

WRITTEN BY
Kumanano

ILLUSTRATED BY
O29

9
novel



KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

– Bear Bear Bear Kuma –

- VOLUME 9 -

-AUTHOR-

Kumanano

-ILLUSTRATOR-

029

[SEVEN SEAS]



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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR Vol. 9

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Illustrated by 029

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TRANSLATION: Jan Cash & Vincent Castaneda

ADAPTATION: M.B. Hare

COVER DESIGN: Kris Aubin

INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner

INTERIOR LAYOUT: Brennan Thome

COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Mercedez Clewis

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori

PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

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Name: Yuna
Age: 15
Gender: Female

► Yuna's Status_

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

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

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

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

► BLACK BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)
► WHITE BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)
Increases speed based on the user's level.
Prevents fatigue walking long distances based on the user's level.

► KUMAYURU (CUB FORM)
▼ KUMAKYU

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

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

Skills

► FANTASY WORLD LANGUAGE

The fantasy world's language will sound like Japanese.

Spoken words are conveyed to the other party in the fantasy world language.

► FANTASY WORLD LITERACY

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

► BEAR EXTRADIMENSIONAL STORAGE

The white bear's mouth opens into infinite space. It can hold (eat) anything.

However, it cannot hold (eat) living things.

Time will stop for objects that are inside of it. Anything that is put into the extradimensional storage can be pulled out at any time.

► BEAR IDENTIFICATION

By looking through the bear eyes on the Bear Clothes' hood, one can see the effects of a weapon or tool.

Doesn't work without wearing the hood.

► BEAR DETECTION

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

► BEAR MAP 2.0

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

► BEAR SUMMONING

Bears can be summoned from the bear gloves.

A black bear can be summoned from the black glove. A white bear can be summoned from the white glove.

► BEAR TRANSPORTER GATE

By setting up a gate, can move between gates.

When more than three gates are in place, can travel to a location by picturing it.

This gate can only be opened with the bear hand.

► BEAR PHONE

Can have long-distance conversations with others.

Phone persists until caster dispels it. Physically indestructible.

Can call people a bear phone is given to by picturing the person.

Incoming call is announced by the sound of a bear's cry.

Magic

► BEAR LIGHT

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

► BEAR PHYSICAL ENHANCEMENT

Routing mana through the bear gear allows for physical enhancement.

► BEAR FIRE MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use fire elemental magic. Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WATER MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use water elemental magic. Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WIND MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use wind elemental magic. Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR EARTH MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use earth elemental magic. Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR HEALING MAGIC

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

CRIMONIA**FINA**

A ten-year-old girl and the first person who Yuna meets when she comes to the other world. Yuna saves her mother. She harvests the monsters that Yuna defeats. She has a little sister three years younger named Shuri.

TIERMINA

Fina's mother. Yuna cured her illness. After that, she married Gentz. Yuna entrusts the accounting work for the "Bear's Dining Room" and "Bear's Lounge" to her.

SHERRY

An orphan girl. Apprentices at a tailor shop because of her dexterous fingers. Takes orders from Yuna to make stuffed animals that look like Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

ANZ

Daughter of an innkeeper in Mileela. Yuna brought her to Crimonia because of her cooking skills. Is in charge of the "Bear's Dining Room."

**NOIRE FOCHROSÉ**

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

ELLELAURA FOCHROSÉ

Noa and Shia's mother. Thirty-five years old. Usually doing her job working for the king and lives in the capital. Seems somewhat well connected and helps Yuna with various things.

CLIFF FOCHROSÉ

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

KARIN

Yuna saves her mother Morin's bakery from loan sharks in the capital. After that, she and her mother bake bread at the "Bear's Lounge."

SHEELIN**MISANA FAHRENGRAM**

Nicknamed Misa. Ten years old. Saved from monsters on the way to the king's birthday festival by Yuna. She invites Yuna to her birthday party.

GRAN FAHRENGRAM

Misa's grandfather. Feudal lord of the Eastern district of Sheelin. He feels indebted to Yuna for her saving him on the way to the king's birthday festival. Always one step behind Gajurdo's schemes.

BOTTS

Head chef for the Fahrengram family. Was in charge of Gran and Misa's birthday parties but fell into Gajurdo's trap and injured his arms.

GAJURDO SALUBAD

Feudal lord of the Western district of Sheelin. Tries to ensnare Gran in his schemes in order to become the single feudal lord of Sheelin.

RANDLE SALUBAD

Gajurdo's son. Has a crude personality and is openly hostile to Misa. He and his father lost face at Gran's birthday party after finding fault with Zelef's cooking.

CAPITAL**LUIMIN**

An elf girl who collapsed in front of the bear house in the capital. She traveled from the elves' village in order to see her sister.

SANYA

Guild master of the capital's Adventurer Guild. A female elf. Helps settle things when Yuna gets in trouble with adventurers and when Yuna slays monsters.

PRINCESS FLORA

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

ZELEF

Head chef of the royal palace. When Botts is injured and can't cook, Yuna brings him to Sheelin for the Fahrengram family.

CHAPTER 206

THE BEAR WALKS AROUND TOWN WITH TWO GENTLEMEN

MISA'S BIRTHDAY had turned into a whole thing. Still... even though I'd wound up in a dress and Noa had *really* wanted those stuffed animals of my bears, things had turned out all right in the end. After that mess, this whole debate kicked off about where to put the iron golem I'd gifted Gran.

Gran himself was pretty gung ho about having it set up near the front entrance, but a ton of people were against the idea. "Father, *please!* Anything but the front door. You'll terrify any newcomers!"

"Is that a problem?" Gran countered.

"You just *can't!*" said his son, Leonardo. He shot me a glance. "If you keep insisting on putting it out there, I'll have Yuna take it back."

Since there were other people who didn't want it there either, Gran gave up on putting it near the front door. After a little discussion, they put the iron golem in the main hallway on the *second* floor. Most guests wouldn't see it, but they could still go upstairs if Gran wanted to show it off. That got everyone on the same page.

For some reason, I ended up being the one who had to haul it up there. I mean, they told me they "didn't have the means to easily move something as heavy as that around," so what else could I do? I put it in my bear storage, headed upstairs, and set it up in the hallway.

Mmm, this thing sure looks spiffy!

The texture of the metal was nice. Mud golems were fragile and not particularly snazzy. Yeah... yeah! This guy would look good with some silver and gold golems accompanying it. Well, I mean, if those things even existed. Mithril-plated golems existed, so gold or silver ones seemed plausible enough.

Once I got back to my room from the party, I stripped the dress off right away and changed back into my bear clothes.

My bear onesie just made me feel at home, you know? It was the texture, and the reassuring safety blanket-like feeling. I'd resisted at first—it felt kinda embarrassing—but now, I *wanted* to wear the thing... and that was a terrifying thought.

There I was, pining for my bear onesie, which practically made it cursed armor. You hear about that in books and manga and stuff—cursed armor that's impossible to take off all the time—but my onesie made the wearer *want* to put it on, which made it an especially *nasty* curse.

When I turned to the side, I saw Fina pulling off her dress too. She looked relieved. I guess she had a different reason for wanting to get out of hers. I heard her whisper, "Thank goodness! I didn't get it dirty."

I guess she was right—we would've had a real situation if she'd sullied it.

Once we were undressed, I asked Noa what to do with the gowns. Even if I wanted to, I didn't know the first thing about washing dresses, and it wasn't like this world had dry cleaners.

But when I tried giving the dress back to her, Noa flat-out refused to take it. "You may keep the dress, Yuna."

I couldn't just take an expensive dress without any reason. "I really couldn't."

"No, it's a fair trade. This dress in exchange for those stuffed animal bears. You absolutely *must* give me some."

So we were bartering. If she paid me in advance, I'd definitely have to fulfill my end of the bargain. I didn't have any problem with that since I'd planned to give her stuffed animals from the get-go, but when was I going to ever wear a dress like this again?

"You may have that one too, Fina," Noa continued. "Do please take good care of it."

"I won't ever have a reason to wear it, so even if I do take it..." Fina tried her hardest to resist.

Noa, however, wasn't backing down. "So you went to Misa's birthday party, but you won't come to mine? Is *that* what you're saying?"

"Th-that's not..."

"Then you can wear it to *my* birthday party. If it ever stops fitting, *do* let me know. I'll make sure it gets tailored."

With all escape routes blocked, Fina ended up accepting the dress.

The day after the party ended, Cliff and Ellelaura came to the room early in the morning to talk about what we'd be doing. Since we were leaving for Crimonia in two days, they said we could do whatever we wanted until then. Ellelaura still had some work, but she was leaving soon afterward.

"If that means Noa is going home in two days," Ellelaura mused, "then maybe I'll go home that day with her."

C'mon, Ellelaura, *please* do your job...

Anyways, since we had some time to kill before we went home to Crimonia, I decided to explore the town.

"Well, I'm heading out!" I told the girls.

"Okay."

They saw me out as I left the room. For the first time in a while, I was doing my own thing without them. Fina, Noa, and Misa would have a tea party in Misa's flower garden. They invited me, but I said I was good—I wanted to go hunting for ingredients.

When I got to the front door, I ran into Zelef and Botts.

"Master Yuna, are you going out?" Zelef asked.

"I am. Are you two heading out too?"

"Yes! Botts has kindly offered to show me around town."

"Are you on your own today, bear girl?" Botts asked, looking past me to Fina and the others.

"The girls are having an intimate tea party together," I said, "so I was thinking of exploring town on my own."

"In that case, Master Yuna, will you accompany us?" Zelef asked.

"Wait, Zelef," Botts butted in. "You mean want to walk around with a girl dressed as a *bear*!?"

He didn't have to put it that way... although he wasn't *wrong* about the bear thing. Still, it'd been a while since I got a reaction like that.

"Miss, I've actually been wondering," said Botts, "why *do* you wear that getup? You were dressed so normally yesterday."

I puppeteered my bear puppets' mouths open and closed and glossed over the details.
"The clothes act as an item bag, among other things. It's convenient!"

"You really threw me for a loop when you pulled out that iron golem. You brought all those ingredients from the capital with that item bag of yours, didn't you?"

"Come now, Botts, didn't you want to thank Yuna? You could at least show her around the town."

Thank me? What'd I do to earn a "thank you" from Botts? It wasn't like I'd healed his arms or anything.

"All right, all right. Any place you wanted to see, bear girl?"

"I want to check out ingredients. Oh, and a stop by the Adventurer Guild would be nice, if there's time for it."

"Speaking of which, Yuna, are you *really* an adventurer? Zelef said so, but I still can't wrap my head around it."

Once again, the onesie was mystifying people. I couldn't blame 'em, though.

"Oh, just forget about it," Botts said. "We were already on our way to look at ingredients,

so I can take you there too."

I didn't have a reason to turn them down, so I decided to tag along. If anything came up, we could just split up. And so our unusual ragtag team of three left the estate together.

"Thanks for bringing Zelef here," said Botts, walking beside me. "You're the reason why those other nobles didn't get a chance to walk all over us." Oh, so that's what he wanted to thank me for. Everyone said that that noble family was a total nightmare.

"I still can't figure out where you learned to cook like that. You called those pudding, cake, and whipped cream, didn't you? And Zelef here says you've got other tasty recipes up your sleeve!"

"Botts, you promised not to pry..." Zelef interjected.

"You got me there. But I am a chef—I can't help but be a *little* curious."

"I know the feeling," Zelef answered.

"And she taught you how to make those things, Zelef?"

"That's right. She *did* teach me!" Zelef stated. (Was it me, or did he sound like he was boasting for some reason?)

Botts could've asked why I'd given Zelef the recipe if he wanted to. Lady Flora was the answer... I wanted her to enjoy the treats whenever she wanted, so I'd taught Zelef the recipes. Obviously, I didn't want her to overindulge, so I'd told him to not go overboard with her treats. But Botts didn't know about all of that, and it seemed to be getting on his nerves. We kept talking about the pudding and cake I'd made while we walked.

"You're setting up shop in the capital, then?" Botts asked.

"I'm going to help set it up before it opens," I said, "I'm gonna teach all the workers the recipes. Want to join in, Botts?"

"No, I've still got my debt to Lord Gran. I need to pay him back for picking me up while I was down."

Wow, Botts really had his priorities right, even if he didn't look like it.

“I could still teach you, Botts,” I offered.

“Will you?!”

“Yeah,” I told him. “But you’ve gotta promise me some things.”

“You want me to make promises?”

“Don’t teach anyone else how to make them. And please don’t set up your own business to sell any of it.”

“I haven’t got the funds to set up shop. I’m purely interested in the craft, as a chef. We could put it in writing, if you want.”

“I don’t need a contract or anything. Oh, and there’s one more condition. This one’s the *most* important one.”

“More important than the other two?”

Don’t spread it to others. Don’t open up a business.

That was all important, but there was one thing that towered above both.

“Ah, of course. I suppose that is very important since you’re working for Lord Gran,” Zelef said. Apparently, he’d caught on.

“You figured out what she means?” Botts asked Zelef.

“She made me promise as well.”

“Is there really anything serious enough to require such a promise like that?” Botts murmured.

“There is,” I said. “You can’t make the recipes every day, even if Misa begs you. Cake is *especially* sugary, so you should only make it once a week, maybe twice at most.”

I wasn’t backing down on that point. I’d feel bad if Misa, adorable as she was, started putting on weight. More importantly, it’d be unhealthy if she ate too many sweets.

“But that’s so trivial...”

"Nope, it's of utmost importance for a growing girl. If Misa gains too much weight and can't find a husband, Botts, then that's on you."

"Uh, wow... when you put it that way, I guess it *is* pretty important," said Botts.

"Make sure to keep an eye on Misa's meals. You can't make desserts every day, even if she begs you."

Zelef nodded. "Yuna told me to do the same for Lady Flora."

"You've got it! It's a promise," said Botts.

Since Zelef was staying for a while, we decided he'd teach Botts the recipe.

Once we got to the market, we examined a ton of stuff.

"We're being watched," said Botts.

"Yes, they are looking at us..." added Zelef.

They seemed bothered by the people looking at us. Maybe it was because we seemed like such an odd bunch. When this here girl in a bear suit took a trip with young girls like Fina and the others, it was a very different look from walking around with these two guys.

"The more people around, the more looks we get," Botts commented.

The shopkeepers and shoppers kept watching us. The word "bear" was getting tossed around all the time now. Fine by me, I guess, so long as they didn't touch me or start something. Botts seemed pretty resigned as he showed me around the shops, though.

Since we weren't that far from Crimonia, the stuff sold in the shops wasn't all that different.

I guess I wouldn't find anything out of the ordinary unless I headed to a place with a different climate. Still, there were a few things I didn't recognize so I decided to interrogate the ingredient experts.

"That fruit there has a bit of a sweet-and-sour flavor," said Zelef. "It might be a tasty substitute for strawberries if you're making a cake."

"Yeah, seems like it'd suit an adult's palate," Botts added.

"And that one there is just plain sweet, so kids would be thrilled if you used it in a cake."

Mmm, this was illuminating! "Shopkeep!" I called out. "I'll take this whole box, and also, that fruit right over there!"

The shopkeeper was pretty surprised when I brought out the money to pay him. I guess I was buying a lot more than most people do?

Or was his surprise about the outfit? Nah, no way...

"Are you really buying all of that, Master Yuna?"

"Crimonia might sell them too, but I don't want to bother hunting them down," I replied.

"But isn't this quite a lot?"

"They're souvenirs for the kids at the orphanage."

"What orphanage?"

Oh, I guess I'd never filled him in on that.

"I'm kind of helping manage an orphanage, so these are going to be souvenirs for the kids."

Botts was shocked. "What? You manage an *orphanage*?"

"Well, I didn't *mean* to..."

"Are you part of the nobility or something?"

"No, I'm just your regular, everyday girl."

“A regular, everyday girl, you say.” Botts looked at me dubiously.

Yeah, I’d say I was your average girl for sure.

Outside of the bear stuff, I mean.

We did a pass around the market and, before long, finished up our shopping.

“Shall we turn back for now?” Botts proposed.

“What will you do, Master Yuna?”

“I’ll head back after roaming around the town a bit more. Thank you so much for everything, guys. I learned a ton.”

“Wonderful!” said Zelef. “Next time, I’ll show you a hole-in-the-wall location in the capital. There’s a place that sells all kinds of rare foods from various locales.”

Oooo... now *that* caught my interest. We made plans for that, and then I headed out...

CHAPTER 207

THE BEAR, ENRAGED

NOW I NEEDED to figure out *where* exactly I was heading. I wandered around the town after I left Zelef and Botts. Just when it felt like I was really getting my browse on, I heard an odd “*Cwoom, cwoom, cwoom...!*” Was that coming from my white bear puppet?

Oh, *duh*. It’s the bear phone! I took it out of my bear storage.

“Fina, is that you?”

“*Y-Yuna... it's Lady Misa...*” Fina sounded positively fraught.

“Fina! Fina, what is it?! What happened?!” I shouted into the phone.

“*Yuna, she's...*”

“She’s what?!” I shouted, but I just got dead silence in return.

I rushed toward Gran’s place. Kept dialing Fina, kept running. Fina... where *was* she?!

When I got to the house, there was a servant waiting out front.

“Are Misa and the others all right?!” I snapped. The servant seemed shocked by how threateningly I’d shouted it.

“What’s this about Lady Misana?” he replied. So even the servants didn’t know what had happened. Which meant... maybe nothing had happened?

But where were Fina and the others?

Fina had told me she’d have a tea party with Misa and Noa in the garden. I thought about asking the servant in front of me where that was, but it’d be faster to just go myself. Without another word, I leapt onto the roof.

I spotted the flower garden to my left. “Fina!”

I leapt down from the roof and landed in front of a beautiful, blooming flowerbed... and Fina and Noa were collapsed beside it. The stuffed animals I’d gifted to Misa were abandoned on the ground near them, but I didn’t see any sign of Misa.

Fina was clutching her bear phone.

“Fina! Noa!”

I rushed over and held Fina. There was a bruise on her face, like someone had hit her.

Who... *who had done this?*!

“Ugh...” Fina groaned.

I gently touched her face and used my healing magic. That got the swelling to go down. I checked on Noa next, but she was just passed out—no other injuries.

Relieved as I was, I still couldn’t find Misa. The only things left behind were her stuffed animals, strewn all over the ground. Something *must* have happened here.

“Misa!” I called, but no one answered.

If they’d been attacked, had she run away? Had they caught her?

If Misa had escaped, there would’ve been a huge commotion, but the servant had been totally calm. No one was freaking out yet. If they had been, it wasn’t like they’d just leave Fina and Noa on the ground like this...

Which meant that Misa must have been kidnapped just *moments* ago.

“Yuna, what happened? You startled one of the servants... *Noa!*” Cliff’s voice went up a decibel the moment he saw Noa on the ground. “Yuna, what happened?!”

“I don’t know. I knew that Fina was in danger, so I came rushing over...”

Cliff held Noa. I went back to Fina, but she was still out like a light. What could have happened? Was Misa safe?

While I talked to Cliff, some servants came along with Meishun. “Mademoiselle Yuna! What happened?!” Meishun exclaimed.

“Looks like someone attacked them. Meishun, please let Gran know. And could you make sure Misa isn’t inside the house, just in case?” I doubted she would be there, but we had to know for sure.

Meishun immediately delegated tasks to the other servants and gave them instructions for the search.

Right as they headed out, Gran arrived on the scene. “What is all of this?”

“Misa isn’t here, and I found Fina and Noa unconscious.”

“*What did you say?*”

I didn’t know anything beyond that. Gran looked at Noa and Fina, who were each in our arms. Misa was the only one missing. Yeah... it was obvious what had happened. But just as Gran was about to do something, Fina opened her eyes slightly.

“Fina!!!” I cried.

“Y... Yuna?”

“What happened?”

Fina looked around, then grabbed my bear clothes and used everything she had in her to wring out a name. “It’s Lady Misa—Lady Misa was...”

“Relax. You can take your time,” I said.

“We were talking and looking at the flowers. But... there was a man in a black mantle and a white mask. He showed up and... and he grabbed Lady Misa and tried to take her. L-Lady Noa and I wanted to protect Lady Misa. We grabbed the man’s clothes, but we... we couldn’t do anything. And then...”

Fina rubbed her face. That must’ve been where he hit her. “Yuna, please save Lady Misa!” She clung onto me, looking as if she’d burst into tears at any moment.

“It’s all right. I’ll save Misa. Meishun, please take care of Fina.” I gently patted Fina’s

head and slowly stood up.

I was about to explode with rage. Just seeing Fina's face after someone had punched her had already gotten me to my boiling point, and knowing that someone had kidnapped Misa? No way could I just stay calm.

Cliff turned to me. "Yuna, what do you intend to do?"

I picked up the stuffed animals from the ground as I spoke. "I'm going to rescue Misa, obviously. Because, you know, Misa was *kidnapped*? Why are you even asking me that?"

Stupid question for such a smart guy. But...

No, this wasn't good. If I lost my cool, I wouldn't be able to keep my emotions in check. I handed the bear stuffed animals to Fina.

"You're going to save her?!" Gran firmly grabbed hold of my shoulders. "Do you know where Misa is?!"

I calmly removed his hands, then stretched out my arms and called out to summon my bears. "Kumayuru! Kumakyu!"

They were full size, so people were clamoring around me, but I ignored them. "Can you guys find Misa?"

My bears sniffed around. "*Cwoom!*"

Good answer. I hopped up on Kumayuru.

"Miss, wait!" Gran called out to me.

I didn't have time for this! "What?!"

"I'm counting on you to find Misa," he said.

I nodded, then directed Kumayuru to jump over the wall and dash off. My bears flew through the middle of the road, scattering frightened townspeople.

They'd be fine. I didn't care.

All I knew was that whoever did this wasn't coming out in one piece.



CHAPTER 208

RANDLE KIDNAPS MISA

WE HAD ARRIVED HOME from the party. That chef's abrupt appearance had ruined whole everything.

It was truly getting on my nerves.

I couldn't believe it. My father just backed down! That wasn't like him. Normally, he'd buckle down and corner whomever he was up against. Why would he flee with his tail between his legs over some chef? He could have simply done what he always had: watch them disobey before *making* them bend to his will. Wasn't that our way? Bribery, intimidation, violence—there were always so many options.

We already had all those children in the basement—the ones he'd already kidnapped, that is. Father had kidnapped them to prevent their parents from going to the birthday party of that old sourpuss, Misana's grandfather. They hadn't listened to my father's threats, so he took their children to keep them from attending the party.

Well, you can't argue with results. I called for Brad and instructed him to kidnap Misana.

"Are those your father's orders?"

"This is *my* order. You'd do well to listen," I told him.

"Sure, as long as you're paying."

"Yes, yes," I said. "I'll pay you. Just keep it inconspicuous. I don't want to deal with the fallout if they realize *I* was behind the kidnapping."

Immediately afterward, Brad made the arrangements to snatch Misana. According to his report, she'd been helping some adventurers with mole extermination outside of town, but the adventurers accompanying her made it far too risky to make our move. But... *mole extermination*? How perfectly *blithe* of her. Well, we'd give her something to worry about soon enough...

I had instructed Brad to kidnap her whenever the chance presented itself, but he failed to do so, even after several days. Was he really such an incompetent person, or just incredibly unlucky?

As for my father, he had yet to do anything even after suffering such disgrace. I saw him speaking with a merchant on occasion, and the parents of the children he had kidnapped would drop by, but it seemed that he wanted to keep them until the chef returned home.

Finally, at last, I got the report that Brad had kidnapped Misana. When I went to receive him, I found that he'd come with Misana, blindfolded and gagged. This was it... this would spell the end of the Fahrergram family!

I had Misana taken to a room next door so she wouldn't be able to hear my voice.

"No one noticed that you were the one who grabbed her, correct?" I asked him.

"I wore a mask and got her blindfolded and gagged right away, so that shouldn't be an issue."

"Yes... Yes, that should suffice."

I pondered my next move until my father arrived, looking rather upset.

"Randle!" he blustered. "You sniveling *whelp*! Did you truly kidnap Misana?!"

"Of course I did! I simply followed your example, Father. We can use her to threaten the old man now. We can make him step down from his fiefdom!"

"You *buffoon*! It's not that simple. Nobles aren't the same as merchants. A noble would abandon a little girl to keep their status. If it were *me*, I would..."

I didn't catch the last part but got the gist.

I would abandon you—that was what he meant. Well, I wouldn't blink an eye abandoning him either. But I doubted pushovers like the Fahrergrams would abandon one of their own, as we would. If they abandoned anything, it might well be their feudal claim in exchange for their little girl.

My father scowled at me and opened his mouth to say something else...

And then, suddenly, there was a dreadful noise at the front door.

CHAPTER 209

THE BEAR RESCUES MISA

KUMAYURU AND KUMAKYU brought me to a mansion about the same size as Gran's. I blasted the front of the yard gate open with wind magic. Then, I climbed off of Kumayuru and slowly walked into the grounds, my bears following close behind.

"Halt! Who goes there!" A gatekeeper rushed over to me, drawing his sword.

"Where is Misa?" The calm, quiet tone of my voice took even *me* by surprise.

"What are you talking about?" So, he didn't know.

But he was in the way. I silenced him with a bear punch. The man crumpled and fell. I stepped over him to get to the front door. Then I gave the door a nice, friendly knock—by blowing it wide open with another bear punch. The door made a satisfying crash as it went flying. Getting rid of that door really opened the place up... even my bears could slip through the opening with room to spare. Plus, this household was in for some dismantling. It wasn't like they needed a door anymore.

"Kumayuru, Kumakyu," I said, prompting my bears to start walking.

They were guiding me to Misa. The moment I started walking, a guy who looked like the owner of the estate appeared. The guy had a face like a toad. That boy was with him too... the one who'd picked a fight with Misa.

Of course it was them.

Did they just jaunt off back home with Misa after nabbing her? Were they *idiots*?

"What is the meaning of this? Who are you? And are those *bears*!?"

I wasn't in the mood to answer questions. "Where is Misa?" My voice was a low growl.

"You're that weird-looking bear from before..."

"So. You remember me. Now, I'll ask again... where is Misa?"

"Who are you talking about?" the toad answered in the boy's place.

Playing dumb? Fine.

I fired a small airshot at the toad man. The toad clutched his stomach and fell to his knee. C'mon... I hadn't packed any punch into that one. Had it really hurt that much?
You should save all that energy. The real living hell's coming after this!

"I'll find her whether you tell me or not where she is. The real question you've got to ask is what am I going to do to you *afterward*...?" If Misa was hurt, I wouldn't be letting them off easy.

"Wh-what are you saying?" The toad man winced in pain as he tried to turn and look at me.

I ignored him and started walking. Kumayuru and Kumakyu were tagging along when a shadow jumped down from above the stairs and blasted a fireball at my bears. My bears dodged it easily.

"Your bears dodged that?" A mantle-clad man in black appeared. "What is that ridiculous costume? And those bears? Just who are you, and how did you realize I was spying on you?" Just a moment after meeting the guy, he was already blustering some weird nonsense.

And he kept on *going*..."I can't believe you could have spotted me when I was watching you from so far away!" What the heck was this guy talking about?

"I hadn't been able to find an opportunity to do it because of them, you see. Then, finally, when only the kids were together, I got her. But you... how did you get here so quickly?! You were out! You shouldn't have found out yet!" cried the man in black.

"Brad! Keep your mouth shut!"

"There's no point in hiding it. The girl in the bear getup already figured it out."

So... the guy in the black mantle was Misa's kidnapper. That *also* made him the guy who hit Fina and Noa. In the end, it hadn't been too much of a hassle to track him down. And wouldn't you know it, he didn't even seem to feel all that guilty.

Which meant it was time to clobber the guy. He'd just popped up in front of me... what luck! I was smiling before I realized it.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh? I'm just glad it was so easy to find the guy who hit Fina."

"Brad!" the toad's son roared. "This wouldn't have happened if you'd covered your tracks! Now *clean up your mess*... and dispose of that strange girl and her even stranger bears!"

"Well... one does what they must," said the man in black. "Normally, I would charge extra for this, but a professional owns his mistakes. This one's on the house!"

The man ran straight at me, throwing fireballs without hesitation. I fended them off with my white bear puppet and returned the favor with a fireball of my own. Brad leapt back to dodge out of the way.

"You blocked my magic and counterattacked with your own," said Brad. "You're an interesting young woman. I thought you were just a kid, but I guess I can't underestimate you."

The man licked his lips like he was a predator, and I was his prey.

(*Nasty, dude! I almost gagged.*)

"Brad, why are you using magic?! Are you trying to destroy my house?!"

"The bear girl is using magic too!"

"Never mind that! Just do something about her! Quickly!" the toad man yelled. "You lot, you better not let her get away either!"

Looking behind me, there were a bunch of guards blocking the front door. Well... I say they were guarding the door, but Kumayuru and Kumakyu were obviously making them a bit antsy. They'd probably clear out if my bears went anywhere near them.

"I would have preferred more space for a fight," said the man in black, "but this will have to do."

He brandished a knife and launched his attack. I could clearly see the man's movements, from where he was going to the trajectory of the knife—I saw through it all. I dodged the man's knife as he approached and fired an uppercut bear punch at the man's face; but then he dodged. The man smirked as we passed each other, which just fanned my rage. He was getting pretty cocky for dodging only one blow.

The man brandished the knife, but he was slow. I grabbed hold of his knife with my white bear puppet. In that instant, he looked surprised for the first time. He pushed forward on the knife, but I didn't let him have any give. I wound up my black bear puppet, sent my right hand flying at him, and—

He dodged *again*!?

The man dropped the knife, jumped back, and hurled another fireball in my direction. I canceled it out with water magic, engulfing the fire. The spell crashed toward him and...

Another dodge.

"Just who are you?! You caught my knife," said the man. "You even overpowered me!"

"I'm just warming up!"

"Hm. But it's cramped in here. We can't use powerful magic without risking the house collapsing. Still... how irritating that your magic overpowered mine."

"Big talk, but I bet you've just been picking fights with weaklings this whole time. Or are you're holding back because of how I look?"

"Not at all!" said the man in black. "Since I first met you, I knew you weren't just some girl in a strange costume."

Did he mean back *then*?

"I knew after seeing you defend that young girl," he continued. "That's why I didn't attack until I knew you weren't around."

Oh, now I was *furious*. "Before I take you down, is it okay if I ask you one more thing? Why did you attack the two girls who were with Misa? You're skilled. You wouldn't have needed to fend them off."

"Ah, yes, the two girls who were with her. What *brave* little girls! When I acquired my target and went to make my escape, the poor things grabbed at my clothes. I had to get a bit rough with them then. They just wouldn't let go of me, you see. They were clinging as if their little lives depended on it."

"That's enough. I don't need to hear anything else." I was a fool for asking. Asking just pissed me off more.

But then I pictured Fina and Noa trying to save their friend; I pictured them being so brave. I didn't want them to walk into danger—not ever again. I just needed to hurry up and finish off everyone here so I could take Misa back.

That was all.

I wound up my black bear puppet hand.

It'd be easy enough defeating them with magic, but that wouldn't be satisfying. I'd clobber his face for Fina and Noa's sake—I'd return the favor a hundredfold.

I threw the knife I'd snatched at him and leapt off the ground at the same time.

The man promptly went to avoid the knife, but I was right where he moved in order to dodge it. He tried to react, but I was faster. I clobbered the man's face with a firm black bear puppet. I got some good follow-through.

The man slammed violently into the ground. He bounced twice—no, three times for sure—and crumpled over. I'd crushed his face. He was bleeding from his nose and mouth. I was pretty sure I'd broken his nose, and probably his teeth too. He twitched, but it didn't look like he was getting up anytime soon.

"*Brad!!!*" the son of the toad cried out.

The toad looked between me and the man in disbelief. I glared back when the toad shouted, "What are you all doing? Do something about those *weird bears!*"

The guards drew their swords at once and started to cast spells, but I used wind magic and blew all of them away.

"What... what *are* you?"

"I'm Misa's friend. I don't usually butt into disputes between nobles, but if someone lays a hand on a little kid like Misa...? Well, that changes things."

"I didn't know anything about that. The boy did it on his own," the toad man said. He looked over to where his son had been, but the kid was gone.

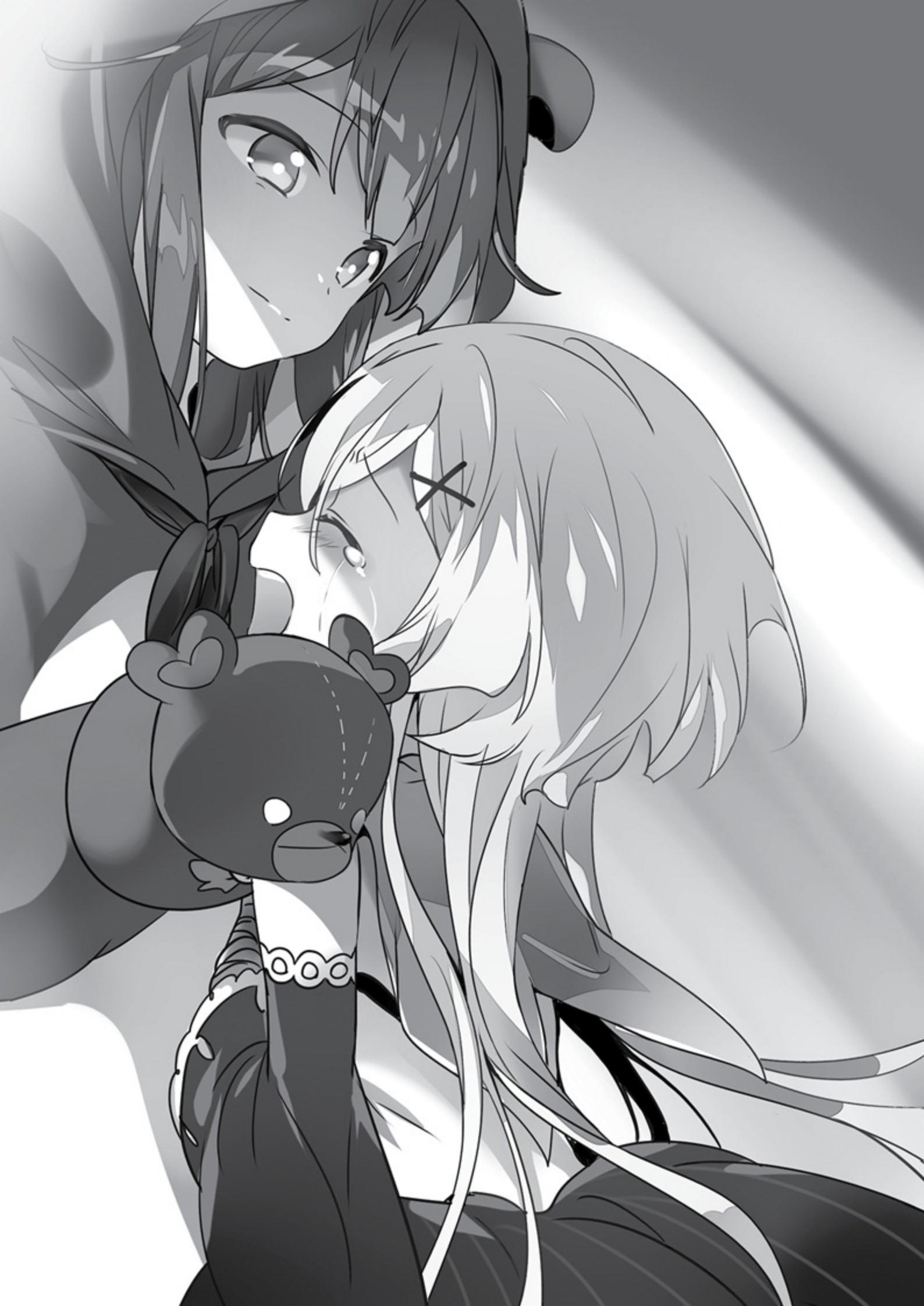
I guess he'd made a break for it the moment the guards had attacked. I used my bear detection skill and searched for any runaways... but then he came back on his own.

