

WRITTEN BY
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O29

11
novel

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR



KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

– Bear Bear Bear Kuma –

- VOLUME 11 -

-AUTHOR-

Kumanano

-ILLUSTRATOR-

029

[SEVEN SEAS]



KUMA
KUMA
KUMA
BEAR

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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR Vol. 11

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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.

► KUMAYURU (CUB FORM)
▼ KUMAKYU

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

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

Skills

► FANTASY WORLD LANGUAGE

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

► FANTASY WORLD LITERACY

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

► BEAR EXTRADIMENSIONAL STORAGE

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

However, it cannot hold (eat) living things.

Time will stop for objects that are inside of it.

Anything that is put into the extradimensional storage can be pulled out at any time.

► BEAR IDENTIFICATION

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

► BEAR DETECTION

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

► BEAR MAP 2.0

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

► BEAR SUMMONING

Bears can be summoned from the bear gloves.

A black bear can be summoned from the black glove.

A white bear can be summoned from the white glove.

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 and she meets nobles a lot.

**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.

**NOIRE FOCHROSÉ**

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

CLIFF FOCHROSÉ

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

TIERMINA

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

CAPITAL**SHIA FOCHROSÉ**

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 her during her practical training for the academy.

**SANYA**

Head chef of the palace. Received recipes for pudding and various foods from Yuna on behalf of Princess Flora. Plans on opening a restaurant in the capital that serves Yuna's original recipes.

**ELLEAURA FOCHROSÉ**

Thirty-five years old. Her husband is the feudal lord of Crimonia. 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.

**QUEEN KITEIA**

Princess Flora's mother and queen of Elfanica. Loves Kumayuru and Kumakyu just as much as Princess Flora. She also received stuffed animals from Yuna.

ZELEF

Head chef of the palace. Received recipes for pudding and various foods from Yuna on behalf of Princess Flora. Plans on opening a restaurant in the capital that serves Yuna's original recipes.

MARICKS, CATTLEYA, TIMOL

Shia's classmates. Along with Shia, they formed a party for the academy's practical training, during which Yuna saved them from a monster attack. They idolize Yuna.

JADE, MEL, TOYA, SENIA

A group of C-rank adventurers who Yuna met at Crimonia's Adventurers' Guild. Yuna sees them again at the academy's practical training and they seem to keep running into each other.



CHAPTER 261

THE BEAR HEADS TO THE CAPITAL

AFTER I GOT BACK FROM THE ELVES' VILLAGE, I had Fina and Shuri review the third volume of *The Bear and the Girl* and made some chawanmushi egg custard. It seemed like a good way to pass the time, and Fina and Shuri sure enjoyed taste-testing the custard.

"Guess it's about time for a trip to the capital," I mused to myself. If I kept holing up too much longer, I'd be doomed to just stay here.

Besides, I'd taken the time to draw a new picture book, so I really wanted to show it to Princess Flora. That way, I could have Ellelaura make copies of it for me to take to the orphans. I was in bed thinking these plans over and snuggling with Kumayuru and Kumakyu in their miniature forms when suddenly, they lifted their heads and crooned.

"What are you looking at?" I followed my bears' gaze to a giant bird outside my window.

For a sec, I was all *Where did that bird even come from?!* but that second passed pretty quickly because I realized it was Sanya's bird summon. Folg, was it?

I opened the window to let Folg in. It perched on the back of a chair.

I waved at the bird. Maybe Sanya was watching? Hmm... no response. Well, that test was inconclusive. We were pretty far away from each other, so maybe her bird vision wasn't working?

I looked Folg over more carefully and noticed a tube tied around its neck. A letter?

"Don't peck me, okay?" I ordered. gingerly, I reached out toward Folg and opened the lid on the tube. A rolled-up piece of paper slipped right out.

"Thank you," I said.

"Coo," Folg replied and, job well done, flew off. I watched Folg go, then closed the window and opened the letter:

Dear Yuna, it began, a strange establishment appeared in the capital. I wonder if you might have been involved with it.

Whoa, why was Sanya jumping to the conclusion that some strange new building was my fault? I hadn't opened a shop in the capital. In fact, the only building I'd set up there was my bear house, but Sanya already knew about that.

My answer was on the next line.

Giant bear statues decorate the establishment's façade, along with a sign declaring it to be The Bear's Lounge Restaurant.

"Wa-huh?!" What the—? Bear decorations? The Bear's Lounge Restaurant?

I sure didn't remember starting a restaurant. It couldn't have any connection to me, unless... yeah, there was *someone* who might be involved.

The culprit's name: Elleaura. Rumor had it that she and Zelef had visited my shops earlier. I had a bad feeling about this. Still, I continued to read the rest of the letter.

The place piqued my curiosity, so I wrote this letter both to ask after this new building and to test whether Folg can make it to your house. If the restaurant isn't one of yours, feel free to ignore this.

I tossed the letter onto my desk, recalled Kumayuru and Kumakyu, and used my bear gate to head to the capital.

Once I got to the capital, I rushed out of my house and headed straight to the Adventurers' Guild to find Sanya. I ignored the stares as I ran. When I burst into the guild, brimming with unchecked energy, everyone turned to look at me.

People chattered all around me:

"It's the bear." "The bear is here!" "Don't make eye contact." "There's an adorable bear in the guild." "Is that the one from the rumors?" "Just keep your nose out of her business." "She really *is* dressed like a bear..."

Ignoring them, I made a beeline for the reception desk.

“What can I do for you today?” the receptionist asked me.

“I want to see Sanya.”

“The guild master? Ah, do you have an appointment?”

“No. Just... tell her Yuna is there, okay? That’ll do the trick.” I stared the receptionist down. *No* was not gonna be an acceptable answer here, sorry not sorry.

“Y-yes, ma’am! Please wait a moment and I’ll check in with the guild master.”

The receptionist stood up from her seat and headed into the back.

Sanya owed me some favors, and she’d been the one to send me that letter in the first place, so there was no way she wouldn’t see me.

But the receptionist came back alone. Had I been wrong? “The guild master will see you in her office,” she said. “Please make your way inside.”

Guess I’d gotten the wrong idea. I thanked the receptionist and headed toward the inner room—the guild master’s office I’d visited a few times now. After I knocked and opened the door, I found Sanya working at the seat closest to the window.

“Welcome, Yuna,” Sanya said in a rather exhausted voice. “I take it this means Folg made it to you safe and sound.”

“I just got the letter,” I replied. So, she hadn’t been looking through Folg’s eyes, then... or maybe it was just too far away for her to do it? “You seem tired.”

“The work piled up while I was away at the elves’ village.”

Being a guild master was a tough gig, huh? When I’d gotten home, I cooked for everyone and drew a picture book—basically, I’d just kicked back and taken it easy. Sanya, on the other hand, must’ve been buried in work since getting back.

“Well,” Sanya said, “you sure were quick to rush over to the guild.”

“Who wouldn’t rush over after reading a letter like that?”

“So then, that restaurant *does* have something to do with you, hmm?”

"That's what I'm here to find out. Are there really *bear statues*?"

According to Sanya, she'd discovered it while going on a walk during her break. "It was only for an instant, but when I saw that thing, I immediately forgot how tired I was and laughed."

"You... laughed..." I repeated. *Laughed* seeing a bear statue! What was up with that? Who laughs at bear decorations, y'know? And did that mean she was secretly laughing whenever she saw *me* dressed as a bear? I mean, I'm pretty much THE iconic bear here these days.

I clenched my bear puppet into a tight fist.

"I-I was joking," Sanya quickly. "Don't give me such a scary look, Yuna."

Oops. I hadn't even noticed my expression change. Let's calm down now..."So, after you laughed at the decorations, what did you do next?"

"I swear I only laughed for a moment."

Aha! So she *had* laughed, and she wasn't even denying it!

"I stopped to get a better look and saw a sign that said 'The Bear's Lounge Restaurant.' It occurred to me that it might be one of your establishments, so I sent the letter. So it *was* relevant to you nonetheless?"

I told her about how the king and Ellelaura had taken a liking to my pudding and other dishes, and that they'd proposed setting up a restaurant in the capital.

Sanya smiled—she liked my pudding too, I guess. "Pudding? That *is* something to look forward to." She paused and mused aloud: "But why would they decorate a pudding restaurant with a *bear*?"

I mumbled an answer... and Sanya's keen ears heard something.

"Hmm? What was that, Yuna?"

I repeated myself: "My shops in Crimonia have bear decorations." I didn't really want to talk about it, but I quickly told her about the shops. Then I told her about Ellelaura and Zelef stopping by while I was at the elves' village. "So... I think they copied my

other shops.”

“Yes, she *would* be one to do that,” Sanya said. “Your shops back in Crimonia are decorated with bears too, you say?” I could see Sanya’s lips starting to curl.

“Um, anyway,” I said, ignoring the weird smile on Sanya’s lips. “Where is this restaurant?”

Sanya pulled out a map of the capital and gave me directions. “I would normally take you over,” she added, gesturing at the pile of papers on her desk, “but I still have a mountain of work to finish up.”

“Um... hang in there!” I didn’t really know what else to say other than your standard motivational cat-poster reply.

“Thank you. I wasn’t away for as long as I could’ve been, thanks to your help. I’m frightened to even imagine what would have been waiting for me if I’d been away as long as I’d originally planned.”

“But don’t tell anyone else,” I reminded her.

“I know. But let me treat you to a meal as a thank-you sometime.”

“In that case,” I said, “let’s do something fancy!”

“Ha ha ha, you’ve got it, Yuna,” she promised. And with that, I headed over to the restaurant with the bear decorations.

CHAPTER 262

THE BEAR QUESTIONS ELLELAURA

JUST LIKE SANYA HAD SAID, I could see the building from far away as I walked down the main thoroughfare... it was hard to miss. It stuck out like a sore thumb. There were bear statues *right* in front of its entrance too. Like really, these were some *beary* bear bears. Beary huge bears, too, to the left and right of the entrance.

They weren't realistic bears, either. These things were *exactly* like the ones in front of my own shops. They were cartoonish and stylized, had adorable faces, and drew the attention of everyone passing by.

The most eye-catching thing about said bears was what they were holding. One of them held a gigantic spoon, and the other a ginormous fork. They were *definitely* mimicking my own shop bears.

The people passing by smiled at the sight of them. I had to be imagining it, but it was almost like they were looking at the restaurant bears *and* at me.

"Oh, my, I wonder if she's from the restaurant...!" "A bear!" "Are they putting on an event of sorts?"

Everyone had gotten it into their heads that I was tied to the restaurant just because of my outfit! I wanted to tell them I wasn't, but I wanted to keep a low profile for now.

When I looked up a little higher, I saw the sign—Bear's Lounge Restaurant—just like Sanya had described. It sounded the same as my shop, and they'd even drawn a bear next to the name!

That name plus the cartoonified bears... that was enough proof for me to know the culprit behind all of this was Ellelaura for sure. I set my mind to head back to the castle in order to interrogate her about why she'd made this place.

Determined, I took a step toward that direction and—speak of the devil—you wouldn't believe who was heading in my direction.

"Oh, Yuna?" Ellelaura walked over to me with a smile. Perfect timing. "Why are you here?"

"Why? Don't *why* me!!! What is this thing, Ellelaura?!" I pointed dramatically at the restaurant (with my bear puppet).

"Why, Yuna... that's your capital-branch restaurant!"

"That's not what I'm asking. Why are there bear decorations here?!" I flung my finger (bear puppet) out again to point it out.

"Because it's *your* restaurant."

"Since when has this been *my* restaurant? I just taught him my recipes." No one had told me that this restaurant would be *mine*. It was supposed to be managed by the castle! Just a place that happened to serve pudding and cake.

"I suppose you're right. But His Majesty would ask, 'How is Yuna's restaurant coming along?' and Zelef would answer, 'Master Yuna's restaurant is going exactly as planned,' and Her Majesty would reply with a 'I'm very much looking forward to Yuna's restaurant.' Before long, it basically *had* become yours in spirit." Well... it was certainly a thorough answer.

Still, I'd only given them the recipes, so I really wish they hadn't tied my name—and identity—to the place. And why had no one corrected anybody about this so-called Yuna's shop thing? Had anyone even noticed? Were any of them thinking straight?

"Is that why you came to visit my shops?" I asked.

"We needed to see your shops in Crimonia at least once. We're serving the recipes you taught us, after all—the exact ones that you serve there."

That was why she'd come all the way out to Crimonia? "I'm surprised the king let you go."

"When I complained by telling him how I wanted to see my daughter and how much work that noble created for me, and I added in a little mention of finally having a break... he gave me permission to go."

True... Ellelaura *had* gone all the way to Sheelin only to end up too busy to spend time

with Noa because of that idiotic nobleman.

"Also, I wanted to see how surprised you'd be," said Ellelaura, looking disappointed. At once, all the pity I'd felt for her over not seeing Noa much disappeared. "I saw your shop's sign and realized that we still hadn't named the restaurant here. We just... used your shop name as a reference for this one."

"As a *reference*? And no one stopped you, even though it's named after bears!"

"Oh, no, one objected. Zelef even said it was a great name, and despite looking rather chagrined over the choice. His Majesty accepted it as well."

Words escaped me.

Could literally anyone have stopped her? Was Ellelaura *invincible*?! Could *anyone*?! The restaurant had *bear* in its name... and it was supposed to be run by the literal government!

"If the country is managing the restaurant, you could have named it 'The Nation's Restaurant,' the 'Palace Restaurant,' or the 'King's Royal Restaurant.' So many ideas that aren't bear-y bearish!!!"

"What stuffy names for a restaurant. Who would *want* to eat there? You'd be hard-pressed to even open the door! "

"So... you're telling me that having 'bear' in the name makes the place more *approachable*...?"

"Not how I would phrase it. More like... that name appeals more to the general populace than your suggestions."

Bears had a popular populace appeal? Since when? Bears were supposed to be savage beasts—you were supposed to fear them. They were supposed to be *terrifying* animals. I mean, c'mon, they attack people! Not *my* two bears of course, but, y'know. Generally speaking.

"The thought crossed my mind when I saw your shops, Yuna: Bears are normally animals to be feared, but the bears decorating your shops and the ones in your picture books are hardly frightening. In fact, they're adorable. The key is presentation."

She did have a point. Even scary stuff looked cute if you cartoonified it. Monsters like goblins, orcs, or even dragons could be cute with a cartoony touch.

"You mentioned the 'general populace.' Does that mean the restaurant will serve normal citizens too?" I thought they'd said the prices would be high because they needed eggs.

"We're hoping to eventually adjust the prices until normal citizens can afford eating at the restaurant, just like your shops. But I *do* think it will take time."

I guess that was just how it had to be—the ingredients were too much for now, and it wasn't like they could raise their own poultry and use eggs on a whim like my shops did...

"If we can increase the supply of eggs, the price should steadily go down as a result," Elleaura said.

"But if the prices are high, will customers still come?" Without customers, there'd be no point in serving the food, no matter how good it was.

"We've already begun to tell people about the pudding that'll be served here, though only really to the aristocracy. We've received many inquiries already, so we needn't worry."

She'd already advertised, then... which I guess was a given. You've gotta start getting the word out way before your debut, no matter what world you live in. Great work dies on the vine if nobody knows about it.

"We've also told them about the strawberry shortcake. And it seems that the people are intrigued."

Guess they wouldn't end up empty when they were ready to open, then—they'd have plenty of customers.

"We plan on starting by squeezing the wealthier class for their money. From there, we use that money in order to create circumstances that will give us access to more eggs. Think of the higher prices as... goodwill donations."

Something about the way she said "goodwill" had real slimy corrupt merchant vibes.

"But if the country is managing the restaurant," I started, "wouldn't you already have the funds?"

"We can't take money like that. The nation is funding *some* of it, but money is still a finite resource. The topnotch building we bought, a guaranteed supply of eggs, the chefs' training... all of these things and more have their own associated costs."

The bear decorations had probably eaten into the funds too. "Sounds like a lot to deal with."

"You'd be correct. So, do you understand now? That's why we need to snatch up all the funds we can, wherever and whenever we're able. We'll then use that money to create a situation where we can steadily lower the prices."

I guess this was the normal thought process behind these things. In my case, I'd bought my shops using the money I'd earned in my original world. I'd used magic to collect kokekkos and to make the henhouse. Money hadn't figured into my thinking much.

Without money or magic, I wouldn't have even been able to start a shop. I guess I had to show some gratitude to my bear onesie and even to the god that sent me to this place with all my in-game money.

"I understand where the name came from now," I said. "But what about these bear decorations?"

The giant cartoonish bears were holding gigantic spoons and huge forks. They didn't *have* to make bear statues just because "bear" was in the name of the restaurant.

"Well... if we're calling it the Bear's Lounge Restaurant, don't we need some bear decorations?"

What was she talking about? I looked at her like she was joking or something. Did I *stutter*? Couldn't she have stopped at the sign?

"We did a pretty good job with these decorations, don't you think?" she said.

She was right. They were well-made. Whoever had crafted them had done a good job. The spoon and fork signaled that this place served food, which worked really well with the motif.

"I can't believe you made them look just like my shop's bears..." I said.

"Hee hee... about that, actually. I borrowed *this* from Noa." Ellelaura pulled a small bear ornament from her item bag.

"Is that the bear I gave her?" When Noa had stopped by my shop, she'd blurted out that she wanted the giant bear out front, so I'd made her one of the tiny bears we had on the tables instead. Ellelaura was currently holding that very same bear in her hand. "Did you use that as the model for these?"

"I had to. Yuna, it's totes difficult describing how your bears look. Having a model to base them on makes things *sooo* much easier."

Totes? Just because she looked young, that didn't actually make Ellelaura young enough to talk like the youths. Actually, did anyone even say "totes" anymore...?

"You seem like you have something to say," Ellelaura said.

I shook my head.

So, she'd been able to make these bears because she had Noa's little bear for a reference. That cleared up one mystery. I mean, they'd done a good job making them. They'd gotten all the important bits down. *Whoever made these really is amazing*, I thought as I inspected the bear decorations.

"There's no point talking about this out here forever. Shall we head inside?" She had a point: we couldn't stay out here all day. Plus, because of the combination of the bear ornaments and my outfit, we were starting to gather stares.

"Am I allowed inside?"

"We've finished the interior, so I don't see why not," she replied.

As we headed into the building, we passed by a sign that said the restaurant would be opening in just a few days. I'd been impressed by the exterior, but the interior was just as luxurious...

Well, except for one thing.

There was a cartoon bear inside the restaurant. Unlike my shop, it wasn't small or on

the tables. No, instead a gigantic, cartoonish bear stood right at the center of the place. The moment you walked in, *wham*—bear statue, instantly noticeable. Talk about making an impact. It was the only bear inside the restaurant, which I suppose was likely the reason they'd equipped it with both a fork and a spoon in its paws. They'd matched the utensils with the bears outside.

"We based this one off the bears at your shop as well," said Ellelaura.

Yes, my shop did in fact have bear decorations in it, but this was on a whole different level of bearitude.

"I heard that people try to take home the small bears or ask for them," she continued, "so we decided to make a big one. They won't be able to steal this one, and it'll be too expensive for anyone to try and buy it outright."

Yeah, I guess no one would steal this thing, but who could imagine a restaurant with a gigantic bear smack dab in the middle of it? "Actually, Ellelaura, why *did* you come here?"

"Oh, just to check on the finishing touches," she said. "Zelef asked me to taste-test the dishes. Would you like to join me?"

"Are you sure you want me along for the taste-test?"

"Why, naturally. As the person who provided the recipes, you would be the best candidate to perform a final check."

Wait a second. If they were doing their final checks... that sign wasn't kidding. This opening was coming right up. And if it was, that'd make it even more difficult to get rid of the bears before opening day.

If Ellelaura even agreed to get rid of them in the first place. Plus, it wasn't like I could ask her to remove them when some artisan somewhere had worked so hard to make them.

What a bearish dilemma.

As Ellelaura took me behind the scenes into the kitchen, I wondered what I could even *begin* to say to fix this unbearable situation...

CHAPTER 263

THE BEAR SAMPLES SOME FARE

ZELEF AND SOME OTHER CHEFS were hard at work in the kitchen.

“We’re here, Zelef!” called Elleaura. The head chef came over to us.

“Master Elleaura, I have been waiting for you. And... oh, Master Yuna?” He looked surprised to see me.

“I happened to run into Yuna right outside. She asked if she could sample the fare as well. Would that be all right?”

But she didn’t “happen to run into me here.” I’d *chosen* to come out here because of the letter from Sanya.

“Why, of course! I would be much obliged if Master Yuna were to try our food.”

“Hey, Zelef...” I said. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to give you any useful notes about the food.” All I had was the average person’s palate. I was a normal fifteen-year-old girl, after all.

“I’m not expecting that at all. As long as you enjoy the dishes, that is enough for me. If any of the food is not to your liking, please do not hesitate to inform me.” Well, as long as he wasn’t expecting much from me.

“In that case,” he continued, “I will introduce you to my staff before we begin the sampling. I have hired these three to work at the restaurant.”

When Zelef called them over, the three people in the kitchen lined up next to him—two men and one woman. The two guys seemed to be in their mid-twenties, and I guessed the woman was around eighteen.

Was I imagining it or was the woman really staring me down...? Yeah, probably just imagining it. Being self-conscious wouldn’t do me any good, and she probably just hadn’t seen someone dressed up as a bear before.

"All three of them are of excellent character and have top-notch cooking skills. I can guarantee they will not disclose your recipes to outsiders or give your dishes a bad reputation!"

Did he really want to waste such amazing talent *here*? On a *bear*-themed restaurant? With *bears* at the entrance? Were all three of them *seriously* okay with that? I really wanted to press things further...

"Please introduce yourselves to Master Yuna."

The two men stared at my outfit while introducing themselves. Apparently, they were the restaurant's head chef and sous chef. They didn't give me any looks that made me feel uncomfortable either, which I suppose meant they really were carefully selected by Zelef. Then, once they were done introducing themselves, the girl finally stood in front of me. Her eyes were glittering.

"I'm Shyla. I'm the youngest of the three of us, but I'm the most motivated. I never would have dreamed of meeting you, Bear! Oh, Bear, I'm so incredibly excited to make your acquaintance!"

Shyla very insistently kept calling me "Bear" over and over and over again while holding my bear puppet and vigorously shaking my hand.

"Uh, name's *Yuna*," I said, giving my name extra emphasis. "Nice to meet you."

"Yes, *Bear*! It's nice to meet you."

Wait a second, was that on purpose? She *had* to be doing that on purpose, right? She'd completely ignored me even *after* I'd enunciated my name clearly for her. Based on her innocent smile, it didn't *seem* like she had any ill intentions... unless she was secretly mocking me?

"Shyla! You mustn't be rude to Master Yuna." Zelef gave Shyla a light prod to the head.

"I'm sorry, uncle dearest."

"Uncle dearest?" Okay, hold up now. She called him *uncle dearest*. Had Zelef really forced a young girl like her to call him *uncle dearest*? That sounded a little, uh... *illicit*. Or maybe it was the brain rot from all my manga and novels... They might have had a bad influence on me.

"Ah, Shyla is my niece. She is very skilled, but when it comes to food, she doesn't think before she leaps," said Zelef, sighing lightly.

"Uncle dearest, how could you say such a thing?"

"I believe I have told you many times that you mustn't call me uncle dearest here. Please call me by my title."

"I'm sorry, Chef Zelef." Good start, but could he tell her not to call me *Bear* while he was at it? "Bear, I will work so very, very hard here. It's nice to meet you!" Shyla said.

"Um, could you call me by my *real name*?"

At this rate, I'd be Bear for the end of time, so I addressed the issue point blank. I'd forgive any small kids for calling me Bear or even older people calling me Bear Girl, but this chick was my age—and it felt more like somebody was making fun of me.

"My apologies. It just slipped out, since we were calling you Bear in my circle..." Shyla bobbed her head down apologetically like she'd just realized what she'd done.

And honestly, I really wasn't one to talk. I've named people based on their trademark characteristics too, like "blonde girl" or "muscle dad." Now that she'd explained that to me, I felt a little self-conscious.

"I've been so very excited to meet you finally." She seemed kind of emotional about it, in fact. "His Majesty and the soldiers and servants all warned me that no good will come from approaching you when you arrive at the castle, so no one comes near you, Yuna."

I finally knew why no one ever stopped me whenever I'd go visit Princess Flora. In any normal situation, a commoner (dressed as a bear, at that) waltzing right into the castle would've been stopped at some point, or at least called out for being suspicious. Instead, they'd bow their heads or look at me. Not a single person had ever stopped me from heading directly to Princess Flora's room.

Normally they'd probably call me out and say something like "Stop, you've violated the law!" or "What is that suspicious outfit...?" but nope! Never happened.

"His Majesty was trying to be considerate," said Elleaura, "and make sure that no one bothered you."

Huh. I'd had no idea.

"Hey Yuna! Um, where did you learn how to cook these things? Did you think them up yourself? How did you come up with these dishes? Why are you dressed as a bear?"

While I was processing the stuff about the castle, Shyla kept asking me one question after the other. With every question, she took another step toward me. And another. And another...

Overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, I backed away.

"*Shyla!*" Zelef gave her another prod to the head.

"Uncle dearest, that *huuurt*!"

"No more uncle dearest. And calm down!"

Shyla deflated and backed way.

"I apologize, Master Yuna," said Zelef. "She simply cannot hold back her enthusiasm."

"You're so mean, Chef Zelef! Yuna, I was very much looking forward to meeting you."

"You were looking forward to it...?" I asked.

"Because you always bring Chef Zelef something to eat."

Since it was a nuisance when I dropped in on Princess Flora during lunch, I'd usually give her maid, Ange, some food along with an apology for Zelef. The only unusual kinds of food I'd bring along were the pudding, cakes, and pizzas. Outside of those, I'd bring new types of bread that Morin (and I) had thought up.

"I always make some for you afterward," said Zelef.

"But you're the one who always says the original is so much better, Chef Zelef."

"Of course it is," Zelef replied. "The versions I make are merely for practice."

"That's why I wanted to talk to you! You're a girl *and* you make such delicious food too!!!" Shyla's eyes glittered as she edged closer again.

This girl was seriously intense, and kind of scary. Too much for a former shut-in, thank you very much.

Zelef gave Shyla another whack on the head. “Please compose yourself right now!”

“Ow, that huuuuurt...”

“Master Yuna, if you ever come to this restaurant, please ask Shyla for anything you need. You two are young women around the same age, so I’m sure that you’ll find her quite approachable.”

Honestly, I wish he’d give me someone a little more well-behaved, but it wasn’t like I could just say that in front of her. All I could do was nod in agreement.

“Now, Master Yuna, I hope you will honor us by sampling the fare.”

They’d already finished getting ready, and now the table was lined with food—correction, with a *lot* of food. There were even cakes and breads on another table. These couldn’t *all* be for the food sampling, right? A young lady like myself can’t wolf down that much food!

And if this was going to be a sampling of what the restaurant had to offer, I would rather have tried the recipes they served the royal family over my own... but apparently, they made those recipes all the time, so they didn’t need them to be taste tested.

Aww... too bad.

“Yuna, I made this one. Please try it.” With no regard to how I felt about the matter, Shyla offered me a slice of cake—strawberry shortcake, to be exact. It looked nicely made and the whipped cream and decorations were tidy.

