

WRITTEN BY
Kumanano
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029

17
novel



KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

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– Bear Bear Bear Kuma –

- VOLUME 17 -

-AUTHOR-

Kumanano

-ILLUSTRATOR-

029

[SEVEN SEAS]



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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR Vol. 17

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Illustrated by 029

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Name: Yuna
Age: 15
Gender: Female

► Yuna's Status_

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

◀ KUMAYURU (CUB FORM)
▼ KUMAKYU

Skills

► FANTASY WORLD LANGUAGE

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

► FANTASY WORLD LITERACY

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

► BEAR EXTRADIMENSIONAL STORAGE

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

► BEAR IDENTIFICATION

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

► BEAR DETECTION

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

► BEAR MAP 2.0

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

► BEAR SUMMONING

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

► BEAR TRANSPORTER GATE

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

► BEAR PHONE

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

► BEAR WATER WALKING

Gain the ability to traverse water. Summons gain the ability to travel on water.

► BEAR TELEPATHIC COMMUNICATION

You can call your summoned beasts from a distance.

Magic

► BEAR LIGHT

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

► BEAR PHYSICAL ENHANCEMENT

Routing mana through the bear gear allows for physical enhancement.

► BEAR FIRE MAGIC

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

► BEAR WATER MAGIC

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

► BEAR WIND MAGIC

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

► BEAR EARTH MAGIC

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

► BEAR ELECTRICITY MAGIC

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

► BEAR HEALING MAGIC

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

CRIMONIA



FINA

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



SHURI

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



TIERMINA

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

GENTZ

In charge of harvesting monsters at the Crimonia Adventurers' Guild. Cares for Fina and later marries Tiermina.



NOIRE FOCHROSÉ

Nicknamed Noa. Ten years old. Second daughter of the Fochrosé family. A cheerful girl who loves bears.

LIZ

A teacher at the orphanage. Takes good care of the orphans with the headmistress Bo.

BO

Headmistress of the orphanage. When financial support was cut and the orphanage was struggling, she still devoted herself to helping the children.



ANZ

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

LEM

Keeper of the bee tree. Has been saved by bears and is grateful when Yuna helps the bee tree's bears.

MORIN

A capital baker. Yuna helps when her bakery is in trouble. After that, she's put in charge of the "Bear's Lounge."

GOLD

Blacksmith in Crimonia. Made Fina's mithril knife.

NELT

Gold's wife. Strong willed and in complete control of her husband.



CLIFF FOCHROSÉ

Noa's father and the Lord of Crimonia. A man well-acquainted with Yuna's hijinks. Friendly and liked by his subjects.

ELF VILLAGE

MUMULUTE

Sanya and Luimin's grandfather. He is the head of the elves' village. Was once an active adventurer.



SANYA

Guild master of the capital's Adventurers' Guild. A female elf, she keeps Yuna out of trouble with the other adventurers. Has a hawk-like summon named Folg that acts as a messenger.



LUIMIN

Sanya's little sister. Yuna helped her when she collapsed in front of the bear house in the capital. Very polite but can be clumsy.

CAPITAL



ELLEAURA FOCHROSE

Noa and Shia's mother. Thirty-five years old. Ordinarily lives in the capital and works for the king. Is very well connected and helps Yuna with a lot of things but can be a bit pushy.



SHIA FOCHROSE

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



PRINCESS FLORA

Princess of the Elfanica Kingdom. Calls Yuna "bear." Yuna likes her, frequently showering her with gifts like picture books and stuffed animals.



TEILIA

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

GHAZAL

A blacksmith in the capital. At Gold's instruction, Yuna comes to see him. Later on, he makes mithril fighting knives for Yuna.

MARICKS

Student at the academy in the capital and friend of Shia's. A boy with a strong sense of justice who tried to act as a decoy during practical training.

ANGE

Princess Flora's caretaker. Has a daughter the same age as Princess Flora.

JADE'S PARTY



JADE

The reliable leader of the four-person party that keeps bumping into Yuna, teamed up with her during the golem extermination and in Dezelt. Recognizes Yuna's strength and is nothing to scoff at himself.



TOYA

A tongue-in-cheek, mischievous swordsman. Often the butt of jokes, he sets the mood for the party.



MEL

A cheerful mage who is always smiling. Adores Kumayuru and Kumakyu, but Yuna refuses to let her ride them.



SENIA

A cool knife-wielding woman. Always teases Toya.



RUDNICK



LILYKA

Bright and energetic dwarf girl. Childhood friend of Ghazal. Maybe she has feelings for him?

LOJINA

Ghazal and Gold's master. When the two of them set out on their own, he stopped making weapons.

KUSEHLO

Blacksmith who works with Jade. Gives Toya a test when he asks for a mithril sword.

WIOLA

Lojina's wife. A calm and reliable person who manages the shop.

TALOTOBIA

Guild master of Rudnick's blacksmith guild. Has kept watch over many blacksmiths and adventurers.

LALUZ

RETBELLE

Major merchant who holds an immense amount of influence in Laluz. A shrewd man but spoils his granddaughter. Gives Yuna a house in exchange for one of her picture books.

ALKA

Retbelle's granddaughter. Has pretty silver hair and an adorable smile. Around five years old. Is obsessed with Yuna's picture books and bear stuffed animals.





CHAPTER 434

THE BEAR GOES TO SEE THE TRIAL

FINA, LUIMIN, AND I had a blast on our way to the dwarven town. We watched Toya take his test to see if he was ready for a mithril sword and visited Lojina, the blacksmith who'd trained Gold and Ghazal. Somewhere in all that commotion, I learned about the town's gate of trials, where adventurers tested their might and the quality of the local blacksmiths' blades. Jade was participating with the blacksmith Kusehlo's blade, so we were going to go and watch.

The only wrinkle was that spectators weren't allowed to go through the gates. Bummer. Well, whatever. The gates were open, and the blacksmiths would be putting their skills to the test starting today.

"Why are we going so early in the morning?"

The sun had only just broken the horizon. Luimin let out a sleepy little yawn. Even Fina, who I knew was a morning person, seemed tuckered out. I wondered if she was still tired from cleaning the house yesterday.

Me? I was just fine thanks to the power of my white bear outfit.

"I want to get to the gate before it gets crowded." I knew I'd make an entrance if I showed up late in my bear getup, so I wanted to find a good spot before everyone else got there.

"But I thought Jade wasn't participating today?"

The first day was supposed to be for apprentices and rookie blacksmiths. As a veteran, Kusehlo wouldn't be participating today. That meant Jade wouldn't be fighting until after tomorrow either.

"I'm curious to see what the fuss is about." Also, I was hoping to catch a peek through a gap in the gates.

"But I'm so sleepy."

“You can go back to bed, if you’d like,” I offered.

“I’ll go.”

The two of them started to perk up as we were finishing breakfast. Once we were ready, we headed out.

We came to the ridiculously long staircase leading up to the gate.

“Let me know if you get tired, Fina. No one’s watching, so you don’t have to be embarrassed.”

“It’s okay. I can do it.” Fina balled her small hand into a fist.

“Yuna, you’re not going to make me the same offer?” Luimin chimed in.

“Considering how you pranced up the stairs last time, I didn’t think it was necessary. I could give you a hand on the way down, though.”

“No, thank you!”

Luimin dashed up the stairs like I was chasing her. I guess grabbing her and jumping off the top of the stairs the other day had scared her. While Luimin nimbly dashed up, Fina and I started our long trudge.

It wasn’t like our first time climbing up the stairs made it any easier today. Fina panted as she took it a step at a time. By the time she made it to the top, her forehead was absolutely drenched in sweat.

“Good work.”

I handed Fina and Luimin some cold water. It was still early, so I didn’t see anybody around. Maybe we were a little *too* early?

We headed over to the gate of trials.

“Yuna, Luimin. There’s someone over there,” Fina said, pointing.

When I followed her finger, I found a dwarf staring at the gate—a dwarf I recognized.

“That’s Lojina,” Luimin said.

“Is he going to participate too?” Fina asked.

“Hmm. I think he hasn’t made any weapons...”

He hadn’t made any since we’d come to town. Apparently, he was only working on pots and pans right now. Lilyka hadn’t mentioned him smithing anything new recently. He had a brooding look to him right now, making me hesitate to approach him in case it got awkward.

As it turned out, he spotted us instead and headed our way.

“Ah, it’s you young ladies. Why are you here so early? It’ll be a while until anyone else gets here.”

It turned out the crowd wouldn’t start gathering until later in the day. Instead of waking up and getting right to it, people thought it was better to rouse early so they’d be in peak physical condition. It was true that if you just handed somebody a weapon right as they got out of bed, their body wouldn’t be fully alert, much less their brain. That was no way to get good results.

I’d heard the same logic—that it was better to be awake for a few hours beforehand—applied to exams. Must be something to it.

“I came early because my clothes would attract attention otherwise,” I explained.
“What about you Lojina? Are you participating?”

“Course not. I haven’t made a weapon in years.”

“So then what brought you here?”

“Just some stuff I can’t let go of,” he said as he stared at the gate of trials.

“What kind of stuff?”

“Weapon making.”

“Can’t you just make one then?”

“It’s not that simple. Sure, I want to make something, but after Ghazal and Gold both left, I’ve felt incomplete. I was looking forward to watching them grow and develop by my side—and I’d improve right along with them. Then they up and left, and I just haven’t had it in me to make anything. Just don’t enjoy it.”

It wasn’t like his daughter got married or his wife had died, though maybe the fact that was where my head went was a sign I wasn’t getting it. Weren’t apprentices *supposed* to leave someday? If that made you sad, you’d just be miserable forever. Lilyka had said he could just find new apprentices once his old ones came into their own, and I was with her on that.

“Then you folks came and showed me the knives Ghazal and Gold made. They kept improving, even without me. I’m overjoyed and feel downright pathetic. I figure if I watch the rookie blacksmiths, that might bring back my old enthusiasm for weapons making.”

Ah. So that’s why he was here with us early birds.

“Did you girls come to watch too?”

“Well, yes,” I said.

“You climbed up all those stairs even though you’re not even participating?” He sounded a little frazzled.

“Isn’t this a big event for this town?” I asked.

“It is if you’re a blacksmith. But since regular folks can’t watch the trials, they don’t come all the way up that long staircase. There’s no fun in it for them.”

Sounded about right. Man, what a bummer! If they at least had cameras or something, they could’ve shown us what was going on inside. Then everyone could have some fun. And that never-ending staircase—if not for my bear gear, I wouldn’t have bothered to climb it either.

“Why is the gate of trials so high up anyway? Couldn’t it have been built lower? And who made it? Was it just always here?”

"It's said that a sorcerer made it long ago. Supposedly this place collects magic, so it was easier to set up here."

Was he talking about something like ley lines? Those sometimes featured in games and manga. Still—created by a sorcerer! I guess that meant it hadn't been here all along, unlike the pyramid in Dezelt.

"So do you not know when the gate will open because it's made of mana?"

"That's right. Magic keeps the gate of trials closed. It opens once it's collected enough mana."

Cool. Another mystery solved.

"But it's pitch-black." Luimin peeked through the gate.

The gate led into a cavern-like tunnel, but it was so dark, I couldn't see ahead.

"The trials are held in the deepest part," Lojina explained. "You can't see them from here."

Aw, too bad. I guess peeking in wasn't going to be an option then.

"I thought I heard someone. That you, Lojina?"

A short dwarf with a magnificent beard came over from the building next to the gate of trials.

"Talotoba," Lojina muttered softly.

"Why are you here?" asked Talotoba. "Wait, are you gonna be joining in?"

"No, just came to observe."

"Gonna make weapons again?"

"Not sure. I might. Might not."

"Hm? So which is it?"

“Don’t know myself.”

Talotoba seemed unimpressed by Lojina’s answer.

“What’s that odd bunch of girls doing behind you?”

He was looking at us. I guess he was right—we *were* kind of an odd group. There was Fina (a human), Luimin (an elf), and me (a bear).

“They’re friends of Ghazal and Gold. They came all this way, so I’m lookin’ after them a bit.”

“Ghazal and Gold’s people, huh...? Well, I’m Talotoba, the master of the Blacksmiths’ Guild.”

I hadn’t known there was a Blacksmiths’ Guild. I supposed there had to be one *somewhere*, even if it was a bit late for me to be having that epiphany. Maybe the guild only existed in this town?

“I’m Yuna. This girl is Fina, and the elf girl is Luimin.”

“Well, you’re already here and we’ve got time until things start. Want something to drink?”

“You sure?”

“Until people arrive, sure. Besides, I’m sure they’re all tired from climbing all the way up those stairs,” Talotoba answered.

We took him up on the offer.

CHAPTER 435

THE BEAR TALKS WITH THE GUILD MASTER

TALOTOBIA TOOK US INSIDE the building, which was spacious, with high ceilings. There was a long table with a sign-in sheet at the entrance. I was guessing that was where they checked people in. The area behind that looked like a large doctor's office waiting room, lined with benches.

"This way."

Talotoba headed into an adjacent room, so we followed him. It was a large space with a table and chairs, which gave me the impression it was like a conference room.

"Well, take a seat wherever."

We did so, and Talotoba went to fetch us tea as promised. I always associated dwarves with alcohol, but I guess even they didn't drink in the morning.

"Is it really okay to kick back like this?"

"It's an annual event. Besides, we've already been prepared for a few days. Now we just have to wait for the guild staff and the participating blacksmiths to show up."

Talotoba served everyone tea and sat down too.

"Seems like it will be fun."

"I suppose it is. I get to see the apprentice blacksmiths improve with my own eyes. That's the privilege of being the guild master."

"How does this year look?"

"I have a feeling that Dolton's apprentice'll be pretty good. And there will be many others. I'm looking forward to it," Talotoba said. He seemed genuinely excited, like a dad watching his kids grow up. He'd be a great fit for working at the orphanage. Then Talotoba glanced over at me.

"So, that supposed to be a bear getup, lass?"

"It is," I said. Don't know what else I could look like.

"Is that look popular in other towns?"

Lojina had said not to worry about my clothes, but it looked like people would be curious no matter what. I didn't really want to bother explaining, so I just answered with what came to mind.

"It's very popular," I said.

"Yuna?!" Fina shouted from her seat next to me. Was she really that surprised? There could be a town out there somewhere that liked decking themselves out in bear gear—it's not like they didn't know one existed. Then again, that would be strange itself, wouldn't it?

"I'm just joking. I'd appreciate it if you didn't ask why I'm dressed like this," I said, gently hinting that I didn't want to talk about it.

"Hm. To each their own."

I wished he wouldn't look at me with pity like that—it wasn't like I dressed as a bear because I *wanted* to. It was a matter of survival is all.

"So, you girls were saying you know Ghazal and Gold?"

"Do you know them too?" I asked.

"Of course I do. I know all the smiths in this town."

"All of them?"

"Course! Comes with being the guild master. Not to mention the outstanding up-and-coming blacksmiths'll leave a lasting impression."

I didn't know how many people there were, but I was impressed he knew everyone anyway. As someone who couldn't even remember people's names, this just seemed weird to me. Maybe I hadn't been wrong when I'd jokingly pegged him for a proud dad.

"Those two doing well for themselves?" he asked.

"They are."

"Ah, I see. I was disappointed to hear they'd left town, but I'm glad they're doing all right. So, what brings you girls here? Did you come here with your dads?"

Our dads? At first, I was like *I'm not a kid*, but then I realized Fina was with me, and she definitely is one. Okay, so... did he mean me too, or...?

"This may surprise you, but the three of them made their way here on their own to buy pots and pans," Lojina said.

Talotoba couldn't hide his shock. He stared at me like he was ogling a circus animal. I supposed that was the appropriate reaction to three girls traveling without older chaperones.

Lojina explained that he was making us pots.

"Well, Lojina's pots are popular. You girls are in luck. This stubborn old man doesn't make anything unless he feels like it."

"Not like I can turn down Gold and Ghazal's friends."

Ah, that'd been why he hadn't turned us away. He'd even given us a discount. I had to be thankful for that.

"Anyway, you girls came here to see the gate of trials today?"

"Yeah, I thought maybe we could get a peek at the trials from the gate, but that seems impossible—or, if I was lucky, that I might be able to participate."

I was secretly thinking that if something happened to one of the adventurers, I could swap in for them. Then again, even if something like that happened, nobody would trust a girl dressed as a bear to take over for them.

"You want to participate? Are you trying to become a blacksmith?"

There was that shocked expression again, but I was the one who should've been shocked this time. Did I really look like an apprentice blacksmith?

“No, I wanted to wield a weapon.”

Talotoba gave me a puzzled look.

“I know how she looks, Talotoba, but she’s an adventurer,” Lojina explained.

“An adventurer? This bear girl?”

Talotoba huffed out a small laugh as he looked at me. Fair enough. I didn’t think I looked like an adventurer, either.

“You’re pulling my leg, aren’t you? It’d be more believable if you told me she was a street performer.”

Did he mean the kind of people who busked for money? I remembered the stuff I’d done at Misa’s birthday party. That might actually be a legitimate career option if I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“Well, I can’t say I disagree about her outfit, but she seems to be an adventurer in her own right. Ghazal even made weapons just for her.”

“Well, who would turn down a paying customer?”

“Would you be saying that about first-class mithril knives? He didn’t just forge her a random weapon—he entrusted her with some of his best work. I’m sure you know what that means, guild master.”

Talotoba eyed me with silent skepticism.

“Miss, would you let me see the weapon Ghazal made you?”

“Sure,” I said, pulling out the Kumayuru knife from my bear storage and handing it to Talotoba. He slowly drew the knife from its sheath and squinted at it.

“Young lady, do you really want to attempt the gate of trials?”

“Yes, I do.” I mean, I couldn’t help but be curious. As an ex-gamer, I wasn’t going to ignore an event flag.

Talotoba furrowed his brow at my nonsense. Lojina interjected, “Talotoba, could she

participate if she registered with me?"

I was shocked. Almost as much as Talotoba.

"I want to check one thing, miss. When was this knife made? Has it been over a year?"

Lojina looked at the Kumayuru knife Talotoba was holding.

"I had it made recently," I said.

"Lojina, are you suggesting she should participate with the knife Ghazal made?"

"You must've been wondering about his progress. It's not like we'd have to write down the results—we can just pretend it never happened after. I want to test both the knife that Ghazal made and the girl's skill."

"Is that possible? I thought the blacksmith who made the weapon had to be with me?"

"That's a rule the Blacksmiths' Guild put in place to prevent certain problems from arising. Doesn't really apply here."

Apparently, in the past, people could attempt the trial as many times as they wanted. If they had ten swords, then they had ten tries. The issue was that the trial consumed magic, so each time someone went through, the gate's mana decreased. That meant the gate only worked for a finite number of trials. If one person made multiple attempts, not everyone who wanted to would get a turn of their own.

As such, the Blacksmiths' Guild took charge of the trials and put some rules in place.

Rule 1: Each challenger is allowed one attempt.

Rule 2: Participants must be accompanied by the blacksmith who forged the weapon. Furthermore, that blacksmith must be registered with the Blacksmiths' Guild.

Rule 3: Use of a weapon forged by another is forbidden. (Upon discovery, participant shall be banned for three years.)

Rule 4: Apprentices and new blacksmiths shall be prioritized on the first day.

Rule 5: The guild cannot guarantee the gate will stay open as long as planned. (Those who were not able to try will be prioritized the following year.)

Rule 6: Do not divulge the details of the trial.

The second and third rules disqualified me.

“I’m surprised no one complained when the rules were made.”

“Those rules evolved into what they are today. Every time a problem arose, we’d amend the rules accordingly. The blacksmith who was guild master when the second and third rules were instituted said, ‘As blacksmiths, every-body should be able to tell which one weapon they made was the best.’”

If you couldn’t tell which was your best weapon, you’d be admitting you didn’t have a good eye. A blacksmith should be able to identify their finest work.

After that, masters began circumventing those rules by giving their apprentices weapons to test for them. So more rules were added.

“There was a risk people would start saying that the swords the apprentice made were better than their masters’. If the master blacksmith acknowledged that they had their apprentices make a sword that they passed it off as their own, it would erode their customers’ trust. Trust is a serious matter when it comes to business.”

“We even had an apprentice participate with a sword bought from another forge, trying to pass it off as their own.”

“There was no point to it. Even if that earns an apprentice recognition and makes them seem qualified, it wouldn’t last. The lie would come out eventually.”

Made sense. Even if there were a lot of blacksmiths who made good weapons, no one would want one made by a liar. Your life depended on the quality of your weapon. Best to buy from a trusted blacksmith, especially if you were seeking something of good make. If you wanted a cheap weapon, on the other hand, anyone would do.

“Nobody does that stuff anymore, though.”

"So there you have it. That's why we don't let anybody participate using another blacksmith's sword as though it's your own."

"Talotoba, could you please make an exception? We'll keep it off the books."

A short silence washed over us. Talotoba carefully chose his words.

"Because it's *you* asking, I will allow it. Nobody's here yet, so if you do it immediately, I'll look the other way."

"You have my gratitude." Lojina bowed.

"I want to see how much Ghazal has grown too. Also, if seeing your apprentice's knife makes you want to make swords again, I'll be mighty glad."

If I failed the trial, I'd be dragging Ghazal's reputation through the mud... and Lojina might never return to making weapons.

I'd initially meant to do this for fun. Now, I felt the sudden weight of responsibility.

CHAPTER 436

THE BEAR TAKES ON THE GATE OF TRIALS, FIRST BATTLE

BEFORE OTHER PARTICIPANTS and guild staff could come, I'd be allowed to attempt the gate of trials. Since we didn't have much time, I swigged the tea Talotoba made us in one go and stood up from my seat. Fina and Luimin followed my lead and stood up too, but Talotoba called them back.

"Sorry, girls, but you won't be able to go inside with her. Please wait here."

Wow. I guess that was just how it was—only the people doing the trial could go inside.

"Aw, really? I wanted to see Yuna do the trial," -Luimin said.

"Yes, we wanted to watch."

Painfully relatable. I'd wanted to see people do the trials too, and finding out I couldn't had been a huge letdown.

"Fina, Luimin, just wait for a bit. I'll be right back."

"Aw, okay."

"Yeah, we'll wait here, so do your best, Yuna."

They looked disappointed, but didn't make a fuss.

Lojina, Talotoba, and I left Fina and Luimin behind in the building, then headed to the gate of trials.

I felt bad for Fina and Luimin, but I was getting pumped. Maybe it was just the gamer in me.

“We don’t have much time. Let’s do this quick.”

“Is it all right for you to go in too, Talotoba?”

“That’s not a problem. Originally, anyone could go inside—we were the ones who ruled that only blacksmiths and champions could enter. If we let just anyone go in, it would be chaos. The trial isn’t supposed to be a spectacle. Some fools even try to linger inside or do the trial over and over, so now the guild master must accompany people.”

Sure. It wasn’t like serious weapons makers and people who used weapons would want a crowd staring at them. And considering the trial *could* be attempted multiple times, I wasn’t surprised some people might try to get in a few more attempts when no one was supervising them.

And so, we entered the gate of trials.

The way it worked was that you tested your weapons in the area deeper inside. Since the entrance had looked like a gate to begin with, and you needed to go through it to undertake the trial, people had started calling it the gate of trials way back when. The area beyond the gate wasn’t man-made, but natural, like the inside of an earthen cave. Lights lining the walls illuminated the interior and led us toward a passageway.

As we continued down the passage, Talotoba and Lojina explained the origins of the gate of trials to me until we reached some stairs. Time to head down. Talotoba said something about watching our step, but I was fine, since I was wearing my bear shoes. He took the lead as we descended.

“So, what sort of thing do you do in the gate of trials?”

“Well, you know it’s for blacksmiths and the people wielding their weapons to test their true strength, yeah?”

“I do, but I don’t know any other details.”

What happened inside the gate stayed inside the gate according to the rules, after all.

“To put it simply, you fight against stuff made from mana.”

“Against mana?”

I didn't quite get it. What kind of stuff?

"Could be monsters or physical objects. Depends on the weapons and the weapon's nature. I'm not sure what form the trial will take for you—when a weapon has been made by an apprentice, the monsters are usually weak."

"Like wolves and such," Lojina chimed in on Talotoba's explanation.

I guess wolves *were* a low-level monster.

"After completing a trial, the opponents become stronger and tougher. The only way to defeat them is to tap into both the weapon and its wielder's potential."

"After completing a trial? Are there multiple?"

"A maximum of five. The first round isn't that tough. Any given weapon has a baseline degree of power, and clearing the first trial just requires the bare minimum of a wielder's skill. From the second round on, it gets tougher."

Well, if someone couldn't handle their weapon, they couldn't beat wolves—Fina and Noa certainly couldn't do it, even with a mithril sword. I kind of doubted they could swing a sword at all.

"Monsters I get, but what did you mean about the physical objects?"

"Those would be objects hardened with mana. Boulders will show up for hammers and walls for spears. It's different every time, so you can't be sure what to expect."

Hm, unexpected. Listening to him made me want to try the hammer and spear challenges too, but I had no experience with those weapons from my gaming days. Then again, my bear gear might give me an edge when it came to trying new things.

"Since I'll be using knives this time, do you know what kinds of objects and monsters will show up?"

"Never had knives in here before. If a blacksmith can't make a sword, their master won't let them participate. No one would even think to try entering with a knife."

"Being able to make a sword is the first step to coming into your own as a blacksmith."

“A skilled blacksmith would never dream of entering a knife into the trials.”

Talotoba and Lojina taught me about the minimum requirements for blacksmiths to participate. Really good blacksmiths would make swords and spears since those weapons were stronger. Apparently, they never considered just trying to make the best knife they could, which seemed harsh to me. A knife could be a real weapon too.

You couldn’t equip a knife as your main weapon in the game, either. They were just starting weapons for beginners. Actually, now that I thought about it, I’d never seen a swordsman use a knife against the final boss. The only people who used knives at all after the beginner levels were assassins and thieves.

I guess it wasn’t like *no one* maimed knives. Senia was excellent with hers.

“Well... *some* people used knives in the past. But the trials weren’t especially challenging.”

Now, why would he jinx me like that? Actually, maybe a jinxed trial would be a little more challenging. I hoped so.

“But you should expect to face trials that match the level of Ghazal’s mithril knife.”

Of course. I wasn’t taking these trials lightly.

“So, is it okay to use magic?”

I had my bear magic and my bear punch.

When I asked that, Talotoba gave me a look like I was some silly little kid.

“Of course not. These trials are meant to test the *weapons*.”

I knew that on some level, but when I heard there would be monsters, I automatically thought of magic. I was afraid I’d do it on reflex.

“You can use magic, miss?”

“Yeah, I can.”

“Then I suppose I should tell you about the rules. First off, magic is forbidden. The

moment any magic strikes your opponent, the trial's over. However, you can use mana through your weapon, since some weapons are powered up through mana."

"Can I make earth walls with magic to defend against attacks?"

"No. The moment the opponent contacts the magical wall, the trial is over just like with any other magic. Dodge or use your weapon to defend. Assume that if your opponent touches any mana other than what's in your weapon, the trial's over. When it comes down to it, this is a test of the weapons and their wielders' ability to use them."

The rules of engagement for the gate of trials were, in summary:

Rule 1: Using magic for attack or defense is prohibited. The moment any such magic touches the opponent, the trial is over.

Rule 2: Imbuing a weapon with mana to attack is allowed.

Rule 3: Wearing armor is allowed.

Rule 4: The trial ends after you take a certain amount of damage.

Rule 5: The trial ends after five rounds.

The list didn't mention one other way I liked to attack.

"Can I punch things?"

I opened and closed the mouths of my bear puppets. That's right—I had my bear punch. My bear punch wasn't magical unless I used it to add some *oomph*.

They just stared at my bear puppets in exasperation.

"Miss, we've come all this way already. You do realize what the trials are for, don't you?"

I knew that—we were putting the weapons on trial, so I was supposed to use them exclusively, I guess.

“Nobody has ever tried to punch anything during the trials before.”

Figures. I guess any normal person wouldn’t go around bear-punching their way through weapons trials. So was it allowed or not? A mystery! Well, I didn’t want to disqualify myself from the trial if I did throw a punch, so I guess I’d keep it in check.

Lojina, Talotoba, and I kept chatting as we went down the stairs, when I spotted a circular pattern drawn up ahead. All sorts of shapes were drawn inside the circle—like something you would see in video games or manga. I guess it was a summoning circle or magic circle?

“The weapons are tested down here.”

The stairs brought us to a wide, spacious room about the size of a schoolyard. It seemed we were under the mountain, which made this surprisingly large for an under-ground space. The ceiling was very high, but the space was well lit, maybe through mana.

We approached the magic circle.

“Thrust your knife into the center of the summoning circle, miss. For a weapon that can absorb mana, this circle will judge the quality of the material, the weapon’s strength, its blade, and its magical absorption properties among other things when you pour mana into it. Then it’ll use that to make an appropriate opponent.”

Cool. Just like a game.

I pulled out my Kumayuru and Kumakyu knives from my bear storage. That was when I remembered that I had two knives.

“Um, so I have two.” I held them out in front of me to demonstrate.

“No matter. Thrust both in.”

I walked to the center of the circle and thrust my knives into the ground like I’d been told. Then, grasping both knives tight, I poured mana into them. The circle began to glow.

Whoa, this was *just* like a game event. It felt like a final boss or treasure was going to appear. As the circle glowed, my excitement grew. I wished Fina and Luimin could have seen this.

Right when the light from the circle vanished, Lojina called out.

“Miss, look ahead!”

I looked up to see the ground starting to bulge as it morphed into something.

“What is it? That’s...”

“A golem.”

As the ground swelled and rose, it formed into a golem.

“Why is something like that showing up in the first trial?”

Lojina and Talotoba were shouting. It was just a -golem. They didn’t have to get so worked up. It was about the size of the golems I had fought in the mines, but this time there was only one.

The golem struck the ground, sending tremors through the very air. Looked like it had packed quite a punch.

“This isn’t right, miss. Run for it!”

They were worried about me—but this was fine. I pulled my knives out of the circle.

“I can beat a golem.”

“Miss, it’ll be hardened with mana. Your weapon will be repelled if you attack thinking it’s just dirt!”

It couldn’t be tougher than an iron golem, but I had no intention of underestimating it. Even with my bear gear’s protection, the trial might end even if I took a single blow.

I grasped my bear knives tight and ran at the golem. It was slow. As I approached, the golem raised its arms overhead. I poured mana into the knives I was holding, then with a few strokes, pruned off the golem’s legs and arms.

“Hmm, I guess that’s all for the first trial?”

“Miss?”

“...”

The two men were staring at me, baffled. Just in case, I finished off the golem by slicing it up and lopping off its head.

“You look like you would have trouble moving in those clothes, but you’re so fast.”

“And you dispatched that golem so easily.”

Despite its appearance, my bear gear was still OP. Besides, I’d fought golems before, so they weren’t opponents that would fluster me, and I had Ghazal’s mithril knives. Even if it had been made with mana, it’s not like it was an iron golem.

CHAPTER 437

LOJINA WATCHES THE BEAR'S TRIAL, SECOND BATTLE

THE BEAR GIRL STUCK the two knives Ghazal had made into the middle of the circle and imbued them with mana.

“What the...?”

The circle shone with light. It had never glowed this bright for any weapons I made. When I looked at Talotoba, who stood next to me, he was just as shocked as I was.

While we were dazzled by the light coming from the circle, I noticed the ground in front of the girl had begun to swell.

“Miss, look ahead!”

At my warning, the girl pulled the knives from the circle.

The earth formed into a large, humanoid shape. Was that a golem? Why was something like that showing up as a first-round opponent, especially against knives?! Those knives Ghazal made had to be something special. The girl had some real skill, but the first trial was only meant to test the *knives*. The circle measured the strength, weight, and edge of the weapons, and how much mana they could channel, then used those details to create an appropriate trial.

There was no way a golem would be presented as the first trial for knives.

The golem swung its arms downward into the ground, which quaked under the sudden blow. Even though I said to run, the girl stood her ground. I guess all I could do was give her some advice.

“Miss, it’ll be hardened with mana. Your weapon will be repelled if you attack like it’s just dirt!”

The opponent here was formed with one year of stored mana—and the hardness of its hide would depend on the amount of mana used.

I'm not sure if she took my advice, but the girl grasped her knives and started running at the golem. Even though it seemed like her bear outfit would impede her movement, she was quick. She closed the distance to her opponent in an instant. The golem swung its arms, but she dodged.

Amazing. Wasn't she scared? Normally being that close to a golem would be terrifying. It took even more courage to approach those solid, swinging arms willingly. She even tracked their trajectory and was dodging them.

The girl dodged the golem's attacks then sliced at it. Her arms moved so quickly I couldn't count the swings. When she stopped, the golem was missing its arms and legs. Since it was reinforced with mana, it shouldn't have been easy to cut through. They may as well have been made of paper.

That was right. I remembered now. She was so powerful she'd sliced through that metal rod I'd held without me even feeling anything.

The girl swung behind the one-legged golem, lopped off its head, and brought the first trial to a close.

"Lojina, you said that Ghazal made those knives?" Talotoba asked while looking on in disbelief and utter shock, just like me.

"Yup, I'm sure of it. But it doesn't matter how sharp they are—the girl must be drawing out every last bit of their potential power."

Even if the girl was strong, the knives wouldn't cut like that if they were dull. Conversely, if a knife was sharp but its wielder unskilled, then it wouldn't cut either. Both blacksmith *and* wielder had to be good.

* * *

As we were talking, the next trial was beginning. A patch of ground a little way from the girl was beginning to swell up again.

