

*Octopath Traveler: Eight Travelers, Four Side Roads*  
～八人の旅人と四つの道草～

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# Chapter 1

## Professor Albright's Hands-On Learning

*Month of Sealticge, Week 1, Windsday*

*So much time has passed already since I first set out on my journey. I left home all alone, but before I knew it, it was like I'd become part of a big family! Every day is so lively.*

*Professor Albright and I seem to get excited about a lot of the same topics – the Flatlands and the Coastlands are right next to each other, after all. Professor Albright isn't really much of an emotional person, but he's not cold or distant or anything at all! Honestly, it's a huge help having such a composed, reliable adult around.*

*Still, he's got some mysterious parts to him, too... It all started on our way to Stonegard, a few days after we left Atlasdam –*

The eight of them varied wildly in birthplace and upbringing alike, making their journey unconventional, to say the least. To start with, the only ones among them that could really be considered experienced “travelers” were Therion, the wandering stranger; H'aanit, ever so particular about their camping arrangements; and Olberic, the seasoned warrior. As for the others, they had hardly left their hometowns, much less gone on a grand journey like this.

“If we proceed at this rate, we should reach the Coastlands by nightfall,” Olberic announced, spreading out the map as he walked along the main road.

They were proceeding faster than normal today, making good time to leave the Flatlands before long. It was with all this in mind that H'aanit, walking in the middle of the group's formation, turned to look back at the rest as she muttered, “Everyone's tenacity far outstrippeth my expectations.” They'd been walking non-stop for a considerable time since departing Atlasdam, yet she'd not once felt even short of breath. Linde, her snow leopard, sat down by her side with an unbothered expression.

Leaving the others in the back a few paces behind, Cyrus expressed his agreement as he approached. “Quite so. It seems neither Alfyn nor Ophilia have known

little of travel at all, but despite that, they've kept up quite nicely, without any show of complaint." He, too, had managed to match their steady pace without even a hitch in his breathing. As for the rest of the group, Primrose and Therion led the group with Olberic, while Tressa, Alfyn, and Ophilia trailed behind. H'aanit raised her eyebrows, bemused.

"Thou art no less included when I say 'everyone,' Cyrus."

"Oh, is that so?" he asked breezily, seemingly not taking any offense. "I'm sure you have an image in your mind of scholars cooped up in their studies, doing naught but reading dusty tomes all day. Naturally, that kind of thing is important, but as for myself, I'm not the kind of person to neglect the value of field work, you know. One's body is a precious resource. My muscles are hardly carved from stone, but I do believe I can handle a little walking."

"Speak'st thou true, I wonder..." H'aanit murmured as she craned her neck to look past the back of the group. There, further down the slope, a small figure with a massive bag strapped to her back continued to climb, weakly gasping for air. It was Tressa Colzione – though a bona fide merchant in both willpower and way of speaking, she still hadn't quite grown out of her teenage looks. Right behind Tressa were Alfyn and Ophilia, who called out in concern as they kept moving.

"Tressa, if you'd like, I can hold your luggage for a bit...?"

"Grrrr.... I'm alright, Ophilia...." Tressa gasped, her voice strained through gritted teeth. "Don't.... Don't take us merchants lightly, you know...! A hill... like this... is *nothing*!"

It was a beautiful day, and the travelers and road before them baked in the Flatlands sun. Sweat beaded on Tressa's face as she continued to limp down the main road step by step.

"She's got quite the burden there, hasn't she?" Cyrus mused, stroking his chin as he gazed back at the little merchant. "It'd be easy to think she isn't particularly strong, but judging from the size of it, carrying that baggage of hers all this time must be no small feat." One's eyes couldn't help but be drawn to her luggage, even from such a distance. She'd strapped those bags to her back ever since she left home in Rippletide. It was natural that she had far more to carry than her companions, given she also had to carry everything she had for sale. They'd proposed she borrow a mule to help carry at least some of it, but she insisted on carrying it all on her lonesome. If she wanted to carry her own merchant's burden by herself, there wasn't much any of the others would say to object. Cyrus, as a scholar, and H'aanit, as a hunter thought perhaps someone should object. The group of eight carried on amidst this strange dynamic.

"H'aanit, I propose we take a short rest here. What say you?"

"Aye, perhaps that would be best." She looked towards the front of the group and nodded slightly as she watched Olberic fold up his map. This wasn't Cyrus offering his wisdom as a scholar, nor H'aanit consulting her expertise as a hunter. This was simply two traveling companions watching Tressa, against all odds, take that last laboring step up the slope and offering her time to catch her breath at last. Perhaps at that proposal, at least, the others would be in agreement.

“Finally... I made it!!” A wide grin split across Tressa’s whole face as she raised her arms in celebration of her achievement. “This is it... it’s actually the top of the hill! You can see the whole ocean from up here! It’s so beautiful... Alfyn, Ophilia, come see!”

“H-hey, Tressa!”

“Tressa, maybe we should rest a little first...” But seeing the girl’s exhaustion begin to melt away into pure excitement, Alfyn and Ophilia nonetheless ran to catch up to her. Cyrus, watching this lively scene play out before him, merely shrugged.

“Do you think our worries were perhaps unfounded?”

“Certainly not. ’Tis absurd to think I wolde not agree she worketh herself too hard. The sooner we maken camp, the sooner she can taken some well deserved rest.”

“Quite so.” Cyrus nodded at her. It was hard not to feel a twinge of pride, watching Tressa excitedly show the other two the scenery from the top of the hill. Cyrus remembered something. When they had first departed Atlasdam, Tressa had told him she had come up from Rippletide, taking the northern road. In that case, she should have passed across this slope once before on her own already. It musn’t have been a pleasant climb then, either, yet it seemed she’d nonetheless discovered something valuable on the way – namely, the picturesque scenery before them. Past the plains and beyond the hill were the Coastlands from which Tressa hailed, a land of salty sea breezes and the roar of the waves, of endless clear skies and the deep blue ocean, where the wind carries the aroma of the shore as you approach. The profound impact of seeing this scenery for the first time must have been something for her and her alone. Now that he thought about it, Cyrus realized he wanted to know more about the reason she had set off on her journey in the first place. He, too, knew the thrumming and ringing in one’s chest that comes with crossing the threshold into worlds yet unknown, how moving and exciting that sense of discovery could be. He walked over to Olberic, who stood in the shade of a tree, unfurling his map to study it once more, and asked, “Olberic, have we made good progress?”

“Indeed. In fact, we may even be going somewhat too fast. I believe we should slow our pace a little.”

“I see. I was thinking of proposing the same myself, actually.”

“Well, when you see how Tressa is faring...” Olberic’s line of sight settled on Tressa, who was now sitting on the ground, monolithic luggage still strapped securely to her back. She had been practically jumping up and down with excitement a moment ago, but now she was making no effort to hide her exhaustion. Taking her into account, as well as the others who were not yet accustomed to travel, it was a reasonable plan Olberic had proposed. Looking at the group as a whole, though, there wasn’t any urgent need to worry too much about their pace from here on out.

“Olberic, do you perhaps know anything about why Tressa began traveling in the first place?”

