WRITTEN BY
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029
8
novel
KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

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– Bear Bear Bear Kuma –

- VOLUME 8 -

-AUTHOR-

Kumanano

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029

[SEVEN SEAS]

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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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 EXTRA-DIMENSIONAL 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 extra-dimensional 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, one 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 to whom a bear phone is given by imagining 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
Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use fire elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When one imagines a bear, power increases even more.

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

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

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

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

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

Equipment

▶ BLACK BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)

Attack glove, increases power based on the user's level.

▶ WHITE BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)

Defense glove, increases defense based on the user's level.

▶ BLACK BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)

▶ WHITE BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)

Increases speed based on the user's level.
Prevents fatigue when walking long distances based on the user's level.

▶ 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.
Amount and speed based on the user's level.
Gives heat and cold resistance.

▶ 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.

CHAPTER 176
THE BEAR ORDERS STUFFED ANIMALS

I SPENT THE MORNING after getting back from the capital just lounging on my bed with Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Before I knew it, I dozed away the first half of the day—oops.

It wasn't like I could stay in bed forever, so I changed from my white bear outfit to the black one, had a quick meal, and headed to the tailor where Sherry worked. I was going to have stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu made for Lady Flora. Maybe I could even get her to make a ton of them—the orphans would love that, and I could probably use some as decorations.

The nice thing about Crimonia was that, unlike the capital, nobody gave me weird looks for my bear onesie. I always got *some* stares, sure, but nothing like the ones—so full of ridicule, curiosity, or surprise—that I got in the city streets. I suppose people in Crimonia were just used to the bear outfit… and hey, I wasn't complaining.

Pondering that, I got to the tailor shop—the kind that sold clothes along with fabric and thread. There were already a couple of customers picking out merchandise by the time I got there, with a lady in her thirties assisting them. She was Nar, one of the people looking after Sherry.

Nar finished up before long and came over to me. "Welcome, Yuna. Did you come to buy some clothes?" she asked, wearing her best customer-service smile. "Would you like me to help pick some cute outfits out for you?"

C'mon, she had to know that I wasn't about to buy any normal clothes for myself. "Maybe some other time. Is Sherry around?"

"Sherry? She's probably sewing clothes with my husband in the back."

“So she’s busy?”

“No, it’s not an urgent job. Just one moment—”

Nar went to the back to grab Sherry. Before long, Sherry came jogging out, her shoulder-length hair bobbing as she came.

“Yuna?!”

“Sorry about interrupting your work.”

Sherry shook her head. “Not a problem. What are you here for? Did you have something to ask me?”

“Since you’re so good at sewing, there was something I was hoping you could make for me. Maybe we can talk about it later if you’ve got stuff to do.”

“Like I said, it’s fine. It would be good for you to take a break, Sherry, so why don’t you talk with Yuna in the back?” Nar offered some well-timed support from behind Sherry.

I took advantage of Nar’s offer and went to use the back room. It was small and seemed like more of a break room. We sat down in a couple chairs.

“So, Yuna, what did you want me to make?”

“I was hoping you could make me stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.” Dolls and stuffed animals existed in this world, after all. I’d seen little kids carrying them while I was walking around town.

“Stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu?”

“Yep. What do you think?”

Sherry chewed on the question a bit. A few different expressions crossed her face before she gave a small nod. “Um… yes, I think I can make them. But before that, could I see your bears more closely? Though I suppose there isn’t enough room in here, is there?”

She looked around. It wasn’t very spacious, especially with the table, chairs, and other stuff crowding it, so there wasn’t space to summon the bears. Not at their normal size,

at least, but I still had their cub forms up my sleeve. Or, uh, puppet.

“It’s fine.” I raised my black bear puppet on my right hand in front of me and summoned cubified Kumayuru right there on the table.

“Whoaa!” Sherry exclaimed, understandably surprised to see the cub version of Kumayuru. “Yuna! Who is this little bear?”

“That’s Kumayuru. I can make my bears small since they’re summoned beasts.” I couldn’t make them bigger, though.

“Kumayuru is so *cute*!” Sherry grabbed Kumayuru’s paws.

“I want you to make the stuffed animal about this size. That sound doable?”

“Y-yes. That should be fine. Oh, just one moment!” Sherry pulled open a drawer behind her, searched around for something, and came back to the conversation, stretching out a measuring tape. “Yuna, is it okay if I measure Kumayuru?”

“That’s fine. You’re okay with that, right, Kumayuru?” I asked.

Kumayuru let out a small *kwoom* and sat up on the table.

“All right then, Kumayuru, I’ll measure your armsies first.” She got up close to Kumayuru, measured my bear’s arm, and jotted stuff down. “And the size of your paws would be… mmhm! Now I’ll do the legs, aaaaand… could I measure the bottoms of your paws?”

Kumayuru sat down and raised the sole of its paw.

“I’ll measure your waist now, so don’t move.”

Kumayuru stayed motionless, just like Sherry asked.

“Next, your tail.”

Kumayuru did a half turn away from Sherry to reveal a cute tail. It wagged as Sherry measured.

“I’ll do your head now, okay?”

Kumayuru nodded.

Sherry measured Kumayuru's head and took some smaller detailed measurements, all the way down to Kumayuru's ears.

I'd be terrified if she were doing all that to me. Getting a measurement of *every* part of your body seemed kinda frightening. I shivered at the thought.

"What's wrong, Yuna?"

"N-nothing. More importantly, is that all you needed?"

"Yep. I got all of Kumayuru's measurements." Every detail was in the memo pad in her hands. If those had been *my* measurements, I would've shredded the thing to pieces, then set the pieces on fire.

"So I didn't want to get just Kumayuru. I was hoping for a Kumakyu stuffed animal too," I told her.

"Kumakyu is the same size, right?"

"Yeah. Still, do you need measurements?"

"Mmhm!"

I summoned Kumakyu, who got the same measurement treatment from Sherry as Kumayuru. Well, Kumayuru and Kumakyu were kind of like twins, so they didn't really have separate measurements. Only their faces and colors were different, and barely so.

"So, how long do you think it'll take?" I asked.

"Hmm, I have my other projects, too. If I work on them at night…"

"Sherry, what are you worrying about?" A slender man in his thirties appeared from the next room.

"Hello, Mr. Temoka," I said.

Temoka was Nar's husband. He was the one teaching Sherry embroidery and how to

make clothing.

“Hello, Yuna,” he said.

“I’m borrowing Sherry a bit,” I explained.

“That’s fine. We’re not that busy. But Sherry, is something the matter?” he asked gently.

“Yuna ordered stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu from me.”

He looked at the bears on the table. “Are Kumayuru and Kumakyu these little ones?”

“That’s right. These are Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

“Ah, Yuna’s famous bears! They’re cute.”

Sherry nodded. “Uh-huh, very cute!”

Temoka looked at the bears thoughtfully, then to Sherry. “In that case, why don’t you take a break from work?”

“But…” Sherry seemed bewildered by the sudden offer. I guess that’d be a pretty normal reaction, though.

“Like I said, the shop isn’t busy,” said Temoka. “Up to now, Nar and I have been managing with just the two of us. Besides, this’ll be good practice. You should try making them.”

“Can I really?”

“If you have any trouble, I can show you the ropes. Go ahead and give it a shot, eh?”

“Umm, thank you very much!” said Sherry cheerfully. “I’ll try.” It looked like she was apprenticing in a good place.

Temoka and Nar didn’t have any children, so they treated Sherry like their own daughter. The headmistress had told me they’d even discussed adopting her. For now, though, they were going to wait and see how things worked out. There was a chance Sherry might say no if they asked too suddenly, so they were trying to foster a closer connection before asking.

“Feel free to use anything we have at the shop,” said Temoka.

“Are you sure?”

“Making a stuffed animal will be good for your studies.” Temoka gently patted Sherry’s head.

Still, it wasn’t like I could just borrow Sherry and use up their supplies. “I can pay for the materials,” I said, “so feel free to charge me for everything you use. And don’t worry about making any mistakes.”

As a wise person once said, mistakes are the path to learning. I learned *that* in the online game back in the day. If you failed to beat an enemy one way, all you had to do was try something else. She was making a teddy bear from scratch. Any mistakes she made would have a material cost, but I didn’t want her worrying about that.

“Thank you, Yuna.”

“I ordered it from you,” I told her with a smile, “so it’s a bit odd for *you* to be thanking *me*.”

“In that case, Mr. Temoka, is it okay if I start working on it now?”

“As if I could say no to that face! We don’t have any pressing work, so go ahead.”

“Thank you very much!” With his permission, Sherry started excitedly preparing to make the stuffed animal. I wasn’t about to get in the way of somebody that motivated, so I thanked Temoka and left the shop.

I couldn’t wait to see what they came up with.

CHAPTER 177
THE BEAR RECEIVES AN INVITATION

AFTER ORDERING THE STUFFED animals from Sherry, I headed to the Adventurers' Guild. It was time to finally get my reward for the mines. It'd been a few days since I'd slain the golems, and I was told the Adventurers' Guild in Crimonia would have received word of the quest's completion by now. All I had to do was pick up my reward at the guild.

When I got to the guild, I consulted with Helen.

"Miss Yuna, you took a quest at the capital?" Helen asked while taking my guild card to examine it. "Looks like you investigated some golems at a mine and slayed them. Yes, we have the information from the capital. The quest is complete."

The golems had stopped appearing at the mines, so normal mining operations had resumed. I guess that meant that either the mithril golem or the bearyllium I'd found really was the source of the golems… maybe?

Speaking of the bearyllium, I was still curious about that stuff. But the dwarf town was far away, so I decided to put that on hold for now.

Helen returned my guild card to me, gave me my quest reward, and then looked at me rather seriously. "By the way, Miss Yuna…"

"What's up?"

"I overheard some of the lady adventurers saying you're selling something very tasty."

"Do you mean the cake?"

"Could I put in an advance order? You're sold out by the time I'm off work and I won't have a day off for a while."

The other female guild workers nodded along with Helen. I guess the cake really was popular enough to be sold out by the time they were done with work. The bakery did

close early, after all.

“I asked the kids at the bakery if they could reserve some for me the other day,” Helen added, “but they said they couldn’t do that.”

We got a lot of reservation requests, but I heard from Tiermina that they wouldn’t be taking any. I vaguely remembered going along with it with some vague response. *“I’ll leave it to you, Tiermina.”* Something like that.

“So, would you take a reservation for me?” Helen clasped her hands together as she asked for this favor.

“That’s unfair, Helen,” one of the people at the reception desk protested.

“Yeah, how could you just order one for yourself?” another one said.

“Well, *I’m* friends with Miss Yuna,” Helen told them.

Wait, when did we become friends? I thought, but I didn’t say that out loud. That aside, Helen *had* done a lot of stuff to help me until now.

“I can’t really reserve cake for you,” I admitted.

“I knew it…” The staff members looked disappointed. C’mon, I wasn’t done talking!

“But I have a cake on me right now, so you can all have some together.” I pulled out a strawberry shortcake from the bear storage. The women working at the guild all perked up. It was one of Nerin’s practice cakes, so it’d probably taste as good as the ones on sale.

“Is this the cake everyone’s been talking about?” asked Helen.

“Make sure to slice it up and share,” I told them.

“Um. How much do we owe you?”

“It’s fine. We’re friends, aren’t we? This time it’s my treat.”

“Oh, Miss Yuna!” Helen stood up and firmly grasped my bear puppet. “Th-thank you so much.”

“No need to make a big deal out of it,” I said.

“So many adventurers have been bragging about how good it is. We were so jealous.”

“Well, if you like it, you can come by and order more when you have a day off?”

“Of course! I’d love to go eat at your shop.”

Helen and the two guild staffers thanked me profusely.

Once I got back to my bear house, I decided to play with Kumayuru and Kumakyu for a bit. They did such a great job at the capital that I needed to reward them, you know? “Get in here, you two!”

They trotted along to me, and I gave ’em a hug. We passed the time playing until dinner when someone came by the house.

I opened the door to find Fina out of breath. “Why’re you in such a hurry?!”

“Th-the le-let-t-ter.”

A letter? Weird. Before hearing her out, I took out a pitcher of water and a cup from my bear storage and handed them to Fina. Fina gulped down all the water in one go and caught her breath.

“All right then,” I said, “what is it?”

“Didn’t you get one, Yuna?”

“A letter?”

Fina looked like she was holding said letter in her hand. Now that she mentioned it, I hadn’t really ever paid attention to my mailbox. I mean, who would even send me a letter in this world? Who would *bother* to send one? They hadn’t in my old world, so I couldn’t see why they would here.

“Please double check, Yuna!”

“Sure, okay.”

Fina rushed me along and forced me to check my bear-shaped mailbox. There really *was* an envelope inside.

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Fina, with a sigh of relief. “You got one too.”

But from whom? I checked for the sender.

“Misana Fahrengram…” Who was that? It seemed familiar, somehow. “Is this someone you know, Fina?”

“It’s Lady Misana. We met her on the way to the capital for the king’s birthday festival. The noble Lady Misa?”

Oh, right—Misa was just Misana’s nickname. I hadn’t recognized her full name. But why was Misa sending me a letter?

I decided to invite Fina in so she could tell me the details. “Did you read the letter, Fina?”

“Yep, I read it. It was an invitation to Misa’s birthday party.”

“A birthday party?” I broke the seal and scanned the letter. Just as Fina had said, it was an invitation to Misa’s birthday party.

“Um… I understand why *you* would get one, but why would Lady Misa send an invitation to me?! It’s a *noble’s* birthday party!” Fina gave her own letter a troubled look.

Honestly, I thought it made a whole lot more sense for Misa to invite Fina than me. They’d been getting along pretty well in the capital, after all. They’d even wandered around the city a bit.

“What do you think will happen if we turned her down, Yuna?”

How was I supposed to know? I didn’t know the etiquette when it came to nobility in this world. Plus, going to a birthday party sounded like a real pain. I hadn’t gone to a single one of those things in my original world, let alone a snooty one for nobility. Sorry, Misa—I really didn’t want to go hang out with a bunch of aristocrats. Ugh, and

they'd probably all be wearing pretty dresses. I'd look like a total clown in my bear onesie…

So I had my own reasons not to go, even if they weren't the same as Fina's. Could I turn down the invite?

The two of us didn't know much about the nobility, so we just couldn't seem to figure the whole thing out. But there was someone who *could* give us an answer.

"We have to ask Cliff and Noa," I said.

"You mean Lord Cliff and Lady Noa?" Fina asked.

"Sure, those guys. If we got invitations, Noa probably did too."

It was getting a little late in the day, so we resolved to visit Noa the next morning.

CHAPTER 178
THE BEAR CONSULTS CLIFF

THE NEXT DAY, I went with Fina to Cliff's estate. After greeting the guards at the gate, we were guided into the usual room. We sat on a sofa and waited. Fina fidgeted nervously beside me.

"You okay, Fina?"

"Yes. Fine! Very fine, extremely fine. The most fine!" she said robotically, looking incredibly un-fine. I thought she'd gotten to know Noa pretty well in the capital, but I guess it hadn't done much for her nerves. "I just get a little nervous thinking about meeting Lord Cliff," she added.

Ah, that made sense—so it was Noa's dad she was worked up about. But Fina had stayed at Ellelaura's place at the capital and had even met the king, so you wouldn't think meeting Cliff would still be a big deal.

"You've met the king. Meeting Cliff should be a cakewalk."

"Of course it's not! A feudal lord is just like meeting a king to me. I'd normally never meet somebody like that. I mean, I'm not even important enough to come into his house. And… and oh no, I'm sitting on his sofa. Should I be sitting on his sofa? Yuna, what if it's a forbidden sofa?! Maybe we should stand instead?"

"It's fine. If Cliff gets mad at you, I'll take him on."

"I'm not angry, so I'd really prefer you not," someone else chimed in.

Cliff and Noa came into the room.

"Were you eavesdropping?" I asked.

"I just happened to hear that."

"Yuna, Fina. Welcome." Noa poked her head out from behind Cliff.

“Noa, sorry for coming by so early in the morning,” I said.

“G-good morning!” Fina stood up and bowed while I stayed hunkered down in my seat. “I-I apologize for intruding.”

“Not at all,” said Noa. “You two are always welcome.”

Cliff and Noa sat facing us from across the table on the opposite sofa.

“Thanks,” I said. “Sorry for diving right in, but could we ask about something?”

“It’s about Misana, isn’t it? I was just about to send someone your way.”

“Yep, thought so. Noa got an invitation too?”

“Yes, we received one as well. Gran also asked me to bring you both along.”

Right, Gran—he helped me out with buying land at the capital too.

“So… can we turn them down?” I asked.

“You’re turning them down?”

“We’re commoners. We’d stick out like a sore thumb at a noble’s birthday party, you know? Even with invites, we can’t just waltz in there.”

Fina nodded along with my every word.

“That should be fine,” said Cliff. “The only ones going to Misana’s party are her relatives.”

“But…” I *did* want to visit Misa. I just didn’t want to go to a noble’s birthday party.

“Noa and I will also be going,” he added. “I can deal with any issues that may arise.”

“You’re going, too, Cliff?” Was it really okay for the feudal lord to leave his town just for his daughter’s friend’s birthday party? Even if they were all nobles, it seemed weird.

“Yes, although I’m really going to Gran’s birthday party.”

“Gran’s?”

“Gran’s fiftieth birthday is just before that of his granddaughter, Misana. That’s the party I’m actually attending. I was hoping to take you with me when I attend it. I don’t usually participate, but it *is* his fiftieth, after all. Misana’s birthday is just a nice extra. You really should go. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Let’s go together,” Noa urged us. “It will be fun. Besides, I think Misa wants to see you too.”

“But I…” Fina hung her head.

“Don’t you want to see Misa, too, Fina?” asked Cliff.

“But…”

“If you don’t go, Misa will be sad. She might even cry.”

“Uh…”

“Misa went through all the trouble of asking for your addresses. She sent the invitations herself.”

So *that* was how the invites had gotten to us. I was wondering—I never told Misa my address, after all.

“If you don’t go, she’ll be so sad.”

She definitely sent us the letters because she really did want us to come—not that I ever thought she sent them to be mean or anything.

“If you sent Yuna an invitation, Fina, and she didn’t turn up, wouldn’t you be sad? I’d be sad if I sent you an invitation and you didn’t come.” Noa pretended to look a little forlorn. Yeah, that was gonna be a critical hit. I bet Fina would cave under that look.

“O-okay… I’ll go.”

I knew it, she couldn’t say no. Noa was *actually* being mean, but she also wasn’t wrong.

“Fina’s coming, so won’t you come as well, Yuna?”

Fina gave me a look now. I could practically read the words in her eyes: *Please come with me.* There was no way I could let Fina go by herself. Honestly, she seemed like she'd burst into tears if I said no.

"I'll go too."

"Yay! Then that means we can go with the bears." Noa was delighted.

Wait… riding on my bears hadn't been her actual goal, right?

"Well, Fina," she said, "let's figure out the dresses we'll wear for the birthday party."

"What?" But Noa had already grabbed Fina's arm and started pulling her along. "Yuna?!" Fina gave me a pleading look, but I saw her off with a smile; I really didn't want to get dragged into any of that.

With that, Fina was whisked away no matter her protests. Ehh, they were just helping her pick a dress. It wasn't like she was dying. I pressed my hands together while facing the door in sympathy.

"We'll depart in five days, and Yuna? It'll be *early* that morning," Cliff discussed the plan without commenting on his daughter's actions.

"Is Misa's town far?"

"Not at all. It's about two days by carriage."

Which was just a few hours, in bear time.

"I don't know anything about nobles' birthday parties. Do I need to bring anything?"

"We'll make all the necessary preparations. You just make sure to bring a present that Misana will enjoy."

Hmm…

"Could I get her gemstones or a dress or something?"

"You must realize that Misana wouldn't enjoy such things."

“But I don’t know what a noble’s daughter would actually like.”

“Why don’t you give her one of those dolls that you have as decoration at your shops? She would like that, wouldn’t she?”

“Can I really give her one of those as a present, though?”

“My daughter would love them.”

True, yeah. But… wait, if she enjoyed the bear decorations at my shop, maybe she’d enjoy the stuffed animals I was having made? Stuffed animals were like a standard gift for girls, right?

“Thanks,” I said, “that was helpful. I’ll head back home. Could you take care of Fina?”

“Certainly. I’ll make sure she’s safe, so don’t worry about her.”

I abandoned Fina—that is, uh, I left Fina the freedom to pick her own dress for the birthday party.

A *noble’s* birthday party at that. I really hoped it wouldn’t end up being a pain…

CHAPTER 179
THE BEAR'S MERCHANT RANK GOES UP

I'D ABANDONED FINA, and here I was now poring over the same thing she probably was: what to get for Misa's birthday. I mean, if I was struggling with this, I doubted Fina *wouldn't* be. I could imagine it. "What should we get her as a present?" she'd say, looking distressed. Or "Oh no, I don't have anything to give her…"

Maybe we could just get her a joint gift. The other standard present was cake, right? I could knock a cake out easy these days, so I was sure I could handle a birthday one. Maybe I could make a two-tier cake and use whipped cream colored with strawberries to write "Happy Birthday." I was sure Misa would like that. I could even put it in my bear storage so it'd be nice and fresh.

If I was doing cake, Fina could make it with me. Maybe after she finished picking out her dress, I'd give her a call…

Until then, I had time to kill.

I was mulling over what to do when someone called over to me. "Miss Yuna?"

It was Lianna from the Merchant Guild. She helped me out when I was buying a plot for Anz's shop.

"Hello, Lianna."

"You're not heading to the Merchant Guild by any chance, are you?"

"The Merchant Guild? I hadn't planned to." I'd entrusted anything businessy to Tiermina, so I didn't have a reason to go to the Merchant Guild.

"Really? I would have thought you'd come after Tiermina told you."

"Told me what? I saw Tiermina earlier, but she didn't say anything." Then again, it was a couple days ago…

“Oh, sorry. I talked to her about it yesterday.”

Ah, made sense. “What’s up? Something you need?”

“Your Merchant Guild rank went up, so I asked Tiermina to tell you to come to the Merchant Guild.”

“My guild rank went up?” I didn’t remember doing anything in particular to cause that. There were Morin and Anz’s shops, I guess? And maybe the egg-selling operation at the orphanage…

“Normally it takes a whole year to go from F-Rank to E-Rank,” Lianna continued.

“Really?”

“It requires steady work and slowly bringing your sales up. After about a year of being on that track, we raise merchants’ ranks. A lot of people give up on being merchants because they *can’t* increase their sales.”

Unlike the Adventurers’ Guild, apparently it was hard to get to even E-Rank in the Merchant Guild.

“I’d like to go through some of the procedures with you,” she said, “so could you come to the guild if you have time?”

Well, I *had* been looking for something to kill time…

Lianna and I walked together toward the Merchant Guild.

“Come to think of it, why are you around here, Lianna?” I would’ve thought she’d be at work in the guild around now.

“I had some work to do outside.”

“It’s not just reception desk work?”

“I visit shops. Some people will come by the Merchant Guild, but there are others who never drop by.”

I made small talk with Lianna on her way to the Merchant Guild.

“Can you wait a moment?” she asked finally. “I’ll come right back after I make my report.”

Lianna went into a back room. I moved to a seat along the wall and waited for Lianna. I’d normally see Milaine sitting at the reception desk, but she was missing today. Was she actually doing her guild master work for once?

Looking around inside the Merchant Guild, I noticed several people looking in my direction. I pulled my bear hood low over my face… and heard a couple merchants talking about me.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What do you wanna know?”

“It’s about that little kid in the bear outfit.”

“Don’t point. And don’t stare either.”

“Wh-why not?”

“Do you not know about the bear girl?” The guy sounded exasperated.

“I just know the rumors. I heard that the shop with the big bear decorations was run by a girl dressed as a bear. I was wondering if that kid was her.”

A kid? Uh, I was *fifteen,* thanks.

“Are you new in town, mister?”

“Yeah. Got here two days ago. On my way to Mileela, ya see.”

“Figured, yep. How much do you really know about the bear?”

“Just that she runs the shop with the bear ornaments. I asked for recommendations for a good meal at the guild and got a ton of recommendations for that bear shop.”

“They got good food there, eh?”

“Yeah, they do. So then I looked into who was running the place, and everyone said it was a girl in a bear outfit.”

“That bear girl is the shop’s owner for sure, but don’t you get any funny ideas.”

“Why not? If I got that recipe, I could make a killing in another town.”

“Drop it. You’ll lose your merchant’s registration.”

“Why’s that?”

“That shop has the backing of both the feudal lord, Fochrosé, and this town’s Merchant Guild.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yeah, the merchants in this town don’t mess with that shop for *exactly* that reason. I don’t know what you had in mind, but you best not pick any fights.”

“Hm. Quite a thing, if it’s the truth.”

“Believe what you want.”

“You’re a fellow merchant, so I’m not about to throw out your advice. I don’t want to get into anything dangerous.”

The merchant nodded amicably. I always assumed that merchants didn’t get along, but I guess that wasn’t true?

“Wise of you,” one of the merchants continued. “There’s a certain charm to those recipes she’s using at her shop, but there isn’t a single idiot in this town who’d pick a fight with that bear girl.”

“Makes sense, if she got the lord and guild backing her.”

The merchant looked exasperated. “You really think that’s why?”

“What, is there more?!”

“That bear girl is *also* an adventurer. On top of all that, she’s a big shot who’s killed

wolf packs, goblin hordes, and even a black viper all on her own."

"Okay, I may not be from around these parts, but are you trying to pull one over on me?!"

"Why would I? If you don't believe me, you can ask someone else. Any merchant in this town knows about the bear girl."

"You've gotta be joking."

Yeah, he *had* to be joking—there was no way everyone in town knew about that.

"Do what ya will, but don't say I didn't warn you."

The man left. The other guy shot a look at me for a second, but also went his merry way. I guess that's how the rumors about me were making the rounds. Thanks to them, I was left in peace, at least? Having the backing of a noble definitely made a difference; I made a mental note to be more grateful to Cliff and all that he'd done for me.

Lianna came back while I was in the middle of my thoughts.

"Miss Yuna, sorry for the wait." Lianna brought me over to the reception desk, sat down, and started processing my rise in rank. "There we are, then: now you're at merchant Rank E."

"Thank you," I said as I took my guild card.

"Normally I'd congratulate you for coming into your own, but that doesn't seem appropriate for you, Yuna."

"Rank E is when you, uh. 'Come into your own'?"

"As I said before, it's difficult for rookies to pay the first-year tax. In addition to that tax, you need to accumulate a certain amount of money to even rise in rank in the first place."

I guess that made sense. If you started a business from scratch, it'd take time to get it on track… especially without a knack for business. Without Morin's help or my knowledge from the old world, no way would I have made it this far.

Lianna drove the point in: “Going up to Rank E after only a few months from joining the guild is a big deal.”

“But I’m not the only one working at the shop…”

Everyone was working earnestly—I hadn’t done it all on my own.

CHAPTER 180
THE BEAR MAKES A BIRTHDAY CAKE

I NEEDED TO KILL a little more time after the Merchant Guild, so I headed to the food stalls lining the plaza. I'd been there enough that nobody gave me any surprised looks. Sure, you'd get them occasionally, but only when someone started a new food stall.

Delicious aromas wafted to me from the stalls.

"Making the rounds today, are we, bear girl?" a man at a skewer stand called out to me.

"Walkin' round, killin' time. Three skewers please, mister."

"Coming right up." The man grilled some skewers for me, and they smelled *great*. "All right, here they are."

"Thank you." I took the grilled skewers and sat at a nearby bench to eat.

It was nice and peaceful. As for Fina, she was probably trying on a pretty dress right around now. Good for her, right?

After I made the rounds at the food stalls, I headed to my bear house.

I wondered if I could call Fina on the bear phone soon? I wanted to talk to her about that present. Then again, Noa was there right then, so… she might just make some trouble for everybody.

While I was thinking about what to do, I reached my bear house. Fina was standing out front, pouting.

"Yuna! I can't believe you left and went home without me!" She hugged me, still furious. It *might* have been an attempt at a tackle, but I caught her right in my arms.

"My bad. I thought it'd take more time for you to choose a dress." I couldn't tell her that

I ran off to avoid getting dragged into the vortex of dress shopping. “But I’m looking forward to seeing what you picked out, Fina.”

I meant that too. I was looking forward to seeing Fina and Noa in dresses.

“Uhm… Yuna, are you not going to wear a dress?”

“Nope. I wouldn’t look good in one even if I tried.” Putting me in a dress would be a total waste. Pearls before swine, as they say.

“That’s not true. I think you would look nice in a dress.”

I was happy to hear it, even if she was just flattering me. Or… maybe Fina really was trying to get me to wear a dress? Since I couldn’t let all this dress talk continue without possible trouble, I used my signature move: changing the subject.

“Come to think of it,” I said, “what are you going to do about Misa’s present?”

“R-right. Uh. What will you do about her present, Yuna?” she asked, clearly taken aback. “I asked Lady Noa about what to get and she said Lady Misa would enjoy anything I gave her. But I can’t think of anything for a present that Lady Misa would like. I don’t think a wolf pelt would work.”

She’d forgotten entirely about the dress, too busy being worried about something else. Exactly as planned. I couldn’t help but smile as I saw her troubled face.

“Why are you smiling?” Fina asked me.

“Oh, it’s nothing. So… why don’t we get a present for her together?”

“Together?”

“I was thinking of doing a cake and stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu. What do you think? We can make the cake together and then we can each give her one of the stuffed animals.”

“I understand the cake, but what are the stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu?”

Oh, right—I hadn’t told her. I explained about how I ordered stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu from Sherry.

“I think the cake is a good idea, but the stuffed animals of your bears will make Lady Misa very happy,” Fina told me. Her eyes sparkled. She looked so happy that she didn’t even seem to remember the dress disaster earlier. It was like she’d completely forgotten that I’d abandoned her.

“So, to be clear, we’re getting Misa cakes and stuffed animals as a joint present,” I said.

Fina thought it over for a minute. “Yuna, could we learn how to make those stuffed animals from Sherry? And then we could make them ourselves?”

“Make them ourselves?”

“Yeah! Since they’re presents, I want to make them myself.”

I got where she was coming from, but… could we actually make them? Or no, could *I* actually make one? I didn’t have any skills when it came to sewing, but I also didn’t want to put a damper on Fina’s inspiration.

“Let’s go to Sherry and try asking her. If it looks like we can, let’s give it a shot.”

“Okay!”

After we settled on some birthday presents, we started heading to Sherry only to see her coming toward us carrying a giant bag. “Sherry?”

“Yuna. Oh, and Fina. Are you going out?” Sherry yawned slightly, swaying a little from side to side.

“We were planning to head over to you, but why are you here, Sherry?” I asked. “You didn’t already finish them, did you?” I looked at the large bag she was carrying.

“Uh-huh, I worked hard to make them—hwaaah.” Sherry yawned again slightly. She sounded pretty satisfied, but still completely exhausted… and all after one day? That seemed too fast.

“Wait, have you slept?” I asked.

Sherry tried to laugh it off, but… she hadn’t needed to sacrifice her sleep just to work.

I silently put my hand on top of Sherry's head. Why *had* she worked that hard? Sherry smiled when I patted her head, but the bags under her eyes made her look like a panda.

Wait, she hadn't made herself into a bear to *make* a bear, had she?

The thought made me shiver. "You didn't have to rush."

"Making them was just so fun." Sherry was smiling, but I could see the fatigue plain on her face. Jeez, I needed to get her to sleep. "So, Yuna… can I have you look at them?" She held out the giant bag she was cradling.

"Thank you, but why don't you borrow my bed first? Get yourself some sleep." I needed Sherry to get some rest before I checked on the stuffed animals.

"Yuna, I'm fiiine."

She sure didn't *look* fine, considering that massive yawn she was letting out. She was still swaying from side-to-side too.

"Get some *rest*!" I said more firmly. "I'm happy you worked so hard, but I never wanted you to push yourself so hard."

"Yuna… I'm sorry," said Sherry meekly.

"You can show them to me later. For right now, please get some rest. And if you don't rest, I won't even look at them. Got it?"

I accepted the large bag, took Sherry to a room, and got her into a bed. She was asleep when she hit the mattress; yep, she really had pushed herself too hard.

"She went out just like that," Fina mused.

I couldn't stop myself from wondering aloud. "Why did she push herself so hard?"

It *had* been fun for Sherry, though—it was clear enough from the look on her face. It probably hadn't even felt like work making the stuffed animals, even, but she still shouldn't have lost sleep over it.

"They all want to be useful to you, Yuna."

“To me?”

“To everyone at the orphanage, you’re their savior. They look up to you. I think they’re just happy to do something about it.”

But if they pushed themselves past their limits, they were just going to cause me more trouble. Treating me like a savior? Looking up to me? I was just doing things for myself. I just happened to give the orphanage work because I’d discovered kokekko eggs. I only hired them at the shop because I hadn’t had enough staff. They didn’t need to thank me for stuff like that. It was a mutually beneficial relationship…

“Yuna, what should we do?”

Well, Sherry was sleeping, so looking at the stuffed animals was out. “How about we make the cake we talked about earlier?”

“Right now?”

“If I put the cake in my item bag, it won’t spoil. We can make it in advance, no problem.” I didn’t know how long it’d take to make the stuffed animals, so I figured it’d be best to get started on the cake while we had time.

The plan was to work on the birthday cake with Fina until Sherry woke up. It’d be the prototypical strawberry shortcake, though the two tiers would set it apart. I didn’t know how many people would be attending, so we made tons of cake. Worst case, if there wasn’t enough, I’d bring more cake out from my bear storage.

Before long, we lined the table with tons of cake, but one was extra fancy—Misa’s present, of course.

“Yuna, am I writing on it?” Fina asked.

“Yeah, you write it.” I left writing duty to Fina. Now she had to finish the cake off by writing *Happy Birthday*.

“Uhh, I’m so nervous.”

“It’s okay if you make a mistake. Just knock it out real quick.”

“O-okay.”

Fina took a deep breath and started writing letters with the strawberry-colored whipped cream. Carefully, verrrry slowly, she wrote out each letter.

“I-I did it.” All at once, Fina let out the breath she was holding.

“Looks like it’s done.”

We looked down at the cake. *Happy Birthday* looked up at us in pink.

“I hope Lady Misa will like it,” said Fina.

“Don’t worry about that. We worked hard to make it,” I reassured her.

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay, I’m going to put it away while it’s still fresh.”

I put the cake in a carrying case, closed the lid tight, and put it away in my bear storage.

“Your bear item bag is so strange. I’ve never heard of a bear item bag that keeps food from spoiling.”

“What can I say? It’s specially made.” I was grateful for what my bear equipment could do, even if I didn’t like how all my powers were tied to my bear gear. It would’ve been nice if the abilities were all just… mine.

At least I hadn’t wound up in another world with nothing at all. I was thankful for that, at least.

CHAPTER 181
THE BEAR CHECKS THE STUFFED ANIMALS

WE STARTED tidying up the kitchen after baking our cake.

Right as we finished up, Sherry made her way into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes.

"Yuna, Fina, good morning." She still looked groggy—probably because she'd just woken up—but she sure looked a lot better.

"Did you get some sleep?"

"Uh-huh. What are you two doing?"

"We were making cakes."

Right when I mentioned the word cakes, Sherry perked up *completely.* What girl doesn't love a nice, sweet cake?

"Want to have some?"

"Can I really?!"

Uh. Actually, could she eat so quickly after waking up? Sherry looked excited, at least, so she could *probably* eat. "But just one slice. The headmistress will be mad if you can't eat your dinner."

The two of them sat down and I pulled out a cake I'd made much earlier from my bear storage. The cakes Fina and I had just made were birthday presents for Misa, after all.

"Would you like tea with that?"

"Yes, please."

I practiced making black tea the way Lala taught me. A lovely aroma drifted up from it. I poured the tea into cups and gently placed the cups in front of them. I didn't forget

the sugar, of course. With the cake and tea prepped, we all started to eat.

“Mmm, it’s so yummy,” Fina said.

“Yeah, sure is!” Sherry added.

The two of them happily chowed down. After we finished eating the cake, we moved onto the next order of business.

“Ready to show us the stuffed animals?” I asked.

“Uh-huh!” Sherry pulled the Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals from the large bag placed next to her and set them on the table.

“Th-they’re sooo *cute*!” Fina exclaimed.

She hugged the Kumayuru bear, and I grabbed the Kumakyu one.

“So these are the Kumayuru and Kumakyu teddy bears,” said Fina. “Just the *cutest!*”

“Thank you very much! Though this part right here was trouble…” Sherry started talking us through the challenging parts and how she handled them. She really did seem to like sewing and embroidery. “Actually, Yuna, did you say you wanted something?”

“Yeah, I was thinking you could teach us how to make these stuffed animals. A girl we know is having her birthday soon, so we wanted to make her presents. Fina and I were thinking of making them together.”

Just like Fina had wanted to do—I wanted to make sure I’d considered her feelings. It’d feel more like she was giving Misa a present if she made the stuffed animal herself, just like we’d made the cakes.

“But then what will happen to these stuffed animals?” Sherry asked.

“I’ll take these. They’ll be a present for another girl.” I was planning on giving the stuffed animals that Sherry made to Lady Flora.

Sherry watched me examine the Kumakyu teddy bear for a moment. “Y-Yuna, I wanted to ask for a favor…”

“What’s up?”

“Well… when I was making the stuffed animals at the orphanage, the little kids really wanted them. I told them no because these were yours, but they cried and… I ended up making a promise. I said I’d give them to the orphans. I’ll pay for the materials, of course, and I’ll make new ones right away. So, um…”

Sherry looked down, as if she’d run out of words. She was still just a kid, like the others.

“You can give the bears to them,” I said. “And don’t sweat paying me back.”

There wasn’t a rush for Lady Flora’s stuffed animals. And besides, I was planning to give stuffed animals to the orphans as presents from the start. This just set the schedule a little earlier on that part.