"Armored knights."

Five fully armored knights appeared with swords in their right hands and shields in their left. The girl would be at a grave disadvantage considering her weapons had no reach. There was no way she could win.

The five knights moved to attack. She would have been at a disadvantage going against one, let alone five. This was impossible. Their armor would even be reinforced with mana and stronger than a normal set.

Something about this trial was different from the ones I was familiar with. It seemed to be assessing and responding to the girl's true abilities.

Despite being surrounded by the knights, and her cumbersome outfit, the girl dodged their attacks.

"Wait a minute—look at her move. How can she be so agile? She's even fending off those knights' swords with her knives." Talotoba was staring at the girl in utter disbelief.

It wasn't that she was just dodging the attacks. She was fluidly parrying those heavy downward strikes with only her knives. You needed a tremendous amount of skill to be able to do that without the knives being sent flying.

I had her cut the metal rod during the test before, but I hadn't imagined this was the extent of her abilities.

With the knives in each hand, the bear girl danced and dodged the attacks from the armored knights and deflected their swords with her blades. Even though that alone would be difficult, she was starting her counter-attack. She struck the weak joints of the armored knights. One after another, they fell. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

In the end, she defeated all five knights.

The girl huffed out a quick breath followed by a deep, relaxing one. Even with all of that scrambling she wasn't exhausted.

"Are your arms okay, miss?"

Even if she had parried the blows, she wouldn't have been able to deflect all the force. Her arms and wrists should have taken some of the burden. In response to my concern, she just shook out her hands as she held the knives, gave me a smile, and said,

“All good.”

Ghazal had said she was an outstanding adventurer. I understood then that he had really meant it. It wasn’t just her raw skill either—the knives Ghazal had made were amazing. They were able to cut up those armored knights, which wouldn’t have been possible if they weren’t good.

What was happening? Was this envy? Jealousy for Ghazal rushed up from the bottom of my heart. I stared at the knives the bear girl was holding. If I had made those instead of Ghazal, could I have done better? Would even more challenging trials have appeared if I had?

Why was I not forging swords? Why hadn’t I made the weapons the girl was holding? When I thought back on the past few years, I curled my hand into a fist.

“That girl is unbelievable. And I guess Ghazal made some good knives too.”

I was glad Talotoba was praising my pupil, but I burned with jealousy too.

Soon after the girl had taken down the knights and caught her breath, a new challenger approached.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

Talotoba was so surprised, he was speechless.

A giant lizard monster erupted from the ground in front of the girl. It was over ten meters long from head to tail. I had seen one of these in a monster manual.

I’d heard of large monsters appearing in trials, but only for the final challenge, not in the third round.

“Should we put an end to this, Lojina? That’s unreasonable. Even if she doesn’t get seriously injured, she’s not gonna come out unscathed.”

The giant, ten-meter-long lizard and the precocious bear girl were squaring off, staring each other down. I could only see this ending in mealtime for the lizard. Its long tail was covered in hardened scales that layered each other like that of a fish, all razor sharp. If this was the monster I thought it was, those scales couldn’t be destroyed easily.

If it whipped its tail around, this would be over in a single blow.

“Miss!”

“It’s fine.”

Instead of running away, she shot us a smile. Then her fight against the giant lizard began.

CHAPTER 438

THE BEAR BATTLES A GIANT LIZARD, THIRD BATTLE

“WHEW,” I LET OUT a little breath of air. The second battle had been five armored knights, and I’d ended it.

Lojina had seemed worried, but I already had experience fighting multiple opponents. There were five of them, but they were slow and didn’t do anything I couldn’t anticipate. When I brought my blade down on one, they’d swing up and push at me with their weight, hurl their sword at me, kick me, or try to shake me up with a sharp cry. But once they swept their swords down, the knights would always resume their prior stance and back up before attempting another attack. Unlike real human opponents, they were utterly unpredictable.

Once I knew that, I realized they weren’t all that scary.

I just needed to time my own attacks for when they brought their swords down. Easy peasy.

“Miss, are your hands all right?” Lojina asked, seeming genuinely worried.

I waved at him and told him I was fine.

“I’m all right.”

Finishing the knights marked the transition into the third battle, which would start in about a minute. No breaks for me.

The ground started to rise. All right, so who was the next opponent going to be? This felt like a game—and I was starting to have fun.

The earth steadily reformed itself until it turned into a giant lizard, right before my eyes.

“Ugh.”

I didn’t just hate bugs but reptiles too. And this one was a good ten meters long, at least. Maybe this was psychological warfare?

I tried using my detection skill to see what the lizard thing was called, but it didn’t show up. Apparently, the monsters in the gate of trials weren’t detectable with my skill. Since I didn’t have a real name for the thing, I decided to just go with “giant lizard.”

“Miss!” Lojina yelled to me. When I looked at him, I realized that Talotoba was looking worried too now.

“It’ll be all right.”

I gave them both a smile to calm them down. Then the battle against the giant lizard began.

I’d been trying to approach it but failing. Even though the thing was huge, it was somehow fast. Its giant mouth was waiting on its front half and if I tried approaching from behind, its long tail would swing at me. If I tried coming in from either side, it’d attack me with those sharp claws. And that wasn’t all I had to deal with, either.

Every tail whip was heavy and fierce. I could hear it whoosh past as it cut through the air, and when it flung its tail down toward the ground, the floor would quake. Even more troublesome: Each scale was sharp as a blade. If it hit me, I’d be seriously hurt.

Since its tail was so fast, I was already fully occupied with dodging it. There was no way I was going to be able to stab at it like this.

If only my knife was just a little longer... I just barely couldn’t reach it. Ugh, this was a pain!

I started to feel tempted to lob some magic attack into that giant mouth. Maybe hack off that irritating tail with magic while I was at it. But If I did that, I’d be disqualified for breaking the rules and the trial would be over. The whole point was to test my weapons, so I stuck to my knives.

They were just so *short*. I had no idea how to even approach defeating this monster.

“Miss! If you can’t do it, just come back to the magic circle and stab your knife in, and that’ll end it,” Lojina shouted when he saw me struggling with what to do.

“Really?”

“That’s right. You can forfeit the trial by stabbing the magic circle, just like how you started it.”

I wish he’d told me before I’d started. Still, I had no intention of giving up. This was my first “event” in a while. I was gonna enjoy this.

“Got it. If I think I can’t defeat it, I’ll forfeit.”

I wasn’t out of the running yet. But could I really defeat this thing using just my knives?

I calmed myself down internally and gripped my knives harder as I watched the giant lizard. The easiest point of attack would probably be its back. I’d have to deal with that giant maw from the front or those sharp claws from the right or left, and it had those blade scales on its tail at the back. Its tail had a 180-degree range side to side, but only about ninety degrees going up. That meant it couldn’t reach its own back. If I could just get up there, I could inflict some damage.

Compared to the giant scorpion I fought in the desert, it wasn’t much of a threat. The only issue was that I couldn’t use magic. But even then—it wasn’t like I couldn’t use my bear cheat skills.

I backed away from the giant lizard, then ran at it. It crawled along the ground toward me. I sidestepped its charge and ran clockwise around to its side.

As I kept my distance, I tried looking for an opening. I kept dodging its sharp claws and tail, trying to get onto its back. The giant lizard moved along with me, shifting the orientation of its whole body. I started running faster, trying to get diagonally behind it where its blind spot would be.

“This is it.”

I leapt toward its back. Then, as though it knew where I was even from behind, it turned around as I was in midair and whipped its long tail toward me. *Shoot!*

I could see it closing in on me. I crossed my knives immediately and blocked it.

“Miss!”

As I was flung through the air, I tumbled until I caught myself when my bear shoes hit the ground. If not for my bear gear, I wouldn’t have been able to block the attack with my knives or even land. I would probably just have gone tumbling across the ground. I had no idea how damage was being calculated, but even though my bear gear looked unharmed, there was a chance that the trial would be cut off if I got hit too many times. I needed to make sure I wasn’t taking unnecessary damage.

Once I pulled myself together, I faced the giant lizard again. What to do...? I’d underestimated the inconvenience of not being able to use spells. This was really making me feel a lot more grateful for my magic.

So, there was the tail, the mouth, or its claws... Which would I head for, then? Hm.

Okay. I had a decision.

I couldn’t figure out how far away the tail was or where it’d come at me from since it was so fast. I needed to worry about both the tail and the claws if I went to either side of it. By process of elimination, this left the front as the best angle of approach.

I started my dash. The giant lizard charged at me again as though it could read my mind. This was the same exact situation as earlier, but this time, instead of dodging to the side, the moment the giant lizard lunged forward to bite me, I leapt up.

Its mouth clamped down on the air where I’d been just a moment ago. I stepped on top of its snout and leapt onto the lizard’s back. As I landed, I imbued the knives with mana and stabbed down, plunging the mana-reinforced blades deep into the beast.

It struggled, then cried out in pain like the monster it was before crumbling back into dirt. I’d defeated it.

I quickly got off its back as it fell apart. It’d been a little tough, but the third battle was over.

I looked over at Lojina and saw that he and Talotoba were staring at me in surprise.

Oh. I'd gotten so caught up in the excitement of the event that I forgot they were there and had gone all out.

I was attracting attention, but there was nothing to be done about it. This wasn't an opponent I could have defeated any other way. Plus, Lojina had gone out of his way to set up these trials for me, and I didn't want to waste them. I couldn't help the fact that I needed to hold back my magic, but I wasn't going to let myself lose because I was holding back my strength.

The fourth and fifth battles worried me. If they were going to be even stronger than this, then I'd need to use even more of my abilities. I'd have to ask them to keep this a secret once the trials were over. I couldn't hold back now. Not after getting this far.

Which meant I could just cut loose and enjoy this. Wasn't that nice?

What's next?

CHAPTER 439

THE BEAR FIGHTS THE FAKE BEAR, FOURTH BATTLE

AFTER DEFEATING the giant lizard, I was waiting for the next trial to start when the ground heaved up and formed into a vertical pillar. It was a lot smaller than I expected. I'd braced myself for something gigantic. Slowly, the column of earth took shape.

...a humanoid shape?

It was even the same height as me. It stood on two legs and had two arms too, and its head was covered by a weird-looking hood. It kind of seemed familiar. I rubbed my eyes and peered at it.

First, I checked out its feet. Gosh, those large shoes looked familiar. I compared them to my own. Pretty similar... Then I looked up at its torso. It had a pudgy stomach, like it had some weight around its belly. I felt my own stomach. That looked the same too...



Next, I looked at the arms that stretched from the right and left of its torso. I recognized those bear heads on its hands. I held up and inspected mine. They looked an awful lot like my bear puppets. It was even holding knives in its bear puppets' mouths, just like me.

Finally, my gaze came to rest on its head, which was covered by a hood fashioned like a bear face.

Okay, enough tension. That thing was definitely me.

"Lojina, am I supposed to fight myself?"

"No idea. This is a first for me too. I think the guild master would know better, considering he's seen a whole lot more trials."

"Don't ask me. I've never heard of anyone having to fight themselves."

Lojina and Talotoba had no clue what was going on either. Even though it was made of dirt and mana, it didn't exactly feel nice to have a spare me around.

I'd heard of games and manga where you'd fight someone almost exactly like yourself in order to take your power to the next level. This wasn't some ham-fisted hint that I needed to grow, was it?

The real issue was how much of my abilities this doppelgänger in front of my eyes had reproduced. My gear was OP. It had literally been given to me by a god. Divine armor. I doubted anyone could just copy that. I also didn't know how much of my gamer know-how it'd copied from me. If it knew everything I did, then this opponent would be my worst nightmare.

While I was watching it, the copy slowly started to move. Calling it my doppelgänger in my head just kind of felt weird, so I decided to call it the fake-me.

Fake-me slowly readied the knife it held in its bear puppet. The moment I sensed it moving, it started dashing straight at me. I needed to figure out how much of me it had copied, and quick.

It was fast. We closed in on each other. The fake-me thrust out its right-hand knife; I

blocked with my right. Of course, its left knife came at me next. I blocked that with my Kumayuru knife and knocked it downward.

Battling a dual-wielder seemed like it'd be more trouble than I expected. If it had just one weapon, then I would be able to focus on avoiding just that. Two meant that I needed to keep both in mind simultaneously. This was going to be a chore.

Worse, it was pretty fast. Was this what it was like to fight me?

* * *

We exchanged blows for a while, both swinging our knives and dodging each other. Even though it wore a weird outfit that looked like it'd be hard to move it, it still dodged my attacks at the last second. I wondered how it could move its legs so fast or handle its knives like that, especially dressed in that baggy bear getup.

I had a feeling that if I said that out loud, my words would come back and bite me in the behind. I decided not to think too many mean things about the fake-me.

It looked like it was copying my moves. Since I'd never seen myself move before, I had no idea what it looked like when I fought. If it'd been keeping tabs on how I moved in the previous three matches, it was probably doing a pretty good imitation of me.

Kinda creepy. Did it know my weight or measurements?

This was the most difficult opponent I'd ever come across. We both backed away from each other. Since I couldn't use magic, I had to fight close combat.

After a short pause me and the fake-me started trading blows again. I thrust and dodged. I slashed and parried. When I avoided her knife, she attacked me in a way I hadn't expected. Her bear foot flew at me from an angle I wasn't tracking.

"Wha—"

I dodged it right before it was about to land on my stomach and backstepped away to dodge.

"Hey! Kicking's against the rules!" I yelled at fake-me. She didn't answer, of course. I

directed my complaints elsewhere.

“Lojina, Talotoba, is kicking allowed?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“It’s human shaped, so I don’t see why it wouldn’t kick.”

“But isn’t it unfair if I’m not allowed to and it is?”

“Never said it’s not allowed. Just that I dunno if it is. This is supposed to be a trial for the weapon, after all.”

I knew that, but it still sure seemed unfair. My copy was using the same weapons and was allowed to kick when I wasn’t! Maybe kicking and punching were allowed? I didn’t want the trials to end just because I tried it, though. This was so unfair!

If fake-me started using magic, that’d just go right beyond unfair into the realm of unsportsmanlike. Luckily it hadn’t used magic yet. Also, yikes, was my copy getting an edge on me in this battle because of that?

I backed off and tried thinking how to approach this as fake-me’s right arm lifted into the air. Then it brought its arm down. I immediately parried with my right. It’d thrown a knife at me.

“Wha—”

Right as I tried to complain, the fake-me’s right arm created itself a new knife that it now held in its hand instead. This had to be against the rules.

“Lojina! Talotoba!”

“This would be the same as if the lizard had flung its scales at you.”

“I guess,” I said.

But that doesn’t make it any less unfair! I wanted to yell. I couldn’t though, considering I was wearing armor from god. I was the walking definition of unfair.

Then fake-me threw both its right and left knives. I dodged again and tried to close the

distance between us, but the fake-me materialized more knives in its hand and kept throwing them. All I had were my two knives. I couldn't throw them or that'd be it. If I had to fight a copy of myself, I wished it had been, well, more of a copy. It should have been limited to my two knives. I was at a disadvantage.

As I dodged the knives, I got closer to fake-me. The only way for me to win was to fight within a range where I could use my knives. One of fake-me's knives flew at me. I needed to really watch it this time.

As I ran, I knocked the knife down. I had the time until it created a new knife to get closer. Fake-me could only make two knives at a time, so there was a pause while the new knives were being made. During that pause, I closed the distance. I got right up to it in one go and swiped at fake-me. Fake-me gripped its knives and parried my slash.

I'd failed. Maybe I'd approached at a bad angle? No, my opponent was just better than me. It had parried my mithril knife. I think it would normally have sliced through my opponent, but fake-me was countering.

I blocked that with my knives, parried it away, and tried slashing at the fake-me again. I tried stabbing instead, just to catch it off guard. It felt like it was predicting my next moves. Just when I thought that I'd hit it, it blocked me instead.

The fake-me brought down its knife. Before it could connect, I stopped its arm. It had left its side wide open. I used the Kumakyu knife in my other hand to stab it, but the fake-me dodged that. Actually, fake-me started to even slash at me with the knife in its left hand even as it dodged. I managed to get out of the way in time. Then we both drew back from each other.

"Whew."

I left out a soft breath. Fake-me was expressionless. Maybe it had infinite stamina? Wait. It was moving through mana, wasn't it? Did that mean it'd keep functioning until it ran out of mana?

Okay, that went beyond unfair into cheating. I didn't realize how frustrating it'd be to fight myself. This was a lot of trouble!

I looked over at fake-me, but I knew what I'd see. It seemed this fake-me had copied

the abilities I'd used in my first three battles. It showed no signs of using any of my skills other than that, but this was still enough to be a threat.

It was time to stop pretending this was fun and games. I needed to end this. I fortified my body and poured mana into my knives. Then I braced my legs and moved the fastest I could. As I measured out the timing of fake-me's movements, I brought my knives down. I parried with my Kumakyu knife and swung my Kumayuru knife from the side. Fake-me tried to block with its knife, but I sliced through it. All the knives were made from dirt hardened with mana, after all. If I just used more mana, I could slice through them.

Fake-me started to move even faster to match my speed. Too late—it'd reacted too late! This was it!

I poured mana into my knives. Fake-me tried to block with its own knives, but this time I'd gotten the angle and speed perfect. I sliced through fake-me's knives, and my arms kept going from the momentum, slicing through the baggy stomach of fake-me.

All right. I tried attacking again, but fake-me stopped in its tracks.

“...”

I stopped too.

Fake-me crumbled back into soil. I'd dealt a lethal blow, and now it was finished. Even though I'd won, I didn't exactly feel all that great about slicing into something that looked like me.

More than that: I felt exhausted.

CHAPTER 440

THE BEAR WORKS HARD TO SAVE FINA, FIFTH BATTLE

I'D NEVER IMAGINED I'd end up having to fight myself.

For the first match, I'd fought a golem reinforced by mana.

For the second, I'd fought five armored knights simultaneously.

For the third, I'd fought a giant lizard monster.

And for the fourth, of all things, I'd fought a copy of myself.

What would I fight for the last trial? Maybe it would be another giant monster. I just hoped I wouldn't be up against a bunch of me-s. If a whole Paw-Bear Rangers force appeared and I had to fight red, blue, yellow, green, pink, black, and white Paw-Bears, I'd probably snap and go on a magical rampage.

"Miss, are you all right?"

While my mind was wandering off in ridiculous directions, Lojina started talking to me.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You did a great job fightin' yourself back there."

"It was a close match though," I said. "I think Ghazal's weapons made the difference."

I could only cut through the mana-reinforced earth magic thanks to his knives.

"Don't be modest. Seeing how you move, I can tell how powerful you really are."

"That's right. I've watched a lot of trials, but I can tell you're more powerful than any

adventurer I've seen before, though you don't look it."

Well, I was wearing the bear onesie. No one would peg me as powerful at first glance. If there *was* someone out there who'd assume I was strong based on how I looked, I'd like to meet that weirdo.

"Miss, can you still fight?"

"I'm all right. I'd like a little more of a break, but it looks like the next trial is starting."

I saw the ground deeper in glow as the fifth and last trial got ready to start. Lojina and Talotoba left to keep out of my way.

The magic circle glowed on the ground and a faint white wall appeared. Was the next trial this wall, then?

It looked like it was made from mana. I tried touching it with my bear puppet, but I couldn't tell how thick it was. All I knew for certain was that I couldn't pass through it.

As I felt my way around the wall, I measured how large it was. It was about the size of a bedroom. When I tried to look through it, I saw another wall, then another behind that.

One, two, three, four, five... I couldn't tell the exact count for sure, but it looked like five walls total. So a five-ply wall defense. Did I just need to break through all these then?

"Lojina, do I just break these down?"

"Yes, once you break those with your weapon, it's over, but that's no ordinary wall. You'll need to use all the power you and your knives have to cut through it," Talotoba answered for Lojina.

Looked like the last trial was an easy one. I'd been convinced that it'd be some ferocious enemy, so this was a relief. I guess this meant we were just testing the strength of me and my weapon now? I was just grateful I wasn't up against those Paw-Bear Rangers.

I backed away until I was within range of my knives. Then the ground inside the walls began to move. When I took a closer look, I realized a person was lying down in there. The figure slowly stirred.

“Where am I...?”

I recognized the voice that filtered through the wall. I approached the faintly glowing barrier. Because of the whitish mana walls, I couldn’t make out the inside clearly, but I recognized the outline of who was in there. Her voice was very familiar.

“Fina?”

Fina was inside the barricade.

“Yuna?”

It really was Fina.

“Yuna, where are we? And what is this white wall?” Fina stood up and was now touching the wall too.

“This is inside the gate of trials. Do you know what you’re doing here, Fina?”

“Um, I was with Luimin until now... and then, uh, I can’t remember.”

Fina held her head in her hands. It seemed like she had no idea what she was doing here, either. How had she gotten here? Was Luimin okay?

All I could assume was that she’d been teleported in. Could the gate really do that? Maybe it could if it used a year’s worth of mana?

“Yuna, what am I doing here?”

“I think you’ve been dragged into my trial.”

“Your trial...?”

I could see Fina still groping at the wall inside. She sounded uneasy.

“Yeah. When I started the final trial, you appeared.”

“Oh. How do I get out?”

Fina started to wander around inside the walls trying to find an exit, but it didn’t seem

like she could find any. I'd tried going all the way around too, but I hadn't found one. All I could assume was that this was part of the trial and that I needed to save Fina by breaking the mana walls.

I inspected them again. I could faintly see Fina beyond the walls and knew there was one simple way of saving her.

"Lojina, the trial ends if I use magic, right?"

"That's right, and it won't count as a success. You can choose how you'd like to approach it, but if there's no danger, I'd prefer if you gave it a try."

"Is this your trial, Yuna?"

"I think saving you is the trial, but I'm not allowed to use magic. The trial would end right away and the walls would disappear if I do."

That was the quickest way of getting Fina free. I didn't have to go along with this whole charade.

"Yuna, I'm okay. You should keep going with your trial. I know you can do it."

"Fina..."

"It doesn't seem like I'm in danger, and I don't want to get in the way of your trial. I'm happy if I can help."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I trust you, Yuna."

I thought about it, deciding to be grateful that Fina felt that way.

"All right. I'll get through this trial and save you, so just sit tight for a little."

"Okay."

"It'll be a little dangerous, so I want you to get away from the walls."

Once I made sure Fina had done that, I gripped my two knives tightly. Then I imbued

them with mana and swung them from the right and left. The first wall broke. I took a step toward Fina.

“Yuna.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll get you out soon.”

I tried to make my voice sound gentle so she wouldn’t feel uneasy. I needed to break through these walls quickly so I could save her.

I sliced through the second wall. Then I brought my knife down on the third wall without hesitation. The mana wall easily repelled my knife.

“Miss, don’t panic. You’ve got time. Keep calm,” Lojina advised me when he saw I was flustered.

I felt rushed to save Fina and it was messing with my precision. I backed away for a bit and checked to make sure I was within the right range to get a good swing in, then I started to alternate—one arm, then the other. The third wall disappeared.

Two more. It seemed like the walls were steadily getting stronger, but if I kept calm and kept going like this, everything would turn out fine.

Once I was calm again, Fina started to panic.

“Huh? What? Water?”

“What’s wrong, Fina?! ”

“A whole bunch of water is coming up from the ground.”

I looked down and saw it.

“Yuna!”

Who cared about the trial now? If too much water built up, Fina could drown. There was only about two meters of height before the water would hit the ceiling and put Fina in deadly danger.

This trial was over. I wasn’t going to play along with this.

“I’ll use magic. This is over now.”

“Yuna, I’m still okay. Keep going.”

The water had made it to her knees, but Fina was still telling me to go on. Sure, it was great to put others before yourself, but I valued Fina more than any trial.

“Yuna...”

I wasn’t going to waste time thinking. I started to gather mana in my bear puppet. If it came down to forfeiting the trial or scaring Fina, I chose the former.

After collecting mana in my puppet, I threw a fireball. The trial would be over, and I wouldn’t have completed it, but this was fine. I didn’t want to scare Fina.

When the fireball hit the wall, something completely unexpected happened. It went straight through the walls and whizzed past Fina.

“Fina!”

“I-I’m okay.”

Oh, what a relief. I told Fina to move to the right side of her little chamber, and unleashed a wind blade well to her left. That also went through the barrier or light.

The magic just went straight through. Why wasn’t the trial ending? Wasn’t using magic supposed to disqualify me and end this?! I thought of using other magic, but I’d just put Fina in danger if it passed through again. My only option was to break it open.

I tried a bear punch, but the wall just repelled me. It didn’t break.

“Lojina! Talotoba!”

“I’m not sure either.”

“Miss! If you can’t use magic, you’ve got to use your knives to cut it. I think you’ll be able to do it!”

“Yuna!”

Oh, right. If the trial tested my weapon, then that was what I needed to use.

I gripped my knives. I poured my mana into them and broke through the fourth wall. Good, only one left. I wasted no time trying to cut through the fifth one, but my Kumayuru knife bounced off. I swung down the Kumakyu knife in my left hand too, but that also bounced off. This thing was sturdy. Or—maybe not quite. It was like rubber.

I tried swinging my knives several times. Why couldn't I cut through it? Was it unbreakable? The wall grew whiter, as though the mana in it was building up. I lost sight of Fina inside. I could tell the water was still rising.

"Miss, calm down. If you try to swing your knives while flustered, you won't be able to cut through, even though you're capable of it."

But—it was Fina in there!

"You still have time. Take a deep breath, center yourself, and believe in the knives Ghazal made you. And believe in your own abilities. You can't be lacking in either."

I did what he said. I relaxed. I took a breath. The water was building up, but I still had time. *Fina, I'm coming.*

I poured mana into my knives, then braced my legs. I gripped the knives with my bear puppets, then I readied them. I braced my legs as I stepped forward and my arms as I swung my knives, rotating my hips as I brought down my weapons on the wall at the exact right angle for the ultimate strike against the wall.

I saw an X form in the wall. This time I didn't feel myself being repelled. I'd cut through it.

The wall broke.

"Fina!... Huh?"

Once I broke through the wall, the water disappeared... but so did the figure I thought had been Fina. Nothing was beyond the wall.

What had happened? Had it all been a trick?

If I'd taken a moment to think, I could have stabbed my knives into the magic circle to end the trial. I kind of felt like I'd been tricked.

CHAPTER 441

THE BEAR OBTAINS THE AWARD

FINA WASN'T THERE when I broke through the wall. At first, I was relieved, but then I started to feel more and more upset about the trick.

"Lojina! What was that trial just now?! Was this meant to upset me?"

"Don't ask me. I had no idea that could even happen as part of the trials. I've never seen one where anyone had to break walls with their weapon, or one with someone trapped like this. Talotoba might have, seeing as how he's a guild master."

"Really?" I turned from Lojina to look at Talotoba.

"That's right. There've been similar trials before."

"Then why didn't you tell me about it? I wouldn't have panicked as much then."

"I couldn't tell you because it's a trial. The trial tests the performance of the weapon, the technique of its wielder, and finally the heart of the wielder. If you're lacking in any of those areas, you wouldn't be able to fulfill the trials. And there would be no point in the trials if I told you what to expect."

"I mean, that makes sense. But it's still terrible, don't you think?"

The worst trial they could think of was exactly this—taking Fina hostage. Even remembering it made me get angry again, and I had nowhere to vent that anger.

"This trial doesn't appear for everyone. It only shows up for a splendid weapon accompanied by a splendid wielder. That's the only time it tests someone's heart. I've been watching these trials for a while and have only seen it twice. It means you've been acknowledged by the gate of trials. You ought to be happy."

Who would be happy about this? It took someone important to me hostage, and when I worked hard to save her, it was just like "Never mind, it was all fake!" Who wouldn't be upset?

I felt awful right then. I wanted to go on a rampage.

“Someday, something important to you might be held captive in a similar fashion. This trial tests whether you can keep a cool head in such a situation. No matter how good your weapon, if you lose your cool, you won’t be able to bring forth that weapon’s true power. That’s the purpose of this trial.”

Anyone would panic if someone important to them was captured. People aren’t that mentally resistant. If someone you loved was in mortal peril right in front of you—of course you’d be shaken. And they were telling me to stay calm in a situation like that? What was I supposed to be? A saint? No normal person could do what they were asking.

I’d even tried to use magic, but couldn’t get the trial to end. There had been multiple things pushing me to lose my cool.

“You must care deeply for the girl above us. Most people see a family member or lover appear.”

“Fina’s like a little sister to me,” I said.

I’d never cared for my parents, and I didn’t have a lover, so there was no way I’d have seen a family member. If I *did*, it might have been my grandfather, who understood me. He was the only one I felt guilty for leaving behind when I came to this world.

But it was true that Fina was important to me. Kumayuru, Kumakyu, Noa, and Shuri were important to me too. When I thought about it that way, I’d gained a lot of people I cared about since coming here to this world. Everyone I’d met so far had been nice.

I wanted to protect them. They were all just doing their best to get by and pull their own weight. They weren’t like my parents, who begged me, their own daughter, for money.

“It’s important to have someone you care about, even if they’re not quite family. That’s enough to make you stronger. Since the job is dangerous, many adventurers don’t value their lives. It’s important to have someone you care for waiting at home for you. Then you’ll want to get home alive,” Talotoba said.

His words seemed heavier, somehow, since he was the guild master. He’d probably seen a lot of blacksmiths and adventurers come and go.

A place to go home to, though... Now that I thought about it, maybe my home was where Fina was.

"So, what happened to the people who had the same trial?" I wondered if they had ended up upset like me. A normal person would be.

"That is a secret, of course. You wouldn't want others talking about you, would you?"

Uh, he had a point. I wanted to know what had happened to others, but I sure didn't want anyone talking about me. If that happened, I'd never be able to come back to this town.

"We also have a rule not to speak of the events of the trials."

Oh wait. Yeah, they'd mentioned that.

"If anyone knows about the contents of the trials ahead of time, they won't be effective. That's why the rule's in place."

If you already knew what the solution was, then there was no point to a trial. So that was why Lilyka hadn't known what the trials would be—Lojina, Ghazal, and Gold hadn't told her.

"So you can't tell anybody what happened here either, all right?"

"Not even to Fina and Luimin—the two waiting above-ground?"

I wasn't planning to let my tongue run loose, but I'd at least wanted to tell them what happened, since they'd waited for me.

"That's right. Even those young girls might grow up to be adventurers who attempt the gate of trials someday."

Fina as an adventurer, huh?

I tried to imagine it, but it just didn't seem to suit her. I saw her protecting her family instead, though she did have the butchering skills. Even if she couldn't wield a weapon, there was a possibility she might fight with magic as an adventurer someday. I still couldn't picture Fina fighting monsters, though.

Well, I guess I couldn't talk about the trials to anyone who might even potentially attempt them.

"Talotoba, looks like we have to cut this off. The prize seems to be appearing."

"Prize?"

Lojina gestured with his thumb, which I followed to the glowing magic circle. Not the ones where the monsters appeared. There had been the magic circle that analyzed my weapons, the ones that showed up during the trial, and now, at the end, one that had appeared right in front of my eyes.

"A prize? What kind of prize?"

I wish they'd mentioned there was a prize. I would've tried to finish the trials faster then. If the prize depended on your clear time, I'd be pretty upset.

"It's not anything exciting."

Wait, really? Well, it wasn't like I needed a rare item or anything, but I hoped it'd be useful.

"The prize is metal. It has the symbolic meaning of taking that iron to work hard at your next trial."

Seriously? It was just a hunk of metal? I already had plenty from the iron golems. I didn't need more, and I couldn't use it anyway. Maybe I could bring it back to Ghazal as a souvenir? I did participate with his knives, after all.

"Is it special iron?"

"No. It's just ordinary. It is free of any impurities, so in a way, it's the best prize a blacksmith could ask for."

Alas, I wasn't a blacksmith. But maybe I'd get mithril at least for attempting the trial with a mithril knife? I asked about that, but apparently that wasn't how it worked. Too bad.

I headed over to the glowing magic circle. The light steadily disappeared, and something completely unexpected appeared in the middle.

"What's that?" Talotoba narrowed his eyes at the thing that had appeared.

I also rubbed my eyes. Maybe they'd gotten worse recently or something? Which was weird, because I hadn't been watching TV, playing games, or reading comics or novels at night. In fact, I was going to bed early and waking up early too. It was the ideal lifestyle for a healthy pair of eyes. Sometimes I'd spend a day lazing around, but that was probably good for them too.

We approached the mystery item in the middle of the magic circle.

"That's a bear."

"Yup, it's a bear all right."

It was a bear, just like they said. It was about as big as a bear ornament from one of my shops.

The two blacksmiths started to poke at it.

"It's an iron bear."

"Yes, an iron bear, without a doubt."

A bear made of iron. For some reason, it even looked cartoonish, just like the bears at my shop. The only thing I could assume was that it'd read my memory to make this thing. I mean, it'd been able to recreate Fina so well from my memories that I'd thought it was her. It probably could make a bear figurine easy. But why a bear?

"Does the iron usually take on a different shape based on the person?"

"It doesn't take a specific shape. They're usually irregular. I've never seen anything with such a defined shape before."

"It's massive too. I've never seen a prize this large before."

It was about as big as Kumayuru or Kumakyu.

"I suppose that goes to show how special your trials were."

"Well, they were quite intense."

“How do we move this thing though? If we don’t, we won’t be able to do the next trials.”

The bear didn’t so much as budge when the two dwarves tried to move it. Wouldn’t be an issue for me.

“Don’t worry.”