"Hm? Now that you mention it, I don't believe I've ever asked her. I get the impression that it differs from the reasons you and I have, though. I have the impression the experience of traveling itself seems to be part of her goal."

"That very well may be. I know she frequently refers to a journal she received from someone, but I don't believe it draws her towards any particular objective." To this, Olberic simply offered a "Hm," as he closed the map once more.

"I take it you haven't simply asked her directly either, then."

"That's right. I can't help but find myself taking some interest in it, though."

"If you're so curious, just go on and ask her. That would save you a good deal of time rather than trying to do your usual roundabout method of investigation."

At this, Cyrus stopped. This idea was so brilliant that it was as though he had been slapped upside the head with it as he nodded with deep satisfaction.

"I do believe you're on to something. All this superfluous enquiry is somewhat of an unintentional bad habit of mine, I believe."

"Have you even the slightest self awareness...?" Olberic muttered, too quiet for Cyrus to hear.

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Just as Olberic predicted, they were able to cross into the Coastlands well before nightfall without any real delay in their overall itinerary. They made camp on a spot by the side of the main road, accompanied by the sound of the waves. As each of the companions passed time in their own ways, night finally came.

*"Month of Sealticge, Week 1, Lightsday... I'm back in the Coastlands for the first time in forever!"* Outside the tent, with the aid of the light of a lamp, Tressa scribbled furiously in her journal. *"The view of my hometown I could see from the Flatlands was so beautiful..."* At this, her hand stopped, and she looked up. When they'd returned back to the area she'd grown up in, the first thing she was surprised by was the sound of the waves beating against the shore over and over again. *"I can't believe how loud the waves are!"* All that time in Rippletide, she'd never realized. Spending such empty, pitch-black nights in the Coastlands truly made one feel as though they were being swallowed whole by the sea. Thinking about her time on the road after leaving home until she eventually arrived in Atlasdam, she realized that sensation was rather familiar. *"At first, it was really scary! Until I reached Atlasdam, I was all on my own."* Countless times she'd had dreams of the waves along the shore catching her unawares and taking her out to sea. Each time she awoke, she dragged her sleeping bag another five steps away from the beach.

Tressa looked down at her journal once more and continued writing, committing everything she felt, everything she thought, everything she said during her time here to paper one by one. *"But now I'm traveling with so many new people, and I don't feel so uneasy at all anymore... There!"* Inside the tent were Primrose, H'aanit, and Ophilia, while Olberic, Therion, and the others were in the men's tent a bit away. She wondered what it was that led each of them to keep traveling. The beginnings of each of their journeys couldn't have been too long ago, but by now she'd already forgotten the concrete reasons. Yet before she knew it, one of them, then two began walking by Tressa's side, until somehow in between the eight of

them had become such a big family. Each and every one of them had been an invaluable companion to her.

Alfyn, worried about her after walking nonstop so long, had prescribed Tressa a salve infused with medicinal herbs to help with the fatigue. Combined with a cold compress, he assured her it would ease her sore, aching muscles. At once, she'd applied the medicine to her calf and wrapped a cool cloth around it just as he told her. The feeling of the cloth, chilled by the sea breeze, was wonderful. She decided to write about that, too: "*Alfyn still told me he wouldn't take any money for his medicine today.*" Each time Tressa tried to propose a price she'd pay for his prescriptions, he gently declined. She tried more than a few times, but no matter how many times she told him, "I'm a merchant! There's no way I can just take an apothecary's medicine without paying for it!" his reply would never change:

"In that case, I ain't an apothecary. Consider it a personal gift from me to you, Tress." She was yet to push past his unshakeable goodwill and get him to take even a single leaf. Still, she understood that refusing payment like that was just what Alfyn believed in.

"*Maybe stuff like that is why Alfyn started traveling – he wants to help people all over the world with his medicine.*" Without realizing it, Tressa's scrawling across the aged paper of her journal had moved to the topic of her companions. She wrote about Olberic and his journey to confront his former brother in arms, about H'aanit and her search for her master who disappeared without a word. "*Everyone's got their own goals to follow. As for me...*" Tressa's pen, which had so fluently been soaring across the page, came to a stop. "As for me... I'm... Er..." *What about me?*

Tressa set down her pen. She crossed her eyes and grimaced, looking up at the sky, then looked back down to scowl at the ground. No matter how much she moaned and groaned to herself, it never came to her. *The reason I'm on this journey.* Naturally, Tressa had one as well. Yet when she lined it up with the others' it felt so... insignificant, almost childish. It wasn't laden with conviction or ideals, or even any kind of special emotions. She wanted to know what was beyond the walls of her hometown, to follow in the footsteps of the nameless traveler whose journal he'd left behind, but that yearning for the open road felt like it was all too commonplace a dream. She tried embellishing it in her mind, qualifying it with all kinds of fancy words and a degree of braggadocio, but still it never felt right. Then, while she was turning this all over in her mind,

"Oh my. You're still awake, Tressa?"

She looked up at the sound of a familiar voice. The face of a man emerged from the pitch black of the night, illuminated in the dim lamplight; a man whose age was difficult to discern, as his youthful looks clashed with his unusually composed presence – Cyrus Albright. As for his reason for taking to the road, Tressa had actually asked him directly. Though his journey had been short, he had a precise goal clear in his mind: He sought to track down *From the Far Reaches of Hell*, a tome that had disappeared from the library of the Royal Academy, in pursuit of his ideal that knowledge ought to be spread far and wide, shared with all people. Tressa thought this was a reason more than worthy of praise.

"Er... I just got wrapped up in writing in my journal." She decided to answer truthfully as she shut the book resting on her knee.

"I see." Cyrus' gaze dropped for only a moment down to the journal, then back to Tressa. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Oh, go ahead. Sorry it's not exactly the most luxurious seating." With a small "Well then," Cyrus sat himself near Tressa on a reasonably-sized boulder.

"Surely anything you're writing about doesn't warrant such deep forethought. It's best to just write it down precisely as it is."

"As it is...?"

"That's right. Just as it is, with no need for any flowery language or embellishments. Particularly if you're simply writing for yourself. The most important thing, Tressa, is that you write down your thoughts in exactly the same way you have them..." At this, Cyrus suddenly grinned. "...Even that, though, can still be quite a challenge. Might I perhaps be of some assistance in helping you organize your thoughts?"

"Um..." Tressa hesitated for only a moment before making up her mind. This was Cyrus Albright, after all – a man who commanded attention at the Royal Academy with the tip of his teacher's pointer. There wasn't a better person in the world she could consult with. An audience with him was worth more than what money could buy. She forced herself to tuck questions about a fraught business proposal of hers into the recesses of her mind and laid her actual worry bare: that she worried that her own journey lacked the same kind of conviction and earnestness of her companions'; that from the moment she departed her dream was one that lacked anything special, that just about anyone could have. She didn't want to come across as self-deprecating, but it was at that point in her thought process that she could no longer put things into words.

"I see." Cyrus nodded slightly and stroked his chin. Amidst the silence broken only by the sound of the waves, the dim lamplight illuminated Cyrus and Tressa's faces dazzlingly.

"Professor, you set out to go find that lost book, right?"

