

NOVEL

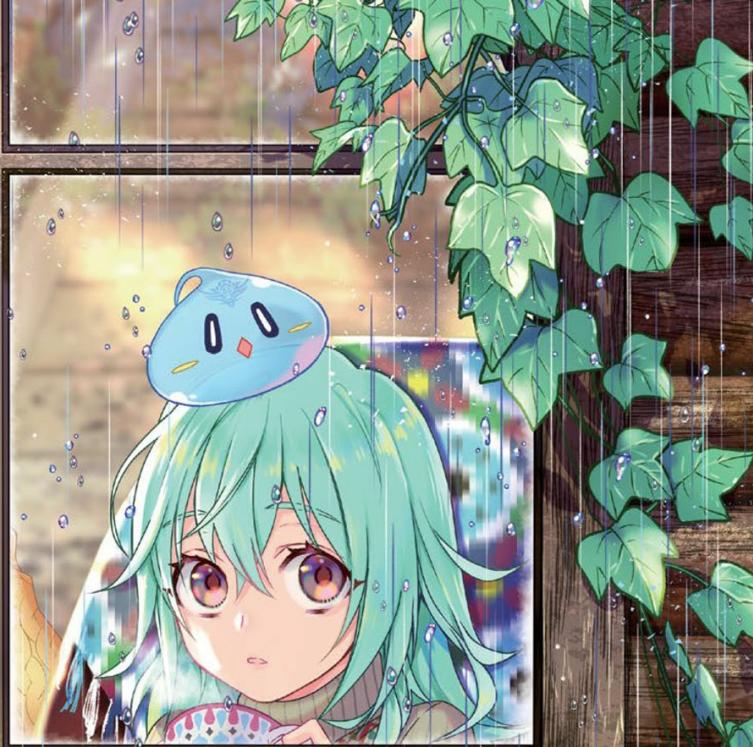
5!

WRITTEN BY
Honobonoru500
ILLUSTRATED BY
Nama

The

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash









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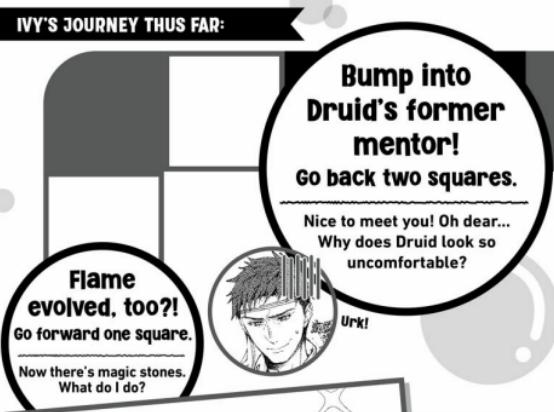
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IVY'S JOURNEY THUS FAR:



START!
So many things to do before we go!

We saved a lot of adventurers!

Go forward two squares.

That's our Ciel—always reliable. (pat, pat)
Thanks for rescuing everyone!



Winter is coming.
Where should we spend it?

To be continued..... ||



You just don't understand!
Huh? You say I'm too stubborn?

CHARACTERS

Druid

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

Ivy

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

Ciel

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

Sora

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

Flame

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

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 5

Story by Honobonoru500

Illustrations by Nama

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Chapter 225: Arriving in Hatow Village

Each gust of chilly wind robbed our bodies of heat.

“Are you okay?” Druid asked in a worried voice.

It was too cold to open my mouth, so I kept it shut and nodded.

“We’ll get to Hatow Village soon. Hang in there, trooper!”

We were going to reach Hatow Village ahead of schedule, but the weather had also gotten cold much sooner than we’d thought. Normally, we’d still have another month of pleasant weather left, but it was cold enough to freeze now.

This is an injustice! I silently cursed the bitter cold winds as I quickened my pace. I wanted to get somewhere warm as soon as possible.

I was really thankful to Ciel and Sora for hunting us those gooth. The past few days had been cold enough to be life-threatening, so we’d just walked three days in a row without sleep. I was sleepy beyond all imagination, but my limbs felt light. Eating gooth meat melted the fatigue from your body and made you feel weightless and energized, which meant we could keep walking at the same fast pace. The only problem was that we were so terribly sleepy. Sleepy beyond measure. So sleepy I could feel my eyes closing while my feet trod beneath me. I just wanted to get to Hatow as quickly as possible and have a nice, long rest at an inn.

“Oh! Is that it up there?”

I could see a gate in the distance. My eyes were playing tricks on me: I could have sworn it was sparkling.

“Yeah, looks like we’ve arrived in Hatow Village.” Relief spread over Druid’s face, and I was sure I looked the same way.

I looked down at the bag on my shoulder and announced our arrival in Hatow. “Sit tight in there for a bit longer, okay?”

The bag stirred slightly. Since Flame was asleep, it was probably Sora or Ciel.

Seeing us, the guard opened the gate. “Hello there.”

I looked up in surprise when I realized that the voice belonged to a lady. This was my first time seeing a female member of the village watch. It was hard to tell her gender at first sight since she was dressed head to toe in thick winter clothes.

“Thank you. We’re planning to spend the winter in Hatow Village—will that be all right?” Druid pulled out his merchant guild card, and I quickly followed suit. My fingers were so stiff from the cold that it was hard to move them. I sighed in relief when I somehow managed to get my card out.

“Please touch your cards to this device so we can check them.”

The desk beside the gate had a magic item that I didn’t recognize on top of it. Druid touched his card to the item, and it turned green.

“What is your name?”

“Druid.” At his answer, the green light turned off.

“Thank you very much. Could I see your daughter’s card, too?”

Oh! She called me his daughter. Gee, I feel kind of embarrassed. And wow, it’s sure surprising that people have stopped mistaking me for a boy just because I grew out my hair a little. Do I really look that different?

“Here you go,” I said, presenting my card. Just like it did for Druid, the item lit up in green. When I gave it my name, the light went off.

“Everything looks good to me. Welcome to Hatow Village. Here are your permits for a long-term stay. They’ve recorded your names, so

nobody else can use them.”

She handed us some white plates decorated with green lines.

“Thank you very much.” I looked in her eyes and bowed as I spoke. The lady gatekeeper looked a bit taken aback at first, but then she gave me the prettiest smile in return.

“Druid, Ivy, have you picked an inn yet?”

“No, not yet. We’re just about to see if we can find one.”

“What type of place are you looking for?”

“Since Ivy’s with me, we want a mid-range lodge that’s safe for families.”

“Then I recommend Ayapo. Take the fifth left on Main Street. The innkeeper is a lady, so it’s nice and clean. Her husband is an adventurer and a bit fierce, but he’ll make sure you both have a safe stay there.”

Oh, it’s run by a lady! I like the sound of it.

“That sounds nice. Thanks for the tip. We’ll go straight there. Oh, by the way, does it have a bath?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks. We’ll be on our way now.”

“Have a nice stay.”

That gatekeeper was so nice! She even helped us find a good inn so we wouldn’t have to look around in the cold. I bowed deeply to her before turning away to go to the inn with Druid.

“She was nice.”

“Well, she probably gave us that tip on the inn because your behavior was so good, Ivy.”

My...behavior? What did I do? I thought about it, but nothing came

to mind. *No, one thing does come to mind: I'm so sleepy. Come on, Ivy, you're almost there!*

“I sure am tired,” Druid said.

“Yeah, I’m dying to sleep.” *If I stop walking, I might fall asleep standing up.*

“As soon as we get to our room, I’m taking a bath.”

“What?! But I want to go to bed.”

“If you get your body warm first, you’ll sleep much better.”

“Really?”

“Yeah...I think?”

“Mr. Druid, what do you mean you *think*?”

“Well, it’s just something I heard someone say once...maybe?”

So...which is it? But I can’t deny it: I’m chilled to the bone. I’m so cold my head hurts a little. I guess I should warm myself up in a bath first. I’d probably sleep much better.

“Okay, we’ll take a nice hot bath, then go to bed. But I’m kind of worried I’ll fall asleep in the tub.”

“Yeah, you said it. If I’d just thought a little more about our travel schedule, then we wouldn’t have to be so cold in the first place. Sorry, Ivy.”

“Oh, no, we planned this trip together. You don’t need to apologize.”

Neither of us could have predicted that it would get this cold so early.

“Once we’ve had a good, long rest at the inn, we’ll need to get some winter coats and cloaks.”

“Yeah.”

We took the fifth left on Main Street like we were told. There was a bakery, a clothing store, and lots of other different shops on the street.

“There it is.”

I looked at where Druid was pointing and saw a sign with “Ayapo” written on it. *What a strange name. I wonder if it means anything?*

We opened the door to Ayapo and went inside. It was a fresh and tidy inn, its wooden fixtures warm and cozy. I could see why the gatekeeper recommended it. All the furnishings and knickknacks were very cute—evidence of its lady innkeeper.

“Welcome!” a lady sang, coming in from the back room while we were looking around the lobby. She was probably about fifty years old. Her gentle smile made me feel warm for some reason. *Is she the innkeeper?*

“We’d like to rent a room for two for the winter. Do you have any openings?”

“We certainly do. If you want to stay the winter, I suppose you’ll want the room for two months?”

“If we want to make sure we get through the coldest part of the year, we might have to go with two and a half months.”

“All right. What do you want to do about your meals?”

“We’d like to have breakfast here at the inn. For dinners, could we play it by ear or maybe borrow a kitchen to use?”

“Understood on the breakfast. I can take care of dinner for you if you’ll just let me know every morning whether you’ll need it that day. We also have a kitchen on the second floor which you’re free to use. Just be sure to mind the fire.”

“Thank you. I must say, I’m surprised to hear you have a kitchen on the second floor. That’s impressive.”

“Well, we got caught up in the latest trends. Ha ha ha!”

A kitchen on the second floor? This I’ve got to see.

“How much will our rent be? And are there any discounts?”

“Well, a room for two with breakfasts included is six radal per month, so two and a half months would be fifteen radal.”

Fifteen radal...fifteen gold plates. It’s within our budget, so I guess we’re taking the place?

“Ivy, are you okay with staying here?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll take it! Thanks for having us for the next two and a half months.”

“And thank you for staying! Oh, about that discount, if you have a magic stone of at least level five for fire or water magic, you get five gidal off.”

Five gidal off with each magic stone of level five or higher?

Wow, that’s a generous discount.

“Five gidal for one magic stone? Isn’t that a bit much?” Druid asked.

“It’s definitely a lot! You see, the caves where you can find a lot of magic stones have been collapsing for some reason, so the stone prices keep going up, which is a real headache! And adventurers don’t go out in the wintertime to hunt for magic stones, either.”

I was a bit startled by how loudly and abruptly the innkeeper answered Druid’s question.

“What’s the fuss about?” a fierce man asked as he came out from

the back. *I guess this is her adventurer husband the gatekeeper told us about?* He did look a little fierce, but he was no scarier than any of the other adventurers I'd met in my travels. He had a three-lined scar on his face, though. It was painful to look at.

"Don't make a fuss in front of the customers. Have you settled the deal yet?"

"Yes... It's done."

Druid smiled uncomfortably at her answer. "I'm sorry, but we haven't finished up yet."

"Um, *Darling*?"

"Oh dear, didn't we get those papers signed? I'm so sorry. Okay, write your name here. Could you also provide some identification?"

"Yes, ma'am."

So this innkeeper was a little ditzy.

We took care of the paperwork right away, and she led us to a room at the end of the second-floor hallway. According to her, this was the best room at the inn. I was looking forward to turning in for the night, but I had to have a bath first...then I could sleep to my heart's content! I really needed it; I was reaching my limit.

Chapter 226: What a Deep Sleep!

Nnn...I think I hear something. What is it? Please...just let me stay like this a bit longer...

Knock, knock.

“Druid? Ivy? Are you all right in there?”

Am I all right? Yeah, I'm all right...but whose voice is that?

I opened my eyes and found myself in an unfamiliar room.

“Where...am I?”

Knock, knock.

What's that sound? Um, it's... Oh, we're in Hatow Village! So it must be...

“Are you all right?”

I knew it! That's the innkeeper's voice.

“We're fine!”

I sat up in bed and quickly unbolted the door. I opened it to find the innkeeper and her husband standing in the hallway, and they both looked relieved at the sight of me. *Huh? Were they worried about something?*

“Oh, thank goodness! We were starting to worry when we didn't see either of you for two whole days.”

“I'm sorry, ma'am. Thanks for checking on us.”

Hm? Two whole days?

“Um, didn't we just get here last night?”

We arrived at the inn yesterday evening, had a quick bath and a

light supper, and went to bed. Then we woke up today, so...hm?

“No, that was two days ago.”

Two days ago? I looked out the window and could see it was the evening. *So that means we were asleep for two whole days? That's impressive... No, it's excessive. Wait, where's Druid?* There was a lump on the bed next to mine. He was probably still asleep.

“We figured we should let you rest since you were on your feet for three whole days without sleeping, but we were worried you'd get too hungry, so I thought I'd get you both a light supper, even though I know you didn't ask for one. Oh, and don't worry about paying me! Consider this the complimentary breakfast you didn't eat this morning.”

Wow, this is a great inn. Wait, where did her husband go? I guess he went back to work?

“Thank you so much. We'll take dinner for two, please.”

“Oh, good. It'll be ready in about thirty minutes, okay? Bring your appetites!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

The innkeeper hummed a joyful tune as she walked downstairs. After I saw her out, I went back into our room and stretched my arms. I couldn't believe we had slept more than a whole day. It was a bit startling. I looked back at my bed and saw that Sora and Flame were awake and staring at me. *Oh, their dinner!*

“Sorry, guys. You must be really hungry.”

I'd made them go a whole day without any food. I quickly got my potions bag, opened it, and pulled out two types of potions and a sword. I'd barely started taking them out when the two slimes began to feed. They'd definitely been quite hungry.

“I’m so sorry...”

The two jiggled in reply as they ate. I took out extra potions for their meal and saw that Ciel was scoping out the room. *Does that mean it didn’t take a look around while I was asleep?*

“Nnnggghhh.”

I heard a sudden groan behind me. I saw that Druid’s covers were moving. *He must be waking up.* After a few seconds, he yawned and sat up.

“Good morning... Wow, you’re up early.”

Uh, actually I’m not. “Hello, Mr. Druid.”

“Hm?! Is it dinnertime already?”

“Yeah.”

Druid looked out the window and made a face. We had arrived at the inn and gone to bed in the evening, but now it was evening again.

“Don’t tell me we slept away the whole day?”

Yeah, that *was* what a normal person would assume. I was glad I wasn’t the only one.

“No, it was two whole days.”

“Hm? Oh... *Two days?!* Um...really?”

“Yeah. I guess we were both in a really deep sleep for those two days.”

“Wow. I didn’t *feel* that tired.”

I felt the same way. It was probably because the gooth meat had made me feel so light and energetic. But since we were up three days straight with no sleep, sleeping for two full days was actually quite reasonable.

“The innkeeper and her husband came up to check in on us. Oh, and they’re going to bring us some supper!”

“Supper?”

“Yes, since we didn’t have breakfast this morning, they said we could have some supper for free.”

“That was nice of them.”

I nodded. “Yes, we should thank that nice lady gatekeeper who told us to come here.”

“Yeah, we should.” Druid got out of bed and stretched his limbs. “I slept too much. My body aches all over.”

“Yeah, my joints are pretty stiff, too.”

Since Druid had begun a sort of morning stretching routine, I decided to join him. Sleeping for two whole days had made our bodies stiff. It hurt to stretch my limbs...but it also felt very good.

“Okay, let’s wash our faces and go downstairs.”

“Sounds good.”

“Hmm...I don’t think we should go dressed like this. We should change.”

“Oh no! I still need to do laundry. I’m out of clean clothes.”

“So am I.”

We scrounged for the least dirty clothes we could find and changed into them. *We’ll definitely have to do laundry tomorrow.* Sora and Flame finished their supper and began to explore the room with Ciel. *I wonder if they were all asleep for two whole days, too?*

“Oh, now they’re exploring? Haven’t they already done that?” Druid asked, giving the creatures a puzzled look.

“Probably not. They might’ve stayed asleep with us.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me. Hey, kids! We’re going to go have dinner. Be quiet in here while we’re gone, okay?”

The three creatures jiggled in reply.

“Mr. Druid, don’t we have a magic item to cancel out the noise in this room?”

“Oh, right. I’ll need to install it later. It’s so lonesome not being able to hear their little voices.”

The three creatures were jiggling, but they stayed silent for us. They knew we hadn’t set up the magic item yet. It was good that they were behaving, but it was a little sad not hearing them talk to us. Since we didn’t remember which magic bag we’d put the item in, we would have to find it later. But we would definitely look for it once we came back.

After carefully locking our room, we went downstairs.

“Ah, there you are. Sit anywhere you’d like. I’ll bring your food right away.”

“Good evening, ma’am. Thanks for waking us.”

“Ha ha ha, don’t mention it. Are you all rested up?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The innkeeper’s husband had a fierce-looking face, but he seemed like an easygoing guy. I glanced around the dining room and saw there were three families with children and two young married couples. It looked like all of them were adventurers.

We found some empty seats, and our dinners were brought to us in no time.

“Here you go. Tonight’s supper is Hatow’s famous soup and white bread.”

White bread! Oh boy, I’m so happy to have that.

“White bread! That’s something you don’t see very often,” I said.

“Well, my wife loves white bread. And this kind is special because she bakes it herself.”

“Oh! The innkeeper bakes this bread herself?”

“She sure does. Amazing, right?” Her husband looked a bit bashful but was still happy to boast about his wife.

“It *is* amazing,” I agreed. “And I love white bread, so I’m very happy to eat it.”

I took a white bread roll from the basket. *Wow! It’s so soft.*

“You’re in luck, then. My wife’s white bread is superb. Well, enjoy your supper.” *He must really love his wife.* Every time he said the words *my wife*, he blushed and smiled.

After he walked away, Druid and I each took a bite of the bread. It was soft, fluffy, moist...and truly divine.

“This is delicious!” I said.

“Yeah, it’s great.”

Then we tried Hatow’s famous soup. It was thick and white with big chunks of meat and vegetables. It looked delicious. I sipped a spoonful, and the sweetness of the vegetables and the savory flavors of the meat filled my mouth. It really *was* delicious. Apparently, Ayapo was also known for serving good food. We definitely needed to properly thank that lady gatekeeper later for telling us about this inn.

After eating every last drop of soup and every last crumb of white bread, we returned to our room. *Ahhh, that was so good. I’m in Heaven.*

“Mr. Druid, would it be acceptable if I washed our bedsheets?”

Ack! I’m speaking all polite again. I looked at Druid. He was fighting back laughter.

“When you’re at an inn for a long-term stay, you can use whatever they have in the cabinet. If there’s sheets in there, we can change them and wash them as we please. If there aren’t any, then we ask the inn staff to change them for us.”

Sheets in the cabinet? I opened the cabinet and found lots of different things inside. *Okay, so there’s six big towels, ten small ones... then there’s cups, and what’s this—tea? Let’s see, sheets...sheets...*

“Found them!”

“You did? That means we can wash and change our sheets if we want. But we can probably ask the staff to launder them, too. We’ll just have to check and see what the fee is.”

“Understood! So tomorrow will be a big laundry day seeing as we got our sheets messed up with our dirty clothes.”

“Yeah, washing our bodies was meaningless without changing into clean clothes.”

We’d been planning to do some laundry during our journey, but the sudden cold spell made us focus on getting to the village.

Unfortunately, the morning dew made our clothes damp, meaning we needed to change them every day. Before we knew it, we were completely out of clean clothes. We’d tried to brush as much dirt off ourselves as we could before getting into bed the previous night, but the sheets still ended up dirty. *So tomorrow, we’ll start the laundry first thing in the morning! But wait...will we even be able to sleep before then?*

Chapter 227: Let's Find Us Some Cloaks

“**H**ave a nice day!”

“Thank you!”

The innkeeper from Ayapo saw us off as we headed out for the day. As we turned to walk onto Main Street, a cold gust of wind hit our faces.

“Agh! It’s so cold,” Druid groaned. “I knew we weren’t wearing the right clothes for this.”

“You’re right—it’s freezing!”

Druid and I were wearing autumn cloaks. They protected us just fine against a normal chill, but they were practically useless in a winter chill like this. It really was freezing cold!

“The shop is the second left off Main Street toward the gate, right?”

We were headed toward a shop specializing in winter coats and cloaks that the innkeeper’s husband had told us about.

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

As a former adventurer, the innkeeper’s husband was sure to know his stuff, so we were looking forward to a great shopping experience.

“Is this the place?”

“I think so...”

We’d been envisioning a rugged shop, knowing that it catered to adventurers; however, this place was quite stylish, all the way down to its doorknob. At least from the outside, this didn’t look like the sort of shop an adventurer would go to.

“Maybe we took a wrong turn?” I wondered.

“We were walking on Main Street toward the gate, right?”

“Right.”

We’d turned onto Main Street from the road our inn was on, and we’d definitely walked toward the gate.

“Then we took the second left.”

We had indeed passed the first turn and turned left at the second. Then we’d walked to the fifth shop after the turn. We’d been told the shop was called “Modd,” and sure enough, that was the name on the store sign.

“That’s the name of the shop we’re looking for, so this has to be it... Not quite what I imagined it would look like, though,” Druid said.

It was hard to believe that a former adventurer had recommended this kind of shop. Though he was easygoing at heart, he had such a gruff exterior.

“Yeah, it’s not what I pictured, either,” I agreed. I had never been to such a stylish shop before, so it felt awkward to just go in...especially in such dirty clothes. Would that even be acceptable?

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. I’ve just never been in a grand shop like this before.”

“You haven’t? Where did you used to buy all your clothes?
At adventurer shops?”

I was dreading he’d ask me that question... “No, um...I’d find clothes that were in decent condition at dumps, and then I’d repair them.”

“I see.” Druid fell deep into thought. I was worried he thought it was inappropriate to get your clothes at a dump. “Okay, let’s go in!”

Huh? Why is Druid suddenly so eager? I have a bad feeling about this...

“Mr. Druid, what are you trying to do?”

“Buy some clothes for you, Ivy.”

“Like, a coat or a cloak, right?” *Wh-why are you smiling like that?*

“No. I’m buying you a whole new wardrobe.”

“Oh, I’m fine, thanks. I don’t need any new clothes.”

“Ivy, you’re a girl. You deserve to wear nice clothes. I’ll take care of everything.”

“But we’re adventurers! I don’t think it matters how nice we look.”

“I think it does. Lady adventurers dress nicely if they want to.”

He was right: There were some very fashionable and beautiful lady adventurers out there. Fashion was for pretty girls, though. It was pointless for me.

“Seriously, sir, I don’t—”

“Ivy, you’re doing it again.”

“Ack!”

“Ivy, you’re eating well, and your hair’s grown longer, so you’re plenty pretty. You’d look good in anything. And if you dressed up a little, you’d definitely draw attention... Well, not like you need attention.”

Um...Mr. Druid? Are you saying I got fat? I hadn’t really noticed. And I don’t think my hair growing has really changed the way I look that much, so you don’t need to worry about me drawing attention. Oh, wait, I remember Rattloore and his gang saying I was pretty. But they were just saying that to be nice, right? Hold on a minute...they also said it would be dangerous for me to travel alone when I got older...

“Yeah, we don’t want you to be *too* pretty,” Druid continued.
“That’ll bring in the riffraff. Well, they can’t have my daughter yet!”

“Um, Mr. Druid? I assure you that will *never* happen. And what are you even talking about, sir?”

“I’m talking about you being too young to get married, of course! Also, *you’re doing it again.*”

Were we talking about marriage? And I’m doing what again? Oh, right, I was being all polite again.

“Is something the matter?”

“Huh?!” we both yelled.

A voice had interrupted our little squabble outside the store. Apparently, someone from the shop had come all the way out here to check on us.

“Oh, we’re so sorry!”

“That’s quite all right. What brings you to our store today?”

“The innkeeper’s husband at Ayapo sent us. Do you have any winter cloaks? Also, I’d like to buy her a suitable set of clothes.”

Arrrgh. He said it before I could stop him.

“Oh, I see. So Dola sent you. Well, we just got in a bunch of the latest items from this year’s collection! Come right on in.”

So the innkeeper’s husband’s name is Dola. I just realized we never asked for it.

The inside of the shop was just like the outside, filled with cute and pretty things that girls and women might like. There were rows and rows of colorful clothing. Some outfits were simple, but they still had bursts of complex needlepoint and embroidery. Being surrounded by so much cuteness made me feel a little nervous.

“Would you prefer a coat or a cloak?”

“We haven’t decided yet.”

Coats have sleeves and cloaks don’t, right? Maybe coats will be easier to move in while traveling?

“In that case, I’ll show you samples of both. This coat is my favorite design of this year. It’s quite popular since it also does a great job at blocking the wind.”

The shopkeeper presented a baby blue coat that was a bit long. There were puffs of fur around the sleeves and embroidery around the collar. It was a very feminine design. The size was right for me, and I had to admit it was rather pretty. But could I pull it off?

Come to think of it, were magic coats ever this cute? I’d seen one before, but it was much simpler than this one—its only asset was its functionality.

“And this is one of our cloaks. It also keeps the wind out. Now, this cloak’s special feature is its fabric. It produces heat on its own, so it’s popular among adventurers for wintertime spelunking or hunting expeditions.”

Next, the shopkeeper brought out a cloak that was a bit shorter than the last coat. It was light green and embroidered all over with quite a complicated design. The collar was rimmed with thick fur that looked very cozy. What’s more, this cloak also produced its own heat, which would be very useful in the winter. I asked the price out of curiosity...then I let it go. Five radal...five gold plates... That was completely out of the question!

“I’ve seen magic coats and cloaks before, but I don’t remember their designs being this nice. I think they were much simpler.”

“Yes, the coats and cloaks dropped by monsters are indeed much simpler. The ones in our collection are made from the thread monsters drop.”

“The thread monsters drop?”

“Yes, somebody discovered a monster about five years ago that drops thread. We use that thread to weave these coats.”

“How do you make them so that they keep out the wind?”

“It’s a power of the thread. Dropped thread is resistant to fire and water, which lets us make weatherproof coats and cloaks like this.”

How interesting... So they use thread dropped by monsters. I'm impressed. You could make so many different things with that thread.

“Ivy, don’t you think this cloak is really cute?”

I'd rather not just casually drop five radal on a cloak. Good thing I checked the price tag.

“No. It’s too expensive.”

Come on, why’re you making that sad face? Five radal is just out of the question!

“So, I have a question,” I told the shopkeeper.

“Yes?”

I’d decided to find something cheaper before Druid had a chance to buy the expensive cloak.

“Do you have any wind-resistant cloaks that cost less?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Something cute, please.”

“Mr. Druid!”

“Hee hee! Sit tight and I’ll bring you some options.”

Great. The shopkeeper laughed at us. “I don’t need to look cute while I’m traveling.”

“But you haven’t stopped smiling since we came into this shop, Ivy.”

“Well...yeah, I have been enjoying myself.” My heart wouldn’t stop dancing.

“Having pretty clothes that make you smile is a good thing, Ivy.”

Is it, though?

“But I wouldn’t feel comfortable wearing something expensive.”

“I do understand that feeling.”

Druid was a bit of a penny-pincher, just like me. It really was best for us to choose clothes that were within our means. *Yup. That's for the best.*

Chapter 228: Clothes-Crazy?

I was sitting on a chair in the shop to rest my weary legs. Why did shopping for a cloak have to be so tiring?

“This one just screams Ivy.”

“I like that one, too, but I think this color is better.”

“Yeah, I think that one looks good as well.”

“Oh, but this one would also be nice!”

How strange... These are my clothes, and yet everything's being decided for me. I'd set a budget. I had to, otherwise Druid and this shopkeeper would go crazy and buy everything. And it was try this on, now try that on... Why did I have to try on so many different things all at once? *We should just pick the clothes and cloaks that are the most functional for me. Who cares about the cute buttons or the embroidery or the print on the fabric?* I definitely didn't care.

“Ivy, what about this one?”

“Mr. Druid, I don't need six of them. Five is more than enough.”

“But this one's really cute.”

“Like I said...”

“Don't worry, we can afford it.”

Um, that's not the issue. And come on, are we really within our budget here?

“Have you picked out your cloak yet, Mr. Druid?”

“Yeah, I'm having it altered to fit me better. I'm having yours altered, too, Ivy.”

When did he find time to do that? I feel like he's been spending all this time choosing clothes for me.

"Did you ask them to make mine a little on the bigger side? I'm still growing."

I did seem to be going through a growth spurt. It was definitely important for me to make sure I was getting enough to eat.

"We can always have them alter your clothes after you grow. And if they can't do that, then we can just buy new ones."

"But that's so *wasteful*."

"The clothes from this shop are so popular they'll easily sell in other villages and towns. Don't worry about it," Baluka assured me with a smile. Baluka, who owned the shop and designed all of its clothes, was a longtime friend of Dola's. He looked about ten years younger than Dola, but he was actually the same age, which surprised both me and Druid.

"Ivy, how about a skir—"

"I absolutely *do not* need one!"

"Aw, too bad..."

For some reason, Druid kept pushing skirts on me. A skirt during my travels was just completely out of the question. Why did he keep urging me to buy pointless things?

"Mr. Druid, I think we should finish up."

"Just a little bit more."

I looked at the clock. We had been in this store for over two hours. To be honest, I wanted to leave Druid there and go back to the inn. But if I did that, I knew he would just buy whatever he wanted, so I was stuck.

"We've had this conversation three times now."

"Just a bit longer, please? You can go lie down on the sofa in the

back if you'd like.”

The nap on the sofa sounded tempting, but I was glued to my spot because of all the clothes the two were bringing me. Looking at the pile, there was no way we were within our budget. As I stared at the clothes, Druid and Baluka stared at me. I shook my head, causing them to sigh in unison and put everything back. *Yup, staying here was definitely the right call.*

“Oh well, I suppose we’ll end things here for today.”

Ahh, it’s finally over! That took so long. Wait... “for today”?! I must have heard wrong...

“I’m sorry to hear that. I just know she’d be adorable in any of these outfits.”

“Yes, she would be.”

Could you please not just casually say embarrassing things like that? And why does Druid look so happy? Is buying clothes for me really that exciting for him?

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Are you having fun?”

“Yes, I sure am.”

Well, great. When you smile at me like that, I don’t know how I should feel anymore.

“Ivy, you know that last dress I brought out for you—”

“The answer is no!”

Not even that smile could make me say yes. I looked at the desk near Baluka, which had a pile of clothes sitting on it. Did they really all fit in our budget? I’m worried.

“Are you sure this is going to be okay?”

Druid, seeing where I was looking, gave my head some soothing pats. “Ivy, you know what our budget is, don’t you? You helped me make it.”

“I know.”

I’ll admit that the clothes at this store were less expensive than they looked. It would be more accurate to say they *also* had some cheaper options. These clothes cost much less because they had little mistakes in the embroidery. They’d been sewn by someone who wasn’t quite skilled enough to create the highest-quality clothes sold there. This was all explained to me while I shopped, although the “defective” embroidery looked just fine to me.

“Everything will be okay, I promise,” Druid assured me.

And I would just have to take Druid’s word for it. To be honest, I was happy that he was buying me clothes; I’d only ever gotten my clothes at the dump, so it meant the world to me.

“Mr. Druid...thank you.”

“Ha ha ha. You’re welcome,” Druid chuckled as he patted my head.

Baluka returned with our final bill. The cloaks were one radal each, which was a bit expensive. I faltered for a moment, but since we couldn’t afford to underestimate the cold of winter, we had decided to go with the more expensive cloaks. This winter was definitely far too cold to take any chances. For the additional clothes alone, our bill came to five whole gidal. This included Druid’s clothing budget...though the clothes were mostly for me.

“That will be five gidal and one hundred twenty dal.”

Ah, we’re over budget!

“Well, I think we can let a mere hundred and twenty dal slide.”

Guess we have no choice?

“Just this once, okay?”

“Ha ha ha. So, when would you like us to settle our bill?” Druid asked.

He just laughed it off, didn't he?

“You could pay when you come pick up the altered cloak.”

“Okay. When do you think it'll be done?”

“Let me see... We have other alterations to make, so please come back in two days.”

I could see the staff working in the back, and they did look quite busy.

“Got it. We had a lovely time shopping here today, and I'm sure we'll be back.”

“Thank you! We hope you'll buy all your spring fashion here as well.”

“Oh, of course. Ivy will need some new clothes by then.”

What?! I angrily turned my head toward Druid, but he just patted it in reply. The pats were nice and all...but still.

As we left the shop, a cold breeze blew right through us. Since we had been in the warm shop for two hours, it felt like ice!

“I'm looking forward to the day after tomorrow.”

“Me, too. By the way, are you really going to buy me spring clothes?”

“Well, yeah. We should start buying our clothes at proper stores now, Ivy.”

“Are you sure we'll have enough money?”

I suddenly felt something move in the bag my slimes were in. With a start, I looked down at it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It just jiggled all of a sudden.”

“It jiggled?”

“Yeah. I wonder what’s up?”

“They’re probably mad that you’re worried about money, Ivy.”

“Huh? Oh, please.”

I tried to laugh it off, but my bag jiggled again. *What? Was it really because I was worried about money?*

“Did it just jiggle again?”

“Yeah.”

“Guess that means they want to take care of our money problems.”

I thought that couldn’t be it, but my bag jiggled yet again, and Druid noticed it, too.

“How uncanny,” he marveled.

“Don’t encourage them! If I rely on them too much, I won’t be able to take care of myself.”

“Nah, Ivy, *you* will be okay.”

What did he mean by that?

“If your creatures offered to bring you money, you’d stop them, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would. I want to do what I can on my own—including earning my own money!”

“Yeah, and *that’s why* you will be okay.”

Druid pumped his fist and promised to help me with my hunting and

gathering. But I still didn't understand what he meant by "that's why."

At that point, I finally noticed that Druid had relaxed a little. In the shop, he had looked more excited and energized than I'd ever seen him before.

"Mr. Druid, have you calmed down?"

"Oh, yes. I'm fine now."

"Good to hear. You surprised me a little back there."

"Ha ha ha. Sorry. It's just fun picking out clothes for someone else."

I looked at Druid and saw he had a shy smile on his face.

"Next time, please let me pick your clothes for you, Mr. Druid."

All the clothes Druid had chosen for me were so cute. *Even though they're bound to get dirty and torn up on our adventures. I better do my best to wear them with care.*

Chapter 229: Uniqueness?

We looked at the stalls along Main Street as we walked to the guild office. We'd been told that the guild in this village stood opposite that street. As we passed by the stalls, I noticed many of them were selling soup. In fact, about half of them were soup stalls.

"They seem to have a lot of soup in this village. Is that something they're famous for?"

Our dinner at the inn the night before had also included soup.

"No, there wasn't so much soup the last time I came here."

"Maybe because it's winter?"

"That's probably it."

I could understand that, since winter did make you crave warm things. It was fascinating how many different-colored soups there were in this village. It was pretty easy to guess the ingredients of the red and green ones. I could also imagine how an orange soup was made. But what went into purple soup? That wasn't an appetizing color... Ugh! Blue soup... I didn't think I ever wanted to so much as try that one.

"Look at all the colors." Druid frowned at the blue soup. *Thank goodness. If he'd said it looked good, I wouldn't be able to agree with him.*

"Yes. They all smell good, but I don't know what to say about how they look."

"Same. I'd never really thought about this before, but the way a food looks is actually quite important."

"Yeah, I think so, too."

The variety of colors was really astounding. Some of them were far too vibrant for food, and others were colors that didn't occur naturally in food. Maybe the point was to make each soup unique?

"I think that's our building."

Druid was looking at three buildings. They were labeled with the marks of the merchant guild, the adventurer guild, and the village watch.

"I'm a little nervous to see how things go for us." I lightly tapped the bag of goodies hanging off my shoulder.

When Druid took stock of the eight types of minerals we'd found in that cave, so many of them were unknown to him that we had no idea how much they were all worth. So now, we were going to the guild to sell five of each kind. We chose the smallest ones we could find, just in case. We also brought the three smallest of the blackstones that Druid said were rare. We needed to earn fifteen radal for our rent at the inn as well as twenty-five gidal for our clothes. We probably didn't have enough, so the extra items we sold that day would determine the rest of our budget. If the forty minerals and three blackstones we were selling met our goal, the inside of our bag would continue to haunt us. Even without the minerals, it still contained the sparkling potions and the transparent magic stones.

"Can we get *that thing* appraised here at the guild?"

"Yeah, that's the plan. We can't use it if we don't even know what it is."

That thing was the black orb we got from the serpent. Since we had no idea what sort of power it contained, we were going to get it assessed. It was a hard decision to make, since we might possibly find out it was something terrifying or evil. But we'd reasoned it was better to know what it was than to remain in the dark.

When we entered the merchant guild, we found three people dressed

like adventurers talking with a middle-aged man by the entrance. As we walked by them, we caught snippets of a conversation about Hatow's guardian deity appearing deep in the forest.

Hatow's guardian deity? Druid also seemed intrigued. We stopped in our tracks a few feet away.

“Has anyone seen it?”

“Nah, only its tracks.”

“Only its tracks?”

“You idiot! Our guardian deity is a giant snake. The biggest serpent in the area. You'll know its tracks when you see them.”

A giant snake? I remembered the giant serpent we found deep in the forest. Its entire body was covered in a mysterious design, and it had seemed rather majestic.

“Oh, so that must mean it was definitely our guardian deity.”

“Yeah. Some people think it was bringing a herd of wood sprites with it.”

Wood sprites?

“Are you sure? Aren't wood sprites figments of the imagination?”

“Yeah, well, lots of people think they exist.”

“What are wood sprites?” the middle-aged man asked.

Oh, good, I'm not the only one who doesn't know what they are. Now I'll get to hear a little more about them.

“Never heard of them?”

“They're servants of our guardian deity. I hear they have black bodies.”

Black-bodied creatures? I thought back to the things I'd

encountered in the forest. A giant serpent and little black creatures... *It couldn't be, right?*

“The texts say the wood sprites can transform themselves into little black orbs, but they’re even shier than the guardian deity. Not many people have seen them, so people eventually started believing they were just figments of their imagination.”

The three adventurers continued to talk, but their words just spun around in my brain. A giant serpent and little black creatures... Creatures who transformed into orbs, too.

I glanced at Druid and found he was already staring at me. Our eyes met, and our faces both crumpled into painful smiles. We carefully scurried away from the adventurers so they wouldn’t notice us...

“If ya ask me, I’d love to see the guardian deity, but those *round black gemstones*? I’d die to see them just once.”

We stopped in our tracks.

“I heard just one of them will buy you a castle in the royal capital. Think that’s true?”

“I heard it is.”

“Well, those round black gemstones *are* legendary, after all.”

Icy sweat trickled down my back. We somehow managed to get our legs working again, and we quickly scurried away from the adventurers. Neither of us said a word. Then, after we made sure nobody was near us, we finally exhaled loudly.

“Ivy...do you think it’s possible?”

“Yes, it’s definitely possible...”

We both laughed nervously. Even then, after we’d moved to a more secluded area, we still caught snippets of the conversation about the

guardian deity. It seemed to be the talk of the town. People were saying that it had white markings all over its black body and that there might even be more than one wood sprite with it. Each thing they said perfectly matched our own encounter with the giant serpent and its babies in the forest. It was believed that the round black gemstone could bring people back from the dead. When I heard that, my brain immediately imagined corpses crawling out of their graves, and I had to shake my head to get rid of the image. It was the last thing I needed from Past Me's memories.

“What’s wrong? Your face is green.”

“I’m fine. But it sounds like that black gemstone has some pretty incredible powers.”

“Yeah, bringing back the dead... But I’ve never heard of anything like that, so I think it’s just a rumor.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. If that kind of power really existed, you’d be hearing about those black gemstones all around the world.”

Druid had a point. It was strange that these stories were only circulating in this village.

“Well, shoot...” Druid sighed. “At least we heard the rumors before we took it to get appraised.”

“That’s for sure,” I agreed, echoing his sigh. If we’d unknowingly shown our stone to the appraiser, things might have gotten pretty crazy. There was still the possibility that *our* round black gemstone wasn’t *the* round black gemstone, but it was too dangerous to find out. We would have to keep it safely tucked away in our bag.

“There’s no point in staying here. Want to go sell our things?”

“Sure.”

I followed Druid out of our little corner and toward the counter. They had just finished serving the person before us, so we were ready to be seen.

“Hello there. May I help you?” A stern woman with slanted eyes greeted us from behind the counter.

“We collected some minerals from a cave. Can we sell them here?”

“Of course. Please place the items you wish to sell here.” The lady of the guild held out a tiny basket, and we put five of each of the eight types of minerals we’d decided to sell in it. We set the last three small blackstones on top and handed it back to the lady.

“Thank you. Please wait just a moment.” She took our basket and handed us a number. We took it, sat in some chairs, and waited. She took each stone out of the basket one at a time and looked at them. She must have had the appraise skill.

After a little while, we heard the clunking sound of a chair falling over, then we saw the flustered lady run off somewhere.

“Mr. Druid...”

“Yeah...must be rare. Let’s hope it’s not *really* rare.”

“Yep, let’s hope. Maybe we should have given her only two of each instead of five.”

“I think that’s the least of our problems. But yeah, looking back, five was kind of lot.”

Watching a lady of the merchant guild blush bright red in excitement, and then seeing the man she whispered to clumsily run upstairs, was definitely *not* how I’d wanted to spend my day.

Chapter 230: Goal Reached!

“So sorry we had to bring you up here like this.”

We were sitting in a private room on the second floor of the merchant guild. A bespectacled man named Agilk set some tea on the table in front of us. He was quite the gentleman.

“Oh, no worries.”

The man sitting on the sofa across from us was Drough, the head appraiser here. He was about fifty years old with a bit of a belly...and, for some reason, he’d been sniffing erratically through his nose ever since we got up here.

“So, how—*sniff!*—did you come across these minerals?!” Drough demanded, leaning forward eagerly.

“Eep!” I squealed, almost dropping the teacup I was about to grab. My tiny shriek even made Druid jump in his seat beside me. He gave my head a few gentle pats to calm me down. I looked at him and saw that he was unabashedly glaring at Drough as thick creases formed between his eyebrows.

“Drough! Don’t scare our guests!” Agilk snapped, giving Drough’s head a hard whack. It made quite the noise and sounded like it hurt. “So sorry about that,” he apologized to us.

“Yeah, sorry,” Drough echoed. “I got a bit carried away.”



“It’s all right. So, which minerals are we talking about, exactly?”

I admired Druid for staying calm in the face of such a rabid man. Still, his voice was a lot deeper than usual. He sounded a bit angry.

“These four types here...” Agilk lined the stones up on the table. We’d found each of them in the cave deep in the forest. One of them was yellow, another was a mixture of light blue and brown, the third was flecked with green, and the fourth looked like an ordinary rock at first sight.

“Could you please explain why you called us up here to drill us about these four stones?” Druid asked stiffly. As a former adventurer, he really knew how to sound intimidating. Even Drough flinched a little at the sound of his voice.

“Well, it’s like this, you see...”

“It’s all your fault, Drough. You scared his poor daughter.”

Meaning me? Oh, I just realized I’m still clinging onto Druid’s arm.
I sheepishly changed my sitting position.

“Are you okay?” Druid asked me.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

My answer filled Agilk’s and Druid’s faces with relief.

“Okay, about these four minerals...they can only be found on the sacred ground where the guardian deity of Hatow Village lives.”

Yikes...we sure brought in some ridiculously rare gems. And did he say “sacred ground where the deity lives”? Is that what that cave deep in the forest was? If he’s right, that means we entered without permission. But Snakey didn’t look angry about it...

“I’m sorry, but we don’t know much about this village’s guardian deity. Is its sacred ground a cave, by any chance?”

Agilk nodded. “That’s right. It’s supposed to lie deep in the forest. We’ve searched for it many times, but there were always too many monsters for us to get close enough.”

Was our cave really that deep in the forest? I didn’t remember—I was too focused on watching my footing. And there were monsters? I suppose there *were*, but Ciel got rid of them all for us, so I didn’t even know what kind of monsters they were.

“Now I see...” Druid murmured cryptically in reply. I wondered what he was going to say. We both knew he had to choose his words carefully.

“I’m terribly sorry, but even I do not know where that cave is,” Druid finally said.

“Oh? But those gems...”

“We got lost along our way, and we sort of arrived at the cave by accident.”

I should probably keep my mouth shut... I don’t really understand where Druid is trying to go with this. I’ll just try to keep my face as neutral as possible. I’d hate for my expression to expose Druid’s lie.

“You got lost?”

“Yes... We dropped our compass.”

A compass was one of the most important things a traveler could carry...except I didn’t have one. Druid showed me his compass once, but we didn’t use it at all on our way to Hatow. We just followed Ciel, so we had no need for it.

“You dropped your compass? Well, that must have been terrible.”

“It was. We wandered off the village road to pick some herbs, and then we got lost...”

The part about picking herbs was true, though it was Ciel who had led us there. I remembered how we lost track of time picking all the rare herbs deep in the forest. We dried about half of them to use in cooking.
Oh, right! We still have some herbs that I was going to sell to the guild. I completely forgot about that.

“Since Ivy was with me, I really panicked. And after wandering lost for about six days in the forest, we finally found that cave.”

“Six whole days! Well, you must have been terribly worried.”

“I was. I had no idea where we were.”

Wow, Druid's a good actor.

“So, you stumbled upon a cave and found these gems inside?”

“Of course not! Caves are far too dangerous to just walk into. We made camp near the cave entrance and happened to find some stones on the ground there. These are the stones we found.”

Actually, they were stuck into the walls deep inside the cave. Ciel had led us through the cave, and Sora and Flame had their own little expedition on the way. Druid only told me later that caves were normally considered quite dangerous and you should never just wander into one freely. Sora, Ciel, and I were all pretty surprised by what Druid had to say, and Druid hung his head and groaned when he saw how surprised we were.

“Then how—*sniff!*—did you ever make it to this village?!” Drough snapped, getting excited again. He really was kind of scary.

“We found the tracks of a large animal or monster near the cave. So we followed those tracks, thinking they were our last hope. And when they ended, we found ourselves back on the road, right between Oll and Hatow. You can’t imagine how relieved I felt in that moment.”

Animal tracks? That's right, the adventurers did mention that their

guardian deity left big tracks. So that's where he got that from. I'm impressed.

“Wait a minute...you found tracks going from a cave to the village road?”

“No,” Agilk snapped at Drough.

“Why not?” Drough pouted. “We finally have a chance to find our guardian deity’s sacred ground!”

“This year’s winter is far too dangerous. Some people have already died from the cold.”

What?! People died? Well, it really has been unusually cold.

“—Sniff!—Yes, but the tracks might disappear.”

“They’ve probably already disappeared, as I’m sure you’re well aware,” Agilk said with a tired sigh.

The tracks have disappeared? But if Druid’s story were true, I don’t think enough time would have passed for the tracks to go away. Sometimes tracks can last for months. Then again, his story’s fake and so are the tracks.

“Why wouldn’t there be tracks? They could easily still be there.”
Druid sounded just as perplexed as I was.

“The guardian deity’s tracks disappear after a couple of days.”

A couple of days? Huh.

“Oh, really? Then I guess we just had a spell of good luck.”

“Yes, I suppose you did.”

“By the way, would it be possible for the guild to buy our gems?”

Oh, right! If they came from sacred ground, maybe we can’t sell them after all? If we can’t, that really throws a wrench in our plans.

“Oh, we’ll buy them!” Drough shouted, slamming his hands on the table. “Actually, if you still have more of them, please let us buy all of them from you.” He bowed sharply. That guy sure seemed to make everything overly dramatic.

“Err...I think we have a few more.” Druid seemed a bit uncomfortable with Drough’s eager intensity, the complete opposite of his earlier behavior.

“Thank you very much. How many more do you have? Oh, how lovely!—*sniff!*—I’ll get to feast my eyes—*sniff!*—on such gems again!” Drough had reached peak levels of excitement. His face was bright red.

“Before we show you, could you please break down the prices of each gem?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, well, from right to left, we have two radal, one radal, one radal, and three radal.”

We definitely should have brought only two of each instead of five of each. The yellow gems were two radal each, the blue and brown mix were one radal each, the green speckled gems were one radal each, and the ones that looked like ordinary rocks were the most expensive at three radal each. And since we had five of each, that made thirty-five radal in all. It looked like we’d reached our financial goal much faster than we’d anticipated.

Chapter 231:

I Never Want to Do This Again

Druid and I checked the balance of the family bank account we'd made for our travel fund. Between the one hundred fifteen radal we'd just added and the one hundred ninety radal we'd had in there before, our current total was three hundred and five radal... *Wow. That's three hundred and five gold plates.*

“Well, that was quick. Hm? What’s wrong, Ivy?”

“I just can’t believe all this is real.”

I felt like I was walking on air. I checked our balance one more time... Three hundred and five radal...

“Are you okay?”

“I...erm...” I tried to give a proper answer, but my mouth was making noises that even I couldn’t decipher. I needed to calm down.

“Phew... Okay, I’m okay.”

“Well, I don’t blame you for being shocked. We earned a whole hundred radal just between Oll and here.”

In times like this, the difference in how we thought about money became quite clear. Druid was surprised that we had raised one hundred radal in such a short period of time. I was surprised by that as well, of course, but my main response was fear. I held in my hand a card that contained over three hundred radal! The contents of my bag already scared me...and now my bank card scared me, too. I supposed the card was better, though, since only people who were authorized to take out the money could do so. But I still had to be very careful not to drop it... *Agh, it’s no use. I’m still terrified.*

After Drough told us what our total would be, Druid and I were given a little time to talk things over in private. We ended up deciding to sell all the gems we'd found except for the blackstones. We thought that the sparkling potions and transparent magic stones were enough of a liability already, and now we also had the supposedly ultra-rare round black gemstone in the mix. We didn't want the responsibility of carrying such a valuable bag to be any heavier than it already was.

"Does everything look good to you?" Agilk asked from behind us. We turned around and saw that the lady who had originally helped us was with him.

"Yes, thank you. We were surprised that you helped us so quickly."

"Thank you for your business," Agilk replied with a light bow.
"Will you let us know when you've determined the prices you'd like for the remaining items?"

Two of the types of gems we were going to sell hadn't been priced. Apparently, their market fluctuated so fast that you didn't know the price until the seller sold them.

"Oh, we don't care what the price is, so please go ahead and sell them for us."

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Yes. We trust you to take care of it for us."

Agilk looked a bit surprised, but he quickly agreed to the plan.
"Very well. Once we've sold the gems, we'll transfer the funds to you. There will be some paperwork, so once the money has gone through, please come by the guild to complete it. I'll keep the paperwork with my colleague here," he said, indicating the lady.

"All right. Then we'll be on our way for today." Druid bowed, so I bowed, too. And Agilk even bowed to me. The lady next to Agilk looked

at him in surprise... *I wonder why?*

After we'd gone several meters away from the merchant guild, my legs turned to jelly. I must have been holding all my tension there.

"Things really went way beyond what we were expecting...but at least it's over now." There was a listlessness in Druid's voice. He was probably just as exhausted as I was.

"Thank goodness for that. From now on, whenever we're selling new things, let's sell just one at a time."

"Of course. But I don't think I ever want to do this again."