I touched the bear and it disappeared into my bear storage. Sure was handy.

“Is that odd glove an item bag?”

Odd? It’s obviously a bear. Then again, I’d thought it was strange the first time I saw it too. Now when other people called bears strange, I felt kind of hostile.

Right as I was about to complain, the surrounding light steadily disappeared until we were left in gloom.

Talotoba looked around and said, “It can’t be! The gate of trials is trying to close?! But we only had one round.”

“She must’ve used that much mana in her fights.”

“How can you be so cool? This is a disaster! Do you know how many dozens of blacksmiths and adventurers are waiting to attempt the gate of trials? What will we do about them?!”

“Asking me won’t help fix that.”

“You’re the one who brought her here!”

“Only after you gave your permission for it.”

Their finger pointing was getting off to a bad start.

“How was I supposed to know how powerful she was? Just look at how she’s dressed—she’s a bear. And she’s so small, and her weapons were just knives.”

Okay, yeah, fair point. I was a bear. But I wasn’t small.

“Darn it! You help me come up with a way to fix this, Lojina! We’ve only got until we

get back to the shack on ground level."

Talotoba held his head in his hands as he started to walk. Lojina and I followed behind him.

CHAPTER 442

THE BEAR FILLS THE MANA GEM

“WHAT CHOICE DO WE have, besides being honest?”

“Are you telling me to announce the gate of trials closed because the bear girl went through one round? They’ll think I’m off my rocker.”

Talotoba and Lojina turned around to look at me as I walked behind them.

“I agree. I’d believe it if she lost immediately after starting the challenge, on the other hand.”

“But a girl dressed like her fought a golem, armored knights—multiple to boot—and a giant lizard on her third battle. Then she fought her own doppelgänger and broke through mana walls. If I tell everyone all of that, and that it exhausted all the mana in the gate of trials, no one will believe us.”

Now that was mean. They were acting like I wasn’t even there, while they said whatever they wanted about me. That said, it would spell trouble if they told a lot of people about me. And they were right that no one would believe I’d used up all the mana in the gate because my trials were so intense.

I was reminded, yet again, of how much importance people placed on physical appearance.

“People will question who forged the weapons too.”

“Can’t we just claim that you made them, Lojina?” I asked.

“The blacksmiths know Lojina hasn’t been making weapons. That’d be suspicious.”

“If we can’t tell the truth, then all we can do is lie.”

“Therein lies the problem. We need something that everyone will accept and that won’t hurt my reputation.”

Wait, was he planning on shirking his responsibilities? Well, it wasn't really his fault. Or Lojina's. Or mine, either. None of us had even considered the possibility that the gate of trials would run out of mana. The real bad guy was whoever made the gate in such a way that it'd go ahead and use up all the mana.

I tried thinking of something that wouldn't put the guild master in a problematic position and that would seem plausible. Was there anything that'd work? We didn't have all that much time to think.

"If the gate closes, will we be stuck here?"

"It won't close right away. We just won't know how much time we've got. Normally, we leave as soon as we get the signal for the last trial being over. Wouldn't be good if any of us got stuck in here, after all."

Right. No fool would stay behind when the gate was closing. Normal people got out quick.

"So how about you say that a high-ranking adventurer tried the trials and used up all the mana?"

"A high-rank adventurer wouldn't use an apprentice blacksmith's weapon to participate. Any adventurer like that would be the talk of the town. I wouldn't be able to tell them who it was if they pressed me."

No matter what solution I came up with, it was no good. I thought of saying that a monster had appeared, but that'd just make adventurers gather in the area to slay it. There were tons of adventurers who wanted to attempt the gate of trials, and we had no way of explaining why the gates would be closed.

"Then how about a cave-in? No one could come in if that were true. I could even make it happen with my magic."

"Don't even think about it." Talotoba looked genuinely upset by that.

"We won't make it actually cave-in. Just a little, so you can see it from the entrance."

I had no idea when the doors would close, but if a few people saw it, word would get around, at least.

"Also, once the repair discussions start, they'd figure it out right away."

Oh, yeah... they'd need to fix it eventually. If it wasn't a real cave-in, they'd figure it out the moment they went to look at it.

"Then just tell them you'll fix it yourself."

"If the gate closes, I wouldn't be able to do that."

"And it wouldn't explain why the gate closed either," Lojina added after Talotoba, shooting down my idea as well. I was trying hard here!

"Then what'll we do?"

Talotoba and Lojina were both stuck in their thoughts as they climbed up the stairs. Were they really still trying to come up with a solution? They didn't seem like the type that could trick people. Maybe I was just the villainous type?

"Then could we fill it with mana? The trials work because of mana, right? How about if I refill it with mana then?"

I had tons, so I could probably charge a few trials for the apprentice blacksmiths.

"..."

"..."

Talotoba and Lojina shared a look.

"What? Did I say something weird?"

"The magic circle takes a whole year collecting the mana from the terrain, you realize. Who knows what'll happen if a single person tries to charge it?"

"Well, sure, but I'm pretty confident in my mana reserves. I think I could charge it enough for a couple of apprentice trials, at least. And if a few people get a try, then I think we could swing it without drawing suspicion..."

"Right. If we can get a few trials done, then this might work. We can just say that this year's mana collection wasn't as good as usual."

"And the gate closed after just one day once in the past."

Lojina and Talotoba thought about my new proposal.

"*Can we recharge the mana, though?*"

"I've never tried, so no idea."

No idea? If it hadn't been attempted, then their doubts were rational. The creator, maintainers, and people using the gate were all different too. In game terms, they were probably as different as the game developers, retailers, and players would be. It wasn't like I knew the first thing about how a game worked internally.

I wondered who'd made the magic circle, and whether I could make my own. It'd be handy to have a magic-circle making skill, but I sure didn't have one right now.

"Do you really have mana left, miss? You did use quite a bit on the knives when you broke through the walls."

I gathered mana into my hand.

"It'll be fine. I still have some left. Plus, it seems like the gate's closing because of my trials, so the least I could do is recharge the mana."

"You shouldn't worry about that, miss. It's that old man's fault that this all happened."

Talotoba glared at Lojina.

"You've seen way more adventurers than I have and still underestimated her," Lojina shot back.

"How could I have known? She doesn't look strong in the slightest."

They glared daggers at each other. Were all dwarves this stubborn?

I sighed.

"So, do you think it's possible to recharge it then?" I asked. If it couldn't be done, there was no point wasting time talking about it.

“Yeah. There’s a spot I can think of where it might work. It’s worth taking a look.”

Talotoba sped up slightly as he climbed the stairs. It was steadily getting darker and darker. I guess the mana really was running out. We needed to hurry.

We got up the stairs and headed through the passageway until we reached a door. It was the same one we’d entered through—that was the entrance to the gate of trials. But Talotoba headed to the left of that.

“This way.”

We walked for a while until we reached a door in the rockface.

“You wait here, Lojina. This spot’s really only meant to be entered by a guild master. You’re a special case. Just this once, miss.”

“All right.”

We left Lojina in front of the door and headed into the room. It seemed like a tunnel that had been dug into the side of the cave, so the rock walls were bare. It was slightly bigger than the average-sized room. The ceiling was about twice as high as I was tall.

“Miss, over here.”

I headed to the middle of the room where Talotoba called me to and saw another magic circle with a mana gem set in the middle. Other mana gems of various sizes were set around the magic circle, but the one at the center was the largest. It wasn’t as large as the mana gem from the kraken I’d defeated, but it was pretty big. Unlike the kraken’s, which had been blue, this one was colorless.

Talotoba crouched down to inspect the gem.

“It really has run out of mana.”

The darker a gem was, the more mana it had, which also applied in reverse. When a gem had no color to begin with, it had a translucent beauty while full of mana, but looked like clouded glass when empty. The gem in front of me was cloudy.

“So I just need to fill that gem with my mana?”

“Yes. I’m counting on you.”

I placed both my bear puppets on top of the gem, then gathered my mana and poured it in. The gem’s cloudiness slowly cleared until it regained its shine and turned transparent.

As that happened, I could feel the mana leaving my body. It was taking a lot more out of me than I’d expected. On top of fighting my copy and having to break through those thick mana walls. Maybe I was drained from before.

I should’ve changed into my white bear onesie, but it wasn’t like I could do that in front of others. I was still a fifteen-year-old young lady, after all, and even if I’d made myself a changing room, I didn’t *want* to change. I could only hope that I’d have enough mana for this.

As I powered up the gem, the dim room around us brightened. Was it being powered directly by my mana? If that were true, that meant this was working.

I kept feeding it mana for a while. It sure was taking a lot... Was it ever going to end? I was starting to feel dizzy.

Talotoba’s voice reached me, dreamlike, and I pulled my hands away from the gem purely as a reaction. Then I took a tiny breath. I might’ve given it too much.

“Miss, are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I think it took a little more mana than I expected.”

Talotoba looked at the gem.

“Looks like it’s got more than enough mana now. If you’d given it much more, you would’ve fainted.”

It’d lost its cloudiness and regained its luster now that it was transparent. I had no idea how much I’d recharged it, but it seemed it’d worked.

“Thank you. We should be able to do some trials with this. You’re amazing. I never thought you’d be able to recharge it this much.”

“I’m glad I could help,” I said.

I mean, this had all happened because of my trial anyway.

CHAPTER 443

THE BEAR HEADS BACK TO THE INN

ONCE I FINISHED replenishing the gate of trials, Talotoba and I headed out of the room. Lojina was looking worried as he waited outside the door.

“Looks like it went well then?” Lojina said as he looked around at our surroundings, which were brighter than before. It was better than when I’d gone into the room, at least. It looked like it’d worked.

“I think we’ll be able to manage. The issue is how long this will last.”

“Well, we’ll figure it out when the mana runs out.”

In the worst-case scenario, I could give it more mana. But that would be a chore, and I really hoped we wouldn’t have to resort to that.

“Still, you do have a lot of mana, miss. Normally people with that much mana would become mages, not learn how to handle knives like you.”

“I suppose you’re right. Having a large amount of mana puts people at an advantage. That’s why people who have a lot of it usually don’t bother with a weapon, but rely on magic instead.”

Well, long-distance attacks were safer. Plus, if you wanted to use magic, you had to practice it. If someone had the time to learn how to use a weapon, they might as well practice their magic instead. I even knew a rookie adventurer who practiced magic daily. If she had to also practice wielding a weapon, she’d have to skip out on honing her magic. Jack-of-all-trades, master of none, as the saying goes.

So, most people who had a lot of mana never learned how to use a weapon. This was also true of the game world, where most mages didn’t fight with swords. Since I mostly played solo, I’d mained as a magical swordsman and learned how to use both.

“And it wouldn’t be easy to learn those techniques at such a young age, either.”

I learned through playing video games. Unlike this world, you could fight all twenty-four hours of the day in a video game. There'd always be monsters outside the towns, and if you went to the combat area, you could find NPCs and other players to fight. In the real world, you could get tired or injured and have to take a break from fighting. Games had healing potions, and any injuries you might've gotten would heal once the fight was over. You could fight multiple battles in a single day.

If you got injured in the real world, you couldn't practice until you healed up. And if you were exhausted, you couldn't just push through and keep going.

In one year in the game world, I'd gained more combat experience than anyone living in this world. I had to wonder how many people had even gotten the opportunity to battle tens of thousands of monsters before. Had anyone else reached my level?

Most importantly, the biggest difference was that no one in this world had died as many times as I had. Most people didn't really get a chance to learn from death. I'd died multiple times and learned a lot from the ways in which I'd been killed. That was a big leg up.

Then again, if it weren't for my bear gear, I'd never have been able to show off the techniques or abilities I'd learned. It really was designed to annoy me.

I looked at my bear onesie and sighed. Couldn't it at least have been cool too?

When we got out of the gate of trials, Fina and Luimin ran up to us. It seemed that they'd been waiting outside.

"Yuna!"

Fina came straight up to me. I stared at Fina.

"Yuna?"

She gave me a curious look back.

"You're real, right?"

"Real?" Fina repeated as she tilted her head at me.

It really was her. After what'd just happened, I couldn't help but doubt it was her. Well, it'd worked because the trial had copied her voice and just her silhouette through the magic walls. The person in front of me right now was definitely Fina.

I lightly patted Fina on the head with my bear puppet. She looked perplexed by my cryptic actions.

“Nothing happened to you two?”

Don't happen to recall your memories being copied or anything out of the ordinary?

“Um, some of the guild employees came over.”

Fina looked behind her and there were indeed two women dressed in guild uniforms. They walked over to Talotoba.

“Guild master, where in the world were you?! When we arrived, you weren't here and there were two small children in your place. They told us you entered the gate of trials.”

“I was just checking some things in the gate.”

“Accompanied by Lojina the blacksmith and this bear girl?” She looked at Lojina and then at me.

“Well...”

“Sorry. I insisted on it, since I had a friend visiting from far away and she said she wanted to see the inside of the gate.”

When Talotoba struggled to figure out what to say, Lojina lent him a helping hand. Then he glanced at me. Uh-huh... so they couldn't mention the trials. They were planning to pin this on me for insisting to see the inside of the gate. Wait, was I taking the fall for them?

“Is that really true, guild master?” one of the employees asked Talotoba, seeming a little peeved.

“Sorry...”

"You won't even allow us in without your permission, yet you bring a little girl in with you because Mr. Lojina asked?!"

Talotoba shrunk back as he was scolded by his own employee.

"W-Well, I didn't show her a trial in progress or anything like that," Talotoba said, though it came out sounding like an excuse. He really didn't have the dignity of a guild master right now. I bet the guild employees held this whole outfit together.

"Still, the rules are the rules. Please follow them."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"I'm sorry as well," Lojina said.

"I'm sorry." Since Lojina was also apologizing, I chime in too.

The guild employee sighed.

"Miss, only the guild master and people who are attempting a trial are allowed into the gate. Even we cannot go inside. You can't insist on looking inside."

They were letting me off the hook since I looked like a kid. I guess they wouldn't leap to the conclusion I'd undergone a trial.

"And you can't break the rules, guild master. Not even for a young girl."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, the blacksmiths and adventurers should be coming soon, so please help us."

Just like the employee had told us, after some time, the blacksmiths and adventurers climbed up the long stairs and started to line up in front of the building.

"We'll begin admitting participants now."

The employee opened the door, and the blacksmiths and adventurers began to file in in pairs. One of the employees handled the front of the table while the other handled the outside.

"Looks like the event is off to a fine start."

Talotoba was gleeful as he watched a weapon-maker and adventurer pass by. They were both young, so they might have both been an apprentice blacksmith and a rookie adventurer. The first group finished up at the front desk and came back over.

"Well, I need to go with them to the gate of trials."

The only ones allowed through the gate of trials were the blacksmith and adventurer taking on the challenge, as well as Talotoba, the guild master, who would be supervising them.

Lojina called out to him as Talotoba was leaving. "Talotoba, thanks for taking care of us today. I'll have to pay you back sometime."

"If you want to thank me, forge a weapon and participate next time. Then I'll hold my complaints."

"Sure. I'll make a great weapon, you'll see."

So he said. Maybe he really would?

"But if you want her to participate again, you'll have to wait until the last day. I have to insist on that, at least."

Talotoba seemed happy to hear Lojina agree. He headed through the gate of trials together with the first group and disappeared deeper into the cave.

Despite what Talotoba said, I wasn't planning on attempting the trial again. I didn't want more trouble, and I'd already had my fill of the gate.

"Lojina, I'm going to head out too."

"Right, right. Thanks for letting me see all that, miss. It was much appreciated. I'll finish up your order by tomorrow, and you can come pick it up."

Lojina was staying behind for a while to watch the blacksmiths showing up for the trials. I decided to take Fina and Luimin back with me.

"Yuna, how did the gate of trials go for you?" Fina asked as she hopped down the stairs.

Luimin was heading down the stairs on her own, as though she was fleeing from me. *Should I join you going down?* I'd asked her, which had made her take off.

"Well, I passed all of them," I said.

"You're amazing, Yuna. But you're not allowed to tell us about the trials, are you?" Fina asked, turning to me from her position further down the stairs.

"Well, those are the rules," I said.

Not to mention I'd be embarrassed to tell Fina how I'd panicked while saving her fake self. The same applied to my doppelgänger. Two bear onesies locked in combat? Mortifying!

"I can't tell you details, but the trial tests the quality of the weapon, the wielder's skill, and the strength of their heart when they're using their weapon."

I used the rules as a shield in order to avoid telling her anything else.

"A trial of the heart? That sounds difficult."

Yeah, it sure was. Especially with the surprise of Fina showing up.

"I wanted to watch you fight, though..."

"Me too," said Luimin, who had overheard, from a few steps below Fina.

"Oh, right. Yuna, you should hear this. Luimin tried to go into the gate of trials on her own even though I told her not to."

"Oh, Fina, don't tell on me. I didn't go inside."

Luimin ran up and clamped her hand over Fina's mouth.

"She said she only wanted a peek."

"Fiiinaaa!"

"Then the guild workers came by, and she didn't go inside. If they hadn't come, I'm sure she would have gone in. It was so hard, trying to stop her."

“But aren’t you curious too?”

I could understand how Luimin was feeling. In fact, I’d been so curious that I’d climbed up these long stairs to get to the gate of trials, taken advantage of Lojina’s kindness, and tried the trial myself. I couldn’t blame Luimin.

“Still, everyone was looking at us.”

“It must be because of how I’m dressed.”

On our way down the stairs, we passed a few blacksmith--adventurer pairs on their way up. Everyone we went by stared curiously at me.

“They were staring at me too, so it wasn’t just you, Yuna,” Luimin said.

“Uh-huh, they were staring at me too.”

“Maybe they’re curious about us because we’re headed down and we aren’t blacksmiths or adventurers?”

I had no idea what trials these people were on their way to face, but I hoped they’d do well.

“What do you two want to do after this? I’m headed back to the inn to rest.” I was pretty exhausted, mentally.

“Then I’ll head back too.”

“I’m not sure what I’ll do,” Luimin said, still mulling it over.

“I’m planning on heading back after getting the pots and pans from Lojina, so you should do whatever you want.”

“We had an early morning... Maybe I’ll head back too.”

Luimin let out a little yawn, which was contagious. Fina and I yawned as well. We really had started early that morning, and then I’d used up my mana. I decided to sleep once I got back to the inn.

Once we got back, I summoned my bears in cub form so I could hug them like stuffed

animals as I slept—but Fina and Luimin stole them from me. I ended up having to sleep on my own. So lonely!

CHAPTER 444

TOYA WORKS HARD,

PART 1

I WOKE UP even before Jade roused me. I'd spent the last few days going back to my time as a beginner, swinging my sword over and over again. It'd been a while since I trained as seriously as this, and it was making sure I got a good night's sleep.

As I was getting dressed, Jade roused in the bed next to mine.

"You're early."

"Yeah. The gate of trials is open by now. There's not much time left to fulfill my promise."

I had until the gate closed. I needed to pass Kusehlo's trial by then.

"Think you can do it?"

"It's not a matter of 'can.' I will."

"Right. It's only over if you give up."

"Compared to being surrounded by monsters, this is nothing. Once I pass his test, how about I try the gate of trials? You know, instead of you?"

Jade was doing the gate of trials for Mr. Kusehlo. A blacksmith had acknowledged his abilities. I felt kind of frustrated that I didn't have that, but that was just the gulf between us right now. I couldn't catch up.

"Right. If you clear his test, want me to ask him for you? You'll need to get his approval today or tomorrow."

Jade was telling one of his rare jokes. Or maybe he'd just said that in order to motivate me.

"Really? If I do it, there won't be any room left for you, Jade."

"Ha. That might make things easier on me!"

"I won't forget you said that."

Ugh... I had to pass Mr. Kusehlo's test to get Jade to acknowledge my abilities.

We headed downstairs to find Mel and Senia were already eating breakfast.

"Good morning, you two," I said.

"You're already eating?"

Jade and I took some seats with the two of them and we ordered breakfast.

"Toya, are you training again today?"

"Yeah. Thanks to that girl, I think I get it a little more. I want to practice before I forget it."

"Yuna really is so strong. She's tiny, but she's good at casting magic and using a weapon."

"I can't believe it."

Mel and Senia were right—that girl was unbelievable. I'd met a lot of adventurers in my travels, but never an oddity like her.

To become a great mage, you needed practice. Mel had told me that when she was the bear girl's age, she'd still been a novice, but the bear girl was an incredible mage *and* equally good with weapons despite her youth. I tried to remember what I'd been like when I was that young, but there was really no comparison. You could only describe her as amazing. Even if I'd practiced my swordplay from the moment I decided to become an adventurer, I wouldn't have been at her level. If I could meet my past self, I would've told him to be more serious about practice.

"She might just be a genius."

"That's not all she is. Yuna's got experience in combat. You can tell by watching that

she's been in tons of fights," Jade said even though I'd basically been talking to myself.

"That's true. Yuna doesn't look scared, even when she fights monsters. People are normally scared of monsters when they come across them. I remember being terrified at the sight of monsters when I was Yuna's age."

"But wouldn't Yuna have become an adventurer around that time too?"

When I first met her, she'd just gotten to rank D. She was the talk of the town among the adventurers after coming in just days before that and turning the table on some adventurers who'd picked a fight with her.

At first, I laughed it off as a joke. But I kept hearing about the bear girl's exploits. I heard rumors that that tiny girl had taken down goblins and a goblin king. Even a tigerwolf. When I finally heard she fought a black viper, I couldn't contain my disbelief.

I thought she might be capable of it because she had a surplus of mana—which had nothing to do with wielding a weapon. I thought she couldn't beat me in melee combat with a weapon in hand, but it turned out she could use both knives and a sword. And at her age!

Jade said it felt like she'd been through way more battles than us. The bear outfit made it a little counter-intuitive, but after everything I'd seen, I agreed.

"I wonder where Yuna used to live and what she used to do before becoming an adventurer. She must have learned magic and how to handle a weapon somewhere."

"Maybe she came from the land of bears," Senia said.

Uh, ridiculous. The land of bears? What the heck was that? I tried to imagine it and all I could come up with was a nation where everyone was dressed up like the bear girl. I'd never want to visit a place like that.

"I think I'd like to visit." Mel's line of thought was exactly the opposite of mine.

"So, you're going back to Kusehlo's place, Jade?"

"That's right. I have some stuff to discuss with him about the gate of trials."

Once they were done eating, Jade and Mel headed over to Mr. Kusehlo's place.

Meanwhile, I headed to the outskirts of the town with Senia.

"You don't have to come with me, you know."

"Jade and Mel told me to make sure you don't do anything ridiculous." Senia was apparently following their instructions to tail me. "Are you going to practice at the usual place?"

"Yeah."

I'd asked the Adventurers' Guild for recommendations on a good place to practice. That's how I learned about a place near a small river. You could wash up in the river and there were trees nearby for shade. The perfect secluded spot for both practicing and taking breaks.

I headed off close to the river with Senia. Then I pulled my sword from my sheath and started to practice my swings. Whenever I got my form right, my sword would feel lighter. It was just a slight difference, but I could feel it. The arc just felt right, somehow. Before I could forget how it felt, I picked up some branches off the ground and started to stake them into the ground.

I took a deep breath. To memorize how it felt, I cut the tree branches one after another. I cut right through the first one and the second, but inadvertently batted away the third and fourth without cutting them. My form just wasn't right. It wasn't just strength that mattered—I needed to get the speed and the angle right, too. I knew I wasn't inferior to Jade in strength or speed, so that left the angle as the problem.

If I couldn't cut through a stationary tree branch, I sure as heck wouldn't be able to slice through a moving opponent. In live combat, I'd need to swing my blade at an opponent as we both moved. All I was doing now was walking from stick to stick. I couldn't get *this* wrong.

Jade, Senia, and the bear girl could do it without a sweat, which was why they could rain blows on their opponents no matter the situation. If I couldn't even handle a stationary target, Mr. Kusehlo was right that I wasn't fit to wield a mithril sword.

I silently swung my blade, set up additional branches, and carried on practicing.

As I silently worked, Senia called out to me, “Toya, lunch. I’m hungry.”

“It’s already that late?”

I did feel hungry now that she’d mentioned it. I hadn’t even realized. I guess that was how hard I’d concentrated.

“I already prepped it, so go ahead and eat.”

While I’d been practicing, Senia had been getting food ready. I’d need to thank her for that.

I wet a towel in the river and wiped myself clean. The water was nice and cool. Once I got the sweat cleaned off me, I headed back to Senia and saw her already eating some bread.

“You started digging in without me? You could’ve waited a little.” I felt a lot less like thanking her.

“You’re too slow. If you don’t hurry up, I’m eating your share too.”

I plopped in front of Senia, grabbed some bread, and shoved it in my mouth. It was delicious, considering how famished I was.

“It can’t be fun just watching me. You can head back.”

“It’s fine. I was just sleeping anyway.”

“You were asleep this whole time?! ”

I’d spent a lot of time with Senia, but sometimes I just didn’t get what she was thinking. Then again, this was absolutely a premium napping spot, what with the shade from the trees blocking the sun and sound of the burbling brook.

Once we finished eating, I started practicing again until I heard laughter—sounded like little kids. The sound steadily grew closer. I heard a branch snap behind me as three dwarf children ran up.

“What’re you doing?” one asked.

“Practicing with my sword, as you can see. Never mind that. What are you doing here?”

“There aren’t any monsters around, so we like to hang out here. We heard people talking and came over to see. Found you and the lady.”

“Are you an adventurer, mister?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

The kids looked delighted at that.

“So cool!”

“Have you slayed a monster before?”

“Yeah, ’course I have.”

“Whoa.”

“Lemme see your sword.”

“Me too.”

One of the kids tried to touch my sword and I immediately held it out of reach.

“You can’t just touch it. Don’t you know that’s dangerous?”

“Sorry.”

He seemed like he was. I lowered my sword back down, then offered it to the kid who’d asked to touch it.

“Are you sure?”

“Just a little, though. It’s heavy, so be careful.”

He took the sword I offered him in both his hands.

“Whoa. I wanna make a sword like this someday.”

Apparently dwarf kids weren't the type who wanted to use swords when they grew up—they were the ones making them.

"Are you going to be a blacksmith?"

"Yeah! That's right. I wanna become a great blacksmith and make lots of cool swords."

"So you are. Best of luck, kid."

I tousled his hair, which seemed to amuse him.

"If I make a cool sword, you gotta buy it, mister!"

"And my sword too!"

"What? Because I'm cool, huh?"

That's just how these kids saw me, huh? A cool guy needing a cool sword.

"No, my dad says to take care of your clients. A blacksmith who can't keep his customers isn't *nothin'*."

"Oh, I see... You guys need to become great blacksmiths so you don't lose any, then."

An adventurer worth their salt wouldn't want a weapon from a third-rate blacksmith. If you were trusting your life to your weapon, that was just like trusting the blacksmith.

"Mister, can we watch you practice?"

"Sure, but it's not anything interesting."

"I don't mind."

They headed off to where Senia was. After making sure the kids were far enough away from me, I started swinging my sword again and again. Whenever I did that, the kids would yell from excitement. When I cut through a branch, they'd cheer.

"That's amazing, mister."

“That weapon must be so good.”

“You’re supposed to say it’s my skill that’s amazing,” I said.

“Is it?”

Damn it! I’d told them they could watch, but it made things difficult, but I was still steadily getting a feel for it. I was finally confident enough to see how far I’d come. I stuck the blunt sword that Mr. Kusehlo’s son forged into the ground. took a deep breath, then readied the mithril sword.

That was when Senia screamed, “Toya! Behind you!”

I turned.

CHAPTER 445

TOYA WORKS HARD,

PART 2

IT WAS A giant boar.

The creature was big—about as big as the bear girl's bears—and it had a long, knifelike horn on its forehead. It would be *fast*. I wasn't going to be able to run from it, and if I couldn't, the kids didn't have a prayer.

My mind started working, trying to figure out what to do. Jade wasn't here to give us directions right now. Mel wasn't there to whisper strategies to me from the rear.

Senia and I were the only ones here, with three kids we needed to protect. We could fight this thing off as long as it was the only threat. The main things to worry about with big boars were their ferocious charge and their horns. No matter where you ran, they would never stop chasing you, which meant you beat them by dodging out of the way as they charged and attacking as they rushed past.

The problem was, if I dodged it and it just kept charging at the kids, that'd be the end of us. If I wanted to defeat the thing, I'd need to finish it in one strike. No choice. I had to get it done.

When I tried to call out to Senia, a second big boar appeared from behind the trees. This had to be a joke. I obviously couldn't defeat two big boars in one strike.

My brain shifted into gear. What was the best course of action? Ha... I knew the answer from the start. If someone acted as a decoy, the kids would be able to escape.

"Senia, take the kids and run!" I shouted both to distract the boar and tell Senia.

"Toya... I'll stay behind. It'll be better if I stay instead."

"You may be stronger than me, Senia, but I'm a man. I can't just take off and leave a woman behind. Plus, it seems like the big boar is looking at me already. If you try

anything, you'll draw attention to the kids beside you. And I should be fine as long as nobody's holding me down!" To attract the boars' attention, I yelled this explanation at her.

"Toya..."

"And I've got the perfect opponent to practice swinging my mithril sword at. Don't try to steal my target!" I said to Senia, my eyes still locked on the boar. It seemed like it was about to attack at any moment. It was growling and staring at me.

"Toya, you're not thinking of doing anything stupid, are you?"

"Stupid? That's uncalled for. Those tusks are perfect for my practice."

I eyed their sharp, white horns.

"You can't do it, Toya! Not the way you are now. It's too dangerous!"

When big boars attack, they gather mana in their horns, which turn red. During that time, their horns became hard and powerful enough to pierce armor when they charged. If you cut off their horns right as the mana pooled in them, they stayed red, which made them more valuable as raw material or ornaments.

"There's no guarantee these are the only ones. I couldn't take the kids and run, but you could manage it."

I couldn't run to town while protecting shivering kids, but Senia would be fine even if she ran into other monsters.

Senia looked between me and the kids. All she said was "Got it."

She called the kids over and told them to run. Meanwhile, I kicked a rock at the big boars to draw their attention and yelled, "Senia, go!"

Senia nodded and headed off with the kids.

"I'm the one you want!" I yelled. I tried to draw attention to myself as Senia disappeared, and then kept yelling to pump myself up.

Grrrrowl!

The big boars menaced me, horns glowing red. They broke into a charge, and I dodged to the right. If I could just cut off one of those red horns, then I knew I'd be worthy of a mithril sword.

As I eyed the first boar's glowing horn, the second one came charging at me. Somehow, I managed to dodge. I checked to make sure I couldn't see Senia anymore, praying that there were no other big boars wherever she'd had escaped to.

I took a deep breath and steadied myself. There were two big boars. If either of them hit me, I wasn't coming out unscathed. *Keep an eye on them. Don't look away. Concentrate.*

The giant boars charged at me from both sides. Their attacks were the same, but their bodies were big, and they were quick. I had trouble timing out their movements.

The biggest problem was their size. Since they were so big I had to make big moves to dodge them. It was almost impossible to swing my sword and cover that much ground.

The other issue was that even if I dodged one, the second would be closing in on me right after. Being even slightly careless was risking my life.

I gripped my mithril blade.

The big boar charged. I dodged to the side, but as soon as I did, the other big boar was closed in from behind. I could dodge it, but I couldn't swing my sword.

Now that I was alone, I really could feel how much I relied on everyone else. Mel could've distracted them, and while Jade attacked head-on, the rest of us could have attacked from the side and behind. I'd had it easy as part of a party. Maybe they'd been so unsure whether I was strong enough that they'd had me attack from safe places.

No. No way. I *had* become strong. Strong enough that Jade asked me to take on monsters in the front line. I couldn't let two animals get the best of me, but I just couldn't get a handle on the timing of their charges. The best thing to do was to move the bare minimum as they charged and to attack. I just couldn't figure it out.

Don't get frustrated. Keep calm. It seemed like I wasn't the only one getting frustrated. The big boar cried out and its horn turned redder. The moment it charged at me, it

kicked up the ground.

This thing was fast! I dodged, keeping my movements to a minimum. I could do this.

I aimed at the big boar's red horn, bringing my sword down right as I saw the other boar charging at me out of the corner of my eye. I immediately twisted away and dodged, but the gigantic boar flung me away. I felt pain rip through me. It'd hit me hard, even though it only grazed me.

No! If there were just one, I could handle this, but two was just too much! I got back up and noticed the grass rustling across from me. It sounded like something was coming my way.

Another big boar?! Oh no. What if it went after Senia? If it came for me instead, then so be it. Fighting three was basically the same as two.

What?! No, that wasn't a boar! It was a bear!

CHAPTER 446

THE BEAR HEADS TO TOYA TO OBSERVE

AS WE WERE EATING at the inn's dining hall after our post Gate of Trials nap, Jade and Mel came over. Jade had gone over to Kusehlo's and gotten the sword he'd use at the gate of trials outfitted. They'd needed to make sure the sword was easy to grip and check whether its weight, length, balance—all that stuff—worked for him. I guess the center of gravity determined how it swung. I hadn't had an option to change that in the game I used to play, so I'd only had to worry about the length of the sword and how heavy it was.

“Is that something you can figure out in one day?”

“Right. So long as the sword doesn’t have any idiosyncrasies, you can get used to any just by swinging it a few times.”

Wow. Guess that was what a first-rate adventurer could do.

“Were you here at the inn the whole time, Yuna?” Mel asked.

“We headed out for a quick trip.”

“Oh, really?”

Since she didn’t ask where I’d gone, I changed the topic and asked about their missing party members.