Still…”But Sherry, are you sure only two of them will be enough?”

Even if I gifted them to only the smallest kids in the orphanage, two didn’t seem like it’d be enough for everyone. If there was a tussle and they started pulling on the stuffed animals, the bears might end up dismembered or worse. That’d be awful for poor plushie Kumayuru and Kumakyu, and I’m sure Sherry would feel terrible.

“I’ll work really hard to make them!” she said at once.

I was kind of worried she’d give up sleep again to make them, though.

“Okay, but you *have* to sleep, okay?”

“Okay…”

Yeah, that still worried me. I made her promise not to start on them today, either. “Take a day off. I won’t be happy if I catch you sleep-deprived again tomorrow.”

“Okay…”

Tomorrow, Fina and I would take lessons on how to make stuffed animals from Sherry. I’d be sure to watch Sherry, too, to make sure she wasn’t pushing herself. If she made more stuffed animals in a single day, I’d give her a scolding.

Sherry put the stuffed animals into her giant bag and carried them home, just like

she'd carried them here.

"Okay," said Fina, "I'm going home too."

"Looks like we'll be making stuffed animals starting tomorrow."

"Uh-huh."

Right as Fina was about to head out, I remembered something. "Oh, right. Almost forgot. Fina, could you let Tiermina know that I went to the Merchant Guild to raise my rank?"

"Your rank went up, Yuna?!"

"Yeah, but only because Morin, Tiermina, and everyone at the orphanage were working so hard."

Thanks to the orphans, we had eggs to sell to the Merchant Guild and for our own pudding and cake. Morin's bread was also popular, of course, and Anz's restaurant was thriving too. Most importantly, Tiermina was the one managing everything. She oversaw the distribution of the eggs, bought ingredients and adjusted prices—she even managed sales.

Yeah, Tiermina was the one who was running things for sure. Now that I thought about it… I'd be in hot water if she ever left her job.

"Fina," I said seriously, "tell Tiermina never to quit."

"Um, I don't really understand. Do I just need to tell her exactly what you said?"

Puzzled by my sudden and cryptic message, Fina headed on home.

The next day, Fina and I headed to the tailor where Sherry worked. Once we got there, I greeted Nar and Temoka as they were getting ready to open shop.

"Morning. Is Sherry in?"

“She came early. She’s making stuffed animals inside.”

Hopefully, she slept first. After getting permission from Temoka, I headed to the back room where Sherry was making stuffed animals.

“Good morning, Sherry. Did you keep your promise and sleep?”

“Yes, I slept, but I woke up early. I came in when Temoka and Nar were eating breakfast.”

She flashed a smile. For a second, I worried that she was trying to sweep everything under the rug, but at least I didn’t see bags under her eyes. I guess she’d actually gotten some proper rest.

“Did the kids fight over them?”

“Almost,” Sherry said, grinning. “But after I told them we’d make enough for everyone, they stopped acting out.”

“They’re all such great kids,” I said.

“Uh-huh!” Sherry seemed to take my compliment like I was praising her own brothers and sisters.

“Well then, Sherry, could you please teach us how to make stuffed animals?”

“Please teach us, Sherry,” Fina added.

We sat down in chairs, and Sherry took on the role of teacher. We started making stuffed animals right away.

“Okay, please follow this pattern when you cut the cloth.”

Fina and I followed her instructions and cut the cloth according to the pattern paper. The template made them easy to make, but making the template itself must’ve been really difficult. I was impressed that Sherry had made it in a single day.

“Temoka helped me,” she explained.

Still, it was impressive.

I awkwardly made the stuffed animal. I didn't have a bear sewing skill, so I was having a difficult time. On the other hand, Fina seemed like she knew what she was doing.

"Oh, um! We didn't have money to buy clothes for a while, so I got good at sewing."

Made sense. Her father had passed away and her mother was sick. I knew Gentz was watching over them, but he could've at least bought clothes for them.

After that, Fina and I set to work making a set of stuffed animals for Misa's birthday party. Fina would give a Kumayuru to Misa as a present and I'd give her a Kumakyu.

Sherry made double the amount we did in the same amount of time, so we ended up with four total sets of bear pairs. I took the first bears Fina and I made to display in my room. The second set would be Misa's present.

"Are you really sure I can have them?" I asked.

"Yeah. I think Kumayuru and Kumakyu should stay together."

"Thank you." I took the Kumakyu Fina made and put it next to the Kumayuru I made.

I guess we'd need to make a set for Fina next?

Sherry would give the stuffed animals she made to the orphans as presents. Apparently, most of the younger orphans had wanted them. Sherry said that the kids who'd cry a lot would stop once they were given a bear to hold, so it'd be easier to get them to sleep. I was glad to know the stuffed animals were serving a purpose.

To finish up the bears we'd use for Misa's present, we tied pretty red ribbons on them.

"Aaaaaaand done," I said.

"Uh-huh! I hope Lady Misa likes them," Fina said.

After we gave them the ribbons as finishing touches, I put the bears away into my bear storage.

Sherry rested in the corner of the room, done with her work for the day.

“Thank you, Sherry,” I said.

“No need for that. I had fun too. How many more should I make?”

We’d need them for Lady Flora and the queen. And Noa would definitely want one. I also wanted to give them to Fina and Shuri as presents since I could tell that Fina wanted her own bears—she was eyeing them up right then. They’d make good thank-you presents too. I also wanted some extras. So if I tallied them up…

“Apart from the ones for the orphans, I guess I’d want about ten sets?”

“That many?!”

“But there’s no hurry. I’m going to be out for a while.”

After Misa’s birthday was over, I was planning on taking Lady Flora her stuffed animals.

“Also, no staying up late anymore,” I warned Sherry. “I’m going to tell Nar and Temoka that too.” I couldn’t have her losing sleep over this again.

“Okay,” she said firmly. “I’ll make sure to sleep and then work really hard.”

She… *had* understood what I was saying, right?

CHAPTER 182
THE BEAR DEPARTS FOR SHEELIN

I BROUGHT FINA WITH me to Cliff's estate like I promised—it was time to head out to Misa's birthday party. Three horses waited in front of the gate. Cliff was there, too, accompanied by two guards. But wait, where was the carriage?

"Finally here, I see," Cliff said.

"Yuna, Fina, good morning!" Noa said.

Fina and I gave her a good morning in response. "You're full of energy right from the morning, Noa," I added.

"Of course I am. We're going out with Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Naturally, I'm quite 'psyched,' as you say."

Her eyes had the sparkle of a kid going to an amusement park. I guess that was just how psyched she was to head out with Kumayuru and Kumakyu. But wasn't she going to even mention Misa? Oof. Poor birthday girl.

"Shall we be off?" said Cliff, and before I knew it, he mounted a horse.

"We're not going with a carriage?" I asked, just to make sure.

"There's no point to having a carriage no one will ride in," Cliff told me.

There were three horses, but Cliff had two guards. That meant Noa was left out.

"Noa insisted that she would ride on your bears," he explained, "so we won't need a carriage. This is also faster, of course."

I mean, I guess it was fine? But what if it started to rain? I guess we could find shelter if that happened, but… what an inconvenience.

"Is it okay if I ask about one more thing?" I said.

“What is it?”

“You’re going with just two guards?”

Last time Cliff went to the capital, there had been five of them.

“Two should do fine since it’s closer than the capital. Of course, we also have you here. I actually hadn’t wanted guards for this trip at all, but Rondo insisted that was unacceptable, so we’re going with two of them.”

“No one’s paid me an escort fee,” I said.

“You can ask Rondo for payment once we get back.”

“I’m joking. I don’t need payment, but… let’s say you owe me a favor in the future.”

I’d probably cause trouble for Cliff at some point, right? Well, I’d just cash that favor in, eh?

“I’ll repeat what I told you at the start,” said Cliff. “There are some things I’m capable of doing and other things I’m not.”

“If that becomes an issue, I’d just go to the king.” He owed me a favor, too, after all.

“How perfectly foreboding of you, Yuna. And worse yet, I know you’re serious about this sort of thing. Well… for the time being, just let me know if you want something.”

Excellent. I successfully won a small favor from Cliff. He probably didn’t realize the little favors could pile up into a huge debt.

But I didn’t have anything to ask for, so I just kept that in my back pocket… for now.

When we got out of the town, I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu. I thought that’d spook the horses for a second, but they seemed fine.

“Always an impressive sight, that summon of yours,” said Cliff.

“Kumayuru! Kumakyu!”

Fina and Cliff didn't react—they knew it all already—but the two guards were shocked when I summoned my bears.

"Yuna! Which one can I ride?!" Noa said. "I'd like to ride both of them, if I can!" She was the only one getting worked up about this.

"We'll take turns riding like last time," I said. "You start with Kumayuru, then we'll swap along the way."

"Got it!"

"I think you already know this, but you'll be riding with Fina like last time."

"Of course. Fina! Let's go." Noa grabbed hold of Fina's hand and headed to Kumayuru.

"L-Lady Noa?!" Fina stuttered.

Kumayuru let the two of them climb on and stood up. I got on Kumakyu as well, not wanting to fall behind. "Okay, we're heading out."

We left with one guard ahead of us and one guard behind.

A few minutes passed. Even if I expected it, it was a whole different thing to *feel* the sluggishness of the journey. We were matching the horses' speed, which was… slow. Slower than Kumayuru and Kumakyu, at least. Enough to make me wonder how fast my bears were, kilometers-per-hour-wise. At times like these, you really want a car or motorcycle speedometer, you know? Maybe some people could tell how fast things were going without a speedometer, but I sure couldn't. I'd never even gotten a license.

"Noa, don't you think we're going slow?!" I called out.

"Do you think so? We may be going slightly slow, but I am happy enough just having the opportunity to ride a bear."

"Have you been to Sheelin before, Noa?" Sheelin was the town where Misa lived.

"To Sheelin? I have."

"What's it like?"

“Not terribly different from Crimonia.” Noa smiled. “I suppose the difference is that there is no bear house there.”

Which was quite a difference, considering only three towns had a bear house in them: Crimonia, the capital, and Mileela.

We took several breaks on the way to Sheelin to give the horses some rest. With each break, we swapped between Kumayuru and Kumakyu. If I didn’t give them equal time, they’d start to sulk.

As the sun began to set, the guard in front looked back at Cliff. “Lord Cliff. I think it is best if we stop here for today.”

“I guess so. We’ll make camp,” Cliff announced.

I thought it was a bit early, but the horses had different limits compared to my bears. We had to let them recover.

“Father, are we sleeping here?” asked Noa.

“Well, we can’t count on beasts and monsters not coming out of that forest.”

The forest stretched nearly end-to-end before us. If we tried going through, night could fall before we reached the other side. Making camp seemed like the right call; it’d give us enough daylight to get through the next day.

“Not using a carriage has already allowed us to cover a considerable distance. There’s no need to push forward unnecessarily.”

Cliff dismounted from his horse and tied its reins to a nearby tree. The two guards did the same. I hopped down from my bear and stretched my stiff body. I didn’t have a need for speed (did I?) but I felt kind of uneasy about how slow we were going. A few times, I had to fight myself not to rush forward.

“Yuna, you will bring out your bear house, won’t you?”

“My house? Oh, you mean the bear house.”

“The two guards already know you have a house on you. I had them swear to keep it a secret, of course.”

The guards probably knew from when I’d slayed the ten thousand monsters. If they knew, I didn’t need to hide it. Plus, using the bear house meant soft beds and a bath. Most importantly, we could sleep without worrying about any trouble.

“Just for the girls, at least,” Cliff said.

“Father, we don’t have to do that! We can sleep with Kumayuru and Kumakyu,” said Noa. Poor kid had really taken a liking to last time’s bear sleepover. I felt bad for Noa, but I’d still rest easier sleeping in a house over camping.

“Fine by me, but people might pass by if we’re here. How about that spot over there with the three trees?” The spot was just a slight distance away.

“Yes, that’s fine,” said Cliff.

With that, we moved to the three-tree spot, and I took out the bear house to a place where it’d be obscured by the foliage. It’d be harder to see through that come nightfall. The guards and Cliff tied the horses’ reins to a nearby tree.

“You could fit a black viper in there,” Cliff mused, “and I know I shouldn’t be surprised that you can store a house. But seeing you take it out… it’s really something else, I’ll admit.”

“Aww, but I was fine sleeping outdoors,” Noa muttered, looking gloomily at the bear house.

“It’s okay, Noa,” I said. “I’m going to keep the bears summoned as guards, so you can cuddle them to your heart’s content.”

“Really!”

I nodded.

“Yuna, I want to sleep with them too!” said Fina.

“How about all three of us sleep in the same bed then?”

“Are you sure?” Fina squealed.

I cubified Kumayuru and Kumakyu. *That* one surprised the guards. “C’mon, you must be tired. Head inside and rest.”

I started heading toward the house, but the two guards stopped at the entrance.

“We will be keeping watch outside,” they said. Even though guarding was their job, it would be awkward if they were the only two left outside while we were inside.

“No need.” I pointed at my bear cubs at my feet. “The cubs’ll let us know if people or monsters come close, so you don’t need to keep watch.”

The two guards looked at Kumayuru and Kumakyu, and then at each other. They were both silent for a while. Finally, the two of them looked at Cliff.

“Yuna, are you sure? We can have these men keep watch outside,” said Cliff.

“It’s fine. They can just keep guard during the daytime instead.”

Travel was monotonous, so I’d probably end up drifting off while riding my bears tomorrow.

“Are you both fine with that?” Cliff asked.

The two guards nodded. “Thank you very much, Master Yuna.”

CHAPTER 183
THE BEAR TAKES IT EASY IN THE BEAR HOUSE

"EXCUSE US." Fina and Noa had visited my bear houses so many times that they just entered it like it was any normal house.

"I haven't been inside this house since you told me that ridiculous story near the capital."

Come to think of it, Cliff had also visited my bear house. He came in after Fina and Noa, trailed by the two guards.

"Have you been here before, Father?" asked Noa.

"Yes, just once."

The two guards stood behind Cliff as he told that story. They didn't seem to know what to do with themselves.

"I'm going to whip up a meal," I said, "so everyone just sit wherever."

"We already have food prepared, you know."

"Yeah, but you're all tired, aren't you? I'll make something warm."

"I'll help, Yuna," Fina offered.

"Me too," Noa added.

I didn't need that much help, but I wasn't about to say no when they seemed so eager, so I let them lend a hand.

"In that case, let's take Yuna up on her kindness," said Cliff. He turned to his guards. "You can rest as well."

"Is that really all right?" the two guards asked, uneasily glancing around the room.

Since this was safer than sleeping outside, there wasn't anything for them to worry about. Plus, the two guys were burly enough that they'd probably just get in the way if they stood around.

"You'll block things if you're standing around," I said bluntly, "so please take a seat."

"You heard what she said," Cliff told them.

The two guards exchanged glances and then took a seat. After making sure they were sitting obediently, I moved to the kitchen in the room over.

"All right—Fina, Noa, can I ask you to get tableware for everyone?" Meanwhile, I pulled bread (baked by Morin) and vegetable soup (made by Anz) from my bear storage. Mhmm, they were fresh and delicious. I thanked my bear storage as I plated the meals.

"All right," I told Fina and Noa, "can you carry these for me?"

They split up the work of carrying the plates. Finally, I prepared the drinks and *bon appétit*—dinner. This would do, I guess?

I prepared food for seconds, then headed back to the room where Cliff and the others were.

"Thank you, Yuna."

"Thank you very much."

Cliff and the two guards seemed grateful.

"No problem. You must be hungry, so let's eat quick," I said.

We started eating once we were all seated. As expected, Morin's bread was delicious. Of course, so was Anz's soup. Maybe I'd do rice tomorrow? I felt like having some sort of meat if we were doing rice. Did I have anything that fit the bill, though? Hmm…

"I never would have expected a meal like this while traveling," Cliff blurted out while I was pondering the next day's menu.

"This is delicious, Yuna." Noa was eating happily.

“Thanks. We have some seconds, so let me know if you want some.”

“Okay. In that case, may I have some more soup?”

I gave Noa some. One of the guards looked over at me when he saw that.

“Um, Master Yuna. Could I… possibly have some more bread? It was awfully delicious.”

“In that case, me too.”

The two guards seemed embarrassed to ask, but Morin’s bread was really just that good. I pulled out some more and gave it to the two guards.

“Yuna, could I have another serving of soup too?” asked Fina.

“Yup. If you don’t eat a lot, you won’t grow up big and strong like me.”

The moment I said that, the atmosphere around us seemed to shift. It was a strange feeling. Had I said something odd?

Fina spoke up. “Y-yeah. I’ll eat a lot and grow up to be like you, Yuna.”

“In that case, you need to eat bread too.” I gave her a second helping of bread with her soup.

“Th-thank you, Yuna.”

“Does everyone else want seconds?”

“Yes, I suppose I do,” Cliff said.

“The soup then, if you could.”

The strange mood dispersed, and everyone had seconds. After our meal, we took a little break… and the two younger members of our party started getting tired.

“I’m getting sleepy. So full…”

“Me too.”

“Make sure you take baths before you go to bed, you two,” I told them.

“Okaaay.”

“Okay.”

They both sounded half-asleep already.

Since they used the bear bath before, they didn’t think that taking a bath here was strange, but there were others around who were confused by the conversation.

“There’s a bath?” Cliff asked me.

“Sure there is. It’s a house, right?”

“Well, it *is*, but… there couldn’t be one in a house like this, could there?” Cliff looked around, hoping for backup.

“Father, houses have baths,” Noa objected.

Fina nodded along with her, but across from them, the two guards were looking dubious. “How else will we wash away the day’s fatigue?”

“I suppose…” Cliff answered.

“We’ll take turns. You three take yours last,” I told them.

“We’re taking baths too?!”

“Obviously. You’ve been working up a sweat riding all day, so I can’t have you dirtying the beds.” What, did they think the sheets would clean and dry themselves?

“The… beds…” Cliff repeated.

“We’re on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, aren’t we?” one of the guards whispered.

The other nodded. “How could we have a delicious meal, a bath, and a bed in a place like this?”

Moving on…"While I'm cleaning up the dishes, you two can get in the bath together."

"Aww, you should come with us, Yuna," Noa whined.

"Nope, I've got to clean up." I couldn't just head to the bath and leave the dishes like this.

"Master Yuna, will you leave the dishes to us?" one of the guards offered. The other nodded. "We really can't just do nothing at all…"

Well… it would help me, and I guess it'd make them feel better too. I took them up on their offer, asked them to clean up, and went to get in the bath with Fina and Noa.

"Oh, and help yourself to any of the drinks in the fridge," I said to the three as I left the room and headed with Fina and Noa to the bath. Kumayuru and Kumakyu followed.

Once we got to the entrance of the bath, I asked my bears to keep watch.

"I don't think anyone will come," I said, "but catch anyone that does."

The bears *kwoomed* quietly in reply.

"Are Kumayuru and Kumakyu not coming inside?"

"Nope. They're going to be keeping watch for us." I didn't think those three would peep, but I asked my bears to keep guard just in case.

"That's too bad."

"Okay, look, just get inside already," I said.

I brought Noa and Fina to the changing room and changed out of my bear outfit. Noa and Fina watched me.

"Yuna, I didn't notice because of your bear outfit, but you're really pretty," said Noa.

"Yeah. Your hair is long and real pretty," Fina said.

"Thanks. You two are pretty cute yourselves."

While they showered me with empty compliments, I ushered them toward the bath. They were way cuter than me.

“Yuna, I’ll help you scrub down.”

“Me too.”

I took the two up on their offers and let them wash my back. It was a little embarrassing, but it felt nice. I also washed their backs to return the favor.

After washing up, we soaked in the water. As a Japanese person, the day didn’t feel over until I got to soak in the tub… but I didn’t get to relax for long, considering the fuss those two were making. Once we got out of the bath, we headed back to Cliff.

“The bath is open, so you can go in,” I told him.

“What is that outfit?” asked Cliff.

What outf—oh, right, I’d changed into my white bear clothes. “I’m going to bed,” I said simply.

“You even wear a bear costume to bed?”

“That’s right.”

“The white bear look is cute too,” said Noa.

I nodded “Your pajamas are cute, too, Noa. And yours, Fina.”

“Thank you very much,” Fina answered.

Cliff seemed exasperated by the storm of compliments. “What is going on? We’re traveling, aren’t we? Aren’t we on the road?”

“Father, what are you saying? Is your mind going?”

“My mind isn’t going anywhere. I was simply musing about what most people would consider common sense.” What, did he think we were being silly?

“Oh, right,” I said. “Cliff, before you go to the bath, could we figure out rooms?”

“I suppose there *would* be rooms if there’s a bath.”

Well, *yeah*, Lord Obvious. “There are three rooms on the second floor. The closest one is mine, and I’ll share with Fina and Noa. You guys can use the other ones.”

“Really?”

“You can have a room to yourself, Cliff, or you can share with the guards. You can decide amongst yourselves.”

“All right. You have my gratitude.”

“Lord Cliff, we can stay here,” one of the guards said.

Wait, the two guards were thinking of sleeping in the living room where we had dinner? “You’d be in the way if you slept here. There are rooms, so use them.”

The guards went silent at that.

“In any case,” I said, “we’re going to bed. Turn off the lights once you’re done with your bath.”

“Indeed. Well then, I suppose I’ll graciously accept the offer,” Cliff said, then headed towards the bath. I headed to my room. Behind me, Fina and Noa followed while cradling Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

The bed in my room was larger than any other in the house. It had to be, if I wanted to cuddle with my bears—even if they were in cub forms. Still, all five of us might’ve been a bit much…

“Yuna, will we all be able to fit?”

“It’ll be fine.” I put the table and chairs next to my bed into my bear storage and pulled out another bed, one the same size as the other. Pushing them together doubled the bed’s area. “That should do it.”

“It’s so spacious!” Noa flopped onto the bed while still holding Kumakyu. Fina flopped with her, hugging Kumayuru.

“Hey, we’ve got an early day tomorrow, so get some rest.”

“Okaaay. Kumakyu, let’s go to sleep together!”

Noa hugged Kumakyu, while Fina buried herself under the covers with Kumayuru. I hoped they wouldn’t toss and turn at night. Not that my bears would mind if Fina and Noa squeezed them a little tight.

“All right, I’m turning off the lights.”

“Okay. Goodnight, Yuna.”

“Goodnight, Yuna.”

“Goodnight, you two.”

No sooner had I turned off the lights than I heard them gently snoring. Before long, I turned in too.

CHAPTER 184
THE BEAR RESCUES THE CARRIAGE IN DISTRESS

I WOKE UP ON MY OWN without needing anyone to jostle me up, probably because of the early bedtime. I rubbed my eyes and looked toward the faintly lit window and the rising sun. Fina was awake and yawning, sitting on the bed with her legs folded to the side, holding Kumayuru in her arms.

"Good morning, Yuna."

"Morning. You're up early."

"I just woke up. Isn't that right, Kumayuru?"

Kumayuru responded with a small *kwoom* when asked.

Fina didn't seem sleepy, though, so she might've been awake even earlier. As for the other girl around Fina's age, Noa was still snoozing comfortably while firmly holding onto Kumakyu, her long golden hair covering Kumakyu's face. Kumakyu was probably okay, but—just in case—I brushed aside Noa's golden hair and peeked at my bear's face. Kumakyu's eyes were closed, and my bear seemed to be sleeping comfortably. I gave Kumakyu's some head pats, which made the bear wake up.

"Let her sleep in for a little longer, will you?" I told Kumakyu.

"Mgh, Kumakyu, Kumayuru…" Noa said in her sleep as she hugged Kumakyu tight.

I patted Noa's head and got out of bed. "All right then, I'll go set up breakfast."

"I'll help too," Fina told me.

"I'll be fine on my own. I'll let you wake up Noa in a bit."

I changed into my black bear outfit and headed down to the first floor, but…

Huh? I sensed that some people were down there waiting. When I went down to the first floor, Cliff was sitting by himself in a chair. I didn't spot the two guards.

"Yuna?"

"You're up early."

"I didn't get much sleep."

"Was the bed uncomfortable? I definitely put out new sheets and aired them out. Maybe the sheets weren't fancy enough for you?"

"Far from it. No, I haven't been able to relax ever since you pulled out a house in the middle of the highway and told us to sleep there."

Okay, that didn't seem fair. "Weren't you the one who told me to do that?"

"True, but I had my daughter in mind. I never imagined it would shake me up to this extent."

Personally, I'd be more on edge sleeping outside. If Kumayuru and Kumakyu weren't around, I'd be too scared to even try. "Are your guards still sleeping?"

Cliff was the only one in the room. Didn't they have work to do for Cliff?

"They're working."

"Working?"

So they *had* gotten up and were already on the job.

"Gouges is looking after the horses. Rabon is cleaning the bath."

…not that I could tell which was which based on those names. "They're looking after the horses and cleaning the *bath*?"

"He said he was doing that to thank you for using it and for the meal yesterday."

"It wasn't your order to do that, then?"

“Correct. They asked me for permission, so I granted it. We didn’t impose, did we?”

“Of course not. That’ll be a big help.”

As we talked, one of the guards came into the room. Um, which one was he again? He just came from the bathroom so…

“Lord Cliff, I am finished cleaning the baths.”

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“Thank you for yesterday, Master Yuna. The bath and bed were wonderfully comfortable.”

I guess the guard had managed to get some sleep, unlike Cliff.

“That’s good. Cliff didn’t seem to like either.”

“I never said anything of the sort. I just didn’t feel like I could settle in.”

How was that any different?

“Thank you for cleaning the bath,” I told the guard.

“Not at all, I’m thankful you let us use it.” He straightened to his full height and bowed.

“Speaking of settling in,” said Cliff, “where’s Noa? Didn’t she stay with you?”

“She’s still sleeping. I’m planning to get her up once I get breakfast ready.”

“In that case, perhaps I should wake her?”

“I asked Fina to, so it’s fine. I’ll prep breakfast, so you sit tight, Cliff.”

“Lord Cliff,” said the guard, “I will go assist Gouges.” With that, the bath-cleaning guard headed toward the guard looking after the horses.

I went to the kitchen and prepared a simple breakfast. Right as I was setting the finished breakfast on the table, Fina and Noa came down from the second story with perfect timing.

“Yuna, Father. Good morning,” Noa greeted us, Kumakyu in her arms.

“Yes, good morning,” said Fina, holding Kumayuru.

“Noa, good morning. Fina, I finished breakfast, so can you go outside and call the guards?”

“Yes, I will,” said Fina, and headed outside while I set breakfast on the table. As I finished arranging things, Fina returned with the guards. Fina and Noa placed the bears on the floor, and it was breakfast time.

“Cliff, how much longer before we arrive?” I mean, I had no clue how far Sheelin was. My bear map only showed places I already visited. Whenever I opened it, the map was pitch black in unknown places. If it was going to take too long, I planned on spending the trip napping on a luxurious fur bed.

“We covered a lot of distance yesterday,” Cliff told me. “Remember that forest ahead? That means we’ll arrive before evening today.”

After breakfast, we headed toward Sheelin.

We made sure to let our horses rest on the way. Outside of the occasional odd look from a passerby at Kumayuru and Kumakyu, nothing much happened. I checked our surroundings with my detection skill, but there weren’t any monsters around.

A while after lunch, I was feeling a bit peckish, so I ate some potato chips on top of Kumayuru for an afternoon snack. Noa and Fina looked like they wanted some, too, so I shared… if they promised to be careful and not spill any. When I looked down, I noticed *I* spilled a ton of crumbs on Kumayuru’s back, so I brushed those off before anyone could notice.

At that, Kumayuru turned around and gave me a curious look, as if asking, *what is it?*

“Oh,” I said quickly, “nothing.”

All those salty potato chips made me thirsty, though. I took out some fruit juice, but it was hard to drink from a cup while being jostled around. Hmm, maybe it was time to buy a water canteen?

Cliff had water inside a leather pouch thing and could drink that while riding his horse. When I looked at Fina and Noa, they also had their own water bags prepped. *Man, I gotta get myself one of those next time…*

As we galloped toward Sheelin, the lead guard instructed us to stop. There was a carriage that had come to a stop up ahead.

"Father, that carriage…"

"Yes, I see it."

"I wonder why it's there?"

"Who knows? Perhaps it's broken. Or perhaps there's another reason."

Another reason?

"Lord Cliff," said one of the guards, "I'll check on it. Please wait here."

"Be careful."

The guard headed over on his horse.

"Cliff, what's going on?" I asked.

"It's just a precaution. There's a possibility that bandits set up the carriage to make it seem like it had broken down. If so, they may spring out to attack us."

Right… this *was* a different world, after all. Still, I hadn't even known that was a thing. I'd be sure to look out for it now. I'd be okay even if bandits took me by surprise, but things would get complicated if I was traveling with somebody else. You can never be too careful.

When the guard approached the carriage, someone came out from behind it. They had a kid with them, too. They were talking about something.

After a short while, the guard came back. "Lord Cliff."

“Your report?”

“One of the carriage wheels appears to be stuck in a rut and won’t budge.”

No bandits, then?

“If you helped them,” said Cliff, “do you think the wheel could be freed?”

“We won’t know until we try.”

“In that case, let’s make an attempt.”

We headed toward the carriage. A man and a woman in their twenties waited there. The woman held a baby, and a little girl around Princess Flora’s age was with them. A pretty ordinary family, looked like.

They were shocked when they saw me and my bears, but they were even more surprised when they saw Cliff.

“Oh Lord Cliff, my utmost apologies for blocking the road.”

The man bowed his head, and the woman followed suit behind him. The girl clung to her mother as she looked over at me. I waved at her, but that just made her hide behind her mom.

Jeez, I don’t bite…

“You know me?” Cliff asked.

“Oh, yes. We live in Crimonia. We have seen you on many occasions, Lord Cliff.”

Which meant they knew about me, too, right?

“I was told the carriage wheel got stuck in a rut,” he said.

“Ah, yes. A stroke of bad luck, that rut. Now we’re stuck. Our apologies for the inconvenience. We cannot move out of the path, but it would be such a help if you could pass by us from the side.”

“Rabon! Gouges!” Cliff called his guards.

The two headed to the stuck wheel.

“Lord Cliff?” the husband said.

“I’m not sure if we can do it but we will lend a hand, good sir,” one of the guards said.

“But we can’t ask for you to help, Lord Cliff.”

“Can you think of another way out of this?” Cliff asked.

“No, but…”

“If four men work together, we should be able to get this done,” Cliff said.

“Please wait, Lord Cliff. Let’s try with the three of us first,” said the guard. He couldn’t imagine getting a noble like Cliff to do manual labor, of course. I’d never seen a noble trying to lift a carriage wheel in any of my manga or novels, that’s for sure.

“Um, thank you so very much.” The husband bowed his head, then the three men grabbed hold of the wheel. But even with their combined strength, the carriage remained firmly planted in the rut.

Maybe it was time for me to give it a go? But if a weak girl like me did what three men couldn’t, it’d probably raise eyebrows. They’d probably make fun of me and call it *bear brute force* or something.

“I’ll help as well,” said Cliff.

“No, we couldn’t possibly ask you to assist, milord,” said the husband.

Yeah, I guess it wasn’t sensible for a noble like Cliff to help with something like that.

“Please don’t worry about it,” said Cliff. “You’re one of my townspeople; helping you is one of my duties.”

“Lord Cliff…” But the man couldn’t keep refusing Cliff’s offer.

Cliff didn’t realize that his kindness was going to cause normal people ulcers. Sure, it’d be super funny seeing Cliff attempt to move the carriage, but it looked like my time to shine had come. I couldn’t bear to let the man’s family go on like this.

“How about I try?” I said.

“You?”

“Yeah.” With a nod, I used earth magic to level out the rut. The carriage wheel rose up with it. Rut filled, carriage free—two birds, one stone. Now any future carriages coming by here would have safe passage.

What, did you think I was going to lift the carriage by hand? When I had magic? Come on, don’t be silly. Plus, that’d really raise some eyebrows.

“Really, Yuna?” said Cliff. “If you could do that, why not just say so?”

“Since you’re the lord of this place, I thought you’d be all suave and handle it.”

“Unlike you, I’m just a normal person.”

Normal? Nope, being a noble wasn’t normal.

“Um, well, thank you very much,” the man said.

“Thank you, bear.” The girl hiding behind the woman imitated her father and thanked me too. She kept staring at me.

“I don’t bite. It’s okay.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“My daughter is a fan of yours.”

“A fan?”

“She’s always going on and on about the bear whenever she sees you. It cheers her right up.”

Really? I just assumed she was scared of me, what with the hiding and looking out from behind her mom. “So… why are you out here? You don’t look like merchants.”

“My mother is in Sheelin. We just recently had our son, so we wanted to introduce him to her. We were just heading home when all this happened.” The man stroked the head

of the baby the woman was carrying.

“Really? I hope he grows up healthy,” said Cliff. “Childrearing’s no easy path, so hold strong. Now, then—we’ll be on our way. Please be careful returning home.”

“Okay. Thank you for everything. You really helped us.”

“I did nothing,” he said, looking to me.

“It wasn’t a big deal, so don’t worry about it. Hey, you have a baby and a little kid, so please try to be careful on the way home.”

“We will.”

Once we said our goodbyes, we made sure that the carriage was mobile and headed out to Sheelin.

CHAPTER 185
THE BEAR ARRIVES AT SHEELIN

THE TOWN OF SHEELIN came into view before dusk. The gate looked a lot like Crimonia's.

"Cliff, wait a moment," I called out.

"What is it?"

"We'll give them a shock if we come up to them like this. Is it okay if I dismiss my bears first?"

Soon enough, they'd be able to see us from the gate. Since we were still far away, it didn't seem like they could tell we were riding bears, although they'd probably see soon enough. I didn't want to cause a commotion.

"Ah, I suppose that's true. You *are* riding bears." Cliff looked at Kumayuru and Kumakyu and nodded. "They've been so well behaved that I'd forgotten."

"What? Is Kumayuru leaving?" Noa clung to Kumayuru's neck in protest. Behind her, Fina obediently dismounted from Kumayuru.

"I'm just recalling them. We don't want to put the bears through dealing with scared townspeople. C'mon, do you want Kumayuru or Kumakyu to get attacked with swords or magic?"

I didn't *think* that would happen if kids like Noa and Fina were riding them, but it would still be a whole scene.

"Ugh, fine," Noa groaned. "Kumayuru, Kumakyu, thank you for bringing us this far." She hopped off Kumayuru and patted each of the bears' heads in thanks. After she finished saying goodbye, I sent my bears away.

From there, we ended up walking toward the town. Cliff offered to let Noa ride his horse, but she rejected him—"I'll walk with Yuna"—and Cliff looked kind of sad. We

walked until we were close enough to make out people standing in front of the gate.

The people by the town entrance were giving me curious looks, some of them even whispering the word "bear." I pulled my bear hood low over my face so I couldn't be seen.

"Please place your IDs on the crystal panel," said the guard at the gate entrance.

Cliff went first, then the two guards, Noa, Fina, and finally myself. I held my guild card to the crystal panel and passed into the town without issue.

The gate guard did ogle me, but the crystal panel didn't turn red, so I was let into the town without any problems. If you were registered as a criminal, the panel would turn red, and you'd be stuck outside.

Once we got in successfully, we immediately headed to Gran's residence, and…

"Hm."

"They're staring."

"They are."

"They're looking at us."

"Everyone is looking at us."

Cliff, the two guards, Noa, and Fina muttered to themselves. Then, everyone looked over at me.

"Yeah. Everyone's probably looking at us because Cliff and Noa are nobles." With two guards and two people dressed up like members of the aristocracy, of course we'd get looks. If I'd seen nobles walking around, I would've been just as curious.

"No!" said Cliff, slapping his palm to his forehead as if he just now remembered. "Everyone is looking at you. You're dressed like a bear, after all."

"You're only realizing that now?"

"No, I just forgot how absurd your outfit is. You've poisoned my mind without me even

realizing."

"Your outfit isn't weird, Yuna," Noa cut in, sounding quite serious. "It's cute, so it's fine. The people are staring because you look so adorable."

At any rate, it was too late to worry about stares. I couldn't live comfortably in this world without my bear gear.

"If you don't want to stand out so much," I said, "maybe we should we split up?"

"If we split up, I'm going with you," Noa declared.

"I'm going with Yuna too," said Fina.

The two of them clung to my clothes. They were such nice kids.

"I'm not allowing that," said Cliff, "since I'm sure the three of you will get yourselves into trouble. Let's just move quickly."

Even though he said to hurry, we had to walk since we didn't have mounts—there was a limit to how fast we could go. We kept getting stares as we walked until we spotted a residence, one about the size as Cliff's. I guess huge houses were just a noble thing?

Two guards stood out in front of the residence.

"I am Cliff Fochrosé."

"We have been waiting for you. Do you have a written invitation?"

Cliff handed him a letter.

"Ah, yes: Lord Cliff and his daughter, young Lady Noir. I will call a guide right away, so please wait a moment." One of the men headed to the residence.

The other stayed behind and looked me over. "Are those girls attendants of Lady Noir?"

He seemed less suspicious and more just… confused.

"They were invited to Misana's birthday party," said Cliff. "They happen to be my daughter's friends, so I brought them along."

“You’re saying they’re Lady Misana’s… ah, if you have an invitation, would you allow me to confirm?”

Fina and I both handed them over. The man went through each one, and his attitude changed.

“Pardon my rudeness,” he said, straightening up.

Since we had written letters, that made us guests. And guests got a warm welcome, whether they be peasant, adventurer, or bear. If he’d upset a guest because he lacked decorum, he’d risk upsetting Gran, the head of the estate, or even Misa.

Shortly after, a maid came out from the residence.

“Lord Cliff, I apologize for keeping you waiting.” The maid bowed to Cliff in polite greeting. She was in her twenties with beautiful light brown hair. She looked like Lala in that way, actually—did they choose maids based on appearance? A lot of them did tend to be pretty.

“Meishun, it’s been too long,” said Cliff.

