumakyu.”

“Kumakyu! What a cute name.” Rosa hugged Kumakyu.

I planned on going to bed early, but I had a promise to keep. And maybe hours to go before I could sleep…

“So, Yuna, if you can shrink them down, can you make them bigger too?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” I said.

“Then could you?” Ran asked.

Well…why not? “The bed hasn’t got enough room, so can you put them on the floor?”

Ran placed Kumayuru on the ground when I asked. Then I returned Kumayuru to their original size.

“Wow! Just like you said.”

Ran leapt on Kumayuru. The room wasn’t that big, but she still climbed onto Kumayuru’s back like she was a little kid.

“Yuna, could you do that with Kumakyu too?”

You too, Rosa? I guess I didn’t have a reason not to, so I made Kumakyu big too. Rosa happily hugged Kumakyu. The room suddenly felt a whole lot smaller.

“Ran does have a point,” said Rosa. “This is better than a lagarut.”

“Fuzzy wuzzy *always* beats cold and slimy,” Ran quipped.

It felt a little weird to hear them compare my bears to lizards. Anyway, they both took their time petting my bears until they were both satisfied. Partway through, I changed them back to their cub forms. Now Rosa and Ran were lying in bed, hugging them.

“Hmm, so warm!” Ran said as she hugged Kumayuru.

They were a lot warmer when they were large, which was part of why I’d shrunk them down. But apparently, my bears were little heaters even in cub form. Ran sipped cold water and kept a tight hold of Kumayuru anyway while Rosa and Glimos took turns holding Kumakyu.

“Umm, I’d like to get to bed soon,” I said. “Could we wrap this up?” I still had an early morning, after all.

“But I haven’t gotten my fill of the fluffs…”

She’d gotten plenty! Just how long did she intend to pet them?

“Come on, now,” said Rosa. “Let Yuna have Kumayuru back.”

Ran resisted, but Rosa returned Kumakyu to me. Kumakyu happily sat up on my lap. Meanwhile, Kumayuru peered at us enviously.

“Look, Kumayuru wants to go back to Yuna too.”

This was my chance. I made eye contact with Kumayuru and signaled: *Kumayuru, make a sad sound.* My bear let out a heartbreaking croon in my direction.

“Uh…” Ran looked back and forth between me and Kumayuru.

One more time, Kumayuru. Kumayuru looked at me again and let out a forlorn “Cwoon.”

“Oooh, how cute… All right. But next time I go to Crimonia, let me pet you again, okay?”

After being tricked by Kumayuru’s masterful performance, Ran reluctantly offered them back up to me. Kumayuru clung close to me during the handoff. My bear was destined to become a master thespian, I just knew it. I made sure to give the great actor a few head pats for his work.

“All right, I’ll get the lights.” Glimos, who had been silent until then, touched the mana gems on the wall and the lights dimmed.

“Remember that you promised, Yuna,” Ran said from the bed next to mine. Yeah, she could come by Crimonia for that if she wanted, I guess.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu snuggled in next to me from my left and right as I settled into bed. They’d wake me up if we were in danger. I cuddled Kumayuru and Kumakyu close to me as they slept.

“Ugh, so jealous,” I heard someone say nearby, but I ignored it and went to sleep.

Chapter 318:
The Bear Departs for Dezelt

HMM, I WAS FEELING kind of uncomfortable in my sleep, like something was pinning me down. I slowly opened my eyes to find Ran hugging Kumayuru and me as she slept.

"Fluff…" she murmured.

Uh, no, no fluff. But wait, why was Ran sleeping in my bed? Kumayuru was snoozing away comfortably right between us.

I looked on my other side. For a moment, I thought Rosa would be there too, but it was just Kumakyu cuddling up to me, fast asleep. I'd asked my bears to wake me up if they sensed anything dangerous, but I guess that didn't include Ran invading my sleeping arrangements.

Well, she was just sleeping, so it wasn't like there was any real danger…except to any hope of me getting some shut-eye.

There are probably girls in this world who like other girls, but Ran liked Blitz, so that…probably wasn't the case here? In any case, my bears were here to protect me. I patted their heads as they slept.