"Neither do I. But good idea asking them to sign a contract."

Druid had given one condition to Drough and Agilk for our little cave gemstone sale: They would keep our identity a secret to their buyers.

"If the adventurers and aristocrats in this village found out about us, they'd make a big fuss about it. I just put up a line of defense, that's all."

Drough and the others had been a little taken aback by Druid's request. After all, his discovery was something to boast about, not to keep secret. When they asked for an explanation, Druid smiled and said, "I like peace and quiet." But that didn't seem to convince them.

Our next stop was the adventurer guild, to report the dump we had found in the forest. This was an easy errand since we were only delivering news, but the person we spoke to snapped at us a little and it scared me. I guess it really was frowned upon to just start a dump anywhere without permission. When we left the guild building, the tension melted out of my shoulders.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just hungry."

"You know, we haven't had lunch yet."

He was right. We'd spent the morning shopping for clothes, which took longer than expected. Then our stop at the guild also lasted much longer than we'd planned.

We looked around as we walked back down Main Street toward the inn. And, once again, all those colorful soups stood out.

"Even though the colors look so gross, I'm still curious about them." I glanced at the blue soup. There was even a light pink soup next to it.

"Me, too. I think they're interesting *because* we don't know what the different colors taste like."

So Druid felt the same way. We stopped in our tracks and watched the blue soup chef at work.

"Well, we did get a little more money today than we thought..."

A little? More like a lot. Oh, but I guess to Druid it really was "a little" more money.

"Let's have a small celebration."

Huh? Celebrate with blue soup? I don't know if I'd like that.

"Well...wanna give it a try?" Druid stared at me.

Yeah, I just can't shake my curiosity! "Of course."

From what we'd seen so far, only three stalls sold blue soup. It was a mystery whether or not they had the same flavor, so we decided to buy some from the stall we were already at.

"Welcome! What'll it be?"

"One bowl, please."

"Sure thing. Remember to return the bowl when you're done."

"Okay. How much is it?"

"Eight hundred dal."

We paid the vendor and took the soup and a spoon. We sat down on some nearby chairs and stared critically into the soup bowl together.

“So...should we do rock-paper-scissors?”

“Sure.”

Since the blue soup didn’t look appetizing at all, we had to psych ourselves up to eat it.

“Ack!”

And I lost. A little smirk formed on Druid’s lips. He sure seemed to be pleased with the result.

“After you.”

“Urrrgh.” I resigned myself to my fate and sipped a spoonful of soup.

“Well...how is it?” Druid looked worried.

“Hmmm...” I wasn’t sure. It was kind of sweet. In fact, it was terribly sweet. That was completely unexpected. “Well, um...it’s sweet.”

“Sweet?”

“Yeah.”

“Sweet? That’s all?”

“Yeah.”

The soup had other ingredients in it, but the broth was so sweet that I couldn’t taste anything else. *Good thing we only bought one bowl.* I handed the soup to Druid and watched him cautiously take a sip.

“Ugh!” Druid groaned the instant the soup hit his mouth. I guess it was too sweet for him to handle. I remembered Druid didn’t like sickeningly sweet desserts. He only ate desserts with a tangy taste.

“Was it too sweet for you?”

“A little, yeah. But wow, what an incredible flavor.”

We pushed ourselves and somehow managed to finish the bowl off between the two of us. That was the first time I’d ever worked so hard to eat soup. We gave the bowl back to the vendor and took a little walk on Main Street to refresh ourselves.

“Do you think the over-sweetness was just because of that vendor?” Druid asked.

“You think so? But the other soups smell the same way, so they might all be sweet.”

If they used different ingredients, they would have smelled different, but many of the soup stalls had the same odor as the one we’d just eaten from. That made me wonder if this village had a sweet tooth.

“If they are, then we might never be able to buy soup in this village again.”

“You’re right. It’s even a little too sweet for me. Oh, but what about the white soup we had at the inn? That kind was only a little sweet.”

“Oh, you’re right. Their special soup was really good. Maybe we just picked a bad vendor?”

Maybe it really was just that one soup vendor? But I’m not brave enough to try any other soups, so I’ll just ask someone at the inn. But wait a minute...

“Mr. Druid, you’ve been to this village before, right?”

“Many times, yes. But I was only here a couple of hours on each trip, so I don’t know it very well.”

Okay, that made sense.

“Oh, I just remembered!” Druid said. “I wanted to go to a store that sells items for adventurers. Are you too tired for that?”

“I’m okay. What do you want to buy?”

“Well, I was thinking of buying a magic box with a lock.”

A magic box with a lock?

“I thought we’d need one to store our valuables.”

Our valuables... Did he mean the potions people would scream about if they saw? Since they were so sparkly, I realized we’d definitely make a scene if we accidentally pulled one out of our bag. Would they be protected in a locked box?

“I’d also like to look at some other magic bags with extra features.”

Magic bags with extra features? That sounds like fun. Okay, now I’m excited!

Chapter 232: Treasure Hunt

We were in a shop just after the second right turn off a side road from Main Street. It was a magic item shop that one of the watchmen on patrol had recommended to us.

“This is the place.”

“It sure is big. I can’t wait to see what’s in there!”

“Seems like you’re more excited about this than the clothing shop.”

“I am!”

“Hmm...I wonder why that is?”

I ignored the frustration in Druid’s voice and skipped into the shop. At first, I thought it would mostly sell tents, but they really did sell all sorts of things. Everything was jumbled together, too, so I felt like I was on a treasure hunt.

I peered deeper into the store and spotted an oddity: a woman. She looked my way, so I gave her a nod.

“Hello, ma’am. Is it all right if we have a look around?”

“Oh, sure. Let me know if you see anything you like.”

“We will, thank you!”

Oh, good. I was a little scared at first because she looked so stern, but she seems normal.

“Ivy?”

“The shopkeeper said we could look around, so let’s hunt for treasure!”

Druid laughed at my excited attitude. “A treasure hunt, eh? Yeah, it

does feel like one.”

There were magic items packed onto the shelves of the store. There were also piles of items in the aisles between the shelves, leaving the question of what exactly the store had in stock an utter mystery. We had to find the things we needed in these piles, but that was actually kind of fun. We could even find items we’d never seen before along the way, so it truly was a joy.

“Okay, so we’re looking for an item box and a magic bag with extra features.”

“Yup! I’ll do my best to find them.”

We split up to search for the items.

“Magic boxes are box-shaped, right? Should I just look for any old box, then?” I pulled each box off its shelf and looked them over one by one. Shops like this had magic items on the shelves that showed the functions of the other magic items. This shop had one of those devices, so I was using it to see what the items could do.

“I’m not finding anything.” The item in my hand read “Trash box. Odor-free.” *I guess if you put trash in there, it won’t stink? I don’t get it. And I can’t find what I’m looking for, either...*

“Well, I’m stuck.”

“Ivy, did you find anything?”

“No. What about you?”

“I found two things.”

He showed me a box three centimeters wide and another one that was bigger. I used the magic item to read their functions. The tiny box said “Magic box: 30 liters. Time-freezing. Lock equipped. Registered: 2.” The bigger box said “Magic box: 30 liters. Lock equipped. Registered: 3.”

“What does the ‘registered’ part mean?”

“It means you can make the box remember which people are allowed to open it.”

Wow! I didn’t know items like that even existed. “So which is the key?”

“This type of box uses the palms of those registered as the key. That way, you don’t have to worry about losing your key and going through that nightmare...” Druid’s eyes grew distant.

“Did that ever happen to you?”

“My mentor lost his key once. That really was a nightmare.”

That sounds like his mentor. He’s really done a lot of stuff. But that made me think of another question.

“What happens to magic boxes if you lose their keys?”

“You just have to give up.”

“Wow, that’s really sad.”

“Yeah, it is. I’m thinking of adding the guild as one of the registered openers, just in case.”

“Just in case?”

“Hardly anybody bothers stealing boxes that open by palm print, seeing as they can’t open them. But there are some fools out there who are up for a challenge. They always fail and wind up throwing away the boxes, though. So if your box becomes ownerless like that, it’ll wind up back at the guild.”

Now I see. Yes, it does seem like registering the box with the guild would be a good idea, just in case.

“So, which one do you think is better?” Druid asked me.

“Well, I’m not sure. What do you think?”

The boxes were different sizes, but they both had the same capacity: thirty liters. The only differences were the number of registered people and the time-freezing feature. If we wanted to put our potions in there, the ability to freeze time would probably be important.

“Maybe the smaller one?”

“Yeah, since they both hold the same volume, the smaller one probably is better.”

“And the bigger box doesn’t have the time-freezing function.”

“Hm? Oh, right. We do need to be able to freeze time.”

Apparently, Druid had forgotten we had rare potions to keep. They wouldn’t deteriorate as quickly as lesser potions, but even genuine potions would weaken over time. That’s why people often put potions into magic bags with time-freezing functions, which stop the genuine ones from deteriorating. Lesser potions, on the other hand, would still get weaker in these types of magic bags, albeit more slowly.

“Then I guess we’ll go with the smaller box. Thirty liters is enough room for all the essentials, right?”

“I think that’ll be enough.”

All we had in our magic bag at the moment was Sora’s potions and Flame’s magic stones...and also the twelve round black gemstones.

“Now we just need a magic bag with extra features.”

I remembered some magic bags piled on the shelves I’d been looking at earlier. “Mr. Druid, there’s some crammed into those shelves over there.”

“Okay, let’s look through them one by one.”

“Okay.”

“Whatcha looking for?”

As we approached the shelves, we heard a voice behind us. We spun around in surprise, as it sounded quite close. We saw a woman standing motionless near us.

“We’re looking for magic bags. We were hoping to find something with some extra features.” There was an edge in Druid’s voice. Apparently, the woman had startled him, too.

“A magic bag with extra features?”

“Yes. Do you carry them?”

“Yeah, we’ve got some basic ones where you’re standing.”

Basic ones?

“What kinda functions d’ya want?”

“Well, do you have any bags with a camouflage feature?”

Camouflage?

“I think we do. What d’ya want it for?”

“We want to keep some valuables at the inn where we’re staying. The staff there are very nice people, but we have the other guests to worry about.”

“Ah, I gotcha. Sit tight.” And with that, the lady disappeared into the back of the shop.

“You mean we’re not going to carry it around with us?” I asked Druid.

“Crime tends to surge in the wintertime, so I figured it would be dangerous to keep it on us.”

I’d heard that some people resorted to crime to make it through the winter. I wondered whether that was going to happen in Hatow.

“Still, the idea of leaving a bag filled with valuables in our room scares me, too.”

Yeah. It's terrifying.

“So I was thinking of locking the items in a magic box that only specific people can open, then putting that box into a magic bag that only specific people can see.”

“I’m surprised to hear about these camouflage magic bags.”

“You didn’t know they existed?”

“No, sir.”

“Huh. Well, magic bags have all kinds of interesting features. I don’t even know how to use some of them.”

What kind of feature could that be?

“Found some. One of ’em even has an alarm function. Whaddaya think?”

“An alarm function?”

“Yeah, an alarm goes off if somebody tries to use the bag without turnin’ the magic function off. I thought an alarm might be just what you’re lookin’ for.”

Hm? Wait, you can turn a magic bag’s features on and off? I’ll need to have Druid explain more about this to me later.

“And this one has a poisoned needle instead of an alarm.”

A poisoned needle? I’m not sure about that... I don’t want to come into my room to find a dead body on the ground.

“We don’t need the poisoned needle, but the alarm would be nice.”

“Here’s another one.” The lady held up a wooden box. It was beautiful, with some very ornate carvings. “Same size and features as the other box, but this one’s got a tracin’ function.”

A tracing function?

“What’s a tracing function?”

I guess Druid doesn’t know, either.

“If your box ever gets stolen...well, look.” The lady pulled a transparent plate out of the box. She said the word “trace,” and the plate lit up.

“This light shows where the box is. If the plate is farther away from the box, it’ll light up with an arrow. Follow the arrow and it’ll take ya right to the box.”

The lady walked away from the box, and the plate really did light up with an arrow showing which direction the box was in.

“I see. It’s an anti-theft feature.”

“Yeah. Whaddaya think?”

“How much does it cost? It sounds expensive.”

The lady smiled and gave a proud nod. “The magic bag and the magic box are one radal all together.”

“What? Wow, that’s a great deal.”

I tilted my head. *Was it really a good deal? One radal sounded pretty expensive to me.*

“Well, I had this thing hidden in the back, so ya can have it for cheap.”

Chapter 233: You're Making Me Blush

The lady's name was Rose, and she was the owner of this shop. I was surprised to meet her, since all the owners of this sort of shop I'd met before were men.

"Here ya go. Thanks for stoppin' by. The features are in good shape, so as long as ya aren't too rough with the items, they should last ya a long time."

We took the magic box and magic bag with extra features from Rose. I was so excited to use them.

Druid paid for the items and promptly wandered off to look for other things. He wasn't looking for anything in particular; he was just browsing for fun.

"Thank you so much, ma'am. We'll be careful with these."

"Ha ha ha, good. That's the spirit, hon'. Oh, by the way, I got some novelty bags to show ya."

She presented me with a magic bag she'd brought out from the back. It was smaller and held less than the others she'd shown us, but she said it made time go faster.

"Does it really do that, ma'am?"

"Yeah."

I knew all about the time-freezing feature, but I'd never heard of an item that sped time up.

"But what would you even use it for?"

"Dunno."

What? Even she doesn't know?

"If ya put anything in this bag, it deteriorates or rots real quick. So I can't think of anything to do with it."

That's strange. Why is she trying to sell me this bag? Oh, right! She said she was going to show me "novelty" bags. Yeah, this bag definitely is a novelty. It breaks and rots things and is completely useless.

"Next, we got this beauty. I call it The Bag of Horrors."

The Bag of Horrors? What a weird name.

Rose slid her hand inside the bag and flipped the switch that turned it on. Apparently, all the bags' functions were operated like this one, with a switch by the handle.

"See?"

"Eek!"

Rose pulled her arm out of the bag. Her hand was broken off, and there was a bloody stump in its place.

Hearing my scream, Druid ran over from the shelves where he'd been browsing. "What are you doing?! Go get a doctor!" When he saw Rose's maimed arm, he frantically dug for a bandage in his bag.

"Don't freak out. I'm okay, I just *look* like I'm wounded," Rose laughed.

"What?!" Druid and I both yelled.

Rose explained that the bag didn't harm people—it only made them *look* that way. And after a while, her missing arm suddenly reappeared and all the blood completely vanished. Her arm really did look like nothing had happened to it.

"It's completely useless, but don'tcha think it's a hoot? Perfect for scarin' people."

Perfect for scaring people... Druid and I both sighed. Rose laughed heartily at us. She was defying my first impression of her. Where had that icy facade run off to? I was also surprised to see she had so many magic bags whose functions were basically useless.

“I haven’t heard you laugh like that in a long time, Rose.” A calm voice broke into our conversation. I looked around and saw a gentle-looking man emerge from the back of the shop.

“That so? But I have a good laugh over something fun at least once or twice a day.”

“Yes, but I don’t often hear you laugh that loudly.”

“Well, I ain’t had funny customers like these in a while. What a lucky find.”

A lucky find... Did she mean us? I guess that means she likes us? But she called us funny...I’m not sure if that’s really a compliment.

“Yes, that really is unusual for us. I haven’t seen you folks around. Are you travelers?”

“Yes, we’re in the middle of a journey and we’re wintering here in Hatow.”

“Aha. Well, I’m Delos, Rose’s husband. Nice to meet you.”

So he’s her husband. He has such a relaxing aura about him.

“Excuse me...” another customer called out to Rose.

“What is it?”

“I’d like to buy this.”

“Arrgh, what a hassle. I wish they’d just leave the money and go.” Rose heaved a loud sigh and rushed over to serve the customer. Delos laughed at the sight of it. What a peculiar pair they were.

Rose was pointing to something on the shelf and talking to the

customer. She was probably showing them where the item was, which made me realize the things we bought had come from the back of the shop. Was there a difference? Rose had described the items on the shelves as “basic” earlier. She pulled something off the shelf next to her, and it looked well made to me.

“The items Rose keeps on the shelves are the ones she calls ‘not that bad, so we might as well sell them,’” Delos explained to me as I watched the exchange with a look of confusion.

“*Not that bad*”? All the items on the shelves looked like well-maintained, high-quality products to me. Druid also had a look of bemusement on his face as he picked up an item and examined it.

“The things Rose thinks are truly great never go on the shelves. We keep all that stuff in the back.”

The two items we purchased had come from the back, meaning that Rose had deemed them superior. That made me feel kind of special.

“Oh, what a hassle. Just take care of it yourself!” Rose’s angry voice suddenly boomed through the shop. I looked over and saw that the adventurer who was with her looked angry.

“What’s going on, sir?”

“Is everything okay?” Druid asked, standing protectively between me and the irate shopkeeper.

“Rose is only nice to the customers she likes. It’s a real liability, having her mood change like the wind,” Delos complained. He smiled warmly, though, as he watched his wife calculate the customer’s bill. Somehow, watching this couple made me feel like something was off.

“Your wife clearly has a very keen eye. As far as I’m concerned, all the items on the shelves are of fine quality,” Druid said.

“Well, yes, Rose has the connoisseur skill.”

Connoisseur skill? Wow, I didn't know a skill like that existed.

"I just *can't* with these people."

"Rose, don't take out your frustrations on our customers."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Her anger had visibly vanished in a flash when she talked to her husband. They sure had a great rapport.

"Ivy, we should head back."

"Right. Oh, when are we going to register people with the box?"

"Let's do it tomorrow. We have to go to the clothing shop anyway. By the way, can we register the box with any guild we'd like?"

"Sure. Merchant guild, adventurer guild...either is fine. Are ya gonna have it registered? That's what they say ya should do, but it's a real hassle so not many adventurers bother, y'know?"

"I know it's not that common, but we can't be too careful."

"I guess you're right."

"How are the winters in Hatow?" Druid asked.

"It's hard to predict this year's winter," Rose sighed, looking out the window.

"Maybe that's why I feel like there's going to be a lot more crime this year. It's really unfortunate." Delos looked genuinely troubled. So Druid was right that there was more crime in the winter.

"The village watch increases its patrols this time of year, so at least the stupid bastards get caught right away." Rose looked thoroughly annoyed.

"This village must have a very good watch, then."

"Yeah, a few years back the watch had a scandal where a bunch of 'em turned out to be in cahoots with a criminal organization...but I guess they're pretty good."

I wondered whether that was the same organization I'd helped expose. Their circle of harm really did spread far and wide.

"Come on, Rose, they're more than *pretty good*. You know the current captain is famous for being a genius."

"Hah! Is that so?"

Delos apparently had a high opinion of the captain of the watch, and Rose seemed to neither agree nor disagree. She seemed...bashful? *Is it just me, or is her face a little pink?*

"He's our son," Delos explained.

"Oh, really? You must be very proud."

"Humph."

So that's why Rose was blushing. Oh! Just look at the twinkle in Delos's eyes as he looks at his wife... Wait, now I'm blushing!

"Watching those two is making me blush," Druid murmured. He sounded uncomfortable.

"Yeah. I feel all ticklish inside."

Rose's pink smile straightened back into a sharp line. As I stood there, wondering what had caused her sudden mood change, she sighed and said, "But...I'm not sure what the future holds for him."

"Rose." Delos's eyes clouded over a little.

Was something wrong? A pained smile formed on Rose's lips.
"They'll only know he's a genius when something truly awful happens."

A mood that I couldn't quite place filled the air. Could it be that this village was already struggling with a terrible problem?

Chapter 234: Guess It Was a Dud

“Hello, you two.”

“Hi, ma’am.”

“Good afternoon, ma’am.”

When we got back to the inn, we were greeted by Salifa, the innkeeper.

“How did your shopping go?”

“Very well! Thanks for telling us about such wonderful shops. We managed to buy everything we needed and more.”

Salifa smiled back at Druid. “I’m sure you did. Dola knows all the best stores here in Hatow, so ask away if you need anything!”

Oh, maybe we should ask about the soup! “Um, has Hatow always had a lot of soup vendors?”

“No, a few years ago somebody started selling a soup sauce. They began popping up after that.”

A soup sauce? Does that mean all the soups are sweet?

“Did you try some while you were out? Dola says a lot of the newer vendors are duds. Was yours okay?”

Dud vendors? Could it be that we just happened to pick a dud? “Well, it had a very...unique flavor,” I said tactfully.

“It was a dud,” Druid said bluntly.

Well, he did make an awful face after he tried the soup. I could understand why he’d want to call it a dud.

“Oh dear. I’ve heard the dud soups are quite something. Are you

feeling okay?”

“Yeah...for now.”

“Good to hear. Oh, that reminds me! Dola told me you two won’t be needing supper all next week. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

This morning, we told the staff we wouldn’t need supper for a week. *Oh no! I just remembered we forgot to see what kind of groceries they sold here. I still have some ingredients in my magic bag, but we need to stock up on a few things before it starts snowing.*

“Listen, I have a favor to ask of you both,” Salifa said.

“What is it?” Druid looked confused.

“I accidentally made too much bread. Could you take some off my hands? I’ll sell it at a discount. Please?”

Bread?

“Do you mean white bread?” I asked.

“Sorry, today it’s bread with a small amount of tree nuts mixed in.”

So it isn’t white bread...too bad. But bread with nuts in it sounds good, too.

“Mr. Druid, can I buy some?”

As a bread lover, I wanted it! And Druid knew about my bread addiction, so he laughed and nodded.

“I’ll take some bread, thank you.”

“Thanks. I don’t know what possessed me to make thirty portions.”

Thirty portions? This inn has fourteen guests, plus the couple who run it, plus me and Druid...huh, that’s eighteen people.

“I had my mind on something else while I was mixing the dough, so

I messed up. It happens a lot. If Dola finds out, he'll be mad."

It happened a lot? Salifa did seem a bit ditzy, but I hadn't realized she was that out of it. *I actually think that's kind of adorable.*

"Salifa?"

"Yes?"

"We'd like to cook our own suppers, but could I ask for some bread every day?" Druid asked.

What? Just bread? If we could get bread from her, I'd be in Heaven. My heart raced as I stared at Salifa, waiting eagerly for her answer.

"Of course. We could do that."

Yay! I get to have bread every day!

"Well then, thanks in advance."

We parted ways with Salifa and headed back to our room in high spirits.

"Thank you, Mr. Druid."

"Hm? Oh, about the bread?"

"Yeah. Having bread every day makes me feel like a queen."

"Don't forget ryce. I'd like to eat some of that, too."

"Of course."

Once we were back in our room, I let my creatures out of their bag. "Sorry we're back so late, guys. I'll just set your dinner potions out for you."

While I set out Sora's and Flame's potions, Druid set up a bunch of items in our room, including the one that muffled our voices and the one that set off an alarm if someone else set foot inside. Then he opened the magic box we'd bought earlier that day and put our potions and other

valuables inside.

“Ivy, come over here so I can register you.”

“Okay, kids! Don’t drink up those potions too fast.”

After I finished setting out the potions, I walked over to join Druid. The inside of the lid on the magic box was glowing faintly.

“Put your palm on this light, okay?”

“Okay. Wow, I feel kinda nervous.”

Druid laughed. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt.”

I pressed my palm to the glowing area, and a beam of light shot from right to left.

“There. All done.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes. You’re registered now.”

I wasn’t expecting anything in particular, but I still felt a little disappointed.

“Ivy, is it okay if I register, too?”

“Huh?”

I made a face. Druid’s question felt quite strange to me because there was no need for him to ask it.

“Well, after all, you were the one who got these potions and magic stones.”

“No, Mr. Druid, we got those things together. So, I have no problem with you using them however you want.”

“Oh? Okay.”

It surprised me how restrained he could be sometimes. *Where was that restraint when he was buying clothes for me earlier? It’s a mystery to*

us all.

“Okay, is there anything else you’d like to put in the box?”

“Nope.”

I looked inside the box. There were ten sparkling potions, as well as a black light that was probably coming from the black gemstone. Then we had several blackstones, plus the transparent red magic stone. The collection was breathtaking. I forced myself to look away and shut the lid.

“If it makes a clicking noise, that means it’s locked.”

Since just closing the lid didn’t lock it, I softly pushed on the lid. Then I heard the click, so I knew it had to be locked.

“Which brings us to the real issue at hand.” Druid held up the camouflage magic bag. I gave him a questioning look, and he answered, “Where should we keep it?”

“Oh, right! We need a good spot.”

Since it had a camouflage function, we could change its appearance. But if somebody touched it or put something else on top of it, they might notice.

“I guess it’ll have to go on the bookshelf if we don’t want anyone touching it by accident.”

The room had an empty bookshelf. It was thin and tall, so it was the ideal place to keep our bag.

“But that’s the sort of place anybody would think to keep a camouflage bag. If somebody saw just one thing in the bookcase, wouldn’t that draw attention to it?”

“You’re right...I hadn’t thought of that.”

But I was having trouble thinking of a better place for it. I opened the door to the cabinet. Piles of sheets and towels were folded up neatly

inside.

“Mr. Druid, why don’t we hide it in here?”

“In that cabinet?”

“Yes. It’s not full, so we can easily fit the bag in here.”

But wouldn’t the cabinet also be a predictable spot? I felt like I’d at least have more peace of mind if it were somewhere with drawers.

“Oh, I know!” Druid cried, looking at Sora. “Sora, Flame, Ciel, where do you think is the best place for us to hide our magic bag?”

Sora had finished eating and was doing its stretches. Ciel was also stretching for some reason. Meanwhile, Flame was already half-asleep. All their eyes moved toward the bag Druid was holding. Then all three of them looked at the nightstand between the two beds.

“In there?”

The three jiggled in reply. I didn’t quite know what to think since it wasn’t on our original list of candidates.

“Since it’s three versus two, I guess we’re going with the nightstand.”

“Guess so.”



I put the magic box inside the magic bag and set it on top of the nightstand. I had to move the little lamp on the stand to make it fit.

“Okay, could you put your hand on the bag? I’m going to activate its function.”

When you wanted to use this magic bag’s function, whoever was touching the bag while the button was pushed would be unaffected by it, so I touched the bag and waited for Druid to push the button. This was a first for me, and my heart was racing.

“There!”

Huh? Over already? I gave Druid a questioning look. But judging by the expression on his face, the function had worked. To me, though, the bag looked no different.

“Is this bag really invisible to other people?”

I took my hand off the bag and looked at it from a distance, but I could still see it clearly. Well, that made sense because I was touching it when the switch was activated.

“Hm? Hold on, I’ll stop it for a minute.” Druid pushed the switch again. “You stay there, Ivy, and tell me if it’s been switched on.”

“Okay.”

Since I wasn’t touching the bag this time, I knew it should become invisible to me once the switch was turned on. The moment Druid flipped the switch, the bag vanished from my vision.

“Wow, how cool! Mr. Druid, it really disappeared!”

“You can’t see it anymore?”

“Not at all!”

“Then we’re okay.”

I walked over to the nightstand and touched the spot where the bag

used to be. Even though I couldn't see it, I could feel it. I cried out in awe, and Druid laughed at me.

Chapter 235: A Special Treat

“We’re finally done!”

“Good work. That was quite a lot.”

I was drying my laundry in a spacious area of the inn...and I definitely had plenty of it.

“Well, that’s because we didn’t do our laundry for weeks, and we also had the inn’s sheets to wash. Boy, are my arms tired.”

Druid could use cleaning magic, but since it didn’t work well with his physique, he lost a lot of magic whenever he used it. Because of this, I was helping him with the laundry. I say “helping,” but he couldn’t wash or squeeze out items with only one arm, so I was the one doing the washing while he cleaned out the dirty water and dried the rinsed items.

“Sorry I couldn’t help more.” There was gloom in Druid’s voice. He sounded really depressed.

“Oh, don’t worry about me.”

Since he lost his arm, Druid had been washing his clothes at the laundromat in Oll, whose owners were skilled in cleaning

magic. It cost money, but they owed him a favor, so he got a discount. When I wanted to do laundry during the journey to Hatow, that was when I found out Druid didn’t use his cleaning magic. And when I asked him what he did about his laundry, that was when I learned of the existence of laundromats.

Hatow also had a laundromat, but Druid said we shouldn’t go there. It had a bad reputation for returning garments with rips in them. When he

saw the sheer volume of laundry I had to do, he felt guilty and offered to send it to the laundromat after all. But since I didn't really mind doing laundry, we gave up on that idea. In fact, I actually liked washing the dirt out of things—it felt good to me. Plus, I'd regret sending our things to the laundromat if they came back to us ripped up. Still, doing the laundry ourselves had been quite the ordeal, and Druid felt bad about it. I felt refreshed now that I saw everything hanging up to dry, though. It just filled me with a sense of *peace*.

However, Druid regretted making me take care of all the laundry. He usually didn't let his negative emotions show, but he was so depressed then that I could tell at a glance. I was worried he would sneak out to the laundromat the next time we needed our laundry done.

Hmm...what should I do? Oh, I know! A treat!

“Hey, Mr. Druid...please take me to that bakery Mr. Dola recommended!”

“Oh, you mean the donut place?” He seemed a bit frazzled by my sudden suggestion, but I decided to just ignore it.

“Yes, that's right. Donuts! As a treat!”

“A treat?”

“Yes, because I worked really hard!”

If insisting I was okay didn't get rid of his sadness, then I would switch up my tactics and ask for a treat. That might make Druid feel better about everything. *I hope... I know he'll feel better.*

“Okay. Dola did say their sweets were good.”

Yay, he smiled! What a relief. According to Dola, the sweets at that bakery were pricier than the others...but he didn't say they were *extremely* expensive, so I thought we should be okay. *Gee, now I wish I'd asked Dola what their price range was.*

“He said they had twenty-five kinds, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see what they have!”

“Okay, since this is a special treat, let’s buy all twenty-five.”

“Huh? All twenty-five?”

“Yeah.”

Twenty-five expensive treats? My special treat had gotten much bigger than I intended. I looked at Druid...and the gloom in his face was completely gone. He was now smiling with excitement. *Well, I guess it’s okay.*

“Let’s eat them together.”

“But it’s *your* treat, Ivy.”

“They’d taste better if we ate them together, though. I can always eat all twenty-five by myself some other time.”

“True, we don’t have to get all twenty-five of them today. We can buy them anytime.”

“Not just anytime. This is just a special treat. It has to happen only after a hard day’s work.”

“Oh? Okay, then...in that case, I’ll be counting on you next laundry day.”

“You got it!” I proudly pounded my chest...and immediately after that, my stomach growled. *Ugh, how embarrassing! But, y’know...* “Just the thought of donuts makes me hungry.”

I’d been wrestling with the laundry ever since breakfast. It had probably taken over an hour. So while it was still a little early for lunch, it made sense that I was hungry considering all the exercise I’d just done.

“Pfft—ha ha ha! Want to go right now?”

“Sure, let’s go now! Mr. Druid, we don’t want to keep those donuts

waiting.”

This is great! It's been ages since I've had sweets! I remembered back to when I used to buy myself something sweet as a little reward whenever I did some hard work. Even cheap sweets gave me plenty of joy. And yet, we hadn't eaten any sweets since we arrived in Hatow, unless you counted that sweet soup we had the day before. But that wasn't a proper dessert—it was sweet but not at all tasty. So, technically, I was starved for sweets. That was why I felt happier than usual to go eat some. And since Dola's clothing shop recommendation was spot-on, I had high hopes for this donut shop.

We stopped by our room to pick up Sora, Flame, and Ciel, and then we went to the donut shop.

“Have you finished your laundry?” Dola asked as we were walking out. He was busy cleaning the entryway.

“Yeah, that's why we're donuting.”

“Donuting?”

Oops! I was so excited that I gave him a weird answer.

“I'm giving her a treat for doing all my laundry for me.”

“Oh, now I get it. Yes, those donuts are very tasty. You'll love them.”

“I know; I can't wait!” *Agggh, I really can't wait.*

“About what time will you be coming back? Should we leave your bread for you in the dining hall?”

“After donuts, we're stopping by the guild and then the clothing store to pick up our clothes, so we should be back by the evening. And yes, we'll take our bread in the dining hall, thank you.”

“Right-o, Ivy. Be sure to go with cocola. That's my favorite flavor.”

“Cocola? Okay. Thank you.”

We turned to walk down Main Street. According to Dola, the shop was nestled deep in the back.

“Okay, go to the third cross street...or was it the second?” I asked, trying to remember Dola’s directions.

“It’s the second right toward the gate,” Druid answered. He seemed to have the directions memorized perfectly, which was a relief to me. That way, we wouldn’t get lost on our way to the donut shop.

“Then, after the turn, it’s the third left,” he continued.

“Aye, sir!” I had listened to Dola give the directions to the donut shop just like Druid, but my memory was worse than I thought. Flustered, I let Druid lead the way.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just a bit upset that I didn’t remember the directions.”

“That’s not like you... Oh, maybe it was because you were focused on the donuts instead of the directions?”

Donuts over directions? You know, I *was* thinking about all the donuts I’d ever eaten before and... *Oh, was I really distracted by the donuts?! Come on, Ivy, I know you said you were starved for sweets earlier, but honestly...*

“Wait...was I right?”

“Hee hee!”

Arrrgh. I just hate it when somebody sees right through me. I’m so embarrassed.

Chapter 236: Donuts and Meat Skewers

“I think this is the place.”

I was a little surprised when we arrived at the donut shop. I imagined it would have some cute, frilly decorations since it was a bakery, but it was quite plainly designed instead. However, the sweet aroma of donuts that filled the air punched my appetite up to the max.

“It smells so good.”

But it hurt a little to smell something so good when I was starving. Especially when there was such a long line, even though it was barely lunchtime. I had heard this was a popular place, but my goodness!

“I’m excited to try them.”

“Me, too. I’m super excited!”

We got in line. My heart bubbled with excitement while we waited our turn. After standing there for hardly a minute, I noticed someone else getting in line behind me. There really was an endless string of customers.

After waiting in line for a while outside, we finally made it inside... where the line continued to snake on. The shop wasn’t just plain-looking on the outside; there weren’t many decorations in here, either. I looked around for the donuts, and I finally saw a neat row of them in front of the person at the head of the line. As I watched them buy their food, I noticed that in this shop, you told the staff which donuts you wanted and they grabbed them for you.

“They use seven different flavors of donut dough,” Druid said, pointing to the menu on the wall.

“Seven flavors?” I read the description on the menu and saw that not

only were the doughs different, but the cream on top came in different flavors, too.

“Welcome. What’ll it be?” When we finally got to the front of the line, a pretty young lady asked us for our order. “Have you decided yet?”

“Can we take one of each kind, please?” Druid asked.

The lady’s eyes widened in confusion. “Er, you mean *all* of them?”

“Yes.”

“All right, just a moment, please.” The lady scurried awkwardly into the back, and we stared after her in confusion. Then she returned with a man.

“I’m sorry, but three of our flavors have already sold out for today.”

Wow, they sold out before lunchtime? This place really is popular.

“Okay...” Druid sighed. “Then can we please have one of everything that’s left?”

“Sure thing. Sorry about that.”

“Oh, it’s okay. That’s the price of being popular.”

Little by little, the lady piled the donuts into a cloth-topped basket that she handed to us afterward. Druid took it and paid her.

Oh no! I was so distracted by all the donuts that I forgot to check their price. I looked at the menu posted on the wall. Eighty dal each... Yikes, that’s expensive. Um, so, since we bought twenty-two donuts, that makes one thousand seven hundred and sixty dal. My little treat wound up being much more expensive than I thought.

“Let’s go.”

“Okay. Thanks for the treat.”

“No, thank you.”

Druid had probably caught on to why I'd asked him for a special treat. That was why he was thanking me, for being considerate of his feelings.

"There's a park a short walk from here. It's not so cold today, so why don't we eat there?"

"Okay."

The sun was showing its face after a long absence, which was making our recent spell of cold weather ease up a little. *The sun sure is powerful.* But that thought lasted only a moment; it was still quite cold, so we bought some hot drinks. The sun's light was warm and all, but the wind was still icy cold. The cloaks Salifa had loaned us when she saw what we were about to wear outside were nice and warm, but that didn't protect my cheeks from the chill of the wind.

We sat on some chairs in the sunshine. Druid set the basket between us and removed the cloth.

"With so many choices, it's hard to decide where to start."

The basket was lined with neat little rows of the colorful donuts. It was impossible to tell what they tasted like just by looking at them, but each one looked more delicious than the last.

"I think this is the one Dola recommended," Druid said, pointing to one in the basket. I remembered that it was called "cocola." I took a closer look. It was covered with a dark brown cream frosting, and there were chopped nuts on top of it.

"Are you sure I can have it?"

"Of course. Here you go." Druid wet a towel in water and handed it to me. Being able to use magic really did come in handy at a time like this. "Squeeze it out first before you use it."

The towel did feel a bit too wet, so I squeezed it out and wiped my

hands with it. Then I handed it to Druid so he could do the same.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Okay, I’ll eat this cocola donut. What about you, Mr. Druid?”

“Hmmm...”

Druid didn’t have much of a sweet tooth, after all. “Maybe you’d like a donut with fruit on it?” I suggested. “It would be tangy and not too sweet.” I thought the sourness of the fruit should balance out the sweetness nicely. While Druid mused over the donuts, I took a bite out of my cocola donut. A bittersweet flavor filled my mouth, and the nuts paired beautifully with it.

“It’s so good. Mr. Druid, this one’s really delicious. It’s bitter-sweet.”

“Bittersweet, you say?”

“Yeah. This cream isn’t very sweet, so it goes down easily.”

“Do you think the other flavors are like that?”

“I’m not sure. But I think you’d like eating a donut with this frosting.”

Druid stared critically at the donut in my hand before choosing one from the basket. Then he took a bite. I was a little worried at first. I stared at him as he chewed, hoping it wasn’t too sweet, but the look that appeared on his face afterward made me relax in relief.

“Is it good?”

“Yeah. This frosting is a lot tastier than I thought it would be. The saucy stuff on top is a little too sweet, but it’s okay.”

That’s good to hear. We started eating the rest of the donuts one by one. Dola really knew his stuff—they were all so good. But twenty-two

was far too many.

“Let’s not stuff ourselves. We can save the rest of them for a snack later.”

“Good idea. Did you have enough, Mr. Druid?”



“Hm? Yeah, I’m fine.”

Is he telling the truth? He didn’t eat as many as I did. Maybe he couldn’t eat as many since they’re so sweet, but he definitely didn’t get enough food in his belly.

“Oh, look, Mr. Druid! Not that soup vendor, but the one selling that meaty thing next to it. Want to go there?”

Soup always hit the spot in cold weather, but I wanted to avoid eating any more of the strange kind from this village. *Oh, maybe I should ask Dola to tell me where the good soup vendors are. I trust him not to give me a bad tip.*

“Meat, eh? Yeah, I am craving something that’s not sweet.”

As I’d guessed, Druid couldn’t make a meal on sweets alone. I’d have to remember that for next time. *Come to think of it, we were so distracted by all the colorful soups that we never bothered to check out the other food stalls. Now I’m excited to see what kind of meat they sell here.*

“Let’s go.”

We left the park and headed for the meat vendor. The sign said they sold two types of meat skewers: hols and tein.

“I’ve never heard of those meats before.”

“I think hols and tein are different kinds of moo raised in pastures,” Druid explained. “And this village does have a lot of grazing land.”

That made sense. But still...hols and tein? I got the feeling I’d heard those words somewhere before...

“Do you want some, too, Ivy?”

“I am a little curious about the flavor, but I’m all fulfilled up.”

I should have left some room. The savory aroma of the meat skewer cart was giving my appetite quite the wake-up call, but sadly my stomach

was at full capacity. *Arrrgh, but it smells so good.*

“Too bad. Think you could have just one bite?”

Was I really gazing so longingly at the meat? And the phrase “just one bite” really was tantalizing.

“Are you sure you don’t mind sharing?”

“Of course I don’t mind. Food tastes better when we eat it together, remember?”

Oh, right! Hee hee. “Okay.”

Druid bought three skewers of each type of meat. I was surprised by how big the skewers were. *I guess donuts really weren’t enough of a meal for Druid.*

“Mr. Druid, please make sure you tell me when you haven’t had enough to eat, okay?”

“Well, I really did think I was full, but the smell of this meat made me hungry again.”

I wonder if that’s a thing? Feeling full from sweets... Well, with a savory smell like that, I was starting to feel lightheaded even after eating so much. We took the skewers back to the chairs where we’d been sitting before.

“Which one do you want to try?”

“Hm?”

“The hols or the tein. The tein is apparently the tender one.”

“Okay, then I’ll take some tein.” I took a skewer and bit into a piece of it. The savory flavor of the meat and the sweetness of the sauce filled my mouth with salty-sweet deliciousness.

“Mr. Druid, this is so good.”

“Glad you like it. Have you had enough?”

“Yes. I really did want just one bite.”

“Okay.”

Druid took the skewer back from me and ate with a big smile on his face. *I really do wish I'd left some room for more.*

Chapter 237: We're VIPs?

My stomach felt heavy. Unable to resist, I'd had another bite of meat even after eating all those donuts...and now I was beyond full. But it was a satisfying kind of full. Everything I'd eaten tasted so good. The only problem was that I was sluggish.

"I think I ate a little too much," Druid admitted.

I thought it was more than just a little too much. He ate as many donuts as I did, then he followed it up with six meat skewers. Granted, I did take two bites, but each skewer had three pieces of meat! I glanced at Druid. He was muscled and strong, while I was lean all over. I had the type of body that just wouldn't put on muscle. Maybe if I ate more, I'd get more muscles? *I had* managed to get a little taller recently because I'd been eating more, so it wasn't too far-fetched, right?

We arrived at the guild office and looked for the lady who'd helped us the previous time. She noticed us just as we spotted her.

"Welcome back. Is there anything I may assist you with?"

Huh? Is she treating us differently today? I looked at Druid, and he didn't seem surprised at all. Maybe it was my imagination.

"We'd like to register our magic box here. Is that possible?"

"Of course. Please wait just a moment. I'm surprised, though. Not many people have their boxes registered here."

"I can see why. It does take some time."

And you have to go through the trouble of bringing your box to the guild. I guess that's a bit of a hassle.

“I do see your point, but it *is* handy to have it registered with the guild.”

“I guess most people don’t realize that until *after* something happens to their valuables.”

True. Regret won’t bring your valuables back.

“Hee hee, yes indeed. If they don’t think of it until then, it’s already too late. All right, I’ve registered it.”

Huh? Already? But all she did was put it on top of a black board.

“Oh, yes!” the lady continued. “The sales of the remaining two minerals you entrusted to us went through just this morning, so I’ve transferred the funds to your account. May I have your signature, please?”

Druid took the documents and signed them.

“Thank you, sir.”

“And thank you for all your help.”

“But of course. Now, if you ever need anything else, don’t hesitate to stop by.” The lady gave a deferential bow.

This confused me again. *Yeah, something’s different today.*

“Thanks.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

We walked away from the lady’s counter and over to a little room in the corner of the guild lobby to check and register our earnings.

“Is it just me, or was that lady much more polite to us today?”

“We’re probably considered VIP business partners now.”

VIP business partners? “But why? We don’t have any more business to do with them.”

“Yes, but nobody at the guild knows that. Besides, there’s no telling

what else is in store this winter.”

I hoped this winter would be a quiet one. I would love to just relax and take it easy in the wintertime.

Druid checked our balance, then withdrew some money for our rent at the inn and our clothing. We’d completely forgotten to pay our bill at the inn yesterday. We both remembered right when we got back to the inn, and we shared an awkward laugh over it.

“We managed to sell everything without a hitch.”

“Yes, I’m glad about that. So, how much did we get for the last two minerals?”

“The white one was cheaper than I thought, but the other one was more expensive, so it was about as much money as I imagined it would be.”

Oh, good. Well, it wouldn’t really matter now if one of the things we sold went for much less than expected.

“Okay, our next stop is the clothing shop.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see our cloaks. This coat I borrowed is nice and warm, but it’s a bit too short for me.”

There weren’t any cloaks that fit me, so I had borrowed a coat, but it was a little too small for me and kind of uncomfortable to move in. Its sleeves were too short as well.

As we walked down Main Street, clouds covered the sun. The bit of warmth we’d felt before had disappeared, and the winds now seemed even colder on our skin.

We sped up our pace and were at the clothing shop before I knew it.

“Welcome!”

“I’d like to settle our bill straight away, if that’s all right?” Druid

asked.

“Of course. Thank you so much.” Baluka called to someone in the back, and a man emerged carrying a giant box. I gave him a little bow, and he happily nodded back at me.

“All right, the bill’s taken care of. Here are your purchases.”

Baluka pulled each item of clothing out one at a time and went over the alterations that they’d made. Since I’d let Druid handle all the negotiations, I had no idea what he was talking about, but judging by his reactions, Druid seemed satisfied by their work.

“Would you like to wear these out of the store?”

“Yes, please. Ivy, take off your coat. We’re going to wear our new coats when we leave.”

“Okay.”

I looked at the coat Druid handed me...and I froze a little. *Huh? I thought I asked for a black coat. This is light blue.* I really liked the color, but I’d decided against it since I would need better camouflage in the forest.

“Mr. Druid?”

“You should buy the clothes that you like.”

“But I’ll stand out in the forest.”

“It’s wintertime. I think you’ll be okay.”

Maybe he was right. Light blue would disappear into the snow pretty well.

“And if you still think you stand out too much, we’ll just have to hunt and gather some more things so we can buy you a second coat.”

“Oh, please...” But I couldn’t deny that it was a lovely color.

“Thanks.”

I slipped my arms through the coat, and it fit perfectly. It was so easy to move my arms. The fur around the collar wasn't that long, but it would keep my neck warm and dry.

"You look lovely in it, dear," Baluka cooed.

I felt my face flush red in embarrassment.

"Yeah, looks great!" Druid said. "It fits her perfectly, too. Your staff really are great craftsmen."

"Thank you very much!"

Druid also removed the coat he was borrowing to change into his new coat, and he looked quite handsome in it. Of course he did. He's Druid.

The staff neatly folded up the coats we'd worn into the store and placed them in our magic bag along with all our other newly purchased clothes.

Wait a minute...are there more things in here than there were yesterday? I counted the items in the bag again. Yeah, there's one too many. And what's more, the extra one is... I looked at Druid, and he sheepishly shrugged his shoulders.

"Thanks."

"Oh, good. I thought you were going to yell at me."

To be honest, I did feel like yelling at first...but once I realized what the extra piece of clothing was, I just couldn't get angry. It was a blouse that had such beautifully embroidered flowers around the collar and sleeves that I couldn't help but touch it in awe. But its design wouldn't work well for treks through the forest, so I'd returned it to the rack. I remember feeling a sense of disappointment as I put it back...but now that blouse was in my bag. I thought nobody had seen my little moment with it, but Druid had.

“When we’re in town or in a village, you should dress up in that blouse and go on a little date with your dad.”

“A date?”

“That’s right.” Druid had a smile on his face.

“A date with Druid...er, with my dad. Ha ha, sounds like fun!”

That’s right, Druid’s my dad now. Hee hee!

“Adorable.”

“What?”

Druid said something, but it was too quiet to hear, and he just shook his head when I asked him to repeat it. I didn’t really understand, but I supposed it wasn’t anything important.

We thanked Baluka and headed out of the shop. But before we left, he said:

“We’ll have our spring collection available just before winter ends, so we hope to see you then!”

And Druid seemed thoroughly intrigued by those words. It looked like we’d have to hunt and gather hard that winter.

Next time we go shopping, I’d like to give my dad a nice present, too.

Chapter 238: The Captain of Hatow's Watch

I thought we were going to head back to the inn first, but instead we found ourselves at Rose's shop.

"Mr. Druid, was there something else on our schedule?" I searched my memory but found nothing.

"I thought we could get something to make our laundry days easier."

So he still feels bad about that? But today was an anomaly—we usually won't have such big loads of laundry to do.

"Hm? Oh, didja folks have a problem with your magic box?" At the sight of Druid, Rose knit her eyebrows together as she sat in her chair by the counter.

"Oh, no, it's working just fine."

"Good. So, d'ya need help findin' somethin' else?"

Rose's personality really did change depending on whom she was serving. She was practically screaming at that other customer last time, demanding they find the product themselves.

"Yes, do you have anything that makes it easier to do laundry? What with my missing arm, I don't want to put too much of the burden on Ivy here."

"Um, but he's not putting a burden on me at all!" I insisted.

Rose laughed, "Ya guys are sweet." Then she pulled out a large book and started to skim through it. "Laundry items, eh? I think I have some..."

Apparently, the book was this shop's inventory. She flipped through

page after page, but she couldn't find what she was looking for.

"If it's a laundry item you're lookin' for, that would be somethin' with cleanin' magic or evaporation magic, right?"

"Yes. Do you have anything with either of those?"

"Hmmm... I coulda *sworn* I saw somethin' like that a while ago."

From the looks of the pair, I knew this would take a while, so I decided to browse the store. Since we were there specifically to find a magic box with a lock yesterday, we hadn't had much time to just look around. I took different items off the shelf and examined them. They were dusty in spots, but each one was well maintained. According to Delos, Rose said all the items on the shop floor were "basic," but they looked perfectly fine to me.

"There's so much variety... This one says 'For perfect kneading'?"

It was a mystery *what* you were meant to knead with it. I studied the item as I returned it to the shelf. Surely somebody would find it useful. The next thing that caught my eye was small and box-shaped with a row of dents in it. The item's description read "Freezes all liquids."

"Freezes? If I had the power to freeze things, I'd love to use it in the summer."

That way, I could make cold water, even on the hottest summer day. And since the item could freeze all liquids, that probably meant I could put cut pieces of fruit into the little dents and freeze them. *You know, I actually kind of want this one.* The experts were saying this summer wouldn't be as hot as the last, but the last summer had already been unbearably hot for me. *Maybe I should ask Druid if we can buy this.*

"Found something?"

Druid had approached me while I was entranced by the item.

“Yeah, I found an item I kind of like.” I showed it to him. He read the description and nodded.

“This would be great in the summer.” It sounded like Druid was on board. “Summer near the royal capital is even hotter than it is here, so this would come in very handy.”

So the royal capital is even hotter? That was news to me. One thing I’d learned about myself during my travels was that I didn’t handle the heat well. That was probably why this new bit of information made me feel gloomy.

“Want to buy it?”

“You mean right now? I think we can wait until later, when we leave this village.”

“But this shop is popular. It might be sold out by then.”

Oh, right.

“Tell you what, why don’t we ask Rose if she has any other freezing items?”

“Okay.”

We carried the item over to the front of the shop and looked at a few other products along the way, but none of them had the functions we wanted.

“By the way, Mr. Druid, did you find what you were looking for?”

“Sadly, no.”

“That’s too bad.” I had gotten my hopes up a little over the evaporation magic; it sounded like fun.

“Wait, where did Rose go?”

When we arrived at the place where she’d been sitting, she wasn’t there.

“Maybe she’s in the back?”

We looked at the door to the back room just in time to see Rose walk out of it. “Sorry, we just don’t have anything like that in the store. I’ll ask a friend of mine, if ya give me a minute.”

“Thanks. And sorry for your trouble.”

Rose shook off Druid’s apology and said, “Oh, whatcha got there?”

“Something we thought would come in handy this summer.” Druid handed her the freezing item.

She looked at it for a while, then nodded. “Great find. We always sell out of items like this in the summertime.”