“Yes, you seem well, Lord Cliff. And you’ve grown so much, Lady Noir.”

“Uh-huh, I’m taller.”

They knew one another, then. After greeting Cliff and Noa, Meishun looked over to me. “You must be Miss Yuna and Miss Fina. I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

“You know about us?” I didn’t think she’d know our names by sight…

“Yes, I do. Lady Misana and Lord Gran informed me about you,” Meishun said with a smile. I wonder what she was told? I mean, I hadn’t known Misa or Gran for long. I couldn’t have done anything odd in that time, right? “Well then, I will guide you to the rooms.”

“May we see Gran?” Cliff asked Meishun as we walked.

“My apologies, Lord Cliff, but he is greeting another guest at the moment.”

“It can wait until he has time. Please, just let him know I’d like to see him.”

“Yes, I will do so.” Meishun guided us to the rooms where we’d be staying. “Lord Cliff and Miss Noir, please make use of this room.”

“What? I have to be with my father?”

“Yes. The room next door has been prepared for Miss Yuna and Miss Fina. Your guards will be staying in rooms in a separate building.”

Noa latched onto Fina’s arm and mine. “But I want to be in the same room as Yuna and Fina…”

“Unfortunately, there are only two beds in that room,” said Meishun.

“That’s okay,” said Noa. “Fina and I can share. That’s okay with you, Fina, right?”

“I can sleep on the floor…”

“No!” said Noa, puffing out her cheeks slightly and grabbing Fina’s hand. “Let’s sleep together.”

“If that is what you would like, Lady Noa.” Meishun gave Cliff a troubled look.

“Sorry about this, Meishun,” said Cliff. “Just let Noa do as she wishes.”

“Understood. Well then, please make use of this room, Lord Cliff. Mademoiselle Yuna, Mademoiselle Fina, and Lady Noa, please make use of the adjacent room.”

“Thank you.”

“Please rest in the rooms until the evening meal.”

And so Fina, Noa, and I were to share a room together.

“I shall show your attendants to their rooms,” said Meishun, and turned to the two guards. “Please come this way.”

“Yuna, Fina, please keep an eye on my daughter,” said Cliff. “If she complains too much, I’ll take her off your hands. Just let me know.”

“F-Father. You’re so mean. I won’t complain at all, you’ll see!”

Hold on, she literally just complained about the room assignments. Had she already forgotten?

“Yuna, let’s head into the room, quickly,” said Noa in a hushed tone, as if she was making a daring escape from Cliff. She grabbed my hand, went inside, and immediately flopped onto a bed. “Ahh, I’m so tired.” Jeez, did she have *any* idea how to be ladylike?

“Yuna. Is it really okay for me to be here?” Fina stood in the middle of the room, unsure what to do with herself.

I shrugged. “I’m in the same boat.” She was a commoner, and I was an adventurer. Neither of us had the social status to participate in a noble’s party. Just like Fina, I wouldn’t have even attended if I could’ve avoided it.

“Yuna, I’m not sure about this.” Fina rubbed her stomach as if it ached. I got the feeling.

“At least we’re not going to Gran’s party. You shouldn’t need to worry too much.” We were just participating in Misa’s party. That was supposed to just be relatives, so we probably didn’t need to worry too much.

“But that’s so unfair,” said Noa. “You should come to Gran’s party too.”

“We didn’t get an invitation from Gran. And, unlike Misa’s party, won’t there be a ton of people?” I could imagine it now. Nope! No thanks.

“I don’t want to go either,” Fina added.

“Ugh, even you, Fina…” Noa puffed up her cheeks and sulked.

CHAPTER 186
THE BEAR WALKS AROUND THE TOWN

AS FINA CONSOLED NOA, there was a knock on the door. Misa peeked into the room.

"Noa!"

"Misa!"

Reunited at last, the two of them hugged it out.

"Yuna and Fina, you made it as well? I'm so happy!"

"Thank you for inviting us, Misa." With her smiling like that, no way could I tell her I hadn't wanted to come.

"Dear Lady Misa, I am so very…" Fina tried her very best to greet Misa, but the noble cut her off.

"You don't have to be so formal. Everyone else at grandfather's party greets me so formally. It gets so very tiresome."

I guess even nobles had their own problems to deal with. Good thing I was an unimportant adventurer. "Are you even supposed to be here?"

"I may have slipped out of the room when Meishun said that you had arrived," Misa said with a smile.

Hm. I hope she didn't get in trouble. "Is it okay if we don't greet Gran?"

"He's busy meeting with a lot of different people, so I think it's okay."

"Gran's party is in four days, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes."

“In that case, do we have time to just do whatever for a while? I kind of want to go for a walk around town.”

“I think that’s okay. Other people have also headed out.”

“Cool. Fina, wanna go for a walk around town tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going too,” Noa declared, raising her hand.

“Are you sure you’re allowed to, Noa?”

“Wh-why not?!” Noa looked shocked at the very idea of being turned down.

“You’d need Cliff’s permission. It’s not like we can just take you along without asking.”

“In that case, I shall attain permission from my father!” Noa stood up from her chair, left the room… and almost immediately came back. “Yuna, I have permission!”

Cliff stood behind the triumphant-looking Noa. Since Cliff was in the room next door, I knew she’d come back right away, but why had Cliff followed her back?

He walked up to me. “Yuna. Can I entrust Noa to you until the party?”

“I don’t really mind. What about you, Cliff?”

“I have work to do. People to meet with. From here on, I have things to discuss with Gran. Time-consuming things—I won’t have time to be with Noa. And as you can imagine, I wouldn’t want Noa to be confined to her room until the day of the party. Even if something does happen on your walks through town, I know she’ll be fine if she’s with you.”

He trusted me an awful lot, and I was glad for that, but… was this really a good idea? “Doesn’t Noa need to do formal greetings?” Noa was a noble like Misa, after all. Didn’t she have duties?

“She can do those at the party proper. Until then, you can do as you please. Noa, you have my permission to go out, so long as you don’t get separated from Yuna. Keep that promise, or you won’t be allowed outside again.”

“Of course, I’ll stick close to Yuna,” she said, glomping onto me. “I’ll even hug her the whole time so we can’t be separated!”

No sooner had I managed to pry Noa off than Misa looked like she wanted to say something. “I-I want to go too.”

Hm. I’d feel bad for Misa if she was the only one we left behind. But even though she said she wanted to come, I couldn’t just take her. She’d need permission from either Gran or her parents, just like Noa had.

Her… parents? Hold on, when was the last time I heard about *them?* Were they… were they dead? When we first met, I remembered hearing that her parents had gone to the capital ahead of her.

Okay, I was probably freaking out for no reason. “If you get permission from your parents, you can.” I wasn’t going to accidentally kidnap a noble kid, thank you very much.

“You mean it?!”

Two extra kids weren’t all that different from one. They didn’t seem like the types to wander off, either. And I trusted Fina, so I didn’t have any worries at all about her.

“Yeah, *if* you get permission.”

“I understand. I’ll go get permission from my mother and father.” Just like Noa, Misa dashed away. But the moment she opened the door, she stopped in her tracks. “Grandfather?!”

“What? You were here too, Misa?” Gran came in through the opened door. “And you too, Cliff?”

“I was asking Yuna to watch over my daughter. But why are you here, Gran?”

“I heard that the bear girl who helped me earlier had arrived, so I came to greet her.”

Nah, *he* was really the one who’d helped *me.* He was there when I purchased that plot of land and when I’d turned in the group of robbers.

“It’s been a while Miss Bear. And Fina, was it?” he said.

“Oh, yes. I’m Fina.” Fina reacted strangely when her name was suddenly said. But wait a minute, why was he using her first name, but calling me Miss Bear?

“Thank you for going to all this trouble for my granddaughter’s sake.”

“No need to thank me,” I said. “I wanted to see Misa too.” That wasn’t quite a lie, though I hadn’t exactly wanted to meet her again at a birthday party.

The conversation lulled for a moment, and Misa broke in. “Umm… Grandfather, may I go out into town with Yuna and the others tomorrow? Everyone says they will go with me.”

“To the town?”

Gran looked at me. “If Miss Bear is there, you should be fine.”

They were leaving things to me *again*? But Misa looked happy enough, so I guess I didn’t mind.

The next day, we got up early and I took the trio of Fina, Noa, and Misa out for a walk around the town.

“Where are we going, Yuna?” one of them asked.

“I don’t know anything about this town,” I admitted, “so I just planned to have a nice walk. Is there somewhere you all want to go?” It was more or less my responsibility to supervise everyone, after all.

“I’m okay going anywhere,” Noa said.

“Yeah, I’ll go anywhere with you, Yuna,” Fina chimed in.

“Anywhere as long as I can go outside,” Misa added.

None of them had any plans, it looked like. “In that case, let’s just walk around. Don’t get separated from me.”

Everyone seemed good with that.

People looked at us as we walked. We were a group of three pretty girls and a bear, so I guess we *would* stand out… but then again, the only bits of talk I overheard kept repeating the word "bear."

Yeah… on second glance, they weren't the right age yet to attract looks. *It's just the bear thing*.

"Should we all eat something?" I asked. We ate breakfast before leaving, but a bit of time had passed. We could probably all eat a little something.

"Yes, I could eat."

"Yes."

"Me too."

Since everyone agreed, I asked Misa where the food stalls were, and we headed on over. According to Misa, they had food stalls lined up in the plaza just like in Crimonia. What I really wanted was to check out the grocers in the marketplace, but I had to be patient.

Several food stalls lined the village square—your standard skewers, drinks, sandwiches, and soups. They were selling a ton of stuff.

Hmm… what to get…

We looked at each of the food stalls, made our choices, and ended up holding a ton of food in our hands. We'd been meaning to have a small snack, but here we were with huge meals. Everything looked so delicious; we just hadn't been able to help ourselves.

"Yuna, are we allowed to buy all of this?"

"Don't worry about money. Hey, mister—four skewers, please!" I made sure to buy a few different kinds to share with the three.

The first stall was so surprised by our massive haul that they shouted out in surprise. Fortunately, that alerted the other stalls enough that everything went a lot smoother with 'em.

“Yuna, I can’t carry any more.”

“And, um, this is more than I can eat.”

Yeah… Noa and Misa were sure carrying a lot, I’ll admit.

“Then do you guys want to find a bench to sit down and eat?”

They nodded, and we happily sat down to dig in.

“This reminds me of the capital,” Noa said.

“Since we all ate together then,” added Fina.

“Noa, Fina… I’m happy to be able to eat with you again,” said Misa.

Even Fina, who seemed so nervous at first, was talking happily with the other two about the capital as they ate. She’d gotten over her nerves. When I looked at those three, I was glad I’d come.

After our tour of the food stalls, we continued our walk around town. The usual gazes followed us, but no one caused trouble. We got to enjoy some window shopping.

As we had fun browsing, a group of boys and girls approached us from up ahead. They were somewhere between me and Fina in age—about thirteen, maybe? Based on looks, they seemed wealthy. A person in a black cloak was a short distance away from them… a guard, maybe. I was one to talk, but the guy seemed kind of suspicious.

As for the young kids, vicious smiles broke out on their faces when they noticed us. They leered at Misa—she saw them and hid behind me.

Huh? Was something going on here? These kids seemed downright nasty compared to the kids under my own watch. The snickering group approached us.

CHAPTER 187
THE BEAR IS MADE FUN OF

MISA HID BEHIND ME. It seemed like she knew the kids.

"Yuna," Noa and Fina mumbled, grabbing hold of my clothes. They could tell something was off, but I wish they wouldn't do that—I might need to get moving if things broke bad.

As for Misa, she was silent.

"It's all right," I told them. "Let go of my clothes, just in case. I'll protect you if something happens." At that, they let go. If I moved while they were still latched on, things might get rough.

"Well, well," said the lead kid. "I thought I saw a creep, and look: you're walking right next to them, Misana. Taking your weird pet bear for a walk?"

His little groupies laughed in response. Ugh, this was bad. For the first time in a while, I was feeling the urge to punch someone. He was a kid, though, and he seemed high status. It wouldn't be worth it.

I mean, it'd be fine if it was *just* me, but Fina, Noa, and Misa were here too. I didn't want to do anything dangerous.

The boy smiled, drawing closer. Misa was shivering behind me. There was something up between these two. Whatever that was, Misa didn't want any part of this, and I was going to let her hide behind me as long as she needed to.

"Could you not come any closer than that?" I got the boy to stop.

"What? Who're you?"

"I'm the bodyguard for these girls."

"Pffft—really? Misana, you've got a bear for a guard?" The boy laughed, and his

underlings joined him. Nauseating. Made me wanna punch that grin right off his face. "No, no, I get it. Bears are *soooo* strong, after all."

The boy laughed even louder. Misa was shaking behind me. Noa and Fina held both of her hands… they were such good kids.

Still, we needed to get out of here for Misa's sake.

"If you have no business with us," I said, "we'll be going."

"Wait, bear, I'm talking to Misana. Wouldn't you know it, Misana… I'm going to Gran's party. Care to thank me for it? C'mon, be a doll and say it." He spoke the words in a nasty, mocking stutter. "'Th-thank you s-so much for g-gracing us with your presence at the party.'"

If he was coming to Gran's party, he was definitely a noble. Having to invite a sneering idiot like this kid must've been hard for Gran.

"Oh, and here's an idea," said the boy. "Maybe I could go to your birthday party too?"

"You don't have to come," said Misa.

"Beg your pardon? Is that how you respond to someone who's offering to attend your party?"

"You don't have to come," Misa repeated.

When he heard her attitude, the boy really flew off the handle. "You think you can talk to me like that? You know your family might be ruined, don't you?"

Misa said nothing.

"Ever consider that it'd be in your best interest to get on my good side? You know, you might just make a good maid if your family winds up destitute. How about that, hmm?" The boy laughed.

Misa hung her head and stayed silent. Whatever was going on, this boy was irking me and making Misa miserable. It'd be best if we left as soon as possible.

“Everyone, we’re going,” I said, ignoring the boy and trying to gather the girls.

“Wait. I wasn’t done *talking*,” said the boy. He tried to grab Misa’s arm.

And I stood in front of him.

“Hey, you: move,” said the boy. “I’m not about to let some fuzzy-suited freak get in my way!”

“I’m a guard. It’s my job to get in your way. You better stop bothering her.”

The boy and I glared at each other.

“You dare to go against me in this town? Do you know the consequences? Don’t pretend you’re a guard, you weirdly dressed brat. That strong guy over there—now *he’s* a guard.”

The boy pointed at the man in the black mantle behind him. That guy looked like trouble, all right.

“You must be trying to make a fool of me,” he continued. “Claiming that this girl in the stupid outfit is a guard? Ridiculous. I could introduce you to the real deal. Then again, you probably won’t need a guard at all pretty soon.”

“That’s fine,” said Misa. “Yuna is way stronger.” It was nice to hear her say that.

“That bear? Strong? Don’t make me laugh.”

I faced the boy. “Let me get this straight: you don’t walk around outside without a big, strong guard? What a little baby. Why don’t you go back home to your mommy? Get some nursing in? *Mommy, I can’t go outside unwess I have a stwong guard*!”

“Why, you little—!” Oh, now he was *fuming.* I guess he had a low boiling point. Maybe no one had ever made fun of him before. Raging, the boy threw a punch at me.

I caught his fist in my bear puppet.

“Damn it, let go!” The boy pulled on his hand with all his might. Not that it mattered, of course.

“Step aside,” I said firmly.

“Shut up! Brad!”

The moment the boy shouted, black-mantled Brad rushed out from behind him. I let go of the boy’s hand and dodged his attack; it was faster than I expected.

The moment I let go of his hand, the boy lost his balance and fell on his backside. Needless to say, Misa and the others busted up laughing. Even his little friends started to smirk. Comedy really brings people together, you know?

“You little—!”

“That wasn’t my fault. You should probably direct your complaints to… Brad, was it? Your guy attacked me out of nowhere. In fact, you’re the one who gave him that order in the first place.”

The Brad guy moved to help the boy up, but got his hand batted away instead. The boy stood up on his own.

“Brad, do something about this weird bear!”

“Lord Randle, look around you,” the guard said. People started gathering after hearing the boy shout.

The boy looked around, seeming annoyed.

“Tsk, let’s go guys,” he called out to his followers. Then he looked at me. “Don’t think you’ll get away with this.”

With that, he left. (But wow… those were some real villain-kinda parting words.)

Once the boy and others disappeared, Misa hugged me from behind.

“They left,” I said, “so it’s okay.”

We found a bench to rest. Misa needed a place to calm down; she was shaking like a leaf.

“What was with that guy?” I asked. “He was so full of himself.”

“That was Randle of the Salbard family, the feudal lord of this town,” said Noa. I knew it—he was a noble. Well, since he was invited to Gran’s party, it was a given he’d be some bigshot’s kid. He was exactly how I pictured nobles before I met Cliff—one of those cocky people who thought the world revolved around them. In other words, precisely the type of person I hated.

Uh. Wait, had she said feudal lord? “Gran isn’t the feudal lord of this town?”

“Yes, my grandfather is also a feudal lord.”

Noa nodded. “Um, this town has two feudal lords.”

Why’d one town have two lords? I never heard of something like that, even in my original world.

Noa continued, filling out what Misa had left out: “I don’t know all the details, but it’s said that long ago the Fahrengram family and the Salbard family were given equal shares of this land for their military services. At the time, the families had gotten along, but their relationship soured over time.”

Even with the explanation, I couldn’t quite wrap my head around it. How had they managed until now? They’d have to share taxes, so it seemed like a recipe for a fight if they didn’t like each other. “I’m surprised they managed the territory like that.”

“The town is split. My grandpa has the east district and the Salbard family has the west. They’re managed separately.”

“So the town is divided in half?”

Misa nodded.

Could they really do that? I guess the town was still running, so it must have worked out, but it seemed like a lot of trouble. The king back then must have been an idiot. Splitting a territory between families was a recipe for trouble. Then again, maybe it wasn’t a problem since they’d gotten along at the time?

As times passes, human relationships change. There was no guarantee that the relationships between the families would stay the same for generations. Plus, things get complicated when property and land rights get involved.

Good thing I hadn't wound up near this town when I came to this world, and thank goodness I met Fina when I did in that forest. If I'd walked in a different direction, I might've showed up *here.* I patted Fina's head while she silently listened in.

"What? Yuna, what are you doing?!" Fina was bewildered by the sudden head pat. I paid her no mind and patted away.

"That lord's son is pretty violent, though."

"I don't like him because he never has anything nice to say," Misa said, which was uncharacteristically damning for her. He really must've been stuck up, suddenly telling her to thank *him* for coming to *her* party. Maybe he just wasn't raised right, though. Thinking about his upbringing… ugh, it made me shiver to think he was part of the nobility.

"Is he always that aggressive?"

"Yeah, especially lately. When he finds me, he insults my parents and my grandfather."

Yeah, he definitely had the delight of a true bully on his mug the moment he'd spotted Misa. Truly the kind of guy where he looked exactly as nasty as he was.

"Is that kid also invited to Gran's party?"

"Yes. He's the son of the other lord of this town, so my grandfather invited him even though he didn't seem to want to."

He didn't even want to? Relationships between the nobility seemed tedious.

Then again, that wasn't exclusive to noble society. When you were going out with friends, sometimes you had to invite people you didn't want to. I'd seen scenes in dramas and movies where people were even invited to parties reluctantly. Keeping up relationships was important, but you sometimes had to deal with people you wanted nothing to do with. It was all for appearance's sake, I guess.

"In that case, are the kids around him also nobles?"

The boys and girls following the boy had laughed at Misa; they seemed just as mean.

"I think they're the kids of merchants and other important people in this town."

Hm. Maybe they were following him to butter him up?

What a sad way to live, having to beg for nobles' attention from childhood on. They'd have to act subservient toward that kid their whole lives. Because I'd been a shut-in, I never had to deal with a pecking order before. I guess if you just didn't want to deal with those kinds of societal relationships, the best way to keep out of it was to become a hermit.

Still, they were the merchants' *children*. If the kids were like that, it probably didn't say anything good about their parents. I could easily see a crooked merchant relying on the feudal lord to make some money illegally, like a scene from one of those historical Japanese dramas: *"Well, looks like someone is dirty." "Not as dirty as the feudal lord."*

There was something else he said that concerned me. Something I couldn't ignore. He said that Gran's household was about to be ruined. That meant the Fahrengram family would be ruined, didn't it? It worried me, but I hesitated to ask Misa about it.

Ugh, that stupid noble killed the whole vibe. I didn't even feel like exploring the town anymore. "Should we head back for the day?"

"I'm okay! Don't worry about me," Misa said cheerfully, but the whole encounter seemed like something I needed to tell Gran as soon as possible, even if it was just a squabble between some kids. Monsters were my domain, but it seemed better to leave an aristocratic baddie to other nobles.

Then again, if I went back right away, Misa might feel like she was to blame for cutting things short. She might even feel guilty for preventing us from having a fun walk around the town. "Then how about we stop by a few more places and then head home?"

"Yes, let's go."

"All right, let's go over there."

Fina and Noa understood what I was thinking and went along with it.

"Thank you… everyone." Misa seemed happy.

To cheer up Misa, we walked around town—and to hell with that stupid noble!

CHAPTER 188
THE BEAR REPORTS TO GRAN

WHEN WE RETURNED to Gran's residence, Meishun came to greet us.

"Welcome home. What happened?" Meishun asked. She must've sensed something was wrong from the expression on Misa's face. Misa cheered up a bit on our walk, but Meishun could still tell.

"We had a bit of trouble."

Meishun gave me a look. Hold on, it wasn't like I caused it. Or, uh. Then again, he *had* spotted me from far away.

"We ran into that irritating idiot Randle from the Salbard family," I said. "He was pretty awful to Misa."

Meishun's expression changed in a flash. She gave Misa a worried look. "Lady Misana, are you all right?!"

"Yuna protected me. I'm okay."

"Is that so?" Meishun bowed deeply. "Mademoiselle Yuna, thank you for protecting Lady Misana."

Ehh, it was my job. Still, I never expected to run into such a picture-perfect stupid noble brat.

We went back to our room to relax. A while later, there was a knock on our door.

Meishun came in. "Mademoiselle Yuna, please excuse me. Lord Gran would like to meet with you."

"Gran? Wait, is this about today?"

“Yes. It seems that he would like a detailed account of what transpired.”

Meishun showed me the way to Gran’s room.

“Here it is,” Meishun said as she knocked on the door. A reply from inside told me to come in. I opened the door.

“I apologize for calling you, Miss.”

It wasn’t just Gran in the room, but also Cliff. It looked like they were discussing things. Documents were piled atop the table; Gran shuffled them together and offered me a seat.

“I heard that you met the son of the Salbard family,” he said.

“I did. He was mean from the start.”

“Were you okay?”

“No one was injured. He was all talk.” Still, it probably was tough on the kids. I reported to Gran what that stupid noble did to Misa.

Gran sighed as he listened to me. “Again?” he muttered, annoyed.

“I heard a bit from Noa and Misa. Is it really as bad as it seems?” I asked.

“It is, and much worse recently. The harassment started a few years back. At first it was trivial things. We didn’t even know who had done them, and so we paid it no mind. But recently, he’s stopped even trying to hide it. The boy directly harasses Misa, for one thing. Though I objected to what was happening, I was told that parents weren’t to get involved in squabbles between children unless one got hurt. That is the state of things,” Gran said, irritation plain in his voice.

Even if he didn’t hurt Misa physically, words can hurt your mind. Some people never recover from wounds like that. Some people even hurt or kill themselves over stuff like that…

Since this felt like it’d be a long conversation, I pulled three drinks out of my bear

storage. They both accepted theirs readily. “Based on all that, Gran, do they also harass you too?”

“The Trade Guild was taken over by a supporter of the Salbard family. As a result, the guild openly gives them preferential treatment. They direct merchandise to the district Salbard manages, for instance, and so the residents go to stores in the Salbard district to buy goods, which lowers sales and tax revenue in my district.”

“Have the merchants protested against the guild?”

“The merchants were told that they are free to sell things wherever they want. And it’s not a terrible inconvenience for the townspeople to walk a little farther to shop.”

“It’s the merchants in the district Gran governs that are hurting,” Cliff added. “Some have moved into Salbard’s district.”

“I had no idea a guild master could be that powerful.”

“Power? I prefer to call it bribery,” said Cliff. “They’re offering to make things convenient if people sell in *his* district. Naturally, a merchant will choose to do business in places that offer more favorable conditions, no matter how minor the difference.”

“And so,” said Gran, “the stores in my district are having stock shortages.”

I suppose that was efficient if he was trying to hit them hard. “Despicable. Basically, he’s not selling to people based on whether he likes them or not?”

Then Cliff, seeming exasperated, said something surprising. “Yuna, have you forgotten what you did to me?”

Huh? What I’d done to Cliff? I didn’t remember anything like that…

“Did you really forget? You asked Milaine to not sell me eggs.”

I struck my puppets together after remembering—right. I did that when I thought Cliff had suspended financial support for the orphanage. He still remembered that after all this time? Pretty petty, Cliff. Not a good look.

If Cliff had been paying close attention, the orphanage wouldn’t have been destitute in the first place, so that whole incident hadn’t been *my* fault.

“It’s the same as what you did to me, Yuna,” said Cliff. “But the scale is larger and the intent far more malicious.”

“The influential people in town have started to side with the Salbards, and my side of town has a goods shortage. I was consulting with Cliff about this.”

Cliff sighed. “You should have spoken to me earlier.”

So this was what they’d been discussing…

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to cause you any trouble.” Gran bowed his head to Cliff, even though Cliff was the younger one.

“Well,” Cliff admonished, “that’s how you got into this situation.”

“I didn’t think they would actually try to ruin us.”

“Ruin…” I repeated. “So a noble’s family can be ruined?”

Gran nodded. “Even a noble household can fall if they have no tax revenue. Our land would be forfeit to the king, and it would be turned over to someone else.”

“And it is quite likely that the other party would be the Salbard family,” said Cliff. “If you only look at the taxation reports, they *appear* to be excellent feudal lords.”

If he increased his tax income, Salbard would look superior on paper. The Salbards weren’t about to document down all the nefarious deeds they committed to get there, after all.

“As it is, Gran and I have taken measures against that. I will be sending over goods from Crimonia, but the fact that they control the guild is quite the irritation.”

“Truly. Since we have invited wealthy people and merchants, it is imperative the party is a success. I cannot pass down my land to my son in this state.”

“Yes. We must win people to our side in this contest, even if it’s only a few.”

So the party had another purpose, then. And Misa and Randle’s relationship ran deeper than a quarrel between two kids. Randle viewed Misa as an opponent he needed to steal territory from—or, no, he viewed her as an opponent he already beat. And ugh,

he thought he could have Misa as a maid? I'd take Misa in if she were destitute. As if I'd hand her over to an idiot like him!

In the best-case scenario, Gran would win out, but he seemed outnumbered right now. Maybe things would be okay since Cliff was helping out now? Anyway, it wasn't my place to get involved in issues between the nobility…

"Yuna, can I ask you to take care of Noa?" asked Cliff. "I don't know if Salbard will try to pull something. Please keep an eye on her."

Gran nodded. "Please do the same for Misa."

They didn't need to ask. Misa and the others were like little sisters to me. I'd protect them no matter what.

"Also—and I apologize, Yuna—but I'll have to ask that you refrain from going out for some time. I don't know if anything will happen. Of course, I believe that they'll be safe with you, but the unthinkable could happen. Please stay within the grounds until after the party."

They really didn't know what level of shut-in they were dealing with, huh? I'd kept myself cooped up for years. A few days? That's nothing.

Even though I didn't have a computer or television, I could find games to play if I wanted to. And hey, I wouldn't be a shut-in by myself this time. There were tons of ways to have fun with four people.

With our talk finished, we stood up… and right then, there was a commotion from the hallway. Meishun rushed in without even bothering to knock.

CHAPTER 189
THE BEAR HANGS ON FOR MISA

"LORD GRAN, we have a problem!" Meishun was pale.

"What happened?!"

"The head chef Botts has been injured. He was attacked."

The two were speechless.

"What's his condition? Is he okay?" asked Gran.

"He's being treated right now."

"Where is he? Lead the way."

Gran headed out of the room, leaving Cliff and me behind.

"So that's what they've resorted to," Cliff muttered softly.

"What do you mean?"

"You remember what I said earlier? Gran was going to use his birthday party to woo influential people to his

side. The chef responsible for making the food for that party is injured. Now he can't cook. Gran's reputation will plummet if he has to cancel the party."

"Can't you just get another chef?"

"Botts was the associate head chef at a top-notch restaurant in the capital. It won't be easy, finding a replacement. If the guests don't approve of the food, the Fahrengram family's reputation will suffer, and no one will lend him their backing."

Here I was just thinking about it as food, but I guess it was important in terms of

hospitality. People negotiated over food, after all. Politicians talked in expensive restaurants; corporations wined and dined people…

I guess people who came in expecting a conversation over a fine meal *would* be upset if they ended up being served the equivalent of instant ramen. Not that it'd be *that* extreme, but I knew what Cliff was trying to say.

A good meal wasn't just part of the entertainment. No, a good meal can be a way to the heart. Serving something lackluster would ruin people's mood, which would dampen any discussions.

"You think this was the Salbard family's doing?"

"No mistaking it," said Cliff, his hand on his chin. "Should we look for a new chef? Where would we find one? In this town? We could certainly get one from Crimonia, but would there be enough time?"

Morin and Anz wouldn't be suited for these kinds of meals. No matter how delicious it might be, their food was more or less home cooking. They couldn't prepare fine cuisine for a party with nobles. Of course, I couldn't make party food, either. The most I could make was party cake.

"Yuna, maybe your bears… sorry," said Cliff, apologizing before he even finished his thought. "Never mind." I knew what he wanted to say: he wanted to use my bears to fetch a chef. It looked like we were both on the same page about that.

If there was a chef in Crimonia, I could probably make the trip in a single day with my bears. But normal horses and carriages took time. And even if we started the search now, it'd still be cutting it close, considering we'd have to prep the food as well.

As we thought about all that, Gran returned.

"Gran. How was he?" asked Cliff.

"His life is not in danger, but his arms were badly injured. He's in no condition to cook right now."

"Then the food for the party…"

"He can't cook it," said Gran. He shook his head and sat down.

Cliff went silent. A dark atmosphere hung over the two. “Where did they attack him?”

“They found him while he was returning home after scouting out ingredients for the party. It happened on a deserted street, it seems.”

“And the culprit?”

“Unknown. I’m having my men look for any eyewitnesses, but it happened in an area where few people go. We’re not even sure if there *are* eyewitnesses, and getting one of them to come forward is going to be another problem.”

“So you think it’s the Salbards?”

“Most likely,” said Gran immediately. “There’s no other reason why he’d be attacked.”

“In that case, Gran, what will you do?”

“Even if we can’t find someone as good as Botts, we have to find a chef. We can’t call off the party, and we can’t host the party without food.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

Gran shook his head. “The people of this town are afraid of Salbard. No one will help us. It’s likely they’ve all already been bought by him.”

“In that case we can bring someone from Crimonia,” said Cliff.

I guess it was my time to shine. “I can bring them. It’ll be quick with Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

“No, you should stay with Noa and the others. I’ll send one of my own. We should make it if we send a fast horse. Is that okay with you as well, Gran?”

“Cliff… I am sorry for putting this upon you.”

“This isn’t unrelated to Crimonia. I would have a problem on my hands if you were no longer a feudal lord here. Gran, this is the least I could do.” With that, Cliff stood up and left the room.

“I must also do what I can.” Gran sat down at his official desk and started working.

Cliff had given me a job, too, so I headed back to my room. When I got back in, Fina and the others had glum looks on their faces.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Um, Botts was apparently attacked.”

“You guys already found out?”

“Uh-huh, we heard the maids talking. And there was such a big commotion…”

Things were pretty busy in the residence, after all. I guess it would’ve been weirder if they *hadn’t* noticed something was up.

“Yuna, do you know anything about it?” Fina asked.

“All I know is that he was attacked. Oh, and that Botts isn’t in any life-threatening danger or anything.”

“Thank goodness.” Misa visibly relaxed.

“But since his arms were hurt, he can’t cook for a while.” They were going to find out sooner or later, so I figured I might as well tell them.

“What about the food for the party?”

“They’re bringing in a chef from Crimonia.”

Misa seemed relieved that the party would continue, but she still looked pale. Exhausted and clearly worried about Botts, she went back to her own room to rest. Worried about Misa herself, Noa went back with her.

“Do you think Lady Misa will be okay?” Fina asked.

Making fun of Randle must’ve been the reason they attacked the chef. Misa looked even gloomier after she heard the chef had been injured. She was trying to keep positive, but it was obvious she was putting on a brave face.

“It’s okay,” I told Fina. “Noa’s with her.”

Noa was spending the night with Misa to keep her company, so she'd be fine even if she was gloomy.

Fina and I were left alone in the room, and Fina was starting to look anxious. I figured this was a job for cute bear cubs, so I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu for her. Fina sat on the bed and hugged the cubified Kumayuru, while I held and patted Kumakyu's head.

"Yuna, do you think things will be okay?"

"Cliff and Gran will take care of it." Things didn't look good, but I had to calm her down somehow.

"Yeah, you're right. Lord Cliff's definitely going to do something."

"Once Gran's birthday party is a success, Misa will have her birthday party. We have to make sure it's a great celebration."

"Uh-huh. I want to give her the presents soon. Do you think Lady Misa will like them?"

"We worked really hard to make them, so I'm sure it'll go well. She'll love them."

Fina yawned slightly; she looked about ready to turn in. I was just about to switch off the lights so we could get to sleep when there was a knock at the door. I looked at Kumayuru and Kumakyu just in case, but there was no sign of danger—the bears were yawning, in fact. Maybe it was Noa and Misa at the door?

"Who is it?"

"It's me. Do you have a moment?" It sounded like Cliff. I opened the door and there he was, exhausted. He came in, and I poured some water into a cup for him. Cliff drained the water in one gulp.

"All right, Cliff, what's going on?"

"I have a favor to ask. You're the only one I can go to for it."

Whew, boy. "Yeah?"

“I sent my guard, Rabon, to Crimonia, and… he encountered a hail of arrows on his ride out. Rabon is safe. The horse, though…” Cliff let the silence speak volumes. “At any rate, Rabon couldn’t get to Crimonia. He just came back.”

I was glad that Rabon was safe, but shooting arrows at a galloping horse was way more dangerous than I would’ve expected. “You think he was ambushed?”

“Yes. I think they may have been tailing him; he was attacked not far from town. That might’ve been what saved him. If they had attacked when he was further from town, he might not have made it back.”

Even though he fell off his horse, he wasn’t badly injured. He was lucky on his way back to town and a carriage had picked him up, so he’d gotten back here a lot quicker than he would’ve.

“I didn’t want to get you caught up in a dispute between the nobility,” he said, “but we’re running out of options. The Fahrengram family is facing ruin. I won’t allow them to meet it. Gran has done much for me since my youth, so I want to help him. I’d like to ask for your help too.” Cliff bowed his head slightly.

Cliff was a noble. In the manga and novels I knew, nobles didn’t just lower their heads for commoners. Was he really that desperate?

“Yeah, sure. I just gotta bring you a chef, right? I’m kind of annoyed at these nobles too. Plus, I’d feel bad for Misa if Gran lost his household. I’ll make that kid regret picking a fight with me.”

Heh. I still hadn’t forgotten that stupid noble calling me a pet and laughing at me.

“Oh? Do you have a chef in mind, then?” Cliff asked.

“I do. And one nobody could complain about either.” I just so happened to be acquainted with a chef in the palace.

“Who would that be?”

“It’s a secret.”

“I can trust you to do this for me, then?”

“Well… you *are* kinda putting me on the spot, but I’ve got a favor I can cash in, so I think it’ll work out.” A favor from the king, as a matter of fact. Even if I couldn’t get Zelef himself, I could just borrow a chef who worked at the palace. “Okay, I’ll head out now.”

“At this second?”

The capital was farther away than Crimonia. If I didn’t leave soon, somebody might suspect something. “Better now than later. Could you let Noa and the others know?”

“I shall.”

“She should be safe as long as she stays indoors, but if you could watch over Fina too…?”

“Yes, I will keep a close eye on her.”

“In that case, I’m going to change, so could you leave the room? I’ll head out sometime after that, so don’t worry about me.”

“In that case, I’ll leave it to you.” Cliff didn’t seem suspicious of what I said at all, leaving the room without another word.

“Yuna, are you leaving now?” Fina asked, already sounding lonely. She was holding Kumayuru.

“Hmm? I’m not leaving,” I told her.

“Huh?” Fina looked surprised.

“Well, I have my bear transport gate. Even if I go now, it’s night. I might as well just head out early in the morning instead. It won’t make a huge difference either way.”

I told Cliff I was going right away so he thought I traveled on bearback. In actuality, I just teleported over instantly with my bear gates.

“O-okay. I guess so, but are you sure you should?” Fina tilted her head to the side.

“It’s fine. It’s already late, so let’s rest. Get ready, I’m turning off the lights.” I pushed Fina into bed and crawled into my own. “Oh, right—Kumayuru, Kumakyu, please get

me up early tomorrow."

They crooned in reply. I grabbed the bear next to me, Kumakyu, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 190
THE BEAR REQUESTS TO BORROW THE PALACE'S HEAD CHEF

***S**PLETCH SPLETCH.*

I was right in the middle of sleeping peacefully when I felt something soft slapping my face. Ah, yep, it was Kumakyu's paw, reminding me that I had to head out today first thing in the morning.

I looked over at the window. It was still dim out.

"Thank you, Kumakyu." I patted Kumakyu on the head for waking me up, then stretched out and got out of bed.

At the same time, Fina shifted in the adjacent bed and got up. "Are you leaving, Yuna?"

"Did I wake you? Sorry about that. You can sleep in a bit more."

"That's okay. I wanted to say bye, so I asked Kumayuru to wake me up when you got up."