“Where are Toya and Senia? Are they not with you?”

“Toya is practicing on the outskirts of town. We asked Senia to keep an eye on him.”

Oh, yeah. He was still doing the mithril sword test thing.

“Do you think he’ll pass Kusehlo’s test?”

“Yuna, I heard you showed Toya how to do it. He mentioned that he was starting to get

a handle on it."

So the demonstration Toya asked me for had paid off. If he got something out of it, it had been worth it.

"Thank you for what you did for him, Yuna."

I started to feel self-conscious. Toya only had until the gate of trials closed to finish. Considering what happened this morning, he probably didn't have much time left. In fact, there was even a possibility I'd be the reason he failed the test.

If that happened, I wouldn't be able to sleep at night. I decided to go check in on Toya.

* * *

"You two could have just stayed at the inn," I said to Fina and Luimin as we headed out to check on Toya. They'd insisted on coming with me to the outskirts of town.

"I'm curious about how he's doing too."

"And there isn't anything to do at the inn."

Well, if they were okay with tagging along, I didn't mind.

Once we were far enough from town, I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

"Could you help us out, Kumayuru, Kumakyu?"

They crooned back at me.

I got on Kumayuru and Fina and Luimin got on Kumakyu, and then we headed off to Toya. He would probably be practicing around the small river like the other time, so it wasn't all that far.

We headed into the woods, but as we were plodding along, my bears stopped and started crooning.

"Kumayuru, Kumakyu, what's wrong?" Luimin asked my bears when they stopped.

It wasn't always easy to interpret their cries. They didn't sound urgent, like when

monsters appeared. Maybe this time it was human?

I used my detection skill. Looked like there were people nearby who they were trying to alert me to. I saw four signals. If it were just Toya and Senia, I would've seen only two. Anyone else would be pretty shocked to see Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

While I was trying to figure out what to do, the signals approached. I was considering the possibility of getting off the path and letting them pass us by when Kumayuru and Kumakyu crooned again.

“What is it?” I was about to ask when Fina and Luimin answered before I could.

“It’s Senia.”

“Oh! And there are kids running with her.”

Senia turned to look behind her as she ran. She had some kids with her too.

“Did something happen?”

We headed over to Senia. Once we stepped out of the woods onto the path, Senia brandished a knife at us.

“Yuna?”

“Bears!”

Senia lowered her knife, looking relieved. The dwarves looked shocked to see Kumayuru and Kumakyu. They hid behind Senia.

“These bears aren’t dangerous. It’s okay.” Senia tried calming the kids down.

“Senia, did something happen? You look like you’re flustered.”

Toya wasn’t with her. The kids looked scared, and I was pretty sure it wasn’t because of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“Some big boars appeared. Toya’s fighting them on his own.”

“Big boars?” A fitting description, if I was remembering this right. The creatures were

huge.

Senia told me all about it. Apparently, some big boars had appeared while Toya was practicing with his sword. Senia had tried to fight with him, but the kids had been there, so Toya had told her to take them and leave.

I used my detection skill to check my surroundings again. I didn't see any monsters around. They were probably farther off.

"Yuna, could you take care of these kids?"

"You're not thinking of going back to Toya, are you?"

Senia nodded very slightly, but the kids grabbed her clothes and wouldn't let go. She looked at them, seeming conflicted.

"Then how about I go to Toya?"

"You, Yuna?"

"I'll go and help him out real quick. Kumayuru's with me. I should be able to get to him fast."

If the monsters weren't showing up on my detection skill, it was because they were out of range. Which meant they were far away. It'd be faster for me to run over on Kumayuru than for Senia to go there.

"But..."

"You know how powerful I am, don't you?"

Senia looked at the dwarf kids, then at me, and then seemed to come to a decision.

"In that case..."

She made a request of me.

Toya was fighting the big boars, and he was being reckless about it. When a big boar's horn collected mana, it grew hard. Senia suspected he was trying to cut through the horn while it was filled with mana, and wanted me to stop him if he was trying to pull

a stunt like that.

“Please, Yuna.”

“Leave it to me. Fina, Luimin, you head back with Senia to town. Once you get everyone to town, come back to meet me, Kumakyu.”

“Cwoon.”

That was Kumakyu’s way of telling me things were handled. I could count on my bears.

“Yuna, be careful,” Fina told me.

“Please don’t do anything reckless,” Luimin said. Everyone saw me off as I rode Kumayuru to go find Toya.

Immediately after I began moving, I picked up the big boar signals and a human signal. Was that Toya? I pressed Kumayuru to run at full speed toward him.

Jade had told me that there weren’t any monsters near the town. Toya was just having a bad day.

CHAPTER 447

TOYA WORKS HARD,

PART 3

IT WAS THE BEAR GIRL, riding a black bear.

“Why are you here?” I kept an eye on the big boars as I talked to her.

“Senia told me where you were, so I’m here to rescue you.”

“What happened to Senia?!”

“She headed back to the town with Kumakyu.”

That was a relief. So she’d made it back safe? And that was why the bear girl was here?

“So, do you need help?”

The girl looked at the big boar. It turned to her and growled menacingly.

“It kind of feels like it’s trying to pick a fight with me,” she said.

Uh, I was pretty sure it was doing that because of the bear she was on, not her. She got off the bear.

“Could you wait a little? Let me try handling these two,” I said.

“Both of them?”

“Yeah.”

Since I knew Senia and the kids were safe, I could fight now. But the big boar ran at the girl instead. Before it could, the bear stood up on its legs and blocked the boar’s charge.

"Can I attack it?" the girl nonchalantly asked.

I wanted to cut the thing's horn while it was red, but I tried to think about this logically. I couldn't give up this opportunity to defeat it, but I wasn't strong enough to fight off two big boars at the same time.

"Let me do it."

It might've been unsportsmanlike, but I attacked the boar from behind as it was immobilized. I stabbed my sword through the boar. Its hide was thick. I pushed the sword into it, and it started to struggle. After I tugged my sword out of its body, I brought my sword down.

It was the monster's own fault for getting distracted. It was a battle of life and death. I wasn't strong enough or kind enough to show it compassion.

Its giant body collapsed with my sword still stuck in it. One left. I looked over at the girl, who looked a little down.

"What's wrong?"

Was she unhappy I'd beaten the monster?

"If you were going to take it down that way, I kind of wish you'd let me cut off its horn while it was red, that's all."

Apparently, she wasn't upset about the fact that I'd been the one to beat it. I couldn't understand how she could talk so casually about cutting off its red horn. If she cut off the other big boar's horn while it was red like it was nothing, I didn't think I'd ever recover from that blow.

I really just can't compete with a genius, I thought.

This was just another confirmation of the difference in our abilities. Jade, Mel, and Senia were also great adventurers. I was the only ordinary one. I'd need to at least be stout of heart.

"Well, I'm sorry I did that then," I said. "I'm going to take down this other one too."

I turned to look at the remaining big boar. The boar seemed upset about losing its

comrade. It growled, horn turning an even deeper shade of red.

I needed the experience, even just once. Now that there was just one, this was perfect for practice. I couldn't let her have it. But then she said something I never expected.

"Then I'll go take down the other big boar. I'll leave Kumayuru here just in case you need help. Kumayuru, if Toya seems in trouble, you give him a hand."

Wait a sec. What'd she just say? I turned from the big boar to the girl.

"Hey! What was that about another big boar?!" She couldn't mean these weren't the only ones.

"I don't think you should be talking to me right now. You need to keep an eye on your enemy, or it's going to attack you from behind like you did with the other one."

I realized she was right and turned. The big boar was running for me! I just barely dodged it. I looked over at the girl again, but only saw the black bear where she'd been.

What was going on? Was there really another big boar? On top of that, while I was here struggling, she just traipsed off to take down another boar like it was nothing?

Well, thanks to her, I was facing this boar one-on-one, at least. Knowing her bear was here to help sure was reassuring. If I couldn't cut off the thing's horn with this much help, I wasn't a true man.

I readied my mithril sword. The big boar growled out and started to gather mana in its horn, which turned red. Then, done preparing, it charged at me. I let it charge right until the last minute, then dodged to the side. I brought down my mithril sword on the red horn, but it bounced off. It was sturdy.

I'd made it angry, and it must've gathered a lot of mana in its horn. It was even redder than before.

"Cwoon."

I wished the bear wouldn't act so worried about me. I mean, its owner had given me this boar to practice with, after all. I didn't want the bear butting in. All it needed to do

was watch.

I glanced at the worried bear and gave it what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

I needed to think back to when I'd cut through that sword. Even if it was by accident, I'd managed to cut through multiple swords. I needed to remember that feeling.

I dodged the big boar over and over, trying to get the timing right. I just barely dodged the big boar, but it moved toward me and out of the way. I'd barely missed! I wouldn't be able to dodge it now.

I braced for impact. *Ouch!* The impact was stronger this time and I tumbled on the ground. I tried to get up quickly, but a pain swept through me and I couldn't get up. If I couldn't get up fast, it'd come at me again. I tried to brace my legs and get my arms to move.

C'mon, stand! Dodge it! I ordered my body.

I tried to flex my whole body and finally got myself up, looking around wildly. There it was—ready for another charge. I wouldn't be able to dodge it. Right as I thought that, something black body-slammed the big boar. The girl's bear had attacked it from the side! It'd saved me. The big boar fell over, and the black bear crooned at me and gave me a worried look.

"You saved me," I said as a way of thanks.

I hadn't thought it'd actually save me when I was in danger. Just thinking that a bear had been watching over me kind of felt weird, but it'd actually saved my life.

How was I so weak? I couldn't help but feel frustrated. Still, I couldn't give up. I needed to remember it—the way she'd cut through the sword. Most importantly, I needed to remember Jade's movement when he wielded his sword as I'd watched him.

The big boar got up, recovering from being flung away by the bear. The bear tried to block it to protect me.

"It's fine. You can move."

"Cwoon."

“Don’t sound so worried about me.”

I had the bear back down and readied my sword as I stood to face the big boar.

“I’m your opponent!” I yelled at it. The big boar that had been looking at the bear was now looking at me. It growled and charged.

I needed to calm myself. Concentrate. Remember what it felt like to cut the sword. Remember how she cut the sword. Remember how Jade cut the sword. I could do it.

I dodged the charge and brought my sword down on the big boar’s red horn. It worked—or so I thought until the boar shifted its head. Because of that, the horn was in a different position and it repelled my sword.

The big boar ran past me and turned around to attack me again. I braced my legs and readied my sword, but a small rock caught on my foot and knocked me off balance.

This was bad. The big boar came at me.

“Cwoon.”

The bear got in between me and the big boar, stopping its charge, then the bear knocked the boar down from the side. This bear was a fighter!

“You saved me again.”

“Cwoon.” The bear gave me a happy croon.

I looked at the big boar on the ground. I wasn’t at a level where I could cut through its horn while it was moving, but maybe I could while it was collapsed.

I forced myself up despite the pain that shot through my body and approached the collapsed boar. It tried to get up, but it was so big, it was slow. I took a firm step forward and clenched my sword as I tried to remember the muscle memory of the swing, then I brought the mithril sword down on the red horn.

I cut through it! Now was my chance! I brought my sword back up and thrust my sword deep into its neck until it stopped moving.

It was over...

I picked up the red horn. I'd sliced through it... Laughter surged up from within me. That had been a great swing—the best I'd had until now—and all I'd done was cut through it while the big boar was unable to move. Nobody would think this counted, and I wouldn't be able to deny it. I needed to work harder.

I looked over at the girl's bear, which had been watching over me the whole time.

"You're Kumayuru, yeah? Thanks."

It happily crooned back in response. Man. After hearing how cute it sounded, I got why Senia and Mel doted on these bears so much. I gave it a pat on the head to thank it again.

What the...?! How was it this soft? Petting it felt awesome.

No one was watching, right? I looked around to check. Since I didn't see anyone, I buried my face in Kuma-yuru's fur.



Wow, this was awesome. How was this guy so fluffy? Since I was exhausted, it felt even better. I could've fallen asleep on the spot. I gave in to the temptation and closed my eyes.

"Toya, what are you doing?"

My eyes flew open, and I got my face out of Kumayuru. I tried to find the owner of the voice I'd just heard and saw Senia riding on top of the white bear.

"What are you doing here, Senia?!"

"I was worried, so I came back. Then I saw you cuddling up to Kumayuru." Senia looked at me and then the bear.

"I-It's not what it looks like."

I got away from Kumayuru, who sadly crooned back.

"No, it's not like that either," I said to Kumayuru.

"What's not like that?"

"Cwoon."

I looked between Senia and Kumayuru.

"It's just not like that!"

My shout echoed through the forest.

The white bear headed off to get the bear girl. Apparently Senia had asked the white bear to take her to the girl.

These bears could understand human language, obey the instructions of their owner, and detect when danger was nearby. I was kind of starting to doubt they were real bears. But most importantly? Petting them was awesome. It felt like I was being swaddled in luxury fur. I couldn't help but fantasize about falling asleep wrapped up in their fur, but I was super embarrassed that Senia saw me cuddling up to Kumayuru

like that.

"Senia, the bear was just helping prop me up after I got injured, all right," I explained to Senia as she treated me.

"Looked to me more like you were having a nice snuggle."

"You're just imagining it."

"Cwoon."

Kumayuru gave me an imploring look. This was terrible, considering it could understand what I was saying. I couldn't say anything that'd hurt its feelings.

Senia smiled and looked at my hands.

"You cut off its horn?"

I was holding it in my hand. It glowed a bright red.

"Yeah, thanks to the bear girl and Kumayuru."

"Kumayuru?" When I said the bear's name, she repeated it back kind of jokingly.

"Well, the bear girl's got two bears, right? So I need to be precise about which one I'm talking about."

"You always just call them the black bear and the white bear though."

Ugh. I'd never hear the end of it from her.

"You're just imagining it." I looked over at Kumayuru. "You're not going to your owner? You can, you know."

"Cwoon." The bear answered me but made no move to leave. I couldn't tell from its face whether it wasn't worried because the white one was with the girl or if it was just protecting me like the girl had told it to.

"What happened to Yuna?"

"She said there was another big boar, so she headed off to go take it down."

"Then we need to go help her." Senia stood up.

Right then, I heard the bushes parting and the bear girl arrived on the white bear's back.

"Miss, you all right?" I asked.

"Are you, Toya?" She tilted her head to the side when she saw Senia treating me.

"Yeah, thanks to the bear you left with me."

I looked at Kumayuru, who happily ran over to its owner. The girl got off the white bear and patted Kumayuru's head.

"Thank you."

"Cwoon."

That seemed to make Kumayuru happy. That was when I realized again that Kumayuru had only saved me because its owner told it to, not because of who *I* was.

Man. Rejected.

"So, what happened to the other big boars?"

"Right, there were three around, so I went and took them down," the girl said, as easily as if she'd just dispatched some common wolves. Then she brought the boars out of her bear-shaped glove—with three red horns to boot.

I'd worked so hard to get just one, and she'd bagged three like it was a piece of cake. And she'd probably done it while they were moving too. I'd needed Kumayuru to take it down.

I couldn't believe it. She was a genius, and I was just plain old mediocre. Trying to make up that difference was going to be hard. I needed to get on Jade, Senia, and Mel's level first.

This was going to be a long path to follow. I looked at the single horn in my hand. But

I'd taken the first step.

CHAPTER 448

THE BEAR DEFEATS THE BIG BOARS

I LEFT TOYA AND RAN into the woods to find the other big boars. I wanted to make sure I wouldn't have to worry about anything before leaving for the boars, but Toya told me he didn't want help.

It'd been a faux pas in the game to steal a monster that another player was battling. If he'd asked for help, I would've fought too, but I couldn't when he turned me down. So, after considering the possibilities, I asked Kumayuru to keep an eye on Toya and headed off to fight the other boars on my own.

I mean, it'd be bad if the big boars attacked other people. There was a strong possibility that there'd be people around like how Senia and the kids were here.

* * *

I used my detection skill as I headed off toward an area with multiple big boars. Found them! They were ambling aimlessly. I could have attacked them from behind, but I wanted their red horns, so I wrapped around to their front.

Didn't look red to me. The moment the boars saw me, they growled and charged. If they attacked the moment they saw a human, they really were dangerous. I guess I did need to take them down.

I easily dodged the big boars. I could have attacked them with magic to finish them off, but if I was going to take them down anyway, I wanted to cut off their red horns first.

I used a little magic—just enough to provoke them. The boars growled and their horns started to turn red. Apparently that happened because mana collected in the horns.

I pulled my Kumayuru knife from my bear storage. Then I just barely dodged the big boar as it was about to charge and brought down my Kumayuru knife on its horn. I slashed right through it, and it tumbled onto the ground. Then the big boar stopped in its tracks as it sped past me and turned around. This time, when it growled, it sounded furious. I got myself ready to run at any point like a matador. It wasn't giving up just

because I'd cut off its horn.

It growled again and pawed the ground, charging at me. It wasn't nearly as fast as it'd been before, though. I felt bad for it, but I couldn't just let a rabid monster run loose when it attacked humans on sight.

I shot an ice arrow at it, piercing its skull. The boar stopped, then fell over. Once I knew for sure it wasn't moving, I put it in an item bag and picked up the red horn on the ground, then headed to the next big boar.

As I was headed over, Kumakyu joined me. They had gotten everyone to town.

Together, we found the rest of the boars and took them down. I got new horns when I did that, of course. Get every-thing you can get your hands on—that was my motto.

After I checked that there were no other big boars around me using my skill, I headed back to Toya. Senia was there helping him even though I was sure she'd left earlier.

"Miss, you all right?" he asked me.

"Are you, Toya?" He seemed a lot more beat up than when I'd left him.

"Yeah, thanks to the bear you left with me."

Kumayuru came over to me. Looks like my bear had done exactly as I'd asked. I gave Kumayuru a pat on the head.

"Thank you."

"Cwoon." Kumayuru gave me a happy cry.

"But what are you doing here, Senia? Didn't you make it to town?"

"I was worried about this fool, so I asked Kumakyu to let me ride back." Senia looked at Toya, then Kumakyu.

"Is that fool supposed to be me?"

"Do you see any others around?" Senia kept wrapping a bandage around Toya's arm as they chatted.

"You said you were going to take down those other big boars. Did you?"

"Right. There were three, so I took care of them," I said as I pulled three red horns from my bear storage. Toya looked at his own horn. Apparently, he'd been successful.

"I finally took one down after all that work."

That bandage Senia was wrapping around him told me how much he'd been through.

"You're really beat up, Toya."

"Just made a little mistake and got flung into the air is all."

"A little mistake?" Senia poked him in one of his bandaged spots and he flinched.

"Yeah, a little one..."

It was obvious he was putting on a tough guy act. He was in real pain, though according to Senia, he was just bruised.

"He's sturdy, at least. I'm jealous."

Senia started to poke all over at the bandages. Toya gritted his teeth but didn't say anything. If it hurt, he could just say so instead of glowering about it.

"So, did you take down the big boar with Senia?"

"I did it on my own."

"Cwoon?"

"...with help," Toya corrected himself after Kumayuru crooned. Why? "Your bear helped a little."

I see. He'd been able to cut through the horn thanks to Kumayuru helping him.

"I saw Toya hugging Kumayuru."

“S-Senia!”

“You hugged Kumayuru?”

“I’m not letting you have Kumayuru.” Senia hugged my bear.

“No one’s taking Kumayuru away.”

Meanwhile, Kumayuru crooned in concern.

“Also, Kumayuru’s mine, you know.”

Kumayuru crooned happily at that, but Kumakyu let out a forlorn noise. When I said, “You’re mine too, Kumakyu,” then Kumakyu finally seemed happy.

“So, Yuna, are there other big boars around?” Senia asked as she clung to Kumayuru.

“Not around here. There might be somewhere farther out.”

My skill had a limited range.

“You can tell they’re not around here? I guess a bear would.”

“Cwoon.”

“Not you,” Toya said when Kumayuru crooned.

“Then we should probably tell the Adventurers’ Guild about this.”

Monsters normally didn’t appear around here, so the kids would hang out in the area, according to Senia. Also, reporting back on monsters was part of an adventurer’s duties. Part of the rules, I guess. When I’d just become an adventurer, Helen had scolded me about that. Ah, memories! I hadn’t known back then though, so what else was I supposed to do?

Once Toya was done getting treated, we got on my bears and headed to town. Since he was injured and all, I asked Toya if he wanted a ride. He looked super conflicted and then told me, “I’m fine. I can walk on my own.”

The whole time we were headed back, he kept glancing at Senia as she rode on Kumayuru. I wondered why.

Once we were back in town, Jade and Mel ran over to us.

“Is Toya all right?”

“Why are you so worried?”

“We heard all about it from Fina and Luimin,” Mel said.

They'd run all the way here after hearing that.

“I can handle a big boar.”

“You say that, but you're hurt.”

“Toya, are you okay?”

“I just got flung around a bit. Kumayuru saved me.”

“Kumayuru?” both Jade and Mel said, seeming puzzled.

It did sound odd coming from his mouth, but Toya really had said Kumayuru's name. All their eyes fell on him.

“Her black bear is what I mean! Senia, let's hurry and get to the Adventurers' Guild so we can make our report.” Trying to brush it off, Toya stalked off toward the guild with Senia.

At first, I wondered whether I'd need to go too. It seemed like such a chore. Then Toya and Senia told me they'd put in a report for me about the big boars I'd taken down.

According to Toya, “No one will believe it if you tell them you took down big boars anyway.”

According to Senia, “And it'll be more trouble to explain your presence.”

I was happy I wouldn't need to report in, but I also felt kind of sad about it. I learned later the adventurers would be conducting their own search around the area. No one

knew why the big boars had appeared, but Senia said that the herd had come foraging for food.

Once I got back to the inn, Fina and Luimin welcomed me back. When they saw me, they ran over, looking relieved.

“I knew you were strong Yuna, but I was still worried about you.”

“Fighting monsters is so dangerous, even if you had Kumayuru and Kumakyu with you.”

Aw, I’d made them worry.

After all the stuff that had happened, I decided to take it easy in the inn. I told Fina and Luimin that they could go out, but they decided to play with my bears in cub form instead.

While I was lounging in my room, I heard a knock on the door.

“It’s me.” It sounded like Toya. I opened the door and Toya came in holding a pot. He’d come back from reporting at the guild.

“What is it?”

He wasn’t going to order me to help slay big boars or something, was he? I did check out the area around the town though. Even if there were more around, they’d have to be far away from town. I didn’t want to deal with it, so I would’ve tried to say no, but Toya didn’t talk about that.

“It’s honey. Give it to the bears. Wanted to say thank you for today.”

Toya thrust out the pot in his hands at me. He’d brought it for Kumayuru.

“Is this for Kumayuru?”

“Your white bear too. It brought Senia over, after all. I couldn’t just give this to one and not the other. Tell them thanks, they were lifesavers today.”

With that, Toya left.

"Kumakyu, Kumayuru, Toya said this is for you to say thank you," I said to my bears, who were in their cub form and playing on the bed with Fina and Luimin. I carried the jar of honey over to the bed and they approached me.

"What did Toya bring?"

"It's honey," I said. "It's a thank-you present for Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Do you two want to eat it?"

My bears both crooned in response. I pulled out a spoon and brought some honey up to Kumayuru's mouth.

"Is it good?"

"Cwoon!"

Looked like it! Next, I brought a spoonful of honey to Kumakyu's mouth. Kumakyu also seemed to enjoy it.

"Oh, Yuna. I'd like to feed them too," Luimin said.

"Me too."

Luimin and Fina seemed eager to try feeding my bears after seeing Kumayuru and Kumakyu sample the honey.

"Well, we don't want you spilling honey on the bed, so let's move over to the table."

"Okay!"

Fina took Kumayuru and Luimin took Kumakyu to head over to the table. I placed the pot on the tabletop and pulled out another spoon that I handed over to Fina and Luimin. The two of them put my bears on their laps and fed them as if they were mama hens and the bears their little chicks.

"This is kind of heartwarming."

"Kumayuru and Kumakyu are so cute."

"Don't feed them too much," I warned, though I doubted that would happen.

Once they were done eating, Kumayuru and Kumakyu's muzzles were a whole mess. I thought of recalling them, but decided to give them a bath instead to show my thanks.



CHAPTER 449

THE BEAR BEARS WITNESS

THE DAY AFTER I killed the big boars, Toya headed to Kusehlo's to take his test, and I headed over to watch. It seemed he was already feeling better.

"You don't have to come with me, you know." Toya, who was in the lead, turned to look at everyone walking behind him.

"Don't have anything better to do."

"I have no other plans."

"I'm bored."

"Yuna's going, so I will too."

"Well, since Yuna's going..."

"I need to be there, as the party leader."

Honestly, we wanted to watch just to have something to pass the time. Also, since I was planning on going home soon, I wanted to check in about something.

Toya let out a little sigh but started walking again. It seemed like he'd given up.

We all shuffled over to Kusehlo's early in the morning.

"You're here?"

"Yeah, I came for the test."

He'd have three chances at the test. If he could use a mithril sword to cut through at least one of the swords Kusehlo's son had made, he'd pass. In baseball, that'd make someone a first-rate batter, but I had no idea if it constituted an easy or hard sword test.

“Think you can do it?”

“Please just look at this.”

Toya produced the sword he’d cut through and the red big boar horn. He was currently able to cut through a sword once every few tries, but the issue was whether he could do it reliably.

“I heard some murmurings about the big boars, but it didn’t occur to me you were part of that business.”

“Well, you know how it is.”

“Liar. Yuna did all the work,” Senia said immediately.

“Wait, I worked hard too. I even took down two of them.”

“According to what you told me yesterday, you attacked the big boars only after Kumayuru held them down for you.”

“Uh, that was—”

“And Yuna took down the other big boars.”

“But I did actually cut off its horn while it was red.” Toya thrust the horn at Senia.

“So it’s three for Yuna, one for Toya.”

“Ugh.” Toya’s shoulders drooped when Senia said that.

“Come now, you realize I don’t have all day. Are we doing this or not?”

“We’re definitely doing this.”

Toya started getting ready.

And... for the results...

“Please, just wait. This has got to be a mistake.”

He'd failed.

“Just one more—just let me have one more chance. Yeah, I'm sure that the blade's just chipped.”

“It's a perfectly good blade.”

“Toya, you were the one who fixed it up yesterday,” revealed Jade, who was rooming with him.

“Mr. Kusehlo, please. Just give me one more chance.” Toya put his hands together and asked Kusehlo.

“All right. Just one more time.” He gave in.

Toya failed the fourth time too.

After that, Toya kept begging for just one more chance. He finally succeeded on the tenth try, passing the test—or had he? A 33 percent success rate was nothing like a ten percent one. Even in baseball, a batter with a.100 batting was nothing like one with a.300 batting. A.100 batting average couldn't get you into the majors.

“Since you also cut off the big boar's horn while it was red, and got injured in the bargain, I'll count this as a pass. Jade, you better keep an eye on this lad.”

“Understood.”

Then Kusehlo spoke to Jade again, “So, Jade, are you ready? If you are, we're heading to the gate of trials.”

It was the second day since the gate of trials had opened. I hadn't heard about the gate closing, so the trials had to be ongoing.

“I'm ready to go at any time.”

“Then we should go. Let's get this over with quick, since I've gotta make this lad's sword.”

Since they were going to the gate of trials right after this, we followed them. I wouldn't be able to see Jade take on the challenge, but I did want to confirm that the trials were still being held.

But then I got to the bottom of the long set of stairs...

"Every time I see these, I wish they'd just let us skip the stairs."

"Yeah, whoever built the gate of trials up there must have had noodles for brains."

Neither Mel nor Senia looked keen to go up the stairs as they looked up. Based on what I'd heard, the landscape and flow of the mana and stuff had something to do with the location, so the creator might not have had a choice. I agreed that this whole thing was a pain though.

"You could rest at the inn, you know, Toya. You must still hurt all over."

"Not really. This barely counts as being injured, so I'm fine. Want me to take your place? Since I passed my test and all."

"Only after a ton of freebies."

Apparently, Jade had promised Toya that he'd talk to Kusehlo about them trading places for the trial as long as Toya passed his test.

"You made a promise like that?"

"I'm sorry. I thought it'd be fine if Toya passed."

"Well, if he'd been able to do it ten out of ten times, I would've been begging him to."

Anyone would want him to be their champion if he was *that* good.

"But he only managed one."

"Don't say that. A success is still a success."

"When you fight a monster, you don't get ten tries. I'd beat the thing before then," Jade said.

“And if there’s an opportunity to swing your sword, that just means your opponent could do the same to you.”

This wasn’t a turn-based game. If you and your opponent were evenly matched, it didn’t mean you’d get a free shot at them and then take turns. If they were weaker than you, it was possible you’d be the only one on the offensive, but everything changed if they were as powerful as you, or more powerful still. If that happened, your opponent could end up with more opportunities to attack you, and the more chances they had, the more danger you’d be in.

If you got the chance to attack, you had to make use of it, and quickly. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t just be endangering yourself, but your friends as well.

“Someday you’ll ask me to handle a monster, Jade.”

“Yeah, I’ll be waiting,” Jade said with a smile.

We climbed the long set of stairs until we were in front of the gate of trials.

“We’re finally here.”

Fina had made it all the way up the stairs on her own, just like yesterday.

“Here—have some water.”

“Thank you, Yuna.” Fina gulped it down.

“Oh, that looks good. Could I have some too, Yuna?” Mel asked.

“Same here.”

“Could I have some too, please?”

I pulled out cups and gave them to Mel, Senia, and Luimin.

“Miss, could I have some too?”

“I’d be much obliged as well.”

Now Jade and Kusehlo were asking too. I ended up getting everyone a drink.

After we had a break, we headed to the gate of trials. Since it was nearly lunch, some adventurers and blacksmiths were already around. Looked like the second day was going swimmingly—which meant I was off the hook.

I should have expected this, but since no one could see what happened with the trials, there was no one around to watch. It wasn't like anyone would willingly climb all those stairs when they couldn't even see what happened at the top. I'd never have done it without my bear gear. Actually, if not for my bear gear, I wouldn't have been *able* to climb the stairs in the first place.

I wished they had an escalator. Or an elevator. *Something*.

"Well, we're off."

"You better not come back right away."

"I won't," Jade said in reply to Toya. He headed over to the check-in desk by the gate of trials. As they were waiting, Talotoba noticed me. For some reason, he released a sigh before taking an adventurer and blacksmith in through the gate of trials.

What was that all about?

After that, it was Jade's turn. He headed into the gate of trials with Kusehlo.

"Ahh, I wanted to do the trials too."

"Maybe an apprentice would let you?"

"But then the apprentice would get the wrong idea."

"What do you mean?"

"If I use their sword, they'd think their sword was a whole lot better than it is. That wouldn't help the apprentice."

"..."

We all stared at Toya with our mouths hanging open. Where'd he get that idea from?

It was a very Toya thing to think, though. Maybe the fact that he never got discouraged was his strength?

While we were bantering with Toya and waiting for Jade and Kusehlo, they finally came back.

“Jade, how’d it go?”

“Right, uh. I dunno. It was what it was.”

He was being evasive. Maybe it hadn’t gone well after all? Then Jade came over to me and placed a hand on my head for some reason. What?

“Mr. Kusehlo, how’d it go?”

“Hmm. This year’s trial was different. The guild master had his head in his hands when he saw the opponent we were up against.”

Since Jade wouldn’t tell us anything, Toya tried getting Kusehlo to talk, but he wasn’t clear about it either.

“Well, we can’t talk about what happened in the trial anyway.”

“You could talk a *little*.”

“I’ll just say it was a tough one, that’s for sure.”

Jade and Kusehlo wouldn’t budge. For some reason, they kept glancing at me. When I asked them what was up, they’d just look away.

Now I was super curious.

CHAPTER 450

JADE TAKES ON THE TRIALS

I PARTED WAYS with my companions as I headed to the gate of trials alongside Kusehlo. At least two other groups were already waiting their turn, and a pair that had just finished their own trial came out of the gate with the guild master.

The adventurer and blacksmith looked somewhat pained, and the guild master sighed heavily. He seemed weary. The guild master needed to go in with every group, so perhaps he was simply fatigued. It had to be a difficult job.

Then it was our turn.

"Looks like you're next, Kusehlo. Looks like a different adventurer from last year."

The guild master eyed me. I could hardly believe he remembered the faces of all the adventurers who participated in the challenge.

"Yup, other one got injured," Kusehlo explained. "So, I asked this lad here when he came to order a sword from me."

"I see. Not the most auspicious circumstances, but I hope you get a good shot at it."

Kusehlo and I headed through the gate of trials with the guild master. We strode down the hall, then down the stairs. I'd challenged the gate of trials just once before. Everything was the same as last time so far, including the magic circle at the bottom of the stairs that you would stick your weapon into to start the trials.

"Once you're ready, go ahead and start it."

"I've got it."

I thrust the sword Kusehlo had made into the circle. The circle glowed and the ground in front of us swelled up.

"Jade, it's coming."

I pulled the sword from the circle and readied myself. A gigantic bear had appeared... but all it did was sit there. It didn't move. It was like a statue.

“...”

Why was there a bear here? Normally if the trial was a stationary object, it'd be a wall or a rock. So why a bear?

Kusehlo looked surprised and the guild master sighed. Did that mean I had to cut through this defenseless bear? It was just a statue made of dirt that'd been fortified with magic. This had to be a trial to test the sword's edge and the wielder's technique. I had to cut through the bear.

I approached the unmoving bear and gripped my sword, then brought it down on the fortified bear, swiping across its right shoulder. The bear statue crumbled, and with that, the first trial was done.