I picked up a mouth-sized piece with my fork and ate it. Yup, delicious! The whipped cream was perfect too. It could have easily competed with Nerin’s cakes, and personally, I thought it was definitely good enough to serve in this restaurant.

“Well? How is it? Is it good?”

"It is." I ate a second mouthful and then a third in front of her.

"Is it really? Thank goodness!" Shyla looked beyond jazzed. "In that case, let's move on to the next cake. I thought of this one myself."

This one used a different fruit this time. I picked up a piece of it on my fork just like I had with the other cake and tried it. The flavor was decidedly different from the strawberry shortcake, but...

"Mmm, it's sweet and sour... and delicious!" Fruit can really transform a cake's flavors.

"Master Yuna, please try this as well."

"And this!"

Even the two men were following up by bringing the dishes they'd made. Those tasted delicious too. I kept stuffing myself, and they kept wheeling over more.

I told them my unfiltered thoughts, with no flattery involved whatsoever: "Delicious!" "Not sure this one's to my taste." "Pretty tasty!" "This is too sweet..." "This needs to be a little spicier." Before I said anything, naturally, I made sure they knew that these were just my opinions.

All three of them held paper in their hands as they jotted down my impressions. Recipe or not, I could tell they were being very careful about doing their best tonight.

"Always the popular one, I see," Ellelaura commented.

"Please stop laughing and try the food too, Ellelaura."

"Why, of course. That's what I've been doing." I noticed Ellelaura actually did have empty plates in front of her.

Odd. She'd surely eaten the same amount as me, but she looked completely fine. I guess Ellelaura could pack it away even more than I could.

CHAPTER 264

THE BEAR SHOWS ELLELAURA THE PICTURE BOOK

TO FINISH OFF THE SAMPLING, we had pudding, which was also delicious as could be. They told me they'd be decorating it with fruit on top to make it look fancy. I thought ice cream might work well too.

"Master Yuna, I sincerely thank you for coming today," Zelef said.

Still, I didn't know how useful my opinions would actually be in the long run. They had a lot of their own original cakes, so it seemed like a fresh take on the food. They also told me the recipes so I could share them with Nerin.

"It wasn't any trouble at all," I said. "Everything was really delicious."

"I'm happy to hear that."

The three of them looked relieved at my words. I wish they wouldn't put me on a pedestal like that.

There were a lot of leftovers after the taste test because they'd had to make whole cakes to get it right. When I asked Zelef what they were doing with those leftovers, he said he was going to bring them to the castle to give out to the soldiers and servants. I wish he'd mentioned that at the start... I wouldn't have forced myself to eat everything they brought out. I gingerly touched my stomach. I couldn't tell through the onesie but didn't think I had anything to worry about.

As I happened to be thinking about food, I remembered something I'd made just a few days ago. "Zelef, I've got a new dish for you. Would you like to try it?" I asked, pulling out some chawanmushi.

The moment he saw it, the expression on Zelef's face changed. The three other chefs and Ellelaura looked over at me.

"Oh, my, Yuna. Is there any of that for me?" Ellelaura asked the dreaded question. I couldn't believe she could still think of eating after how much we'd devoured in the taste test.

"You want to eat *more*?" I asked. I couldn't tell whether it was a joke, so I wanted to make sure.

"Of course! I would eat any of your new recipes, Yuna."

She was serious, then. Her stomach was just on a completely different level from mine.

"Don't come crying to me if you gain weight," I said.

Since she'd left me no choice, I pulled out another chawanmushi and immediately noticed that Shyla and the two guys were looking at it. Yep, they wanted some too.

"Um, would you like some?" I asked.

"Can we really?!"

"If you would be so kind."

"Yes."

"It's hot, so be careful." So I ended up bringing out three more servings. And thanks to my bear storage, they were still piping hot and fresh.

Ellelaura lifted the cap off her chawanmushi. "Your item bag is so very useful, Yuna."

"I see that this is also an egg-based dish. Hmm..." Zelef inspected the chawanmushi and sniffed it.

"Please eat it while it's still warm," I said. They could eat it cold too, but I figured it'd taste better hot.

They all picked up spoons and dug in. For the dish, I'd used the mushrooms I'd gotten from the elves' village, the bamboo shoots from Mileela, and poultry from the kokekkos that the orphans had raised. I also had shrimp chawanmushi, of course.

"It's soft as pudding, but entirely different as well," Ellelaura noted.

“Why, this is so warm. It’s so delicious!”

“This is so good, Miss Yuna!”

The head chef and sous chef seemed to be enjoying the food too.

“It appears that this contains many ingredients.”

“I spy poultry, and oh! Is this a mushroom? And the texture of this that I’m chewing on... what could that be?”

He probably meant the bamboo shoots. The other three were mulling it over too, but none of them seemed to have an answer. I guess they didn’t eat bamboo shoots in this world. Well, who would suspect that green, tough bamboo tubes could be edible?

“Master Yuna, what is this?” Zelef held a piece of bamboo shoot on a fork.

Knew it—the bamboo shoots had stumped them. “I think you might not eat these around here. That’s a bamboo shoot.” I pulled a fresh one from my bear storage.

Edible bamboo was underground. When they’re fully grown, they end up becoming hard bamboo stalks. I drew a picture of bamboo and taught them about the difference between the edible shoots below and the hard, aboveground stalks.

“I know about bamboo, Master Yuna, but I never would have conceived that it might be *edible*.” Zelef picked up the bamboo shoot and marveled at it.

“They’re great stir-fried too,” I said. “If you want some, I’ve got a few.”

“I would be thrilled to have them!”

I pulled out several bamboo shoots from my bear storage and handed them over.

“Thank you very much. I shall attempt to make several new dishes from these!” Zelef looked happy to have new ingredients.

After that, I taught him the basics of cooking with bamboo shoots. You have to soak them to remove the bitterness, after all, or they don’t taste good.

“Zelef, here’s the recipe for chawanmushi. I think you should be able to find everything

you need, but please check it to make sure." I handed Zelef a sheet of paper with the chawanmushi recipe with my bear puppet.

"Are you sure? You're always doing these things for me."

"It's not just for you. Please make it for Princess Flora."

Zelef thought for a moment. "Understood," he said finally. "But Master Yuna, please give your chawanmushi to Princess Flora first. If I were to give her my version to begin with, she would mistakenly believe I made the recipe, and not you."

I nodded, and then he took the recipe from me.

"Yuna, aren't you overindulgent when it comes to Lady Flora?" asked Ellelaura.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, and it's the same with Fina and my own daughter. You have a soft spot for children, don't you?"

If I did, it wasn't on purpose.

"I think that's because Fina and Noa are both good kids," I said. "If Noa were selfish and bossy, I wouldn't be nice to her." If she were like that one dummy noble's kid, I would've avoided her like the plague, and I sure wouldn't have spent a second being nice either.

"Ha ha ha, I'm happy to hear you say she's a good child." Ellelaura smiled appreciatively.

Meanwhile, Shyla was looking at the recipe that Zelef was holding. She flung up her hands. "Chef Zelef!"

"What is it?"

"Are you going to teach us the recipe?"

"You know very well that I cannot." Zelef put the recipe into his pocket.

"Aw, but..." Shyla began, then sunk to her hands and knees on the ground, looking utterly defeated at how quickly Zelef had refused. She sure was dramatic, especially

when it came to the stuff that brought her down. She raised face and gave Zelef a bitter look. "You're so unfair, Uncle dearest..."

"That's *Chef* Zelef," Zelef corrected.

Did it really matter? Was I the only one who didn't care much?

"Yuna." Shyla stood up and was looking at me. Her eyes were pleading with me to teach her the recipe.

"I only gave him the recipe for Princess Flora's sake."

"But I'll make it for Princess Flora!"

"I wouldn't leave Princess Flora's food in your hands," Zelef said.

Shyla was insistent, but Zelef rejected the idea right away. She looked at the ground. The head chef and associate head chef looked pretty disappointed too at that answer.

Ignoring them, Zelef looked over the recipe. "I knew it. This uses eggs as well."

I'd been bringing a lot of recipes that called for eggs recently. "Actually, do you need eggs?"

"We should have plenty," said Ellelaura. "There is a village nearby that produces eggs near the capital. The only issue was that they previously only produced enough eggs for the village. But they have increased their number of birds, so the castle may purchase eggs from them."

"I'm surprised they agreed to that," I said.

"The nation is paying for the cost of all the upkeep. Though they have other work to do, they accepted the offer."

I guess they had to have other work to make a living. It wasn't like they could abandon their previous jobs.

"As I said before, we're planning to gradually increase egg production. We'll need everyone working hard and earning their keep to accomplish that." Ellelaura looked at the three employees now.

All three answered her with an enthusiastic “Yes, ma’am!”

They'd finished eating the chawanmushi, so it was about time for a break.

“Miss Yuna, I will be waiting in great anticipation for you to come back to the restaurant sometime,” Shyla said. The head chef and associate chef nodded at that.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’ll make sure to stop by.”

Shyla looked really happy when I said that, but... man, I’d need a lot of courage to walk into a restaurant decorated with bear statues while wearing a bear onesie. Maybe I’d come with Fina next time.

Elleaura and I left the restaurant together. When I got outside, I saw the giant bear statues at the entrance. The things were here to stay, I guess—nothing I said could convince them otherwise. The capital would have its bear restaurant, no matter what.

I’d told Shyla I’d be back, but being in a bear outfit made it kind of hard to go anywhere near the place.

“What brought you to the capital in the first place, Yuna?” Elleaura asked. “Did you come to see Lady Flora?”

I couldn’t bring myself to admit that I’d come to see the very bears before me. Plus, I couldn’t just say I’d found out through Sanya’s summoned bird, and I *definitely* couldn’t mention the bear transport gate either.

“Um... yep, that’s it! I drew a new picture book, so I wanted to bring it to her.”

“A book? Why, Lady Flora will be so pleased!”

I wasn’t lying, technically. I’d planned to give Princess Flora the book from the start. I just hadn’t made plans to do it today specifically.

Elleaura and I talked for a while, and eventually I asked my question. “What should I do with the book?”

"What do you mean? You're not giving it to her?"

"Aren't you going to reprint it? I was thinking you couldn't do that if I gave it to her."

"Was that bothering you? It should be fine. If we ask Lady Flora, she'll let us borrow it. And I think you should be the one to give her new books, Yuna," Ellelaura said. "That would make Lady Flora so much happier."

In the end, we decided I'd give the book to Princess Flora first and that the reprinting could come after.

"Though I would like to read it myself," Ellelaura said. "May I take a look?"

"Mmm, I wouldn't mind."

We headed back to Ellelaura's house so I could show her the book. When we got there, we were greeted by Surilina, the maid.

"Miss Yuna, welcome."

"Pardon me for dropping in, Surilina," I replied.

I'd seen her back during the stuff with the golems, but it'd been a while since then.

"Surilina," said Ellelaura, "please prepare some tea."

"As you wish, lady."

Once we got to the drawing room, I showed Ellelaura the book right away.

"A charming book, as always," Ellelaura said, smiling as she flipped through it. "I presume these sisters are Fina and Shuri." She pointed at the two girls in the book. "She looks just like Fina. How adorable! Make sure to bring her by the house next time you come to the capital with her."

I didn't have any plans to bring her at the time, but I'd bring her by if I had a reason for it.

Ellelaura turned another page. “The girls have to move, then, which means they need to part ways with the bear.” She turned the page. “Then the bear saves them when monsters attack. Very heroic! And I see even Kumayuru and Kumakyu have made appearances. Ha ha ha, they’re so cute.” The pages rustled as she flipped through them. “Oh, and they shrunk down just like your bears, so everyone can live together. I suppose tiny bears would be able to live with them in harmony.” She had finished the book.

I accepted the tea that Surilina brought in. “So, what did you think?” I asked her.

“Why, I thought it was lovely, naturally. But may I ask a question?”

“What is it?”

“What happened to the other passengers on the carriage?”

Fina had asked the same thing. Was that really something people cared about?

I gave Ellelaura the same explanation I’d given Fina. “I haven’t decided, so you can interpret the events any way you like.”

“Any way I like? You have a penchant for making things complicated, don’t you? I suppose everyone will have their own interpretation.”

Some people would think they were killed by the monsters, and others would believe they escaped to live another day. It’d depend on the reader. It seemed like Ellelaura had gotten the story’s intent. I was kind of happy.

“Do you think I should rewrite it?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary, though I’m still trying to figure out what to tell Lady Flora when she asks about it. That’s why I asked you—to see how you would respond.” Ellelaura handed the book back to me.

Hmm... I guess it depended on who was reading the story. If someone wanted their kid to grow up brave, they might teach their kids that it would be right to stay and protect the girls. A merchant might say it’s important to make a quick decision and hightail it out of there. What would someone from the royal family learn from the book?

Escaping would be important for royalty... but I felt like they’d tell her that she couldn’t

just abandon the citizens in order to get away. Teaching kids a moral lesson sure is hard.

As Elleaura and I discussed the book, we heard a commotion outside the door. Someone burst through it—it was Shia, still in her school clothes.

“Mother, is Yuna really here?!”

“Shia! Long time, no see.”

“Yuna!!!” She came over, looking happy.

Cattleya, Maricks, and Timol, also wearing school clothes, followed her through the door.

CHAPTER 265

THE BEAR LEARNS ABOUT THE ACADEMY FESTIVAL

THEY WERE ALL IN THEIR UNIFORMS, dressed as if they'd just gotten out of school.

"What are you doing in the capital, Yuna?" asked Timol. "Are you here for work?"

"No, just an errand. Why'd you all come to Shia's house?"

Were they all planning to have a study group? As a loner, I'd never studied in a group with friends, not even once... not that I ever needed to. It never bugged me either, to be honest. Because I could study on my own, y'know? It was all perfectly fine and good.

"We're talking about the exhibit we want to have at the academy festival."

"An academy festival?" So, not a study group, then.

"The academy is going to have a festival where the students put on productions," said Shia. "And we're going to be part of it!"

So schools here have festivals too. I hadn't had one at my elementary school, and I'd holed myself up at home during middle school, so I'd never been part of one. They show up pretty often in manga and TV, though.

But were school festivals of this world like the ones in mine? I guess most festivals set up shops, put on plays, or even put on musical performances, right? Was there a go-to kind of performance this world put on, though? Something they preferred...?

I mean, magic and swords are mundane in this world. What kind of performance would be normal here? I was a little curious.

"Sounds fun," I said.

"Would you like to attend, Yuna?" asked Shia.

“Are you sure I can come?”

“Yes, please do!”

Hmm, I wanted to go, but could I really go to a crowded place like that while dressed as a bear? Would people mistake me for a festival performer? Or... maybe that would be a good thing, since I wouldn’t stand out as much? I don’t know.

I needed more info. “What are you guys doing for the festival?”

Shia looked at the three others. “We all have different opinions, so we decided to get together and talk about it today.”

“I want to battle other people with swords!”

Okay, Maricks wanted to do sword fights.

“I think a battle of magic might do nicely...”

And Cattleya *also* wanted to fight, but charged with magic. Well, there you go—this definitely wasn’t my original world. It sure sounded like a lot of fun, considering they could use swords and magic in their events.

“I want to make something to sell,” Timol said.

“What about you, Shia?” I asked

“I wouldn’t mind a battle, but we’re always doing those during class. I’d like to do something we can only do at the festival.”

“C’mon, let’s have a duel!” said Maricks. “That’d definitely attract attention.”

“It would, but we duel in classes too.”

“But normally no one gets to *watch* us.”

Did Maricks really want to stand out that much? He could just wear a bear suit if he was that desperate for attention.

“Let’s do a store and sell some sort of goods,” Timol insisted.

"What would we even sell?" asked Maricks.

"How about food like they have at the food carts?"

"Other groups have already said they're doing the same thing."

Cattleya nodded. "Yes, I heard they even know a place to acquire flavorsome victuals!"

The three of them were all trying to poke holes into each other's suggestions.

"Um, are you doing something with just the four of you? Not as a class?"

"We're set up more like clubs than classes for the festival. And really close friend groups are participating too."

Close friends... now that really hit me where it hurt. I guess normal people did that kinda stuff—have friends, enjoyed school. That sort of thing.

After listening to all their plans, Ellelaura turned to Shia. "So, Maricks and Cattleya want to put on a battle showcase, and Timol wants to set up a shop. What about you, Shia?"

"I suppose if I had to choose, I'd want to do the shop. I mean, this is really the only time we can set one up."

They were exactly divided down the middle.

"Besides, do we really have enough people to do battles? There's only four of us," remarked Shia.

"There are a myriad of people having matches," said Cattleya. "We can simply enter into one of those!"

"But doesn't that mean we'd have to win in order to get attention?" asked Shia.

"We will!" Maricks said.

"We shall win," Cattleya confidently said.

Timol didn't look particularly into it.

"I would've taken you for a battle person, Shia," I said.

"We do those for class, so I just want to try something different."

Yeah, you don't get the opportunity to try setting up a shop every day.

"Are you two really sure you wouldn't want to sell stuff?" I asked.

"I'm not against it, but I want to do something that'll make us stand out if we're doing anything," said Maricks. "A shop wouldn't do that."

"I wouldn't mind if the shop were entertaining," said Cattleya. "If it's like all the other shops, however, I must decline."

Hmm. So, Maricks would agree to a shop if it got them attention and Cattleya would be onboard if the shop was unique.

Flashy, one-of-a-kind, and interesting for the customers.

"Shia, Timol... what do you two think about the battle show?"

"If we can't have a shop," said Shia, "then I guess there's not much else I can do about it."

"I feel the same."

"So you both wouldn't mind if you did battles instead?" Ellelaura asked. For some reason, she'd butted into the conversation. Now she was starting to direct the flow of things, even though it was supposed to be between the four of them. Maybe she just couldn't turn her mind off after work? I mean, Ellelaura is the type to take the lead on things and stick her nose into anything she finds amusing, though she never did anything she found annoying.

"Then why don't you start by thinking about a shop?" asked Ellelaura. "You'll never be able to have that experience outside of a school festival."

"I guess that's true. But just so you know, Timol's ideas stop there."

"Hey!" said Timol, "I told you we can think of what to do from there together."

"We haven't been able to decide," said Shia, looking troubled. "All our conversations end up like this. But we need to make a decision, and soon."

"Shia, why don't you think of something?" asked Elleaura.

"Entirely right," said Cattleya. "If we're setting up a shop, you must propose what kind of shop we are to run."

Shia got to thinking, but then she looked up at me as if asking for help. "Any ideas, Yuna?"

"Me?" She'd suddenly dragged *me* into this.

"You have your own shop in Crimonia, after all. Can you think of anything unique, but easy? Something that could be popular?"

"Dear, you can't simply ask Yuna for that," Elleaura scolded.

A shop that would be popular, huh...? Then they had to go with selling food. Making pudding would take time and sourcing the eggs would cause problems, so that was a no-go. I could prep things for them, but that meant they wouldn't have to do the work.

Pizza required a stone oven, which wouldn't work if they had to do the event in their classroom. What else was there?

"Yuna, you really don't need to consider it so seriously," said Elleaura. "This is a problem for Shia and her friends." Everyone went silent at that, but I still couldn't help but think about it. Now I was even kinda looking forward to it.

It wasn't like I had to limit my ideas only to things from an average school festival. Full-blown festivals have goldfish-scooping games, ring tosses, shooting booths, and masks. Oh, and when it came to food, they'd have yakisoba, shaved ice, candied apples, takoyaki, grilled squid, grilled corn, and hot dogs... *wait!!!*

Right, I'd forgotten about something! There was something that'd be easy to make—a candy I'd made for Fina and Shuri in the past. Neither of them had known what it was, though. Maybe this world just didn't have it?

Still, those two hadn't had an easy life growing up, so maybe they'd just never been exposed to the candy. After all, they'd had trouble feeding themselves until Fina met

me. Until then, Tiermina had been sick, so the three of them hadn't had much money.

"I think I've thought of something good," I told them.

"Have you really?!" Shia asked excitedly.

"But you might already know what it is," I added.

"What is it?"

"It's a type of candy that looks like cotton that you can make from sugar. Have you heard of that?"

"A... cotton-like candy you can make from sugar? I haven't heard of any such thing. Have any of you?" Shia asked, but they all shook their heads. Finally, she looked over at Ellelaura.

"I can't think of anything that fits the bill," said Ellelaura with a shrug.

Well, I could hardly just rely on their experiences. They were the sons and daughters of nobles, knights, and financiers. There was a chance they didn't know about the candy of the common people. I needed to ask your everyday guy about their experiences.

Right as I was thinking that, Surilina came into the room with tea for Shia and her friends.

"Pardon me." Surilina placed the tea in front of them. "If there is anything else you require, please call me." She bowed her head, then tried to leave the room.

A maid's an everyday person, right? Which meant Surilina's opinion would be the most useful one in the room.

I stopped her right as she was trying to leave. "Surilina, there's something I'd like to ask you, if that's all right?"

"Something you would like to ask me? If it is something I can answer, I would be happy to do so."

"Have you heard of a candy that uses something called granulated sugar to make stuff

that looks like cotton?"

"A candy like cotton, you say...?" Surilina tilted her head to the side in thought.
"Nothing comes to mind."

"Then I guess it might work. I'd like to show it to you too, so would you come with us?"

"My lady?" Surilina looked to Ellelaura.

"I don't mind."

With Ellelaura's permission, I pulled out a cotton candy machine.

"Yuna, what is this device?"

"Cotton candy machine. You use it to make the sugar candy fluffy, like cotton."

It was a lot harder to make the thing than I'd expected. When I'd found a shop selling granulated sugar, I'd gotten it in my head that making cotton candy would be easy, but it just wouldn't turn out right.

After a whole lot of work, I'd finally gotten the thing together... and only used it once. I mean, it's really easy to get sick of cotton candy. The whole reason cotton candy is good in the first place is because you don't eat it all the time—and that's all there is to say on the matter.

Next, I pulled out the sugar I'd bought and filled the tube at the center of the machine with it.

"Is that just normal sugar?"

"It's the kind that's sold in Crimonia and the capital." I'd found it at the capital initially, but Fina told me later about some I could get in Crimonia. Apparently, the capital often used it for candy-making.

"And you're saying this will make a candy that's cotton-like...?"

"Just watch." I poured mana into the mana gem of the machine, which made the fire gem at the center begin to heat up. The cylinder with the sugar inside started to turn quickly.

After a while, white cotton-like floss started to come out of the hole on the side of the tube at the center of the machine.

"Yuna," said Shia, "something's coming out of it!"

"This is cotton candy," I told her.

More and more of the white floss appeared from the machine. Wait, I couldn't just watch—I'd almost forgotten to prep the sticks! Instead of chopsticks, I'd prepped twigs. I pulled several out of my bear storage. Then, once I had one ready in my hand, I twirled it around and caught the strands on the twig. The floss caught and twisted around it steadily, turning into a cloud of cotton.

It'd been hard to do at first, but now I was a little better at it. The cotton candy rapidly grew in size.

"I'm beginning to see why they say it's like cotton..." mused Shia.

I kept twirling the twig and the cloud kept growing bigger. Aaand... there! That'd do it. I'd finished making about the amount of cotton candy they sell at festival stalls. I stopped the machine.

"Done and done." Everyone looked at me and the cotton candy in shock. "What's wrong?"

"It just looked so... incredible."

"Yuna, is this a type of magic?" asked Cattleya.



"No, it's just candy made from sugar." I handed Shia the cotton candy.

"It really does look like cotton...!!!"

"It truly does."

They were all ogling the candy.

"Yuna, how do we eat this?" asked Shia.

Yeah, I guess a daughter of a noble couldn't exactly just start chowing down on things.

"You can tear off a mouth-sized piece to eat it."

"With my hand?"

"Are nobles not allowed to eat with their hands?"

"No, that's not an issue." Shia stared at the cotton candy as she plucked off some with her fingertips. "It's sweet..."

"Well, it's all sugar." I hadn't used any other ingredients for it.

"Shia, let me try some." Elleaura tore off a piece of cotton candy when Shia held it out to her. "Hmm, it really *is* quite sweet."

"Shia, may I have some too?"

"And me."

"Me too."

Cattleya, Maricks, and Timol all seemed interested in the cotton candy. Shia held it out to the three of them and they all plucked pieces off.

"It melts instantly in my mouth."

"That is so strange."

"Yeah, but it's really good."

You could see it on their faces... they'd never had anything like this before in their entire lives.

"Surilina, this is the candy I was talking about. Have you seen it before?"

Shia held the cotton candy out to Surilina and had her tear off a piece to try too.

"No, I never knew such a confection existed," Surilina said. "I have never tried it, nor have I seen it before."

"Cool. We might just be in business. Why don't you try selling this at the school festival?" I asked. The kids all looked at each other, then back at me. "Think about it, right? It should gather attention, like Maricks wanted, and we'd be selling something unique to satisfy Cattleya's requirement. I think it should also fit Timol's idea for a shop."

"I'm sure we could sell this, but..." Shia and Timol seemed hesitant about the strange candy. "This would attract attention and sell well, but can we really go through with it? You're telling us the secret to something really special. Are you okay with that?"

It wasn't all *that* special, as far as candy went, and I didn't mind all that much since people would just be eating it at a festival.

"Yuna," Elleaura broke in. "I know I shouldn't be the one to propose this, but I think you ought to sell this at your own restaurant."

"This candy is specifically made for festivals," I explained. "I'm not planning on making it part of my business."

"Specifically for festivals, you say... really?"

Well, supermarkets and candy stores sold cotton candy sometimes, but in my mind, it was firmly a festival food.

In the end, they chose to sell cotton candy at the festival and got started on practicing how to make it right away.

CHAPTER 266

THE BEAR RECEIVES A REQUEST FROM SHIA

AFTER TEACHING THEM to make cotton candy, I decided it was time to give Princess Flora the book.

“Okay, guys,” I said, “make sure you practice until the festival!”

Right as I was about to leave, Shia stopped me. “Please wait a moment!”

“What’s up?”

“Um... if we requested you as a guard through the guild, how much would we need to pay for you to accept the work?”

“As a guard?” Wait, was I allowed to name my price? Was that how direct commissions worked?

The guild did have a minimum fee, though. Plus, the payouts changed based on the type of quest being offered, along with how many people were needed as guards, the distance, and the danger level. And if you wanted a higher-ranking adventurer, you paid a higher price. But if it was direct... could I just negotiate whatever fee I wanted for a quest? I hadn’t accepted one that way before, so I didn’t know the process.

“Where are you traveling, Shia?” Depending on what it was for, I wouldn’t need Shia to pay me at all.

“Oh, it’s not for me. If you’re coming to the festival, I was hoping you could bring Noa with you. I think she’ll go to the capital’s academy in the future too, and she couldn’t make it to the festival last year. I want you to bring her along.”

Escort Noa to the capital, huh? What a kind big sister Shia was.

After hearing that, I was considering doing it pro bono. Plus, I wasn’t so sure about taking money from Shia in the first place. I had no idea what the market rate was for an escort quest, after all, and I had no idea how the guild had handled that stuff in the

past when I'd worked through them.

"In that case, dear, I can pay the fee," Ellelaura offered.

"Mother?"

"If Noa can come to the festival, would you please bring her too if I were to pay you?"