Anyway, I managed to wriggle out of Ran's embrace. Once I pulled myself out of her grasp, I stole out of my bed. Then I quietly shifted Kumakyu (still asleep) away from Ran and onto Ran's former bed. From there, I tried to rescue Kumayuru from Ran's clutches, but it was no use.

What to do? Suddenly, brilliance struck. I could just recall Kumayuru and resummon them.

So I did just that. Huge success, Yuna! All is well.

Although when I transferred over to Ran's old bed, she started muttering in her sleep.

"Ugh, where are my fluffs…?" she murmured sadly, her arms searching forlornly. "Ugh. Kumayuru…"

I knew it, she was looking for Kumayuru. She really was looking for my bear.

It wasn't like I could put Kumayuru back though. Then another brilliant solution hit me, and I took out a Kumayuru stuffed animal from my bear storage. I placed it within Ran's reach and her despondent hands latched onto the stuffed animal.

"Fluffy…" she murmured.

There we go! Now everyone was happy. I went back to sleep.

When morning properly arrived, my bears woke me up.

Was it time already? Jeez, hadn't I literally just fallen asleep? It was dark out, but the sun was rising. We were leaving early, so I had to wake up early too.

I sat up and looked over at the bed next to me. Ran slept happily in her new bed, hugging the Kumayuru stuffed animal. I guess she hadn't noticed that she was sleeping by herself.

On my other side was Rosa, and in the bed next to the door was a still-slumbering Glimos. I recalled Kumayuru and Kumakyu, careful not to wake anyone.

"Are you up, Yuna?" Rosa was getting up in the bed next to mine.

I guess I woke her up. "Morning."

"Morning. Why are you in the bed next to me, Yuna?" Rosa asked.

I looked over at the bed Ran was sleeping in, the one that used to be mine.

"Fluff…" Ran gave the Kumayuru plush another squeeze.

"Oh, Ran…"

Rosa seemed flabbergasted by Ran's sleep talking, so I gave a brief explanation of last night's events.

"I'm so sorry about that, Yuna. She's just so happy to see you and Kumayuru again after so long. We've been traveling to so many places, you see, so it's special to see familiar faces in other towns. Plus, we didn't think we would run into you so far from Crimonia, so it's extra special."

We *were* pretty far from Crimonia. I could easily get around with my bear gate

and my bears, but it was harder for others. I guess it *would* be nice to run into people you knew so far away. Honestly, I was pretty happy myself that I ran into Rosa.

"So please forgive Ran," Rosa concluded.

"I'm not upset at all," I assured her. "I would've shaken her awake if I was." And I definitely wouldn't have given her a stuffed animal.

"Hee hee, thanks. Well, let's get these two up and have some food."

Rosa took Glimos and I woke up Ran.

"Good morning, Kumayuru…?" Ran stopped and stared at the Kumayuru stuffed animal. "Wh-what is this?"

"It's a Kumayuru stuffed animal."

"A stuffed animal?" Ran touched the bear once again. "It's true. It really *is* a stuffed animal. But why was I hugging a stuffed animal? I should have been hugging Kumayuru."

"I swapped them out."

"When?" Ran fluffed up the teddy bear. "I never knew you had this, Yuna."

"They're really popular with kids," I replied.

"Then where is the real Kumayuru?" Ran was restlessly searching for Kumayuru, squeezing the teddy bear tight.

"I already recalled them."

"B-but…" Ran deflated.

"And *don't* sneak into my bed."

"But Kumayuru was calling for me."

I immediately summoned a cub-sized Kumayuru to call her bluff. "Kumayuru, did you call for Ran?"

Kumayuru crooned and shook their head.

"Kumayuru says you didn't," I countered.

"No, Kumayuru!"

Rosa stared at Kumayuru in wonder. “I suspected as much when I met them, but they really can understand us.”

“They’re not your average bears.” As a matter of fact, they were special bears I’d gotten from a god. Hey, did that make them sacred beasts? I examined Kumayuru’s face. Just looked adorable to me. Didn’t seem like a sacred face at all. “Also, give back my stuffed animal, Ran.”