I could definitely see it selling out in the summer.

“Ivy was the one who found it. Do you have anything else with this kind of function?”

“Sorry, but no.”

“Okay, in that case, we’ll take this one, please.”

“Lemme give it a final once-over before ya do.”

“Sure, thank you.”

We didn’t need any ice now that it was winter, but I was eager to give it a spin. I wanted to see what kind of ice it made.

“Here ya go. It’s all good.”

“How much is it?”

“Two gidal.”

I decided I’d try it out when we got back to the inn.

We paid and thanked her. As we turned to walk out of the store, we almost ran into a man near the entrance.

“Sorry, sir!”

“Oh, it’s all right, I wasn’t looking. Hope you’re not hurt.”

The man was wearing the watchman’s uniform of Hatow. He was a bit more muscular than Druid.

“Ah, hi there, sweetie. You’re home early today.”

“Um...I haven’t been home in two days, though.”

“Whoa, really?!”

From the way they spoke to each other, they sounded like family... *Oh, Rose said her son was captain of the watch! So this man must be the captain.* I stared at him until his eyes awkwardly met mine. I was a bit flustered, but I gave him a little bow and a greeting.

“Hello, sir. We were just doing some shopping.”

“Shopping, eh? Hope Mom isn’t giving you a hard time.”

“Um...no?”

“She’s been taking good care of us.”

The captain stared at both of us in wide-eyed disbelief. *Funny, I don’t think we said anything particularly odd.*

“Mom, you don’t usually take a liking to kids.”

Take a liking to kids? He must be talking about me.

“Well, I like this one. She doesn’t seem like a kid when I talk to her.”

My cheeks reddened a little from Rose’s praise. I always seem to get really embarrassed whenever I receive a compliment.

“Well, there’s a sight you definitely don’t see every day. Oh, by the way, I’m Tableau, captain of the watch. Nice to meet you both.”

“I’m Druid. A pleasure.” Druid gave him a light handshake, and I awkwardly offered my hand, too. I didn’t usually greet people this way, so

my heart raced a little.

“I’m Ivy. Very nice to meet you, sir.” I lightly shook Tableau’s hand, and his free hand gave my head a couple of gentle pats.

“How do I put it... She has a charm about her that makes you want to take care of her,” Tableau said to Druid and Rose.

A charm that makes him want to take care of me?

“I know, right? She’s so adorable.” Druid answered.

Rose and Tableau nodded in understanding. I wasn’t sure why, but it made me feel terribly embarrassed. I just knew my face was even redder than before.

Chapter 239: Forms of Address Are Important

I pressed my hands to my red cheeks and protested, “Mr. Druid, don’t talk like that about me!”

I decided I needed to give him a stern warning. He had been teasing me a lot more than usual lately.

“Come on, I wasn’t making fun of you.”

“Lies!”

“I’m speaking from the heart! It’s not teasing. I really do think you’re adorable.”

I really wish he’d stop that. My eyes darted nervously around until they landed on Tableau, who looked a little conflicted. *I wonder what’s wrong?*

“It’s okay if you don’t want to tell us, but...why did you two come to this village? And what’s your relationship?”

Why did he have to ask that?

“We come from a town called Oll. Ivy saved my life, so I’m traveling with her right now. If you need to know more, ask the guild in Oll. The guild master there knows us both.”

I saved his life? That’s a bit extreme.

“She saved your life?” Tableau looked thoughtfully back and forth between me and Druid. Druid just shrugged his shoulders, but I had no idea what was going on, so I stared at Tableau. “Forgive me... Looks like I was wrong,” he said. “Sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable.”

Um...about what? I shot Druid a confused look.

“Captain Tableau, Ivy can’t possibly feel uncomfortable. She didn’t even understand what you meant.”

Druid just called Tableau “Captain.” Maybe I should call him Captain, too? But I just don’t get what they’re talking about. I should make sure I understand, right? I don’t want to cause some misunderstandings later because I don’t know what’s going on.

“Excuse me, but...what are you talking about?” *I know it’s about me, but what is it?*

“Um, how should I put it...” Captain Tableau looked uncomfortable, so I turned to Druid for an answer.

“Ivy, you and I look like we’re father and daughter, don’t we?”

“Yeah.”

People told us that during our travels. They’d say things like “Oh, you and your daughter are so cute together.” It made me feel good to hear that.

“But you don’t call me ‘Dad,’ you call me by name instead, so that confuses the people we meet. If I weren’t your father, then you’d at least call me ‘Uncle,’ and we’re way too far apart in age to be friends.”

Oh, now I get it! If he really were my father, I wouldn’t call him by name. That would make our relationship kind of confusing to people.

“By the least-charitable interpretation, I look like someone who’s kidnapped you, Ivy.”

But Druid would never do something like that!

“Yeah, I did wonder that for a minute,” Captain Tableau admitted.

“What?! But why would you do that?” Hearing that some people saw Druid that way was a shock to me. Maybe if I started calling him “Dad,” we’d stop having this problem?

“A huge criminal organization was brought down earlier this summer. The reports said their victims were trafficked, which means some of them might have been taken away in secret. That’s why it’s our policy to check up on people with dubious relationships.”

Oh dear. The organization strikes again.

“Ivy? Um, I’m really sorry.”

Huh? Why is Captain Tableau apologizing? Oh, maybe thinking about that organization put a sour look on my face.

“Um, well, you see, sir, it’s like this...” *I should explain it to him, right? But I don’t really wanna.*

“It’s okay, Captain Tableau, Ivy wasn’t actually offended.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.” And I definitely wasn’t offended by Captain Tableau. He was just doing his job, and it was important to make sure of things.

“Okay.”

“I gotta apologize for my idiot son,” Rose said with a tired sigh.

Tableau frowned slightly. “Mom, I’m only doing my job.”

“Yeah, and ya did your job *wrong*.”

Captain Tableau fell silent. I got the impression that he could never win an argument against his mother.

“Wait a minute, don’t they have to check everyone who comes through the gate?” I asked.

I knew they used magic items to thoroughly inspect the people who passed through, as well as their guild cards.

“Yes, but some sneaky ones slip through the cracks,” Druid replied, patting my head.

Oh. I guess it isn't foolproof, then.

"If you have any other questions, would you like to ask 'em in the back room?"

*Oh, we've been standing by the shop entrance this whole time.
Guess we're getting in her way.*

"That's all right. So you come from Oll?"

"Hm?! Oh, yes, Oll, the town that was terrorized by berserk monsters not long ago."

"Yes, I heard you folks had a terrible time over there. Did you have enough food? I imagine you had some shortages."

"Yeah, but we were able to get the townsfolk to eat ryce, so I guess we solved that problem."

It was almost funny how quickly ryce's popularity had taken off, though it was probably because food scarcity was so rampant.

"Ryce? You mean animal feed?" Tableau looked astonished. I supposed that was a reasonable reaction.

"Yeah, it's good. Want to try some?"

"Er, no thanks."

Guess it's a hard sell.

"I gotta know more. How d'ya eat it, hon'?"

Wow. I wouldn't have expected Rose to be interested.

"You steam the ryce, then you form it into balls, stuff them with condiments, and eat them," Druid explained quickly. I wondered if that was enough for her to get a picture.

"Hm? I don't get that at all."

Yeah, I guess people who don't know what onigiri is would have a

hard time of it. Oh, I have an idea!

“Would you like me to make you some?” I’d love to have more rice-eating comrades in my life, and I’d also like to figure out what this village’s mother sauce is like.

“Oh, wouldja?”

“Sure. The rice balls are called onigiri, and I’d love to share the joy with others.”

“Well, then I’d love to have some. Bring enough for me, my husband, and my son.”

Huh? But didn’t Captain Tableau just turn them down? I glanced at him sideways and saw a grimace on his face.

“What’s wrong, Tableau? Ya got somethin’ to say?”

“Er, thanks, but I’m opting out.”

Well, I don’t want to force it on anyone anyway.

“Remember that time years ago when our crops got ruined by all that rain? When winter came, we were short on food. If we’d known back then that we could eat ryce, the kids wouldn’t have had to suffer like they did. Am I wrong?”

The sorrow and bitterness in Rose’s voice made my heart ache.

“Ryce is so easy to grow. Ya just sow it, and you got a bumper crop in no time. Even in that year with all the rain, we still had plenty of ryce. That was part of what saved this village, though. We fed it to the moos.”

“You’re right,” her son conceded. “I definitely don’t want another tragedy like that. Ivy, would you bring us some ryce?”

“Of course, sir.”

If I wanted to get them to think of rice as an emergency food source, maybe I should have them cook it with me instead of just bringing them

some. The water levels really changed the way rice cooked, and they'd also need to learn how to properly adjust the flame.

"Captain Tableau, Rose, would you like to cook the ryce with me?"

"What?" they both asked.

"You know, that's a good idea. There's a trick to cooking ryce well. If you want to know how to cook it in case of an emergency, it'd be better for you to watch Ivy and learn." Druid seemed to be on the same page as me.

"Ya got a point. Knowin' ya can eat it is one thing; knowing how to cook it is a whole 'nother matter." Now Rose seemed to understand as well. I looked at Tableau.

"Um, well..."

Hm?

"Well, Tableau may be skilled, but he's a dunce when it comes to cookin'," Rose explained. "No matter how many times I teach him, everything he cooks is awful."

Tableau's eyes shifted awkwardly. Rattloore was just as insecure about cooking as he was. I remembered how he cooked me soup once, since he felt bad about me cooking for him all the time, but I wouldn't let him do it again because, well...his soup was a lovely gesture of his feelings, but I sure struggled to fix its flavor afterward.

"As long as the instructions are simple, I'll be okay cooking this...I hope."

Um...I sense incredible insecurity from this one.

"Er, well, it is a little hard to cook, so you don't have to learn if you don't want to. Maybe bring someone who's good at cooking with you instead?"

“Pfft!” Druid spat.

“Ha ha ha ha!” Rose guffawed.

I’m sorry, Captain Tableau. I was trying to help you save face, I swear. I didn’t mean any harm.

Chapter 240: Reunited with Rice!

After the laughter died down, we set a date and time to make onigiri with Rose and her son. Tableau was engaged, so he was going to bring his fiancée along. I was a little worried she'd be turned off by the idea of cooking rice on a date, so I asked him about his relationship just in case. Tableau made an awkward face and didn't say anything, but Rose came to his rescue and said his fiancée was the queen of curiosities, so there wouldn't be a problem. This explanation made Tableau sigh...which made me wonder if his fiancee's strange whims and fancies ever drove him crazy.

"Well, good luck," I said to the young man.

Rose roared with laughter and gave my back a hearty slap. I still didn't understand her sense of humor.

We gave Captain Tableau our inn's address and left the shop. Rose, in a good mood now, was being unusually friendly with the other customers, though I'd occasionally hear the screams of one who got pranked by a magic bag's special functions...

Before we returned to our inn, we did some shopping: groceries for dinner, rice, meat, and other things.

"You're buying ryce, too? Don't we already have a lot?"

"Since they're grown in different regions, they might cook differently, so I want to test out the local crop."

Before we left the town of Oll, one of the farmers had given us a huge supply of rice. They said it was a little token to thank us for teaching everyone how to use it, but the amount we got was easily enough to last

both of us through winter. Thanks to his gift, we had no need to buy any rice, but I did want to test this village's rice to see what it was like.

"I see, that makes sense. Well, let's drop into the shops as we pass them, then."

"Okay."

On Main Street, the first shop we passed was the vegetable stand. It was a big store, seeing as it was facing Main Street. It had the usual assortment of vegetables as well as some of the town's specialties. I checked with the greengrocer about which vegetables were best cooked and which should stay raw, and then I made my purchases.

Next, at the butcher, we were able to buy cuts of meat from two different types of moo: the hols and the tein. Finally, we went to a dry goods store to check out the local rice. As we thought, rice was cheap since it was considered livestock feed. The shopkeeper looked confused by our request—we had to reassure him three times that yes, we really did want rice—but we finally got what we came for. I supposed it was unusual for travelers to buy livestock feed.

Back at the inn, the tantalizing aroma of bread filled the air. It smelled so good that it made me hungry, even though I'd just eaten. We returned to our room and took the slimes out of their bag. Druid flipped the switch on the magic item that made their voices inaudible outside the room.

"It's okay for you kids to talk now."

The three bounced with glee at Druid's announcement. Well, Flame didn't bounce so much as roll around.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

"Te! Ryu-ryuuu."

Mrrrow.

I guess spending half the day in a bag is no fun.

“Think we should go to the dump tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Sora, Flame, Ciel, we’ll be going to the forest tomorrow, so you’ll all get to have plenty of fun.”

All three jiggled happily in reply. Since they each had their own signature jiggle, it was cute to watch.

“By the way, Mr. Druid, are you sure you’re okay with plain onigiri? You like the grilled ones better, right?”

I remembered that Druid preferred the grilled onigiri since he liked strong flavors, so he’d been a little surprised when I described uncooked onigiri to Rose and her son.

“Oh, remember the onigiri you made during our trip? The ones with the sweet and spicy meat mixed in?”

Onigiri with sweet and spicy meat? Was he talking about the ones I’d made by mixing in meat with the rice since the onigiri wouldn’t make a proper meal by themselves? *I remember those. They were really flavorful and tasty. I think Druid asked for seconds, too.*

“When you talked about ryce, I remembered those onigiri and wanted to eat them again.”

Oh, really? Well, hearing him say he really wants to eat my cooking is kind of flattering.

“Okay, we’ll make that kind of onigiri with Rose and her son, then.” Just one kind probably wouldn’t be enough, though. *What other flavor of onigiri should we make?*

“Hearing you talk about ryce made me just want to eat plain ryce again. It’s been so long! Can we have that?”

“Yeah, that sounds really good to me right now, too.”

Oooh, rice. What should I cook? Druid seems to like rice bowls with meat on top. Oh, and we just bought some moo meat! The names of the moo meat, as well as what it looked like, was jogging something in Past Me's memory.

“I’ll make gyuu-don.” *Oops! I used the wrong word... I looked at Druid. He was laughing at me. Yeah, I know, I say strange words sometimes.*

“Sounds good. Can’t wait.”

Druid’s smile was so pure that I just had to smile, too, and... *Wait, stop! I don’t have time to waste being cozy.*

“Mr. Druid?”

“What is it?”

“Do you think I should call you *Dad*?”

If calling him by his name made people suspicious of us, I thought I should probably change that.

“You should call me whatever you want to call me.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t care what people say. Just be boldly and unapologetically you.”

He’s right. It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong. But I’m not really happy having to explain our relationship to other people all the time. Then again, the idea of suddenly calling Druid “Dad” out of nowhere...it’s embarrassing. Well, actually, I have called him Dad once or twice before, but that was more a spur of the moment thing.

“Ha ha! It’s okay. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“I won’t. Thanks.”

“Now, want to make dinner?”

“Sure.”

As I steamed the rice, I cut up the moo meat. I also chopped the vegetables and braised them in a sweet and spicy sauce. Once the rice was done, I poured a beaten egg all over the braised meat and vegetables. (I say “egg,” but in this world, it’s called hexa fruit.) Then, once the egg was half-cooked, I turned off the fire and let the residual heat cook it the rest of the way through. Just as I was scooping the rice into bowls, Dola came up to the second floor.

“Whatcha got there?” He looked quite curious, either because of the way the food looked in the bowl or because of the rice itself.

“It’s a rice dish called gyuu-don. You put braised meat and vegetables on top of some rice and that’s it.”

“Ryce?” Dola had a strange look of surprise in his eyes.

“Yes, rice.”

Dola stared hard at my rice bowls. *Er, I’d kind of like to finish cooking dinner, if you don’t mind.* “Um...would you like to try some?”

I had made a little extra just in case Druid wanted seconds, so I had enough to give Dola a sample.

“Is there enough for Salifa, too?”

“I think so? Only if you both take just a little, though.”

I would no longer have a second helping for Druid, so I’d just have to give him an extra-big serving and apologize.

“Then we’d love to have some if you can spare a little.”

I got another bowl from my room and filled it with rice and toppings.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Dola walked downstairs with a big smile on his face. *I*

wonder why he came up here in the first place.

“What’s up? You came by our room to get another bowl, didn’t you?”

Druid, who was getting our things ready for our trip to the dump tomorrow, came into the kitchen.

“Dola showed up, and I wound up giving him your second helping of dinner.”

“Oh, that’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

I was a little confused by his reaction, but I went ahead and served our bowls of gyuu-don.

As we sat down to eat, I scrutinized the texture of the rice. *I think I cooked it a bit too dry. But if that’s the only difference, I think it’ll work just fine.*

“Which type of ryce did you use today?”

“The stuff from Hatow.”

“Okay, yeah, it’s a bit different from the ryce you usually make. But it’s still delicious.”

It feels so good to feed someone and hear them tell you the food was delicious. Even though there wasn’t very much left for a second helping for Druid, it was still a lovely meal.

“My compliments to the chef.”

“My compliments to the eater.”

I had Druid take care of the dishes and clean up so I could start making our after-dinner tea in our room. But just as I was about to go back in there, a very flustered Dola came flying up to the second floor.

“Sorry to bother you!”

“Huh?!”

“I came up earlier to tell you Salifa made bread, but I completely forgot.”

Oh, so that's why he was up on the second floor in the first place!

“It's okay, we forgot about it, too. We'll come down and get it right away.”

“You can come anytime. Oh, and that...ryce bowl? It was great.”

“I'm glad you liked it.”

“Could you teach me and Salifa how to cook ryce sometime?”

“Sure!”

“Thanks.”

Dola hurried back downstairs. Poor thing. This was their busiest time of day.

I went back to our room and told Druid about the bread. He went down to the first floor to fetch it while I got the tea ready. Sora and the others were doing their after-dinner stretches.

Wait...huh? I feel like I'm forgetting something...

“I'm back,” Druid said.

“Agh! The laundry!”

“Ah!”

We rushed away to get our laundry. Since it was so cold, everything we'd washed was freezing. We weren't sure if they'd dried properly, but we took them back to our room anyway. And, well...thank goodness everything was dry.

Chapter 241: Getting Slime Food!

“Be careful out there; it’s cold. And look for a place to take shelter if it starts raining. When the rain is this cold, you may suddenly find yourself freezing to death if you’re not careful.”

“Thank you.”

We trekked into the forest on the tail of some stern warnings from the gatekeeper. I wanted to give my creatures a chance to play for a really long time today. Ever since we arrived in Hatow, we’d been busy every waking moment with winter shopping and visits to the guild.

Too bad it was so cold.

“My head hurts.”

“Can’t you do something to keep your face warm?” Druid asked.

“You mean, like wrap cloth around it?” I responded earnestly.

“Actually, you shouldn’t. If you cover your face, we’ll be driven away from the village.”

“Oh, that’s right!” I had forgotten that covering your face was forbidden in Hatow. If we did cover our faces, they’d think we were intruders and might not let us back into the village.

“Well, if you get too cold, I’m sure it’d be okay to cover your neck and chin. But probably not in this milder level of cold, I’d assume.”

It already felt quite cold to me. Would it really be wrong for me to cover my face? This was going to be a tough winter.

I looked over my shoulder and saw that we had walked pretty far

away from the gate. After I checked to make sure nobody was near us...

“Okay, you can come on out!”

I opened the bag and out jumped Sora with a big bounce. Ciel followed with a much more graceful landing than Sora. Then came Flame. It looked like it was about to fall out of the bag like it usually did, so I gently lowered it to the ground.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora bounced gleefully around us. Ciel returned to its adandara form and gave a big stretch.

“Sorry we kept you guys cooped up for so long.”

Ciel and Sora really did look more at home in the forest. And Flame...well, Flame looked most at home on top of a blanket. Ciel took the lead and walked us deep into the forest. I looked at the three creatures. Back in its true form, Ciel had grown more dignified than before. Maybe it was its firmer muscles? And Sora was just as crazy as ever about Ciel, slamming affectionately against the adandara as it walked. Flame sat atop Ciel’s back, looking quite satisfied. Let’s just say that Sora and Flame were more than carefree.

“Where do you think we’re going?” I asked.

“I’m sure we’ll be safe wherever we go.” Druid checked for creature tracks as he followed Ciel. “I’m not seeing any big animal or monster tracks near the village.”

“Yeah, neither am I. It’s mostly field mice and wild rabbits.”

After a while, we arrived in a spot that smelled sweet.

“Flowers at this time of year?” Druid asked.

“I don’t see any.”

We looked around us but saw no flowers. I gave Ciel a questioning look and found the adandara was also examining the area.

“Ciel?”

I gave the area a soft search for auras, but I found none that were moving.

Mrrrow.

“What’s wrong?” Druid and I both asked in unison, which surprised me a little. Feeling a bit embarrassed, I approached Ciel. Sora had also jiggled over to the adandara and was watching something. I followed its gaze and saw a patch of tiny white flowers. They were quite pretty.

“Yikes!” Meanwhile, Druid had a look of disgust on his face. Were these flowers poisonous?

“Mr. Druid, do you know what these flowers are?”

“Yeah. People call them *corpse blooms*.”

Corpse blooms...what a morbid name. “Is that the name of this flower?”

“No, the flower’s name is just *snow*.”

Snow... That’s a cute name. But people call them corpse blooms? They were about fifteen centimeters tall, with tiny blooms of five white petals.

“Why do people call them corpse blooms?”

“Because on years when they bloom, there’s extra snow and more people die than usual.”

So that’s why they’re corpse blooms. “How do you think they got such a bad name?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, these snow blooms are doing a good thing, warning us of the snow.”

“Warning us?”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t seeing these flowers give people time to get ready for a snowy winter?”

“Oh, that reminds me, they do go by another name. I think they’re also called *messenger blooms*. ”

“See, I like that name better.” Calling these flowers corpses was just cruel. They were too pretty for that.

“The more provocative name probably made a bigger impact.”

I guess he was right; the word *corpse* would get people’s attention. Still, I wondered if these flowers blooming really did mean that this winter would be harsher than normal.

“We’re ready for a harsh winter, aren’t we?”

“Let’s check when we get back to the inn. We’ll also need to let the guild know that we saw these blooms.”

If we tell the guild about the flowers, would they help everyone get ready for the winter? Well, I guess it’ll all be in the guild master’s hands.

“Thanks for showing us these flowers, Ciel.”

Mrrrow.

Druid made a note of where the flowers were, then we headed for our true destination: the dump. After a while, it came into sight.

“Huh, this village’s dump is smaller than the others I’ve seen.”

“It is,” Druid agreed. “Judging by Hatow’s size, they could probably stand to have a dump that’s twice as big. Maybe the village has a tamer or retainer?”

The dump was indeed much smaller than I thought it would be. It made me worry that there weren’t many potions, but at a quick glance, I saw there were plenty. That was a relief.

“Sora, Ciel, don’t stray too far, okay? Also, we don’t need any

special potions or magic stones, all right? You hear that, Flame?"

After making that request of my creatures, I got to work picking up the things we needed.

"How many more swords do we need?" Druid asked.

I thought back to the number of swords I'd counted the night before. Since I fed Sora two swords per day, we had enough to last another ten days. I wasn't sure how many more swords I should pick up, though.

"We have ten days' worth back at the inn. We should be okay as long as it doesn't snow."

"Yeah, if it snows, the swords will get buried."

He was right—whenever the snow got too thick, there were times when you couldn't pick up anything from dumps at all.

"Should we just take as many as we can? I don't think it would be a waste of time."

He was right. Sora would never let swords go to waste. "Okay, let's do that."

I let Druid handle the swords while I collected potions. Once my bag was full, we were ready to go. If we came here one more time before it snowed, we could probably gather enough to last us through the winter. I'd have to count everything once we got back to the inn.

"Okay, I'm back," Druid announced. "I think I picked up over thirty swords."

"Thanks."

Druid's bag looked just as full as mine.

"Okay, do you think the kids behaved today?" he asked.

"Don't worry, I asked them not to make anything."

My heart raced a little as we headed toward the creatures. "Hey,

guys. I just got lots of meals for you.”

My eyes darted around Sora’s and Flame’s general area...and there were no treasures on the ground. I was so relieved by the sight that I could just feel the tension melt from my muscles. *Oh, thank goodness.* I didn’t want to have to add anything else to the magic box.

Mrrrow.

“Hm? What’s up, Ciel?”

Ciel was rubbing its face against mine. That was its way of saying “I’m going away for a little while.”

“Are you going hunting for lunch?”

Mrrrow.

“Okay, be careful out there. We don’t know what kinds of monsters live in these parts.”

I gave Ciel’s head a little pat, and it closed its eyes and smiled.

“I haven’t heard any news of monsters more powerful than an adandara out there, but do be careful,” Druid told the creature, giving it a light pat on the head.

Mrrrow. With a cheerful swish of its tail in reply, Ciel elegantly bounded off into the forest.

“Dang, what a fast runner.” By the time Druid finished that sentence, the fiercely running Ciel was already out of sight.

Okay, maybe we’ll do a little exploring in the forest until Ciel gets back. Sora has looked kind of antsy since we got here.

“Sora, would you like to explore the forest?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“...ryuuu,” Flame groaned as if to say, “I’ve had enough.”

“Flame, you’re so lazy,” Druid said.

Flame stretched up tall in reply. Was it doing that in protest? If so, it was the cutest little protest I’d ever seen.

“Pu! Pu, pu, pu, puuu.”

“Okay, okay, just a minute!” I picked up Flame and walked over to Sora. *I wonder if we’ll find anything before Ciel comes back?*

Chapter 242: Are You Lost?

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora’s voice boomed through the woods. Its voice was a little louder than usual today—it must have been in an especially good mood to finally be back in the forest.

“Sora, we can’t head too far into the woods, okay?” I followed after Sora as it bounced ahead. I couldn’t shake the feeling that it wanted to go very deep into the forest.

“Puuu?” Sora stopped in its tracks and turned back to look at us.

“There might be dangerous monsters or animals out there, Sora.” I made a face right after I said this. I’d been scanning the area for auras and hadn’t noticed any. This was strange.

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked.

“Well, um, I’m not sensing any auras around here.”

“Hm?”

“I know that the creatures who don’t like the cold might have already started hibernating for the winter, but animals and monsters who don’t mind the cold ought to still be out. It’s weird that they aren’t.”

Usually, whenever I walked through the forest, I would always sense auras moving about. I would figure out which were safe and which were dangerous as I walked. And when we first entered this forest, I had indeed felt the movement of many different auras. A lot of these auras fled when they sensed Ciel’s presence, but for some reason, the air was completely still now. I did sense auras, but they all seemed to be motionless. It struck me as strange.

“Do you think something’s wrong? You’re right, it *is* too quiet,” my dad agreed.

I sharpened my ears. I could hear the breeze and the rustling of the trees, but I couldn’t hear any animals moving. It was like I thought: There were auras there, but none of them were moving.

“I’m starting to get a little scared,” I admitted.

“Yeah, I can see why.”

Is Ciel okay out there? I nervously looked around.

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora cried out joyously.

I cautiously walked over to the slime...and found a little black orb on the ground in front of it.

“Oh! Isn’t this one of the guardian deity’s children?”

Druid was right. It was indeed a baby of the serpent we’d encountered a little while ago, the one that might have been Hatow’s guardian deity.

“What’s wrong, little guy? Is Snakey not around?” I asked the little black orb, but it didn’t even budge. Worried, I carefully touched it. It shivered the moment my finger made contact. “Oh, good. It’s alive.”

I was worried it might be dead, but it was okay. *Is it just scared? I remember the other orbs like this one acted timid when I met them. Hmm... Maybe it was the wrong decision to touch it.* I moved my hand away and made my voice as calm as possible.

“I’m sorry, buddy. We met before a little while ago. Do you remember me?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora jumped in a little circle around the orb. Was it trying to have a conversation? I stared at the two for a while...and then another little black orb suddenly popped out atop the first one.

“Look! It has a face,” Druid cried.

“Aw, that’s so cute.”

During our last encounter, we’d been so preoccupied with the giant serpent that we hadn’t gotten a very good look at its children, so we hadn’t noticed they actually had little heads. They were just so cute to me.

“Huh? You think it’s cute? Uhh, I wouldn’t go there.”

Druid disagreed with me. That was too bad. I thought they were cute, but maybe I was alone in that viewpoint. That was an unsettling thought.

The little black orb spun its tiny head around to have a look. It seemed quite desperate. Maybe it had gotten lost from the serpent?

“Do you know where Snakey is?” I asked, assuming it was comfortable around us by then.

The little black orb stretched its neck as far as it would go to look at me, then shook its little head no. I was surprised to find out it had a neck, but the sight of it relieved me a little. I’m not sure exactly why; maybe seeing creatures caring so much about something warms my heart?

“If it doesn’t know, then it must be lost,” Druid said.

But it shook its head again. It wasn’t lost.

“Do you know where we are right now?” Druid asked again. The black orb went completely still. It just didn’t seem lost to me. I shot a glance at Druid and saw that he had an awkward smile on his face.

“What should we do?”

“Good question. Sora, do you know where Snakey is?”

“Pu!” Sora jiggled from side to side and shrugged its head. *I guess that’s a no.*

“Oh well,” Druid sighed. “Let’s just wait here until Ciel returns.”

Was that really the only thing we could do? There were no moving auras nearby, but it was too dangerous for us to go wandering around to search for the serpent. Then again, I was one to talk, seeing as how we'd already followed Sora off into the forest. Hypocrisy aside, I didn't think it was a good idea for us to move any further. Not while we still didn't know where Snakey was.

“Yeah, we’ll just have to ask Ciel for help when it comes back.”

It felt bad to give Ciel more work to do, but we couldn’t just leave this little black orb that was apparently a wood sprite alone. If someone bad found it, there might be trouble.

“What a funny little creature you are, though,” Druid said, poking the black orb. It didn’t retract its head, but it did shiver. It was probably still timid. The jerky way it moved was so cute to me.

“Druid, be nice.”

“You’re laughing, too, Ivy.”

“But its reactions are just so cute!”

As we stood there, laughing, I sensed an aura approaching us. I tensed up for a second, but relaxed when I recognized its owner. Sora, also picking up on Ciel’s aura, bounced off in its direction.

“Is it Ciel?” Druid watched Sora bounce away.

“Yeah, it’s headed toward us really fast.” As I marveled over Ciel’s speed, the adandara elegantly pranced over to us.

Mrrrow.

“Hello! Hope you didn’t get hurt?” I asked. Ciel nuzzled its cheek against mine in reply, pressing harder than it usually did. In high spirits over a good hunt, it was nudging me so hard that I was falling over.

“Are you all full?” Druid asked. He gently held me up so I could

manage to survive Ciel's affections.

Mrrrow. Ciel purred as Druid gave its head some scratches.

I suddenly remembered the black orb and looked over to see it was back in the same form as when we first encountered it. It had probably retracted its head in fear of Ciel.

“Ciel, I have a job for you.” I stared into Ciel’s eyes, and it stared right back.

“You see, this little guy is Snakey’s baby… You know, that giant snake we met in the forest on our way to Hatow? And I think it’s lost. Sorry, kid, I’m just gonna pick you up a bit, okay?” I gently took the black orb in my hands and showed it to Ciel. “We want to take it back to Snakey. Do you know where it is?”

Mrrrow, Ciel answered without hesitation. It knew where the serpent was.

“Can we go see the snake?” I asked.

Ciel turned back to walk on the path it had just come from.

“Are you going to take us to it?”

Mrrrow.

“Thanks.”

I was about to put the black orb back down on the ground, but then I remembered how slowly they moved, so I kept it in my arms instead. If we walked at the little guy’s pace, we wouldn’t get back to the inn until nighttime.

“We’re going to take you to Snakey, okay?” I quietly told the little orb in my arms. I was surprised when its little head popped out. I had to admit that the little creature was a bit creepy when it moved suddenly like that.

Chapter 243: I'm a Little Worried

We followed Ciel far into the forest. I searched our surroundings for auras and picked up on an animal here and there, but none of them were moving.

“It sure gets quiet this deep in the forest,” Druid said.

I nodded in agreement and put my senses on high alert. I had to be prepared for anything.

And boy, was it cold. Since we’d been outdoors longer than expected, the temperature dropped lower than we had prepared for. My fingers and toes were starting to get numb—I’d need a nice, hot bath as soon as we got back. I finally understood why Druid insisted so much on staying at an inn with a bathtub.

“Hm? Are you cold, Ivy?” Druid looked at me with worry. He’d caught me rubbing my fingers together.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

I never was comfortable when Druid looked at me with worried eyes like that. It made me feel like I was doing something wrong. Well, it *was* wrong of me to say I was fine when I wasn’t...

“Well, the coat is keeping me warm just fine, except my hands and feet. Don’t worry, I’ll take a nice, long bath when we get back to the inn.” It was starting to sound like I was making excuses.

“Good idea. My hands and feet are cold, too. It makes me long for a nice hot bath.”

“Yeah, really.”

I felt a rustling in my arms and looked down at the black orb. Its little head darted from side to side, looking all around us. Maybe we were getting close to the serpent?

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora suddenly cried out behind Ciel. I looked over to see that Sora was bounding wildly now. My eyes widened as I saw it was headed toward a giant black boulder.

“Wow, that’s a big rock. Wait...are those markings?” I noticed that what I thought was a big black boulder had white markings on it. And those markings looked familiar, too. “Is that Snakey?”

What seemed to be a boulder was actually a creature’s body.

“Which side do you think has the head?” Druid asked.

I compared the left side with the right. They were completely identical.

“Umm...”

It was great that we’d found Snakey, but since only its torso was visible, we would need to figure out where its head was. The torso was curved slightly, making both sides indistinguishable, so we had no idea which way we should go. Snakey really was huge. So huge that it was a marvel that the creature had grown that big in the first place. As we stood there, wondering which direction we should go, I felt a shadow fall over my head. I glanced up to see Snakey’s eyes peering down at me. The moment our eyes met, all worry vanished from my mind. I was just relieved to finally see the serpent.

“So good to see you again. Remember us?” My voice got a little higher as I waved at it. Druid also gave the creature a soft wave. It stared at us for a while, its eyes narrowing slightly. Then it suddenly lowered its head.

“Oh, good. It remembers us. We came here today to return this little one to you. I think it got lost.”

I showed Snakey the little black orb I was holding, and it let out a sigh. The black orb flinched in my arms. Uh-oh, was it in for a stern talking-to later? *Good luck, little buddy!*

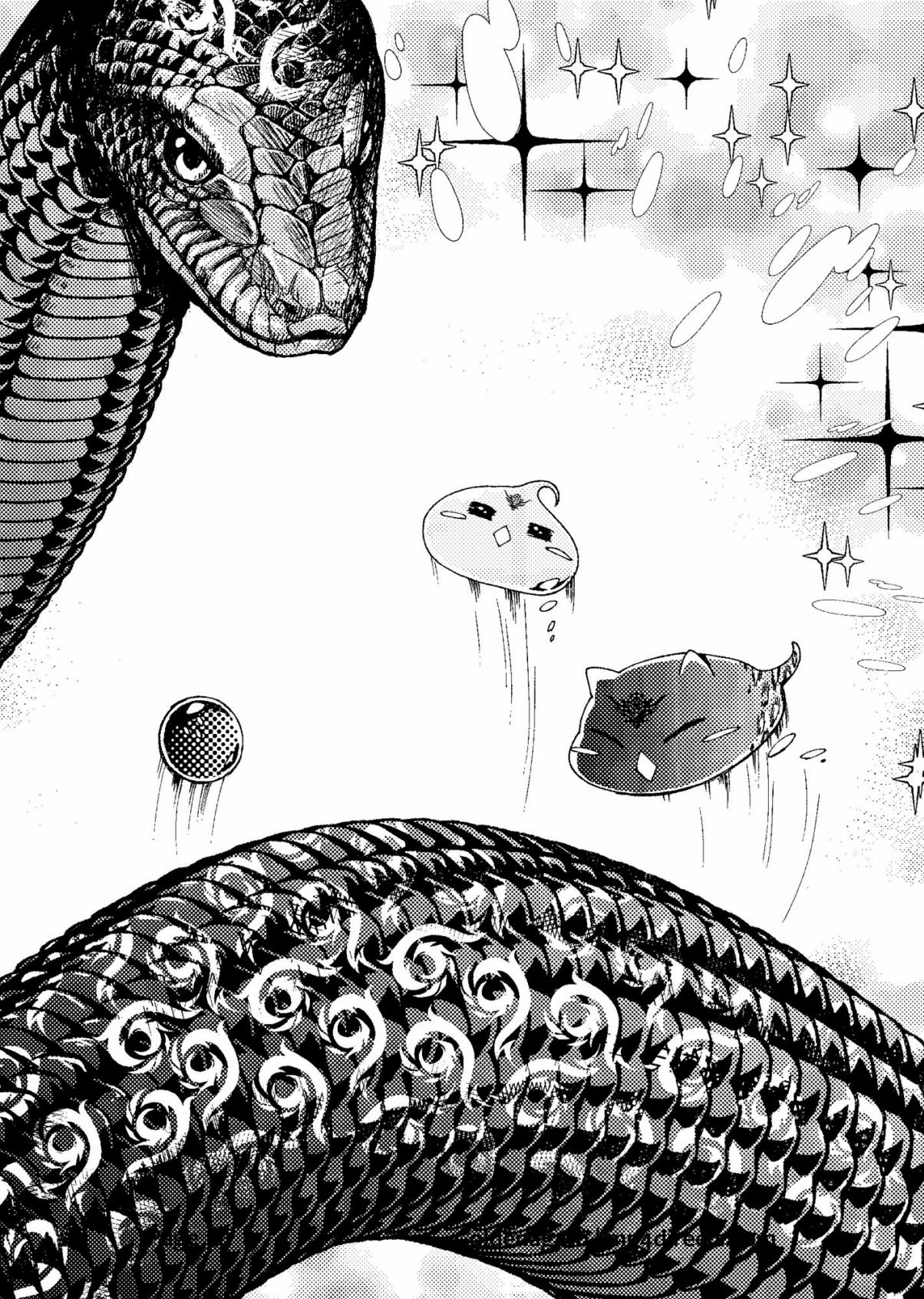
“Here you go. Be careful not to get lost next time, okay?” When I set the little black orb on the ground, it grew tiny feet and scurried over toward the serpent, but it promptly collided with a small rock and started rolling in another direction. Druid rushed after it and picked it up, setting it directly on top of the serpent’s torso this time.

“Sorry, kid. We should have done this from the start.”

Oddly enough, it didn’t fall off the serpent. I took a curious look at the black orb’s legs. They had little claws which dug snugly into the serpent’s skin. *Aha, so that’s why they don’t fall off.*

While I was busy marveling over the sight, Ciel turned into slime form and jumped on top of Snakey. Sora followed suit. Then the three began to have a little jumping party with the tiny black orb.

“Sorry about Sora and Ciel. Is it okay if they play on you?”



Snakey gave me a glance but made no other reaction. That probably meant it was all right. *Those two sure are ridiculous!*

“Kk-kk-kk-kk!”

I looked around at the mysterious noise, but aside from us, there were no moving auras. Druid also scanned the area, but he couldn’t find anything, either.

“Kk-kk-kk-kk!” The sound came again from above.

“Wait, Snakey, you can talk?”

“Kk-kk-kk-kk!”

Wait a minute...its mouth isn't moving. Is it making that noise with its throat? Wow, I didn't know snakes could talk! And what a cute little voice, too... Not really what you'd imagine for a serpent with a giant body like that, though. As I stared at Snakey, it moved its face closer to mine. And to my surprise, its tongue slid out of its mouth. There was a little black orb on top of it.

“Whoa! Oh, um, no thanks, we've got plenty!”

Even though the serpent probably meant it as a thank-you gift, that would be yet another magic stone we would have to keep secret. I gently refused the gift, but it was shoved back in my face. I nervously tried to return it again, but the serpent’s face had already moved far away. Now I’d lost my chance to give it back. Besides, the serpent had looked so pleased with itself that I felt bad turning it down now.

“Thanks...” I sighed.

The serpent narrowed its eyes and nodded at me. *Come to think of it, we don't even know what powers these magic stones have. Would the serpent tell us if we asked?*

“Excuse me, Snakey, but what exactly can these magic stones do?”

“Kk-kk-kk! Kk-kk-kk-kk!”

Oh no. I don't speak Serpentese. I think it's trying to explain things to me. I looked up at Snakey, and it returned my glance.

“I'm sorry. I didn't understand what you just said.”

“Kk-kk-kk...” Snakey sounded glum. *I guess it must have been trying to explain the magic stones to me.*

“Um...oh, I know! Is it true that the magic stones can bring people back from the dead?”

Snakey shook its head from side to side. *I guess that means no. So Druid was right.* I was relieved to find that out. I didn't want such terrifying magic.

“Thank you.”

The magic stone felt a little less heavy in my hand. Just a little, though.

“We should head back. It's starting to get dark.”

I looked around and saw that the light in the forest had indeed grown dimmer. “Okay. Snakey, see you later. Sora! Ciel! We're going home.”

The two creatures wiggled in reply from atop the serpent.

“We're leaving you behind!” Druid warned. That made them frantic. *You guys are ridiculous.*

When they jumped back to my side, I gave both their heads a gentle pat.

“Kk-kk-kk-kk!” Snakey chirped out a farewell and then began to move away.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

Ciel and Sora also gave their goodbyes...I think. And the next thing I knew, Ciel was back in adandara form. Ciel's shapeshifting had become quite smooth, and the creature seemed to enjoy doing it.

“Okay, let’s go.”

On the way back to the village, I noticed that the monster auras were moving again after they’d been still all that time. I searched the auras and found animals among them, too.

“Something wrong?”

“No, I just felt the auras moving again.”

“Maybe they were standing still because of the serpent...”

“Hm?”

“Since that serpent is called a guardian deity, it must be really powerful. They’re probably scared of it.”

They’re scared? But Snakey is so nice. There’s still so much we don’t know about that creature. I wonder if we’ll ever see it again?

Chapter 244: Extreme Cold Advisory

We greeted the gatekeeper and returned to Hatow. The low sun made the air especially frigid. It felt even colder than yesterday, but maybe I was imagining that.

“Are we going straight to the guild?”

“No, let’s call it a day and go back to the inn to warm up. We got too cold out there.”

It was true—I could no longer feel my fingers and toes. Dola greeted us at the door with a look of relief on his face when we returned to the inn.

“Welcome back.”

“Good evening. Is everything okay?”

“Well, we just heard from the guild that it’s going to be extra cold tonight.”

“Oh dear. Well, it did feel unusually cold today.” So *it wasn’t my imagination after all. It really was much colder than yesterday.*

“It *was* unusually cold today. It’s still too early in the year for temperatures this low. It’s worrying, really.”

“Are you still waiting for anybody else to come back?”

“Yes, Druid, the family staying next to you isn’t back yet, and they’ve got children.” Dola glanced outside the door. The family next to us had two sons, one my age and another a bit older. I hoped they were okay.

“Well, sorry to keep you. Go take a nice hot bath and warm your chilled bones, or you’ll catch your death of cold.”

We thanked Dola, returned to our room, and immediately got our things ready for the bath. My frozen toes and fingers were making my whole body cold.

“Be sure to stay in there a good long time and get warm.”

“Yes, sir!”

I parted ways with Druid and headed to the ladies’ bath. I tried to undress and stopped mid-button. My fingers were too stiff to move. As I stood there, wrestling with my buttons, I heard a voice ask, “Are you okay?”

It was a gentle lady’s voice. I looked up to see a woman in her forties who had just come out of the bath staring at my hands. “Need me to help unbutton you?”

“Um, no thanks.”

“Don’t be shy, dear. You need to get in the water fast or you’ll catch cold.”

As her hand reached out to me, my back stiffened straight with nervousness. The woman hesitated for a moment when she noticed, then she gently unbuttoned my clothes for me.

“There. You’re all set.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You’re welcome. I’m Lucia. I’m staying on the third floor. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Ivy, from the second floor. Nice to meet you, too.” I bowed politely. Lucia giggled and bowed back.

“Come on, now! In the bath with you. We don’t want you catching cold.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With my buttons undone, I could undress myself the rest of the way, even with my stiff fingers. I grabbed my soap and towel and stepped into the bath. I looked back just in time to see Lucia walking out of the dressing area.

She was nice.

The water was painfully hot against my cold skin, but I sank myself deep down to warm myself through. The warm water slowly melted away the cold stiffness in my muscles...and it felt so good.

Grrr...

“I’m hungry.”

I’m nice and warm now. I can probably get out.

Grrr...

Okay, I’m getting out! When I wiped myself dry and left the changing area, I smelled bread in the air. Staying at this inn was definitely going to make me fat.

On my way to the second floor, I saw that Dola was still waiting by the front door. That must have meant the missing guests weren’t back yet.

“Hi, Ivy. Have a good bath?”

“Yes, thank you.”

When I got back to our room, I found Sora and Ciel were playing with Druid...or should I say they were playing *on* him? Druid was lying on his stomach in bed, and Sora and Ciel were body-slamming each other on top of his back.

“Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Hm? No, the way they move actually feels good.”

I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine? Well, more like I’ll hit your back, you hit mine... Anyway, does it really feel good?

“I already gave Sora and Ciel sponge baths. I didn’t wash Flame, though. It’s on the bed.”

“Thanks.”

I looked over at my bed to find Flame asleep on it. I quietly checked in on the slime and brought a towel over to it. Flame’s mouth was soft and droopy as always. A string of drool was just about to fall onto my mattress.

“Oh, by the way, Lucia from the third floor helped me in the bath just now.”

“Hm? Did you have a problem?”

“Yeah, my fingers were too cold to work my buttons, so she helped me get undressed.”

“Oh dear. Maybe we should have warmed you up a little before sending you to the bath.”

“Were you okay, Mr. Druid?”

“Yeah, my clothes didn’t have buttons.”

That’s right, they didn’t. I think I’ll wear clothes without buttons whenever we go into the forest on cold days from now on.

“So how am I even supposed to warm myself up before a bath?”

“Well...like, rub your hands together or get a hot towel from the inn staff.”

A hot towel. That would be nice. It was so cold today that no amount of rubbing could have possibly kept my hands from freezing.

Grrr... My stomach growled.

Druid and I looked at each other. *Ah...I want to hide.* I could just feel the redness gathering in my face.

“Um...I think I’ll go make dinner.” *Oops, I forgot to feed the slimes! I’d better get their things ready first.*

“Ha ha ha, let me help. No wonder you’re hungry; you’ve been walking around all day in the cold.”

“Are you hungry, too?”

Druid glanced at me, then smiled and nodded. “Yeah, my stomach growled when I was in the bath. It was really embarrassing, too, since there were people in there with me.”

I chuckled at Druid’s story as I took the slimes’ potions out of my magic bag. Sora jumped eagerly off Druid’s back at the sight of them.

“Oof! Sora, don’t do that.”

That must have hurt.

Also noticing the rows of potions, Flame rolled off the bed toward them.

You lazy little goof.

“Okay, I’m going to go cook dinner now. Sora, Flame, eat your fill. Ciel, wait until they’ve finished eating before you get back to playtime. All right, I’ll be back soon.”

“Pu! Puuu.”

“Ryuu.”

Mrrrow.

I went to the public kitchen on the second floor to finish dinner. I had started a soup in the morning since we were planning on being in the forest all day, so all I had to do was heat it up. Then I would make a simple salad, get some freshly baked bread from Salifa, and dinner would be served. Since I wanted to really take my time with dinner tonight, I brought everything into our room. All three creatures were curled up asleep on my bed. Druid had moved Flame on top of a towel.

We sat down to eat...and soup really did hit the spot on cold

days. I had also made sure the chunks of meat were big, so it felt great to chew.

“I think it’d be a great idea to cook soup all day whenever we go to the forest. We can just heat it up and eat it as soon as we get home.”

“I think so, too.”

Whooo! Rattle, rattle, rattle.

“Ack!” I yelled.

A sudden gust of wind had rattled our window.

“The winds have gotten stronger.”

“Yeah.”

We ate our dinner to the music of our window rattling in the wind. It was a real shame to ruin such a tasty meal with such an unsettling feeling.

Chapter 245: Starved for Sleep

“So sleepy...”

The wind howled all night long. The rattling windows scared me so badly that I couldn’t sleep. For some reason, the hollow *whooo* noise stirred up anxiety in me.

“Good morning... Are you okay? You didn’t seem to get much sleep last night.”

“I’m okay. I slept a little in the morning.”

“Let’s take it easy today. We’ll just go to the guild to tell them about the snow blooms.”

“Okay.”

I did a little light stretching to trick my weary muscles into thinking they were awake, then we went to the first floor for some breakfast. Inside the dining hall, we found all the other guests seated and talking.

“Good morning,” we said to the people as we passed. They greeted us in reply.

I headed straight for my spot at the table, but Druid joined the circle of adventurers instead. Every morning, they would exchange information. Since I was still a child, I wasn’t allowed to join them, so the morning report had become one of Druid’s daily tasks.

“Good morning.” I greeted Dola, who was serving breakfast, and sat in my seat. Everyone always sat in the same seats—I suppose they got used to the same spot after a few days.

“Good morning. Did you manage to get any sleep during the storm

last night? Hm? Ah, judging by your face, that's a no." Dola smiled.

Did my face really look that bad? When I looked in the mirror earlier, all I'd seen were some faint circles under my eyes. "Do I really look that ugly?" I asked, feeling a little concerned.

"You've got circles under your eyes, and your complexion is a bit dull. You don't look well, kid."

Come to think of it, my coloring was a little off. Oh, so I do look that bad.

"Are you sure you're okay? Do you have a scratchy throat or chills or anything?"

I thought for a second, but nothing came to mind. I shook my head.

"Well, if you're feeling even a little ill, you let me know, okay?"

"I will, thank you."

Maybe I should drink one of Flame's potions just in case? I'll ask Druid later.

"Something wrong?"

"Dola was worried I caught a cold because my complexion looks so bad today."

"Ahh, yes. I can understand why."

So I guess Druid noticed my face, too.

"I was a little worried about it, but you seemed well enough so I thought I'd just keep an eye on you. You do look a bit worse now than you did earlier this morning, though. After breakfast, you should take a po... uh, we'll talk later." He shrugged his shoulders.

Druid was probably about to mention Flame's potions but realized it wasn't a conversation we should be having in public.

While we ate breakfast, I asked him if there was any news.

“There’s a group of adventurers who deliver meat four times a month to Hatow and the other villages and towns nearby, but they suddenly lost touch with one of their members who was supposed to get here two days ago. They made the basic preparations for winter weather, but they probably didn’t think it was going to be this cold. They’re going to send a search party.”

“Oh dear.”

I thought back to how cold it was yesterday. Even though we had a furnace powered by a red magic stone in our room, it still felt colder than usual.

“Let’s go to the adventurer guild in the afternoon. They’ll probably be busy this morning.”

“Okay.”

Oh, I wonder if that family got back okay last night. I looked around the dining hall and found them in the farthest corner of the room. The kids looked tired, but everyone seemed all right.

Back in our room, we found that Sora and Flame had finished their breakfast.

“We’re going to the adventurer guild in the afternoon. Would you like to come with us?” The three giggled in reply. *Gosh, they’re so cute.*

“Want some tea?” Druid asked. He was already in the middle of making some.

“Yes, please.”

“Oh, about what we were saying earlier...”

“Hm?”

“You might be coming down with a cold, so you should take one of Flame’s potions, just in case.”