Now Ellelaura was offering to pay the fee after listening in. The idea didn't feel as weird as accepting pay from Shia.

"Also," Ellelaura continued, "could you bring Fina and Shuri as well?"

"Fina? And Shuri too?"

"Fina took such good care of us when we went to visit your shops, but I would feel remiss if we left poor Shuri behind."

I suppose I had to agree. Shuri would sometimes complain about it being unfair, even if she always listened and stayed at home.

"As a thank-you for what they did for us, we'll invite both of them to my house and to the festival." With her plan conceived, Ellelaura was already pushing it along to the next step with total confidence.

I doubted the sisters would have many chances to see a school festival otherwise, so I was pretty into the idea myself. The issue was whether they *would* come along. Shuri wouldn't think twice about it—she'd be happy just to come to the capital, but I wondered how Fina would feel being invited by Ellelaura, who was a noble. But I was getting ahead of myself—first things first. I'd need Tiermina and Gentz's permission.

"I think even you would feel a big weight on your shoulders guarding three young girls, Yuna," added Ellelaura.

If I use the bear transport gate, it wouldn't be any burden at all, I wanted to say. But even then, I wasn't really sure about whether to share knowledge of the gate with Noa and Shuri. Neither of them would probably spread my secret around, but I didn't want all that many people knowing about it. Loose lips sink ships.

I could see Noa muttering it in her sleep: "Yuna's bear transport gate is so amazing..."

mumble mumble..."

"Are you sure you won't have problems guarding them and getting them to the capital?" Ellelaura asked.

"My bears would be able to carry two people each, and they'd be able to run away if we ran into monsters or bandits. It'll be fine."

I was pretty sure we'd be able to escape anything as long as we weren't being attacked by a dragon or something. I'd run into a wyvern before, but never a dragon. People don't just randomly run into dragons.

"Since I know you're powerful and have your bears," said Ellelaura, "I feel more at ease asking you than some regular adventurer."

She was talking like I'd already agreed to take the girls over here. I didn't mind bringing them over, but c'mon...

"Would it be all right if I left them in your hands?" asked Ellelaura finally.

"Sure," I said. "But if Cliff says Noa isn't allowed to go, then what should I do about Fina and Shuri?"

"If that happens, you can just bring them without Noa, since I truly do want to thank them. And I very much doubt Cliff would say no, so long as you're the one guarding them."

Yeah, he probably did trust me as a guard. The issue was whether Noa would be able to go. If Cliff didn't give permission, Noa would just have to give up on the whole thing.

"I'll write a letter for Cliff, so would you wait for a bit?" Ellelaura stood up and left the room before even waiting for me to answer.

Now that I was doing this, I needed to figure out how I'd get them here. There were only two options, really.

"Thank you, Yuna," Shia said. "I think Noa will be really excited about this."

"Remember, we need Cliff's permission," I reminded her.

Noa and Shia were nobles, but they were very different from that dummy noble's dummy son—that guy we'd met at Misa's birthday party. Honestly, it felt gross even putting them in the same category. They were *nothing* alike.

"What's Fina's little sister like?"

"She's exactly like Fina, and she's a real good kid," I answered. "And they get along really well, just like you and Noa."

"Ha! Then I'm looking forward to the festival even more. I'm glad I'll be able to see Noa, but I'm really looking forward to meeting Shuri too."

Shia hadn't seen Noa since the king's birthday festival, and she probably hadn't seen Fina either since the golem incident.

"Then you need to keep practicing the cotton candy until you're good," I said. "Don't want to embarrass yourselves when they get here, after all."

As Shia and I had talked, Maricks and the others kept making cotton candy.

"Ugh, it's so sweet! I can't stand to eat any more of it!"

"Me either."

Maricks and Timol were trying their hardest to finish the cotton candy they'd made, but they were on the verge of giving up. It's not like you can just gorge yourself on it, after all: cotton candy is pure sugar on a stick.

"Come now, you both need to eat it," said Cattleya, handing some cotton candy they'd messed up earlier to Maricks. "We can't make more otherwise."

"Then why don't you have some, Cattleya?"

"Oh, I *would*, but I might gain weight. Thank you, but I'm fine."

"*Seriously*, Cattleya?!"

I guess no matter how much of a sweet tooth a girl has, everyone's got their limits... and potentially expanding waistlines. Matter of fact, I was kinda feeling like I'd overeaten a little at the restaurant earlier. I guess you learn to live with that feeling as

a girl, I guess. As for Maricks and Timol, all I could do was wish the poor souls good luck.

"Eat this as a palate cleanser," I offered, pulling out some chips from my bear storage. They'd probably work well, since they were salty instead of sweet.

"Thank you, Yuna." Maricks started chowing down on the chips. "Oh. *Om... nom nom...* this could really work well too, don't you think?"

Y'know... maybe he had the right idea. I'd been so busy thinking about stuff I associated with festivals that I hadn't even considered selling potato chips.

"Yeah, I think you're right," Timol said. "These are pretty tasty!"

Cattleya munched a few chips and nodded. "I do believe if we were to sell these as a set, they would create quite the buzz."

"But can you get potatoes around here?" I asked.

"Well, there are some places that sell them," Surilina answered. "They are quite cheap, so they're often a food for the desperate and the destitute."

They were? I had no idea. "In that case, this might just work."

"If I may speak my mind," said Surilina, "I believe you should not serve them."

"Why is that?" Maricks asked between bites. "But they're—*nom om*—so good—*nom!*"

"If anyone were to fall ill eating these chips, the customers would likely blame you."

Well, I suppose there were people who really believed potatoes could make them sick. In actuality, they just had to avoid eating the sprouting eyes.

"Guess you've got a point," admitted Maricks. "I was pretty surprised too, when Yuna told me these were made from spuds."

"That is why I suggest against selling these at the festival. The aristocracy and wealthy will likely be in attendance, after all," said Surilina.

"You're right," said Timol.

"Yes, I suppose it's one thing to make them, but it would be quite unpleasant if anyone were to complain," said Cattleya.

Shia nodded. "And Yuna already went through to the trouble of teaching us how to make cotton candy."

After talking it over, the four of them decided not to serve any chips.

"Then I shall bring some refreshments to cleanse your palates," said Surilina, then left the room.

The four of them chowed down on some chips, and before long, they'd gotten back to making cotton candy. While I was watching them, Ellelaura came back with the letter.

"There we are, Yuna!" she said. "Please give this to Cliff."

I put the letter away in my bear storage so I wouldn't lose it, and with that, my business there was done. Finally, I asked them when the festival would be and said my goodbyes.

"I'm looking forward to the festival," I said, "so make sure you practice lots."

"Yuna, thank you so much for everything today," said Shia, and the other four followed suit.

I left the estate and headed to the castle next, but... wait, why wasn't Ellelaura coming with me? Didn't she have to get back there too?

CHAPTER 267

THE BEAR STRUGGLES TO ANSWER PRINCESS FLORA'S QUESTION

FROM THE ESTATE, I headed over to the castle to give Princess Flora the picture book.

Let's see, though... I needed to get Noa and Shuri to the capital, but how? I guess riding on Kumayuru and Kumakyu could work. The transport gate was a no-go, though—it'd be fine if I was just going with Fina, but not with Noa and Shuri. Then again, telling them about the gate *would* cut travel time to basically nothing...

I walked on, wracking my brain about what to do, and before long, I found myself at the gate. The soldiers standing out front were looking at me, as usual—though I'm sure they'd noticed me a while ago, considering my eye-catching outfit. I greeted the gate guards... who were staring behind me.

"Oh!" a guard exclaimed. "Greetings, Lady Ellelaura."

Sure enough, I turned around and there she was—

"Thank you for your service," said Ellelaura, smiling.

"Ellelaura? Since when were you behind me?"

"Why, as soon as you left the house, Yuna."

So... the entire time then. "Why would you follow me? That's terrible!" I'd been so lost in thought that I hadn't noticed her at all.

"It was so cute walking behind you. Why, your little tail was wagging all about!"

"Please don't ogle my behind," I said, hiding my tail with my hands. To tell the truth, I liked watching Kumayuru and Kumakyu's tails too but... imagining somebody watching my tail made me feel a little embarrassed.

"But it was oh-so-cute!" said Ellelaura, looking a little disappointed that I'd hidden my tail.

"Okay, sure, but why were you following me? You could have at least said something."

"I wanted to. But you see, I became so utterly entranced by your tail that I stared at it all the way to the castle."

Seriously, Ellelaura? "Anyway, um... are you going to work, Ellelaura?"

"Unless running a restaurant became my only job when I wasn't looking, then yes."

"Wow. So you really *do* have a job sometimes."

"Yuna, must you be so mean? I always take my work seriously!"

The "always" seemed like an overstatement, but I suppose her talk about the restaurant and eggs proved that she *was* doing work... though it always seemed like she was skipping out on it when I ran into her.

"Let's not just stand here and talk. We should go to Lady Flora, hmm? You came here to give her the book, after all."

Uh... I thought she'd come back to the castle in order to *work*. But I wasn't about to say that out loud. Wasn't worth the energy. Besides, even if Ellelaura skipped out on work, the only person she'd be causing trouble for was the king. No skin off my nose.

With permission from the guards, we entered the castle.

"My, I never would have imagined such a confectionery could be made with only sugar," Ellelaura mused. "How did you learn about such a candy?"

Was she trying to milk me for info or something? It wasn't like I could just tell her I was from another world or anything. "That's one of my secrets, of course."

"What a shame. But do be careful. You bring such wondrous ideas for food with you that someone might get... curious. If you work on anything new, be sure to tell me. I should be able to lend some assistance."

Maybe she was worried about how I'd told Shia and the others how to make cotton

candy?

I accepted the offer. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to do that.”

“If you come up with any new dishes, please come straight to me.”

Wait, was *that* what she was after? Jeez, Ellelaura was so hard to read. Hopefully, Noa and Shia wouldn’t turn out like her.

“Yuna, dear, am I mistaken in believing you thought something incredibly rude about me just now?”

“No, no. I was thinking about how *kind* you are, Ellelaura.”

“Were you now?” She gave me a dubious look. I gave her my best poker face.

Avoiding her gaze, I started walking off toward Princess Flora’s room.

“Would you please look at me, Yuna?” she asked.

“If you’re not joining me, I can get to her room on my own.”

“I’m coming along.”

“Didn’t you have work?” I blurted out.

“It should be fine. I’ve already finished everything important.”

Had she, though? Had she *really*?

While we walked down a familiar corridor, we came across a Kumayuru stuffed animal that was walking on two legs. Next to it stood Ange.

“Oh, why, if it isn’t Lady Ellelaura and Yuna!”

“Bear?” The Kumayuru stuffed animal cut in right after Ange.

Wow. Can you believe it? Somewhere along the line, I’d learned to talk with stuffed animals. Truly, the power of the bear girl has grown to terrible, reality-bending heights. What a wonder, what a terror, what a—

Okay, okay, I'm kidding. It was actually just Princess Flora behind the Kumayuru stuffed animal I'd given her. She eagerly popped her head out from behind it.

"Bear!" She looked positively giddy when she spotted me. A little unsteadily on her feet—she was lugging the bear around, after all—she ran right over.

Come to think of it, she'd only said "Bear" after hearing Ange say my name, so I guess that meant she actually *did* know my real name was Yuna. Maybe she'd stop calling me Bear when she got a bit older?

I placed a hand on Princess Flora's head as she hugged me, and then I looked to Ange. "What are the two of you doing in the hall?"

"We are on the way back from a walk," Ange replied.

"A walk? With a stuffed animal?"

"Walking with Bear!" Princess Flora exclaimed, giving the Kumayuru stuffed animal a squeeze. I was a little sad not to see Kumakyu with her too, but Princess Flora was too tiny to carry both stuffed animals at the same time.

"Did you come to see Princess Flora?" asked Ange.

"I have a new picture book, so I brought it along."

"Pik-ture book?!" Princess Flora squeaked happily.

"*Another* picture book?" Ange seemed thrilled too.

I understood why Princess Flora was so excited, but... Ange? Seriously?

"So, Lady Flora," said Ange, "Yuna has brought a book. Shall we return to your room?"

"We can wait until after you're done with your walk," I offered.

"I wanna go back to the woom!" Princess Flora said, hugging her teddy bear close and tugging on my clothes with her itty-bitty hand.

We had decided. "The room, then!" I grabbed her hand with my bear puppet and we headed right over.

"You really are so soft when it comes to kids," Ellelaura noted.

Looking back on what I'd done so far, I really couldn't tell her I wasn't, so... I guess she was right? But what kind of person could brush a kid off after seeing a smile like that? I bet Ellelaura herself couldn't. Besides, what was wrong with being soft, you know?

Once we got to the room, Princess Flora headed right to her bed. The Kumakyu stuffed animal waited by her pillows, its duty to keep watch during the walk coming to a close. Princess Flora set her Kumayuru on her pillows and then picked up her Kumakyu.

Wait, what? I didn't understand.

"She brings the black bear with her outside the room," Ange explained, "and has the white bear inside the room."

"Why does she have them divided up in that way?"

Ange seemed reluctant as she explained. "She may get them dirty when going outside, so... um... if the black bear *does* pick up some dirt... it won't be as noticeable..." Sounded sensible to me. "That is why she carries the white bear in the room, and the black bear outside."

Kumakyu wasn't being left out at least, but I still felt a little bad for Kumayuru. It wasn't like Kumayuru was made black *specifically* to avoid stains... but did that outweigh the risk of getting Kumakyu's white coat dirty?

Princess Flora headed over to the table with Kumakyu, getting ready to read.

"Here's the new book," I said, holding it out.

"Thank you, Bear." Princess Flora happily took the book from me and plunked down on her chair. She started looking through it right away. Ange hovered over her to peek at the book. She apparently wanted to know what was in this story.

"Lady Ellelaura, can you take care of this book too?"

She nodded. "Of course. You can rest assured that we will distribute it."

"Thank you."

Ange looked pleased to hear it. Princess Flora slowly turned the pages of the book, and Ange managed to restrain herself from reading along to get us some tea... though she kept close by while pouring it. With the instruments she had on hand, she finished prepping the tea.

"Thank you," I said.

We drank the tea and rested for a while. I wondered whether the king would come by today. I'd seen one of the guards running off, which was usually a sign he'd make an appearance.

While I thought that over and sipped my tea, Princess Flora's face fell.

"Bye-bye, Bear..." Flip. She turned the page. "Bear!" Now she looked happy. I guess the bear had just shown up in the story.

Once she finished reading everything, she turned to me. "Bears can turn small...?"

Everyone in the room paused as soon as she asked that.

Hmm...

Any normal adult knew that bears just couldn't change size all willy-nilly. And kids around Fina and Noa's age would understand that if you just explained it. But at Princess Flora's age, I wasn't so sure she'd grasp the concept. I mean, Princess Flora literally knew that some bears who *could* change sizes.

Ange took the reins. "Lady Flora, bears are normally incapable of changing size."

"But the Bear's bears turned small!" she insisted. Princess Flora was equating my bear summons to real-life, actual bears.

"Well..." Ange looked pleadingly at Elleaura and me for help.

It was already difficult to tell my summon bears and natural ones apart, and even I couldn't have explained them *that* well.

"Lady Flora, normal bears cannot shrink," said Elleaura. "Yuna's bears are very special, and so are the bears in this book."

“Spe-shul...?”

“Yes, they are *special* bears. So you mustn’t think normal bears can shrink, okay?”

But Princess Flora still tilted her head and looked confused. It was difficult to explain.

I’d planted the misconception in her head, so now it was my responsibility to fix things. If she hadn’t known about my bears, I could have just told her the bears in the book were fantasies... but Princess Flora knew my bears *could* shrink.

“Bears can’t shwink?” Princess Flora hugged her Kumakyu plush close.

“Like they said, my bears are special,” I said gently. “Normal bears can’t shrink.”

Princess Flora looked uncertain. Of all things she might’ve asked, I never would’ve expected this question. If she’d asked about the people who had run away, I’d planned on foisting the responsibility to answer on Elleaura or the king... but this one had come out of the blue.

Then, the king and queen came in, a little later than usual. I guess they hadn’t been able to escape from work right away this time. They thanked me when they saw Princess Flora’s new book.

Right then, I remembered my promise to Zelef. I pulled out chawanmushi for Princess Flora and everyone else. It seemed like everyone enjoyed it.

CHAPTER 268

THE BEAR GOES TO SEE NOA

AFTER I GAVE PRINCESS FLORA THE BOOK, it was back to Crimonia... and it was also time to make my choice. I'd been hovering back and forth about whether or not to share the bear gate with Noa and Shuri.

"What'll it be, then?" I asked Fina.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure what the answer is to your question."

I'd called Fina over to my house to ask for her advice and gone through the trouble of serving her tea and sweets to make sure she'd at least humor me.

Not that I was about to withhold snacks for an answer, but everybody loves getting a treat or two.

I laid out some more food for Fina.

Fina looked thoughtful. "Does that mean Shuri and I are going to the capital?"

"Elleaura told me she wanted to thank you both for taking care of her while she visited," I replied.

"I didn't do anything she'd need to thank me for though," said Fina.

"I thought you showed her around to the shops and told her about things, right?"

"Only a little, and only to help my mom."

Made sense. I could imagine Fina having to step in if Tiermina got too nervous to say anything.

"I don't think you need to think too deeply about it," I said. "It seemed to me like she really did just want to thank you. So... do you not want to go to the capital?"

"The school festival is for the students going to Lady Shia's academy?"

"I think so. I haven't been to it, so I'm not *entirely* sure. But I heard that the students set up shops and put on shows."

I hadn't even gone to a school festival in my original world. When you got down to it, I only really knew about school festivals in a theoretical sense. And when it came to alternate universe school festivals, I was making pretty big swings based on nothing.

"I would like to go, but are you sure Shuri and I are allowed to be there?" she asked.
"You're sure we won't get in the way...?"

Wait, is that what was bothering her? "I don't think you'll get in the way at all. Honestly, it'd be more of a problem for me if you didn't come."

Fina tilted her head at me, confused.

"If you didn't come," I explained, "Ellelaura would get in my face with all kinds of questions. 'Why didn't you bring them with you?' 'Did you *actually* invite them?' 'You didn't say something odd to them, did you?' That kinda stuff, y'know."

Well, I doubted Ellelaura would put it so snidely, but she'd definitely be disappointed with me.

"Well, I guess I really *can't* say no after hearing that."

What a nice, good kid.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding," I said. "I won't force you to go. If you really don't want to, you can just tell me. I'll give Ellelaura some excuse."

I wasn't about to force her to go if she really didn't want to. If going to the festival was some compulsory attendance duty, how would Fina and Shuri even enjoy the festival?

"Are you sure we won't be in your way...?" she asked.

"I've never thought you were in the way, Fina. Never once in my life. Honestly, I more wonder whether you ever get annoyed that I always force you to tag along with me everywhere."

"Force me to—I don't feel that way at all, no! I'm happy you've taken me to see all these wonderful places, Yuna!"

"You mean it?"

"Uh-huh! I felt that way when you first took me to the capital, and the second time, and then when you took me to the ocean and to all those other villages. And when you took me to the honey tree and to Lady Misa's birthday party, I was so nervous and tired at first... but by the end, I was having fun. Lots of fun!"

The look in Fina's eyes was utterly serious and perfectly honest.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm happy to hear that. So... can I assume that you'll come this time too?"

"Uh-huh, I want to see the festival!"

"Let's all go together, then. I'd be lonely if you weren't there."

I wanted to give her a pat on the head, but she was sitting across from me and I couldn't quite reach her. I settled for smiling.

"But we're bringing Shuri this time?" she asked.

"Yeah, Ellelaura said she wanted me to bring both of you. I haven't asked Tiermina and Gentz for permission yet, though."

"I think Mom will say okay, but... I'm not so sure about Dad."

I figured they'd agree to Fina going, since I was normally dragging her around with me from place to place, but... then again, I'd only taken Shuri overnight to the ocean that one time. Still, I'd be with both of them, and I was also still a pretty powerful adventurer—unexpected monsters wouldn't be a problem for me.

And surely I'd earned enough trust from Gentz to get his permission.

"So, Fina, what about the gate? Do you think that I can tell Shuri about it?"

"She keeps promises, so I don't think she would tell anyone. But I think she'd be even happier if she got to ride Kumayuru and Kumakyu."

Yeah, that's probably how Noa felt too. It'd be like missing a chance to travel with my bears.

In the end, though Fina did give me advice, I still didn't have a concrete answer. I decided to ask Noa directly.

"Welcome, Miss Yuna."

Lala was there to greet me when I arrived at Noa's house.

"Are Cliff and Noa here?" I asked. "I have a letter from Elleaura, so I was hoping to see them."

"Did you require them both? Lady Noa is available in her room, but I believe Lord Cliff is still working. I do not know whether he will accept visitors. I will check, so please come inside and wait a moment."

Lala led me to a room, and I waited for a while.

Before long, Noa burst in. "Yuna?!"

She rushed over with a smile on her face. Now that I was seeing her again, I could really see her resemblance to Shia. I wondered if she'll start to look more like Elleaura as she gets older... If so, I could only pray it was only the *looks* she'd have in common. I really wanted her to grow up honest and sensible.

"Yuna, what's the matter?"

I'd been staring at Noa, and now she seemed a bit of a loss.

"Uhhh... it's nothing. I was just thinking about how adorable you are."

"You're much more adorable than I am, Yuna!"

"Thank you." I gave her a pat on the head, and then she plopped herself down right beside me.

"Lala told me that you have a letter from Mother."

"Yeah, but it's really more for Cliff than for you. Shia wants to show you the academy festival, so she asked me to bring you over."

"Mother asked for that...?" She looked positively ecstatic. Noa and Shia really were just as close as Fina and Shuri then. Just seeing that was heartwarming.

"Elleaura wrote a letter to get permission for the journey from Cliff," I said. "What do you think, Noa? Do you want to go to the festival?"

"Wh-why, of course I want to go!"

Exactly what I'd thought. "Then all we have left to do is to get Cliff's permission."

"I will absolutely convince Father," Noa announced.

She didn't need to do all of that. We already had Elleaura's letter after all, and I was planning on making a case for her too. If he *really* didn't want to let her go, then I'd use the favor he owed me. Then again, I'd caused him so much trouble, I kind of felt like that had already canceled any debt he owed me.

Possibly.

But maybe there was a *smidgen* of debt left...?

"This means I will be able to go on another outing with Kumayuru and Kumakyu!" She turned a very happy smile to me. I guess she really did want to ride on my bears, then.

"Are you really looking forward to traveling with them that much?"

"Why, of course! Simply hearing the possibility is enough to get me excited for it! Will I be able to have both of them to myself this time?"

"Fina and Shuri are both going to come this time, so you can't monopolize them."

Even if we didn't have two other people coming, I still needed to ride at least one of my bears, so she couldn't have both regardless.

"Fina and Shuri are coming too!?" Noa asked.

"Elleaura asked for them to come, yeah. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes, of course! I am disappointed that I won't have Kumayuru and Kumakyu to myself, but I'm happy we will all be going to the capital together."

"Happy about what?" Cliff had walked in through the door. "Sorry for the wait, Yuna."

"I didn't mind. I was just talking with Noa."

Cliff sat down on the sofa in front of me, looking incredibly haggard. Managing a fiefdom could get pretty exhausting. "Lala says you have a letter for me from Elleaura."

I pulled the letter out of my bear storage and handed it off to Cliff. He read it. I kind of felt like I saw a scowl forming on his face the more he read, but... that had to be my imagination, right?

"The academy festival, eh? It's already that time of year..."

"Please, Father. Please allow me to go to the festival. Yuna will even escort me. Won't you *please* let me go?" Noa looked earnest as she begged Cliff.

"I'll make sure she gets to the capital safely," I promised. "Can you give her permission to go?"

If I used the gate, it'd really only take a moment to get there. But even using my bears would be safe enough.

"I'm not worried about the escorting," said Cliff. "I doubt any adventurer could do a better job protecting Noa."

So he did trust me, then. And yet the moment I'd mentioned the capital, he'd suddenly looked so reluctant...

"Noa, have you been minding your studies?" he asked.

"Yes, I've been doing them properly."

Cliff thought for a bit.

"Are you worried about something?" I asked.

Cliff looked over at Noa. "When she went to the capital last time during the birthday

festival, several people tried to discuss her potential for betrothal."

"Me?! Betrothal?!" Noa looked apprehensive.

Who wouldn't? Anyone would get shaken up if the word "betrothal" started getting thrown around.

"We turned down all the offers, of course," he said.

Noa looked relieved to hear Cliff say that, and I was too. Hearing this come up so suddenly had genuinely surprised me.

"But wouldn't Shia marry first?" Noa asked.

"Shia will succeed me, so her husband-to-be will join our family. Anyone wishing to have a connection to me or Ellelaura would aim for an engagement with you, Noa... and I don't intend to let people like that use you as a bargaining chip in their game."

So he was worried about would-be suitors getting near Noa. Even though I didn't know much about the aristocracy, I could understand why being betrothed to one of their daughters would be useful for getting an in with Ellelaura or Cliff.

But... man, she was only ten years old! I guess they were trying to call dibs on her early, but... even if that was just the way of things here, it sure didn't sit right with me.

"You needn't worry, Father. I wouldn't become betrothed to anyone," Noa said, looking up at her father seriously.

"Noa, dear, that would *also* be an issue in a different way..."

"Okay, well... if I must marry, then I will become engaged to Yuna!"

"..."

"..."

Cliff and I just kinda... stood there, wide-eyed. I hadn't misheard her, right?

"Noa, you *do* know I'm a girl, right?"

She didn't think I was a guy because I was lacking in a certain... chest-forward department, right? We'd bathed together, so she couldn't think that.

Ugh, I'd be having a good cry into my pillow tonight.

"Of course I know that you're a girl!" said Noa.

Right. Thank goodness. My original world did have certain countries where same-sex marriage was allowed, though. Wait, was it legal in this world for two women to get married too?!

Huh. Not what I would've expected.

"If I were to marry Yuna," she explained, "I would be able to always be with Kumayuru and Kumakyu!"

Okay, so she didn't actually want *me*—it was all about the bears. That seemed very like Noa, but I wish she'd just, y'know... led with that part instead of nearly proposing to me.

"All right," said Cliff. "In that case, I'm leaving Noa in your hands."

"Uh. You want me to marry her?!"

"No, of course not—you're both female. I'd like you to escort her to the capital. She should be fine even if a miscreant tries to approach her. And Yuna, I take it you're intending to stick by her side throughout the entire festival?"

"That's what I was planning," I said. "Though I might go my own separate way if Shia and Elleaura want to spend time with her."

"Then I trust you to watch her when you're accompanying her. If anyone so much as *approaches* Noa, please show the Fochrosé crest Elleaura gave you. If they still won't withdraw their advances, then I give you permission to, *ah...* knock them around a little."

"Are you sure?"

"If they don't withdraw after seeing the Fochrosé crest, what happens after that is their own fault."

"Are you sure there won't be anyone super important coming up to us?"

"Not at this point, no. If anyone like that were to appear, they would come to me or Ellelaura to talk directly."

Yeah, I guess anyone important would be able to talk to Cliff and Ellelaura in the first place—there'd be no need to go to Noa.