I was happy to hear that.

Grateful for Fina's consideration, I changed into my usual black bear outfit. "All right then, I'm off. Call me on the bear phone if anything happens. I'll run right back. Don't go outside while I'm out since it's dangerous, though," I warned her. I was worried about leaving her, but she would be safe as long as she stayed indoors.

"Okay, Yuna, but you be careful too."

I patted Fina's head and called back Kumayuru and Kumakyu. As everyone slept in the early morning, I opened the window and headed onto the veranda. I was headed for the roof. I jumped up right onto it.

Maybe this spot would work?

The center of the roof had a spot that wasn't visible to anyone nearby. I set up a bear gate so it would lie flat against the roof, ensuring no one in any direction could see it. I opened the door below me and teleported to my bear house in the capital.

The instant I entered, gravity turned; I crumpled right to the ground.

Oops. I kind of headed through like I was jumping straight into a hole, so I lost my balance. It didn't hurt, but it *was* pretty embarrassing for a second. Good thing no one saw that.

I had breakfast in my capital bear house and killed some time before heading for the castle. I supposedly left yesterday night and came here on my bears without sleeping, but that still would've only been half a day of travel. I made sure to time things in a way that wouldn't raise anyone's suspicions.

The guards in front of the gate noticed me when I arrived at the entrance of the castle.

"Um, could I go inside?"

"Ah, yes. Please come in."

After they gave me permission to enter, one of the guards started to run off.

"Just a minute," I called out to stop the running guard. "I'm not meeting Lady Flora today, but I do have urgent business with the king or Ellelaura. Could I meet with them?"

"Umm, please wait a moment. Ellelaura is here, but we don't know *where* she currently is. We can report your presence to His Majesty, but we can't necessarily guarantee an audience…"

Ah, yeah, I guess it was kind of unfair to expect a normal guard to know stuff like that.

In that case, I wondered if it'd be best for him to report directly to the king, then for

me to wait in Lady Flora's room. But then, Lady Flora wouldn't want me to leave right away. I could see the sad look on her face right then. Argh, if only I'd brought the stuffed animals just in case, but… the only ones I had in bear storage were for Misa's present.

It was weird that they didn't know where Ellelaura was. Where was she and what could she have been doing?

"What would you like me to do?" the guard in front of the gate asked me.

Hmm… the best case would be if I could see Ellelaura. I agonized over what to do when, speak of the devil, Ellelaura herself just so happened to come over to me.

"I spotted a bear from far off and came over for a look. I knew it had to be you, Yuna." Ellelaura, who was so elusive just a second ago, appeared just like that. Normally that penchant for popping in out of nowhere was a pain, but today it was helpful.

"Ellelaura, I wanted to ask you for something, if I could?"

"What is it? Why don't we take a walk and talk about it; I'm strolling and patrolling at present."

Uh. Weird way to put it, Ellelaura—weren't walking, patrolling, and strolling all the same thing? Or was she just trying to sound busy?

Ellelaura told the guard he didn't need to report to the king. Then, we started on our walk/stroll/patrol. "So what do you need? You hardly ever ask me for anything, Yuna."

"Well, I'm not asking you so much as the king. I'd like to borrow Zelef for a few days."

"Zelef? May I ask why?"

I explained what was happening in Sheelin.

Ellelaura nodded slowly. "Now that you mention it, Cliff *did* mention in one of his letters that he was going to Sheelin. The Salbard family, is it? Their reputation has been a little spotty of late."

I knew it.

"Of course, I can't give you permission to take Zelef on my own," she said.

Right. He was the royal family's head chef, so I couldn't whisk him away without the king's permission.

"Well then," said Ellelaura, "let's go see His Majesty."

"Can we really?"

"We can. I would have to report to him about your arrival regardless."

What kind of a rule was that?

Well, all fine by me as long as I could see the king. Ellelaura guided me deep into the castle. During that time, when we passed by other people, they all greeted Ellelaura by bowing their heads at her. Ellelaura gave them a casual greeting back. Maybe Ellelaura really was someone important? As we continued down a corridor, we came upon a door guarded by two soldiers.

"Why, Lady Ellelaura, is that you? Is this the girl dressed as a bear from all the rumors?"

What rumors? I wanted to ask. But I could guess, so let it go. Besides, it'd probably be better not to know what weird things people were saying about me.

"We would like to meet with His Majesty. May we proceed?"

"Yes, just one moment." The soldier knocked on the door to check inside. Then we heard a verbal approval from the other side of the door. The guard turned to us. "Come in. Please make your way inside."

Ellelaura and I went in, and inside the spacious room were three other people. One was the king, another a man the same age as him. Finally, at a desk to the left, sat a handsome man in his twenties. He looked oddly familiar.

"Why, Ellelaura and Yuna. What brings you here? You never come to see me, Yuna."

"It seems Yuna has a request," Ellelaura told him.

"A request from me?" he repeated. A smile came to the king's face, but the other two looked kinda uncertain. I guess that's the sort of look anyone would have if a girl in a bear onesie suddenly appeared and started making direct requests to the king.

“What did you need, Yuna? Keep in mind there are some things I can’t do, even if it’s coming from you.”

True, but I was just glad that I could ask the king for something at all. I cut straight to the chase. “I’d like to borrow Zelef for a few days.”

“Zelef? Why is that?”

Once again, I explained everything I already told Ellelaura to him.

“The Salbard family and the Fahrengram family, you say?” said the man beside the king.

Who was he? I’d never seen him before, but he had to be a big deal if he was hanging out with the king.

“That territory, then…” The king leaned back in his chair. “My grandfather did make some odd choices,” he lamented.

“Well,” said the man beside the king, “he must’ve had his reasons. There’s no changing it now.”

“No matter the reasons, now we’re stuck with those pesky consequences.”

I guess they were talking about one of the previous kings—specifically the one who divided the territory between two noble families. For my part, I agreed. This never would have happened if that king hadn’t divided the land like that.

“You already know about what’s going on?” I asked.

“There are rumors that the Salbard family has been up to no good behind the scenes,” said the man.

“The tax yields from Salbard have increased, while Fahrengram’s have fallen,” said the king. “I had a report compiled, but it gave no reason for the changes.”

And if you didn’t know better, it might’ve looked like the Fahrengrams were just failing to attract clientele compared to those good ol’ hardworking Salbards. If anyone went under the magnifying glass, then, it would be the Fahrengrams.

“The nobility is always squabbling over territory. To put it rather harshly, the Fahrengram family simply weren’t a powerful enough player in the game.”

That had crossed my mind too. There were disputes like that in my old world too, both big and small. It was the duty of the ruling class in a territory to make their land easier to live in and to develop it.

Still, why hadn’t these guys here *done* anything about it? It felt like they were going around in circles, just talking and talking…

“However, there have been those terrible rumors about the Salbards.”

“Mm, yes. Embezzlement, blackmail, violence… constant rumors, but never any proof from their subjects. We are unable to get involved.”

Right, that was the red tape of bureaucracy at work. Even the king couldn’t pass judgment on people—no matter how villainous—without proof. Not if he still wanted to be on the side of justice, anyway. And without proof, there was always the chance he could make the wrong decision.

“If I’m not mistaken, there are rumors that the Salbard family is connected to the Bornardt firm,” said the blond dreamboat who was silent so far. He *really* looked like someone I knew. The king noticed me staring at the guy’s blond hair.

“Come to think of it, is this the first time you’re meeting Ernat?” the king asked.

“Ernat?” I hadn’t heard that name before. I tilted my head to the side and the pretty boy smiled.

“Really, now? I never thought I’d find someone who came and went from the castle and was unaware of me. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, bear maiden: I am the heir of King Forot, Ernat.”

Oh! So it was the king he reminded me of. He was the prince.

“You know about me?” I asked.

“I’ve heard all about you from Father, Mother, and Flora. After all, my father dumps his work on me and disappears whenever you appear.”

He said that with a smile, but there was something foreboding about it. But was that really *my* fault? I'd just come to visit Princess Flora. I never summoned the king on any of those occasions. He wasn't blaming me, was he? When I gave the king a hard stare, he cleared his throat.

"So, ah, the Bornardt firm?" Wait, he just changed the subject. That was *my* signature move, my Secret Technique of Subject Change.

That name *had* piqued my interest, though, so I asked Ellelaura about it.

"You don't know about them, Yuna? It's the largest company in the capital. Their merchants do business across the country. With all their influence, even the nobility can't defy them."

"Their reputation is good, but there have been some terrible rumors as well."

"You think they're some of the merchants causing all those problems?" I asked.

"They might be the ones pulling the strings, but for all we know, they might also have nothing to do with it."

"It would mean trouble if they were trying to target Gran's territory, though."

I guess they had seedy corporations even in this world, eh?

If the Bornardt firm and the Salbards were in bed with each other, Gran wouldn't be able to win over the merchants and bigwigs easily. The odds were stacked totally against him, even with his party. The ending would have been set in stone all along—if the party failed, it would just come sooner. For now, though, we still needed that chef…

"So, will you let me borrow Zelef?" I asked. There wasn't much I could do about sinister firms, but I could at least grab my chef.

"Ah, yes. I can't intervene on account of the chef being attacked… but we're talking about the head of the Fahrengram family's birthday party, after all. I can give you permission to borrow Zelef."

It wasn't like the king could go out there himself just because a chef had been attacked. It might be a different matter if Zelef—the palace's head chef—had been the one

attacked, but a chef from a mere noble's household didn't quite cut it. We also didn't have solid proof of the culprit's identity, even with our suspicions about the Salbards.

Besides, if everyone came to the king for every petty little issue, he'd never be able to get his work done.

In Japan, this would be the equivalent of someone being punched and expecting the prime minister to investigate a random guy for being kind of sus. No—finding the culprit would be Gran's job since he was the lord of the territory. If the culprit ended up being a commoner, he'd levy a punishment. If it were the Salbards, he'd have to find proof before running it up the ladder to the king.

"However, we'll say that Ellelaura asked you to take on Zelef for the party. Are you fine with that?" The king looked at Ellelaura.

"Of course. Cliff is attending, after all. If the other nobles object, we can use that as a cover."

We needed an excuse for having Zelef himself at Gran's party, and obviously, we couldn't say it was because a girl in a bear onesie cashed in a favor.

Once we were done talking things out, we headed to the kitchen to find Zelef.

CHAPTER 191
THE BEAR SEES THE PALACE'S HEAD CHEF

SINCE I RECEIVED the king's permission, we headed on to Zelef. For some reason, the king was the one accompanying me instead of Ellelaura. They had a short talk about it right before we left the room:

"Ellelaura, I will accompany her, so you can return to work."

"Wai—what? *I* was going to accompany her."

"You can't. You need to do your job. It would be faster if I were the one to explain things to Zelef, wouldn't it?"

"I *am* doing my job. I could explain things to him as well."

"If I may, Lady Ellelaura…" said the man next to the king. "…what happened with the matter from the other day?"

"Oh, I still haven't gotten to that matter yet, Zang," Ellelaura answered, averting her eyes.

"Please see to it soon," Zang said in a gentle tone.

"Ugh, all right. Yuna, I'll see you again some other time. Make sure to bring something scrumptious next time."

"Please come back right away, Father," said Prince Ernat. "You always slip away at a moment's notice whenever anything happens. You have just as much work as Lady Ellelaura."

"I am aware. You say that as though I'm always shirking my work."

"When the bear maiden comes, you do." The prince looked over at me. Okay, but why *me*? I hadn't ever asked the king to come by. He came on his own accord, and I was getting blamed for it? Sure, it *was* my fault this time, but not normally! Maybe he was

just in the dark about some stuff.

I guess this was how one-sided grudges got formed. Little things piled up into a mountain and, before the other person knew it, they'd end up stabbed in the back. Even if none of this was my fault…

If they really wanted to make the king work, they should've tied him down to his chair. Doing that would force the king to do his job, keep the prince's workload down, and even prevent the king from bugging me. There, three birds with one stone—or maybe one throne. Also, ropes.

The next time we happened to meet, I'd suggest it to the prince. Plus, he was Flora's older brother. I had to make a good impression if I didn't want him to get in the way of me seeing Lady Flora.

As Ellelaura reluctantly went back to her work, I went with the king to the kitchen. There were a ton of chefs hard at work there.

"That's a lot of people," I commented.

"That's because they prepare food for the people who work in this castle. They don't cook every meal for everyone, but it still results in quite a lot of food."

Some people brought lunch, but most seemed to eat in the dining hall.

The king and I stuck out like sore thumbs in the entrance to the kitchen. The king *was* the most important person in the castle, and I happened to be wearing a bear onesie. Of course we were gonna attract attention.

"It's the bear."

"Why is the bear here?

"Is it *that* bear?"

"From the rumors?!"

"Wow, it really *is* a bear."

“What? Is this your first time seeing her?”

“Is she younger than me?”

“She’s so small.”

“Why’s she dressed like that?”

“Hey, everyone can hear you.”

“The head chef will give you an earful if you make her upset.”

Excuse me, I can hear you. There might’ve been more people staring at *me* than the king. Wasn’t that weird? Shouldn’t the king showing up be a little rarer?

“Hey, someone go talk to the bear.”

“You go.”

“Oh, His Majesty is with her.”

They started pushing each other. Um, yeah, I’d say they *should’ve* been more worried about greeting the king. You know, the most important person in the country? *You’re all weird*. Since no one was coming to us, I made up my mind to talk to them first—right as a plump chef made his way over to us.

“Your Majesty and Master Yuna, what brings you here?”

It was Zelef. At least *he* knew how to greet people properly. He addressed the king first, then me. I guess that was why he was the head chef.

“Did you perhaps come with a new type of cuisine to share?!” he asked, his eyes sparkling like a kid’s.

“I came here to ask for something,” I told him.

“Of me?”

“Zelef, would you be kind enough to accompany Yuna to Sheelin?” the king asked.

Zelef was shocked. It must've seemed pretty out of the blue. "Did you say Sheelin? Why would you need me to go there?"

"The Fahrengrams are having a party, but their chef was injured and can't cook. Yuna wanted to ask you to cook instead."

Zelef shifted his gaze from the king to me. "Master Yuna, you're asking me to do this?"

"Is that okay? You're the only person I know who can cook for a party."

"With His Majesty's permission, I would be happy to assist. May I?" Zelef looked to the king.

"I am indebted to both you and Yuna. Please hear Yuna out."

"Yes, My Majesty. Master Yuna, if you'd humbly allow me to prepare my own cuisine…"

"Thank you, Zelef," I said.

"Not at all! You always serve me delicious foods. You've even taught me recipes. I've wanted to repay you for some time now, so please do not worry."

I'd gotten Zelef to agree without any issues. We'd distract the chefs if we kept talking in the kitchen, so we decided to move to another location to talk details.

Before Zelef left, he gave various instructions to someone who looked like the associate head chef. After that, we headed to an adjacent room.

"So, what kind of party will this be?" Zelef asked. "How many attendees will there be? What kind of guests are we expecting? When is the party taking place?"

I tried to explain things to the best of my abilities.

"Two days?" Zelef repeated. "Will we make it in time?"

"We'll ride on my bear summons. We might not make it on horses, but my bears should be able to do it." Maybe. *Hopefully.*

“You want me to ride on one of those bears?! Ah… well, I suppose. However, it will still be tight. It seems we won’t have enough time to buy ingredients at Sheelin.”

“We can’t be sure that Sheelin will have what you need. How about we buy things at the capital before leaving?”

With how the Salbard family was handling things, we might not even be able to buy anything at all. They might even interfere with us. No, it’d be better, probably, to stock up in the capital.

“That would use up time better spent elsewhere,” said Zelef. “Your Majesty, may I have permission to take ingredients from the palace?”

“As you like, but record how much you take.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You can bill me for it,” I said. “I’ll charge Gran later.”

“You don’t have to worry about such trifles,” the king said.

“No, I have to make sure to settle up.” Everything comes at a cost—and sometimes that wasn’t monetary. Although Gran would be the one paying, not me.

“Then I’ll give you the bill later, Yuna.”

“Lastly, Your Majesty, may I have your permission to use an item bag? Since I will need to take quite a large amount of food, my item bag will not fit it all.”

“That’s all right. It can all go in mine,” I told him.

“Can it really?!”

“Yeah, it can manage that much stuff.”

“In that case, let’s go to the storehouse to select the ingredients.”

“Well then, I need to head out before I get a scolding,” said the king. “I’ll leave the rest to you, Zelef.”

“Yes, as you wish.”

“Thank you,” the king said. “And you should bring more of that delicious food of yours.”

The king left. We headed to the storehouse next to the kitchen, which was located close by for the sake of convenience. It was pretty chilly in there.

“I shall pack the ingredients into boxes. May I ask for your assistance?”

“Sure. Put as much stuff in the boxes as you want. I think too much is better than not having enough.”

Zelef stuffed ingredients into a box. Once he had the first box finished, I put it away in my bear storage. Then we repeated the process.

“Master Yuna, thank you very much for this.”

“Huh?” Shouldn’t I be the one thanking him?

“Since I became the palace’s head chef, I haven’t gone on a trip. I’m looking forward to this. Of course, it’s not that I dislike my current position. I quite enjoy it, and it is an honor to be trusted by His Majesty. I’m happy here. And I am grateful that I have been able to experience your food.”

“I’m just glad I’m not imposing on you.”

“No, you’re not imposing at all. I am also enjoying my role for the restaurant. I’ve been very busy, but it’s also been a treasured experience.”

“Oh, right. What happened with that restaurant?”

“Ah, yes. I don’t know all the details without asking Lady Ellelaura, but we are training the chefs to ensure they will never be an embarrassment, no matter where they end up. I believe she is still having trouble deciding the menu, however.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but creating a menu is an enjoyable process.”

I was glad he was having fun. I still felt bad intruding right when he seemed to be busy,

but Zelef seemed genuinely thankful. I'd have to bring him some new dish in order to thank him next time.

CHAPTER 192
THE BEAR DEPARTS FROM THE PALACE WITH THE HEAD CHEF

I FINISHED PUTTING the ingredients Zelef prepared into my bear storage. We were taking a lot, but like we talked about earlier, going overboard was better than not having enough. Besides, it wasn't like it'd be any heavier to carry.

"May we go to the wine cellar as our last stop? I think we will require wine for a party."

Alcohol? I guess you did need that stuff at a party. In fact, that always showed up in stories about the fancy parties of nobility. I always imagined them sipping from fine wine glasses…

We went to the wine cellar, and I put the wines Zelef selected into bear storage. Hmm… since I didn't drink, I didn't know whether these were good wines. Not that I'd be able to tell if I tried them.

"Is that everything?" I'd just stored away the final bottle.

"Yes. After this, I shall return to my kitchen to pick up seasoning."

We headed back to the kitchen and Zelef started packing away seasonings. He had a lot of them. Probably even some I could use. Maybe I'd ask him to show them to me next time I had the chance.

"Master Yuna, I am finished with the preparations."

"Cool. Can we head out now?" I thought we'd still make it in time, but I was still worried about Fina and the others. Better too much than too little, and better sooner than later…

"Yes. Anytime is fine with me."

"And you haven't forgotten anything? We won't be able to come back for anything." I

did have the bear transport gate, but I wasn't so sure about letting Zelef use it.

"That's all right. But—actually, just a moment," he said, and jogged back into the depths of the kitchen. "I nearly forgot my kitchen knife. I could use theirs, but I would much rather use ones I am familiar with."

Good, that was the last thing. Zelef was still in his chef clothes though. Since we couldn't head out with him like that, I had him change.

With everything prepared, we found a carriage that was prepped to take us from the capital. Ellelaura was the one to set us up with that.

Ellelaura's attention to detail never failed to impress me. Walking out of the capital would take time, and we would have drawn attention if we shared a carriage with others—or I would've, anyway.

As the carriage headed to the gate, I muttered a thank you to Ellelaura. Any time saved was fantastic right now. After we were outside the capital, I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

"Oh, they came from your hands!" Zelef was really excited. "And they're so large!" I guess Zelef had only ever seen them in their cub form. "Well, Master Yuna, which bear shall I ride?" He happily looked back and forth between Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

"You're not afraid of them, Zelef?"

"I saw them before when they were small, and I watched as Princess Flora played with them. I'm not frightened of such creatures."

"But they were small back then. Right now, they're huge."

"Ah, true, but for all the fur and bulk, their faces are the same. I do not find those faces frightening in the slightest."

I was happy to hear that. I would have felt bad for my bears if he was scared while riding them. "All right then, Zelef, can you ride Kumakyu?"

"Certainly. Master Kumakyu is the white one?" Zelef stood in front of Kumakyu. "Good Master Kumakyu, allow me to inform your bearishness beforehand in regards to my weight. I do hope this shan't be a problem."

Zelef bowed his head to Kumakyu in greeting. Kumakyu nodded in response, did a half turn and lowered to make it easier for Zelef to climb on.

“Many thanks to you, good Master Kumakyu.” With that, the plump Zelef clambered aboard Kumakyu. Once Kumakyu was certain Zelef was mounted, my bear slowly stood up.

Yeah, it was nothin’. Even if Zelef was a tad overweight, this was nothing to Kumakyu.

I jumped up onto Kumayuru. “Then we’re off. We’re starting off slowly, but we’ll gradually speed up.”

“Go easy on me, would you?”

The four of us departed to the town of Sheelin. Our mounts Kumayuru and Kumakyu nimbly dashed down the highway.

“Why, this is more comfortable than a horse.”

“You can—err, you ride horses, Zelef?”

Not to be mean, but he didn’t quite… look like the horse-riding type.

“I generally do not. However, during certain times of palace emergency, such a skill may be needed. As such, I have been given the minimum level of mandated instruction on it…” He paused, and mumbled, as if he didn’t quite want me to hear it, “…though I’m not very good at it.”

Since he said he needed to know for emergencies, did that mean they might dispatch Zelef as a cook for something?

“I doubt I will have need of a horse any time soon.”

Yeah, I doubted we’d have a cavalry battle like that anytime soon. I guess if we did ever send out troops, it’d be to fight monsters that were really far away? Probably not one of Zelef’s talents either, fighting monsters. If Zelef *did* have to take part in a war, that meant the royal family themselves would be involved. And *that* would be a real emergency.

Once Zelef got used to riding my bears, we increased our speed as we hurried to Sheelin.

After several hours, we took a break and allowed Kumayuru and Kumakyu to rest. Even though they were summoned beasts, I couldn’t force them to run without a break.

“It was so easy to ride Master Kumakyu. Perhaps my knack for riding is more ursine than equestrian?” No, Kumakyu was just easy to ride—otherwise, Zelef would probably be tuckered out.

After our break, Zelef approached Kumakyu. I stopped him. “Zelef, can you ride Kumayuru next?”

The moment the break ended and Zelef approached Kumakyu, I saw that the bear looked really sad. It wasn’t that my bear didn’t like Zelef; Kumakyu just wanted me to ride it.

“You mean Master Kumayuru? I don’t mind, but may I ask why?”

“If I only ride one of them, the other one sulks,” I explained. “So I alternate.”

“I see. In that case, I just need to ride Kumayuru next. Yes, yes!” Zelef understood

immediately and approached Kumayuru. He greeted the bear in the same way he had Kumakyu. “Master Kumayuru, I put myself in your care.”

Kumayuru let out a *kwoom* in response. I went up to Kumakyu, who happily approached me. I gave my bear a head pat, then hopped on and we headed out.

We didn’t encounter any monsters, and things were going swimmingly. Even if monsters did appear, they were weak and easily escapable. Kumayuru and Kumakyu just sped up even more.

A few hours after I switched to Kumakyu, the sun began to set and our surroundings grew dark. I could have had my bears keep marching along, but I didn’t want to push them. The party was in two days, and we would arrive the next day around noon, leaving us time to prep.

I called out to Zelef and let him know that we would be making camp.

Zelef dismounted from Kumayuru and pet the bear. “Master Kumayuru, thank you very much.”

Kumayuru faced him and crooned in response. I pulled firewood out of my bear storage and made a fire, then pulled out two chairs around it. I refrained from bringing out the bear house, of course. “Okay, I’m going to get a meal prepped right away.”

“In that case, I could…” Zelef offered, but I wasn’t actually cooking. I pulled out some of Morin’s bread and Anz’s soup. “I suppose you didn’t need me.”

“You’ll be doing plenty once we arrive.”

“Then I shall be sure to live up to your expectations. Thank you for letting me do my best.” Zelef accepted the bread and soup, savoring both. “Did you make this bread and soup, Master Yuna?”

“No, they’re sold in shops in Crimonia.”

“They’re both delicious and delightful.”

“I’ll let them know that the head chef of the royal palace complimented them,” I said,

grinning.

“It’s not just flattery. It really is delicious. They’ve mastered the essentials of the craft; it is no wonder that the food has turned out so fine.” Before long, Zelef finished the bread and soup. “Yes, I would certainly like to visit Crimonia someday.”

“It’s not *my* town, but you’re welcome any time.”

“I look forward to it.”

After our meal, we didn’t have anything particular to do, so I brushed Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Zelef talked to me as he watched.

“It seems Masters Kumayuru and Kumakyu are not worn out, even after carrying someone of my, ah, countenance.” Zelef looked down at the bears, patting his swollen belly and beaming.

“Zelef, don’t you think you might be eating a little too much?” I heard it was easy for chefs to put on weight since they needed to taste test their food.

“Ah, such words pain me to hear. And yet it is the duty of the head chef to eat the dishes their subordinates make. I must sample everything and point out where they went wrong.”

“Wow, so you’re really teaching them? You don’t tell them to just learn by watching you?”

“Certainly, such is the technique of some chefs, but it’s not for me. In addition, the chefs at the palace know all the essential arts. Thus, learning a recipe once is enough for them to memorize the entire process.”

Well, they *did* all work at the palace. I guess even rookie chefs needed to know their stuff to get that far.

“Master Yuna, how were you taught to make food the way you do?”

That was a toughie. I wasn’t taught by a person. I was mainly self-taught from the internet and books, so I couldn’t really point to a mentor or anything. It wasn’t like I could tell him that, though.

“I apologize,” said Zelef, lowering his head. “If you cannot answer, you do not need to. It’s just that I have so many questions about the way you make your dishes…” I guess he was concerned when I went silent.

“No, it’s fine. I was just thinking about how to answer since, uh, no one taught me how to cook.”

“And yet you still thought up all those marvelous dishes?”

I shook my head. “They’re staples in my hometown, in a faraway land.”

“In your hometown?”

“Yeah, so I didn’t invent them.”

“Is that right? The world is such a vast place.”

Yep—and there was more than one world, to boot. I could never have imagined that a whole other world could exist in the universe. We lived in a very big world, indeed.

“I would like to visit your hometown sometime,” said Zelef.

He said it so casually, and yet I didn’t have a reply for him. Only silence flowed between us. I guess Zelef realized something was off, since he didn’t pry any further. “How about we turn in soon?” I asked.

“I suppose we should. But what should be do about keeping watch? This is nothing to brag about, but the night… the night troubles me, I would say.”

That *definitely* wasn’t something to brag about. “It’s all right. We have Kumayuru and Kumakyu. They’ll wake us up right away if we’re in danger.”

He looked at my bears, sitting beside us. “Is that so? They can even keep watch.”

“Mmhm. You can sleep without having to worry. If anyone attacks me or you in the night, my bear attacks them right back. That goes for *anyone,* by the way. You included,” I warned him with a smile.

“A truly terrifying thought. I have no death wish, so I think I will refrain from doing any such thing. I also do not want to do anything that would make you or your bears

dislike me, Master Yuna."

Zelef smiled as he wrapped himself in a blanket to lie down. As for me, I snuggled in between Kumayuru and Kumakyu and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 193
THE BEAR COMES BACK WITH THE PALACE'S HEAD CHEF

THE SUN CAME UP as I comfortably snuggled up in Kumayuru and Kumakyu's embraces. Guess it was already morning. Early to bed, early to rise.

"Morning, you two," I greeted my bears and stood up, stretching. Sure, my literal bear bed was fine, but nothing could beat an actual bed. I guess I must've woken Zelef, since he emerged from under his blanket.

"Master Yuna, good morning to you."

"Morning. Well then, how about we get some breakfast, then head out?"

"Why, certainly."

We headed out right after we finished a simple meal, just like we had for dinner. Travel went smoothly, without any monsters or thieves making an appearance.

"Zelef, are you okay? You're not tired, are you?"

"I am right as rain. Riding the horses in the past caused all kinds of aches and pains in my hips, but Masters Kumayuru and Kumakyu are such comfortable mounts. I hardly feel tired."

No problem with pressing on, then. We needed to hurry. Cliff was waiting for us, so I needed my bears to really go all out.

We spotted Sheelin's outer wall a little after lunch. Hmm… I really wanted to just keep going, but it'd be such a pain to explain my summon beasts to the gate guards.

"Zelef, would you be fine with walking from here?"

“Huh? From here?”

“I don’t want to have to bother explaining my summon beasts to the guards, so I usually dismount when I get close to towns.”

“Ah, I see. Understood. I shall walk and consider this good exercise for myself.” Zelef rubbed his belly.

I kind of doubted he’d lose weight from a short stroll, and it wasn’t that far away. It’d probably be a pretty good walking distance if someone did it every day, but just doing it once was a drop in the bucket.

Then again, it wasn’t like I was one to talk when it came to exercise. I tried to take off my bear onesie for exercise a few times, but I had no stamina. I ended up dead tired and had to give up. It took persistence *and* exercise to build up any stamina or lose weight.

After I recalled my bears, Zelef and I headed to the town on foot.

“Aren’t you the bear from the other day?” the guard asked. It’d be a pain to answer his questions, so I just held my guild card up to the crystal panel and quickly headed into the town.

“Is this Sheelin?” Zelef asked, looking around.

“You haven’t been here before?”

“I was born in the capital. I was so preoccupied with studying the culinary arts that I hardly ever left.”

I suppose he wouldn’t have been the head chef of the royal family if he hadn’t studied that hard. As for me, I couldn’t just keep my focus on a single thing like that. I was the kind of person who got her hands into everything to the point that I didn’t have any time to spare. I could start projects, but finishing them through to the end? No way. I was the archetype of a layabout. Even if there were plenty of people in this world who dedicated themselves to accomplishing just one goal.

Then again, having too much of an interest in food was also a problem in and of itself.

Zelef spotted a restaurant and was trying to head there.

“Zelef, please wait until after the party’s over.”

“Yes, but the possibilities…”

“Please, no ‘but’s. The party is tomorrow, so we have to hurry.”

“Oh…”

With Zelef in tow, I headed to Gran’s estate. I was a little worried that I might run into Randle again, but we got to Gran’s place without incident.

The guard seemed surprised when he saw me.

“Can we come inside?”

“Yes, Lord Gran informed us about you. He has asked us to let you and your guest through.”

Since they’d gotten the message, they didn’t question Zelef and let him into the estate.

“Mademoiselle Yuna!” Once we got inside, Meishun ran over to me.

“Heya, Meishun. Would we be able to see Gran and Cliff soon?”

“Yes, they told me to call you in the moment you came back.” Meishun led us just like she had earlier to the room where Cliff and Gran were. “Lord Gran, Mademoiselle Yuna has returned.”

“Yuna?!”

“You’re back?!”

Gran and Cliff were both shocked when I came in. There was also a stranger in the room with them. *Hmm…*

“We just got back. Um, and who is this?” I asked, since I didn’t know if we could talk about Zelef in front of the guy.

“This is my son, Leonardo. He may be faint of heart, but he’s my boy.”

“Faint of heart? Father, must you say that? I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I am Misana’s father, Leonardo. It seems that you helped my father and my daughter. Thank you. Um… Miss Bear?”

“It’s Yuna.”

“I see. Pardon me. Whenever I’ve spoken to my daughter and father, they always go on about bears. And there you are, in a bear outfit. My apologies.” So this was Misa’s dad, then. He was no Gran. He was on the slender side and really did seem fainthearted. Didn’t look like any noble I’d imagined.

“Yuna, where’s the chef?” Cliff asked gravely.

It wouldn’t be a problem for me to introduce Zelef right now if Leonardo was Gran’s son, right? “I’ve brought him.” On cue, Zelef came into the room.

“I have been asked by Master Yuna to cook for Lord Gran’s party. I humbly introduce myself. I am Zelef.” He bowed.

“Zelef… pardon me, but have we met somewhere?” asked Gran. “I feel as though I have seen you before, but I can’t quite place it.”

“Yuna… when you said you were bringing a chef, this wasn’t what I had in mind,” said Cliff.

Gran looked Zelef over, putting his hand to his chin in thought. Cliff looked over Zelef, too, and when he looked at *me*, he seemed at wit’s end. Leonardo’s mouth was gaping, and he was mouthing something, but words weren’t coming out.

“Do you know Master Zelef, Cliff?” asked Gran.

“Gran, old chap, it’s much too early for you to be going senile. You know him as well as I do. It looks that Leo’s already recognized him, at least.”

“We’ve met then?” asked Gran. “I do recognize him from somewhere, but I can’t quite recall where. Master Zelef, I’m very sorry if we have met before.”

Cliff and Leonardo, on the other hand, recognized him.

“No, please do not worry about it,” said Zelef. “I believe this is the first time we are meeting face to face.”

“Is it?”

“I am Zelef, head chef of the castle. Perhaps we have seen each other at one of His Majesty’s parties?”

“You’re the head chef of the castle?!” Gran’s eyes widened in shock. Cliff and Leonardo just looked like they had their suspicions confirmed.

“Yuna, when you said you knew someone,” said Cliff, “you meant *Master Zelef*?!”

“Yeah. He’s the only first-rate chef I know.”

“First rate?” Zelef repeated bashfully. “Why, Master Yuna, to hear such a thing from you is an honor.”

Gran was completely taken aback at Zelef’s identity. He offered us seats, and I took one. “Then you will really cook for us?”

“Master Yuna asked me to. And His Majesty has also asked me to help her.”

“His Majesty has…” Gran repeated. The room fell silent. Gran and his son were shocked.

Cliff looked exasperated. “How in the world did you get the palace’s head chef to come all the way here?”

“Hm? I just asked.”

“You just *asked* His Majesty? I’ve never heard of the head chef of a castle cooking for a noble’s party.”

“I guess I’ve just got a way with people.”

“Listen, you…” Cliff breathed, seeming completely done with everything.

“Indeed—I, too, was shocked when His Majesty asked me to do this. But that just shows how much faith Master Yuna has in me,” Zelef said.

“Oh, but *officially* you asked Ellelaura to ask him.” I told Cliff what the king had told me.

“I’ll need to go to His Majesty to thank him later,” said Cliff.

“Why?”

“If Master Zelef is here because of Ellelaura, then don’t I have to thank him?”

“That’s just the ‘official story.’ They needed an excuse to explain why Zelef came.”

“That’s exactly why I’ve got to go,” said Cliff.

“And before you go to seek an audience,” said Gran, sighing slightly, “we’ll need to write a letter.”

Sure seems like a lot of work being a noble, worrying about official stuff, all this ceremony, and all this subtler stuff. I muttered the thought aloud to myself, but Cliff apparently heard.

“You know what, Yuna? Normal people can’t just go to His Majesty and meet him right away. You need to send a letter *days* in advance just to *see* him. You’re the outlier here, not us.”

Okay, sure. But how was I supposed to know? Whenever I saw Lady Flora, the king would just barge right in. Plus, last time I asked Ellelaura to see him and she’d brought me in like it was fine.

Uh. Now that I thought about it, it *did* seem a little weird.

Cliff looked dead tired, Gran worried, and Leonardo was still flabbergasted, even now. Guess that was just how amazing Zelef was.

“So why are the three of you together?” I asked.

“We were talking about what to do if you didn’t make it in time.”

“And?”

“We hadn’t decided on anything. We don’t have any replacement chefs. Even if we did,

they wouldn't have the skill we need. We were about to give up."

"And we couldn't postpone the party, given it would inconvenience the guests. We were thinking of having a drinking party as a last resort."

"But won't there be kids?"

"The kids would get juice."

It sounded like a real downer of a party. Maybe it was fine for a little event after a meal, but I don't think a party that started and ended with drinks would really work out for this.

"But now that Master Zelef is here, that takes a large burden off our shoulders."

"If you want to thank anyone," said Zelef, "please thank Master Yuna. I'm indebted to her, so I was simply hoping to pay her back even in the slightest."

"Miss," said Gran, putting his hands on the table and bowing his head, "I'm grateful that you've brought Master Zelef with you. Now I've been saved by you twice."

"Don't worry about it. If you couldn't have the party, you wouldn't be able to celebrate Misa's birthday, right? I did it for her. Plus, there are kids who would be even more disappointed than I'd be if Misa couldn't celebrate her birthday." I didn't want to let down those three girls. That was my biggest reason for doing anything. "So, Master Zelef, the party is tomorrow. Do you think we'll make it in time?"

"We stocked up on ingredients at the capital. If I begin preparations now, we should make it in time," Zelef said confidently. He sure seemed dependable.

"Thank you. Then please, we really are relying on you."

Oh, I almost forgot. "About the ingredients? I'll send you the bill later, Gran. The king is going to charge me."

"You're being charged by His Majesty…"

"Yeah, so if you could cover that…"

Gran and Leonardo seemed speechless.

“In that case, we really must ask His Majesty to review it as soon as possible,” Gran said, which elicited a deep nod from Cliff.

CHAPTER 194
THE BEAR HEADS TO THE KITCHEN WITH ZELEF

I FINISHED INTRODUCING Zelef, and he started asking questions about how many people were attending, what kinds of people would be there, all that stuff. There were going to be about fifty people, more or less. Most would be nearby nobles, some of them the town's merchants, and the political bigwigs. Once he got a sense of the attendees, Zelef told Gran he wanted to get started right away.

The party would be tomorrow, so we really needed to get crackin'. Zelef headed to the kitchen, directed by Meishun. Since I was the one carrying the ingredients, I headed over with them.

"This is where the kitchen is," said Meishun. "Please use it as you wish. I will call assistants for you, Mr. Zelef, so please wait a few moments." She left right after bringing us to the kitchen.