If I got sick, I'd worry Druid *and* throw off our plans. It was best that I take some precautions.

"Okay. Hey, Flame, I'm just going to take one of your potions, okay?"

Flame sleepily awakened where it lay on my bed. Despite the default glare in its eyes, the slime was still wonderfully cute.

"Teryuuu..." it sang sleepily.

Can I take that to mean "Sure thing"? I stared at Flame...and the eyes it had fought so hard to keep open gradually closed shut.

"Here you go." Druid handed me a potion he'd taken out of the magic box while I was waiting for Flame to respond. I poured it into a little cup and gulped it down. I felt a surge of lightness in my body as the potion took effect. *I guess I really was starting to get sick.*

"Are you okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Flame's potions are the best."

"Okay, then let's take it easy until after lunchtime. If you want to sleep, go ahead. Not getting enough sleep is bad for your health."

"Thanks." Now that I was full, sleepiness was overtaking me. There was no use in me powering through the day anyway. "I think I'll take a little nap."

"Okay, sleep well."

I got in bed and lay down, then Druid gave my head some pats. I closed my eyes, reveling in the soothing feel of his touch.

I was jolted awake. I sat up in bed and stretched my arms as I looked around the room. Druid was gone. I looked over to his bed and saw all three creatures asleep in a pile together. Then I glanced at the window to

see warm light flooding into the room. Had the cold gone away today?

Click.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

Druid entered the room, bringing the delicious aroma of bread with him. That smell always made me hungry.

“How are you feeling? Your complexion looks much better.”

“I’m totally fine now.” I didn’t feel sluggish at all. I was sleep-deprived no more.

“Glad to hear it. We still have some bread from yesterday. Are you okay with eating that for lunch?”

“Sure, thanks.” I slapped the wrinkles out of my clothes. *Hmmm, why are wrinkles so difficult to get out? I probably should have changed clothes before I took my nap.*

As we ate lunch, we talked over our plans for the rest of the day. Well, I say “plans,” but we were really just going to the adventurer guild.

“If you’re tired, you can always stay at the inn, you know.” Druid offered.

“Don’t worry, I’m okay now.”

Though Druid was quite worried about me, I managed to convince him to let me come along. I looked over at the creatures, and my eyes met with a very sleepy-eyed Ciel. Was it even fully awake?

“Are you sleepy? You can stay at the inn if you want.”

I was going to take them with us, but they looked too tired. It worried me a little to leave them behind, but I knew they were smart enough to hide if someone came by.

Mew! Ciel yipped unhappily.

“You want to come with us? Will you be okay?”

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Sora sounded sleepy, but they both wanted to come along. And Flame was...in a deep sleep. *I don't think I've ever seen it sleep so deeply before.*

“I don't think the three of them got much sleep last night,” Druid said.

“Really?”

“They were worried about the wind. Every time there was a big gust, they woke up and looked around just like you did, Ivy.”

I nodded in understanding. I *had* woken up with each gust of wind. That explained why they were so sleepy and lethargic today.

“We should probably take Flame with us, too. I don't think it's in any shape to put up much of a fight if anyone breaks into our room.”

The slime really was in a trancelike sleep. There was a chance somebody might discover it.

“Okay, let's all go to the guild together, then.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

Chapter 246: The Snow Report

When we stepped out of the inn, we could tell it was colder than yesterday—so cold that we almost went right back inside.

I looked at the bag with my creatures in it. I hoped they were warm enough. I'd bought a fluffy towel to make the bag warmer, but I hadn't expected having to deal with weather this cold.

"Everything okay?" Druid asked, eyeing me with worry as I stared at the bag. I must have made him think there was something wrong.

"Do you think there's any way I can make their bag warmer?"

Druid thought for a moment. Then he nodded, understanding what I was trying to do. "Let's stop by Rose's shop on the way back and ask her."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Well, we do love the little guys."

My bag moved a bit in reply. Was it Sora? Or maybe Ciel?

We set out on Main Street, which turned out to be almost empty. Most people had probably stayed home to keep out of the cold.

"Hardly anybody's out today."

"Yeah, and some of the stores are closed, too."

I looked around the stalls and saw that about half of them were shuttered. This kind of cold weather must have even changed people's daily routine.

"Let's go."

Usually, I'd have a look around as we walked down the street, but it was too cold for that today. That meant we made it to the adventurer guild

in record time. And when we got there, you could hear a pin drop. I'd never seen any guild lodge in that state before.

"I guess nobody wanted to come here in the cold. Maybe that guy will help us."

There was a guild employee seated at the counter. His eyes were droopy with fatigue.

"Excuse me."

"Oh! Yes! May I help you?" the man yelped, seeming a little frazzled. Was he sleeping with his eyes open?

"We came here to report that we saw some snow blooms in the forest yesterday."

"Thank you for that. Could you please tell me more?"

The man explained to Druid that snow blooms matured quickly. They bloomed and withered within a single day, so if you found snow blooms on multiple days, you had seen more than one set of flowers. Therefore, the more reports of snow blooms they received, the harsher the winter would be. We didn't know how many times the guild had already heard about snow bloom sightings, but judging by the man's facial expression...well, let's just say he looked a bit ill, unless I was mistaken. Maybe they were already under a heavy load of snow bloom reports.

"Thank you very much for providing that information."

"Um, have you gotten a lot of reports this year?" Druid asked.

The man nodded meekly. His face was creased deeply with solemnity.

We walked out of the adventurer guild. Rose's shop was our next stop, but the sun was already starting to hide behind some clouds. Without its warmth, the air was really icy cold.

“When winter truly begins, it might be too dangerous to travel into the forest,” Druid said.

“Yeah, we’ll most likely have to just relax at the inn.”

“We probably will.”

There was no need for us to risk our lives by going into the woods. If Ciel had to live in the forest, we probably would have found a way to visit it, but Ciel could stay with us now. I really was grateful to Flame for creating the magic stone that let Ciel shapeshift.

Even though we walked twice as fast to Rose’s shop, it seemed twice as far away. Human senses really can be unreliable sometimes, can’t they?

As soon as we opened the door to Rose’s shop, we were slammed with a voice greeting us. “Hello! Come in...and close the door quickly, please! It’s cold—oh, hey, Ivy.” The instant she recognized us, the sourness in her voice sweetened. I had to stop myself from laughing.

“We wanted to ask you something, Rose,” Druid said.

“Sure, what’s up?”

On the way over, we had decided to tell Rose that I was a tamer who had tamed slimes.

“I keep the slimes I’ve tamed in this bag, and I’m worried they might get cold. Do you have any items like a heater to defend against cold?”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were a tamer, Ivy.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rose looked at the bag hanging off my shoulder. Since it was the only bag I carried that wasn’t magic, it obviously held the slimes.

“Bag-warming merch, eh? Hmm...I think I saw somethin’ like that

lying around somewhere..." Rose flipped through her catalogue. "Aha, found it! How's about this?" She smiled and pointed at an item on her list.

I took the book and read its description: "This baby is powered by fire magic stones and heats bags like nobody's business! Use with its companion bag to double—even triple—its power! Buy yours today!"

Hm? Why does this product description sound like a really cheesy advertisement? Well, it's easy to understand; I'll give it that much.

"Yes, I'd like to see this one, please, so... Huh?" I looked up at Rose, only to find that she was gone. "Hey, Rose?"

"She ran off to the back room. She's probably finding the item for you."

She sure moved fast.

"Found it! Here ya go." Rose showed me the item, which was a thin wooden board with a hole in one end. It was a little bigger than the bag I was currently using.

"Will it really heat up the bag?" Druid asked, squinting skeptically at the board.

"Well, that's what it says. Anyway, here's the companion bag that comes with it." Rose showed us the bag. It was a size and shape that allowed the board to sit flat on the bottom, so it was bigger than the one I was already carrying.

"Why don'tcha give this thing a spin to see how ya like it? The description didn't really say just how warm it made things."

Rose let me borrow a red magic stone with fire magic, so I checked the product description to see how to use the item. All I had to do was put the magic stone in the hole in the board, set the board on the bottom of the bag, and push the button once. That was it. The magic stone didn't even need to be particularly special or high-level. After a few seconds, the bag

started to feel warm.

“Wow! It really does make the bag pretty warm.” I slid my arm into the bag to check its temperature. Druid and Rose followed suit, testing the item’s effects with their hands.

“It really is warm. I think it’ll do just fine. Oh, I guess that means we’ll have to change bags...” As Druid looked at the bag the slimes were currently in, I remembered he had told me that it was given to him by someone special. He might have felt conflicted about giving it up. And I felt conflicted, too, but when it came to my creatures’ safety, I couldn’t stay conflicted for long.

“The slimes will just have to have one bag for summer and one for winter. It feels a little extravagant, but it’s for the best.”

Druid laughed at my cheap idea of extravagance, but I didn’t think the bag was exactly cheap.

“I’ll pay for this one—I insist!” I said.

“No, it’s something we need for the journey, so the money should come from our *joint* account.”

“No, *I’m* paying. It’s for the creatures *I* tamed.”

After a brief staring contest, Druid finally caved in with a sigh.
“You are just so damn *stubborn*, Ivy.”

“Oh, *really*? But *you’re* the stubborn one, Mr. Druid!”

Rose looked at us and burst out laughing. “You two really are so cute. C’mom, Ivy, why don’tcha let him buy it for ya?”

“Not you, too, Rose! Um, you see...if I get used to letting him buy things for me, I’m worried I’ll become very selfish and greedy.”

“That would never happen,” both adults insisted in unison.

“But my creatures have helped me so much... Please, I want to

repay them."

Sora, Ciel, and Flame really had helped me out a lot. That's why I wanted to give them a special present, to give them a better living environment. My heartfelt words seemed to work because Druid conceded. But he insisted that he would pay next time my creatures got a present.

Chapter 247: Flame's Drooling Issues

The moment we set foot back in the inn, my entire body tingled with warmth. I could feel my joints and muscles, stiff from the cold, quickly loosening up.

"Welcome back, you two," someone called out from behind us as we started to walk upstairs to our room.

"Hello, we were just out in town to... Huh?!" I turned around to see Salifa was soaked through with water. "What's wrong, ma'am?"

Druid rushed back to the front entrance. He grabbed one of the guest towels and handed it to her.

"Hee hee, I sort of slipped in the bath."

Her laughter was innocent and shy, but I really was worried about her safety. "Are you okay, ma'am? I hope you didn't get hurt."

"You're so sweet, Ivy. No, I'm fine. It happens all the time. I take pride in my tumbling skills."

Um...tumbling skills?

"Anyway, it must be freezing out there! Just so you know, the bath is open all day and night, okay?"

"Thank you, ma'am. But please, you should have the first bath. You'll catch your death of cold."

"Oh, I'm okay."

"No, you're not. You'll scare Mr. Dola, too."

"Yes, I suppose he would get worried. Okay, I'll go take a bath. Oh, Druid, Ivy, you're taking care of your own dinner tonight again, right?"

“Yes. Why do you ask?” Druid looked curious.

“Well, I have something to tell everyone, and I thought I’d do it at dinnertime...”

She has something to tell everyone?

“In that case, we can be in the dining hall at dinnertime, if you want,” Druid offered.

“Oh, would you please?”

“Of course. You okay with that, Ivy?”

“Sure.”

If it’s something she needs to tell everyone, it must be important, so of course we would be there—it clearly involved us, too.

After hearing when the dinner announcement would be, Druid and I returned to our room, removed the slimes from their bag, and took out the special bag we bought from Rose.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Apparently, they’d been listening in on the conversation and were super excited about the new bag.

“Now you can stay warm in this bag, even when it’s cold outside. You must have been cold in your bag when we were out earlier today.”

“Puuu,” Sora trilled, with a very tight jiggle that was more like a quiver. Was it trying to convey shivering in the cold? If it was, buying this bag was definitely the right decision.

“Want to take a bath first?”

“Sure! Oh, but before that I need to wipe everyone off.”

I grabbed a towel, planning to wet it with hot water, but Druid stopped me.

“But aren’t they clean?” he asked. “They didn’t play outside at all today.”

“Well, um...”

“What?”

“Flame’s drool gets all over everyone...”

“Puuu!”

Mew!

“...teryu.”

I wonder this every day, but can’t Flame close its mouth better? When I put it in the bag with the others, everyone falls victim to its drool.

“Ah, I see. I’ll wipe them off.”

“Thanks.” I handed the wet towel to Druid and started reorganizing my old bag. I threw Flame’s drool-covered towel into the laundry basket, then carefully wiped the inside of the bag clean. Next, I set a fresh towel on top of the heating item in the new bag. “There.”

“I’m done, too.” Druid tossed the towel into the laundry basket.

“Thanks. The new bag is all ready to go.”

“Okay, then it’s bath time. Behave, you three. We’ve muffled the sound in here, but be sure to hide if somebody comes into our room.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Teryu.”

I looked at Flame, whose reply had been unusually short. The harder I stared, the more I sensed the slime was sulking. Was it upset that I

complained about its drooling? I gave its head a few soft pats, but it turned away in a huff. *Yeah, Flame's sulking all right... So cute.*

“We’re just going to take a bath, okay? We’ll all have dinner when we get back.”

After my bath, I saw that something had been left in front of our door. I looked around and saw the same thing in front of all the other rooms’ doors. Did that mean it was okay for each of us to use whatever it was? *I guess I’ll bring it inside.* I opened the door and set down our new item just as Druid returned.

“Where did you get that?”

“It was in front of our door, so I figured it was something for us to use. Do you know what it is?”

“It’s a heating item. You use a red magic stone to operate it, and it heats the whole room.”

“Huh? But isn’t our room already warm?”

“Yeah...I guess this is what the announcement at dinner is going to be about.”

That’s right, we’re going to hear an announcement in the dining hall tonight. Yeah, it’s probably to explain how this item works.

“What do you want to do? Have dinner up here before it’s time for dinner down there?”

“Yeah. We have plenty of time to eat first, so let’s go ahead and do that.”

The time we were supposed to be down in the dining hall was about when we would usually finish eating dinner and relax with a nice cup of tea. That meant we would have to finish our dinner a little sooner. I looked at the clock and saw it was still early, but if I dillydallied much longer, it

would be dinnertime before I knew it.

I returned to my room and got some meat out of my magic bag that I'd started marinating it in spicy sauce earlier that morning. Then I got some vegetables...and rice! Yes, it was a rice day. Spicy meat and veggies over fresh, steamy rice was the best thing ever.

I brought everything I needed into the second-floor kitchen and got to work. First, I had to rinse the rice. Next, I heated the rice water. Once the rice started steaming, it was time to cook the rest of the meal. Druid kept an eye on the heat and water levels of the rice, so I didn't have to worry about that. I seasoned the food a bit stronger than usual today, since the meat was spicy. I also fixed some vegetable soup and steamed vegetables. At the very end, I grilled the marinated meat. We fluffed and served the rice while the meat finished cooking, and then we were ready to eat.

"That looks great."

"Hee hee! Well, let's dig in."

We'd borrowed a table from the kitchen for our dinner that day. We sat down and tucked in. Every steamed vegetable in the medley was tasty and slightly sweet. It went perfectly with the spicy meat and the soft, fluffy rice. *Yup. Delicious.*

"Ivy, this meat is so good."

Thank goodness he likes it.

When we were halfway through our meal, a little boy popped his head into the kitchen and yelled, "It's coming from here!" He was probably staying on the same floor as us.

"Something wrong, kiddo?"

"I'm hungry and I smelled something yummy, so I came here and... is that it?" He pointed at the meat Druid had skewered on his fork. His

eyes were bursting with curiosity.

“Say, don’t you know it’s almost dinnertime? If you eat now, you’ll spoil your appetite and make your parents mad.”

“Well, yeah, but...” He stared at the meat so hard that it was obvious how hungry he was. Even Druid was starting to look uncomfortable.

“Hey! Guttie!”

“Ugh! It’s my brother.”

The little boy’s big brother had come looking for him. Druid and I heaved a synchronized sigh of relief. We didn’t mind sharing some of our meal with Guttie, but not without his parents’ permission.

“Sorry about my little brother.”

“Oh, it’s okay.”

“I’m Luidi. We’re staying on the second floor. And this is my little brother, Guttie.”

“Hi. I’m Druid.”

“And I’m Ivy. Nice to meet you.”

Guttie gave us a hearty wave. Luidi sighed heavily, apologized for disturbing us, and dragged Guttie away.

“That Guttie is quite a little rascal,” Druid smiled, trying not to laugh.

And yes, that was exactly the impression he gave me, too. I really felt sorry for his big brother.

Chapter 248: How to Survive a Cold Winter

When we entered the dining hall, we found that most of the guests had already finished their dinners. As they talked and made merry, we sat in our usual seats and Druid brought us some tea.

“Thank you very much.” I slowly sipped my hot tea. The tea at this inn was a bit sweeter than the kind I usually brewed. I would have to ask Salifa what kind she used.

The corner of my eye caught something fluttering in the corner of the room. I looked closer and saw that it was Guttie, the boy we had just met, waving at us. When I waved back, a gigantic smile bloomed onto his face and he waved harder. I had assumed he was my age, but maybe he was a few years younger. After a few minutes, Salifa entered the dining hall.

“Thank you all for coming here this evening.” She looked around the room and took a little breath in and out. Then she said, “We received a winter weather advisory from the guild today. I’m sure you’ve all noticed, but this year’s winter is abnormally cold. The guild has also received quite a few reports of snow blooms from adventurers.”

As soon as she said the words *snow blooms*, a hushed murmur fell over the crowd.

“Snow blooms only appear in years when the winter is going to be particularly harsh, so we’ve consulted our village history to make whatever preparations for the winter that we can. However, we don’t know just how effective these preparations will be.”

The dining hall fell silent.

“The heating items we use at the inn today are more powerful than the ones people used in the past, but there’s no guarantee that they will be powerful enough to protect us from this winter. According to the village records, in years with cold winters, people sometimes froze to death even in buildings with heating devices.”

People froze to death inside? Does that mean the heaters weren’t strong enough to protect them from the cold? Just how cold could that possibly be? It kind of scares me...

“So I’m going to need everyone’s cooperation to make sure we all survive the winter. Earlier this evening, I left heating devices in front of all your rooms. They’re powered by red magic stones. If you don’t know how to operate yours, I will walk you through it personally in your room. I want you all to use your own heaters in your rooms to help keep this entire inn warm.”

She needs our help to warm the entire inn?

“I’m terribly sorry to have to say this, but we don’t have enough red magic stones to operate all of the heating devices right now.”

This bombshell caused quite a stir among the guests.

“The caves where we usually find our magic stones have collapsed, so we’ve been unable to get any more of them. I’m so sorry.”

Come to think of it, I’d heard something about that when we first came to this inn. The caves where adventurers used to find magic stones had collapsed and that was why their prices had gone way up.

“Excuse me, but just how many magic stones do each of us need?” a man asked with a raised hand.

“At least five if they’re Level 6. It really depends on how cold the weather gets, but if we break our record for the lowest temperature, you might need as many as twenty.”

All the adventurers present gasped at the number. Then they began to gossip in hushed whispers. Salifa sighed quietly, looking utterly helpless.

“Twenty red magic stones at Level 6...”

I didn’t think we had any Level 6 magic stones. That was because we’d sold all the magic stones below Level 5 that Druid had in his house. And we didn’t know what level Flame’s magic stones were, but their transparent color meant they had to be at least Level 5. Druid had guessed that most of them were probably Level 4 or Level 5.

“Would magic stones higher than Level 5 be a problem?”

“No, higher-level stones would work, and you wouldn’t need as many as twenty in that case.”

As long as they could be used, I guessed they wouldn’t be a problem. We could sell the rest of our magic stones to the inn. We would have to talk about that after we got back to our room.

“If anyone has any questions, I’ll take them now.”

“What are you supposed to do if you don’t have enough magic stones?”

“Well...I would ask you to buy more, but they’ve gone way up in price even before the shortage, so I don’t feel comfortable asking that of people...” Salifa fell silent.

“I see. Well, I’ll try to see if there’s a way we can buy them cheaply.”

“Thank you so much.”

People asked more questions for a while, but it quickly became clear that none of the adventurers had twenty magic stones. That shortage seemed to be the biggest problem here.

“Let’s go back to our room.”

“Okay.”

We got up from our seats and were about to leave the dining hall when Dola stopped us. “Do you know how to use the heating item?”

“Yes, I’ve used one before, so there should be no problem.”

“I see. Well, we apologize for the inconvenience and appreciate your cooperation.” Dola bowed deeply. He seemed just as helpless as Salifa, and his eyes were strained with concern.

“Don’t worry about us. We have plenty of magic stones,” Druid said.

“Oh, do you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good to know. Well, have a good night.” Dola did look truly relieved to hear about our stones.

We went back to our room to count our magic stones. We got the magic bag containing several smaller bags of stones and took them out.

“Here’s the bag with the stones we know are Level 5.” Druid opened the bag, emptied it out onto our table, and counted eighteen in total. “This should be plenty for us.”

“Um, if there’s enough for us, shouldn’t we sell the extra ones to the inn?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

What a relief.

“But let’s not sell the very high-level stones.”

I assumed he was talking about the ones in the magic box. He was right—those would make us stand out far too much.

“So, this is the magic stone that Flame created, but we don’t know what level it is.”

He held up the magic stone Flame had produced at the dump. Nobody could appraise it, so its level was a mystery. But it did look more transparent than the Level 5 magic stones we had found in Druid’s house.

“Let’s sell the stones that we know the levels of to the inn, and we’ll use the other ones ourselves.”

“How many do we have?”

“Let’s see...thirty-three in total.”

We could clearly tell the mysterious magic stones were higher than Level 5 because of their transparency. We surely wouldn’t need as many of them since they were more powerful.

“Why don’t we sell these stones, too?”

“Because their levels are unknown.”

Was there something wrong with selling stones of unknown levels?

“People would be suspicious of us if they found out we had magic stones whose levels couldn’t be appraised. For one thing, we’re going to stand out way too much as it is with thirty-three magic stones this powerful. But I would feel bad not sharing what we have when so many people are in need right now.”

Druid scratched his head. He did have a point: There was no such thing as an adventurer who didn’t have their valuable magic stones appraised. I held one of the magic stones up to the light. It was a little cloudy, but it was very transparent. Carrying even one of these in public would draw a lot of attention.

“Do you think we should take someone into our confidence?”

Er, is it just me...or did Druid just make a terrifying suggestion?

“Mr. Druid?”

“It’s a nice thought, but we don’t have any friends in this village. It can’t be just *anybody*, you know.”

Oh dear...Druid has a serious look in his eyes. But he’s right. We would need someone on our side to help us here in Hatow. Maybe then we could get Flame to produce more magic stones for everybody.

“Teryuuu.”

Flame’s quiet chirping snapped me out of my thought spiral. I looked over to see a very unusual sight: Flame was awake, and the other two creatures were asleep.

“Flame, if I asked you to make more magic stones, could you do it?”

Flame jiggled happily. *That must mean it wants to help. Gee, everyone in my family is just so nice. It makes me feel all fuzzy inside.*

After thinking for a minute, Druid made another terrifying suggestion. “Okay, let’s make it the captain!”

“Um...Mr. Druid?”

“Hm?”

“Well, um...oh, wait! Let’s go to Rose’s shop and see if she has an item that can appraise magic stone levels for us.” *Yeah, there might be something like that.*

“Sure, we could try that.”

Oh, good. Looks like I managed to nip that dangerous plan in the bud. Now, what should I do if Rose’s place doesn’t have that kind of item?

Chapter 249: A Pesky Item

The sun was able to subdue the cold air just a little, so we waited for it to come out before we headed to Rose's shop.

"Hi, come on in."

"Hello, ma'am."

"Oh, did you folks need somethin' again?" Rose looked puzzled to see us there so many days in a row.

I laughed and answered, "Well, yes, there's this one thing we really need."

"What is it, hon?"

"Do you have an item that tells you the level of magic stones?"

Rose opened her eyes wide in surprise. "Magic stone levels? But can't ya just take 'em to the guild and have them check?"

She was technically right... Maybe her shop was a dead end after all?

"We have some items we're hoping to do our own research on. So, do you have an item like that?" Druid asked with a smile.

Rose's eyebrow raised slightly. I think she suspected us. "It's...not for somethin' illegal, I hope?"

"Of course not."

I looked back and forth between Druid and Rose. Both of their eyes were earnest, and there was a strange tension between them. My heart was beating crazy-loud.

"Whewww... Well, I guess it's okay."

“Thank you very much. Do you have that item, then?”

“I do have somethin’ like it. But it won’t give ya a detailed answer like ya get from someone with an appraise skill. Also, it’s got issues.”

Issues?

“Could we please take a look at it?”

“Sure. Sit tight.”

After Rose disappeared into the back room, Druid let out a sigh.
“Agh, that was terrifying.”

“You were a real trooper.”

I just remembered... I wonder if the magic item that describes an item’s functions can tell you the levels of magic stones?

I picked up the item I was thinking about. “Um, do you think we could just use this to see what levels our magic stones are?”

“No, that can’t determine the level of magic stones. And even if it could, we wouldn’t be able to buy it.”

“Why not?”

“You need to take a certification test to use that magic item. Only people with shops like this are allowed to use it.”

“A certification test?”

“Magic items can be dangerous if they’re used incorrectly, so you need a lot of knowledge to use them. But determining who is and isn’t knowledgeable needs to be regulated and codified to eliminate bias.”

He had a point.

“That’s why they designed a test to identify people who knew more about magic items than the average person. I think if you fail it five times, you’re barred for life from using the item.”

Wow, that sounds like pretty harsh regulation. And when I heard the word “test,” I had a horrible, negative reaction. I always knew that tests were very tough slogs, but I’ve never actually taken one myself. That was probably Past Me’s senses coming through. She’d been laying low lately, so it was a bit of a surprise to feel her presence out of nowhere.

“Sorry that took so long. Here ya go.” Rose returned with a black board in her hand. “If ya put a magic stone on here, it’ll say the level. At least, that’s what it *should* do.”

Rose usually sounded so confident, but there was something different in her tone when she explained how this item worked. I stared at the black board dubiously as Rose placed a magic stone onto it. We waited for the level to display...but there was no change.

Druid and I exchanged confused looks.

“Oh dear,” Rose sighed. “Yeah, it didn’t work.”

“Huh?” I glanced over at her and saw a deep crease in her brow.
“What happened?”

“Ya saw for yourself, didn’t ya? Appraise skill-based items like this one are really pesky.”

“You mean they break easily?”

“No, it’s not broken. It just...didn’t react.”

It’s not broken, but it didn’t react? Um...wouldn’t you just call that “broken”?

“This thing’s fickle. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. And it’s a mystery why. I’ve done my fair share of investigatin’, but I’ve still got no clue.”

Rose swapped out the magic stone on the board with others, but there was still no reaction. She tried stone after stone with no luck. Maybe

it really was just broken?

“If it’s this slow, I would just say it’s broken,” Rose said.

My eyes wandered nervously away.

“But my goodness, ya really are super useless today, aren’t ya!” Rose sighed heavily at the item. “Anyway, this is the one that gives ya details about magic stones, but I can’t recommend it in good faith.”

Druid and I exchanged glances. She was right: The item was useless. We didn’t even know how long it would take us to test all of our stones...and we were worried it wouldn’t even work in the first place.

“You’re right, ma’am,” I admitted. “I’m not sure if this item will work for us.”

“It definitely won’t,” Druid added.

“I’m so sorry you had to bother getting it out for us,” I apologized.

Rose smiled and gave my head a vigorous rub. “Don’t worry about it, hon. So, why didja even want somethin’ like this? Did the guild ban y’all or somethin’?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that.”

“Then what’s the problem? If ya want to know a magic stone’s level, the guild is your best shot.”

We knew that. But the problem was the type of magic stones we wanted to investigate... *Hmm, how should we explain it?*

“Ivy?”

“Yes?”

There was a stern look in Druid’s eyes, like he was seriously mulling something over.

“Is something wrong?” The look on his face made me a little nervous.

“Maybe we should confide in Rose? Everyone knows her, and she trusts us.”

He was right. We’d been so vague with our most recent request, yet she’d trusted us. I looked at Rose. She shrugged her shoulders and started testing the pile of magic stones strewn about the table again. She still hadn’t given up.

“You’re right. Besides, I think *they* liked what you just said. So should we tell her everything?”

The bag on my shoulder shook in reply. It made me laugh because it was wiggling much more vigorously than usual. Rose, who had been listening in on our conversation, gave us a strange look. I didn’t blame her—our conversation would sound terribly strange to an outsider.

“So, um, we have a secret.”

“And after you hear what we have to say, we need to know if you can help us or not.”

Rose looked first at me, then at Druid. Then she smiled and nodded. “Sit tight. I’m just gonna close up the shop.”

“Oh, but you don’t need to bother.”

“But ya don’t want anyone eavesdroppin’, right? Besides, I don’t wanna have customers butt in while we’re trying to talk.”

Um, is this really okay? I looked at Druid, and he smiled back at me as if to say “I don’t think we can stop her.” And he was right—the prospect of closing shop in the middle of the day had put the biggest smile on her face.

“There! Now I’ll just cancel out the noise.” Being the owner of a shop that sold magic items, she managed to activate the item we needed in no time. “So, whaddaya need my help with?”

“You can decide whether you want to help us *after* we tell you, you know?”

“Well, I am a sucker for a fun adventure.”

Is she really okay with being so gung-ho? Isn't she worried about getting caught up in a terrible mess and running into trouble?

“Ivy, don’t be so worried,” Rose urged me. “I’ve met all sorts of people in my line of work, so I know how to pick out the good ones.”

“Okay...” I sighed, settling down beside Druid. Rose sat across from us, but she kept the black board and the magic stones on the table between us. Apparently, she still hadn’t given up on them.

“Oh! I got somethin’!” Rose squealed happily.

“What?!”

The black board was glowing faintly. After a while, it read: “Magic enhancement? Red magic stone. Level 7-8.” So it wasn’t broken after all. But what a strange description that was.

“These boards are always so cryptic,” Rose complained.

That made me laugh. Not only had the board failed to say the stone was enhanced with fire magic, but its range of levels was quite sketchy. From what I’d heard, there was a big difference in magic between Level 7 and Level 8.

“I guess this thing isn’t going to work,” Druid said, shaking his head at the words on the board.

“Just so ya know, this is one of the higher-level versions of this item. The lesser ones are even sketchier.”

Magic items sure were profound in all kinds of ways...

Chapter 250: Introductions

“Okay, um, so you know how I told you yesterday that I’m a tamer? Well...” Telling other people about myself and my companions always made me so nervous.

“It’s okay, hon, just say whatever you’re comfortable with,” Rose said. “You’re too honest for your own good, Ivy.”

“Huh?”

“Adventurers and travelers gotta be a bit sly now and then.”

Sly?

“What I’m saying is, it’s okay to be a bit selfish and look out for number one. Just don’t be cruel, of course.”

Umm... I looked at Druid for help, and he just smiled awkwardly back at me. Did that mean he agreed with Rose?

“It’s simple. Ya don’t need to tell me the whole truth. Remember what I said? I know how to spot people I can trust and I’m always up for a fun adventure.”

Errr...so, in other words, I don’t have to give her a super-detailed explanation because she trusts me? As for the liking fun adventures part... well, I still don’t get it. She’s hard to understand.

“So, why didja want an appraisal item?”

If I word this too carefully, she won’t understand. Gee, now it’s even harder to explain everything.

“Rose, Ivy’s overthinking it now. What you said backfired.”

I don’t think I’m overthinking anything.

“Yeah, I guess so. I meant ya could just speak freely without frettin’ too much.”

Speak freely...speak freely...

“We want the appraisal item because I’ve tamed a slime that can regenerate spent magic stones. Um, and we need to be able to test the levels of the stones because we want to sell them to people.”

Did that make everything clear? I didn’t say anything wrong, so it’s okay, right? I looked at Rose. There was an expression on her face I couldn’t put into words. *Huh? Did I say something wrong?*

“Okay, I get it so far. Ya have magic stones and ya don’t know their levels and ya want to be able to look it up, right?”

“Exactly!” *Oh, good. I think she gets it.*

“As you can tell, the two of us aren’t completely on the same page,” Druid said.

I gave him a funny look. What was he talking about?

“Yeah, Ivy sure is a cutie. You’re going to have to start being careful around bad men.”

Um, how in the world did we jump to this subject?

“Don’t worry. If any men come by, I’ll make them see stars.”

Um, Druid, you’re scaring me a little. And again, why are we even talking about this?

“Umm...so, can I introduce my companions now?”

It would be best for everyone to meet face-to-face now that Rose was going to be in on our secret.

“You really are such a good girl,” Rose said, looking at me with incredibly warm eyes. It made me a little uncomfortable. I’m not sure if I was embarrassed or flattered.

“Ivy,” Druid said, trying not to laugh, “what Rose was trying to say is that it’s okay if you don’t tell her why we have magic stones whose level we don’t know.”

“Huh?!” But why? Most people would find us suspicious if they knew we had magic stones we didn’t want to take to the guild for appraisal.

“You could have just said ‘We have some magic stones, but we don’t know their level, so we’d like to find out,’” Druid explained.

“That’s all?” I asked in surprise.

Rose laughed and nodded. “Ya don’t usually see people wantin’ to look up magic stones on their own when they could just take them to the guild. So ya obviously got these stones in some weird way. But I can tell from how ya both act that you’re not bad people. Since I trust ya, I don’t think it matters how ya got these magic stones.”

Oh. So that’s what she meant. “You know, Rose...you’re really chivalrous.” I blurted out the masculine word without even thinking.

Rose laughed loudly at my phrasing. “Thanks! I’m honored.”

“So, um, I want you to meet my companions, ma’am. They’re all very nice.” Favors and helping aside, I was just really eager to introduce her to my creatures. I wanted her to know them.

“Thanks. But first, ya gotta promise me somethin’.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Trust nobody. Ya still haven’t known me long enough to figure out what kind of person I am, right? But ya told me ya tamed a slime that can regenerate spent magic stones, of all things. What if I tried to steal it from ya? Especially when ya really want to introduce me to it. Wouldn’t ya be sad if I took your slime away? Ya hear me, Ivy? *Always take people with a grain of salt.* Never forget that.”

Huh? I get the feeling I've heard something like that before. Where was it? It was...something Druid's mentor said. That's right, he did say something similar.

"Um, but, Rose, it wasn't a problem that I told you. I talked it over with my companions and they told me you were safe."

Besides, I didn't think that anybody who lectured me on the importance of not trusting people could be a bad person.

"I sure am honored that ya trust me, Ivy. But I'm still a tad worried 'bout ya... People who show up with a friendly smile are the ones ya should be *most* suspicious of, ya hear?"

"Yes, ma'am. But my tamed slimes have the power to figure out whether somebody is good or bad."

"Ivy! What did I just tell ya?!"

"But Sora said you're safe, Rose. And when I mentioned earlier that I wanted to introduce them to you, they jiggled really hard and tried to get out of their bag."

Rose sighed. "I'm really happy to hear that, but still..." She shot Druid an exasperated look.

"Why don't we just take everyone out of the bag?" Druid interjected.

We brought Sora, Flame, and Ciel into the open.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Mrrrow.

"Te! Ryu, ryuuu."

The three sat on the table, each giving their greetings to Rose.

"I don't know exactly why, but these creatures definitely look like ya tamed them, Ivy."

How did she get that impression? I looked at them and saw nothing out of the ordinary. They seemed perfectly normal to me.

“Anyway, let’s have some tea and sort things out,” Druid said, settling everyone down.

I sat down and sipped my tea while telling Rose about Sora, Flame, and Ciel. She looked shocked when I told her Flame could make potions. And if the news surprised somebody as well seasoned as Rose, then it must be a startling fact indeed. Then, when I explained to her that Ciel was actually an adandara, she seemed perplexed.

“But why does your adandara look like a slime?”

“Flame created a stone that helps it shapeshift into one.”

Rose reached out and gave my head a gentle pat. “Thanks for sharin’ everything with me.”

This was a great relief to hear. Even though my companions had assured me she was safe, I was still nervous about having her meet them.

“Okay! Are we ready to talk business?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So, let’s just say ya want to *discreetly* look up the level of some magic stones. Do ya approve of that wording?”

“Yes. Do you know anyone who can do that?”

We would need somebody with an appraise skill. I looked at Rose. Her expression grew conflicted, and she shook her head no.

“That’s too bad.”

“Since there’s plenty of magic stones in the caves around here, we’ve got more people with the appraise skill than most towns and villages. But they’d all be registered with the guild, and travelin’ appraisers aren’t to be trusted.”

Oh dear.

“Um, Rose, may I ask something of you?” Druid’s eyes were solemn.

Rose nodded with a similar look in her eyes.

“The captain of the watch...your son...could you introduce us to him?”

That’s right. That’s what Druid’s original plan was.

“Sure, I don’t mind. But wouldn’t ya prefer the guild master?”

So she will introduce us. Is it really that easy? And why does she think the guild master would be better?

“The guild master knows more about magic stones. He’s been using them for a while.”

“Oh, really? But we haven’t met him yet.”

“Want me to introduce ya?”

“I’m tempted, but I’ve heard the top dogs of the adventurer and merchant guilds don’t get along well. And since we already

know people in the merchant guild, we’d kind of like to avoid meeting the adventurer guild’s master.”

“That makes sense.”

What? The leaders of the guilds don’t get along? I’ve never seen that before in a village.

“Okay, then I’ll set ya up with my son instead. He probably knows somebody who can figure out the levels of your stones.”

It looks like everything got settled in the end. What a relief.

Chapter 251: Aren't They Cute?!

“But my goodness, your creatures are so cute,” Rose said, petting each of them on the head in turn. Sora, Ciel, and Flame jiggled happily in reply.

“Oh yes, they’re extremely cute!” I was so flattered by her praise that my voice cracked a little. I was so happy that I could introduce my precious companions to somebody who truly cared about them. I wished I could share my wonderful creatures far and wide, but I knew that wasn’t possible.

“Hee hee! Oh, Ivy, ya sure do love ‘em, don’tcha?”

“Yes. Very much so.” I could tell even without looking in a mirror that I was wearing the goofiest grin. It was such a good feeling.

“Oh, by the way, when d’ya want to meet my son?”

“Whenever he has time. We have a very flexible schedule.”

“Do ya now? Well, thanks for being so accommodating.”

Flame had slid onto the top of the table and was stretching toward me. I was a little startled by this new behavior, but I picked it up and put it on my lap. Then it just stared up at me, and I stared back in confusion.

“Something wrong?”

“Teryuuu.”

It sounded like it was asking me something, but I didn’t understand. I thought through all the possible things Flame could want.

“Are you sleepy?” *It didn’t wiggle, so that must not be it. What could it be? It’s no use. I can’t think of anything.*

“I’m sorry. Um, if you could give me a hint, maybe I could understand you.”

Flame’s gaze spun around to something behind it on the table. *The black board?* I turned Flame on its side and peered into its face. *Hm?*

“The magic stones?” Was it indicating not the board but the stones? After all, Flame’s specialty was magic stones and potions.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.” Flame cheered up at those words.

Oh, thank goodness. So magic stones was the correct answer. Wait, could that mean... “Flame, do you want to make red magic stones?”

“Ryu! Ryu, ryuuu.”

I guess that means I was right. Flame was jumping for joy on my lap.

“Are ya gonna make me a magic stone, hon?” Rose asked Flame.

“Ryuuu,” Flame sang cheerfully back. It seemed even more inspired than usual.

“But, Flame, there aren’t any spent magic stones here. We’ll have to go get some from the dump tomorrow.”

“Teryuuu.”

Come on, you don’t have to be so obviously upset.

“We got some gray magic stones, though. Would they work?” Rose asked.

This brought back Flame’s good mood in a flash. Flame really was behaving so differently today. Even Druid looked at it in surprise.

“Is Flame okay?”

“I’m not sure. I just hope this whole thing doesn’t tire it out later.”

It was nice that Flame was in such high spirits, but I would feel so

sorry for the poor slime if it ended up collapsing from exhaustion. I needed to be considerate.

Rose returned to the back room and came out with a large drawstring bag. She set it down on the table with a heavy-sounding clunk. She loosened the strings and opened the bag to reveal a large number of gray stones. To the untrained eye, it was a worthless sack of rocks somebody had found on the side of the road.

“That’s quite a big collection.”

“Well, I gotta use magic stones to test and measure items. I forgot to throw these out, so they’ve been pilin’ up.”

I could see what she meant with just one look around the shop. You’d need a lot of magic stones to test and operate all these magic items.

“Teryuuu.” Flame examined a gray magic stone on the table, then cheerfully bounced up and down in my lap. Its jumps were about a centimeter high, so low that you wouldn’t even notice if you weren’t paying attention. I set Flame down beside the bag.

“Take as many as ya please,” Rose said.

Flame jiggled in reply, then chomped down an ordinary-looking gray stone from the bag.

“Ryu! Ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu...”

The magic stone foamed with bubbles inside of Flame’s body until it disappeared from view. Then Flame cried out...so softly that you wouldn’t even have heard it if you weren’t right next to it.

“Ryu!...pong!” And with a delicate sound, a beautiful red magic stone flew out of Flame’s mouth.

“Wow, you work fast. And what a pretty stone you’ve made, too.”

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu,” Flame chirped, swallowing the next

magic stone and jiggling. Its eyes were closed, and it was smiling contentedly. “Ryu!...pong.”

That made two. Flame jiggled happily and swallowed the next stone.

“It sure is having fun.” Druid picked up the magic stone Flame had just made and set it beside the other one.

“Yeah, I think it likes making magic stones.” I felt bad about keeping it from doing what it loved.

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu...”

I examined the row of new magic stones. They were quite clear and bright, just like all the magic stones Flame made.

“That one’s mighty pretty, too. Been a while since I’ve seen magic stones so transparent. Adventurers haven’t been findin’ many high-level stones in caves lately, ya know.”

“Ryu!...pong.”

“Oh, really?”

Druid placed the third magic stone beside its companions.

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu...”

I suddenly realized Sora and Ciel had been awfully quiet, so I looked for them... *Wait, where did they go?*

“Ivy, over here.”

I looked where Druid was pointing. Sora was perched on his head and Ciel was on his shoulder.

“Aren’t they heavy?”

“A little, yeah, but not enough to be a problem.”

But why had they settled there, of all places?

“Ryu!...pong.”

The fourth magic stone was a bit smaller than the others, and when it was set next to the previous three, it was obviously murkier, too.

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu.”

“Ivy, is Flame gonna be okay makin’ all these magic stones at once?” Rose asked, casting a worried glance at Flame. I wondered what she meant by “okay.”

“Um, what do you mean, ma’am?”

“It takes a bunch of magic to recharge a magic stone. Won’t recharging all these stones at once use up all its magic?”

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu.”

Use up all its magic? Come to think of it, I guess regenerating a magic stone would use up a lot of magic.

“Well, Flame once spat out twenty magic stones like it was nothing, so we never really worried about it running out of magic.”

“Ryu!...pong.”

“And it didn’t even run out of magic when it pumped out twenty stones, remember?”

“Yeah, it didn’t have any problems.”

“Well, that’s impressive. Ya must have a ton of magic yourself, eh, Ivy?”

“What?!” Druid and I gasped in unison, since we both knew that I had the lowest possible level of magic.

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu...”

“What makes you say that, ma’am?”

“Well, a tamed creature’s level of magic depends a lot on the magic of its tamer.”

“Really, ma’am?”

“Oh yeah! That is how it works.” Druid slapped his knee hard, suddenly remembering.

“Ryu!...pong.”

But that information couldn’t be completely right. After all, my very existence disproved it.

“Um, but I...” *It should be safe to tell Rose.* I glanced at Sora on top of Druid’s head. Our eyes met, and the slime jiggled happily in encouragement. I said, “I have no stars, so I don’t have much magic. I’m not at all powerful, either.”

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu...”

“What?!” That was the most shock Rose had shown all day...and I found it a little flattering. “Ivy, don’tcha *dare* just blurt that out to anybody! What if somebody uses it for evil?!”

Her anger was flattering, but she was really mad at me. There was such a huge crease between her brows that I was slightly...er, *very* scared.

“But I don’t just blab it to anybody. I trust you, Rose, so there’s no problem with telling you.” Even though Rose scared me sometimes, I knew she was a worthy exception. I would never trust just anybody without thinking!

“Ryu!...pong.”

Rose sighed, “D’ya really have no stars?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, wow... So are adandaras actually weak monsters or somethin’?”

“Ryu-ryuuu, ryuuu, ryuuu...”

Now it was Ciel’s turn to be doubted, so I quickly told her the story

of its taming.

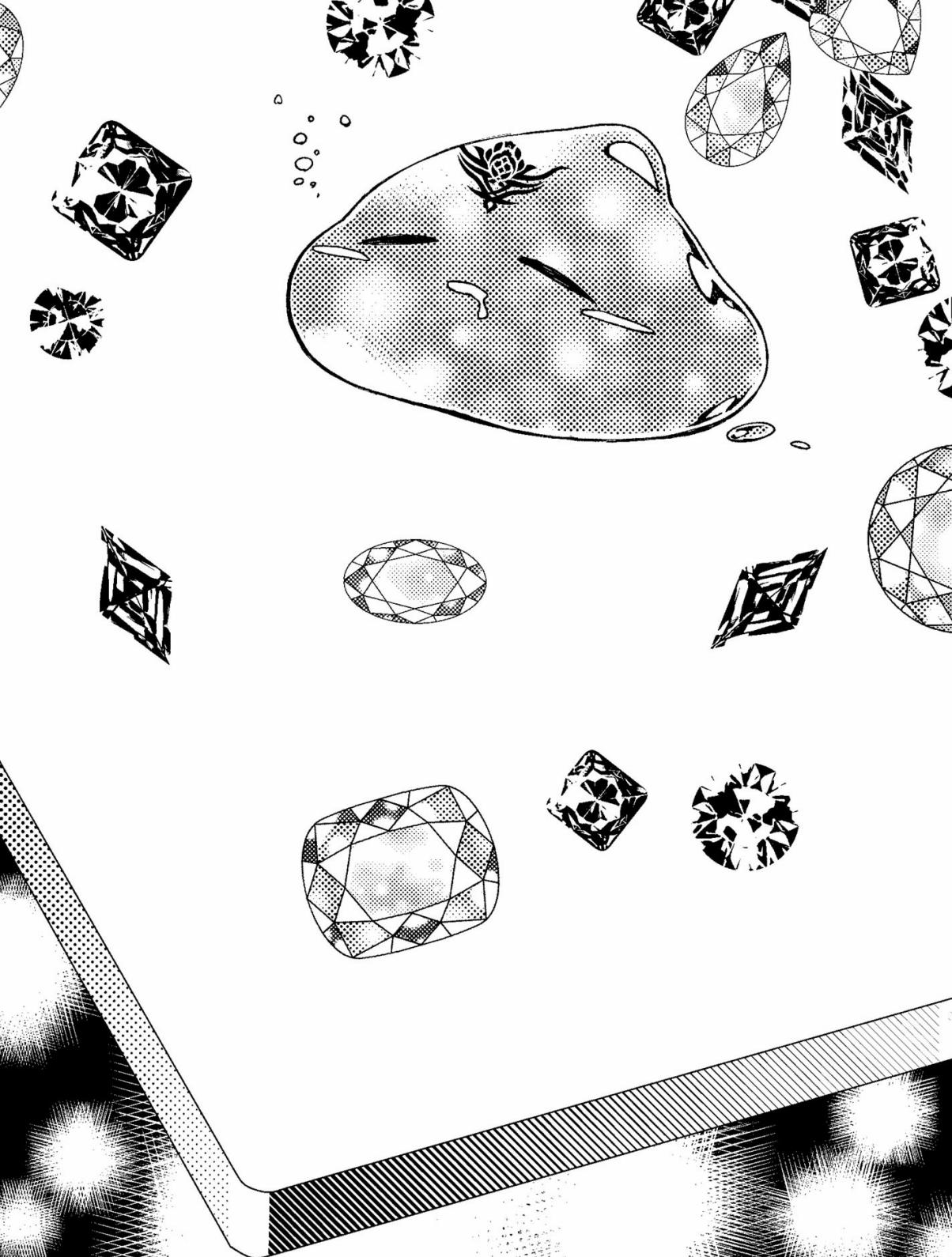
“I don’t know why, but ya seem to attract some pretty amazin’ creatures, Ivy.”

“Ryu!...pong.”

“Oh, Ivy! Flame fell down.”

“Huh?! Oh...so it really did burn itself out.”

Flame had fallen flat and was asleep on the table. Next to it, Druid had lined up all the magic stones it had regenerated. There were eighteen in total. I had heard all the sounds while we were talking, but there were even more magic stones than the number of *pongs* I’d noticed.



“Aghhh, not again.”

One of the magic stones in the lineup was particularly eye-catching. It was clearly far more transparent than the other stones.

“Just what in blazes *are ya?*” Rose asked, grabbing the stone and squinting as she rotated it in her hand.

“A magic stone...probably Level 1 or Level 2.”

“Level 1 or 2? Well, that’s the first time I’ve ever seen one that high.” Rose ceremoniously set the stone back down on the table. “Yeah, ya can’t offer this stone to anybody. You’d cause quite a ruckus if ya did.”

So I guess that magic stone really isn’t fit to sell or give away...too bad.

Chapter 252: Flame Is Super Satisfied

Flame seemed to like regenerating magic stones so much that I honestly wished I could have let it keep going, so I talked it over with Druid and Rose. They said that, since this village was going to need a lot of red magic stones anyway, we might as well let Flame regenerate stones until it was satisfied.

The next morning, I set some of Rose's spent magic stones in front of Flame. It blinked its eyes wide open in surprise.

"Whoa...have you ever seen Flame wake up so fast before?" Druid, who was just leaving to tell the staff whether or not we needed dinner today, stopped in his tracks and took a careful look at Flame's face.

"No, I haven't." Druid was right. I had never seen Flame make that alert expression before. It usually looked very sleepy, which was cute in its own way, but it was also adorable when it was surprised like this. Druid gave Flame's head a few pats and left the room.

"Ryu?" The way it leaned toward me with that little face was just too precious.

"Oh, right! I need to explain things to you. Okay, so this village is going to need a bunch of red magic stones, so you can do as you please with these. But only while we're here in Hatow, okay?"

I wonder if we could get a license or something that would make it okay for us to sell a lot of magic stones?

"Ryuuu, ryu! Ryu-ryuuu, ryu-ryu-ryuuuu," Flame sang, jiggling wildly in understanding. Its extremely excited jiggling caught the attention of Sora and Ciel. To be honest, I was quite taken aback, too. I didn't even

know Flame could ever get that excited. But that kind of reaction meant it probably had felt quite deprived all this time.

“Flame, calm down.”

It looked at me and jumped in my direction...but fell and tumbled before it could reach me. Flame was probably trying to mimic Sora and jump into my arms to express its joy, but no amount of excitement could cancel out Flame’s clumsiness. And I got the sense that it didn’t have as much energy to jump into my arms as it did before. Well, as long as it still had its appetite, I supposed I had nothing to worry about.

“Flame, you can regenerate as many magic stones as you like, but know your limits, okay? You don’t have to go too crazy and make super high-level stones. We can’t sell those anyway. Don’t overwork yourself.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

It’s still so hyper. Will it be okay?