In other words, if anyone came near Noa, I'd show them the crest on my knife and, if they still wouldn't leave us alone—*wham!* Bear punch. Easy-peasy lemon-squeezy.

Well, I'd gotten permission to take Noa to the festival... even if I'd briefly wondered if Cliff was trying to marry me to his daughter. He *really* needs to watch his phrasing sometimes, I swear.

Runs in the family, I guess. Noa and Cliff had both given me a scare by being way too ambiguous with their words.

CHAPTER 269

THE BEAR INVITES FINA AND THE OTHERS TO THE ACADEMY'S FESTIVAL

AS OUR TALK CAME TO A CLOSE, Cliff pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Are you tired?" I asked. He'd looked beat when he came into the room too—I mean *really* beat.

"Because of a certain someone, we've had an influx of people and trade. This has led to an inflow of work as well."

"Seems like a big job, being a feudal lord and all."

"Don't pretend you're not involved, Yuna."

"It's your job, isn't it? How's that my fault?" What did a feudal lord's work have to do with me?

"Yes, I suppose governing the fief is my work. But *you're* the reason for my increased workload!"

"I am?" C'mon, how could I have made Cliff's job busier?

"Did you forget what you did?"

"Uh...?"

He gave me an exasperated look, as if that'd be enough to jog my memory. Ugh, I've had it with these disingenuous assertions!

"Um, Yuna?" Noa spoke up. "I think he means the tunnel to Mileela that you found."

I hit the first of my bear puppet against my other hand when I made the connection. Right, that tunnel to Mileela. Just the other day, Milaine had mentioned that there were

more merchants coming from Mileela lately, and things were getting pretty busy around here. I'd only half-listened though, because it didn't seem to have anything to do with me.

"So you've finally remembered," Cliff said.

Yeah, I'd completely forgotten. Whenever I went to Mileela, I'd used the transport gate, so the tunnel was barely a blip in my brain these days. I'd wiped the time he'd made me make the bear statue from my mind too, because it's human nature to forget unpleasant memories.

"Thanks to the tunnel, we've started to have a higher number of people traveling between Crimonia and Mileela. More and more people want to see the ocean or engage in trade... which has led to a shortage of rooms in the inn. And more people means more trouble. I've increased the number of guards, and they're doing more patrols, but we're critically understaffed. That applies to both Crimonia and Mileela. While I expected this, it's all just happening so much faster than I'd anticipated."

Yeesh, just hearing him say all that was enough to give me a little anxiety. What a disaster. Yeah, I definitely never wanted to be someone as important as he was. I was lucky that I hadn't showed up in this world incarnated as royalty or aristocracy or something, honestly. Probably wouldn't be having any fun at all.

"I never knew you had so much more work," I said.

"Even more than I expected," he grumbled.

Now that I thought about it, Tiermina had mentioned something to that effect too, and I hadn't really paid attention. It didn't help that I never stayed at inns anymore, and I hadn't really been stopping by the Adventurers' or Merchants' Guild lately either, so... it'd just kinda slipped through the cracks.

"Sounds like a lot." At least I knew why Cliff was so tired now, I guess.

"You really act like it's not your problem..."

"Huh? I mean, it's not, right?"

Sure, I might have caused all the initial work, but people commuting back and forth had nothing to do with me. It was Cliff's duty to keep an eye on that. I mean, it was his

job, after all. That had nothing to do with a regular old bear girl like yours truly.

"You have a point, but don't you see that this all started from that tunnel you found? Could you at least *pretend* that it's weighing on you, even a little bit? I haven't even been able to see my daughter as much as usual."

Ohhh... so he was mad because he couldn't get time in with Noa?

"I can close off the tunnel if you want," I said. I was joking, obviously—if I did that, Crimonia would lose its supply of seafood and Anz would have a huge problem on her hands. Worst of all, *I'd* have a huge problem too.

"Don't you dare," said Cliff. "If you do, I'd collapse."

Oops. Apparently, Cliff wasn't exactly in the mood to pick up on jokes.

"Yuna, you cannot!" Noa added. "If you do that, we won't be able to go to the ocean anymore."

And she was taking the joke seriously too?! "It was a joke."

That settled Noa down, at least.

"It'll be busy until we're able to train new people," said Cliff. "Once I find some talented people, I can delegate the work to them and relax a little more. Milaine is working hard as can be too, so I'm sure that things will settle sooner rather than later... as long as a certain someone doesn't bring us more trouble."

Who, me? He said it like I was a detective who always ran into murders wherever she went, or an anime protagonist who's always stirring up chains of battles with powerful baddies.

Nah, I was just your average fifteen-year-old girl in a bear onesie who'd been summoned to this other world by a god. The only trouble I'd stirred up was the tunnel to Mileela and the 10,000 monsters and the stuff at Misa's birthday party when I'd gone to beat the crap out of people!

Which, uh... hmm.

Okay, considering how little time I'd actually been here, when you think about it,

maybe that *did* count for a lot of incidents. Now I just felt guilty.

“So, um, Cliff... anything I can help with?”

“No, it’s fine. I expected this. It just heated up earlier than I’d anticipated. I’ve said too much. Sorry.”

“All right, if you say so. But if you do need anything, just ask. I’ll help with what I can.”

“Taking Noa to the festival will be help enough,” he replied. “Please make sure Noa has a good time.”

“That’s the plan.” I guess he didn’t need my help, then.

Cliff pinched the bridge of his nose again. Poor, burned-out guy. I wanted to use recovery magic on him, but that’d probably cause trouble somehow. What could I do for him...?

Wait, hold on—I did have something that fit the bill.

“You can have this, Cliff.” I pulled out the sacred tree tea leaves and gave Cliff a small amount as a present.

“What is this?”

“It’s tea that’ll make you less tired. Have Lala brew it for you later.”

“Hmm...” He looked at the tea leaves dubiously. “This isn’t anything unscrupulous, is it?”

“Have I ever given you anything unscrupulous even *once*? ”

I couldn’t believe he was acting like they were suspicious. I couldn’t remember a single time I’d fed Cliff anything weird... probably. Uh. Not that I could recall.

Right?

He paused thoughtfully. “I suppose you’re right,” he said, accepting the tea leaves from me. “You bring trouble wherever you go, but the food you bring me has always been delicious. My apologies for doubting you. I greatly appreciate the gift. Truly.”

“Once you’ve tried it, let me know what you think,” I said.

“What? You haven’t tried it yourself then?”

“I have. But I couldn’t tell if it actually made me less tired, so I wanted to see what you think.”

As long as I was wearing my bear onesie, I’d just fundamentally never get tired no matter how much I was running around. On the other hand, when I wore the white bear onesie to bed, I’d feel refreshed by morning. I had no way of checking whether the tea worked.

And I wasn’t about to take off my onesie just to test the theory.

“Yuna, may I try some as well?” Noa asked.

“I wouldn’t mind, but it just tastes like normal tea.”

“Then we’ll have Lala brew it later,” Cliff said. “I will be going back to work. I entrust Noa to you.” Tea leaves in hand, Cliff left the room.

“Noa, are you glad you’re going to the academy festival?” I asked.

“Very much so! Thank you, Yuna. So, when shall we leave?”

Now that was the next big problem. “Hmm... about that. I want to ask you something, so could you stop by my house tomorrow?”

“At your house, Yuna? I wouldn’t mind, but why there?”

“Well, remember how I told you that Fina and Shuri are going too?”

“Yes.”

“There’s something I want to discuss with the three of you.” I couldn’t tell Noa about the bear gate with just *any* company, after all.

“Something to discuss...? Mmm, all right. In that case, I will come to visit your house tomorrow.”

"Thank you. Let's discuss it over lunch."

I went back to my bear house, and then—around the time I thought Gentz probably got off work—I headed for Fina's place so I could tell her folks about taking their daughters to the capital.

I needed to convince Gentz and Tiermina to let the two go, so I'd prepped myself with tons of lines to persuade them: "I'll protect them, so you don't have to worry." "I am a C-rank adventurer, after all." "I can fight off a black viper, so they'll be safe even if we get attacked by monsters." "Even if we're attacked, my bears will be there, so they'll be able to escape without harm."

And so, at last, I arrived at Fina's house with all my most brilliant arguments locked and loaded.

"Fine by me if you're with them, Yuna," said Gentz.

"What a relief to know you'll accompany them!" said Tiermina.

"..." My jaw dropped. I hadn't counted on such a quick *yes*.

Shuri and Fina seemed ecstatic at that.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. When Fina went to the capital, Shuri was so patient when she had to stay behind in Crimonia. If they were going on their own, I'd stop them, but you're going to be with them. We can rest easy knowing you'll watch them."

So Gentz trusted me after all. The thought of that made me happy.

Tiermina nodded. "And we can't turn down an invitation from Lady Elleaura!"

"I don't think she'd be particularly hung up about it..." I trailed off. She wouldn't be mad, but I guess she'd probably be sad.

"I suppose she wouldn't be *upset*, per se. She didn't seem like the type," Tiermina admitted. "But still, we can't turn down a noble's invitation."

“Lady Ellelaura is kind,” I said, “but she does also kinda like making people do stuff.”

I’d heard that Ellelaura had actually dragged Fina all over the place and dressed her up like a doll while I was out slaying the golems. That would’ve been a real sight, to be honest... but then again, just thinking about anyone trying that on *me* made me shudder.

“And we can’t take you to the capital easily ourselves,” added Gentz. “I think it would be a good experience for Shuri to have, just like it was for Fina. Still, I am a bit worried that you two might cause trouble for Lady Ellelaura.”

“I won’t cause trouble,” said Fina.

“Me neither!” said Shuri, pouting a little.

Man, now I was nostalgic for the days when Fina froze up at the mere mention of the word “noble.” She’d really grown up. It was bittersweet.

Tiermina laughed. “I know you two are good kids, but I’m your mother. It’s my job to worry, you know.” Tiermina gave Shuri a pat on the head. “Wouldn’t they be causing you some trouble, Yuna?”

“Fina and Shuri wouldn’t whine, so it should be fine.”

“I won’t whine at all!” Shuri piped up.

“I won’t whine either,” said Fina.

“Ha ha ha! Then I’ll leave both of them in your capable hands, Yuna.”

There we go: I had permission to take Fina and Shuri to the capital. I tried to head home after that, but Tiermina invited me to dinner: I gratefully accepted her home cooking.

Before I headed back home, I had Fina and Shuri promise to come to my house the next day.

CHAPTER 270

THE BEAR TALKS ABOUT A WAY TO GET TO THE CAPITAL

FINA CAME HOME EARLY the next day, so I spent some time prepping lunch with her as we waited for Noa. In the meantime, Shuri played with my miniaturized bears.

“Yuna, I set the table,” said Fina.

“Thanks. Can you prep the tea next?”

“Yep.” I could hear the two of them talking behind me then. “Shuri, Lady Noa will be here soon. That’s enough playing with Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

“Kay. Kumayuru, Kumakyu, I’ll play with you later.”

Once we were about done prepping lunch, Noa came by.

“I was waiting for you,” I said.

“You don’t mean to say I’m late, am I?” Noa asked when she saw both Fina and Shuri helping me with the food.

“Nah, right on time. These two came early, so they’re just helping me set up lunch.”

“I see, then. In that case, I really ought to have come early too.”

“Don’t worry about it. C’mon, how about we talk over food?”

For today’s lunch, I’d prepped fried rice, soup, and salad. Once they were all seated, my miniaturized bears curled up next to me.

“I suppose we’re here to figure out when to leave?” Noa asked between bites of fried rice.

"Basically. But I'd like to tell you and Shuri something quickly before we decide that, if that's all right?"

"Yes," said Noa.

"What is it?" asked Shuri.

The two of them gripped their spoons as they looked over to me.

"You two want to travel with Kumayuru and Kumakyu, right?" I asked.

"Absolutely!"

"Yeah!"

They didn't even hesitate. Right, I knew it.

"I'm so happy just thinking about spending the whole day with Kumayuru and Kumakyu," said Noa.

"Mm-hm, me too!"

They had such similar ways of seeing things that it almost felt like they were the real sisters in the room.

Not that Fina didn't love my bears too. She always looked happy when I summoned them, giving them tons of pets right away.

"I'm so happy imagining how we'll go to the capital with your bears!" said Noa.

"I wanna ride Kumakyu soon," said Shuri.

They both had bears on their minds. But since we could get to the capital instantly using the transport gate, it almost felt like a waste of time riding on bears all the way. If I didn't tell them about it... maybe nobody would feel weird about that? I held the spoon in my mouth for a moment, lost in thought.

"What's wrong, Yuna?" asked Noa.

"Hm? Oh, just had something on my mind. I was thinking how nice it'd be if we could

get to the capital instantly."

"Instantly?" Noa repeated. "If we could do that, I could see Mother any time I wished!"

I barely managed to swallow my words. *You can get to Ellelaura real easily by just using the bear transport gate.*

What was the right time to tell her my secret? I'd figured this would be hard to discuss after asking Fina, but talking about my bear secrets seemed even harder in the moment.

"If that were possible, what would you two want to do? Would you still want to ride Kumayuru and Kumakyu to the capital?"

"I still wanna ride the bears!" Shuri said immediately.

"I think if such a thing existed, it would be nice," said Noa. "But I would still want to ride the bears as well."

So Shuri was pro-bear and Noa was split on the decision.

Noa blinked. "But why are you asking us that question, Yuna?"

"Just to... get an idea of things."

I knew how the two of them felt now. They seemed to prefer traveling on my bears over using the bear gate.

Fina spoke up, choosing her words carefully. "Yuna, could we go to the capital on Kumayuru and Kumakyu? We could always find another way back."

She had a point. The two of them were looking forward to riding my bears. We could just head there via bear and use the gate to get home.

We'd have a long journey, followed by the festival, so we'd probably be tired by the time we needed to head back. That's when the gate would come in handy. Fina's idea was solid for sure.

"What are you talking about, Fina?" asked Noa.

"Um, nothing at all!" Fina planned on keeping her promise with me and not giving up the secret of the gate.

Totally unaware of what had just happened, Noa dug into her fried rice. "Then let's all go to the capital together!"

We decided to go a few days early instead on the day of the festival—it'd be nice to have some spare time, after all. The goal from the beginning was making sure that the three of them had a good time. If I needed to tell them about the gate at some point, I could tell them on the way home, like Fina had proposed. Timing was super important for this.

After finishing the fried rice (which everyone seemed to like), I pulled out some pudding for dessert. Then the trio played with mini Kumayuru and Kumakyu until the sun went down. Once they tuckered themselves out, they fell asleep with my bears in their arms.

The next day, I got ready for our trip to the festival. I had three kids to take care of, so I'd need things for them to play with.

I had Othello, but that game could get boring after a while. I decided to finally get together that classic jack of all trades item for any game on the road: a pack of playing cards.

I'd been working on them little by little, whenever I could get a spare moment. I'd drawn all the kings, queens, and jacks as tiny bears with heads as big as their bodies. The kings wore crowns, and I made sure to make the queens extra-regal. The jacks held swords, and of course, the jokers were bears.

I'd also wanted to make the backings into patterns of little bears for the kids, but I left them white—drawing fifty-four sets of the same design was way too much, so I wanted to find some way to print the backs. Plus, if I lost the cards I'd drawn or if they tore, I'd lose all the time and effort I'd spent working on those designs.

I headed to the Merchants' Guild in Crimonia to see if I could print duplicates of my playing cards. As I approached, I realized that there really were a lot of merchants, just like Cliff had said.

And how, you ask, do I know these merchants weren't around these parts? Well, the merchants from Crimonia would avert their eyes as soon as they saw me since they knew me. But merchants from out of town wouldn't be able to stop their curious stares from the moment they spotted me.

In the past, the guild master, Milaine, had told me that almost all the merchants living in Crimonia knew who I was. Rumor had spread about a bear beating the black viper after said bear came in with the raw, harvested monster parts. Soon enough, they were all talking about the bear who'd opened shops—and then there was the whole business with the eggs.

The merchants around here were familiar with the weirdness, so I didn't get any strange looks. By the process of elimination, the only merchants who stared at me had to be from out of town. The one thing that Crimonian merchants really *didn't* know was my name. Apparently, everyone just called me "the bear."

Rude much?

I headed into the Merchants' Guild. There were a few receptionists at the desk, but no sign of Milaine. Then again, Milaine was pretty busy, what with the whole "guild master" thing, so I guess she didn't have much time to horse around at reception desks. Lianna was there—the employee who'd helped me out back when all the stuff with the honey was happening—but she was already serving someone. Our eyes met, so I bobbed my head in greeting and left it at that.

All of the reception desks had lines of waiting merchants. Hmm... seemed like a bother to wait. Maybe I'd come back tomorrow? But right as I was about to leave, Lianna stopped me.

"Miss Yuna!" she called, and I turned around. She'd finished with the person she'd been serving, but it still wasn't my place in line, right? "What's brought you here today?"

"I needed to talk to Milaine real quick." I paused for a sec, taking in just how full the place was. "Would I be able to meet with her?"

"The guild master is busy, so I'm afraid she can't talk. You could discuss the matter with me, if that would help."

“Are you sure? What about the other people waiting?”

“It should be fine. Someone else will serve them.” She was playing it down, but was she really allowed to do this? Still, Lianna called on another worker in the back to take her place. “Please, Yuna, come this way.”

She led me to another room. It felt a little like special treatment. Seriously, was this actually allowed? I tried asking about it.

Lianna answered without hesitation. “Any guild would grant a warm reception to someone who has been a major contributor to said guild, *especially* if that contributor is important around town. Upsetting such a person causes more problems than it’s worth.”

“But I wouldn’t get mad or anything.”

“We know that, but this just shows how important you are to the Merchants’ Guild.”

“Am I really?”

“You bring us raw materials from monsters, proceeds from sales at your shop, and an egg supply, and most importantly, you provided the tunnel to Mileela. The profits of the Merchants’ Guild have skyrocketed, all thanks to you. We couldn’t make you wait after all that.”

Okay, when you put it that way, sure. But the shops were really being run by Morin and Anz. The eggs were the result of the orphans’ hard work. Plus, adults like Tiermina supported everybody. As for the tunnel, I’d just dug a big hole. Cliff had landscaped it and set up mana gem lights in the tunnel so it would be usable.

Thinking about it, I’d pretty much just brought monster materials and dug the tunnel... and that was all due to the bear gear.

Hmm... was it really okay to bask in all this preferential treatment? Then again, the bear gear was mine and I was basically the owner of the shops...

“So, then,” she continued, “what was it you wanted to speak about?”

“I’m looking for a place that can print things.”

“Print things?”

“I want a place that can make duplicates of these. Do you know a place I could order them from?” I pulled the playing cards out of my bear storage.

“Is that a card game?” Lianna asked, gazing down at the bear cards.

So this world had cards after all. Maybe I’d look into that later.

“Yeah, I want them to make duplicates of these. Do you know where I could do it?”

“I do. Would you like the guild to take these and arrange it?”

That’d make things easy. I explained the cards to her, sure to add that I wanted them to print a bear design on the white backs of the cards that I’d prep separately.

“I can pay whatever the cost is. Just make sure the paper’s sturdy and doesn’t rip, please. And the number... uh, a hundred sets should do.”

“A hundred?!”

“Not that I think I’ll *really* need that many, but it’d be a pain to have to make another order sometime.” I’d need at least ten for all the kids in the orphanage, and playing cards can fall apart over time. You can never have too many backups.

“All right. If you really want that many, I will order that quantity.”

“How long do you think it’d take? I’m going to the capital soon, so I’d like them before then.” I told Lianna the date and time we were leaving.

“Understood. I will ask them to make sure that the cards are finished before then.”

“Thank you.”

Lianna swiped through the cards for a moment. “These really are such cute bear drawings. If you ever want to sell them through the guild, please tell us. We would be happy to help!”

“I will if I do.”

“Excellent. Once they are complete, I will send them to your house.”

With my playing card business done, I left the Merchants' Guild.

CHAPTER 271

THE BEAR LEARNS ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SACRED TREE

A FEW DAYS AFTER I ordered the playing cards, Lala, Noa's maid, came by while I was playing with my bears.

She lowered her head. "Miss Yuna, I apologize for interrupting you at such a busy time."

"It's all right. So, what brought you here today? Noa isn't here." Noa would sometimes come by my house and Lala would have to pick her up, but Noa hadn't come by today.

"No, I am not here for Lady Noire today. I came to ask about the tea you gave Lord Cliff a few days ago."

"The tea leaves, right? He didn't get sick from them or anything, did he?" I kind of felt like Lala was struggling to tell me something awkward, but... I had to be imagining that.

"No, he isn't sick. He seemed dubious about the tea at first, but now he quite enjoys it."

So I'd been off the mark. But then why did it still seem like she was holding something back from me? "If the tea tastes good, I'm sure it was because of the way you brewed it."

"Thank you, but, ah, I do believe that it is probably the tea leaves themselves he enjoys."

"I'm glad he likes the tea. So, how is Cliff doing health-wise? I heard that the tea is supposed to make you feel less sleepy." I wanted to know how he felt after drinking the sacred tree tea.

"He started to feel better after drinking the tea he received from you," said Lala. "Actually, he drinks it all day long, and his work has progressed quite well."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. Normally he wakes up in the morning feeling exhausted, but the last few days, he has felt refreshed upon waking. He's told me that he can work through the entire day, in fact."

The more she described it, the more it sounded kinda like an energy drink. I'd never had the stuff before, but energy drinks always make me think of manga artists pulling all-nighters to meet deadlines and stuff. Fortunately, it seemed like Cliff was capable of sleeping.

"In addition, Rondo, who has been helping Lord Cliff and was so exhausted as well, began to drink the tea too. He has been feeling so much better."

"I'm glad it worked," I said. This proved the sacred tree's leaves did something after all... though I didn't really need it, what with my white bear gear.

"But... regarding the tea you gave Lord Cliff... it seems we have run out. So I came to visit hoping you might share some more. We, of course, would be able to pay you for it, so I'm ever-so-hopeful you might be willing to part with some."

So she'd come for the tea leaves. That explained why she hadn't told me right away.

The tea, though... I had some in reserve, but was it really safe for them to drink that much? If it was anything like an energy drink, I got the feeling it'd start becoming a problem if they kept guzzling it. Then again, elves drank it a lot, and they'd never mentioned any ill effects.

Except elves are a totally different species, and I'd never bothered asking just how many times a day they were sipping their tea. What was the right thing to do here?

"I can give you some," I said, "but maybe you should be careful to make sure they don't drink too much."

"Is it unhealthy for them to?" she asked worriedly.

I quickly shook my head. "I've heard of others drinking it for years without issues, so I think it'll be okay. I just think a little restraint's good when it comes to things like this."

I didn't think there would be side effects. When I'd used my bear identification, all it'd

said was that it had recovery effects and could replenish mana. Whatever it was, it wasn't dangerous. Still, drinking too much of it felt like a bad idea.

Having too much sugar or salt, for instance, is bad for just about anyone even if we don't put warning labels on them. The same applied to alcohol. A little couldn't hurt you, but a ton could be a major issue.

There was a chance the same could apply to these tea leaves. Having a balanced diet is important, whatever you're eating or drinking.

"You've gotta moderate intake," I said. "And if it really does relieve his exhaustion, then it'd do him some good to rest, instead of just trying to let the tea carry him through it."

"Why, yes, of course."

"I'll give you more if you can promise to only serve it to him once a day."

"I understand. I promise. I will tell Lord Cliff as well."

Once Lala agreed to my promise, I gave her more tea. "I know I said it before, but I've gotta say it again: make sure to serve it in moderation."

"Yes, I will." Lala bowed, then headed back to the estate.

Thanks to Cliff, I had proof the tea worked, but I was kind of worried about his newly acquired drinking habit. That probably meant it wouldn't be a good idea to sell the tea at the shop. I'd have a problem if customers started coming by after finding out what the tea could do.

Up until the day we were heading out to the capital, I passed the time by playing with my bears, with Fina and Shuri, and, on occasion, with Noa.

I'd made a new cotton candy machine a few days ago and gave the orphans some candy.

"Yuna, this cloud is yummy!" one of them said.

"It's so fluffy!" another said.

“Careful,” I warned. “It gets sticky when it melts.”

“It melts in my mouth!”

“So sweet and yummy...!”

When I saw them enjoying the candy, I knew it’d be a hit at the academy’s festival.

A few lazy days passed in their usual way. I found myself on Kumayuru’s full-sized belly, taking a siesta, when Kumayuru reached out to me and woke me up.

“Just a little longer,” I said.

I hugged Kumayuru’s giant paw. It was basically a body pillow.

But Kumayuru wasn’t giving up. I felt my bear’s other paw trying to jostle me awake.

“What is it?” I asked, but then I heard someone calling me from outside. “Okay, ugh, *who* is it?”

I yawned slightly as I rolled off Kumayuru’s belly and headed over. Couldn’t I sleep a little longer? I rubbed my eyes and looked outside to find Lianna from the Merchants’ Guild.

“Miss Yuna, I have the sets of cards you ordered prepared. I’ve brought them to you.”

“Thank you, Lianna.” I let out a yawn. “Hwaaah.” (Naturally, it was a little, polite yawn. Very ladylike and all that.)

“Did I disturb you while you were sleeping?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I didn’t have anything else to do, so I took a nap.”

I’d summoned my bears to play with them because I was bored, but that’d tuckered me out. Truly, I was finding new ways to be a fabulously unproductive member of society.

“If you say so,” said Lianna.

“So are the cards really done?”

"Yes, here they are." Lianna pulled a small wooden box from her item bag. I took it from her and opened the top to find the playing cards inside. They really had been printed with the bears! I pulled the cards out of the box and checked them over.

Whoa, they looked legit. I got caught up admiring them for a second.

"What do you think of them?" she asked.

"Oh, sorry. Thank you. They look even better than I expected!" I could feel that the cards were made from sturdy paper. They probably wouldn't tear easily.

"I'm so happy to hear that," Lianna said.

"Thank you, Lianna. I really mean it."

"Not at all. It's all part of the job."

It was awkward talking in front of the bear house, so I invited Lianna inside.

"How has the work been today?" I asked. The guild was supposedly busy from all the stuff happening with Mileela. I'd thought that a merchant or a free guild member would've delivered the cards.

"It should be fine. We have the day off today."

"You came here on your day off?"

"I couldn't ask anyone else to do it." I felt like I was imposing on her, but she continued. "I can't believe I have the chance to go inside your famous house. That itself makes this worthwhile."

"My... famous house...?"

"Everyone is very curious about your bear-shaped house, naturally"

"Yeah, but it looks like a normal house inside." I pulled some drinks out of the fridge. She'd come all the way out here on her day off, so I at least needed to serve some refreshments.

I offered Lianna a seat and took one across from her. Once I got settled in, Lianna

started pulling out the rest of the playing cards. A hundred was... kind of a lot of sets.

"How much was it?" I asked.

"Right, here is the bill." The printing fee and paper cost were all listed on it, but one thing was missing. "Hey, where's the cost of the boxes?"

I'd totally forgotten to order cases, which, y'know, you need to have. I sure felt grateful that Lianna had arranged for them.

"That was on the house," she replied.

"I can't let you do that. I'll pay for it."

"How about instead, you can show me how you'll play with these cards?"

"How I'll play with them?"