And he had Misa. "Hey, bear! Another move, and she'll get—"

Before the idiot kid could get out another syllable, I fired an airshot right into his dumb mug. He let go of Misa, and I closed the distance between us in an instant, recovered Misa, and threw a bear punch into the kid's face. Bleeding from his mouth and nostrils, he collapsed.

I looked at Misa. Her hands had been bound, and she'd been blindfolded and gagged with cloth. I lifted up the cloth. She'd been crying.

"It's all okay now." I gave her a gentle smile.



“Y-Yuna...” As she started to cry, I gave her a tender hug and cut the cord around her hands with a knife. Then I glared coldly at the father of the foolish idiot boy.

“I had no idea this was happening!” the father moaned. “The boy acted on his own, I promise you!”

“So, this has nothing to do with you?” I asked.

“Th-that’s right...! Besides, do you think you could get away with doing this to a noble like me?”

Hmph. The apple didn’t fall far from the idiot apple tree. He didn’t offer even a single apology. Honestly, I wished he’d just shut up already. My patience had reached its limit, so I went to silence him with a punch—

“Yuna, wait a minute!” Somewhere behind me, Elleaura cried out to me...

CHAPTER 210

THE BEAR EXPLAINS THINGS TO ELLELAURA

“YUNA, wait a minute!”

It wasn’t like I could instantly stop my arm when she shouted at me. Nope, too late—my bear punch made contact.

“Urgh!” My bear puppet sunk into the toad man’s stomach.

“I was too slow...” said Ellelaura.

Nah, she’d gotten here right in the nick of time. I’d halved the power in my bear punch specifically because she’d shouted at me. You could tell because the toad guy hadn’t been blown away, and his guts were still comfortably resting in his body. He was just unconscious and foaming at the mouth—that’s all.

“*Ellelaura?* Why are you here?” I asked her as she entered through the doorway I’d blown open.

“I spotted you riding your bears like a lunatic just as I was returning from the Merchant Guild, so I simply had to rush over. I couldn’t help but follow you after seeing that look on your face.”

A lunatic? Had the look on my face really been that scary? I thought back to my departure. Okay, yeah—probably. Fina and the others had been attacked; it’d be weird if I hadn’t been angry.

“But please, don’t make your elders run like that,” Ellelaura added.

She didn’t seem all that out of breath. And who was she calling an *elder*? She barely looked like she was in her mid-twenties. While we were talking, three out-of-breath people appeared behind her. I recognized one of them—it looked like Ranzel. He’d helped me out at the king’s birthday festival with the whole bandit thing, and with that

commotion when I'd tried buying cheese. The other two were new to me. They were with Ranzel, so maybe they were knights too?

Even though the three knights were out of breath, Ellelaura was calm and composed. What was she, even?

"So, Yuna... can you explain all of this?" Ellelaura asked as she looked around, taking in the, uh... current state of affairs.

The door had been blown off, part of the wall had collapsed, and two people were a bloody mess. Also, there was one unconscious toad, still foaming at the mouth. The servants were trembling. Looking at it again, it was kind of a terrible scene to behold. By all accounts, it looked like a bear had terrorized the place—not that I regretted it.

Nah, I hadn't rampaged *enough*.

I explained that I'd come here to rescue Misa after she'd been kidnapped.

"Kidnapped?!" Ellelaura was shocked at that. She looked to Misa.

"We were all attacked when we were looking at the flowers," she chimed in, "but Yuna came right away to rescue me!"

I summarized what had happened at Gran's house. Of course, I also filled her in on Fina and Noa.

"Are they okay?!"

"They only lost consciousness. They'll be all right."

Ellelaura looked relieved at that, though she then scowled at the collapsed toad of a man. Yeah, she *would* be angry if she heard that her beloved daughter had been attacked. "And that was why you were so upset? That's why you ransacked this place?"

Okay, harsh but true... but ultimately, it was all the kidnappers' fault.

Ellelaura thought for a bit, then turned to speak to the servants and guards. "I am Ellelaura Fochrosé. In the name of His Majesty, the King, I shall take Gajurdo Salbard into custody. I will also be interviewing all of you, and I suggest you answer honestly. If you lie, the consequences will be as severe as the crime itself."

The guards and servants exchanged looks among themselves.

"If we're honest, would our crimes be reduced...?"

"If your crimes aren't truly *terrible*, you have my word that your sentences will be lessened."

Half of the guards looked at their feet, and the other half looked relieved. The servants basically reacted the same way.

"If you intend to cooperate, please take out your guild and citizen cards," Elleaura commanded them all.

If they didn't have a card, they couldn't leave the town. It was also a way to temporarily strip them of their status. If they'd only lost their card, it could be reissued, but that wasn't the case for criminals. If they tried to run away, they'd never be able to get back into town again.

The soldiers and servants obediently submitted their ID cards, which Ranzel and the other two guys collected. Nothing good would come from disobeying the orders.

"Ranzel, Volz, start by arresting the three main offenders. After that, interview everyone in the estate, but don't rough anyone up."

"Yes, ma'am!" They rushed over to the man in the black mantle with the smashed-in face, and to the idiot son and his toad father.

"Mishel," said Elleaura, "go to the Fahrengram's house and call on Cliff and Gran. Don't forget to bring some guards, of course."

"Yes, ma'am!" Mishel left the mansion.

"Now, then... what shall I do with the rest of this?" Elleaura looked around. Ranzel was tying up the toad, his idiot offspring, and the man in the black mantle. Everyone else had obediently gathered together in one spot. "Ranzel, do you think you can get those three back into consciousness?"

"I doubt it. They're out cold. I'd say two of them are in critical condition."

I *had* given them a good old punch... and nearly become a murderer, now that I thought

about it. Killing them would've left a bad taste in my mouth. I'd have felt better just punching them out.

"There's a lot of things I need to ask those three, so we would be in dire straits if they died. Please administer first aid," Ellelaura instructed Ranzel, then turned toward Misa, who was clinging to me. "Misana, I want to ask you something. Is that okay?"

"Okay..."

"Were there other kids besides you? It's enough if you even just heard their voices."

Misa shook her head. "I was blindfolded. I didn't hear anyone else either."

"Is that right? I suppose I will need to question Gajurdo directly, just as I thought."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"It seems that merchants' children have also been kidnapped by Gajurdo. I went to the guild today and talked with the merchants about exactly that. Just as I was pondering what to do, I left the guild and spotted you."

"So that means there are probably other kids here?"

"There's certainly the possibility."

That'd been close... I'd been this close to bringing down the house in my rage. If Ellelaura hadn't arrived, I would've done it without a second thought... bringing down the whole place on the kids. It would've been a nightmare... one day I'd just find out that they'd unearthed a bunch of kids' corpses.

"That's why I wanted to ask Gajurdo about the kidnapped children," said Ellelaura. "So, I suppose we have to wake him up."

The toad man was still unconscious and foaming at the mouth. He really was in no state to be questioned. But, since he was a toad, maybe he would wake up if I threw some water on him? Still, even if he didn't wake up, I had my detection skill—Kumayuru and Kumakyu were here. If the kidnapped kids were on the estate, we'd find them.

Ellelaura approached the unconscious toad and extended her arm. Water surged out of her hand straight onto the toad man's face. I knew it—she *was* a mage. Her daughter

Shia was, so that wasn't all that surprising.

"Wh-what is going on....?" The toad man opened his eyes. Sure enough, the water *had* revived the toad. "Why am I tied up!?" He struggled against his restraints.

"Long time no see, Gajurdo," Ellelaura greeted him.

"*Ellelaura*?! Why are you here!?"

"I came to inspect Sheelin at the direction of His Majesty. I've heard some dark rumors coming out this town, as of late. I never thought I'd hear that the granddaughter of a feudal lord had been abducted."

"I don't know anything about that," Gajurdo insisted. "My son did that on his own. I took no part in it. If you can catch him, you can have him. I'll even disown him!" The toad man looked at the sleeping boy next to him.

"A child is the parent's responsibility," Ellelaura declared. "The granddaughter of a feudal lord was kidnapped, and my very own daughter was attacked. You think you can pass the buck that easily?" Rage welled up behind her words.

"Regardless, that has nothing to do with me! Release me from these bindings at once! I am a *noble*!"

What a chatterbox. Maybe I could give him another smack to silence him. But Ellelaura wanted to hit him more than me, and she was bearing through it. C'mon, bear with it... bear with it...

"Could you please stop claiming to be a noble? It's rather embarrassing. If Yuna got it into her head that we were even in the same class of *being*, I could hardly keep on living. Even if your son was the one who kidnapped Misana, *you* are the one who abducted the merchants' children, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about?" Gajurdo said. "I know nothing about that."

"Oh, is that right? If you insist on your ignorance, then you'll let us investigate your estate."

"Outrageous!!! You think you can get away with that?! How can you justify that!?"

"Easily enough. You've already kidnapped the granddaughter of the Fahrerogram family. Do you really think you can refuse to submit to an investigation in this state?"

He was clenching his teeth in frustration, but then a smirk came over his face right away. "Suppose that you do have the authority to do this, but I was just taking care of them. I even have written contracts, so I haven't kidnapped *anyone*."

Now that was an unbearably outrageous thing to say.

"I'm sure you forced their parents to sign those contracts by threatening their children," countered Ellelaura.

"You have no proof of that. All you have are kids I'm *legally* looking after." The toad man smiled, despite being tied up. I didn't know what kind of written agreements they were, but he sure looked confident. When I saw Ellelaura's glum face, I realized there was some weight to what he was saying. Even in my original world, I'd heard of corrupt salesmen tricking people into signing things, then forcing people to pay. A contract could go a long, long way.

"I see," said Ellelaura. "Well, that's fine. We'll still search every corner of this estate. Of course... that includes your room. I'm looking forward to seeing what crops up, other than the children." Ellelaura looked downright wicked.

"Preposterous! You can't just conduct a search!" Gajurdo exclaimed.

"We don't need permission from *you*. I already have permission from His Majesty."

"His Majesty..."

Ellelaura took a single sheet of paper from her item bag and showed it to the toad man. "See here? If you commit a crime, I am entrusted with investigative powers. To be honest, I never thought I would actually use them."

The toad man's expression went cold at the sight of Ellelaura's paper. "But my son was the one who..."

"It's all the same. Your son kidnapped Misana Fahrerogram. You admitted it yourself. Because of that, we can search every nook and cranny of this estate. If it is made known to His Majesty that *you* aren't doing anything unsavory, then there won't be a problem." Ellelaura was *super* angry.

“Inconceivable! Someone save me!!! I’ll pay you! *Kill this woman!!!*”

All of the servants ignored the toad man and looked away. No one was going to listen to the toad’s orders in a situation like this.

CHAPTER 211

THE BEAR RESCUES THE CHILDREN

EVEN THOUGH we asked the toad man where the children were, he wouldn't tell us. Ellelaura was still angry, but we had plenty of ways to conduct a search—I could use my skills or Kumayuru and Kumakyu. When I offered to help out, a short-haired maid in her twenties raised her hand slightly. "I know where the children are."

"Lufa!" The toad man glared at the maid.

Ellelaura immediately silenced the toad man with a blast of water and addressed Lufa, "You know where the children are?"

"That's right. I prepare their meals."

"Lufa, do you know what will happen if you betray me?!"

"Please, let me put an end to these crimes. I... I also want to atone for what I've done."

"Stop screwing around!" Gajurdo roared. "Who do you think it was that paid off your parent's debt when they disappeared?!"

"That was you, Lord Gajurdo," Lufa replied.

"You see?!"

The moment the toad man shouted, Ellelaura sprayed water on him again and he went silent.

"Ranzel, could you please gag him?" Ellelaura asked. "He's noisy, and his breath is intolerable."

"Ellela—"

Ranzel shoved some cloth into the toad man's mouth, as commanded.

"Let's see... Lufa, was it? Please don't worry about Gajurdo. Could you guide us to the children?"

"Certainly."

Elleaura surveyed the area, then looked at Ranzel. "Ranzel, please get the names of any servant who isn't present from the ones who are. When Cliff and the others arrive, entrust this situation to them. Then you'll go and search the house and look for any remaining servants."

Elleaura turned to me now. "Yuna, sorry, but... could you stay with me?" I didn't really mind, so I nodded in agreement. "And it would be helpful if you left either Kumayuru or Kumakyu behind to stand guard."

"In that case, Kumayuru, keep an eye on things please." Kumayuru crooned in response.

"And Misana..." Elleaura started to say.

"I'm going with Yuna." Misa clung to me.

"...Don't get separated from Yuna," she said. Elleaura had put Misa in my care. That was fine by me.

I picked up Misa and put her on Kumakyu's back. "You'll be safe there. Don't get down, okay?" Misa clung to Kumakyu tightly.

"What a docile bear..." Lufa was surprised when she saw Misa riding on Kumakyu—and a little frightened.

"They won't attack if you don't hurt them," I told her.

"I wouldn't attempt anything so frightening," she said. Still, she really didn't need to be so scared of my bears...

Lufa took the lead, followed by me, Elleaura, and a bear-riding Misa. Cliff and Gran's estates were huge, just like this one. Did these guys *really* need so many rooms?

"Isn't kidnapping children a crime?" I asked.

"Well..." said Ellelaura, "there are written contracts."

"So, what then? Does he just get found innocent and released?"

"It's complicated," said Ellelaura. "From my point of view, it *is* a crime. But if there is a written contract, the law sees it differently. When people borrow a lot of money, it would be a problem if they took the money and ran, and so some merchants will even take a debtor's children."

Children as collateral? Didn't that make them *hostages*!?

It sounded cruel, but I guess that sort of thing even happened in my original world... even if we thought of it as nothing more than history.

"There were also some people whose children were taken because their parents defied Gajurdo," Ellelaura continued. "I don't think he'll come out of this completely innocent. Luck was not on Gajurdo's side when you got involved."

Whoa, what? Was it unlucky to get involved with me? It sounded like she was saying the toad noble had been taken down *because* I'd showed up.

"You seem surprised," Ellelaura said. "If you hadn't gone to the capital and brought Zelef, Gran's party would have ended in failure. If *that* had happened, I don't think Misa would have been abducted. If *that* hadn't happened, you wouldn't have punched your way through the Salbard household. If you hadn't done that, then *this* wouldn't have come to pass. And finally, if you hadn't come to the capital, *I* wouldn't be here. Everything is connected to you, Yuna."

When she put it that way, I suppose she had a point.

"But all of that was because Misa sent me an invitation to her birthday party," I said.

Had... Misa been kidnapped because of me? No... if I hadn't come here, she still might've been taken if the party had been a success. And if the party had been a failure, Misa might've lost her status as a noble. So, it was good that I'd come here... right? Yeah, it was good—and our chance encounter had been pretty important too...

"Lufa, why do you work here?" I asked. Lufa looked like she was a decent person, so I was curious why she'd work for such a toad of a man.

“I inherited my father’s debt, so I am being made to work.”

“His debt?”

“My father was a merchant and he had needed a large sum of money to conduct his business. He borrowed money from Lord Gajurdo, but the business failed. He was left with significant debt. After that, Lord Gajurdo seized my citizen card in order to prevent my father from running away. In truth, I’m a hostage. Though my father worked as hard as he could, his debt was not a payable sum. Then one day, my father went to another town to replenish supplies. He... He never returned. And so, I work here to pay off the debt in place of my father.”

Hm. Something about her words bothered me. “Elleaura, what’s the significance of confiscating a card?”

“I think you already know, but citizen cards and guild cards are necessary for entering and exiting towns. If someone has theirs taken away, they can’t leave town.”

“But can’t they be reissued?”

“Normally, yes. But, as a noble, Gajurdo could put pressure to prevent one from being reissued, keeping someone from leaving. Gajurdo has the influence to pull it off.”

“That’s just how it is,” Lufa said. “My father ran away because he couldn’t pay back the debt, which means I can’t run either.”

“But...”

“My father just wasn’t cut out to be a businessman.”

The group went quiet at Lufa’s blunt reply. All that could be heard were Elleaura and Lufa’s footsteps as we walked. I didn’t make a sound, thanks to my bear shoes. What about Kumakyu? I couldn’t hear my bear’s footsteps either. Now that got me thinking about Kumakyu’s precious toe beans.

Lufa led us out of the estate through a back entrance and brought us to a small storage shed. “There are stairs inside that lead underground. That’s where the children are.” She opened the lock on the door and brought us to the staircase entrance. It was wide enough for Kumakyu to fit as well, so Misa also came with us.

“A dungeon?”

“That’s right. I’ve been in there before as well.”

We went down the stairs and came to a passageway lined with doors. There were about six rooms.

Lufa stopped in front of one of them. “This is it.” She opened the lock. I looked through the opening to see two boys around the age of five or six and a girl around ten.

“Is that you, Lufa?” the oldest girl asked.

“Someone has come for you all, so you can leave.”

“We can leave...?”

“Yes.”

“We’re not going to be hit, are we?” the girl asked. Ellelaura and I winced at that.

“Not at all,” said Lufa. “It’s going to be okay.”

“My name is Ellelaura,” she said gently. “I was asked by your fathers to come and retrieve you.”

However, that children didn’t look at Ellelaura, but instead at me, standing behind her.

“A bear...?” The children approached me, which led them to leave the room and encounter Kumakyu. The shocked children gasped in surprise and fell backward. The girl stood in front of the younger boys to protect them, but then they spotted Misa riding Kumakyu.

“There’s a *girl* on the bear...”

“It’s not scary bear,” said Misa. “Kumakyu is gentle!” She hugged Kumakyu, which put the kids at ease.

“Everyone, this bear isn’t dangerous,” said Lufa. “It’s safe.”

Lufa and Misa got the three kids to calm down and relax.

"All right, everyone. Want to ride the bear and get out of here?" I asked. The kids piled onto Kumakyu. It wasn't like we could fit four of them, though, even if they were kids, so I had Misa walk with the girl, while the two boys rode on Kumakyu. Even though the kids had been scared at first, Misa talked them through it. They saw how she was acting and got up onto Kumakyu. Once they were on, they seemed pretty happy about it. Kumakyu took the lead as we walked back.

In the back, I could hear Lufa whispering something to Elleaura. "Please check the other rooms later. I think the keys are in Lord Gajurdo's room, but please... never take children there."

I was curious, but I knew no good would come from asking.

I pretended I'd heard nothing.

CHAPTER 212

THE BEAR RETURNS FROM THE RESCUE

“WE’LL NEED CARRIAGES, so get them ready!”

When we brought the children back to the ground floor, we found Cliff giving orders. He came over when he spotted us. “Finally made it back, have you?” He looked a little tired. I let the kids down from Kumakyu and left them in Misa’s care.

“Cliff, you’re here,” Ellelaura said.

“I arrived just a bit ago.” Cliff turned his attention from Misa to me. “Yuna, thank you for rescuing Misana. I’m sure Gran and the others will also be relieved.”

“Is Noa all right?” I asked. Fina had woken up, but Noa had still been out cold when I’d taken off.

“She’s all right. In fact, she woke up right after you left.”

Good. That was one less thing to worry about. “Now that you mention it, Gran isn’t here?”

I looked around, but I still didn’t spot him. His grandchild had been carried off, so I thought he’d come running before anyone else. Maybe he was still searching for Misa at home?

But that wasn’t the answer Cliff gave. “Gran is being held up by the townspeople because of you.”

“Because of *me*?” Was he saying that it was *my* fault Gran wasn’t here?

“Yuna, you barreled through the middle of town on your bears! You gave the townspeople a scare, and now they’re in a panic. When Gran showed up, they surrounded him to tell him about the bears appearing. He’s the feudal lord, after all. Now they’re raising a fuss about dispatching soldiers and adventurers to get rid of the bears on the loose. Gran had to stay behind to calm them down.”

"Oh, yes. I think anyone would be startled after seeing Yuna riding a bear like a lunatic." Ellelaura agreed.

Was it really that big of a deal? Wait... did this mean I couldn't walk around town anymore? That seemed like a difficult position to be in...

Just as I was feeling deflated, Kumayuru and Kumakyu came over to nuzzle me and cheer me up. Or... no, that didn't seem right. Actually, I got the sense that my bears were apologizing.

"It's not really your fault, Kumayuru and Kumakyu." I said, softly patting their heads.

"That's right," said Misa. She gave Kumakyu a big bear hug. "Kumayuru and Kumakyu aren't scary at all."

"Still, that's why Gran won't be coming for a while," said Cliff.

But this all wasn't *our* fault. It was all because that toad noble kidnapped Misa! If they hadn't kidnapped anyone, I wouldn't have gotten mad and rushed through the town while riding Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Nope! Not my fault, thank you very much.

...Not that it mattered much. I probably wouldn't be walking around Sheelin for a while.

"All right, Cliff, how much have you been filled in?" Ellelaura asked.

"I met Mishel on the way, and then Ranzel got me caught up here. I know that Yuna went on a rampage and rescued an unscathed Misana, and that afterward, you and Yuna went to search for the other children."

"The children came into our care without issue," said Ellelaura. "After this, I will be reaching out the merchant guild to contact their families, though I'd rather not meet with the guild master at present."

That's right—the Merchant Guild master had connections with the toad man, according to what they'd said.

"In that case, we could take them to Gran's house," said Cliff. "Since they're merchants who have been friends of Gran, I'm sure he would at least have their contact information."

"A fine idea," said Ellelaura. "Taking them to Gran's house is the best option."

"I'm having a carriage prepared right now, so just wait a while."

"How thoughtful of you."

"For now, I've done the essentials. I've established a guard, of course, and the carriage. We've also checked the surrounding area, and Ranzel has volunteered to search for the remaining servants. We even sent a few people to help him."

Whoa, Cliff was really on the ball with the lord stuff today! He'd already gotten the work done?

"But there were several things I wanted to confirm with Gran," Ellelaura said. "Who would've thought the man would be caught up because of an uproar due to a couple of *bears*?" Ellelaura gave me a look, but hey, I already said it wasn't my fault. It'd been an emergency, and the toad noble had *literally* kidnapped Misa.

"I came with some guards I borrowed from Gran. Let's do what we can until then," said Cliff.

"You're right," said Ellelaura. "After we gather all the servants, we'll need to question them one at a time. *Then*, we'll need to search every room of the estate after that. There's no end to the work we'll need to do."

"In that case, I will get started on the questioning."

"Thank you. I'll take my leave to search the rooms," Ellelaura said, which made the toad groan and turn bright red. Guess he had something he *really* didn't want her seeing. Ellelaura ignored the toad and addressed me. "Yuna, you take the children to Gran's estate once the carriage arrives. Misana probably wants to see her family soon as well. I'm sure it'll make them feel better."

There wasn't anything I could help with, even if I stayed here, so I agreed.

The carriage was ready right away after that, so I boarded it with the kids and we headed to Gran's house. Cliff had told me that the townspeople would probably lose it if they spotted me, so it'd be best to recall my bears and go with them in the carriage. It seemed like good advice, from what he'd told me...

When our carriage arrived at Gran's house, we were greeted by Misa's sobbing mother. When Misa spotted her mother, she started crying as well. Her father, Leonardo, seemed overjoyed at the sight of his wife and daughter reunited. He came over to me. "Yuna... Thank you so much for rescuing our daughter."

"I'm glad I made it in time."

"We can't thank you enough, Yuna. I was surprised the first time I saw you, but my father reassured me that you'd be able to handle things."

"Truly, thank you so much for rescuing our daughter," said Misa's mother, holding Misa tightly in her arms. I followed Elleaura and Cliff's instructions and reported everything, just like they'd requested.

"Could you contact these kids' families?" I asked.

"Who are they?"

"These are the kids of the merchants who were kidnapped, like Misa. Gran might know their parents, according to Cliff and Elleaura."

"I understand. I'll check right away."

Leonardo went over to the children and asked them their names. Since I'd safely delivered Misa, I headed to the room where Fina and Noa were. I figured they might have been sleeping, so I opened the door quietly. I heard Noa's voice come from inside the room.

"I told you, I'm fine!" she said.

"You *can't*," said another voice. "Please rest. Otherwise, I'll get in trouble with Lord Cliff."

"But isn't Yuna back?"

"It appears she is, but both you and Mademoiselle Fina were told to rest. Please rest quietly like Mademoiselle Fina."

Inside the room, Noa and Meishun were quarreling beside Fina's bed.

"Noa," I broke in, "you sure look chipper."

"Yuna!" the kids exclaimed. They jumped from their beds to rush over to me.

"Lady Noire! Mademoiselle Fina!" Meishun called out from behind Noa and Fina.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" I asked.

"I daresay I'm quite fine!"

"Uh-huh! I'm fine too!"

Good. They were safe and sound.

"Um... how is Misa?" Noa asked me.

"Saved her before they could harm a hair on her head," I said. Well, I didn't know that for sure, but she seemed fine. "Rest easy."

It seemed like they'd been pretty worried about Misa—they both looked really relieved. And in the middle of our chat, Misa herself came in to show them that she was fine.

"Sorry for making you worry Noa, Fina," she said. "And thanks, you two, for trying to save me."

"You're *practically* my little sister," Noa said. "Of course I would save you, as your elder."

"And you're my friend, Lady Misa," added Fina.

"Thank you..." Smiling ear-to-ear, Misa hugged Noa and Fina.

Misa talked with us for several more minutes before leaving. I guess she'd spend today with her worried mother.

When dinnertime rolled around, Zelef treated us to a delicious meal, but Cliff, Elleaura, and even Gran hadn't returned yet.

Gran was there in the morning when I went to the dining room for breakfast, but I didn't see Cliff or Elleaura. Still, he thanked me the moment he saw me.

"I'm just glad she's safe," I said. That was what really mattered—not any thanks or appreciation.

"Mister Gran, where are my mother and father?" Noa asked. Before we came to the dining room, we had knocked on Cliff's room next to ours, but there hadn't been a response. We'd thought he could be in the dining hall, but he wasn't here either.

"They're still working," Gran replied. It seemed they hadn't returned last night. Gran complained that they'd sent him home because he was old.

"Even I could stay up a night or two," he said, but Misa's parents had done everything they could to stop him. "But I did need to come back to ask you for a favor, Yuna."

"From me?"

"Yuna, I'm sorry, but for now could you *please* not walk around town in that bear outfit?" Gran blurted.

CHAPTER 213

THE BEAR THINKS OF HOW TO MAKE THE BEARS SEEM LESS FRIGHTENING

“YOU GAVE SOME PEOPLE quite the fright with your bears,” Gran said.

I’d heard that from Cliff too. Apparently, I’d terrified the townspeople quite a bit when they saw me with Kumayuru and Kumakyu on our way to save Misa. Since I’d been seen riding my bears around, they wanted me to lay low for the time being. They’d already told everyone we weren’t dangerous, but I think they wanted to avoid any additional mayhem.

“In that case,” I said, “I’ll just stay in my room until we go back to Crimonia.”

They’d best not underestimate the skills of a former shut-in. I could even kill a few days without television, computers, video games, movies, or books to entertain me. Maybe I’d just pass the time sleeping.

“Ah, I’m sorry,” said Misa, pulling me out of my thoughts. “This is my fault. Kumayuru and Kumakyu were just coming to save me. They’re not scary at all...”

“You’re the victim, Misa. You didn’t do anything wrong,” I told her. “It’s the Salbard family that kidnapped you. It’s *their* fault.” The toad and his bumbling idiot son were the ones who’d kidnapped Misa, after all.

“But...”

“All I need to do is avoid going out for a while.”

“But... then they’ll be afraid of you and your bears forever.”

“I can just avoid town in the future. It’s all right.”

“That’s not all right!” Misa exclaimed. “I still want to walk around town with you, and Kumayuru and Kumakyu too!” She looked like she was going to cry. “Kumayuru and

Kumakyu aren't scary," she repeated. "They're really nice bears."

"Misa..."

As far as I was concerned, it was fine if people didn't like me. I didn't mind whatever they said about me—I'd take any fight they picked with me. That's why I was fine with avoiding town if they were scared of my bears... but Misa herself wasn't okay with that. If we left town as is and Misa still blamed herself for my bears being feared, I wouldn't be able to come back again... *and* it'd traumatize Misa. Even if I was wrong on that, Misa was probably still frightened from being kidnapped. I wanted to do something for her, but this would be a tough nut to crack.

"Grandfather, you *did* explain to everyone, didn't you?" she asked.

"Of course! I told them Yuna's bears are nothing to be feared. I even explained that they were acquaintances of mine and that they would never attack anyone," Gran said. "But there's only so much that words can do."

"They wouldn't even listen to you, grandfather?"

"If a raging dragon appeared in front of you, and His Majesty approached, telling you it was safe, would you believe him? We're in a similar situation."

Well, it wasn't easy to convince people of that kinda stuff. Even if the president or prime minister told the people not to be afraid of something objectively freaky, why would anyone just believe it? Still, something about that explanation kind of got to me—why was he comparing us to a *dragon*?

"But Kumayuru and Kumakyu aren't scary..." Misa objected.

"Well, then we just have to convince the people that they aren't, right?" Noa said, seemingly coming up with an idea. "In that case, Misa, why don't you just do the same thing you did earlier?"

"What did I do earlier...?"

"Didn't you hug Kumakyu to show the children they didn't need to be afraid?"

"Yeah! Since they were afraid, I showed them that I could hug and pet Kumakyu."

"So, if we go into town while riding Kumayuru and Kumakyu, I think we can show them that they aren't scary."

"You're saying that you want to ride my bears into town and walk around with them?" I asked.

"Exactly!" said Noa. "If girls like us ride Kumayuru and Kumakyu, I think the townspeople won't think they're scary anymore."

"You don't think adventurers will come to slay them?" I asked.

"We'll be riding them. It will be fine!~"

"Yeah! And I'll protect Kumayuru and Kumakyu."

"Me too!"

The three little girls were really going out on a limb for my bears. I suppose they were right; it wasn't like anyone would attack if three cute kids were having fun riding bearback on bears.

"Got it," I said. "In that case, should we give it a shot?"

I accepted their sentiments and Noa's proposal. If that was the price for helping Misa feel better, it was cheap enough to pay.

"Well, then, I'll go with you," Gran said.

"You too, Grandfather?"

"The plan will be much more effective if I am there too, don't you think?"

"But Grandfather, do you have the time for that? Aren't you busy?"

"I certainly am, but I am indebted to Yuna for rescuing you. If I let her go home as things are now, I won't feel right. But I do have many things to attend to at present. How about we do this tomorrow?"

Misa brightened. "Yes! Thank you so much, Grandfather!"

After that, I returned to our room and started a mini-meeting with the three girls concerning how we would do our walk around with Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“All right, then!” Noa got right into it like she was the class president at some studious school, with Misa and Fina sitting down in front of her, listening to what she had to say. “We’ll brainstorm if there are any other ways to show how Kumayuru and Kumakyu aren’t scary.”

“You don’t think it’s enough just to walk around town?”

“If that’s all we do, then no,” she replied. Noa was probably right... walking around town wouldn’t be enough.

“Do you have a good idea, Fina? You’ve known Kumayuru and Kumakyu longer than I have, right?” Noa asked. Fina had been listening silently, but she had definitely spent the most time with my bears out of the three of them.

Fina thought for a bit, then offered up an idea. “How about we play with them? That should show everybody that they’re not dangerous.”

“Yes, you’ve got it!” Noa exclaimed. “Playing with the bears strikes two birds with one stone.”

I guess seeing my bears play with kids *would* make people feel more at ease... right? Then again, in my original world, that would’ve just made people extra anxious. They probably would’ve started yelling at the kids to get away from the bears.

“But how should we play?” Noa pondered.

“We could ride them like normal?”

Noa shook her head. “Insufficient. Yuna, can Kumayuru and Kumakyu do anything special?”

I’d just been listening in when the conversation turned to me. “Uh... they can do a lot of stuff. You have to keep it a secret that they change size, though.”

“Hmm... then what shall we do?” Noa wondered.

"Couldn't we just talk to them?" Fina offered.

Noa tilted her head. "Just *talk* to them?"

"Yes. Normal bears can't understand us, but Kumayuru and Kumakyu can."

"That's right! I forgot. They've always been able to understand us, after all."

Uh, she *really* shouldn't forget something like that. If she talked to a wild bear like that, it *definitely* wouldn't understand her... probably. I think.

I remembered the bear family from the honey tree... but I'd only understood them because my own bears had interpreted for us.

"Yuna, I want to talk to Kumayuru and Kumakyu," Noa said. "Can you summon them?"

She wanted to talk to the bears? Now this situation seemed like it was getting out of hand. I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu in their cub forms in front of Noa, then they started talking.

"Well then, Kumayuru..." she said.

"And Kumakyu..."

"Can you do something like this?"

"Cwoom," one of my bears answered.

"And how about this?"

"Cwoom!"

The girls and the bears talked. It was such a surreal scene. Was this how people looked at me when I was talking to my bears? Still, seeing how much fun they were having talking with my bears made me feel more relaxed. Just as Noa had said, maybe people *wouldn't* be scared seeing girls getting along with the bears.

I was just glad Misa had her smile back. She'd been crying when I rescued her and anxious ever since. On top of that, she'd been so sad when she learned how scared people were of my bears. But no, now she was dedicating herself to helping my bears

and seemed to be really having fun.

As I was thinking about that, Noa looked over at me. "Please give us some ideas too, Yuna. This way, everyone will know that Kumayuru and Kumakyu aren't dangerous."

"Yes, please think with us, Yuna!" Misa said.

"Please help too, Yuna!" Fina added.

"Cwoom!"

"Cwoom!!!"

I couldn't say no to all five of them, so with that, I joined their little circle.

Once our meeting was over, Cliff and Ellelaura returned, and we ended up having lunch together.

"What? You're going to play with Noa?" Cliff laughed after listening to Noa.

"Not me. Kumayuru and Kumakyu are going."

"All three of you are bears," he stated. "It's the same thing." How was it all the same? It *totally* made a difference.

But Ellelaura seemed to agree. "That's right!" she said with a laugh.

They both needed to get their eyes checked, I swear...

"I'm impressed you came up with the idea to show everyone as you play with the bears," Ellelaura said.

"It was Fina's idea," Noa said. "But we worked together to figure out what we'll do!"

"Oh, then I'll have to go see that."

"You mean it?!" Noa seemed delighted. I didn't really think Ellelaura needed to watch us, though. Cliff and Ellelaura were busy right now, after all. They had a tough job

ahead. They didn't have that kind of spare time, considering everything that had happened.