Druid returned to our room with a letter in hand. “Ivy, it’s from Rose. Her son asked us to come to her shop tomorrow afternoon.”

“Aye, sir! Wow, that was faster than I expected.”

Since the captain of the watch was so busy, Druid had assumed it would take a week to hear from him, but it had been only two days since we’d spoken with Rose.

“I hope Rose didn’t force him to make time for us.”

Knowing her, that’s quite possible. Well, since we’ll be giving him red magic stones, it isn’t a bad deal for him. And since he’s Rose’s son, I assume he’s safe. I’m still a little worried, though.

“I just realized something.”

“What’s that?”

“The magic stones we plan on selling...it doesn’t matter whether we

know their level or not.”

“Oh...you’re right.”

Druid and I had talked it over and decided to sell the magic stones regardless of their level. Since Rose had advised us not to sell the Level 1 or Level 2 stones, we were planning on leaving out the transparent magic stones whose levels were unknown. All the other stones should be safe to sell, though...I hoped.

“Also, both guilds announced a state of emergency this morning. Now that that’s in effect, we should be able to price the magic stones at four different classes.”

“There’s a state of emergency?”

“Yeah. I just checked, and they were asking for magic stones. Just like we thought, there’s a big shortage.”

The state of emergency was called due to inclement weather. If I recalled correctly, these measures were only taken when conditions were life-threatening and... There was something else, right?

“I forget, are there any kinds of restrictions in this state of emergency?” I’d never been involved in anything like this, so I just didn’t know.

“Not for now, but they’re calling for all red magic stones, heating items, and potions anyone can spare.”

“Well, I guess we can’t exactly give them any potions.”

I looked over at our magic box, wondering if it was possible...but when I remembered the types of magic potions we had, I gave up on the idea.

“Also, what do you mean by pricing the magic stones at four different classes?”

“Well, usually, each magic stone is sold at its own unique price. If you offer them directly to the guild, they buy them at sixty percent of the normal price. But if there’s a state of emergency—at least this is how it works in other villages—they’re divided into four classes: Levels 1 through 4, Levels 5 and 6, Levels 7 and 8, and Levels 9 and 10. Each class has its own specific price; they don’t vary from stone to stone. I assume things are done the same way here in Hatow.”

“Oh, that’s good to know.”

“By the way, Ivy?”

I followed Druid’s gaze. “...Yeah?” Flame was still regenerating magic stones. It would probably be okay since I’d advised it to not push itself to its limits. And boy, did it look like it was enjoying itself. Sora and Ciel, drawn in by the fun, were playing with the regenerated magic stones.

“So...are you sure it’s okay to just let them loose like that?”

“Well...”

Ciel and Sora were batting a magic stone around. They’d most likely understood our conversation earlier and were keeping away from the ones we needed to sell. That meant they were probably playing with the magic stone we couldn’t sell... So the stone they were playing catch with was the especially shiny, transparent one. If anyone happened upon the scene, they would be glued to the spot in disbelief.

“Well, that’s the magic stone we *can’t* sell.”

Druid gave me a sarcastic smile. “Yes, *technically* it is. Oh, there’s more!”

The one sparkling magic stone had become two, and the two creatures continued to skillfully bat the pair of stones back and forth between them. *Well...they’re having fun, and Druid and I are the only people in this room anyway, so let’s give them a pass.*

“By the way, I told Flame we couldn’t sell the very high-level magic stones...but do you think maybe it doesn’t have any control over the types of stones it makes?”

“Yeah, that’s possible.”

If Flame had no control, then we might need to cut down on its regeneration sessions before they got out of hand. I wanted to avoid creating any more super-powerful magic stones, even though it really just meant that our magic box would get fuller...

“Ryuuu!” Flame sang, sounding very satisfied. I looked over and saw that it had finally finished regenerating magic stones. And the stones scattered about it... Unless I was imagining things, there were a lot more than before.

“Flame, I see you made a lot of stones again today. That’s twenty-eight in all, and three of them are super transparent.”

“Te! Ryu-ryuuu.”

“Did you have fun?” Druid asked.

“Ryuuu!” it screamed loudly in reply. Thank goodness we’d activated the noise-canceling item in advance. “Ryuuu...” Flame’s energetic voice suddenly sounded deflated. I looked at the slime. Its eyes were droopy with exhaustion, and it was yawning over and over.

“Flame, you overworked yourself. But thanks.”

Flame fell over on its face mid-yawn and went right to sleep.

“That was sudden,” Druid said.

I smiled and started putting the magic stones into a bag. “Looks like we have quite a collection of stones to give to the captain tomorrow.”

“Yeah, well...I think we should play it by ear.”

Oh, really? I thought Rose’s son would be trustworthy enough.

“Ivy, if you keep trusting people too easily, Rose will yell at you again.”

Dang. He read my mind. “Ha ha ha! But, well, he is Rose’s son, you know.”

“If you seriously said that to her, she’d *definitely* give you an earful.”

He was right. I could just picture myself bowing to Rose in shame.
“Yes, sir. I promise I’ll be more cautious of other people from now on.”

I’ll have to ask Sora to help me out.

Chapter 253: So Angry!

When we arrived at Rose's shop, the curtains were closed and nobody seemed to be around. I tried the door and was able to open it, so I called out, "Good afternoon, ma'am?"

"What're ya doin', hon? Hurry on in!" Rose's voice sounded. I breathed a little sigh of relief and stepped into her store.

"Hello again," Druid said, following behind and shutting the door tightly. The weather today was much chillier than the day before. The sun was out, but we just couldn't shake off the chill.

"Come on over here where it's warm."

We followed her voice to a spot filled with all sorts of heating devices like the ones we'd seen back at the inn. Tableau, captain of the village watch, sat beside them.

"Thanks for making time to see us today, sir," Druid said with a little bow. I nervously followed suit.

"Oh, well, I just came here today because my mother said she needed help with something... So, what do you need? Fair warning, sometimes there are things I can't help with."

I wasn't sure why, but there was a stiffness in his voice. Did he suspect us of something? Druid smiled awkwardly in reply, and Rose frowned in deep disapproval.

"Tableau, they want you to help them process somethin'," Rose grumbled.

We "want him to help us process somethin'"? That...seemed like a questionable way of phrasing it.

“Process something?” Captain Tableau shot Druid a dubious look.

“Yes. There’s something we need processed under the table. Can you do it for us?”

Now Druid was using cryptic language as well. And the words *under the table*, at that. That might make Tableau think we were up to something illegal. He seemed to be suspicious of us already, too. I risked a glance at him and... Ack! As I feared, he’d gotten the wrong impression.

“Are you asking me to abet you in a crime?” Tableau asked.

Druid smiled innocently back. Rose remained silent. Were they acting like this on purpose? But...why?

“Because I won’t lend aid to anyone doing a crime.”

The sound of his voice and the look in his eyes were scaring me. I found myself scooting back a couple of paces. I still didn’t understand why he’d seemed to suspect us from the very beginning—he’d acted normal around us the last time we met him. Had we done something during the past few days that put a mark on us?

“It’s about red magic stones. Won’t you at least hear us out?” Druid stared hard at Captain Tableau, studying him carefully.

Why is he treating us with such suspicion? I just don’t get it...
I looked at Rose. Her shoulders were shaking, and she was staring at the floor. *Wait a minute, is she trying not to laugh?*

“No matter what dire straits you are in, I will never abet a criminal... If that’s what you brought me here to talk about, then I’ll be on my way!” Captain Tableau turned to leave.

“Ha ha ha! My stupid son!” Rose’s laughter boomed through the shop. “Okay, who got to ya this time?”

Captain Tableau looked at her in surprise. Then he looked at Druid,

then back at her...and then, for some reason, his eyes landed on me. He stared hard at me and let out a loud sigh.

“Was this a trick?” Captain Tableau glared at Druid.

But Druid just smiled back as if everything were normal. “Forgive me; this was Rose’s idea. But I didn’t like your attitude when you got here, so I went along with it. She told us we needed to test you, and you passed by refusing to play ball. But you didn’t question our strange behavior, so you failed on that score.”

Druid seemed offended by Captain Tableau’s attitude, though I wasn’t sure why.

“Suspecting them from the very start was a mistake. And when Druid started talking, ya never once looked at me. That was another mistake. But your biggest mistake of all was not thinkin’ for yourself. D’ya get it now, hon?”

Aha...so Rose was also mad because of Captain Tableau’s behavior. Tableau grunted. “I...I’m sorry. But the guild master said...”

The guild master? So does this mean either the adventurer guild or the merchant guild suspects us of foul play? I don’t really like that. Did we do anything to put a target on our backs?

“You idiot!” Rose barked.

“Agh!” Druid and I jumped in unison, alarmed by the sheer volume of Rose’s voice bouncing off the walls of her shop. Even my bag jumped, followed quickly by a quiver. I took a breath to calm myself, then gave the bag a couple of gentle pats. After a few seconds, my creatures calmed down and the quivering subsided.

“Why d’ya blindly listen to what the guild master says without judgin’ things for yourself?! Why would ya come in here without hidin’ the hostility in your eyes? What if they were important allies all along?

What if people died because of your prejudice? Wouldja be able to live with yourself?”

Rose’s anger was clearly sincere—she was incredibly intense.

“The merchant guild said a large number of valuable minerals recently came in, but the sellers were unknown. So I looked up the people who came to this village a few days before the sale and these two names came up. That’s why I...”

“Aaarrggghhh.” Rose’s giant sigh left an awkward ringing in my ears. Captain Tableau must have felt it, too—his eyes were swimming. “Is selling minerals anonymously against the law?”

“No.”

“Then why were ya so upset about it?”

“I assumed...that the minerals might have been acquired illegally.”

“And why wouldja go out of your way to poke your nose into the sale, when the merchant guild already vetted it and let it happen?”

“It...wasn’t my idea.”

“I figured as much. Bein’ an idiot and lookin’ for trouble has the adventurer guild master’s name written all over it.”

“He wasn’t looking for trouble! He had a genuine suspicion.”

“Selling a bunch of valuable minerals brings in a lot of money, so some adventurers like to keep their name out of it to protect themselves. And yeah, most adventurers are out for praise and recognition, so not many of them sell anonymously. But some of them do! You stupid boys got impulsive, though. So what if you’d gotten their names out to the village and they’d been attacked? What were ya gonna do then?”

Captain Tableau had no response.

Dola was worried that crime would be worse this year because

people were worried about the winter, which meant the possibilities Rose brought up should be taken seriously.

Rose gave another heavy sigh and said, “I’m sorry my son’s such an idiot. To be honest, I didn’t think he had *this* much idiocy in him.”

Gee, she’s sure been calling him an idiot a lot. I’m starting to feel sorry for the guy.

“I’m sorry,” Captain Tableau bowed his head.

Druid shrugged and looked at me. I had my doubts, but I wasn’t at all angry, so I nodded once to signal I was okay with everything.

“It’s all right now, Captain. I hope you’ve calmed down?”

“Yes... I was in the middle of dealing with something very hectic and irritating when my mother asked me over here to speak with the two people the guild master suspected, so I flew off the handle a little...”

“Enough excuses,” Rose snapped coldly.

“Sorry.”

Hmm...so did the stress of his job put him on edge? Well, he’s calm now, so everything should be okay. Rose wouldn’t have introduced him to us in the first place if there was a problem with him. Besides, my creatures all said Captain Tableau is safe.

“Water under the bridge. Sorry to bother you when you’re overworked,” I said.

Captain Tableau looked at me in surprise. Druid gave my head a couple of gentle pats.

“Okay, now that the idiot’s got his cool back, should we have a nice, long chat?”

There she goes, calling him an idiot again. Captain Tableau looked like he’d already given in. *Hang in there just a bit longer, Captain!* Rose

didn't seem like the type of person who would drag out a conversation.

Chapter 254: A Contract?

“Oh, I just remembered there was somethin’ I wanted to ask ya,” Rose said as she set out tea for all of us on the table.

“Thank you, ma’am. What is it?”

We all sat down and took a breath. The hot tea was especially delicious after the tense conversation we’d just had. Rose’s tea also had a hint of sweetness to it. I wondered whether Hatow’s tea was always like that.

“Do ya still need a magic item to tell ya the levels of magic stones?”

What did she mean by that? Captain Tableau looked just as confused as I was.

“It turns out ya don’t need to know the exact level after all, right? So I figured ya probably didn’t need the magic item anymore, either.”

She had a point; we no longer needed it. But Flame would probably keep regenerating magic stones, so it could be useful later.

“We don’t need it now, but I think we eventually will,” Druid said.

“Ah, right. Eventually...” Rose smiled and nodded. She had seen Flame’s joy as it regenerated magic stones, so she understood. “But still, the magic items I’ve got right now just don’t cut it...” She sighed heavily. She was right—changing the magic stones over and over again trying to get a result...the idea made my head spin.

“You’re right. Even a rough estimate of the level would be fine, but there’s no telling how long it would take to test the level of over twenty magic stones... That’s the problem.”

Twenty stones...yeah, that sounds like a nightmare.

“Got it. I’ll ask the other shops and look around for more sensitive items.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Druid asked.

Rose nodded. Captain Tableau looked just as uncomfortable as he’d been when we all sat down. He was probably frustrated and struggling to understand what we were talking about. *I wonder...are Rose and Druid being vague on purpose?*

“When ya run into a problem like this later on, ya can hopefully ask someone else for help, but that won’t always be doable. I guess that means ya do need this magic item. Well, only if it works well enough, that is.”

“Thank you very much for looking out for us.”

Once there was a lull in our conversation, Captain Tableau cleared his throat.

“What is it?” Rose stared at him.

He fidgeted a little. “Er, I’d just kind of like to know why exactly you asked me to come here today.”

Rose rolled her eyes in resignation. “Yeah, I guess we will have to talk about that. These two probably have some errands they want to get to.”

If you asked me, Captain Tableau was the one who was anxious to get back to work, not us.

“Tableau, I asked ya here to help these two sell their red magic stones.”

Wow, she really just threw him a hardball without any warning.

“Their magic stones? But can’t they just go through the guild or the village watch?” Tableau had a confused look in his eyes that said *Is that*

what you called me all the way out here to do?

“That’s what they’d do if there were no issues. But there *are* issues. That’s why you’re here.”

Druid and I exchanged smiles. Then Druid set a bag onto the table. Rose’s eyes bulged a little when she saw how big it was.

“Are there more now? Don’t tell me that yesterday...”

“*Flame regenerated more stones?*” was what Rose was probably thinking.

“Yes. Very happily, I might add.”

As we talked with Rose, Captain Tableau looked utterly confused.

“These are red magic stones. We want to sell them, but we don’t know any of their levels.”

“Huh? Is this all of them?”

“Yes.”

Captain Tableau looked inside the bag, then went stiff for a few moments. As Druid had guessed, their level was too high for them to be sold. Usually, stones for sale would be Level 5 at most, but Flame’s *lowest* level of regenerated magic stones were Level 5. I guess it was only natural for him to be stunned by the contents of the bag.

“Um, is this everything?”

“Yes, though we’re pretty sure there will be more later,” Druid said.

A look of bewilderment filled Tableau’s eyes. “Sooo, if you’re going to sell them, the state of emergency means you would have to part with them for quite a low price.”

“Yes, I understand that.”

“I see.” Tableau stared mindlessly at the stones. I was starting to worry.

“Are you okay, sir?” I asked.

He looked at me. “I’m fine, thanks. To tell the truth, Hatow is desperate for any magic stones at all right now.”

“I’m glad we can help.”

Captain Tableau kept staring at me. He took a sip of tea and said, “But there’s just one thing I need you to tell me.” Then his eyes bored into Druid, who stared right back. “Please tell me how you got these magic stones.”

“It’s only natural for you to be curious about that. That’s why we called you here to tell you,” Druid answered.

“Oh, it is?”

“Yes. We couldn’t let just anyone overhear our conversation.”

“What exactly is going on?”

“Before I tell you anything, I want you to sign a contract.”

“A contract?”

“Yes. A nondisclosure agreement.”

“As long as it’s nothing criminal, I don’t mind. I’ll sign,” Captain Tableau said.

Rose set a piece of paper on the table. Druid and I were startled at the sight of it. The original plan had been to see how committed Tableau was, not to get him to actually sign that day.

“Tableau, this is the nondisclosure agreement. Hurry up and sign it. Druid, this one is from me.” Rose handed Tableau a pen, then gave Druid another piece of paper.

“Wow, this is a little excessive.”

“You two are way too trusting. These contracts are the least ya should do. Ya gotta keep Ivy and her friends safe.” Rose shoved the paper

at Druid. There was a look of astonishment on his face as he took it and read it over.

“Once you’ve read through it, you and Ivy should both sign it.”

“Mom, are these papers magic?”

“Of course they are—they’re binding contracts.”

“Yeah, but common folks don’t really use these. Most people just use regular paper.”

“Well, this is the paper I want to use.”

“Uh...okay.”

While the mother and son squabbled, Druid asked me if I wanted to see Rose’s contract. I agreed that I should at least read it.

1. *I will not tell anyone about Ivy or her companions.*
2. *If I do tell anyone, I will become a slave.*
3. *My official classification will be a criminal-slave.*
4. *If that happens, all my assets will be split evenly between Ivy and Druid.*

“Isn’t this a bit too extreme?”

“Ya think so, hon? I don’t plan on breaking the contract, so I have no problems with the punishments being extreme.”

Was that really the issue here? Also, this contract didn’t spell out what “breaking” it meant.

“Um, why didn’t you specify what counts as breaking the contract?”

“Because it wasn’t necessary.”

But...is it really unnecessary? I looked at Druid. He shook his head, probably to tell me that nothing I could say would change Rose’s mind. After Druid and I signed the contract, Rose smiled and patted my head.

“There. All signed.”

Now that Tableau had finished, we went ahead and signed his contract, too. I never imagined we would be signing a contract just to talk about red magic stones.

“Okay, now please explain everything.”

“Captain Tableau, I’m leaving the explanation to Ivy, not me.”

“What?! Really, Ivy?”

“Yes, and I also have some friends I want you to meet.”

I pulled Sora, Flame, and Ciel out of their bag and repeated the story I’d told Rose. The more I talked, the blander the look on Tableau’s face got. I was starting to worry again.

“Um, so...did that all make sense, sir?”

Tableau let out a frustrated moan. “For now, yes... Okay, so this slime named Flame can make magic stones. Is that right?”

“Not *make* them, exactly. Flame regenerates them.”

“Oh, yes. That’s right.”

Now that I’d told him everything, the three of us sipped our tea and waited for him to put all the pieces together in his mind. For some reason, Rose was rolling Sora around, much to its delight. Ciel was playing on the shelf. I wanted to stop them, but Rose insisted they should do as they pleased. Flame, meanwhile, just slept soundly.

“Okay. I understand it all now. So...could I watch your slime regenerate a magic stone?”

As soon as Captain Tableau said those words, Flame’s eyes shot open. It seemed really eager, so I had Rose bring out a spent magic stone. As Flame regenerated the stone into a high-level one before his very eyes, Tableau froze up like a statue.

*Come on, Flame...why now, of all times, did you have to regenerate
a stone close to Level 1?*

Chapter 255: Let's Talk

“I truly am sorry for the way I behaved,” Captain Tableau said, getting up from his seat and bowing deeply to me.

“It’s okay now, sir.”

“But I was so rude to you. I really am sorry.”

Captain Tableau was firmly committed to helping us with the red magic stones. Rose had sealed the deal by giving him Flame’s newest regenerated stone. She made us some more tea, and we sipped it for a while. That was when Captain Tableau suddenly stood up and apologized.

“Captain Tableau, apology accepted. Thank you very much.”

He looked a little taken aback by my reaction, but he finally settled back into his seat.

“So, um...may I ask you something?” I would be opening a can of worms, but I just had to know the answer.

“Sure. What is it?”

“Why did you act like you were suspicious of us today?”

He’d acted normally the first time we met, but today he was on guard from the moment he saw us. That must have meant we’d done something during the past few days that made him suspect us. But what? I needed to know so I could avoid doing it again.

“Rumor has it that the merchant guild master has been dabbling in illegal activity. Only a few other people know about it besides me.”

“Oh, really?” Rose looked just as surprised as I was.

“Um...are you sure you’re okay with telling us? You barely know

us.” It bothered me that he would just blab something like that so easily.

“Ivy, pot calling the kettle black much?” Rose sounded tired.

“Huh?”

Why? Oh, is she talking about Sora? But Captain Tableau’s secret is more important, isn’t it?

“That question alone tells me I can trust you, Ivy. Besides, if someone with unlimited access to high-level magic stones like this were a bad person, we’d be hopeless against them anyway. You could do so much with just this one stone, yet you don’t.”

Come on, it’s not like Flame can just pop them out whenever. And even though we’re going to give them to other people, we’ll still get compensated. Besides, what does he mean that I could do so much with just one stone? Nothing’s really coming to mind...

“Back to your question, Ivy, one of my fellow watchmen overheard the guild master talking with his friends. He said, ‘There’s a traitor among us selling minerals without permission. Find them.’”

Ah, so it’s the typical backstabbing you’d find in any criminal gang. Wait a minute, why do I have to get caught up with criminals again? I was being extra careful, too.

“I did some digging and found out that some valuable minerals had been sold anonymously at the merchant guild, so I launched an investigation. And that’s where your names popped up, Druid.”

“So it was the minerals that made us look suspicious,” I said.

“That makes sense.”

As we talked and sipped our tea, Captain Tableau looked at me with mysterious eyes. “Um, is that all you have to say about it?”

“What do you mean?” Druid was just as confused as I was.

“I investigated you without your consent.”

“But you were just doing your job as captain of the watch, right?” I said. “Of course you wouldn’t ask us first if you were going to check up on us.”

Druid nodded.

“Well, you’re right, but...” Captain Tableau let out a sigh. “It was so foolish of me to investigate you both.”

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, that was a waste of time. By the way, Tableau, are ya sure the minerals the guild master was talkin’ about were the same ones they sold?”

“At the time, I thought so. Priya and I made that judgment call.”

Priya?

“Priya is the master of the adventurer guild, and an old friend of Tableau’s, too.”

An old friend... I wonder if they have the same kind of relationship as Druid and his old mentor in Oll? Oh, but wait, I get the sense that Rose doesn’t exactly like this guild master.

“Now I think our original ideas were wrong,” Tableau said. “I know this is going to sound like an excuse, but things have been so hectic with planning for the harsh winter that I haven’t been sleeping well for weeks. I’m sure the facts I needed were there, but somehow I overlooked the most important information.”

Lack of sleep really does lead to bad judgment. I remember a time when the rain was so relentless that I couldn’t find a safe place to sleep and I walked around the forest for two days straight. And I definitely did get a little paranoid and lose my sense of judgment for a while there... Like, I’d burst into areas without checking for monsters first. Those were really a dangerous few days.

“By the way, Ivy, what kind of minerals did you sell, exactly?” Rose asked.

Druid and I fell silent. She meant *those* minerals, didn’t she? I glanced at Druid, wondering whether it was okay to tell her. He gave me his usual gentle smile and nodded.

“Ciel found them in a cave on the sacred ground of the guardian deity of the forest.”

Huh? Why do Rose and her son look like statues?

“Um, are you both okay?”

“So it was you two who sold those minerals...”

Apparently, he knew about the minerals. Well, I shouldn’t be surprised, since they did come from their guardian deity’s sacred ground. They must have been very significant to the people of Hatow.

“I heard those minerals were being traded for the first time in years... To think it was you two all along. I’m shocked.”

Rose took a sip of her most likely cold tea and exhaled loudly. It looked like those minerals really were incredibly special. Maybe we shouldn’t have sold them? *Well, too late for that now.*

“Who handled the sale for ya, hon?” Rose asked as she brewed a new pot of tea. *Wow, she and Tableau sure have been drinking a lot of tea.*

“Agilk and the appraiser Drough helped us,” Druid said.

Captain Tableau was surprised to hear that. *Wait, is there a problem with either of them?*

“Both of them are on my team.”

So they’re on our side. We sure made some unlikely connections to Captain Tableau without knowing it.

“But didn’t they tell ya Ivy’s name when ya were lookin’ into who

sold the minerals?” Rose asked.

“They didn’t. Oh! Now that you mention it, there was this one time when I got called to the office for an important secret meeting. But just when we were about to get down to business, that damn guild master barged in and made me leave before they could tell me anything.”

“Maybe the meeting was about Ivy and Druid, hon.”

“You’re probably right. Then the corrupt guild master’s cronies started sniffing around me, and I didn’t have a chance to talk to my friends. Then I got loaded down with a hectic work schedule and...”

It sounded like one thing had led to another, which eventually led to him suspecting us. I supposed it was a case of bad timing.

“Still, was that really any reason to think Druid and Ivy were crooks?” Rose asked.

“The name Ivy did stick out a little.”

Me?!

“Priya and I both remembered the name from reading crime reports.”

Oh...I think I know what he's talking about.

“It was an unusual name, so it stuck in our minds. The only problem was, Ivy was still quite little. So I came here today planning to check up on you. But on my way, that damn guild master told me an adventurer threatened him into giving up his red magic stones and it ticked me off... I’m sorry for venting. I know this has nothing to do with you.”

I thought I had grown up, but he called me *little*. It made me wonder how old I looked.

“But now I see,” Captain Tableau said. “So you suspected me because of my poor judgment.

“Remember how a bunch of people got caught up with those criminals a little while ago? Well, I was one of the many people who didn’t notice it, and I figured somebody out there was trying to swindle my mom. I wanted to, you know...get her away from problematic people as quickly as possible. My dad told me that Mom was unusually taken with the both of you, so...”

“I get it. You were just worried about your mother,” Druid said.

Tableau’s face turned bright red. I glanced at Rose and saw that she was faintly pink. The sight embarrassed me a little, so I gulped down my tea to calm my nerves.

“Ahem! But still, that was no excuse to assume Ivy was one of the criminals.”

“The criminals? Oh, no, that’s not what I thought. I thought she was one of the persons of merit.”

“Persons of merit?” Rose looked surprised.

“Yes, well...”

Somebody suddenly flew into the shop. “Tableau, you were right all along! Ivy’s name was on the list of persons of merit!”

“Persons of merit...” Judging by what he said earlier...was this Priya?

Chapter 256: Different Positions

“**M**y deepest apologies,” said Priya, the adventurer guild master, as he bowed deeply to me and Druid. I was satisfied with the apology, but Rose sneered at Priya, looking very menacing indeed.

“Um, Rose, don’t you think we can let this go now?” Druid gently asked her. He probably thought it was a lost cause, but I admired his courage. I wouldn’t have been able to say anything to Rose at all.

“Criminy... Druid, you and Ivy are way too forgiving.”

Er, but anybody would be confused if one problem after another kept popping up when things were already so crazy. Especially when

the merchant guild master was suspected of committing a crime when Hatow was already busy preparing for a harsh winter as quickly as possible.

“Everything’s okay now. Apology accepted, so please stand up.”

“Thank you very much.”

Priya was worried about our meeting here today, and he had found a window in his busy schedule to reread the documents about the criminal organization. When he saw my name right there on the list of persons of merit in the incident, he hurried over to tell Tableau, but he was a little too late. Soon after Priya arrived, Vice-Captain Pith of the village watch arrived to fetch Captain Tableau back since he had been gone longer than expected. When he saw the state the shop was in, he asked Captain Tableau for an explanation. And now the captain was a few meters away from us, receiving quite an earful from Vice-Captain Pith.

Apparently, both Captain Tableau and Priya were new to their

positions. Both of them were skilled enough as fighters and leaders, but Pith told us that they still needed some training before they could be considered first-class. Pith seemed to be a sort of watchdog who helped guide people to greatness. The only problem was that the weather had suddenly turned cold right when Hatow was already facing all sorts of problems, so he'd been out in the forest checking for anomalies instead of manning his post. Captain Tableau and Vice-Captain Pith had simply fallen on a string of bad luck—that's all you could say about it.

I glanced around the room looking for my creatures as I hadn't seen them for a while. I'd panicked a little when Priya stormed into the shop, but they had already hidden themselves by then. They were good hiders... too good, in fact. Druid calmly looked around for them, but he didn't seem to have any better luck than I did.

"Good grief." The scolding finally over, Vice-Captain Pith walked over and sat in the chair Captain Tableau had been using.

"Sorry about that, hon. Have some tea." Rose was in good form. This kind of thing probably happened a lot.

"What's this?" Pith froze when he saw the bag of red magic stones we gave to Captain Tableau.

Everyone seemed to react the same way. Were they really that rare? *Oh, that's right, I put the really high-level magic stone that Flame regenerated a little while ago in there.* That definitely would give anybody a shock.

"Um, so these are..."

"The magic stones they sold us."

"No...no, no, no, that can't be right. You're mistaken, aren't you?" Vice-Captain Pith vehemently insisted.

"No, these really are the magic stones we sold him."

Pith wouldn't believe us. Meanwhile, Priya was staring at the magic stones in silence.

"Captain! Didn't I say you had to explain how selling works to them?!"

"Yes, well, I did explain to them...didn't I? Wait, *did* I?"

He hadn't explained it, but Druid had already gone over the basics with me, so I didn't think there were any problems.

"It's quite all right. I know how it works," Druid smiled awkwardly, jumping to Tableau's defense.

"That's nice and all, but this is far from the first time he's forgotten to do that." With a heavy sigh, Pith took a sip of tea. Both Tableau's and Priya's eyes were shifting wildly.

"But are you sure you're all right with selling these magic stones to us?" Pith continued. "They're quite high-level."

"Of course. Magic stones are only valuable if you use them."

"Might I ask where you found them?" Pith said.

"We settled that with Tableau," Rose answered gruffly. "Sorry, but we're not telling anyone else besides the captain."

Pith looked at Rose, Tableau, Druid, and me in turn. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. If the captain has concluded that there are no problems, then that's good enough for me. But we really just can't accept this one."

He removed the clearest magic stone from the bag and gave it back to Druid. That was a shame, but it was nice to hear Pith speaking so calmly.

"Guild Master Priya told me most of the details, but about how much progress have you made in your investigation of Guild Master

Hisaza?”

Guild Master Hisaza? Was that the head of the merchant guild?

“This is my store, not your office,” Rose cut in. “Don’tcha dare get Ivy and Druid caught up in somethin’ dangerous.”

“Oh...so you’re on to us?” Vice-Captain Pith asked.

Get us caught up in what?

“Of course I’m on to ya. Now get your asses outta here.” Rose pointed outside. With a shrug of resignation, Pith left the shop with Priya and Tableau. Since they took the magic stones with them, I hoped they would serve somebody well.

“Thank you for that,” Druid said to Rose.

I gave Druid a questioning look.

“Ya gotta keep your wits about ya when that damn Pith is around. When he saw your name on the list of persons of merit, he probably wanted to rope ya guys into helping them fix their problems. Criminy.”

Person of merit...that’s me, right? And they wanted my help?

“But I couldn’t possibly do that. It was just a fluke when I helped take down that criminal organization.”

“Was it really just a fluke, hon?” Rose stared into my eyes.

My heart raced a little as I nodded.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Ack!” I jumped, looking frantically around the floor for Sora. I spotted it at my feet, doing its stretching exercises.

“Oh, thank goodness! Sorry I couldn’t take care of you. Those guys came in when I didn’t expect it.”

Mrrrow.

“Teryuuu.”

Ciel leapt onto the table from behind me, and Flame oozed out of an item on a shelf a few meters away. It was a relief to see them all.

“Sorry, everyone. I forgot to lock up the shop,” Rose said, scurrying away to lock the door.

“It’s okay. I forgot, too,” Druid said.

“Sorry about my son, though.”

“He couldn’t help it. He’s overwhelmed with all the emergencies that are going on.”

The captain of the watch seemed to wear many hats. Then again, the same could be said of the guild master.

“But emergencies are when ya *really* can’t afford to mess up.” There was a lonely look in Rose’s eyes.

“So, um, what kind of person is Priya?”

At first, I’d gotten the impression Rose disliked him, but I was starting to think I was wrong.

“He’s a good kid, and I mean it. He cares for his friends a great deal.”

So Rose *did* like Priya. Then why did she act that way around him?

“But being a good guild master doesn’t mean always caring about people,” Druid said.

Rose nodded sincerely. “Exactly. He still doesn’t get that.”

Oh, now I see! The guild master is in a position where he has to make tough choices... Sometimes he has to choose to save the town even if that means his friends will die. I thought back to the guild master of Oll. He’d shown his strong commitment to protecting the town, and his adventurers answered by pledging their lives to serve him. Nobody died

because Ciel was there, but he told me that there would have been many casualties if Ciel hadn't rescued them.

"Besides, I'm worried about him and Tableau. I'm glad they've helped each other out for so long, but they don't get

that they're in different places now. Tableau is the head of the watch, Priya is the head of the adventurer guild. End of the day, they gotta make different judgment calls sometimes. And I'm worried that when the time comes to make tough decisions, their friendship is gonna blind them from knowin' what to do."

Different places... That sure sounded complicated.

Chapter 257: Too Difficult

“**T**oday was very eventful, wasn’t it?” Druid said.

“It sure was,” I sighed in reply, remembering everything that had happened. *I sure wish there were some way to stop people from assuming I’m involved with criminals. Yeah. It’s hopeless.*

“Heh!”

As I was stuck in my agonizing spiral, a sudden laugh from my side startled me. I turned my head to see Druid’s shoulders shaking with laughter. It was so sudden that it took me aback.

“Huh? Oh, Ivy, that reaction makes me a little sad.”

“Well, did you really have to laugh out of nowhere? It scared me.”

“Sorry, I was just thinking about how Tableau reminded me of Gotos back in the day.”

Gotos... Oh, right. The guild master of Oll.

“Why aren’t you calling him Guild Master?” I thought I remembered him calling Gotos by that title when we were back in Oll.

“Well, we’re pretty far away from Oll now, so I thought I’d go back to the name I used to call him in the old days.”

In the old days? That’s right, weren’t Gotos and Druid childhood friends? Wait, am I remembering wrong?

“Tableau is struggling with a lot of internal conflict right now.”

“Internal conflict?”

“That’s right. He’s wondering what he needs to do and what he should be like as head watchman. He knows his judgments could bring

suffering to the people of Hatow, so he's stuck, especially since he has to deal with the merchant guild master on top of it all.”

I suppose being the head of any organization is a really big deal.

“Guild Master Priya of the adventurer guild is probably going through the same thing.”

That’s right, they did say he became guild master around the same time Tableau took over as captain of the watch.

“It takes a lot of grit to make it to the top of an organization, but once you find yourself standing there, the grit you thought you had crumbles away into insecurity...and extreme loneliness.”

“Loneliness?”

“Of course you have allies and people who can help you, but when it comes time to make decisions, you’re on your own. And you have to carry the burden of what comes from those decisions alone, too.”

That...is terrifying. I couldn’t stand the thought of my decisions causing someone to die.

“When you’re on the top, you can’t fear death.”

Well, I agree with that, but still...

“Ideally, you save everyone, but reality isn’t so kind. That means you always have to make the decisions that will save the most possible lives.”

That was a decision Oll’s guild master had needed to make, too. He sent a team of adventurers off into the forest, knowing some of them would die, so that the people of the town could be saved.

“It’s easy to put this into words, and it’s easy to understand with your head...but not with your heart. The biggest challenge of all is figuring out whether your decisions are correct or not. The answers never

come easily.”

He was right. You might also come up with an even better idea after you’ve already made your decision.

“Having a support system helps, but it’s still hard.”

“It does sound quite stressful.” But the words sounded shallow coming from me, and my face twisted with shame. Noticing this, Druid patted me gently on the head.

“Gotos struggled quite a bit at first. Whenever reports came in that his friends had died, he’d drown his sorrows in wine and take out his anger on me and our mentor. But in the end, he always blamed himself. There was one time where none of the people he sent away on a mission came home. He really lost it then, and I hated myself for not being a better friend when he needed me.”

Gotos must have hurt harder than anybody, but I guess Druid and his other friends were hurt, too. Druid was talking with a smile on his face now, but sometimes I caught twinges of pain or sadness in his eyes. He was probably reliving those days.

Earlier that day, when Rose was yelling at Captain Tableau, I’d caught something. It lasted just for a second, and it might have been my imagination. For a moment, though, she looked like she was on the verge of tears. I’d thought I was mistaken at the time, but Rose might have been letting her hidden feelings rise to the surface.

“So, how did Gotos calm his nerves? How did he grow into the Gotos I know today?”

“He overcame each challenge one by one, all by himself. Of course, we helped him a little, too. Also, meeting his wife played a big part in his transformation.”

Druid wrote himself off, but I was sure he was a big help to Gotos.

They loved each other; that was why Gotos had been so overjoyed to see the change in Druid that he thanked me personally.

When I was alone in the forest, abandoned by my parents, the fortune-teller said nothing and simply stood by my side. And whenever the things my parents said made me cry, Past Me would scream in my mind, *Keep living! Look toward the future!* Thanks to both of them, I was able to move on through the pain. Everybody has their own kinds of support systems.

“Captain Tableau and Guild Master Priya are each other’s support systems, aren’t they?” I got that sense from looking at them.

“Yeah, and that won’t work.”

“Huh?! Oh! Because their positions are different, like Rose said.”

“Exactly. Their positions are way too different. They’re friends and allies, but they can’t be each other’s support systems.”

This is so hard. They’re friends and allies...but they can’t be each other’s support systems? I guess that means they each have to take care of themselves...I think.

“Ha ha ha! Is this too deep for you?” Druid poked the spot between my brows. I must have had a big crease there.

“Yeah. Don’t either of them have other people in their lives to support them?”

“Captain Tableau has Vice-Captain Pith. And judging by what I saw of him today, he’s committed.”

“Committed to what?”

“Committed to supporting his captain. His eyes are earnest. I know he’ll be all right.”

His eyes? I couldn’t remember what his eyes looked like, even

though I'd just seen him earlier that day. *If I ever meet him again, maybe I should look and see what kind of eyes he has.*

"But maybe Guild Master Priya doesn't have anyone like that in his life. I sensed a different kind of insecurity coming from him than from Tableau."

Really? I couldn't sense anything at all.

"Well, we're just travelers. There's not much we can do."

"Yeah."

Since we weren't citizens of Hatow, we couldn't get too involved in the village's affairs. But if there were something we could do to help, we definitely would.

"Okay, I guess there's not much more we can say about that," Druid said. "Oh, by the way, didn't we forget we promised to teach Rose how to make onigiri?"

"Oh! Yeah, I completely forgot." I remembered making that promise a little while ago. It was no use—my wits hadn't been about me ever since we moved into this inn.

"I feel like I've been a lot more forgetful lately..."

"Nah, you're fine," Druid assured me. "You're much better than me, at least."

"I'd rather not turn this into a competition."

A competition to see who's more forgetful? How silly.

"Yeah, neither do I."

We already got the rice, so maybe we could do it tomorrow? Or maybe that's too soon. Oh, no we can't. I didn't get any ingredients to put inside the onigiri.

"Why don't we get everything ready and go back to her shop?"

Druid suggested.

“I’d like some time to make the fillings for the onigiri.”

“Oh, yeah. Then let’s go ask Rose tomorrow what her plans are.”

“Okay. I want to buy the ingredients for the onigiri filling on the way back.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I was about to get ready for bed when Ciel bounced up between us.

“What’s up?”

Meowww.

What could it be? I think it’s trying to tell me something. What is it, Ciel?

“Oh no, are you hungry?”

Mrrrow.

Oh, okay. Yeah, it has been a while since the last time it hunted for some meat and ate its fill.

“Okay, Ciel, why don’t we spend tomorrow morning in the forest?” Druid suggested. “Then when you get back, we can go to Rose’s shop.”

Ciel happily jiggled in reply.

“That’s a good idea. While we’re waiting for Ciel, we can pick up more potions for the slimes, too. Does that sound good to you, Ciel?”

Mrrrow.

Okay! Well, let’s get to bed. It’ll probably be cold again tomorrow, so I have to make sure I get a good night’s sleep.

Chapter 258: An Even Rarer Rarity

“Zoooh...gooold...” It was so cold that I couldn’t even talk right. I hadn’t imagined the forest could possibly be this cold. I’d assumed it would be just a little colder than the village since the trees blocked out the sun, but did the forest really *need* to be this freezing? *I don’t think so.*

We were at the dump collecting potions while Ciel hunted to fill its stomach...and it was just too cold. Even the potions were icy to the touch.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Why are you guys acting totally normal? “Mr. Druid, are slimes resistant to the cold?”

“I’ve never heard anything like that. But judging by the look of Sora and Flame, they must be.”

“Yeah...I’m jealous.”

“You seem to do better in the heat than in the cold, Ivy.”

“I do. I’m figuring that out for the first time this winter.”

My fingers were so stiff that I kept dropping the potions and wasting time. *Oops! There I go again.* I was rubbing my hands together, but they were frozen to the core and just wouldn’t warm up. Druid noticed and gave my hands a squeeze.

“Wow, they’re so cold.”

“I know.”

Druid’s hands felt warmer than usual. Or maybe my hands were just much colder than usual?

“I just remembered that they sell winter gloves.”

“Winter gloves?”

“Yeah, they make gloves for the winter so that people like me who have to grip a sword can be better protected from the elements.”

Druid was indeed wearing a glove on his remaining hand. It was designed to protect his palm from the hilt of his sword, but since he wasn’t carrying a blade, it was hard to visualize how it worked.

“They make gloves that look like this, but they’re for the winter.”

“For the winter...”

Aha! A pair of gloves completely unlike the one Druid was wearing materialized deep in the recesses of my memory. It was probably Past Me’s memory. Maybe that means there were winter gloves in my past life. They sure do sound warm.

“Where do you think the winter gloves are?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I mean, which store? An item shop or a clothing shop?”

According to Past Me, it was probably a clothing shop. Actually, I didn’t seem to have any knowledge of item shops from my past life. Maybe that type of shop didn’t exist there.

“We’ll ask Rose. If she doesn’t have any, we’ll go to Modd.”

“Are you sure, sir?” I was so happy that I forgot to not call him “sir.”

“Yeah, when it’s this cold, your hands are so numb you can’t even hold potions.”

Even after Druid had warmed up my hands, they were still throbbing and aching from the cold.

“Okay, let’s fill up that bag before Ciel gets back,” Druid said.

“Sure.” *I’d better do my best not to drop any this time.* “Mr. Druid, do you think it’s okay for us to ignore that noise?”

While we were picking up potions and talking, there was a *pong-pong* sound around us. And I hadn’t asked Flame not to make magic stones while we were out... In fact, I’d requested the opposite.

“Well, you know, the village does need them. And we can always shove them onto Captain Tableau...er, I mean, he’ll kindly take care of them for us.”

Did Druid just say “shove them onto”? Is it really okay for us to shove all our problems onto Captain Tableau when he’s already dealing with so much uncertainty?

“Don’t worry, it’s all right.”

If Druid says it’s all right, I guess it’s all right?

“But we should make sure Flame isn’t straining itself too hard.”

“Yeah, judging by all the ponging noises, it’s really outdoing itself.”

“Ha ha ha!”

It sounded like Flame *was* working a little too hard. Maybe I shouldn’t have given it so much encouragement.

“This ought to do it.” My magic bag was filled with potions and swords. Our current haul plus the stash at the inn was just barely enough for us to get through the winter without needing to come back to the dump again.

“Wow, we got a lot, didn’t we?” Druid marveled.

“Yeah. Sora and Flame should be okay all winter now, even if it’s too cold to go into the forest.”

“Now Ciel just needs to go hunting.”

He was right. If Ciel got hungry, it would need to head into the

forest to hunt. I didn't know what it would do if the forest were blocked off by the ice and snow.

"We'll need a confidant to help us, just in case the worst happens."

He was right. But who could we take into our confidence?

"Mr. Druid, who do you think would be a good confidant?"

"Guild Master Priya."

"Really?"

Now that was a name I wasn't expecting. I'd just assumed he would say Captain Tableau.

"If we want to charge through a winter gate that's blocked by ice and snow, we'll need to know how the forest changes. The adventurer guild gathers that sort of intel."

That made sense. If we wanted to go into the forest with any idea of how it changed, that was how we'd have to do it.

"Well, let's talk it over later."

"Okay."

We headed over to Sora and Flame. The *pong* noises had stopped a little while ago. Flame had probably gotten tired and fallen asleep.

"Well...this exceeded my imagination."

The sleeping slime was surrounded by piles of magic stones. *I think I'd better not encourage it from now on.*

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

Sora, looking very satisfied, was doing its after-dinner stretches. I kept an eye on it as I gathered the regenerated stones into my magic bag one at a time.

"You know, Rose was very impressed with the magic stones Flame

regenerated,” Druid said.

“Impressed? Why?”

“Well, there’s something that even I didn’t notice until Rose pointed it out to me...”

What could it be?

“The spent magic stones Rose gave us to be regenerated were only around Level 7 or Level 8.”

Whoa, really? So does that mean that when Flame regenerates magic stones...

“But the magic stones Flame regenerated were at least Level 5. It upgraded the magic stones a little from their original levels.”

“I guess that must be what happened.”

“So then Flame can upgrade magic stones.”

Level 7 and 8 magic stones became Level 5... In just a few minutes, Flame, already a rarity, had become even rarer. I wished I could just pretend I didn’t hear what Druid said. I gathered all the magic stones, then I picked up Flame and left the dump.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora looked quite pleased with itself. The dump was, after all, the only place where it could eat to its heart’s content.

“I think Ciel should be back soon,” Druid said.

“Yes, I hope so...”

I searched for Ciel’s aura and faintly sensed something like it, but it was still rather far away.

I pulled a warm towel from my magic bag, set Sora and Flame on my lap, and wiped them off. Sora enjoyed it very much, but Flame resisted a little. It probably thought I was trying to wake it from its slumber.

“Flame, I’m just giving you a wipe-down.”

After I somehow managed to finish, I wiped my hands with the towel while it was still warm. Then I made sure the towel was placed properly in the bag before transferring Flame from my lap to the bag.

“Huh?”

Flame’s body was red all over. It was a slightly transparent red, so it was very pretty, but there was a bit of a...stain?...on the slime’s chest area. I softly touched it, and Flame didn’t show any signs of pain. In fact, it didn’t really react at all. I wiped its chest again with the now-cold towel, but I couldn’t get the mark off.

I looked at Sora, who was playfully bouncing around nearby. I remembered that Sora’s coloring had suddenly changed in the past, but it hadn’t looked like a stain. *Oh well, I’ll just have to keep an eye on Flame for a while.*

Chapter 259: The Mood in Town

It was a relief to see Ciel come back with a full stomach. Since animals hibernated during the winter, that meant Ciel had to hunt monsters for its food. And since monsters were stronger than animals, I couldn't help but worry about my adandara.

“Ciel, are you all full?”

Mrrrow.

Ha ha ha, look at that big smile on its face. I got Ciel to shapeshift into a slime so I could put it in the bag. Watching that giant creature turn into a little slime always astounded me, no matter how many times I witnessed it.

We returned to the village and walked down Main Street to Rose's shop. On the way, we noticed that the villagers seemed a bit on edge.

“I wonder what's going on?” I asked.

“Me, too... The atmosphere here is pretty hostile. Let's hurry to Rose's shop.”

We quickened our pace to get there.

“Good afternoon, ma'am.”

“Welcome to my st—oh, hi.”

“Sorry we keep coming back every day.”

“Nah, I'm glad to have ya here. Not too many customers comin' by in winter, what with the cold and all.”

It was good to know we weren't bothering her. We set down Flame's regenerated magic stones in front of her. Rose looked worried at

the sight of them, and no wonder. It was only the previous day that she'd seen it regenerate so many other ones.

"Is Flame okay, hon? Oh, wow! I'm giving this magic stone back. It's too high-level."

Since I'd lumped all the magic stones together in one bag, there were Level 1 and Level 2 magic stones in the mix. Rose wrapped two of them in a cloth and gave them back to us. Druid chuckled awkwardly as he stored them in our bag.

"I told Flame not to push itself too hard, so it should be okay."

"Okay. Where's Flame now?"

"Fast asleep."

I opened the bag, and Sora and Ciel bounded out playfully.

"Ack! Sora! Ciel! Not now."

"It's okay, I'll just put out my 'gone on break' sign and lock the door. I can afford to close up for a bit." Rose shut the door and took the precautions she'd described. I felt bad that we were cramping her style, but she gave my hanging head a gentle, reassuring pat.

"Ya worry too much," she chuckled.

I opened my bag again and pulled Flame out. I checked its mouth, but it still wasn't drooling yet. *Oh, the stain is gone now!* Yes, the stain that had been on Flame's chest when I put it in the bag earlier had disappeared. *I wonder what happened?*

"Little fella sure does sleep a lot," Rose cooed.

"Flame sleeps all day, actually," Druid said. "Every now and then it sleeps all day and night, aside from mealtimes."

Rose looked a bit startled. "Ha ha ha...well, that is quite impressive."

“I know, right?”

“Well, as lovely as that sounds, I’d probably get sick of it after a day of sleepin’,” Rose said.

The lifestyle did seem wrong for her. For all her grumbling about things being a hassle, Rose definitely struck me as a hard worker.

“By the way, Rose, did something happen in town? It feels like everyone’s on edge.”

“Oh, yeah. That damn Hisaza got caught stealing magic stones from a young travelin’ adventurer. What a damn fool. But half of the villagers don’t think he did anything wrong. They say he was just stealin’ for the good of Hatow.”

If you do bad things, you’ll always get caught eventually. But the villagers think he did it for them? They’re wrong, though. If more people start acting like this, it’ll only hurt the villagers.

“They’re huge fools, the lot of them. It’s a big enough scandal as it is that a guild master would commit a crime...but the villagers takin’ his side on top of that? If word of this gets out to the other villages and towns, Hatow can say goodbye to its reputation. The entire life of this village could be at stake.”

If people lost their trust in Hatow, fewer adventurers and merchants would travel here. That would lead to Hatow deteriorating over time. No matter how big your community is, a reputation for integrity is very important. Didn’t the villagers of Hatow realize this?

“What a dangerous situation we’re in.”

“Yeah, ya think so, too, hon?”

Why is it dangerous? Because the villagers are standing with their lawbreaking guild master? Or is it something else?

Rose sighed. “Maybe those two aren’t up to the task yet.”

Those two...does she mean Captain Tableau and Guild Master Priya? I don't really get it.

Silence hung over the room.

Oh no. Neither of them can think of anything to say. Um...I guess this means bad things are happening in Hatow. Which means the problems are only getting worse for the people in charge?

“They’ll have to work through this, or else they’re doomed,” Rose lamented.

Wow, this tension is making me really uncomfortable.

“Then we’ll just have to trust them,” Druid said.

“Do ya know any leaders, Druid?”

“Yes. Guild master of an adventurer guild. He’s still going strong.”

“I see. Hm? Oh, sorry, Ivy. Didn’t mean to give ya that look on your face.”

Huh? What look on my face? Rose caressed my hair and smiled softly.

“Excuse me, Rose, but do you have any winter gloves in your shop?” Druid asked suddenly.

I gave him a surprised look, and he replied with a playful grin. I guess he changed the subject for my sake. I wonder...what kind of look did I have on my face?

“Winter gloves? Well, if ya wanna protect your hand from your sword, there’s no difference between winter and summer, right?”

“That’s not what I meant. Ivy gets cold easily, so I was wondering if you had any winter gloves.”