"Yes, I was very curious to know. And I won't tell others, I assure you."

I guess anyone would be curious about games. I sure would be—I'd want to know what kind of game needed cards like this. "I don't mind telling you. Actually, want to learn by playing?"

"Would you really be willing to show me like that?"

"Yeah, I could fit it into my schedule." Honestly, I'd been so bored, I'd been napping the day away and using Kumayuru as a body pillow.

"Thank you."

I put away all the playing card sets into my bear storage, except for one. I'd played cards online before, but I hadn't played in person since elementary school. I pulled the cards out of the box and set them on the table.

"I think you already know since you saw them earlier, but there are fifty-four cards in total. These two cards here are special." I laid them out on the table according to whether they were fire, water, wind, or earth suites and set them in number order. I placed the two jokers to the side. "There's tons of ways to play, so I'll just show you the fundamentals."

I gathered the cards, shuffled the deck, and turned them all over.

"This game's called Memory, and it's pretty self-explanatory. We compete with our memories here. We take turns flipping over cards. If you flip over cards with the same number, then you get to take them. The player with the most cards at the end wins."

"I see. So, you have to memorize not only your cards, but also the other person's cards in order to have an advantage."

"Also, if you match cards, then you get to turn over another card."

We tried playing a round. Lianna was so good at memorizing things that it was actually a challenge for me, even if it was her first time playing.

"Memory is pretty difficult," she said. "But it seems like a good way of helping children foster their ability to memorize things."

Next I taught her how to play Sevens, which was a simple strategy game.

"So having an ace or a king card is a disadvantage in this game?"

"That depends on your luck. The trick is to make it easier to play your own cards."

Then we played Old Maid. Like Sevens, it wasn't really a fun game with two people, but I still explained it.

"Yes, I see. So, the person with the joker card loses."

"Right, you gotta make it seem like you don't have the joker card for this game."

You needed a really good poker face when it came to Old Maid. Admittedly, bluffing wasn't as important for this as for real poker, but it was better if you could do it. In my case, I could pull my bear hood low over my head, so I didn't need to bluff.

Finally, I taught her Daifugo, which was kind of like the card game President.

"This one is a little difficult..." Lianna commented.

"It's really easy to be influenced by your neighbor's cards or what's in your hand."

That seemed like a good start, so we wrapped up after that game. The rules for poker and blackjack were too fussy for me to bother teaching, and they also involved gambling.

“Are there any other games, Miss Yuna?”

“There are, but the rules get pretty complicated.”

“I see. So there are many ways to play with these cards, then.”

“And you can play with either a pair or a larger group.”

Lianna looked at the cards thoughtfully. “In order to sell these, I suppose the directions would need to be written down.”

Right, they’d need to come with a rulebook. No one would buy them if they didn’t know the rules.

“If you do decide to sell them,” she said, “please let me know. The Merchants’ Guild will assist you.”

“I’ll take you up on that if I do,” I said, though I still hadn’t decided if I actually would.

Soon enough, Lianna decided to leave. “Thank you for allowing me to intrude.”

“No, thank you for going to all that trouble.”

With that, Lianna headed home.

CHAPTER 272

THE BEAR HEADS TO THE CAPITAL

IT WAS THE DAY OF THE CAPITAL TRIP. We were gathering at my house, so I'd told everyone to come after breakfast... but when they arrived, I'd barely woken up.

"Um. Aren't you all a little early?" Since I'd just rolled out of bed, I was still dressed in my white bear outfit, but the three of them were all already at my house. I hadn't even changed yet or had any breakfast, and I knew I hadn't overslept either.

But even though I'd planned to get up early for breakfast, the three of them were already in my house.

"Shuri, see? I told you it was too early!" Fina scolded.

"But..." Ah, so it was Shuri's fault... but Fina could've stopped her.

I looked at the third girl who had come at this ungodly hour. "What's your excuse, Noa?"

"Well, that's obvious," said Noa without missing a beat. "I wanted to see Kumayuru and Kumakyu as soon as possible."

Right.

Last time I'd met with Noa, she'd been waiting out in front of her house way earlier than planned. I should've known full well she'd come early—she just couldn't wait.

I'd had us meet in my house to make things easier for Fina and Shuri, but maybe it would've been better to meet at Noa's instead. Eh, it wasn't like I could turn them away now.

"You can wait while I get changed," I said, and headed back to my bedroom to change into my black bear clothes. Ugh, I knew they were excited, but did they have to come this early? Once I was dressed, I prepped a simple breakfast of bread that Morin had baked a while back.

As usual, the bread was delicious. I'd actually wanted some rice, but the three of them were waiting for me, so I fixed something easy.

The three of them stared as I ate. "Uh, you want some?"

"Yeah!"

"Can I really?"

"Yes, please!"

I figured they'd eaten before coming here, so I guess they were just still hungry. They were growing girls, after all. I pulled out three more servings of bread. They gobbled it up, and I got to eat my breakfast in peace. After the meal, I led the three of them outside of the bear house.

"I'm so excited!" Noa skipped as she walked.

"I want to get to the capital soon." Shuri looked thrilled as she held Fina's hand.

Fina was smiling too, of course. When I saw the three of them as happy as can be, I started feeling excited too. I was really grateful to Elleaura for inviting them to the festival.

The moment we reached the outskirts of Crimonia, I summoned my bears. Noa and Shuri ran right over to them as soon as they appeared. Fina watched the two girls with a smile.

"Aren't you going over with them, Fina?" I asked.

"I want to, but I'll let the two of them go first today." Fina was so mature these days. Even if she looked like a kid, she seemed like she was an adult on the inside.

"Hurry up, Yuna!" Noa said.

"Fina, you hurry too!" Shuri called.

"Time to go, Yuna?"

"Yes." I held Fina's hand, and we headed over to the pair.

Kumakyu carried Shuri and Fina. Shuri looked ecstatic to be on Kumakyu's back as Fina sat behind her. As for Noa, she sat behind me on Kumayuru.

"Noa, are you sure you don't want the front?" I asked.

"I'm sure. I'll hug you from behind."

Noa did exactly that.

"That's unfair," Shuri said. "I wanna hug Yuna too!"

"Hee hee, this is the special privilege one receives when riding with Yuna." She rubbed her face into my back.

"Noa, don't squeeze me too hard," I said.

"But I must so I don't fall off."

That just made Shuri even more jealous for... some reason. I mean, Shuri gave me hugs all the time already. At any rate, I had to do something.

"How about we take turns switching?" I suggested.

If I were a guy, I guess I would've been like "Please, ladies, no need to fight over me!" or something... or maybe not. Even in movies, that stuff sounds kinda cringey, to be honest. I think I'd die of embarrassment if I ever saw someone try that line in real life.

With our seating arrangements ready, we headed out to the capital.

"It's fast!" Shuri shouted, making a real commotion.

"Shuri, don't wriggle." And making it hard for Fina to settle down.

Noa and I rode alongside them, and we made sure to take breaks on the way. On one of those breaks, after we finished lunch, we switched bears and headed out. The three boisterous girls quieted down the further we got from morning. Shuri was even sleeping on top of Kumayuru, with Fina holding her so she wouldn't fall. Noa was sleeping too, leaning on me.

"Shuri was so excited last night that she hardly slept," said Fina. "But then she got up early this morning and said we had to go to your house."

"I bet Noa did the same thing." We made sure not to wake the two up while we rode along. Of course, we didn't forget to give my bears breaks, either.

By sunset, we'd made some good progress. I had my bears slow down and go off the path a bit so we could set up camp. Then I had them head over to a rocky hill a little way off.

"Are we staying here tonight, Yuna?" Noa asked. She'd woken up a while ago.

I nodded. "We should be able to set up a house here without anyone noticing." It'd be a pain if somebody spotted the bear house.

Once we got behind the rocky area, so we couldn't be seen from the road, Noa and I hopped off of Kuma-yuru.

"What's happening, Fina?" Shuri asked, rubbing her eyes.

"We're stopping here for today. Can you get off of Kumakyu?"

"Yeah!"

Fina and Shuri both got off my bear, and I pulled my traveling bear house from bear storage.

"It's a bear house!" Shuri was shocked by the house's appearance. I guess this was probably Shuri's first time seeing one of my bear houses come out of storage. It'd really woken her up.

"Well, how about we head inside?" I miniaturized my bears and led the three girls indoors, and Shuri started marveling at the interior right away. "I'll get the food ready, so you three sit down."

"I'll help."

"Me too!"

"I would like to help as well."

All three of them were offering, but it wasn't like I was gonna make anything fancy. I was just pulling out premade meals from my bear storage.

"I'm fine on my own. You three can rest with Kumayuru and Kumakyu."

The trio headed to the sofa, where my bears waited. While the three of them rested, I got a hot meal together. The dish of the day? Japanese hamburger Steaks, rice, miso soup, and a side salad. Since we'd had bread for breakfast and lunch, I'd decided we'd have rice for the evening. Besides, after working so hard to get rice, I was gonna make sure to enjoy it as much as possible.

Although I had freshly made rice and premade hamburger steaks in bear storage, I didn't have any salad—I'd have to prep it myself. Tiermina had made me promise to make sure Fina and Shuri got their veggies, after all. Kids need a balanced meal, you know?

I didn't have any miso soup prepped either, so I made some with daikon radish, carrots, and potatoes in it. The three of them had tried miso soup at Anz's restaurant, so I was pretty sure they'd like it.

Once I was done, I brought the food over to the girls. They were having a great time playing with my bears.

When Fina noticed me carrying out the food, she came running over. "I can help you carry it!"

"Thank you."

"Me too!"

"I can carry things as well!"

Not to be outdone by Fina, the other two immediately insisted on helping.

"Thank you all," I said.

Once we were done moving the food over, we started to eat together.

"It's yummy."

"Yes, it is," said Fina.

"You really can do anything, Yuna," Noa told me.

"C'mon, I can't do *everything*." She was putting me on a pedestal.

"You can make such delicious meals, you're a superb adventurer, and you even manage shops," said Noa. "I think you are *really* amazing, Yuna."

"I'm really not," I said. "Anyone can learn how to cook with practice, and the shops are actually run by Morin and Anz and Tiermina. Plus, it's all the workers at the shops who are putting in the effort. I haven't done anything really."

I was only a good adventurer thanks to my gaming experience. Plus, if I didn't have my bear onesie, I would've been powerless. No way would I be able to hold my own in a fight without it, even with game experience.

"But if you put it that way," said Noa, "then I don't know what it means to accomplish stuff at all..."

"You're only ten, Noa. Your life is just starting."

Plus, the things Noa needed to do as a part of the aristocracy were totally different from me. There wasn't any adventuring or cooking in her future, though I didn't know what *was* in her future, exactly. Maybe she'd help Shia govern a fief, or maybe she'd marry into another aristocratic family and move elsewhere.

Everything lay ahead of Noa.

We took a break after finishing dinner and headed to the bath together, but...

"Noa, Shuri? Why did you bring Kumayuru and Kumakyu?"

"Because they're bathing with us, of course. We're doing this as a thank-you for carrying us all day long."

"I wanna go in with Kumakyu!" said Shuri.

I didn't mind if the bears tagged along, but they didn't need a bath to clean up—I could just re-summon them and they'd be squeaky clean. But I couldn't just stop them; I'd be a total buzzkill.

Sometimes I did give my bears a bath to show them my appreciation, and they always seemed to enjoy it. If they wanted to give my bears a bath, I was going to let them. It was the thought that counted.

"All right," I said. "Make sure you clean them up nice."

"Uh-huh!"

"Okay!"

Fina and I happily watched the two.

I started to pull off my bear onesie. Fina was telling Shuri to fold up her clothes, and Shuri was dutifully doing just that. When I glanced over at Noa, she'd folded her clothes too—a little surprising, from an aristocrat's daughter. All three of them were such good kids.

While I was looking at them, Noa's eyes met mine. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's nothing."

"But you looked exactly like Father and Mother when they praise me for doing something good."

Hold on, so I looked like a doting parent? Weird. I don't even have kids.

"I was just thinking of how great you three are," I said.

Once we were undressed, we headed into the bath with my bears. First, we washed up and got our hair clean before finally washing off Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Noa and I washed Kumayuru, and Fina and Shuri teamed up to clean up Kumakyu.

Before long, my bears were covered in white bubbles. Finally, we poured hot water over them and washed away the foam until they were clean.

"Kumakyu is flat," Shuri observed.

Yeah, the wet fur really was a look, wasn't it?

Now that my bears were clean, we all decided to get in the tub. Ah... that's the life. Anyone from Japan could appreciate a good soak in the tub. Showers just didn't cut it.

I slowly sunk into the water. Fina looked like she was on cloud nine next to me. Shuri and Noa were entertaining themselves by looking at the bear statues that poured hot water into the tub. Kumayuru and Kumakyu were also relaxing, only their faces visible above the water.

This was serenity. Traveling by bear gate would've made things easy, but this journey with everyone together... it was pretty great too.

Once we were done washing away the fatigue from the day, we got out of the bath.

"That was very nice," said Noa, drying herself off.

Shuri was wiping Kumakyu down with a towel. "You need to dry off too, Kumakyu."

"You need to dry yourself first." Fina dried Shuri from behind as she dried Kumakyu.

This felt so peaceful. I changed into my white bear onesie and we headed back to the room. Once we were all out of the bath, we each had a glass of cold milk. It was as refreshing as it was delicious. After that, we dried our hair with my hairdryer and even gave Kumayuru and Kumakyu blowouts.

It was nice to have a day like this from time to time.

CHAPTER 273

THE BEAR PLAYS CARDS

“OKAY, everyone, we’re going to bed.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Okaaay!”

The three of them replied so quickly and obediently that I kinda felt like the lead teacher on a field trip. Not every kid is as well behaved as that, though, which got me thinking a little about just how hard teaching must be.

“Are the three of you all right with sharing a room?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Why, of course we are.”

“Gotcha. I think you already know, by the way, but we’re heading out early tomorrow. Don’t stay up too late and make sure you get enough sleep.”

“We will!”

“Definitely!”

“Kay!”

They gave me their answers, and we headed over to the second-floor rooms. As for my bears, I took them to my own room. I wasn’t really sleepy, but I needed to wake up early the next day, so it’d be better to go to bed now.

“Kumayuru, Kumakyu, make sure to tell me if you sense anything dangerous nearby,” I told my bears, who were curled up on my bed.

Then I burrowed into my blankets. I'd hung up my sheets to dry before we headed out, so they felt heavenly. I was so cozy that I fell asleep instantly.

My bears woke me up the next morning.

I looked outside, but it was still dark. Normally, I'd still be asleep around now, but we had to leave early and there was nothing I could do about it. I powered through the drowsiness and headed downstairs to the first floor, yawning all the way. My bears followed.

Nobody was on the first floor. I guess the three of them were still sleeping.

I started getting breakfast ready so they'd be able to eat as soon as they came down. It was the usual fare: bread, soup, and milk. Starting the day off with something more luxurious would've been a waste.

Once I had things ready, the three sleepy girls came over. Shuri held a stuffed Kumakyu in her arms.

"Morning, guys. Once we eat, we'll head out."

"I'm sorry I didn't help..." Fina said.

"I'm just pulling the food out of my item bag, so don't worry about it."

They sat down and we started eating.

After breakfast, we headed out to the capital and quickly made great progress—no delays, no monsters, and no robbers. As long as we didn't have any trouble, we were on track for getting to the capital that day...

But then there was the sky. The clouds weren't looking good. I hoped it wouldn't rain, but that prayer went unheard and it started really coming down that afternoon.

"Yuna! It's raining!"

“Lunchtime is over. Time to get on the move!”

We got on my bears and headed off right away. Once we found a spot that’d work for my bear house, I pulled it out and we ran inside.

“Are you all okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” said Fina.

“I’m only a little wet,” said Noa.

“I’m okay,” said Shuri.

Good. We’d gotten a little drizzled on, but everyone was doing well. My bears were mostly spared from the rain, too. Ah... my beloved bear house. Gotta love it.

To make sure they didn’t catch colds now that we were indoors, I got the bath ready to heat us all back up.

As soon as Shuri got out of the bath, she looked out the window. “Still raining...”

Noa peeked out the window from behind her. “It seems we likely won’t be able to travel any further.”

“We’ll still make the festival on time, even if we don’t rush. It should be fine.”

Unless the storm kept coming down all week, that is. But for now, I felt like we could take a break for the rest of the day.

The girls had started off playing with my bears, but they seemed bored of that now. We didn’t have anything else to do, so it was time for my playing cards to shine. I’d actually been planning to play with them during the evenings, but we’d been so busy with eating dinner, taking baths, and getting to bed early that we hadn’t been able to play until now.

So, for the first time, the girls learned to play a card game.

“A... card game?”

"Yeah, we use these cards to play." I put the cards on the tabletop.

"Bear drawings!" cried Noa.

"*Cuuuuute!*" Shuri squeaked.

"How do you play with these?" asked Noa.

"There's all kinds of ways," I said. But... which one should we start with? I ended up showing them how to play Memory first. It'd be the easiest one to learn. I taught the three of them the rules.

"In other words, we compete with our memories," said Fina.

"I won't lose to anyone!" said Noa.

"Uhhh... Kumakyu, let's work hard together," Shuri said to the cub version of Kumakyu.

I shook my head. "Shuri, you can't pair up with Kumakyu."

I didn't know exactly how good Kumayuru's memory was, but I got the feeling that my bears would whoop me at cards. They'd probably even guess cards they hadn't looked at! I could see 'em now, slapping their cards with their paws, sweeping up matches...

I took Kumakyu from Shuri and set my bear down a little ways away. Shuri looked sad, but I just couldn't let my bears play cards.

We went counterclockwise—me first, then Shuri, Fina, and Noa. But once we started, it turned out that Shuri had a great memory. I felt like I was seeing an entirely new side to her.

"This one and this one," Shuri said, flipping matching cards over. "And this one and this one..."

"Oh, that's—" Noa began, and—*fwip!*—Shuri cheerfully took another pair.

Noa was bummed out about that one. She'd probably been planning on going with them.

Shuri flipped over her third set of cards —ah, her luck ran out that time. Still, she'd

done pretty good for herself.

Next, Fina and Noa both turned over cards with numbers we hadn't seen before, but no luck and no pairs. It was my turn now, so I flipped a card over. Luckily, I found a card that had already shown up and got some cards for me too.

I barely won in the end, preserving my honor as the eldest person there, but that'd sure been close. I couldn't lose to them, especially with their first time playing. Shuri came in second, so Fina and Noa were hankering for a rematch after losing against the youngest one there.

After playing Memory over and over again, we finally moved on to playing Sevens.

"Who has it? Who has the four of water?" Noa murmured, comparing the cards she held and the ones on the table. She'd kept having to pass since she couldn't use her cards. "I can't use my one, two, or three of water..."

That's what she had? You... weren't supposed to say the cards out loud. The point of Sevens was to avoid using key cards until the very end. If you revealed what you needed, no one would set the card down... or I couldn't see why they would, at least.

"Oh, I have it. I'll set the four of water down!" said Fina, and she did just that.

Uh. You're... not supposed to do that. "Buh—Fina. That's not how you play."

"But Lady Noa said..." Fina apologetically looked over at Noa. I guess this is just how things shake out when nobles and commoners play cards together.

For Memory, you were playing against your own mind's capabilities. But for Sevens, you were supposed to hold back numbers that others needed, while pushing the game in the direction you wanted.

In a game about holding someone else back, Fina would gravitate toward helping Noa. Sevens just wasn't Fina's game.

But it wouldn't be a real game at this rate. "Noa, you're not allowed to say which cards you want out loud!" I pointed at her with my bear puppet.

"Aw, but..."

“Fina, you’re supposed to be competing, so you can’t just give in to her.”

“I’m sorry...”

If Fina didn’t know the card that Noa wanted, at least Fina wouldn’t be able to play the card.

Even Fina now, who’d been acting awkward at the start, steadily realized we were competing and started to enjoy the game. Noa was enjoying the game too, now that it was fair.

“Ha ha. Here’s the bear king of flames!” Noa looked giddy. “Now I can play an ace.”

That was an extra rule. When someone played a king, you could play an ace. I’d added rules to make it a little easier.

I went after Noa and played a card.

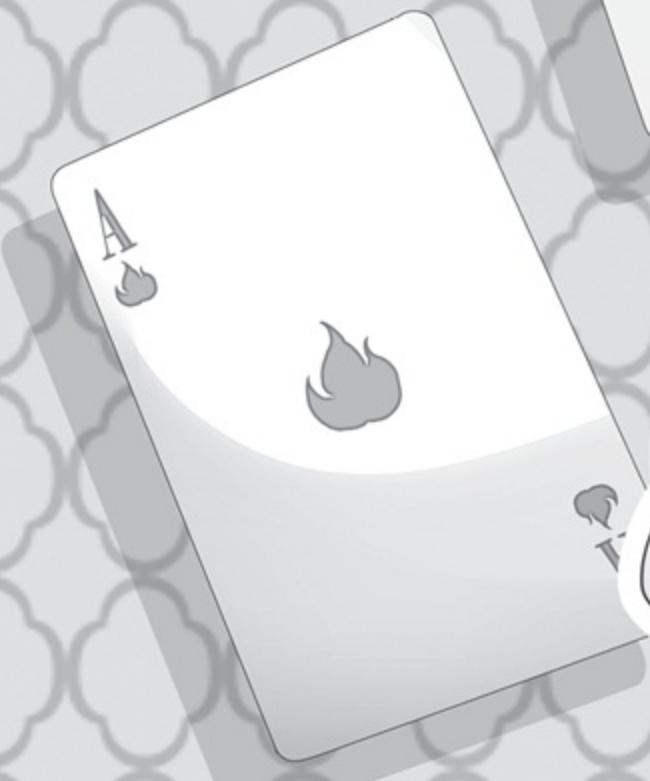
Shuri looked at her cards. “Aw, I can’t play one.”

“Then I’ll play,” said Fina.

Noa went next, and we went on, each playing our cards.

Finally, Noa played her last card.

“I won!” Noa was overjoyed—she’d been able to compete for real, on her own terms. This wasn’t cutting corners or reaping the advantages of nobility, but a victory on an equal playing field.



Everyone was strategizing, so now things were finally getting interesting. There was no fun in winning against a beginner, after all.

Over time, we added the joker in, along with some more special rules. A joker could be put down next to any sequence, which made things even more interesting. If the joker were played, then the person with the card that went in that spot had to produce the card.

After that, we played Daifugo until dinner.

When I looked outside again, the rain had passed. Looked like we'd be fine tomorrow.

CHAPTER 274

THE BEAR ARRIVES AT THE CAPITAL

ON THE DAY AFTER IT RAINED, while riding Kumayuru, I watched white clouds float along the blue sky. Yeah, we wouldn't need to worry about rain today. The paths weren't in bad shape either. A night of playing cards had made the rain pass a lot faster—or at least that's how it felt.

We kept up a good pace and, that afternoon, caught sight of the walls of the capital.

Shuri's little mouth hung open. "It's big...!" It was her first time seeing the wall, so I understood that feeling: it'd been a shock to me too.

"We wouldn't want to cause a commotion with Kumayuru and Kumakyu," I said, "so let's walk from here." I'd already explained to everyone why we'd be getting off my bears and walking once we saw the capital wall, so they all got off without complaint.

Shuri patted my bears. "Kumakyu, Kumayuru, thank you." Fina and Noa thanked my bears too after seeing Shuri do that. My bears replied with happy croons. Finally, I thanked my bears and recalled them.

Unlike during the birthday festival, there weren't a lot of crowds in the capital by the time we got there on foot. Still, I got the usual curious stares. I was almost used to it... but just almost. On top of that, I was a bear with three girls in tow this time, so I got even more stares than usual.

We were the beauty (beauties?) and the beast.

I headed further into the capital with the trio. The issue was how we'd get around, now that we were in the capital. The place was huge! Like, big enough that people rode carriages in it. And Ellelaura's estate was pretty far into the city. Maybe we could take a commuter carriage or walk around to take a tour of the place.

Right when I was going to ask everyone what they wanted, Noa piped up. "Oh, Yuna?!"

Mother wrote in her letter to go to the guardhouse when we arrive.”

“The guardhouse?”

“Yes. Apparently, she prepared a carriage for us to use because she thought we might not be able to travel on Kumakyu and Kumayuru.”

I was grateful for that, but I wish she’d told me sooner. We would’ve been in trouble if we’d used the gate without knowing about the carriage.

“So, do you know where this guardhouse is?”

“Yes, over here.” Noa led me to it.

On our way there, a man came up to us. “I heard that a girl in a bear outfit had arrived. Ah, so it is you, Master Yuna.”

It was Ranzel—he’d helped me out in the past during the king’s birthday festival and also at Misa’s birthday party.

“Nice to see you,” I said.

“It’s been too long!” he replied. “Thank you for all your help with the Salbards the other day.”

But Ranzel’d been the one helping me! He’d helped me when I’d gone to the festival after the thing with the robbers, and he’d done the same when he’d tagged along with Ellelaura during the aristocrat mess.

Ugh, just remembering all the stuff with that aristocrat made me nauseated. Should’ve really punched that guy harder, now that I thought about it. He’d been the reason Fina and the others had gotten hit, after all. I wish he’d gotten all that pain back a hundred times over...

“Please don’t do anything too reckless,” Ranzel said, noticing the look on my face. “You may be an adventurer, but you’re still a young lady.”

There we go, finally! For once someone was actually treating me like a young woman instead of a bear! “What are you doing here, Ranzel?”

"Lady Ellelaura asked for me to prepare a carriage. I have been waiting for Lady Noire and yourself to arrive in the guardhouse for the last few days."

That sure sounded like she was abusing her authority. Was Ellelaura even allowed to do that? Then again, this was Ellelaura we were talking about, so it was fine. Probably.

Good thing I hadn't used the gate, though, because it would've meant that Ranzel wasted all that time waiting.

"Um... if Mother forced you to do this, I'm very sorry," said Noa.

"Please don't worry about it," said Ranzel. "This is just part of my job."

"You didn't have to wait for us the whole time, did you?" I asked. "You could've taken turns waiting with other people."

"I suspect that Lady Ellelaura thought you and Lady Noir would be more likely to ride the carriage with me than with some stranger. You already know me, after all."

Yeah, he was right—better him than some random guy. Ellelaura could be really thoughtful.

"I have prepared the carriage," said Ranzel, "so please come this way."

The four of us talked as we followed him to our carriage.

"You really saved the day, Noa," I said.

"Thank you, Lady Noa," added Fina.

Shuri nodded brightly. "Noa, thanks!"

She shook her head. "I haven't done a thing. Mother set up everything."

But even if she rejected our thanks, that didn't make us less thankful.

"Still, I'm grateful," I said.

"Thank you."

"Thanks!"

That put Noa on the spot a little, but I was still happy to see that stuff like this didn't get to her head.

Ranzel drove the carriage to Elleaura's estate. We could see the crowded streets through the small windows. Sure, it wasn't nearly as packed as it had been during the king's birthday festival, but the capital was still teeming with people.

"Wow!" Shuri's eyes glittered as she took it all in. Seeing that look in her eyes... that's the sort of thing that makes a trip like this worth it.

"Want to look around the capital tomorrow?" I offered.

"Can we really?!" Shuri turned to me, hyped beyond belief.