"You're not busy?" I asked. *You really don't have to come*, I was trying to say.

Elleaura smiled. "I don't see anything wrong with stopping by for a bit."

"It's also important to take breaks." Cliff seemed like he was enjoying the idea.

Misa's parents were gung ho about going too, after hearing all of that. They were acting like this was some sort of school performance or something. Should they really have been doing this after the whole fuss—and with how busy they were?

I looked over at Fina. I felt bad her parents were the only ones who weren't around.

"Um, should I get Tiermina?" I asked her.

"You don't have to. It's embarrassing." Fina flat out rejected that idea.

CHAPTER 214

THE BEAR HOLDS A JAMBEAREE

THE NEXT DAY, Kumayuru and Kumakyu would walk to the center of town, and we'd have our event. Here was the schedule:

First, the four of us would ride Kumayuru and Kumakyu from Gran's house. Since that might not be enough to reassure the townspeople, Gran would also go with us for an added boost of confidence. Cliff and Elleaura, as well as Misa's parents, would head out after us.

Next, we would go down the main street toward the public square. There, Fina and the others would play with Kumayuru and Kumakyu to show that they weren't dangerous.

According to Gran, there was already a place for us at the square. Then again, if we went to the public square and there *wasn't* a place to play with the bears, our plan would've gone straight down the drain.

I summoned my bears. Fina and I would be with Kumayuru, and Noa and Misa would ride Kumakyu. The girls were wearing uniforms from the Bear's Lounge. That ended up happening because of a conversation from yesterday that had gone a little something like this:

"Yuna, can we wear Bear's Lounge uniforms?" Noa had asked.

"The lounge uniforms? Why?"

"I thought it might be good if we all dressed as bears. I think if you're with us, Yuna, people will focus on you no matter what. If that happens, then there wouldn't be much point in us being with you. But if we're all dressed up, you won't stand out!"

Noa kind of had a point. If she and the other kids didn't stand out, there wouldn't be any point and all eyes would be on me instead. Unfortunately, I didn't have any shop uniforms on me.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have any with me.”

“You don’t?” Noa seemed disappointed.

“I have uniforms,” Fina interjected.

“Really?!”

“But do you have enough for everyone?”

“I think so.” Fina pulled three Bear’s Lounge uniforms out of her item bag.

“But why are you carrying *three* of them?”

“I usually carry two just in case.”

“And what about the third one?”

“That’s Shuri’s uniform.”

Apparently, Fina had taken it from Shuri for safekeeping and had accidentally brought it with her.

“What about the sizes?”

“The sizes should be okay. Shuri’s is the same size as me. It’s a bit big for her, but she can still wear it like that.”

Well, Shuri *was* still growing. In that case, it seemed like it’d be all right. The three of them weren’t that different. Misa was a bit smaller, but if Shuri could wear it, then it’d probably be fine.

And so, the three of them had ended up wearing bear uniforms.

“All right, let’s go!” Noa shouted, and we headed out.

With the four of us all beared up and riding Kumayuru and Kumakyu, we walked into town. Since we were girls dressed as bears riding *on* bears, we obviously gathered

attention—and a crowd.

“Everyone’s watching us...” Fina seemed embarrassed as she rode with me.

On the other hand, Noa and Misa were energetically waving their hands while riding on Kumakyu and seemed to be having fun. They were totally different compared to commoners like me and Fina.

I’d walked around towns and even the capital while in my bear onesie since coming to this world, but I still wasn’t used to people looking at me. It was still super embarrassing. I kind of felt like that sense of embarrassment was what still made me a girl. It was kinda my last bit of femininity, so I couldn’t just throw it out the window.

Yeah... I hadn’t abandoned it yet.

No way.

Thanks to Noa and Misa’s happy smiles and Gran being with us, no one made a scene, even with Kumayuru and Kumakyu accompanying us. We slowly walked through the town until we came to the square, where we got off of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

Who made up our gathered audience, you ask? Townspeople gathered around us in a circle. Gran’s servants were at the square, directing people just as expected, and the townspeople were obediently listening to their instructions. When I looked closely, Marina’s adventurer group was directing people too. Our eyes met.

“I’m looking forward to this,” she briefly said and immediately returned to her work.

There was a rope strung up to section off an area, and improvised seating had been set up too. The townspeople wore all kinds of expressions, from worry and fear to hope and anticipation. I spotted Cliff, Elleaura, and Misa’s parents among them.

Once we were done prepping things, Gran went out in front of everyone. “Right now, you know these bears as the ones that created all the ruckus in town, but let me assure you that they were guests for my own granddaughter’s birthday party. We had an urgent situation that caused a disturbance, but these bears wouldn’t harm a fly. Today, I invite you to watch these young girls and see the myriad things they can safely do with these bears.” Gran bowed, moved back, and swapped places with us.

We started out with something simple. First, Fina came out in her bear outfit with Kumayuru. At the sight of her, I could hear an audience member say, "How cute!" Fina seemed a little embarrassed by that, but she still stood in front of the townspeople, did a small bow, and looked at Kumayuru.

"Kumayuru, shake!" Fina held out her hand, then Kumayuru placed a paw on top of it. The audience stirred, just from that.



"Now... spin!" Kumayuru spun around in place, which made the audience murmur even more—and applaud. Maybe this *was* actually enough? The audience was getting more worked up, in a good way.

Next, Misa made her entrance with Kumakyu. Misa was carrying a ball about the size of a soccer ball. She stood in front of Kumakyu and lightly threw the ball to the bear. The ball drew a light arc towards Kumakyu, who caught it.

Ample applause broke out. But there was more coming up...

This time, Kumakyu threw the ball back to Misa with an underhand pass using both paws. Misa caught it and passed it back to Kumakyu. Even though they were just throwing the ball back and forth, the townspeople were eagerly applauding. For the last trick, Misa threw the ball up high, which Kumakyu headbutted back to Misa.

The townspeople didn't look scared anymore. All I could see was delight. The kids sitting the closest were smiling and happily clapping.

Next, the girls made an entrance—Noa rode Kumayuru, and Misa rode Kumakyu. I made small obstacles with earth magic.

Noa climbed up a hill while riding Kumayuru and leapt off from the top. We hadn't prepared a net, though... so there was nothing to catch their fall. It felt kind of like being in a traveling circus troupe.

Each time Kumayuru overcame an obstacle, there was another round of applause. I could see Ellelaura among them, and Cliff looking like he was enjoying himself beside her. Misa's parents seemed like they were having fun too. They looked like proud parents who were watching their kids put on a school performance.

After that, the three girls prepared apples. Then they moved away from my bears and tossed the apples. My bears caught each one in their mouths and chomped 'em. Misa threw one of the apples in a random direction, but Kumakyu still jumped up and caught it. That winning move earned a big round of applause.

I looked around. There wasn't a single person who looked scared of Kumayuru and

Kumakyu. This was probably enough for them to know that the bears weren't dangerous, but we had a cincher to make *double* sure that everyone understood.

"Would anyone like to ride the bears?" Misa called out to the audience as she looked at the children sitting in front. She invited two boys and a girl over. "Would you like to try riding them?"

The boys and girl exchanged looks and then nodded slightly. The people around them seemed a little anxious, but the boys and girl approached Kumayuru and Kumakyu without fear. Then, they each petted and mounted the bears.

Even the initially nervous spectators started clapping in appreciation.

Oh, and I should mention that these boys and girl were the children we'd rescued from the toad man's house the other day. We'd asked them to do this yesterday—they were basically audience plants.

Thanks to them, when the next children were called on, they went up to Kumayuru and Kumakyu without any hesitation. After that, the event turned into a Kumayuru and Kumakyu petting zoo.

Eventually, the event came to a close. When we announced that, even the adults were disappointed. I hadn't thought that'd actually happen, but Noa had anticipated it. "After the event is over," she'd told us, "there will be children who won't even want to *leave* the bears. I guarantee it!"

Just as Noa had said, there *were* kids who just wouldn't leave my bears alone.

As a countermeasure, we gave pudding to the kids who had played with my bears. Once one of them had some, it'd catch the other kids' interest and their attention would shift from my bears to the pudding. The kids who had received pudding were eating it on their own or with their parents.

The love of a good snack is universal, I guess, no matter what world you come from.

Seeing their faces, it looked like we might've successfully cleared up that whole lunatic-bear incident. Then again, I doubted I'd walk around *in* town with Kumayuru and Kumakyu very often, but at least I'd be able to ride *into* town without a problem.

And with that, the jambearee came to a close... and mega-successfully, to boot.

Cliff, Ellelaura, and Misa's parents had returned to their work halfway through. I was grateful they had come at all, considering how busy they were.

Noa and Misa had wanted the bear uniforms, so we ended up gifting those to them. I wondered what they'd do with them. I couldn't see much use for the outfits, unless they used them as pajamas or something.

CHAPTER 215

THE BEAR RETURNS TO CRIMONIA

CLIFF REACHED a stopping point with his own work, so we ended up heading back home. People gathered in front of Gran's estate to see us off.

"Noa," Ellelaura said, "I'm so glad I could see you again. It had been much too long."

"Oh, yes, Mother," Noa replied. "I was so happy to see you again too! Ah, and please say hello to Shia for me, won't you?"

Ellelaura was going to stay behind until an inspector came from the capital to pick up the investigation. After that, Gran would go with her to take the toad family and the man in black who had kidnapped Misa to the capital. The toad man's servants would be tried in this town, but only after the son and father were dealt with at the capital.

Lufa, the maid who'd told us where the captured children were, weighed on my mind. According to Ellelaura, she'd kept cooperating even after that. She'd been just as much a victim of the toad household as anyone, and I hoped that her charges would be lessened because of that. It wasn't my place to butt in, though, so all I could do was keep hope alive.

Ellelaura patted Noa's head, then looked over at Fina and me.

"Please look after Noa, you two. Capricious as she is, she's a good girl at heart."

We nodded—yeah, I knew Noa was a good kid. She got along well with Fina, who was a commoner, so that was proof already. Every once in a while, she'd throw a fit over the bear stuff, but other than that, she was kindhearted.

Noa looked embarrassed. "*Mother...* stop, please."

Now Zelef, standing beside Ellelaura, spoke up. "Master Yuna, thank you for this precious experience."

"Thanks. Sorry it ended up becoming an entire *thing*."

"Oh, no, please don't worry! I had the chance to meet a dear old friend again, after all. I'm glad I came," he said, which made me feel better, since I knew I'd caused him a bunch of trouble. "It's just unfortunate that we won't be returning on Master's Kumayuru and Kumakyu. It was such a comfortable ride, and I was hoping to experience it one more time."

Zelef looked really disappointed. When he found out he'd be returning with Elleaura in a carriage, he'd seemed pretty bummed out. Zelef had done so much for me, so I definitely had to bring him some new recipes next time I saw him.

After I said goodbye to Zelef, the entire Fahrerogram household gathered to bid us farewell. "Miss," said Gran, bowing his head, "we are forever in your debt. If you weren't here, our family may have been destroyed. Thank you."

"You've really thanked me more than enough." Gran and Misa's parents had thanked me so many times, I'd lost count.

Since they wanted to do something to thank me, they asked if there was something I wanted. Well... *hmm*. I'd saved Misa, but it felt wrong getting some reward for that. I'd just wanted to save her for her own sake—not for some reward, and not because it was a job. If they paid me, all that rage, all that motivation to save Misa... it all would have felt hollow. I was just fine with some verbal gratitude.

"I suppose you're all going home and leaving now," Misa said, looking lonesome. There was nothing we could do about that—we needed to head home to Crimonia. Misa looked enviously at her father standing across from her. "Oh, you're so *mean*, Father! I want to go with them too!"

Misa's father, Leonardo, was going with us to Crimonia to apologize to Fina's parents for the whole mess. Normally Gran, as the feudal lord, was supposed to do that, but he had to go to the capital, and so Leonardo was going in his place.

Fina had claimed this wasn't necessary, but eventually, they had worn her down. She'd even looked to me for help a few times, but I didn't have the right to intervene in things. Besides, I also had to apologize to Tiermina and Gentz for putting Fina in danger. But I knew how Gran and Leonardo felt, so I'd held my tongue.

"I'm just going to apologize to Fina's parents. I'll be back right away." Leonardo placed his hand on Misa's to placate her. "Be a good girl and sit tight for me, okay?"

"Next time you can come along, Misa," I told her. "Then I'll show you around the shop!"

"Okay! I can't wait!"

Crimonia wasn't that far from this town, so we could make the trip pretty much whenever. Thanks to the jambearee event, I wouldn't cause a hullabearloo if I got spotted next time, so I didn't have to worry. Then again... I guess it *still* might cause an *actual* hullabaloo—but at least it wouldn't be a *bad* one.

Once we finished up our goodbyes, we headed for Crimonia. Since Leonardo and his guard were with us, I wasn't using the bear house—I'd told Cliff ahead of time.

The journey was uneventful, and we returned to Crimonia safely. I felt like we'd been away for a long time. It felt kinda nostalgic.

The sun was starting to set when we got back. I wanted to just head home, hop in the bath, and go to sleep right away, but I needed to take Fina home and report to Tiermina.

Noa and Cliff went their own way. Then Fina and I, along with Leonardo's party of three, headed to Fina's house. Leonardo had said that they'd go to Fina's house tomorrow to apologize, but the mornings were busy—it'd be a real bother. It'd be better to just go straight over right away. I hadn't *technically* lied, but my biggest reason for the suggestion was so I wouldn't have to drag myself there in the morning.

I was really sure that no matter what time they went, nobles coming to visit would be a huge surprise for Tiermina and the rest of the family. I felt bad for them, but I wanted to get this over with so I could finally relax.

"Are you sure you want to visit us, sir?" Fina asked gloomily, as if Leonardo would just come all this way and suddenly change his mind. She *really* didn't seem to want a noble coming over to apologize... not that I didn't get it.

If this had been my original world and the mayor—or worse yet, a *governor*—had come to my house to apologize, I would've been just as bewildered. That's just how it was when people in a totally different social strata stopped by for a visit. On top of that, there was the even greater gap between commoners and the nobility in this world.

But he'd come all this way, and this was happening... whether we wanted it or not.

"We let you, one of Misa's dear friends, go through a harrowing experience," Leonardo said. "If I don't apologize, my father would give me a hearty scolding."

"But I really was fine," Fina said.

"That's an entirely separate matter," Leonardo replied.

Fina gave up and headed to her house.

Fina arrived at the house, then headed inside and called out for Tiermina, "Mom! Mom!"

Since the door was open, we could hear Tiermina, Gentz, and Shuri bustling—"You're back, Fina?" "Is Fina back?" "Sis?"

"Come outside, Mom," said Fina. "Someone wants to meet you."

After a short time, Fina brought Tiermina and Gentz out of the house. I guess Gentz was done working?

"Welcome back, Yuna!" said Tiermina. "It's a bit later than expected. Did you want to meet with me?"

"Not me," I said. Leonardo took a step forward behind me. "This is the person who wanted to meet with you."

"Yuna, who is this?" Tiermina asked.

"This is the son of the feudal lord of Sheelin. He's Misa's father."

Leonardo bowed his head. "I am Leonardo Fahrergram."

"The son of a feudal lord? You mean a *noble*? But why here of all places?" Tiermina and Gentz were shocked, but who wouldn't be if a noble stopped by for a home visit?

"My daughter didn't do anything rude, did she?" Tiermina asked anxiously. Yeah, I guess that would be the first assumption anyone would make.

"Not at all. I came on this occasion to apologize for troubling your daughter."

Tiermina gave me a questioning look. I was going to explain, but Leonardo spoke faster—he explained while I supplemented.

"My daughter, Misa, was kidnapped. Your daughter happened to be present. and she risked her life trying to protect her."

Tiermina looked at Fina. "Is that true? And you took the trouble to come all the way from Sheelin because of that? My apologies."

Tiermina and Gentz were at a loss. Were they supposed to invite him in? Show him some hospitality? Every once in a while, they looked at me, but I didn't know that to do either. There wasn't specific etiquette for something like *this*. Besides, Leonardo had said he'd head home immediately after apologizing.

Jeez... I'd never seen Tiermina look so hesitant. I'd always thought of her as someone who'd rush in and tackle her goals head-on, so this was super *weird*. Then again, Gentz looked even more worried than Tiermina. Was he seriously the head of the household?

Leonardo finished his apology, offering an apology gift at the end. "I am so sorry for what happened, but I hope you will continue to let our daughters be friends in the future." He bowed his head. Tiermina and Gentz returned the bow.

"And now," Leonardo said, "I shall take my leave." He glanced at me. "Thank you for this, Yuna."

"You're heading home tomorrow, Leonardo, right?"

"Indeed. Since my father went to the capital, I need to return quickly." He bowed once again and departed. He'd stay at Cliff's estate today and then return tomorrow. Even though he hadn't wanted to rush, he couldn't take his time given the circumstances.

"Whew..." Tiemina shook her head once Leonardo had left. "That was a surprise. I never would have thought a noble from Sheelin would come to our house!"

"Agreed!"

"Mom, Dad... I'm sorry," said Fina.

"It's not really something to apologize for. You were just protecting your friend. Still, don't make us worry so much." Tiermina wasn't angry. She gently patted Fina's head. "And thank you, Yuna. Looks like I owe you one for my daughter and everything you did."

"I'm sorry too. I was supposed to be looking after her..."

"Don't worry about it. You take great care of my daughters. They're always safe with you." Tiermina hugged Fina herself.

"Mom, that hurts..."

"I haven't seen you in a while, so just bear with it."

"It's embarrassing...!" It was a heartwarming scene. Gentz looked like he wanted to jump in, but he restrained himself.

After that, I let them know I was heading back home.

"In that case, why don't you have dinner with us? I want to hear all the details!"

"But you've just got back together..." I was saying, but Tiermina interrupted me.

"What are you talking about? Don't have to worry about that. Well, come on already!"

Tiermina pulled one arm while Fina grabbed the other. I couldn't resist... they brought me into the house.

CHAPTER 216

THE BEAR RECEIVES A PACKAGE FROM THE LAND OF WA

YESTERDAY, when I was having a meal at Fina's house, Tiermina told me that a delivery I was looking forward to had arrived at Anz's shop. It was from Jeremo of Mileela, which meant it was probably the package I'd ordered a while back from the Land of Wa. Today, I was going to Anz's shop to get the package.

Anz, Seno, Forne, and Bettle from Mileela were living on the second floor of Anz's shop. The other girl from Mileela, Neaf, ended up working at the orphanage, so that's where she was staying.

I opened the door to the back entrance and found Seno; she was the youngest one, after Anz. She was a bubbly person when she worked in the shop—always all smiles.
“Oh, Yuna. What brings you here?”

“Is Anz in? I heard from Tiermina that a package from Jeremo came in from Mileela.”

“Ah, that delivery. Sorry, Anz is out with Forne looking for ingredients.” I thought she'd be here, since it was the day the store was closed, but we'd just missed each other. Anz liked to look at ingredients for herself during her days off, so she would go to the market. Bettle had apparently gone to the orphanage.

“What are you up to, Seno?” I asked.

“I'm minding the house.”

“I'm not really sure what to do, then...”

“You mean about the package? I know where it is.”

“Really?”

"Anz told me to hand it over if you turned up."

"Cool. Can I see it?"

Seno led me to the warehouse. "Here's your delivery."

In the corner of the warehouse sat some wooden crates and burlap sacks. "Yuna's Package" was written on the stuff in a cutesy script. Well, that made it easy.

"Oh, we put anything that can spoil into cold storage."

I'd deal with that stuff later, then. For now, I went to check the packages in front of me. First, I checked the burlap sacks. Score—rice! "Is it okay if I take all of this?"

"That's fine. Everything is yours, after all."

I put the bags of rice into bear storage, feeling immense gratitude. Finally, I'd be able to have rice at home. I'm Japanese, after all... I yearned for rice. After putting the rice bags into my bear storage, I noticed burlap sacks of a different color.

"Seno, what's in these other bags?"

"Umm..." Seno paused thoughtfully. "If I'm not mistaken, it's a different variety of rice."

"A different variety rice...?"

"If memory serves. Anz said something about mochi rice?"

"*Mochi rice?!*"

"It all looks the same to me, but I guess it's somehow different."

Well, they both just looked like rice—at a glance. If you compared them side by side, the color was slightly different. Still, it was hard to tell the difference by sight alone. Still... if this actually *was* mochi rice...!

"You know what it is, Yuna?" Seno asked.

"Basically, yeah." Ah, mochi rice. If it really *was* that, I could make mochi! That sounded so good...

After that, I opened a wooden crate that was storing pots. Oh? They were filled with soy sauce. In a small box next to that one, I found seaweed. Okay, the universe itself was basically telling me to eat mochi right now.

There were tea leaves too, and... what was that larger crate? It was filled with lovely cloth. I tried unfurling one. It was a yukata; a hairpin was nearby too.

Thought so. The Land of Wa was similar to Japan.

But I hadn't worn a yukata since elementary school. How do you put one of these on again? I vaguely remembered seeing it on TV. Maybe muscle memory would kick in if I tried it on? I kind of wanted to have Fina wear one.

It'd be nice if we could all wear yukatas and watch fireworks. Did fireworks even exist here? This world had magic, so there probably wasn't any need to invent gunpowder. In that case, maybe I could make firework magic? I could launch fire magic into the sky and make it explode. Or maybe lightning magic would work for that? Maybe I'd try it out next time I had free time.

What else was there? A *tanto* dagger? Whoa, now *that* was cool. I liked knives and European swords as much as anyone sensible. Still... being Japanese, I naturally had a soft spot for these kinds of blades. I pulled it out of its sheath. Ooooooh... now that's a beautiful blade. As pretty as the mithril knife was, this more or less matched it. (I bet it was expensive.)

I was overjoyed.

On top of all of that, there were handkerchiefs, ribbons, and pretty fabrics. I looked over all of the boxes before putting them away into my bear storage.

After I checked everything in the warehouse, we headed over to the next room—the cold storage. Seno immediately started shivering from the cold. My bear clothes gave me cold protection, so I didn't have to worry about that. Putting aside how the bear clothes looked, it was nice that I didn't have to fret over being too hot or too cold. Anyway, this is where they kept food and drinks for the shop. There was also a freezer room for the frozen fish and meats.

"Your stuff is on this shelf." Seno pointed—there were earthenware pots like the ones

that had contained the soy sauce, all lined up. I wondered what was inside those.

I picked up one of the pots. It was tightly sealed. I pried open the lid and found something inside that looked like... brown clay? This smell... could it be...?

Seno peered in from behind me. "That's miso."

Oh, yeah. It sure was. I could make soup—*miso soup!* Miso soup with rice, plus omelets with nori. My old Japanese-style breakfast was now complete.

Top priority, above all things—even above the mochi—was making miso soup as soon as humanly possible. I opened the pot beside it to find another type of miso that was a different color. Oh, they had different kinds of miso too? It would be fun to make miso soup with this.

Breakfast was complete, but... it still felt like there was something missing. What was it? It was on the tip of my tongue...

I thought there would be miso in the next pot I opened, when a sour aroma spread throughout my mouth and made me pucker. I was salivating from just the smell.

"That's umeboshi," said Seno, wrinkling her nose with disgust. "I don't like them because they're sour."

There were pickled plums inside the pot. So nostalgic...

Seno looked at the umeboshi and backed up a bit. Of course, being Japanese, I was fine. These were a staple in my fridge back in Japan.

They were great in rice balls. Since I also had tea, I could have umeboshi rice soup. Just smelling the umeboshi worked up my appetite. That was it, that's what I'd forgotten—I'd been missing *umeboshi*.

I immediately added umeboshi to the menu I had in my mind.

All the ingredients were so similar to stuff from Japan. I just had to go to the Land of Wa at some point. There were probably all kinds of other familiar things there.

All that hard work to defeat the kraken and dig the tunnel was paying off. I guess people really *are* rewarded for their efforts.

Having picked up my delivery, I cheerfully returned to my bear house, did the laundry, and tidied up a bit. With that done, I started preparing dinner a bit early. I was making miso soup, of course.

I made soup stock from kelp and prepared the ingredients. I had wakame, but... dang it, no tofu. Maybe there was some in the Land of Wa? If so, I just *had* to buy some.

For now, my miso soup ingredients were wakame, daikon, and carrots. When I taste-tested it, it was unbearably delicious. I also cooked some rice and served it in a Japanese-style rice bowl. The bowl came with the delivery, and I decided to use it right away. Finally, I placed an umeboshi on top of the rice.

I also had miso soup and grilled fish. Naturally, I drizzled soy sauce on the grilled fish. Finally, to complete my Japanese meal, I prepared some hot tea.

Done and done! Even if I also kinda wanted pickled vegetables now...

“Thank you for the meal!”

I started with the miso soup. Yup, delicious. Then, I took a small piece of the umeboshi using my chopsticks and ate it with the rice. The sourness spread throughout my mouth. It was *great*. And the grilled fish was *so* yummy. Finally, I poured tea over the rice and made rice soup.

The delicious cuisine was a nice reminder that I was Japanese, you know? Plus, it was so good that I ended up having seconds of both the rice *and* the miso soup.

CHAPTER 217

THE BEAR BRINGS STUFFED ANIMALS TO NOA

IT WAS THE DAY AFTER I got my package. For breakfast, I had the rice and umeboshi with some of the miso soup I'd made last night. Having Japanese food first thing in the morning really hit the spot!

After breakfast, I started washing the used sheets and towels from my traveling bear house. Not that the ones used by Cliff and his guards were filthy or anything. No, I just wanted my next guests to have crisp, clean sheets when they slept.

Since doing the laundry on my own was lonely, I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu in their cub forms. They helped me out a little, but they mostly just fooled around.

After finishing the laundry, I headed to the tailor's shop where Sherry was working, to pick up the stuffed animals. When I got into the shop, I found Nar working. She said that Sherry was in a back room, so that's where I went next.

I knocked on the door and entered; Sherry was there, sewing stuffed animals. "Good morning, Sherry. Did you finish the stuffed animals?"

"Yuna?! Um, yes! The finished ones are up on that shelf." She pointed up to it.

Three sets of Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals sat on the shelf, all in a row. I guess she'd set them up according to the order they were made in. They were alternating in black and white: Kumayuru, Kumakyu, Kumayuru, Kumakyu, Kumayuru, Kumakyu.

The six side-by-side bears made me feel like I'd come to a proper stuffed animal shop. I could imagine the shelf totally filled with them... that would've made it perfect.

"I think I should have made a few more," Sherry said.

Six was more than enough right now. My priorities were getting a pair to Noa (since

I'd promised her a present) and a pair to Princess Flora (since she'd been the whole reason I'd had them made). Just two pairs were good enough for now.

"This is plenty. You can make the remaining ones in your spare time." I went over to the shelf and put the stuffed animals into my bear storage. Behind them, I found a smaller Kumayuru and Kumakyu sitting side by side. They were palm-sized. "Sherry, what're these?"

"Oh, right. I didn't want to let the leftover cloth go to waste, so I made two smaller stuffed animals."

"They're cute." Kids would love these...

"Thank you very much. The little kids really like them." So, she'd already been giving some of them away.

It made sense that there'd be scraps left over from making a ton of stuffed animals. It was good she'd found a use for them. "Is it okay if I take them?"

"Yes, you can."

"Thank you!" I had to get Sherry something to thank her. Hmm... what would make her happy?

I thanked Sherry and left the shop.

With the stuffed animals acquired, I headed to Noa's house. Lala guided me to Noa's room.

"Yuna, what brings you here today?" Noa asked.

"I brought the stuffed animals I promised you."

"Really?!" Noa stumbled forward. It was kind of cute.

I took out a Kumayuru stuffed animal and a Kumakyu stuffed animal from my bear storage and handed them to her.

"Th-thank you very much! I'll treasure them!!!" Noa hugged the stuffed animals happily. It was nice seeing her so excited about them. "But wasn't this a bit quick...?"

It'd only been a few days since Misa's party. "I ordered the stuffed animals before we left, so I went to pick them up today."

"Does that mean you're making a lot of them?"

"I don't know if I'd say a lot, but there's definitely gonna be some for the orphans." There were also the ones for Princess Flora, and some for Fina and Shuri if they wanted them. But I guess Fina could make those herself?

"You're making that many?" Noa seemed a bit disappointed. "In that case, I guess Misa and I won't be the only ones with bear stuffed animals..."

"Right now, if you don't include the orphans, it is just you and Misa." Well, I planned to give some to Lady Flora after this too though.

"But where did you order them?" she asked. "I thought that you and Fina had made them by hand."

"From a tailor in town. Since Misa's stuffed animals were presents, Fina and I made them together."

"So, you didn't make these by hand? That's a bit unfortunate," she said.

"Do you not want them, then?" I moved to take back the stuffed animals... and Noa hugged them close, so I couldn't snatch them away.

"I do. I do want them," she said. "Since they were made in a tailor shop, could I buy more if I put in an order?"

"Buy them? But I just gifted you a set."

Noa was hugging the Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals. "Why, isn't the reason obvious? I need spares, of course."

She was looking at me like *I* had said something weird. Had I? Why would she need duplicates of the same stuffed animals? I'd get it they were somehow different versions, but a bunch of the same ones? Hmm, I guess even in my original world,

sometimes people bought three of the same thing so they'd have one to use, one to save, and one to give away.

Anyway, I told Noa not to do that. She puffed up her cheeks in irritation, but it was too cute to work on me. "By the way, has Leonardo headed home?"

"Yes, he went home the morning after."

He'd told me so himself, and I guess he'd really gone with that plan. If he was going to stay in Crimonia, I would've treated him to a meal at the shop. I'd just have to wait until he came with Misa.

"Yuna, do you have any plans today after this?" Noa asked, still hugging her stuffed animals.

"Not really." I was planning to go home and put away the laundry, but that was it.

"Well then, please bring out Kumayuru and Kumakyu. I want to be buried in bears!"

So... she wanted to be surrounded by them and their stuffed animal counterparts, just like at Misa's birthday party. "Sure. Do you want them big or small?"

"Please make them big!"

I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu in their regular sizes, per Noa's request. While she was still hugging the stuffed animals, Noa dove into Kumayuru and Kumakyu.



I stayed with Noa until lunch. She had her studies in the afternoon, though, so I went home to make sure I wasn't in the way. Noa seemed sad, but she couldn't skip out on her studies.

I headed home and put away the laundry I'd hung up to dry. Mm-hmm—they were nice and clean, and oh-so-soft.

CHAPTER 218

THE BEAR MAKES MOCHI

I DECIDED TO MOBILIZE and get myself some mochi to eat.

See... if you have mochi rice, you've just gotta pound it into mochi. Doing that alone is boring, though, so I decided I'd make it at the orphanage during the shops' next day off. I'd have the orphans, Morin's group that worked at the Bear's Lounge, Anz's group at the Bear Dining Room, and Fina's family help me out. Gentz tagged along too.

"That seems fun!" the headmistress had told me when I'd asked.

Anz's group seemed very interested in the rice cakes. "A dish made with mochi rice? Count us in!"

Morin's group replied with a frank "Of course we're going!"

And, of course, Fina had asked me if Shuri, Mom, and Dad were invited.

I started prep work right away. I used the same trick I'd used to make the stone bears in order to create a stone mortar—that is, I dug out a groove in some stone to make a stone mortar like I'd seen on TV.

(It *did* look like this, right? I'd never seen a real one...)

The next thing I had to make were the mochi-pounding mallets. They needed to be made from wood, and they looked kind of like huge hammers.

All I really needed the mallets to do was pound mochi, so anything would work. Then again, maybe I'd be best off asking a woodworker to make them?

Hm. If I couldn't make the mallets, I guess I could consult Tiermina or Milaine. I'd give it a shot myself first, though. I cut some lumber with wind magic, shaped it, and was able to make something mallet-like.

I... hadn't expected it to work.

I tried holding the mallet, twirled it around, and gave it a light swing. It seemed okay? As a test, I tried removing my bear puppets and lifting it up, but no dice. Once again, I could see just how much of a weakling I was without the onesie...

While swinging the mallet down onto the mortar, it hit me: Who was going to fold the mochi?

Mochi couldn't be made alone. The mallet was heavy and impossible for anyone but me to manage. I was sure the kids couldn't hold it, much less swing it again and again.

I sat down to rest and looked over at Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Maybe...? No, Kumayuru and Kumakyu wouldn't be able to turn the mochi—plus, it'd get all fuzzy from their fur.

Then again, they were summoned beasts. Did summoned beasts even shed? They didn't *look* dirty to me, but it's not like I'm an expert in bear cleanliness.

Would it be dangerous to let the older kids, like Fina, try it if I taught them? I'd seen kids doing it on television. Yeah... it'd be fine if we didn't go too quickly. As I was thinking about that, Kumayuru came over and lifted the mallet.

"Kumayuru?"

Kumayuru stood on their hind legs and lifted up the mallet with their forelegs.

Looked like they'd be participating—just not by turning.

"Can you do that?"

"Cwoom!~" Kumayuru's face seemed to say, "Just leave it to me!~"

Kumayuru tried swinging the mallet down. Now *that* packed some punch.

"Ease up a little, that's dangerous."

I guess *I* could turn the mochi. I was a little scared to, but I'd *probably* be fine? I felt like we'd kind a found our answer—and also like we hadn't. All we could do was try it out.

Just in case, I made a few more identical mallets and mortars. From watching

Kumayuru, there was a chance things might break. This way, having spares around would never be an issue.

The day before the mochi-pounding event, I soaked the mochi rice with plenty of water to prepare for the following day.

I got up early the next morning and got to work steaming the mochi rice. It had absorbed a good amount of the water.

Ugh... I was *tired*.

Maybe it would have been better if I'd made it yesterday and put it in my bear storage. Too late now, though; I continued to work. I left my bear house after finishing the prep work. When I arrived at the orphanage, I was greeted by the little kid gang.

"Where's everyone else?" I asked.

I didn't see Tiermina, Fina, or Anz. Maybe I'd arrived a little too early?

"Everyone went to go take care of the birds," one of the kids told me.

Another one piped up. "They said if everyone does, it'll be over right away,"

Yeah... even if they took a break from the shop, they couldn't take a break from taking care of the birds. But if everyone pitched in, they could finish that work quickly. In that case, I'd get the mochi pounding prepared before everyone returned.

I took the stone mortar and mallet out of my bear storage, and I prepared buckets of steamed mochi rice and warm water.

"What are you making, Yuna?" a kid asked me.

"A thing called mochi. It's a type of food you make by smashing rice."

"Does it taste good?"

The boys and girls, all around five or four years old, started questioning me. They were holding onto stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Other children had stuffed

animals too. Looked like those were popular, just like Sherry had told me.

"Umm, I'm not sure how to describe mochi. *I* think they're tasty. You should try some after they're done!"

"Okay!"

After I completed the prep work, the last thing was summoning Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Once I summoned my bears, the little kid gang happily ran right over.

"Yay! It's Kumayuru!"

"Kumakyuuuu!"

There were kids holding bear stuffed animals and collecting around Kumayuru and Kumakyu... it was a total overload of bear. If the children had been in bear uniforms, it would've been an unbearable amount of bear!