“Oh, ya mean *those* kinds of gloves. You’ll have to go to a clothing

shop. Maybe try a shop that sells cloaks?”

“Okay...do you think Modd would have them?”

“Yep. They’ve got all the latest fashion there. But if ya wanna buy some gloves, I think ya should get them sooner than later.” Rose looked outside. I hadn’t noticed earlier, but the clouds were looking a bit threatening. Was it about to snow?

“Good idea. Ivy, want to go there now?”

“Sure. Sora, Ciel, we’re leaving. Come on back.”

The two playing creatures jumped into my arms. It was something they did all the time, so I was used to it by now. Sometimes I dropped them, but today I managed to catch both of them safely.

“Wow, that’s some trick,” Rose said.

“They’re a real handful. They love playing and pulling pranks.”

“Well, I love me a good prank, too. Oh, that sure was a fun day.”

She really had given me a scare then. When her arm suddenly... *No, don’t think about it.* I hated how realistic it looked.

“You’d better take it easy, Rose, or your pranks will bite you in the foot.”

“Oh, I’ve been bitten plenty of times already.”

“I don’t suppose...that quitting pranking is on the table for you?”

“No way, kid. Why would I quit somethin’ so fun?”

Druid and I sighed.

“Come on, you two, that’s exactly what Tableau did.”

“Yes, he does seem to be the nervous type,” Druid said.

That made me laugh. It was all too easy to picture a flustered Tableau dealing with his mother’s crazy pranks.

“Humph!”

“Ha ha ha. Okay, Ivy, should we head out?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks for the magic stones, you two. I’m really glad to have them. Be sure to tell Flame not to push itself too hard.”

“We will, ma’am. Well, goodbye... Wait, I almost forgot. Rose, are you going to be in your shop for a while longer today?”

“Yeah, I will. What’s up?”

What did we forget?

“Remember how Ivy promised a while back to teach you how to make onigiri from ryce?”

Oh, wow. We talked about that just yesterday and I forgot again... That makes me kind of sad.

“Oh, right! We did promise.”

“Ivy, when would be a good time for you?”

“Well, we’ll have to buy the ingredients today and then get started this evening, so tomorrow should be okay.”

“Tomorrow works for me. Delos will be here then, too. Oh, I’m excited.”

We really had made a habit of coming to Rose’s shop every day, but she always smiled around us, so I guessed it was okay. After cementing our plans for the next day, we finally left her shop for real.

As we were on our way to Modd, a cold and painful breeze cut my face. Winter was brutal this year.

“Welcome! Oh, hello there. Long time no see.”

“Good to see you again. We’ve got something we want to ask you.”

Baluka rushed over to greet us at the shop entrance. He already had two customers inside.

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“We heard you sell winter gloves. Do you have any in stock?”

“We do. They’re from a couple of years ago, though.”

Baluka escorted us over to a shelf with rows of colorful gloves lined up inside. They looked quite different from the armored one Druid wore.

“Oooh... Oh, wow! How about this pair?” Druid held up a cute pair of pink gloves with flowers embroidered on them. I thought they were a little too frilly.

“Uh, they’re not exactly *me*...”

“Are you sure? I think they’re really cute.”

“I think they’re too bold for my coat...”

My coat was a light blue, so pink gloves would clash with it. And these gloves Druid had picked out were a very bright pink indeed.

Druid and Baluka sighed in unison. Sometimes those two seemed like they were cut from the same cloth. I didn’t understand why they were both so disappointed.

“Well, if you want something that will go with your coat, I recommend these three pairs.” Baluka showed me three sets of gloves: white, light blue, and dark blue. They had no embroidery, either, so they were very plain and sensible.

“Um...don’t you have something cuter?” Druid asked.

Baluka shook his head sadly and answered, “We’re all sold out.”

“I wish we’d come here sooner,” Druid sighed. He sounded very dissatisfied, but the three pairs of gloves were perfect as far as I was concerned. I wanted to explain to them that I only cared about keeping out

the cold...but I had a feeling that would just make them more disappointed.

Chapter 260: Peace of Mind

When I tried to pick the dark blue gloves since they would be the best at hiding dirt, Druid encouraged me to get the white ones instead.

“But dirt won’t show up as much on the dark gloves.”

“But you can just wash them. And if they get too dirty, we can always buy another pair. From what I’ve heard, you need to replace your gloves every year or two anyway.”

Wow, they really have such a short life?

“The fur lining flattens after a year or two, and they don’t keep your hands as warm anymore.”

I looked inside the gloves and saw that he was right. They were lined with some kind of fur.

“Then I guess...”

“You’ll go with the white gloves.”

I was going to put my foot down and say no, I didn’t want gloves that would get dirty so quickly. But when I looked at Druid, he was already handing the white gloves to Baluka.

“Mr. Druid?”

“Sorry, Ivy, could you try these on for size?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, sure.”

I took the gloves and slid my hands into them. I could wiggle my fingers, so they were on the large side.

“So sorry. It looks like you have some room in the fingers.”

“Do you have a smaller pair, sir?”

“Oh, I can easily alter these gloves. Could you please remove them? I’ll just take your finger measurements.”

Baluka helped me take off the gloves and measured my fingers with a ruler. We were apparently committed to buying them now, so I bit my tongue. I stole a glance at Druid and saw that he was beaming radiantly as he watched us. *Maybe I should just let him spoil me?*

“There. All done.”

“Thank you, sir...”

Yeah. Let’s get spoiled.

“How long will the alterations take?”

“I can have them ready tomorrow.”

“Oh, good.”

I could tell just from the short time I had tried the gloves on for size that they were extremely warm. One part of me felt guilty about getting them, but a bigger part was very excited.

Druid and Baluka plunged into a conversation about men’s clothes, so I decided to have a look around the shop. He had a bunch of different products on display this time. This shop seemed to be incredibly popular.

“That won’t work. We need to sort that out ourselves.” A customer’s gruff voice sounded from nearby. I felt bad eavesdropping, so I was trying to discreetly sneak away when I heard another voice.

“Oh, so you agree with me? Yeah, that’s right. You have to protect your own life.”

What? Did they just say “protect your life”? Those words made me stop in my tracks.

“But how are we supposed to gather magic stones now?” a woman asked.

Magic stones... Does that mean they're talking about this winter? But aren't both guilds and the watchmen already doing their best to get them? I slowly looked over to the conversing pair and saw two women talking with very solemn looks on their faces. They really did seem to think that they had to gather their own magic stones. Maybe they didn't trust the guilds or the watch. I thought back to Druid and Rose's conversation from a little while ago. They had both said we were in a "dangerous situation." Did they mean it was dangerous because the villagers were losing faith in their local government? But these were all very hardworking people who were committed to protecting their village and their fellow citizens. Sure, there were some exceptions, but they were few and far between.

I recalled the guild master of Oll, Gotos, who was Druid's best friend in the present and probably in the past as well. Even though he looked intimidating, he was easy to talk to. I didn't sense a wall between us. And even when Oll was in such dire straits, Gotos and everyone who worked for him always had smiles on their faces. He had incredible judgment skills and was trusted by everyone...though he wasn't very good with paperwork, according to Druid.

Even so, all the adventurers and villagers trusted him. And it was *because* they trusted him that they managed to endure even when the gurbars went berserk and the town was plunged into a state of uncertainty. *Hm? Endure? Yes...that's it exactly.* They were able to endure all the hardships because they believed their head watchman and guild master would do something to help. I hadn't seen much of the head watchman in Oll, aside from the one time he'd been with the guild master when I went to see him, so I didn't even catch his name. But I got the sense that he and the two guild masters would do whatever it took to help us all. This village also had a head watchman and two guild masters. Whether or not the

merchant guild master would be of any help was a mystery, but there were still two capable people at the top. And yet the villagers' minds were not at peace. That was why they were taking matters into their own hands. I guess leaders are no good unless they can take care of run-of-the-mill matters as well.

“Ivy?”

“Oh! Yes?” I was startled out of my thoughts.

“Are you okay? Did something happen?” Druid peered worriedly into my eyes. I must have had a strange look on my face, but this was neither the time nor the place to talk about it.

“I’m fine. Are you finished talking with Baluka?”

“Yeah, I asked them to add in a little embroidery with blue thread.”

“Hm? What’re you talking about?”

“Your gloves, Ivy.”

Huh? Weren’t they talking about Druid’s clothes? Uh-oh. I should have stayed and listened to what they were saying.

“I asked them to embroider some cute blue flowers.”

*Oh, please. Get that happy grin off your face. You look so...
Actually, I’m happy, too.*

“Um...thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Wanna head back?”

“Yeah, we have to buy some groceries.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

We said goodbye to Baluka and left the shop. I glanced at the two women and saw that they were still having a solemn conversation.

“Will the grocery store on the way home have what you need?”

“I’m just looking for meat and this village’s mother sauce.”

“That should be doable.”

We turned onto Main Street and walked toward our inn. Along with the drop in temperature, there were fewer roadside stalls and less foot traffic.

“Wait a minute...it looks closed.” The lights were out in the shop when we arrived.

“There sure are a lot of closed shops.”

About half of the shops on Main Street were shuttered that day.

“What should we do?” I asked. “It’s a little too late to find someplace else.”

Druid and I went by each shop we could find around Main Street to see if any groceries were available.

“Aha! Over there.” As we crossed a one-way street, we saw signs for a butcher and a grocery store.

“Oh, good. I’m glad they’re not too far away.”

“Yeah.”

We hurried over to the stores. We had been outside for so long that our bodies were freezing to the core.

“Welcome! Come on in.” Two voices greeted us when we entered the shop.

“Mr. Druid, look! This shop is part of the grocery store.”

“So it is.”

From the outside, it looked like two separate stores, but inside we could see that there was no wall separating the two. Surprised by the unusual design, neither of us could stop ourselves from looking around the store with our heads bobbing.

“Come in...is it really that strange in here to you?”

I looked up at the sound of the voice and saw a woman nodding to greet us.

“Hello. Yes, this is our first time here, so we’re pretty surprised.”

“The grocery store is my brother’s. I run the butcher’s shop on this side.”

Oh, so it’s a family business.

“What’ll it be? Meat, I assume?”

“We need some meat, and we’d also like this village’s mother sauce. Can we buy them together?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you. What meat do you recommend?”

Druid and I checked out the meat on the shelves. *Huh? That’s strange. The butcher I went to last time mostly sold hols and tein meats, but I don’t see them here.*

“We only sell wild game. Is that all right with you?”

Oh, that makes sense. I guess I’ll have to change my plans a little. Come to think of it, I don’t really know exactly what kind of game you can hunt near Hatow in the first place. The inn served smoked meats, but I didn’t bother to check what animal they came from.

“Um, do you have any meat that isn’t so gamey?”

“These two are the least gamey compared to the others. What do you plan on cooking with it?”

“We’re going to mix it with rice.”

“With...ryce? Um...ryce?!” She sounded utterly dumbfounded. I supposed Hatow was also put off by the idea of eating rice. Rose must

have been the exception.

“You’re kidding, right? You can’t really mean ryce?”

“Yes, we do.”

Her level of surprise was downright bizarre... Was everything going to be okay? *Maybe I should have just said something vague?*

“I love ryce, too! But nobody else understands my love of it and I feel so alone! Eeee, I’m so happy I have some ryce buddies!”

Wow, you don’t see that every day. I’ve found another rice lover!

Chapter 261: Chummy Siblings

“**Y**ou really do eat ryce, right? You’re not lying, are you?”

“We really do.”

Druid and I nodded, both a little befuddled. The lady grinned back at us with the sort of smile I knew I’d regret getting involved with. I took a step backward.

“Whatcha doin’?”

I turned around at the sound of a voice behind me and saw a man who looked like the lady. He was probably her brother, the owner of the grocery store. Their faces looked quite similar.

“They *do* exist! People who like to eat ryce! You lose this bet, sweet brother of mine!”

Huh? They had a...*bet* to see if anyone else liked eating rice? And winning the bet was what gave her such a creepy...I mean, such a slightly disturbing smile?

“Whaaat? I lost?”

“Yeah! These two people are my kin! My *comrades*!”

We did indeed enjoy eating rice just like she did...but for some reason I wasn’t sure whether I should smile and nod.

“Lies! All lies!” Her brother’s voice boomed through the shop. Then his eyes shot toward both of us, so we had to meekly nod. “Whoa. For *real*?” Her brother made the most incredible face.

Was it really that earth-shattering to find people who liked to eat rice?

“I don’t really understand them, but what a funny family,” Druid whispered in my ear.

And yes, they were a little too intense, but their banter was entertaining to watch.

“Alloui, you didn’t groom them to love ryce, did you?!”

“How cruel, sweet brother of mine. You know I would never stoop to such treacherous lengths! Unlike *you!*”

Um...can we just buy some meat?

“Say whaaat?”

“Oh, don’t play innocent. You’ve sent in plants before! Don’t you dare tell me you forgot!”

“But that was just...well, yeah.”

So he did cheat on their bet. Do they really take their betting this seriously? And also, why are they ignoring us?

“Oops! I’m so sorry. Okay, um, you wanted meat, right?”

Thank goodness. She remembers we exist.

“You two sure are alike,” Druid said.

“No, we’re *not!* Ugh!” they both screamed.

They...are alike, aren’t they? They even shrieked at the same pitch.

“Um, could you please get us the two types of meat you mentioned earlier?” Druid asked, covering his mouth. His shoulders were shaking slightly, so he was clearly fighting a losing battle to keep from laughing.

“Yes, sir. How many grams?”

“One kilo of each, please.”

“Sure thing. So I heard you say you were gonna mix it with ryce earlier... How exactly do you prepare that?” Alloui asked as she weighed

our meat.

“I steam some rice, then I mix in the braised meat. After that, I squeeze them into mounds and serve them as onigiri.”

“Squeeze them...into mounds? O-ni-gi-ri?”

It really was tough to explain. How could I make it easier to understand?

“Wait, do you mean...”

“Hey, Alloui, you should stop right there if you know what’s good for you.”

“Oh, *bite* me!”

“It’s going to rain. How will you feel if our customers catch cold?” he said, looking out the window. *Yeah, it does look pretty yikes out there.*

“Oh, wow, it *is* gonna rain. Right, they also want some Hatow mother sauce. Go get some, will you?”

“Mother sauce? Which one? We’ve got four different kinds.”

Four whole sauces!

“Um...how are the flavors different?”

“Basically, different levels of sweetness.”

Oh, so they’re sweet. Do the people of Hatow just really like sweet foods?

“Then I’ll take the least sweet one, please.”

“Comin’ right up.”

While he walked off to get the sauce, I took another look outside. It was supposed to still be light out at this time of day, but the entire sky was covered in dark clouds. It wasn’t raining yet, but it was only a matter of time.

“Sorry about him. You guys are travelers, right? Is your inn nearby? If it’s far, you can always stay here until the rain lets up.”

“It’s right around the corner, so we’ll be fine. Thank you, though.”

Druid took the meat and sauce from Alloui’s brother and paid the bill.

“Come back and chat about ryce with me anytime. In fact, I insist.”

“Sure, I’ll come back soon.”

We hurried out of the shop.

“Phew. We made it just in time.”

Just as we safely arrived inside the inn, we heard the rain begin to pour outside. We’d really made it back just in the nick of time. If we got caught in the rain when it was this cold, we’d most likely catch pneumonia.

“Were you both okay out there?” Salifa rushed into the entryway as we stood there, looking outside. She was holding a guest towel for us.

“Yes, we were fine. We made it back just before it started raining.”

“Well, I’m glad you did! If you get stuck in the rain when it’s freezing like this, you’ll catch your death of cold. But you must be chilled to the bone! Go take a nice hot bath and get warm.”

“We will, thank you.”

“Oh, by the way, there was something I wanted to ask you.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Dola brought back some ryce, so I was wondering if you could make that...um...whatchamacallit...that thingy with meat on top of it...I can’t remember its name.”

“You mean gyuu-don?”

I had given Dola a bowl of gyuu-don several days ago because he'd been curious about it.

"Yeah, that's it! So, could you maybe teach me how to make it?"

"Yeah, I don't mind. Are you sure you're okay with the idea of eating rice?"

"I felt a little uncomfortable at first, but it was so delicious that I got converted." Salifa clenched her fist proudly. She must have really loved it. It was pretty strange that rice was coming up so much in our conversations today.

I went back into our room, took a hot bath, and then went to the second-floor kitchen to prep for tomorrow. I finely diced both meats. I would braise half of it in a sweet and spicy broth, and I would add some medicinal herbs into that sauce to give the other half a savory zing. Boy, was I glad I bought several bottles of soy sauce in advance. But if I kept using them at such a quick rate, I would soon run out. *Maybe I should look and see if this village has soy sauce, too. Oh, right, it's called ponzu in this world. Since it's the exact opposite in Past Me's world, I'm worried I'll get them mixed up. I'd better be careful. Okay, I'll steam the rice in Rose's shop...so I guess everything's prepped for now.*

And for tonight's dinner, we were having omurice, a dish that had popped up in Past Me's memories. It was bright-red rice blanketed in eggs, and it looked really yummy. Too bad the ingredients in this world were different. I couldn't make an exact replica...

"The red rice tastes like toma, I think. So maybe I should cook it in toma sauce?"

I sauteed some finely diced meat and vegetables in my pan, then added cooked toma sauce and steamed rice and stirred everything together. *Hm? There seems to be way more liquid in the pan than the way Past Me*

remembers it. Do I...really wrap this up in eggs?

I decided to do my best to copy the image I had in my mind, and I made a single plate of omurice. *Hmm...I think I messed up. The eggs got all soggy from the extra liquid. They didn't wrap up the rice very cleanly.*

“Something wrong?”

“I messed up dinner.”

“Really? It looks good to me.”

“No, the eggs were supposed to completely surround the rice.”

“It’s okay, the eggs don’t have to do that. Can’t you just put them on top of the ryce?”

I could...but I wanted to get as close to the omurice in my memory as I could. It was a matter of pride. *Okay, second attempt! Gee...it's a lot harder to wrap up the rice than it looks.*

“Let’s eat.” Druid gently gave my sulking head a couple of pats.

Hey, I know you’re laughing at me!



The toma-flavored rice with the fluffy eggs was very tasty; I just felt like the toma flavor was a little bland. *Maybe I should cook down the toma sauce a bit more next time? That way, it won't be so soggy, either. Yeah, I'll give it another try.*

Chapter 262: The Happy Couple's Little World

“Good morning.”

“Mornin’. I’m not openin’ the shop today, so go ahead and lock the door behind ya.”

“Are you sure, ma’am?”

“Yeah, I’ve got somethin’ *better* than work today!”

Was that really the right way to look at it?

We locked the door behind us as we came into Rose’s shop. Then Delos emerged from the back room, all smiles.

“Good morning,” I greeted.

“Morning. Is Rose giving you a hard time?”

“It’s all right. She’s the one doing us a favor.”

“Well, Rose loves doing favors for people, so that’s a good thing.”
Delos really did seem to love Rose. His eyes got so soft whenever he talked about her.

“The cooking area is already set up, so let’s get started. Oh, what should we do about them?” Rose looked a bit hesitant when she saw the bag my creatures were in. Maybe she hadn’t told Delos about my creatures yet? I’d just assumed she probably had, since they were married.

“Didn’t you tell him about them?”

“Of course not! I had no reason to. But I’d feel bad leaving them in the bag all day... Should I send Delos away somewhere?”

What? Send Delos away? But wouldn’t most people just tell their husbands about my creatures instead?

“Sorry, Delos, but this’ll take about five hours.”

“No, no, Rose, please, ma’am,” I insisted. “You know better than anyone what kind of person Delos is. He’s someone we can trust, right?”

“Sure he is. I wouldn’t have married him if he wasn’t.”

“Then it’s okay if he knows, so please don’t kick Delos out of the shop.” I was quite flustered. Meanwhile, Druid was chuckling beside me. *And what about you, Delos? Why do you have such a big grin on your face when we’re talking about kicking you out of your own shop?!*

“Well, if I must, I must...”

I wouldn’t say it’s a matter of “must”... I just don’t get the way Rose thinks. As I stood there, my mind swimming, Rose told Delos about my special creatures.

“Ivy has some secret pals: Flame, Sora, and Ciel. They’re all cute little monsters, but they’re quite rare, so don’t tell anyone else about them. Got it, hon?”

“Yeah, I understand.”

I thought Rose’s oversimplified explanation would only make things more complicated, but Delos nodded with a smile. *I guess this is what being married is like?*

“Well, now that he’s heard their story, take your kids out of the bag already! Poor things.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I took them out and Sora immediately bounced over to Delos. He quickly caught the slime, but I felt bad about it.

“Sorry about that, sir.”

“Oh, it’s okay. Wow, I’ve never met a slime as lively as you before! And you’re just as cute as Rose said you were.”

“Isn’t it, though?” said Rose. “I could stare at it all day.”

“Now, now, didn’t you bring Ivy and Druid here to teach us how to cook ryce? We don’t want to keep them waiting.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Okay, the kitchen’s this way. Delos, babysit the slimes for us, okay?”

“Of course, dear.”

Rose and Delos sure had a mysterious connection. Watching them, I got the idea that nothing we ever did could possibly come between them. I had the urge to watch them quietly from the sidelines... Anyway, the mood between them was hard to describe, but it was magical.

“Hm? Whatcha both doin’?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Watching the happy couple warmed my heart. *I really hope I meet someone I can share this kind of bond with. Druid is more like a father to me, which isn’t quite the same thing. Then again, I should focus on getting him a sweetheart before me... Maybe we should make finding Druid a sweetheart one of the goals of this journey? He does strike me as someone who’s given up on romance. What a shame. He’s such a good person.*

“I’ll do my best for you, Mr. Druid.”

“Hm? Uh...about what? The onigiri?”

My sudden proclamation was making Druid act a little odd, but he’d definitely protest if I told him what I was thinking, so I kept quiet.

“Okay, let’s get started,” Rose said.

“Sure, but there’s really not much to do while we wait for the rice to cook.”

“Really, hon?”

“Yes, ma’am. All you have to do to steam good rice is monitor the

water temperature.”

“Keeping track of the temperature is a bit tricky, though,” said Druid, who had recently taken to watching me when I cooked. He was comfortable enough now that there were no problems, but he was originally very worried about moderating the heat on the stove. Many times, I had to stop myself from laughing at the solemn look on his face as he checked on the rice. *Well...I used to pray whenever I opened the lid, so I'm one to talk.*

“Should we make somethin’ else while the rice is cookin’, then?”

Oh, that's right! I wanted to ask her something. “Rose, could you please teach me how to use Hatow’s mother sauce?”

I brought the sauce I’d bought yesterday. It was the least sweet kind, but it was still so sweet that I didn’t quite know what to do with it.

“Hatow’s mother sauce? There’s no special way of using it, though.”

“But isn’t it too sweet?”

“Maybe you bought the sweetest kind?”

“No, I bought the opposite, actually.”

Rose gave me an odd look. *Did I say something funny?* Once we were in the kitchen, I took the soaked rice out of my magic bag. When I soaked it, I’d allowed plenty of time for us to cook it.

“So ya put water onto ryce, is that right, hon?”

“Yes, ma’am. You soak it for about thirty minutes. And the longer it’s been since the harvest, the longer you should soak it. It all comes down to personal taste, though.”

“Okay. I gotta make a note of that.”

I added some water to Rose’s pot and turned on the flame. I started

with high heat, then turned the fire down when the lid of the pot began to rattle. Next, once the rice was finished cooking, I steamed it with the lid on. I explained these steps simply to Rose while Druid told her how to monitor the flame.

“So ya have to keep track of the flame and water levels. Got it.”

As we watched the rice cook, I took the sauce I’d just purchased out of my bag. I’d tasted a little of it the night before, but it was so sweet I thought it would overpower anything I cooked with it.

“This sauce? Oh, no. This is the sweetest sauce out there, hon.”

“What!?” Druid and I gasped.

Huh? Did we mess up? Or did Alloui’s brother get mad because we made him lose the bet?

“This sauce is famous for being unusually sweet. Not many people like it. Where didja buy this?”

“From a shop run by a brother and sister. A grocery store and a butcher under one roof.”

“Oh, you mean Alloui and Toluca’s shop. Was Toluca the one who brought ya the sauce?”

So she knew them. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m so sorry, hon. That boy is a bit of a doofus.” Rose sighed heavily and pulled two bottles of sauce off her shelf. “These are the main sauces we use in Hatow. They’re not so sweet, and they’re easy to use in all your recipes.”

Rose poured a little bit of each sauce onto saucers and handed them to me. I dabbed my finger in them and tasted. She was right—neither sauce was very sweet. They did seem like they could work with a lot of recipes.

“They’re good. Just the right amount of sweetness, too.”

“Right? These sauces are the pride of Hatow Village.”

I could see why people would be proud of them. There was a richness behind the flavor, and they really did taste good. If I ever wanted to cook something sweet and spicy, I could probably make do with just this sauce.

“That poor Toluca. Criminy, he’s got a lot of work to do,” Rose grumbled as Druid chuckled.

I followed Rose’s instructions and made some braised vegetables with Hatow’s mother sauce. The kitchen started to fill with the sweet aroma of steamed rice.

“That’s a lovely smell,” Rose said.

I guess she likes it. If she didn’t even like the smell, it would be game over already. Okay... Once it’s cooled down a bit, let’s stir in the filling and form it into onigiri!

Chapter 263: A Smile Is Powerful

“Oooh, I never knew ryce could be so delicious.”

“Yeah, it really is good.”

Rose and Delos couldn’t stop smiling as they munched their onigiri. They were both already on their second rice ball, so that must’ve meant they really liked them. I was relieved. And Rose sure was talented, too. This was her first time making onigiri, but by the second rice ball, she already understood how to squeeze with just the right pressure to form perfect little domes. *She’s just good at everything she tries.*

“Think we should bring some of these to Tableau later?”

“I think they’d be good for him. He can eat them with one hand.”

How would Tableau feel about getting such an unfamiliar food for lunch? I had a feeling it would just make him uncomfortable.

“So, d’ya have any other dishes with ryce in them, hon?”

“I make gyuu-don a lot.”

“What’s that?”

“You put white rice in a bowl, then you top it with meat and vegetables braised in a flavorful broth.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely, too.”

“It is really good, and very filling as well.”

“Really, hon? Well, I’d like that.”

Rose and Druid started chatting excitedly about rice. She asked him what sorts of rice dishes he’d eaten, which was a little embarrassing for me since he even included the ones I’d messed up.

“Well, thanks for lunch.”

“No problem. I’ll just go make some tea.”

“Thanks. You know, you’re a really good cook.”

“Thanks back at you. I’m flattered to hear that.”

At first, I’d cooked because I had to, but now it was a hobby of mine. Druid and Rose had a lively conversation while Delos and I relaxed. The gathering just made me feel warm and cozy.

“Should we head back?” Druid asked after he’d had his fill of rice and conversation.

“Sure. Sora, Flame, Ciel?” I called out to my creatures, who were playing around the room.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

Flame was already asleep. I looked around and found it curled up next to its bag.

“Sorry it took so long.” I put Flame into the bag, followed by Sora and Ciel, who’d leapt into my arms. They were both in high spirits from playing with Delos the whole time. But was it okay for them to get too attached?

“Thanks for everything,” Rose said.

“Oh, no, thank you! I loved learning something new about cooking.” The dishes Rose had made with Hatow’s proper sauce were delicious and easy to prepare. Once I got a bottle of the stuff, I planned on cooking them myself.

When we left Rose’s shop, the sun was much farther away than it had been the day before. I looked at the tiny basket in my arms, which contained three of the onigiri we’d made that day. We were planning on

stopping by the sibling-run shop we'd gone to the previous day.

"It's pretty cold, huh?" Druid said.

"Is it? I feel like yesterday was colder."

Druid gave me a questioning look. It concerned me a little, so I reached up and touched his forehead. It wasn't hot...

"When we get back, you should drink one of Flame's potions. You never can be too careful."

"Okay, I'll do that. And you can wipe that worried grimace off your face. I'll be fine."

I had a worried grimace on my face? Apparently, I sometimes made the most grotesque faces without knowing it. Druid poked my cheek and laughed. It was a relief to see him acting normal again.

"Huh?" I happened to glance over at the park in the plaza and saw someone familiar sitting on the bench. Druid followed my gaze. Unless I was mistaken, it was Priya, master of the adventurer guild.

"That's Guild Master Priya."

"So I was right."

Priya looked like there was something on his mind. *Hmm...maybe the best thing to do would be to pretend we didn't see him? Or should we lend an ear?*

"We don't belong to this village, you know," Druid told me. "I'm not sure how much we should get involved in its business..."

He was right. We were travelers. That meant sometimes we would need to get involved, but other times it would be best that we stay out. That was a lesson Druid had taught me. I studied Priya's face and saw that his eyes were full of sorrow.

"Mr. Druid...should we give him a treat?"

“Hm? A treat?”

“Yes. We happen to have the perfect thing.” I lifted the basket and showed it to Druid.

“Ha ha ha. You’re right, we do.”

We walked into the park and approached the bench where Guild Master Priya was seated. Sensing our presence, he looked up, seeming faintly surprised to see us.

“Good afternoon.”

“Ah...hello.” He appeared flustered to be talked to so suddenly.

“Have you eaten yet?”

“Huh?”

“Your lunch.”

“Oh, um, not yet...”

“Then here’s a little treat.”

“Um...a treat?”

“That’s right.”

I pushed the basket toward him, but he was too flustered to take it, so I set it down on his lap instead. *There. Mission accomplished.*

“What is this?”

“Onigiri made from rice.”

“Oh, I see... Made from ryce... Huh? Ryce?”

Would he be okay eating it? His reaction seemed a little listless. Was Guild Master Priya not feeling too well, either? I reached out and touched his forehead. He didn’t feel particularly hot to me.

“Um, what are you doing?” Priya asked.

“I think she’s checking to see if you have a fever.” There was a hint

of laughter in Druid's voice. Was I doing something funny? I glanced at him behind me, but he shook his head to tell me it was okay.

"You don't seem to have a fever, sir."

"Yeah...um, so why were you taking my temperature?"

"Because you looked a little out of it."

"Oh...sorry about that," Guild Master Priya chuckled lightly.

Something in his smile made my heart uneasy. It was almost like he was...

"You're so doom and gloom."

"Pfft!" Druid burst out laughing behind me.

For a few moments, Guild Master Priya looked stunned by my words...then he squeezed his eyebrows together. "Well, I'm dealing with a lot."

I think I struck a bad nerve. He looks even more doom and gloom now, too. The whole thing just made me sigh in frustration. That earned me a glare, but it wasn't a harsh one.

"I have nothing to offer, and I can't possibly understand what you're going through. But you're just being a downer!"

"Bfffttt!" I heard a strange noise behind me. I looked around to see that Druid had turned his back and his shoulders were shaking violently. *If he thinks it's so funny, he should just go ahead and laugh it up.*

"But I can't just laugh it off with everything that's going on!"

Priya's voice was suddenly much louder. I shivered a little, but not out of fear. I couldn't be afraid when he was on the verge of tears. "You're just a kid. How could you possibly understand?"

When his quiet murmuring reached my ears, I was filled with immense sadness. But I couldn't let on to him that I felt that way. Comforting him would be too difficult—I couldn't even try. Instead, I

would have to tell him what I'd seen during my travels.

"Yeah, I told you I didn't understand."

He glared at me again...but he still looked like he was about to cry. I held his gaze and smiled, which earned me an odd stare from him.

"The guild master in Oll—the town where the monsters were going berserk—he was always smiling, and so were all of his comrades."

"What?"

"The only time I saw any pain in his eyes was when he thanked me after everything was over. He was so thankful...but in so much pain."

"What?" Priya looked utterly bewildered as to why I'd suddenly changed the subject. But I ignored his confusion and continued.

"Before they stood up to fight against the big criminal gang, the captain of the watch and the guild master were both smiling—having fun, in fact. The people around them were smiling, too, even though some of them looked perplexed."

Guild Master Priya just kept staring.

"When my life was in danger, everyone around me kept smiling. Even though I was scared, that helped me hold my ground and fight. And with a smile on my face, too."

A smile is a powerful thing. It might be a bluff at first, but it will give you strength and good cheer.

"Please, sir, eat your lunch and get your strength back. *Especially* with everything that's going on."

I couldn't possibly understand the sufferings of those above me, so I couldn't advise him on that front. But there was one thing I'd just had to tell him about: the power of the smiles of all the guild masters and captains of the watch I'd met so far. Because I knew those smiles meant something.

“Well, goodbye then.” With a smile and a bow to the stunned guild master, I turned to walk away with Druid, who gave my head a gentle pat.

“But I...”

We heard him start to say something, but we left the plaza without looking back.

“Hmm, so... Let’s pick up your gloves, then go back to the inn and make onigiri?” Druid asked.

I nodded. “Yup. We just keep getting more things to do, don’t we?”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

I’m not so naive as to believe that a smile will solve all your problems. But if you want to keep the doom and gloom from crushing you, a smile is very important, even if it’s a forced one. Sometimes you need those, too.

Chapter 264: An Unnecessary Skill

I gripped the handle of the basket with my gloved hands. Inside the basket were three onigiri wrapped in bana leaves that we were going to take to Alloui. And in the magic bag on my shoulder were some magic stones that Flame had regenerated.

Three days had passed since we came across Guild Master Priya in the plaza. Right after that, we'd gone to Modd to pick up my gloves. We were supposed to go right back to the inn, but Druid and Baluka got caught up in another lively discussion. It was well into the evening by the time we returned to our room, so we canceled our plans and decided to bring Alloui the onigiri the next day instead.

However.

It rained steadily for the next two days. It showed no signs of stopping, and there was a horrible chill in the air. We didn't want to leave the inn, so we decided to stay indoors and wait out the storm instead. Then finally, on the morning of the third day, the rains stopped.

"It sure is cold," I said with a shiver.

"Sure is. It scares me to think how cold it'll get this winter."

"Thanks for the gloves, Mr. Druid." *Seriously. Without them, my fingertips would be in danger of freezing right off.*

"Seeing you so happy makes me want to buy you another gift."

"I object!"

"Gee, you don't have to be so blunt about it..."

There were even embroidered slimes alongside the embroidered

flowers on the gloves. The moment I saw them, I was so happy that I threw my arms around Druid and thanked him. I was so surprised that he'd ask for the slimes to be added. Poor Baluka looked a bit conflicted when he saw how happy I was about embroidered monsters, though.

“Can’t I ask them to put Sora and Flame on your coat collar?”

That would be very cute, but since it would cost money, that was a no. “Absolutely not.” Glove embroidery was well within our means. Besides, I could tell from Baluka’s attitude that embroidered monsters would make me stand out too much.

When we turned onto Main Street, we were stunned to see all the shops were closed. None of the stalls were out, either.

“Maybe Alloui’s shop is closed as well,” Druid said.

“Yeah.” I hadn’t thought of that. *Well, if it’s closed, it’s closed. We’d just have to go home.* After a while on Main Street, their shop came into view. I looked at it with a hint of apprehension, but the sign was up and it was lit up inside. *Oh, good. I think they’re open.*

“So, they *are* open.”

“Yeah, and there’s a lot of customers inside, too.”

Just ahead, a relentless stream of customers was coming and going. Was this shop always so popular? When we got closer, we could hear laughter inside.

“Toluca, it’s *this* one, not *that* one. No, not *that*. Right next to it! Yes, that one!”

Through the mingled laughter of Alloui and the customers, we heard somebody say “Turn your brain on, Toluca!” So Toluca really was a doofus. I peered inside the shop to see customers showing him where things were and complaining that he’d gotten their orders wrong. Alloui’s butcher shop was also filled with customers. She looked frazzled.

“I think we came at a bad time,” Druid said.

“Yeah.”

The last time we were here, I never thought it could be this full of customers. Maybe we should come back later?

“Oh, hey! Yoo-hoo, little cutie!” Alloui’s voice boomed through the shop just as we were turning to leave. I spun around in surprise to meet her bubbly gaze.

“Oh, I knew it! I knew it was you! I’ve been wanting to talk to ya. My sister in ryce!”

The other customers stared at us curiously. *Yup, we definitely came at a bad time!* Druid looked just as uncomfortable as I was. He didn’t like attention, either.

“Toluca, you gave me the wrong sauce again.”

“No way! Arrrgh, why do all the sauce bottles have to look the same?” Toluca’s whining voice made the whole store erupt into laughter. It sounded like all the regulars here were good friends.

“Aww, are ya leaving already? Come on, let’s sing ryce’s praises together!”

Uh, no thanks. You have work to do.

“What was it ya promised? Y’know, that thingy you were gonna feed me. Ummm...”

“Onigiri? I brought some.”

“Yeah, *that!* Oh, so you *did* bring me some! Thanks!”

“I’ll just leave it on the counter, since you’re busy.”

“What? No, you should stay and hang out!”

Nope. I stand out way too much here. Besides, the customers are starting to look restless, what with you taking so long to cut their meat and

all.

“Thanks, but I’ll come back later. That way, I can stay longer.”

“Boo. Oh well, I *am* really busy today seeing as how the other shops are closed.”

Aha. So that was why there were so many customers.

“Alloui, most of the people here are regulars,” someone in line at the butcher counter told her. The customers around them started to chuckle.

“Oh, really? Ha ha ha...”

So was Alloui a doofus, too?

“About what time should I come here so we can talk more privately?” I asked.

“I’m not sure...” Alloui held her cleaver to her chin and thought.

“The evening should be fine, Miss,” one of the customers (probably an eavesdropper) told me.

I thanked them and told Alloui, “I’ll be back this evening, then.”

“Thanks! Sorry I’m so busy.”

We left the shop as the cheerful voices behind us rang in our ears.

“Those siblings really are a quirky pair.”

“They sure are.”

We wound up going to Rose’s shop earlier than we’d planned. Would it even be open?

“Aha! Looks like things have taken a turn for the better,” Druid said cheerfully when we were on our way to Rose’s shop. He was smiling about something. I followed his gaze to see three men dressed in watchmen’s uniforms.

“Oh, they look happy!”

They were smiling and talking with some villagers. The watchmen had looked so overwhelmed and upset the last time we'd seen them, but all traces of that were gone now. Perhaps the positive energy of the watch had calmed the edginess we'd sensed among the villagers over the past few days.

"Things are looking good," Druid said.

"Yeah. I'm glad, but wasn't the change a little sudden?"

"You think so? Well, Captain Tableau must have been recommended for the job because somebody saw he had what it took to lead. He would have studied for years under the former captain of the watch, too. All he needs is a little encouragement to put him on the right track."

I guess it really was that simple. In any case, the villagers sure did look happy. It was a relief to see.

"Shall we go?" Druid asked.

"Okay. It sure is weird walking on Main Street when there aren't any stalls on it. I didn't realize how wide it was." Without the stalls, the street felt twice as big. It gave me an empty feeling inside.

"Well, nobody wants to be out in this cold."

The air had gotten frigid after all that rain. Going outside was quite a daunting prospect.

"Oh, look! I don't see Rose's sign."

As soon as Rose's shop came into view, it was clear that her sign wasn't out. Apparently, she was closed today.

"Hello?" we called from outside the shop in case she was in there. We waited for a while, but there wasn't a peep.

"Sounds like nobody's home," I said.

“Too bad. We’ll have to come back some other day.”

Just as we turned on our heels to walk away, the door opened behind us and we whirled around to see Rose. She was yawning widely, but she was indeed there.

“So that *was* your voice, Ivy. Come on in.”

I didn’t sense Rose’s aura just now. Wait a minute...she’s not an adventurer, is she?

“What’s up, hon?”

“Umm...”

“Rose, are you a former adventurer?” Druid asked. He couldn’t sense auras, but maybe there was something else he’d picked up on.

“Hm? Ah, didn’t I have an aura?”

So she *had* masked her aura. If we couldn’t sense her presence when she was so close, maybe she’d been quite a skilled adventurer in the past?

“Well, I can’t sense auras,” Druid explained, “but the only sound I could hear was the door opening.”

“Wow...the subconscious can sure be a scary thing. Usually I’m okay.” Rose sighed. “I’ve got the shadow skill, which is completely useless.”

The shadow skill? I looked at Druid, but he only shook his head in equal confusion. Maybe it wasn’t a very well-known ability.

“I can hide my aura, move without makin’ a sound, and other things like that, but I got no use for it. Oh, about your question... No, I was never an adventurer. Magic items are my life.”

What an impressive skill. But I guess it was unnecessary if she had nothing to use it for. Still, it was pretty incredible that she could completely mask her aura like that. She could be lurking in the shadows at

any time, ready to pounce... *Wait a minute, isn't that a really dangerous skill for someone like me to deal with? I always have to be searching for people's auras. My creatures might get discovered if I didn't.*

Chapter 265: I Need Countermeasures!

“Excuse me, um, Rose?”

“What is it, hon? You’re lookin’ kinda grim.”

“Are there any other skills besides the shadow one that mask auras?”

If there were many other skills like it, I needed to figure out a way to deal with them in the future.

“I think there are. Let me see...”

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked me while Rose racked her brain for answers.

“I’ve relied a lot on sensing where people are by their auras. If I can’t use that ability, I need to figure out a countermeasure.”

“A countermeasure?”

“Yeah. If I can’t sense somebody’s aura coming up to me, they might surprise us when Ciel is in its adandara form or discover Sora and Flame as well.”

Druid looked startled by what I’d said. “I’m sorry. I never thought about it that much.”

I shook off his apology.

“I see what you’re saying,” Rose said. “Ya gotta think up some other way to deal with it. Maybe there’s an item for that?” Rose also seemed to understand the problem her skill had raised for me. She rushed off to see if she had an item that would help.

“Well, this looks pretty tough.” Rose pressed her fingers between

her eyes and shook her head. It looked like she didn't have the item we need. "Oh, I just remembered another skill! It's called spy skill, and you can mask your aura with it."

"Spy skill?"

Spy...like a ninja? Hm? Oh, that must be Past Me. So, were there people called ninjas in my past life who had the spy skill? In a world where the dead could be brought back to life, there were ninjas who could mask their auras. Wow...what kind of crazy world did I live in before? It must have been much scarier than the one I'm in now. I mean, dead people crawled out of the dirt! Agh, now I can't get that image out of my mind.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh! Uh, nothing. Just thinking of an unpleasant memory..."

"Are you okay? You look like you're going to be sick."

"I'm fine."

Um, let's think of something nicer. Like, dead people crawling out of... Nope, not that. Phewww...hm? My slime bag is rustling.

"Oh, sorry, Rose, may I take my creatures out of their bag?"

"Of course, hon, take 'em out."

I quickly opened my bag, and two of them immediately jumped out. Flame, who was fast asleep in the bag, was left behind.

"Don't you wanna come out, Flame?"

"...ryuuu..." Its reaction was quieter than usual. It must have been really sleepy.

Huh? There's a black stain on it again. I touched the stain with my hand, but Flame didn't seem hurt by it. Would it disappear like last time?

"That reminds me, I heard somebody with a new skill got discovered in the capital," Rose said.

I looked her. “You mean new skills are still being born?”

“I don’t know about that. Some of the skill scholars say that new ones are being born, but others say they’ve always existed and we just didn’t know about them.”

Aha, so nobody really knows the truth. Come to think of it, Druid’s skill is quite rare... And in a way, my “skill” is very rare, too.

“Anyway, I got in touch with some people who might know where to find what you’re looking for. Let me warn you, it’ll take a while because of the cold.” With a sigh, Rose glanced out the window. The glass was rattling with a strong breeze. It was sounding like we had another wind-howling night ahead of us.

“Thank you so much for going to all this trouble for us, ma’am.”

“Yeah, well, my items intel comes from people in and around the capital, after all. If something’s goin’ on, I’ll hear about it.”

I almost didn’t notice because she’d said it so casually, but...she got intel from the capital and its surrounding areas? Did she really have information sources as powerful as that? Rose had said it so quickly that I didn’t get much of a chance to marvel over it.

“Pretty amazing, isn’t it?” Druid asked me, looking a bit perplexed.

How should I know? “I don’t know, but it sounds pretty amazing to me.”

“Oh, it’s nothin’ special,” Rose argued. “If a bunch of item nerds get together, they sew up a net of intel without meaning to.”

Rose really was an item nerd, then.

“How long could you carry on a conversation about items, ma’am?”

“Forever,” she answered without hesitation. There was nothing more we could say at that point.

“Ha ha ha, okay, we get it. Oh, by the way, we’ve got the magic stones Flame regenerated.” Between the mysterious new skill and the items, I’d completely forgotten that I brought them.

“Oh, thanks. Wow, Flame sure outdid itself.” Rose was shocked when we handed her the very heavy bag of magic stones. While Sora, Ciel, and we two humans spent the last two rainy days lying around, Flame had been hard at work. I felt so bad about it that I made sure to clean the room thoroughly afterward.

“Thanks, Flame,” Rose addressed the bag containing the sleeping slime. The back jiggled a little...then it stopped. It was like Flame had tried to answer but changed its mind.

“Hee, hee, hee! You’re so stinkin’ cute.”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

Triggered by the word “cute,” Sora and Ciel stopped frolicking around the store and bounded onto the table in front of Rose.

“Aww, what cute reactions you guys have,” Rose laughed.

Sora and Ciel both protested in reply.

The three of us had a good laugh and ended up killing some time together. We were originally planning on going back to the inn before heading to Alloui’s shop, but Rose insisted we stay at her place until it was time for our appointment.

“Thanks for everything today, ma’am.”

Druid and I both bowed on our way out. Figuring Alloui would have her hands free by then, we were about to head over to her shop.

“Don’t sweat it, hon. So, three days from now, right?”

“Right. We’d like to reschedule if there’s too much rain or snow,

though.”

“Well, of course. No good reason to go outside when the weather’s bad.”

We had scheduled a time to bring Rose the regenerated magic stones. I was grateful it wouldn’t be on a day it rained or snowed.

“The winds have picked up. Will ya guys be okay?”

“Yes, but they’re sure going to keep us up tonight.”

I looked out the window while Druid and Rose talked. I could hear the howling of the wind and something rattling in the distance, making me really hesitant to go outside.

“Well, shall we be on our way?”

“Sure.”

I opened the door and stepped outside, quickly closing it once Druid was also out. I bowed slightly to Rose as she waved to us from inside the store, and then we hurried over to Alloui’s shop.

“Seems like things have quieted down.”

Looking in from the outside, there were customers, but nothing like the hustle and bustle of the morning. That was great. Now Alloui and I could have a relaxing conversation. We set foot into the shop and...

“You idiot! Toluca, you dum-dum!”

“C’mon, stop calling me dumb! I just made a little mistake!”

Well...maybe we wouldn’t be able to have a relaxing conversation after all.

Chapter 266: Romance in the Air?

“**A** little mistake? All. Lies. You’ve been making mistakes left and right all day, you dummy!” Alloui yelled.

Toluca frowned defiantly. But after what I’d seen that morning, I couldn’t exactly come to his defense.

“C’mon, Alloui, the customers yell at you for cutting up the wrong meat, too! It was only a little mistake.”

“A *little* mistake you made over ten times!”

Wow, that’s a lot. Wait a minute, should we do something here? I got the feeling that if we did nothing, they would never even notice we were there. I glanced at Druid beside me and saw that his shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter.

“*This* coming from the guy who makes the *customers* calculate their own bills?!”

“Hey, they *asked* me to let them do it.”

“Yeah, because they couldn’t stand to watch *you* mess it up!”

Wow, what in the world could have made the customers want to calculate their own bills?

“Urrrg.” Toluca, realizing this was a fight he couldn’t win, resorted to glaring at his sister with contempt.

“Will you kids just cut it out already? I don’t mind it, but you’ve got other customers.” One of the people in line (who was probably a regular) lightly tapped the siblings’ heads and sighed loudly. Then the siblings finally noticed we were there and smiled awkwardly.

“Um, hi,” I said.

“Oh, my sister in ryce!”

Could you maybe stop calling me that? Your customers are all staring at me and Druid!

“Ha ha ha! Um, so, have you eaten already?”

“Sorry! Things got so hectic today. I was gonna finally take a little break and eat now.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Brother of mine, I’m on break, okay?”

Huh? She was calling him by name a little while ago. Maybe she only does that when they’re fighting?

“So, um...could you guys hang out with me during my break?”

We were planning to just browse around the shop until Alloui was finished with her meal, but she put a stop to that.

“Won’t we get in your way?”

“Course not! This is my first time meeting someone else who eats ryce, and I’m *super stoked* about it!”

So I’m the first. The word *first* made my heart race a little.

“Well, thanks. We’ll stay, then.”

“Hey, Ivy? I’m going to browse around the store. If there’s anything you want, I can look for it.”

“In that case, could you try to find some sho...I mean, ponzu, please.”

“Ponzu? Oh, right. I got it.”

Yikes, that was a close call. I almost said shoyu. I just have to hurry up and get used to calling soy sauce “ponzu” like they do in this world.

“Have some tea,” Alloui said, setting a cup of hot tea in front of me. I took the onigiri out of my basket.

“That smells good. It’s cute, too.”

Cute? In what way? Because I squeezed them into rounded triangles?

“Time to eat you, my pretty.”

I carefully watched Alloui as she chewed. This part always made my heart race, since I couldn’t predict whether or not the uninitiated would like it.

“Whoa! This is heckin’ good! I eat ryce now and then, but this is, like, *totally* different!”

Oh, good. She likes it.

“I love the way you seasoned it. Oooh, but maybe I would’ve made it a little sweeter?” She finished her first onigiri and promptly went for seconds.

“Are they really that good?” asked the customer who’d told the siblings about us earlier, eyeing the contents of my basket.

“No ryce for you!”

“Come on, please. I’ve been working for free for you all day.”

“That’s Toluca’s fault, not mine!”

“Well, true, but I really want to know what it tastes like.”

The customer’s expression was so serious that I was a little put off. All this fuss over onigiri, of all things?

“Okay, *fine*. Hey, kid, can ya teach me how to make these?”

“Sure, ma’am.”

Alloui took the last onigiri out of the basket and handed it to the

customer. “Well? D’ya like it?”

“I haven’t even tasted it yet!” The customer took a bite of onigiri. “Whoa! Dang, this is great. Wait, was ryce always this good? All of Alloui’s ryce dishes are kind of blah.”

The customer’s voice was unusually loud with excitement, which brought us a lot of attention from the other customers in the shop. Even though they weren’t necessarily looking at me, I was still very self-conscious.

“Um, sorry, I didn’t catch your name yet. What is it?” Alloui asked as she poured more tea.

“I’m Ivy.”

“And I’m Alloui. Well, since my brother yells my name all the time, you probably already knew that.”

“I did, ma’am.”

“Figures. Oh, and you don’t have to call me ‘ma’am,’ either. I don’t really deserve that much respect.”

“That’s for sure.” The customer polished off the onigiri and poured some tea. Come to think of it, this guy seemed very much at home. Did he actually work here?

“Cultur, you meanie!”

Cultur laughed. Then I suddenly heard laughter behind me. Toluca was laughing with Cultur, and another customer next to the two of them looked very tired. This shop was often filled with laughter, and the shop owners seemed to be loved by their customers.

“So, could you teach me how to make onigiri? I’d love to make some, like, tomorrow if possible.” Alloui was holding up a paper and pen. She sure was a woman of action.