Zelef asked for more hands to help with the cooking. He'd need more people to move the ingredients, wash them, and cook for such a big crowd. When Gran asked just how many people, he answered… three. I thought that was on the low side, but apparently, he was cooking the main dishes himself, so he'd be fine as long as he had some assistants.

"Master Yuna, if you could please…"

"Are you sure you want me to take them out right here? I could put them in the cold storage for you." If I pulled things out right where I was, I was worried I'd double the work.

"We need to do some prep work in advance, so you can take out the ingredients here. We'll separate out what we'll use immediately and what we won't."

After Zelef asked me to bring out the ingredients, he started checking whether he had all his cooking utensils. I pulled out the boxes of ingredients I'd brought from the

capital and set them in the kitchen corner. After getting everything out of bear storage, there was a commotion at the door.

“Mr. Botts, you still need rest!”

“Out of the way! Lord Gran asked me to do this! I promised him I would.”

“Yes, but your arms—”

“I can’t let just any cook make the meals!”

“The new chef should be able to do it. Lord Gran has approved of him.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Open the door.”

We could hear the voice outside the door even all the way here. The house chef seemed mad. I guess no one had filled him in on the details. While I was wondering what to do about it, Zelef walked over to the door.

I gave him a look. “Zelef?”

“It’s only natural a chef would be upset that someone else is taking their work. I’ll talk to him myself.” When Zelef opened the door, Meishun and a man with bandaged arms entered the kitchen.

“Is this the chef you called? This… this…” When the man looked Zelef in the face, he cut himself right off. “*Zelef*?”

“Is that you, Botts?”

“Zelef, what are you doing here?”

It looked like they knew each other. Zelef was the palace head chef, so it wasn’t weird for Botts to know about him, but it looked like Zelef knew Botts too.

“I’m the one cooking meals for Lord Gran’s party—you know, the chef you were just about to complain about.”

“What? You’re cooking, Zelef? But I thought you were the head chef at the palace?”

“I still am. Master Yuna asked me to cook in place of a chef who injured his arms.”

Botts looked at me. He only had one thing to say: “A bear?”

“This is Master Yuna. I am greatly indebted to her, so I accepted her request to cook for this party.”

“You’re indebted to a *bear*? And you’re the one cooking?”

I could practically see the question mark on his head. It looked like he was just totally stunned.

“Zelef, do you know Gran’s chef?” I asked.

“Yes, we used to work together at a restaurant before I started working at the palace.”

“Back then, Zelef used to be the associate head chef,” said Botts. “And I worked directly for him.”

Huh? Wait, hadn’t Botts been the associate head chef too? I vaguely remembered something like that, at least.

“But after a while,” said Zelef, “I caught the eye of the head chef of the palace at the time and ended up becoming a chef there.”

I see, so that was the rest of the story.

“But Botts, I thought you were supposed to be the associate head chef after I left,” said Zelef. “What are you doing here?”

Ahah! So Botts *had* been the associate head chef.

“I got in a fight with another chef and was fired.”

“You got in a fight?”

“He’d blame his mistakes on others, do spiteful things to people, and would punch other chefs. One day I couldn’t take it anymore. Got in a fight with him, and that led to my firing.”

“I didn’t think Chef Moloog was that kind of person.”

“Oh, Chef Moloog finally retired. The current chef is a man named Bolsack. He came in after you left, Zelef. He’s skilled, but he’s got one terrible personality.”

“Then… you got in a fight and quit?”

“Since I was the associate head chef, I tried to keep my mouth shut, but I suppose I just couldn’t take it anymore…”

“It *just* happened…?”

“And, y’know what that Bolsack guy did? He pressured the guild to formally blacklist me from work at the capital.” Whew, he was really unloading a lot. Botts was starting to seem agitated too. “Now the word is that I’m violent, so I can’t get work in the capital anymore.”

“You didn’t deny the allegations?”

“Of course I did. But there’s a difference between head chef and *associate* head chef. And lotsa people like him. I hate to say it, but the guy’s a good cook and he’s got a flair for flattery. I’m not much of a sweet talker, you know?”

“And how did you end up here?”

“Right—after I couldn’t work at the capital anymore, I was drowning my sorrows at a tavern when Lord Gran found me.”

Gran was at a tavern? Well… it kind of seemed like something he’d do, even if it wasn’t really a place for a noble to hang out.

“So,” said Botts, “I needed to make sure this party was a success to pay back Lord Gran.” He looked at his arms. His arms were so heavily bandaged that they almost looked like ridiculous foam batons.

“Are your arms all right?” Zelef looked at them worriedly.

“Yeah, I can’t cook for a while, but I’m fine.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.” Zelef smiled, which made Botts smile back.

“It’s nothing to be glad about. I’m disappointed that I cannot repay my debt to him yet.”

“But you were the one who was attacked, weren’t you, Botts?” I interjected. It wasn’t Botts’s fault.

“I did get attacked, but… thinking about the situation between the Fahrengram and Salbard families, I should’ve been more careful. I was just walking around in a deserted place without a care in the world. Lord Gran told me to be careful outside, and I didn’t listen.”

“Botts, I didn’t hear all the details. Was it someone from Salbard’s household that attacked you?”

“We have no evidence of that, but… given the relationship between the families, the fact that I was the one who got attacked and that they focused on my arms makes it likely. Of course, there’s a chance somebody else completely unrelated to the situation hates me too,” he answered with a smile. Guy knew how to keep the vibes pleasant, even if he was injured.

“All right,” said Zelef. “Please don’t you worry, Botts. I’ll make sure that your feelings come through in the food I make for the party.”

“Zelef…”

“Am I not good enough to get the job done?”

Botts shook his head. “No, I can count on you.”

“Yes, please do leave it to me,” said Zelef, smiling at him.

“Still, you’ve packed it on a little since the last time I saw you,” said Botts with a chuckle. Zelef laughed it off. “Zelef, could I watch you cook? It’s been a while.”

“Ah, like the good old days. Back when we’d compete and watch each other cook…”

“Really takes me back…”

“Well then, I’ll cook something that won’t disappoint.”

Zelef started his prep work. Even though he was injured, I could tell Botts was having fun watching. Soon enough, the three helpers came by. I quietly left the kitchen so I wouldn't be in the way.

When I headed back to the other room, Fina was with the other two.

"I'm back. Anything interesting happen?"

"Something did!" Noa raised her hand. She kind of looked a little mad.

"Huh? That dummy aristocrat didn't do something to you, did he?!" I exclaimed.

"No. When I woke up, you weren't here. When I came to see you and Fina, Fina was here all by herself and she looked oh-so-lonely. And when I asked her what was wrong, she said my father asked for you to bring a chef over."

Oops. She was mad that I left without saying anything. "Sorry for leaving without a goodbye. I was in a hurry."

"I know it wasn't *your* fault, Yuna. It just made me sad." Noa looked embarrassed. I gave Noa a pat on the head.

"So, Yuna, did you bring a chef with you?" Fina asked.

"Yep, a first-class chef. It looks like he knows Botts."

"He knew Botts?" Misa perked up when I mentioned Botts's name.

"Apparently they worked at the same restaurant at the capital." Small world.

"I think my grandfather did say that Botts used to work at the restaurant with the large stone falcon."

"The restaurant with the falcon? I know that one too. It's famous at the capital. I've been there once."

They told me all the details. The famous place was supposed to have things on the menu you couldn't eat without a reservation—that's how prestigious the restaurant

was. That explained Zelef's skills and why Gran approved of Botts's cooking. Maybe I'd go eat there sometime—apparently, the head chef was really good even though he was a jerk. Although I did wonder if I could go to a first-class restaurant dressed in a onesie. I couldn't imagine a world where they *didn't* turn me away.

On second thought, maybe I wouldn't go. I didn't have to go out of my way to get my feelings hurt.

"Anyway, what were you guys doing?"

"Nothing at all," Noa said, which prompted the other two to nod. "I mean, Botts got attacked and injured and it didn't seem likely we'd have the party. You went to find a chef and my father forbade the three of us from going outside, so we were good and kept put in the room."

"Sorry." And I also told Fina not to go outside since it seemed dangerous, hadn't I? We still didn't know if someone from the Salbard family had attacked Botts, but that didn't make it any safer out there. Staying cooped up in a room for another day seemed miserable, no matter the reason.

I tried to think of a way for them to kill time. One idea *did* come to mind.

"In that case, how about we make something for the party too?"

"You mean something to eat?"

"Yeah. We can't make a normal entree, but I think pudding would work great. It's simple to make, and it got everyone talking at the king's banquet."

The pudding would look even more extravagant if we topped it with whipped cream and fruit. I made over two hundred puddings for the banquet, so the four of us could whip 'em up real quick.

"So, guys, how about we all make pudding together instead of just being bored and cooped up here?" It wouldn't do anyone any good to stay put while spirits were low. This was the perfect time to keep ourselves occupied and lighten the mood.

"I'll make some!"

"Yes, I'd like to help."

“I’ll make some too.”

The three of them raised their hands, full of energy.

I took the three excited girls and went back down the hall I just came from, toward the kitchen.

CHAPTER 195
THE BEAR MAKES PUDDING WITH THE THREE GIRLS

"PLEASE TAKE that box to the cold storage. We'll use what's in that box, so if you could put it over here…"

When I came back to the kitchen with the three girls in tow, Zelef was fast at work giving out directions on how to divide up the ingredients we'd brought. Botts was sitting in a slightly out-of-the-way chair watching Zelef. I was just about to ask Zelef for permission to use the kitchen when Botts spotted us.

"Aren't you the bear from earlier? And Lady Misana?"

Zelef noticed us, too, now, and stopped for a moment. "Master Yuna? Is something the matter?"

"Zelef, we won't get in your way, so would you let us use a corner of the kitchen?"

Botts and Zelef spoke at the same time—

"No."

"Yes, Master Yuna."

Zelef was the one I was asking, so why was Botts answering for him?

"You'll get in Zelef's way," Botts reiterated, "so absolutely not."

"Botts, I don't personally mind. Are you making something, Master Yuna?"

"The girls seemed bored, so I was thinking we could make pudding together. Maybe we could even make some for tomorrow's party. With your permission, of course."

Simultaneously—

“Obviously you may *not*.”

“Oh yes, that seems like a wonderful idea.”

—they were saying the opposite things, yet again.

“Zelef, what do you think you’re saying! This is the party we’re talking about—it’s a serious affair. There’s no way you could serve dinner made by a bear.”

“Botts, it’s fine. We served Master Yuna’s cooking at His Majesty’s own birthday festival banquet.”

“You’re kidding, right? You mean this bear here cooked for *His Majesty’s birthday banquet*?”

“Not only that—her food was hailed as even better than my own cooking. It made quite the stir at the party.”

“Zelef… are you pulling my leg?”

“No, I wouldn’t tease about this. It’s true. His Majesty himself has approved the taste of her cooking.”

Botts seemed shocked, even hearing it directly from Zelef’s mouth. I hadn’t witnessed the party myself, so I personally still found it hard to believe.

“Master Yuna is an excellent adventurer, an excellent merchant, and an excellent cook as well.”

I wish he’d quit calling me excellent over and over again. I mean, there were impressionable kids right here, and now these three girls were looking at me with glittering eyes. I’m not that amazing, okay? I was just a normal girl you could find anywhere—I just so happened to have a bear onesie. Uh, not that there actually were any girls in bear onesies anywhere around here. Now that I thought about it, no wonder Botts found me kinda suspect.

To others, I just looked like a girl wearing a bear onesie. I didn’t look like a chef, let alone an adventurer or a merchant. It was like I had the words “Class: Bear” stamped on my forehead. (I vowed to never let anyone know that was literally what it said on my guild card.)

Still, it kind of seemed like it'd be a pain to whip up a batch of pudding with someone eyeing me suspiciously. Maybe it'd be best if I let him try some?

I pulled a pudding from my bear storage and set it down on the tabletop. "This is pudding. Want a bite?" I was well stocked. Actually, I had more than enough for the entire party. Still, this was a festive occasion. It'd make for a better gift if everyone chipped in to make it.

"This is pudding?" Botts came up to me and tried to reach out to me before realizing that he couldn't. I forgot he was injured, too. One of the maids that'd been watching came up to us.

"Chef Botts, if I may?"

"Sorry. If you could."

The maid took a spoon, scooped up some pudding, and brought it to Botts's mouth. She seemed like she'd done this plenty of times before. I guess she was in charge of Botts's meals?

"What… is this?"

"Isn't it good? Both His and Her Majesty have taken a liking to it." The maid gave him another spoonful.

"It's good. Did you really make this, bear?" He wasn't looking at me dubiously anymore. Now he was eyeing me like I was a curiosity, which… uh, wasn't that big of a difference, now that I thought about it.

"Chef Botts, is it really that good?" one of the maids asked. I guess anyone would want a taste of something delicious, especially after hearing that from a chef. I felt bad having them eat Botts's leftovers, so I brought out some more puddings for the maids who were helping us.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Make sure you help Zelef lots."

"Why, of course," said one of the maids, and the three of them dug in.

“It’s delectable.”

“Yes, I’ve never had something so delicious.”

I was glad that it was so popular with the maids.

“Yuna’s amazing! She can make tons of other really good stuff! Not just pudding,” Noa said proudly, sticking her chest out. Fina and Misa agreed with her. I wasn’t going to shrug off the praise, but they didn’t have to set the bar *quite* that high.

Botts reluctantly agreed to let us use the kitchen as he worked at his pudding. “If Zelef says it’s fine, then I won’t complain. But you better not get in his way.”

“I know. Okay, guys. Everyone’s okay with it, so let’s get to work.”

“Okay!” the three girls said energetically. We headed to the corner right away so we wouldn’t get in the way.

I pulled out about fifty eggs from my bear storage. It wasn’t like we’d have a problem if we made too much. If there were too many leftovers, I could keep them in my bear storage or give them away to the people working for Gran. I could even bring them to Misa’s birthday party.

“Fina, you break the eggs. Noa and Misa can whip them.”

They did just that: Fina skillfully cracked the eggs, while Noa and Misa carefully mixed them.

“Hey, Zelef, look how many eggs she’s got,” said Botts.

“Why, of course she does. According to what I’ve heard, Master Yuna raises kokekko for their eggs. She can get several hundred in a single day.”

“Several hundred eggs?!”

Yep. After all, you needed eggs for pudding, cake, pancakes, and other stuff. A shop used hundreds of eggs in a single day. I was always getting more kokekko too.

Botts seemed bewildered as he watched Fina crack the eggs. “And you’re letting a child handle the eggs, too?”

To Botts, they probably seemed like luxury food items. But I told Tiermina that she could bring home eggs for her family if she wanted. Plus, the orphanage was eating them now, so they were becoming familiar with using them.

I kind of missed the early days when Fina was nervous about cracking the eggs. Her hands would shake while she did it, if I remembered right. She kept making mistakes and apologizing. I couldn't help but crack a smile at the memory.

Now she'd just go *tap*, *crack*. *Tap, crack.* She had a pretty good rhythm going. Fina sure had grown up.

"Yuna, what is it? Why are you smiling?" Fina asked.

"I'm smiling??"

"Yeah. Like, the kind of smile I see on mom and dad sometimes."

Was this how Tiermina and Gentz felt? It was like I was watching my own daughter grow up.

"Yuna, I want to try cracking the eggs!"

"M-me too."

The other girls too? "Sure. Fina, teach them, would you? It's okay if you mess up, but make sure you don't get any shells in."

"Okay."

Noa and Misa excitedly started to crack the eggs.

We had fifty eggs. Once they got the hang of it, they'd be able to get those done right away.

"Zelef, if you need eggs, just let us know. I have them stockpiled."

"That would be of great help. We have some in the capital, but I could not bring them with me, of course."

"Gotcha. I'll just leave them in the cold storage, so feel free to use them." I stuffed the

packs of eggs in the giant cold storage. Hopefully they'd be enough…

"Wait, are you serious? That's a ton!" Botts exclaimed. I ignored him. "Zelef, who is this bear girl?"

"Botts. If you let every single little thing about Master Yuna surprise you, you'll never get any cooking done again. If you reject the unknown, you'll never evolve as a chef."

"But who *is* she?" Botts insisted.

"His Majesty has forbidden questioning Master Yuna. If you would like to ask her questions, you do so at the risk of your own life. You won't get any help from me."

"What does that mean?"

"If Master Yuna reports anything bad about you back to His Majesty, your head will go flying." Zelef laughed as he tapped his neck. C'mon, I wasn't going to let someone get beheaded… though I'd punch him if he made me feel bad.

"You're joking, right?"

"I am. But His Majesty really won't hold back when it comes to Master Yuna."

Botts gave me a surprised look.

Zelef laughed. "Is my presence here not proof enough? Do you think just anyone could get an audience with His Majesty? Just anyone could borrow the head chef of the palace, immediately receive a decision, and have me dispatched? Any regular person get permission to take the castle's ingredients? I'm here right now because Master Yuna asked for me to be here. Most people wouldn't even be able to see His Majesty at all."

Botts gulped at that.

Huh? Was I really that highly regarded?! The king did owe me a couple favors, I suppose. There was the stuff with the ten thousand monsters, the food, the picture book… but they were all little favors. He was just returning *favors*—that's all.

"So heed my warning: I suggest that you do nothing to upset Master Yuna."

“Okay… I won’t ask her anything. I don’t want to die quite yet, after all.”

He made good on his words. Even though he looked like he had questions, he kept them to himself. I didn’t know whether to be thankful to Zelef or to the king, but I was glad that Botts wasn’t going to be another pain in the rear.

Now silent, Botts watched Zelef’s preparations. Occasionally, he looked at us. He didn’t really say anything to us, though, and the pudding-making went without a hitch.

“After we chill them in the refrigerator, we’ll be done,” I said.

The only problem was that we couldn’t find an open fridge. With no other option, I pulled out the bear-shaped fridge I had in reserve and started putting away the puddings.

Hm? Why make the fridge bear-shaped? Because the fridge at my bear house was also bear-shaped. Obviously.

“I’m really looking forward to this. I want to eat them soon.”

“Remember, these are for the party.”

“I know that.”

“We’ll eat them together during then. Right, Fina?”

“Yeah!”

“Yuna, are you really not going?”

“I’m not. I only came here to attend *your* party, Misa.”

“What about you, Fina?” Noa asked. Fina shook her head.

The same applied for Misa’s party, but Fina wouldn’t like being surrounded by rich aristocrats. The kid might give herself an ulcer. Plus, if Fina went, I’d probably have to go, too—I couldn’t exactly let her attend alone. Noa and Misa seemed disappointed, but they’d have to bear with it.

That night, as all were asleep, a certain bear secretly scaled the building to the roof. (That bear was me, to be honest, and I was just heading up to dismantle the bear transporter gate.)

CHAPTER 196
CLIFF ATTENDS THE PARTY

THANKS TO Yuna, we had secured a chef for Gran's party.

And not just any chef—no, she brought the head chef of the palace himself. I have no idea what that bear was thinking. If she had just brought any other palace chef, I would've understood, but here she was with the head chef—the most powerful culinary force in the nation. It was a violation of common sense.

She had left three days earlier in the middle of the night. I didn't know how fast those summoned bears of hers were, but she would've needed to get an audience with the king immediately after arriving at the capital. Even if Ellelaura had put in a good word for her, I never considered that His Majesty would immediately give her permission to whisk the head chef away. Not under any normal circumstances, anyway.

She went to see His Majesty without even sending him correspondence beforehand. Then she'd asked him to lend her his head chef… and received permission to do so immediately. The palace provided the ingredients. Everything was accounted for. What in the world had she done to get His Majesty to approve of it all? It was beyond baffling.

Whenever she got to work on a problem, things generally changed for the better, but that bear generally brought trouble in her wake. Grateful as I was, I couldn't quite rest easy when I knew that some kind of trouble, somewhere, would accompany her. And why hadn't she consulted me before bringing on the head chef of the palace? Gran, the old man, was holding his head in his hands. It seemed he had the same sentiments. We'd likely need to go to the capital and present ourselves to His Majesty to thank him. I'd need to hear the full details from Ellelaura as well.

The thought of it gave me a headache, but she still truly brought the best chef she could to us. I couldn't argue with that. At present, I needed to focus on how we could make this go as smoothly as possible with this new opportunity.

The challenge would be whether we could get the guests to the party.

Gran and Leonardo spoke with the merchants in advance, but things had not gone well. Unsurprisingly, given the state of the town, no one wanted to join the losing side. But there were many whom Gran had helped up until this point. We needed to show our strength with this party, even if it only earned us a few more allies. We had to bring as many neutral people to our side as possible.

We went to the venue early and waited for the attendees. Gran and the others were the center of attention, of course, and I would be devoting myself to assisting the Fahrengram household in the endeavor.

I moved to a spot where I could get a full view of the place. Once the party's starting time arrived, the attendees steadily gathered. They ranged from neighboring aristocrats to merchants—the powers in the town. As I watched the entrance, a man with a toadish face came in. He was Gajurdo Salbard—the other feudal lord of the town and Gran's political adversary.

Next to Gajurdo was his son, the one who tried to pick a fight with Yuna and the others. Just hearing it from the girls made me want to punch the lad. They came unaccompanied; I heard his wife had passed several years ago.

When Gajurdo came in, a small crowd approached him at once—likely the merchants who were taking his side. They even bowed their heads in their attempts to butter him up. I wasn't frightened of those fools; knowing their allegiance made them far less dangerous than the false friends who might betray us. That treacherous lot could leak any of our information to Gajurdo, and we'd find ourselves just one ally weaker before we knew it. The very thought nearly had me jumping at shadows. I could only pray that no such viper was in our midst.

Naturally, many people greeted Gran as well… but they were only doing it out of courtesy because he had invited them to the party. The true battle would likely come after the party started. As Gran had a friendly chat with the guests, Gajurdo approached.

"My congratulations for reaching your fiftieth birthday." A churlish smile broke out over Gajurdo's face, a sloppy mask that hardly hid his schemer's heart.

"Ah yes, I am glad you've come. We have prepared a feast, so please enjoy yourself."

"I will indeed enjoy the fare. Especially that of the former associate head chef from

that *very* famous restaurant in the capital, mm?"

As they shared pleasantries, I saw Gran's hand balling into a fist. I understood how he felt, but I couldn't let them begin to brawl here. We didn't have any proof that one of Gajurdo's henchmen had hurt Botts. We couldn't find any witnesses either, because no one had been near the site of the attack. Even if the situation seemed suspect, we couldn't lodge a complaint. All we could do was wait. It was surely vexing for old Gran.

When it was getting close to the official start time of the party, I saw Leonardo whisper into Gran's ear.

"Did something happen?" I asked Gran.

"Several people are missing. People who seemed sympathetic to me."

"They promised to come," added Leonardo.

"You think it's Gajurdo?"

"It's unclear. We don't have the time for this right now."

They might have been threatened or harmed—that was another possibility. Still, the fact remained that people who had been sympathetic to Gran were absent. But we didn't have time to worry about people who weren't in attendance. It was time for the party to start.

Gran brought Leonardo along with him and welcomed his guests. "Thank you very much for attending my birthday party while you've all been so busy." Simple, clear words of gratitude. "We have prepared some victuals, so please take your time enjoying yourselves."

Once Gran and Leonardo finished their address, the food was brought in. Since everyone was standing for the party, they couldn't serve people individually. Instead, the maids lined the table at the center of the gathering with food. Every dish looked and smelled delectable—well befitting the head chef of the palace.

One of the maids brought a drink to me, so I accepted the glass. With the food set out and the orchestra playing, the attendees began to enjoy themselves and start up conversations.

They greeted those they knew, along with Gran and the Salbards. Some also greeted me.

“Why, isn’t it Master Cliff? It has been some time.”

I nodded. “Since the king’s birthday festival, has it not?”

A local aristocrat had come to greet me. With our pleasantries exchanged, the noble went on to see the next person. He was neutral in the dispute, keeping his distance from both the Fahrengrams and the Salbards. They should’ve been trying to win him over, but it was likely difficult. The same held true for the Salbards. What we knew, then, was that the man couldn’t be bought… which made him a potential trustworthy ally.

When I looked over at Gran, he was with Leonardo greeting each noble and their wives, one by one. It looked like they were making a positive impression, but I couldn’t know for certain. Gran and Leonardo’s bargaining abilities were being tested. What I needed to do was show that the Fochrosé family was with the Fahrengrams. That might give Gran an advantage in negotiations. I didn’t know how much sway my name would have in a place like this, but it was better than nothing.

Once the pleasantries were over, I looked for my daughter and found her eating with Misana.

I told Noa to stick close by her friend, especially since Salbard’s thickheaded son might try approaching her. It was much better than allowing Misana to be on her own. As for Gajurdo’s son, he was with three other children and seemed to be enjoying a meal. I thought he might attempt some mischief, but that seemed to be a needless fear at the moment.

I really wanted Yuna to stay by Misana’s side, but she turned down an invitation to the party. I suppose that it *was* likely she’d invite trouble, with that bear outfit of hers. Did she ever take that thing off? The image of her as a bear was overtaking my image of her as a girl. I couldn’t visualize her as anything else.

Although the son was behaving, Gajurdo was causing quite the commotion with his

never-ending short, polite, and meaningful pleasantries. It was even worse than I expected. The sheer number of allies he seemed to have might be enough to even turn neutral actors into allies of the Salbards.

That had always been a possibility, and I advised Gran not to let the Salbards come. Unfortunately, he'd already sent an invitation. I wish he'd consulted me sooner.

"Regardless of how I feel about him, he is still a feudal lord of the town. It's not as though I can refuse to invite him," Gran told me. But he could've made up an excuse to leave the Salbards out. Tell them that this was an intimate party, perhaps, to be attended only by close friends. There were plenty of excuses to be had.

"If I invite the local aristocrats and even you, Cliff, then I cannot create an excuse to not invite the Salbards."

Although I understood where Gran was coming from, I couldn't agree with it. A single blunder, and the power balance would solidify here. Those who were neutral would likely soon pick their most advantageous… and probably at this very party.

A party that had already begun. There was no point in complaining that Gran invited Salbard. The only thing we could do was show that there were more who favored the Fahrengrams.

We were midway through the party when new plates were being brought in.

"I can't bear it anymore. What is this food?" I looked to see who had shouted—it was Gajurdo himself. "How dare the Fahrengrams serve such terrible fare at a party!"

The party went quiet. 'Terrible fare?' What a joke. He was enjoying his meal just a moment ago. Still, it wasn't a good idea to let Gajurdo keep running his mouth.

"Is the food I prepared not to your taste?" Gran addressed him.

"I should say. I heard you hired the associate head chef from a famous restaurant in the capital. What a disappointment. Unless you had a different chef serve us?"

A vulgar smile broke out over his face. Yes, he knew. He knew that our chef was injured. We had no proof, but Gajurdo was behind the attack I was certain of it.

“We did indeed have a different chef cook for us. He rivals Botts in skill.”

“Oh, so you had a different chef? Is that why this food is so thoroughly revolting?” He ate a spoonful of soup, then grimaced. His toadies began to murmur, picking at the food.

“It really is quite lacking.”

“Yes, the seasoning is second rate. No, I’d say this must be a third-rate chef.”

I wanted to shout to them: “That didn’t stop you from scarfing it down!” But the anger died down. Things turned out like Yuna had anticipated, after all.

Yuna mentioned it before the party even started. She advised us about several possible patterns of behavior, telling us that he might put rubbish or bugs in the food or claim, that it was terrible. I never heard of anything so cowardly happening at an aristocrat’s party before.

However, it had gone precisely as Yuna had told us. Which meant we had a plan to address it.

I looked at the door—there stood Master Zelef.

According to Yuna, we couldn’t let him walk right in. He had to make a show of it. Master Zelef readily accepted the idea. (“That seems like quite the entertaining prospect!”) After that, Yuna had coached Master Zelef on how to act. I had no idea where the girl picked up these things. A mysterious bear indeed.

“It seems the Fahrengrams have truly fallen into decline if this was the best food you could serve for a party.”

Scattered laughter among the toadies. Those watching from afar had no idea what to do and simply watched. That was when Master Zelef, who had been on standby, entered.

Perhaps I was seeing things, but I swear I could see—below Master Zelef’s smile—a boiling rage.

CHAPTER 197
THE HEAD CHEF OF THE PALACE, ZELEF, IS ENRAGED

AS I MINDED my own business and worked in the capital's kitchen, His Majesty and Master Yuna stopped by. It was quite the rare pairing indeed, and still more unusual for them to visit the kitchen. When I asked them what this was about, they informed me that the feudal lord of Sheelin would be hosting a party and that my services were required for the fare.

Under normal circumstances, I would not cook for other nobles. But it was good Master Yuna herself asking me this favor, so I requested His Majesty's permission and went to Sheelin.

I initially thought we would be travelling by carriage. However, time being limited indeed, Master Yuna informed me we would travel by way of her bear summons. By summons, she meant her adorable bears. I had seen them in the past with Lady Flora just a few days ago, when she played with the tiny cubs. Yuna told me that they could become larger and carry people. I was both frightened and excited to ride a bear.

After we finished preparing the required ingredients, we left right away. Once we were out of the capital, Master Yuna summoned her bears from the mouths of the bears on her hands.

They were enormous. They did indeed look large enough to carry a human at that size. But when I observed the bears' faces, I realized they were indeed the same as the ones I had seen with Lady Flora.

I asked which one I would ride, and she informed me I should use the white one. She introduced the black bear as Master Kumayuru and the white one as Master Kumakyu. After I greeted Master Kumakyu, the bear crooned gently to me and crouched to show its back.

What a clever bear.

Though I am a bit heavy, Master Kumakyu stood up with ease even while I was on its back. It slowly began to move upon Master Yuna's command.

Oh, we went quite fast. Though we steadily sped up, I stayed firmly mounted on Master Kumakyu with no sign of falling.

When we took a break, Master Yuna informed me that we would be trading bears. I asked why that would be and learned that when she rode only one of the bears, the other would pout. I suppose that they really would rather carry their owner, Master Yuna, instead of an old man like myself. I agreed and rode on Master Kumayuru next.

We made camp partway there and arrived at Sheelin the next day in the afternoon. The trip had simply flown by. We left in the morning and arrived the next day a little past noon. What more could be expected from Master Yuna's summoned beasts?

Once we arrived at Sheelin, we greeted Lord Gran, who was organizing the party. Since we had no time, I immediately borrowed their kitchen and began preparations. As I worked in the kitchen, the chef of the house arrived. It seemed that he was angry, naturally, that some stranger was to use his kitchen.

But when I opened the kitchen door to finally hear him, I found a familiar face—a nostalgic face. It was Botts, the chef I'd worked alongside at a restaurant before I moved on to the palace. I never would have expected Botts to be the head chef here. But with no time to reminisce, I explained the full particulars of what had brought me here.

I had an eventful time, and it seemed the same held true for Botts. The king had given me more than a few days away from the palace, so I considered taking my time talking with him once the party was over.

But we had no time to spare at the moment, so I returned to my prep work.

After some time, Master Yuna came asking if she could make pudding, so I gave her permission.

Botts seemed upset by that. But then, he knew nothing of Master Yuna. I remembered

being upset when Lady Flora had eaten Master Yuna's cooking, and I was told they would not require my services. Ah, what a time…

With the preparations finished, I got ready to leave and inform Lord Gran. Master Yuna planned to tell him about pudding, so the two of us went together. There we found Lord Gran and Lord Cliff discussing the next day's party.

"Master Zelef, my deepest of thanks. Now we will be able to have the party without worry."

"Not at all, Master Yuna asked me to do this. Please thank Master Yuna if you thank anyone."

Master Yuna blinked. "Hm? I don't need anybody thanking me. You could be thinking about countermeasures for tomorrow—that's more important." She didn't seem to fully understand what it meant for the head chef of the castle to be here. Well, I suppose that was just like her.

"Yes, we've discussed who we will prioritize talking to…"

"Not that," Yuna interrupted. "I mean, don't you think that the Salbards will try something?"

"We can't do much about that. The Salbards already have several followers. We will likely have to give up on them."

Master Yuna sighed. "Um, like I said, I don't mean that either."

"You think he will 'try something?' We have food to serve thanks to Master Zelef. What could they try?"

"He might put bugs or junk in the food and complain or something?"

"You think he would really do that?!"

"If he's trying to upset you, that'd be a way to do it. Why *wouldn't* he?"

I could not believe the absurdity of Master Yuna's words. If he put bugs and rubbish into finished food and complained, that would be an act of stark culinary cruelty to any chef. I wanted to believe that he wouldn't do that, no matter how their relationship

had soured.

“Oh, and he could complain about the food tasting bad because he knows there’s a different chef, couldn’t he? Gran said you were already turned down by a really good chef, weren’t you?”

“That is true, but I doubt they would say that after tasting anything cooked by Master Zelef, the head chef of the palace himself.”

“But he has no idea that Zelef is cooking the food.”

“That *is* true.”

From there, Master Yuna told us many things. “If he were going to try upsetting you, isn’t that the way to do it?” Still, it seemed so strange to me. To even consider that someone might put rubbish or bugs in food on purpose…

But Lord Gran and Lord Cliff agreed that the horror was possible. As a chef, the very concept was abhorrent.

“If someone were to complain about the food,” Master Yuna said, “we’d just need Zelef to step up.”

Me? Face up against a noble? I had been given the position of head chef of the palace, but I was still no aristocrat. If anything, my position made me all the less willing to misuse the authority of the royal family. I had no interest in putting on airs.

Master Yuna saw it differently. “You need to be angry when someone insults your food. It’s insulting to the people who enjoyed your food, don’t you think? I mean, because it *does* taste good. You got here because everyone’s acknowledged your skills, Zelef, right? The king and queen, Lady Flora, and all the people who made you head chef of the palace all think your food is delicious. And the Salbards are going to insult every single one of those people by insulting your food,” she told me.

I suppose she was right. It was the same as insulting the king’s own palate. That held true for the previous head chef, who relinquished his position to me and acknowledged my skills, and to all who studied under me. If anyone denounced me, then he denounced everyone else.

In that moment, I felt my entire view of the world change. I made sure to carve Master

Yuna's words deep into my heart.

Then Master Yuna informed me how to deal with someone else trying to upset us.

On the day of the party, I cooked and cooked.

We still hadn't heard anything from the venue right then; if there was any commotion concerning the food, I was to come running immediately. It seemed that things were likely to end without any of Master Yuna's fears coming into being.

I gave instructions to the aides. Unlike the palace's kitchen, I felt little sense of urgency, but we were all moving quickly enough.

When we were midway thought the party, a woman ran into the kitchen.

"Chef Zelef, Lord Gajurdo has spoken about your cooking… and criticized it," she said. She seemed reluctant to tell me.

Things really *had* come to pass like Master Yuna predicted. Had I not been ready for it, I might've rushed over to apologize. "I see. I understand."

With that, I put a halt to the cooking and headed to the party. When I peered in through a crack in the door, Lord Gran was arguing with a man. Lord Gajurdo of the Salbard family, perhaps.

I could hear the others around claiming the food was terrible and that the seasoning was second rate and third rate and such. Though I knew that they were just saying such things to be cruel, it still stung. I could understand right now what Master Yuna had meant. I needed to be upset for the sake of the royal family, those who knew and loved my food.

I took a deep breath and made my entrance.

"Pardon me. I am Zelef, and I have had the opportunity to cook the meals for this party. Was the food not to your liking?" Master Yuna told me to act angry when I said it, but no acting was required. The rage seeped into my voice.

"You were the one who made this meal?!"

“Yes, I was given the honor of cooking it.”

“How could you serve something so disgusting?” Lord Gajurdo said and pointed at my food.

It was the soup I had spent a great deal of time working on since yesterday. Disgusting? After all that time, he called it *disgusting?* Yes, there was no need to *act* angry.

As Lord Gajurdo shouted at me, I asked him directly, “Would you be so kind as to tell me what aspect of the flavor you did not care for? I shall use it as reference for the employer I serve.”

Master Yuna had told me yesterday not to apologize for the taste of my food. If Master Yuna hadn’t, I likely would have let Lord Gajurdo get away with it.

“All of it was terrible. Seems your employer doesn’t know much. I can’t believe he’d be happy with this cooking. It seems the Fahrengram family has fallen quite far to leave things to a chef like you.”

“I see. Then I shall inform my employer—that is, I shall inform His Majesty.”

“His… Majesty?” Lord Gajurdo froze.

The people around us stirred. “Yes, right. I thought I’d seen him somewhere before.”

“That’s the head chef of the palace, Master Zelef…”

It seemed that there were people around who knew who I was. When I cooked, I greeted everyone at the end, so they might’ve seen me then.

“You’re the head chef of the palace…”

“Yes. I am Zelef, and I am employed as the head chef of the palace. Would you be kind enough to inform me what about my meal was not to your liking? I cannot serve meals that are not up to snuff for His Majesty, who always enjoys my cooking so very much.”

Using the royal family’s influence like this made me uncomfortable indeed, but I could not back down. I could not insult the royal family so.

“That…” Lord Gajurdo stammered.

“I wouldn’t mind an explanation from you either,” I said to the man beside him. “In what way is the flavor third-rate? It would be *such* a help if you were to let me know.”

“No, I…”

“No, please! Weren’t you just making a fuss about how terrible the food tasted? Just tell me what you meant, won’t you? I simply cannot serve His Majesty food that is not up to snuff.”

The anger from these insults to my food was bad enough. But even if His Majesty didn’t know it, the wrath boiling inside of me at these guests that dared to snub him refused to evaporate.

It was pure deception on their part. When I thought about how this could have happened to another chef, I felt even angrier. If the food was truly terrible, then so be it. But if a chef were misled, were told that a truly delicious meal was terrible, their life’s work might be led astray. These people—these enemies to the chefs of the world—could not conceive of the gravity of their crime.

I glared at the person who claimed my cooking was terrible.