"Kumayuru will be helping me," I said, "so you can all play with Kumakyu. Kumakyu, please take care of everyone."

"Cwoom."

Since it'd be dangerous for the young children to get too close, I asked Kumakyu to look after them. In the meantime, Kumayuru and I started practicing pounding mochi.

To start, I put the steamed rice into the center of a stone. Steam rose up from the mortar.

Since fine movements were impossible for Kumayuru, I kicked things off by crushing the rice and lightly kneading it with the mallet. It was going smashingly.

I guess this is enough...? Once the rice looked sufficiently smooshed, I handed the mallet back to Kumayuru.

"Okay—when I fold it, try pounding it, but go lightly at first."

"Cwoom!"

I took off my bear puppets and put my hands onto the mochi. “Ouch!” Correction: the *hot* mochi.

“Yuna!”

“I’m okay!” The kids were looking at me with concern. I waved and showed them my hands to calm them down.

But man, that had been dangerous. It was really hot—I thought I’d nearly burned myself. It was incredible how frail my hands were after being a shut-in for so long. I’d be careful next time.

I think on TV they used water and just barely touched the mochi.

I tried again, but it was still piping hot. I looked at the bear puppets I’d placed on the ground—the bear puppets that never got dirty... the bear puppets that never required washing.

I put on my bear puppets and lightly touched the mochi.

Oh, they didn’t stick? It barely felt real.

I tried turning over the mochi with the bear puppets as a test. Well, there we go. The mochi wasn’t sticking to the bear puppets at all. I was impressed by my all-purpose bear puppets.

“Kumayuru, let’s go again.”

“Cwoom.”

“Okay.” *Slam.* “Okay.” *Slam.* “Okay...!” *Slam.* “Okay!” *Slam.*

The pounding was going well! We kept at it, keeping the mochi hydrated as we went.

As Kumayuru and I were absorbed in the mochi, the kids came back after finishing taking care of the birds. Tiermina, Fina, and Shuri were with them.

“You’ve already started?” Tiermina asked me.

“Yeah, I thought I’d give it a shot.” I continued pounding mochi as I explained it all to

Tiermina.

“Okay.” *Slam.* “Okay.” *Slam.* “Okay...!” *Slam.* “Okay!” *Slam.*

“Is this a new food?” Tiermina looked inside the mortar.

“Yeah... you make it by... crushing... mochi rice,” I answered while turning the mochi.

“Are you going to sell this in the shop?” Tiermina gave me a wary *not-this-again* look.

“This time... it’s for... personal consumption... so we’re not... selling it... at the shop.”

As you might expect, making mochi was tough. I wish we had an automatic mochi kneading machine, but we didn’t have anything that convenient. No, this would take some seriously hard work.

And it wouldn’t work well with my shop, since I employed women and children. Even if that wasn’t an issue, making it required a full day’s work. It just wasn’t reasonable to use it for dishes. We could freeze some, so technically, it *could* work—if we made a ton ahead of time. But that seemed like a pain, so I didn’t have any plans like that yet.

Besides, mochi’s good because you only get to have it every once in a while.

Tiermina seemed relieved by my answers.

“Okay.” *Slam.* “Okay.” *Slam.* “Okay...!” *Slam.* “Okay!” *Slam.*

The mochi was starting to get nice and sticky. We were almost there.

As I worked with the mochi, Morin, Anz, and the others came over.

“Sorry we’re late, Ms. Yuna! We heard you were making a dish with the mochi rice, so we made some food.”

Anz, Morin, and the others had been cooking something up? I was glad to hear it. A mochi-only meal seemed kind of sad.

But there were a *lot* of people. I doubted we’d be able to make enough at this rate, not with this amount of time. It took some time for me and Kumayuru to make mochi by ourselves. Maybe I’d have to ask Tiermina and the others to help me out...

Then, right as I was starting to worry, reinforcements arrived—

“Yuna, we heard you were making a new type of food. Is it okay if we join you?”

“Yeah! Anything we can help with?”

Rulina and Gil! They must’ve heard about this around town and came over. Behind them was the adventurer Blitz, accompanied by a harem of super-beautiful, mega-cute women that would make any other dude boil with envy.

“I’ll help as well!”

We had more men now. I guess they’d heard from Gentz, but I didn’t see Gentz himself around. Tiermina let me know he’d be back from work. In the meantime, it was time to teach everybody how to pound mochi.

We made two groups: Rulina and Gil, and Blitz and his party members. Immediately, though, Anz’s group and the female cooks wanted to give it a shot too.

Eventually, Gentz finished his work up early and came over. He paired up with Tiermina while Fina and Shuri assisted.

I guess it hadn’t been a waste to make the extra mallets and mortars. Though I’d made the mallet for Anz’s group a size smaller, the mallets still seemed heavy.

We had a ton more people making mochi, so our output picked right up. The bakery team—Morin, Karin, and Nerin—made bite-size balls of mochi.

I arranged small plates with soy sauce and seaweed, then handed the mochi out to the kids. The seaweed and soy sauce were a winning combination—but we also tried it in the soup that Anz and the others had made.

I ate it with the seaweed and the soy sauce. It was *delicious!*

We took turns pounding mochi in between munching on the food. I could put any leftovers into my bear storage, so it wasn’t a problem if we made too much.

The mochi-pounding event ended with a smashing success.

"Yuna, thank you so very much!" the headmistress said as we were cleaning up. "Ever since you arrived, the children always seem to be enjoying themselves. I was happy seeing them smiling today too."

The headmistress affectionately watched the children cleaning up the plates, chairs, and picnic sheets. It was nice to see that even she was enjoying herself.

Later on, when I told Noa about the event, she got mad at me.

"Next time you simply *must* invite me!" she'd said.

"Okay, okay. Just calm down..."

CHAPTER 219

THE BEAR GIVES PRINCESS FLORA STUFFED ANIMAL PRESENTS

A FEW DAYS had passed since the mochi-pounding event. I was debating whether or not to head to the capital. I was curious about what had happened with the toad family, but Cliff didn't know.

Elleaura had said that because there was evidence, the toad would *definitely* be stripped of his title. In the end, the king would be the one passing down the judgment. The problem was what would happen *after* his status was taken. Would they return to Sheelin? If they did, Misa might still be in danger.

My worrying wouldn't change a thing, so I decided to get moving instead. I'd go give Princess Flora the Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals. And if I just so happened to see Elleaura, she could answer my questions.

I took my bear transport gate to the capital. It was the first time I'd visited in a while. The gate guards greeted me and, as usual, one of them ran off to make a report. I headed into the castle as they retreated.

Since I'd come many times before, I headed toward Lady Flora's room without getting lost. I encountered people on the way to her room, but nobody stopped me. I always wondered what they were thinking, letting a normal person just waltz right into the room of the princess.

While I was pondering that, I got to my destination.

I knocked on the door like always, and Ange let me into room. Lady Flora was sitting at a desk against a wall. "Am I interrupting?" I asked.

"It's all right. We were just about to take a break." Ange looked over at Flora. "Lady Flora, Yuna has come to visit!"

Flora turned her little face over my way. "Bear?" She beamed at the sight of me and

rushed over. It was worth coming just to see her smile.

“You doing well?”

“Yeah!” she answered energetically.

“I brought a present for you today.”

“A present?”

“It’s bears!” I pulled out the Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals from my bear storage.

Even though the cub stuffed animals were small, they were plenty big for Lady Flora. I wondered which one she would take first, but then she grabbed one paw of each stuffed bear and pulled. They toppled onto the floor, and she hugged them then and there.

“Lady Flora, you can’t sit on the floor!” Ange warned. Flora looked like she was gonna tear up, but Ange cautioned her gently. “It isn’t good for the bears to be on the floor, so please, stand up.”

Personally, I thought the floor was plenty clean. There was a lovely carpet, and I could tell it was well-maintained. I wouldn’t have minded lying down on it to play games, but I guess princesses couldn’t do stuff like that.

Ange carried the stuffed animals to the top of a table. “Lady Flora,” she said as Lady Flora sat in a chair, hugging her bears, “don’t you have something to say to Yuna?”

Flora looked back and forth between me and the stuffed animals. Then she got down off the chair and came over to me. “Thank you!”

“Take good care of them,” I said, and Flora nodded happily.

All things considered, Ange was *definitely* teaching her right. Not just with her studies, either—Ange was also teaching her morals and etiquette. Lady Flora would grow up to be a great member of the royalty.

Lady Flora went back to the table and grabbed the Kumayuru stuffed animal. “Ms. Yuna, thank you so much for everything.”

I sat down in the chair across from Flora as Ange brought out tea. “Thank you so much,” I said, and took a sip. Man, the royal family’s tea was so good.

I was taking my time—it wasn’t like I had any other plans that day—when there was a knock at the door. The queen’s voice called through it, and Ange headed over to let her in. Had the king come too?

The door closed after the queen entered. Huh? No one else was with her?

The queen greeted me. “Hello, Yuna.” Then she noticed the stuffed animals that were right in front of Lady Flora. “My, are these stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu?”

“Yeah! Bear gave them to me.”

“Lady Flora seemed sad the other day when she had to say bye to Kumayuru and Kumakyu, so I thought it’d help if she had stuffed animals of them,” I explained.

The queen sat down in a chair next to Lady Flora, then borrowed the Kumakyu stuffed animal from her. “How adorable...!” She sat the Kumakyu stuffed animal on her lap and started to pet its head.

Uh. I’d made that stuffed animal for Lady Flora, and the queen was just... taking it? Come on now...

But Lady Flora didn’t seem to mind. She put her Kumayuru on her lap in the same way and hugged it. Like parent, like child. If Flora wasn’t making a fuss, I guess it was okay? Or maybe it’d be better if I got the queen her own set of stuffed animals...

“Good for you, Flora,” the queen said. The queen stroked her stuffed animal’s head while drinking the tea that Ange had set out.

“Uh-huh!” They both seemed happy.

“The real ones are cute, but these are pretty nice too.”

“Do you need a set too, Your Majesty?” I asked just in case.

“My, my, you’ll give me a set too?”

“If I do, you won’t take Lady Flora’s stuffed animals, will you?”

"I won't take my daughter's cherished possessions either way. But if you say you'll give me a set, then I'll gladly accept them."

I placed another pair of stuffed animals on the table. Now there were four Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals.

"So many bears!" Flora seemed thrilled about the four stuffed animals. Ange was staring at them.

"Do you want a set too, Ange?" I asked.

"No, I was simply thinking that my daughter would love them. She loves your picture books."

Argh. I couldn't *not* give her a present now. "Please give these to your daughter, Ange."

"Are you sure?"

"You said she loves bears, so you have to take them." I took out one more bear set. Now there were six bears on top of the table.

"Thank you very much. My daughter will be delighted."

After I'd gotten Noa's set, Sherry had made more in her spare time. The bears were continuing to multiply, and I'd picked up more just a few days ago.

I watched Lady Flora happily hugging her stuffed animals as Ange poured a second serving of tea. "Ms. Yuna," asked Ange, "what are you doing for lunch today?"

"Lunch?"

Lady Flora and the queen reacted when Ange said that. Maybe that was because I usually brought food with me? But if I made them food, I'd be causing Zelef trouble by not letting him know too.

I thought about it. I had bread and rice in my bear storage, but today I pulled out the mochi. In a way, I'd prepared something special specifically for today.

"I'm not sure if this will suit your palate," I said as I took out the mochi. They were in a pot with various other ingredients.

"Ah, it looks like it's hot pot today," said the queen.

"Does royalty eat hot pot...?"

"We don't all eat out of a single pot," she elaborated, "but we eat what the chef serves us."

So it was like soup, basically?

I lifted the lid of the pot and steam rose up. (Man, my bear storage was handy.) I prepared bowls, forks, and spoons. "Lady Flora, are there any vegetables you don't like?"

"Nuh-uh!"

"You're such a good kid."

"Uh-huh!" I served her plenty of vegetables along with the mochi. "Yummy!"

I gave the queen and Ange their portions as well. When we all started eating, the door opened without a knock and Ellelaura came into the room. "Did I make it in time?"

What she was talking about? Ellelaura look at the table and murmured to herself. "Whew, looks like I did."

I guess she was talking about the food. She hadn't come to see me. then. "Do you want some, Ellelaura?"

"Of course! That's why I hurried over." Ellelaura happily sat down in a chair, so I served up another portion from the pot and placed it in front of her. "Thank you!"

Then, everyone started eating.

"My, what is this?" Ellelaura held the mochi.

"That's mochi. You can eat it grilled or put it in a pot."

“Goodness, it’s stretchy...!”

“Weally, weally stretchy!” Flora stretched the mochi.

“Lady Flora, dear, *please* don’t play with your food.”

“I’m sorry...” Flora ate her mochi normally.

“It’s quite delicious and springy! I don’t think I’ve eaten anything quite like this. It’s rather tasty.”

I guess hot pot really was more of a commoner food? I couldn’t picture nobles and royalty eating it.

“Yuna, you actually brought Lady Flora stuffed animals?” Ellelaura looked at the stuffed animals placed behind Flora.

“I promised, you know? Besides, I intended to make them gifts from the beginning. I gave some to Noa too.”

“Thank you. She was looking rather enviously at the stuffed animals Misana had.”

She’d looked *really* envious. Noa had been thrilled when I’d gifted them to her. She’d even tried to order more, which kinda got me worried about her future. I wanted to think that her penchant for bears wasn’t *my* fault.

I didn’t want to bear that responsibility.

It was so quiet without the king around. I thought the guard at the gate went to report to him, but he wasn’t here. “Ellelaura, is the king not coming?” I asked her.

She looked up from her mochi. “He’s busy with *that* matter today, so Zang and Ernat were standing guard so he wouldn’t get away.”

She must have been talking about *that* incident. Would she tell me what happened if I asked?

“He didn’t just kidnap Misa and the merchant children,” said Ellelaura. “Various other...

misdeeds came to light. We're investigating, interviewing witnesses, and juggling so many more processes." Here I was, unsure if I could ask for details—now she was just opening up about it.

"So, you have evidence that he committed crimes?"

"The evidence is strong. They won't be able to talk their way out of this one."

Since they were nobles, I'd thought the process would drag on, but it looked like they were *actually* getting punished.

Then again, they'd kidnapped children. They had to be punished for something like that, and it looked like they'd committed even more crimes than that.

"It seems Gajurdo had his fun."

According to Ellelaura, he'd participated in unfair business dealings with merchants, on top of coercion, violence, and various other misdeeds. Her wording was vague, but I got the sense that he'd even murdered people. I didn't ask about the dungeon, and Ellelaura didn't mention it either. I assumed I didn't need to know more about it.

"The Salbard family will be stripped of their titles."

"Which means they wouldn't be lords anymore, right?" I asked.

Ellelaura nodded. "The Fahrengram family will now govern the town of Sheelin."

That was a relief for Gran, since he wouldn't be harassed any more. But I was worried that the father and son would return to the town—even if they lost their titles. I didn't know what kind of punishments this country had, but if they went back to that town, there was a chance they would hold a grudge and attack Misa.

I asked about that too.

Ellelaura slowly shook her head. "All of their property has been seized, and Gajurdo will be executed. The son will be left in the care of some relatives in the capital."

I was shocked that he was to be executed, but what could I say? There wasn't much anyone could do. With the son going to a relative's house in the capital, did that mean that Misa would be safe? If the son resented her, then we might have another problem

if he kidnapped her or harassed her.

"It's okay. The son, Randle, won't be able to enter Sheelin for the rest of his life. The family looking after him will be monitoring him as well. They know they'll be punished if he causes problems."

In that case... I could relax maybe? I felt like he was likely to do something from the shadows, considering his nasty personality. He might've tried giving another order to the adventurer who'd kidnapped Misa or something. Just like Elleaura had said, we had to rely on the people who had taken him in.

Just in case, and because I was interested, I asked about the adventurer in black who had kidnapped Misa.

"Oh, that adventurer? It seems that he's committed other crimes, so we're investigating him."

Ah, so, that was the situation then.

"I suppose I ought to also tell you that Duke Gran has taken responsibility for the situation. He's voluntarily stepping down. His son Leonardo will become the Lord of Sheelin."

"Really?"

"With his granddaughter kidnapped, and with the way the merchants who followed him were in danger, he decided to retire."

"It wasn't Gran's fault that Misa was kidnapped, though! And he's definitely not to blame with what happened to those merchants, right?" He'd been *harassed!* After all, he hadn't done anything wrong himself...

But I guess he'd had to step down since it'd been happening for a while, and he should've done something about it before it got this bad. From what Elleaura said, he'd always been one step behind.

There were neighborly disputes even in this world, I suppose... although this was on a much larger scale, considering we were talking about squabbling lords.

"Though it may not be his fault, he also said that it was the right time to hand things

off to his son. We really can't criticize him, as far as the situation goes."

I guess that was true. Leonardo was about the same age as Cliff himself, after all. If this was Gran's decision, I didn't have a right to butt in.

"Gran will also be free now to do as he wishes now. He said he'll be taking Misana to your shop." The old guy sure was spry. I'd have to welcome him if he came by my shop.

CHAPTER 220

THE BEAR TAKES HOME AN ELF GIRL

LADY FLORA FELL ASLEEP with a full belly, still holding the bear stuffed animals, so after the meal, I headed out from the castle. I was just getting home to my bear house in the capital when I saw someone collapsed against the wall of my house—wait, *what?* Why was someone collapsed in front of my house?!

I rushed over and found a girl with long ears and light green hair. Was she an elf? I could definitely see those long ears poking out of the long hair... ears like that were pretty much the calling card for elves.

She looked like she was about the same age as me. Then again, that's just how she *looked*. Based on common knowledge, though, elves lived a long time. For all I knew, she was much older.

The girl was still leaning against the wall in a sitting position, completely still. I *really* didn't want anyone up and *dying* in front of my house, so I crouched down to check that she was still breathing. She was still alive, thank goodness; at least I hadn't come home to find a corpse out front.

"Hey." I grabbed her shoulder and shook her lightly. "Are you okay?"

She slowly opened her eyes. Good, good...

"What are you doing in a place like this?" I asked.

The elf girl stared back at me with blank, half-lidded eyes. "A bear...?" She looked at me and then tilted her head slightly to the side.

"Why are you sleeping here?"

"Am I dreaming...? A girl who looks like a bear... nobody would dress so strangely."

"Hate to break it to you," I said, "but this getup just so happens to be my style."

"I'm sure I'll actually wake up if I go back to sleep again..." The girl actually closed her eyes again! I even heard her start *snoring*. I tried shaking her gently, but she wouldn't wake up.

Uh, wait, what was I supposed to do now?

I thought about calling a guard, but it seemed awkward to just hand them a sleeping elf girl. And it wasn't like I could just leave her while I went to get someone. I'd probably stand out too, if I was carrying her in my arms in this bear onesie.

So, I decided to take the girl into my house. I carried her in my arms bridal-style. Thanks to my bear equipment, she wasn't so heavy either!

I carried her in, shut the door, and brought her up to the second floor. Then I put her down in a guest bed. Uh... *hmm*.

I'd ended up bringing her home. Was... was this such a good idea? I looked at the elf girl sleeping peacefully on the bed. Nah, I couldn't have just left her like that. No way I could have!

As I tried to convince myself of that, I removed the item bag and knife that the girl had around her waist and placed them on a table, since they'd be pretty uncomfortable to sleep with. More comfortable now, the girl turned in her sleep and seemed downright cozy.

I guess she was fine now...?

As I made to leave the room, I remembered something. Ah, right—I'd almost forgotten. I summoned Kumayuru as a cub onto the corner of the bed.

"Let me know if she wakes up," I told Kumayuru and gently patted their head before leaving the room.

I went down to the first floor, sat on the sofa, and took out some potato chips and oren juice.

Crunch, crunch.

Okay, but seriously... what had I gotten myself into? I never thought I'd take an elf girl home.

Gulp, gulp.

Except... I felt like I'd seen her before? But where? Had we just passed by each other somewhere?

Crunch, crunch.

I ate the potato chips, drank the oren juice, and relaxed.

I started to get drowsy, so I summoned and hugged Kumakyu in cub form. "Kumakyu, wake me up if something happens." I flopped over on the sofa while still hugging Kumakyu. Ah... truly, there's no luxury in human civilization like a good ol' siesta. I hugged Kumakyu and settled in. The moment I closed my eyes, I drifted off to dreamland.

Bop, bop.

Something soft patted my cheek. I guess Kumakyu was trying to wake me. I got up, still hugging Kumakyu. "What a good rest, Kumakyu, right?"

"Cwoom."

How long had I been out? It was starting to get dark outside the window. Was it already evening? I guess I'd slept a bit too long.

I got up from the sofa and looked at Kumakyu, who let out a small cry and looked up.

"Did the elf girl wake up?"

Kumakyu shook their head. She hadn't? Then what had happened? If the elf girl had woken up, Kumayuru would've let me know... but then again, maybe not.

I'd closed the door. Would I be able to hear Kumayuru, even if they crooned loudly?

Kumakyu was still staring upstairs, so I went to go check on things.

I went up to the second floor and opened the door to the room where the elf girl was sleeping, and...

...spotted the girl there, hugging Kumayuru.

“Ngh, so soft and warm!”

Kumayuru was trying to escape, but couldn't get away with the girl hugging them. I mean, Kumayuru probably could if they really tried, but they seemed a little at a loss.

Because the girl wasn't awake at all. She was just hugging Kumayuru in her sleep.



Kumayuru looked at me like they wanted to be saved. So, *that* was what Kumakyu wanted me to do.

But I felt bad about waking the sleeping girl. I was wondering how to fix this when the girl slowly opened her eyes.

Oh, was she *actually* going to wake up this time?

She looked at Kumayuru, the bear she was holding “Bear...?” Then she turned to look over at me. “A bear? A... a dream?”

Then, at once, she was falling asleep again. I lightly bopped the elf girl on the head as she tried to drift off. “You’re not dreaming.”

She opened her eyes when I bopped her. I kind of needed her to wake up sooner or later, anyways. The girl got up and looked around the room restlessly.

“Where am I?” She looked at me again. “A bear...?”

Argh, could we move on from that? “This is my house. You were collapsed out front. Do you not remember that?”

The elf girl looked worried. She walked through her thoughts out loud. “I got tired after walking through crowds for hours. I didn’t have any money or anywhere to rest. After staggering around, I saw a bear house. I don’t remember anything after that.”

“Haaah...” All I could do was sigh. She’d gotten tired and collapsed in front of my house. “Where’s your home?”

“The elves’ village.”

Which was *where* exactly? Why was she talking like it was just around the block from here?! “So, you’re not from the capital, then? You didn’t come all the way from the elves’ village on your own, did you?”

Not that I knew where the village was in the first place.

“I came by myself.”

Alone? But she was so small, even if we were about the same age. And yet she’d gotten

all the way to the capital with no money? I was dumbstruck. What were her parents thinking? Or maybe... she was actually considered an adult since she was an elf, so they let her travel on their own? Still, it was pretty dangerous.

Admittedly, calling her out on that would be the pot calling the kettle black, but *still*...

"Well, why did you come to..." *...the capital?* I was about to say right when the girl's stomach quietly growled. "How about we get something to eat first? I'll prep something for us. Let's go downstairs."

She probably hadn't had anything decent to eat, and I could hear her stomach cry out for food.

"Really?" she said.

"Yeah!"

"So, um..." she said.

Oh, right—we hadn't really introduced ourselves. "I'm Yuna."

"Yuna, thank you very much. I'm Luimin."

"All right, Luimin. Could you... maybe let Kumayuru go soon-ish please?" Kumayuru was still in her arms and had been shooting me pleading looks for the length of our talk.

"This cub is called Kumayuru?" she asked as she lifted up my bear.

"The black bear is Kumayuru, yeah. This white bear is Kumakyu," I held Kumakyu up in my arms.

"They're cute!"

Luimin let Kumayuru go, and I took her down to the first floor. "Sit wherever you like."

She sat in a chair. I pulled out some juice and some bread that Morin had made and served it to her.

Luimin bowed her head. "Thank you very much." Her belly gurgled again, and I urged

her to eat. I guess this would be dinner today. I took out some for myself and sat down.

"It's yummy..." Luimin seemed to be relishing it. "This is the first time I've eaten bread this delicious!"

Morin would probably be overjoyed at that.

"Yuna, is your family here? I would like to meet them."

"I don't have any family. I'm by myself."

"Huh? You're *alone*?"

"That's right."

She looked surprised at that. "You're living alone even though you're so little?!"

I *wasn't* so little.

And honestly, Luimin wasn't much bigger than me. She was actually just about the same height. Since she was an elf and they lived a long time, she had to be older than me though, right?

How old was she anyways? She *looked* fifteen!

"Besides," I said, "I'm not alone. I have Kumayuru and Kumakyu right here."

Kumayuru and Kumakyu came over at that. They were my beary precious family.

"Um... so I just arrived at the capital, and I don't know much about it. Is that look you have, ah... the current fashion?"

It seemed like that'd been weighing on her for a while. I guess anyone would wonder about that.

"It's definitely not." I'd be terrified if this *was* the current trend. "And I'd prefer not to talk about my look, thanks. Now, Luimin, what brought you to the capital?" I didn't want to talk about my outfit to somebody I'd just met, so I just moved right past that.

"I came looking for someone. She was working in the capital the last time I saw her."

She was looking for someone in the *capital*? Had she just walked around aimlessly for hours searching for them?

That couldn't be right. At least, I hoped not. "Where is this person? I can take you to her."

There was no way she'd come to the capital looking for someone without knowing where they were. If she told me where they lived, I could show her the way. In the very least, I could ask Elleaura if she didn't know enough.

"She said she was working at the Adventurer Guild ten years ago," Luimin offered.

"Ten years ago!?"

"Yes, ten years ago." Luimin tilted her head a bit. "Why? Is there something wrong?"

She'd met the person *ten years ago*? And she hadn't even seen this person for a literal *decade*?! I guess that's just a near immortal race for you, then. Maybe ten years felt like one human year to them.

If this person worked at the Adventurer Guild, that probably made her an adventurer. But if Luimin hadn't seen this person in ten years... what if she'd died? That's been known to happen with adventurers.

Let's start there. "Is she an adventurer?"

"I don't know. I just heard that she was working at the Adventurer Guild."

Hmm. Maybe Sanya would know if I asked her? She was the guild master, after all. Plus, she was *also* an elf...

I looked at Luimin's face... it looked kinda familiar?

Staring at her seemed to have made her embarrassed. "What is it?"

"Um, what's her name?" I asked.

"Sanya. She's my older sister."

Of course! I'd been wondering why she looked so familiar—it *was* Sanya. Why hadn't

I noticed before? They were both the only elves I'd seen around the whole city, and I hadn't realized the connection.

Luimin leaned forward. "So, you know her...!" She must have seen my reaction and sensed something.

"I do. Sanya is the guild master of the Adventurer Guild."

"She's the *guild master*?"

"Yeah. She's an elf, her hair is the same color as yours, and the name checks out too."

"Yuna, could you take me to her? Please?" Luimin bowed her head.

"Sure, but let's go tomorrow. It's too late today."

It would be dusk soon. The guild was essentially a twenty-four-hour establishment, but it would be packed with adventurers coming back from jobs right now. I really wanted to avoid the rush hour crowd. Plus, Sanya might've already headed home from work.

I promised to take Luimin tomorrow and told her to stay over for the night.

"Yuna, thank you." Well, it wasn't like I could kick her out. But Luimin already seemed like a magnet for trouble.

CHAPTER 221

THE BEAR GOES TO SEE SANYA

THE DAY AFTER I picked up the elf girl, Luimin, I headed to the Adventurer Guild. Luimin wanted to get over there right away, but we had to go after the morning rush unless we wanted to run into trouble.

“Um, Yuna...” Luimin hid in my shadow.

“What is it?” I knew what she wanted to say, but I asked anyway.

“Everyone’s *staring*.”

Sure were—just like usual. There were even kids pointing at us.

“So, your outfit really *is* weird... I mean, uh... it’s unique? Per... sonalized?” Jeez, choosing your words carefully doesn’t really help when you say the whole process out loud...

“Maybe they’re staring at you because elves are so rare, Luimin.”

“I do not think that’s true. I’ve never been stared at like this before. Not even once!”

Yeah, I knew the stares were for me—but she really didn’t have to be so blunt about her disagreement. I couldn’t avoid the stares while walking through the capital. Unlike Crimonia, the capital was huge and populous. There probably weren’t a ton of people who knew about me.

That’s why I ended up the center of attention, since I was dressed as a *bear*.

“Uh!” Luimin shrunk into herself. “I feel kind of embarrassed...”

I was the one being stared at. Was there really any point to hiding behind me? If she really hated it so much, she could’ve just kept her distance while we walked. The only reason she felt like she was being stared at was because she was hiding behind me while *I* was being stared at.

Plus, it only bothered her because she let it; I really wanted to tell Luimin that. I mean, I'd learned that lesson myself over the last few months. But I was getting kind of anxious because of the stares too, I admit, so I pulled my bear hood low over my face to shut out the rest of the world.

"Are we almost at the Adventurer Guild, Yuna?"

"Almost." While we walked down the main road, we caught sight of a building that was bigger than the rest. "It's that big one ahead." I used my bear puppet to point out the Adventurer Guild, which was way larger than the one in Crimonia.

"Is that where my sister is...?" Luimin suddenly broke into a sprint toward the place.

"Wai—Luimin!" I ran after her.

When I got inside the guild, Luimin was searching all over the place. The stares gathered on us after we barged in. I heard the adventurers saying "bear" this and "bear" that, but none of them approached us.

Guess rumors from the last time had spread around? Still, it didn't seem like I'd be running into trouble, so that worked out fine.

"What's wrong?" Luimin asked.

"Hold up a sec."

We'd be in the way if we hovered around the entrance, so I grabbed Luimin's hand with my bear puppet and headed to the back. I looked at the reception desk. We'd avoided the rush, so they were free.

I pulled Luimin over to one. "Could I ask you something really quick?"

"Yes, what do you need?" the receptionist answered, even after getting a good look at me. Yeah, I guess most guild workers wouldn't need to ask who I was.

"I'd like to see the guild master, Sanya. Is she in?"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I don't, but could you let her know Yuna wants to see her?" She owed me one, after

all.

Luimin nodded. "Please tell her that her younger sister, Luimin, has come to see her. I'm Sanya's little sister."

"You're the guild master's *sister*?!" The receptionist seemed shocked. The other guild workers nearby looked just as startled. Was it really all *that* surprising?

"So... please." Luimin bowed her head. "I'd like to see my sister, no matter what it takes."

"Of course. I will let her know. Just one moment..." The receptionist left her seat and headed into a back room.

I guess you had to schedule something in advance to be able to see the capital's guild master. I mean, normally, she'd too busy for just anyone to come in and see her. While I was thinking that over, the whispering about bears I'd heard earlier had turned into whispering about the guild master's sister. It spreading from adventurer to adventurer like wildfire.

Luimin looked around, seeming surprised herself, but that just made the adventurers stare at her even more, eager to get a look at her face.

"Wh-what is this?!" She hid behind me.

...Really? Like I'd said earlier, I really wished she wouldn't hide behind me. "Looks like they're all staring because they overheard that you're Sanya's little sister."

"Uhn... but that's so embarrassing!"

This time the stares were meant for Luimin, so I thought she ought to be on the receiving end of them. She looked pretty embarrassed about it. Then, at once, the door to the back room flung open.

"Luimin?!" Sanya hurried out of the room.

"Sanya!!!"

Sanya ran over and hugged Luimin. "It's been five years, hasn't it? You've grown so big!"

“Sanya, it’s been *ten* years.”

“Oh, my, has it?”

They both broke into laughter. Yeah, there was no helping these elf siblings. Their sense of time was totally different from mine.

“So, what happened?” Sanya asked. “What brought you all the way to the capital?”

Then she noticed the eyes around us. The stares were coming from adventurers and guild workers alike.

“All of you, back to your jobs!” she snapped. “Don’t loiter around all day. You’re adventurers! Hurry up and get on with your quests!!!” The peanut gallery looked away at once. Sanya sighed and led us to the guild master’s office.

(I went with the flow and followed them, not quite sure if I was supposed to.)

“Luimin, it’s been too long. What are the two of you doing together?” Sanya looked at each of us.

“Well...” Luimin started awkwardly.

I jumped in—not like she could just say I’d found her collapsed in the street. “She bumped into me after getting lost, so I brought her over here.” I left out the bit about her fainting, to protect Luimin’s honor.

“Really?” Sanya looked dubiously at Luimin.

Luimin’s eyes wandered away as she nodded. “Yes, really.”

Hey, as long as she was fine with the lie, no harm done.

“Yuna, I’m so sorry,” Sanya said. “My sister must have given you quite some trouble.”

“We just happened to run into each other, so don’t worry about it.” *Wouldn’t you know it, I thought to myself, I just so happened to find your sister’s unconscious body in my front yard! Surprise, surprise!*

“What brought you all the way to the capital? Did you come to see me?”

"The barrier around the elven woods has weakened, so the elder asked me to bring you back."

Sanya looked shocked at that. "Luimin, the barrier has *weakened*?!"

Just hearing the words "elven woods" brought up the image of some supernatural, mystical forest, so the barrier had to be something important.

"Yeah. There's a tear in the barrier and monsters have been getting into the woods. We're going to patch it back up and the elder wants you there."

"I see what's going on now, but... the barrier? It's fading? It should have held up for another hundred years...!"

"Wishful thinking isn't going to change anything. It *has* weakened. Monsters *have* started slipping past." I could understand why Luimin was being so insistent. You could whine all day about what should've been, but monsters were getting in regardless of all that—the *should've-been* wasn't so.

Maybe Sanya had a kind of point too, though. Was there a reason that the barrier was weakening all of a sudden? In games and manga, there'd usually be some villain trying to attack pretty much any elven village they could. That mysterious someone might've broken the barrier around the village to try to steal their treasure. You know, as you do if you're a villain who stumbles upon an elven village. Made sense to me.

"Um, if I could interject...?"

"What is it, Yuna?"

"Are elves the only ones able to get through the barrier?"

"Others can too. Only monsters can't."

So, *people* could get in, and monsters couldn't. That sank my evil villain theory, I guess. But could just *anyone* really get in? That meant I could get in too, right? Elven woods and villages were standard fantasy stuff. If I asked, maybe they'd let me visit?

Well, when in a fantasy world... go visit the elves' village? I guess?

"What a headache..." said Sanya. "But I suppose I can't refuse."

"Do you have to be the one to fix the barrier, Sanya?" I asked. I wasn't going to go so far as offer to go in her place, but...

"It's not like others couldn't do it, but the magic used to create the barrier is a secret among the family of the elder."

"And the elder is... who?"

"My grandfather. He needs me to make the barrier."

"Why not Luimin?"

"She's still too small."

"Ugh, I'm not small!"

"You're right. You've grown bigger. Still... you knew I was alive, and you knew where I'd be, so you came searching for me." I suppose if it was a family secret, I wouldn't be able to just do it in her place.

"Still," Sanya continued, "the village is somewhat out of the way from here."

"How out of the way are we talkin'?"

"The next kingdom over."

Which meant *what*, exactly? What was the scale of that? Luimin must've traveled all that way on her own. Sure, she'd fainted on my doorstep, but now I was impressed she'd made it to the capital at all.