"That's right. Of course, it also happened that I found myself to be no longer needed at the Academy... Well, I suppose you could just as well consider either of those to be my reason for departing Atlasdam." There was nothing on his face to suggest he felt any anger or regret about the situation. "Tressa, I believe you flattered me by calling my own reason 'more than worthy of praise,' is that right?"

"Erm... yeah." Tressa gave a small nod. "It feels like it suits you too. Holding fast to your ideals, it's so... grown-up."

"I also happen to be some twelve years older than you. It would be unbecoming of me to set a poor example." He laughed drily, then continued, "But following one's ideals doesn't just take one form. I can see from how you conduct yourself that there are certain principles of your own you adhere to, and in them I respect you a great deal."

"Really?"



“Really. ...But I suppose that naturally it’s difficult to simply take my word for it at face value.” Gazing up at the star-filled sky, Cyrus continued on to the main topic at hand. “If I may, there’s actually something I wished to ask you, Tressa.”

“Me, Professor? What is it?” Her eyes widened – it seemed she felt she couldn’t possibly have anything to offer him except perhaps her expertise as a merchant.

“As a matter of fact, it was what your reason for going on such a journey might have been. A moment ago, you said you felt it wasn’t so grand as the motivations of Olberic and the others, but I don’t believe I ever asked you precisely what it actually was, have I?”

“I don’t think so...” Tressa scratched her cheek. She wanted to talk, but she was too embarrassed to put it into words; at the very least, this wasn’t something she was very proud of. But she’d already agreed to talk to him, so keeping quiet now was out of the question.

“It’s really nothing important. But there was something I wanted to see.”

“Something you wanted to see?”

“Mhm.” Tressa clutched her journal as she stood and took in the scenery around her, cloaked in the curtain of night. Lit only by the faint stars and the light of the moon, it was hard to see the deep black ocean clearly. In that silent world, the horizon over the water dissolved in the thick darkness, and the sky and the sea and the vast land around them all blurred together. There was only the sound of the waves to accompany the passage of time, to tell Cyrus and Tressa that these really were the Coastlands.

“I wanted to know what was beyond that horizon.” Tressa had been born and raised in the port town of Rippletide. In comparison to those she traveled with, nothing terribly dramatic had ever happened to her. She had lived a life that anybody could have had for eighteen perfectly normal years. Every day, she woke up and learned the fundamentals of commerce from her parents, hearing those same waves and bathed in the sea breeze. Yet one day, staring at the water past the port, that question finally occurred to her. *What in the world could be on the other side of that water?* And so, that was the reason Tressa began her journey. Certainly there were ways for her to learn of the world beyond without needing to leave home, but not a single one ever left her satisfied. When she first set foot in the Flatlands and looked back upon the path she’d traveled, that uncertain curiosity solidified into conviction. Beyond that, there was no other reason she’d begun her travels. Of course, what motivated her to leave at all was Captain Leon and the journal he’d given her – the words written on its aging pages kindled her desire enough to give her that final push.

“I see.” Cyrus closed his eyes and nodded deeply. Tressa worried she’d disappointed him. Cyrus wasn’t the kind of person to thoughtlessly deride what other people thought, but she truly felt she hadn’t said anything so dramatic as to provoke any kind of special emotion.

“So, Professor, I really think that–”

“That’s a marvelous reason, isn’t it?”

"H-Huhh?" His response startled her so much she accidentally raised her voice. "B-but Professor, that really is all there is to it... Going on such a dangerous trip with such a vague reason in mind just feels so childish...isn't it?" Yet Cyrus' face showed every indication he was being serious.

"If I may, Tressa. When we have doubts about something, when there is something which we desire to know – that is the first step on the stairway to the door to scholarship. Moreover—" As he spoke, his words became tinged more and more with passion. Tressa had only been at the man's side for a brief time, but that was enough to know full well how his voice became packed with energy when he was confronted with a topic he cared deeply about.

"Moreover, those doubts encompass a great, great many things. Yet the people who are able to open that door – in other words, those who depart on the quest for that knowledge – are very, very few. Tressa, when you, in pursuit of your own curiosity, took your hand and opened that door, you placed your foot across the threshold dividing the known and the unknown. As a scholar myself, I cannot help but express my marvel and admiration in face of your motivation to journey on." Cyrus' expression as he heaped on this praise was unbelievably earnest. Tressa squirmed a little, and couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed.

"I don't know about all that, ehehe..."

"I'm certain of it. Tressa, your inquisitiveness truly is well-suited to scholarship." Cyrus was not a man given to flattery, certainly, but being confronted head-on with such lavish compliments was almost too much to bear, not to mention being told she was "well-suited to scholarship" by a man who stood as a professor at the Royal Academy in Atlasdam.

"I mean, I'm just a merchant..." She tried to protest, but she couldn't help but break into a grin. "But if you say so, Professor, I'll hardly take offense!"

"Wonderful. Do you think you'll be able to keep writing from here?"

"Yes, thank you so much, Professor!" Cyrus smiled gently listening to Tressa's earnest words of gratitude as she placed the journal on her knee and opened it once more. After hearing Cyrus' words, she once again sorted out her emotions. She tickled her forehead with the feather of her pen as she paused to choose the right words, then dipped its nib in ink and set it racing against the page. "*As for me, I set out to learn about what's beyond the horizon that I've been fascinated by for so long.*" She didn't care if anyone praised her for it. It didn't matter if anyone else approved of it – why Tressa left on her journey was something that belonged to Tressa and no one else. Nevertheless, though it may have been just the exhaustion of the long journey, something about Cyrus' words tugged deeply at Tressa's heart. "*I still haven't found the answer yet... But I hope I can pack this journal with all the time before I do.* ...Aaand, done! Mhm, not bad at all!" Tressa held the journal up proudly over her head, pages spread open. Cyrus nodded contently towards Tressa, seeing her look up from the book.

"Hey, don't you know it's rude to read other people's journals, Professor?"

"Ah, my apologies. In my defense, I wasn't reading your journal, but rather watching how swiftly your pen darted across the page. You had the most wonderful

expression on your face, you see.”

“That so...”

“I certainly thought so. I’ll confess I can’t help but wonder of what you were thinking, of what you were writing, but I know prying into other’s business is a poor habit of mine. Whatever the contents of your journal may be are for your eyes only.”

Tressa closed the book and put it back into her bag. “But Professor, I thought you hated people who kept knowledge all to themselves? You said something like that to me once, I think...” She’d blurted out the question without thinking, but Cyrus merely responded with a “Hm,” offering neither denial nor agreement.

“It’s true that I believe knowledge is something that should be open to all... But what is recorded in that journal of yours is not ‘knowledge,’ but rather ‘experience.’ That experience is not something that can be deciphered simply by reading your notes. Not to say that that itself can’t be valuable in scholarship, however.”

“Hmm.... I think kinda get it... But I also kinda don’t.”

“Really? In that case, allow me to explain this in a way that may be perhaps more understandable...” As Cyrus retrieved a stick from the ground, preparing to make ready use of the ground in place of a chalkboard, Tressa frantically rushed to intercept him; this was a clear sign that they were on the precipice of a lecture that may not be able to be stopped once started.

“Oh, I- I think I get it now, Professor! All of a sudden, it just clicked! No need to worry about it!”