“No, um…”

“I will use it as reference next time, so please, *do tell me*,” I asked, staring daggers at the man.

“Ahem, ahem!” One of the attendees broke into a cough and bowed his head. “Master Zelef, I am so sorry. I actually have a cold. It seems that my palate has been off.”

“Oh, has it?”

“Yes, Lord Gran informed me that there was something terribly important he wanted to consult with me about, so I attended despite having a cold. Isn’t that right, Lord Gran?” The attendee looked at Lord Gran, seeming to seek help.

“Yes,” said Lord Gran. “I had something terribly important to talk about with him, so I asked him to attend.”

“Lord Gran, I am not feeling well, so if we could please hasten the meeting?”

“Why, of course.”

After bowing his head to me, the attendee headed to Lord Gran. “Please, do take care of yourself.”

Exactly as Master Yuna had predicted.

She had told me that if I questioned them like this, there would be three options for them: they would keep quiet and have nothing to say, would run to Lord Gran, or would blame Lord Gajurdo.

If they ran to Lord Gran, she said, there was no need to pursue them.

Despite knowing that the man had lied, I managed to follow Master Yuna’s directions. I really would have liked to question him further, but Lord Gajurdo was the one to compel him to tell such lies about my food.

Eventually, the other guests also started to move about.

“Master Zelef, I also was not feeling well and could not taste the food properly. I came to speak to Lord Gran about something important as well. May I go to speak to Lord Gran before I begin feeling worse?”

“Please take care of yourself.”

“Thank you.”

Another person left, and another.

I hadn’t paid much attention to it until now, but it seemed that the title of head chef of the palace held some influence. I acquired my current position because I’d made food for my fellows since I was a youth. I hadn’t spared a moment’s thought for my position or for my influence. I simply made delicious meals. I absolutely did not think of myself as better than the aristocrats.

However, I couldn’t forgive anyone who insulted all those people who had recognized and admired my own skills. The entire royal family… all the people who had eaten my food… they had all said that it was delicious. There was Master Yuna, too, who believed I was a first-rate chef. I couldn’t let anyone lie about or disparage my meals.

I took a step toward Lord Gajurdo. The others coughed as they quietly stepped away from him, leaving him behind so he was the only one left.

"Lord Gajurdo, would you please inform me what about my food was not to your liking? I will use it for reference for the future."

"Wh-what would you, the head chef of the palace, be doing in a place like this, Master Zelef? Does His Majesty know you are here?"

"Why, of course His Majesty knows that I'm here. But you see, I came for personal reasons. The lord's chef here is a dear old friend."

I couldn't claim that this was His Majesty's order.

"An old friend?"

"Yes, Lord Gran's chef, Botts, worked with me at a restaurant in the capital. The Falcon's Claw. Are you familiar?"

"I…"

"Furthermore, I was asked by Lord Cliff's wife, Lady Ellelaura, to come here to cook for this party. I received permission from the king to take time away."

"You came running here just because the chef got himself injured? That's impossible… you… couldn't have had the time to…!"

"Pardon my asking, but were you already aware that Chef Botts was injured, Lord Gajurdo?"

"No, I was not. I only found out because Master Gran brought it up earlier."

"I see. If you *did* know he was injured, and knew of any witnesses, I would've hoped you'd inform us."

"I'm terribly sorry that I could be of no help."

"No need to apologize. It seems that he was assaulted in a place with few people around."

When I mentioned that the chef was attacked, a commotion ran through the place. According to Master Yuna and the others, Lord Gajurdo was undoubtably the one to injure Botts. He knew about Botts's injuries, so he must've been.

He had injured a chef's arms—their most important tools. Botts had told me he would heal and be just fine, but he wouldn't be able to hold a kitchen knife for a while yet.

"Master Zelef, please don't misunderstand. It wasn't that the food wasn't actually good. It was very good."

"But I heard you say that it was terrible, Lord Gajurdo. And several in attendance said the same. I am not complaining about you in particular. However, as a chef, if someone complains about my cooking, then I must apologize to them, for I am the person primarily responsible for the food. In order to do that, I would need to know what *about* the food was so terrible."

I looked straight at Lord Gajurdo. He kept trying to open his mouth and say something, but nothing came out. Then finally…

"Master Zelef, I apologize. It seems that I was also not feeling well," he said, and looked over at Lord Gran, who was speaking with someone some distance away. "Master Gran, I am feeling unwell, so I believe I shall take my leave, if I may?"

"Why of course. I apologize for asking you to come here while you were unwell. As a fellow lord, I hope that you take care of yourself."

"Well, Master Zelef, if you'll excuse me…" To Lord Gajurdo's irritation, Lord Gran hadn't batted an eye. Lord Gajurdo bit his lip firmly.

I treated him in the same manner. "I hope that you can enjoy my food when you are well. I would love to get your opinion."

Lord Gajurdo called for a young boy—his son, perhaps. He didn't hide his chagrin as he glared at the others around him before leaving.

"Everyone, I am sorry for the commotion," I said. "Though it is far earlier than planned, I would like to offer you all some pudding, which was offered at His Majesty's birthday party as a palate cleanser. I shall continue to make full use of my skills to serve you, so please enjoy."

Master Yuna left the timing of the pudding to me. Though I really wanted to serve it a little later, I thought this would work better.

I took off my hat, bowed, then left the place.

A great deal of applause followed me.

CHAPTER 198
GAJURDO IS ENRAGED

I PAID THE Bornardt firm a pretty penny to force out that Trade Guild master.

In return, we would buy all commodities exclusively from traders belonging to the Bornardt firm. We would buy it all, and they would not sell a single thing to the territories Gran managed. It was a splendid success, so much so that Gran's territories had no commodities while sales in my territory skyrocketed. At this rate, it was just a matter of time until this whole town would be mine.

I received an invitation from Gran.

Ha! Looked like he wasn't giving up, even now. Not only did I have the Trade Guild in the palm of my hands, I had several influential people in town under my thumb. It was too late for Gran's little party at this point… but then again, one can never be too careful.

I heard an unpleasant rumor that he'd hired the associate head chef at a famous restaurant at the capital. But… let's say that chef wasn't able to cook. I could just imagine Gran panicking. A party without any food? It brought a smile to my face.

I immediately called for Brad, my bodyguard, and instructed him to *prevent* the Fahrengrams from serving food at the celebration.

"Are you sure you don't want me to snuff him, sir?"

"Snuff him? Of course not. Why, they'd use that as an excuse to cancel the party. All you need to do is bang up his arm a little, so he can't cook. And time it carefully; attack him as close to the time of the party as possible. They won't be able to find a new chef."

"As you wish." Brad withdrew.

He was a C-Rank adventurer. He caught my eye when he was having a brawl with

another adventurer at the capital. He kept hitting the adventurer even as they were pleading for him to stop, begging for forgiveness. I looked into him and found he was a rather *problematic* fellow. He was ordinarily a mild-mannered man, but all sense of reason flew out the window when he caught sight of his own blood. He became a brute with no control. Because of that, despite his capabilities, he couldn't join any party. I wanted him on hand, so I beckoned him to join me. He was ready to do so.

The man had grown tired of adventuring, so I told him that he could join me until he grew bored.

Brad was most useful. He followed my instructions to the letter. Though there was something off about the man, he was a great adventurer in his own right and had reached C-Rank without a party. Lately, I was using him to attack the merchants who refused to do my bidding. Things were going swimmingly, and no one suspected a thing. Surely the fates were smiling on me, to gift me with such a perfect pawn. And once he was no longer useful, I could dispose of him. No matter how formidable he was, I had several methods of killing him.

A few days before the party, I received a report from Brad. He had injured the chef's arms and rendered the man unable to cook. Gran wouldn't be able to use the chef on his service. I couldn't stop smiling. Ah, imagining Gran scrambling to fix this had me positively beaming.

However, there were still a few days before the party. He would likely try to hire another chef into his service, but he wouldn't have enough time to seek one from out of town. If he were to find someone, he would need to hire someone nearby.

Before Gran could begin his search, I threatened or arranged bribes for the prominent chefs. I didn't need to do that for all of them, either; if he called in the second-rate and third-rate chefs, that would be all the better for me. I had all manners of methods of driving Gran into a corner.

Just as I anticipated, reports came in of Gran attempting to bring in other chefs. Of course, all of them turned him down. Now all he could do was rely on the second- and third-rate ones.

But Fochrosé of Crimonia's entrance might mean trouble. I placed people on Gran's residence and ordered them to attack anyone heading for Crimonia.

My predictions were perfectly right: someone sent a horse heading for Crimonia. Fortunately, the horse was shot with an arrow, and it was no longer capable of travel. That was good enough. If we mistakenly killed the envoy, it would become a whole affair. All I needed to do was prevent them from making food for the party.

On the day of the party, I headed to Gran's residence. It was, infuriatingly, just about the size of mine. The old thought crossed my mind once more: *this town only has room for one lord's estate*. On his deathbed, my father told me to get along with the Fahrengrams, but why would I? No other lords or nobles were insulted by the prospect of having to rule jointly over one town with another household. I would run him out as quickly as I could.

I would make this *my* town.

When I reached the venue, people had gathered. The merchants scurried over to me at once—those little nobodies who threw themselves at me, my valuable pawns who obeyed me as readily as my very hands. I dealt with them as they came and headed to Gran. This would be his last party in this house, so I supposed that I might as well give him his final goodbyes. When I saw his placid face, I almost broke out into a smile.

So dumb, so soft—*far* too soft. Like my father in that way. Trusting everyone.

Easy marks.

After I finished with the pleasantries, I left Gran. I needed to watch who would talk to him. The one that spelled the most trouble was likely Crimonia's lord, from the Fochrosé household. He'd recently built up a relationship with Mileela and was gathering influence. I ordered the Merchant Guild to have any merchants heading to Crimonia obtain information on that, but… none of their reports made sense. They'd spout nonsense about a bear statue in front of a tunnel, gigantic bear statues in Mileela's seaport, a bear shop, a bear adventurer. Most of all, they told me not to "defy the bear."

Whatever *that* nonsense meant. I could launch a proper investigation into Crimonia after I took it for myself. Power flowed from wealth; I needed to keep my eyes on the merchants coming in from Crimonia, not some weirdo in a bear suit. All was falling

into place. I couldn't let anyone get in the way.

Once I finished speaking with Gran, the food was brought in. I was trying to imagine what cruddy food they'd serve, but it looked and smelled delicious. Was there even a chef in this town who could cook like this? How? And why weren't they *mine*?

The chef couldn't have recovered, could he?

No, never. I had my underlings look into it and the chef was still injured without a doubt. I got a report that he wouldn't be able to cook. But either the report had been false, or he had healed to the point he could cook again. Which one?

The food tasted as delicious as it smelled. Where had they brought in a chef talented enough to make food as good as this? I'd need to punish the lookout I assigned to this place.

I thought that the food wouldn't be all that great, so I'd be able to insult it. This was much better than I anticipated.

It seemed that I'd need to observe for a while.

Soon enough, I had my fill of the food as I greeted people. More people streamed in to greet me.

After all, any half-witted dope knew which side would be most advantageous. The only ones siding with Gran were the idiots. I decided to leave the details for tomorrow and dispensed with the pleasantries. When I happened to look at the door, I saw a man peering into the party. He had a bandage around his arm.

This was the red-headed man from the reports—Gran's chef. He was clearly still injured. Who was the chef, then? I had no idea, but they had to be extraordinary.

I wasn't happy to learn that such a chef was helping Gran. Perhaps I would hire him later for myself. For now, I would make him rue the day he decided to help Gran.

Since I confirmed he had a different cook, it was about time to ruin this party. I signaled to those around me.

"I can't bear it anymore. What is this food?!" I yelled. Silence fell. The aforementioned merchants began to agree with me, admonishing the food just as I had. The complaints

steadily spread.

Gran attempted to approach me, the fool. I simply needed to ruin the party to end things for him.

Once I insulted the food and told them that the chef was clearly a different person, Gran straightforwardly confirmed it with me. Anyone else would've either lied or kept quiet about that. When I pressed him to bring the chef out, he didn't even try to bargain—it was as though he didn't even know how! What a dreary man.

I was unilaterally levying my complaints at him when a man wearing a chef's uniform entered.

Hm? Where had I seen *him* before? I couldn't recall. Perhaps at some restaurant…

"Pardon me. I am Zelef and I have had the opportunity to cook the meals for this party. Was the food not to your liking?"

So this was the man, then. What a waste to crush a chef like him. Still, plans are machines that must move without hesitation.

I thought he'd apologize when I complained, but he didn't. Instead, he had the gall to ask what about the food was terrible. Normally, if a noble declared it to be so, even a delicious meal would become as good as hovel.

Did he not know his place? Did he not understand the difference between the aristocracy and line cooks? "All of it was terrible. Seems your employer doesn't know much. I can't believe he'd be happy with this cooking. It seems the Fahrengram family has fallen quite far to leave things to a chef like you."

"I see. Then I shall inform my employer—that is, I shall inform His Majesty."

"His… Majesty?" Wait, what? Had he just said *His Majesty*?

The place stirred slightly. Then someone said, "Yes, right. I thought I'd seen him somewhere before."

"That's the head chef of the palace, Master Zelef…"

"You're the head chef of the palace…" I whispered.

Promptly, the man reintroduced himself. “Yes. I am Zelef, and I am employed as the head chef of the palace. Would you be kind enough to inform me what about my meal was not to your liking? I cannot serve meals that are not up to snuff for His Majesty, who always enjoys my cooking so very much.”

What was the head chef of the palace doing here? It was preposterous. Unbelievable.

While I floundered for a response, the head chef began to question the people who had joined me in insulting him. He didn’t appear angry, but he made it clear he would not take any ambiguous answers.

“No, please! Weren’t you just making a fuss about how terrible the food tasted? Just tell me what you meant, won’t you? I simply cannot serve His Majesty food that is not up to snuff.”

One of the little toadies who had been supporting me looked at me with an inquiring look, as if asking me what to do.

Why look to *me?* I hadn’t the faintest idea.

I turned away, then the man started to cough. Suddenly the man was claiming he had a cold, which supposedly changed his palate, and he ran off. To make matters worse, he ran to *Gran*, of all people. What treachery! Not that I could say anything about it right then.

The others began to flee too, like rats from a sinking ship. Lying and coughing and running to Gran—damn it all, why had things turned out like this?!

“Wh-what would you, the head chef of the palace, be doing in a place like this, Master Zelef? Does His Majesty know you are here?”

If His Majesty knew, it could be a problem. How *much* did His Majesty know?

“Why, of course His Majesty knows that I’m here. But you see, I came for personal reasons. The lord’s chef here is a dear old friend.”

Friends? So he hadn’t come on His Majesty’s orders. That was a small relief, but it didn’t change the fact that I had denounced the palace chef’s food. When I pressed him for more details, it seemed that this had happened at Ellelaura of the Fochrosé family’s suggestion. Of course it was the Fochrosés.

But there was something peculiar about it all. This place was nowhere near the capital. They shouldn't have made it in time, no matter how quickly they rushed after learning of the other chef's injury.

"You came running here just because the chef got himself injured? That's impossible… you… couldn't have had the time to…!"

"Pardon my asking, but were you already aware that Chef Botts was injured, Lord Gajurdo?"

He heard me muttering to myself. "No, I was not. I only found out because Master Gran brought it up earlier."

Damn it all, this would be tricky. I must have raised his suspicions.

"I see. If you did know he was injured, and knew of any witnesses, I would've hoped you'd inform us."

"I'm terribly sorry that I could be of no help."

"No need to apologize. It seems that he was assaulted in a place with few people around."

When Zelef said the word "assaulted," the place stirred. If anyone had heard what I just said, they would likely begin to suspect me. Damn it all. The palace chef was going to undo all my hard work…

It was all his fault, this Zelef before me. Vitriol bubbled inside of me. One single chef had crushed all my grand goals.

"Master Zelef, please don't misunderstand. It wasn't that the food wasn't actually good. It was very good."

"But I heard you say that it was terrible, Lord Gajurdo. And several in attendance said the same. I am not complaining about you in particular. However, as a chef, if someone complains about my cooking, then I must apologize to them, for I am the person primarily responsible for the food. In order to do that, I would need to know what about the food was so terrible."

Damn it. Even if I had to try, I knew it was no use praising his food at this juncture.

Earlier, I spoke loudly so the others in my vicinity could hear my complaints. But now I couldn't claim the food was terrible; that would be the same as insulting the king's own palate, or even the taste of the whole royal family.

I should have done more research. How in the world had he made it all the way from the capital? It was unbelievable, given the time they had. All I could do was make an excuse, just like the man who fled to Gran.

"Master Zelef, I apologize. It seems that I was also not feeling well."

I pained me, but I had to withdraw. I apologized to Gran and took my son to leave. No one followed. I bit my lip so hard I could taste blood.

"Father." My son was looking at me, but I couldn't deal with him now.

"We're going home."

"Father!"

"Shut up!" If that fussy boy didn't shut his trap, I'd *make* him.

Once we returned to the residence and I retired to my room, I screamed. "Rubbish, rubbish, *rubbish*! The head chef of the palace?! How? And those damned merchants… they were buttering me up moments before, and then they ran off to Gran!"

Just recalling it made my blood boil. Ungrateful slime!

Yes, it seemed as though the plan really was the Fochrosé family's doing—Cliff and Ellelaura both. They got in my way. If only they hadn't been there, my plans would've been a success. The mere thought of that blond man's face drew my ire. Once I dealt with Gran, he was next.

"Father!"

"Oh, Randle. Are you still here?"

"What are you saying? Why did we leave? He was just a chef, wasn't he?"

“He’s the head chef of the palace. He is no ordinary chef. Whatever he feeds to His Majesty’s ears could ruin the Salbard family’s image.”

“That’s no reason to let him trample over you. It’s not like you, Father.”

“Randle, please pay more attention to our position.”

My son seemed to believe that everything would go as he wished—he had little discipline. I had indeed taught the boy that the aristocracy stood at the top, but I never expected him to mistake the head chef of the palace for a mere cook. It seemed as though he didn’t know who not to cross—him, fourteen and ignorant of such a vital role? Oh, for God’s sake…

“Father, are you just going to leave things be?”

“We’ll observe for a while. Our course has changed because of tonight. Many people might have joined Gran.”

“In that case, you should threaten them again or let our money do the talking.”

“I can’t make any moves until Zelef, that palace chef, leaves.”

I couldn’t cause an uproar. If the king heard of it, we would be in trouble. Now was not the time to make a move. I would have a chance soon.

I told my son not to cause any trouble and shooed him from my room.

CHAPTER 199
THE BEAR PLAYS OTHELLO

EVEN IF WE WANTED to help with Gran's party at the estate, Fina and I couldn't do much considering we didn't know the first thing about parties. The maids and servants were super busy receiving the guests. If they caught me anywhere near the party in my onesie, it'd be a huge deal, so we stayed cooped up in the room to make sure we weren't in the way.

"Not much to do."

"Yes," said Fina. "In Crimonia, I could have done work, helped out at the orphanage, or helped Morin and Anz at the shop."

Work, work, work. Fina worked too much. She needed to have fun every once in a while. "In that case, how about we play a game?"

"A game?"

I nodded, moved to the top of the bed, and called Fina over. The table was a little too big and inconvenient for a face-to-face game, after all. I told Fina to sit in front of me and pulled out a board with lines drawn on it, and two small boxes.

"It's a game called Othello."

I handed one of the small boxes to Fina. I opened the one I still held. Fina mimicked me and opened hers. There were round game pieces inside. There was one thing that was different about these Othello pieces compared to the ones in my original world. Those were normal black-and-white pieces. Instead, these were illustrated with black and white bears.

“Ooo, they have bears drawn on the front and the back. They’re cute.” Fina turned them over, beaming. “How do we play with these?”

“Well, it’s a game about competing for spaces. Fina, do you want the white bear or the black bear?”

She looked at each of the bear colors several times, comparing them. “I can’t choose. The black bear is pretty much Kumayuru, and the white bear is Kumakyu. I can’t choose between those two.”

I couldn’t either. The bears on the game pieces weren’t actually supposed to be my bears. They were cartoonified bear faces. But even if they weren’t supposed to be my bears, if I chose one, the other might end up sulking. That was why I *wanted* Fina to choose, but it looked like she was facing the same predicament.

“In that case, how about we take turns using them?”

“Okay.”

My usual bear-rotation system worked again. It’s important to treat everyone as equals, after all.

“Okay, I’ll explain the rules. First, you put the pieces down in the middle of these boxes like this.”

I placed two of the black bear pieces in the center of the board so they formed a diagonal.

“You put the white bears down in the same pattern, Fina.”

Fina did so. As an example of what to do, I placed a black bear so that one of the white bears was sandwiched by my pieces, then I flipped the white piece.

“You put a white piece down so that your pieces surround a black bear too, Fina.”

“Can I put it down anywhere?”

“As long as it’s right next to a black bear. But you have to put it down so that you’re sandwiching your opponent’s pieces.”

Fina put a white piece down so it sandwiched my black piece. With that, the black bear was flipped.

“We take turns putting down pieces like this. In the end, the person with more of their color on the board wins.”

“I’ve got it.”

We started an Othello competition to kill the time.

I actually wanted to make playing cards, but I was still struggling with how to draw the kings, queens, and jacks. I was considering making the actual king and queen into the playing card king and queen, with Lady Flora featured as the jack. But, if I was going to play with them in Crimonia, I figured it might be better to use local people like Cliff, Ellelaura, and Noa. Maybe my bears would become the jokers?

Fina and I passed the time playing Othello, eating the pudding we made yesterday, and having some pizza—we hadn’t had pizza in a while, after all.

Right around the time I thought the party was ending, Noa and Misa came into the room wearing beautiful dresses. Noa was in red; it looked great with her shiny golden hair. Misa was wearing a dress that was kind of an aqua color, which went great with her own silver hair. I remembered that Fina was also going to wear a dress for Misa’s birthday party, and I was looking forward to that one too.

“You both look cute,” I said.

“Thank you, Yuna!”

“Did the party go all right?”

Based on their smiles, it looked like nothing bad had happened. I thought that noble would give them trouble, but I guess things hadn’t gone as I predicted.

“Zelef was so cool.”

Noa and Misa told me about what happened at the party.

I knew it—that noble, he complained about the food. Guess we could be grateful that he hadn't snuck junk into the party food, too. Just hearing what had happened, it seemed like the guy was a stereotypical jerk of a noble. I couldn't believe he had the guts to eat Zelef's food and call it bad. Sure, he hadn't known Zelef was the cook, but it still made wonder if he had *any* sense of taste.

"Thanks to Zelef, Randle left with his dad. I was so, so happy," Misa told me excitedly.

Randle… right, that idiot who tried to start a fight with me. Well, I guess no one would be able to enjoy the party with someone like him around. That's the difference a good parent makes, I suppose. I looked at the three girls. Hopefully they'd stay on the right track.

"But he was glaring at us when he left, which was a little frightening," said Misa.

"He was glaring because he was upset," said Noa.

I guess it'd be best if we kept our guards up for a while. It was normal for people like them to hold grudges. He'd probably pick another fight if he ran into any of us again.

After that, Misa and Noa excitedly told me what happened after the Salbards left.

"Also, there was the pudding we made. Everyone looked like they enjoyed it!"

"But everyone believed Zelef made it. Even though we worked so hard…"

They both seemed a little upset.

"Well, there's not much we can do about that. Everyone enjoyed the pudding, right?"

"Yeah! They were all saying how much they loved it while they ate it."

Even if they couldn't get credit, they seemed happy that people liked their pudding. And Zelef's food had gotten a nice reception, too. I hadn't wanted to go to the party proper, but I wanted to try some of Zelef's party food sometime. Would he make some for me if I asked?

"You and Fina should have come too," Noa said. Fina and I shared forced smiles.

I didn't want to go to a party full of aristocrats and bigwigs. I'd probably be so worried

about the stares coming from around me that I wouldn't be able to enjoy my meal. Also, I didn't know the etiquette. Fina probably felt the same. Most important of all, I couldn't just wear a bear outfit to that.

I realized something while Noa and the others were talking: I hadn't asked what Zelef's plans were. Did he need to get back to the capital right away? Misa's party would be in two days, and I'd kind of have a problem if he said he needed to head back tomorrow. I decided to check in with Zelef about that.

I headed to the kitchen in search of him and found a maid cleaning up, but no sign of the chef in question. When I asked the busy maid where he was, she told me that Gran might have called Zelef.

Gran called him?

Hmm, I didn't know what to do. I wondered whether he was in the room Cliff and Gran had met up in before.

"Mademoiselle Yuna, what are you doing in a place like this?"

"Meishun?"

When I turned around, I found Meishun bussing the plates and stuff they'd used at the party.

"I needed to talk to Zelef a little. Apparently, Gran already called him in for something."

"After the party ended, Lord Gran did indeed call Master Zelef in. I believe he was called into the room that I led you to the other day."

Now that I knew where Zelef was, I headed over at once.

"Miss, what is the matter?"

I found Zelef and Gran in the room. I didn't see Cliff anywhere.

“I was hoping to ask Zelef what his plans were,” I said.

“My plans?”

“Yeah. You don’t need to head back to the capital right away, do you? If we could, I’d like to stay until Misa’s birthday party is over.”

“Is Lady Misana having a party?”

“In two days. I’d like to head back to the capital after that’s over.”

“In that case, by all means. I have permission from His Majesty to do so. In addition, it’s been some time since I’ve had a conversation with Botts.”

“Thank you.”

“In that case, I would like to take on the task of cooking for Lady Misana’s party.”

“Are you sure?” Gran was the one to speak up there, not me.

“Yes. It seems that Botts likely won’t be able to cook for some time. Please think of the food as a present from me,” Zelef said.

“Thank you.” Gran bobbed his head.

Oh, looks like I actually *would* be trying some of Zelef’s party food. Now that kind of made me happy.

“I heard from Noa and Misa that you were vital tonight, Zelef. Is that true?”

“Not at all. When someone claimed my food tasted terrible, I simply asked them to elaborate. And that was all thanks to what you told us, Master Yuna.”

“What I told you?”

“That it would be a discourtesy to the people who enjoy my food to acknowledge someone’s insults.”

I suppose I *had* said that.

“When I thought that over,” Zelef continued, smiling, “I felt like he was denouncing His Majesty, everyone who has cooked alongside me, and anyone who has said they enjoyed my cooking. That made me a little upset.”

I hadn’t wanted to attend the party, but I kind of wished I’d seen Zelef do that. “Still, I’m glad that the party ended without anything bad happening.”

“That’s all because you brought Master Zelef here, Miss,” said Gran. “I am truly grateful.”

“Well, that silly noble’s son did kind of get on my nerves.”

“I believe that the two of them will quiet down considering the events that have transpired.”

Gran would have his work cut out for him while they were lying low.

Once I went back to my room after my conversation with Zelef, I found the three girls still playing with the Othello board I’d left out. And on top of that, Noa and Misa were still in their party dresses.

I really wished they’d change before playing games.

CHAPTER 200
THE BEAR REUNITES WITH THE ADVENTURERS

THE DAY AFTER Gran's party, Gran and Cliff came to the room with Misa in tow to formally thank me.

I heard some stuff yesterday from Noa and Gran. It seemed that the party was a huge success thanks to Zelef. Tons of merchants and bigwigs had decided to hear Gran out.

Apparently, a ton of people were asking about Zelef. I guess sketchy people *would* ask questions if the head chef of the palace just showed up. If it seemed like the king was going to get involved, none of them likely wanted to be on Gran's bad side. Nobody would be dumb enough to oppose the king. They were probably trying to gather info.

Gran's story was that, with Zelef and Botts being friends, Ellelaura had asked for a favor to get him to come here, using her authority as the lady of the Fochrosé family and her position in the capital. They weren't telling anyone that I was the one to ask.

Besides, even if they did say that the bear brought him over, most people wouldn't know what that meant. Since I personally didn't want to get involved with anything annoying, it was fine by me.

Apparently, the pudding was all the rage at the party too. And someone knew about my shop in Crimonia as well.

One of them had whispered to Gran, "Do you happen to know the bear?" And Gran had answered, "Yes, she's a friend of my granddaughter." That seemed to have startled them. I kind of wanted to know what was so surprising about it.

A weird thing to whisper, honestly. Though I'd prefer that to shouting.

"Yuna," Cliff said, "I need to help Gran for a while, so if you could watch over Noa for me. If she makes a fuss, you can force her to stay in her room."

“I wouldn’t make a fuss,” Noa proclaimed.

“Then you won’t cause any trouble when it comes to anything bear related?”

“Well…” Noa hemmed.

Wait, what was that about bear-related things and trouble?

“You already promised,” Cliff warned.

“You’re so mean, Father.” Noa pouted slightly.

Gran would leave Misa with me, too, but…”Just to make sure, we’re okay when it comes to that dumb aristocrat, right?”

“I think he won’t cause trouble for a while,” said Cliff.

“The Salbards are unlikely to cause trouble as long as Master Zelef is around. If Master Zelef happened to tell the king anything about them, they’re aware that there would be consequences.”

It almost sounded like Zelef’s word held more weight than that of Cliff or Gran. “So we can go out? I was thinking of walking around town this time.” I could manage if I was alone, but if I wanted to walk around town, I knew the little ones would want to come along.

“I want to go too!” Noa said promptly. Misa and Fina said the same thing a split second later. “We’re in another town, after all,” Noa added. “Father, seeing lots of other towns is part of my studies, isn’t it? You *do* always say that, don’t you?”

“I do, but…” Cliff looked at his daughter thoughtfully. He looked over at me next. “Can you promise you’ll stick by Yuna?”

“Yes!”

“Yuna, can I leave my daughter in your hands? If she wanders off without permission, I’m sorry, but I’d need to ask you to bring her back home. If that happens, make sure to lock her away in her room.”

I didn’t mind escorting her, but trying to find Noa if she wandered off sounded like a

pain to me. “Noa, can you stay behind in your room?”

“Yuna, that’s so mean. I won’t wander off on my own.”

“Okay, okay. You *absolutely* can’t leave my side though, got that?”

“Grandfather…” When she saw that I was taking Noa with me, Misa also started to petition Gran.

“Hm. Miss, would you be able to watch her like you’re watching Miss Noa?”

“Sure!”

Misa was now going with us too. I gave permission to Fina to come, too, so we all headed out together.

For the second time, I led the three girls out of the residence. We were interrupted last time, so I was hoping we’d be able to finally take our time. If the three of them weren’t with me, I actually wanted to go check out the Adventurers’ Guild, but it looked like I’d need to give up on that this round. It wasn’t like I was planning on picking up a quest, but I was thinking I might try to get one next time I was around. Could be something interesting, after all.

If I couldn’t go to the guild, I kind of wanted to see the places selling food. I wanted rarities, whether vegetable, meat, or fruit. I’d sometimes see things in this world that I’d barely ever seen in Japan. There were tons of things I hadn’t known about, like spicy foods and sweet fruits. I wanted to buy samples of those if they were around. But—putting Fina aside—Noa and Misa probably wouldn’t enjoy getting dragged to a place.

“Anywhere you want to go?”

The three of them looked at each other and brooded for a little before any of them said anything.

“I’m okay with anywhere.”

“Same here.”

“I’d like to go to the food stands again,” Misa said after a pause. “The food there when we went last time was very good. I don’t get to eat at those places often…”

“You don’t?” I guess the daughter of an aristocrat couldn’t just go for a stroll. Maybe she wasn’t able to go out because of that dumb noble? “Are you two okay with that too?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Yes.”

With a destination in mind, we headed to the plaza where the food stalls were.

“Do you normally eat at food stalls, Noa?”

“I do. I eat there a lot with my mother.” Huh. Ellelaura *did* seem like she’d be the type to take her daughter there. “Sometimes I even go on my own. But lately I’ve been going to your shop instead, Yuna.”

At first, I wondered if it was okay for a noble’s daughter to go out on her own, but I suppose that I’d seen Noa come by unattended. Her maid, Lala, sometimes came by to bring her back home. I guess there were a lot of different kinds of nobles in this other world.

“Noa, that’s so unfair. I’d like to go to Yuna’s shop too,” said Misa.

“I’ll take you there next time you’re in Crimonia.”

“Will you really? That’s a promise, then!” Misa was jubilant, but I wondered if she would really make it to Crimonia.

Once we got to the spot with the food stalls, we let Misa lead us around to what she wanted to eat.

All the people working the food stalls stared at me when they saw my outfit. *Yeah, I get it.* That happened last time I came here too. I ignored them and made my food orders. While I was looking around the plaza, I spotted some udon noodles.

Oooo, they had udon in this world? I guess all they needed to do was knead some wheat and cut it into thin strips, but still…

While I was deeply moved by my discovery, Fina said something absolutely ridiculous, "You can eat that at Anz's shop."

"Fina, my dear," I said. "What, pray tell, did you just say?"

"You can eat that at Anz's shop," Fina told me again very seriously, word for word.

"You're kidding, right?"

"The soup is different, but you can get it there to eat. You always eat rice when you go to Anz's shop, so you probably just didn't notice."

Oh. Uh. I mean, I never even gave the menu a glance when I went to Anz's shop, so she was probably right. I just focused on making orders that revolved around rice. I left the menu-making to Anz and Tiermina.

I never in my dreams would've thought that I'd be able to have udon at her shop. Maybe I'd try some when I got back. For the time being, I ordered the udon (*udooooon!)* before me. It was good, but the broth left something to be desired. Anz's would've used seaweed soup stock, so it'd probably be better. I really wanted to get home.

After eating the udon, we took a break at a bench—we were stuffed. That was when I saw two people I recognized.

"She really is here."

"She is."

Uhh, let's see… that was Marina, and the other one was a mage with huge boobs. She'd guarded Gran, and her name was… was…

She introduced herself before, but I'd only met her once, so I'd forgotten. Which was totally normal, and not insulting, and I decided not to feel bad about it.

“Hello Marina, Elle,” said Misa, saving my life.

Right. Yeah, it was Elle. That was her name. *Thanks for the Elle, Misa.*

“Lady Misana, it has been too long.” The two of them greeted Misa.

“What was that you said earlier?” I said. “You weren’t looking for me, were you?”

“Yes, since the guild was buzzing with talk about a girl in a bear outfit,” said Marina.

“Rumor has it the outfit was cute too,” Elle added.

“There were even a couple of people laughing about it.”

Elle tried to follow up with something nice, but Marina butted in with a joke.

“Well, *I* thought it was you right away, Yuna,” said Elle. “What are you doing with Lady Misana?”

“She invited me to her birthday party.”

“Her birthday party?” Marina looked at Misa.

“Uh-huh, I’m going to be ten.”

“Are you really? Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“So why were you two looking for me?” I asked.

“We weren’t, actually. We were just about to head out to exterminate some moles in the fields outside of town. That was when we spotted you in your bear outfit.”

“Moles… eating crops?” Like, *moles* moles? The ones that dig underground? According to Marina, the moles were eating the crops, so they needed to be dealt with. Is… is that a thing that moles do? Eat crops?

Was this really a job for an adventurer?

“Yes, they are,” said Elle.

“Of course, not all moles eat crops. But the ones that showed up have apparently been messing with them.”

“And so we’re about to head out and exterminate them.”

“Have you not seen a mole before, Yuna?” asked Marina.

“I haven’t.” I was a city girl born and raised, so I hadn’t had the opportunity to see any.

“There are huge ones like this.” Marina spread out her arms. Okay, nope, that was way too big to be a mole. Unless that was just how things were in this world, maybe?

Still, I couldn’t wrap my mind around adventurers exterminating moles. I guess there were a lot of odd jobs; it wasn’t all just slaying monsters and guarding people. I wondered how they were going to exterminate these moles, considering they’d probably be underground. All I could come up with was using earth magic.

I kind of wanted to see how they did it… but I guess that wasn’t going to happen with the three girls with me.

But when I looked at said girls, they seemed even more interested in seeing the moles than I was—or at least Noa and Misa were. Fina looked nonplussed. Guess that was the difference between nobles and the common folk.

“Yuna!” Misa and Noa tugged at my bear clothes.

Did they have to give me that look? They really seemed like they wanted to go.

“Are the fields far?” I asked.

“If you go out the gate and head to the right, you’ll see them right away.”

Close, then. “Would it be dangerous?”

“Of course not. There aren’t any monsters nearby, and the woods are far enough away that there aren’t even any animals. But for some reason, we’re still getting moles coming out of nowhere and destroying the crops.”

“Since food is vital to the towns, we adventurers sometimes exterminate the moles.”

Not dangerous and close by, then. “Do you all want to go?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go!”

Noa and Misa energetically responded.

Fina smiled and watched them. She kind of looked like the oldest one of the bunch, like she really had it together compared to them.

“Lady Misana,” said Marina, “it won’t be very interesting to watch. Elle will root out the moles from underground with her magic and I’ll exterminate them. That’s all we do.”

“So we can’t go?”

“Well, it’s not that you *can’t* go.” Marina looked at me helplessly.

“I’ll make sure to watch over them,” I said. “You two remember what Gran and Cliff said, right?”

“Yes,” said Misa.

“That we’re supposed to stick close to you, Yuna.” Noa hugged me.

Did she actually get what he meant though? That smile on her face made me wonder.

CHAPTER 201
THE BEAR HELPS EXTERMINATE MOLES

MISA HAPPILY WALKED next to Marina, who led the group on ahead. It seemed like she trusted Marina. When they'd been attacked by orcs, Marina hadn't run out on them. She'd protected Misa's carriage—guess that made her trustworthy.

"Where are the other members of your party?" I asked Marina. When they'd guarded Gran, there had been four of them. I didn't remember all their names though.

"Masrika and Itia are doing another job. Elle and I can handle this."

In fact, I bet they couldn't do this job without Elle. She was the mage, after all.

Once we were out of the gates, we walked for a while until we caught sight of the fields. They were pretty big. I could see a couple of farmers working the soil. Marina called out to them from behind, "Excuse me. We received a quest from the Adventurers' Guild because some moles appeared."