I was assaulted by a strong sense of guilt. I felt like I'd done something inexcusable...

I remembered Yuna's summoned bears and when we'd parted ways at the gate of trials. I reminded myself this was a trial. Even the slightest hesitation could mean failure.

As I steadied myself, the next trial started. The ground swelled. This time several small bears appeared. Now I was remembering Yuna's small cubs, which shook me up all over again.

I needed to get it together. I let out a little breath and tried to settle myself again.

“Jade!” Kusehlo yelled.

The small bears went on the move. It seemed this next trial was about accuracy. The little bears swarmed around me, and again, I couldn't help but imagine the little cubs as Yuna's miniaturized summoned beasts.

My heart wavered. The little bears tried to attack me, and I was too slow to respond. Normally I'd slice through them right then and there, but now, I couldn't react soon enough. I'd had a trial like this before, but it used to be wolves. Why did it have to be bears this time?

I slashed at the bears in front of my eyes.

“Ugh.”

It wasn't just one. I needed to slice through them all. I huffed and puffed as I took down all the bears. I felt like a villain. It felt like I'd forced myself to do something reprehensible. Even though I knew it was terrible, I had to do it, and that it just made me feel guilty.

I knew the trials would test our resolve too, but I hadn't thought it would happen in the very first and second. If this was part of the trial, it was the most terrible one I could imagine.

“Jade, you're not looking good. Are you all right?” Kusehlo asked, seeming concerned.

“Yeah, I'm fine.”

I took a deep breath and steadied myself yet again. This was a trial. And it had nothing to do with Yuna's bears.

The third trial was a gigantic bear. Yet another opponent to leave me shaken. It felt like I was up against one of Yuna's bears. I calmed my racing heart. Why were the trials like this? Had the gate read my mind and decided to make everything the shape of bears?

The bear attacked me. I dodged and looked for an opening. As I was in the middle of cutting through the bear, the faces of Yuna's bears came into my mind. I even thought I heard them croon.

I shook my head, dismissing the bear that appeared in my mind. I needed to focus on the bear in front of me. This wasn't one of Yuna's bears. I'd barely been able to defeat the other bears. Now that one that was actually hostile had appeared, I couldn't bring myself to hurt it.

I hardened my heart and attacked. I felt mentally exhausted, and my sword was dulling, but I somehow got through the third trial.

Then the fourth started. The ground started to rise. *Please, please don't make it another*

bear. My wish only half came true.

The fourth trial was a girl dressed as a bear. This was definitely modeled after Yuna. Why had Yuna appeared out of nowhere? Maybe this was a representation of my jealousy of Yuna's strength? Yuna was powerful and could battle any kind of monster. She could even take down ones that I couldn't. Maybe that was why Yuna had appeared.

I lowered my sword and told Kusehlo I was surrendering. He was silent for a while, then finally, simply said, "Got it."

I thrust my sword into the magic circle. The trial was over.

I was exhausted. I never wanted to go through this again.

"Jade, was it? Do you know the girl dressed as a bear? Seemed like you were with her before the trial."

As I was sheathing my sword, the guild master started talking to me.

"Yes, I know her."

Based on what the guild master was saying, it seemed that he knew her.

"Is that why you quit?"

"There's that, and even though it's a fake, I might have been too afraid of facing her. She's powerful. If I tried as hard as I could and still failed, I don't know what I'd do with myself."

"You're in rank C, if I remember correctly? You really think she's that powerful?" Kusehlo asked after hearing the guild master.

"She is. I haven't seen her handle a weapon much, but I can tell she's skilled. And she's also a great mage. Most importantly, she's resolute. A normal person would be afraid of going up against a large man or a monster, but she faces them like it's just business as usual. She acts like a battle-forged warrior."

Yuna was the kind of person who'd head out to fight a black viper on her own. She fought wyrms without batting an eye and she'd even defeated that giant scorpion. I

would never have even considered engaging those enemies on my own. The only reason I could fight at all, as I was now, was because I had companions with me. Even if I was in the vanguard, I had others to support me and people to warn me when I was in danger.

My strength came from the people I trusted, who helped me fight monsters. Yuna was powerful because she could fight alone.

Not that you'd know it from how she dressed.

The iron that was meant to be the prize appeared. It was also in the shape of a small bear. If the guild master knew about Yuna, then there was the possibility she had something to do with these trials, but I was too afraid to dare ask how she might be involved.

I took the iron bear and the room went dim.

"Looks like that was the last trial of the year."

The guild master looked relieved.

"This year seemed a little shorter than usual."

"There've been times when they only lasted one day. Some years are just like that. Come, let's head back up." The guild master pushed us from behind.

Once we made it back out, the guild master announced the trials were over at once, to the disappointment of the next blacksmith. No one had suspected it would end in two days.

We headed to where everyone was waiting for us. I noticed Yuna staring at me. For whatever reason, I ended up patting her head.

CHAPTER 451

THE BEAR GOES TO GET THE POTS AND PANS

JADE TOLD US THAT he'd been the last challenger for the gate of trials. I felt bad for the people who'd been waiting, but I was glad things ended without an issue.

...they *had* ended without issue, right?

Once we parted ways with Jade, I headed off to Lojina with Fina and Luimin. We were getting the stuff we'd ordered.

“We’re going home once we get the pots from Lojina?”

“We’ve been here for a while, so we need to head back soon.”

We were using my bear phone to call Shuri and Tiermina regularly, but Gentz seemed worried, so we needed to get home soon. Also, we hadn’t been checking in with Luimin’s family. I wanted to touch base with them, but Luimin was the only one with a bear phone in the elven village, so we couldn’t contact anyone.

Once we got everything we needed, we’d be heading home.

Lilyka greeted us at the shop.

“Welcome back, everyone,” she said.

“Where’s Lojina? He said that everything would be ready today.”

“It is. It’s all in the back room. Come with me.”

We followed Lilyka into the back room. Once we were there, I saw a pile of pots, pans, and kitchen utensils. Seemed like our order.

“This is yours, Yuna, and this is Fina’s, and the biggest one is Luimin’s order. Would

you like to check to make sure everything's here?"

I had the fewest items. Fina had a larger pile, while Luimin's haul was just huge. I'd only bought enough to use at home and in bear houses, plus a giant pot that I wasn't planning on using just yet. I'd done so because Fina had gotten a similar pot for the orphanage.

Fina had put in an order of kitchenware for her home, the shops, and the orphanage. Luimin's order was the largest because she'd gotten a list from Talia after her mother had consulted the whole village.

"Fina, let me know once you're done checking them. I'll put them away in my item bag after." I flapped the mouth of my white bear puppet.

"Yes."

Fina and Luimin checked their notes as they looked through their piles. I did the same with mine. Pots, pans, and other utensils. Looked like everything was present! Since I'd just ordered these on a whim, I didn't remember. I wasn't going to need any of these things anytime soon, so if the order was slightly off, it wouldn't matter much to me.

"Mine looks fine."

I had the smallest order, so I finished right away.

"Mine looks fine too."

Fina seemed to have also finished.

"Oh, please give me a bit more time." Fina and I had finished, but Luimin had so many things that she wasn't close to done.

"Take your time. Yuna, how about you and Fina check the bill and sign if everything looks good?"

Fina and I checked the receipt and signed.

"Fina, do you have enough money? If you don't, I'll pay." They were going to be used at my shops, so I could pay for them too.

"I-It's okay," she said. "I have money from Mom."

Fina took out money from her item bag. I did the same, and Lilyka counted the amounts.

"Okay! Everything's here."

I put the two piles into my bear storage.

"I've finished too. Everything looks good." Luimin, who had a ton of notes, had finally finished taking inventory of her order. She checked the price, then paid.

"Luimin, do you have enough to cover the bill?" She had the most stuff, and therefore the steepest bill.

"Yes—everyone got together the money in advance. And it was discounted too, so it should be okay."

"Lilyka, are you sure about the discount?"

"It should be fine. We calculated it based on the cost of materials, so we're still making a profit. It's just enough of a discount that my dad won't be able to afford to drink, though."

Lilyka smiled. Wasn't something like that a matter of life and death for a dwarf? At least, I couldn't help but imagine dwarves being heavy drinkers.

I offered silent mental condolences to Lojina.

Once we'd paid and put away our wares in our item bags, the door to the back opened and Lojina came in.

"Ah miss, you were here?" Lojina yawned.

"She was. Yuna, listen to this. As soon as Dad finished your order, he started hammering right away at a sword."

Fina, Luimin, and I opened our mouths in shock.

"Well, seeing the knives Ghazal and Gold made, just put me in the mood for a bit of

weapon-making." Lojina seemed a little embarrassed.

"So, are you going to become a weapons maker again?"

"I've let my skills get rusty, so I can't get right back to it, but I think I'll forge a blade or two while I'm making my pots. Don't want to embarrass myself in front of Ghazal and Gold if they come back."

"Dad..." Lilyka seemed touched.

"Are you all headed back to the capital, then?"

"Yeah."

That was a fib. We were going to head to the elven woods through the transport gate that I'd set up in the house I bought, then go home to Crimonia right after. Lojina, who had no idea of any of this, assumed we were headed to the capital.

"I have a favor to ask of you." Lojina looked at Lilyka for a moment, then at me.

"What is it?"

"Could you take Lilyka to see Ghazal?"

"Dad!" Lilyka protested.

It seemed she hadn't known he was going to propose that. I was surprised, too.

"She's been antsy since Ghazal left. So go see him. You like him, don't you?"

Lilyka was silent in response to that. I'd gotten the sense she cared about him, so it made sense that she *liked* him.

"Don't worry about the shop. And if he turns you down, just come home."

"Dad, but what about Mom?"

"I've given this my approval." Wiola appeared from behind Lojina. "Lilyka, you should go. The two of us can handle the shop. If we need more hands, we'll hire someone."

“But...”

“And you’re an adult now. You should do what you want. The fact that Yuna knows him and came here must be fate.”

“And she’s stronger than a normal adventurer. I can leave you in her hands without having to worry. Most importantly, she’s a girl like you, so that’s another reason I can rest easy.”

It would’ve been one thing to leave her in the hands of a mixed party like Jade’s—let alone leaving her alone with a male adventurer.

“But this is all so sudden. Doesn’t this put Yuna on the spot?”

Well, it meant I couldn’t use my gate, but Lojina had done a ton for me already. He was Ghazal and Gold’s master, too. I couldn’t say no to this.

“I’m fine with that. What’ll you do if he turns you down though, Lilyka?”

I understood how Lilyka felt, but I had no idea how *Ghazal* felt. There was a chance he was already seeing someone, and I just hadn’t known. If he turned Lilyka down, it would put me in an awkward position. I couldn’t console her. I had no experience whatsoever with romance.

“Oh, Yuuna! How could you ask about that?” Lilyka batted at me, which didn’t hurt.

But if it *did* happen, I’d be the one really put on the spot. I’d never helped a girl get over heartbreak before. I didn’t suppose I could ask Fina to help her?

I glanced at Fina. She was still just ten. She probably didn’t know anything about romance either.

“Well, troublesome as it might be, just bring her back if that happens. We’ll pay you to guard her, too.”

Just imagining us returning here with a dejected Lilyka in tow was enough to give me second thoughts about doing this. Maybe I’d use the bear gate if it came to that.

“Urgh. Why are you assuming I’ll be dumped from the start? Aren’t you sending me off right now?”

"I know Ghazal cares for you, but he also used to see you as a little sister."

"Ugh."

"That said, his letter mentioned he was worried about you. I'm sure he still cares for you. And, Lilyka, it depends on how you feel too."

"Dad..."

"So just go already."

"Dad, Mom, are you really sure?" Lilyka looked at Lojina and Wiola.

"Please go on," her mom said.

"Get going before we change our minds."

They were both pushing her to go ahead. Looking at her so lovingly, just like parents should.

"Thank you both." She hugged them.

"C'mon, no need to finish up work today. Go get ready!"

"Okay!" Lilyka left the room.

"Miss, I'm sorry, but I'm leaving my girl in your hands." Lojina bowed his head deep and low. "If Ghazal rejects her, could you give him a good sucker punch for me?"

"And for me too, if it comes to that."

Looks like I'd obtained two free passes to punch Ghazal. If I punched him at full force, things would get messy... but then again, if he turned down a girl who traveled that far to see him, he'd kind of deserve it.

* * *

We helped Lilyka pack.

"Uhh, this is far too much, but it'll be so expensive to buy things in the capital. And if

Ghazal's already dating someone, then it'll all be for nothing."

"I can carry your stuff in my item bag, so don't worry about him turning you away."

"Yuna, you're supposed to tell me that he won't reject me and that everything will be okay."

Saying anything like that felt irresponsible. I didn't know how Ghazal felt.

Lilyka ended up mostly packing clothes, which I put away in my bear storage.

"Are you sure about not telling the people you know that you're going to the capital? We can delay leaving for a little longer."

"If I do that, it might make it harder to come back if Ghazal turns me down. I'll just send them letters if I stay in the capital."

I guess she had a point. If she told everyone she was going to the capital for a guy, there was a chance she'd be too embarrassed to come home. Lilyka already seemed anxious.

* * *

Once she was done packing, the family invited us to eat with them. If Lilyka moved to the capital, they wouldn't be able to have family dinners anymore. I didn't want to take up any of their precious family time, so I politely turned them down, promising to meet them at the inn the next morning before heading back there.

I also politely turned down their offer of an escort fee. The iron from the gate of trials was normally supposed to be for the blacksmith, but I'd taken the iron bear, and had gotten a discount on our kitchenware to boot. I'd already taken way more than I'd given these people. I didn't need payment for this.

CHAPTER 452

THE BEAR RETURNS TO THE ELVES' VILLAGE

THE NEXT DAY, Lilyka came to the inn early in the morning. Everything was already packed into my bear storage, so she just had a small bag and some light clothes.

“You’re early, Lilyka.”

“My dad wouldn’t stop talking about how I could come home if I got rejected, and that he’d find me a nice boy.”

“That just means he’s worried about you.”

“And here I thought he was being so cool yesterday.”

Well, a whole evening had passed since then, so he was probably starting to feel the empty nest. It just showed how much he cared about her. Some parents and children didn’t even *talk* to each other. I thought his clinginess was kind of a good thing, by comparison, but it probably wouldn’t be so great if it made her feel like she couldn’t leave her dad.

* * *

Now that Lilyka was here, we made ready to leave.

“No one forgot anything, right?”

“I didn’t.”

“I think I have everything.”

We left behind the room that had served us for a week and headed to the first floor, where we found Jade’s group. They were here to see us off. Since they had to wait for Toya’s sword, they’d need to stay behind for a while.

“You did a lot for us, miss. Say ‘thank you’ to your bears for me too.”

“They really liked the honey,” I said.

“Did they now?” Toya looked a little happy about that.

“Ugh, I wanted to ride Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

“Hee hee. I got to ride them. They were so soft,” Senia boasted to Mel.

“I had no idea Lojina had such a charming little girl.”

“Or that you were Ghazal’s girlfriend.”

Lilyka seemed a little embarrassed at this, but didn’t deny it. “You all know Ghazal then?”

“He’s a well-known blacksmith in the capital. Lots of adventurers have heard about him, too.”

Lilyka glowed at their praise of Ghazal.

“If you’re going to the capital, I suppose that means we’ll be crossing paths again.”

“Well, yes. It’ll be nice to see you again.”

Of course, this would only apply if Lilyka actually moved to the capital. She could end up back here again.

“Ugh, but Yuna, you’re going home before us?”

“I wanted to ride home on your bears.”

They both looked disappointed. Unfortunately, even if we did go home together, there were too many people for Kumayuru and Kumakyu to carry. I didn’t have room to bring Mel and Senia.

“We can leave Toya behind and just go back with Yuna.”

“That’s it!”

“No! That’s not it,” Toya protested.

"That's enough, you two. Yuna, you did a lot to help out Toya. We'll see you when we're in Crimonia again."

"Yeah, and we'll treat you to a meal. With Toya's money."

"Why mine?"

"Because Yuna helped you out the most."

"Ugh." Toya couldn't deny that.

"Well then, I think we're heading out," I said.

"Yuna, Fina, Luimin, Lilyka—see you later."

We left Jade's group and headed out of town.

"Um, are we really riding on bears?" Lilyka asked.

"That's right. A carriage would be too slow."

I could've used the bear bus, but that would consume mana and be a lot of work to drive. I could sleep on Kumayuru and Kumakyu while they ran, and it would be impossible to navigate elven woods in a bear bus, anyway.

We made it some distance away from town before I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

"Summons are so mystical. They just appear out of nowhere."

"Uh, so, Fina and I will take Kumayuru to start. Luimin and Lilyka, you two take Kumakyu."

"To start?" Lilyka seemed puzzled.

"We'll switch out partway. If we don't, Kumakyu might end up sad."

"Kumayuru and Kumakyu like Yuna so much that if she rides too much on one, the

other one will sulk," Fina explained.

"The bears sulk? That's so cute..."

Lilyka approached Kumakyu.

"I know I'm no Yuna, but I hope you'll let me ride you."

"Cwoon." Kumakyu lowered itself to the ground to let Lilyka ride.

"Thank you."

"Oh, me too."

Luimin climbed on after her. Fina and I got on Kumayuru, and off we bounded. We were headed to the elven village—Luimin's home.

"Lilyka, I'm going to have them run faster. If you get scared, just say so."

"Okay, got it."

Lilyka held firmly on to Kumakyu so she didn't fall off.

"You don't need to hold on that tight. You won't fall off if you just keep a light grip."

"Okay." Lilyka loosened her grip.

My bears ran along the roads until we cut through a meadow and entered the woods. We went in among the trees without slowing down.

"Yuna, how do they know where they're going?"

"Kumayuru and Kumakyu know the way already."

They generally remembered paths they'd already taken once. Luimin had struggled to remember the path on the way here, but my bears didn't hesitate to follow the same route without any directions.

We crossed the bridge deep in the mountains. It was the same one I'd made on the way here.

“We’re already back here.”

The path back was much faster now that we knew where we were going. It’d taken us two days and a night to get to the dwarven’ town, but we were already near the elven village by evening on our way back. If we kept going, we’d reach it in a single day.

The woods were dark, though. If I used my bear lights, we could have kept going, but I didn’t want to force us to get there extra-early for no reason. Most importantly, if we got in at night, we’d just be inconveniencing the village.

“Well, let’s camp out here for tonight and then tomorrow morning we can go to the village.”

“We’re very close to the village already.”

“We’d just be a nuisance if we got in at night. We might as well wait until morning.”

“I think my mom and dad wouldn’t mind.”

“I would, though. Do you want to head back alone, Luimin?”

If she did, she’d need to walk around the woods at night all by herself. Without my bears she’d probably get lost. Even if she knew the way at night, the paths could look different in the dark.

“You’re so mean, Yuna.”

I just wasn’t shameless enough to come in un-announced to a person’s home in the middle of the night. We’d need to crash at someone’s home. Sure, we could avoid doing that by using my bear house, but then why not just camp here anyway? If it meant avoiding a whole conversation, I preferred spending the night here. Most importantly, I’d get a good night’s sleep in my bear house.

“Uhh, all right,” Luimin replied.

“So are we camping out here?” Lilyka looked around.

We were in the middle of the woods. It was dark and beasts could get us.

“Isn’t it dangerous?”

“I’ll pull out my house, so don’t worry.”

“Your house?”

I looked around for a clearing, pulled my bear house out of my bear storage, then I yanked the flabbergasted Lilyka inside. I gave her another shock when I said I was prepping dinner and another when I said that there was a bath. Yet another when I told her she’d be sleeping in a warm bed.

All Lilyka could manage was “This isn’t like the camping I’m used to.”

The next day, we headed to the elves’ village. Since we were close to the village, we got there right away.

“I’d like to go to Mumulute’s first. Would that be okay?”

“I’ll tell everyone I’m home, so that should be fine.”

“Mumulute?” Lilyka asked, since she hadn’t met him before.

“He’s my grandfather and the village chief.”

“Oh, really?”

When we got to the entrance of the village, I recalled my bears. If I kept them out, the kids would swarm us.

“It’s the bear girl!”

Odd. Kumayuru and Kumakyu weren’t here, but I was still surrounded by kids. My precautions had failed!

“Don’t get in Yuna’s way, everyone.”

“Aww.”

“Grandfather—I mean the chief—told you that, didn’t he? You can’t give Yuna trouble.”

“Ugh.”

The kids looked forlorn about that. If they were adults, I would’ve just batted them away, but I couldn’t do that to kids.

“How about we go to Mumulute’s house together?” It wasn’t that far, but the kids still seemed happy about that anyway.

“Urgh, Yuna. I’m sorry.”

“You’re so popular, Yuna.” Lilyka looked at the kids surrounding me. “I suppose you are dressed like *that*.”

The kids left just as promised once we got to Mumulute’s house. Luimin called us to follow her as she went inside, and we did so.

* * *

“It must have been a bother keeping an eye on Luimin, lass.” Mumulute looked a little apologetic.

“Grandfather, I didn’t cause any of this. Mom did.”

“Ah, yes.”

“So, who is this dwarven girl here?” Mumulute looked at Lilyka.

“I’m Lilyka. I’m headed to the capital, so I’ve come along with Yuna,” Lilyka greeted him.

Well, this was where the real talk would start.

“Mumulute, I have a little favor to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“I was wondering if you would let us travel to the capital?”

“Yuna?” Lilyka was confused.

The night before, I'd used my bear gate to travel secretly to Mumulute's house. There, I'd asked him for something. I wanted to use my gate to go to the capital, but I didn't want Lilyka to know it was mine. So, I asked Mumulute to help me trick her into believing we were traveling using his powers.

Mumulute agreed to go along with it. I'd already explained this to Fina and Luimin, so they knew what to do.

"As the chief of the elven village, Mumulute has a mystic power that lets him instantly transport us to the capital."

"What? You can do that?" Lilyka looked surprised. Well, yeah. Anyone would be.

"Mumulute, can I ask you to help us?"

"I cannot turn down a request from the one who saved our village. However, this is a secret of the elves. Though you know of the secret, we cannot have this young lady see it. I must apologize, but I'll have to ask you to blindfold yourself. Would you mind?"

Mumulute made sure to guide the conversation as I'd asked. I didn't want her seeing the bear gate, so we were blindfolding her.

"Um, in other words, I'll be able to see Ghazal right away? I haven't prepared myself yet."

Lilyka seemed shaken by this unexpected turn of events. She'd thought she still had time before we got to the capital. Most people would be questioning our method of transport, but she was too flustered to do that.

"So, are you prepared to go right away?"

"Yes, please."

"Wait, I'm not ready."

"You should have been prepared the moment you left home."

"But... but..."

I'd never been in love, so I just didn't get it. I guess she was worried about being turned

down. I wasn't kind enough to wait for her to get used to the idea, though.

"Mumulute, if you would."

"Let us move, then. This way."

I led a panicked-looking Lilyka to what turned out to be a room with a magic circle, which Mumulute seemed to have prepped in advance. I hadn't expected him to go this far.

"What is this place?"

"Well, can you put on the blindfold?" I pulled out some fabric and handed it to Lilyka.

"Wait, just wait."

"Okay, I'll count to ten. One, two, three..."

"That's not enough time. It's not nearly enough!"

"Five, six, seven..."

"What about Fina?"

"Fina already knows about this. Nine, then..."

"Okay, put on the blindfold."

I pressed the blindfold on her again. She stared at it and took a deep breath before taking it. Then she looked at Mumulute.

"We really can get to the capital?"

"Yes. I guarantee it."

"Then I'm at your mercy."

Lilyka prepared herself and bowed her head to Mumulute.

"Lilyka, hang in there. You're cute, so you'll do fine."

“Luimin, thank you.”

Luimin turned from Lilyka to Fina.

“Fina, there are lots of places I want to see together. Come by to hang out again sometime!”

“Yes, I will.”

We finished saying our goodbyes.

Lilyka put the blindfold on. I tried waving my hands in front of her, but she didn’t react. Good. Having confirmed she couldn’t see, I pulled out the bear gate.

“Well, let’s go.”

Mumulute chanted something. I opened the bear gate. “We need to walk for a bit, so you keep hold of my hand.”

“All right.”

Lilyka held my hand and we slowly headed through the gate.

CHAPTER 453

THE BEAR PLAYS CUPID

I KEPT PULLING LILYKA by the hand as we walked through the gate and into my bear house in the capital. Fina followed behind us and Luimin waved goodbye. I let go of Lilyka's hand in order to dismiss the bear gate.

"Yuna?"

She sounded uneasy.

"One sec."

I closed the gate and put it away in my bear storage.

"You can take off the blindfold," I said, and Lilyka did just that.

"Where are we?"

"We're at my house in the capital."

"Your house in the capital? Then we really made it?"

Lilyka looked around the room. We definitely weren't in Mumulute's house anymore, but she needed a moment to accept reality.

"You'll see once we go outside."

We headed out. The castle could be seen towering in the distance to one side.

"A castle... Then we really are in the capital where Ghazal is?"

"If anyone knows about the teleportation, it could cause problems for Mumulute. So don't tell anyone, okay? Not Ghazal or Lojina, either."

"Of course. I won't tell anyone," Lilyka promised. She swiveled all the way around,

looking at the capital in wonder.

This also meant she caught sight of one particular thing...

“A bear?” Her eyes settled on my bear house. “You really must like bears, Yuna.”

Since Kumayuru and Kumakyu would probably be sad if I said otherwise, I didn’t deny that. It wasn’t like I disliked bears. Bears were just a part of my life now. I had to own being into them at this point, but it was too embarrassing to admit it, so I just avoided the question altogether by not answering.

“Well, enough about me. Let’s get you to Ghazal.”

“Yeah.”

We headed to his forge. After coming all this way, I doubted Lilyka would try to run off, but Fina still kept a tight grip on her hand. Lilyka didn’t try to shake Fina off, of course. In fact, Fina’s grip kept her from getting too distracted by her surroundings and lost.

As we were walking through the capital, I kept hearing people repeat the same word over and over again as they stared: “Bear.”

“Yuna, can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

I knew what she was going to ask, but I said that anyway.

“Nobody else in the capital is dressed like you?”

I said nothing, so Lilyka looked at Fina instead.

“Um, there aren’t,” Fina awkwardly answered.

“I see,” she replied. “Being stared at by so many people is so embarrassing.”

I’d already cast all my embarrassment aside. Or rather, I’d just given up on being embarrassed. If people stared, I could just ignore them, and if they tried to pick a fight,

I could deal with them.

"It doesn't bother you, Fina?"

"I'm used to it now. Also, I think Yuna's bears are cute."

"Well, I suppose they are."

We headed to Ghazal's forge, being showered in stares all the while.

* * *

"So Ghazal is here?"

We stood in front of his shop.

"He is. Well, let's go inside." I opened the door and called into the shop, "Ghazal!"

"Y-Yuna?!" Lilyka was panicked when I called his name so suddenly.

"Well, we need to call him or he won't come out."

"I'm still not ready."

"Shouldn't you have been ready when you came to the capital?"

We'd already had this conversation at the bear gate. I didn't want to do this over and over again.

"But..."

"Who is that?" I heard Ghazal say from inside as he made his way out.

As Lilyka tried to run, Fina kept a tight grip of her hand to hold her back.

"Lilyka, where are you going?" Fina asked.

"Fina, please. Let me go."

"No."

Lilyka tried to run off, but Fina kept hold of her. Thank goodness for Fina!

“What? Ah, the bear girl. What do you need today?”

“We brought over someone who wanted to see you.”

“Me?”

“Fina, please let me go.”

“I recognize that voice.”

Ghazal came out of the shop to see Lilyka trying to leave and Fina holding her hand.

“Lilyka?”

“Ghazal!”

“What is Lilyka doing here?”

“She came to see you,” I answered for Lilyka, who was still trying to escape.

“Um, well, I was just worried about you, Ghazal... just a teeny bit. And Yuna said she was coming to the capital, so I came with her.”

Uh, wait. Was she pretending she didn’t like him? We came all the way here and that was what she did? What a chore. Being unable to admit your feelings might be cute in anime and manga, but in real life, it was just a hassle. Tsunderes only belong in the 2D world, okay?

“You came all the way to the capital for that?”

“Was I not allowed to?”

“Well, no...” Ghazal seemed like he had no idea how to respond.

“I think you’re the one who’s in the wrong for not coming back to Rudnik every once in a while. You could stand to visit *sometimes*.”

“Sorry. I was busy with work.”

What a very guy thing to say. This conversation was going nowhere.

“Lilyka,” I said, signaling with my eyes for her to get on with it.

“I-I know.”

Lilyka took a deep breath, then approached Ghazal.

“Are you managing the shop all on your own?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not going to hire anyone?”

“I hadn’t planned to.”

Wow. Oblivious.

“Ghazal, Lilyka can’t go back home, so would you let her work here? That’s what she’s trying to say.”

“Yuna!”

Since they weren’t getting anywhere, I gave Lilyka a push in the right direction.

“What’s this now?”

“In other words, Lilyka came all the way here to see you. You get what I’m trying to say, right?”

I couldn’t say that she’d come here to get married, but he’d get it now, right?

“Lilyka...”

“What do you say?”

“Well...”

Time for that right punch...

“Or would I be a bother?”

Now an upper...

“Well...”

Punch, punch... Left hook, left, right. A light jab and another right straight.

“So that’s a no then?”

More punching... Left hook, right, left, right...

“I need to know something first, if that’s all right?”

“What is it?”

More punching...

“Well, not you... Why’s Yuna punching the air behind you?”

“Please don’t worry about it. I’m just practicing to slug you if you reject Lilyka.”

Another straight. My bear punch cut right through the air. Looking good. I think it’d be a great punch.

“Why would you punch me?”

“Lojina gave me permission to, so don’t worry.”

“My master?”

“He said to give you a punch if you turn down his daughter. Also, Wiola asked for a second. If I add in one for myself, that’s three.”

More punching...

“When did they do that?” Lilyka asked.

I kept shadow boxing with my bear puppets. When I did that, the air whooshed as I sliced through it.

“Wait. That doesn’t seem right. Why do you get a punch too?!”

“Well, I went to some trouble to get Lilyka here.”

We’d just traveled on my bears and gone through the gate to get back—two days on the road and one overnight stay, but Ghazal didn’t know that. Still, considering the stuff I’d have to go through if he rejected her, I think I deserved to get an uppercut in. Lilyka would probably be beside herself and I’d need to comfort her. Actually, now that I thought about it, maybe I deserved more than one good sock.

“Miss, you do realize that’s coercion, don’t you?”

“If you’re feeling coerced, does that mean you don’t want it?” I cut through the air with another straight punch that was accompanied by an audible whoosh.

Ghazal scratched his head and thought about it.

“Lilyka, are you sure? If you work here, you won’t be able to see Teacher anymore.”

“Yeah. As long as I’m with you.” Lilyka didn’t even hesitate.

“All right...”

Lilyka gave Ghazal a full smile. Looked like I wasn’t going to get to hit anybody.

“Ghazal?”

“What is it?”

“Just one more thing. He said to come back home. And even if it takes a while, to do it before you have a kid.”

“D-Dad!” Lilyka yelled in embarrassment. She’d gone red. “Ghazal, he was joking. It was just a joke.”

“Right. I suppose I should head back at least once.”

“Ghazal...” Lilyka seemed happy now.

Looks like all’s well that ends well. I’d wanted to talk about Lojina and the gate of trials,

but decided to leave the lovebirds alone for now. I extracted Lilyka's things from my bear storage and then moved to leave.

"Thank you so much, Yuna."

"Yes, please come by again if you need anything. I need to thank you for everything you've done—including this."

"I'll take you up on that later," I said.

Fina and I left the shop.

"I'm glad Lilyka looked happy." Fina seemed as happy as Lilyka.

I was glad she hadn't been turned away. Even my god-like bear gear didn't have a "console lovelorn maiden" function.

"Right. It might be nice if they get married."

"Yeah."

If they did, I'd need to come up with a gift. Hmm. That would take some thinking.

"Yuna, what are we doing next?"

"I need to get you back, so we'll go to Crimonia really quick."

I couldn't keep Fina for too long. We got back to the bear house, and I set the bear gate back up. Then I opened the gate and we teleported to Crimonia.

"It was only about ten days, but so much happened. It felt like such a long time."

Fina had gotten to see Luimin at the elven village and been reunited with Jade and the others. She'd met Lojina and Lilyka and gotten to explore the dwarven town. She'd even gone with me to see the gate of trials, not to mention all the stuff with Toya's mithril sword. It had been a very full ten days.

I felt like taking it easy for a while, but I needed to ask Mumulute about the bearyllium, so I needed to go back to the elves' village. Most importantly, the bear gate was still set up in Mumulute's room, so I needed to deal with that.

CHAPTER 454

THE BEAR GETS BACK TO CRIMONIA

FINA AND I RETURNED to Crimonia from my bear house in the capital.

“Well, let’s head to the orphanage.”

“Okay!”

Yesterday, we’d told Shuri and Tiermina we were coming back by bear phone, so they’d told us they’d be at the orphanage in the morning. Same as always.

Once we got closer, I saw the kids playing. They looked like they were doing great. Shuri was with them, and they all noticed me.

“Fina!”

Shuri ran to Fina, and the two hugged.

“I’m home,” she said.

The kids also surrounded me. I asked Shuri and the kids where Tiermina was. They let me know she was talking to the director of the orphanage and dragged me into the building. where I headed to Tiermina and the headmistress.