“Is that so? But don’t you want to know more?” Tressa’s scowl would have been truly spectacular, had Cyrus not been so engrossed in diagramming in the sand.

“There’s a most wonderful book from a scholar by the name of Susanna Grottoff, you see...”

“P-Professor! Come on, it’s night already! It’s really getting late, so maybe we should call it... Right!?”

“...I suppose you may be right.” The relief Tressa felt in her chest as Cyrus finally looked up from his makeshift chalkboard was palpable.

“At any rate, the most important thing is that our conversation was able to be of service to you, Tressa.” With the air of a teacher dismissing his class, he set his stick back on the ground.

“Mhm. Really, you were a huge help. Thanks, Professor.”

“No need to thank me. It was privilege enough to get to know you that much better.” Cyrus stood as he spoke. “Now then, you should go get some sleep. We’re getting back on the road bright and early tomorrow morning.”

“Good idea. You too, Professor.”

“Actually, I believe I’ll be awake just a moment longer. I thought I’d roam around the area a bit, you see.”

“Huh??” For Tressa to respond in such a way to Cyrus was natural. That simple “Huh??” contained a multitude of meanings: “Why on earth??” and “Just go to bed already!” for instance.

Yet in Cyrus' ever indefatigable fashion, he simply said, "It's been quite some time since I was last in the Coastlands, you know. There's an endless amount of things I wish to examine, but I wouldn't dare slow down the pace of our travel. Thus, I can only take the time to investigate to my heart's content in the middle of the night..."

"I-I see..."

"Nevertheless, you should go rest as soon as you can. If you allow your fatigue to persist into tomorrow, it would put all of Alfyn's care to waste." Tressa looked at the cold compress Alfyn made with so much care for her.

With no more than a "Well then," Cyrus stood once more. It seemed he was serious about going on his nighttime excursion – and alone, at that. It wasn't that the area around Rippletide was dangerous, really – Tressa had managed alone fine, after all – but she couldn't help but wonder what on earth he was going to investigate at this hour. Just as Cyrus began to walk away, Tressa grabbed at the hem of his cloak.

"Hold on a second, Professor!" Naturally, he looked down at her with surprise. She looked back up at his face, illuminated by the lamp and the starry sky.

"What's wrong, Tressa?"

"I'm going too!"

\* \* \*

Why had Tressa said such a thing? Even she wasn't quite sure. The idea that she was worried about Cyrus wasn't particularly convincing. If that were the case, it would be all the more reason for her to stay behind and have someone like Olberic or H'aanit accompany him. If she had to admit the real reason she'd blurted out "I'm going too!" like that...

"Are you curious?" Tressa tilted her head, watching Cyrus from behind. To be honest, she thought seeing what Cyrus found interesting about her native Coastlands was interesting in and of itself; on top of that, though, she'd never actually walked through the shores near Rippletide at night before. The idea was somehow exciting.

In other words, yes, she was curious. She hadn't expected that inquisitiveness Cyrus had praised in her just a moment ago to manifest itself at a time like this.

Cyrus turned back to face Tressa and asked, "Won't you stay behind?"

"I'm okay. Really, I don't feel so tired anymore."

"Is that so? I truly do not wish to potentially put you in danger. If you are still ailing, I'd prefer that you be honest about it." She didn't get the sense he was unnecessarily needling her; this really was just Cyrus looking after her health, assuming the role of the adult in the room. Tressa wondered if he showed every single one of his students at the Royal Academy this much care. *I can see why he was so popular...* Cyrus' real tragedy was that though he excelled at demonstrating such care, he was equally capable of impressive insensitivity towards girls' feelings towards him. Well, perhaps it was simply that he saw them not as female suitors, but merely as his students. Tressa studied his face in profile as she caught up to him.

"Hey, Professor, can I ask you kind of a weird question?"

"What is it, Tressa?"

"Why didn't you really object? When I said I was going, I mean." Even though he seemed worried for her, his resistance was at most mild before he agreed to her coming along. Something about her fatigue lasting into the next day. Even so, when she'd burst out with her "I'm going too!" he'd not said anything at all at first.

"Hmm... That's a rather difficult question."

"Huh? Really?"

Cyrus smiled faintly as he elaborated, "Even when I was working at the Royal Academy, it was rare for me to have pupils ask such difficult questions. It's true that, as the adult in this situation, perhaps I should have been more opposed to you joining me..."

"Right."

"If I were to speak honestly, though, I think it was that I was delighted at your suggestion." Tressa's eyes widened. She hadn't expected him to say anything like that at all.

"D-delighted?"

"That's right. I think if I were to search for an appropriate word for it, that would suffice." The way Cyrus spoke was always impossibly circuitous. When she tried to square what "delighted" could possibly mean inside his head with his normal speech and conduct, she couldn't help but feel as though she were trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. She thought about trying to probe him further to reclaim those pieces, but in the end decided to keep her mouth shut.

\* \* \*

"Ah, I do believe we're here." They'd just arrived at a sandy beach, not far separated from the sea road by which they'd made camp. At their feet, lying in wait, was the gaping maw of a large cave. Tressa realized this must have been his destination. This was new to even her, who'd been born and raised in the Coastlands.

"I had no idea there was such a huge cave this close to Rippletide..."

"I chanced across it some years ago doing fieldwork in the Coastlands. It piqued my interest immediately, but my original pursuit offered me no time to investigate." Cyrus held up their lantern, shining it into the cave. It was hard to understand how such a cave could be surrounded by nothing but sandy beach, but they were nevertheless assured by the overpowering scent of the sea.

"The entrance facing the sea at such a small distance has allowed the waves to erode it in quite a curious way, don't you think? It's a most mysterious place." Cyrus' face took on a strange light as he spoke. His youthful looks already made it difficult to believe he was in his thirties, but at times like this his smile was like a little kid's. That wasn't quite it; it was as though the man was embodying curiosity and drive itself.

"Y-yeah..." Tressa warily peeped into the entrance to the cave. She was still filled more with unease than curiosity at the moment. Then – with an "Ah!", she stepped into the cave.

"Tressa?"

"Over here, Professor! Come look at this!" Tressa had picked up a spiral shellfish that had been stuck along the entrance wall. Amidst the darkness, its shell gleamed with a brilliant fluorescence. "It's a glassfish! I've never seen one this big before!"

"Oh my... Now that you mention it, Tressa, there certainly were a good many shells strewn along the beach on the way here."

"All the kids in the Coastlands gather them up so they can sell 'em for a little pocket money." Glassfish shells and their shattered fragments were common sights along Coastland beaches. The beautiful transparent shells reflected light, shining red and blue. There were people in the area who made a livelihood out of trawling up and down the beaches for them, making a couple leaves out of each one. When Tressa was younger, she'd done the same. Yet although the shells were plentiful across the shore, it was much rarer to see a live glassfish, much less one like this.

"I see... The translucent shell refracts light, making the body appear as though it were glowing..." Looking intently at the glassfish perched upon Tressa's palm, Cyrus nodded eagerly.

"I can't believe we found one in a place like this... I wonder if there are any more..."

"I'd say the probability is quite high. From the look of things, I'd take it people rarely set foot in this cave at all."

"Somehow," Tressa gulped, "somehow, it's a little thrilling."