“What?! You’re not giving it to me?”

“No way.” Those were for kids, not mages.

“You *could* give it to me?” Ran wasn’t giving up. Ehh, I had a lot of them, so I guess I *could* give her one.

“Fine, you can have it. Just take good care of it.”

“Thank you, Yuna.” She hugged the stuffed animal happily.

“Good for you, Ran,” Rosa mumbled enviously at Ran.

“Do you want one too, Rosa?”

“Are you sure?” She brightened at once. I pulled out a Kumakyu stuffed animal and handed it over to Rosa. Now they had a full set.

“You had one of Kumakyu too?” Ran asked.

“How about you, Glimos?” I asked.

“I’m good.”

I figured as much.

After the conclusion of the great stuffed animal kerfuffle, we headed down to the ground floor for some grub. Blitz wasn’t there—was he still sleeping? No one was leaving to wake him, so I guess it was fine.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” I said. “What kinds of monsters are there in the desert?”

Scouting was just as important in this world as it had been in the game. You had to prepare your equipment ahead of time. Then again, it wasn’t like I had anything to use but bear gear, but it couldn’t hurt to know what monsters I might meet.

“Did we not tell you? They’re mostly sand wolves and sand wyrms, but you’ll probably only see the wolves.”

Sand wolves, huh? Maybe their fur was different from normal wolves or something.

I could probably assume that sand wyrms were related to that wyrm I fought a while back. But man, there were *more* types of wyrms? I felt gross just thinking about it. Wolves I could tolerate, but wyrms were just nasty. I’d immediately slay any I came across.

Maybe I’d bring a wyrm or two back as a souvenir for Fina?

“Be careful about those sand wyrms,” warned the ever-silent Glimos.

“That’s right. Sand wyrms move under the surface of the sand. If you don’t notice them quickly, they can slip in and take you out. From what I’ve heard, you can see ripples in the sand when they move. Keep an eye out for that and you should be fine.”

My detection skills would be a huge help, then. Add in my bears, and yeah, I’d do fine.

“I’ve heard some reports of other monsters,” Rosa added, “but that’s rumor.”

“Rumors?”

“That’s all we’ve heard. Sorry. As long as you stick to the pillars, you should only encounter sand wolves. It should be fine.”

If this was a game, Rosa would’ve *absolutely* set off an event flag in this world…and on some level, I kinda wondered if she really had. Still, event flags are made to be avoided.

“You’ll be fine if you come across anything, Yuna.”

“I mean, you did slay *that* leviathan.”

They were talking about the kraken but making sure not to mention it directly. There was a gag order in Mileela, so they were keeping it quiet for me.

“But be on your guard,” Glimos warned, contrasting their optimism. She was right, honestly. Even with my bear gear, I could still get tripped up if I wasn’t

careful.

“Thank you, Glimos. I’ll be careful.”

We were done eating and I’d got my info, so I was about to head out.

“Tell Blitz I said hi, all right?” He hadn’t shown up in the end. Maybe the adventurer yesterday was right and he’d taken a girl to his room…

The moment I thought that, a bleary-eyed Blitz walked in and grabbed an open seat.

“I’m wiped. If I knew I was going to be like this, I wouldn’t have gotten so wasted.”

“You were up late drinking?” Rosa asked as she handed him a glass of water.

“Yeah, Doran asked me to have a drink last night.”

Of course, so that was why he slept in.

“Are you leaving already, Yuna?” he asked.

“Yep!”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” he said, “but be careful out there.”

“Thank you. I’ll escape on Kumayuru and Kumakyu if any dangerous monsters appear.” If things got really bad, I could also escape through a bear gate.

“Don’t let Kumayuru get hurt,” said Ran, the worry clear in her voice. Hold on, didn’t she have any concern for *me*?

“We’ll look for you in Crimonia later,” said Blitz, “so don’t go missing on us.”

Rosa giggled. “I guess Blitz is saying we’ll see you in Crimonia next.”

Ran sighed. “You can just say it, you know.”

“Shut up.” Blitz tugged on Ran’s cheek as she sat next to him.