"Which inn are you staying in right now, Luimin? You should stay at my house for a while."

"A while?"

"Well, we can't just leave immediately. I need to transfer my duties over to someone and finish up any urgent work. I'm the guild master, after all. I need to make sure everything is in order, or I'd cause trouble for lots of people."

Right. Sanya was the guild master in the capital. She probably had a lot of work and

needed someone else to do it while she'd be gone. That was just working life, you know? Compare that to me... I was basically on a perpetual vacation.

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

"Well..." Luimin glanced at me.

"Answer me honestly..." Sanya pressed Luimin for the truth.

Luimin answered honestly. "I got to the capital yesterday and Yuna let me stay with her."

"Ah, that's what I thought. Thank you, Yuna, truly. She's a little scatterbrained, so I've been rather worried about her. Still, I'd like to thank you somehow. Since I need to figure out my replacement, could I pay you back after I get back from the elves' village?" Sanya seemed apologetic.

"Or..." I said without hesitation, "you could just take me with you."

CHAPTER 222

THE BEAR WANTS TO GO TO THE ELVES' VILLAGE

“Huh? Yuna, you want to go to the elves’ village?”

“Yeah. Would I be in the way if I did?”

Scenes where elves attacked intruders to their elven wood were classic tropes. There’d be an elf with a bow up in a tree. And he’d be all like “Leave. Take a step further and I’ll shoot you!” So, I didn’t want to cause trouble for them, but... I also couldn’t just stay home after all this.

“That’s fine. They’ll be on guard with a stranger coming in, but you should be all right as long as you’re with us. Still, the village is far away and located deep within the woods. It’s quite an ordeal for any normal human to get to it.”

With my bear gear, I could walk as far as I needed, no problem. Plus, I had the bears themselves. I could get there by riding Kumakyu or Kumayuru, and I could even nap on the way. I wasn’t going to have any problems traveling whatsoever.

Uh. Now that I think about it, I’m pretty dependent on bear stuff, aren’t I?

“Yuna... I hope you know that it’s not a quest. There isn’t a reward, and it won’t count as an achievement to go toward your rank.”

I didn’t need money or the rank; I just wanted to see a standard, fantasy-world elven village. When I told as much, they looked exasperated with me.

“If you say so, Yuna,” said Sanya. “There really isn’t anything interesting there.”

Maybe not to elves, but I was sure there’d be tons of interesting things for this particular human girl. There’d be treasures to behold, or precious medicinal herbs that could only be found in their woods—the elven woods were uncharted territory

as far as I was concerned. Plus, elf villages are always major staples in games, novels, and comics. It'd be a huge waste not to see one myself if I was already in another world! Even if it wasn't super interesting, I was content just seeing where elves lived in in this world.

It was sightseeing.

I was thrilled to get Sanya's permission to go with them right when, all of a sudden, someone interjected rather contrarily.

"Sister, are you really planning to bring Yuna with us?" Luimin looked up at Sanya in disbelief. Was she against having me tag along? I'd been really hoping for her blessing. I didn't want things being tense between us if we were going to be travel buddies.

"It's very far away," Luimin continued. "And Yuna is still just a child."

A child? And hey, I wasn't that little! Plus, Luimin wasn't all that grown herself, physically. Especially in *certain* areas...

But apparently Luimin's objections to me coming along were about safety.

"You're small too, Luimin," I pointed out.

"Maybe so, but you're a human, Yuna. You're not an elf. It'll be too dangerous."

The concern from Luimin was nice and all, but this was a little much.

"So, you're worried about Yuna being in danger," Sanya said, as though she were holding something in her back teeth. She turned to me and gave me a look.

Why was she looking at me like *that*? Wait... no, I got it. I guess I needed to convince Luimin it'd be fine for now.

"Luimin, I'm an adventurer," I said. "I know how to fend for myself. Don't worry about me."

"You're an adventurer?" She looked at me dubiously, as though she couldn't wrap her mind around it.

Here we go again. No one was going to believe a girl wearing a bear onesie claiming to

be an adventurer.

While I was trying to figure out how to explain it to Luimin, Sanya came to my rescue. “Despite her outfit, Yuna is a fine adventurer. It’ll be all right. She won’t hold us back.”

Man... I wish I had a good objection to the bit about the outfit. Couldn’t she be more tactful if she was going to back me up?

“Yuna, it will be a long trip,” said Luimin. “You won’t be able to go home for several days. It’ll be perilous. There will be monster attacks and sudden, drenching rains. And it’s not just the monsters that’ll be dangerous—the people will be too. They’ll come up to us assuming we’re easy marks. They’ll try to swindle us.”

She spoke like she knew from experience. I could see that Luimin hadn’t had an easy time traveling here to the capital. I kind of wanted to pat her on the head and tell her she’d tried her best...

If it rained, I could take shelter in my bear house. With my skills, I could handle just about any normal monster. I already knew about stranger danger too, so I’d just beat them at their own game. I wondered whether it was just in my head that the last bit, “they’ll swindle you,” had packed so much emphasis when she’d said it.

“If you’re that worried for her, Luimin, why don’t you protect her? You’ve matured a little, haven’t you?” Sanya proposed, a nefarious grin gracing her lips.

Luimin stared at me. She brooded for a short while. Then, finally: “All right. I’ll protect Yuna. But you make sure to watch over her on the way home, Sister.”

Things had gotten a little weird, but Luimin had given her consent for me to tag along.

I was more worried for Luimin, especially after she’d collapsed right in front of my bear house. She seemed really klutzy. I got the feeling that letting her walk off on her own was dangerous. Regardless, Luimin was probably worried for *me*.

“Well, then, let’s figure out our plans.”

After that, Sanya carefully took stock of her work. We decided on the day we’d head out, among other things.

“Sister, how should we get there? A carriage?”

That seemed like a pain. The worst thing about carriages was how slow they were. Horses were much better. But Luimin might have proposed a carriage because she was thinking of me.

“Luimin, how did you get all the way here?”

“I used shared carriages and walked.”

Shared carriages were one way of getting from one town to another. They were kind of like buses and trains back in my original world. You could use them as a way to get to a specific destination. If you got an expensive one, they’d come with guards. I’d sometimes see escort quests, but most places had long-term contracts with adventurers; they were rarely put up on the guild boards.

“Hmm... right.” Sanya seemed to think for a moment. “Yuna, could I ask you for a favor?”

She was being ambiguous, but I knew she probably was asking me for Kumayuru and Kumakyu. I didn’t mind, so I nodded. The carriage would take way too much time. Besides, I preferred traveling on my bears. The sisters would be doing me a favor if we took them.

We figured out our schedule and how we’d be traveling. We decided to meet up at the Adventurer Guild on the day of departure and parted ways.

Once I was out of the guild, I used my bear transport gate to go back to Crimonia so I could tell Fina and Tiermina that I was going on a trip.

“Yuna, please be careful,” Fina told me.

“If anything happens, I’ll call you over the bear phone.” I was more worried about Fina and the others. That’s why I told Fina to make sure she called me on the bear phone. I could come right back as long as I had the bear gate.

Tiermina spoke up. “I’m sure you’ll be fine with how powerful you are and with those bears, but please, try to get back as soon as you can. I think the orphans will be worried if you’re gone too long, and Fina and Shuri always seem down without you around.”

"I'll try to get back as soon as I can," I promised. It kind of made me happy that so many people cared about me. I hadn't had much of that in my old world.

If things got hairy, I could set up a bear gate at the elves' village and cut my trip short. The only issue was that I couldn't tell Sanya and Luimin about the gate.

One the day of the trip, I headed to the Adventurer Guild. The sun had only just started to rise.

Ugh, I'm sleepy...

I didn't think we had to leave so early, but apparently, they wanted to head out before there was a crowd trying to get in or out of the gates. Honestly, I couldn't argue with that. The capital gate tends to get traffic.

I yawned as I headed to the Adventurer Guild. Maybe it wasn't so bad being up this early. There weren't that many people around. No children to point fingers at me, no people whispering about me... I *did* encounter some people who looked shocked when they ran into me, but it wasn't anything compared to usual.

Sanya and Luimin were already there waiting for me at the guild.

"G-gwood mowning," I said with a yawn.

"You seem tired, Yuna," said Sanya.

"I don't usually wake up this early." Normally I'd get another hour or two of sleep.

It wasn't like I ever had to wake up early for work. When I did need to travel, Kumayuru and Kumakyu could get me there in a flash, considering how fast they were. Even if I needed to get to the capital, I could just use the bear transport gate. I didn't have any reason to wake up early. Even Fina didn't come over to do her harvesting work at my house until after sunrise.

"You two don't seem tired," I added.

"We're elves. We're used to waking with the sun," said Sanya, but Luimin immediately contradicted her.

"Sister! What are you talking about? You would have never woken up if I hadn't been there to wake you. And you *never* actually get up, no matter how many times I try! On top of that, *you* were just yawning a moment ago!"

A brutal exposé.

Wicked—so basically, I could yawn all I wanted without feeling bad about it. I didn't hold back and let loose another one. Guess I'd be taking a nap on one of my bears once we got going.

"Today was different from normal," Sanya insisted. "I was working so late last night that I had trouble waking up. It's not like I was sleeping in because that's how I normally do things, you know? It's... it's not that!"

Huh. So, Sanya had an actual *reason* for her yawns, unlike me.

"Yuna, where are the horse and carriage?" Luimin piped up. What a strange thing to ask.

Why did she think I was getting horses ready? When Sanya and I shot her weird looks, Luimin started to explain, seeming flustered. "The other day, my sister asked you to prepare the transportation, so I thought you would get the horse and carriage. Was that not the plan? Or did you make reservations for a shared carriage?"

I looked at Sanya. She had a slight smirk on her face. So, she'd neglected to tell her little sister about my bears. Teasing her, eh?

"Luimin, it's okay," she said. "Yuna has prepped a way for us to get to the village."

"Has she?" Luimin gave me a concerned look.

I nodded. We weren't lying.

"Well, let's get to it!" Sanya started walking toward the gate.

Luimin followed, looking confused.

CHAPTER 223

THE BEAR HEADS OUT TO THE ELVES' VILLAGE

WE HEADED OUT of the gate and into the hubbub of departing merchants and shared carriages.

"Um, we're not walking the whole way there, are we?" Luimin asked nervously.

Well, who wouldn't be worried after we walked out of the gate without explaining anything to her?

I headed to a relatively deserted place. "I guess here will work?" I stretched out both my arms and summoned my bears.

"Wh-wh-what are those?!" Luimin yelped.

"This is Kumayuru, and this is Kumakyu. I introduced them to you, didn't I?"

"You mean *little* Kumayuru and Kumakyu? But they were so much smaller!" Luimin held up her hands to demonstrate how tiny they were.

"You saw them while they were in cub form."

I shrunk my bears... and now someone else was shouting at me in surprise.

"Yuna! What are these little bears?!" Sanya watched the scene, wide eyed.

Come to think of it, Sanya hadn't known anything about their cub forms. "I can switch my bears between their normal size and this small cub form."

"I had no idea..."

Both sisters picked up a bear and cradled them in their arms in exactly the same way. Still, I did have to get them to let go of my bears so I could return them to their original size.

“How curious...!”

“How curious indeed...!”

It was time to move things along. “Okay, you two, get on Kumayuru.”

“You don’t mean that we’re riding them to the village?”

“I do. They’re a lot more comfortable than a horse.”

The two of them approached Kumayuru.

“I’ve never ridden a bear before.”

“It’s not any day that you’d get to ride on one, I suppose...”

Kumayuru turned around for them. Luimin got on first, then Sanya.

“Um... I’m looking forward to riding with you, Kumayuru.”

I got on Kumakyu and gave my bear a gentle pat. “I’m counting on you again.” Kumakyu gave me a small croon in response.

I turned to the elves. “I don’t think you’d actually fall off, but make sure that you’re not struggling while you’re riding. Ready? Let’s head out!”

We galloped away toward the elves’ village.

“They’re so fast!” Luimin marveled.

“They really are!” replied Sanya.

Luimin looked worried. “Is Kumayuru going to be okay running this fast?”

Even though she was calling this fast, we weren’t going that much quicker than your average horse. We could’ve really stepped on the gas, but we were in for a long journey. I didn’t want to put any stress on my bears, so I was having them take it slow. I also wasn’t sure how much I wanted them to know about my bears’ true abilities, so—for now, at least—I pretended that they had a little more speed and stamina than most horses. The stamina thing gave us a good reason to use them too—they’d be able to

run a lot longer.

"We'll have breaks," I told her, "so it'll be fine. Also, Sanya, you said that we were making a stop at Laluz first?" She'd mentioned as much the other day. I didn't know its location, though, or how far away it was.

Still, I assumed that Sanya and Luimin would just tell me on the way. I left the pathfinding to the two of them as we continued on to the elves' village. It was their trip. I was just giving them transportation and tagging along.

"Yes, we have to start there. Laluz leads to the neighboring nation—we'll enter Solzonark from there."

According to Sanya, there were other villages and towns on the way to Laluz, but we'd decide whether to stop by them depending on the circumstances. As much as I wanted to make my maps, stopping in those towns was a different matter. Honestly, I would've liked to go sightseeing if I weren't stuck with this bear outfit. Irritating. I mean, it'd be one thing if I was traveling alone in the outfit, but I was with Sanya and Luimin today. I didn't want to bring trouble down on them.

We'd woken up early today, so I was tired. Above us stretched nothing but clear skies. The sunlight felt nice—perfect nap weather. I was in the mood to leave myself to Kumakyu and just sleep... but I couldn't with the two of them talking beside me.

"I've never heard of summoned bears being able to change sizes," pondered Sanya.

"You never told me that they become bigger," fumed Luimin.

They were both telling me off, but for entirely different reasons. What could I say? It wasn't like I was trying to spread that info all around. And even if I wanted to tell them, there hadn't been a good time for that.

"Still, they're cute." Luimin gave Kumayuru a head pat. She didn't seem scared at all.

"Actually, Luimin, you weren't freaked out at all when you first saw Kumayuru, am I right?" Surprised, maybe, but not scared. It was always sad when people were afraid of my bears.

"We have a cute bear family in the elven woods too. I think I'm not scared thanks to them."

"The bears don't attack?" I asked.

"They're friendly, so they don't. And even if they did attack, I can't let a bear beat me."

That sounded reassuring. I was glad she wasn't scared of them, even if it was because of those other bears.

Then again, being scared of bears was *pretty reasonable*. Being around my bears could numb you to that fact.

The journey went smoothly on. Whenever we saw people, we'd keep a bit of distance so we wouldn't give them a fright. Didn't want to spoke somebody's horses and bring chaos raining down on some poor travelers.

We took several breaks on the way, switching our mounts every time. I didn't want either bear to sulk too much because I'd left them to the strangers, after all.

"They *sulk*? How cute!"

"It's really not funny. When they're sulking, they won't even look at me. It takes a while for them to get out of their slump." Which only meant spending an afternoon with them, really, but I wasn't going to go out of my way to upset my bears.

After quite a few breaks into the trip, Sanya launched into our plans. The sun was just about to set.

"If your bears keep up this pace, I think we'll make it to the next town."

"Are we staying overnight in that town?" Luimin asked.

A town, huh? I didn't really *mind* going to a town, per se, but I wasn't exactly *hyped* either. "Do we have to keep going? I was thinking we could stop somewhere around here to camp out instead of pushing ourselves. What do you think?"

My bears could probably do it, though. If they ran, they'd definitely be able to get to the town. But Sanya was trying to be nice to them. She wasn't going to force them to run, summons or not. I liked that about her.

"I'm fine with camping too. I don't want to force Kumayuru or Kumakyu to push themselves. And we've made a lot of progress in just one day. Your bears are amazing!"

said Luimin.

"They really are," said Sanya. "I never thought we'd get this far this quickly. Do they never get tired?" She gave my bears a tender look.

I didn't really know, honestly. I didn't think I *could* figure out my bears' limits, because learning that meant pushing the poor things as far as they could go. I wasn't going to let that happen. That's why I had them take breaks even when they didn't seem tired, and that's why I wouldn't ask them to run at top speed for long periods of time.

"Are you fine with camping, Yuna?"

"I'm okay with that. What do you think of that spot?" I pointed at a thicket of trees that would probably prevent anyone from seeing my bear house from the road. I had no idea how long until we'd reach the elves' village, but I figured we'd keep camping out. In that case, I might as well tell them about the bear house sooner rather than later.

"Yes, that works. Let's camp under those trees then."

They went right along with my plan without suspecting a thing.

I headed over to the trees. "Sanya, Luimin, could you hold up a sec?"

"Why?"

"I'm going to bring out something, and I'd *really* appreciate if you could keep a secret from others."

"What's that?" asked Sanya.

"I don't really understand," said Luimin, "but... if you don't want us to talk about it, then I won't say a word to anyone."

I looked over at Sanya.

"All right. I won't breathe a word to anyone either."

After the pair promised, I pulled my mobile bear house out of my bear storage.

"*Another bear?!*"

"A house?!"

They'd blurted out two different things, but the looks on their faces was the same... and absolutely priceless.

"Yuna, what exactly is this?" Sanya pointed at my bear house.

"It's a house." What else could I say?

"Sister, do people from the capital carry around their *houses* with them?"

"Normal people can't do this. I suppose Yuna can because her item bag is better than any other."

Oh, right. I'd decided it'd be a pain to explain away the ten thousand monsters I'd slayed back in the day, so I'd told her about my bear storage.

"It's an item bag better than any other?" Luimin looked at Kumayuru, Kumakyu, my bear house, and my bear puppet. Finally, her eyes finally settled on me. "Just what are you, Yuna?"

Uh. Hmm... how could I even answer that? "I'm just your everyday adventurer."

I tried to play it off all cool and urged them to go into the bear house. They didn't seem to buy it, but at least they didn't pry anymore.

CHAPTER 224

THE BEAR TAKES A BATH WITH THE ELF SISTERS

I TRANSFORMED MY BEARS into their cub forms and headed into my bear house with the elf sisters.

“I’m going to prep dinner. You two can sit wherever you’d like.”

“I’ll help you,” said Sanya, which prompted Luimin to also offer a hand.

“Me too!”

“I’m fine. You two can relax.”

After I got them settled in and resting, I headed to the bath before starting dinner prep. I got the bath and towels ready ahead of time. We’d be sleepy after warming up in the bath, after all.

After I got the bath ready, I went back to the kitchen and started to work. Dinner consisted of the usual fare: Morin’s bread and Anz’s soup. I also dished out some veggies I had on hand and tried to make it a balanced meal.

Then I lined the table with the plates.

“Oh, now, that looks delectable.”

“It really does.”

“Thank you very much, Yuna,” Sanya said.

“Yes, thank you!”

“Well, let’s get to it.” I started digging in.

“It’s delicious!”

“The soup is so warm and good.”

“Thanks. You can have seconds if you want. Just let me know.”

“I never would have guessed we’d have a homecooked meal while out camping,” Sanya said, taking another good look around the house.

Luimin nodded. “This means we can take breaks during the rain. We won’t even have to get wet!” She looked so serious right then that I could practically see her sopping wet on her trip to the capital. “And we won’t even need to keep watch at night!”

Still, I got what she meant. I wasn’t super fond of keeping watch in the middle of the night either. Just imagining it made me sleepy...

“We’ll need to keep watch, house or not,” said Sanya. “Bandits could still attack us.”

A shadow came over Luimin’s face at that.

“We don’t need to keep watch.” I glanced at the bears curled up at my feet. “We’ve got these two.”

“Kumayuru and Kumakyu?” Luimin asked.

“They’ll let us know if we’re in danger, so we’ll be fine.” My bears seemed to have realized we were talking about them. They lifted their heads and crooned.

“They’re amazing!!!” cried Luimin.

Sanya nodded vigorously. “They really are!!!”

The two sisters looked at my bears in admiration. “Yep. You two can rest easy tonight.”

“I suppose we won’t actually need to make stops at any towns or villages, in that case,” Sanya blurted out.

Well, we had a place to sleep, and I had plenty of food in my bear storage. On top of that, we had a bath. We pretty much had everything we needed for our trip. Now that I thought about it, we really didn’t need to take detours to stay *anywhere* if we didn’t

want to. Unless we were planning on staying the night, I really hoped we didn't have to go to any towns at all.

After supper, we took a post-meal break. Luimin played with my bears while Sanya and I watched her.

"So, Yuna, where should the two of us sleep? We would be more than happy to sleep right here, of course."

"I have rooms for you, so you don't have to sleep here. But let's take a bath before we all head to bed."

"A bath?"

"What, do elves not take baths?" Hmm... I tried to imagine a bathing elf. Seemed to me that they'd prefer fresh, cold water. Maybe a warm bath really *wasn't* their style.

"We do. But... a bath?"

So, even elves liked a warm dip in the water. "Yep! I'll get the bath ready, and we can head to bed afterward."

We'd been traveling all day on my bears, even before sunrise. They were probably sweaty, at the very least. I didn't want them having to sit with that all night, getting all that sweat over the covers and everything...

"That's not what I meant. I'm asking whether you have a bath in this house."

"Yeah." I took them to the bathroom. "Please use those towels over there. You do have a change of clothes, right? I'd really appreciate it if you changed before going to bed."

I really wanted them to be clean when they headed to bed. The two of them gave me dubious looks while I explained things to them.

"Yuna, if I could..." Sanya began.

"What is it?"

"None of this makes any sense."

Huh? What was she talking about? Well, I guess I'd had a conversation just like this with Cliff once too.

"Sanya... this *truly* isn't normal for the capital then?" Luimin asked.

"No. This is completely absurd!"

Well, *that* seemed like a little much. "Anyway, why don't you guys take a nice long bath to let the fatigue melt away? You could even head in together."

I'd taken a bath with Fina and Noa, so I knew it was big enough for the two of them.

"If two of us can fit, then that means all three of us could, right? Since we're all already here, why don't you join us, Yuna?" Sanya glanced at the bath. "I'd like to talk to you more anyway."

"I can just take one after you two."

"No, no," said Sanya. "In any case, we'd be the ones going last. It's not as though we're *actual* guests."

"That's right!" said Luimin. "I want to help you wash your back, Yuna!"

And now Luimin was joining Sanya's side? "You really don't need to."

In the end, no matter how hard I tried to convince them that I wanted to take my bath alone, I suffered an embarrassing defeat. They wore me down until I agreed that the three of us could bathe together.

Sanya lived up to her name as an elf. She was beautiful. She didn't have much of a chest, but she was slender, and her waist was way small. Her light green hair hung down her back. She really looked like a mature woman! On the other hand, Luimin was very thin and still looked young. You could say we were, uh... bosom buddies that way.

Looking at the two of them, I suddenly wondered if elves even *could* gain weight. I'd never seen a chunky elf in any games or comics, after all. Huh, weird.

I stripped down and pulled off my onesie.

Luimin watched me. "Your hair is so pretty, Yuna!"

"Yours is too." Her hair was beautiful—just like her sister's.

Once we were done ready to head in, I looked over at Sanya. She was still pulling off her bracelet. It was a nice one, too, embedded with a pretty green gem. She'd polished that thing so much that it gleamed! The whole style of it just *screamed* maturity!

"Well, then, I suppose I'll head in first." Luimin, now nude, headed into the bath.

Sanya grabbed her sister's arm. "Stop right there!"

"What? Sister?"

"Where is your bracelet?"

The color drained from Luimin's face.

"I hadn't noticed until now," said Sanya. "But all this time, you haven't been wearing it."

"Well..." Luimin hesitated. I guess Sanya was talking about a bracelet that matched her own.

"What happened to it?!"

"Sister, you're hurting me...!"

Things had turned so bad, so suddenly. "I don't really get what's going on, but could we talk it over *in the bath?*" I *really* didn't want to hang out buck naked in a changing room.

Sanya seemed to understand what I was getting at. She let go of Luimin's arm.

Still, Sanya glared at Luimin the whole time we were scrubbing down. Luimin seemed to shrink into herself as she rinsed off.

Hmm. Guess it probably did have something to do with that bracelet Sanya had been wearing earlier. It really was pretty. Based on Luimin's reaction, I could guess that she'd lost it.

"Luimin, how long are you going to take to rinse off?" Luimin was clearly taking her sweet time in order to avoid heading into the bath. "Get over here and explain yourself. Quickly now!"

Luimin timidly stepped into the water.

"Tell me, right now. Why don't you have your bracelet?"

"I sold it..."

"I know you understand just how important that bracelet is to us elves, Luimin!"

Luimin shrunk into herself. "Sorry..."

"Tell me the whole story, Luimin. Every. Single. Thing."

According to Luimin, she hadn't had enough money to get to the capital. While she was trying to find a way to make some cash, some adventurers had started chatting her up. They told her that they had a way to get her some money.

"And that was?"

"It was a job carrying some things. Putting stuff away, that sort of thing."

But there'd been a valuable painting among the luggage, and she had torn it. Ugh. Yeah, I think that's when I figured out where it was going.

"And I didn't have enough money to reimburse him..."

Sanya sighed. "So, you gave him the bracelet...?"

Luimin sat there in the bath, holding her knees. She nodded slightly.

"Ahh, I understand. But we'll still need to get it back."

"But I don't have the money..."

"No worries, I have enough. You can count on your big sister."

"Sister, I'm sorry..."

Good. Everything had ended well, and we weren't going to have a tense trip together after all. What a relief. "Is the bracelet that important?"

"In our village, yes, it's very important. Our parents gave them to us."

Parents, she told me, would wear something called a fey stone when they had kids. Once the kid turned ten, they'd have that stone turned into something that could be worn. They didn't just come in the form of bracelets either. Sanya told me they could be necklaces, hair ornaments, and all kinds of other things.

"Parents pray to their fey stone so their children are born healthy..." Sanya glanced at her sister now. "...and then *you* went and sold something so important just like that?"

"Sorry..."

"Fine, fine. I know you didn't mean anything bad when you sold it. I forgot how much of a klutz you are."

Blub, blub. Luimin half sunk into the water and breathed bubbles from her mouth.

Sanya placed a gentle hand on her sister's head. "I just wish you'd just told me instead of keeping that from me."

"These things are important to elves. I got that," I said. "But is that bracelet really worth money to anyone else?"

Sure, the bracelet might've meant something to elves, but what about everybody else? Then again, she couldn't have paid the guy back if the bracelet was worthless. That painting was supposed to be priceless, after all.

"Humans who wear the bracelet will receive the blessing of the wind."

"The blessing of the wind?"

"Put simply, it can make wind magic stronger. Those who know this would be willing to pay for such a thing."

So, it was a power-up item or something? Dang... now I kind of wanted one. Then again, I guess there wasn't really a point in powering up my bear gear—it was already too OP for that to matter. In the game, on the other hand, I would've really loved this

thing...

After that heartfelt reconciliation, we all got out of the bath.

I couldn't really decide whether to wear my white bear outfit or my black bear outfit. In the end, I decided to go with the black; I was pretty sure showing them the white bear outfit would come back to bite me somehow.

Once we dried off our hair, I took the two to their rooms. They were the same ones that Cliff and the others had used. I'd already cleaned them and washed the sheets.

There wouldn't be masculine B.O. anymore. Probably.

"I've got beds too."

"You mean we can use this room?"

"Sure. Use it however you'd like."

The two of them went inside.

"You've given us your bears to ride on and keep watch overnight," said Sanya. "You've given us a warm meal and bath, and now... a warm bed. You say we're the ones taking you on our journey, but I'm not so sure about that."

It wasn't like I could've made it to the elves' village on my own, though. I needed someone to show me the way.

"Yuna! If there are any monsters, I'll protect you!" Luimin thrust her fist up, and Sanya smiled.

CHAPTER 225

THE BEAR SHELTERS FROM THE RAIN

I NEVER SLEEP WELL on a journey, so I made sure to set my Kumayuru/Kumakyu alarm clock. When morning came around, they woke me up with their paw punches. I headed downstairs after thanking them.

“Good morning, Yuna.”

“Morning, Yuna!” Luimin said.

Sanya and Luimin were already awake? “You’re up early.”

“Luimin woke me. Oh! And we couldn’t make a breakfast that could compare to yours, but we did prepare something. Would you be kind enough to try it?”

They had set up three people’s worth of bread and drinks on the table.

Feeling grateful, I sat down to eat. “Did you get a good night of rest?”

“Yes. It would be hard not to, with such lovely beds.”

“Yes, the beds were very soft.”

“Good thing I hung the sheets up to dry.” I nibbled on the bread Sanya had prepped.

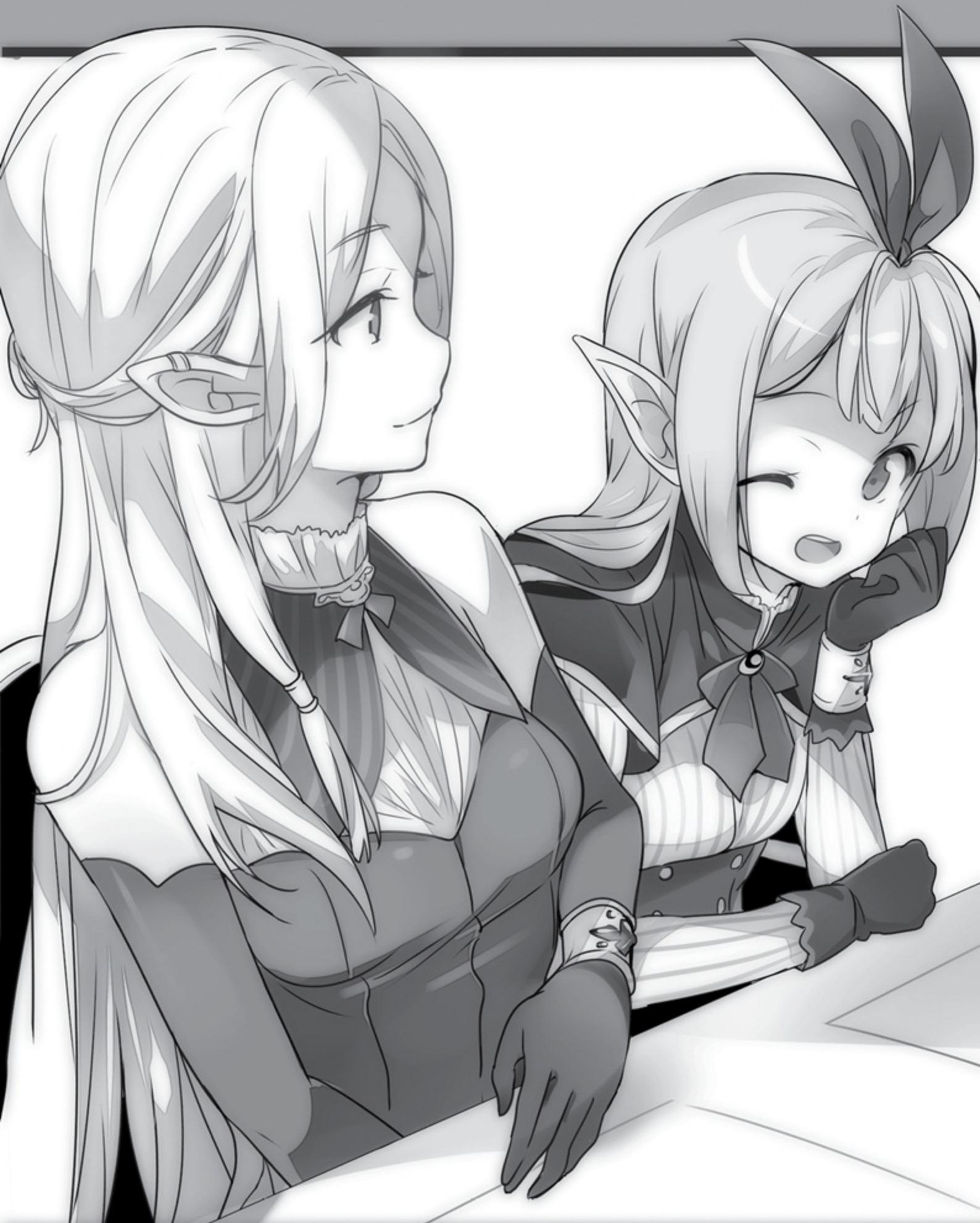
After our meals, we were off toward the elves’ village. This time we were headed for Laluz, at the border. That’s where Luimin had sold off her bracelet to repay someone after tearing the expensive painting.

“Hmm... maybe we should talk to the adventurers before we go to the merchant you sold your bracelet to,” said Sanya. “If it was the adventurers who gave you the job, they’d likely know more.”

“You think so?”

"Yes. I think that'll make it easier to get through to the merchant."

From there, Sanya started questioning her sister about the adventurers.



"They were all women," said Luimin, "and the leader was named Miranda. They really helped me when I was in trouble at the Adventurer Guild. They asked me if I wanted work when they found out I didn't have money. They even explained everything to me about the work really nicely!" Luimin smiled at the memory. "But then I messed up and caused all that trouble..."

"You said that the job was to carry some baggage around and to put it away, right?"

"Yes, that was it."

They'd been putting things away when Luimin had torn the painting.

Yeah... hearing her story, it felt like the adventurer and merchant might've been in on a plan to hoodwink her. It seemed like the adventurers had seen Luimin's bracelet and made her destroy a cheap painting on purpose so she'd need to pay them back—that's how it'd go in a comic or novel, at least.

Still, I didn't have enough proof, and Luimin seemed to trust these adventurers. But here I was, immediately thinking of the most dramatic tropes possible. Yeesh... maybe I should've chilled on all the comics, manga, and games back then.

"And what about the merchant? Do you think they'd give the bracelet back if you could pay for it?"

"I think so..." Then there was no problem, right? "But it's supposed to be valuable, so there *was* someone who wanted it..."

Argh. That meant it was probably sold off already.

"I suppose all we can do is hope that it hasn't been sold yet," said Sanya.

Yeah, it really seemed like all we had was hope... and also, a really good reason to put our butts into gear as quickly as we could.

Worst-case scenario: If the merchant had already sold it, we could buy it back from whoever had gotten it. If they wouldn't let us, maybe Elleaura's knife with the family crest on it would come in handy. I could show off to imply the Fochrosés would get involved if they didn't give it back, maybe. Or was that misusing it?

It felt like using it would put me in some kind of invisible debt. For now, I'd think of it

as a last resort.

I urged my bears to run faster.

"They're really fast, aren't they?" said Luimin.

"Agreed," said Sanya. "Their stamina is amazing!"

"Yeah, I never would have guessed they'd be this fast."

We were making good progress, but things looked stormy ahead of us... literally. The clouds were dark and heavy ahead. I'm no weather forecaster, but even I knew we were probably in for some rain.

"I thought we could get there today on Kumayuru and Kumakyu," Luimin said.

Even I couldn't win against the weather. I couldn't use some kind of weather-changing magic either. Being able to do *that* would practically make me a god. As I thought that over, raindrops started coming down. When the rain would fall onto my bear gear, it'd roll off instead of soaking in.

I looked at the sky again. It was only a matter of time until it'd be all-out pouring.

"Yuna, would you be okay with bringing out your house?" Sanya proposed. "Until the rain passes, at least."