"We've still got a few days until the academy festival starts, so we've got plenty of time to look around."

"Since you're finally here," said Noa, "I will show you around myself. Is there anywhere you would like to go, Shuri?" She was older than Shuri and really acting like it.

"I wanna go to the castle!" Shuri blurted out the impossible.

"The castle..." Noa looked up at the carriage ceiling.

I know it's a weird thing to say for me, of all people, but getting into the castle is no simple matter. How far did my permit extend? Would it be good for my own acquaintances? I'd ask Elleaura about it, at least. If she said it was all right, maybe we could take a castle tour.

"So, we can't go?" Shuri looked a little disappointed.

"I can try asking Mother," said Noa, looking a little troubled by the request, "but it's not easy getting in."

"Shuri, you can't bother Lady Noa too much," I said. "You promised you wouldn't on the way over, remember?"

It was one of many things she'd promised in order to come here, along with generally

not being difficult.

"Noa, I'm sorry for asking for something I shouldn't have..." said Shuri. "I'm happy going anywhere as long as we're together."

Still, I figured I'd be able to swing this one if Ellelaura and I both asked. I'd gotten Fina in, after all, and who was coming in with food and presents and picture books and stuffed animals for Princess Flora? Yours truly. Then there was that whole thing where I'd slayed all those monsters. Maybe they'd let Shuri in to see the castle as a thank-you for me doing that?

I'd need to ask Ellelaura later.

Though we didn't know whether we could go to the castle, we were buzzing with conversation about all the places we'd visit as the carriage jostled us.

We were still going back and forth, sharing our ideas, when the carriage came to a halt. Out the window, I could see Ellelaura's estate.

"It's big." Shuri looked up at the mansion once she got out of the carriage.

Well, it *was* an aristocrat's estate.

"Well, I will be taking my leave now. Please give my regards to Lady Ellelaura."

"Thank you, Ranzel," I said, which prompted everyone to bow.

Ranzel got into the carriage, gave us a smile, and left.

I looked back at the estate and noticed that Surilina was standing in front of the gate.

"Lady Noire, we have been waiting for you. Miss Yuna, thank you for escorting Lady Noire. Miss Fina, I am glad to see you look as vibrant as ever. And I assume that the charming girl must be Miss Shuri?" Surilina addressed each one of us, and then her eyes finally settled on Shuri. Shuri squeezed Fina's hand.

"Come on," said Fina. "Say hello."

"I'm Shuri..." she whispered.

"I am Surilina. I work as a maid at this estate. It is good to meet you, Miss Shuri." Surilina gave Shuri a smile to help her relax.

It worked—Shuri eased up and smiled back.

"I am sure you must all be tired," Surilina beckoned us inside. "Please do come in."

"Where are Mother and Shia, Surilina?" asked Noa.

"Madame is not here yet. I believe Lady Shia should be home very soon."

I felt like Elleaura wouldn't take long to get back either. For now, Surilina led us to a room and served us refreshments and snacks. We were chatting away with Surilina when Shia came into the room, still in her uniform.

"I heard that Noa's here," she said.

Noa stood up and greeted her sister. "Shia, it has been so very long."

"Noa, and Yuna and Fina. And you must be Fina's little sister, Shuri?"

Fina nodded. "Lady Shia, it has been so long. Thank you so much for inviting us to the academy festival!"

"Thank you," Shuri echoed.

"Mother was the one who invited you. I hope you enjoy the festival."

"We will," Fina answered happily.

"Shia, do you think the festival will go well?" I asked.

"Thanks to you, I think it'll go swimmingly."

"Thanks to Yuna...?" Noa tilted her head. She'd been kept in the dark about everything, now that I thought about it.

"Yuna gave us a suggestion for the festival," Shia explained.

"It was just an interesting idea I had, that's all. Speaking of which, how did making the cotton candy go?"

"Right. We've been practicing every day, and we've figured out how to make it very well. The problem is: we need someone to eat it. We've been having Surilina and everyone else at home eat it, and my other classmates' family members are having to eat it too."

I could see why they were getting help—I couldn't imagine having to eat cotton candy multiple times a day.

"But now we're all really good at making it," said Shia.

"Do you mean you're serving cotton candy at the festival?" asked Fina.

"Yeah, they are. I thought it'd be an interesting idea," I said.

"But making cotton candy is so difficult. It's amazing that you can make it!"

"Mm-hmm! It was so difficult to learn." Shuri waved her hand like she was making cotton candy.

When I'd made it for the orphans a few days ago, Fina and Shuri had gotten a chance to try making it too. They'd found out just how difficult it was to make.

"Ah... what are you all talking about?" asked Noa. "What is this cotton candy?" Everyone else had been going on and on about how exciting the cotton candy was, but she'd been alone in the dark.

Now that I thought about it, Noa was the only one here who had no idea what cotton candy was.

"It's this interesting candy that's fluffy like a cloud and super sweet and delicious," Shuri explained.

Noa thought about it, looking at the rest of us. "Did you all already know what this cotton candy was?"

Shia nodded, of course, and so did Fina.

"Then I was the only one who didn't?"

I suppose that was right.

"So, I... I was the only one left out of everything?"

"We didn't mean for it to be like that," I said... but just because we hadn't meant it didn't mean it hadn't happened.

"So I really *am* the only one who didn't know about this." Noa looked a little glum.

"Hee hee!" Shia giggled. "Then how about we make some for you? Just you wait! You need to see how well I can make it now too, Yuna." She prepped the machine and whipped up some cotton candy, just like that. She'd really gotten better.

Noa tried out Shia's candy. "Wow... it really is like a cloud. It melts in my mouth. I cannot believe you wouldn't tell me about such a wonderful candy, Fina. And you too Yuna!"

"I'm sorry," said Fina.

"But all I did was make it for the orphans just once," I said.

"You could have invited me too..." Noa pouted slightly.

Then Shia made Fina and Shuri candy, since they seemed like they wanted some too. They looked like they were enjoying it, but I politely turned it down when I was offered some.

"It really is such a curious candy," said Noa. "It's soft, but it melts in your mouth, and is ever-so-sweet."

"I mean, the main ingredient is sugar, you know?" I said.

"You're not having any?" Noa asked her sister.

"I don't need any," said Shia. "To be honest, I feel like I can taste how sweet it is just looking at it." Yeah, she'd probably gotten a little sick of it by now. Cotton candy was supposed to be a rare treat—you weren't supposed to eat it multiple times.

“But Shuri... if you’re setting up a shop, do you not have time to explore the festival with me?”

“It should be fine. We’re taking turns so we can each enjoy the festival. We’ll have plenty of time to see it together then.”

“Okay!”

Shia and Noa were getting more hyped by the second.

CHAPTER 275

THE BEAR TALKS ABOUT FUTURE PLANS

NOA CHEERED UP after trying the cotton candy, and she began to excitedly talk about the academy festival with Shia.

Surilina came in and refilled our tea.

Shortly afterward, as we were relaxing, Ellelaura came in. “I’m home!”

“Mother!”

“Noa, I’m glad you made it. Thank you, Yuna.”

“It was so fun coming here together with everyone!” said Noa.

“Lady Ellelaura, thank you for having us,” said Fina, bobbing her head in greeting.

Shuri followed suit. “Thank you.”

“Why, Fina and Shuri. Thank you for showing me around the Crimonian shops before. I’d like to thank you for that, so please enjoy the festival.”

“Yes, thank you very much!” said Fina.

And—as usual—Shuri echoed her sister. “Thank you!”

“Come to think of it, where should we stay?” Fina asked suddenly, as if she’d just remembered. “Should we go to Yuna’s house?”

Normally, since Ellelaura had invited us, we’d stay at her house. Then again, Fina didn’t feel comfortable living in a house with a noble.

“We can stay at my place,” I said.

"Oh, my, Yuna," Ellelaura cooed. "Are you intending to steal my guests?"

"Not steal, per se. But you haven't seen Noa in a while. I didn't want to interrupt your family time."

"You wouldn't be interrupting in the slightest," she said.

"That's right," Noa added. "You should all stay here."

Both Ellelaura and Noa insisted that we stay. Even though Cliff wasn't here, I still felt like we were butting in on family time.

"I called you both here to thank you," Ellelaura continued, "so please stay here."

Fina seemed at a loss. "Um..." She looked at me, then at Ellelaura. After a moment's thought, she looked at Shuri... who just cocked her head to the side, not entirely sure what was happening.

"Shuri," said Fina, gently passing the buck to her sister, "would you prefer staying here or at Yuna's house?"

"Yuna has a house?"

"I do. It's the exact same as the one in Crimonia though."

"Ooo! I wanna see!"

Wow. Looked like my bear house had won out.

"Shuri, our house is also a lovely place to stay," said Ellelaura, refusing to give up without a fight. "We have *very* good food here."

"Um! Then... I wanna stay here."

Ellelaura looked downright triumphant... and Fina looked disappointed.

Guess it was time for me to save the day. "Guess we won't be seeing Kumayuru and Kumakyu then."

"Kumakyu! Kumayuru!" There we go, that got a reaction.

"Using bears for bait, are we? How unfair!" That was rich coming from someone who'd just tried to use food in the exact same way.

"Okay, then how about this? Fina wouldn't feel at home in such a big mansion. So why don't we take turns staying at my place and here?"

Elleaura considered it. "I... suppose you leave me with few options. We can try that."

We shook on it, ending the competition for... wait, why were we competing for this? Eh, Fina looked relieved, so... I guess things had worked out?

"Mother, may I ask for something?"

"What is it?"

"I would like to show Fina and Shuri around the castle. Do you think that would be possible?"

"The castle?"

"Shuri said she wants to see it, so I'd like to show her around," said Noa, seeming a tad self-conscious.

"In that case, dear, I can take her."

"Can you really?!"

"Yes. Though if Yuna is there, she could go in without my permission."

"If Yuna is there...?" Noa repeated. Everyone looked at me.

Elleaura blinked. "Oh, you didn't know? Yuna has an entry permit for the castle. She can go inside any time she wants."

"I can? I thought that only applied to me, not guests." Letting me bring any old rando to the castle seemed like a weird thing to allow.

"It should be fine. You can't bring a group of ten people, of course, but three shouldn't

be a problem. Of course, if anything happens, it would be on your head.”

Yeah, I’d pretty much assumed that I’d have responsibility for the visitors. Made sense.

“In that case,” I said, “how about we head to the castle tomorrow?”

“Are you sure?” asked Fina.

“You three aren’t planning on causing trouble, right?” I asked.

Fina looked uneasily at Shuri. “Do you promise you won’t ever leave my side? You promise you won’t just walk away?”

“I promise!”

Okay, things would be fine as long as someone held Shuri’s hand to keep her from running off.

“If you’re worried, I can accompany you,” Ellelaura offered.

“But what about your work?” I asked.

“It’ll be fine if it’s just for a bit. His Very Capable Majesty is there to handle things, after all.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. Still, pestering nobles would be a pain to deal with, so I figured it’d be better to have Ellelaura there to ward them off.

“Marvelous. Let’s have a welcome party tonight.”

With the plans decided, they treated us to dinner and we stayed at Ellelaura’s for the night.

We went right back out into the capital after breakfast.

“I wanted to go too...” Shia looked at us jealously—she had class today.

“You need to go to school,” said Ellelaura. “Mind your studies, now. And don’t forget to

prepare for the festival!"

A student's main duty was studying, and that took a lot of hard work. Then again, I'd hate to hear that directed at me, considering I'd been a truant shut-in.

"I'll head to the academy," said Shia. "And Noa? Please don't cause trouble for Yuna."

Shia gave Noa a pat on the head and then headed on out.

"It's about time we headed out too," said Ellelaura.

"Okaaay!" Shuri energetically responded.

By the time we reached the castle, Shuri's eyes were glued to it, and her smile could have lit up a room. "It's huge!"

"You can't cause a commotion inside, okay?" said Fina.

"Uh-huh!" Still, Fina kept a firm hold of Shuri's hand so her sister couldn't wander off.

"Well, then," said Ellelaura, "let's go on in." We all followed Ellelaura inside like she was the head teacher leading a field trip.

When we approached the castle gates, the guards looked us over. "Lady Ellelaura and Master Bear."

Master... what now? I mean, I'd never even told them my name, now that I thought about it, but... Master *Bear*...?

"These children are with me," said Ellelaura. "I'm bringing them along."

"Understood. You may enter." The guards stood stick straight as they cleared a path for us, and the whole thing was one of the most Ellelaura things I'd ever seen.

"You're amazing, Lady Ellelaura!" said Shuri.

"You think so?" Ellelaura looked very pleased with herself. She glanced to me suddenly and then turned to the guards. "Oh, and you needn't tell His Majesty that she is here."

"Yes, but..." The guard looked over at me. They'd probably been told to tell him if I came, but now Ellelaura was trying to put a stop to that. It was like watching a cashier handle two conflicting orders from two different managers.

"It's all right," said Ellelaura. "They're just touring the castle today. If anything happens, I'll take full responsibility."

"As you wish." And just like that, the guards had picked their manager.

For once, I agreed with Ellelaura. I wasn't planning to visit Princess Flora's room this time, so the king wouldn't find me there if he knew I were here. Plus, if he were to tell Princess Flora that I was here, she'd probably wait for me. I'd hate for that to happen to her. No, it was best for him to just never find out.

CHAPTER 276

THE BEAR UNKNOWINGLY CAUSES MISFORTUNE

AFTER WE GOT INTO THE CASTLE without a hitch, Ellelaura showed us around.

We walked down a pretty corridor and made our way through the castle's halls. I'd seen the place plenty of times before, but Shuri's eyes were glittering. As for Fina, she just seemed kind of tense—it had been a while since she'd visited the castle, after all.

Ellelaura led us around to the same places she'd taken us in the past. I guess this was a kind of standard tour, then? It made sense—there were probably places that normal people weren't allowed to see, so a set route for tours would be a good way to keep curious citizens in check.

After touring a fair amount of the castle, we headed to the open space where the soldiers and knights were training. This was where I'd first met Princess Flora. I'd been surprised that a random little girl had suddenly hugged me... and still more surprised to find out she was a princess.

The tour really took me back. And now, when I looked over the area, those same knights and soldiers were training. Their swords clashed, ringing out loudly. Sure, sword fighting was fine to watch, but personally? I really wanted to see mages training. What kind of stuff were the mages serving the castle made of?

"Looks like the third order of chivalry is practicing today," Ellelaura said as she watched the training knights. She scowled suddenly. A shadow crossed her face. "We're going somewhere else," she said abruptly, even though we'd barely started watching them.

I guess this wasn't exactly a child-friendly activity to watch, but—

"Oh, if it isn't *Madame* Ellelaura."

Just as we were leaving, a bearded man in his forties with a horrid grin called out to us. The moment I saw that smirk, something in my gut twisted. I didn't want to look at

him directly, so I pulled my bear hood low over my head and had Fina and Shuri move behind me. Noa had already hidden behind Ellelaura.

"Lutum..." Ellelaura whispered his name when she saw the man. She looked like she'd swallowed a bug.

"So that's the bear at the center of all the gossip, eh? And this is your daughter, Madame Ellelaura?" He looked at me, then to Noa, who was still hiding behind her mom.

"You're frightening my daughter," said Ellelaura. "I would appreciate it if you refrained from looking at her."

"Oh, how rude of me. She's the splitting image of her sister. How *adorable*."

"Yes. They both take after my looks," said Ellelaura with a smile.

"Are you giving a tour, then?"

"I am, but I believe we will take our leave. We wouldn't want to interrupt your training, after all. Please pay us no mind."

"Oh, no, please pay *us* no mind! Watch as long as you wish. The knights are so very motivated when you watch them, after all... *Madame* Ellelaura."

"I'm grateful for the sentiment, but we have plans to tour other places. I'm afraid we must decline. Let's go, everyone."

Ellelaura began to walk away, and we silently followed. I turned around to look at the man and saw that he was staring daggers into her back.

"Mother, are you sure about this?"

"Don't you worry about it, Noa. I won't let him lay a finger on you." Ellelaura placed a hand on Noa's head and smiled gently.

Whoever this man was, he knew about me: plus, that look he'd given me grossed me out. I was curious, but I doubted she'd tell me anything if I asked right here. Fina and the others were around, and I preferred to not involve them if I could help it.

To lighten the mood, Ellelaura brought us to the garden.

"Wow! There are so many flowers," said Shuri.

"It's pretty!" said Noa.

"Let's relax here for a while," said Ellelaura.

But Noa wasn't having it. "Fina, Shuri, let's go that way."

"Don't run or you'll trip," Ellelaura warned.

"We *woon't*!" Noa grabbed her friends' hands and led them further into the garden. After they left Ellelaura and me, we started walking slowly over to the center of the garden.

"They look like they're having such fun." Ellelaura smiled as she watched the three girls.

The girls were also out of earshot now. "Ellelaura, who was that man earlier? It seemed kind of tense between you two." If he was a threat to them, then he was an enemy to me.

"He... doesn't like me."

That was obvious. When we left him, he'd been glaring at Ellelaura. "I thought so. Do nobles have cliques?"

I wasn't familiar with this world—and I wasn't really part of this society, I hadn't gone to school here, and I'd pretty much led a life where that kind of stuff was irrelevant to me. Anything I knew came from manga and novels.

"Of course there are cliques, but... I suppose it would be more accurate to say that he holds a grudge against me rather than simply disliking me."

Maybe that was because Ellelaura gave out ridiculous orders or skipped out on work? Yeah, that seemed likely.

As if she could read my mind, Ellelaura added: "I think you probably have the wrong idea."

“I didn’t have any ideas!” Jeez, I wish she’d stop doing that.

“Count Lutum Roland holds a grudge against me because of *Cliff*”

“Cliff? What happened?”

“It was some time ago. There was some nasty business caused by one of the people Cliff employed. Cliff was in quite a rage and executed them... and the people in question happened to be from Lutum’s family. The official charge was treason. Now, he holds a grudge against me.”

I couldn’t even imagine Cliff killing anyone... which must’ve meant that the people in question had done something truly reprehensible. At the same time, though, I couldn’t really blame Lutum for holding it against them. Who wouldn’t hold a grudge when their family was executed? Still, it didn’t make sense to hold it against Elleaura too.

“Also, Yuna, you have a connection with him too.”

“I do?” But I hadn’t really interacted with the nobility much, and I sure didn’t remember doing anything that’d get some aristocrats to resent me. When it came to nobles, I basically only knew Cliff and Gran.

“Yuna, don’t you remember the Salbard family?”

Ugh. I really didn’t want to remember them, but I suppose they counted as nobility. They were idiot nobles who kidnapped Misa.

“The Roland family are distant relatives of theirs.”

“You don’t mean that man’s son...”

“Indeed. He was taken in by the Roland family.”

“So, then they know about me too, huh?”

“Hmm... I think that would depend entirely on Gajurdo’s son, Randle. His Majesty forbade word of the incident from being spread prior to his adoption. He would be forbidden to speak of it, even to family. If anyone did learn that he’d spoken of the incident, he would be punished. I suspect he’d fear that punishment enough that he wouldn’t dare to speak of the incident. Still, Count Roland sent Gajurdo’s son to his fief

when he adopted the boy.”

I had no idea where the fief could be, but I guess I was relieved to know he’d been sent there.

Elleaura sighed softly. “Then again... even though they’re only distant relatives, he knows that the Fochrosé family was involved in the ruin of the Salbards. And so, Lutum holds an even greater grudge against me than you.”

“I guess I stirred up trouble for you.”

“It’s not your fault, Yuna,” Elleaura said. “I’m grateful you saved Misa. And we also brought ruin to the Salbard household. That was more than worthwhile, even if it brought bitter consequences. Besides, the man disliked me from the beginning.”

I could understand why was resentful toward Elleaura, considering her involvement in the whole Salbard incident. Still, half of it was my fault. No matter what Elleaura said, I’d had a hand in stirring up trouble for her.

“That would be enough for me to resign myself to his loathing, but there’s yet another reason for the grudge. Do you remember when you slayed those monsters around the time of His Majesty’s birthday festival?”

“Well, yeah.” Hard to forget killing ten thousand monsters. I still had some of the monsters in my bear storage.

“Seeking glory, Lutum led the monster-slaying conquest.” Elleaura looked me over now, letting me fill in the last blank: that I’d ended up taking the glory from him.

“He was upset that he lost his great chance. He was insistent that His Majesty tell him about the adventurer who accomplished the slaying, but His Majesty would only say that it was an A-rank adventurer.”

The king was honoring his promise, then. I really needed to be grateful. Next time, I’d bring him something tasty without giving him lip.

“But he noticed that the adventurer who slayed the monster had ties with Cliff, since he found out that Cliff met with Sanya from the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“I was there with him for that.”

"Listen, Yuna: you're currently Rank D. No one thinks that you slayed the monster. And, because His Majesty told Lutum that an A-rank adventurer had done the deed, the very idea that it could've been a D-rank adventurer hasn't even crossed his mind. And put bluntly, he would never think that someone in an adorable bear outfit could've slayed them in the first place."

Yeah, who'd assume that a D-rank adventurer could've slayed 10,000 monsters? Add in the fact that said adventurer is a girl in a *bear onesie*, and...

"Worse yet, he's suffered business failures recently. When monsters appeared in the mines and we weren't able to mine the ore, Lutum apparently bought up a large quantity of iron. It seems he was hoping to profit by selling it... and then a certain someone settled the situation at the mine. The iron is flowing, but his dreams of dominating the iron trade have dried up with his investments."

Elleaura smiled meaningfully. She had to be talking about the whole incident with the golems. But that wasn't *my* fault! The Adventurers' Guild had commissioned me to do that, and all I'd done was fight off the golems. Plus, hadn't Jade's party and those bozo rangers gotten the credit? Man, I'd really dodged a bullet by letting them do that. If I tried to duck out of it now, I doubted anyone would believe me.

Still, I had a connection to every single one of those things, save Cliff's executions. The only saving grace was that he couldn't pin any of it directly on me.

" You shouldn't worry though, Yuna. It's his own folly for trying to profit from the situation, and it serves him right! It made me laugh more than I have in a long time, hearing about that disaster." Elleaura smiled again. "I doubt he suspects you had any hand in it, but he *does* know that you are connected to me. Just let me know if he does anything to upset you. If he dares, His Majesty and I will help you out."

I'd come by the castle plenty of times until now, but I didn't remember anyone trying to upset me. Yeah, I doubted he'd try anything. We were here for the school festival and for fun, after all. But Fina, Shuri, and Noa were with me, so I decided to keep it at the back of my mind.

CHAPTER 277

THE BEAR IS INUNDATED WITH BEARS

ELLELAURA AND I HEADED TO THE CENTER of the garden as we talked. There were chairs and tables set up so we could sit and admire the flowers. It was also covered with a roof, which made it a great place to rest.

We turned the corner and caught sight of our destination, along with Fina and the others. But the girls were accompanied now by Princess Flora, the queen, and Ange.

I could see even from here that stuffed animals of my bears were sitting side by side on the table. Kumayuru was in front of Princess Flora and Fina, and Kumakyu was in front of Shuri and Noa.

Uh... but... why?

“Oh, Yuna!” The queen noticed us walking over.

“Bear!” Princess Flora ran over to me and leapt into my chest.

“Hello.” One by one, I greeted Princess Flora, the queen and Ange. “Lady Kiteia and Lady Flora, I had no idea you would be here.”

“Yes, I was having tea with Flora here. Then these children came in, and we invited them to have tea with us.”

Ange had brewed some tea and set it in front of Fina and the others.

I sidled up to Fina and spoke to her quietly. “Fina, what happened?”

“We were walking and looking at the flowers when we found the queen and Lady Flora here. Then Shuri noticed Lady Flora had a Kumayuru stuffed animal and ran over.”

Yeah, I could totally see Shuri running after a Kumayuru teddy bear.

“I was so very surprised when Shuri said ‘Kumayuru’ and came over.” The queen

smiled at us. I guess she'd been eavesdropping then.

It was all fine. After all, Lady Flora and the queen were good people. Of course, it'd be a different story if the royal family was evil like in fantasy stories. In those things, commoners weren't supposed to so much as even *approach* the royalty. Normally, this kind of thing would've ended in mild-to-extreme groveling. Shuri really needed to be a little more careful.

Then again, if the royal family had been that rotten, I never would've been able to go in and out of the castle. In fact, I never would've been able to bring Fina and the others with me in the first place, and I sure wouldn't have given the princess any stuffed animals for presents either.

"Then, once we all introduced ourselves," the queen continued, "they said they came here with you two, so we invited them to tea. And of course, Noire is far from a stranger to me—I've met her many times."

"Yes," said Noa nervously. So even Noa, a noble, was nervous in front of the queen. Well, the royalty and aristocracy probably weren't seeing each other *that* regularly. In fact, Noa lived out in Crimonia, so she probably saw royalty even less than other nobles. Now that I thought about it, that kinda made me an outlier, didn't it? I saw the royals every time I dropped by the castle.

"Though I was surprised to learn the three of you have the same stuffed animals as Flora."

It seemed Princess Flora hadn't been all that comfortable with Shuri showing up at first. But once Shuri had said Kumayuru and Kumakyu's names, that'd set Princess Flora at ease. When she told the princess she also had her own stuffed animals, Fina had produced a Kumakyu and they'd started talking about me. Princess Flora's stranger danger vibes had totally evaporated after that.

Who would've thought teddy bears would bring together the royalty and the commoners? Any normal person would've laughed at the idea. But lo and behold, these teddy bears were bridging divides.

"Bear, there's lots of bears!" Princess Flora surveyed the stuffed animals, looking quite pleased with herself. The teddies I'd gifted to Fina and Shuri were on top of the table too. Fina had a Kumayuru and Shuri had a Kumakyu.

"Did you both really bring your bears with you?" I asked Fina and Noa.

"Yes, of course," said Noa. "I'm the president of the bear fan club, after all."

Hmm, that sounded... awfully suspect, so I just pretended not to hear. If I asked for more details, I was pretty sure I'd be in for some sanity damage, so I'd just... let it go.

"With so many stuffed bears here, it almost feels like I've wandered into a strange land," the queen blurted. "Perhaps I'll bring my own stuffed bears from my chambers as well?"

Nope! Nope! *Nope!* No more sanity damage, please!

"We're really being buried in bears," said the literal, actual queen of the kingdom. "While we're at it, Yuna, would you bring out the real ones as well?"

"The real *what*?" I knew exactly what she wanted, but I... man. C'mon, give me a break.

"Bear!" Princess Flora looked like she wanted me to summon them too, and that did it. I couldn't say no after seeing that face.

"Only for a little bit, all right?" I asked.

"Okay!"

So I'm a bit of a softie. Sue me. I summoned my cub-sized bears on top of the table.

"Kumayuru!"

"Kumakyu!"

Princess Flora and Shuri both seemed happy to see my bears sitting in front of me on the table. We now had six bears on the table—and don't you *dare* say it was seven. I won't stand for being counted in that number, you hear me?

The queen had appeared next to me at... some point. "I will be confiscating this one to avoid anyone fighting over them," she said, picking up Kumakyu.

"Then perhaps I'll take Kumayuru," said Elleaura, who was sitting directly across from the queen. Then, just like that, she picked up Kumayuru.

“Mommy!”

“Mother!”