"...Isn't it?" Cyrus' lips slackened into a boy's loose grin.

\* \* \*

Even after only walking a short distance, the passage became unexpectedly wide, opening up into a vast, complicated underground cavity. If they strained their ears, they could hear the faint echo of the waves lapping at some distant corner of the cave – another sign of its mysterious entwining with the sea. The air was perfectly clear, with a distinct sensation in their lungs. Cyrus and Tressa continued their investigation, their footsteps echoing in the serene cavern. About ten steps in, Tressa noticed another glassfish stuck to the side of a boulder. Although she was trying not to accidentally take too many, she nevertheless gleefully tucked it away into her bag.

"Oh, I wish I could tell my younger self about this place! I coulda made a pretty penny here."

As for Cyrus, he was walking a couple steps away. "Tressa, rather than going straight forward, let's take this passage to the right here."

"Ah, okay!" Tressa had been single-mindedly following the trail of glassfish, snatching them up with abandon, but at Cyrus' words, she swiveled around and went to go file behind him.

"What about you, Professor? Find anything interesting?"

"Indeed, this entire place is richly fascinating. I'm glad we decided to take this little nighttime excursion."

"Hehe, me too." Tressa grinned and looked up at the ceiling. Finding so many high-quality glassfish naturally had lifted her mood considerably, but she was en-

joying the cave expedition as a whole much more. She loved the sensation of being somewhere new. The scent of an unfamiliar wind blowing through this cave, a place she'd never even known was so close to Rippletide, delighted her.

"‘The world is full of treasure,’ huh?" She remembered those words written in her journal, words she'd read over and over, time and time again. She wasn't sure if it could be called treasure, but the experience of discovering an unexpected place so close to somewhere so familiar to her filled her heart with a certain kind of joy.

"Come to think of it, Professor, haven't you noticed how there aren't any monsters in here?" They'd only been walking a short while, but the thought tumbled from Tressa's mouth nonetheless. They weren't terribly strong, but even the Caves of Maiya to the west of Rippletide were well known to contain monsters. When Tressa had business there, she tended to only need to bring the bare minimum of equipment to fend them off. Ever since she'd set off with Cyrus and the others, they'd ventured into caves many times; without exception, they too had always met with monsters. Just as inevitably, she always managed to use her keen eye to make off with some valuable minerals to exchange for leaf later.

It was with this in mind that Tressa found the absence of monsters in this particular cave so unusual. But then Cyrus said, breezily,

"Oh, there most certainly are, Tressa. As far as I can tell, it seems we've only managed to take a detour around their usual routes thus far."

"H-huh?" Tressa whipped around to find Cyrus once again studying the ground intently. As though he felt her gaze, he looked up and gestured with his head past the edge of the path. Amidst the cave's complex, intertwining network of passageways, the one they presently walked was suspended over another below, stretching across like a bridge. She peeked over the edge at where Cyrus indicated, and—

—she felt a gasp escape her lungs. Prowling below them was a colossal monster the likes of which Tressa had never seen. It looked as though a whale had sprouted limbs and crawled out of the ocean. Though they had entered the cave not long ago, she couldn't believe she hadn't yet noticed such an enormous beast walking along with them.

"P-Professor, do you mean... you knew this whole time!?"

"Not from the start, of course not. If I'd known it was so dangerous, I never would have taken you along." He crept to Tressa's side, all the while fixing his eyes on the monster's movements. Could it be that when he was so furtively studying the ground and the walls of the cave, he was really searching for its tracks...? As she watched his profile closely, he continued, surmising her unspoken question:

"...I've learned the hard way that although studying the nature of a newfound monster is deeply fascinating, it is an indispensable skill for any scholar to be able to handle themselves when encountering with such fearsome beasts."

"A narrow escape from death, huh... I'm glad I didn't know about this place when I was little."

"Indeed. This would've been quite a dangerous place for little Tressa to go on her own." He began walking once more, this time moving as though to draw Tressa

to him. "Let's go back, shall we? It's quite late, and I don't want to worry the others any more than I'm sure we already have."

"R-right." The image of the land-whale's hulking body wouldn't escape her mind. Her heart hammered like an alarm going off, and she clutched the glassfish she'd just picked up tightly in her hand. Could it be that it was her fault they were in this situation? That she'd been too excited and wandered too far into the dangerous recesses of the cave? If Cyrus were alone, wouldn't he have turned back the instant he saw these huge monsters? Tressa began to worry.

Cyrus gave her no time to stew in her thoughts, though, as he said,

"I was well aware of the danger this cave could pose only minutes after we entered. It's nothing you need worry yourself over, Tressa."

"R-really...?"

"Really." Cyrus' voice was calm and steady, as it somehow always was. No matter what the danger was, he never wavered and he never lost his wits. His unflappability had saved Tressa and the others time and time again. Yet it was precisely because he was so constantly composed that at times like these she couldn't quite tell what he was thinking. It made her a little nervous.

"Hm." Cyrus glanced over his shoulder. "It may have been somewhat imprudent of me – irresponsible, even – but I wanted to avoid causing you too much worry. That's why I didn't speak up earlier."

"Huh?" *What's he saying all of a sudden*, Tressa thought. A faint smile played at Cyrus' lips. He laid a hand on the cave wall and looked to the ceiling.

"You know, Tressa. I personally find these conditions to be great fun."

"You mean... finding all these new things in this cave?"

Cyrus nodded. "That's right. To venture into foreign surroundings and experience all their new and unknown contents...it's a wonderful experience. But that's not all."

"Watching you walking ahead of me, likewise exploring those new surroundings and taking in everything around us...seeing the joy of discovery on your face – now that's something I certainly couldn't experience alone." It was then that Tressa remembered what Cyrus had said shortly before they entered the cave. *I was delighted* – that was the reason he hadn't objected to taking her along. They had arrived at the mouth of the cave just then and she forgot to question him further, but those words had been nagging at her ever since.

"It's a unique delight to watch sensitive young people like yourself awaken to the joy of discovery. That's why I didn't want to worry you – and why I would be grateful if you were able to keep on just as you have up until now." So that was it. Tressa felt a lump in her chest. Cyrus' roundabout way of talking always made him feel a little distant, but she could tell he was being truly genuine. That this was the reason he'd brought her along and ventured into this cave with her – it was surprisingly satisfactory.

"You know, you really do live up to the 'Professor' in 'Professor Albright!'"



"I'm... not quite certain how to interpret that, but I'll choose to take it as a compliment. Thank you, Tressa." Once more wearing that gentle smile, he turned back to the path ahead of them.

"Of course, my self-indulgence and the danger of this cave are two separate matters entirely. As the adult who brought you here, the proper thing to do would be for us to turn back and return to camp in one piece."

"Yes, please, Professor Albright!" Cyrus began walking once more, and Tressa followed suit.

"Say, Professor, what was that monster from before, anyway?"

"Hm. Indeed, that's an excellent question, Tressa. I must confess this is my first time seeing something quite like it firsthand. The literature shows that similar creatures exist in the Coastlands, but to my knowledge, this is the first any have been found so close to Rippletide. If I recall, the previous sightings were near the western end of the highway to Grandport."