I was more than happy to agree, of course. I didn't really want my bears running in the rain, and I didn't personally want to run in it either.

I quickly looked for an inconspicuous place to bring out the bear house before the rain really started coming down.

"Kumayuru, head over there." Using my bear puppet, I pointed to a small thicket of trees where I could pull out the house. Kumayuru crooned and headed over at a quick clip.

"Looks like we made it just in the nick of time."

We'd fled into the bear house before the rain had really started to pour down, though the two elf sisters had gotten a little wet while running for it. Thanks to my bear gear, I was dry. My bears weren't wet either.

"This house sure is useful," said Luimin.

"Definitely," said Sanya. "We would've wound up sopping wet."

"It's not as though we'd be completely sheltered, even if we ran under the trees. And if the wind picked up, we'd just be out of luck."

"Do you think the rain will pass soon?"

The rain was coming down in buckets outside. If we'd been even a little slower, we would have been completely soaked.

"Those clouds were pretty dark, so I really doubt it." I brought out some hot tea for the two as they talked. When I looked at the clouds myself, it really did look like we'd be cooped up in here all day. I really hoped the rain would pass by the next morning.

Sanya told us we didn't need to rush ourselves to get there faster, so we settled with having a slow day.

The two of them started up a conversation. Since they hadn't seen each other in a while, they had a lot to catch up on. Apparently, they hadn't had much time back in the capital to talk because of Sanya's job. Still, too bad we couldn't go anywhere because of the rain.

I decided to leave the two of them alone. I let them know I was going to spend time in my room, then left with my bears.

I headed to my desk when I got there, pulled out some paper from my bear storage, and started working on that set of playing cards I'd started a while ago. I'd made the suites into fire, water, wind, and earth symbols, which were familiar for the people in this world.

Now the issue was who I'd draw as the jacks, queens, and kings. Using the king or Cliff would be boring—and might even cause problems—so I passed on that idea. But the only other thing I could think of was using bear designs.

No biggie. I'd probably play with the orphans and Fina, after all, so they'd be more into bears than the king or Cliff. It was a little late in the game to keep denouncing bear stuff, so I decided to make the kings, queens, and jacks into cubified bears.

While the rest of the world was stuck in the rain, I was stuck in my room, sketching away.

The king bear bore a crown, the queen bear wore a royal-looking dress, and the jack of all bears held a sword. Of course, I had to make the jokers into bears too.

The other side was still just plain white paper, but I wanted to print a bear pattern on it if I could. I drew a pattern on the back side just as a sample. While I was zeroing in on my drawings, something suddenly dove onto my back.

I twisted around to find Kumayuru there.

“What’s up?”

Knock knock! There was a sound at the door before Kumayuru could answer me.

“Yuna, are you in? You’re not sleeping, are you? I’m coming in!”

The door opened and Luimin came in.

“What’s wrong, Luimin?” I asked.

“So, you’re awake, then?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I was just caught up in a project.”

I collected the cards scattered on top of my desk and put them away in my bear storage.

“So, what’s up?” I asked again.

“What should we do for dinner?”

"Is it already that late?" I looked outside. It was pitch-black, but that might've just been the rain clouds. The rain was still pouring down. It'd probably *keep* coming down until the morning.

Luimin and I headed downstairs to prep dinner, my bears trailing behind.

In the dining room, we got to work right away... or got to what work there was. I was pulling most of the stuff out of my bear storage, so there really wasn't much to do. Man, what would I do without my handy-dandy bear storage?

I finished eating, and while I was loafing around, Sanya came back in from checking on the rain outside. "Even if we got to Laluz tomorrow," she said, "I think this rain is going to keep us from moving for a while."

"Really?"

"I suppose we haven't told you," said Sanya. "There's a large river at Laluz, so we need to use a boat to get to the neighboring kingdom. Even when the rain does subside, it'll be impossible to cross by boat for a while."

Nobody had told me that.

A river, though...

I knew that heavy rain could create dangerous conditions, since the river would be flowing quickly. I'd even seen news reports of people getting swept away by rivers in my original world.

Sanya sipped her tea and told me more about Laluz. According to her, the large river there acted as the border between the two countries—the country across the river was called Solzonark. That was our destination now.

There was another large town on the other side, and the two cities had a deep-rooted connection. It was kind of fun just hearing about it... and it sounded like there'd be a ton of cool stuff to buy from both countries.

It seemed like the perfect midway point to set up a bear gate. I guess I'd need to figure that out after we got there.

"Did you travel by boat too, Luimin?" I asked.

"Yes, I did. It was very big. It could carry a lot of carriages too!"

Carriages, huh? Looked like it was a big, full-on boat and not just some dinky li'l ferry.

CHAPTER 226

THE BEAR REACHES LALUZ

THE SKY WAS STILL GRAY when I woke the next day. We'd be able to head out, but sooner or later, we knew that the rain would start coming down on us. For the time being, we'd just cover as much ground as we could.

Although... the ground was a total *mess* after yesterday's rain. There were horrible puddles, full enough that they'd probably stop carriages in their tracks. They didn't put a stop to our bears, but their paws were getting filthy. Their *everything* was getting filthy, and Kumakyu's white fur looked particularly terrible. I knew that they'd clean right up if I resummoned them, but I still felt bad for them.

They'd splash mud water if they went too fast, so I kept them at a leisurely sprint.

"I see it!"

After several breaks and some more progress, we caught sight of the wall surrounding the town. The dark clouds still hung over us threateningly... but we'd made it before they could follow through on that threat.

Riding in on my bears would've caused a commotion, so I let Sanya know I was recalling them. "Right. If we get closer, someone will see them and make a fuss over it." We got off of my bears.

"Thank you for carrying us up to this point," Luimin said to my bears. Sanya thanked them too and gave them a pat.

I thanked my bears too, and then recalled them. "Well, let's get going."

We started walking to Laluz. It wasn't far off or anything—we could see it, after all. Once we started getting closer, we began to notice horses heading out of the town.

According to Sanya, the town was usually bustling with people coming in and out, but this was low traffic. Probably the rain's fault, she guessed. I really didn't mind, since it meant we wouldn't need to wait in line.

We didn't see anyone trying to get in when we got near the gate, so we didn't need to wait in the first place before entering town.

The gate guard there was shocked when we came by. "Miss, what is that outfit you're wearing?"

"I'm dressed as a bear. Why do you ask?" I was used to this; what else could I say?

"You traveled all the way here in that...?"

"Can we just move on please?"

"I see. Guess you must have your reasons for dressing like that."

The gate guard seemed to have reached some conclusion on his own. He didn't ask any other questions and held my guild card up to the crystal panel. The panel let us through—though I can't imagine why it'd glow red and keep us out. We weren't criminals.

"You're welcome to come in," the guard said.

He probably saw a lot of people in his job as guard for a big town. He was probably used to just rolling with the weird stuff. Fine by me. That meant I could get into town without comments.

But the moment we entered, the stares gathered.

"We're being watched, aren't we?"

"We are."

The sisters were right.

Anybody would stare at a mysterious outsider girl in the bear onesie.

Just another day for me.

After that, we got a room at an inn and went straight to the Adventurer Guild. We

wanted to find the adventurers who'd "worked" with Luimin as quick as we could.

"Could you wait at the inn, Yuna?"

Translation: "*You're an embarrassment to be around, so could you make yourself scarce at the inn?*" (That's what I assumed, at least.)

But I really wanted to see the guild too! As a former gamer, it wasn't like I could just sit pretty at an inn after traveling this far! Plus, wanted to know who in the guild would start talking to Luimin... and I had a hunch they'd head over to the merchant right after.

If Luimin were a complete stranger, I might not have cared, but we'd traveled far now. We'd really gotten to know each other, and I wanted to tag along... if they'd let me.

"Sanya, I'd like to go with you if it wouldn't cause trouble," I said, "but I'll stay put in the inn if that's what you really want."

Sanya seemed a little flustered, as if she hadn't expected that response. "Yuna, I'm so sorry. That's not what I meant. Everyone's been giving you such strange looks, and I just assumed that it bothered you. I thought you'd prefer staying at the inn."

I'd just gotten the wrong idea. She'd just been trying to be nice. "Nah, I'm used to this. It's all good. If you two are okay with it, I would really like to tag along."

"I'd be fine with that!" said Luimin.

"You mean it?"

"I think you'd be lonely at the inn all by yourself. So, let's go together!"

She was so gracious as she said it. It made me feel kind of giddy.

"You're right!" I said. "In that case, let's go to the guild together—all three of us." Since they were so nice to me, I took them up on it.

But only a few minutes passed before we hit a snag...

"We're being watched, aren't we?"

“We are.”

People hadn’t stopped watching us just because we’d had a nice conversation. No, there were people passing by us and looking. Some even stopped in their tracks. Regardless of what they were doing, they were all staring at me. I pulled my bear hood low over my face so no one could see me.

“Let’s go fast.”

“Uh-huh.”

The two of them started speed-walking in order to escape from the stares. I guess it’d be best if I kept my distance from the two of them? I fell back to give them some space.

“Yuna, what are you doing?” said Luimin. “We’re in a hurry.” She ran over to me, grabbed my bear puppet, and started pulling me along. I guess they didn’t like my idea... but I was kind of happy that Luimin didn’t mind the three of us walking close together.

She pulled me all the way to the guild, a big building that was almost as large as the one at the capital.

“I’ll greet the guild master,” said Sanya. “Luimin, you look for the adventurers, and Yuna, you...” Sanya went silent.

Uh. What?

“Just... keep out of trouble, will you?”

What a nice order. I wish I could follow it, but trouble seemed to come to me whether or not I wanted it to. Or maybe it was my bear gear that attracted the trouble.

Either way, I promised to try the best I could.

Sanya left to go meet the guild master, so I followed Luimin as she tried to find the adventurers. If they showed any sign of having duped Luimin, I’d give them a fitting payback. Once I got into the guild, even more eyes were on me than before.

“A bear?” “What’s with that outfit?” “Huh? That is a bear, right...?” “Is that a girl...?” “What’s she doing in the Adventurer Guild?” “How adorable!~” “Luimin?” “That is a

bear, isn't it?"

One of those words was not like the other. Just as we got ready to look for their speaker, they approached us instead.

Luimin gasped. "Miranda?"

"I knew it was you, Luimin," said the speaker, an adventurer in her early twenties.

Two women appeared after Luimin called out to Miranda.

"Is Luimin really here?" one asked.

Another said, "She is!"

"It's been so long, Miranda," Luimin said.

"It hasn't been *that* long!" Miranda gave Luimin a firm hug. "We were worried after you disappeared on us"

"C-can't breathe...!" Luimin looked pretty uncomfortable being squeezed like that. Miranda let her go quick enough, though.

"You *really* worried us."

"Sorry," Luimin apologized.

Another woman entered the conversation. "Really, now. I can't believe you'd just hand off your precious bracelet to Doglud!" The woman pinched Luimin's cute little cheeks.

"I-I'm sorwy... I didn't want to cause trouble for all of you."

"That's no reason to not talk to us and to disappear."

"I'm sorwy...!" Luimin was released from the cheek-pincher strike.

"Still, I'm glad you're okay." Luimin got a gentler hug now.

"Did you get to the capital safely?" a woman cut in—she looked like a mage.

"Yes, somehow," said Luimin.

"You know, Eriel was saying that she was going to run after you."

"Yep! We were all worried."

"Obviously."

So, these were the adventurers who'd helped Luimin out.

From their conversation, they didn't *seem* like the type to trick her out of her bracelet. They seemed like they'd been pretty worried about Luimin. Maybe I'd been too paranoid...

"So, Luimin, is that cute girl in the bear outfit a friend of yours?"

They all looked at me as I just kinda stood there beside Luimin.

"Yes, she came with me from the capital," said Luimin, not quite answering the question. She just smiled mysteriously.

"That's quite a cute outfit she's got there!" Miranda was looking at me now, so I figured it was time for me to speak up.

"I'm Yuna. I came here with Luimin and her sister."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Miranda. I worked with Luimin for a short time."

"And I'm Eriel. You've got a cute outfit there!" Eriel sidled up to me. I took a step back.

"Don't frighten the girl, Eriel," said the mage girl, tugging Eriel away before she could go for a hug. "Back off, okay? I'm Sharla, by the way. Nice to meet you."

"But that outfit is so *cute!*" Eriel groaned. "How can I *not* hug her?"

"Don't be so pushy!!!" said Sharla, giving Eriel a quick bop on the head. "Sorry about that. Eriel just *loves* cute girls."

Uh, say what? I took another step back at that.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m completely normal!”

And maybe another step back, just in case?

“Ahhh, don’t back away from me! Just one little hug. Just one! You look so soft, I gotta feel that!”

Everyone broke out into laughter.

“I heard the commotion.” Sanya had come back. “Of course it was your doing, Yuna.” Did she really have to say that? It really wasn’t me this time!

“Did you finish, Sanya?” I asked.

“Yes, we’re done talking. You’re not the adventurers who took care of Luimin, are you?” She looked at the adventurers with us.

“Yes, they are,” said Luimin. “This is Miranda’s group.” She introduced them, one by one.

“Thank you for taking care of my little sister,” said Sanya.

“Not need for that. I’m just sorry that Luimin let go of her bracelet.”

And so, Sanya and Miranda, who I half-expected to duke it out, exchanged pleasantries.

CHAPTER 227

THE BEAR NEGOTIATES WITH THE MERCHANT

PART ONE

SANYA BORROWED A ROOM at the guild. We decided to use it for our talk.

After Sanya heard the adventurers out, she looked completely exasperated. After tearing the painting, the adventurers said, Luimin had handed her bracelet off to the merchant to avoid causing trouble for Miranda and the others. Then, without telling them, Luimin had skipped town.

"I just didn't want to cause trouble for everyone..." she mumbled.

"We told you that we wanted to talk it over with you, Luimin."

Luimin said nothing. She just hung her head and avoided looking at everyone.

"According to Doglud," said Eriel, "that bracelet is important to elves."

Sharla nodded. "We invited you to join the job, so we all share in that responsibility."

"But it was my fault for tearing it," Luimin insisted. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Miranda shook her head. "We asked you to join us, so we share in the responsibility."

"But that money..."

"Yes, there's the money, but—" Sharla began.

"—that's still no reason to just leave!" finished Eriel. "Do you have any idea how worried we were about you?!"

Luimin shrunk into herself. "Sorry..." she said in a small voice.

Jeez... I apologized to the three adventurers internally. Here I was, thinking that they'd

been after Luimin's bracelet, even wondering if they were in bed with some corrupt merchant.

When Luimin had first told us about what'd happened, I'd been convinced that she'd been duped by some terrible adventurers. But all along, they'd just been worried from the bottom of their heart for their dear friend. They'd found Luimin hanging around looking for work at the Adventurer Guild, saw that she was too broke to make it to the capital, and invited her to join their job. Even when Luimin had made a mistake, they'd tried to address it with her together.

Helping a stranger with a money problem, even after that stranger made a mistake... I couldn't imagine there were many people who would do that in my old world, let alone this one.

On top of that, I could hardly believe what they'd done after Luimin had left town.

"You're telling us that the bracelet... is safe?"

"Yes!" said Miranda. "Once we found out Luimin had left her bracelet behind and gone out of town, we negotiated with Doglud and asked him not to sell the bracelet to anyone else."

Sharla nodded. "We didn't know how long it would take, but we were planning on buying it back."

"But we have no idea how long it'll take us," said Eriel, "We're low-rank adventurers, you know?"

"Everyone..." Luimin gazed at Miranda, eyes welling up.

They'd negotiated with the merchant just so they could get Luimin's bracelet back. They'd told him they wanted to buy it back. They'd reached out and asked him not to sell it.

It was idiotic! Idiotic, plain and simple. What kind of total *idiot* would buy back a bracelet for some stranger they barely knew?

Well... the kind of idiot that I like.

"On behalf of my sister, please receive my deepest thanks," Sanya said. "Please, let me

show you my gratitude again.”

“Not at all. We still haven’t bought it back yet.”

“Just making sure he didn’t sell it to someone else was more than enough.”

It really was. If Miranda and the others hadn’t negotiated with the merchant, the bracelet might’ve already gone to another buyer, and then we’d be in *real* trouble.

“Please let me thank you,” said Sanya.

“But we didn’t do this for any reward...”

“If you do want to pay us back,” a certain someone said, “then I’d settle for a hug from Yuna!”

We decided to ignore that little comment. Yeah, I was *definitely* just hearing things...

But Eriel was *definitely* looking at me. I pulled my bear hood low over my face and hid from her stare.

Once we were done talking, we were introduced to the guild master to finish things up. Y’know, check in, explain that I’m a bear who gets into trouble a lot, and ask, “Couldn’t they please help us if we got into a jam?” and all that.

The Laluz guild master reluctantly agreed, if only because Sanya was the one asking.

Cool. Looked like I could rampage away!

With that over, we left the Adventurer Guild behind. Miranda led us to the merchant—we were going to buy the bracelet back.

“This is Mr. Doglud’s shop,” she told us.

There were a lot of people hanging around the place. It was a great place for a shop. There was a large carriage stopped in front of it too. The thing was beautifully decorated, as if the owner could barely stop themselves from painting something on it like “I’M A HUGE SPENDER!” I guess that was the sort of clientele the merchant had—rich dudes, here to buy some expensive stuff.

As we were looked at the carriage, Miranda headed into the shop without us. I followed her, just in case. Didn't want to get left behind either.

When we got inside, a boy greeted us. "Welcome!" And then he recognized Miranda. "What brings you here today, Miranda?"

"Is Mr. Doglud here?"

"He is! I'll call him in right away." The boy headed to a back room to do just that. After a short wait, a thin guy in his thirties came in along with the boy.

Miranda approached him. "Mr. Doglud."

So, this was the guy who owned the shop... and the guy who had Luimin's bracelet.

"Oh, Miranda? What brings you here today?" asked Doglud. "And goodness, is that Miss Luimin I see?"

He'd noticed me too, of course, but he looked over at Luimin again when she spoke up.

Luimin bowed her head. "I'm so sorry about what happened earlier."

"Mr. Doglud, you haven't sold Luimin's bracelet, have you?" asked Miranda.

"No, not yet."

"Oh, good!" Everyone looked incredibly relieved.

Sanya came to stand by Luimin's side now and greeted Doglud, "I'm Luimin's sister, Sanya. I'd like to repay you for the painting she tore. Would you be willing to give us back her bracelet?"

"You're Miss Luimin's *sister*?!" Doglud looked over at Luimin. Luimin nodded slightly. "So you are, then. Rutto, if you could mind the store? Please follow me, if you would. I have something I need to tell you regarding that, ah... *incident*."

He had us file into the back room. The room was pretty spacious. There was a long table in the middle and some chairs to the right and left of it. I guessed that it was Doglud's workspace.

"Please, come right in. Take a seat." Doglud took the seat at the very back so casually that I supposed it was his usual spot. We all sat around the table.

Was Doglud giving me a look? No, that was probably just my imagination.

"How much would we need to pay to get Luimin's bracelet back?" asked Sanya.

Doglud looked away from her. He lowered his head. "I'm sorry. I can no longer return the bracelet to you."

"Wait, what does that mean?" Miranda shot up in her seat and slapped the desk right in front of Doglud. "You promised not to sell her bracelet! Well?! *Didn't you?!*"

"I'm sorry," Doglud repeated.

"I don't need your apologies. You promised not to sell it, and Luimin's sister is agreeing to pay for it. Explain yourself."

"Well... I..."

Sanya's calm tone threw water on the fire. "Could you explain it to us?"

Miranda sat down again, fuming.

"There was a client I had, you see. He'd wanted to buy the painting that Miss Luimin tore. When he learned that the painting was no longer available, that individual proposed different conditions for our trade."

"Different conditions?"

"Yes. He noticed Miss Luimin's bracelet in this room and told me he wanted it. I refused, of course, but I was already beholden to him due to the issue with the painting. In the end, I couldn't say no."

"But you said things were fine a few days ago."

"Yes. I had added another condition: I would prepare a painting by the same artist if he would give up on the matter of Miss Luimin's bracelet."

"Then we have a chance?"

"The painting was supposed to come in from Solzonark yesterday. That was why I told you that things would be fine. But..."

"It wasn't the rain, was it?"

"Yes... it was the rain. The river was raging and they couldn't get any boats out. The painting never made it, even though I'd promised to have it here this evening."

Miranda sighed. "But..." The painting *had* reached the town on the other side of the river, at least. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"They plan to keep an eye on the river for a few days, even after it seems safe to cross."

I guess they wanted to make absolutely sure. Raging rapids could be pretty unpredictable.

"Is there anything we can do?" Miranda asked.

"Nothing I can do at all if the painting doesn't reach us by this evening. I already broke a promise once. I can't do that again."

"He won't wait a few days?"

"He already *has* been waiting long enough."

"But the rain is to blame."

"I had taken that into consideration when I determined the day. I cut it too close, I suspect. It was my own error."

"No, it's not!" said Sanya. "You've done so much for Luimin, keeping her bracelet safe. That alone is enough for us to be thankful..."

"Thank you for your kind words," said Doglud.

Yeah. No one could complain after he'd gone so completely out of his way to help.

"So, who was it? Do you think we could negotiate with this person?" Sanya asked.

Sanya was the capital guild master, so maybe she could use her influence to strike a

deal. If I needed to, I could probably help out with my crest knife.

"It's Mr. Retbelle," said Doglud, "one of the large merchants in this town."

"Mr. Retbelle..." Luimin repeated.

"Why is *he* involved in this?" Miranda said ruefully.

"Who's Mr. Retbelle?" asked Sanya.

"One of the influential merchants in town," said Eriel. And something of a celebrity, apparently.

"Do you think he might listen to Sanya, at least?" Miranda wondered.

"I only have influence within the Adventurer Guild. If it's a prominent merchant we're dealing with..."

If all else failed, I could try the knife. But as much as I wanted to give it a test drive, but this guy might've been too much of a big shot for it to work.

The room went silent.

Why were we getting all broody? The answer seemed simple.

"We just need to cross the river and get the painting, right?" I said, breaking up the silence and speaking for the first time.

Sanya turned to me. "Yuna?"

"I'll go get it. Where do I need to go? The painting's at the town on the other side of the river, yeah?"

"Child, there aren't any boats going out! Do you plan on swimming? Or perhaps you're thinking of flapping your arms and flying across the river?!" Doglud was coming on a little strong. Fair enough—I'd probably sounded like I was making a joke in poor taste.

"I'm not going to swim, and I'm not going to fly."

The time had finally come for me to use my new skill—the one I'd gotten after that job slaying the golems.

Bear Water Walking.

CHAPTER 228

THE BEAR NEGOTIATES WITH THE MERCHANT

PART TWO

Bear Water Walking

Gain the ability to traverse water.

Summons gain the ability to travel on water.

I'd gotten the skill earlier, but I'd never had a good use for it. Still, I'd tested it once, though—it was a ton of fun, playing around with the skill on top of a river near Crimonia.

We'd run across the water, jumping all around. It basically made me feel like a ninja, and who doesn't want to feel like a *freakin' ninja*? I'd even rode on my bears and had them take me up the river. It wasn't an experience you could have every day. If I'd had this skill when I'd fought the kraken, it would've been a total game changer.

I hadn't *needed* it, of course, but it was a fun what-if.

"You're not serious, Yuna... are you?" Sanya asked.

Luimin gave me a pleading look. "Don't do anything reckless just for my bracelet, Yuna. Please?"

The elf siblings were worried for me, but it's not like it'd be remotely difficult.

Basically, I'd just be... running. Even if the river had rapids, it'd be like dashing down a bumpy road. And even if the river was wide, it couldn't be more than a couple hundred meters long. I'd probably be able to run across in a couple of minutes, max. No problem.

“Do you have a plan, Yuna?” Sanya asked—not patronizingly either. If we had another plan ready, Sanya wouldn’t have to strongarm a negotiation for the bracelet with the merchant. She was probably hoping to avoid trouble.

“It’ll be fine. Trust me with this,” I said, with a smile that I hoped was comforting.

“All right. I’m putting my faith in you.”

With her decision made, she turned back to Doglud. “Mr. Doglud, would you let us handle that painting?”

“Handle it? But how do you even plan on getting it here? The boats aren’t going out. Swimming across isn’t an option. How are you even planning on getting to the other side of the river?!” Doglud turned and fixed his gaze on me. “This may come across as impolite, but do you *really* believe this girl in a bear outfit can do it?”

Eh, I was used to hearing that kind of stuff. Even if I didn’t have the bear onesie, this would be a pretty wild claim on my part—anybody would reasonably doubt it.

“It wouldn’t hurt you, though, if we brought you the painting, Mr. Doglud?” asked Sanya.

“I suppose not.”

If we couldn’t bring him the painting, there was nothing we could do. He’d have to hand over Luimin’s bracelet if he didn’t get it by tonight.

“If we can’t get the painting to you, we’ll give up claims on the bracelet,” said Sanya. “We won’t even complain if you give it to that merchant.”

Luimin was taken aback. “*Sister!!!*”

Regardless, Sanya kept going. “So please, leave retrieving the painting in our hands. If we can bring the painting back by tonight, let that be compensation for the painting that Luimin destroyed. You won’t need the bracelet anymore either.”

She couldn’t have had any idea how I was planning on crossing the river, but Sanya was still negotiating with Doglud like she knew I’d get it done. She had full faith in me.

When he realized Sanya was serious, Doglud put his hands on his head and ruffled his

hair thoughtfully. He seemed to make up his mind then, and he spoke. "Fine. I will leave the matter of the painting in your hands. I also agree to the matter with the bracelet. If you are able to bring the painting in tonight, I promise to trade Luimin's bracelet for the cost of the painting she destroyed."

"Thank you."

The deal was struck. As long as I brought the painting over from the other side of the river, we'd be able to get Luimin's bracelet back. It was a little past noon, which gave us plenty of time. Time to spare, even.

"Let's get a contract drawn up, shall we? If I could have your identification card or guild card please?"

Right. We needed to prove who we were. If we lost the painting or damaged it on the way, we'd be responsible for it. Plus, someone could just run off with it. We'd be more likely to damage the goods than steal them, but I couldn't blame the guy for precautions.

"It's that girl in the bear outfit, then? *She's* the one who's going?" Doglud looked at me.

"Yeah, I'm going alone," I replied, but Sanya broke in.

"Could I come with you? I don't know how you plan on getting to the town, but I'm worried for you." She looked quite serious.

Both of my bears could walk on water, so I could take her on one of my bears if I had to. Still, even I knew that bears weren't supposed to walk on water. Maybe people could walk on water with magic or special items, but I didn't know that for sure.

"Would it be possible?"

I couldn't say no to her after seeing that look on her face. She was *actually* worried about me.

I considered it.

Sanya already knew a couple of my secrets, and I knew she wasn't going around

sharing those. She'd even gone out of her way trying to protect them. Plus, having Sanya around would be a huge help in the town. She could take me to the shop, and they'd be more likely to trust her. If I went over... even if I had a letter, there was a chance they wouldn't trust me because of the bear getup. Which meant they wouldn't hand over the painting. And with our time crunch right now, that was bad news.

On the other hand, if I had Sanya around, my credibility would go through the roof. She was the master of the capital's Adventurer Guild, after all. Yeah, it was clear which was the right choice.

The number one thing was getting that painting back, and Sanya could help with that.

"You can come with me," I said, "but you have to keep my methods for crossing the river a secret."

"Of course. I'd never tell a soul if you told me not to. I'll admit, though... it sure seems like I've wound up with a lot of your secrets." Sanya smiled. Yeah, she really did know more than almost anybody.

"So, the two of you will go together?" Doglud asked.

"P-please let me come too..." Luimin squeezed out her voice.

"You stay here," Sanya said at once, as if she'd been waiting for Luimin to volunteer.

"Sister..."

"Luimin, we'll be okay. We'll be back before you know it."

A round trip wouldn't take too long—we really would be back right away. The only time-consuming thing might be trying to find the shop, but I was sure that Sanya could get that done quick enough. We'd be fine.

"Could you trust us and stay here?" I asked.

"Okay... I will, Yuna." Luimin didn't put up a fight.

"All right," Sanya said to Doglud. "Looks like Yuna and I will be going."

"All right. Now, could I have your identification cards or guild cards?"

We pulled out our guild cards. When Doglud took Sanya's guild card first, he did a double take.

"You're the capital's Adventurer Guild master?!" He pried his eyes from the card and looked at her face.

She looked positively delighted by his surprise. "Now, do you think you can put a little faith in us?"

Miranda looked just as surprised. "Luimin, I had no idea that your sister was the Adventurer Guild master at the capital. Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

Well, Luimin herself hadn't known until she found Sanya.

Doglud looked at my guild card next and seemed surprised again. I guess he didn't expect a girl in a bear onesie to be a C-rank adventurer.

"Your class is... bear?"

Wait, why was he hung up on *that*? Why not the fact that I was an adventurer at all, let alone a C-rank?!

Doglud looked at my guild card, then me. "I suppose you *are* a bear," he said, sounding resigned. He looked at my guild card again and, again, his eyes widened with surprise. "And a C-rank adventurer at that?"

See, *that's* what you were *supposed* to be surprised about. Sure, anyone would be confused if someone had their class written out as "bear," but the guild rank should've been way weirder!

"You're in rank C?!" Luimin looked flabbergasted too. Practically everyone was—Miranda's whole group had the same look on their faces. Only Sanya was unfazed.

"But you're so fun-sized and cute...!"

"And you're a bear!"

"Really?"

Hopefully, they'd all learned a valuable lesson about judging a book by its cover. So

what if I was small or dressed like a bear? That didn't mean I was weak! I mean, even gamers would sometimes be really good and still wear joke equipment. Not that my bear gear was a joke or anything...

"Despite the cutesy bear outfit," said Sanya, "Yuna is a great adventurer in her own right."

Thanks? I couldn't quite tell if she was backing me up or dunking on me a little, but I think Sanya was trying to defend me. Whether or not everybody believed her, they were at least smiling. Hooray...?

Doglud started writing something out on a slip of paper in front of us.

"Now, then, if you could take this with you...? It's a written request from me, acknowledging that you may take the painting. If you show this to the shop on the other side of the river, they should give it to you."

Apparently, he'd written up a letter of introduction for us. Fair enough. It wasn't like we could just show up demanding a painting and expect them to fork it over, especially not to some bear.

He gave us the shop's location, and then sighed heavily. "You have until this evening. We won't be able to wait any longer than that, so please keep an eye on the time."

I put the letter into my bear storage. We still had a time until evening. Way more than we needed, as a matter of fact.

Still, we didn't want to lose too much time, so we tried leaving the shop... only to find sheets of rain waiting for us. Better to wait.

"No way..."

"Now *that's* some rain. Wasn't it clear skies just a bit ago?"

The rain was coming down when we left the shop—*really* coming down. Sure, it had been overcast earlier, but it was nothing like this.

Miranda and the others looked up at the sky. "Why's it raining?"

"There's no way you'd be able to cross the river like this."

Luimin looked as downcast as the sky above her. "Ugh. I'm sure it's my fault. This is just my luck..."

"Don't worry about it. This is nothing." We weren't going to swim or anything. We were just going to run across a raging body of water. No problem—piece of cake.

"Yuna..." Luimin looked worried, but this was actually ideal. Thanks to the rain, there wouldn't be many people out and about the town... and there'd be no one around the river. I wouldn't have to worry about anyone seeing me use my Bear Water Walking skill. This rain had hit just in time, if you asked me.

Far from unlucky, Luimin was practically a good luck charm! Or... admittedly, if she was *really* a good luck charm, the rain wouldn't have stopped the boats in the first place. But every (rain) cloud has a silver lining, you know?

"Are you really going out in the middle of the rain, Yuna?"

"I am. I have to get the painting before this evening, after all."

"But..."

"It'll be fine. Just stay put and don't worry about us, Luimin."

Since we didn't know how long it'd take us to get back, we had Luimin wait at the inn.

"Please be careful, Yuna," she said. "If anything happened to you or my sister... I don't know what I'd..."

I felt like she was being pretty dramatic, but I guess this was pretty reasonable if you didn't know what I knew? We were trying to cross the river in the middle of a monsoon, after all.

"We'll come right back once we get the painting. Please take care of Luimin, guys. And make sure she doesn't do anything rash on her own."

In a situation like this, I could see her try to sort this out by going to the merchant by herself.

Miranda and the others all readily agreed.

CHAPTER 229

THE BEAR CROSSES THE RIVER

SANYA PULLED OUT A RAINCOAT from her item bag. As for me, my bear gear would combat the rain. I didn't need one.

"Are you sure you're all right in the rain?" Sanya asked me.

"My clothes are specialized, so I'm good." I explained that as we left. Even though the rain was really coming down, it couldn't soak into my bear onesie—the rainwater was repelled.

"What kind of material is this? There's a lot of water-resistant materials, but I don't know any of them that feel like your clothes."

I had no idea, since that god had made it for me. It probably didn't even exist in this world. The onesie was pretty unique in a lot of ways—it could come out unscathed even after I'd been attacked, and it helped me regenerate my mana.

Sanya gave my bear gear an odd look. "Well, enough of that. Let's get going."

She told me that there were two ways of getting there: we could go to the wharf in the town, or we could leave through the gate and head out of town first.

Going directly to the wharf would be the fastest. There wouldn't be a lot of people by the riverside, with all this rain. We ran through the downpour to the wharf.

Just as expected, no one was around. No one was going to sail a boat into this kind of weather, and there probably wouldn't be people coming out here for curiosity's sake either.

When we reached the river, we saw a huge boat rocking in the waves, big enough to fit several carriages—it was the one they'd told me about earlier. I'd wanted to take a ride in it, but I guess I'd have to wait till next time.

The river was wide and swelling with massive waves. I could see the town on the other side, but that didn't mean it was *really* that close.

"What now?" said Sanya. "We're not actually swimming, are we?"

I had only one answer to that: "We're crossing on Kumayuru and Kumakyu."

"We're crossing on your bears?"

We were. "My bears are special."

Sanya seemed puzzled, but at least she accepted my explanation. "I suppose they're *your* summons, after all,"

Yeah, I'd already shown her my summons weren't any normal bears. They had more speed and stamina than horses, and they could even alert us to any lurking monsters. Plus, they could shrink. What was a little walking on water when we already had that kind of list? Didn't seem like a big deal, if you asked me.

I used my Detection skill to make sure the coast was clear, then summoned my bears. The poor guys were positively pummeled by the rain and wind.

"Sorry for bringing you into this, but we need to get to that shore!"

They crooned in response, giving me a confident, *we-got-this* kind of look.

"Cool. Well, Sanya, let's get to it!" I got on Kumayuru, Sanya got on Kumakyu, and my bears started carrying us to the shore with us. Beneath us, the river raged.

"Are you sure we'll be okay, Yuna?" Sanya gave the muddy maelstrom beneath us a worried look.

I couldn't blame her for being freaked out—not when the river seemed so downright feral. And we were *running across the top of it*? Yeah, I got where she was coming from.

"Do you want to stay here instead?" I'd lose my guide, but I could deal.

"I-I'm fine."

She super did not look fine, so I gave her some advice. “In that case, just hang onto Kumakyu as hard as you can and close your eyes. We’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

“I trust you, Kumakyu...”