Princess Flora and Noa yelled at their mothers, but the queen and Ellelaura headed back to their seats, bears in hand. Wait, was that why they’d made me summon the bears in the first place?

Looking over this situation again, it’d gotten real weird, real fast. There were six bears in total—yes, *six* bears, and jokes about the seventh bear will not be tolerated, got it? Everyone except for me and Ange, who happened to be standing, now held a bear.

“Everyone’s carrying a bear,” said Ange.

“I don’t have one,” I piped up.

“You have *yourself*.”

Right, of course. No matter how many times I deny it, to others I’ll always be a bear.

The queen grinned. “Ha ha ha. This has become a strange gathering indeed. Looks like Fol won’t be able to join in at this rate.”

(Fol, by the way, is short for King Folhaut.)

Anyway, I doubted a king would feel at peace surrounded by so many girls—and he probably wouldn’t have wanted to join in the first place. Plus, a lot of the people here were children. Finally, I was a little worried about Shuri doing something wild in the presence of the king. Yeah, this was for the best.



"But if Yuna is here," said Ellelaura, "Fol might be on his way to Flora's chambers."

"Shall I go find him?" Ange proposed.

"It should be fine," said Ellelaura. "I didn't have the guards get him today, so His Majesty shouldn't know that Yuna is here. We only came to show these girls around the castle, after all."

"Really?" The queen looked disappointed. "In that case, I suppose you haven't brought anything tasty to eat?" Did the royal power couple expect me to bring food every time I came? Maybe it was my own fault for, y'know, doing exactly that, but I'd really only been bringing stuff as gifts for Princess Flora. None of it was supposed to be for her parents.

"Yuna, why don't you bring out some cotton candy?" Ellelaura blurted out after seeing the queen look a little disappointed.

"Cotton candy?" Ange echoed.

"Oh, my, what is that?" asked the Queen.

Shuri looked up from her stuffed animals for a moment. "It's a type of candy that's kinda like a cloud."

"Cwoud?" Princess Flora tilted her head.

"By cloud do you mean the ones floating up in the sky?" The queen looked up. There were, in fact, white clouds drifting around.

"Mommy! We can eat cwouds!?"

"Hmm... they're so white and fluffy, aren't they? They may well taste good."

The queen smiled. Why was she teaching her daughter nonsense? Then again, maybe people in this world actually didn't know about clouds. Maybe she actually thought they were edible? I hoped she wasn't just saying that to tease her own daughter. Still, this wouldn't be any good for her education, so I took it upon myself to set matters straight.

"Princess Flora, you can't eat clouds. But I do have candy that *looks* a lot like a cloud

that you *can* eat.” I pulled the cotton candy machine out of my bear storage, filled it with sugar, and switched it on. The metal at the center heated up and started to spin. White floss started to extrude from the little holes at the center of the machine.

Princess Flora leaned onto the table and stared at the cottony floss coming from the center of the machine. “There’s something coming out!”

I prepped some twigs for the cotton candy.

“Yuna, could I try?” Shuri asked right as I was about to spin the candy around the twig.

“Sure. But make sure you do it right.”

I handed her the twig and she got to work spinning the floss around it. Fina looked like she wanted to say something while she was watching that, but she didn’t say a word.

Shuri spun the twig around and around, gathering white floss and making a larger and larger ball of cotton candy. She was pretty good, especially considering the only other practice she’d had was at the orphanage. Maybe she had a knack for it? Not that I was going to let her become a cotton candy seller someday, even if she wanted to.

“Wow!” Princess Flora marveled. “It’s a cwoud!”

“Oh, my, it really is,” the queen chimed in. “It’s fluffy, exactly like a cloud.”

The candy floss grew larger and larger, and Princess Flora was getting more excited by the moment. When Shuri realized that everyone was getting worked up over the cotton candy, she couldn’t help but make the candy even bigger.

“Shuri, stop right there!” I exclaimed. “Stop, stop!”

Shuri panicked and quit, but I was already too late—there was *way* too much cotton candy now. Still, what’s done was done.

“This is yummy, Princess,” said Shuri, offering the candy to Princess Flora. She took the monstrosity, and I was a little worried that she’d drop the thing.

“How do I eat it?” she asked.

"Um, you can tear off a little bit using your fingers," I told her. I couldn't just tell a princess to bite right into it. "It might make your hands a little sticky, though, so you shouldn't go near your stuffed animal afterward."

Ange took the Kumayuru sitting on Princess Flora's lap and set it on the table—good going on her for moving that quick.

Princess Flora tore off a piece of candy with her teeny-tiny hand and ate it. "It's sweet...!" Just one bite in and she was all smiles.

"Oh, is it?" said the queen. "Shuri, would you make some for me as well?"

"Okay!" Shuri nodded and started up another batch of cotton candy. This time, she made one that was a more reasonable size.

Soon enough, the queen was enjoying the cotton candy too. Still, Princess Flora couldn't be the only kid eating cotton candy, so Shuri started eating it with her. Man, they really got along well. Maybe that was thanks to the teddy bears too?

"So, dear, what were you discussing before we arrived?" Ellelaura asked.

Noa looked up from beside her mother. "About Yuna and whether you're causing any trouble, Mother."

"Why, how rude. I'm getting all my work done, I'll have you know."

Huh. Never would've figured that causing trouble for everybody was part of her job description. Then again, not doing her work caused more trouble too, so maybe she was just going above and beyond?

Still, I couldn't help but think back on what she'd said. Maybe I'd created problems for Cliff, the king, and Ellelaura.

"Ha, it's all right," said the queen. "The only person who'd be in trouble if you didn't do your job is Fol."

"Why, Lady Kiteia, you say that as though I'm the root of his troubles," said Ellelaura.

"Do you think you're not?"

"Well..."

"Mother..." Noa gave her mother an exasperated look.

"I am doing my work though, truly. If I weren't, he would've sent me back to Crimonia long ago." She had a point. If she was in the way, he'd have sent her home. "Still," she mused, "that might be nice. Going back to Crimonia..."

"Shia would be upset if she heard you say that..." Noa warned.

"But don't you want me home, Noa?" Ellelaura looked a tad glum.

"I'm sad I don't see you often, Mother," said Noa. She looked a little bashful. "But if you and Shia returned to Crimonia, I would be all alone when I leave for the academy in the capital."

"You're right. Then I suppose the two of us will live together in the future," said Ellelaura, happily taking Noa into a hug.

The queen laughed. "Ellelaura, I take it you were showing your dear daughter around the castle?"

"My charming daughter asked me to show her friends around the castle, and I simply couldn't refuse." Ellelaura gave Noa an even firmer squeeze.

Embarrassed, Noa struggled to escape Ellelaura's grasp, but no dice. Kumayuru, who was sandwiched right between Ellelaura and Noa, seemed pretty squished now.

Jeez, I hope Ellelaura loosens her grip soon, I thought to myself. Kumayuru did *not* look comfortable.

"What brought you to the capital?" asked the queen. "I'm sure you didn't come all this way just to see the castle."

"My daughter Shia invited them to the academy festival."

"The festival? I believe my daughter spoke of that as well." Her daughter? As in Princess Flora? Did Princess Flora want to go too?

We passed the afternoon looking out at the flowers and talking. Soon enough, Princess

Flora and Shuri ended up falling asleep holding their teddy bears, closing the curtains on our castle tour.

And by the way, I did eventually get my real bears back from the queen and Ellelaura.

CHAPTER 278

THE BEAR PLAYS WITH NOA'S HAIR

IN THE DAYS LEADING UP to the academy festival, I did a whole lot—took Fina and the others out to tour the capital, visited Sanya and Ghazal, cleaned my capital bear house, and played with my bears in Ellelaura's garden.

Then, finally, the day of the festival arrived.

"I need to get ready," said Shia, "so I'll head out first. Come by when it's time for the festival. Noa, wait by the entrance to the academy. Don't wander around until I come to get you."

"You don't have to keep telling me!" replied Noa.

"Also, do you have your money? If you forget, you won't be able to buy anything."

"Mother gave me an allowance. It should be fine."

Fina and Shuri had gotten an allowance too, not just Noa. At first, Fina had refused, but she'd lost the argument with Ellelaura in the end. Ellelaura had tried to even give me money, but I politely turned her down by telling her I'd already gotten the escort fee for bringing everyone over safe and sound.

"If any men call you over, you can't follow them, all right?"

"I wouldn't!" Noa said.

"Even if they say they'll buy you something to eat."

"*I wouldn't!!!*"

Shia gave warning after warning to Noa. "Also... also..." She tapped her foot, racking her brain for more ideas.

"We should be fine, Shia," she said. "You can hurry up and go to the academy."

Shia had really been putting off leaving, huh? "Fine, fine. Yuna, please take care of Noa."

"I will. Break a leg out there, Shia."

"Okay, I'm off!" Shia's skirt fluttered as she raced out of the room.

"Shia... I'm not a kid anymore," Noa mumbled to herself.

I shook my head. "Sorry to tell you, but you still are."

Once Shia left, the room quieted down. We still had time before we needed to head out.

"Oh, right!" There was still something to do. "Noa, come here and sit down."

"What is it?" Like I asked, she sat beside me. I stood behind Noa, pulled a comb out of bear storage, and started to run it through Noa's long blonde hair.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she asked, surprised.

"Cliff said not to let any weird lowlifes near you, right?" He'd been worried that guys would try to propose to her.

"Do you really believe what Father said?"

"You *don't*?"

"I'm not sure, but... I don't think any men would come near me. This isn't a party, after all, and I'm much too young to think of dating."

Yeah, ten was way too early for dating. At the same time, I didn't have any experience with that, so maybe that factored into my opinion. Even if there were apparently a few kids back in my old world who would date in elementary, that wasn't common. But this world wasn't that one, and Noa was part of the nobility. Guys probably *would* try to date her with the intention of proposing later, which would be *such* a pain to deal with.

"Well, I already made Cliff a promise. There's no such thing as being too careful."

“But what does that have to do with combing my hair?”

“I was thinking of giving you a makeover. If people haven’t seen you often in the first place, you’ll be *way* harder to recognize.”

At the very least, she’d be disguised if no one got too close. But most people have distinct enough features that makeovers can’t do it all. Still, how many people would recognize me if I changed out of my bear onesie? People who’d only met me once probably wouldn’t even know who I was.

As for Noa, she lived way off in Crimonia, so people from the capital didn’t see her often. There was a chance they wouldn’t recognize her if her hair were different—a new hairstyle can really transform us girls.

“That’s why I think changing your hair might help, just in case. What do you say?”

“If you’re doing it, then I don’t mind.”

Since Noa agreed, I got started with her hair. “What kind of style do you like? Fina, Shuri, you can give your input too.”

“Okay.”

“Uh-huh.”

As I combed her beautiful blonde hair, I tried to think of styles that would fit her long, flowing locks. First I divided her hair in the back and tried giving her pigtails like Shia’s.

“That’s like Lady Shia’s hair!” said Fina.

“It’s Shia!” Shuri agreed.

Fina held a mirror in front of Noa.

“It looks exactly like my sister’s hair.” Noa touched her hair, smiling.

“It looks good,” I said, “but this won’t work.”

“Why not?!” Noa asked.

"If you look more like Shia, they'll be able to tell it's you right away."

Why did I give her pigtails, you ask? I just wanted to see how they'd look on her. They were sisters, after all, so they looked alike when they had the same hair too. Shia might've looked like Noa when she was younger.

Next I tried a ponytail, followed by a side ponytail.

"You look so cute, Lady Noa," said Fina.

"Yeah, Noa, you're cute!" Shuri agreed.

All the hairstyles looked great on her. I had no idea which one to choose.

While I was playing with Noa's hair, Ellelaura walked in. "Oh, my, what are you up to?"

"We're playing with Noa's hair," I said.

"Yuna..." Noa's reflection in the mirror looked peeved to hear me put it like that.

I explained what was *actually* happening to Ellelaura.

She nodded. "I see. In that case, may I lend a hand?"

"Mother?!"

Ellelaura joined in and we started our hair fashion show. We tried a bun, braids, and all kinds of other styles. Every single one of them looked adorable on her.

"Which did you like, Noa?" I asked.

She had other concerns. "Ow, my head hurts... You really got into playing with my hair, didn't you?"

Yeah, she had us there. The moment I touched her golden hair, I just couldn't help it. Fina's hair was short, so there wasn't much I could do with it. Noa's, on the other hand, was long. It had tons of styling potential.

At the same time, we needed to decide on a hairstyle soon, because we were about to head out. I asked everyone what they thought, and we settled on one hairstyle. In the

end, we got a giant ribbon ready for her, just like Fina's, and tied her hair up in the back.

If her hair looked too unique, she'd stand out too much and all of our work would've been for nothing. That's why we went for something simple, though even that was enough to change her look.

With Noa sporting her new do, we left the academy. Elleaura had wanted to come with us, but she reluctantly left to get some work done.

Noa skipped along, looking rather pleased with herself. Her hair swayed from side to side as she went. "I am so excited."

"Is this your first academy festival, Noa?"

"Yes. You see, I'm not allowed to come to the capital on my own."

Well, it made sense not to let a ten-year-old just wander off on her own, and it'd apply just as much last year when she was nine.

"Shuri, make sure you keep holding my hand, okay?" Fina held Shuri's hand. "You can't wander off on your own."

It wasn't like she could, considering they were holding hands, but I kept that comment to myself. I smiled while I watched them—Fina and Shuri were as close as Noa and Shia.

"What is it?" Fina asked, noticing the look on my face.

"I was just thinking of what it'd be like to have a sister. Since Shia was just as worried about Noa."

"Shia was much too worried about me," Noa said.

"Uh-huh!" Shuri piped up. "You worry too much, Fina."

I guess kids got how parents felt, but a little sister couldn't understand a big sister's feelings.

While we walked toward the academy, we ran into people who seemed to be heading the same direction. The more people we encountered, the more stares were directed my way.

I'm a little used to that. More people *always* meant more stares, and I hadn't forgotten that. The parents and their kids talked about me as they stared: "A bear...?" "I wonder if the bear is part of the festival?"

I'm not a part of the show, I shouted in my brain, not that any of them could hear.

Finally, we reached the academy... although the stares didn't go away.

"It looks like Shia isn't here yet," said Noa.

We didn't see her anywhere near the entrance. The other people headed into the festival, passing us one after another. They had a crystal panel set up at the entrance, which visitors held their residence or guild cards up to. It seemed to be a security measure.

While we were waiting for Shia, some kids came running from far off. The moment they reached us, the kids leapt right onto me.

"It's a bear!"

"A beaaar!!!"

More and more kids gathered around me, piling right on.

"Oh, I wonder if she made that for the festival."

"What a cute bear...!"

"Mom, I'm going over to her too!"

The adults unleashed their kids... kids who then gathered around me. Why couldn't they hold them back? I pulled my hood low over my face so they couldn't see me.

"Yuna!" Noa said, and the other two echoed her—

“Yunaaa!”

“Yunaaaaaa!”

They were worried, but I was in no state to reply. The kids kept gathering around me, trying to get me to respond. If I’d been facing monsters instead, I could’ve sent them flying by blasting them with magic or a bear punch, but that’s... not exactly something I could do with kids.

“You’re so soft, bear,” said one kid.

“You’re pudgy,” said another.

“Could you let go of me please?” I said gently, but the kids wouldn’t budge. The more time passed, the more kids gathered. The adults around us watched, smiling.

But I wasn’t some performing act for the festival! “Help...”

“Yuna? What do you think you’re doing?!“ Shia, the goddess of my salvation, had appeared before my eyes.

“Shia, help me!!!” I begged.

Shia looked at the kids around me, sighed, and started to pry them away. “Come on, you’re in the bear’s way. Please move aside.”

“We wiiill!”

“Okay.”

The kids headed off one after another. Shia had saved me from the child siege.

“Whew. Thanks, Shia,” I said.

“What were you even doing, Yuna?” Shia gave me an exasperated look.

Huh? We’d just been waiting here. I hadn’t done anything! “We were waiting for you when all these kids started coming up to me.”

I looked over at the kids. It looked like they were waiting for another chance to latch

right back onto me. Maybe I was just imagining that, but the terror was real. Who would have thought that a tiny tyke assault would be so frightening?

“Are you okay, Yuna?” Fina asked.

“Yuna?”

“Yuna...”

When Fina, Shuri, and Noa came over to me, the other little kids also tried to come back. I stopped them all.

When Shia saw that, she picked up on what was going on. “If we stick around here, we’ll end up with another crowd. Let’s head inside.”

Didn’t have to tell me twice. Shia led us into the academy. The kids looked disappointed, but this was just the way it had to be.

“Shia, thank you so much. Seriously. You saved me.”

“I’m so used to that outfit that I forgot how much it stands out.”

I hadn’t exactly forgotten, but I didn’t think it’d attract so many kids. Could I even get into the academy dressed like this?

CHAPTER 279

THE BEAR MEETS A PRINCESS

I HELD MY GUILD CARD up to the crystal panel, and out came a slip of paper. I'd seen some other people getting this thing too. Looking it over, I could see it was a questionnaire to figure out what exhibitions were the most interesting to people. I hadn't expected a survey here, of all things.

Once we got into the academy, the kids from earlier also streamed in. It kind of felt like they were following me. Then again, there was only one entrance. I tried to convince myself that they'd go off on their own separate ways as I followed after Shia.

"I don't think they'd surround you if you keep walking," said Shia, "but let's get to our shop stall just in case." Everyone agreed, but at once Shia noticed Noa's new 'do. "What happened to your hair?"

"Yuna did it for me. Do you think it suits me?" Noa ran a hand through her hair and the giant ribbon that kept it in place.

"Of course it does! It looks very cute. But you had your usual hairstyle this morning. Why did you change it?"

"Yuna took Father very seriously." Noa quickly explained the change.

"Ha! Yuna, you and Father are worrying too much. Even if Mother and Father are receiving engagement requests, no one would ask Noa to marry them directly."

"But then if someone does actually like you," I said, "they wouldn't recognize you. Who knows? Maybe some boy fell in love with you at first sight at the party a while back. Now he won't know who you are."

Noa was cute, y'know? I could totally see a boy falling for her after seeing her get all dressed up.

Noa didn't sound too interested in that, though. "I wouldn't care for any boy who couldn't even bother to talk to me at the party." *Rejected!* Just like that, the imaginary

boy was shot down. I guess she preferred ‘em to be direct.

But probably not “total player” direct either, though I doubted any boys her age would be like that. A ten-year-old Casanova—yeesh, there’s a scary thought.

“Besides,” Noa added, “I doubt that anyone would be able to approach me in such a crowded place with so many people if he couldn’t even talk to me at the party.”

She had a point. If the boy was that sheepish, no way would he be able to talk to her in a place as visible as this. Plus, she was surrounded by people.

“I think that doing her hair differently is a good thing,” said Shia. “She won’t have to talk with tiresome acquaintances as much and, most importantly, it looks great on her.”

Hmm. Yeah, a lot of nobles went to this school, and I bet some of them were aristocrats that we didn’t want to see. What if we saw that dummy noble we ran into around the time of Misa’s party? Yeah, there was no such thing as too much caution.

“Plus, with this many people around,” said Noa, “no one would recognize me anyway.”

We kept talking while we headed to Shia’s stall.

“We’re almost there—it’s just past the training grounds here.”

According to Shia, the exhibits were separated based on type, and the food stalls were in a specific location. Considering how huge the academy was, I kind of wanted a pamphlet or a guidebook or, like, something. Shia said they didn’t have one available, but there were large signs in some places with a map.

The training grounds were typically used to practice magic and sword fighting: there were several available to the students. We looked around the academy and talked all about Noa’s hair until we reached the training grounds.

It kind of felt like a large schoolyard. A ton of stalls stood in rows on the grounds, and they’d prepped tables and chairs so people could eat. It seemed like it’d be a lot more popular when lunch came around.

“The food stalls are divided into different areas,” said Shia, “so I don’t think everyone will just go to one place.”

Others who had gotten there earlier were already lined up at the stalls. I even saw some people already eating. We headed to the cotton candy stall, but they didn't have any customers. Maybe they hadn't started serving yet?

Cattleya greeted us when we arrived at the stall. "How is everything going?"

"It's perfect," said Shia. "I'm excited to see how much we sell."

Maricks cackled. "We'll show them all by placing first in our division by the end of the festival!" he declared, sounding hyped beyond belief. All we had to do now was hope that the candy would sell.

"The division?" I repeated.

"There are division prizes to help motivate the students. If you win, you can get something fancy," said Cattleya. "Did you receive a questionnaire at the entrance earlier?"

"Yeah, we did."

"You only need to write a number to vote, so just remember the number of the exhibit you liked. Ours just so happens to be thirty-five. If you like our stall, please be sure to write it down."

I checked the questionnaire again. It said to write down the numbers of three exhibits that stood out and seemed interesting. Apparently, this was how they were vying for the prizes.

"I'll do that," I said. "Just let me check if there are other good exhibits around first."

I felt bad, but I didn't want to play favorites. If I was going to fill out the survey, I wanted to be sure to give equal attention to the other places. Fina and the others were already starting to write the number down, so I stopped them. I mean, they couldn't just go writing down a number when they hadn't even eaten at the other places yet, right? We hadn't gone to a single other one yet.

A girl standing behind Shia tugged at one of her pigtails. "Shia, will you please introduce me sometime soon?"

The girl had been glancing at me from behind Shia for a while now. Her uniform looked

just like Shia's, so I could tell she was another student. I felt like I'd seen her before, but... where? I don't feel like I'd forget such a charming girl.

"All right, I hear you," said Shia. "Please don't tug my hair."

She let go of Shia's pigtail. They say hair is a girl's life. You're just plain not supposed to pull on it.

"But you were having a whole conversation and leaving me out, Shia," she said, pouting. "What else was I to do?"

"Yuna, I'd like to introduce you to my classmate, Lady Teilia."

Teilia stepped forward once Shia introduced her.

"I'm so pleased to finally meet you, Bear. My name is Teilia. I hope we'll be good friends."

"Uh, hey. I'm Yuna. Nice to meet you?"

Teilia offered me her hand, so I offered her mine, but then she took my bear puppet into both her hands. Apparently, she knew who I was? I didn't know her, but she still looked weirdly familiar. Had I passed by her before? I'd come by the academy when I was doing a guarding quest before, so maybe it happened then? That was what I thought... until she spoke up again.

"Wow... you really are dressed as a bear. Thank you for how well you always treat my little sister."

Uh, whomst? I treated her *sister* well? Did I know her little sister? I didn't know very many people who were much younger than her besides Noa and Misa. And, though it was very unlikely it was her, maybe Cattleya? I looked at Shia, Noa, then Cattleya, but none of them looked like the girl. Well, sometimes sisters didn't look alike.

The only other possibility I could think of was her being the product of an illicit affair between Cliff and another woman, which would make her Shia and Noa's sister. Maybe... that's why she didn't look like Elleaura?!

"I have no idea what you could possibly be thinking," said Shia, exasperated, "but I doubt you have it right."

Rude! I wish people would stop trying to read my mind.

"My sister is always going on about a bear, so I was convinced you must wear bear pelts. It seems I was mistaken. I didn't think you would look like such a cute bear." Teilia began to feel my bear puppets up and pat down my torso.

"Um, sorry but... could you stop touching me?"

"I'm sorry. Well, then, I'll give you a hug and then will be done."

Teilia had pulled away from me, but then she suddenly opened her arms and flung them around me. Why was she doing that?!

"You really are as soft as my sister says." She squeezed me a couple of times. "I could easily become addicted to this." After feeling me up, she finally pressed her face into my chest.

"No fair. I wanna too!" Now Shuri was hugging me from behind. It was the same thing as earlier.

I grabbed Teilia by the shoulders and pulled her off of me. "Why're you suddenly on me like that? And you get off me too, Shuri."

"I'm sorry. My sister said you were soft and felt so nice to hug that I was set upon hugging you as well," said Teilia.

"That's no reason to suddenly hug someone."

Teilia withdrew, but she looked sad. And who was this mysterious sister she kept on mentioning? I'd been racking my brains, but I just couldn't figure out who it was.

"It wasn't just my sister who told me that. Mother and Father said the same thing."

Wait, it wasn't just her sister? Even her parents know me? Just who was her sister? I kept trying to think of who it could be, but I just couldn't come up with anyone.

"But why do you always come when I am out? When I return from the academy, my parents and sister regale me with stories about the delicious foods you bring them. My brother tells me that Father stops working whenever you arrive too, which causes him ever so much trouble."

Her little sister knew me as the “bear,” and whenever I would come with food, her brother would run into trouble because her father would stop working. The pieces started coming together.

Wait... was she? Could she be? I steadily realized who this girl was. I looked at the girl—Teilia’s—face again. I could see the resemblance now. “Are you Princess *Flora*’s sister?”

“I am. Did you not know?”

How would I?! I hadn’t known the name of the king’s other daughter, much less her existence. No one had told me—and I hadn’t asked either.

The oldest son was in his twenties and Princess Flora was four or five, so I guess it wasn’t too weird for them to have had a kid or two in-between. Now that I knew, she did look like Princess Flora and the queen. Why hadn’t I realized? That seemed like something I could’ve guessed earlier.

“Shia said that she knew the bear and that you would be coming to today’s festival, so I asked her to introduce me in exchange for me helping at their stall.”

It had finally come together. “Huh. I had no idea Princess Flora had a sister.”

“I wanted to thank you,” she said, “for all the things you do for my sister.”



"You really don't have to..."

"The stuffed animals were especially cute. And that picture book was particularly lovely. Whenever I heard about you, I tried to imagine the type of girl who could be so accomplished at cooking, stuffed animal making, and picture-book drawing."

I could tell Teilia had really wanted to meet me. Like, a lot.

She beamed at me.

The queen had mentioned hearing about the festival from her daughter a few days ago, but I guess she'd meant Teilia all along. If only she'd actually said her daughter's *name*.

I never would've expected that Princess Flora had a sister, let alone that I'd meet her at the festival.

CHAPTER 280

THE BEAR HELPS ADVERTISE THE STALL

“IS THE STALL DOING WELL?” I asked. “It doesn’t look like you’ve sold much.”

“We... actually haven’t had a single person come by.”

“It’s because we’ve got such unique candy,” said Maricks. “They’ll come later, you’ll see!” He turned to some kids who’d been staring at me for a while. “Hey, kids—yeah, you! Cotton candy, huh? Whaddya think?”

The kids looked at each other, shook their heads, and ran off. Aww... and they’d finally landed some potential customers, too.

“Maricks, you looked too scary when you invited them to come by,” Shia said.

“What? Are you calling my face scary?”

“You need to smile more.”

Well, Maricks’s face might’ve had something to do with it, but I also don’t think customers wanted to pay money to try out something they’d never eaten or even heard of, just because someone asked them to. Up until now, everyone who’d been willing to eat my cooking had already known me, and I hadn’t charged them for it either. If you take that away, well...

Hmm. I hadn’t seen this coming. No matter how unique and delicious something was, it wouldn’t sell if no one knew that it was good. At this rate, all of Shia and her friends’ hard work would be for nothing.

I looked at their stall again.

First I checked the price they’d posted. If they’d priced it too high, kids wouldn’t have been able to afford it with their allowance. But the price seemed fine. It was, in fact, well within a kid’s price range. How could I possibly know what a kid’s allowance might be, you might ask? Well, I’d asked Tiermina a while ago. She’d asked me not to

give Fina and Shuri too much for the festival and told me how much was typical.