"So you've come? You'll be such a great help…" The man turned around and looked at Marina, but then immediately fixed a look on me. I was standing right behind her. "A bear?"

Marina glanced at me for a second. "Don't mind her." Sure, she was making things easier for me by moving the conversation along, but it felt rude.

But the man still seemed curious about me, and he kept glancing over. "And those children?" He looked at the girls next to me.

I guess that would catch his attention. Two adventurers, a girl in a bear outfit, and some kids? Not something you see every day.

"Please don't mind them either," said Marina. "Now, where did the moles appear?"

"I'd say… around thereabouts." The man turned away from us and pointed at the place. "They ruined quite a few of our crops, so we're counting on you."

Marina started walking in that direction. I used my detection skill to check whether there were monsters around. Just like Marina had said, I didn't detect any monster signals nearby. Unfortunately, as I expected, I couldn't detect any of the moles.

My skill only worked for monsters and people, and moles counted as animals. The only things I could see were the signals of the people working in the field. There were a lot of farmers, now that I took another look around. I didn't remember passing the person, but there was even someone behind me—I turned to look but didn't see them.

There was a giant tree where I saw the signals. I guess they were resting in the shade. Maybe they were even skipping out on work. Farming seemed pretty draining.

Once we got to the place that the man had indicated, Marina started issuing instructions. "It's around here. Elle, if you could? Please keep back slightly, Lady Misana. All of you."

"In that case, I'll look around." Elle started walking around the circumference of the field.

"There are a couple holes, aren't there?" I asked.

When I looked around the path Elle had walked, I did see things that looked like holes.

"How do you find the moles?" Misa asked Elle, seeming very curious.

"We use water magic to draw them out. I'll start doing that now, so please stay back slightly."

We gave Elle a little distance. After making sure we really had moved away, Elle brought her hands close to the hole and used magic. The water from Elle's hands flowed underground. Instead of being absorbed by the dirt, the water flowed right into the hole, filling it steadily.

As I watched, wondering what would happen, the water started to flow back up instead. Was she pulling back the water?

The three girls looked downright baffled.

"Now, the magic Elle is using is very difficult," Marina said, seeming proud as she explained to the three entranced girls.

“It is?” said Misa.

“Just producing water magic is easy. Manipulating the water? Not so much.”

I guess she was right. Just producing it was easy for me, too, but trying to manipulate a golem made from it was kind of advanced. I guess you’d need to really use your powers of imagination to do it.

“Marina, that’s enough talking,” said Elle. “They’re going to come out soon.”

Marina brandished her sword.

We looked at the hole.

“S-Something’s coming out from it!” Misa yelled right as something black that had been pulled with the water jumped out.

It was a mole, but it was a whole lot bigger than any of the moles I’d seen on TV. The moment the mole fell to the ground, Marina skewered it with her sword. It was dead, just like that. She did the same thing to the other two moles that came out of the hole.

“Three down.”

“That was pretty good work,” said Marina. “Okay, let’s go to the next hole.”

“Lady Misana, see?” said Elle, starting for the next hole. “It wasn’t all that interesting, right?”

Misa nodded. “I feel bad for the moles since they’re being killed, but I know that our food is important. And your magic was amazing, Elle.”

“Thank you, Lady Misana, but it wasn’t all that impressive.”

“But Marina just said that your magic is.”

“A little, maybe. But if I’m not touching the water I make with magic, I can’t manipulate it. Once I train more, I’ll be able to do this with the water even if I’m far away.”

Hm? Wait, did that mean my golem manipulation was impressive?

“So just consider it moderately impressive magic,” Elle said with a smile, bending down to get at Misa’s eye level. It really emphasized her giant boobs.

They were so huge. Someday—*someday* I’d be there…

After that, we started helping with the mole extermination.

Okay, I called it helping, but all we really did was look for holes. Since the gig was Marina and Elle’s, we didn’t help with the actual extermination bit.

“Marina, there’s a hole over here too,” Misa yelled from afar.

“Once we’re finished at this hole, we’ll be right over. Elle, let’s do this.”

Elle started using her magic and did the same thing as earlier.

By working together, we found the holes right away. But when the holes were really close together, we’d sometimes end up finding no moles. Still, things were going great.

“There are a lot more of them than I thought there would be, I have to say.”

“You’re right. We haven’t even looked through half the field yet and we’ve already found so many.”

I couldn’t speak to that, but I knew we’d already exterminated nearly thirty moles. That *seemed* like a lot.

“I wonder if there’s a big mole around,” Elle mused.

“A big mole?” I could make a pretty good guess about what that was. Still, I’d never heard a mole referred to as that before.

“It’s possible,” said Marina. “Maybe we should put a break on searching for regular mole holes to dedicate ourselves to finding a big mole hole.”

“Marina, what’s a big mole?” Misa asked.

Glad that Misa was the one to ask. I was thinking the same thing, but I didn’t want to

look like I was the only person who didn't know.

"A big mole is a kind of mother to the normal moles. Since they have lots of babies all at once, we need to hurry and slay it or they'll all lay waste to the fields," said Marina.

"We probably shouldn't do this alone," said Elle. "We might want to find reinforcements. If we take too long, that'd be bad."

"Let's decide what to do after we find the hole."

"Right. Hole takes priority."

According to Elle, we were supposed to look for a huge hole—about the size of a human child, in fact. How big did that make the *mole,* then?

While we split up to search for it, we saw the man from before running toward us. "Excuse meee!" He looked totally out of breath.

"Is something wrong?"

The man paused to catch his breath. "We… we found a giant hole over there. More ruined crops, too."

"A big hole?" said Elle.

"It's not a big mole, is it?!" said Marina.

"I thought it was a possibility, so I came to tell you. At this rate, it'll be a disaster. Please, if you could help…" The man bowed his head. It looked like we didn't have any more searching to do—the guy was going to lead us right to the big mole's hole.

"It does look rather large."

The hole in the ground was absolutely gaping. Yeah, it was about the size of a kid.

Elle checked out the area around the hole. A ton of the crops around had been eaten. "It really does look like there's a big mole around."

But it wasn't a monster, right? I tried using my detection skill, but I got zilch. All I could see were human signals. Hmm, it looked like that one person was still near that tree and slacking off.

"Elle, if you could?" Marina said to Elle. Elle used her magic like she had before and washed water down the hole. Even when she brought the water back up, nothing came with it.

"Is it not in there?"

"I'm not sure. It might not be."

Marina took another look around the decimated field. "But it's got to be. Just look around."

"It might be so big that I can't pull it out." Elle tried to flush the hole with water several more times, but we didn't see any sign of the mole coming out.

I hadn't actually been meaning to help them, but I wasn't about to let the crops get wiped out either. "Want me to try?"

"You want to, Yuna?" asked Marina.

"Can we count on you? It looks like I can't get this done."

Marina nodded. "I knew you were amazing at earth magic, but I had no idea you could use water magic too."

"I pretty much can." I used water magic the same way that Elle had. The water came out of my bear puppet. It flooded down the gaping hole.

"That sure is a lot of water."

Elle nodded. "It's more than double the amount I can produce."

I could more or less tell what was going on in the hole using the mana in the water. I could even feel the water touching something. "There's something big in this hole."

"You can tell?"

“More or less.” I pulled the water back up like Elle had. Yeah, I could feel something huge coming with it.

“Marina, something’s about to come up,” I said, “so I’m counting on you.”

“Just leave it to me.” Marina brandished her sword.

It’d be coming soon. And the thing that came out was… was that seriously a mole?!

“It’s a big mole!” Marina yelled.

And even bigger than I expected. It was practically the size of a wolf. The thing wasn’t anywhere close to the size of a mole.

“Marina! We can’t let it get away!”

“I know.” Marina skewered the big mole that came out of the hole with her sword. Her blade went right through the thing’s torso. It stopped moving. Dead in one blow.

“Whoa, it’s huge,” said Misa.

“I had no idea they could be this big,” said Noa.

I knew Fina could handle it, but it seemed Misa and Noa weren’t freaking out that much over the mole’s dead corpse. I was shocked just seeing a dead wolf when I came to this world. The kids in this world sure are tough.

“Yuna, you were a huge help,” said Marina.

“Yes, you were, especially since my magic couldn’t handle it,” said Elle.

The two of them thanked me.

“Well, the farmers would have been in trouble if their crops were eaten,” I said.

The farmers had spent a ton of effort growing those crops, and it wasn’t like I could abandon them when they were right in front of me. I’d seen people on the news in my original world having a terrible time after getting hit by a typhoon or other disasters. Since I was going to be eating the food these farmers produced, I wanted to make sure I could protect them however I could.

CHAPTER 202
THE BEAR REUNITES WITH ELLELAURA

WE WERE ABLE to exterminate the big mole without incident.

"That's basically it, right?"

Marina said that finding two big moles in the same place was unheard of. Apparently, they'd find places with plenty of food and start producing a ton of offspring. They'd have a lot of babies too, so if you waited too long to exterminate them, they'd eat everything around and end up hurting a lot of people. Just one of those weird fantasy world things, I guess. I couldn't imagine it happening in my old world.

All that was left, now was exterminating the moles that the big mole had produced, but it was getting late. Since we'd probably worry people if we headed home *too* late, we ended up heading back around then.

"Marina, Elle… thanks for everything today."

"Not at all. We were so happy to see you, Lady Misana, especially after so long."

"Lady Misana, if anything happens, please just call us."

Until Elle ran out of mana, the two of them were going to stay behind to exterminate the moles. We left them to their mole search, and I started walking back with the three girls.

Partway there, we passed by that tree that was perfect for a midafternoon nap. Come to think of it, I wondered what happened to the person who'd been napping there. I tried checking it out as we walked by, but I didn't see anyone. They were right there when we were exterminating the big mole, hadn't they? Maybe they moved somewhere else after all the commotion?

On the way home, I took a close look at the three girls. They were filthy—both when it came to their faces and their clothes. We *had* been walking around in the middle of a field, after all. Their feet were especially dirty. This seemed like something we'd get in

trouble for if we got home, so I supposed I couldn't let them stay like that? I couldn't do much for their clothes, but I could at least clean up their faces.

"All three of you, stay still."

I used water magic to dampen a towel and rubbed their faces clean. Their faces were fine now, but there still wasn't anything to be done about those clothes. Yeah, trouble might be ahead for them regardless.

I was thinking up an excuse as we got back to the residence, but right as we got inside, I saw a familiar face.

"Mother!" Noa ran to her mother, who had clearly just arrived herself.

Ellelaura turned around when she heard her daughter. "Noa?!" A smile broke out over her face. "You look like you're doing splendidly."

"Yes, I am. But why are you here, Mother?"

"Why, I came to see my beloved daughter. What else?" Ellelaura tried to give Noa a hug, but stopped partway. "Noa, you're filthy."

Noa looked over herself again. Her beautiful clothes were pretty grody. Since I hadn't come up with an excuse, I decided to take the blame. I was the one who was watching them, after all. "Ellelaura, sorry. I took the three of them to the fields, that's why they're dirty."

"No. I said that I wanted to go, so we went," Misa said, contradicting me. Of course.

"I said that I wanted to go too," Noa butted in, "so it's not Yuna or Misa's fault."

Here I was trying to take the fall for them, but they were trying to take the fall for me instead.

"Ha ha! I'm not upset at you. And if you're worried about dirty clothes, I got into much more muck when I was your age." Ellelaura smiled and hugged Noa, not minding the grime at all.

"But mother, I'll get you dirty."

“What mother wouldn’t hug her own daughter because of a little dirt?”

“M-Mother!” Noa was struggling to breathe, but it was a heartwarming scene.

“But really, Ellelaura, why are you here?” I asked.

“Hmm. Well, I really did come to see my daughter. Ten percent of it is for work, another ten so I could see Cliff, and eighty percent of it was to see Noa.”

Uh, I didn’t even know where to start with that one. She could’ve at least given Cliff and Noa equal shares, and her work was supposed to be more important.

“There’s something I’ll need to discuss with you later, Yuna. But before that, I need to greet Gran. Let’s head inside.”

We entered the place with Ellelaura, and Meishun came running. Just one sight of us and she yelled out: “Why are you all filthy?!” She looked a little mad at the sight of the three girls.

“I’m sorry, Meishun,” said Misa. “It’s all my fault.” She told Meishun she’d been in the fields with Marina.

“But I said that I wanted to go, too, so it wasn’t *all* Misa’s fault,” said Noa.

“Me too,” added Fina.

Noa and Fina tried taking some of the blame for Misa. When Meishun saw the three of them protecting each other like that, a gentle look came over her face.

“I wasn’t really upset at you,” she said.

“Really?” Misa asked dubiously.

“Yes, I’m not upset. But please use the bath to wash yourselves up. You cannot come to dinner as you are, after all.”

The three of them said they would and headed off to the bath together.

Meishun smiled as she saw them off. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen Lady Misana have so much fun. Please go take a bath with them, Mademoiselle Yuna.”

“I can take one later. I’ll go after I talk with Ellelaura.”

“With… Lady Ellelaura?!” The three girls had distracted Meishun from even noticing the noblewoman. When she saw Ellelaura, she looked shocked.

“Meishun,” said Ellelaura, “it’s been so long, hasn’t it?”

“I apologize for not noticing you, ma’am.” Meishun bowed her head deep and low.

“It’s all right. I did come unannounced, after all. I’d like to greet Gran. Would I be able to meet him?”

“Yes, I believe so. He has already finished meeting all of his guests for today.”

And according to what he said that morning, it was a *lot* of people.

“Yuna,” said Ellelaura, “I’ll go greet Gran. You can have a bath with everyone.”

“Please do,” said Meishun. “Since it would be quite an issue if you were to walk through here with dirty feet…” She looked at me. “Didn’t you also go to the fields, Mademoiselle Yuna?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“But it seems you’re not dirty. I can’t tell from your black foot, but your white foot looks pristine.” Meishun looked at my feet, picked them up, and looked at the bottom of them.

“They’re made from a special material, so they don’t get dirty.”

They didn’t need to be washed. They’d stay clean even if I wore them for an entire year straight. They were amazing in that they’d never soil or start smelling bad—not even if someone poured muddy water all over me.

“How curious.” Meishun cocked her head to the side in puzzlement, looking at my bear gear. “Yuna, please take your time in the bath. I’m sure you must be tired after watching over the children.”

Great, but I wasn’t so sure that bathing with them would actually be restful.

Well, Noa and Misa were nobles who supposedly had training in etiquette, so they probably wouldn't goof off in the bath. (Warning: They *definitely* goofed off in the bear bath.) And Fina was good, so she'd be fine. I promised to meet with Ellelaura later and headed to the bath.

Once I got there, the three of them had already changed out of their clothes.

"You're late, Yuna."

"I was having a quick chat with Meishun and Ellelaura."

"Let's get in soon."

"I'll be there in a sec, so you three head in first."

I let the three of them go first, then pulled off my bear clothes and headed in. Though the family made up only one half of the nobility in charge of the town, they still had a grand enough bath. The four of us could fit in it with room to spare. Since Noa was helping Misa scrub down, I called Fina over, "Fina, come here. I'll help you wash up."

"I'm okay. I can do it myself."

"I don't mind."

I forced Fina to sit in front of me and started washing her back and her head. Next, I tried to wash my own hair. The three of them offered to help, but I politely turned them down and told them to soak in the bath. Noa complained, but I ignored her.

Once I was done getting clean, I used my hair dryer. It wouldn't do me any good to catch a cold, after all. I left the bath and went back to the room to find that the three of them had started playing Othello. While I was lounging around and watching them, Ellelaura came into the room.

"Mother!"

"You've all cleaned up, haven't you? Perhaps I'll borrow the bath later on." She patted her daughter's clean head as she made her way into the room. "Thank you for what you did, Yuna."

“Huh?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“I heard about what happened from Cliff and Gran. If you hadn’t brought Zelef in, things could have gotten dangerous.”

Oh, that. “I brought him over, but Zelef still did all the hard work for the party.”

“Yes, I heard. And apparently Zelef gave Gajurdo a talking to for insulting the food. I wish I was there to see it,” she said with a sigh.

Me too, honestly. I wish I could’ve seen that dumb noble I’d heard so much about have a miserable time…

“So, about Zelef,” she said. “After Misana’s party, I’ll take him back, so you don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. In return, I’ll leave Cliff and Noa with you.”

Fine by me; I was glad that I wouldn’t have to go back to the capital. When all was said and done, it would’ve been a pain. “That’ll help a lot, but are you sure you’ll be fine on your own?”

“I have a few people with me. I’m having them stay at an inn until it’s time to leave.”

Yeah, I guess even Ellelaura wouldn’t come out to a place like this alone.

“Although I really could’ve been fine on my own,” she mused. “But His Majesty simply insisted I take them, so I had little choice.”

She had little choice? She was a noble, so it seemed to me like having a guard would be a real no-brainer.

“Mother, will you stay with us until you need to go back?”

“I have work, but I suppose I can spend some time with you.”

“You have work?”

“It’s an order from an ill-tempered king, if you will. I do wish I could have ignored him and spent time with you, Noa.”

That was her way of saying sorry, I suppose. Come to think of it, she really had said that she’d come on business—ten percent business, anyway.

“Will you finish your work right away?” asked Noa.

“Hmm. I don’t think I could during the daytime. But I’ll have time at night, so we can spend that time together then. So, Yuna, if you could watch over Noa during the afternoons?”

“What’s your work, by the way?” I asked. “If you can’t talk about it, I won’t ask any other questions.” I really didn’t want to get pulled into any annoying drama, but I also didn’t want to cause trouble for Fina and the others. I figured it’d be best to ask about it.

“It’s to inspect this town. His Majesty was attempting to send an official, who I usurped—err, that is—who I requested to replace.”

Wait, did she just say *usurp*?

“I’m surprised the king allowed you to come.”

“That’s because I worked oh-so-hard to petition him. It went a little like this: I want to see my daughter, I want to see my husband, I want to see my daughter, I want to see my daughter, *I want to see my daughter*. After all that—you know, sort of a chant after a while—he finally gave me permission to come here.”

Jeez, she must’ve really annoyed the heck out of him. And had she even bothered to mention Cliff, her own husband, in that little chant? “So… what are you inspecting?”

“Oh, nothing particularly important. I’ll just walk around town and gather information. After that, I’ll talk to Gran and Cliff, then think over what to do next. Oh, and I’m planning to attend Misana’s party tomorrow.”

Didn’t an inspection usually have a bit more, y’know… structure?

“Like I said,” she continued, “the real work starts later. After the party, I suppose? I’ll need to look around town, go to the Adventurers’ Guild and Merchant Guild, and pay

a visit to the Salbards."

Ellelaura ended up participating in our Othello contest once she spotted the board. We ended up playing until Meishun called us for dinner.

CHAPTER 203
THE BEAR WEARS A DRESS

IT WAS THE DAY OF Misa's party, and the day I encountered my greatest foe. Slaying it? Impossible. I couldn't run, either. I'd come face to face with the most dangerous thing that I could encounter since coming to this other world.

And I never thought that things would come to this, never could've imagined it. Who would believe that Noa and Fina would betray me like this? Truly, I could trust no one. Even those I held the most faith in betrayed me.

I searched for a way to escape, but the psychological damage of my betrayal left me near-catatonic. And now my nemeses were approaching me, holding a dress, and leaving me with no time to think…

"Here, Yuna! We prepared a dress for you, so please change." Noa held a beautiful dress in her hands.

Had she been Milaine or Ellelaura, I could've shaken her off and made a break for it. But today was Misa's birthday party and the challenger approaching was a ten-year-old girl. I couldn't strike back or run.

"Noa, let's talk about this. Once we talk it out, you'll see things my way."

Negotiation was the only option.

"You do look wonderful in your bear clothes," she said, "but today is Misa's party. Please wear a dress with us, Yuna."

Noa held a black and white number as she cornered me. According to Noa, it was made with Kumayuru and Kumakyu's colors in mind. Noa and Fina had chosen it together, they said.

Sure, it was a pretty dress. Yes, I happen to be a girl. If this had been in my old world and I had a choice between the bear onesie and a beautiful dress, I would've definitely said yes to the dress. I *did* want to wear pretty dresses, but I had my scruples about

taking off my bear onesie.

“Fina, why didn’t you say anything?” I wouldn’t have known how to respond if she told me, but at least I would’ve had time to think.

“Yuna, that’s when you left me behind and went home.”

I *had* left Fina behind with Noa back then, thinking that it’d take a long time for them to choose a dress. And no, I *hadn’t* run off because I was afraid that I’d end up dragged into the dress shopping too. Not at all! I was simply considerate about not getting in Fina and Noa’s way.

“Also, Lady Noa asked me not to say anything because it’d be a fun surprise for you on the day of the party.”

I suppose most girls would find this pleasant. After all, how often do you get to wear a fancy dress like this? But now that I was used to my bear onesie, I was way more embarrassed about wearing a dress.

“Yuna, are you not going to try it on?”

“Well… it might not be the right size.” I was wearing a bear onesie. They couldn’t know what size I actually was. In fact, my measurements were top secret. Yuna Clearance only, thank you very much.

“It’s okay. Lala knew how tall you are, and we checked your size in the bath.”

In the bath? But we’d only recently taken a bath together. Wait, wait, it must have been at the king’s birthday festival!

But… no, no way she could know my actual clothing size just by eyeballing me.

Besides, she had to consider how much time had passed since then. Human beings, they grow day by day, you know? I was sure I’d grown and as for my weight… that probably hadn’t changed. But… boobs? If I’d grown boobs…

I checked from over my bear onesie. Hm, I couldn’t really tell.

“We made sure from when we were in the bear bath earlier and in the normal one yesterday that you haven’t changed sizes,” said Noa with a smile that oozed confidence.

“It should be okay.”

Children say the most innocent things, but they sure can sting. Psychological damage, critical hit. At this rate, she seemed likely to defeat me before the party began.

“Why are you so against it? It’ll make Misa happy too,” Noa continued.

“Uhh.”

“And you’re pretty, Yuna, so a dress would look lovely on you.”

“Hhhh.”

“Fina, don’t you want to see Yuna in a dress?”

“Yes.”

That look on Fina’s face… it said that she’d wear one, too, so I had to go through with it. It’d be easy to run out of the room, but if I *did* make a break for it, it’d be hard for me to go to the party.

I wanted to attend for Misa. If I ran instead of participating, I’d be doing a disservice to her after she bothered sending me an invitation. Ugh, there was no escape!

“O-okay. But I have some conditions.” As a last resort, I told Noa what I wanted. She reluctantly accepted.

Noa and Fina were already in their dresses. I thought Noa looked cute in her dress the other day, but Fina ran a tough race in hers. Noa’s was red and Fina’s was light green. Noa wore hers confidently; she was used to wearing fancy dresses. As for Fina, she shrunk into herself.

“Uh, I feel so embarrassed.” I was the one who was *really* embarrassed.

I wore the black and white dress, and it fit perfectly. How’d they figure out my size just by eyeballing it? And they had the nerve to tell me I hadn’t grown at all!

“Yuna, you look wonderful! You’re so pretty!” But Noa’s praise just made me feel awkward. In my old world, I never wore a dress like this. I mean, how many people wore fancy dresses and went to parties at my age? Not any rando off the street, that

was for sure.

I stood in front of the mirror and felt even more embarrassed at the sight of myself. Maybe it was because I wasn't used to this look? It… wasn't a *good* look.

"Your long black hair is pretty," said Noa, "so a white and black dress looks good on you." Yeah, but Noa's golden hair was much prettier.

“Aw, you look so pretty, Yuna! I could never look like I belong in a pretty dress like this.” Fina was even more self-deprecating than me. As far as I was concerned, Fina looked much better. The light green dress was way cute. Fina looked great.

“You’re cute, Fina. I’m… nah.”

“You’re not *nah.* You’re cuter than me, Yuna.”

And now we were *both* blushing. A nuclear war of compliments, with mutually assured embarrassment.

“It’s fine. You both look great,” said Noa. “I’m sure that Mother and Father will be so surprised when they see.”

So I’d be in front of people looking like this? *Sorry Misa, but I just want to go home now.* And I was sure that Fina felt the same. I gave up and started to creep toward my bear gear—I’d stripped and thrown it to the ground. I started with my bear shoes and both my bear puppets.

“Yuna, are you really putting those on?”

Yep. These were the conditions for me to wear the dress. That was the trade: I’d wear the dress if I could keep the bear shoes and puppets.

So… well, I was wearing a beautiful black and white dress with shoes and bear puppets from a onesie.

Since I’d come to this world, my bear onesie served me for pretty much my entire daily existence, 24/7 unless I was in the bath or something. I couldn’t just pull all of it off. I tried to just have my puppets and shoes with me, but that hadn’t been enough to make me feel comfy.

Sure, I might’ve been comfortable just having an all-powerful weapon and flimsy paper armor while doing quests in the past, but I just didn’t have that mindset these days. I didn’t really get why some gamers liked being exposed like this, especially if it meant you’d die in just one hit. Then again, this wasn’t a game anymore.

I gently put away my ultimate armor, the bear onesie, into my bear storage.

After we were all wearing our dresses, we headed to the room where the party would be.

The party would be held in a different place from Gran's, apparently. It seemed that Misa really had just invited close friends. I heard that the only ones going were Misa's family, the Fochrosés, and the people who worked for Gran.

When we got to the place, Cliff and Ellelaura were already there with a couple of other people. People were staring at me, but… maybe I was just being self-conscious?

Ellelaura smiled as she came over. "Oh my, Yuna. You look so charming today."

Thanks to your daughter.

"But what are those?" said Cliff, looking exasperated at the sight of the bear hands and feet. "Why are you wearing that?"

"You agree, Father? Yuna said that the condition for her wearing the dress was to let her have her bear hands and feet. She's so pretty, it's such a waste."

I couldn't take off the bear puppets or shoes, no matter what they said. If I didn't have the bear puppets, I couldn't use magic. If I didn't have the bear shoes, I couldn't move fast. I couldn't just let them go.

I don't think I've even *tried* running since elementary school. If I didn't have the bear shoes, even Fina and the other girls could probably outrun me. Heck, the orphans were probably faster from running after those kokekkos.

"Still, it feels strange to see you without your bear outfit…"

Yep. I was feeling strange all around. And unsettled, too.

"…but it *does* look good on you. If any boys saw you, they'd probably rush over to propose."

A rush of boys? No thanks. Do not need, do not want. "You should save your compliments for your daughter."

"Of course. Noa and Fina are cute, but you're far prettier in your dress, Yuna."

Hurray. I sighed and tried to get to my seat, but I had no idea where to even sit. I'd never been to an aristocrat's party before, so… what was I supposed to do? I struggled with that until Meishun came over.

"Mademoiselle Yuna, Mademoiselle Fina, your placements are this way. Please take a seat as you wait."

So we were sitting according by family—that meant the Fochrosés and Fahrengrams, then Fina and me. The employees were sitting a little farther away.

I sat down and waited.

It was kind of cold in the dress. Thanks to my onesie, I was always at an optimum temperature. I never minded the cold before. But with a skirt, my legs were freezing. I'd only been away from it for a short time, but how I yearned for the mighty bear onesie.

While I sat and waited, Gran, Misa's parents, and finally, Misa came into the room. Then, as Gran looked around the room, his eyes fell on me.

"I was wondering who you were… is that you, Miss?"

C'mon, didn't he recognize me? It wasn't like I ever pulled my bear hood super low over my face in front of Gran.

"Yuna, you're so pretty," Misa told me.

"Thank you. You're looking pretty yourself, Misa." Even if she was just being nice, it was better than her making fun of me.

We all got to our seats and kicked off the party.

CHAPTER 204
THE BEAR ATTENDS THE PARTY

ONCE THE PARTY STARTED, Zelef's food was brought in.

That's right, food from the head chef of the palace himself. He cooked us dinner last night, too, but this was my first time trying his food for parties. The delicious cuisine lined the table. Beautifully plated they were; the visual aesthetics and aroma of the colorful food stimulated my appetite.

Once they finished setting out the food, Misa stood up, seemingly embarrassed. She told us to enjoy ourselves, there was a toast, and we started the party.

I didn't know anything about the etiquette. I could eat like normal, right?

When I looked next to me, Fina also seemed unsure about what to do. Then she looked to me, seeming worried. I didn't know how to eat properly at a noble's party, and that uncertain look from her wouldn't change a thing. Like a kid copying test answers, all we could do was look to the person next to us and fake it. Noa was enjoying her food and eating with a fork and spoon diagonal from us.

"I think we'll be all right if we just copy Noa?" I whispered.

Then again, I doubted anyone would complain as long as we weren't doing something truly horrendous. If they warned us about anything, *then* we'd need to be careful. Plus, it'd be terrible if we were so worried about manners that we couldn't enjoy Zelef's food now that we finally had a chance to try it. I decided not to worry about it too much and got to munching.

I started with the delicious-looking soup. It wasn't like the soups Anz made, but it was still good. I wanted to ask Zelef about how he made the party food sometime in the future. Maybe he'd be willing to teach Anz. If I could convince him to do that, I'd be able to have it anytime I wanted.

Delicious food aside, my thighs, arms, and neck were all just way too cold. It was so weird. My onesie regulated my temperature normally. As long as I didn't mind how it looked, it served as amazing clothes. I yearned for the feel of its fluffy fabric.

Since I was borrowing the dress, I needed to be careful not to get it dirty. I didn't intend to, but getting food on my dress would be a disaster. I had no idea how much the dress cost, but I was sure it was a ton.

Fina was so worried that she could only eat a small bite at a time, so she was going very slowly.

"So Misa is ten now, isn't she?" I asked, trying to make conversation.

Misa's mother looked at her daughter. "Yes, the same as Noa."

"But in a few months, I'll be eleven. Then I'll practically be your older sister," Noa declared, almost the moment Misa's mother said the words "same age." I guess? She was born earlier, after all.

"Mmhm! You're still like an older sister to me, Noa."

Come to think of it, Fina was ten too. What was her birthday, anyway?

Considering Fina's circumstances until now, had she even celebrated it before? It might be a good idea to talk to Tiermina, maybe have a surprise party for her. Fina was the first person to help me after I got to this world, after all. I thought it was a pretty good plan, so I remembered to keep a note about it.

The maids who helped out with the party food started participating themselves. Zelef and Botts were eating as they critiqued the food. They talked about seasoning, whether it was strong or weak, whether it might be a good idea to use other ingredients… the works.

Botts could manage holding a fork now, but he still winced whenever he raised his arm. Knives, on the other hand, were out of the question. Food required careful work, so it seemed that it would take a while until he was able to make food like normal again.

Ellelaura, who finally had a chance to see Noa, was enjoying a conversation with Cliff. Cliff was incredibly busy lately too.

I could hear Ellelaura talking about Shia, who was still in the capital, and discussing that whole thing where I'd guarded the students. Noa, being Noa, talked about things I'd done in Crimonia. Why were they all talking about me?

Wouldn't a family talk about themselves after finally managing to get together again?

Some time had passed, so Noa gave Misa her present. It turned out to be a ribbon—a cute present that worked well for someone her age. If the present had been jewels or a dress or something super expensive, it would've made things a bit weird. Then again, for all I knew that ribbon cost a small fortune.

I tried to gauge the timing of my present. Next to me, Fina was giving me another searching, pleading sort of look: *"What do we do?"*

We had two presents: the cake and the bear stuffed animals. Noa tied the ribbon on Misa and she was looking happy about it. I looked at the table. Since we were in the middle of the party, there wasn't so much food left.

Maybe it was about time for the cake? "Misa, could I talk to you for a second?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Fina and I also have a present for you."

"A present?!" Misa seemed pretty happy about that.

"Fina and I made something sweet for you. Would you like to try it?" I pulled out a giant two-tier cake from my bear storage.

Misa looked way interested in the cake—she hadn't seen it before, either. I lined up the strawberries on the cake and the center of the cake had "Happy Birthday" written on it in strawberry whipped cream, courtesy of one very anxious Fina.

"Did you and Fina make this, Yuna? I'm so happy."

"Fina was so worried about your present that we talked about making this together."

“It’s such a pretty cake,” said Misa’s mother.

“Yes, it seems like such a waste to eat. But… how do you eat it?”

It was a whole two-tier cake. They probably hadn’t assumed the whole thing was for one person. I told them generally how to slice it.

“We need to cut it?!”

“Well, yeah. You gotta slice it to eat it.”

“Hmm, but you even wrote on it. That’s such a waste.”

Fina looked embarrassed now. “I’d be happy if you just cherish your memory of the writing and how it tastes,” she said.

“All right,” said Misa with a nod, looking the cake over. “I’ll make sure to remember it.”

With Misa on board, I decided to start the slicing. When I inserted the knife into the cake, Misa very quietly and sadly let out an “*Ohh*.” There wasn’t much we could do about that, so I hoped that she’d be patient.

I placed the cake slices onto plates. We’d made tons, so we had enough for everyone. After that, everyone picked up their forks and started digging in.

“It’s delicious,” said Misa.

“It really is quite good,” said Gran.

“I’ve had this before. It’s delicious,” said Cliff.

“I wanted to make it together with you.”

Misa and Gran, who’d never tried the cake before, and Noa and Cliff, who had it in the past, all praised the cake.

“I had no idea you could make something so delicious, Miss. You could give up adventuring and put on a chef’s hat, if you wished,” said Gran. He really didn’t know much about me…

“Gran, old chap, she already has two shops. She sells much more than cake,” said Cliff.

“Does she, now?”

“And her shop is popular in Crimonia. My daughter visits all the time.”

“That’s just because Yuna’s food at her shop is so yummy,” Noa said.

“Noa, that’s so unfair,” Misa chimed in.

I didn’t really get why, but everyone at Misa’s birthday party seemed really into talking about me. Noa proudly talked about what foods she liked at my shop. Misa listened in, seemingly jealous.

I even heard her mutter to herself about how unfair it all was.

“But Fina,” said Noa suddenly, “what you got to do is the most unfair of all.”

“M-me?”

“Since you got to make a cake with Yuna. I wanted to make it with you too. Why didn’t you invite me?” Noa pouted and sulked.

“Well, Fina didn’t know what to get Misa as a present,” I said.

Fina groaned. “Then I should’ve talked to you too.”

“Then want to make one later?”

“Do you mean it?” asked Noa.

“I-I’d like to make it too,” Misa cut in, somewhat demurely.

“In that case,” I said, how about we all make one together when the party’s over?”

“Can we really?”

Misa and Noa were thrilled at that.

Next I looked toward Zelef and the others, catching bits of their conversation.

“It really is delicious,” said Botts. “The pudding as well. Did that girl make this?”

“She’s an adventurer as well as a chef. I hold her in high esteem,” Zelef answered. I wish he’d stop saying things about *holding me in high esteem* and such. If the palace’s head chef went around saying he respected me like that, I’d just have more complications. And it wasn’t like I was a cook.

“But how did you make this?” Botts scooped up some of the whipped cream with a spoon and ate it.

“I can make it because Yuna taught me, but I cannot teach you, Botts,” Zelef said, sounding just a little smug about it. Botts seemed pained by Zelef’s attitude.

They got along well.

It seemed like people generally liked the cake. Now all we had left was giving Misa the stuffed animals.

CHAPTER 205
THE BEAR GIFTS BEAR STUFFED ANIMALS

WE FINISHED EATING the cake, so all that was left was giving Misa the stuffed animals.

I hoped that she'd be happy. They certainly made *me* happy. I was kind of worried she'd try to act grownup and would say something like, "A stuffed animal? I'm not a little kid anymore." I was a little late in realizing it, but ten was kind of a strange age. There are adults who still like stuffed animals, but there are also kids who have no interest in them whatsoever despite being young.

"Misa, I have a question. Do you like stuffed animals?"

"Stuffed animals?" She paused for a moment. "I do… I care very much about a stuffed doggie my mother gave me." She paused for a moment, but Fina and I were both relieved when she said she liked them.

"In that case, would you accept one more present?"

"You have another one?!"

I pulled out the Kumayuru stuffed animal from my bear storage and handed it to Fina, then I took the Kumakyu stuffed animal in my hands. That made it look more like we were each giving her a present.

The moment I pulled out the stuffed animals, the place stirred.

"Wh-wh-what is that?! What is it?!" Noa reacted before Misa could.

"They're stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu."

Noa stood out of her seat and ran over to inspect the Kumakyu I was holding. "It's adorable. It looks just like Kumakyu. Yuna, please let me have that."

"What? No, you can't. It's a present for Misa."

“But at least let me have *one* of them,” said Noa, looking back and forth between the Kumakyu and Kumayuru plushies.

“You *can’t*. It’d be mean to separate them. They’re both Misa’s birthday present.”

It’d be sad to separate Kumakyu and Kumayuru, even if they were just stuffed animals. Plus, these were meant to be a present from me and Fina.

“Why couldn’t it be my birthday today?!”

I didn’t know how to react to that. If she wanted to complain, she could bring it up with Cliff and Ellelaura.

Noa fell to her knees, deflated. “Ugh, I want stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu too.” She looked miserable.

Just like I expected.

“Um, did you really want them *that* much?” I said.

“Yes, I really do…” She raised her face up and gave me a pleading look.

“In that case, I’ll get you one as a present next time.”

“R-really?!” Aaaand Noa perked right back up.

I knew that Noa would want one, so I’d always planned to gift her some. Sherry definitely would have several more ready by the time I got back to Crimonia. Still, Noa was reacting a lot more dramatically than I expected.

“Just wait it out for today, got it?”

“All right. I’m sorry for being difficult,” she said. Then added, insistently, “but it’s a promise, okay?”

Fina and I held the bear stuffed animals and headed to Misa. Behind her, Noa watched enviously. I really was planning on giving her bears as a present later, so… could she not look at me like that?

We walked over to Misa, still under Noa’s scrutiny.

“You can do it first,” I said to Fina.

“Lady Misa, happy birthday. Yuna and I worked really hard to make these.”

When Fina offered the Kumayuru stuffed animal, Misa happily stretched her arms out to take it. “Thank you. It’s adorable. Can I really have it?”