“O-ouch.”

They all burst out in laughter. Since I’d gotten to say my goodbyes to everyone, including Blitz, I headed out.

I left Rosa’s party and walked toward the town entrance. Even though it was

early in the morning, there were a lot of people riding lizards. Guess they were on their way out too? According to Rosa, a lot of people left before sunrise, when it was still cool outside.

I came to the town gate and saw a few sleepy guards standing around. When they noticed me, their eyes shot open like they'd been shocked wide awake. Normally, leaving a town just required holding my guild card up to the crystal panel, but the men stopped me.

"Miss, what are you wearing?"

"Bear clothes." I was a little snide, but can you blame me?

"I see… Bear clothes." He was scrutinizing me, but I ignored him and moved to leave. "Young lady, where are you going so early in the morning? It's dangerous out there."

I didn't have a mount and I was a young girl in a bear outfit, so I guess they wouldn't just let me leave.

The gate I was going to depart from was on the opposite side of the one that led to the capital. The desert spread out before me, and there were no towns between here and Dezelt.

"I'm going for a walk?" Maybe that would work.

"A walk? By yourself? Looking like that? At this time of day?"

Or not. I could've just made a break for it, but I didn't really have anything against them, and it would be a problem if they sent out a search party.

Hmm. What to do? I was in a bind when I heard some familiar voices.

"Yup, of course. She got caught up."

"I knew it."

After a brief pause, I looked over where the voices had come from and found Rosa and Ran, who I just parted with. They smiled at me.

"Rosa?"

"I remembered what happened when you arrived, so I thought they'd stop you again, so I came by to check on you." And she was right. Rosa turned to the

guards. “It’s all right, she’s an adventurer.”

“An *adventurer*?”

They didn’t seem so sure as they gave me another scrutinizing look.

“Yes, an adventurer. Let her through.”

“May we confirm that?” one guard said.

I showed the man my guild card.

“C-rank?” He looked back and forth between the card and me. He couldn’t deny what was in front of him, so he handed the card back. “But from here on out there’s only desert, and you have no lagarut.”

Was this the time to summon Kumayuru? Yeah, I guess it was.

“A bear!?”

I explained how my beast summons worked, and they finally let me pass. At the very least, now they’d probably let me in without thinking I was suspicious next time I came to town. Once we got out of the town borders, I mounted Kumayuru and headed toward the desert city of Dezelt.

“Let’s go, Kumayuru!”

My bear crooned and broke out into a run.

Extra Story:
The Aristocrat Who Lost to the Bear

I LOST TO A GIRL.

The matter began with a match, upon which Ellelaura and I had wagered our positions of employment. As a trusted confidante of His Majesty, she carried much influence. Even her husband, the Lord Fochrosé of Crimonia, had gained the attention of the public eye as of late.

His territory, the town of Crimonia, was once separated from the sea by a sizable mountain range, which was by no means an easy journey to cross. Historically, this range prevented much trade with the town residing on the other side of the mountainous terrain…that is, until a tunnel was discovered that connected Crimonia to the water.

Now, the town boasted a bountiful supply of seafood, and even salt. Crimonia became ever more valuable. With that value shall surely come strength. As part of the Fochrosé family, Ellelaura's own influence shall surely increase as well.

Which would, I gathered, soon prove to be an obstacle to my promoting of male knights. In an effort to obtain that power the Fochrosé family held, I sought to have my sons marry Ellelaura's daughters. Such a match was unequivocally well founded, and yet the Fochrosé family showed reluctance.

I learned of the planned practice battles between our knights and the academy students who aspired to be knights at the school festival. Among these aspirants were a number of young girls. In order to nip such foolish ambitions in the bud, I arranged for a change: my own order was to participate in the matches. If my men were to be challenged by a girl, I commanded them to squash her brutally. By striking fear into their hearts, I would force them to give up, rather than continue to make a mockery of such a noble profession. Such a surrender would itself show how little they were prepared.

Only the strong must aspire to knighthood.

The king and Ellelaura arrived at the school festival. I found that Ellelaura's daughter was present as well, which roused a truly splendid idea.