"Grandport, huh... I wonder if I'll ever have the chance to visit it myself..." There were too many places in the world she hadn't yet gone. Could her dream to see them all really come true? Tressa still didn't have the first clue what kind of things could be found in a place like Grandport.

They had only been walking for a short while when Cyrus stopped once more. He held out one hand to stop Tressa and put the index finger of the other to his lips.

There was a monster. Treading as lightly as she could to avoid making a sound, she crept to Cyrus' side and peeked ahead of them.

"Professor... that's..."

"A monster like that...that, too, is rare to see in these parts." At the end of the passage before them, a group of enormous crabs were clustered together. Of course, compared to the land-whale from earlier, they were positively tiny, but they were still each nearly as big as a person. Their bodies were a sickening, ominous color, and Tressa couldn't avert her eyes from their jumbo-size claws.

"The literature has only documented these around the Grandport area as well. For them to be this close to Rippletide... this cave has an unusual ecosystem indeed. I can't say I'm not fascinated, but this is certainly neither the time nor place for that."

"Uh-huh... What do we do, Professor?"

Cyrus stared intently at the end of the passage, estimating its size. It was by no means narrow, but it wasn't especially wide, either. About halfway, it split into several branches. At least one of these must have been connected to an exit, as a faint breeze could be felt.

"If we can divert the monsters and sprint for the exit, we should be able to make it out...Tressa, can you run?"

"You bet! My feet are raring to go!" The morning's exhaustion had all but disappeared – presumably thanks to Alfyn's cold compress.

"At my signal, we run for it. Now then..." Cyrus produced a small bundle from his breast pocket and opened it. Inside were several meatballs wrapped together.

The instant they came into contact with the air, the black crabs began to move with a terrible rustling.

"P-Professor, what are you...?"

"These are a specially-made kind of feed – one which monsters are particularly fond of. H'aanit told me about it. Apparently, the people of S'warkii use it to great effect in the hunt."

"Wow..." While she admired Cyrus' handiwork, Tressa prepared to run for it. All the glassfish she'd found were snugly tucked away into her small bag.

It was lucky they were downwind. It was clear the crabs had caught the scent of the meat, but they showed no signs of having noticed Cyrus and Tressa. Cyrus scattered the meatballs near where the path split into branches. All at once, the crabs started to scuttle in the direction of their meal. Cyrus and Tressa's eyes met.

"Let's go!" Tressa nodded and began to sprint. Cyrus was a little later to move, but they were soon running more or less side-by-side. As they sprinted headlong for the exit, Tressa glanced over her shoulder to see the black crabs beginning to huddle together. Their extraordinary size and the sickening click of their pincers made her skin crawl.

"Gah-!" Tressa's foot caught on a stray pebble and she lost her balance. With a great clatter, the glassfish that had been safely tucked away in her bag came free and scattered across the cave floor. She managed to regain her footing, but in an instant she was spotted by the cluster of crabs.

"Tressa, are you alright!?" Cyrus called out from behind her.

"I-I'm fine!"

"Good to hear – now, let's hurry!"

"Right!" The huddle of black-clawed monsters was now right at their heels. Tressa and Cyrus were running as fast as they could, but the crabs were even faster, and the sickening click of their pincers was growing ever louder.

"Gah!!" The very tip of a crab's coarse claws caught on Tressa's slender shoulder. The monster growled. Noticing her plight, Cyrus reached out and shoved her forward. What the dark pincer had nicked was not her shoulder, but in fact the bag slung across her body. The bag's strap was sliced in two, and it fell to the ground with a thunk.

"Ah!! M-My-" She instinctively reached out to retrieve it, but Cyrus snatched her wrist before she could touch it.

"Tressa!"

"O-Oh... Right!" she cried, coming to her senses. Cyrus sensed something in even her brief moment of hesitation, but this wasn't the time or place to discuss it further. The monsters were growing ever closer, passing where her bag lay on the ground. Cyrus grabbed Tressa's arm and the two once again began sprinting down the narrow passage, Tressa shooting furtive glances behind her along the way. In the wall at the end of the passage was a slim opening, barely more than a crack, just wide enough for one person to move through at a time – through which a faint sea breeze could be felt.

"Tressa, there!"

“Got it!” Cyrus gave her a small push from behind as Tressa squeezed herself into the thin gap, worming through with ease thanks to her slight frame. Cyrus then followed, deftly preventing his cloak from snagging. The black crabs, unable to pursue them through the gap, clustered around its mouth and clicked their pincers furiously, but before long seemed to give up and disperse.

“Now, then...” Cyrus examined their surroundings. To have come this far, the exit couldn’t be much farther. They couldn’t let their guard down quite yet, but if they could keep moving and find the exit, it seemed they would be able to declare their investigation over and return safely to camp. But Cyrus knew that wouldn’t be all. Even while they were running for their lives, he couldn’t possibly have missed Tressa’s lingering concern for her dropped bag.

“Tressa, you took a bit of a fall earlier. Are you alright?”

“O-Oh, mhm. I’m all good. No worries...” She nodded vigorously, over and over. But Cyrus simply shook his head softly.

“...It’s your ‘merchandise,’ isn’t it?”

“Ah...” She awkwardly lowered her gaze.

When her carefully gathered glassfish had tumbled to the ground, Tressa had gotten ready to start running again in an instant, sparing no thought of trying to retrieve them. Cyrus thought that split-second decision was laudable – a merchant has a duty to the safety of her wares, but any careless action in a situation like that could have cost her her life. Yet when her bag was cut down, he had unmistakably seen her waver.

*(Then that must have been...)* Without a doubt, she had been carrying something precious in that bag. But what was it? He arrived at his answer in an instant, during the infinite peace between the ticks of the second hand of a clock.

“Tressa, could it be that in your bag...”

“That’s right...” She nodded, her gaze fixed at the gap in the wall. “...I kept the journal in that bag.” So his guess was right. After all, it was clearly so precious that even while facing such dangerous monsters, dropping her bag had stopped Tressa dead in her tracks. There was simply no other answer. But why bring something so precious to such a dangerous place...? When Cyrus put himself in Tressa’s shoes, though, he supposed it was natural. That journal was her first true encounter with the unknown. It was the very thing that had given her the final push to quench her aching thirst to know more of the world. It was the only record of that unknown traveler’s long-ago journey whose path she now doggedly traced, and now it stood as a testament to the experience and knowledge she’d gained along the way.

“...I suppose there’s no helping it, then,” Cyrus muttered softly, closing his eyes. Tressa’s shoulders slumped.

“Y-Yeah, I guess you’re right. No helping it, huh...”

“Well then, I’ll be right back.”

“H-Huh!?” She hadn’t expected such a response at all. She lifted her drooped head in surprise. “B-But Professor Albright, won’t it be too dangerous...?”

Cyrus nodded. “Certainly, there is a very real danger in going back. I can’t deny that.” He placed a hand on the rocky cliff face. “But I still bear the responsibility

for having brought you this far. And while it's true that I just grabbed your hand and dragged you away from that danger by force... I couldn't bear for you to give up on your journal, Tressa."

"I-It's not that I'm not giving up, but..."

"Excellent. That's all I wanted to hear." Without a word more, he promptly began stuffing himself back through the crack in the cave wall, quietly returning to the path they'd left not moments before.