I saw the headmistress, Tiermina, and the younger kids in there. The kids were holding their own Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals. The headmistress had told me they didn’t cry as much thanks to the dolls. I was glad they helped.

“Tiermina, I’m back.”

“Mom, we just got home.” Fina ran over to Tiermina.

“Welcome home. Yuna, Fina didn’t make any trouble for you, did she?” Tiermina asked as she patted her daughter’s head.

“She was good, like she always is.”

“Mom, I wouldn’t make any trouble.”

“I know, but sometimes you take too much onto yourself to not cause trouble for others. That worries people and makes them nervous.”

“Mom...”

“But you’re only like this because I relied on you so much,” Tiermina said.

Fina had been working hard all on her own for her sick mom and her little sister. She probably wasn’t good at relying on others.

“You’re right. I offered her a piggyback ride, but she refused.”

“Y-Yuna!”

“Now that sounds like an entertaining story.”

I told her very quickly about what had happened in the dwarves’ town. About meeting Luimin at the elven village, seeing Crimonian adventurers, meeting Gold’s master, the blacksmiths’ trials, the long staircase, and how Fina had said no to a piggyback ride. Tiermina seemed to enjoy that part, and Shuri seemed jealous.

“Also, here’s the stuff you asked Fina to get.”

I pulled the kitchenware for the orphanage from my bear storage.

“Thank you, Yuna.” Tiermina set about taking inventory of the goods.

“Are these for the orphanage?” the director asked, looking at the items.

“Yes. The orphanage’s pots and pans are all so old, and it would be such a mess if any of them broke while in use. When I heard Yuna was headed to a dwarven town, I asked Fina to get these.”

Old kitchenware could be dangerous—if a handle came off while the pan was in use,

for instance, whoever was cooking might get burned. Besides, having to use multiple small pots was inconvenient. I wanted things to be as easy and safe as possible for the orphanage.

“The older you get, the harder it becomes to throw things away.” The headmistress took good care of what they already had. She rarely asked for new things.

That was why I’d told Tiermina that she could use the proceeds from the eggs to make purchases for the orphanage. The pots and other kitchenware were part of that.

“Thank you so much, Ms. Tiermina.”

“Yuna and my daughter are who you should thank.”

“Fina, Yuna, thank you. With this, we should be able to cook without worries!”

“Mom just asked me to do it, though.”

“I was just helping out Fina, so you should thank Tiermina, if anything.”

“Hee hee. Looks like we’ve come full circle back to Ms. Tiermina.” The headmistress smiled. “Thank you, all three of you.”

“Headmistress, if there’s anything else that’s been bothering you, just let us know and we can buy it.”

Soon after, Liz and Neaf came by to marvel at the kitchenware.

After that, Tiermina, Fina, Shuri, and I headed to Anz’s restaurant.

“We didn’t have enough large pots to make a big batch of soup at once. I’m so glad to have new pans and knives. Thank you, Miss Yuna.” She looked happily at the knives and giant pots.

“You should really thank Tiermina instead.”

“Thank you so much, Ms. Tiermina.”

"You've wanted these for a while."

Anz was pleased as punch, just as the headmistress had been. I was glad we'd bought these. We'd made people happy, and it was all thanks to Tiermina and Fina.

We left Anz's restaurant and headed to Morin, giving her some pots she could use to cook up chips and fries, along with some smaller kitchenware too.

"This is a lifesaver. Yuna, Ms. Tiermina, thanks."

"If you need anything else, just say the word."

"Thank you. When the time comes, I will."

We left the Bear's Lounge and finally headed to Tiermina's house. There, I pulled out all the kitchenware that Tiermina's family would use.

"The things we've been using for years have gotten so worn out, and Fina wouldn't let me buy anything new because she didn't want to waste what we already had. Now I can cook to my heart's content."

"But we've been using these for so long," Fina said. She thought of old things as friends, the same way as the headmistress.

"Handles on older kitchenware wear out and can become dangerous, and they can only be repaired so many times."

How very like Fina. Even though they had money now, she couldn't simply bring herself to buy stuff. I, on the other hand, always bought whatever I wanted. Maybe I should take a leaf out of Fina's book, though it wouldn't be easy to change my habits. I mean, spending money just helped the economy... or so I told myself.

I tried to give Tiermina the big boar's horn as a gift, but she told me she didn't need it.

"We wouldn't decorate our home with something that expensive. I'd much prefer something we can eat."

I promised to bring her some boar meat later. I'd have Fina butcher the boar for its

meat, of course. Shuri volunteered to help, so they'd do it together.

Once I was done delivering everything, I headed to Gold's place on my own.

"Oh my, Yuna. Welcome. What brings you here today?" Gold's wife, Nelt, who was minding the shop, greeted me.

"I went to Rudnik and brought this letter back from Lojina."

"Gold! Gold!" Nelt shouted into the back.

"What? What's all the racket for?"

"Yuna went to Rudnik and brought back a letter from Mr. Lojina."

Gold looked shocked. Nelt handed over the letter. He opened the envelope and started reading. His expression steadily changed until he started sniffling.

"I see. You showed him the knife I made. Thank you, miss."

"Gold, what does it say?"

"I still have a long way to go, but it's a good knife."

"I'm glad to hear that."

I told them how Lilyka and Ghazal were doing.

"I see, so Lilyka's in the capital now. Suppose we should go visit sometime."

"You're right. I'd like to see the two of them too," Nelt said. Unlike Rudnik, the capital was easy to get to in comparison.

They started talking about when all four of them used to be together. I tried sneaking out of the shop so I wasn't intruding on their walk down memory lane, but they noticed.

"Thank you, miss."

“We’ll thank you later, so come back again.”

I said, “Yeah, I will,” and left the shop.

It felt nice doing good deeds.

I headed back to my bear house. I just wanted to dive straight into bed and relax, but I still needed to go retrieve the bear gate I’d left at Mumulute’s house—and ask him about the bearyllium.

CHAPTER 455

THE BEAR EQUIPS THE BEARYLLIUM

I USED THE BEAR GATE to go back to Mumulute's house. The room with the gate was empty, but then again, I'd gone to go to the capital and taken Lilyka to Ghazal, then hit up Crimonia and done the rounds of the orphanage, the Bear's Lounge, the Bear Dining Room, and Fina's house and Gold's place. All said and done, I'd been gone a long time.

I took down the bear gate and headed to the room where Mumulute could usually be found.

"Already back, miss?" He was sipping some tea.

"Thank you, Mumulute. You really saved me. I didn't think you'd go so far as to prep a whole magic circle."

"I did it after you talked to me that night." He smiled slightly.

Thanks to that, Lilyka hadn't doubted a thing. She was convinced Mumulute had gotten us to the capital. To be fair, teleportation was probably much more believable as a mystical elven power than something a girl dressed as a bear could do.

"Is Luimin not around?" I only saw Mumulute in the room.

"She went around the village with everything she bought."

Uh-huh. I'd need to go see her later, then. For now, I decided to ask Mumulute my question.

"Right, Mumulute, could you look at something for me?"

I pulled out the two round pieces of bearyllium and showed them to Mumulute. He took them and inspected them.

"Is this a fey stone? And it's white?"

So it really was a fey stone, just like Lojina had said. But I also knew it was called bearyllium.

“Where did you find these?”

“By chance. Someone told me that elves would know more about them.”

“Elves do know a thing or two about fey stones, yes.”

“So, these rocks power up the people carrying them?” That was what I’d expect from a video game.

“Fey stones have attributes, so a wind stone will strengthen a mage who uses wind magic, while fire is good for fire magic, and so on. You need a stone that works for you, or there’s no point in having one. As users of wind magic, fire stones would be of little use to us.”

Video game equipment often had affinities too. Sometimes those affinities restricted what you could equip.

“But this is a white one.”

Now that I thought about it, he seemed shocked by the color.

“Is white rare?”

I wondered what attribute could be white. Maybe light? But these were supposed to be bear stones...

“A pure white stone... It’s almost a divine color.”

I choked when Mumulute said that.

Wait, wait. This stuff was called bearyllium, so I’d assumed it was a bear-related fey stone. But if it was a gift from the god, he might not be far off the mark. Mumulute was really going to think it had some kind of divine attribute at this rate, so I made sure to tell him otherwise.

“I actually got this from a friend. They said it’s called bearyllium.”

By ‘friend,’ I meant the god. I hadn’t *met* the god of this world before, but we definitely knew each other.

“It’s called bearyllium, so I was thinking it might be a bear fey stone.” Since I couldn’t tell him about my skill, I just told him that.

“A bear fey stone?” Mumulute looked at me, then the bearyllium.

“I guess it does sound far-fetched. If this *were* a bear fey stone, would attaching it to myself make me more powerful?”

I was hinting that I had the bear attribute. Based on the stone’s name, it was made for me.

“If you and this fey stone both have the bear attribute, then yes. However, you will only be able to take advantage of half of the stone’s power.”

“Really? How do I draw out the rest?”

I thought just carrying it would do, but apparently, that wouldn’t give me the full benefit of its bear powers. How could I equip it to use it effectively?

“We can accomplish that in the room where the circle was. Would you like to try?”

“Can we?”

“You did save the village. I owe you a debt.”

Deciding to take advantage of Mumulute’s kindness, I followed him back to the room with the magic circle to draw out the power of the fey stone. Once we entered the room, Mumulute crouched, grabbed the end of the rug on the ground, and rolled it up, thereby removing the surface the magic circle had been written on. He stowed it on a shelf along the wall that held a number of similarly rolled carpets.

He looked at each one, spreading them out then rolling them up and putting them back as he tried to find the right circle to make a contract with the fey stone. Each carpet bore a different circle.

“Now, which one was it?”

“Do all the carpets have magic circles drawn on them?”

“Yes. It takes some time to find the right one.”

I felt like it might be a good idea to write down what each circle did on a note then, but maybe it was better not to.

“So was the other magic circle for something in particular?”

“That one helps one recover from fatigue.”

I had no idea something like that existed. I started to feel curious about all the circles here. Maybe he’d tell me if I asked? Seeing all this stuff got my ex-gamer blood pumping.

“How do you make the magic circles drawn on these carpets?”

“We sew them using thread imbued with mana. It helps improve the flow of mana and they can be used many times.”

I suppose it would be a hassle to have to draw a complicated circle every time. They were all so complex, I couldn’t memorize them. Drawing them on the ground couldn’t be too convenient, either. If you wove a carpet, you could just lay it out and use it, as long as the carpet didn’t tear.

“Here we are...”

As I was thinking about the carpets, Mumulute pulled one out and spread it along the floor. It had a different pattern from the carpet I saw earlier.

Mumulute stood in front of the circle.

“Well, miss, place the fey stones in the middle circle and touch the right circle, then imbue it with mana.”

There was a circle in the center and some complex patterns making up the rest of the circle. I looked at the two bearyllium stones in my hand.

“Miss...?”

“So, would it be possible to make the pact with someone other than me?”

“Those are bear fey stones, yes? Who else would be able to make a contract with them?”

He was right that I’d probably be the only one in the world who could make a contract based around bearyllium. I was just curious to see if anyone else had mana like mine and the bear attribute.

I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu at their full size. The spacious room was pretty cramped with two large bears in it.

“Could I have them make the contract instead?”

Bearyllium strengthened its holder. Thanks to my bear gear, I already had pretty good attack and defense. Kumayuru and Kumakyu were strong compared to other bears, and more than a match for normal monsters, but remembering what happened with those wyverns on Talgwei made me worry. The memory of Kumayuru being attacked by that wyvern still scared me, even now. My bears always tried to protect me. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to them.

Plus, I asked my bears to guard Fina and other people a lot. It’d be much better to have Kumayuru and Kumakyu level up rather than me. Even in the game, it was important to raise the abilities of your summons.

“Well, I’ve never tried setting up a contract for animals before, but if they have mana and the bear attribute, why not?”

They did have both of those—at least, I thought they did.

“Then could you set the bearyllium... I mean the fey stone for them?”

“If that’s what you want, fine by me.”

I placed one bearyllium stone in the middle of the magic circle.

“Then let’s do Kumayuru first. Try imbuing that with mana.”

“Cwoon.”

Kumayuru walked up and placed a paw where Mumulute indicated. It imbued the circle with mana, which made the circle glow as it gathered around the bearyllium. It kind of felt like Kumayuru's mana was going into the bearyllium.

The light from the magic circle faded.

"Is this it?"

Once Mumulute said that it was done, I picked up the bearyllium and placed the second stone down.

"Okay, Kumakyu, you're next."

"Cwoon."

Kumakyu walked forward and switched places with Kumayuru. It placed a white paw on top of the magic circle and imbued it with mana like Kumayuru had. The circle glowed, and Kumakyu was done making a contract with the bearyllium.

I used my bear observation to inspect the bearyllium and found a shocking change to the text.

Bearyllium - When equipped on Kumayuru, increases physical abilities and makes magic use possible.

Bearyllium - When equipped on Kumakyu, increases physical abilities and makes magic use possible.

My bears could use magic? Wow. What a huge power-up.

"Kumayuru, come over here."

Kumayuru came to my side. I undid the ribbon on my bear's neck, placed the bearyllium inside of it and tied it back on.

“Cwoon.”

I think the bear was thanking me.

“Okay, Kumakyu, you’re next.”

“Cwoon.”

Kumakyu took Kumayuru’s place and I did the same thing to its ribbon.

I guess they could use magic now? I’d need to check on that later.

“Thank you, Mumulute.”

“I’m just glad to be of help.”

I recalled both my bears, thanked Mumulute, and headed out. I figured I’d see Luimin and then go home.

I went to her house and a very tired Luimin came to greet me.

“Oh, Yuna. You’re back.”

“Yeah, I got back just earlier. You look tired, Luimin.”

“I had to go hand out everything we bought.” And there had been a *lot* of things. “It made me happy, though, since everyone was excited.”

Luimin smiled, as though trying to dispel some of her fatigue. If I were a boy, my heart might’ve skipped a beat. Too bad I wasn’t.

It seemed like everyone loved a new pot. You might be attached to the one you’d used for many years, but getting a new one still made you happy. I mean, I was excited when I got a new PC in my old world.

I wondered what had become of it. I guess all I ever used it for was playing the game. If I’d answered that I valued my computer when the god asked me those questions at the beginning, would I have been sent here with it?

Instead, I'd said I valued money. As a result, I'd never had to worry about cash while living here. I'd been able to enjoy this new world to its fullest, and I was grateful for that.

Anyway, there was no electricity here. I couldn't really have used my PC if I'd had it. Mind you, a phone or tablet would've been nice if they came paired with a solar panel for recharging. I wouldn't be able to access the internet, but I could've read e-books I already had. I had some manga and novels I'd bought and never gotten a chance to read.

"So, Yuna, how did things go for Lilyka? I'm so curious."

Of course she was. "She's going to be working at the capital with Ghazal."

"Are they dating then?! Will they get married?"

That seemed a little rushed... though I was curious to know the answer too.

"Hmm, not yet. I think we'll see things develop between them in the future."

"I see."

Luimin looked a tad disappointed. Even though Ghazal had seemed taken aback to start, I was sure he'd been happy by the end. It seemed like it was just a matter of time.

"I'm glad that Lilyka wasn't rejected, at least."

I agreed with that. I was glad I wouldn't have to trek all the way back to Lojina to take her home after she was rejected. I might've just blindfolded her and thrown her through the bear gate.

"Maybe I should have gone to the capital too. I could have seen my sister again... and I want to visit the town you and Fina live in too."

"We just got back, though. We can go to Crimonia next time."

"Okay, it's a promise. Please take me there for sure."

I left Luimin to return the item bag to Mumulute and headed out of the village.

I headed to the bear house near the sacred tree and summoned my bears. Time for an experiment!

“Kumayuru and Kumakyu, can you use magic?”

They crooned at me. It kind of felt like they were telling me to just leave it to them.

I used earth magic to create a stick, then added a target on top. The result was like one of those archery dummies.

“Okay, aim at that target and try using magic.”

They both crooned at me, then each scrambled to be the first.

“I’ll make a second one, so don’t fight.”

They crooned again as I made one more target. Kumayuru and Kumakyu lined up side by side, stood up at the same time, and raised their right paws. Wind blades shot forth from their claws, slicing through the targets.

Oh, wow! So this was bear magic, huh? I’d thought bearyllium was a joke at first, but it was amazing. I didn’t want to have my bears do anything dangerous, but if they could use magic, then I wouldn’t be as worried when they protected Fina and the others. I’d rather they be as strong as possible.

If this was what the bearyllium could do, I wish I’d have investigated it earlier. Imagine what Kumayuru could have done with magic while facing the wyverns on Talgwei... It would’ve been a lot less dangerous. I was glad that things had turned out okay, but we might not be so lucky next time.

“By the way, I don’t suppose you got the ability to fly? Or anything like that?”

If they did, it would make travel a whole lot easier. But they both crooned sadly at me. Looks like that was a no-go.

“Don’t be so sad. I was just checking.” I gave my bears pats on their heads.

I headed back to Crimonia and literally dived into bed the minute I was through the

door, turning my bears into cubs so they could join me. Their ribbons became miniature versions along with them. Apparently, the bearyllium had shrunk too. Maybe they really were divine fey stones, then?

CHAPTER 456

THE BEAR GOES OUT WITH SHURI

TO MAKE GOOD ON my promise to Tiermina, I had the big boars butchered at my house. Fina and Shuri were doing all the actual work—I was just there to observe.

“So, why’s Gentz here?”

I’d asked Fina to come over, but for some reason Gentz had followed her.

“I heard you were butchering big boars. Since they’re rare animals, I’m going to help. Fina’s also new at this, so there might be things she doesn’t know yet.”

When I’d talked to Fina, she’d told me that it would be okay because she’d butchered a regular boar before.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I took off from work.”

I didn’t know why that would prevent me from worrying, but Gentz puffed out his chest. Well, I had three boars, so I guess this worked out. It would be convenient if they finished the butchering faster. If they got it done by noon, we could have a barbecue at the orphanage like we’d planned.

I was thankful for Gentz’s help. “Okay, I’m counting on you.”

I brought out the three boars from my bear storage.

“They’re huge.”

“So big.”

“Yuna, you defeated these giant beasts?”

All three of them marveled at the boars’ sizes.

“We need to finish before noon, so let’s hurry up and get this done. Fina, Shuri, you

two watch your dad carefully.”

Gentz emphasized the words “your dad.” In a few years, they’d probably be telling him he was stinky and to back off of them, but for now, they both enthusiastically agreed.

Maybe he just wanted to hang out with his daughters on his day off? Fina had been in the dwarven town, so he hadn’t seen her in a while. Tiermina and Shuri had been able to talk with her over the bear phone, but Gentz was excluded from that, since I hadn’t let him in on the secret. Or maybe he just wanted to be their dad for the day.

“Yuna, is something wrong?” Fina asked when she noticed me staring at her.

“It’s nothing,” I told her. “I was just thinking it’d be great if you stayed like this forever.”

“Huh...?” Fina tilted her head slightly.

Thanks to Gentz, the work went by fast. We took the meat over to the orphanage, where Anz and Morin were busy doing food prep, since it was their days off. All the women from the shops were helping with the preparations.

The meat tasted delicious between slices of bread that Morin had baked, and Anz had done a great job marinating it. The kids ate their fill, and I was glad to see the barbecue being such a success.

Oh. Maybe I should have invited Luimin?

The day after that, I took Shuri with me to Talgwei.

While butchering the boars at my house, she’d complained that I always only took Fina with me. So when she asked me to take her somewhere this time, I’d agreed. She wanted to go to the island “with the fruit,” so here we were, together on Talgwei.

Fina was with Tiermina this time, so their roles had reversed. She probably wanted some quality time with her mom too. She was only ten years old, after all. It was only natural she’d want her mom’s attention, and that got harder when her little sister was there, so I was happy to take Shuri off alone for some quality time of our own.

I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu and warned Shuri that she needed to be ready to run at any moment.

“And you can’t leave Kumayuru’s side.”

“Okay!”

“If Kumayuru says you can’t go somewhere, you really can’t.”

“Okay!”

“And don’t eat things you haven’t seen before. And make sure you listen to Kumayuru!”

“Okay!”

“Also, if anything happens, call me on the bear phone.”

“Okay!”

“And...”

Did I have any other warnings, actually?

“Urgh, Yuna, you’re acting like Fina. I’ll stay with Kumayuru and listen. Right, Kumayuru?” Shuri hugged my bear. Kumayuru crooned.

“Kumayuru, I’m leaving Shuri in your paws.”

“Cwoon.”

“Let’s hurry, Kumayuru!”

“Cwoon.”

Shuri happily rode away on Kumayuru. Kumakyu and I dawdled behind. We trudged along until we caught up with Shuri, who was picking orans with Kumayuru. She stood on Kumayuru’s back on tiptoes, stretching her hands as far as she could. I smiled when I realized she’d even taken off her shoes.

“Kumayuru, can you move a little to the right?”

“Cwoon.”

Kumayuru did as Shuri asked. She was doing a pretty good job balancing on its back.

“Ah, that’s too far.”

“Cwoon.”

Kumayuru shifted back slightly, and Shuri reached out her hand.

“I got it.”

“Cwoon.”

It was a charming scene.

I left the two of them to the orans and went further in with Kumakyu to get mangoes and bananas. I ended up not just finding fruit, but a bunch of veggies too. There really was a lot to eat around here. There wasn’t enough for me to stock a shop, but more than enough to enjoy on my own. Maybe I could have a shop with a limited amount of produce?

* * *



Today, I went with Yuna to an island with lots of fruit. Yuna had a door in her house that went to this island. It was very mysterious!

Sometimes, Yuna gets bossy like my sister. She told me lots of times to be careful today. She didn't need to say it that much.

I rode on Kumayuru to look for fruit. I looked around until I found orans.

"Kumayuru, can we go to that tree?"

"Cwoon."

Kumayuru went to the oran tree. I stood up on Kumayuru's back and looked for the yummy ones.

We looked for other fruit and saw Yuna picking some with Kumakyu. I didn't want to lose to Yuna. Was there any other yummy fruit around?

I saw some black fruits. "Kumayuru, can we eat this?"

"Cwoon."

Yuna told me to ask Kumayuru about fruit if I didn't know what it was.

Kumayuru shook their head. I wasn't supposed to eat that one.

"Can I eat that?"

I pointed at a green and yellow fruit. It looked almost like an oran. It was smaller though and the tree was different. I hadn't seen it before, but it looked okay to eat.

"Kumayuru, What about this one?" I asked.

Kumayuru crooned and nodded. I could eat this one. It wasn't that high up, so I reached out and grabbed a yellow one. Was it yummy?

I cut it in half with my knife. It looked different, but it was juicy like an oran. I bit it.

"Ugggghhh!"

I threw it on the ground. It was really sour.

"Ugh. Kumayuru, you lied. You said I could eat this."

"Cwoon."

Kumayuru looked sad—but it was the one who lied. My mouth was still sour. Kumayuru tricked me!

"What's wrong?" Yuna came over when she saw I was mad at Kumayuru.

"Kumayuru lied to me!"

Yuna looked around and then saw the tree in front of us.

"You didn't try eating a lemon, did you?"

"It was really sour. But Kumayuru said I could eat it."

"Well, most people don't just bite into it. You usually use it to add flavor to meats and veggies. So you *can* still eat it."

"Really?"

"It's not dangerous. That's probably why Kumayuru said you can eat it. So forgive Kumayuru, will you?"

I looked at the yellow fruit and then at Kumayuru. Kumayuru didn't lie.

"Kumayuru, I'm sorry for getting mad."

I gave Kumayuru a gentle pat on the head. Kumayuru crooned and nuzzled me. I guess it forgave me.

Next time, I wanted to find something I could eat.

* * *

I picked some of the lemons Shuri had found. I could juice them or make lemon tea. I'd heard you could also eat them with honey, but I hadn't tried them that way before.

How would that taste? Maybe I'd try it later.

To ensure she wouldn't make the mistake again, I accompanied Shuri this time. That said, even if I was with her, I wouldn't be able to tell her about any of the fruit I'd never seen before...

While we were exploring, I found a part of the island that was filled with corn.

Hm? The ones on the right looked different from the ones on the left. The ones on the right looked super juicy, like I could eat them as-is, but the left ones were dry. Huh. They could dry out in the field?

I picked one of the dry ones. Was this what I thought it was? I remembered seeing on TV that the type of corn used for popcorn was dried on the cob. If I picked these and dried them more, maybe they'd become popcorn? My memories weren't clear, but I thought that might be how it worked. If it was the wrong kind of corn, it wouldn't work, but it was still worth trying.

I only ever ate popcorn when I went to the movies in elementary school. Once I was in middle school, I'd become a recluse. After that, I hadn't had popcorn for years. I wished I could eat some while watching a movie again, but unfortunately, this world didn't have theaters or TV.

I guess they had stages and plays... maybe I could eat it while watching a play? Then again, eating popcorn at a show would only draw attention to me.

Even if I didn't try bringing popcorn into an amphitheater, I could still teach Fina and Shuri how to make it. They'd get to see the hard kernels explode into soft white popcorn they could eat. Seeing that for the first time was always a shock.

I picked the dry corn.

"Yuna, you can't eat that when it's dry and so hard. These ones are soft."

Shuri looked between the dry corn and the juicy ones.

“There’s something I want to try. I need these dry ones for that.”

“You want to try something?”

“I just don’t know if I can eat them.”

“You eat them?”

Shuri looked at the dry husks, seeming a little unhappy at the idea. Well, she wouldn’t want to eat something this hard, of course.

“Could you and Kumayuru grab those on that side? Kumakyu, help me with these.”

“Cwoon.”

Shuri and I divided the work and collected both types of corn.

The cotton candy at the academy’s festival had been great, but maybe popcorn would have been a good choice too? Well, I hadn’t had the right corn at the time—and this might not be it, either.

“Yuna, I’m hungry,” Shuri blurted out as we were picking the corn. It was almost noon.

“How about we eat some corn then?”

“Okay!”

I brought out the pot I’d gotten from Lojina and poured water in it, then started boiling the corn. It looked ready to eat before long.

“It’s hot, so be careful.”

I wrapped one in a handkerchief so she couldn’t burn herself and handed it off to Shuri. Shuri blew on it and started to eat.

“Hot!”

“Careful when you eat it.”

“But it’s yummy.”

“That’s because it’s fresh.”

I also picked some for Kumayuru and Kumakyu, who were sitting with us. They held the corn in their paws and started chowing down.

Eating just corn felt kind of sad, so I cut some fruit and put it on a plate.

“Oh, they’re all so good! I wish Fina were here.”

Fina was probably soaking up attention from Tiermina right now. I tried to imagine it, but all I could visualize was the two of them hard at work working together. I bet they were happy.

“How about we pick some to give to Fina and Tiermina?”

“Okay!”

“And Gentz too.” It’d be sad if we forgot him.

After we finished eating, we picked some more fruits and veggies and headed home with enough for Fina and the orphanage.

CHAPTER 457

THE BEAR GOES TO SEE THE BEARS WITH NOA,

PART 1

WHILE I WAS RELAXING at home, Noa came by.

“Yuna, where in the world were you?! You haven’t been at home the last few days when I’ve visited, and the shops told me you went somewhere with Fina. It’s so unfair that you only take Fina with you! I would like to go on an outing with you as well.”

Looked like it was Noa’s turn, after Shuri, to complain I was favoring Fina. I just wanted to relax...

“Oh Yuna, Yuna!” Noa grabbed me and started shaking me back and forth. I wished she’d knock that off.

“So, where’d you like to go?” I asked her since she wouldn’t stop.

“The capital!”

“Not happening!”

“Ugh, Kumakyu, Kumayuru! Yuna is so mean!”

Noa let go of me, sat on the sofa, and glommed onto my bears as she flailed her legs.

“That’s very unbecoming,” I said. “You’re supposed to be a young lady, Noa.”

“Ugh! Then please take me somewhere.” Noa puffed up her cheeks.

I wanted to, but unlike Fina and Shuri, I couldn’t just walk off with the daughter of a noble. I needed Cliff’s permission too.

Also, the bear gate was a secret. That put a spanner in the works.

“I’m going out for a bit. Want to stay here, Noa?”

“Huh? Where are you going? I’ll go as well!”

“I’m just buying Kumayuru and Kumakyu some honey.”

“Huh?”

Noa decided to come too, though she complained all the way. We headed to the honey shop, each carrying one of my bears. Noa walked beside me, but she puffed her cheeks out. I bet she was annoyed we were staying local.

“Look, remember how I took you to the beach?”

“And then you went right out with Fina again.”

“How about you ask Cliff to take you somewhere?”

“I want to go with you and Kumayuru and Kumakyu.” Noa gave Kumakyu a squeeze.

Uhh. Maybe we could have a picnic near the town? I tried to think of more options as we arrived at the shop.

“I guess this is where we buy honey.”

We headed inside to find Lem and the other shop assistants there. Lem recognized me immediately.

“Ah, so it’s you, bear girl. More honey for the cubs today?”

“Yes, please.”

I pulled out an empty jar from my storage and set it on the counter.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Well, it’s Kumayuru and Kumakyu’s favorite.”

I’d started coming here once in a while to buy honey for my bears. They’d finished off the honey Toya had bought them, so I was restocking.

“Your bears are so cute, as always.”

Lem patted Kumayuru on the head. Then, just as he was about to give Kumakyu a pat, he noticed Noa.

“Hm? Are you Lady Noir?”

“Hello again,” Noa greeted, still holding Kumakyu.

“Noa, you know Lem?”

“Yes, I saw him speaking with Father, so I said hello.”

I guess he would know Cliff from working together, so it was only natural Noa did too.

Lem looked at us, both holding my bears. “I didn’t know you knew each other,” he said.

“Yes, Yuna has helped me a lot. I came here with Yuna, Kumayuru, and Kumakyu to buy honey.”

She’d been pouting about “just” going shopping all this time, and now here she was, suddenly having a polite conversation. I guess this was her little lady etiquette lessons in action.

“Ah, yes, honey.”

Lem took the container, headed to an even larger jar, and filled it with honey. The jars that honey came in weren’t free. If you brought your own, it’d be cheaper.

“Here—for Kumayuru and Kumakyu, was it? My treat.”

Lem dribbled some honey on a plate and set it in front of my bears.

“Are you sure? You don’t need to do this every time.”

“You and your bears really helped me.”

Noa and I put the bears down so they could go lick the honey.

“Yuna, did you do something?” Noa asked.

“I killed some monster that set up house near the bee tree a little while ago.”

“That really helped me out.”

“It was work, so don’t even worry about it.”

“Come to think of it, miss, are you free tomorrow?”

“I don’t have any particular plans. Why?”

I was supposed to be adventuring and managing the shops, but I didn’t have any quests on my docket, and Tiermina, Anz, and Morin did all the actual work of running the shops, so I was just sitting idle. I’d just left them to manage everything since I left for Rudnik. Even without me, there weren’t any issues.

Every day was like a Sunday for me. I wasn’t unemployed or anything, though—I was still an adventurer, even between jobs.

“In that case, would you like to collect honey with me tomorrow?”

“Honey?”

“And I’m sure you’d like to see the bears too.”

Ever since I beat off the monsters at the bee tree, I’d been visiting the bears. Lem had been there once. I remembered him looking happy as he petted them. If he was inviting me, I guess that meant I could get close to them? Until now, I’d been watching them from afar.

“Um, what is this about bears?”

“There’s a family of bears near the bee tree,” Lem explained to Noa.

“Are they dangerous?”

“No, they’re very gentle. They slay lesser monsters for us, so they are the bee tree’s protectors,” Lem answered Noa proudly. Noa’s expression changed rapidly in response to Lem’s answer. I knew what she was going to say next.

“I’d like to see the bears.”

And there it was.

"Uh, well..." But I wasn't the one panicking—it was Lem.

Of course he would panic. The daughter of a noble was asking to go see bears. He couldn't allow that. Even her saying it out loud posed a problem, because he couldn't disobey her.

"Yuna..." Noa gave me puppy-dog eyes.

I understood why she wanted me to take her out. And it was true I hadn't asked Noa on the trip to the dwarven town.

"All right... But I have some conditions."

"Conditions?"

"You need permission from Cliff. If he approves, then I'll take you."

I couldn't just take her without asking, of course. That was the bare minimum.

"F-Father's..."

"If you don't get that, then I can't take you. And I'll check in with Cliff before we go too. You can't lie."

Noa balled her hands into determined fists. "All right. I will obtain his permission."

After I finished my purchase, Noa headed home to get permission from Cliff.

The next day I headed to Noa's house before we were meeting with Lem. I needed to check whether she'd gotten his permission.

When I got to her house, Noa seemed in a good mood.

"Yuna, I obtained Father's permission," Noa said with a smile.

I checked with Cliff.

"Yes, she may go," he said almost immediately when I saw him.

"Um, did Noa explain everything to you? We're meeting some wild bears."

"And you'll be with her, correct?"

"I will..."

"Then I see no problem. You've already slayed all sorts of monsters. I'm sure you wouldn't bat an eye at bears."

"..."

"And I hear from Lem that they're rather gentle."

"..."

"Seeing the bee tree will be good for Noa's education. I would be worried if it were only Lem, but if you're taking her, I have no cause for concern."

Since we had Cliff's permission, we met up with Lem and headed to see the bee tree and the bears. Lem rode in a wagon, but I rode on Kumayuru and Noa was on Kumakyu. Lem's wagon had two large jars rattling around in it.

"Yuna, what kind of bears are they?"

"There are four in total, two of them cubs. I think the cubs are only a few months old, so they might still be small."