I could use these would-be knights as bargaining chips in order to press Ellelaura's daughters into an engagement. Further research uncovered that one such knight hopeful was a female friend of Ellelaura's daughter. Most convenient indeed… I planned to take full advantage of this.

I soon hinted at the ploy and initiated negotiations with Ellelaura. If she wanted to protect the schoolgirls, she would have to accept my demands. Ellelaura's very own daughter entered the fray at that point, claiming she would fight in the matches herself.

Ellelaura was in a sticky position now. I sensed that if I pressed more, her daughter would soon break.

Alas, that was when another young girl in a school uniform interrupted our discussion.

"Shia, I'll fight in your place," said the girl beside Ellelaura's daughter.

She was short and slight. I laughed at her obvious joke…and yet, to my surprise, it appeared that the waif was serious.

After a pause for thought, even Ellelaura was proposing the unexpected. She proposed that, instead of her daughter's hand in marriage, we could wager our positions of employ. If the girl lost to a knight, then Ellelaura would resign and return to Crimonia.

Was she truly such a fool? I couldn't contain my laughter. She thought this pint-sized little thing could best a true knight? But she seemed serious, and so I proposed to wager my position as captain of my order of chivalry. I had the upper hand, did I not? Yes, I could not let this opportunity escape. I accepted Ellelaura's conditions. Then, as an additional measure, I asked the king to be our witness so Ellelaura could not go back on her word.

Ah, I could hardly keep from smiling! Things were going splendidly.

Still, Ellelaura had chosen to put her very job in the hands of this girl. I couldn't let my guard down. There was a possibility she was different from the other girls present. I assigned one of my strongest knights, Figo, to be her opponent.

The girl claimed that if she defeated him, then she would fight me as well. As Figo could surely not lose—why, the very thought of it was absurd!—I accepted the proposal.

Figo lost. Although Figo had avoided using magic, the girl was still clearly powerful. How did she move with such speed?

After a short reprieve, we would fight. I could not have her insist that she only lost because of fatigue, after all.

"Are you ready, girl?"

"Anytime, anywhere."

"I'll wipe that self-confidence off your face in the blink of an eye."

"Then if I win, I get to punch you in the face."

Ha! She intended to beat me. I smiled. "If you *can* win. I'll give you some advice. You've got a weakness. It seems that Figo was holding back on you, but I won't be so kind."

"Then if I win against you not holding back, you won't have any issue with me punching you?"

"If you can defeat me, I'll acknowledge women can be knights and I'll allow you to marry my son."

"No thanks."

The fool seemed genuinely disgusted when she refused. Why, to so lightly squander the opportunity to marry into nobility…! At any rate, I knew it was impossible for her to defeat me.

The match began. I better understood the moment we began to fight—this

girl truly was powerful. She didn't break eye contact where others flinched beneath my glare. Her swordsmanship was outstanding, but above all else, she seemed accustomed to battle. She showed no trepidation when I charged. The clash of swords before one's eyes would have struck fear in any common person. One blundered block would result in injury. Women were especially scared of scarring their faces—one of their weaknesses. But this girl was different. This girl was *fearless*. She parried my sword and dodged. Could any of my men do the same?

However, such trifles didn't matter. As a captain of the knights, I could not lose in front of my men or the king.

I knew from Figo's match that this girl had not used magic. Surely she couldn't do such a thing, as no knight would forfeit such an advantage if it was available to them.

Alas, I pitied the poor girl for choosing to play in a man's game. Impressive though her sword fighting might be, my magic would show her exactly how low she was compared to me.

I cast a spell that she could not avoid. But…she moved out of the way.

Ha! She'd really dodged it? I was close to breaking out into laughter.

Though I moved to continue the match, she shouted. "You broke the rules." I couldn't fathom what she meant. It seemed the girl thought we couldn't use magic. Why would a knight think such a thing?

The girl seemed unconvinced. Still, after speaking to Ellelaura, she acquiesced…though her expression seemed unsure. She declared then that she could use magic too.

She could use magic in addition to fighting with a sword? Interesting. I hoped to soon see her true power.

The match resumed.