"Professor Albright..." Tressa whispered. This was so like Cyrus. She'd been privately overjoyed when he told her he would go and retrieve the journal himself, and surely he could more than handle himself in a fight. She told herself this, but it didn't change the fact that it wasn't something that could serve any use to their party... was it really worth risking his life? Yet despite that, he'd promised to go and take it back for her; that he bore the responsibility for it. Tressa clutched the hem of her shirt. Maybe that was true, but surely that wasn't all. This was the proof that he really meant what Cyrus had told her when she was agonizing over what to write. That he really wasn't laughing at her reason for setting out on her journal, that he really thought her dream was a noble one.

"In that case, there's no way I can just sit here and—" At that moment, she saw in the corner of her eye a dazzling light erupt from the depths of the cave and gave a start. Once, twice, the cave lit up in rapid succession. A roar reverberated from within. Tressa understood in an instant – that light was undoubtedly Cyrus' magic. ...In other words, he'd gotten himself into a fight.

"Already!?" Tressa steeled her nerves and made for the crack in the cave wall.

\* \* \*

Just as she'd anticipated, when she entered the cave she saw Cyrus locked in combat. It seemed as though he'd managed to sneak past the monsters' eyes and reach her bag, but as soon as he had made to return to Tressa, he had an unlucky run-in with one of the crabs. Its pincers clicked menacingly as Cyrus carefully put some distance between them.

"This will all be for nothing if I can't get out of here now..." Cyrus muttered, steeling his inner resolve. Cyrus could make the best use of his magic at medium-to long-range, and it was a lucky thing that at that distance he was safe from those vicious-looking claws. Bracing himself for the very moment he could secure his position, he began chanting, preparing to unleash his power.

There were once people who specialized exclusively in the magical arts – so-called "sorcerers." In Cyrus' time, such people no longer existed. The vast majority of the magical abilities that made up the techniques of those sorcerers of old were handed down in each part of the world as regional charms and incantations. At Atlasdam's Royal Academy, though, research continued in unraveling the mysteries found in ancient texts, reviving and reshaping their now-arcane knowledge for the modern era. The magic Cyrus made such liberal use of was the product of that research. His accomplishments and the work of his forebears were the crowning jewels of Atlasdam's cumulative wisdom. Those scholars who brandished that wis-

dom as a weapon, freely wielding magic as an offensive tool, necessarily lurked in the background.

*“O lightning, smite them down!”*

At Cyrus’ incantation, a surge of lightning flooded the cave. With a dry *crack!*, the walls of the gloomy cave shone brilliantly, and electricity snaked along the crab’s body, searing meandering zigzags into the surface of its shell. The crab roared.

Yet it was stalled for only a moment before its movements began once again, gradually closing the distance between it and Cyrus. It seemed as though his magic had had no effect at all.

“Ghk...!” Cyrus spluttered. He was beginning to get uncharacteristically flustered. These monsters, usually native only to the Grandport area, seemed to have bodies orders of magnitude tougher than those found near Rippletide. By all accounts, they should have been outside of their range, which was concentrated closer to the Central Sea, but it seemed these monsters were an exception to that rule. It would be difficult for Cyrus to have any real impact on its absurdly thick shell. Eventually, crab hot on his heels, he found himself pressed up against a rock face.

“Well then...” Now more than ever, Cyrus needed to keep a cool head. There was no doubt that he was in quite the dilemma, but there *had* to be a way out. He observed the crab’s movements intently. It was true that this species’ large claws were their signature feature, but this specimen’s seemed to be particularly massive. All he needed to do was to find a way to slip past them and strike at a weak point. But how to do that...?

While he thought, the crab’s pincers grew ever closer to Cyrus. His thinking was interrupted, however, by a thundering cry that echoed throughout the whole cave:

*“The winds of fortune are howling!”*

It was a voice Cyrus knew very well. Just like the incantation promised, a fierce wind gusted through the cave’s narrow passage. The overwhelming pressure furled the hems of Cyrus’ clothes and stole the air from his lungs.

“T-Tressa!”

“Professor Albright!”

There was no mistaking it. Tressa’s incantation was that of a piece of folk magic common in the Coastlands, a relic of what had once been pure elemental wind magic.

“Professor, are you alr-*Hyahh!!*” Sprinting to Cyrus’ side, Tressa jumped at the monster just feet in front of him. But on closer examination, the crab’s movements were clearly dull and sluggish. Its pincers limply fell to the ground. Swiftly moving just beside the monster’s body, he turned to Tressa.

“Tressa, why on earth did you follow me? Of course, it’s only thanks to you I escaped at all, but...”

“Oh, well, that’s... It’s hard to say, I just...” It wasn’t as though she didn’t expect him to ask, but still she found herself at a momentary loss for words. But lifting

her head and looking at Cyrus, she said, "I couldn't stand letting you get yourself into danger all by yourself."

"I'm certain we already discussed this earlier, I—"

Tressa didn't let him finish. "I know that, but still!" Stepping over the monster's limp leg, Tressa walked over to Cyrus and forcefully took his hands into hers. "I know that, but... Professor Albright, this is still my journey, too."

"Mm..." There was force in her words, and it didn't seem she was going to wait for him to respond.

"I left home of my own free will, and I chose to go with you on my own free will, too... It just doesn't seem right for someone else, even if they're an 'adult,' to go and shoulder the responsibility for that."

Cyrus was stunned. Looking at Tressa, seeing the steadfast resolve in her eyes, he realized for the first time that perhaps he had been looking down on her all this time.

"You're absolutely right. I'm sorry, Tressa." Out of concern for her youth and her inexperience, in the face of her curiosity and promise, he had unconsciously grown overprotective. Of course, he should worry about her in the way he would worry about any of his companions, but at the very least he saw Tressa had the resolve to take responsibility for her own actions without passing off the blame to others.

"I hope I haven't gone so far as to unwittingly insult your prowess as a merchant."

"H-huh!? No, I don't think you went quite that far, but..."

"Well, one way or another, at least we managed to recover your prized possession." Tressa scooped her bag off the ground and looked it over. The strap was torn, so she wouldn't be able to sling it over her shoulder, but it seemed the contents escaped any real damage. Her treasured journal was tucked safely in the deepest part of the bag.

"Let's not overstay our welcome, huh, Professor Albright?"

"Quite right. Let's hurry back to camp." There was no knowing if the monster would come to its senses and pursue them anew. Keeping an equal eye on Tressa, who ran ahead of him, clutching her bag, and the passage behind him, the pair made for the exit.

*Life truly is full of learning experiences*, Cyrus mused. Over the course of their travels, he had learned many things from his companions. This time, too, exploring the cave with Tressa had shown and taught him much. She truly could have had the makings of an outstanding scholar. *What a shame*, he thought to himself.

"Heh..."

"Huh? Did you laugh just now, Professor Albright?"

"I was just thinking what a wonderful companion you are, Tressa."

"Oh? Praising me all of a sudden isn't gonna earn you a discount, you know."

\* \* \*

Slipping through the crack and finally leaving the cave, it was just as pitch-black outside as it had been when they arrived. They walked the length of the beach and

left the sea – its water so dark it seemed it could swallow them whole – behind them as they made for camp. There they were greeted by a scowling H’aanit, arms crossed grimly.