“Okay.” I explained how to select, steam, and season the rice in the simplest language possible. Then I used a tiny towel to show Alloui how to form the onigiri. After my little lecture was over, she asked me a flurry of questions. She really did seem dead-set on making her own onigiri.

“Thanks. Shaping them into triangles sure sounds hard.” Alloui read over her notes and tried to squeeze the tiny towel into a triangle. It was easy enough with a towel...but would she be okay with the real thing?

“When you shape your onigiri, be gentle. Don’t apply too much pressure, okay?”

From the way Alloui was gripping the towel, the rice would get smashed to paste. Now Cultur was reading over Alloui’s notes, too.

“Do you work here, Mr. Cultur?”

“Who, me? Nah, I’m just a customer.”

He seemed a little too comfortable to be just a customer. He was going into the back to bring out some fruit to cut at that moment.

“Want some fruit? It’s really good.”

“Uhh...” Was it really okay for me to eat free fruit offered by someone who didn’t work there?

“Go ahead, eat it. The crop was really good this year! It’s super sweet.” Alloui popped a piece of fruit into her mouth and grinned ear to ear.

“Thanks, I’ll have some.” I took a bite of fruit...and my mouth was filled with sweetness. It really was good. I turned to thank Cultur, but he was gone. *Did he leave...oh, wait, he just went to get more fruit. My goodness, what a free spirit.*

“Oh! I want the one next to that one, Cultur.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Hmm...something about the chemistry between them...

“Are you two dating? Or married?”

Alloui glanced awkwardly at Cultur in silence.

“We’re dating now...but we want to get married next year.”

Oooh, Alloui’s face is bright red! And Cultur looks pleased by that reaction.

“See? You aren’t just a customer after all.”

“Well...no, I guess not. You’ve got a keen eye, kid.” Cultur shyly scratched his cheek.

“Well, you two seem just like a married couple.”

At that, Alloui’s face turned an even darker shade of red. Then she got up out of her chair and retreated into the back room.

“Um...I’m sorry?” *Did I say something weird?*

“It’s all good. She may act embarrassed, but she’s really thrilled you said that.”

You know...Alloui is actually really adorable.

“Ivy, they had ponzu, so I bought so...hm? Who’s this?” Druid asked, walking up to me with his purchase.

“This is Cultur, Alloui’s boyfriend. And her husband, next year.”

“Ha ha ha. Nice to meet you. Um...you’re Ivy’s father?” Cultur reached out his hand with a smile...and Druid shook it with one of the biggest grins I’d ever seen. *Did he just buy some really good food or something?*

Chapter 267: Rice for Dinner?

After a while, Alloui returned to the counter and apologized for slipping away. I told her not to worry about it, but then Toluca butted in with another quip and their sibling fight resumed... Well, I guess it was more like a play-fight. As I watched from the sidelines, Cultur occasionally intervened.

“They’re a great trio,” Druid said.

I smiled and nodded. It looked like their playful quarrel was still going strong, so we said goodbye to Cultur on our way out.

“Sorry about them.”

“Oh, it’s okay. They seem to love it.”

“Don’t tell them that—they’ll yell at you. And in perfect unison, too.”

The three of us had a good laugh over that. We stepped out of the shop to find a big cart toppled over and blocking our path. The winds were pretty strong.

“Let’s hurry back,” Druid said.

“Okay.”

When we got back to the inn, Dola told us we were the last guests to come home that day.

“We’re going to lock up for the night. If you need to go outside, please tell one of us.”

“Will do, sir. Did something good happen today?” Druid asked.

Dola beamed radiantly. “Yes. We got a message around noontime

from both the village watch and the adventurer guild.”

The message said that the guild and the watch would distribute red magic stones. But since supplies were limited, the rations for houses and inns would be different. The message also spelled out several more details. Dola was very happy with it because he knew it would give the villagers some peace of mind.

“Ivy, there you are! Could you please tell me how to make, um... gyuu-don? I want to serve it at dinner tonight.”

What?! She's going to serve rice to her guests? I, um, uh...will everything go okay?

“Um, there’s a little problem... Well, it’s not exactly a problem, but...”

“Don’t worry, I have all the ingredients here! I even got some ryce.”

“That’s not what I meant. If you serve rice to your guests, won’t they complain?”

That was what I was worried about. Most people thought of rice as animal feed, so if someone gave it to them for dinner, they would probably complain. I would hate for Salifa to get yelled at or chastised on my account.

“Don’t worry about it. This inn is known for serving quirky cuisine sometimes.”

“What?!” Druid and I exclaimed together. I’d never heard anything about them serving unusual food.

“Oh, didn’t you know? We’re famous for it.”

Well, now I know. So maybe the guests will be okay with rice? Gee, now I'm starting to wonder about what kind of quirky cuisine she cooks. I'll have to ask later.

“Thank you in advance, master.”

The word “master” threw me off guard. I had no idea who she was talking to. As I stared dumbly up at Salifa, she gave me a confused look in return.

“The master is *you*, Ivy,” Druid said.

My eyes opened wide in surprise. *Me? A master?*

“Well, aren’t you a master? You’re going to teach me how to make gyuu-don, a dish that only you know about. Anyway, let’s get cookin’!”

I didn’t think gyuu-don was really worth getting so fired up over, but I figured I might as well do my job. “Uh, sure thing!”

“Mr. Druid, I just got some unusual wine. Would you like to have a cup?”

“Huh? Oh, no, thank you.”

Druid hadn’t touched a drop of liquor since we left on our journey. Even back in Oll, the only time I’d ever seen him drinking was right after we met. *Maybe he quit because of me?*

“Mr. Druid, don’t you want to try the unusual wine? You should.”

“Huh? Well...”

“This is an inn. All you have to do after supper is go upstairs to bed, so it’s okay if you drink.”

From what I’d heard from people who’d known him for a long time, Druid enjoyed drinking. I didn’t like the idea of him giving it up for my sake. When we were on the road, he wouldn’t have had a drink even if I’d told him it was okay. But we were at an inn now, and I’d gotten settled enough to be confident in telling him it was okay to drink. I just wanted him to enjoy what he loved.

“Ivy...are you sure you’re okay with it?”

Gee, my dad's a worrywart. "I'm okay with it."

"Okay... Then I guess I will have a little wine."

"Have fun."

"Ha ha ha, I'm waiting until after supper. May I have some then, Dola?"

"Certainly. Where would you like to drink? Shall I bring it up to your room?"

"No, I'll have it in the dining hall." There was a big smile on Druid's face. He really did like liquor. And since we'd be spending the whole winter at this inn, I wanted him to take it easy and enjoy himself.

"Ivy, do you want me to help with dinner?" Druid asked.

I shook my head. Gyuu-don wasn't particularly difficult to make, so I knew I could handle it by myself. I parted ways with Druid and headed to the kitchen with Salifa. When I saw the assortment of ingredients on the counter, I was quite surprised.

"That's a lot."

"I always use this much, you know? No, actually, I may have a bit less tonight."

There were piles of groceries before my eyes. Was this really *a bit less* than usual? Cooking for everyone at the inn sure was quite an undertaking. But I didn't have time to waste marveling over it, so I started by getting the rice ready. During the time it took to soak and cook the rice, I could prepare all the other ingredients. The vegetables—more than I'd ever cut before—were an epic struggle. I was deeply impressed by the way Salifa merrily hummed as she cut them.

Once everything was prepped, I poured the soaked rice into the pot, filled it with water, and lit a fire under it. Meanwhile, I warmed a pot of

water next to it and added the meat, vegetables, and seasonings. Then all I had to do was stir in a little of Hatow's mother sauce and some ponzu...

Oh, it's yummy!

"All done, ma'am. All you have to do is put rice in a bowl and top it with the stewed meat and veggies."

"Wow, I'm impressed, Ivy. You know, ryce takes some time and care, but it's surprisingly easy to make."

"Yes, and all you have to do with the meat and vegetables is braise them. Oh, could you see how you like the seasoning? I used Hatow's mother sauce as is, since it was working."

"Yes, I was wondering how it would taste... Oooh, it's really good!"

Thank goodness. I tasted it as I seasoned it, but I was pretty worried about it. The sweet sauces of Hatow actually come in handy when you make dishes like gyuu-don. Which sauce did I use again? Ah, right, it was the third-sweetest of the four. I'll have to remember that.

While we waited for the rice to aerate, we made a vegetable salad and some braised radishes. By the time the radishes became tender, our dinner would be ready. I checked on the consistency of the rice kernels and they were fine, too.

"Okay, all you need to do to serve this is pour the meat and vegetable braise over the rice."

"Thanks. I think I can take things from here. Oh dear, it's just about time for everyone to come down to supper with their empty stomachs."

I looked at the clock, and it was indeed dinnertime.

"Ivy?" Druid popped his head into the kitchen.

"Yes?"

“Come relax and have dinner.”

“But...” I’d been planning to stay and help Salifa finish up.

“Oh, I’m fine now! Go be with your dad. He must be worried about you.”

Worried? Even though I’m safe in the inn? I looked at Druid, who smiled awkwardly back at me. *Okay, I’d better go out there.*

“Um, all right. I’m coming out.”

“Thanks for all the help, Ivy. If you know any other dishes that use ryce, I’d love for you to teach them to me. That okay?”

“Yes, I’d love to.” I bowed to Salifa and made my way with Druid into the dining hall, which was already filling up with guests. My heart started to race. How would everyone react to the rice dinner?

Dola began to serve the bowls of gyuu-don to the guests. At first, they looked bewildered and fascinated by the food. Then, when they found out it was rice, they responded in many different ways. The elderly were the most reluctant to eat it, but the kids eagerly took the first bites and said it was delicious. And, encouraged by their positive reactions, the hesitant adults started to eat the gyuu-don. Even the meal’s staunchest opponents ended up sheepishly asking Dola for seconds, which made me laugh.

It seemed the gyuu-don was a big hit.

SIDE: Of Druid and Drink

DRUID'S POV

“Good evening.”

“Good evening. Here’s the wine. It’s the infamous dry wine from the capital everyone’s been talking about. Oh, are you okay with that kind of wine?”

“Of course.”

“Would two bottles work for you, or would you rather have three?”

I haven’t had wine in a while, so I’d better go easy on myself. “I’m fine with just one bottle. It’s high-proof, isn’t it?”

“Are you sure? Well, if you want more, let me know.”

“Thanks.”

We took our wine into the farthest corner of the lounge and set it on the table. Since this was a secluded area, it was well suited to drinking alone.

“Dola! Mind your manners! You need to speak politely with our guests, remember?”

Just as we were about to sit at the table, Salifa’s voice boomed out from behind us. It made me chuckle a little. She often scolded him for being too familiar with the inn’s guests, but it never seemed to work. The fact that Dola insisted on being on first-name terms with the guests probably played a big part in that.

I removed the cork from my wine and enjoyed its aroma before

pouring it into a cup and taking a sip. The familiar fiery sensation of the alcohol washed down my throat.

“Phew.” *This stuff’s good. Dola knows his wine.*

“Here, Druid. Try this with it.” Dola set some chopped fruit and a sauce onto the table. I glanced at Salifa, and she gently smiled back at me.

“Ivy made you boys a snack to go with your wine.”

“Did she? Well, thank you for bringing it to us.”

“She really is a sweet girl. She said having wine on its own after a meal was bad for your health, so she thought some tree fruits you could eat with your hands would be just the thing.”

I’d been planning to just have wine after dinner, but Ivy understood that I would be even happier if I had a snack to go with it. *She really is a great travel companion. I don’t deserve her.*

“Have a good time, boys.”

“Thanks.” I took a bite of the sauced fruit. It really packed a punch, which paired it really well with the wine. Had Ivy asked what kind of wine we’d be drinking so she could make something to go with it? Now I really needed to be sure to thank her.

I really need to do better... Why didn’t I realize we needed to think of a countermeasure when we found out about Rose’s shadow skill? I absentmindedly took another bite of fruit, and the tangy sensation in my mouth was quickly washed down with another sip of wine.

“I hope I’m not a burden on Ivy...” No matter how hard I tried to make up for it, I still only had one arm. I was definitely holding her back more than other people would. But in spite of this, I still wanted to travel with her. “When it comes down to it, I’m selfish.”

Ahh, but if Ivy knew I felt that way, she’d probably yell at me. She

really is too kind.

I got hurt once on the way to Hatow. I was frustrated that I couldn't tend to it myself because of my missing arm, and I took it out on Ivy. I calmed down right away and apologized to her over and over, and she forgave me then and there. But I felt wretched. A negative seed took root in my heart that day.

A few days later, I suggested to Ivy that she find a new travel companion because I couldn't protect her with just one arm. The next thing I knew, my cheeks were being pinched hard. So hard, in fact, that it hurt a lot. I looked at Ivy in shock—she was angry. I'd never seen her that mad before. As I stared at her in amazement, she said, "I didn't bring you along on my journey to protect me. I brought you because you make me feel all warm inside and you make me smile! I never even thought about replacing you! If you're quitting this journey, Mr. Druid, then I'll just go on by myself!"

Oh no. I'm starting to grin like an idiot. Well, I can't help it. Nobody's ever said anything like that to me before. Oh, right...that's because I've spent my life avoiding people. I gulped down all the wine in my cup.

"*What's wrong with being selfish?*" When I told Ivy I was selfish to want to travel with her when I only had one arm, that was what she said back to me. "*Everyone is selfish. That's what it means to be human, so just accept it. Problem solved!*" And she was right.

Okay. I'd better cheer myself up. If Ivy finds out I've gone into another emotional spiral, she'll pinch my cheeks again. That was really painful. Ivy seemed to hurt herself pinching me, too. She leapt back and rubbed her fingers together afterward. Okay, I'll stop spiraling!

I started to pour another cup of wine...but nothing came out of the

bottle. *I guess I drank it all up when I was in that spiral. What should I do? Should I go back to my room or have another bottle?*

“Here ya go!” Dola set another bottle of wine on the table in front of me.

“Ha ha! Thanks.” I took another sip.

“So, you have a visitor. What do you wanna do?”

“I have a visitor?”

“Yeah...Captain Tableau of all people. That’s quite a surprise.”

Captain Tableau?

“It seems he wants to talk to you, but it’s late. Should I tell him to come back tomorrow?”

Is it about the magic stones? Then maybe I should get it taken care of sooner than later.

“It’s fine, I’ll see him.” But right after I said that, I looked around and noticed the room was filled with guests, laughing and drinking. *Will we be able to talk here? Or should I borrow another room?*

“You can talk in the dining hall if you’d like,” Dola said. “It’s closed to the public right now.”

“Thank you. I’ll go in there, then.” I picked the wine and my cup up off the table and headed to the dining hall. The clock on the wall said it was already past eleven. *Maybe I should tell Ivy Captain Tableau is here? No, I’d better not. He might have sad news. Ivy’s probably asleep by now anyway.*

I sat far away from the door to the dining hall so that nobody would overhear our conversation. *Oh, I should’ve brought another cup with me. Should I go get one now?*

“Sorry to bother you so late.”

Before I could make up my mind, Captain Tableau arrived in the dining hall. *Guess I'm staying, then.*

“Have a seat.” Dola set a bottle of wine and a cup in front of Tableau and left the dining hall. *He's always the perfect host.*

“Sorry to show up unannounced.”

“It's quite all right.”

There were clear lines of fatigue on Captain Tableau's face, but his expression was completely different than it had been when I first met him. He looked one-hundred-percent calm. I took the cork out of his wine and poured him a cup.

“I hear you've decided which direction to take. Congratulations.”

“Thank you very much. Well, the real work lies ahead.”

We lightly tapped our cups together and sipped our wine. *Oh no! I forgot to bring the wine-friendly snack Ivy made. No, wait...I ate it all up. Too bad.*

“I came here to thank you, Mr. Druid. Both you and Miss Ivy.”

To thank us? About the magic stones? This late at night?

“Um, I think you had a talk with Priya a few days ago...”

“Oh, so *that's* what this is about.”

Ivy telling Priya about the power of a smile. That surprised me, too. She'd suddenly brought up Gotos's smile, of all things.

“My predecessor was also a man of endless smiles,” Captain Tableau said, gulping the rest of his wine down quickly.

SIDE: Druid and Captain Tableau

I poured more wine into Captain Tableau's empty cup.

"Thank you."

"Those words of wisdom came from Ivy, not me."

"Miss Ivy?" Captain Tableau looked surprised by what I said.
Didn't Priya tell him that Ivy was the one giving the advice?

"Yes. It was Ivy who told the story of the power of a smile."

"Oh, did she? Priya didn't specifically say she told it, so I just assumed it was you, Mr. Druid. Forgive me."

"It's all right, don't worry about it. Ivy is already asleep, but I'll tell her you came by to thank her when she wakes up tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Also, um..."

"Something wrong?"

"Well...how exactly are you related to her? I heard she saved your life, but that can't be right. You don't have to answer if you don't want to, though."

"No, Ivy really did save my life. She's my savior."

"Huh? Your savior?"

The word probably struck Captain Tableau as odd. His eyes were wide open. *Well, I don't blame him. It is hard to believe Ivy saved my life. The opposite would make more sense.*

"I was ambushed by monsters during a quest. She found me with my arm torn off, bleeding to death, and she healed me."

"Oh, wow... Wait a minute, isn't Miss Ivy a tamer? How did she

heal you, then?”

“With potions, of course.”

Captain Tableau raised an eyebrow. He must have been wondering what kind of potion could possibly bring a maimed and gored man back from the brink of death. He probably thought it was impossible.

“She used every potion she could find on me at once.”

“Every potion at once?”

“Yes. There were other guards with me on the quest who were already dead by the time she got there, so she took all their potions and used them on me.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! So what kind of potions were they?”

“She was too panicked to remember, but there was a huge pile of empty bottles afterward. Well, it’s still a mystery how they all worked to heal me, but as you can see, I’m alive.”

“You know, I *have* heard that potions can do remarkable things when they’re combined together in certain ways. Maybe that was what happened?”

“Most likely, yes. I was knocked out at the time, so I don’t know for sure.”

Did that convince him? Well...if he looks into Oll’s records, he’ll find nothing different from what I just said, so we should be in the clear.

“Miss Ivy sure is a mystery. The creatures she tamed are quite peculiar, too.”

“Sorry, but can I turn on a magic item?”

I was starting to panic. There was no telling how or where information might get leaked. With Captain Tableau’s permission, I activated my noise-canceling magic item. Now nobody would overhear

our conversation.

“Sorry I’ve been so tactless,” the watchman apologized.

“We just like to be extra careful, since they’re such rare slimes.”

“As you should be. I’ve never heard of a slime that regenerates magic stones before.”

Have you heard of slimes that make rare potions, dissolve swords in seconds, or bring people back from the brink of death? Yeah, just thinking about the things those little guys have done makes me realize how unique they are. They’re so rare, they’re in a whole other league from everything else that’s rare.

“I’m very grateful to you both for providing Hatow with so many magic stones—and such high-level ones, at that. Many lives will be saved because of you. But a part of me is almost frightened by you... You’ve given us all of these magic stones, yet you’ve asked for nothing special in return.”

He has a point. We happily sold them a pile of precious magic stones at a low price without batting an eye. We didn’t ask for anything more, either... Ack, you know, I really didn’t think of it before. This would be a rather scary situation for someone who didn’t know the full story.

“Don’t worry, we won’t demand anything special from you later, either. Ivy said she felt bad for selling things she hadn’t paid for herself.”

And there wasn’t a selfish fiber in her soul that longed to use those magic stones for her own profit. In fact, when I told her she could accomplish all sorts of incredible things with just one stone, she got a solemn look in her eyes and thought for a while before finally shaking her head no.

“You say she didn’t pay for them?”

“Yes, all she had to do was pick up spent magic stones at the dump

and use the ones Rose had later on.”

“That’s true and all, but most of us don’t even have the time to look for spent magic stones in the first place. It’s a nuisance.”

Braving the cold to find and deliver spent magic stones... The tamers I’ve known wanted to be paid for things like that, but the thought had never crossed Ivy’s mind once.

“But for Ivy, collecting spent stones isn’t a nuisance.”

To Ivy, trips to the dump were special opportunities to get food for her loved ones. She never thought that was a nuisance.

“She really is a kind person.”

“Yes, very kind.”

Captain Tableau’s praise brought a smile to my lips. I’d been catching myself smiling a lot now, whenever anyone praised my precious little girl. A few years ago, I never would have dreamed I could experience emotions like this.

“Mr. Druid, I notice you’re always smiling, too.”

Am I? You know...I do smile a lot these days. In the past, I’d been... surly. Nothing needed to jog my memory in that department.

“Pfft!”

“Huh?”

I had laughed at the idea of what Past Druid would think of me now. He would probably look at me with utter disbelief. Before I met Ivy, I hadn’t even trusted myself, let alone anyone else.

“Sorry, I was just laughing about how much I’ve changed.”

“You’ve changed?”

“Yes, completely and utterly. If she hadn’t come into my life, my heart would have stayed dead.”

“Your heart was dead?”

Yes, my heart had been dead. I’d never let myself open up to anybody because I was terrified that I would steal their stars. I felt so sorry for my family. And even though I did resent my brothers, there were other feelings mixed in. As for Gotos and my old mentor, there was always one barrier I never let them cross with me.

“I went through a lot of stuff.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah.”

It felt surreal remembering everything now. Life-saving aside, it was a wonder that I’d never built a wall between myself and Ivy. But I was sure that if anyone else had been in Ivy’s place, things would not have ended up as they did.

“Oh. I’m sorry...”

We had been talking for a while, but now I sensed something strange in Captain Tableau’s behavior for some reason. What was it? I studied him across the table as he sipped his wine. Was he sweating? I saw faint beads of perspiration on his brow, but it was so cold. *Could it be that he’s...wait, but why?*

“Pardon me for asking, but...are you nervous?”

“Bfft!” Captain Tableau spat out his drink.

“Agh!”

Bad timing. I fumbled to pull a tiny towel out of my pocket and wiped the wine off the table.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting you to react like that.”

“It’s all right, Mr. Druid. You were right, anyway. I am nervous.”

“Aha...”

But he didn't seem nervous when he first got here...

SIDE: Druid and the Drunkard

“**Y**ou see, there was a noble family that caused some problems in this village a little while ago,” Captain Tableau explained.

“A noble family? That must have been a real headache to deal with. They just throw money and influence at all their troubles.”

Noble families tended to mock adventurers, even though they depended on them for protection and safe travel. There did seem to be good noble families out there, but the ones I had encountered weren’t among them.

“We knew they were involved in crimes, but the former guild master and captain of the watch couldn’t get any solid proof of it. In fact, their investigations cost them their positions.”

That sounds terrible. Ah, but that explains why so many rookies are in those top jobs now. I’d thought it was kind of strange. Towns and villages usually stagger the replacement of their leaders, but Hatow’s top brass are all inexperienced. So that’s why.

“I was so bitter about it. But I knew from experience that I couldn’t afford to do anything rash, or else I’d meet the same fate.”

This troublesome noble family must have been cunning. They’d immobilized both the adventurer guild and the watch at the same time.

“And after months of not knowing what to do, the adventurer guild and the watch received an important document. We were stunned by what it said. The noble family causing our problems

was among the leadership of a criminal organization that involved blood relatives of the royal family.”

A criminal organization that involved the royal family... Those must be the bastards Ivy helped take down.

“The report was only a few pages long, but its finally allowed me to vindicate the former head watchman. And Priya was able to clear the name of the former adventurer guild master, too.”

Tableau gulped down his wine. Then he looked at me and said, “Ivy is like a messiah to us. I thought I understood that better than anyone, but...listening to you, Mr. Druid, it sounds like it’s even truer for you than it is for us.”

It was hard to follow what he was saying. I think he meant that he knew Ivy was their messiah, but all the problems that were going on had made him push that information back into the recesses of his mind. But once he knew that those problems were resolved for good, he was able to sort through his jumbled thoughts and notice just how amazing that report he’d shoved into the depths of his memory had been. *Hm? No, that's not quite right. Ivy was always amazing... Dang, I'm drunk. My brain is turning into soup. Anyway, this much is clear: He's wasting his time being nervous around me.*

“Um, I’m sorry, but I had nothing to do with taking down those criminals. It was just Ivy.” I would hate to have someone be nervous around me because of her accomplishments.

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yes.”

Wait...is he still nervous? And wow, he sure is drinking a lot. That's my wine now, isn't it? Captain Tableau’s bottle was already empty, so the wine he was drinking was mine. But he didn’t seem to notice, and he was slurring his words from time to time, too.

“Captain Tableau...when’s the last time you slept?” I had a bad

feeling about this.

“I...haven’t really slept all week.”

“Have you eaten today?”

“Yeah...I think I did?”

“Captain Tableau...you’re drunk, aren’t you? Maybe you should stop drinking.”

No matter how well a person held their liquor, they would get drunk for sure if they drank high-proof wine while sleep-deprived and hungry. I noticed it too late because he didn’t show it at all in his face, but he was definitely drunk.

“Heh! I’m okay. I’m thinging cryssstal-clear and I’m verrry mush not drunk, sir. Hee hee!”

Uh, but you’re slurring your words and talking funny. And there’s some nervous laughter in there, too. Are you gonna be okay, buddy? Or do you just look really bad off because I’m drunk as well?

“So, I have a quession about Miss Ivy...”

He sure has been preoccupied about Ivy. He had only met her a few times, but had something else happened? We’d already cleared up the misunderstanding about her being in cahoots with the corrupt merchant guild master.

“Is she mad at me?”

“What?!”

Ivy? Mad? I’d seen her angry several times, but it was always over something impulsive or ridiculous that I’d done. Why would Ivy ever be angry with Captain Tableau?

“Ivy’s not mad at you, Captain Tableau, and not at Guild Master Priya, either.”

“Reeeeally?”

Aha! Now I know why he’s so nervous. He was worried that Ivy would get angry because of the way he and Guild Master Priya had acted and demand that they return the magic stones. Just as that realization took a load off my mind, I understood just how nervous he must have been trying to interpret our behavior from the outside.

“Ivy would never demand the magic stones back. She isn’t that kind of person. Didn’t you say she was kind? Once you get a moment, you should both sit down and have a nice, long chat. Then I’m sure you’ll understand her better.”

“I will... Oh, shank goodness.”

Thunk!

“Hm?”

I looked toward the sound...and saw that Captain Tableau had smashed his head onto the table. I could hear faint snoring coming from his mouth.

“Pffft! Ha ha ha ha!” I couldn’t help but laugh at the ridiculousness of it. The poor bastard probably was so desperate to see how Ivy felt about him, even though he had pushed his body to the limit. If Ivy were a spiteful person, she never would have given Hatow the magic stones in the first place. Maybe the lack of sleep had impaired his judgment. Still, it was astounding to see that the organization Ivy helped take down had sunk its claws into Hatow as well. They’d ravaged my own town pretty badly as it was.

Knock, knock!

“Hm? Who’s there?” I switched off my magic item and called out.

“Please excuse me, but have you finished talk—Captain?” Dola had come to check in on us. That solved my little Tableau problem.

“After days upon days of fatigue, he finally just passed out.”

“Looks like it.”

“Is there somewhere he can sleep?”

“We have a spare room on the second floor.”

“Thanks.”

When I stood up, I wobbled a little. I must have been drunk, too.

“Are you okay?”

“Ha ha, it’s been a while since the last time I drank, so I’m a lightweight tonight. Actually, isn’t this wine a little heavy?”

“Yeahhh, it’s pretty strong.”

I thought so. So it wasn’t just because it had been a while. It tasted really good, though.

“Captain, can you stand up?”

No answer.

“I think that’s a no. Let’s carry him.”

“I’ll help.”

Dola and I brought Tableau up to the spare room on the second floor.

“I’m beat.”

Unconscious muscular men sure were heavy.

“Thanks for taking care of him,” a lady’s voice said. I looked up just in time to find Salifa handing me a glass of water.

“Thank you, ma’am.” The cold water felt heavenly as it streamed through my overheated body. “Phewww, I’m a new man.”

“Ha ha ha, let’s hope you don’t get a hangover tomorrow morning.”

“I think I should be okay.”

I bid goodnight to Dola and Salifa and returned to my room. I opened the door, peeked inside...and saw Ciel awake, staring critically at me.

“Ha ha ha. Sorry. You can go to bed now.”

Was it just me, or did Ciel have a menacing look in its eyes? Was it being protective of Ivy? *Ahhh, I'm exhausted. My head is spinning... spinning...*

“Tomorrow...I'll have to—hic!—tell Ivy...”

Chapter 268: That Smile Is All I Need

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Hm? Is that Sora’s voice?

Mrrrow.

That’s Ciel. Oh...did I oversleep? I quickly opened my eyes and looked around. Errr, based on the angle of the sunlight through the window, I didn’t oversleep. Thank goodness.

“Sora, Ciel, Flame, good morning.” I sat up in bed and stretched my arms. *Mmm...feels good. Oh! That’s right, I fell asleep before Druid came back last night. Is he here now?* I looked at the bed next to mine...and saw someone lying face-down on it.

“Ha ha ha, looks like somebody had too much to drink.”

Usually, Druid slept on his back with his shoes off, but he was wearing them and lying on his face. Had he just walked over to his bed and then flopped forward?

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

Sora and Ciel jumped onto Druid’s bed.

“Be quiet, okay? He’s still asleep.” *He might also be hungover.*

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.” Flame looked up at Druid from under his bed. Did it want to get up there? I got out of bed to walk over to Flame, but Ciel got there first. Then it put Flame on its back and sprung onto the bed.

“Wow! Ciel, that was amazing!”

Flame seemed to be having fun riding atop Ciel.

“Hm?”

Oh no! We were too noisy around Druid while he was trying to sleep. I shushed the three creatures, but it was too late. Druid was already awake.

“Um...huh? Ivy?” Druid frowned as he slid himself up from his prone position.

So I guess he does have a hangover? Oh, I think I have some herbs that are a good hangover cure. They’re supposed to work even if you just soak them in cold water and drink them, so let’s give it a try. I walked away from the sleeping area and got those herbs out of the bag where I kept them. I shook my water-producing pot left to right to fill it with water, then poured the water into a cup and dropped the herbs inside.

“I think this should do the trick?”

I’d never used the herbs before, so I didn’t know how many to add. I started out with one spoonful in the cup for the moment, but I wished I’d asked somebody the proper dosage.

“Mr. Druid, can you drink this?”

“Ah, sure, thanks... Wait, that’s a lot.” Druid made a face when he saw the cup.

Huh? Is it the wrong amount? “Did I put in too much?”

“Yeah, I think just a pinch is all you need.”

Aha. That explained the gross face he was making. I looked in the cup and saw that the herbs had dyed the formerly clear water an unappetizing green. Even I wouldn’t have wanted to drink that.

“I’ll make you another glass.”

“Sorry, but yeah, I can’t drink that. Those herbs have a really overpowering flavor.”

The strong flavor concerned me, but I'd just have to make it again. I got a new cup of water, added just a pinch of the herbs to it, and then brought it over to Druid. "Drink up, Mr. Druid."

"Thanks."

I watched to make sure he drank it, then took the empty cup out of the room to wash it in the kitchen. *He said it was really overpowering... Now I kind of want to know what it tastes like.* I stuck my finger in and licked it.

"Urrgh!"

I wished I hadn't tried it. A complex, astringent, sour bitterness whose likes I can't even describe filled my mouth. Even just a pinch of it would probably be hard to swallow. I was impressed by Druid's ability to drink a whole glass of the stuff, even if it was watered down and slightly better.

"Ah!"

Hm? I spun around at the sound of a startled yelp behind me to see Captain Tableau. What was he doing here? And why was he pressing his fingers to his head... Oh, did he have a hangover, too?

"Hangover, sir?"

"Ha ha ha. Looks like it, yeah."

"Would you like some hangover medicine in a glass of water?"

"Oh, um, are you sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not, sir. Please wait here, and I'll make some and bring it to you."

"Thanks. Sorry for the trouble."

I hurried back into my room and made another glass of what I'd just given Druid. I carried it back to Captain Tableau, walking slowly to avoid

spilling it.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

Oh, I have to wash that other cup! Since it was only one glass, I made quick work of it and returned to Captain Tableau. “Have you finished your medicine? I could take the cup back.”

“Pheww...um...”

“Yes?”

“Is Mr. Druid in his room?”

Mr. Druid? Were they drinking together last night? “He’s in our room. Should I go get him?”

“Oh! Um, no thanks. I just passed out in the middle of our conversation last night, and I was worried I put him in a bad spot. I just wanted to apologize.”

“Sure, I’ll go tell him you’re here. But, Captain...you really shouldn’t drink so much.”

“Oh, um, yes, ma’am. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

I’d better go get Druid. When I got back to our room, Druid looked good as new. Maybe he’d washed his face. He was getting the slimes their breakfast.

“Thanks, Mr. Druid. Captain Tableau wants to see you. He’s in the upstairs kitchen.”

“Oh, that’s right. He came over last night while I was drinking and wound up joining me for a drink and a chat.”

Judging by the grin on his face, I guess they had a good time?

Druid and I said goodbye to the trio of monsters and left the room. It was almost time for breakfast.

“Good morning,” Druid greeted Captain Tableau. “Did you manage to get some rest? Or should I say, do you even remember anything?”

“Good morning. Yes, I remember. I’m very sorry for all the trouble I caused you last night.”

“Don’t worry about it. You were tired, so you couldn’t help it. Oh, now that Ivy’s here, want to tell her what you told me?”

I wondered what Captain Tableau wanted to say to me. *Hmmm... Is it about the magic stones? Well, that was all thanks to Flame. I couldn’t have done it by myself.*

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any more just yet. But once more are regenerated, I’ll have Rose give them to you.”

“Huh?!” both men exclaimed.

Oh, did I say something wrong? I quietly said, “Magic stones?” but they both shook their heads. *Huh, so I was wrong. What did he want to say to me, then?* I gave them a questioning look, which only made Druid smile and tousle my hair.

“See? Isn’t she sweet?”

“Yes.”

Ummm, could you guys please stop leaving me out of the loop? I looked back and forth between Druid and Tableau. They both seemed relaxed and comfortable around each other. Then again, they also both had circles under their eyes from lack of sleep...and Captain Tableau’s circles looked a few days old, in fact. He must have been overworked.

“Miss Ivy?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

What could he mean? I sensed it wasn’t just about the magic stones,

but I couldn't think of anything else it could be. I stared at Captain Tableau and realized that he looked much happier. *Yeah, looking at him now, I can confidently say that he's going to be okay.*

“You’re welcome.”

It didn’t matter what he was thanking me for. I was sure I’d helped him with something. I didn’t know what that something was, but that smile was all the thanks I needed.

“If you’re ever in trouble, I promise I will drop everything to come to your aid.”

“Thank you, Captain, but please don’t strain yourself.”

“Don’t strain myself?”

“Captain Tableau, please be sure to sleep regularly. In any endeavor, your health is your most important asset!”

“Thanks. I won’t push myself too hard.”

The three of us went down to the first floor together. Captain Tableau was going to head straight to work. He really did have a tough job. We said goodbye to him and went into the dining hall to find Dola giving the guests a drink similar to the hangover cure I’d made.

“Good morning. Looks like you didn’t get a hangover after all. That wine does go down easily, so a lot of guys drink way more than they should.”

“Er, actually, Ivy made me that drink you’ve got right now.” Druid pointed at the glasses of herbal water Dola was carrying.

“Oh, so you did get hungover.”

“Yeah, that wine got me good. Oh, and if you’re wondering about Captain Tableau, he went straight to work.”

“Would you like some breakfast?”

“I think I’d better pass. Could I please just have a cup of tea?”

“Sure thing. I’ll get you some right away.”

“Thank you very much.”

We thanked Dola and sat down.

“Phewww...” Druid sighed wearily as he flopped into his chair.

“Take it easy on yourself, okay?”

“Sorry. It’d been so long that I forgot to pace myself.”

Druid looked just a tad remorseful. I wished he didn’t think he had to feel that way.

“But...did you enjoy yourself?”

“Yeah. The wine was delicious, too.”

“Then it was worth it. You need to let loose every now and then.”

Druid’s worried face softened into a smile. “Thanks.”

Chapter 269: Rain?

“W~~h~~o, it’s really cold out there. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

When we set foot out of the inn, we shivered in the cold and instantly regretted it. But Captain Tableau had told us we needed to hurry, and we’d assured him everything would be okay. Flame did its best and managed to regenerate some more magic stones, so we wanted to deliver them to Rose. We knew there was still a great need for them.

“Good thing I’m wearing my winter gloves. You should have bought one for yourself, too, Mr. Druid.”

“I’ll be fine. If we run into trouble and I need to grip a sword, only this type of glove will do.”

I had given him that sword, but I regretted it a little. Still, the weapon Druid had originally carried was also a sword, so I supposed nothing would be different even if I hadn’t given it to him.

“By the way, how’s that sword working for you, sir?”

Sora and Flame had made this sword together. I held it once, and I was astounded by how light it felt compared to other swords I’d known. Druid said it was quite different from any sword he had used before, so I was worried he would have a hard time getting used to it.

“Oh, this sword is great. I gave it a couple of practice swings, and it barely put any pressure on my shoulder. It also molds really well to my hand, so it’s quite easy to handle.”

Looks like my worries were unnecessary. “Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

Truth be told, I wasn't sure if it was okay to give the sword to Druid, a man with one arm. But to someone like Druid, who had made a living with a sword all his life, not having one was out of the question. So, I gave him the sword with my blessing.

"Hm? Something wrong, Ivy?"

I looked at Druid. The first time I'd seen the sword hanging at his belt, something had felt amiss, but now the look really suited him. It was too bad that the SS or SSS magic stone at the hilt of the sword had to be covered in cloth, though. It was a beautiful stone.

"Oh, no. I was just thinking how much that sword suits you."

Druid beamed proudly in reply. It really was the right move to give it to him.

"Ugh, none of the shops are open."

Every store on Main Street was closed. There were no people around, either, and the sky was dim even though it was around noon. An inexplicable eeriness hung in the air.

"Mr. Druid...let's just go." I gripped his sleeve and marched ahead quickly.

"Yeah, this town does feel pretty creepy with all the shops shut and the people gone."

I nodded. "We still have to go to the forest today, so let's make this quick."

"Agreed."

We were planning on dropping off the magic stones with Rose, then going to the forest so Ciel could feed and we could collect our final potions to last us through the winter. After a short walk, Rose's shop came into view. It was also closed, but Druid knocked on her door undaunted.

We knew she was expecting us since we'd made plans to come today the last time we saw her.

"Ya must be freezin'! Come on in," she called from inside. We opened the door and let ourselves in. "Druid, Tableau told me all about how he passed out drunk and gave ya a hard time. You too, Ivy."

Huh? But I don't remember him doing that to me. "He didn't give me a hard time, ma'am," I quickly insisted.

For some reason, Druid gave my head a gentle pat.

"I figured ya'd say that, hon. That's our Ivy."

"That's for sure."

Huh? Is it just me, or are they both smiling sweetly at me right now? My face was burning with embarrassment. *I just know I'm turning red!*

"Here's your magic stones, ma'am," I said, fumbling in my bag and pulling out the stones Flame had regenerated to shake off my embarrassment.

"Thanks. Are ya sure Flame didn't work too hard?" Rose asked me and Druid as she examined the magic stones. We told her that Flame was fine, and there were probably more magic stones this time because it had gotten stronger. Very obviously, at that.

There was one thing that concerned me, though: the stain on Flame's chest. It was getting bigger. I asked Druid about it and he'd also been concerned, but neither Sora nor Ciel had much of a reaction when I asked them, so we assumed everything was okay. Still, it was scary not understanding what was going on. I wished we could figure out what that stain was, sooner than later.

"So, do you happen to have any more spent magic stones, ma'am?"

Now that Flame was regenerating magic stones in bigger batches,

we were quickly running out of spent ones and would need to restock soon.

“Wow, it went through that giant pile so fast? Actually, yeah... lookin’ at the big load ya just gave me now, it makes sense. I still got some, but are ya sure ya don’t wanna give Flame some time off, hon?”

I kept telling Flame it should take a break if it wanted to, but it had so much fun regenerating the magic stones that my urgings didn’t have much of an effect. Besides, my creatures were very smart, so I figured they wouldn’t work themselves past their limits.

“If Flame needs some time off, it’ll take some time off,” Druid assured her. “Those kids would never do anything to hurt Ivy, so I don’t think Flame is pushing itself too hard.”

Rose nodded in reply and said, “Wait just a second.” She pulled a box off the bottom shelf of a cabinet and opened the lid. Inside was a large stash of spent magic stones.

“Wow, that’s quite a pile.”

“Ha ha ha! Well, it’s a hassle to go and throw them away, so I got a big collection before I knew it.”

There really were a lot of stones. I picked up one and noticed that it was dusty, despite being stored in a covered box. It looked like it had been used up ages ago. *I’d better dust these stones off before I give them to Flame.*

We put the spent magic stones into our bag, told Rose we were going to the forest that day, and left the shop. We wanted to be back at the inn by sunset. As we walked out to the forest, it started to drizzle, and we ran to find shelter from the rain.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“It looks like it’s not going to stop. Let’s go tomorrow instead.”

“Okay.”

“Huh...that’s strange.” Druid made a face at the sky. I looked up in the same direction, but I couldn’t see what was so odd.

“Mr. Druid? What’s wrong?”

“It’s really cold today, right?”

“Yeah. It’s colder than yesterday.”

“Then why is it raining instead of snowing?”

Hm? Oh...yeah, if it’s this cold, it ought to be snowing. But it’s raining.

“It isn’t very humid, either, so it definitely should be snowing right now.”

I don’t really understand humidity, but...does this mean something is wrong?

“Oh, it stopped!” Druid said.

I looked up at the sky and saw it was much brighter than before.

“I guess we can go out to the forest now?”

“Yeah. Let’s go before the weather changes again.”

The gatekeeper was surprised and worried to hear we were going to the forest, so we told her what route we planned to take before we headed out. Once we made sure there were no other people around, we opened the bag.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

The two creatures leapt eagerly out of the bag. Lately, I’d started leaning back away from the bag when I opened it so I wouldn’t get in their way and they could jump out with all their might. When it was time to

open their bag, safety always came first. I had to make sure there weren't any branches nearby they would slam into. One time, Sora rammed a tree branch and knocked an animal off it and onto my head. That was terrifying.

“Flame?”

Flame was asleep in the bag. I'd have to try to wake it again once we got to the dump.

Mrrrow. Ciel, back in adandara form, was stretching. I wondered if being in slime form made it feel confined.

“Be careful out there, okay, Ciel? The only things out there to hunt right now are monsters, so pace yourself.”

Mrrrow.

I knew Ciel would probably be all right, but my most anxious moments in life were when I sent it off on its hunting trips. *Have another safe trip, Ciel,* I prayed as I watched the creature bound off into the forest.

Then we headed to the dump. It was actually quite close, which meant we would know right away when Ciel came back.

“Okay, potions and swords. And I guess we'll need more spent magic stones, too?”

Then again, it was hard to tell the difference between spent magic stones and normal rocks. You'd find gray rocks on the ground everywhere. *Oh well, I'll just do my best.*

“Oh, Flame? We're at the dump now. Can you get up?”

“Teryuuu...”

It sounded sleepy. But it seemed to want to get up, so I took it out of its bag. I set it down by my feet and it lazily tumbled over toward Sora.

“Sora, Flame, be careful not to hurt yourselves, okay?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

They both sounded so chipper. Even Flame had energy—it was finally awake. *I guess it'll be okay now.*

Chapter 270: It Happened. Again.

“So we have seventy-one magic stones total, five of which we can’t give away.”

This time there were five special magic stones, the kind that glittered brightly in the sun. Flame said it had no control over the level of the magic stones it created, so it couldn’t be helped. I looked at the sparkling potions next to them.

I might need to have two magic boxes someday...and that terrifies me. We have plenty of room left in the current one, but still.

It was shocking how Flame had increased its output of regenerated magic stones yet again. And it seemed to grow stronger with every regenerating session, too. It was incredibly surreal. Druid and I talked about it earlier, and as far as he knew, most normal slimes were nothing like Flame. We weren’t sure if other rare slimes had this characteristic or if it was unique to Flame. Sora had some secrets of its own, but Flame was nothing but mysteries.

“Okay, let’s swing by Rose’s shop on the way back and give these new magic stones to her,” Druid suggested, picking up the bag with all the Level 3 and lower stones.

“Sure. She’ll sure be surprised to see them considering we already gave her a batch this morning.”

“That’s for sure.”

We put everything in our bags and left the dump. I searched the area for auras, but Ciel still seemed to be off on its hunting trip.

“Oh, Mr. Druid, what do you think Ciel will do for hunting when the

snow is too deep to move in?”

I hated to have the poor creature go hungry, but it would be hard for us to get the large amounts of meat it needed to be satisfied.

“Hm? Well, I guess we’ll have to go to the edge of the village and have Ciel jump over the wall.”

Jump over the wall? Um, wait a minute...

“I hate that we won’t be able to go outside with Ciel, but it is what it is,” Druid said.

“But don’t the walls around villages have some sort of magic spell on them?”

I had heard that the walls protecting towns and villages had a spell cast on them to stop people from crossing over them without being spotted. But from the way Druid was talking, was it possible for Ciel to jump over the walls undetected?

“Yes, there is a defensive barrier spell that goes about one meter above the walls, but the area above that is safe.”

The area above that? So, is Ciel supposed to come and go by jumping a meter above the wall? I think it’s probably able to jump that high, but I’d better ask it once it gets back just to make sure.

“Look, it’s back.”

Ciel came into view, dodging the trees as it dashed toward us. It always looked so magnificent when it ran.

“Hi, Ciel,” we both said.

Mrrrow.

I quickly looked over its body and saw that it wasn’t wounded.
Thank goodness.

Mrrrow, Ciel trilled as it approached me.

“What’s up?”

I gently patted its head. After a while, it started to purr. I smiled and petted it harder, and it purred even louder in reply. Did it like being petted more heavily?

Mew! Ciel yipped and drew its head away. I stared at it curiously... then it suddenly spat out a magic stone. I stared at it in surprise while Druid picked it up and examined it.

“What’s wrong, sir?”

“This magic stone...it’s two-colored. Look.”

I looked at the stone in Druid’s hand. Sure enough, it had two colors: green and yellow.

“This is quite rare,” he said.

“Yeah, I’ve never seen a colored magic stone with two colors, either.”

I hadn’t even known they existed.

Mrrrow.

Ciel had never returned from a hunting trip with a magic stone before. Did it find it in a cave or something?

“Ciel, did you go in a cave?”

Ciel shook its head. It had discovered the stone elsewhere.

“Where do you think it found this magic stone?”

“If it wasn’t from a cave, maybe it came from a monster it killed?” my father suggested.

Ciel nodded its head, meaning the stone had been inside a monster.

“Sometimes monsters do carry magic stones inside them.”

“Yeah, some monsters eat magic stones because that’s the source of

their power. And some of them even use the stones externally.”

I had no idea. There were still so many things I didn’t know.

“Thanks for showing us your magic stone, Ciel. I really appreciate it.” I made sure to look the stone over from several angles and appreciate it because I was sure it was a rare object that Ciel wanted me to see. But when I tried to return it, Ciel shook its head. “Huh? You don’t want it back?”

Mrrrow.

I looked at Ciel, who had an anxious expression on its face. Why did it look so worried? I retraced my steps, but I couldn’t think of anything I’d done recently that would make it feel bad. *Umm...is it upset because I tried to give the stone back?*

“Is this magic stone a present for me?”

Mrrrow. Ciel’s eyes lit up.

Aha, so the rare magic stone was a present. “Thanks, Ciel,” I said with a smile. Ciel’s tail wagged, stirring up a mini-tornado. That massive tail never ceased to amaze me. “Okay, Ciel, let’s pack things up. We have to go back to the village soon.”

Ciel immediately shapeshifted back into slime form.

“Thanks.”

On the walk back, I asked Ciel if it would be able to jump over the magic walls to hunt when the snow got too heavy for us to go outside. It answered me normally, which meant it would be okay with it. I was relieved to hear that, and I felt silly for worrying about it over the last few days.

Once the gate was in sight, I put the creatures back in their bag. I made sure the lid was tightly shut, then we greeted the gatekeeper and

entered the village. On the way to Rose's shop, we saw a few adventurers excitedly looking at something. They were cheering so loudly that I could make out a little of what they were saying. One of them had just received word that their little sister had had a baby. Watching them rejoice over the happy event made me smile, too.

"Agh!" A panicky voice from my side jolted me out of my reverie. I looked to see Druid, green in the face and quite frantic.

"What's wrong?"

"I forgot to send a message."

A message? What was he talking about?

"My parents said they wanted me to send them a message when I arrived in Hatow to let them know I'd gotten there safely."

"Err...it's been several weeks since we got here."

Silence.

"We'd better get in touch with them right away."

"Yeah."

Wait a minute...how would he contact them? By letter?

"The guild should still be open."

"Won't it take several more weeks to arrive?"

"Huh?!" Druid looked a bit shocked by my question. *I guess I said something wrong.*

"Aren't you sending a letter?"

"Oh, you thought I was sending a letter. Well, it technically is a letter, but the guild has a magic item called a *faax*. It takes a little time, but it can send messages within a day."

A fax? I wasn't sure why, but I suddenly got a mental picture of a

box with numbered buttons. *Is that a fax? But this is Past Me's memory, right? Does this mean we also had faxes in my past life? That's...kinda neat. It's nice that they have the same name, too, so it doesn't feel unnatural to me.*

“Ivy, is it okay if we swing by the guild first?”

“Of course.”

We went to the adventurer guild on the way back and sent a message to Gotos telling him that we were okay and describing what we had been up to lately.

“Huh? Aren’t you sending it to your family?”

“Err...nah, I’ll have Gotos deliver the message.”

He was too shy to send a fax directly to his parents. When I laughed at him, he poked my forehead. A closer look revealed that his ears were red, which only made me chuckle again.

“Arrgh, fine. I’m gonna go send the message now.” Druid marched away in a huff.

I’d better pull myself together by the time he gets back. But wow, between ryce, ponzu, and fax, so many words from my past life keep popping up. It actually scares me a little.

Chapter 271: The Past Repeats Itself

While Druid was sending his fax, I walked around the guild to hear the news. I wandered close to groups of adventurers and listened in to see if they were saying anything important. I used this method out in town, too, but since the guild was a place where adventurers gathered, I was nervous about it. I felt at first like I was doing something wrong. But gathering intelligence was vital for your survival if you were a traveler, so I'd gotten over it. Now that Druid was with me, I could always ask the adventurers directly if they had any news, but I still found myself using my old methods anyway.

I stopped near a group of five adventurers. Naturally, I kept alert and made sure nobody noticed me.

“So, it’s not just me, right? This rain isn’t normal.”

“Yeah, it should be snowing right now.”

“Right, it gives me the creeps.”

“Me, too.”

They were saying the same things Druid had said earlier, so apparently the rain *wasn’t* normal. The village I came from only had about a week of snow in the winter, so I hadn’t really noticed.

“Y’know, my granny was saying somethin’ like this happened a long time ago.”

“That so?”

“Yeah, she was really worried that a lot of people would die. That’s what happened the other time.”

“Yeah, my gramps said the same thing. I wonder what’s goin’ on?”

So something like this happened long ago. Maybe I should ask other villagers if that’s correct. When I sensed Druid’s aura approaching, I left the group of adventurers.

“Sorry it took so long.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got something I want to talk about, Mr. Druid.”