“Cwoom~” Kumakyu gave her a reassuring reply. Sanya kept a tight hold of my bear.

“All right. Let’s roll!” I gave the signal, and my bears rushed for the river.

Sanya was yelling, but I ignored her.

Once the bears were on top of the water, they started galloping along the rapids. They weren’t about to get swept downstream. Driftwood tumbled toward us, but my bears leapt over them and weaved around them, gracefully navigating the muddy current.

It felt like an obstacle race... or at least, it reminded me of the ones I’d seen on TV. We crossed over the waves, avoided the driftwood, and ran toward the other side, all while the waves pushed us back.

“Yuna! What happens if we fall?!”

“I guess we’d be swept away.” Why was she asking something so *obvious*?

Sanya tightened her grip on Kumakyu at that. She should have known from our trip over that she wouldn’t fall off—it didn’t matter how tightly or loosely she held on. Still, she was holding onto Kumakyu for dear life.

After a while, we caught sight of the other wharf.

We’d crossed in a couple of minutes. That’s the power of my bears.

I used my Detection skill to check for any witnesses before we got to the shore—nope, we were good. I got off Kumayuru.

As for Sanya, she dismounted Kumakyu and immediately sunk to the ground. That was a sure way to get wet. Then again, she was wearing a raincoat thingie? She’d be fine.

Probably.

“You good, Sanya?”

“Yes, I-I’m fine.” Wobbling a little, Sanya stood. “We actually made it across...” Sanya looked back at the raging river as if to reassure herself that we’d done it. “I already knew your summons were amazing, Yuna, but... I’ve never heard of a bear that can walk on water.”

That made two of us, to be honest. I’d never heard of a story like that. “All right, we need to hurry up and get that painting.” We couldn’t just stand here forever.

“You’re right. Let’s hurry.”

I thanked my bears and recalled them, then we headed to Doglud’s shop.

Sanya took us to Doglud’s shop. Thanks to the rain, there weren’t many people around.

Honestly... even if they noticed me, nothing would’ve come of it. It was good that we had a guide, because we got to the shop before long. If I’d been alone, it would’ve been a lot harder.

There weren’t any customers at all inside of the shop, probably on account of the rain. I didn’t even see employees.

“Excuse me!” Sanya called into the back of the shop.

For a moment, there was only silence. Then, suddenly—

“Yes, I’ll be right there!” A woman in her mid-twenties came out. “A bear?!” Unsurprisingly, she was surprised.

“I know that’s odd, and I know that this is sudden, but she’s an adventurer that Mr. Doglud sent. We came to take the painting for Mr. Doglud,” said Sanya.

“You’re a messenger?”

C’mon, we didn’t have the time to waste! I handed the letter I’d gotten from Doglud to the woman.

"Is that an item bag?" She got another shock just from seeing the letter come out of the bear puppet's mouth. I guess merchants have some weird priorities. Anyway, after reading the letter, she nodded to herself a few times. Finally, she smiled at me.

Because, uh... wait, why?

"I understand what's going on," she said, "but I still can't believe it. This letter was supposedly written today. You traveled through all this rain?"

"You're not doubting us, are you?"

"No, this absolutely a letter from him. I believe that part. And he says in his letter to hand over the painting upon receipt."

What a relief. I was afraid she wouldn't give us the painting or something after we'd come all this way. I could see it on Sanya's face... she felt the same way.

"But I can't help but wonder how you got here in this rain," the woman added.

"That's a secret," Sanya answered for me.

"All right. Now, if you would please show me your guild cards so I can confirm your identities?"

We pulled out our guild cards and she checked them. A barely suppressed grin grew on her face after she scanned mine. "Sorry, sorry. But it looks like your class really *is* bear! He wrote about Ms. Sanya, the Adventurer Guild master from the capital, and Miss Yuna, the person with the bear class..."

She beamed at me.

Why couldn't he have just written my name and that I was an adventurer like a normal person? Was the thing about my class really necessary? You'd think a merchant would have a sense of discretion!

"He also wrote that you're dressed as a bear."

Sanya laughed out loud at that bit. I did *not* like where this was headed.

"Well, I'll get it ready," the woman said. "If you could wait for a moment?"

You know what? It could've gone worse. We were basically getting the painting without issue.

"Good thing we didn't run into any trouble," said Sanya, echoing my thoughts.

"For sure. Now we'll be able to get Luimin's bracelet back, no problem."

"Thank you so much, Yuna. Truly," Sanya said. "I don't have the words to thank you."

"Long as you keep the stuff about my bears secret, don't even worry about it."

"Of course."

While we were chatting away, the woman came back with a big, heavy-looking box. Sanya started helping as soon as she noticed it.

"I'm sorry," said the woman, "thank you."

They got the crate onto the table together.

"Is this it?" asked Sanya.

"Yes, please give this to him."

I put the crate into my bear storage. All we had to do was deliver this, and finally, we'd be able to get Luimin's bracelet back. Now that we had the painting, we thanked her and started heading out of the shop.

"Are you already heading back?"

"Yep. Mr. Doglud is waiting for us, after all."

"I have no idea how you're making your way back," said the woman, "but I do hope you make it back safely."

Sanya and I headed out into the rain. The rain poured relentlessly, with no sign that it'd ever up. That didn't matter to us, though.

We ran to the river, hoping to get back to Doglud as quick as we could.

CHAPTER 230

DOGLUD WAITS FOR THE BEAR

THE GIRL IN THE BEAR OUTFIT and the guild master Sanya headed out into the rain.

I couldn't fathom how the pair were planning to cross the river in the middle of the downpour. I had lived in this town for many years, and I had never heard of a way to cross the river to the other town during such a deluge. Any reckless soul who attempted such a thing was simply swept away and carried downstream.

Even if someone were able to reach the other side, they would need to make their way to the town from wherever they ended up, *then* they'd need to prepare a new boat to return, and that boat would *also* end up downstream from their intended destination. A costly endeavor—not to mention incredibly dangerous.

Yet that bear girl spoke as though she had a simple method for crossing the water. It was possible that there was a method unknown to me, but... what? It piqued my curiosity.

After the two of them left, I got back to work in my office... and soon enough, Mr. Retbelle came by.

It wasn't even evening yet, but he wanted his bracelet.

"Why, Mr. Retbelle, it seems you've come much earlier than our appointed time."

I led my rain-drenched, elderly visitor to a room where we could sit together.

"The very thought of coming in the evening made me weary. Yes, I thought it better to come early. Besides, the boats aren't going anywhere in this rain. You wouldn't mind if I took it now, would you?"

A reasonable request, I must admit. The boats weren't moving. There was no way to bring the painting over.

I prepared some tea and set it in front of Mr. Retbelle. “I’m sure you must be chilly, with the weather like that. Please, have some warm tea.”

“Ah, yes, thank you.”

I sat down and looked Mr. Retbelle in the eye. “Regarding the elven bracelet I promised you... would you be willing to wait until evening, as we agreed?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Someone is picking up the painting I promised you at this very moment.”

“In this rain?!” Mr. Retbelle was shocked, naturally. No resident of this town would guess that someone could cross the river in this rain.

“Indeed. It’s the sister of this bracelet’s owner, to be exact. She left in the middle of this deluge and insisted that she would bring the painting here.”

“An elf went to all that trouble simply for a bracelet?”

“Surely you’re aware of how much elves value such a thing, Mr. Retbelle.”

“Yes, yes—which makes them all the more difficult to acquire.”

“She left in this terrible rain to recover her family’s *precious* heirloom. I made a promise to that elf, you understand. I told her I would return the bracelet if she brought the painting tonight. You *did* promise that the earlier issue would be water under the bridge, Mr. Retbelle. Am I correct?”

“Yes, I promised. When did this elf go? We’ve had rain these past few days.”

“She just left.”

“She just *left?*” He blinked. “She *just left?*”

“Yes. She said she would be certain to come back by evening too.”

“And you didn’t stop her? You saw the state of the river, surely! You say she’ll get to the other town but look at this rain! What boat could survive it?”

"I'm not sure. But I did make a promise. If she's able to bring the painting you asked for by this evening, then I must return the bracelet to its owner. And so, I ask you... please wait until evening. As a fellow merchant, I hope you will understand the importance of this sort of agreement. It's the foundation of our trade, after all."

"Well, I do understand..."

"So please, Mr. Retbelle, keep your own promise. If the painting doesn't make it by this evening, I *will* give you the bracelet." That had been my original promise to him.

"Yes, yes. If you insist, I shall wait. But I shall come this evening, I swear it."

"Of course."

Truthfully, I was just as doubtful as Mr. Retbelle. I didn't expect them to come back in time. Still, a promise was a promise. Merchants must honor such things. If the two didn't come back, I would give Mr. Retbelle the bracelet.

But promises aside and merchantly duties forgotten... I did hope that they would come back soon.

You see, I didn't want to make that little elf girl cry.

CHAPTER 231

THE BEAR GETS THE BRACELET BACK

ONCE WE GOT TO THE SHORE, I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu and we hopped on 'em at once, riding them across the raging waters.

This was the second time Sanya was going through this, so she didn't seem panicked this time. Just like before, the river was furious, but my bears ran over it regardless. We finished crossing without a hitch.

"Yuna, let's get to the shop quickly. We have time, but we should get there sooner than later."

It still wasn't evening yet. I still hurried along just like Sanya told me to. I didn't want to deal with being even a second late, nor any quibbles that could open us up to.

There was a carriage stopped in front of Doglud's shop. When we headed inside, the young guy who worked at the place noticed us.

"You've already made it back?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"Could we see Mr. Doglud, by any chance?" Sanya asked.

"Yes, he is currently with Mr. Retbelle. That's the fellow who wants to buy the painting."

If Retbelle the merchant was here, I guess he was the owner of that carriage. Seemed a bit early, though. It wasn't even evening yet...

The guy headed to the back room's door and knocked before opening.

"Sir," the employee said—and at once, Doglud noticed us.

"You've made it back?" he asked hurriedly.

We joined him in the back room. Doglud sat there with an older guy, someone I didn't recognize.

"What is this? A girl in a bear outfit? And an elf... why, you couldn't be...?" As surprised as the man was to see me, he was even more shocked at the sight of Sanya.

"These are the ones I was telling you about," said Doglud. "The ones who went to get the painting. Ms. Sanya, were you able to acquire it?"

"Yes, and with no issues," said Sanya, and she looked at me.

I was the one actually carrying the painting, so I brought the crate that contained it out of my bear storage.

The two men looked surprised about the whole producing-a-gigantic-crate-from-a-bear-shaped-puppet thing, but soon enough, they were focusing on the crate.

"If you don't mind me doing a check..." Doglud opened the crate and looked inside.
"Yes. There is no doubt about it. Mr. Retbelle, if you'd like to take a gander?"

"Yes, this is the genuine article. I recognize the artist's signature."

"You've really made it back with it," said Doglud.

Retbelle nodded vaguely. "I simply cannot believe it..."

"Mr. Doglud, does this mean you'll honor our agreement?" Sanya asked.

If, after all of this, the answer was no... well, I'd have to get grizzly on this guy.

"Yes, of course I will. Is this satisfactory to you, Mr. Retbelle?" Doglud checked in with the stranger in the room—I guess this geezer was the one who wanted Luimin's bracelet.

"You are a relative of the elf who owns the bracelet, then?" he asked.

"I am, and I've come for it. I'm very sorry that my ill-bred sister caused you such trouble."

"I suppose," the old man said slowly, "that no amount of money could tempt you to part with the bracelet?"

"Correct. That bracelet is important to my people. We cannot give it away. We *will* not

give it away.”

The old man stroked his beard, deep in thought. “But how did you cross the river in this rain?”

Sanya grinned. “It’s a trade secret.”

“And to think, I’d believed such a feat impossible...” Retbelle wondered aloud. Not that I could blame him for that part. He shook his head, disappointed. “What a pity.”

“I’m sorry. If I had anything else of worth,” said Sanya, “I would give it to you.”

“No, that’s not necessary. I wanted the bracelet, yes, but it wasn’t for the money.”

“Then... why?” Sanya asked. “Why did you want it?”

“I was going to give it to my granddaughter as a gift. An elven bracelet has the blessing of the wind. Of course, I know that it means nothing if the wearer isn’t a skilled practitioner of wind magic, but I thought it would protect her, in the very least. One can never know how the future will turn out.”

So, he was getting his grandkid a present. I guess it could’ve made for a good protection charm.

“I’m sorry,” said Sanya. “I really can’t give this away.”

“Understandable,” said the old man. “Tell your sister, please, to never to let it leave her hands again. There are surely many others who would seek such an artifact.”

“Yes, I’ll be sure to tell her.”

He wasn’t anything like what I’d imagined. I thought he’d be some sinister supervillain, but he seemed like a doting grandfather.

In the end, Sanya was able to buy the bracelet back. She upended her item bag and jewels came tumbling out onto the table. Doglud examined them all—*jeez, how much were they worth?*—before taking a few of them and nodding.

“Yes, that’ll do,” he said, and returned the rest to Sanya.

With the trade done, Sanya took the bracelet. It looked exactly like the one she wore. It was Luimin's, after all.

"Thank you, Yuna," said Sanya. "Thank you for everything. If you hadn't been here, the bracelet might've been sold off before we even reached the town, let alone before we could even bring the painting over."

I guess we'd gotten here pretty quick thanks to my bears. If they'd gone by carriage, they'd still be out on the road...

"If you're going to thank anyone," I said, "thank Kumayuru and Kumakyu."

"Yes, of course."

With that, we were done. Once we got the bracelet back to Luimin, the whole thing would be settled. We could finally head out to the elves' village without anything holding us back.

CHAPTER 232

THE BEAR NEGOTIATES WITH THE PICTURE BOOK

“MR. DOGLUD, there was that one other matter I wished to ask you about.”

Ah, man. We had the perfect window to slip away, but now the old man was striking up a new conversation with Doglud.

“I’m sorry,” said Doglud. “I wasn’t able to procure *it* either.”

“I see. Even you, with all of your connections, couldn’t find it...” The old man sighed quietly.

He’d asked for something besides the painting? Hm... and Doglud hadn’t been able to locate it...

“You weren’t even able to find the *author*?” the old man added. “If we could find the person who created it, we may well be able to commission another picture book.”

So, it was the author of some picture book they were looking for?

“For all of our research, we could only find the word ‘bear.’ We couldn’t even locate an author. The only other information we were able to ascertain was that those who have the book are related in some way to the castle.”

Excuse me, say *what*?

Did he just say the author was “Bear”? And the only people with the book had some connection to the castle? That meant...

“I did so want that bear book for my granddaughter.”

A bear book?!

"I'm so sorry for the inconvenience," Doglud said.

Was he looking for the bear book that *I* wrote?!

"Speaking of bears..." The old man looked at me.

Yeah? I thought. *So I'm a bear, so what?*

Doglud looked me too. "Come to think of it, I did hear rumors of a girl in a bear suit who visits the castle..."

"You dress as a bear yourself," said the old man. "Do you happen to know her?"

I could've said I knew squat. That would've been so easy.

"Do you really want that book that much?" I asked instead.

"One of my granddaughter's friends from the capital showed her the book and she became so fond of it, but I haven't been able to procure a copy no matter how hard I try."

He'd been trying to get the bracelet for his granddaughter too, and he didn't look like a bad guy. After thinking about it for a while, I pulled a book out of my bear storage.

"Was this the bear book you were looking for?"

The moment the old man saw it, he reached out for it. "That it is! *This is it!*" Once he had the book in his hands, he stood up and shouted. "Then the bear who wrote this is..."

"That'd be me." You'd think that would be obvious, given my whole style, wouldn't you, my guy?

"And what of the bear who visits the castle in the capital?"

"Also me, unless something *really* weird is going on."

"I see, so you are the author." The old man looked at me again. "If I may be so forward, would you let me have this book? I will pay you, of course."

Since he was doing it for his granddaughter, I didn't really mind, but I was kind of curious how much he'd offer me for it.

"How much?" I asked.

"As much as you desire."

Okay, that was just ridiculous. How were you supposed to answer something like that? It wasn't like I wanted the money, though, and I'd kind of asked as a joke in the first place.

He continued, without a note of hesitation in his voice. "How much would I need to offer to take this off your hands, my dear bear lass?"

I kind of felt like he was judging me. Wait... was this guy testing me? Was I supposed to ask for a premium price? For the normal price of a picture book? Hold up, what was the normal price of a picture book?

"So, what's your answer?"

Uhhh, he was really turning up the heat all of a sudden. I was no match for a merchant, obviously. I felt like I'd lose this match if I just spouted off a random price. Still, I wasn't exactly hyped about just handing the book over to him for nothing though. So...

"Your granddaughter can pay me for it directly"

"What was that?" Took you by surprise, old man, eh? I guess that meant I won? He looked downright flabbergasted.

"It all depends on if she smiles when you give her that book. If she doesn't seem excited to have it, then I'm not forking it over no matter how much you pay me. But if she gives me a spectacular smile, she can have it as a present."

"Oh ho, are you sure you're fine with that? You think you can wager it all on my granddaughter's smile, do you?" He grinned. I guess he liked my proposition.

That firm look he'd had, like he was sizing me up, disappeared. Still, it wasn't like seeing his granddaughter smile would mean I lost this match.

"You can't buy a kid's genuine smile, no matter how much money you've got," I said.

"Absolutely right!" He beamed.

"What would you have done if I asked you for a ton of money?"

"If I could have paid for it, I would have. If not, I would have given up. Luckily, you had a different answer for me. It's been a mighty long time since anyone's made me smile like that. I never would've expected anyone to demand my own granddaughter's smile as a payment."

Maybe. But seeing her excited about the book was the best payment of all. "I'm going to make sure you cough up that price, you know."

"My granddaughter has joy to spare. You'll get more than enough smiles."

Talk about a doting grandparent. Looked like we were all winners here, in the end. At the very least, we didn't have any losers. To him, seeing his granddaughter smile was a little victory in and of itself.

I'd won too. My book was being exchanged for smiles, after all. Then again, I'd feel like a huge loser if she got the book and wasn't really into it.

"I have one more thing to ask you, Miss," said the old man. "What connection do you have with the castle? Why haven't we been able to learn anything about the book?"

"I asked His Majesty to keep it a secret."

"His Majesty?"

Both the old man and Doglud seemed flabbergasted when I mentioned the king. "I made the book for Lady Flora in the beginning. But then everyone working at the castle saw her with it and they started wanting copies too. I let them have copies, but only in the castle. I didn't want anyone finding out about me either, so I asked them to keep the author a secret."

"That explains why we could find nothing about the book." The old man nodded. "I see why everyone kept tight-lipped about it."

"Why won't you sell it everywhere?" asked Doglud. "I'm sure this would fly off the shelves, especially with the king's seal of approval."

"I don't really need the money, and people knowing I wrote it would be nothing but trouble."

I asked everyone in the room to keep silent about the book. They all agreed right away... they probably didn't want to invite the king's wrath on them, after all. I mean, the king had put a gag order in place for me! I couldn't just hand the book over without making sure they'd keep quiet. That'd be such a waste.

You never know when it'll be useful to have a king backing you up.

"It seems the king has taken quite a liking to you, hasn't he?" the old man noted. "I doubt he would go to such lengths to obfuscate the author of any normal picture book."

I suppose he had a point. I'd kind of thrown that request out there, but the king had taken it really seriously. Maybe it was just one of my billion secrets, as far as the king was concerned. He knew about the ten thousand monsters I'd slain, the kraken, and that tunnel I'd built. Plus, somebody had probably filled him in about those iron golems. A picture book was a drop in the secret bucket compared to all of that.

"So, my dear bear girl, would you accompany me to see my granddaughter right now?"

"Right now?" Wasn't this all a bit fast?

"I can't wait to see my granddaughter's smile!" From the look on his face, I don't think he'd take no for an answer.

Eh. It wasn't like I had anything coming up at the inn anyway. "All right. I'll go with you. Sanya, you can go back to the inn ahead of me, so we don't keep Luimin worried."

Luimin was probably fine since Miranda was with her, but I was sure she was worried.

"Are you sure about going on your own?" asked Sanya, for some reason. C'mon, Sanya knew full well what I was capable of. What was she so worried about?

Although... the fact she cared felt nice.

"Yuna, you can't go accepting fights even if you're not the one who starts it, you hear?"

Oh, so that was what she was worried about. I couldn't make any promises about *that*. Poor Sanya, thinking that she could suppress the fiery soul of a gamer. Still, I was pretty

selective about who I fought with these days, so Sanya didn't really have to worry about it.

Sanya headed to the inn, and I went to the old man's carriage to meet his granddaughter.

The sky had cleared. It'd been bucketing rain just earlier, though. Sure was weird weather today, with all these cycles of starts and stops.

The coach driver who'd been standing at the entrance sat down in the carriage. We got off to a slow start. Since I was in the carriage alone with the old man, we introduced ourselves properly.

"So... Yuna, is it? Now, will you tell me why you have that getup on?"

The question on everyone's minds, huh? Well, I had a brilliant go-to response for *that!*

"I've got my reasons."

"I won't dig into it, then. Experience tells me not to ask any further questions."

The reason wasn't actually deep. I just couldn't tell anyone the truth.

"How old's your granddaughter, Mr. Retbelle?" I couldn't really tell him much about myself, so I decided to change the topic. (I'm very good at that.)

"She's five this year. She's very cute. Looks just like me!"

Was he implying that he was cute? But... *how?* And she was supposed to be cute because she looked like him? Maybe if she had his nose or something, that'd be fine, but... come on.

I hadn't asked him for more details, but he started going off about how cute his granddaughter was. Sure, I'd been the one to change the conversation topic, but he sure was long-winded about his grandkid. Then again, I could talk about how cute Fina was all day. Somewhere in the middle of me letting him brag about his grandkid, the carriage stopped.

We'd finally made it.

"Already here, then?" the old man wondered. "There was so much more I had to tell

you."

I'd really heard enough. *Really* heard enough.

When I got out of the carriage, I discovered we were right in front of a tall building. Looked like it was about five stories tall?

"The bottom is where our business is, and the upper part is my home."

In other words, he owned the whole building.

"Rodis, if you would mind the carriage?"

"As you wish, sir," the man in the coach seat answered and drove the carriage away. He left, and we headed into the building.

Retbelle headed up the stairs and took me into the house. "I'm sorry, would you wait here? I'll bring my granddaughter to you," he said, and left the room.

I looked around while waiting for him. The place was decorated with paintings and vases, but I had no idea if they counted as fancy or not.

Still, it got me thinking. I kind of liked the idea of getting something to decorate my bear house. Maybe a bear something-or-other that Fina or Shuri would like? Or maybe I'd paint a bear myself?

It kind of felt weird decorating my house with something I'd made myself, though. Maybe it'd be better to have Fina and Shuri draw something for me?

As I wondered about that and checked out the room, the door opened and Retbelle came in. "Thank you for waiting."

There was a little girl hiding behind him.

I looked at her. Yeah, no family resemblance, even in the slightest.

CHAPTER 233

THE BEAR GIFTS THE GIRL A PICTURE BOOK

A LITTLE GIRL hid behind Retbelle and watched me.

Okay... I said it earlier, but I'll say it again. She didn't look like Retbelle whatsoever! I couldn't really make out her face, but her hair was definitely a different color from his. Retbelle had black hair, but this girl had pretty, silvery locks. I was *this* close to accusing the guy of kidnapping.

"A bear...?" the girl said in a whisper when she looked at me.

"Hello, I'm Yuna. What's your name?"

I crouched down so I was at eye level with her.

She got embarrassed and hid further behind Retbelle.

"Come now, give her an answer."

"Alka..."

"Alka? What a cute name."

Alka gave me a happy smile and appeared from behind Retbelle. Then she walked over to me and gave me a hug.

"Soft." Well, I was wearing a onesie. "Why are you here, Bear?"

I'd just told her my name. Why was she still calling me "Bear"? Eh, that wasn't something to get mad about. I've had a ton of character development since then, so to speak. "Your grandfather asked me to come here."

"Grandpapa did?" Alka looked at Retbelle. "Do you know Bear, Grandpapa?"

"I met her while out and about. I asked her to come here so you could meet her too."

Retbelle watched as Alka burst into a huge smile.

If I didn't know they were blood relatives, I'd be worried. They *were* related, right?

I ignored him and looked at Alka. "I've brought you a present, Alka." I pulled out the first volume of my bear picture book from my bear storage. The moment Alka saw the cover, she broke out into a smile.

"It's your book!" She took it happily from my bear puppets. "I can have it?!"

"Yeah, it's a gift."

"Thank you." Alka was all smiles. Yep, she was getting the book for free. When I looked over at Retbelle, he had this victorious look on his face. I could practically hear what was going on in his head.

See how cute my granddaughter is? I've won this match!

I looked at my book and felt my own sense of victory. *But she's smiling because of my book, you got that?* She'd taken the book with open arms. I'd won.

Doesn't she have the most winning smile?

I had to give him that one, but it was all he was getting from me. Once our silent conversation was over, I realized someone was tugging on my bear puppet glove. Alka's little hand was holding onto mine.

"Bear, will you read to me?"

She was looking at me with big ol' puppy-dog eyes. It wasn't like I could say no.

"I'll be downstairs," said Retbelle. "I'll leave Alka with you for a bit." With that, Retbelle left the room.



I sat down on the sofa and Alka got on my lap. I kind of felt bashful reading from a book I'd made myself. Once we were done with the first volume and I was reading the second for her, the door opened.

It wasn't Retbelle this time. Instead, a woman with silver hair walked in.

"Why, it really *is* a bear."

"Mommy!" Alka stood up and latched onto the woman.

That was her mom, I guess; Alka *definitely* took after her mom. Which meant... Retbelle's son probably married this woman then? Hm. Maybe Alka looked like her grandmother, but there was no way she looked like her grandpa.

"Thank you so much for looking after her," said the woman. "I'm her mother, Seffle."

"I'm Yuna."

"She wasn't difficult, was she?"

"She was great. Totally charming!"

"Excellent. And this is the picture book?" Seffle looked down at the book in her daughter's hands.

"Bear gave it to me!"

"Good for you." She gave her happy daughter a pat on the head. "My stepfather told me about the book. Thank you so much for bringing it to her. One of her friends showed it to her at the capital. She was so taken by it, we hardly knew what to do. My stepfather looked for a copy, but he just simply never found one. He'd almost given up."

"I'm just happy that she's happy." Alka had been thrilled when I'd gifted the book to her.

I thought my job here was done and had just been about to head out, when...

"I'm so sorry. We didn't even offer you any tea!" Seffle quickly shuffled to the next room over.

"I'm all right. I'm heading home now."

"Won't you stay for a bit longer? My stepfather wanted to thank you. He asked me to keep you here—"

I'd already gotten Alka's smile, which was payment enough. That was the promise, after all. But—

"I think he'll be here shortly, so please have some tea while you wait."

"I really don't need any, thanks."

"Bear, you're going home...?" When I tried turning down the tea, Alka grabbed my clothes. I was defenseless against her tiny, little hands! Lady Flora was one thing, but this was just unfair. A hit below the belt! In the end, I stayed for tea just like they'd asked.

At least I let Alka know I wasn't heading home right away, which got her to let go.

When I sat down on the sofa, Alka plopped down right beside me. Her little hands latched right onto my clothes. She'd only been planning to let me out of her grip for a moment...

"Ha ha! It seems Alka's taken a real liking to you!" Seffle sat in a chair across from me and sipped her tea as she grinned.

"It's because of my clothes."

"When my stepfather told me that a girl dressed as a bear had brought a bear book for my daughter, I had no idea what to make of it. And then, wouldn't you know it, I came over and *actually* found a girl dressed as a bear. You can imagine my surprise."

Seffle flashed me a smile, then borrowed the picture book from Alka and started reading it.

Once we were done reading the book again, Retbelle came back. "Sorry. That took me longer than I expected."

"Well then, I'll be off!" I said—or rather, I was *about* to say that. I didn't need a thank-you, but—

"Wait a moment. I still haven't thanked you!"

"I've already gotten a thank-you from Alka, so..." That had been the condition for giving her the book, after all.

But Retbelle was having none of it. "Please, allow me to thank you as well."

Now he was putting me on the spot. I really didn't want his money. "I don't need anything. We had a deal, you know? The price of the book was Alka's smile. I've gotten plenty of those."

I placed my hand gently on Alka's head. She smiled and looked up at me.

"I know full well you don't want money. But that isn't enough to make me feel right. I've got influence in this town. Is there anything I can thank you with?"

Something did come to mind, now that I thought about it. "I guess there's one thing, if you'd hear me out."

"What is it?"

"Is it possible to buy a house in this town?" I needed one to set up a bear gate.

In certain parts of the capital, you needed a letter of introduction to buy property. If it was the same way here, I wanted to have one of those letters ready. That'd help me out a lot more than any money exchanging hands.

"Do you intend to settle down here?"

"Not really, but I needed a house for something." I couldn't tell him about the bear gate, but *man*, did I want one here. This place was so far away that it'd be really useful.

"I see. In these parts, so long as one's identity is verified, anyone can buy a house."

"I wouldn't need a letter of introduction?"

"You wouldn't *need* one, no. But some locations might be cheaper if you had one."

So, if I had the funds and wasn't picky about where the house was, I could pretty much pick any place I wanted. "I'd just go the Merchant Guild to handle that, right?"

"Do you really intend to purchase a house in this town?"

"I do..."

"The houses are not cheap enough for a child to buy, you know—not even the smaller ones."

"That's not an issue." I had money from my original world, and even more was rolling in from the shops and the tunnel tolls. No matter how much it cost, I was sure I had enough.

"Stepfather, why don't you sell her that one house?" Seffle asked. "Perhaps even give her a discount?"

"Ah, yes... that house. But it's rather out of the way."

They had a small house in an out-of-the-way part of town, but they didn't have any use for it. No one wanted to buy it either, so the thing had been left abandoned for years. As long as I could set up a bear gate inside, I didn't mind. I wouldn't need to buy land and build a new bear house, which meant I wouldn't draw crowds with *that* whole ordeal. Sounded good to me!

And it'd be a pain to go to the Merchant Guild and go through all the formalities of buying a place. Just thinking about the scene I'd make if I went there... nah, I'd prefer to just get a house here, if they were willing to let me have it.

Plus, if I bought a place from the guild, Sanya and Luimin would notice it and I'd have to explain myself, which would be even more of a pain.

"If you really will let me have it, that'd be a huge help."

"Then I'll show it to you now," Retbelle said. "We'll decide on the price once you see it."

Retbelle stood up, and I did too, but Alka's little hand wasn't letting go.

"Sorry, Alka," I said. "I need to go now."

“Bear...” She looked so forlorn.

“I’ll come by again.”

“Really?”

Seffle laughed. “She really seems to like you. Alka is normally so shy with strangers. She’s never like this.” She smiled.

I was kind of happy, but I also had no idea what to do. But I had a new, special technique to placate kids: I pulled out stuffed animals of my bears from my bear storage.

“A black bear and a white bear?!” Alka shouted. Her vice grip loosened, and she grabbed the two bears.

“Goodness, what cute bear toys!”

“It wasn’t just the copies of the books?” said Retbelle. “You had stuffed animals with you too?”

“Don’t try to produce your own, okay?” I said.

“I would never.”

“Hey, Alka. These two are going to take my place, okay?”

“I can have them...?”

“Yeah. You keep them safe, okay?”

“Uh-huh, thank you!!!” Alka happily clutched the toys.

If they let me have the house, I could come visit her whenever I wanted. We left Alka, and Retbelle took me to the house. I thought we’d be walking, but Retbelle had his carriage bring us around instead.

CHAPTER 234

THE BEAR HEADS OUT TO THE ELVES' VILLAGE AGAIN

WE PLODDDED ALONG in the carriage, leaving the main road on our way to the house. Eventually, the carriage stopped in front of a cute little place with a red roof.

“This is it. So, what do you say?”

It was far away from the center of town, so it was deserted... which worked great for my purposes. Retbelle took out his key and let us in. The house was a tad dusty, so we opened some windows to get the air flowing. I guess no one had been there for a while.

“I hope you won’t mind the dust. We do clean it occasionally, I assure you.”

Actually, it looked pretty nice. And any house is going to get dusty if it isn’t lived in for a couple years.

I scoped out the place. It was furnished with a bed and the bare minimum of furniture. The first floor had a kitchen, a living room, and a bathroom with a proper bath. The second floor had two bedrooms. Kind of felt like a newlyweds’ house—but I was just using it as a base to get to and from places, so this’d do just fine.

If I set up a transport gate here, it’d make traveling to the neighboring country easier. Honestly, I could’ve gotten more fancy and found a place in the town across the river, but... the grass is always greener on the other side, you know?

“Looks good,” I said. “How much are you willing to part with it for?”

Retbelle silently produced a slip of paper. “This is the title of the house. I don’t need your money, you see. You can have it. You’ve given us two copies of the book, you’ve given us stuffed animals... think of this as a way to repay you for them.”

“That doesn’t really sound like a fair trade.”

"That's not for you to decide. I tried for ages to get a hold of that book, and not once did I succeed. Please, don't concern yourself with the price. This is but a mere expression of my gratitude. And you managed to acquire that painting for me, didn't you? I needed to get that to someone quickly. If you hadn't, my negotiations would've been for naught."

"Was that destroyed painting part of the deal?"

"That's right. I originally had needed that painting. But, since we still had time, I arranged for a different one. However, we couldn't get a boat out for days. We were in dire straits as well. But you managed to bring the painting over, and all was well. This is a token of my gratitude for that."

"I don't think that's enough of a reason to give me a whole house."

"Please, don't fret about it. Think of it as thanks for letting me see Alka's smile. No amount of money could buy such a thing. That's why I'm so grateful to you, my dear."

"Are you really sure about this?"

"Yes. We've left it neglected as it is because we couldn't find a buyer. If you want it, it's yours!" Retbelle thrust the house's title at me.

"I guess I'll graciously accept then." I was a little conflicted, but I did end up taking the deed from him.

"Are you sure you don't want us to take you back?"

"I'm fine. I'd like to poke around the house a little more." I still had one more thing left to do: put up the gate.

"I see. In that case, please come to our house if anything happens."

Then Retbelle left.

He'd said that they cleaned it occasionally, but the dust still bothered me a little. I used wind magic to blow the dust that had collected on the floors outside. That was easy enough to do for every room. The only reason I could do that was because there wasn't

anything in the house other than the big furniture. If the house were filled with little odds and ends, they'd have gone flying off with the dust.

After some light cleaning, I set up a bear gate in the room next to the bedroom on the second floor. Now I could get back here whenever I wanted.

If I spent too much time out, I'd worry Sanya and Luimin, so I closed up the doors and headed back to the inn.

"Yuna, you've been out late. Did everything go okay?" asked Sanya. She seemed worried.

Yeah, I'd probably stayed out a little too late. If I'd been a tad later, they'd been planning on going to Retbelle's house to get me.

"I'm fine. I met his grandkid and read her a book. They served me tea too, but that was all."

I explained what had been holding me up, but I left the house out of it.

"Glad to hear it," said Sanya. "If he tried to do anything to you, though, you let me know." I really appreciated that.