“Heavens, Cyrus! And having the nerve to bringen her with thee!” The rest of the party, a diverse array of expressions on their faces, were also awake to greet them. As they told it, H’aanit had woken in the middle of the night and noticed Tressa hadn’t returned to the tent yet. She then woke up Linde, who had been sleeping in the treetops, to ask if she had seen anything. Apparently, Linde had been awake at least long enough to see Cyrus and Tressa talking. Thinking Cyrus might know something, H’aanit made her way to the men’s tent, only to find he was missing as well. It seemed Cyrus and Tressa had made their grand return just as the rest of the party was arguing over whether or not there was any need to go and search for them. Therion, standing a bit away from the group, seemed to be making a face that all but said *I told you so...* or perhaps not. In any case, they could go over the particulars later, but for the time being Cyrus was in for quite the remonstrance from H’aanit.

“I can only express my deepest apologies. I was the one who put Tressa in danger.”

“Knowinge Tressa was still exhausted from the day, thou still durste...!”

“H-hang on a second!” Tressa tried desperately to intervene before H’aanit could enter full Lecturing Mode.

“Geez, you’re too good at scolding people, H’aanit...”

“E-e’en so? Thanks, I suppose... Forgive me if I lost myself. Well, what is it you wish to sayen?”

“If anyone is getting scolded, you should scold me, too! Even after Alfyn went to all that trouble, I was still the one who told Cyrus to let me go with him...” As Tressa saw it, it didn’t make any sense at all for Cyrus to be the one taking all the heat. If she made a mistake, she was the one who should pay the penalty and no one else. Tressa wondered if H’aanit had expected her to try to stick up for Cyrus. She seemed somewhat stunned. Then, she crossed her arms and breathed a deep sigh.

“Quite so. Tressa, you sholde have taken better care of your body. That staying up and writing in your journal is precious to you, I know and wille not protesten, but when that is done, it were better to have simply gone to bed. If you needs must steal away to take part in Cyrus’ foolishness, at the very least wake us to letten us know.”

“Right... I’m sorry I worried you all.” Tressa bowed her head in apology.

“Excellent.” H’aanit, apparently satisfied, once more made to stand before Cyrus and resume her lecture with a vengeance. Somehow, watching H’aanit scold Cyrus as though it was something she had done a thousand times, Tressa wondered if this was what H’aanit’s relationship with her master had been like before he disappeared. That much seemed obvious, having a front-row seat to her masterful remonstrance. As Cyrus continued to apologize for his rashness, carelessness, and so forth, Tressa walked a little to where Olberic stood.

"Hey, Olberic?"

"What is it, Tressa?"

"Well, first I wanna apologize for worrying you guys... But also, I have something I wanted to ask you about..." She opened her now-strapless bag. Once she told him what she was thinking, he hummed thoughtfully.

"Certainly, they would be good to have for our future travels. The thought had crossed my mind at some point or another, but..."

"Mhm, I think once we get to Rippletide, I can use some of my contacts and try to pull some strings for us."

"Understood. Well then, I'll leave that to you."

"Great!" Tressa jumped up and down a little and pumped her fists in the air. She then went to go apologize to Ophilia and Alfyn as well, but at that moment H'aanit finally seemed to give Cyrus some reprieve.

"Hello again, Tressa."

"Good hanging in there, Professor." As Tressa and Cyrus swapped greetings, neither of them could stop a smile from escaping.

"I'm just glad we both made it out safely. That being the case, I'm truly glad I had the chance to explore that cave with you."

"Mhm, me too! We had a lot of close shaves, but we got some things out of it too, huh?"

"A moment ago you were talking to Olberic about something, right? Was that perhaps one of them?"

*So he saw that, huh,* Tressa thought, but she honestly couldn't say she was too surprised. "There's that, too." She nodded. "I was thinking once we got to Rippletide, I might be able to borrow some horses, so I went to ask Olberic what he thought."

"Packhorses, then? I see."

"Mhm. I still feel pretty bad that us staying up all night is gonna affect our progress tomorrow, so I thought it'd be nice if I could help make things go a little smoother from here on out."

"How do you intend to handle the funds for that, though?" Cyrus suspected he already knew the answer. Tressa grinned and opened her bag they'd worked so hard to recover. Inside the bag, countless glassfish shells of all shapes and sizes were crammed together, gleaming with the pale glow of so many fireflies. Cyrus was stunned – he couldn't believe she'd managed to gather this many.

"You certainly did your due diligence picking these up."

"To tell the truth, while I was on my way to go rescue you, an old merchants' saying crossed my mind. 'Even if a storm moors your ship, scour the port for wares,' or something along those lines."

"I see." He nodded deeply, fully taken in by her words. "A merchant through and through, aren't you?"

"You betcha! It's only natural! And you're a scholar through and through, huh, Professor Albright?"



Cyrus looked up at the sky. Following his lead, Tressa tilted her head. Before they knew it, the star-scattered inky night sky had given way to a deep ultramarine. Dazzling light had begun streaming from the eastern horizon. Only the waves, crashing along the shoreline in their constant ebb and flow, pierced the early morning silence. As if reminded of their conversation before setting off for the cave, Cyrus suddenly spoke.

“I truly do pray that someday, you’ll find that brilliant treasure of your dreams.”

\* \* \*

*That was my very first homework assignment from Professor Cyrus Albright. That night, I was reminded all over again how wonderful it feels to know that even if the world is filled with so many things I don’t know and I’ve never seen, I just know that someday, I’ll be able to discover them all on my own! Professor Albright isn’t really much of an emotional person, but he’s not cold or distant or anything at all! Honestly, it’s a huge help having such a composed, reliable adult around. But he’s still got some mysterious parts to him, too... when he smiles, he looks just like a little kid. Whenever I see Professor Albright get all excited about something he doesn’t know or something new, it just fills me with determination!*

*I really do believe that someday, just like Cyrus said, I’ll find the brilliant treasure of my dreams, a treasure that’s special just for me.*

*I’ll leave it here for today!*

*On the highway to Rippletide  
Tressa Colzione*



## Chapter 2

# Trust and Betrayal

“WHEW, that was a real piece of work, I’ll tell you!” Alfyn made a funny sort of whole-body gesture as he related the party’s grand exploits in Noblecourt. Sunlight spilled over the table, and the beautiful girl with short-cropped golden hair giggled as she listened to Alfyn’s (somewhat embellished) story.



## **Chapter 3**

# **On the Eve of a Blizzard**



## Chapter 4

# One More Dance, After

“PRIMROSE...!?”

Olberic gripped his sword tightly, utterly failing to mask his surprise. Before his eyes was, without a shadow of a doubt, one Primrose Azelhart – his once-indispensable companion on a long, long journey. There she stood, a gentle smile on her face.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? How have you been?” If that was all, perhaps Olberic wouldn’t be so shocked, but the time and place were all wrong. More than that, though, it so happened that in Primrose’s hand was a long, thin saber – and it was pointed squarely in his face.

“Wh-what’s the meaning of this? Why on earth are you here!?”





## **Chapter 5**

## **Epilogue**