"Ugh, I want to see them soon."

"Don't forget we're there for the bee tree too."

"Of course. I need to report back to Father, lest he scold me. If I don't report back, then I will be disciplined by having to study much harder."

Guess that was what made them nobles. They really needed their education.

We got close to the woods. Lem's wagon headed onto the single trail, and we followed. After some time heading forward, we got to the place where the flowers were

blooming.

"It's pretty," Noa said.

"I'm happy to hear you say that." Lem smiled.

"Lem and his workers take care of the flowers here so the bees can make good honey."

"I heard about it, but it is prettier than I thought."

"Yeah, it really is lovely."

I remembered the field of flowers on Talgwei. Come to think of it, I wondered if Talgwei had a bee tree.

"Is that the bee tree?" Noa looked ahead of the blooming flowers. There was a giant tree and lots of bees flying around.

"That's right. It's dangerous, so you can't go near it."

You had to be a specialist to go near it safely.

"Miss, could I handle the honey before we meet the bears?"

"Then I'll help. Noa, you watch Kumayuru and Kumakyu here."

"Understood. Though please do hurry."

I put the jar in the wagon in my bear storage, then headed to the bee tree and brought it back out again.

"Miss, thank you. That's a big help."

Lem filled the jars with honey while making sure not to anger the bees. I put the honey-filled jar back in my storage and did the same thing again with the next one. When all the jars were full, we headed back to the wagon and loaded it up.

"This went quick, thanks to you. I know you bought some yesterday, but please take this." Lem offered me a jar of honey.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, as a thank you for helping me.”

I took the small, honey-filled jar. Kumayuru and Kumakyu looked like they wanted to eat it.

“After we get home, okay?”

“Cwoon.”

They seemed a little sad, but they already had honey yesterday.

CHAPTER 458

THE BEAR GOES TO SEE THE BEARS WITH NOA,

PART 2

“SO, YUNA, WHERE are the bears?” Noa asked as she held Kumakyu.

It seemed like she couldn’t wait. Noa already had a bear in her arms, but I didn’t say that to her face. She hadn’t seen real bears before, so I guess she was looking forward to it.

“I don’t know where they are, so I’ll have Kumayuru and Kumakyu get them. Kumakyu, Kumayuru, can I count on you?”

They both crooned at us. Next, they started crooning even more loudly.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“They’re calling the bears.”

I couldn’t tell where the bears were with my detection skill, but since Kumayuru and Kumakyu were bears, they could talk to them and call them over. I’d been shocked

when I first saw Kumayuru and Kumakyu talking to the bears.

“So the bears are coming?” Noa looked around.

I was wondering where they would appear from when I saw the bears emerge through the trees on our right. There were two big bears and two cubs.

“Yuna, bears! They’re bears! And the bears’ cubs!”

Noa was so excited, she grabbed my arms and gave me a shake. I understood she was happy, but I really wished she would quit that.

“I can see. Don’t get so excited that you scare them.”

I didn't want to put her in danger if they attacked out of surprise. They were docile, but I couldn't forget they were wild bears.

"I know. It'll be okay. I'll give them a gentle pat."

Oh, she thought she could pet them? She seemed about to run after them even now, so I needed to be firmer.

"Remember, they're wild. Don't pet them until I say you can."

"I will." She calmed down a little with my warning.

The bears slowly made their way over to us until they were nuzzling my bears. It looked okay.

"Cwoon."

The two cubs came over to me. Kumayuru and Kumakyu were cute in their bear form, but these cubs were adorable. It looked like they'd grown a bit. The smaller bears were, the cuter they got.

"Yuna, may I touch them too?"

As I was petting the bears, Noa was trying to put her hands on them, but she refrained and kept her promise to me.

"Kumayuru and Kumakyu, Noa is going to touch the cubs. Can you tell them that she isn't dangerous?" I asked my bears, since they knew the parents.

They started talking.

"Cwooon!" "Cwoon." "Cwooon." "Cwoon."

I didn't know what they were saying, but it sounded like a conversation. It was times like these that made me want a bear language skill, but I was also kind of afraid of finding out what my bears thought of things. Maybe I was better off without it.

Once the conversation ended, Kumayuru headed over to Noa. Kumayuru went behind Noa and pushed against her back.

“Kumayuru?”

“Looks like you can touch the cubs.”

“May I really?”

Noa seemed a little scared, but she reached her hand out to touch the cub in my arms.

“It feels different from Kumayuru and Kumakyu. The fur isn’t as soft.”

“Kumayuru and Kumakyu take baths. Of course they’ll be different from wild bears.”

Also, every time I summoned them, they were clean and fluffy.

“It’s so fluffy.”

Well, yeah. It *was* covered in fur. I patted the cub’s back.

“And this bear’s face is super cool.”

“Cwoon!”

Both Kumayuru and Kumakyu seemed upset when she said that.

“I’m sorry. You two are more cute than cool.”

“Miss, may I pet them too?” Lem, who had been watching in silence behind Noa until now, seemed like he wanted to pet the bears.

“Kumayuru and Kumakyu, Lem wants a turn.”

“Cwooon!” “Cwoon.” “Cwooon.” “Cwoon.”

Kumakyu went behind Lem and pushed him.

“Looks like you’ve got the okay.”

“I see.”

Lem gave the parents a pat and then the cubs, looking delighted. He must have been

looking forward to this.

"Thank you for always protecting the bee tree. Please don't do anything reckless."

They couldn't understand him, but he gently spoke to them anyway.

"The bears are the bee tree's protectors," I said.

"They've fought away monsters."

They were only doing that to protect their turf. If it came down to a fight between the bears and goblins and orcs, I was rooting for the bears.

"But the next monsters might not be ones the bears can defeat. If monsters take up residence in the area, we can call in adventurers. The bears won't have to risk themselves to fight them."

"I'll take the quest when that happens."

"I would feel so relieved if you would."

It would be real bad if adventurers came across the bears and attacked them. I wanted to protect the bears, above all else.

"Well, it's not just the monsters that are dangerous. If any adventurers come to slay you, you run away, okay?" Lem said as he patted the bears.

That was a real possibility. Humans might be more dangerous than monsters.

"But are there really any adventurers in town who would slay bears?"

Noa looked at me, Kumakyu, and Kumayuru. Lem looked over at me in response.

"If someone submitted a quest to the Adventurers' Guild, they might. I don't think anyone would go out of their way to slay nonviolent bears."

Internally, I wondered if people ate bears, but I was too scared of the answer to ask.

"Any adventurer who knows you, Yuna, would never lay a hand on a bear."

"I agree." Noa nodded.

Wait. It was kind of too late to wonder about this now, but how did the other adventurers see me? It kind of felt like they didn't have the best opinion of me. Also, why was Lem agreeing with them in the first place? I was starting to worry about how Lem saw me too.

We played with the bears for a while, until they stood on their hind legs and crooned, then headed to the bee tree. Looked like it was their mealtime.

"Oh, I would like to join them," Noa said.

"It's too dangerous, so just watch from afar."

"Ugh, okay." Noa didn't seem happy with it, but she watched the cubs leave.

Once the family was at the bee tree, the bear family started eating the honey. Lem and Cliff kept their distance. In another circumstance, there might have been a fight. I mean, they were basically invading the bears' space—and the bears were invading theirs.

If I heard anything about someone wanting to slay the bears, maybe I'd take them to Talgwei's island so they'd be safe.

While I was watching the bears, I heard a little gurgle to my side. I looked over and saw that Noa was clutching her stomach.

"I-It wasn't my stomach."

Her face was red.

"I never said it was," I answered.

"Uh..."

She still seemed embarrassed, but it was time for lunch. Of course she'd be hungry.

"Well, how about we eat too?"

"Lunch?"

“We’re already here, and the flowers here are pretty. Don’t you need to ask Lem questions, anyway?”

I laid a carpet-like picnic blanket on the ground and pulled out a box of bread from my bear storage.

“If you’d like to join us, please do, Lem.”

“Are you sure? I’d be much obliged.”

Lem and Noa sat down on the blanket. I pulled out a small cask filled with something to drink and some cups.

“I have juice and milk, so drink whichever one you prefer”

“Thank you. I would like the milk.”



“I’d like the juice.”

I poured for the two of them.

“Make sure to wipe your hands with this before you touch the bread, since you’ve been touching bears.”

I handed the two of them damp towels. It was risky for them to eat bread after touching wild bears. Unlike Kumayuru and Kumakyu, those bears hadn’t been bathing... Well, maybe they were bathing in rivers and stuff, but I still figured they weren’t super hygienic.

“I feel somewhat apologetic that you’ve been handling everything for us, miss.”

“Yuna, you’re acting just like Lala.”

Well, I *was* older than Noa. And kind of playing a big sister role for her right now.

After they wiped their hands, they reached for the bread.

“Oh, it’s bear bread!”

Noa found the bear bread in the box. I brought some because I thought Noa would get a kick out of it.

“So this is the bear face bread that’s been the talk of the town.”

Lem also picked up the bear bread.

“You’ve heard about it, Lem?”

“Why yes. It’s been quite the topic of conversation for my employees at the shop,” Lem said as he nibbled on the bear bread.

I felt a little weird eating bear bread while watching the bears, so I took a sandwich instead.

“Here, you too, Kumakyu, Kumayuru.”

I stuffed sandwiches into Kumayuru and Kumakyu’s mouths.

"Oh, I want to feed them too!" Noa gave my bears some more bread.

Then, as we ate, Lem started up on a lecture.

"So do you replace the flowers based on the season?"

"Different flowers bloom depending on the time of year. When it's winter, the bee tree goes dormant, so we simply have them gather nectar during the rest of the year. They have periods of activity times and breeding seasons, of course, so this doesn't apply all the time—but generally speaking, as long as there are flowers, they will collect nectar. We try to keep them blooming year-round."

"I see." Noa was obediently listening to Lem's lecture.

"So the flavor of the honey can change depending on the season?"

Apparently, it was affected by the flowers. Lem started explaining the types of flowers that would bloom and what the honey tasted like. Noa listened studiously and took notes.

Once the lecture on flowers and honey finished up, Noa asked about the times the bears had fought monsters.

* * *

The conversation with Lem wound down as the bears finished their meal and headed off elsewhere.

"Oh, the bears are leaving."

The bear family disappeared into the woods.

"You can't follow them."

"I so wish I could have taken the cubs home."

"If you do that, they'll get upset."

"I'm simply joking. I couldn't separate a family... but I still wanted to take them home."

The cubs *were* cute, but they'd be scary once they grew up. Maybe my bears had read my mind, because they nuzzled me.

"You two aren't scary even if you're big," I told them.

"Miss, thank you for the meal. I'd like to look at the flowers in the area, so please give me a few moments."

Lem stood up.

"I will go too. Yuna, you're fine with that as well, -aren't you?"

"Sure, but don't get in Lem's way."

"Of course I wouldn't. I will simply go see what kinds of flowers are blooming." Noa followed after Lem.

I leaned on my bears and closed my eyes as I waited for them. The wind carried Lem's lectures about the flowers and Noa's questions my way. It was a really educational trip for her.

It was kind of nice to occasionally relax outside, I supposed.

CHAPTER 459

THE BEAR IS CAPTURED BY THE STUDENTS

AFTER GOING TO SEE the bears with Noa, I went back to my shut-in lifestyle and relaxed while cooking meals for myself. I didn't have a TV, or games, or a PC, or books in my room, so my shut-in life didn't last long.

I ended up not even lasting three days before I decided to go out. Maybe being unable to stick to a shut-in lifestyle was a good thing?

I finished up in the kitchen and put everything into my bear storage.

"Kumayuru, Kumakyu, we're going out," I said to my bears, who were even more vegged out than me. They say pets grew to resemble their owners. I hoped that wasn't happening to them.

I recalled my bears and went to the bear gate in my house, opening the door onto my bear house in the capital. I was curious about what had happened with Lilyka and Ghazal, but decided to head to the castle to see Lady Flora instead.

"Oh, well, if it isn't Mademoiselle Yuna. It's been a while. Are you here for an audience with Princess Flora?" one of the guards asked me. They'd been surprised by me at first, but nowadays, they referred to me by name. I didn't know *their* names, though...

"I am. Can I see her?"

"Yes, that should be all right. I believe Princess Flora is waiting for you. She is never out and about without her black bear stuffed animal."

If it was the black one, it had to be the Kumayuru stuffed animal. If I remembered correctly, Ange insisted Flora only take Kumayuru outside, since it was black and could therefore get dirty without showing it. She only played with the Kumakyu in her room.

I was glad to hear she liked the present I'd gotten her, though I didn't think they needed to be so careful with them—I mean, you could just wash them if they got dirty. I'd rather she wear them ragged carrying them around than leave them pristine and

untouched on a shelf.

That said, I hoped she wasn't tossing it around or carrying it by just a single arm or leg. I'd seen my bears being tossed around in the orphanage just once. That sure made me sad.

* * *

After I was done greeting the guards, I headed into the castle. One of the guards ran off, which was par for the course. Since I knew what was coming, I'd already prepped food for His Majesty and Elleaura too. I'd given up on even resisting.

"Yuna!"

I heard a girl calling my name while I was looking at the scenery around me on the way to Lady Flora's room. I looked to see who was calling and spotted her right away.

"Yuna, you came to visit the castle?"

It was Princess Teilia, her long hair swishing side to side as she ran toward me. She was Lady Flora's older sister, but I hardly ever encountered her in the castle.

"Did you come here to see me, by any chance?"

"No, Lady Flora," I said.

"This is when you're supposed to lie and tell me you did, you know?"

That was the kind of line you'd expect from a guy who hit on every girl he met. I doubted anyone actually *liked* being fed lines like that.

While I was talking to Teilia, two more familiar faces approached us.

"Lady Teilia, please don't run off like that."

"Well, I saw a bear walking through the castle—it's only natural I would run after her."

"I do understand you were excited to spot Yuna, but please, don't run off."

"Could you let us know before you do?"

“I’m sorry, you two.”

Shia and Maricks had come running after Teilia. Sure, I expected to see Teilia around the castle, but not to just bump into Shia or Maricks.

“Why are you in the capital, Yuna?”

“And why the castle?”

I had the same question for them. They’d beaten me to asking it.

“I just came to see Lady Flora,” I said.

“Yuna always brings delicious treats and other exciting things for Flora.”

Well, even if I didn’t have a gift, Lady Flora was usually happy just to see Kumayuru and Kumakyu. I’d just somehow gotten into the habit of bringing gifts to the castle whenever I visited. That was probably the fault of a certain group of adults.

“Yuna, you bring things other than food with you?”

“Yeah, like bear picture books and bear stuffed animals.”

“You gave a stuffed animal to Teilia too, didn’t you?”

When I saw Teilia at the academy festival, she’d asked me for a stuffed animal, so I’d given her one.

“You mean the Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals?” Shia had picked up the mention of plushies.

“Yes, Yuna gave me one.”

“I’d like one. When I went to our house in Crimonia, Noa had one in her room. Yuna, I’d like one too.”

“Sure, but... you really want one?”

I wasn’t going to comment on her age. She was kind of right on the cusp of being too old for stuffed animals... but then again, I had stuffed animals in my room too.

“You’ll really let me have one?”

“So anyway, which one do you want?”

“Huh? You won’t let me have both?!?” Shia seemed very surprised by my question.

“I’m kidding. I was just wondering which of my bears you like better, Shia.”

“I think they’re both cute. I couldn’t choose.”

Well, I couldn’t either. That’d be the most extreme decision I’d ever have to make. If I could only save one, which would it be?

Was that even a question?! You couldn’t choose one if you cared for both.

I pulled a set of stuffed animals from my bear storage and handed them to Shia.

“Thank you, Yuna.”

Shia happily held her stuffed animals, then put them away in her item bag. Maricks had this indescribable expression on his face, but I didn’t comment on it.

“So, why are you two in the castle?”

“I came here with Mother, then ran into Lady Teilia.”

“Since I had nothing else to do, I invited her to tea.”

“I came here to get in on the knight practice through my dad, but then these two caught me.”

“Why would you put it that way? We invited you to come with us because you were bored after you couldn’t join practice.”

Apparently, the knight brigade had left on a mission, putting training on hold. If all three of them were here, did that mean they had a break from school?

While I looked them over, Maricks wore an expression that suggested he wanted to say something.

“What is it?” I asked, and he started off awkwardly...

“So, Yuna... If you happen to have some time, would you mind practicing swordplay with me?”

“Swordplay?”

“You’re strong, and you won against Lord Lutum, didn’t you? Shia and the others got to see it. I was the only one who didn’t.”

“Lady Teilia and I were the only ones who saw it. Timol and Cattleya didn’t see it either.”

“I guess that’s true. Someone else I know told me about the match too. They said it was amazing. So please, Yuna?” Maricks put his hands together.

What was this all about? “Before we get into it, who’s Lutum again?”

I had no memory whatsoever of fighting a person by that name, but all three of them just gave me dumbstruck looks. They seemed pretty done with me.

“Yuna, are you serious about that?”

“She did fight Lord Lutum, right?”

“Okay, like I said, who’s this Lutum person?” I just didn’t know, okay? “Are you sure you’ve got that right?”

“Looks like she really doesn’t remember.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Look, remember when you challenged the knight captain to a duel for my sake at the academy festival?”

Thwop. I smacked my fist into the open puppet mouth of my other hand as I realized who it was.

“Right! That annoying grandpa dude.”

So that was his name. They kept saying Lutum, Lutum, and I'd had no idea who that was.

"Yuna, did you really forget?"

"Well, I just never bothered memorizing his name."

I wasn't going to remember the name of a guy I never wanted to meet again. If they'd just said it was the guy I got in a fight with at the academy's festival, I would've known at once who they meant. There was no guarantee I'd remember anyone's *name*.

"Grandpa dude..."

"I think you're the only one who could call Sir Lutum that, Yuna."

Teilia looked flabbergasted, Maricks seemed like he couldn't believe me. Shia smiled.

"You want to fight Yuna? Do you have a death wish, Maricks? Even Sir Lutum can't win against her."

"No one in their right mind would think they could beat Yuna—not when she can take down a *black tiger*. But if she has time, I was hoping for a match. Sparring with someone stronger than you is a good way to learn." Maricks looked at me reverently.

People really could change, huh? I wish I had video footage of the first time Maricks and I met so I could replay it for him.

"Hmm, a match with Yuna... Maybe I'll ask her to fight me too." Now Shia was asking for the same thing as Maricks.

This was all turning into a massive hassle. I tried to find an escape route. "Weren't you going to have tea with Teilia?"

"I was hoping to have tea, but I'd also like to see you fight, Yuna," Teilia said, joining in with the first two.

I only emerged from the shut-in isolation house because I wanted to visit Lady Flora...

"I need to see Lady Flora. Also, I don't want to do this anywhere that would attract attention," I said, still trying to wriggle free.

There weren't a lot of places we could fight that wouldn't have knights and soldiers around, training. I didn't want to have a match somewhere they could watch.

Teilia cut off my escape route. "In that case, we can use the indoor training area in the back."

"Lady Teilia, are you sure?"

"Yes, you have my permission. I'll just nip off and borrow the training room keys for a bit. You know where it is, right?"

Things were proceeding quickly. I restated why I'd come here again. "I'm going to see Lady Flora."

"We have that covered. I'll go get Flora. That should work, right? I'll borrow the key, then pick up Flora, so you three go to the training area ahead of me," Teilia said and didn't wait for my reply before she ran off.

Having been left behind, I headed with Maricks and Shia to the training area.

CHAPTER 460

THE BEAR ENCOUNTERS THE KNIGHT AGAIN

“MY, YUNA, YOU really do drop by the capital on a whim.”

“Well, I’ve got Kumayuru and Kumakyu, so I can get here really easily.”

That was my standard lie for this situation. I’d told it often enough that the words just flowed right out. That said, the very fact of my existence sometimes seemed too outlandish to be true...

“If I had bears like yours, I’d be able to travel to and from Crimonia so easily. Then I could go to the beach.”

“You’ll have to make do with the stuffed animals.”

“But I can’t ride them,” Shia laughed. “The beach was very fun. I’d like to go again.”

“Yeah, we should.”

“I’ll take that as a promise,” Shia said.

Maricks seemed a little jealous of the way Shia and I were chatting.

“I wanted to go too.”

“Hee hee. It was a lot of fun. We rode in Yuna’s bear golems and traveled in a huge group. And then we stayed in a giant bear house and there was a bear slide where we were playing. And we rode on the boats and caught fish.”

Shia chattered away happily, reminiscing about the beach trip. I remembered Talgwei island and the incident there.

“Invite me next time.”

“Why would I invite you to accompany me home, Maricks? I don’t want Father getting

the wrong idea.”

She was right—Cliff might freak out if she brought a boy home.

“It should be fine as long as you invite Timol and Cattleya too.”

So it would be acceptable if she invited over the whole friend group? I didn’t really know what was normal for aristocrats.

“But I needed to go right away back then, so I didn’t have time to tell everyone.”

Even though Shia had known we were heading to Mileela, she hadn’t known what day or time. I supposed it made sense that she’d thought she needed to leave immediately.

“I’ll invite everyone next time.”

“If you don’t forget.”

We kept talking about the beach trip until we were near the training area. It was a big building, with a giant, imposing door to match. I had no idea the castle had a giant training area like this.

“We should wait for Teilia to return.”

I knew she’d gone running off, but she needed to fetch Flora too. She’d probably be a while.

“I’m just grateful that she’s letting us use this space.”

“Now no one will see you get beaten to a pulp, Maricks.”

“If anyone laughed at me after seeing Yuna fight, I think they’d need to get their eyes checked.”

“Well, sure, but do you really think they won’t laugh after seeing how she’s dressed?”

Maricks stared at me.

“Uh, I guess I wouldn’t want them seeing...”

Maybe he was embarrassed at the prospect of people seeing him get beat by a girl in a bear onesie.

“Also, you need to work hard if you want Yuna to really show you what she can do.”

“I’ll give it a go.”

Maricks placed a hand on the door and it opened. “Huh? It’s already open?”

He headed inside.

“Wait! Don’t just go inside!”

“But Lady Teilia might have gotten here before us and opened it.”

I didn’t know where the key would be, but I supposed it was possible Teilia had run over here ahead of time and left the task of fetching Flora to Ange. Maricks took the lead, heading into the training area, where we found a lone knight swinging his sword. Teilia wasn’t anywhere to be seen, of course.

“Lady Teilia isn’t here. What should we do?” Shia asked as she looked around the training grounds.

The lone knight looked familiar. Super familiar, actually, but I couldn’t remember from where.

“Yuna, is something the matter?”

“No, I just feel like I’ve seen him before, but I can’t remember from where.”

“Isn’t that knight Assistant Captain Figo? You mean him?”

“You know him, Maricks?”

“Yeah, he’s the vice-captain of a unit.”

Maricks’s dad was a knight, and Maricks was trying to become a knight himself. Must’ve been why he recognized the assistant captain.

“Figo... Oh, it’s him.”

Shia seemed to recall something when Maricks said that. I couldn't place him myself, though I felt like I was almost there. Where had I seen him before?

"He's the knight you battled before you fought with Sir Lutum."

Now that she explained it to me, I remembered. I'd dueled a knight before the old guy who tried to pick a fight with me.

"Right—that guy back then."

"Oh, now that I think about it... you did fight him too."

Apparently, Maricks knew about our duel. I supposed he would have found out who my opponent had been if anyone told him about the match.

While we were talking, the man Maricks identified as Figo looked over at us.

"What are you doing here?!"

"Excuse us. We came here hoping to practice."

"You're all students, aren't you? This place isn't for you guys to use."

"We were given permission by Lady Teilia, you see."

"Lady Teilia?"

"Yes. We intended to practice a bit, and so Lady Teilia gave us permission to use this training area. She should be here soon, and you can confirm it with her."

Maricks seemed nervous as he answered.

"I see. I thought no one would use this place today, so I decided to come here. It's quiet when no one's around."

Figo sheathed his sword. I hid behind Maricks and Shia.

"And that girl in the bear suit...?"

He'd spotted me anyway. Well, I was kind of wide, which made it hard to hide. Not that

I was *fat*, of course. It was just the bear onesie.

“Are you the girl who sometimes comes to the castle?”

“You know me?”

“Just what others say.”

Shia smiled at that and Maricks seemed curious. I wanted to know what exactly people said, but it didn’t seem like Figo remembered we’d fought before, so I held my tongue. I knew from experience that listening to the rumors that circulated about me could give me psychic damage.

Figo looked at me and then at Shia.

“Since we happened to meet here, Lady Shia, I would like to ask you something.”

“Me?” Shia hadn’t expected him to address her. I heard her murmur softly, “He remembers me?”

“Who was the girl named Youna that I fought at the academy festival? I’ve asked around, but no one seemed to know who she was. I can hardly ask His Majesty or Lady Elleaura.”

“Um.”

Shia didn’t know where to look. She glanced at me, but I shook my head. He hadn’t realized I was right there. At first, I was like, *Who’s Youna?* But then I remembered it was my fake name.

“Um, may I ask why you want to know?”

“I’d like to have another match with her. She was quite powerful. I must admit it hurt my pride to be beaten by her, so I was hoping to have another, proper bout.”

Shia didn’t know what to say. She glanced at me, and I shook my head slightly again.

“I’m sorry. She’s a friend who lives in Crimonia. She was only there for the festival.”

“So she wasn’t a student of the academy? That’s a shame.”

He looked disappointed. Did he really want a match with me that badly? Not that I was going to let that persuade me to tell him who I was, of course.

I dwelled on my guilt until the door opening startled me out of it.

“It was open already.”

“Is the bear here?”

Teilia and Lady Flora had come into the training area. When Lady Flora spotted me, she ran over and glomped onto my belly.

“Lady Teilia, I apologize. I have been using the training area.” Even though he hadn’t done anything wrong, Figo still apologized to Teilia.

“You must be Figo. I didn’t interrupt you, did I?”

“No. I was about to finish soon, so it is fine.”

“Are you sure? You’re not simply being polite? You can continue to practice.”

“No, no. I’m on duty after this too.”

Figo handed the key off to Teilia and then bobbed his head—a quick little bow—as he left the training area.

“Shia, thank you for not saying anything,” I said. It would’ve been a lot of trouble if she had revealed my identity.

“Well, you always say you don’t want to stand out.”

“Even though you’re in that bear outfit.”

“Do you think we interrupted his training?”

“Hmm, I think maybe not. Figo is a very stubborn person. According to Father, he was supposed to become the captain in Lutum’s place, but he rejected the position because he said he was too weak. Apparently, losing to Yuna gave him a lot to think about. It seems like he regrets fighting her, even though he was ordered to do it by Lutum and couldn’t refuse his captain.”

"Really? If he didn't want to do it, he could have said no," Maricks said. That was a very childish opinion to have.

"That attitude will do you no good in a unit. Maricks, if you want to be a knight, then you need to understand the unit captain's orders are absolute. I know it seems extreme to put it that way, but a person who can't follow orders can't become a knight," Teilia replied, suddenly serious.

"Even if those orders are wrong?"

"That's right."

"..."

Teilia was right. It was the army, after all. At the same time, I could see Maricks's point of view.

What Teilia was saying applied everywhere. Normal employees needed to follow the orders of the managers, directors, and president above them. Teachers couldn't refuse to do what their supervisors or principal told them to do. Well, they *could*, of course, but then they'd be fired.

If even a single cog in the machine malfunctioned, it could have huge consequences for the organization as a whole. For example, a knight could be told to protect one area, but notice somewhere outside their post was in danger. If they decided to run over without permission and left their post unguarded, it could end in people's deaths.

It was a whole lot of pressure, and to be honest, I didn't really want to be a part of society if it was like that. Not that I'd wanted to do that in my original world, either. I'd saved up enough money to live all on my own, but I was still grateful I'd been sent to this world rather than have to live like that. I *much* preferred it here.

"Maricks, if you don't want that to happen, then you need to become a captain. Even if you do, the king's orders would still be absolute."

If he defied the king, it was game over, obviously.

"But I doubt Father or my brother would order you to do anything unwarranted, so don't worry. In Figo's case, Lutum was also a noble. He really couldn't say no."

Lutum was the one to blame, really, but I still felt a little guilty. Not *too* guilty, though. I'd been acting to defend Shia's future, so I couldn't have let myself lose. Even if it did turn Figo's life upside down.

Besides... maybe I'd saved him from having an idiot for a boss.

CHAPTER 461

THE BEAR HAS A MATCH WITH MARICKS

“OKAY, YUNA, WILL YOU do this for me?”

“Sure, but are you going to fight like that?”

Maricks was in his casual clothes, which didn’t seem all that safe for a fight. I didn’t plan on walloping him, but if he moved in a way I didn’t expect, there was a possibility I might hit him harder than intended. It’d be better for him to wear armor, even if this was practice.

“I have my gear, since I was planning on participating in the knights’ training. I’ll go change real quick.”

Maricks headed off.

“What about you, Shia?”

“I didn’t bring anything, so I guess I’ll just wear this, if that’s okay? I didn’t have any gear when I first had a match with you.”

I guess she hadn’t, since it’d all happened so suddenly. But protective gear really made a difference when it came to how potentially dangerous things could be.

While we were talking, Teilia came over.

“Shia, it’s okay. I thought you might not have gear, so I brought mine for you.” She retrieved some girls’ gear from her item bag.

“Lady Teilia, are you sure?”

“Well, you’re going to entertain me with your match in exchange.”

Shia thought about it for a bit, took the gear, then headed away to change. “I’ll borrow this, then...”

“What’s bear going to do?” Lady Flora, who had a grip on my bear clothes, asked as she listened in.

I plopped a bear puppet on her head and explained, “It’s a little match, you could say. It’ll be over soon, so you wait with Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu at their full size.

“Kumayuru! Kumakyu!”

Lady Flora happily ran over to them, but Teilia already had Kumayuru in her arms.

“Teiwia, that’s unfair.”

Lady Flora hugged Kumakyu a little later.

“You be good and stay put, okay?”

I picked up Lady Flora and placed her on Kumakyu’s back. Teilia climbed onto Kumayuru on her own.

“Yuna, can we run around on them?”

“Sure, but don’t push them too far.”

“We’ll just run, that’s all. Kumayuru, your owner said it’s okay, so run around, will you?”

“Cwoon.”

Kumayuru looked at me to check in.

“Run just a little for her, but not too fast.”

“Cwoon.”

Kumayuru started running around the training area.

“Ugh, Teiwia, that’s unfair. Kumakyu, I wanna too!”

Lady Flora wiggled back and forth on top of Kumakyu. Kumakyu gave me a worried look. They were just like sisters.

“Kumakyu, run slowly for her.”

“Cwoon.”

When I gave that order, Kumakyu slowly started to run with Lady Flora.

“Fast! It’s fast!” She seemed to be having a great time riding Kumakyu.

After doing a loop around the training area, Teilia came riding up behind Lady Flora on Kumayuru. Soon my bears were shoulder to shoulder.

“Kumayuru, faster!”

“Kumakyu, you go faster too!”

“Kumayuru, Kumakyu, don’t go any faster,” I ordered my bears.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu followed my instructions and kept the same speed.

“Yuna!”

“Whyyy!”

They both whined. *Just* like sisters—super alike. I wondered if Lady Flora would look like Teilia once she grew up.

“Teilia, Lady Flora—if you throw a fit, I’m going to make you get off of them.”

I doubted they’d get hurt, but I didn’t want Lady Flora turning into a speed fiend, either.

“Ugh, not that.”

“I’m sowwy.”

They listened to me after that, and kept running around the area at a modest speed. While I was watching them ride my bears, Maricks and Shia came over, ready for the

match.

“Yuna, what should we do for weapons? Would a sword work for you?”

“What are you two using?”

“We have normal training swords.”

Ones with blunted edges, by the looks of them.

“We also brought you one too, Yuna.”

I took the sword Shia held out, deciding to go along with what they wanted.

“Well, I’ll fight using whatever weapon you two want.”

“...?”

“What does that mean?”

“If you want me to use a sword, I’ll use one. Or a knife, if you prefer that, or a spear. I’d even do a match without a weapon, if you’d like.”

“Can you really use that many weapons?”

“I can’t wield everything, just the things I already know.”

I’d never used a mace before, or anything hammer-like. Though I’d probably crush it if I tried.

“A weaponless match? That’s a bit much, even for a joke.”

“I’d be fine as long as I didn’t get hit. My gloves are more than enough for me.”

I flapped the mouths of my bear puppets open and shut. After all, it was only thanks to my bear gear that I could handle fighting unarmed.

“I don’t think I’d want to fight you when you don’t have a weapon, so please use a sword.”

Maricks wanted me to use a sword, so that was what I did. I gripped the practice blade and moved some distance from Maricks. Shia also moved away and both Teilia and Lady Flora halted to watch us. When we started the match, I heard the voices of some people who should not have been there.

“What? Are you going to have a match right now?”

“Oh my, it seems Maricks and Yuna are having a match.”

Looking over, I saw the king and Ellelaura walking over to us. Maricks and Shia seemed surprised to see them.

“Father.”

“Fawther.”

Teilia and Lady Flora, who were still on my bears, headed over to the king. To a random observer, it would have looked like a pair of bears were galloping over to maul the king. Of course, that didn’t happen. My bears just stopped right in front of him.

“What are you and Ellelaura doing here, Father?” Teilia asked what everyone was thinking.

I could imagine what’d happened after the gate guard ran off. I didn’t see the queen around.

“I received word you’d come here, so I went to Flora’s room, but neither of you were there. When I asked Ange about it, she told me that you went to the training area with Teilia.”