The girl came at me with her spells. How far did her talents reach?

Even though my job was at stake, I was smiling. I would have wished to continue the match, but in order to secure my victory, I began to guide the girl right where I wanted her using my spells. She approached without realizing I was leading her closer to me, like a lamb to the slaughter.

This was where I would put an end to it. I swung my sword down. She moved too late. She couldn't dodge. Yes…she had fought well, and I had enjoyed this.

I swung my sword—it ricocheted off of *something*. What in confoundment?! Some oddly shaped object had appeared from thin air and deflected my sword.

As I straightened myself, I found the girl had a blade to my neck. I tried to figure out what happened, and it seemed that she had blocked my sword with a strange bear-shaped object.

Oho, I was the one who had been led into a trap! I had been dancing in the palm of her hand this entire time. All I could do was laugh.

"Looks like I won. Or do you want to go another round?"

"No. I lost."

Instead of driving Ellelaura out of the capital, I had ousted myself from the order of chivalry. The king himself was a witness. I could not pretend these events hadn't taken place.

I'd been joking before, but I would not be chagrined if I could betroth the girl to my son. If I remembered correctly, her name was Yu'una.

The girl made her way over to me. "Oh, right. I get to punch you since I won, just like you promised."

She proceeded to pummel me.

A few days after I lost to the girl, I received my official dismissal from the king. I resigned as a captain of the knights and became an instructor at the academy.

"I expect good things from you," His Majesty told me. "You'll train the students who aspire to knighthood."

"I humbly accept."

I was to train all students who aspired to become knights, male or female. Doing so would cause me to soon lose the support of those who only believed in male knights, and that would lead to a decline in my influence at the capital. Indeed, it was likely that my former sympathizers would soon come to begrudge me.

“Did you find the girl to be strong?” the king asked me, quite serious.

“She was. She was my equal in swordsmanship, judgment, physical ability, and intuition. I felt as though I was fighting a veteran knight.”

“Is that so?”

“I cannot help but think back to how I was at her age. She has disproved all I’ve stood for, up until now.”

And the girl had been holding back. Though it was a sorry excuse, I had been holding back as well. If we genuinely fought, those around us would have been in danger.

Still, that hadn’t been the reason I had lost. A fight with limitations was still a fight. The girl had only used the same magic I had.

Even as we used the same spells, even as we locked swords, I had lost.

“May I ask you something?” I ventured.

“What is it?”

“Do you know who that girl is, Your Majesty? I looked into her a bit, but the only girl named Yu’una at the academy was a different person. Who was the girl I fought?”

“I can’t answer that. Now, this is an order: you are prohibited from looking into that girl.”

The king stared straight at me.

“Understood,” I replied.

Afterword

I'M KUMANANO. Thank you for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*'s twelfth volume.

This one is a continuation of the eleventh volume, where we're still at the academy festival.

I think some of you might have been surprised to see the cover and notice that Yuna isn't wearing the bear onesie on the thirteenth published book. Since Yuna was going to wear a uniform in this one, we decided to have her wear it on the cover too. When I made the request to the publisher, they were very willing to comply. That's why Yuna ended up dressed in a uniform on the cover here, just like I hoped. Yuna in her uniform and Teilia look very cute on the cover that 029 drew.

Yuna enjoys the festival with the others while dressed in the uniform, and she also runs into trouble.

In the latter half, Yuna promises to take Fina and the others to the beach because it's getting warmer. In order to go, they need swimsuits and to figure out who will take care of the kokekko while the orphans are out, so they end up having to sort out all kinds of things before they can take the trip. While Yuna gets ready to head out for the beach, the king calls her. Yuna hurries over to the king, who had asked her for something. Before she can go on her trip to the beach, Yuna starts up a new adventure. I hope that you enjoy it.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who strived to get this book out.

Thank you for drawing such wonderful illustrations, 029.

I'm always relying on my editor as well. Also, to the many people who were involved in the publishing of *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* Volume 12, thank you.

I'm grateful for the readers who have read along thus far.

I hope we can meet again in the thirteenth volume.

KUMANANO — ON A DAY IN APRIL, 2019

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