“What is it?”

“Can we talk outside?”

“Sure...”

I had to be careful since the adventurers might get angry if they found out I had been eavesdropping. I needed to change the way I got my news before I got any older. *But dang, talking to adventurers is so intimidating!*

When we left the guild, the clouds were blanketing the sky again. It looked like the rain might be coming back.

“Some young adventurers were talking about how unusual the rain was. They said it should be snowing right now.”

“Aha.”

“They also said something like this happened in the past.”

“What?” Druid gasped.

I nodded and answered, “Their grandpas and grandmas experienced it a long time ago. They said the elders were worried that a lot of people would die because that’s what happened last time.”

Druid pondered over what I’d just said. He was probably thinking we needed somebody to confirm this and give us more information. “It has to be Rose. She’s the oldest and most knowledgeable person we know here. Salifa and Dola don’t look any older than me.”

“Well, we’re about to go see Rose now. Should we ask her?”

“Yeah, we’d better.”

Now that we had another reason to be there besides the magic stones, we hurried on even faster feet to Rose’s shop. Would she still be in? Once we arrived, Druid pounded on the door.

“Hello? It’s Druid.”

There was no answer. *I guess she’s out after all?*

“What’s this? Why, it’s Druid and Ivy.”

We spun around to find Delos, holding a bag.

“Excuse me, but is Rose in?”

“I think she’s home. Hold on a sec.” Delos unlocked the door and let us inside. We thanked him and entered the shop.

“Rose! Are you in here?”

“Nng... What is it, hon? Ya don’t usually holler at me right after I get home,” Rose grumbled as she stuck her head out. “Hm?! What’s wrong, you two?” she asked, suddenly looking worried at the sight of us.

“Sorry to bother you, but we’ve got some more regenerated magic stones for you,” Druid explained. “Also, we wanted to ask you something about the past.”

Rose looked relieved for a second, then confused the next. “Magic stones? But didn’t ya already give me some this morning?”

“Yes, but Flame regenerated a bunch more at the dump, so we brought them here for you.”

Rose looked surprised to hear that, and she immediately asked if Flame was okay.

“Flame is fine. Regenerating magic stones actually seems to put more life into it.”

“Is that so, hon? Well, the world is full of mysteries, isn’t it?”

She was quite right, so I vaguely laughed it off. I couldn’t help that there were things I wasn’t able to explain to her.

“So, what didja want to ask me about the past?”

“Rose, why don’t we talk over a nice hot cup of tea?” Delos suggested.

Rose gasped and hastily offered us some chairs. “Sorry I’m so scatterbrained.”

“It’s all right,” Delos told her. “You go ahead and hear what they have to say, Rose. I’ll go make the tea.”

“Thanks, dear.”

Delos went to prepare the tea while Rose sat across from us.

“So, what do you make of the way winter’s going this year, Rose?”

“The way it’s goin’? Ah, you mean how there’s no snow?”

“Yes.”

Rose sighed loudly. Then she said, “Yeah, it ain’t normal.”

“We don’t know how long ago it happened, but we heard there was a winter like this many years ago. Do you know about it?”

“Hm? A winter like this one?” Rose made a strange face and thought. Maybe our information was wrong? “Oh! Now that ya mention it, you’re right, Druid. The way winter is this year, it’s definitely similar.”

Oh, good. So we’re on the right track after all.

A troubled look formed on Rose’s face as she thought back to the past. “It really is a lot like that winter... Actually, it’s *exactly* like that winter. The winter fifty years ago.”

Just then, Delos returned to the room with our tea. I took a sip and

felt its warmth tingle through my body.

“You remember it, too, don’tcha, Delos?”

“Hm? Fifty years ago?” Delos was a little startled by the sudden change of subject, but he thought for a little bit and nodded gravely. “You’re right, come to think of it. The abnormal cold, the snow blooms, and now the rain...”

So the rain *and* the snow blooms were just like that winter fifty years ago. “Did something happen fifty years ago to make the winter that way, sir?”

“Not really. It just rained when it was unusually cold.” Delos’s eyes clouded over with sadness. “But we weren’t prepared for that winter like we are for this one...so more than half of the villagers froze to death.”

More than half! That’s horrible. “Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that, sir. What are winters usually like in Hatow?”

“I’ve spent winters in other villages, and this one is no different. It gets cold and it snows for about a month, then spring comes. Nothing special. That winter fifty years ago was an outlier.”

So the winter fifty years ago was different from the others...and so was this winter. *I wonder if there were any other abnormal winters before that?*

“That winter fifty years ago...did people say it reminded them of a winter they’d lived through in the past?”

“I’m not sure. Delos, do you remember?”

“Well, I was only six years old at the time.”

“That’s right. I was eleven, so I recall a lot more than you. But I don’t remember hearin’ anything like that from anybody.”

Which meant this abnormal winter wasn’t a recurring thing.

“Looks like rain out there.”

The four of us looked out the window. Hatow was much darker than before.

“We should head back before it starts,” Druid said.

“Okay. Thank you, sir and ma’am.”

When we walked out of Rose’s shop, the icy winds made me shiver even harder than before.

“Let’s hurry. It’s too cold.”

“Yeah.”

Druid took my hand and began to run, half dragging me behind him. When we arrived at the inn, Dola and Salifa were very worried about us. Both guilds had sent a notice that there would be a curfew tonight. *Good thing we made it back in time.*

Chapter 272: Deep into the Forest

“It’s not letting up, is it?”

This was the third rainy day in a row. We spent the whole time sitting on the sofa, looking through our window and watching the constant rain fall. It was also bitterly cold, and although we hadn’t heard any details, we knew that people had died. I let out another sigh.

“Puuu?”

As I sat looking out the window, I suddenly felt a weight on my lap. I looked down to see Sora sitting there and staring up at me.

“Pu! Puuu.” Sora stretched up its body to look me in the eye. It was worried about me.

“I know, Sora. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

We had just heard the news that someone had frozen to death. In my head, I knew I couldn’t have done anything to help, but my heart ached a little. “We did everything we could. Right, Sora?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

I was a little surprised to hear everyone else chime in after Sora. I must have been in such a daze that I hadn’t even noticed them come up to me.

“Thanks, guys.”

They were right. I’d done everything I could to help, so there was no use moping about it. I heard the door click open and saw Druid come in

with some hot drinks.

“Hanging in there? Here, this’ll help.”

I thanked Druid and took the drink. *He noticed I was getting depressed. I feel so pathetic.* I took a sip, and a refreshing sweet warmth filled my mouth. “This is good.”

“Glad you like it.”

I hate worrying him. Okay! I’m okay now. I nodded slowly, and he patted my head. Everyone’s love warmed my heart.

“Dola says the rain is supposed to take a break tomorrow.”

“Oh, good.”

“We won’t be able to go hunting unless it snows, though.”

“Hunting?”

“Remember? We wanted to go hunt those rare monsters that only come out in winter.”

“Oh!”

That’s right, we did make that promise. But doesn’t it need to snow for us to do that?

“Those monsters only show up when it’s snowing. No matter how cold it is, they won’t come out in the rain.”

Oh, that’s too bad. Well, winter has only just begun. It can’t - possibly rain the whole time. But if something strange was going on, maybe it would just keep raining unless we could do something to change it.

“I sure wish it would stop raining,” I said.

“Me, too.”

“The sun is shining!”

We stepped outside the inn and looked up at the sky. Seeing the sun after so long was such a relief, although it was still bitterly cold.

“I never thought I’d feel this blessed to see the sun,” Druid murmured in awe beside me. He was right: Without the days of rain and cold, we wouldn’t have been so impatient for the sun. “Well, let’s get going.”

“Sure.”

Our plan for the day was to deliver the magic stones Flame had regenerated a few days earlier to Rose. After that, we were going to the forest. Our reason for doing this was that Ciel had been behaving strangely since around noon the previous day. It would shiver out of nowhere, stare out the window, and then shiver again. It would repeat that same behavior about once an hour. And though it could technically return to its true form in our room at the inn, that wasn’t really possible because its magic powers might leak out of the room. A whole day had passed with Ciel in that condition, so we wanted to make sure it was okay by taking it to the forest where it could turn into its true form. I asked Ciel if it was wounded or sick, but it didn’t seem to have a problem there. Druid said it couldn’t be a serious problem since Flame and Sora weren’t concerned, but I knew my worries wouldn’t disappear until I found out what was wrong.

Rose’s shop was open that day and she had a few customers. We said hello and gave her the magic stones.

“Thanks, hon. Wanna stay for tea?”

“No thanks. We have somewhere we need to go today, but we’ll come back soon.”

“Take care of yourselves, ya hear?”

“We will, thank you.”

This time, we didn't stick around to visit after handing off the magic stones. Rose and Delos were surprised by how busy we looked. Once we found out what was wrong with Ciel, we'd have to explain the situation to them.

We greeted the gatekeeper and took a look at the outskirts of the forest. We didn't see any dangerous monsters, which was a relief.

"Please come back the minute you feel the weather turning bad, okay?"

"We will, thank you. Have a nice day."

"Be safe out there."

Then we headed for the forest. We needed to keep our eyes open today, since the sunny weather had drawn the adventurers out into the forest, too.

"We've gone pretty deep into the woods today," Druid said.

I stopped walking and searched the area for auras. I sensed some adventurer-like presences in the distance, but they wouldn't be a problem. I prayed that none of them had Rose's shadow skill and let everyone out of the bag.

"Pu! Pu, puuu," Sora happily leaped out and bounced around in a circle. Ciel flew out right behind it, returned to its true form, and did some stretching exercises. I took a good look at Ciel in adandara form, and it looked like everything was okay. It was running around happily. Had it just been getting jittery from being cooped up inside all that time? Lastly, Flame bounced out of the bag.

"You've gotten really good at that, Flame."

It was able to jump out of the bag by itself now, meaning it had probably gotten stronger. But the stain on its chest really worried me. I had Druid measure it and we found out it had grown a little, though only

slightly.

Mrrrow.

I looked toward the sound of Ciel's voice and noticed it was squinting deep into the forest. Then I noticed Sora and Flame were also looking at something. The trio glanced at me.

"Mr. Druid, is it okay?"

"Er, is what okay?"

"If we go see what they're looking at over there."

"Ha ha ha. It's just another day in my life now."

"Huh? What was that?" His voice was too quiet for me to hear what he had said.

Druid shook his head and said, "It's nothing. Let's go."

"Thanks. Okay, guys, come on!"

This is exciting. I haven't been on an adventure in a while. Being in the forest really makes me crave it, though. Sora bounced in the lead, followed by Druid, myself, and Ciel. Druid was carrying Flame.

After walking for a while, we came upon a field of snow blooms. There was an incredible number of them, fluttering in the wind. The sight was so breathtaking. The flowers that heralded disaster were tantalizingly beautiful.

"I've never heard of these blooming in fields before." Druid sounded bewildered. And no wonder, the more snow blooms that flowered, the harsher winter would be.

"Pu! Pu, puuu."

I let myself get too distracted by the flowers and got separated from Sora. I ran to catch up with it and found myself at a rocky slope.

"Is this where people hunted for magic stones?" Druid asked,

pointing with his finger.

I looked where he was gesturing and saw a caved-in section of the boulders. When I got closer, I saw that it had indeed collapsed in on itself. There was no telling what was inside.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

I looked to see Sora and Ciel indicating a big hole in a boulder.
“They’re saying we can go in through there.”



“Apparently. I guess that means this *isn’t* a cave that collapsed and is no longer safe to enter?” Druid peered inside the mouth of the little cave and made a puzzled face. “I think this hole is newly made.”

Wow, he can really tell that just by looking? I examined it, but I couldn’t even tell what I was supposed to be looking for. We followed Sora and Ciel into the cave.

“Don’t you think maybe this *is* one of the collapsed caves Dola told us about?” Druid asked, pointing at the wall. I looked and saw it was embedded with magic stones—many of them, in fact.

“If it is, does that mean people could have been coming here to collect magic stones after all?”

“Judging by the cave mouth, I don’t think it was open until just a few days ago.”

That made sense.

Then Sora started bouncing excitedly in place. I approached it out of curiosity and found several of Snakey’s black orb babies. “Oh! Hello, little ones. Do you think this is also Snakey’s sacred ground?”

“Probably not—it’s too close to the village. If this were its sacred ground, there would be a lot more eyewitness reports about it.”

Huh. Yeah, I guess it is too close to Hatow. It’s only about an hour’s walk away. “Hi there, little ones. We’ve met before. Do you remember us?”

“Are these the same orbs we met before?” Druid asked.

That made me wonder. *Were* they the same ones? “I’m not sure, but I have a feeling they are.”

Druid laughed in reply, but it just wasn’t possible to tell the little black orb creatures apart. Their eyes and bodies were all the same jet-black

color.

Chapter 273: Deep in the Cave

“Ivy, I think this cave goes even deeper.”

I followed the line of Druid’s gaze and saw that the cave really did extend farther. What’s more, I could see a faint light.

“Do you think somebody’s in there?” Druid asked.

I quickly searched for auras, but there were no human ones. It was a familiar aura, though. Who was it...? “Oh! It’s Snakey’s aura!”

“The serpent? Should we go see?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Mrrrow.

Sora and Ciel happily bounded off into the cave before I could even answer. Druid and I hurried after them.

Since this was a cave, the ground was treacherous, so we couldn’t actually make our way through it that quickly. What’s more, I was carrying Flame. If I tripped and fell, it might get hurt, too. My heart raced as we traveled deeper into the cave... Then, suddenly, Flame’s weight disappeared from my arms.

“Huh?!”

“I’ll carry Flame. This is too dangerous. You okay with that, Flame?”

I looked to my right to see Druid holding Flame.

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.” Apparently Flame was also worried about its safety.

“Thanks.”

Druid patted me on the head. We followed Sora and Ciel a little deeper into the cave until we arrived in a space much larger than before.

“Whoa!”

There was Snakey, sprawled before my very eyes. It wasn’t moving, so perhaps it was asleep. Or was it dead? Worried, I took a step closer and...

“Puuu.”

“Sora?”

“What’s wrong?”

Sora cried out loudly, bouncing between Druid’s and my feet. Sora was warning us that it was too dangerous to go any farther. It had helped me out many times with this signal when I used to travel alone.

“That means it’s not safe to go any closer, right?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“Pu! Pu, puuu.” Sora bounced up and down, pleased that I understood.

“Thanks, Sora. Mr. Druid, it’s dangerous to get any closer.”

“Wow, Sora, you’re so smart. Thanks,” Druid said, crouching down to pat its head.

“Pu! Pu, puuu,” Sora happily jiggled in reply.

“But what in the world is the serpent doing here? Do you think it was the one who opened that hole?”

Druid stood up and examined the serpent, leaving ample space between it and himself. I could take its temperature by touching it, but since I was unable to do that, all I could do was call out to it.

“Snakey! Snakey!” My voice bounced off the cave’s walls, but the serpent didn’t budge. Had it died?

“Ivy, look! The spot beneath its face is moving.”

I looked where Druid was pointing...and it was indeed moving up and down.

“Is it alive?”

“Yeah. It’s breathing regularly, so it should be okay.”

“Oh, thank goodness.”

“But why won’t it wake up on its own?”

He had a point. We were so close to the serpent, calling out to it, but it showed no signs of waking. Was something happening to it?

“Hm?” Druid turned and walked back up the path we’d entered through. “Damn it, I think it started raining.”

“What?!” I hurried over to the mouth of the cave, and I could hear the pattering of the rain outside. It was quite loud, too, which meant the drops were large. And the howling wind was far colder than it had been before.

“It sure gets cold fast out here...let’s go back inside.”

“Okay.”

The area where Snakey lay was deep enough in the cave to be protected from the cold. If it stopped raining soon, we would be okay. And if it *didn’t* stop raining, we would have to find some way to get ourselves back to the village. Just the thought of getting hit by that icy rain sent shivers down my spine.

“Panicking won’t solve anything. Let’s have a little tea break.”

“Okay, good idea.”

Yes, let’s just calm down. I found a sturdy area and set out my cups. I took out my pot and used a red magic stone to heat up the cold water. One thing I hated about myself was that my magic was weak enough for

me to need Druid's help using magic stones. Would I ever get more magic? I put some tea leaves in the hot water, waited a little while, and then poured it through a strainer into our cups.

"Here you go, Mr. Druid."

"Thanks."

"How is it looking?"

Druid had checked Snakey all over while I made the tea. "I didn't see anything that seemed unusual. It doesn't look wounded, either."

Well, that was good news. But I was still worried that it wouldn't wake up. I just had a bad feeling about it.

"Do you have any theories, based on what you see from Snakey?"

"Well, if it's not wounded, then it must be sick. Somebody could also have put it to sleep."

Put it to sleep? That's a terrifying thought. I shoved down my anxious feelings with a big, long gulp of tea.

"Hm? But it doesn't make sense for it to be sick."

"Yeah, I agree. If it were sick, then why would Sora and the others be keeping their distance? They might be trying to tell us we'll catch the illness if we touch the snake, but Flame could always heal us. I doubt there's any illness Flame's potions can't cure."

So, does this point to the theory that someone put it to sleep? Like, an adventurer with as much magic as Snakey? But it doesn't make sense that my slimes are keeping us away. Unless only the person who cast the spell on the serpent can come near it?

"Mr. Druid, is there a magic spell that could put Snakey to sleep and make it so only the caster can safely go near it?"

"Hm? Ah, I see what you mean. Yes, there is a spell like that, but

you need a summoning circle for it.”

A summoning circle? I looked around Snakey, but I didn’t see any summoning circles drawn on the ground. Maybe it was hidden beneath its big body?

“Could Snakey be on top of the summoning circle?”

“No, the circle has to be bigger than the subject you’re casting the spell on.”

Okay, so the serpent couldn’t hide it. I took another careful look around Snakey, but I could find nothing resembling a summoning circle.

“This is just a big mystery, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I wish we could ask somebody about it...”

I was fairly certain that Snakey *was* Hatow’s guardian deity. But if we were wrong and told somebody, they might hunt it. And if it did turn out to be their guardian deity, that would cause quite a commotion.

“What should we do about this...?” Druid fell into thought, a perplexed look on his face.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

I turned toward the voice and saw Sora and Flame playing with the little black orb creatures. *They sure get along well. Wait...* Noticing Ciel was gone, I looked around the cave. Then I spotted it, right in front of Snakey’s face.

“Ciel...?”

“Huh?” Druid, also noticing Ciel, stared at it.

“Isn’t Ciel too close?”

“Yeah.”

Ciel was bumping its nose against Snakey’s. Then, the next thing I knew, a sinister magic energy surged up from the ground.

“Ciel!”

The moment the magic sprung forth, Ciel jumped behind me. The adandara had just barely avoided getting caught up in that menacing magic force.

“Oh, thank goodness.”

But what was that sinister magic aura? I hadn’t even touched it, and it made my skin sting.

Chapter 274: We Made a Friend

As the sinister magic energy welled up around Snakey and enveloped it, its giant body flinched a little. Was it waking up?

“Snakey!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I think it just moved.”

I scooted closer to get a better look, but a gray substance covered Snakey completely, obscuring it from view.

“What is this? Is it magic energy?”

Magic energy wasn’t supposed to have a color, but ever since it emerged, I could tell that this skin-prickling energy had intensified in strength. I decided to try moving over to see if I could get a better glimpse of any part of Snakey. As I examined its entire body, I found one spot where the gray energy was a bit thinner. I walked over there and strained my eyes to look inside. It was then that I noticed Snakey’s eyes were slightly open.

“Mr. Druid, its eyes are open.”

“Really? But what is this creepy aura? It seems like magic energy, but I’ve never heard of it being colored gray.”

So Druid also seemed to feel that this gray stuff was magic energy. A strange magic energy that pierced the skin. It seemed like it was welling out from Snakey, but it was not the serpent’s own energy. Its magic energy was warm, rather than icy cold like this.

“Gwaaah,” a voice suddenly howled in pain nearby. I looked at

Druid, thinking it was him for a moment, but he was looking at me, thinking the same. Realizing we were both wrong, we looked at Snakey. It was hard to see through the gray stuff, but the serpent was floating a little off the ground, wriggling back and forth in pain.

“What should we do?”

My heart pounded nervously against my chest. I had no idea how we could help.

Mee-yaaa!

A sound I’d never heard from Ciel bounced off the cave’s walls. Then, the next thing I knew, the adandara’s magic energy had filled the cave. Its dense power struck my head and knocked me onto my bottom, but I somehow managed to look up at Ciel. It was facing Snakey, its hair standing straight up, and hissing angrily.

After a while, the gray stuff disappeared, and the stabbing pain on my skin stopped along with it. *So was the gray stuff magic energy after all?* Once everything had cleared up, Snakey fell to the ground with a thud and lay still. I wanted to go up to it, but my legs wouldn’t move.

“Phew...that was some powerful magic. Ivy, are you okay?”

“Yeah, but...I can’t stand up.”

“The strength of the magic probably gave your body a bad reaction. My legs are a shaking mess, too. Don’t push yourself—just sit down until it wears off.”

“Okay.”

Druid cautiously approached Snakey. This time, Sora didn’t stop him.

“Is it dead?” There was a catch in my voice.

Druid gently touched Snakey and closed his eyes. After a while, he

turned toward me and smiled. “It’s alive. It’s weak but breathing.”

Relief washing over me, I slumped further to the ground. Then my downturned eyes caught sight of something. “Mr. Druid, look at the ground! We’re on the summoning circle!”

“Huh?!” Druid looked beneath him. When he saw the circle, he noticed he was on it, too.

“That’s quite a big summoning circle. Do you think it’s what created that sinister magic energy?”

Mrrrow, Ciel answered Druid. Did it know the truth about the summoning circle?

“Ciel, did you know that this summoning circle was what trapped Snakey here?”

Mew! Ciel answered that it hadn’t known.

“Did you sense that creepy energy?”

Mrrrow.

“Wow, Ciel, you found the magic energy this deep into the forest!”

So now we knew why Ciel had been acting so strangely: It had been following the sinister magic energy.

“Ivy?”

“Is something wrong?”

Oh, I can move my legs! It’s probably safe for me to stand up.

“We’ll need to report this.”

“Oh, right!”

Druid was right. We couldn’t let whoever drew this summoning circle get away with it, although we had no idea who was involved. That sinister magic energy tugged on my conscience as well.

“What do you think we should do?”

“Hmm...maybe we should let Captain Tableau handle this.”

That was probably the best idea. He was captain of the watch, after all. “I’d hate to bother him since he’s already got his plate full as it is.”

“Well, it’s tough, but that’s what it means to be captain of the watch.”

He was right. We needed to inform somebody about the problem the village was facing. But relying on somebody who was already overworked still didn’t sit right with me. The only other person I could think of was Guild Master Priya, but I didn’t know him very well and I was sure he was quite busy, too. *I guess we’ll have to go with Captain Tableau after all.*

“Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

Flame? Wait a minute, where did it go? I looked in the direction of its voice...and found it surrounded by the little black orbs that were Snakey’s children. I slowly rose to my feet and made sure my muscles were alive again. *Okay, I’m good to walk.* I wobbled a little, but by going slow and focusing on my footing, I was able to walk again.

“Are you okay? Don’t force it, Ivy.”

“I think I’m okay. I really am impressed with Ciel’s magic, though. It’s incredibly powerful.”

“Well, that’s an adandara for you.”

Ciel’s magic energy was much denser and more beautiful than anything I could have ever imagined. Slowly and carefully, I made my way over to Flame.

“Whatcha doing, Flame?”

When the black orbs noticed me, they opened up a pathway to the slime.

“Thanks, guys.”

Pong!

Hm? Was that a pong? I looked in the direction of the sound, and sitting before Flame was a large, clear aquamarine magic stone with hints of silver. Aha, that was the ponging sound of a magic stone getting created... Wait, was Flame making a magic stone? As I curiously reached for the stone, one of the black orbs expertly picked it up and moved it. I followed it with my eyes and saw it was headed toward Snakey. I wasn't sure whether to stop it or keep watching, so I cautiously looked on. Then the black orb tossed the magic stone right into Snakey's mouth.

Druid and I stared at the serpent...then at each other...then we both made a face. How were we even supposed to react to that? To be honest, I had no idea.

“What was that magic stone?” Druid asked.

“Flame made it.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, it was crystal-clear blue, with silver mixed into it.”

“A silvery-blue magic stone?” From the look on Druid’s face, it was clear that Flame had once again created a ridiculously rare magic stone. “That magic stone...” Druid began, but before he could finish what he wanted to say, Snakey was enveloped in a beautiful silvery-blue light. I felt magic energy from the light like before, but this time the energy had a warmth to it. As it slowly seeped away, all I could do was just stand and stare.

“Okaaay, ummm, so what just happened?” Druid sounded bewildered.

I had no idea how to answer him. All I could do was wonder what was going on. As we both stood there in confusion, Snakey slithered itself

up off the ground.

“Oh, look!”

“Snakey! Are you okay?” I asked the creature. I felt its magic energy softly flow through the cave and then evaporate into the ether. I gave Snakey a curious look. Then its face moved until it was just inches from mine.

“Whoa! You scared me.” Our gazes locked...then its tongue slithered out and licked my cheek again and again. *Umm...huh?*

“Looks like you made a friend,” Druid said.

So Druid thinks so, too? I'm honored that you like me, but...my cheek is all slobbery now. Could you maybe stop?

Chapter 275: A Typical Winter?

By the time Snakey had finally settled down...well, let's just say I had to wipe my face three times with a wet towel to get it clean. The drool in my hair was hard to wipe off, too. Big serpents have big tongues, you see.

“Snakey, do you know what this summoning circle is?”

Snakey stared at the ground. Then it looked at me, lifted its body up a little, and shook its head no.

“Krrr!”

Um...does that mean it's not sure? “You don't know?”



Snakey nodded. *Guess I was right.* But my goodness, how big it was. All it did was lift its head a little, and its face was far above the top of my own head.

“I know you had Ciel and the others to practice on, but I’m still impressed, Ivy. You can already have a conversation without any awkwardness.”

I heard Druid murmur something, so I looked in his direction, but he just shook his head at me. *I guess it wasn’t important.*

“Are you okay now, Snakey? By the way, what happened to that magic stone Flame made?”

Oops. That was pushy. I jumped right to a question.

“Krr-rr,” Snakey trilled, extending its head down to my eye level and sticking out its tongue. I thought it was going to lick me again, but it was different this time. It had two gray stones on top of its tongue. I picked them up and stared at them. They looked a lot like the other gray stones I’d been seeing a lot of lately.

“Did these used to be a magic stone?”

“Krr-rr,” Snakey answered, nodding its head yes. So that crystal-blue stone had used up its magic. *What a shame.* What’s more, it had split into two spent stones.

“What’s wrong?” Druid asked, standing next to me and staring at my hand.

“The magic stone broke in two.”

“Oh. Well, I can’t say this for sure since I don’t know what kind of magic stone it started out as, but it must have been quite a strain to get the magic out of it.”

“A strain?”

“Yeah, sometimes magic stones break in half from the pressure if you force their magic out too suddenly or too intensely.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that could happen.”

“Krrr!”

Mrrrow.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

“Teryu? Te! Ryu, ryuuu.”

As Druid and I stared at the two halves of the spent magic stone, the creatures sang merrily around us. I looked over to find Snakey playing with both the black orbs and my creatures.

“They’re having quite a party,” Druid remarked.

“Yeah.” *Wait...I don’t hear the rain anymore.* “Mr. Druid, I think it’s stopped raining.”

“Hm? Yeah, now that you mention it, maybe it has. This might be our chance to get back to the village.”

We told the creatures we had to go and walked toward the cave entrance.

“You’re still wobbling a little,” Druid said, resting a supportive hand on my back. He was right: Even though I could technically walk, I was a bit unsteady. I was probably still under the effects of the magic from earlier.

“I’ll just have to power through it. But I think my strength will come back little by little.”

“*You think?* Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Well, this has never happened to me before.” I’d never had that much magic energy wash over me. Even in the forest, when I’d encountered monsters of the highest level that I’d read about in books, I’d

never felt magic energy that strong. “Since this is my first time, I don’t know how long it’ll take for me to get back to normal.”

Now that I was walking, I could feel a...numbness?...in my legs. I didn’t think walking was going to make the feeling any worse, though. *Hmm...powerful magic sure has some powerful effects.*

“Are you okay, Mr. Druid?”

“Hm? Yeah...I also had a bad reaction to the magic, but I’m fine now.”

“Huh.” *Maybe it’s because he’s way more experienced than me? Or maybe it’s because my magic is so low? I do seem to remember Druid mentioning he had high magic levels.*

“Oh, look! It’s snowing,” Druid said.

I suddenly looked up from my vigilant ground-staring. The area outside the cave was filled with pure-white snow. “Oh, you’re right! It sure is snowing. Oh, do you think that means it’s gotten colder, too?”

What a relief. We still didn’t know what had kept it at bay all this time, but it was snowing at last. Maybe we would have a typical winter after all? Or was this only temporary? I still had reasons to worry, but I might as well enjoy the fact that it was snowing now.

“Do you think that summoning circle had something to do with it?”
Druid asked.

I felt something cold tingle down my spine... It was possible. Which meant I might have found myself smack-dab in the middle of some trouble again—and it was too late to avoid it now.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... I was just thinking that I seem to have a knack for finding trouble.”

“What?! Well...yeah, you do have a point.” He was reluctant to admit I was right, but he firmly agreed with what I’d said.

“Pu! Pu, puuu.”

Huh? Is that Sora’s voice? I looked behind me...and a giant figure shot up in front of my face.

“Agh!”

Crash!

“Snakey...could you please stop sneakily slithering behind me?” *I was so startled I actually screamed back there. How embarrassing.*

“Krr-rr-rr?”

The giant figure was Snakey, giving all my creatures a ride on its back. It was following behind us without projecting an aura or making a sound, so even Druid was quite startled by its presence. So startled that he had his hand on his sword. Thank goodness he hadn’t drawn it.

“Phew...okay, Ivy, let’s go back to the village and report this. The cold weather finally seems to have settled down for a bit, but there’s no telling when that icy-cold rain will come back.”

“Okay. Snakey, be careful, all right? Some adventurers might come by here soon.”

“Krrr?!” It tilted its head. Maybe that meant it didn’t understand me.

“Some adventurers are going to come here to look at that summoning circle, so you should hide if you don’t want them to see you.”

“Krr-rr.” That meant “I understand.” I was surprised by how smart Snakey was.

“Are you going to wait here for the adventurers?”

“Krrr!” That sounded different from the noise it made earlier...so maybe it meant “no”? In that case, it wouldn’t be here the next time we

came back. Would we ever see it again?

“Can we come visit you again?”

“Krr-rr!”

Oh, good. “Ciel, can you change into a slime for me?” Ciel, who could shapeshift very quickly now, promptly complied. I put everyone in their bag and shut the lid tightly to keep them from getting wet in the snow. “Take care, Snakey.”

“Krr-rr!”

“Snakey, please watch out. Make no mistake—somebody is after you.”

“Krr-rr!”

We waved goodbye and left the cave. Even though the weather had settled, it was still quite cold. We quickened our pace back to Hatow.

“Ivy, can you walk okay now?”

“Huh?! Oh...I’m fine now!” The tingling had subsided and I hadn’t even noticed. *Thank goodness. I was worried it wouldn’t go away. Oh, what a relief.*



EXTRA * Somebody, Please Stop Them



“Ivy, what do you think of this one?” Druid asked, shoving a frilly skirt in my face. I couldn’t think of any occasion when I would even wear it.

“I can’t wear that... Um, maybe we should get going...”

“Then what about this one? Isn’t it cute?”

Yes, it was very cute. But it didn’t suit a traveler like me, and it was probably very expensive, too. The embroidery was terribly lavish, unlike the kind on the other clothes I’d seen so far.

“Um, I’d kind of rather have some simpler, everyday clothes...”

How did I get myself in this mess? As I stared at the mountain of clothes piling up before me, my consciousness flew far away.

“Ivy, you don’t like this one?”

“Huh?! What part of it don’t you like?”

You guys just don’t get it! Why were Druid and Baluka going so gaga over choosing clothes for me? And completely ignoring my wishes, too.

It had started with Druid asking me if he could pick out some clothes he thought would suit me. So I said, “Sure, thank you.” I mean, wouldn’t most people choose about three items? But he and Baluka kept trying to one-up each other’s choices, and before I knew it, I had a mountain of clothes in front of me. I tried to stop them, but they wouldn’t even listen to me. *Somebody, please stop these guys!*

“Sir, an order just came in for you.”

Aha! Is that a store employee I hear? Maybe he can stop them.

“An order? Please leave it on my desk, and I’ll check it later. By the way, what do you think of this?” Baluka asked, barely giving the order a glance before losing interest. *Come on, taking care of orders is a big part*

of your job!

“I think this lighter color scheme would suit her better. The embroidery is quite pretty, too.” The employee took a look at me and selected two blouses. I had to admit that the colors were cute, and the tight embroidery was also pretty. He sure knew how to pick out clothes—I guess that comes with the job.

“Yes, that is very cute.”

“I think this would look good on her, too.”

Baluka scrutinized the garment his employee had brought over, then scurried off and returned with one where collar was the only thing designed differently. “Don’t you think this one’s cuter?”

“You’re right. This one is definitely more girlish.”

No, employee, I wanted you to stop them, not join them. As I watched the two giggle over the collar design, I let a quiet sigh escape me.

“Gee, they sure are getting excited.”

I flinched at the sound of yet another voice. I nervously turned to see who it was...and my eyes were met with a man carrying a big pile of clothes.

“Um, yes, they sure are. And who are you?”

“I’m Miche, head of the embroidery department. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Ivy. Um, could you maybe please stop them...?”

Miche’s eyes filled with sympathy. “I’m sorry, sweetie. You can never stop Baluka once he gets in that mood. He gets even more insuf...er, more excited than usual.”

Was he about to call Baluka “insufferable”? I gave Miche a suspicious look, and he smiled awkwardly in reply. “Just give up. You know, I’m more surprised by your friend. He’s giving Baluka a run for his

money.”

“Oh, that’s Mr. Druid. He’s family.”

Miche gave me a kind smile and lightly patted my shoulder twice. “Hang in there, kid. I’ll take Buff away for you.” And with that, he dragged Buff away to the back room.

“But this color suits Ivy better.”

“Yes, it does, but this one’s better because it’s brighter.”

Baluka and my dad were disagreeing passionately over the same color. And as important as color was, there’s no way I’d ever wear the clothes they were holding anyway. Ribbons are cute, but they’re not my style.

“Oh, nice. This one might look good on her, too.”

“Yes, it sure would. But this color would definitely be better.”

Was it just me, or were they trekking deeper and deeper into cutesy territory? Having a look was nice and all, but I would definitely never pick any of those clothes for myself.

“Mr. Druid, please, what you’re holding really isn’t my style. I’d never wear it.”

“Huh?!”

Wow. The kindred spirits even gasped in unison.

“These clothes just aren’t me.” I looked at the clothes Druid and Baluka were holding, then I nodded. *I’m glad I said it. I just had to avoid flashy, frilly clothes like that.*

“Then what about this one?”

Oh! How cute. Unlike the overly girlish designs from before, this one was simple while still having a subdued prettiness about it. It was light-colored, too, so it would be easy to coordinate with my other clothes.

Yeah, it was always best to choose a color that was easy to match with.

“Okay, we’re definitely taking this one,” Druid said. Baluka nodded in reply. I gave them a funny look. For the first time, they were on the same page. The clothes Druid had chosen got moved somewhere else. Apparently, the garment they’d just shown me was our winner.

“Hee hee!” It was so lovely to me that the sight of it made me giggle with excitement.

“Okay, now that we’ve got her style pinned down, we’ve just got to find some others along the same lines,” Baluka said.

I flinched. They had already chosen so many clothes...were they still going to pick out some more? *Mmmrrrgggh... If I let them do what they want, this shopping trip will definitely wind up taking forever.*

“Um, hey, why don’t we decide on our price limit before we buy anything?” I suggested.

Druid and Baluka gave me the same bewildered look. They really were kindred spirits.

“But we don’t need to worry about money,” Druid said.

I shook my head no. “Yes, we *do* need to worry, so let’s set a price limit first! Please?” Otherwise, Druid would keep buying clothes for me for all eternity.

“Oh, fine, if you insist, Ivy. But it wouldn’t hurt to let loose a little.”

You never were going to stay within a budget, were you?!

“No, Mr. Druid. I insist we set a budget, sir!”

Ack, I’m talking like that again...well, no, it’s actually best for me to sound firm. I looked at Druid, and he slumped his shoulders in reply. He was unsatisfied, but I wasn’t backing off.

“Okay, fine.”

I won!... Wait, not exactly. Why do we always have to bicker over our budget? Druid was so headstrong when it came to money.

“You’re just too stubborn, Ivy.”

“*You’re the stubborn one, Mr. Druid!*”

“No, no, you never give me an inch once you’ve made up your mind! *You’re the stubborn one, Ivy.*”

I’m absolutely positive Druid is more stubborn.

“Like father, like daughter, eh?” Baluka remarked.

Druid and I froze. Then the stubborn people who stubbornly argued over which one was more stubborn stared at each other. *Were we alike? You know...I’m happy to hear that. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not happy that we’re both stubborn...*

“What’s wrong? Is your face getting a little red?” Druid asked.

“I’m sure you’re just imagining things...”

Great, I got giddy because Baluka said we were alike. How embarrassing.

“Ivy, how about a clothing budget of ten gidal per person?”

Ten gidal per person? Ten...gidal? What? Per person?

“Absolutely not! Two gidal per person is just fine. Our cloaks already cost twenty gidal all together. We need to be more careful with money!”

Druid and Baluka had both told me that you couldn’t be cheap when it came to cloaks. They would protect your life, so it was okay to invest a lot of money in them.

“Awww, but two gidal just isn’t enough. Ten gidal for the both of us.”

“That’s too much, Mr. Druid. Maybe not for you, but I’m still

growing.”

There was no telling whether or not I could wear the clothes we'd bought today when next winter came. Now that I was eating well, I was catching up in size, little by little. That meant ten gidal was frivolous.

“You know, you have gotten a little taller...” Druid thought for a moment, then he nodded. “Okay, then. Five gidal for the both of us. And not a dal less!”

I looked into Druid's eyes. Absolutely nothing would sway him. *I guess five gidal it is.*

“Okay, I'm fine with that. Then we can quickly choose my...”

“Good! Now, we'll have to pick the best clothes for you within our budget.”

Huh? What is this sensation I'm feeling... It's dread. I can't believe I thought he'd calm down a little once we set a price limit. Ack! Baluka, not you, too...

“Oh well...” I sighed. “Guess I'll let them win. Oh!” *The pants Baluka just brought out are really cute. Especially the embroidery at the pockets...super cute.*

“Guess this one's a yes,” Baluka said.

“Uh-huh,” Druid nodded.

Huh? Oh, so we're buying the pants, too. But I think these ones are cute, so I'm actually happy about that. Oh, now they're fighting over a blouse with the same kind of embroidery.

“I don't think this will ever end...”

I really didn't care much about whether the embroidery was around the collar or the pockets. I just couldn't understand the fascination. But there was no point in just sitting there waiting for them to finish. I decided

I might as well have a look around.

“Oh, this would look really good on Mr. Druid!” I touched a polo shirt with embroidery on the collar. The pockets were also embroidered. *Wow, how dashing! But the color...it's not bad, but I think a brighter one would suit Druid better.* Something with a similar print, but a brighter color... Could I find something like that?

“Found it! Yeah, a brighter color definitely works better for him. Hm?! Oh, the embroidery is a bit different on this one. Maybe this one’s more attractive?”

Which one would suit him better? Hmm...whichever one evokes an image of strength, probably? Huh? This one, then? I pictured Druid in my mind. No, darker embroidery would make the overall look too intense. How about this cool green polo shirt with the brown embroidery...? Oh, this light-blue polo shirt would look good on him, too! No, maybe the green? Urgh! I just know they’d both look great on him. Okay, let’s pick the embroidery first! Which of these is better? Which one screams “Druid”...? I think the one with the shield motif is manlier than the one with leaves. Oh, but also this feather design...

“This one? No, this one?”

Hmm...every embroidery design seems to work well for Druid. I glanced at him. He and Baluka were still having a lively time choosing my clothes. Silly boys. It was just clothes—they didn’t have to agonize so hard over it.

“This is never gonna end, is it...?”

I looked at the polo shirts in my hand that might suit Druid... *Yeah, I think the shield motif is cooler. Then again, those feathers...*



BONUS * Beauty!



“Will you be all right on your own?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I’m done, okay?”

Druid’s eyes were so filled with worry that I just had to laugh. He wouldn’t even be away for an entire day. It was more like three hours, at most.

“Be sure to pay really close attention to what they’re saying, okay?”

“I will. Well, I guess I’ll be off then.”

“Have a nice time.”

I waved goodbye to Druid as he walked out of our room at the inn and headed to the adventurer guild. I wanted to walk him to the inn’s front door, but he told me it was too cold for that. *Silly Druid, I’m not that frail.*

“He said it was bitterly cold... I wonder just how cold it really is?”

Last night at dinner, the head staff at Ayapo had asked all the inn guests to study up on how to survive a cold winter. Apparently, many other adventurers had seen corpse blooms, the other name for the snow blooms Druid and I found in the forest. Since past records indicated that many sightings of these blooms meant a harsh winter, the villagers were quite anxious.

“Puuu?” Sora asked, jumping onto my lap and looking up at me as I stared out the window.

“A lot of people froze to death in the past, Sora. Isn’t that scary?”

According to Salifa, Hatow had used those past experiences to better strategize how to survive in the winter, so the deaths were not in vain. But since they could no longer collect magic stones—a situation they had not accounted for—they needed to amend their strategy. All of the winters I’d lived through so far were relatively warm, so I honestly had no idea what

we should do.

“I’m so glad I have Druid with me now. I might not have made it through this winter if I’d been on my own.” And I hoped that the magic stones Flame regenerated would help save lives in Hatow—the more the better. “Well, we’d better take care of the things we can until Druid comes back.” I took Sora off my lap and stretched my back. “What should we do?”

“Pu! Puuu.”

“Te! Ryuuu.”

Mrrrow.

I looked toward their voices to see Ciel and Flame both looking on the tired side. Sora was yawning.

“It’s okay, you can sleep if you want. You’ve been playing awfully hard all morning.”

This morning’s game had been tag. In their version, they jumped all over the room and body-slammed each other. It was a rather intense workout. However, you might say Druid and I exhibited a different level of intensity by sitting in the middle of the room and quietly sipping our tea while all of this was going on. It’s scary how one can adapt so easily.

“I think I’ll cook supper. I told Salifa we didn’t need any tonight anyway.”

Druid will probably be drained from the meeting, so I’ll have something ready for him when he gets back...unless he comes back too early for supper.

“I think I’ll braise a big roast since we haven’t had that in a while. Slow-cooked meat is so yummy. I love how it gets all tender.”

And meat was Druid’s favorite thing to eat. *Oh, I know. I’ll make it*

sweet and spicy. I noticed Druid seemed especially happy the last time I seasoned the meat that way. Okay, let's cook a pot roast!

“Sora, Ciel, Flame, I’m just gonna go cook sup...annnd they’re asleep.”

I watched them sleep in a cuddle-pile on my bed. It must have been a deep sleep since none of them budged when I got closer to them. *They should be okay if I leave them for a while.*

“I’m just gonna go cook supper, okay?” I whispered to them as I grabbed my bag of cooking supplies and left our room. I carefully locked the door behind me and headed for the kitchen on the second floor.

“Nobody’s here today...”

Some people used the kitchen in the morning and at lunchtime, but apparently not for supper because I never saw anyone in there after noon. Then again, I kind of liked it that way. I had the kitchen all to myself.

“Okay, I need to fill a pot with water...”

I think I'll sear the outside of the roast before I add the braising liquid. Okay, frying pan, frying pan...

“Bigger roasts are always better, huh?”

I admired the chunk of meat I’d just cut on the board, then I checked the time. There were five hours max until dinnertime. *I might not have enough time to braise the meat. Should I cut it up? It tastes much better when it's one big chunk, though. Oh well, we can always have it tomorrow for supper if it doesn't cook in time. Then it'll be even more tender. Agh, but what about my original plans... Well, there's such a thing as playing it by ear, right? Let's just do that and hope for the best.*

I cut the veggies while I seared the meat. I could keep them big since they’d be braising for several hours. Then I’d put in the seared meat. As for medicinal herbs, I’d choose ones that took the gaminess out of the

meat and made it tender. Making it spicy would be the final task, so I didn't have to deal with that yet. *Okay...now I just need to braise it for several hours.*

“Darn...this dish is mostly hands-off, isn’t it?”

Also, I didn't even think about what I'd do if it wasn't ready on time for supper. *Hmm...oh, I know. I think I'll marinate some meat. If the pot roast is ready to eat tonight, I can always cook it tomorrow for supper. I'll also make a salad.*

“Aha, there you are.”

“Huh?” I turned in the direction of the voice. It was Salifa, waving and walking over to me. She was carrying a basket of bread and...a pot?

“Oh, dear, are you already cooking your supper for tonight?”

“Um, yes. Is there a problem with that, ma’am?” *I remember asking for bread, but what's with the pot?*

“Well, you see, this is Hatow’s famous soup...but I made too much.”

She made too much? But it shouldn't be a problem to serve the guests the same thing two days in a row.

“I figured serving the same supper four days straight was really overdoing it.”

Four days?

“Just how much did you make, ma’am?”

“Hee hee, well, I was going to change up the seasonings, but before I knew it, I’d made four pots of the same soup.”

“Wow...”

“It won’t do, right?”

Salifa’s special soup was delicious, so that was no problem. It

wouldn't go with my pot roast, though. *Okay. I'll serve that for supper tomorrow instead! Tonight, we'll have Salifa's special soup...and the marinated meat? No, that doesn't feel right. Oh, I know, I'll braise it in wine. And I'll make a refreshing sauce to go with it.*

"I'd be happy to take that soup off your hands. It'll be just the thing, because I'm cooking a pot roast and that needs a very long braise anyway."

"You mean it? I'm not imposing?"

"Not a bit, ma'am."

"Oh, good. Well, thanks. You really saved my hide."

Salifa gave me the pot of special soup. Then I took the bread basket and peeked inside. It looked so good, but I'd have to be patient and save it to eat when Druid came back.

"Oh, there was something I wanted to ask you, ma'am. Do you have a minute?"

"Of course. What's up?"

"The soup they sell at the outdoor stalls...is there any demand for it?"

She said that the sickeningly sweet soup sold at the stalls was made because of the sweet sauces that were available. If it wasn't selling well, there would be a drop in supply, but the fact that the stalls were still doing so much business implied that there was a demand for it.

"Despite the way it tastes, yes."

So people did want it. *I wonder if the villagers of Hatow just really love sweet things?*

"The sauce they put in that soup uses a fruit that's supposed to be really good for your complexion, so it's also called *Beauty Soup*."

Beauty?! I must have looked shocked because Salifa chuckled at me.

“You know how your skin gets dry in the winter? That’s why you’ll see more of those soup stalls in the wintertime.”

I guess that means there’s quite a high demand for it. “Well, if it’s Beauty Soup, I guess even with that flavor...”

“It wasn’t that sweet at first. But every soup vendor wanted to make their soup increase people’s beauty more than the others, so they added more and more fruit to the sauce. Then word spread quickly that the soup was really sweet but did wonders for your skin. That’s probably why even more stalls have started adding extra fruit.”

“Oh, then that’s how it all happened.” So that sweetness was actually good for your skin.

“In the springtime, lady adventurers flock here from all over to eat that soup.”

Wow, I had no idea that soup was that powerful. I always wondered why so many stalls sold it when it tasted so bad. But if it’s good for your skin, I can kind of see why now. I still can’t stomach it, though. Wait a minute, will I come back to Hatow someday in the future just to eat that soup? I can’t even picture that version of myself right now...

“But it really is too sweet, ya know? The chefs at the stalls have been trying to balance out that sweetness for a while now.”

Well, I hope they figure out how to do that by the time I need it.

“Oh, I’d better get back to work! Sorry for the sudden visit today.”

“Not a problem, ma’am. Thank you for supper.”

After Salifa left for the first floor to go back to work, I heated up the special soup. I wanted to warm it slowly.

“That reminds me, Druid did complain about his skin feeling dry.”

Maybe I should explain the sweet soup to him and suggest that he eat some...? I hope he won't put up a fight.

“Mr. Druid?” I studied him as he tried Salifa’s special soup. He looked a bit tired, but he was probably up for a little talk.

“What’s up?”

“You know that soup they sell at the outdoor stalls? Well, it’s apparently a cosmetic soup that’s good for dry skin. And since you said you’ve got dry skin, I was thinking...”

“No! Absolutely not!”

Wow, he shot me down a lot harder than I expected. I guess we'll just have to wait until the soup chefs find a way to balance out that sweetness.

Afterword

Hi, everyone, long time no see. Honobonoru500 here. Thanks for picking up a copy of *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*, Volume 5. You all helped make this possible. Nama-sama, thank you for the beautiful illustrations of a slightly grown-up Ivy. I just love the vibes from everyone on the front cover. Also, get this: *Weakest Tamer*, Volume 4 is getting a second edition! Thank you all, seriously. I received word on the second edition while I was writing this very afterword, so I'm still stunned from the news. I'm also quite flattered that they decided to do the reprint only a month after it went on sale.

For Volume 5, I wanted to focus on deepening Ivy's relationship with Druid. I struggled with that, though, since their relationship was already in a good place by the end of Volume 4. My goal was to show a glowing new dad, giddy about his first year with his daughter. I wanted him to try to show a little restraint, since he wasn't her real father, but make him unable to hide his joy...and somehow, he wound up being a dad who loves playing dress-up with his daughter.

Also, since Volumes 1-4 had gotten a bit heavier than I intended, I wanted to lighten up the story a bit this time...yet, for some reason, things got heavy again! Every time I sit down to write this story, things never seem to go in the direction I originally planned. One thing I was satisfied about, though, was that I finally found a way to work a summoning circle into the story. I really struggled with where to introduce that.

Another thing I'm proud of with Volume 5 is finally writing about how hard it is to be a guild master and a captain of the watch. Then again, that's what made the story take a heavy turn... Believe me, I really did intend to keep things lighter this time, but when I started fitting all the

pieces together, I got a bit carried away. And before I knew it, the guild master and captain of the watch were much more gloomy than I'd intended. I'm really glad I was able to resolve their little character arcs.

Thank you, once again, to everyone at TO Books for your help. To my editor K-sama, thank you as always. Every single one of you, thank you with all of my heart for making Volume 5's publication possible. And thank you in advance for your continuing support.

Lastly, to those of you who read this book, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Also, I have some exciting news: Volume 6 will go on sale soon! I hope you'll check it out, and take a look at the manga version, too. May we meet again in this "Isekai'ed into a world...where proper waste disposal rules!" light novel and manga series.

HONOBONORU500

MAY 2021

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the fifth volume of Honobonoru500's second story, *Weakest Tamer!* Ivy's travels with Druid bring laughter, silly little arguments...and a more feminine version of Ivy? In a village facing an abnormally harsh winter, Ivy and her little monsters are working hard behind the scenes. And there are all sorts of new people to meet, too! Everybody will survive the winter's cold with the warmth in their hearts.

NAMA

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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