“And I did the very same thing.”

I always seemed to end up asking myself this question, but... didn’t they have jobs to do? Well, I supposed that the prince and their employees would just pick up the slack. It was probably fine.

“Why did His Majesty come to see Yuna?”

“I have no idea.”

Maricks was talking in a hushed voice, but he was close enough for me to hear.

“So, are you having a match now or not?”

“Yeah, with these two.”

The king and Ellelaura looked at Maricks and Shia.

“I’m Maricks.”

“I’m Shia.”

They both nervously said their names.

“You’re Ellelaura’s daughter, aren’t you, Shia?”

“Isn’t she cute? And doesn’t she look just like me?”

“...”

The king ignored Ellelaura’s trap. If he acknowledged that she was cute, then he’d be saying Ellelaura was cute by association too. But he couldn’t exactly lie and say Shia *wasn’t* cute, which was probably why he was holding his tongue.

The king had clearly met Shia before, but he didn’t seem to know who Maricks was. Maricks’s dad was supposed to be a captain among the knights, so that seemed a little odd to me.

“Then I’m going to observe your match. Give it your best, you two,” Ellelaura said before going to the wall with the king. Teilia and Lady Flora also headed to the wall on top of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“Wait, are we really having a match in front of His Majesty?”

“Looks like.”

We were really putting Maricks and Shia on the spot. I knew how they felt. To keep going with the society metaphor from earlier, it was like the president observing some new recruits at work—but we couldn’t exactly tell the king *not* to watch, so I started my match with Maricks.

"Okay, attack me from anywhere," I said.

Maricks gripped his sword, stepped forward, and swung. I parried his blade. He lost his balance but then immediately repositioned himself and swiped again. I swept my sword at him. He tried to hack at me multiple times, clearly frustrated, but never touched me.

"Ugh!"

This was Maricks's training, so I tried to avoid attacking him much. Sometimes he'd leave himself wide open, so I'd swing my sword to show him that. After a lengthy sparring match, he steadily lost his breath. Swinging a sword made you tired. When swords clashed, that also tested your grip. It was kind of like trying to hit something hard with a wooden stick. Just that was enough to make your arms tired and your grip less firm.

My hands didn't go numb thanks to my bear puppets, so I still held tight to my sword. If I hadn't had my puppets, my sword would definitely have been sent hurtling with one strike. Even if I knew the technique, I wasn't strong enough to use it without my bear gear.

"Darn it, Yuna. You're too strong."

Maricks fell onto his knees.

"Boy, is that it?" the king said to Maricks.

"No, I can still go on."

Maricks was panting. The question had come from the king himself, so he couldn't say he wasn't able to do it. He stood right back up.

We kept going with the match. I placed limitations on myself, like only using a knife and only moving within a one-meter radius of a given spot. We only stopped once Maricks collapsed. When I offered the option of continuing with me totally unarmed, he turned me down. He was at his limit, sprawled out on the floor like a corpse.

Now that I was done with Maricks, it was Shia's turn.

"You're not tired, are you, Yuna?"

Shia looked at Maricks, who was lying face up on the ground, as she asked that. He was panting. I wasn't.

"I'm okay. I can start the match right away."

"But your clothes look so difficult to move in."

Well, thanks to these difficult-to-move-in clothes, I was able to take on people like Maricks and Shia as opponents.

"So, what kind of match do you want, Shia?"

"The same as Maricks."

Shia readied her sword. It wasn't like we could use magic indoors—even a little would be enough to cave in a wall. It just wasn't allowed.

"Shia, you can do it." Elleaura waved her hand to cheer.

"Ugh, this is so difficult..."

I had no idea if this world had anything like parents' day, but I guess this was kind of like that for Shia.

"Shia, show us how cool you are," Teilia cheered.

I thought everyone was on Shia's side, but Lady Flora gave me a cheer too. "Go, bear!" I was starting to feel pumped up.

My match with Shia started.

She wasn't as physically powerful as Maricks, but she was precise with her attacks. It was a good approach. If she was going to defeat me, it would probably be with speed and precision rather than strength.

I dealt with her attacks, repelling her sword. After letting her attack me all she wanted, I would jab my sword lightly at her to show where she was leaving herself open. She'd look surprised or frustrated when I did.

After a few short minutes, there was another corpse in the training area.

"I'm not dead," Shia said from the ground.

Had she read my mind.?

"You made a sound," she said, exasperated. I must have done it unconsciously.

CHAPTER 462

THE BEAR FINISHES THE MATCHES

“UGH, I'M SO TIRED.” Shia panted from the floor.

She was in danger since she was wearing a skirt. Maricks was right by her. I told them to get up and poured some water in cups and handed those to them. Shia thanked me and gulped it down.

“How are you still so energetic after a match with both me and Maricks?”

“Well, I am an adventurer. I've trained for this.”

Yup, that was a lie. Under the bear suit was the body of a weakling who'd never spent a single day at the gym in her life. I wasn't fat, but I had fat where I should've had muscle. My upper arms were jelly too. If I took off my bear gear for the fight, I probably wouldn't be able to move, just like Maricks and Shia.

“We've trained too.”

“Yeah, we have,” Shia agreed, chiming in with Maricks's griping.

I had trained to increase my level in my gaming days, so I guess I wasn't completely lying?

“I knew you were strong, Yuna, but I had no idea the difference between us was this huge.”

“You're this powerful with just a sword. And you can use magic.”

“I'm terrified at the thought of fighting you in a battle with magic.”

“I did before. I was really out of line.”

She'd only done that because she was thinking of Noa, though I hadn't really felt good about her at the start. She might have been mad at Cliff, too, for making me her sister's

guard.

I quickly told the two my thoughts now that we were done. I told them what they did well and what they did badly, though it was all just my opinions.

"Maricks, you have power, but you only use one move to attack. You move in exactly the same way too often. You're only thinking of attacking, so you leave yourself open a lot. You probably assumed you could disarm me, based on my weapon. If a knife is handled at the right angle, it can parry a sword."

"Normally people can't do that stuff."

He was sort of right. If there wasn't such a huge gap in our abilities, a sword would usually win in a fight between a sword and a knife. But a knife could be swung faster. What mattered was how you moved, rather than how you used your weapon.

"If you can dodge someone's attacks, you can still beat a swordsman with a knife. Shia, you did a better job of moving around, but I think the sword might have been heavy for you. It was moving you, rather than the other way around. You should pick out a lighter one."

"Yes, it was a little heavy. I should have chosen a lighter one, but you had the same kind, Yuna."

Well, I also had my bear puppets. They made even heavy weapons feel like they were made of balsa wood. Without my puppets, I wouldn't even be able to swing the sword.

"You really are strong, Yuna."

"You two are quite skilled, for students." Oh, they'd been praised by the king!... but they didn't seem all that happy about it.

"The king is praising you both, you realize?"

"He is, but we couldn't touch a hair on your head."

"And that was *with* you limiting yourself. We couldn't even make you get out of breath."

They couldn't accept a compliment for a failure. It wasn't anything to do with them, though, or me for that matter. If you thought about it, my bear gear was really what'd won the fights.

"Well, even Lutum lost against her. I think you did all you could."

"The bear is stwong."

Teilia consoled the two from on top of Kumayuru and Lady Flora praised me from on top of Kumakyu. Maricks and Shia accepted Teilia's comment.

"Ugh. I feel so hot."

Maricks started to pull off his gear.

"I'm also sweating so much."

We were still in the warm season, and they'd moved around a ton. It made sense they were sweating.

"Are you okay, Yuna? Your clothes look like they'd be so hot."

"I think I mentioned this earlier, but they're temperature regulating clothes. I'm not hot."

I was cool in the summer and warm in the winter. This bear suit was made of the very best material for clothing. The only issue was that, you know, bear shaped. I just wished that my gear looked cooler. Back when I was playing the game, I'd had lots of cool gear I crafted from the rare materials I got as drops. Now? Bear gear.

I looked down at my hands as I flapped the mouths of my bear puppets open and shut.

"So, I brought a cold treat for Lady Flora. Would you all like to try it?"

"A cold treat?"

"Oh my, Yuna. You do have some for me as well, I take it?"

As soon as we started talking about food, Elleaura's interest was piqued.

“You have some for me, don’t you?”

Oh, now the king was in on it.

“Yuna, you have some for me too, right?”

It’d spread to Teilia!

Well, I’d assumed this might happen. In fact, I’d been pretty sure it would, so I’d made some for the king and Ellelaura too. I had enough for everyone.

“I made tons, so it should be fine.”

“Oh, good! It would be so unfair if only Father, Mother, and Flora got to eat your treats.”

Well, there wasn’t much I could do about that. I hadn’t even known Teilia existed until the academy festival. Considering how old the king was, I’d known it was likely he had a kid Teilia’s age, but hadn’t exactly looked into it. I hadn’t even known there was a prince until we’d met.

Then again, even if I had known about her, I wouldn’t have prepped food for a stranger.

“Well, I will gratefully accept the treat. Ah, yes! I think the garden would be a perfect location. You two, clean yourselves of your sweat, and come once you are done,” the king said to Shia and Maricks, who were sitting on the ground.

“We’ll go get ready then, shall we?”

The king and Ellelaura left the training area as soon as they’d said what they wanted to say. Shia and Maricks both gaped at the order he’d just given them, then shared a look, and quickly hopped to. They wiped themselves down, put away the weapons, and cleaned up the gear. They were fast.

While that was going on, I tried to coax Teilia and Lady Flora off of my bears so I could recall them. The girls wanted to ride them into the garden.

“If we go outside like this, you’re going to scare people. Let’s walk, okay?”

Lady Flora clutched Kumakyu, showing no signs of getting off. I’d given her the stuffed animals with exactly this scenario in mind, but the real thing still beat the copies.

“Ugh.”

“If anyone thinks Kumakyu is dangerous, the soldiers might attack. We would have a huge problem.”

If the two of them were riding my bears, I doubted they’d be attacked outright. Though someone might still think they needed rescuing, and do something stupid...

“You don’t want Kumakyu getting stabbed by a sword, do you?”

“No...”

Just as I thought I’d done it, Teilia butted in, “Then how about if they’re small? I think we could manage that.”

That just put off recalling them and it didn’t fix the problem.

“The wittle bears? Yeah! We can do wittle bears.”

Uh, now Lady Flora wanted my bears to be small. Looked like I’d been outvoted. Well, I didn’t come to the capital all that often. I guessed I could let her hang out with mini Kumakyu today.

“Okay, Lady Flora. Can you make a promise then? When we need to go home, you have to let Kumakyu go.”

“Uh-huh, I pwomise.”

After Lady Flora and I sealed our deal, I miniaturized Kumakyu, and she picked up my bear. Teilia ended up carrying mini Kumayuru, of course.

“They’re so cute big, but they’re just as cute small.”

Maricks and Shia came back after I’d shrunk my bears. They gave both bears pats on the head, seeming unsurprised by the change in size.

“Kumayuru, Kumakyu, we haven’t seen each other since the beach trip, have we?”

“Thanks for everything back then.”

Shia had seen my bears at Mileela, but Maricks hadn't since the escort quest.

After we finished cleaning up, we headed to the garden. Teilia carried Kumayuru and Lady Flora walked beside her with Kumakyu in her arms. I heard Maricks and Shia chatting too.

"Are we eating alongside His Majesty?"

"Looks like."

"A meal with His Majesty..."

"I'm so nervous."

"Yeah."

Maricks was clutching his stomach. He was winding himself up. This was such a throwback.

"Yuna, what are you smiling about?"

I guess thinking about the past had brought a smile to my face.

"Seeing you two reminded me of when Fina had a meal with His Majesty."

"Fina is the girl that Mother brought to the castle? So they had a meal with His Majesty?"

"Fina's the small kid who was with you, right? Is she a noble?"

"Nope. She's just a normal girl."

"Lady Elleaura does some savage things to people. What kind of person brings a regular person into the presence of His Majesty? I'd be so nervous, I'd die."

"I'm nervous too."

"You get nervous, Shia?"

"Of course I do. This is *His Majesty*. The most important person in the kingdom. You're the strange one for being able to hold a normal conversation with him, Yuna."

I'd been nervous too at first, but gotten used to him over time.

"But you're fine with Teilia?"

"That's because we're around her at the academy so often, and she's easy to talk to."

"Shia, was that praise for me?" Teilia turned around as she walked ahead of us. Guess she'd been eavesdropping.

"Of course."

Well, I hadn't been using any honorifics with her since we met. Maybe she was easy to talk to.

CHAPTER 463

THE BEAR BRINGS OUT FRUIT PARFAITS

I HEADED INTO the garden. Flowers of all colors were blooming there, just as always. The flowers on Talgwei and the bee tree were really pretty, but the ones at the castle held their own. Maricks was nervously stalking around, apparently too discomfited to even look at the flowers.

As I walked through the garden, taking in the flowers, I spotted the king, Elleaura, and the queen, who'd joined them, too. Lady Flora, with mini Kumakyu toddling behind her, grew excited as soon as she spotted the queen. Her Majesty tousled Lady Flora's hair.

"Maricks, the queen is here too."

"Four royal family members..."

"So we're eating with the whole family."

Maricks rubbed his stomach again.

Thinking about it like a normal person, it kind of was an absurd situation. Four members of the royal family! If we had one more, we'd have the full set.

"Miss Yuna, we were waiting for your arrival." Ange, Lady Flora's nanny, greeted me.

"Hello, Ange."

"It is nice to see you," said Ange. "Now everyone, please be seated."

She led us to our places. The king, queen, and Lady Flora sat down at a huge round table. Teilia took a seat across from His Majesty, while I sat down next to Lady Flora and Elleaura, and Shia and Maricks followed suit. Maricks ended up next to Teilia.

When Lady Flora sat down, the queen noticed Kumakyu and my bear backed away. She smiled and offered her hands to my bear. When Kumakyu refused to move, the

queen stood up and scooped the bear up. I recalled the time when she'd refused to let go of Kumakyu.

"Well, aren't you charming?"

"Yeah. The bears are cute," Lady Flora said.

"So they are!"

The queen finished stroking Kumakyu's head and released my bear. Wait a sec... I thought she'd keep an iron hold on my bear like last time, though. Kumakyu crooned and seemed puzzled too. Kumayuru just so happened to be on Teilia's lap.

We all took our seats, and I pulled out a bear-shaped fridge from my bear storage. The look in everyone's eyes said, "More bear stuff?" I ignored that, opened the door to pull out the things I'd made, and set them on the table.

Everyone's eyes gathered on the tabletop.

They stared at the clear glass container filled with ice cream, whipped cream, and pudding. I'd also topped it off with the fruit I'd collected with Shuri on Talgwei's island.

It was a fruit parfait. Since I couldn't find a long and tall glass container like in my old world, I'd used a bowl instead. Since it was a combo of ice cream, pudding, and whipped cream with lots of fruit sprinkled on top. Some kind of parfait.

Everyone stared at the single fruit parfait and seemed eager to try it, so I pulled out enough for everyone.

"Miss Yuna, allow me to help," Ange came over and said.

As I pulled them out of the fridge, Ange handed the containers out to everyone. She brought them over to the king, the queen, and Teilia, and started to set one in front of Lady Flora too.

"Ange, I have something for Lady Flora that's special, so you can serve everyone else first."

“As you wish.”

She set the parfaits out for everyone else.

“It’s so pretty,” Ellelaura murmured as she marveled at the parfait.

“Yuna, is this that ‘ice cream’ we tried earlier?” Teilia asked as she inspected the parfait.

“That’s right. But I added a bunch of toppings to it.”

“Aha, so this is the cold treat I wasn’t able to try last time.”

“It was so delicious!”

When I’d brought ice cream before, the king and queen hadn’t been able to come by. Since I didn’t want them complaining at me, I’d left Ange with some ice cream for them. Looked like it was a big hit.

“Zelef was making a commotion about it.”

“Bear, I want some too!”

Everyone had stopped working since we were talking, so Lady Flora had ended up the only one without a parfait.

“I’ll bring it right over.”

I pulled out the last, special parfait from the fridge and set it in front of Lady Flora.

“It’s a bear!” When she saw it, her eyes glittered.

Yup. The ice cream of the parfait in front of Lady Flora was in the shape of a bear. I’d used cookies and fruit to decorate it too.

“Oh, Lady Flora’s is the only one that’s special!” She looked kind of jealous.

“It was too much work to make one for everyone, so I just made one for Lady Flora.”

I wasn’t going to go to that effort for everyone. Also, I didn’t like to picture the king

eating a bear-shaped parfait, so I'd just made enough for Lady Flora.

"You spoil Flora."

I couldn't even reply to that. My black heart was just too weak against her pure one!

I handed out spoons and forks to everyone. Flora gripped hers tightly.

"Can I weally eat it?"

"Yes, you may."

Even though I'd given her permission, Lady Flora still seemed on the fence. She poked her fork through a piece of fruit and brought it up to her mouth.

"It's cowld and sweet."

I'd refrigerated the fruit too. Maybe next time I'd make fruit sherbet.

Lady Flora ate a spoonful of ice cream from the bear's face. She seemed to like it.



She'd had her reservations about eating the bear face at first, but once she'd eaten a bite, the rest disappeared fast. It didn't seem like she was picky about fruit. She also ate the cream and pudding with the fruit. I wiped off the whipped cream that'd smeared across her mouth.

"There's some fruit here I've never seen before too," the king said about the banana I'd cut into rounds. I guess you couldn't get bananas around here?

"It's delicious."

"It really is."

"Where do you obtain these fruits?"

"Hmm, from all over, I suppose?"

I couldn't say Talgwei, so I just tried to play it off.

"Why did you phrase that like a question?"

"You can't ask a lady to reveal her secrets."

"A *lady*?"

Uh, yeah. A lady dressed like a bear sat right in front of his eyes. Was his eyesight going? He seemed flabbergasted, but I pretended not to notice.

"They're all delicious, and all taste different. I have no idea which to eat next!" Despite saying that, Teilia didn't hesitate to try another piece of fruit.

"This is such an impressively colorful assemblage. It would really draw attention if served at a party."

I'd used bananas, orans, peaches, strawberries, cherries, and grapes. It did seem like a good party dish, like Ellelaura had suggested.

"Yuna, you have very good taste in decoration."

"Though not so much when it comes to clothes."

Ellelaura's compliment was followed by a judgmental stare from the king. I wasn't wearing these clothes because they were to my taste, though. The god who'd dressed me like this was the one without any taste.

"What are you talking about? I personally think it's adorable." Ellelaura came to my rescue.

"Yes, it may be cute, but I would hardly wear it. Would you want to?"

"Hmm, I think I'd like to dress my daughters like her."

Everyone except Lady Flora and the queen stared at Shia when Ellelaura said that.

"No, thank you." Shia didn't miss a beat rejecting the suggestion.

"Aww, but don't you think Shia would look wonderful as a bear, Maricks?"

"Uh, well..." Maricks didn't seem to know what to say now that the conversation had suddenly turned to him. He looked warily at Ellelaura and Shia before talking.

"I think it would be best to refrain from forcing someone to do anything they don't want to."

He'd gone for respecting a person's wishes rather than hypothesizing about whether the outfit would look good. That was a good way of getting out of talking about it. I guess people wouldn't want to put on a bear onesie.

Well, if I were in Shia's position, I'd feel the same. I couldn't judge.

"You're so mean! How could you turn down your dear mother's wishes? Then I'll need to ask Noa later."

Noa would happily dress up as a bear. She even loved wearing the Bear's Lounge uniform.

Ellelaura continued to eat her parfait as she talked, a full smile on her face.

Everyone loved the parfaits. After we were all done, Lady Flora and Teilia played with

my bears. The queen smiled and watched them. Ellelaura seemed close to putting Shia in a bear outfit, but she firmly turned her mother down. The king was talking about knights while Maricks listened nervously.

I pulled out the rest of the parfaits from the fridge and had Ange take them to the castle's fridge. Those were Zelef, Ange, and Ange's daughter.

Then the king and Ellelaura went back to work.

I decided to go home, which meant it was time for Lady Flora to say her goodbyes to my bears.

"Lady Flora, I'm going home too. You remember our promise?" I asked Lady Flora, who clutched Kumakyu.

She stared at my bear.

"Y-Yes..."

She sadly let go of my bear. Kumakyu crooned and came over to me. Now I needed to pry Kumayuru out of Teilia's arms, but she also let my bear go after silently watching her little sister. She couldn't throw a fit, being the older one.

"Kumakyu, Kumayuru, see you later." Lady Flora waved her hand slightly.

My bears crooned at her in response before I recalled both of them.

Lady Flora looked sad, but Ange appeared with the Kumayuru stuffed animal and handed it to her. Lady Flora hugged it tight. The stuffed animal seemed to help.

The queen and Ange took Lady Flora back to her room. Once they were out of sight, I heard twin sighs.

"I was so nervous! I couldn't even enjoy the food."

"It was delicious, but I wish I could have enjoyed it."

Maricks and Shia could finally relax.

"Hee hee. I enjoyed mine thoroughly."

Teilia was the only one who looked satisfied. I guess if she was on good terms with her parents, she had no reason to be nervous.

"Yuna, thank you for today. I've learned a lot."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to beat you, Yuna."

I left the castle with Shia and Maricks.

* * *

Once I got home from the capital, I headed off to Talgwei on my own to restock on fruit. I was thinking of making fruit parfaits for Noa and the orphans next.

According to my bear map, the island was moving slowly. I wondered where it was heading now. Since I didn't have a full map, I had no idea how far away I was from Mileela or what direction we were going.

I pulled off my bear hood. There was a nice breeze going.

I slowly walked around Talgwei and picked fruit. Kumayuru and Kumakyu, who were walking beside me, raised their heads.

"What is it?"

They both crooned. I followed their gaze and saw they were looking out into the ocean. Wait, there weren't monsters around, were there?!

I looked over, but instead I saw a ship off in the distance. Was there another island up ahead? Or maybe another continent? I could see land. Maybe there were people around?

I pulled up my bear map again and checked on the direction Talgwei was headed. As long as Talgwei didn't turn around, we weren't going to get to the land.

Hmm... what did I want to do? My two options were to go over there or to ignore it. I didn't have the option of coming back. If I passed this up, I'd never get to come here again. The possibility of spotting land while on Talgwei was low as it was, *especially* populated land.

I knew what I had to do. Even if I couldn't get back to Talgwei, I could get home by setting up a bear gate. As a gamer, I couldn't ignore a new area opening up to me.

"Kumayuru and Kumakyu, let's go," I said. They both crooned in response.

I climbed on Kumayuru and told my bears to head for land. They both leapt onto the waves and started running over the water, avoiding the whirlpools around Talgwei as they went.

I was excited to find out what this new land had in store.

EXTRA STORY

STOCKING UP ON BEARS, RETBELLE CHRONICLES

I MADE MY WAY to the dwarves' town of Rudnik to procure some wares.

"I'll take all the bear ornaments there." I pointed at the wooden carved bears on the shelves.

"All of the bears, you say?"

The employee looked quite puzzled, but I didn't mind him and proceeded to make my purchase.

"I will be in town for a few more days. How many more would you be able to carve in that time?"

The worker thought for a moment.

"I can pay in advance."

"Understood. Then I'll get in touch with the craftsmen right away." The employee immediately set to work.

This was what it meant to be a merchant. Flash some money, and any real business person would react. If he displayed merchandise, he had no guarantee of when it would sell. An advance meant that he had proof a customer would pay.

After I made my additional order of bear figurines, I left the shop and went to the next one. This one stocked iron trinkets in various shapes. Their wares included animals and humans that lined their shelves.

Bears, bears, bears, bears... I searched among their inventory for bears.

"Aha, there they are."

They had three. I then purchased them from the employee. I, of course, made an additional order of them as well.

I walked from shop to shop, buying up their stock of bears. When the employees asked why I only bought bears, I simply informed them they were popular in the capital.

Well, it certainly was true that those who read the bear picture book were quite taken by bears. When I searched for the book at my granddaughter's request, she also wanted bear merchandise. She was delighted when I brought bear goods from the shop. When I stocked bear goods in the capital branch of my shop as well, I found they flew off the shelves.

After hearing those reports, I set my eyes upon the dwarves and decided to buy everything bear-related I came across.

* * *

Once I'd bought what I thought I needed, I also traveled to the weapons and armor makers. I did not deal in such goods, but a merchant colleague had asked me to purchase them. I would be collecting a commission, of course, so there was something in it for me. There had to be. I was a merchant, after all.

I stopped in at the Merchants' Guild for some business. That was where I spotted someone who stood out.

A bear? I'd only ever seen one person dressed that way before. I couldn't even entertain the possibility of a second person dressing in such a way. I also recognized the green-haired girl beside her.

"Is that you, bear girl?"

When I called to her from behind, she turned toward me.

"Mr. Retbelle?"

She was, in fact, the girl I knew.

The green-haired elf girl was the one I'd inconvenienced with the ordeal with the

bracelet. Another girl accompanied them, but I wasn't acquainted with her.

The bear girl asked me why I was here, but that was something I wished to ask her. I explained to her that I was procuring merchandise.

"Now then, what brings you here, lass?" I asked her, to which she replied that she had come to purchase pots, fry pans, and other kitchen tools.

I was so flabbergasted, I couldn't say anything. She could buy pots and pans in the capital, and even if she wished for superior kitchenware, she needn't travel to the dwarven' town to find it. Just consider the distance between here and the capital!

Why was she in the Merchants' Guild? She couldn't buy pots and pans here, that's for sure. It seemed that she'd wanted to purchase a home here, but the receptionist assumed she was a runaway. I really could not believe she was here for kitchenware. Now also a house?

When I asked why she was purchasing a house, she seemed quite troubled by the question. The young elf chimed, saying the elves would be living there. I could see plainly on her face that it was a fib. She under-estimated a merchant's keen eyes.

I decided not to question her deeply. That was just another facet of being a good merchant—and anyway, I didn't want to cause the bear girl any trouble.

Following that, I did a quick investigation on the bear girl's background. This simply consisted of asking the merchants and guilds I knew about her. After I inquired at the Merchants' Guild in the capital, I found she had bought some land to build a house. She had bought it in cash. In addition to that, two nobles had given her their backing.

Now that I thought over it, she was rather friendly with the Adventurers' Guild master. I learned through another source that she freely came and went from the castle. I understood by her picture book featuring the castle's seal.

My instincts as a merchant told me not to make an enemy of the bear girl, and not to dig too deep into her origins, either. A top-rate merchant knows where to draw the line.

If I ever found her in trouble, it would be best to help her out, so she'd remain a friend to me. So I asked no further questions about why she needed a house, choosing instead to serve as her guarantor. I worried whether she had enough money, but it seemed

that worry was unfounded. She had enough money to purchase land in the capital, and connections to the nobility to boot. I had no cause for concern.

My work here was done.

"Well, then. If you will excuse me, I will be returning to my duties."

"But how can I thank you?" As I tried to leave, the bear girl stopped me.

"If you'd like to do that, then please bring any new books you write to my granddaughter, Alka."

That would be the greatest thanks of all for me. I'd created some trouble for the elf girl as it was. I couldn't simply take something from her.

I quickly left.

Well, I still had work to do. I had quite the list of tasks, including retrieving the bear figurines I'd ordered, searching for bargains, and meeting with acquaintances. Besides, I now had a good story to tell Alka about my travels.

I would finish my work quickly and tell Alka about the bear girl once I returned home.

EXTRA STORY

KUMAYURU AND KUMAKYU TALK

AFTER LOJINA TOLD ME the bearyllium was a fey stone and that the elves would know more about it, I learned from Mumulute that the stones strengthened elements. In other words, the bearyllium strengthened the bear attribute.

The god had apparently given the fey stone a bear blessing. I wish the god hadn't gone through that whole incomprehensible roundabout route and had just attached it to my bear gear from the start.

Anyway, I had two bearyllium ores. Since they could strengthen the bear attribute, I decided to give them to Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Made sense given there were two of them.

Once I equipped my bears with the bearyllium, they were stronger and even gained the ability to use magic. I was happy with these presents. It also meant that I didn't have to worry as much about the safety of my bears since they were both stronger. There was nothing wrong with them being able to protect themselves better. Then again, I didn't really want them to have to fight in the first place.

The whole thing with the bearyllium was settled, and once I got done with the whole thing I was after in the first place, I was back in my bed for the first time in forever and fast asleep.

Light leaked in from the curtains. I knew it was morning, but I thought I could sleep in every once in a while. Instead, certain somebodies were getting in the way of my oversleeping.

I felt something soft slapping my cheek. I'd already decided to sleep as much as I wanted to today, but my bears were trying to wake me up.

I brushed aside their paws, but I felt something soft pressing into my face anyway. They weren't going to let me sleep in. I pushed their paws away again and covered

myself with my blanket and took the defensive position.

“Wake up, master!”

“It’s morning, master!”

They couldn’t touch me, so they started calling for me.

“Just a little longer...”

Hm? I only noticed something was wrong after answering them. My brain started to kick into gear. Master? Wait... my bears couldn’t talk! That snapped me awake— I mean, someone was in here with me! And who was this “master” anyway?

I got out from under the covers to check my surroundings but no one else was around. The only other ones in the room were my bears in their cub form. They were staring up at me from the side of the bed.

“Huh? Maybe it was a dream?”

It wasn’t like my bears could talk. Apparently, I’d thought my dream was real. I had to be tired. Now that I was awake, I couldn’t fall back asleep. I decided to just get up at that point.

“Good morning, you two,” I said.

“Good morning, Master.”

“Morning.”

“Um, good... morning?”

Wait, who was I talking to? I was pretty sure that’d been my bears. I looked at them again. No one else was in the room.

“Master, I’m hungry!”

“Food!”

I pinched my cheek.

“Ouch.”

“What’s wrong, Master?”

“Did you hurt yourself?”

My bears looked worried. I picked up Kumayuru and stared at the bear.

“What is it?”

When Kumayuru’s mouth opened, I heard the voice again.

“Don’t you ‘what is it’ me! How are you talking?”

“Because of this.”

My bears touched the ribbons around their necks. That was where the bearyllium was that I’d given them a few days ago.

“The bearyllium?”

“Uh-huh, that’s right.”

“Thanks to these rocks, we can talk to you now.”

“That rock had this power?”

It felt kind of weird to hear my bears talk. I was happy we could communicate now, but also kind of disappointed I wouldn’t hear them croon anymore. They kept talking, apparently oblivious to this.

“We can do this now too.”

“Watch, Master.”

They moved away to the right and left. What was this? My bears sidled back toward each other and tapped their claws together.

“Fusion.”

Light surrounded them. Once the light subsided, a black and white creature stood in their place.

"We powered up, so we can fight with you, Master," they said, their voices overlapping each other.

Uh, what was going on? This was a big nope for me!

"We're the strongest bear ever."

"You're a panda!"

I yelled so loud, I startled myself. And then—

"Hm?"

Wait a sec... I was sitting up in bed.

My mind started to clear, and I looked around. My bears, in their cub forms, were sleeping happily on either side of me. They raised their heads slightly and crooned when I disturbed them by sitting up.

"It was a dream?"

It had felt so real. In order to be sure, I greeted my bears. "Kumayuru and Kumakyu, morning."

They both crooned back at me. They nuzzled up to me without a word.

"Can you two talk?" I asked, patting their heads.

They both crooned back at me. They weren't talking. It didn't look like they could, either.



“And you can’t fuse together or anything, right?”

They both crooned back at me, then shook their heads apologetically. *Looks like it really was a dream.*

“It’s fine. Please don’t fuse.”

I hugged my bears. They were cute as a panda, but I liked them best as they were right now. I felt so relieved that it was all a dream.

AFTERWORD

KUMANANO HERE, and thank you for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear's* seventeenth volume.

This is the year the *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* anime was broadcast on TV! When I first heard about the anime adaptation, I thought it'd be a long time before it made it to air. But time went by in the blink of an eye, and the anime aired and ended.

I got to see the production studio and voice actors at work while the anime was being produced, plus all the material put together for the anime. It was a valuable experience! I tried to participated in absolutely everything I was invited to, knowing I might never have the opportunity to experience something like this again.

All twelve episodes of the anime are done airing, and I'm happy to say that the second season has been approved for development. I think it happened halfway through season one. My editor told me, "There have been talks about a second season. What would you like to do?"

And my answer was "Yes! Let's make it happen."

I'm very thankful that there will be a second season. So many people are working hard to make *Kuma* a success, and I can't thank them all enough. It makes me so happy to think of the busy days that lie ahead of me, even though I know it'll be a lot of work. As the author, I like to be involved where I can.

I'm looking forward to finding out what lies in store for the next season of the anime.

The seventeenth novel covers the latter half of the dwarf village arc, and Yuna taking on the gate of trials. It may have been a shock to see it on the cover, but Yuna fought a copy of herself! When the editor asked what might be good for the cover, I suggested Yuna's double. My suggestion was picked up, and that was the cover we ended up with.

After that, Yuna came back from the dwarves' town and relaxed with Shuri and Noa in Crimonia. Then one day, she goes to Talgwei and spots land.

Yuna will start a new adventure soon. I hope you will follow along with the continuation of the novel!

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who strived to get this book out.

Thank you for drawing such wonderful illustrations, 029. It must have been so much work, along with everything you did for the anime. Thank you for continuing to draw illustrations during that time!

To my editor, whom I always rely on, and to the many people who were involved in the publishing of *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*, Volume 17: thank you. I am so grateful to everyone who's read along this far.

Let's meet again in the eighteenth volume!

KUMANANO — ON A DAY IN APRIL 2021



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