“Yeah! It’s a birthday present for you, after all. I’m glad you like stuffed animals.”

“And I’m glad you said you like it and you’re not embarrassed,” I added. “I was kinda worried for a sec that you’d say you outgrew them or something.”

“If I had, then you wouldn’t have given them to me as a present?” said Misa.

“But… but then *I* would have gotten them…” Noa muttered disappointedly.

“Make sure you take care of Kumakyu, okay? It’d be sad for you to just have one of them, so I want you to take care of both of them together.”

When it came to the real Kumayuru and Kumakyu, I always had to make sure to give them equal attention or the other one would end up pouting. And so now I gave Misa the Kumakyu stuffed animal.

Petite little Misa held it preciously. “I’ll treasure them both. Thank you.” She showed us her very best smile of the day.

“Isn’t it great that you’ve gotten cute stuffed animals, Misa?” asked Misa’s mother.

“Yes.”

Misa’s mother seemed happy to see her daughter’s smile.

Misa cradled the stuffed animals. “But now that you’ve given me this, I can’t ask you for anything…”

“There was something you wanted to ask for?”

“Yes, I was hoping to see Kumayuru and Kumakyu one more time. That’s what I was going to ask.”

“You were going to ask for that?”

“Yes…”

“Why didn’t you say so?” I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu in cub form.

“Wh-what is going on?! Kumayuru and Kumakyu are so tiny! Like… like stuffed animals.”

“We used them at this size as a model,” I said.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu headed over to Misa. Four bears surrounded her: Kumayuru, Kumakyu, and their plushie doubles.

“Misa, that’s so unfair!” Noa couldn’t hold back anymore. She ran into the scene and started hugging as many bears as she could get her hands on. The bears were overwhelmed with hugs, and before long Noa and Misa were playing games with my bears.

Misa’s mother, watching all it all with a smile, turned to me. “Yuna, Fina, thank you for this. It’s been so long since I’ve seen my daughter this happy. Misa has been looking forward to this ever since she sent the invitations to you and Fina.”

Yeah. I was glad that I hadn’t turned the invitation down… though I hadn’t expected that I’d end up wearing a dress.

“I hope you continue to be friends with my daughter,” she said.

“Of course,” I answered along with Fina.

“Yuna, I’m happy that you’re giving my daughter stuffed animals,” said Ellelaura, “but do you have any for Lady Flora?” She watched her daughter playing with the bears.

“Of course I have some in store for her.”

“Ha! Oh, excellent. After seeing these, I didn’t know what I would do if Lady Flora couldn’t have some of her own.”

I was giving out bears in a very strange order, but Flora was the whole reason I wanted to make the stuffed animals in the first place.

“Still, Misa, you’ve gotten such a nice gift,” said Gran. “Maybe I should have sent her an invitation to my party as well.”

What, did he want a present too? “Want a stuffed animal, Gran?”

“No! It’s just that you always bring surprises, whether presents or food. I was simply wondering what kind of present you would have given me, had you given me one.”

Huh. What *would* I give Gran? What do old people even like? A voucher for a shoulder massage? Wait, wait, that was something his actual grandchild would give him, not me. Then… maybe an antique or a rare weapon, like the one the king had gotten for his birthday?

The only other thing I could think of for an aristocrat was jewels, but I didn’t have anything like that on me. Yep, I couldn’t think of a thing.

Unless…

“Gran, would a decoration work?”

“A decoration?”

“I have something cool that you could put at the entrance or somewhere it’d stand out.”

“Oh ho! And would you give me something like that as a present?”

“Yeah, sure. If you don’t want it, just let me know and I’ll take it home.” I headed to a less crowded part of the room and pulled out an iron golem from my bear storage.

“Ahh!”

“What is that?!”

“It’s a golem!”

“Yuna, what do you think you’re doing?!”

Everyone started to freak out when I pulled out the golem. Someone even flipped over their chair as they attempted to run. Some of them yelled, some fell to the ground.

Seemed like a pretty big fuss over just one golem.

“Gran, don’t you think it’d be cool to use this as a decoration?” I knocked on the iron golem—*clang!* Or… more of a mental clang, I guess. I was wearing my bear puppets, so I had to fill in the clangs for myself.

“Miss, are you sure it’s not dangerous?” Gran asked cautiously.

“What is?”

“Isn’t that an iron golem?”

“Yeah, it is.”

That seemed pretty obvious. I guess maybe it was their first time seeing one? Then again, I’d first seen these guys pretty recently myself. It *did* feel a bit like we were talking past each other, though.

“Yuna,” said Fina gently. I tilted my head at her. “It looks like everyone thinks that the golem will move.”

Oh, right. That was why everyone was making such a huge deal out of it. “This golem won’t move, so it’s no problem.”

“Really?”

They seemed very skeptical. In order to prove it, I poked the golem a few times.

“Yuna, is that golem one of the ones from earlier?” Ellelaura asked.

“That’s right. I just happened to figure out a way to slay them and leave them intact,” I said. Ellelaura was talking about the golems I’d slain in the mines.

“You slayed iron golems?” Gran marveled. “But I’ve never seen one in such pristine condition.”

Gran approached the golem and peered at it. Ghazal and some others had said something along those lines too. When golems were slain, they usually were damaged out of necessity. It usually wasn’t possible to keep them in their original form. In my case, I slayed them with electricity magic to destroy their mana gems, so they kept

their shape.

“How about the entrance, then?” I said. “It’d be really visible and cool there, don’t you think?”

The other two people I gifted them to kept them up as decorations.

“It would definitely stand out, but all the guests would be shocked by it.”

“Not interested?” I thought it was a good present, though…

“If you’re giving it to me, then I’ll accept it, but are you sure? You could sell a golem in such good shape for quite a high price,” said Gran. “The amount of metal alone would fetch a large sum, I’m sure.”

“I have a bajillion of ’em, so it’s fine.” I still had several iron golems in my bear storage, not that I really knew what to do with the things.

At that, Cliff held his head in his hands. Gran and Ellelaura smiled, but they seemed exasperated. As for Misa and Noa, they just approached the golem. I guess they were curious about it. It was their first time seeing one, after all.

The others were with Zelef and Botts, and watched from afar. An iron golem was a big surprise to most people, it seemed. Neither of the blacksmiths had freaked out, so I hadn’t really thought about it much. I’d be more careful next time I took one out.

“I already thought you really don’t follow any rules of common sense,” said Gran, “but I didn’t realize you were this absurd.”

“I already knew that,” said Cliff.

“Same here,” said Ellelaura.

Even Zelef and Botts were nodding along.

Huh? Weird? But… I wasn’t even wearing the bear onesie, right? So, you know. Normal. Right?

I looked at the three girls, as if to silently ask them, but they didn’t say anything.

C'mon, guys, you're going to make the bear cry!

EXTRA STORY
NERIN AND ELENA PART ONE

ONCE I GOT TO CRIMONIA, the days flew by in a busy haze.

I was going to be working at the bakery, so I learned how to bake cakes. I'd also consult Yuna to think up new cake ideas. And of course, Auntie Morin taught me how to bake breads. I was out of my element at first about a lot of things, but the days passed pleasantly. I was scared about work, but Auntie Morin was kind. Whenever I was in trouble, Karin helped me. There were also the orphans I worked with, too—it was a cheery place to work.

Auntie Morin managed the shop, but Tiermina handled anything that had to do with money. Stocking up, figuring out the seasonal ingredients, the rising prices, and how much to pay for ingredients—it was all just part of Tiermina's job. If we lacked anything, she helped us at once. She was always organized, too. Auntie Morin said it was a huge help, because that way we could focus on baking the bread.

She also already figured out the ingredients I needed for the cakes, so I could just focus on baking them. It would've been an ordeal if I needed to stock up on the ingredients all by myself; I really needed to be grateful to Tiermina.

What surprised me most of all about this shop now that I worked here was Yuna, the one dressed up as a bear. She's the owner of my workplace, the Bear's Lounge. She also managed another store run by Anz, who came from Mileela. Apparently, Yuna hadn't just thought up the cakes she had taught me to make. She also made something called pizza using an ingredient called *cheese,* and she made a food called pudding. She also made this delicious snack, this thing called *potato chips*. She was a genius chef, but she told me she didn't run shops herself. According to her, it was a "pain."

Yuna was the head of the shops, but she barely ever gave her opinion about anything. Sometimes she even asked Auntie Morin to make breads because she wanted to eat them.

Every week, the shop was open for six days followed by a one-day break. That was so everyone could refresh and work well in the following six days—Yuna said we wouldn't be as efficient if we worked too hard. The exhaustion would add up and we would just get slower at our work, according to her. "You'll be more efficient with a break, and happier too," she told us. She was right. I was happier with a break. If we were working shifts, I would've been worried about the shop. But since we were all taking a day off, I wouldn't need to worry. That also meant I could go out with Auntie Morin and Karin.

Since we had the day off today, I made plans to go out with Elena—I'd met her back at the inn. She was the innkeeper's daughter, and she really helped me out when I first got to Crimonia. I was a little older than her, and she sometimes stopped by the shop to get to know me better.

"Elena, thank you for taking the day off at the same time as me."

"It's fine. You already have an established day off at the Bear's Lounge," she said. "I just asked my mom and dad ahead of time."

"But the inn is really busy, isn't it?"

Apparently, a big tunnel was made recently (or discovered?) and the people of Crimonia could now easily visit a town that they previously had to cross the mountains to reach. There was a lot of traffic back and forth, so the inn was pretty hopping these days. I was just lucky when I first came here and managed to get a room. I wanted to go to that town someday.

"It's busier than I ever imagined," said Elena. "We're really happy about it, but we have to do the washing and cleaning every day. Also, I have to help with the cooking. There's just so much to do."

So I wasn't the only one who was busy. "I'm surprised they let you have the day off."

"We recently hired someone, so things are a little easier now."

Elena and I walked around town, talking.

“That clothing shop sells cute clothes,” Elena told me when we got to the front of an establishment. “Definitely recommended.”

“They don’t have bear clothes there, right?” Like Yuna’s, maybe?

Elena just laughed. “No, they don’t.”

Where in the world had Yuna bought those things? Maybe she made them herself?

We went into the shop to look at the clothes. After browsing a bit, we went to a general store that sold cute accessories. Then we went to a delicious food stand, followed by a queer bookseller with stacks and stacks of books, to a rest area Elena recommended, and next to the Merchant Guild. Then, for some reason, she led me to the Adventurers’ Guild.

I was pretty sure that Fina and Shuri’s dad worked at that Adventurers’ Guild. They were both Tiermina’s daughters. Fina was the one I met with Yuna at the capital. She was quite serious and usually hung out around Yuna. Shuri was Fina’s little sister. The two of them were usually with Tiermina. I only met their dad once. Since he worked at the Adventurers’ Guild, he was very burly. Despite his looks, though, he was a nice person.

“Maybe we can peek inside for a little,” I said. I always imagined the Adventurers’ Guild would be full of frightening people, but a lot of them had stopped by the shop already. Whenever I saw the female adventurers eating the cakes I made, it made me happy. Even they enjoyed a sweet treat now and then. The guy adventurers showed up, too, usually savoring the bread and pizza.

There were female adventurers around here and a reception lady there too. I guess it would be safe to go inside?

Elena pulled me into the Adventurers’ Guild.

There were tons of adventurers with armor and swords. I felt like I stuck out. There were lots of frightening people, too. When one of them saw us, he started talking to us.

“Ah, is that Elena from the inn? What are you doing at the Adventurers’ Guild?”

“I was just out on a little walk.” Elena was striking up a perfectly normal conversation with the man, even though he looked terrifying.

“Did you come all the way here in search of some handsome men?”

Another male adventurer came by, dressed much the same as the first. “In that case,” he said, “she definitely didn’t come here for you. Must’ve been looking for me.”

“You should both take a good gander in the mirror,” said a third.

“Oh, so sure that they’ve even got good enough eyesight to tell in the first place?”

The adventurers who were listening in burst into loud laughter. The man scowled when his colleagues laughed right in front of him.

“That’s not true. I’m cool, aren’t I? You think so, don’t you, lass?”

The adventurer closed in on me.

“Uh. Hm…” I was scared. I took a step back.

“Then how about we go out tonight? I’ll show you how great of a guy I really am, eh?”

He came even closer.

“Um.” I looked at Elena, pleading with her to save me.

“Get back. You’re scaring Nerin.” Elena stood in front of me, coming to my rescue. “And you can’t just go scaring girls like that. You’ll cause yourself a *lot* of trouble that way.” She was implying something, but what?

“Trouble? Like what?”

“She’s Nerin. As in, the girl working at the Bear’s Lounge.”

At that, the adventurers stopped in their tracks.

“You mean that shop the bear girl runs?”

“No way.”

The men slowly backed away from me.

Um, what? One mention of Yuna's shop, and they all changed their tunes. They seemed panicked, hardly believing what was happening.

"Miss…" said one of them. "Are you working at that shop run by the bear girl?"

"Yes, Yuna employed me there."

When I answered, the adventurers gave each other looks.

"Please pretend nothing happened today," said the rough guy at last. "I never talked to you. And if you *do* tell her that I talked to you, please don't tell her I hit on you. Just… please just don't tell the bear girl about what happened today."

"Hey, I didn't do nothin'!"

The adventurers were practically running away from me. What in the world just happened?

"Ha ha! Looks like none of them want to invite Yuna's wrath."

"Yuna? *Wrath?*"

Elena nodded. "I don't think any adventurers in this town would pick a fight with her. And there'd be hell to pay if they made Yuna mad. Honestly, just not being able to eat at the shops would be trouble enough for them."

She smiled, pulled on my hand, and led us out of the guild.

Just who was Yuna really? Even the big male adventurers were afraid of her. But she looked like a girl in a cute bear outfit… right? Auntie Morin had said that Yuna was an adventurer. Maybe that was true after all? But… she was an adventurer who made grown men shake in their boots?

"Is Yuna really an adventurer?" I asked. "Auntie Morin, Karin, and the other kids kept saying she was an amazing adventurer, but she seems like such a cute little girl. It's unbelievable." Fina, Shuri, and Tiermina… they all said the same thing.

"She is. And she's a really powerful one."

“It really wasn’t a joke, then?”

Elena laughed. “It’s tough to imagine because of her cute outfit, isn’t it?” Was she really fighting off monsters in that cute getup? I couldn’t even imagine it. “Yes, Yuna is a great adventurer in her own right. There are lots of legends about the bear. I didn’t believe them either at first, so I understand how you feel.”

Legends… about the bear? “What legends?”

Elena smiled. Then she put on airs and said, “Oh, what will I do with you?”

“Tell me already.”

And Elena told me all kinds of things.

Yuna had apparently invaded the Adventurers’ Guild and fought off nearly a dozen adventurers. She’d fought against monsters dozens of meters long. Every single thing she told me was unbelievable.

I just… couldn’t imagine it.

Yuna really was a girl of many mysteries. The more I learned, the more of an enigma she became.

EXTRA STORY
NERIN AND ELENA PART TWO

AFTER WE LEFT the Adventurers' Guild, we went to the Bear's Lounge, which both served as my workplace and my home.

The first floor was the shop, and the second floor was our living quarters. It was a mansion in the past, so the rooms were huge, and the furniture was luxurious. It made me doubt whether I really belonged in a place like this. On top of that, rent was free. So long as I worked hard, I'd have a place to live.

I brought Elena over. We passed by the stone statue of the bear holding a giant loaf of bread out front and headed to the back. I promised to treat Elena to lunch, so Karin was supposed to be making bread around this time. After having some of Karin's bread, we were going to have cake.

"Are you really sure?" Elena asked me.

"Yes, we made it just for you. Please try it."

I made a cake the night before and put it away in the fridge. I really worked hard on it, so I wanted her to eat it.

Once we got to the back entrance, I smelled the freshly baked bread at once. She'd been baking with my uncle and aunt for years, so Karin's bread was great.

"I can't let the kids beat me," Karin told me. She meant the orphans working at the shop—they were all very serious and hard workers. They couldn't stand to goof off, apparently. I felt the same, truthfully—I couldn't let the kids steal the cake baking from me.

Once we got into the kitchen, we found Karin baking bread. She was with Tiermina and Yuna, in her bear costume as always.

“Yuna, Tiermina, you’re both here too?”

Then again, Yuna did come to eat bread at the shop a lot. Tiermina would do the same to get bread for dinner or for breakfast the next day. Tiermina tried to pay for it at first, but Yuna told her that she didn’t need to. Since we were making the food for the orphans and for ourselves with the ingredients from the shop, Yuna told Tiermina that she couldn’t be the only one paying.

I’ll admit, that worried me. It probably cost Yuna a bunch. Sometimes I think Yuna is too kind for her own good…

“Are you two eating lunch?” Yuna asked, after swallowing a mouthful of bread.

“Yes.”

Elena nodded. “Nerin invited me over, so I took her up on it.”

The two of us sat down.

I didn’t see Auntie Morin anywhere. Whenever we had a break, Auntie Morin often went to the market to see the ingredients available, or maybe to the orphanage. That’s why she sometimes ate her meals somewhere else.

“They’re all freshly baked, so you can choose the one you want to eat.” Karin set the freshly baked bread on the table. Everything looked good.

Elena and I thanked Karin, then started to eat. I nibbled on the bread and looked at Yuna. She sat across from me, still dressed in her cute bear outfit even today. As I was looking at her, I remembered what happened at the Adventurers’ Guild. She looked like a little girl, though… not at all like someone that the adventurers would be scared of. She was super cute, actually. Could she even *be* an adventurer? Even if she was, could she really be that powerful?

“What is it?” Yuna asked, nibbling her bread as I stared.

“Um, I was just thinking about how cute you are today. Like you usually are.”

“You don’t have to flatter me. Is it the onesie? Are you thinking it’s weird?” Yuna turned to look away.

“That’s not true at all. You look adorable, Yuna.” I really did think so. I wasn’t a kid, but I still felt the urge to hug her. She looked so soft!

“So, Nerin,” said Yuna, “you know Elena?

“When I first got here, I stayed at Elena’s inn. Before long, Elena started coming to the shop and we became friends.” Just the fact that I made a friend made me grateful that I’d come.

“But when I went to the shop to see Nerin,” said Elena, “she was in her bear outfit. I was so surprised.”

“Ugh, please don’t mention that. I’m so embarrassed by it.”

“Are you?” Elena smiled. “I thought it was cute.”

“I was under the impression I wouldn’t be allowed to work at the shop if I *didn’t* wear it.”

I really wanted to work at the shop back then, so I’d taken Yuna’s joke seriously and gone right along with it. It really was a cute outfit, but I was still a little embarrassed, and even more so whenever a customer told me I looked cute.

“Nerin, is it really so embarrassing to be dressed like a bear?” Yuna squinted at me. She looked a little scary.

“No. It looks cute on you, but I don’t think it looks any good on me.”

Yuna gave me a dubious look. I did think it looked cute on Yuna and the kids, but it didn’t feel so cute on someone like me.

“Come to think of it, where are Fina and Shuri?” I tried changing the topic to escape from Yuna’s glare. The two of them normally hung around Yuna or Tiermina, but they were nowhere to be seen right now.

“They took the bread that Karin baked and headed to the orphanage,” said Tiermina.

Auntie Morin and Karin baked bread for the orphanage—it was a lot more economical than buying bread from somewhere else. Karin usually baked bread even when she had the day off. She even baked the bread the day before, if she had plans for the next

day. Sometimes I even baked with her for practice, if I didn't have anything to do.

Once I finished eating my bread, I went to the refrigerator for the cake.

"Would all of you like to have some too?" I asked everyone. Karin and Tiermina told me that they'd have some. Yuna just wanted some tea. I set the cakes on the table and prepared the drinks. Elena watched me all the while.

"You're very good at brewing tea," she said, which made me happy. I learned from Lala, a maid who worked at a noble's estate. After that, I practiced really hard. I was so nervous when I'd been brought to the feudal lord's house, but it ended up being a very valuable experience.

After I finished preparing the tea and cake, Elena started eating right away.

"Mmm, it's been so long since I've had cake. It's delicious. Thank you, Nerin." Elena smiled as she ate. Just the sight of that smile made me happy. "Oh, and what would you say to serving this cake at our inn?" Elena asked. She seemed to savor every bite…

Yuna made me swear I'd never teach anyone else the cake's recipe, so I really couldn't say yes.

"Our tenants at the inn like to talk about the cake," added Elena, "and I've heard that people heading home from work never get the chance to try it."

"We have kids working at the shop," I said, "so we can't stay open late."

Yuna didn't like keeping kids up to work, so Auntie Morin told us not to stay open too late.

"In that case," said Yuna, taking a sip of tea, "how about we sell the cake at the inn too?" Elena and I were both taken by surprise by that. Karin just smiled.

Tiermina looked exasperated. "Yuna, you can't always blurt out the first thing that comes to mind."

Yuna shrugged. "It's not like we'll teach anyone how to make the cake. If Nerin has extra time to bake, I think we could sell the cakes at the inn."

“In other words,” said Tiermina, “we’d have Nerin make the cakes, but the inn would sell them?”

Yuna told us that was something called consignment. “But we’d need Tiermina and Nerin to talk to Elena’s parents about that. We’ll sell it at the same price as the shop. Tiermina, you’ll need to figure out the wholesale price for the inn to buy the cakes at.”

“I knew I’d be the one talking to them,” said Tiermina with a little sigh.

“But there really has been talk from people about wanting to buy cakes later in the day. Not everyone can get them before they close.”

The Bear’s Lounge closed early, but the inn was open until late. The dining hall was open not only to the tenants, but to people who weren’t staying at the inn.

“In that case, if they do start selling the cakes, then you’ll need to make a bear statue for them,” said Tiermina, beaming at Yuna.

Yuna looked… less than happy about it.

There were bears at any place that had to do with Yuna. There was a giant bear statue holding some bread in front of this shop. Her other shop had a bear holding a fish. There were bears at the orphanage, and Yuna’s very own house was shaped like a bear. Tiermina seemed to think of it as a good way to signal that a place was associated with Yuna. *Branding,* she called it.

“Um, I just blurted out the thing about selling cakes at the inn,” Elena admitted, “but I haven’t checked in with anyone to make sure it’s okay.” She said it as a whim, it was a big deal now, and suddenly she was on the spot. “And that seems like a lot of trouble for Nerin.”

Elena looked from Yuna to Tiermina, then finally to me for help.

But I didn’t reply back in the way that Elena was expecting. “As long as I don’t have to make tons, it should be fine.”

“Nerin?”

I was fine being a little busier if it was for Elena’s sake. And I was happy being useful for her, even in the slightest. Elena tried to turn us down, but when Tiermina started

to feel a little motivated, the gears started turning… and a few days later, I was talking to Elena's parents.

In the end, we decided to consign cakes at the inn every few days rather than daily.

EXTRA STORY
THE PALACE GATE GUARD ENCOUNTERS THE BEAR

IT'S BEEN OVER A YEAR since I started working as a gate guard at the castle.

It is our duty as gate guards to keep suspicious persons at bay. Many people come to the castle on a daily basis. Those who worked at the castle, those bringing in ingredients, those coming for consultations, and the envoys of each guild… people of all colors and stripes make their way to the castle. It is our duty to prevent any fishy characters from entering.

Lately, a girl wearing a bear outfit had begun to enter and leave the castle.

When one thinks of bears, a frightening image comes to mind, but this girl's getup was a rather charming version of that beast.

Lady Ellelaura had brought her in when I saw her for the first time. There was a child with them as well. The next time, she was with the Adventurers' Guild master. The time after that, she appeared with Lady Ellelaura just as we were bustling on the day of His Majesty's birthday festival. Lady Ellelaura and the Adventurers' Guild master are both quite powerful people. I could hardly understand what kind of person this girl must've been if she was coming to the castle with those two individuals. I thought she was Lady Ellelaura's daughter, but that didn't seem to be the case based on their conversations.

She had become something of a talking point among the guards. Who was this mystery bear? But we could not ask Lady Ellelaura or the Adventurers' Guild master, so she was still shrouded in mystery even now.

The final day of the birthday festival, just as I finished my work of closing the castle

gate, all the gate guards—including the off-duty ones—were gathered. We worked in shifts. We would guard at the gate, train, patrol the town, and so on according to a rotating schedule. As a rule, we would do this in pairs.

Once a month, we would all gather for reports… but it wasn't the day for that.

There was a different air in the room from usual as all of us gathered in that room, save for the guards currently guarding the gate. Why? Well, we had an unusual guest.

"Hey, what's Lady Ellelaura doing here?" Beside me, Roymond spoke in a whisper.

Yes, Lady Ellelaura was right in front of us. But I had no answer for him, so there was no point in him asking. Though Lady Ellelaura did show up for inspections, she usually wouldn't attend gatherings like this. The normally lively room went silent from Lady Ellelaura's presence. It seemed like everyone believed that there was something important happening.

"Looks like all of you've gathered," said our commanding officer, standing beside Lady Ellelaura.

"Thanks to all of you, His Majesty's birthday festival ended without incident. I'll thank you for that," our captain said. It really was an ordeal. There was a report at short notice that a ton of monsters had shown up, which caused an uproar. The Adventurers' Guild had gone out in force to slay them, and then things got confusing.

According to rumors, the monster report was… false? There was also a rumor going around that an A-Rank adventurer had slain them. Though it was resolved right away, nerves ran high.

If it weren't for that, His Majesty's birthday festival would've concluded without incident.

"So, we have received a direct order from His Majesty."

We all tensed up. That kind of thing rarely happened. *Never* happened, really. Since His Majesty was issuing a direct order right after the birthday festival, the whole room stirred. Had something happened?

"Is that why Lady Ellelaura is here, then?" Roymond whispered.

Maybe that was the case. Lady Ellelaura did work directly for His Majesty. Perhaps it *was* that important.

"Keep quiet," our captain snapped. "Lady Ellelaura will inform you of the details." He took a step back, and Lady Ellelaura stepped forward.

We all looked at her. What she said next was unbelievable. I was sure everyone else felt the same as me.

I mean, her words were… they were…

"If a girl in a bear outfit comes to the castle, let her in."

"If a girl in a bear outfit comes to the castle, treat her like an honored guest."

By "a girl in a bear outfit" did she mean *that* girl? I'd seen that bear girl before, but… if that girl in a bear outfit came to the castle, we were just supposed to let her in then?

And the last thing that Lady Ellelaura said was the most unbelievable part of all:

"If a girl in a bear outfit comes to the castle, inform His Majesty."

We were supposed to inform *His Majesty* over some girl? I didn't understand anymore. Who was this girl in the bear outfit?

"Oh, and please let me know as well. This part isn't an order from His Majesty. It's a personal request from me," Lady Ellelaura said with the sweetest smile. Though a charming woman, Lady Ellelaura was also frightening. One did not simply upset Lady Ellelaura.

"Um, who is that girl in the bear outfit? Is she a noble's daughter?"

Someone finally asked the question on all our minds. He sure was a brave one.

Lady Ellelaura narrowed her eyes at that question. Had her mood soured slightly? She probably hadn't thought anyone would dare question her. "What does it matter to *you* who the girl in the bear outfit is? What were you planning on doing after asking for that information, hmm?"

Lady Ellelaura smiled. Her eyes remained cold.

“Nothing at all, ma’am.” The man who asked lowered his head.

“Then there’s no issue.”

Which meant that we weren’t supposed to ask questions about the girl in the bear outfit.

All we needed to know was that she had some sort of relation to His Majesty. It was best not to probe any further. We would simply follow orders.

“Also, never laugh at her outfit. And under no circumstances *ask* her about the outfit. You are not to make her feel uncomfortable.”

I swallowed the saliva that collected in my mouth. This seemed like it would become a big deal.

That night, I went out drinking with my buddies after work.

“So that girl in the bear outfit, huh? Wonder what she’s actually dressed like. Can’t imagine it myself.”

“Right. You haven’t seen her then, Roymond.”

“What? You’ve seen her before?”

“Yeah, when I was on duty.”

“What’s she like?”

“Right, she had this adorable bear outfit on.”

“An abominable bear outfit? Oh, man…”

He said adorable, but I couldn’t blame the guy for thinking he said something else. I guess pretty much anybody would imagine a real bear if they were told someone was dressed like one. Of course he’d think of something frightening.

“No, it’s kind of more… fluffy and warm-lookin’? Like… a stuffed animal,” I said. “And

she's got a sweet little face, this girl, so it looked even more charming. You'll get it once you get a look at her."

Roymond looked at me like I was speaking gibberish. If I hadn't seen the bear girl myself, I'd probably be making that same exact face.

I was working at the castle gate today, and I'd nearly forgotten about the royal order from Lady Ellelaura when I saw the girl in the bear outfit walking on over.

"Who is that girl in the bear getup?" asked my partner, Lok.

"That's the girl in the bear outfit that Lady Ellelaura talked about."

Which meant we had to quickly inform His Majesty, but… who was going to inform him? We never figured that part out. But now one of us needed to receive her while the other informed His Majesty.

Lok called out to the girl in the bear outfit. The girl asked Lok whether she was allowed in, because His Majesty had given her permission to enter.

Lok checked her card and politely gave her permission to enter. Then he… looked at me? Hold on, was I supposed to be the one going?!

I wanted to chew Lok out, but I held that back and ran to His Majesty. Duty called, and I needed to inform him as quickly as possible. I ran from the gate toward the castle. It was a long distance from the gate, then an even longer distance down through the halls.

His Majesty's office was high in the central tower. It was rare for a gate guard like me to make it all this way.

Finally, I got to the front of the door where His Majesty was working, which meant… which…

I'd gotten all this way, but I had no idea what to do now.

A guard was stationed in front of the door to prevent any suspicious characters from getting through the door.

“Who goes there?” The guard gave me a suspicious look. I suppose I *was* suspicious, considering I ran all the way up and was currently totally out of breath. The soldier steeled himself as he watched me.

“Please tell His Majesty that a girl in a bear outfit has arrived,” I said. And wouldn’t you know it, the guard seemed to understand.

“Understood,” said the guard. Then he knocked on the door and informed His Majesty of the girl in the bear outfit.

My work was done, then. I started to return to the gate, but then I remembered something else: I needed to inform Lady Ellelaura.

Wait, *where was Lady Ellelaura?!*

I dashed off to the place where I thought I might find her…

Once I successfully informed Lady Ellelaura, I headed back to the gate.

“Nice work.”

“Yeah, I never thought that I’d actually go up to His Majesty to tell him that a girl in a bear outfit arrived.”

But I had, and we’d keep on doing that. We would end up running all the way to His Majesty whenever the girl in the bear outfit showed up.

The biggest issue was figuring out where Lady Ellelaura was. She would appear in all sorts of places; she gave us more trouble than His Majesty!

EXTRA STORY
SHERRY MAKES STUFFED ANIMALS

THE SHOP that I work in deals with fabric and thread. We make clothes there. One day, Yuna came by. She asked me about making stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu are the names of Yuna's bears. They are very cute and good bears. Apparently, she wanted me to make stuffed animals of them.

I wanted to make sure I did a great job, so I asked her if she could show me her bears. Since the room we were in was small, I thought she wouldn't be able to, but Yuna stuck out her arm and a little Kumayuru came out of her bear hand.

Wh-what is this?! What is this little tiny bear?! I thought. It was very, very cute. A small Kumayuru…

A small Kumayuru?! I looked at the bear, totally shocked. Yuna told me that she wanted a stuffed animal the size of this Kumayuru to be made.

I brought out the tape measure and measured Kumayuru. I took Kumayuru's measurements all over, including Kumayuru's head, body, legs, paws, ears, and tail.

The bear was so very fluffy and soft.

Oof, it was so very cute.

I got permission from Temoka, the owner of the shop, and started making the stuffed animals right away.

I learned how to make things that I didn't understand from Temoka and made the pattern for the stuffed animal. That part was the hardest. After that, I cut out the cloth from the patterns, and sewed them together to finish up the stuffed animal. It was a

little like making clothes.

“Sherry, I think that’s it for today,” said Mr. Temoka.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Temoka. I finished the difficult part thanks to you.”

“This is just part of your studies. And if there’s anything you don’t understand, make sure to let me know.”

Temoka was very kind about teaching me. Was this what it was like to have a father?

“I want to make a bit more progress at home. Can I bring it with me?”

“I wouldn’t mind that. But don’t overdo it.”

“I won’t.”

I decided to bring the materials back with me so I could keep making the stuffed animal at home.

Once I got home and had dinner, I started making the stuffed animals again.

“Sherry, whatcha making?” Minsha asked me. Minsha is a little girl.

“It’s a bear stuffed animal.”

“A bear?!” Bears are dangerous creatures. But thanks to Yuna’s bears, everyone perked up just hearing about them. I was a little worried about what would happen to them…

“Yuna asked me to make stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

“That’s so nice. I want one too.”

“Hmm… would you like me to ask Yuna if I can make you one?”

“Are you sure?”

“But only after checking in with Yuna, okay?”

“Okay!”

After everyone went to bed, I started working on the stuffed animals in the dining hall to make sure I wasn’t causing trouble for the other kids I shared a room with. I was tired, but I kept going. Yuna asked me to do this. She asked because it was me. I was really happy, so I kept sewing in order to live up to Yuna’s expectations.

Then, once it was almost morning, I finished the Kumayuru stuffed animal.

It was done. It was my first time making one, but it turned out great.

The most difficult part was definitely the face. I had to work really hard to make the face cute.

Once I was done with Kumayuru, I relaxed too much and fell right asleep. But then the headmistress woke me up right away and scolded me.

I went back to my room and slept a little.

After I slept just a little, it was breakfast time and the other kids in my room woke me right up. I rubbed my tired eyes and got up. I was tired since I’d only slept a little, but I was making a stuffed animal until morning, so of course I’d be tired.

I looked around the room. Huh? I couldn’t find the Kumayuru stuffed animal. I hadn’t just dreamed finishing it, right? I remembered I left it in the dining hall.

I went outside, hurried to the dining room, and found the tiny little kids fighting over the stuffed animal.

“This is mine.”

“It’s *mine*.”

“Uwghhhh! Let me hold it too.”

They were fighting over the stuffed animal I’d made? “I made that, so could you give it

back?”

When I said that to them, they all looked like they were about to cry.

“Nuh-uh.”

“I want the bear.”

They hugged the bear really tightly and didn’t seem like they wanted to let it go. I never would have thought that anyone would want it that much.

“Yuna asked me to make it. So please give it back.”

“Yuna did?”

“Uh-huh. And you all don’t want to make trouble for Yuna, do you?” I said. Then the little kid with the stuffed animal looked sad. They all really liked Yuna, so they wouldn’t cause trouble for her. But I felt bad for the kids.

“Thank you. I can’t do it right away, but I’ll ask Yuna if I can make stuffed animals for all of you.”

“Really?!”

“For me too?!”

“And me?!”

Their frowns turned upside down. “Uh-huh, so just wait for now.” I promised to make them all stuffed animals.

“Sherry, don’t you have a Kumakyu?”

“I’m going to start making it.”

“Then I want a Kumakyu one.”

“I want a Kumayuru.”

“I want a Kumayuru too.”

“I want a Kumakyu.”

Minsha also bugged me for one since I promised her one yesterday. I had to make a lot of stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu now.

After eating breakfast, I rubbed my eyes and headed to the shop.

“Sherry, you look tired. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I was working a little hard.”

“You need to make sure you get a good night’s sleep.”

“Okay.”

“In that case, I’ll work, but you can come ask me about anything you’re not sure about.”

“Okay.”

I already finished Kumayuru, so now all I needed to do was use white cloth to make Kumakyu and it would be fine.

I started making Kumakyu as a stuffed animal. Before long, I started to yawn. I was sleepy. But I needed to work hard and finish it.

I was tired, but I somehow finished making the Kumakyu stuffed animal. Now all I needed to do was take it to Yuna. I got permission from Temoka to go out.

“Sherry, after you go to Yuna’s place, you can take the rest of the day off. I understand why you’re pushing yourself for Yuna, but you need to take breaks too.”

It seemed like he noticed I was tired while I was working.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and decided to take a break for today. I put away the finished Kumayuru and Kumakyu into a bag. It was a little big, but not too big for me to carry.

I carried the bag with the stuffed animals and went to Yuna’s house.

I’d be happy if she liked them…

AFTERWORD

IT'S BEEN A WHILE. I'm Kumanano. Thank you for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*'s eighth volume. We're already at the eighth installment.

This time around, Yuna and Fina have received an invitation from Misa to a birthday party that they will attend. They decide to bring a cake and stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu as gifts.

Yuna was supposed to attend the party, but she ends up involved in the fight between the Fahrengram and Salbard noble families. Thanks to Yuna, they successfully stop the Salbards and can celebrate Misa's birthday party.

However, Yuna's greatest opponent shows up at the party. Noa makes an appearance with Yuna's dress. Unable to run from the party or shake off Noa, Yuna ends up wearing the party dress.

The story involving the Fahrengrams and Salbards continues for a little longer, too. I hope that you'll continue to follow along in the ninth volume.

I think this had already been announced, but *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* is set to be turned into a comic. We'll be able to meet Yuna, Kumayuru, and Kumakyu in the manga.

I had a conversation a while ago with my editor, telling him that it would be nice to have a comic version of the story, but I never expected it to become reality. With this, another dream has come true.

Sergei will be in charge of the manga and will be drawing incredibly cute illustrations.

Thinking about how *Kuma* will spread in not only novel form, but also as a manga has made me the happiest I can be. I hope that you will enjoy *Kuma* in both its novel and manga forms.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who strived to get this book out.

I'd like to thank 029 for drawing Yuna, Fina, Noa, and Misa in their dresses. I was so happy seeing them in a way they normally wouldn't be seen.

I'm always causing trouble for my editor because of my typos and omissions. And to the many people who were involved in the publishing of *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* Volume 8, thank you.

I'm grateful for the readers who have read along thus far.

Well, I hope we can meet again in the ninth volume.

KUMANANO – ON A DAY IN DECEMBER, 2017

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