And now it was Luimin's turn to greet me. "Thank you so much, Yuna." She bowed her head. On her arm now hung the same type of bracelet that Sanya wore.

"I'm glad you got your bracelet back."

"All thanks to you, Yuna."

"But Sanya was the one who paid for it." All I'd done was take them across the river on my bears. Sure, that was the hard part, but I was just making use of a skill from that god. I wasn't going to act like I'd done them a big favor because I just so happened to have the skill.

"My sister told me the whole thing," said Luimin. "She said that we never would have gotten it back without you."

"That's not true. Sanya did *plenty*."

"But Kumayuru and Kumakyu *did* run across the river, didn't they?"

Looked like Sanya had told her that my bears could walk on water. Fine by me—since the boats would be held up for days and we wanted to get to the elves' village quick, I'd told Sanya that she could spill the beans to Luimin.

"If you're going to thank anyone, thank my bears. They were working hard, even in the rain."

"Yes, of course. I'm so grateful to them too!"

"Since you're back," said Sanya, "how about we go out to eat? Miranda and the others are waiting."

Apparently, we were treating Miranda's group for staying with Luimin. They'd arranged the meal while waiting for me at the inn. We headed to the meeting place.

Sanya started off by apologized to Miranda's group. "Thank you, everyone. I'm so sorry my silly little sister caused you all this trouble."

"I still wonder how you got across that raging river to buy back that bracelet," Miranda mused. "I suppose that's just why you're a guild master, Sanya."

"Poor adventurers like us could never do that," added Sharla.

Miranda's group smiled bitterly at their own words.

Eriel inched closer to me. "But Yuna, how did you cross the river, really?"

I backed away. "Top secret."

"Top secret?" Eriel pouted. "C'mon, tell *meeeeee...*"

"Sanya, how did you cross the river?" Miranda asked, turning to her.

"A guild master can't go around revealing an adventurer's secrets."

Miranda smiled wryly. "Dang. No dice."

That marked the end of the bracelet talk, and we started talking about what came next.

"Do the ships seem like they'll be heading out?" Sanya asked.

"Hmm... I'd give it three more days? That sounds about right, by my estimation."

"I think it'll be very crowded," said Sharla. "The rain really backed up trade for everybody."

Miranda's group were locals, so we could probably trust their guess about something like this. Besides, I wanted to take my time sightseeing if I was going to get on a boat. I didn't want to be packed in like sardines in a stuffy, crowded ship.

Once again, it was gonna be Kumayuru and Kumakyu for us.

"Thank you so much for everything you did for Luimin," said Sanya. "If you ever make your way to the capital, please do come by the Adventurer Guild. I'll pay you back."

"You bet we'll stop by if we come to the capital, but we're not going to ask for payment."

Made sense—they were adventurers, so they'd probably end up at the guild sooner or later. Hopefully I'd be there in the capital to see them, but I guess that'd be hard to time?

"Do you live in the capital too, Yuna?" Eriel asked me. I didn't really want to tell her all *that* much about me. Then again, Crimonia was pretty far away. I could probably share that much.

"I live in a town called Crimonia."

"Um, Crimonia, so that's..."

"It's a little far away, isn't it?" Miranda answered as Eriel counted on her fingers.

So, you can't come visit, I thought.

"But it's not like we *can't* get there," said Eriel.

"Well, then!" said Miranda. "Next time we visit, you'll need to let us stay at your place!"

No freaking way. I smiled and tried to pretend I hadn't heard that.

"Everyone, thank you so very much," said Sanya. "I'm so grateful I met all of you."

"We couldn't do all that much for you, though," said Miranda.

"We really, really didn't," added Eriel.

"That's not true!" said Luimin. "I was so happy that you were all so nice to me..."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Miranda. "If something ever brings you to town, don't be a stranger!"

"Gotcha!"

The conversation continued until we were done with the meal, and soon enough, the day came to a close.

The next day, the rain and its remnants had cleared up like they'd never happened.

Still, the ships still weren't moving because the river was raging. We left the town in order to ride on my bears across the river, as I'd planned. I obviously couldn't summon them at the wharf and waltz the lot of us across the water in broad daylight. Nah, we had to leave town first and then cross.

"I think this'll do." We found a spot upstream from the town—deserted, of course.

"We're crossing the river from *here*?" Luimin looked super happy to be riding on Kumayuru. She'd been all "*Are we there yet?*" and "*Don't you think we could try around here?*" for the entire trip.

"Don't move around too much while we're on the river. I'm not responsible if you fall."

The weather was nice, but the river wasn't. I was pretty sure we'd be fine, but I still gave Luimin a warning. And so, finally, my bears ran out onto the river and started crossing.

"This is amazing! We're actually running across the top of the river!" Luimin wasn't moving around *too* much, but she was sure making a scene.

"Luimin, please keep your voice down," Sanya told her.

“But, Sister, we’re running on top of the river!”

“I’m well aware.” Sanya tried to get Luimin to chill out a little, but she couldn’t.

Well, it only lasted for a few minutes. My bears were across the river in the blink of an eye.

“You were amazing, Kumayuru.” Luimin hugged Kumayuru and stroked the bear’s fur.

Still, it seemed like she was pretty excited even though we were done crossing. I left Luimin to Sanya as we headed off toward the elves’ village again.



EXTRA STORY

LUFA, FIRST HALF

THE SALBARD HOUSEHOLD had been ruined by a single girl who looked like a bear, and Lord Gajurdo had been arrested after years of terrible deeds, ranging from intimidation to backroom deals to bribery... and worse. What finally brought the Salbards down was Gajurdo's son, Lord Randle, for making the mistake of kidnapping the noble Lady Misana.

I was in the middle of tidying up at the Salbard estate when a terrible crash came from the front entrance. I rushed over and found a girl who looked like a bear along with *actual* bears—one black and one white.

The bear girl looked positively furious. She glared at Lord Gajurdo and Lord Randle with a fury that I could hardly think someone so adorable could even *contain*.

From what I could gather of their conversation, it seemed that Lord Gajurdo and Lord Randle had kidnapped Lady Misana of the Fahrengram family. Lady Gajurdo denied the accusation, but the girl seemed confident that Misana was here.

Randle instructed his bodyguard, Brad, to take down the girl. I knew the man was terribly strong. Well-spoken though he was, the man was a lover of violence. Not the sort of man you would want to cross paths with.

Brad and the bear girl began fighting. How would he toy with her? She could run—she *should* run—and yet the cute bear girl fought on equal terms. With her magic, she defeated Brad in the end with a well-placed fist. I could hardly believe the scene in front of me. The other servants seemed just as shocked. We merely stared at the furious bear girl and at the brute she'd *very* quickly rendered immobile.

When I got a hold of myself and looked around, I realized Lord Randle had fled at some point.

Only Lord Gajurdo remained.

The bear girl began questioning Lord Gajurdo... and eventually, Randle returned with Lady Misana as a hostage. But before Lord Randle could get a word out, the bear girl sent him flying and saved the Lady.

Lady Misana was sobbing, but the bear girl hugged her gently. I supposed that tender expression on her face was the girl's true, most natural expression.

Lord Gajurdo began to shout, and the girl knocked him out in a single blow. Soon after, the noble Lady Ellelaura entered the fray. She knew about the merchant children being snatched away, and so Lord Gajurdo was taken into her custody.

In that short span of time, the Salbard family was no more. I was finally released from Lord Gajurdo. It would become known that I had assisted him, yes, but that meant little in the grand scheme of things.

I offered to cooperate with Lady Ellelaura. It wasn't as though that would forgive what I had done with Lord Gajurdo, but I wanted to repent. I guided Lady Ellelaura to where the kidnapped children were underground.

The children were happy when they found out they were being rescued. When we emerged from underground, I asked Lady Ellelaura to check on the other rooms.

Those were torture rooms where people who opposed Lord Gajurdo were brought. I had often heard screams echoing out from those rooms. But far worse than the screams was when, sometimes quite suddenly, the screams completely *stopped*. I had never gone inside then, but it took little imagination to understand the place.

After the children were sent home, Lady Ellelaura and I retrieved the keys from Lord Gajurdo's room and returned to the dungeon with two guards.

"What is in these rooms?"

I used the key from Lord Gajurdo's room and opened the door.

A putrid odor spilled out. "What is this?"

The inside of the room reeked of blood. When Lady Ellelaura saw the room, there was no need for me to give her an explanation of what had occurred there. Lady Ellelaura

and the guards began to investigate.

I opened a drawer in a desk. Inside were several citizen and guild cards. I slowly checked the cards one by one. There it was; a guild card... and on that guild card, my father's name was written.

My father had not run away. He had not abandoned me.

I began to cry.

"Lufa...?" Ellelaura called out from behind me, but I couldn't answer.

I tried to overcome the sobs. Then I wiped away my tears and looked back to Ellelaura. "I think these are the citizen and guild cards of the people who were killed in this room. Please, take a look."

"Is your father's card there as well?" Lady Ellelaura asked.

"Yes... it is."

"Is that right? I... I don't know what to say."

"You're fine. I thought there was a possibility he had been killed, but seeing the guild card myself... I couldn't stop myself from crying."

"Oh, of course you'd cry. He was your own flesh and blood, Lufa."

I wiped away the tears, but they simply wouldn't stop. *Oh, Father...*

"Lady Ellelaura, I have something to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"Would it be possible to find out where Gajurdo put the, ah... *remains* of the victims?" I wanted to know where my father was.

"Of course. You should be able to place flowers at his resting place."

"Thank you very much."

After that we searched the rooms, but I ended up feeling sick.

"It's okay to take a break outside the room," said Ellelaura.

"No. No, I need to help."

"We appreciate that," she said, "but are you *really* okay?"

"Yes, I should be fine."

"You're very strong," Lady Ellelaura said.

But I wasn't.

I was always thinking about how I wanted to run away. But since I was weak, I hadn't been able to escape. I wasn't strong at all...

After that we checked the other rooms, we went to Lord Gajurdo's room. That's where the real investigation began.

"Looks like these are the contracts from the merchants," I said. We found a large number of the contracts in a drawer. "He forced people to sign them with his threats. I hope you can review them."

"There's quite a few here," said Lady Ellelaura. "This is a job for Gran. Still, from the number of them, I'll need to send for help from the capital."

I checked the next drawer.

"This is..."

"Is there something there?"

"It's *my* card."

I held it out to Lady Ellelaura. I was a criminal too, after all. The other servants had given up their citizen cards, so I thought it would be fitting to give mine to Lady Ellelaura. It seemed she had understood what I intended.

Lady Ellelaura took the card—one of many servants' cards that turned up in the investigation.

"Confiscating citizen cards sure is cruel," Lady Ellelaura said.

"I suppose we all had no choice in the matter because of our debts."

"You seem quite unaffected by this, don't you?"

"I have to be. If I think too much, I don't know that I could bear it..."

When I had seen my father's guild card, I hadn't been able to contain my emotions. Somewhere deep down, I'd still believed that my father could be alive. All this time, it had kept me going.

"I'm sorry," said Lady Ellelaura, but she had nothing to apologize for.

Lord Gran came by after that, looking quite worn down. Lady Ellelaura filled him in.

"We're investigating everything," she said with a sigh, "but it's taking some time."

"Yes, I suppose it would." Lord Gran looked even more exhausted, now that he knew what Lord Gajurdo had done. "I never imagined that his cruelty ran so deep."

The servants who had worked at Lord Gajurdo's estate were taken into custody—I was no exception. But I *had* worked closely with Lord Gajurdo, so I knew a considerable amount about his operations. As such, I was placed in a private holding room, away from the others.

The people who had been detained were interviewed, one by one. Those without a direct connection to Lord Gajurdo were released and returned to their families. But I still remained.

I knew full well I wouldn't be released after all I'd done. I couldn't escape either way—I had no family in town, and I couldn't leave since I didn't have a citizen card. Even if I did get out of town, where would I go?

From time to time, Lady Ellelaura and Lord Gran would come to talk and question me. Sometimes, they'd take me to Lord Gajurdo's estate and I would explain things to them.

Several days passed since Lord Gajurdo had been arrested. Lord Gran and Lady Ellelaura were to head for the capital with Lord Gajurdo.

But before they left, Lady Ellelaura and Lord Gran stopped by.

"Are you sure you would not like me to go as well?" I asked.

"That won't be necessary" Lady Ellelaura replied.

"Everything you have told us has been correct," Lord Gran said. "There is no reason to take you to the capital."

"I see." I thought they would take me with them, but they were to leave me behind...

"Once Gajurdo's punishment is decided, yours will also be handed down," said Lord Gran. "My apologies. Could you hold on for a bit?"

"Yes," I said.

I had no future ahead of me.

All I could do was wait.

EXTRA STORY

ELLELAURA HEADS HOME TO THE CAPITAL

“AHH...” I sighed.

I had so wanted to see Noa that I came to Sheelin after seeking permission from the king himself, but I’d never expected matters to become so grave.

I made my way to Sheelin on the pretense of inspecting the town, though I really *was* only there to see Noa. The peculiar quirk of Sheelin is that it’s governed by two noble families—the Fahrergrams and the Salbards.

The families had gotten along swimmingly at first, but their relationship had soured after they handed the reins to their children. One reason that things had gotten so bad was that Gajurdo had taken over as head of the Salbard family. Rumors of his wrongdoings were everywhere, but no one had enough proof to get in his way.

He couldn’t be judged on the basis of rumor, after all. Condemning people based on hearsay would spell the end of the nation. Before we charged him with anything, we needed evidence.

On my trip to see Noa, I’d hoped to grasp some hint of the Salbards’ villainy.

Such an opportunity presented itself the second night after my arrival at Sheelin.

Gran Fahrergram’s granddaughter, Misana, had been kidnapped... and Yuna had funneled her rage into a rampage. She sleuthed out Misana’s location using her summoned bears and charged into the Salbards’ on her own. Just as I left the merchant guild, I found Yuna charging right down the street on Kumayuru, a lunatic gleam in her eye.

I followed her with my three guards in tow and, as we chased her, I realized that she was headed to Gajurdo’s estate. The gate had been demolished—not a trace of the door remained.

Inside, I found that Yuna was about to punch that toad-faced creep. I tried shouting for her to stop, but I hadn't reached her in time. The blow had landed on Gajurdo.

That was the moment of House Salbard's downfall.

The Salbards had the unfortunate fate of Yuna being in town.

Only Yuna could bring Zelef, the head palace chef, here from the capital. Only Yuna could've made sure that the chef made it to the party on time. Only Yuna could've figured out who had kidnapped Misana, could've charged into this place without any help, could've defeated the skilled guards.

Yuna was the Salbards' worst nightmare... but to the Fahrergrams, she was the goddess of luck.

"Ha ha!" The thought of the girl in her adorable bear outfit, punching away, always made me laugh. Any good people who crossed Yuna's path seemed to meet good fortune. On the other hand, anyone or anything that opposed her—be they monsters or adventurers—met an ill end. She was like an odd goddess, perhaps.

And to the two families, she was a *very* different sort of goddess.

I was putting together a report for His Majesty, to my frustration. I would've much preferred to spend time with my daughter. My one saving grace was that I could watch her play with the others and the bears. Seeing my daughter dressed as a bear, playing with Kumakyu and Kumayuru, was an enchantingly adorable sight.

All the while, I looked into Gajurdo's crimes, collected testimonies using his contracts, and investigated how they had actually been executed.

Gran, Cliff, and Leonardo also helped, but I was an agent of His Majesty. Naturally, my pile of work only grew.

There were many servants and involved parties willing to speak up, but Gajurdo's own interrogation had been quite an ordeal. The moment he opened his mouth, rancid insults came pouring out. The apple did not fall far from the tree either—his boy was no better. However, as the evidence and testimony closed in on him, Gajurdo steadily became more sensible.

Still, Gajurdo's misdeeds only seemed to grow more horrific the more we learned. How could one man commit so many crimes?

Once we had enough evidence, I went to the capital with Gran. The two of us rode in a carriage together.

"If this hadn't happened," I groaned, "I could've stopped by Crimonia. You know, by pretending to go for an inspection." But this mess had ruined my plans *and* my trip to Crimonia.

"I'm very sorry about that," said Gran.

"It's quite all right. It wasn't your fault, Gran. It was all that awful Gajurdo."

"I'm terribly thankful you came. Had you not, matters may have spun out of control."

"It's Yuna you should thank. She was the one who figured out that Misana was taken to the Salbards' estate. She made that whole fuss about it."

"Quite right. I am bound from doing the sorts of things she is capable of. Had we not found Misana, I would've... been left a frail shell of myself. I would have lost all my political influence and caved to Gajurdo's will."

Yuna's actions had saved us. Disciplining the nobility took a certain amount of authority. We wouldn't have been able to waltz into their estate simply out of suspicion. Had we forced them to allow an inspection and come out empty-handed, they would've surely retaliated.

"This will likely be the end of the Salbards," I said.

Though the kidnapping of a noble's daughter was *quite* the crime—and we had proof of their many other wrongdoings. Murder, kidnappings, bribery, embezzlement... they had crossed the line.

Gajurdo seemed well aware of that. But he'd only hung his head in shame when we left for the capital. His son Randle, on the other hand, seemed ignorant of the enormity of his crimes. I suppose that went to show just how spoiled the boy was.

It made me glad that I hadn't raised *my* girls like that. Although I was a bit worried about the penchant for bears that Noa had developed thanks to Yuna. It was inevitable, I suppose, considering how adorable Yuna was, as well as Kumayuru and Kumakyu. I wasn't planning to give any of them a scolding... as long as they behaved.

And yes, I admit it... the bears were *rather* cute.

Once we arrived at the capital, Gajurdo and Randle were taken away by the soldiers. Gran and I entered the castle to report back to His Majesty.

"Ah, Gran, Elleaura. You're back!"

"I am, and just when I thought I'd have some quality time with my daughter."

"Enough of that. Just get on with the report, will you?"

We reported Misana's kidnapping—the reason for the whole mess—to the impatient king.

The king laughed after hearing our tale. "The bear girl did what...?"

"Yuna saved us," Gran said.

"I suppose that means you've collected evidence?"

"We've seized the documents, and we've interviewed the merchants in question. I'll have the inspection team I left behind give you the details."

"In that case, just give me the general gist of what has happened with Gajurdo for now."

I gave him the details of the Salbard family's crimes, with an emphasis on the data I'd collected.

The king's expression grew grave. "Elleaura, I would like to serve him his sentence immediately."

"Your Majesty."

"He's had his fun at the expense of my kingdom. What was his relationship with the Merchant Guild?"

"The guild master of Sheelin was conspiring with him, it seems."

"And are they connected to the Bornardt firm?"

"At present, we haven't found a link between them." The current guild master had transferred to Sheelin because the prior person in charge had supposedly retired. Perhaps the Bornardt firm had been involved, and perhaps not. It was unclear.

"I see."

Since we had already reported this to the capital's guild master, the guild would be appointing someone new to Sheelin any day now to restore normality.

With the report out of the way, the Salbard family's punishment was decided upon in due time.

The Salbards were stripped of their count status, and their estate was seized. As for Gajurdo, he was sentenced to death. Randle would be put into the care of a distant relative and would be barred from entering Sheelin again. Never again would he be permitted to regain his status as an aristocrat.

The section of Sheelin that the Salbards had once governed would come under the control of the Fahrengrams. Gran would withdraw from his position as Sheelin's lord, and his son Leonardo would succeed him.

"The moment is ripe for my retirement, now that Gajurdo is out of the picture. I think that Leonardo should be able to manage on his own. Sheelin will be a brand-new town... and I think that calls for a new lord in turn."

Gran paused for a moment, and then he sighed. "And if I had been a better lord, this whole mess never would have come to be. Gajurdo wasn't the only one to blame. I was at fault as well."

The king was quick to acquiesce to Gran's request.

It was decided Gran would be going back to Sheelin, now that the report was done.

Before he did, I wanted to ask him something. "What will happen to that girl?"

"Which girl?"

"Lufa, that girl who was with Gajurdo."

"Ah, yes. Her..."

"I could take her in." The girl had been by Gajurdo's side, and she knew many things. Though she'd also been a victim, we couldn't acquit her just yet. Still... as long as she was under my supervision, she would be allowed some freedom.

"You needn't worry about the girl. I plan to take her in," said Gran.

"I see." Fair enough—I left her in Gran's hands. I knew he could be trusted.

EXTRA STORY

LUFA, SECOND HALF

HOW MANY DAYS had passed since Lord Gran and Lady Elleaura had left for the capital?

My mind was as blank as the ceiling above my bed. I stared into it, thinking of nothing at all... or rather, not *wanting* to think. But it was so hard to keep those dark thoughts at bay. The quiet room... the empty room... the infinite march of time. The thoughts came to me—thoughts of Lord Gajurdo, of my father, and of my own future...

I was shocked to learn about my father's murder. His killer, Lord Gajurdo, had been caught. Whatever punishment he received, Lord Gran and Lady Elleaura assured me, would be severe.

There was a hole in my heart. My body was too heavy.

I couldn't breathe.

Father... I want to see you.

Another day of lying on the bed, staring at a familiar ceiling. Just when I'd written off the day as another waste, the door opened, and an old gentleman entered the room.

"Lord Gran..."

It really *was* him. "I apologize for the delay. Please follow me."

I was taken from the room. Lord Gran led me onward. No one said a word. We left the building, and I was made to board a carriage.

Where was he taking me? The gallows, perhaps.

Fine—so be it.

Lord Gran glanced at me from time to time from up front. It seemed as though he wanted to say something, but he stayed silent. All I could hear was the rattle of the carriage.

The carriage rolled on in silence. There were things I wanted to ask Gran, but I couldn't produce the words. When I looked at the seat next to Gran was sitting, I saw bouquets of flowers.

In the end, the carriage came to a stop before I could ask him anything.

"We're getting off here."

I got out of the carriage, just as Lord Gran requested.

"Where is this?" I asked.

The carriage has stopped at the outskirts of town where a thick outcropping of trees grew. Why were we here?

Gran handed me a bouquet. I glanced around, puzzled... these were the flowers from the carriage. But... why did he give them to me?

I didn't understand any of it. "Lord Gran...?"

"Hold on," he said. "This way" Lord Gran started walking. I did as I was told and walked behind him, flowers in hand.

"...Around here." Lord Gran stopped in front of a tree. "It should be here." He seemed to struggle to get the words out. "That is, *he* should be. Your father... he should be resting below this tree."

"My father is here...?"

"Lord Gajurdo told us who buried your father. We questioned him, and..."

Lady Elleaura had kept her promise.

Lord Gran placed his own flowers at the base of the tree and clasped his hands together. Then he moved away slightly and let me take his place. Slowly, I came to the roots of the tree. I placed my flowers next to Lord Gran's and put my hands together.

Father. This is where he put you.

Very nice and sunny, wasn't it? It's not gloomy at all.

There were no buildings around. It was a quiet place, but the sun still shone on this spot.

I'm glad you're sleeping somewhere sunny.

I felt my tears flow down my face. And here I'd been, thinking I had nothing more to cry about. But it was no use. It wouldn't stop...

Father...

Memories of him came rushing back. Fun times... sad times. The day we cried together after mother had passed away. A flood of memories washed over me.

I wiped away my tears and looked over at Lord Gran.

"Are you done already?" he asked. Lord Gran had been silently waiting this whole time.

"Thank you very much. I'm glad I could pay my respects to my father for the final time."

I was glad I could see his resting place before heading to my own.

"The final time...? You can come as many times as you like," Lord Gran said.

I was silent. I didn't understand what Lord Gran was saying.

"I'm sure your father would be sad if you only visited once. Please see him often. I'm sure he'll appreciate that."

"But what about my sentence?" I asked.

"Did I not tell you? My apologies. You've been placed under my care. I will be monitoring you."

"Monitoring me?"

"You don't have to think too much of it. Think of it as something of a guardianship. You

can't leave town without my permission, but you can more or less do as you please."

"But Lord Gran, I don't have anywhere to go."

"In that case, you can work at my house. I've actually been in search of an excellent maid. As for the 'lord' business, I'm giving up that title to my son. I suppose I'm just a regular old man now."

Lord Gran smiled tenderly. He was referencing the fact that he'd be stepping down as lord so his son, Leonardo, could take his place after the recent incident.

"Are you sure you want to hire me?" I asked.

"I know I'm just an old-timer" he said. "If you'd prefer, you could work for Ellelaura instead."

"Lady Ellelaura?"

"She was worried about you, and she also offered to look after you herself. I think she would make an *excellent* employer. So," he said gently, leaving the choice to me, "what will you do?"

I looked over at my father's resting place. "Please let me work for you, Lord Gran."

I could visit my father again. If I lived in this town, I could see him whenever I wanted.

"In that case, I look forward to it," Lord Gran said. He offered his hand. I took it. "Ah! I have *this* for you." Lord Gran handed me a card he pulled from his pocket. I took it and saw that it was a guild card.

"This is my *father's*...!" My father's guild card... the one we had found in that *terrible* room.

"We weren't able to find any other keepsakes. I thought you might at least want this."

I looked at my father's name written on the card and started crying again.

"Thank you very much...!" I clutched my father's card to my heart.

After that, I went to work for Lord Gran. Every day was busy. After a time, Lord Gran informed me that Lord Gajurdo had been executed. Lord Randle would be left with a distant relative.

The news of *his* execution didn't bring me joy exactly. Still, I felt like the chains that had been around my neck had been released.

I would atone for my crimes as well, so I worked steadfastly for Lord Gran.

EXTRA STORY

MIRANDA AND LUIMIN'S ENCOUNTER

THERE'S A LARGE RIVER in the town of Laluz that acts as the border between Elfanica and Solzonark. The river is bordered on either side by towns. We had come to the town on Solzonark's side for a job. Once the gig was over, we decided to head back to the town in Elfanica, where we'd rented out a house.

After we finished reporting back to the Adventurer Guild, we checked out the quest board and found a gig across the water to help carry some goods. The client was going to pay the ferry fare, and it was an urgent job they needed done within a day.

We'd save on the ferry—two birds with one stone. And our party of adventurers weren't exactly rolling in dough, so we took up the gig. After I finished getting the work settled at the front desk, I went back to my buddies Sharla and Eriel.

"So, how'd it go?"

Eriel was looking over at the quest board. "Saw a cute girl."

A fifteen-year-old girl was ogling the quest board, and Eriel was watching her.

"You better not try taking advantage of her or something..."

"I wouldn't dare. But I mean, *look* at her! She's a damsel in distress! How could I turn a blind eye when she's looking at those quest boards all on her lonesome?"

"I suppose you have a point..."

"I'm going to talk to her really quick!~" Eriel said, then headed over to the girl in question. Sharla and I gave up and followed after her.

We discovered that the girl was an elf.

She was apparently trying to get to the capital in order to see her sister, but she didn't have money to get on the ferry or even to stay at an inn. She'd come searching for a

quest at the Adventurer Guild, but none of the quests seemed like things she could do. She was in a real fix.

We couldn't just abandon her after hearing her story—Eriel and Sharla agreed.

"In that case, why don't you join us?" I asked the girl. "We're transporting some goods as part of our job."

"Can I really...?" the girl asked hesitantly.

"They'll pay for the ferry fee. It won't be much money, but it'll be enough to help you get to the capital," I said. She thought it over; maybe we looked kinda sketchy.

She looked at us, then bowed her head slightly. "As long as I'm not in the way, I'd like to take you up on that."

"Glad to hear it. We're looking forward to working with you too. I'm Miranda. And this is—"

"It's Eriel!!!"

"Call me Sharla."

"I'm Luimin."

We exchanged introductions. "So, Luimin, do you have a guild card?"

"Yes, my dad had me get one."

We looked at her guild card. She was in rank E.

Once we finished getting registered, we headed to the client's shop.

The gig was to transport the goods from the branch shop over the river to the main establishment.

Normally, they'd use item bags, but those weren't available today. Since some of the items were pretty urgently needed, they'd gotten assistance from adventurers.

The client was Mr. Doglud, the merchant. He seemed rather nice. "Thank you, everyone," he said. "I'm so thankful you could come on such short notice for this quest!"

"No need to thank us. We were about to head back to the town ourselves, so this worked out perfectly."

"Well, if you could move the merchandise into the carriages...?"

We followed Mr. Doglud's orders and carried the goods to the carriage.

"They are all expensive items, so please, handle them carefully."

That's why the quest had been limited to women, apparently. It wasn't like men couldn't handle delicate work, but these gigs tended to get listed like that anyway.

"Luimin, could you carry that one?"

"Okay!"

Eriel and Luimin started carrying the goods together. I figured Luimin would be in good hands with Eriel, considering Eriel had already taken a liking to the elf.

We finished loading all the goods onto the carriage.

"Thank you. We will be going to the boat right away, so please get in."

We got into the carriage, which headed right out to the docks. Mr. Doglud had the fare for us. We were incredibly lucky.

"Doing all right, Luimin?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Luimin had seemed uneasy, but it didn't *seem* like anything was wrong.

The boat slowly headed out into the river to cross over. The carriage disembarked from the ship and we headed straight into town until we got to the front of Mr. Doglud's shop.

We needed to unload the goods this time.

"Sharla, you carry that over there."

"It's heavy...!"

"Come on, now. Eriel and Luimin are working hard."

Luimin was hauling the goods as best she could, despite her small size. We really needed to up our game too. We started putting away the goods according to Mr. Doglud's directions. That was when things went wrong.

"Ahhhhh!!!"

When I looked where the cry had come from, I found Luimin had fallen down. "Luimin, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I tripped." She stood up. "Uh... oh..."

"What is it?"

"..." Luimin didn't answer. She was just looking at something and quivering.

When I went up to her, I noticed the torn painting in front of her.

"Is something the matter?" Mr. Doglud made his way over now.

"The painting..." Luimin whispered.

Doglud looked at the painting grimly.

The painting Luimin had torn was *incredibly* expensive. Just hearing the price tag blew me away. We couldn't cough up that much cash even if we worked for a million years.

"This is quite a predicament," said Mr. Doglud. "We already had a buyer set up for this painting." The more she heard, the paler Luimin's face got.

"Is it really that expensive?" I asked. It wasn't as though I doubted Mr. Doglud, but I

still had to be sure.

“Yes, the painter is quite famous.”

Just to make *absolutely* sure, we checked in with the Merchant Guild. It was, without a doubt, the work of a famous artist, and a painting that would fetch a hefty sum. We’d flubbed the quest, but we had no idea what to do about the money. Sure, we could’ve put the blame on Luimin, but we couldn’t do that to the poor, shivering girl.

Soon enough, dinnertime came around. We decided to put off the details until the next day and headed to the house we were renting.

“Luimin, it’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry...” Luimin had been doing nothing but apologizing this whole time.

I wanted to do something for her, but I had no idea what. For the time being, the only thing I could think of was negotiating to lower the price of the painting. Luimin still looked rather pale when we got her to bed and turned in for the night.

When we woke up the next day, Luimin was gone. We tried looking for her, but we only found a letter on the table.

“I’m going to pay for the painting. Thank you all for being so kind to me.

— Luimin”

I clutched the letter in my hand. “She’s *paying* for it? But she doesn’t have any money...”

Eriel started to panic. “You don’t think she’s selling her body or something, do you?!”

“No, I heard Luimin and Mr. Doglud talking yesterday,” said Sharla. “Something about a bracelet...”

“A bracelet?” When I thought back on it, I remembered that Luimin had been wearing a pretty prominent one on her wrist.

“I’m pretty sure those things are really important to elves,” said Sharla. “And it’s also worth a lot, from what I’ve heard.”

“You don’t think she sold it, do you?!”

We rushed out of the room and headed for Mr. Doglud’s shop. We got there earlier than we’d intended—and Mr. Doglud was already there to receive us.

“I thought you would be coming,” he said. He led us to a back room, where the bracelet was on a table. This looked like the one I’d seen Luimin wearing. “She left this here.”

I knew it. “And where’s Luimin now?”

“She’s left town.”

Eriel stood from her seat after hearing that. “We need to go after her as soon as we can!”

“Calm down, Eriel.”

“But Sharla, what’ll happen to Luimin?”

Sharla stopped Eriel from bolting out. “I’m worried too, all right? That’s why we need to think clearly.”

“Miss Luimin was very apologetic,” said Mr. Doglud. “She asked me to let you know how sorry she was if you came by.”

Eriel sighed. “Oh, Luimin...”

“And you still took the bracelet from her, Mr. Doglud?” I asked.

“No matter my own feelings on such matters. I’m a merchant. I can’t just shrug off a torn, priceless painting.”

“I suppose you have a point...” Still, it all made me sick at heart. “What are you planning on doing with the bracelet?”

“I don’t have any concrete plans.”

“In that case, we’ll buy it from you.”

“You will?”

“We won’t be able to buy it right away, but I’m sure that we’ll be able to save up enough eventually. Just promise us that you won’t sell it to anyone else, won’t you?”

Poor as we were, we had no idea how long it would take to pay him for it... but we couldn’t let Luimin suffer like this.

“You’re all fine doing that too, right?” he asked.

“I’m on the right side of history, thank you very much,” said Eriel. “The side of adorable girls!~”

“Yes,” said Sharla. “It’s not as though we don’t share part of the blame.”

Everyone agreed to my proposal.

“I see how you all feel,” he said. “I’ll avoid selling it as best I can.”

We took on gigs so we could buy Luimin’s bracelet back. Someday, we’d give it back to her.

Then, one fateful day, we headed to the Adventurer Guild...

AFTERWORD

IT'S BEEN A WHILE. I'm Kumanano. Thank you for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear's* ninth volume. It's thanks to all of you that the ninth volume is on sale.

This volume continues along the lines of the previous one and covers the storyline between the Fahrergrams and the Salbards.

Misa is kidnapped, leaving Yuna enraged. She goes on a giant rampage, not even caring that she's up against the aristocracy. She shows them just how dangerous it is to make a bear angry. This might be the first time Yuna's actually gotten angry. It's in Yuna's nature not to be interested in others, but she'll offer a helping hand when anyone asks her for assistance. This time, though, she lets her emotions guide her before she's even thought about it. Since coming to the other world, Yuna has slowly found things that are precious to her, starting with Fina. She cares about more than a game now—these are real living, breathing people who are dear to her.

I also have written a new story about Lufa, which is something I hadn't even been able to write about in the web novel. Lufa is a kind woman. She thought that she would die but always held onto a small bit of hope that her father would come home. That hope ceased to exist, but there was a person there to offer her a helping hand. Lufa takes Gran's hand. He wants her to be happy.

By the time this book goes on sale, the manga version will have started. Writing a novel is a lot of work, but I think drawing a manga is even harder. You have to create the characters from the ground up. You have to make the character designs and decide on the panel splits—I think it must be a lot of work just for one aspect of it. I only have words of gratitude for Sergei.

You can read the manga on the *Comic PASH!* website for free, so I hope you'll enjoy the bears in the manga that Sergei has drawn.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who strived to get this book out.

Thank you for drawing such wonderful illustrations, 029. The new character, Luimin,

is so cute.

I'm always causing trouble for my editor because of my typos and omissions. Also, to the many people who were involved in the publishing of *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* Volume 9, thank you.

I'm grateful for the readers who have read along thus far.

Well, I hope we can meet again in the tenth volume.

ON A DAY IN MARCH 2018, KUMANANO



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