The price was fine.

Next, I checked the signboard. All they'd written was "cotton candy." But that was useless if you didn't know what cotton candy already was. Without a food sample, nobody would even know what they were making. Even if they got foot traffic, at this rate they still wouldn't get any takers.

This world didn't have clear plastic bags, like my old world did, so they couldn't make the cotton candy and then cover it like they did at festivals. Plus, unlike other types of food, making cotton candy didn't have a delicious smell that could attract people.

Shia and the others didn't know any better, since they'd never sold anything before, but they were missing a ton of elements a stand would need.

The price was reasonable, so the issue boiled down to the shop's appearance and marketing.

I didn't really think it'd be a good idea for someone like me to help them, considering I wasn't part of their group. But they'd probably practiced really hard to make the cotton candy, and I'd feel bad if they couldn't sell anything even after all of their efforts. Plus, as the person who taught them how to make cotton candy, seeing it flop bummed me out a little too.

I could think of one way of advertising for them, but I really didn't want to actually do it. Still... it'd get results. I decided I'd grin and bear it for their sakes.

"I think you need a little more advertisement, so could I use the space next to your stall?"

They were set up just like your usual festival stalls, with room in between each one. The stalls were spaced out slightly into rows.

"You may," said Shia, "but what do you intend to do?"

"You'll get it when you see it." I really wished we'd made food samples. Unlike in my home world, we couldn't make fake food samples—but I could whip something else

up.

I gathered my mana to form a giant, two-meter tall, cartoonish, cute bear statue: the bear was sitting down. Then I used earth magic to give the bear some cotton candy to hold and eat. With this poster boy—or rather, poster *bear*—it was clear that they were selling food.

“It’s a bear!”

“A bear *made* a bear?!”

Who’d said that just now? I looked around, but I couldn’t find the culprit.

“You always make grandiose things look easy, Yuna...” said Shia.

“Yeah, but now you’ll stand out a little.”

“I can see that, but why is it a bear?”

My imagination tends to go for bears. I mean, sure, I *could* imagine something normal and make something else, but all of my powerful offensive magic was bear-related and had been since I got to this place. When I made golems? Bears. Ornaments? Bears. My summons were bears, my picture books were bears... even *I* was a bear. My brain was bursting with bears. You can bearly blame me, y’know?

Still, maybe I’d be able to make something else if I tried hard enough. “If you don’t want a bear, how about something else?”

“No, this will do fine. It looks cute and you already went through the trouble of making it for us. It’s perfect for advertising the stand.”

As long as everybody agreed that it was fine, I guess that was good enough for me. No sooner had I looked behind me than I found some starry-eyed kids staring at my bear statue—probably the kids who’d followed me from the entrance of the academy. In that case, I’d have them help.

“Maricks, make three cotton candies,” I said.

“Hm? All right.”

The kids went from staring at me to staring at Maricks as he made the cotton candy. “What’s that coming out of it?” “Is that thread?” “What’s *that*?” “Is it food?”

Maricks’s practice had made perfect: the cotton candy looked great. He’d probably really put in the work, because he was twirling that twig around like a pro. The kids watched in wonder as he spun the cotton candy.

I called over Fina and Shia, who were watching a ways away, then whispered to them. Fina nodded, then she headed to Shuri and Noa. Shia nodded and told me, “I got it.”

Once the cotton candy was done, I gave them money and took the candy. Maricks tried to turn me down, but I gave him the cash anyway. “I’m a customer, got it?”

Then I gave the cotton candy to Fina, Shuri, and Noa.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks.”

“Yuna, thank you so much.”

The three of them thanked me and dug in.

“It’s delicious!”

“It’s so sweet and yummy!”

“It’s really good!”

My three plants started to talk about the cotton candy in very loud voices. Even if the kids already knew they had a connection to the stall, it didn’t matter as long as the trio looked like they were enjoying the cotton candy.

The kids watched Fina and the others very curiously. Even some passersby stopped. Their gaze went from my bear outfit to the bear statue to the strange food Fina and the others were eating.

“Are they eating cotton...?”

“What is that...?”

People started to gather as the cotton candy hype rose. I looked over at Shia. She nodded.

"We're going to start handing out samples now," Shia called out to the people around her. "Please try one if you would like. They're very sweet and very good."

When Maricks heard that, he got started on spinning up more cotton candy. The people who'd been interested looked downright surprised at the sight of Maricks making it. The cloud-like floss appeared in the machine, he spun it around the twigs, and the people marveled.

Once he'd finished, Shia let each member of the gathered crowd try a bite-sized piece. Every one of them looked surprised when they tried the cotton candy. The way the cotton candy melted in their mouth, the way the sweetness slowly spread across their tongues... it must've been a real shock.

And so, of course, they started to make orders.

A line steadily began to form. The line itself (along with my outfit) drew even more patrons. My work here was done. I headed behind the stall—they could figure out the rest on their own. In the end, after all, I wasn't really part of their group.

When I headed behind the stall, I heard the kids calling out to me as they waved, "Bear!" "Bear." I kind of felt like a character mascot.

Let's see... was there anything else I needed to do? "Hey, Shia—I think you know this already, but remember to tell them that the candy will melt over time."

Some customers would probably try to take the cotton candy home, and there was a chance that the stuff would melt into a small ball by the time they got back. It wouldn't be any good to get complaints over that.

"I've got it."

And there we go. Duty done. "Keep at it, Shia," I said. "I'm going to head out."

"Good luck, Shia!" said Noa.

Shia sighed. "I wish I could show you around, though."

“Yuna is here, so we’re okay.”

“That’s... actually my main worry,” Shia said.

Rude? I wouldn’t do anything bad. Trouble just tended to find me. Although... okay, I admit that my bearish appearance was usually to blame.

“In that case, may I show you around?”

“Lady Teilia?”

“Just Teilia would suffice, Bear.”

“Are you sure? Because if so, how about just... Yuna?”

“Shall we, Yuna? I will show you around the academy. As long as I accompany you, I doubt anyone will attempt anything uncouth.”

“But shouldn’t Teilia help your stall?” I asked Shia.

“It should be fine since Lady Teilia promised to help us tomorrow.”

With that, we ended up going around to see the festival with Princess Teilia. Fina and Noa looked shocked, but we’d probably be all right.

CHAPTER 281

THE BEAR ENJOYS THE ACADEMY FESTIVAL

NOW THAT WE WERE GOING around the festival with Teilia, we gave each other proper introductions. It seemed like Noa and Teilia already knew each other, but only by sight. Fina introduced herself very nervously as Shuri let out an enthusiastic “She’s a princess!”

Fina admonished Shuri and had her give a proper introduction, and Teilia smiled and patted Shuri’s head.

“Anywhere you’d like to go?” I asked. “Or would you rather eat something here before going?” I wasn’t particularly hungry.

“I’d like to head somewhere else,” she said. “Is that okay with everyone else?”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” Noa said.

“You can decide, Yuna,” Fina said.

“I’m not hungry, so... sure!”

We’d get food later. For now, we’d check out the other exhibits.

“You really do stand out, Yuna.”

Whenever we passed anyone by, I could hear them chattering: “A bear?” “What is a bear doing here...?” “Is she part of an event?” “Which stand is she from...?” Since it was a festival, a lot of people thought I was an attraction.

Some of the students would also recognize Teilia and say hello. Then they’d look at me and get the weirdest look on their faces, as if quietly asking *Why on earth is Teilia with a bear?*

"I've heard so much about you, so I'm so happy to finally meet you," said Teilia, walking backward as she talked to me. "So many people at the castle know you, Yuna, but no one knows what you're actually like. My mother just said you're a cute bear and my little sister said you're kind. My father left it at 'she's a bear.'"

Yeah, Princess Flora wouldn't know much, and the queen would only know what the king had told her. As for the king, he probably just couldn't tell her about the ten thousand monsters.

"But why is it that you wear that bear outfit?" Teilia asked, looking me over.

I knew she'd ask that at some point. "Um, I have the bear's blessing. I guess you could say that's why I need to dress as a bear."

"Blessed by bears...? Is that truly a thing?"

I wasn't technically lying. If I took off my clothes, I'd be defenseless against attack, heat, and cold. If I took off the bear puppets, I'd lose the ability to summon Kumayuru and Kumakyu, my magic, and even the ability to hold up a heavy sword. I wouldn't even be able to use my item bag. If I kicked off my bear shoes, I wouldn't be able to run fast, and I sure wouldn't be able to do any sick flips in the air. In other words, I was useless without my bear gear.

I ignored Noa and Shuri when I heard them say, "I want the bear's blessing too," and "Uh-huh, me too!" *Then I hope you like having to wear bear clothes 24/7*, I thought, but I didn't say it. To be honest, I was a little afraid they'd be excited to hear it.

Teilia walked over to my side and pinched the side of my bear onesie. "Aren't you hot in that?" Did she have to do that? I felt like she was pinching my flab or something.

"It's made from a special fabric, so it doesn't get hot."

"It doesn't? What type of fabric is it made from?" Teilia pinched my bear clothes again. "Well, you're such a cute girl that I suppose it looks good on you. A boy would probably be too embarrassed to even put it on."

Nope! Even I was embarrassed now. I was so done with the outfit.

"Oh, I know!" she said. "You reminded me with the bears. Would you be so kind as to show me your bear summons next? They should look exactly like the bears Flora has,

from what I hear.”

So she knew about my summons too? It wasn’t anything to keep hidden, so I didn’t mind.

“They’re such cute bear stuffed animals,” she cooed. “So cute, in fact, that I asked Flora to give them to me. It was no good, sadly. She looked like she was about to cry. I nearly panicked.”

She did *what*?! I knew just how much Princess Flora loved her bear stuffed animals. She was always carrying them around. When she left them in her room, she even put them by her pillows. How could she try taking them from Princess Flora?

“You can’t take them from the princess,” Shuri piped up at Teilia. Fina had been too slow to cover Shuri’s mouth in that moment.

“Ha ha! I suppose I shouldn’t. But they were so very cute that I wanted one too. Don’t worry—I won’t take them from Flora. I wouldn’t take something that she cared so much about,” Teilia promised, resting a hand on Shuri’s head.

I was glad she wasn’t a *your stuff is my stuff* kind of big sister.

“If you really want them, I’ll gift you some,” I said. “Just don’t take them from Princess Flora.”

“You too, Yuna? I already said I wouldn’t take them. I only asked because she had two, so I thought she might let me have the extra.”

“Kumayuru and Kumakyu have to stay together,” Shuri explained.

“Flora and Mother said the same thing. I just assumed they were different-colored versions of the same bear.

Yeah, I guess that’s what anyone would assume if they didn’t know my bears.

“Do you have stuffed animals too, Shuri?” she asked.

“Uh-huh. I have a Kumakyu.”

“Do all of you?”

“I have a Kumayuru!”

“I have both.”

“So you *do* all have bears. Then, Yuna, I’m holding you to that promise. Please give me one too.”

I promised. It’d be an issue, after all, if she stole Princess Flora’s stuffed animals.

“I didn’t think Mother would also have her own,” said Teilia. “When I went to her chambers, I was so surprised to see them as decorations.”

I’d only given her those because she wouldn’t give back Kumakyu and she seemed to want Princess Flora’s stuffed animals. As for the possibility of Princess Flora having an older sister, let alone her wanting a set of her own... that hadn’t even entered into it.

Well... like mother, like daughter.

While we were really getting into talking about stuffed animals, we went from one training ground to another, leaving the one where Shia and her classmates were behind.

There were a lot of people, and they were getting really worked up around one exhibit.

“Where should we go first?” asked Teilia.

“How about we start at the end?” I had no idea what kinds of things there were.

“Yes, just let me know if there’s anything you want a closer look at.”

As we walked, we’d look at anything that seemed interesting. Some students showed off their sword fighting in a clearing. Others were using magic. It felt weird watching them do all that in school uniforms, though... but it was another reminder that this really was another world.

“Why, that looks interesting,” said Teilia, looking up ahead. We followed behind her and ran into an excited crowd. I got closer, curious—it was knife throwing. There were

different-sized targets lined up at various distances.

A boy in a uniform hit the target and looked ecstatic. He got something that looked like a prize and gave it to a girl. It looked a little like a flower hair decoration.

The next boy got onto the stage and threw three knives. I guess he'd been trying to hit one of the farther targets, but he whiffed every single one. Poor guy ended up apologizing to the girl with him.

"I guess this is a good excuse for guys to show off for the girls," I said.

Shuri was looking at the prizes. "If you hit the target, you get that?"

They had a ton of hair ornaments. The ones at the bottom weren't all that fancy and the flowers were smaller, but the higher up ones were a lot fancier. The one at the very top was the prettiest one of the bunch—probably the top prize for the knife-throwing exhibit.

You got points for hitting the targets based on the distance and accuracy of the throw. The higher your total score, the better the prize you could get. The guy from earlier had gotten the third-tier hair ornament they had up. For the top prize, you had to get a perfect score.

The next boy played it safe by hitting the close targets and got the smallest and lowest-ranking hair ornament, but the girl with him still seemed happy about that. The audience booed, though. In my original world, they probably would've been hassling the happy couple out of jealousy and spite.

The next person up was a girl. Guess she was trying to win one for herself.

Knife-throwing, though, huh? It was very fantasy-world, and it sure seemed fun. You couldn't just throw knives around in my original world—way too dangerous. I'd never even had the chance to try throwing knives before.

"Would all of you like to try it?" Teilia asked.

"I will!" said Fina.

"Uh-huh, let's do it!" said Shuri.

"Well, if you're all trying it too..." I said.

We were all in. For a second, I'd hesitated about letting kids have knives, but then I remembered that Fina and Shuri had helped me with harvesting work. I had no reason to stop them. Plus, they were all super into the idea.

And it wasn't like I was going to throw knives at people—we were at a festival today, and how often would we get a chance to do this? Yeah, I decided to go along with it.

While we waited in line, I heard people start talking: "A bear?" "A bear?" I pulled my bear hood low over my head to hide. Yep... I was standing out again because of my clothes...

After a while, it was our turn. Teilia went first.

"I'd like to play," Teilia told the attendant.

"Lady Teilia? Y-yes, of course." A surprised student hesitantly handed Teilia her knives. Once she took all three knives, she went to stand on the oblong stage—you had to throw them from that platform. If you fell off, you lost.

"Ha ha! I'll sweep the prizes."

I wondered which target Teilia would go for. She readied her knife and threw it with beautiful form. It was a straight shot and made a resounding *thump* as it hit a mid-range target.

Oh, wow. The audience was going wild: "You're so cool, Lady Teilia!" "Lady Teilia!" Whenever she threw a knife, I heard high-pitched screaming. She was popular with the girls too—one of the perks of being a princess, I guess.

She hit a second target and, amazingly, hit a third one too. With her score, she got the third flower ornament from the top. Apparently you needed to hit the smaller or further away targets to get the second prize.

Teilia took her hair ornament and came back to us.

"You're really good for a princess," I said.

"Well, I'm simply good at knife throwing."

It sorta went without saying, but I couldn't help but wonder how a princess could get so good at knife throwing.

"Then I'll go next," said Noa, and took the platform in Teilia's place.

The crowd started to murmur, but not like they had when Teilia took the stage. I guess it was because of how little Noa was. "She's so cute." "I saw her with Lady Teilia. I wonder who she is." That kind of stuff.

Noa ignored them all as she stood up and threw the knives. She aimed for the same target as Teilia but missed the first and second. Then, just barely, she somehow hit the third time and got her hands on the smallest prize.

"That was so close. I almost received no points at all!"

"I think it's still amazing you hit the target," I said.

"Thank you," said Noa. "Fina, you and Shuri should try for the closer targets."

"Okay." Fina took the knives from the student and got up on the platform.

"Another adorable little girl." "Go get 'em!"

Fina looked a little embarrassed by the cheering. Then, with a practiced hand, she gripped the knife and pitched it *fast*. I guess all that harvesting had helped. Just like Noa had told her, she aimed for the closest target.

She'd only aimed for the safe targets, so Fina ended up with a small hair ornament just like Noa. I guess they'd set up the closest targets so kids and beginners could at least get something small. That's why they had so many of the smallest hair decorations.

Wondering which target I'd go for, I got ready to go next... and got blocked by Shuri.

"I go next!" she proclaimed.

"Are you sure?"

"Fina taught me how to hold a knife, so I can do it."

But she'd only been taught how to harvest, not how to throw. But Fina didn't comment, so I let her go.

Once Shuri got on the platform, the crowd was at it again: "She's cute." "Is she the other girl's sister?" "Can she do it?" "You got this!" It was nice to see people other than Teilia, Noa, and Fina cheering her on.

Just like Fina, she aimed for the closest targets. She went too far right for the first one, and too far left for the second. The third one hit the target... but it didn't stick and fell onto the ground.

"You did great!" "Give her a prize!" the crowd insisted. But the attendant wouldn't make an exception to the rules.

"Aww..." Shuri came back looking down. That was too bad.

"Shuri, you can have mine." Fina tried to give Shuri her own, but the little girl shook her head.

"No, that one's yours."

They were such good sisters.

"Well then," I said, "I'll give you mine."

"Yuna? But..."

"I can't wear anything in my hair," I explained.

I motioned to the bear hood that covered my head. I didn't need any hair stuff while I was wearing it. Also, I wanted Shuri to be happy.

"So I want you to have it," I told her.

"Okay, good luck," she said.

"Thanks. I'm going in, guys." I headed up to the platform as the crowd went wild.

“It’s a bear.” “A bear...!” “Did someone make that for the festival?” “Who’s wearing it?” They seemed to think I was a student. I pulled my hood down low and hid my face so they couldn’t recognize me.

“Here you go.” The girl on duty handed me the knives as she stared at my outfit.

Knives in hand, I looked at the targets. Which would it be? I had bear aim assist, so I’d basically hit a bullseye for any stationary targets. I needed to give it all I had for Shuri’s sake.

I picked up the knife in my bear puppet’s mouth. *Wsssh*—I threw the first knife and it dug right into the center of the furthest target.

The crowd cheered. “Whoa.” “She hit the center one from that far away.” “That’s got to be pure luck!” “Nah, nobody’s that lucky!”

Wsssh—my second throw hit the furthest target right in the center, of course. The third throw went the same way. I was three for three.

“Whoa.” “That bear’s amazing.” “What the—*three in a row?*” “Good going, bear.”

I could hear the crowd around me. They were making it a way bigger deal than it was. Any decent adventurer could do this, and I was relying on my bear gear instead of my own abilities. Then again, I’d developed the technique from back when I’d been playing games. I guess that factored into it a little bit.

I got down from the platform, and the girl in charge came over to me holding the beautiful hair ornament. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Um... was it easy for you?”

“Hmm. I’m good at knife-throwing, so I don’t think my opinion would be helpful.”

“I see. I didn’t think anyone would win on the first day.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

"Don't be. You got the crowd going, so I'm grateful for that."

I looked around—they were getting pretty rowdy, yeah. "Who's the bear?" "Does Lady Teilia know her?" "She must. I mean, they're together."

Although it felt a bit more like they were talking about Teilia than me.

I took the prize and headed to Shuri. "I got it," I said, handing her the hair ornament.

"Yuna, thanks." She beamed at me, and I knew it was all worth it. I'd attracted attention—which was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not—but it seemed like everyone thought I was part of the festival. Maybe it was fine.

Noa was eying Shuri's hair ornament. "Aww. I'm so jealous you got a present from Yuna."

"Want me to win ornaments for all of you?" I looked at the prizes. The girl at the desk fought a scowl and lost.

"I don't think you should," said Fina.

Teilia nodded. "That would probably be a bad idea."

"In that case, I'd like to play again," Noa begged, but we said no and headed to the next attraction.

CHAPTER 282

THE BEAR HEARS FINA BEING CRITICAL

AFTER WE HEADED AWAY from the knife exhibition, we put on the hair ornaments.

“I can put these on for you,” Teilia offered. She helped Fina and Noa with theirs before finally, she put her own hair ornament on.

Every one of them looked pretty with those ornaments, although Shuri was the only one with a giant one.

“Hee hee! I feel like I’ve gotten several new little sisters,” Teilia gloated.

“But you already have an adorable little sister,” I said.

“True, but... it’s different, though.”

We headed off to see the next exhibit. Shuri skipped ahead as though the hair ornament had put her in a good mood.

“If only I’d been allowed to try one more time,” said Noa, looking at Shuri’s hair, “I could have gotten one just like Lady Teilia did.”

I didn’t know where all this self-confidence was coming from, considering she’d missed two of the targets.

“Had I tried again,” Teilia declared dramatically, “I also believe I would’ve gotten an even better score than before.” It was like they were trying to compete on things that hadn’t happened.

Still... maybe I’d try it again myself and get Fina another one so she could match her sister.

Then again, with the face the girl at the booth was making, I doubt she’d let me try

again. They probably didn't want all their handmade hair ornaments to walk away so easily. I'm sure they'd put in a lot of time into making them.

After the knife-throwing, we participated in a ton of exhibits.

We started out with a ball toss, where you were supposed to throw balls at students dressed as monsters. The targets were bigger than the last game, but they also moved. The trick was aiming for where they were headed, not where they were in the moment. You guided them with the first ball to go a certain way, then hit them with the second. Although there was a fair share of players who couldn't figure that out—

“Oh, no, they dodged it!”

“Ugh, I can't get them...!”

The farther away the monster-student, the more points they were worth... which meant that they could only move side-to-side. Still, every monster moved a little slower when kids around Fina's age played.

I aimed for the monsters worth the highest number of points. I threw a fastball with my bear puppets and hit the furthest away student. Guess they hadn't thought I'd make it—they didn't even try dodging and I hit them smack-dab in the torso. I threw the rest of my balls to cinch my win in place. All of them hit their mark, the others cheered for me, and the people around us started to applaud.

I'd gotten the first-place prize with flying colors.

“You're incredible, Yuna,” Noa said.

“You're so cool, Yuna,” Shuri said.

“You're amazing, Yuna,” said Fina.

“You already did so well with the knife throwing,” said Teilia. “I'm impressed you could hit these targets too. What exactly are you, Yuna?”

“No one told you I'm an adventurer?”

"An adventurer? Oh, I suppose Shia and the others did mention that," Teilia said as though she'd just remembered. "You were dressed so adorably, I'd entirely forgotten. I've never seen you fight before, so I suppose it's difficult to imagine even when others told me."

Fina and the others agreed with that.

From there, we played ball games, ran an obstacle race, and competed in timed games. We did a ton of other things too and won lots of prizes.

I gave a lot of my winnings away to Fina, Shuri, and Noa. There was that hair ornament from the knife throwing, then some necklaces, bracelets, and broaches. We also got small stuff and flowers that the students had grown.

"You've really earned quite a lot of prizes," Teilia said. She looked at Fina, amused by all the winnings the girl was decked out in... although Teilia herself was one to talk, considering all the winning she was covered in. "You tend to take the highest prize wherever you go, which makes everyone quite sullen."

I shrugged. "What can I say? It just brings out the competitor in me." But this just brings out the competition in me." As an ex-gamer, I was already on that 24/7 all day, every day gamer mindset. When I see a game, I can't help but want to get the highest score possible.

When I find a mini-game, I've got to 100-percent it, completionist style—and all of these felt just like that.

Once we got a ton of prizes, we headed to the next exhibit.

"What's that?" I wondered. The exhibit was hidden all around by a giant cloth, so we couldn't see inside.

"I wonder," Teilia mused. So even Teilia didn't know, huh? Well, it wasn't like she could magically know every exhibit and where they were placed.

But... it was covered in cloth, right? So was it going to be a haunted house? Then again,

would they even do that during the daytime? Did this world even have the concept of ghosts? If it wasn't a haunted house, maybe it was a maze?

We headed to the entrance, where a male student was standing.

"A bear? And... Lady Teilia?!" He was surprised enough by my outfit and seemed even more surprised by the sight of Teilia.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Well... this is where you can learn how to harvest monsters and butcher animals. It didn't seem like the sort of place you'd visit, Lady Teilia."

I looked at the sign near the entrance, and yep: it said something about butchering monsters and animals. There was also a warning with it: "As this exhibit involves butchering monsters and animals, it may not be to the taste of all guests. Visitor discretion is advised."

"You have exhibitions about *monster harvesting*?" I asked.

"This academy produces knights and soldiers as well as nobles," he said. "Adventurers have to harvest and butcher what they slay, of course, but so must knights and soldiers. The average student wouldn't have any interest in this, but there are some who have to learn it out of necessity."

I guess they'd sometimes need to procure their own food on the spot, so knights and soldiers would need to know how to butcher things. "You're saying we can watch and do some harvesting ourselves in there?"

"Yes," said Teilia, "but it's not much fun watching that. How about we head somewhere else?"

Shuri raised her hand. "I wanna see!"

Teilia looked at the little girl in surprise. Shuri had been harvesting monsters with Fina lately, so maybe she was developing an interest in the trade. "You do realize they're butchering monsters and animals, though? I don't think it'll be much fun for a darling girl like you to watch them. You might lose your appetite for meat."

Hmm. I guess that's what most people would think.

As Teilia tried to convince Shuri out of going from the exhibit, Fina piped up. “I’m a little curious to see it too.”

“Why? I don’t think it’ll be a pleasant experience.”

“Teilia,” I said, “they’ll be able to handle it. They’ve butchered animals and harvested from monsters before.” To be honest, I was the one who was a little skeeved out here. I’d never butchered or harvested anything before.

“Really?!” Teilia exclaimed.

“Yeah,” I said, “I think it might be a good learning experience.”

“Actually,” said Fina, “I’m more worried about you, Teilia, and Noa.”

I’d slayed monsters and animals before, so I’d become a little immune to it, but... yeah. This would probably be an intense experience for two aristocratic girls.

“I should be fine,” I said. “If Fina and Shuri want to go, I’ll go too.”

“Just don’t force yourself,” said Noa. “I think you should be fine as long as we don’t get too close of a look.”

Teilia couldn’t say no now—there were too many of us. We ended up going to the exhibition to check it out.

“So,” said Teilia to the boy at the front desk, “it seems that we do want to go in.”

He looked surprised. “Are you sure you want those younger girls to see this?”

“I already have!” said Shuri, maybe a little too enthusiastically. She *was* already harvesting on a regular basis, but I got how the guy felt. He looked kind of worried.

“I’ll take full responsibility over them,” Teilia assured him.

“All right...” the boy said. “But if you start feeling sick, tell us right away.”

“I’ll take them outside right away if anything happens,” Teilia promised.

“All right. They’re starting up the demonstration, so please go inside and wait.”

We found about twenty people gathered inside, some of them students in uniform. If this was an exhibition, would it be like a performance? There were some students showing off how to sword fight, so maybe they'd show off harvesting techniques.

"I expected more people," I said.

"Few students are very serious about harvesting," said Teilia. "And students with their own exhibits might not be able to make this exhibition—it might clash with their own schedules. No, I think they've gathered plenty of people."

Hmm. When you put it like that, she had a point. They'd prepped a big table in front of us, which Shuri was trying to run to so she could get a front-row view. I quickly grabbed Shuri by the arm.

"Yuna?"

"Don't cut," I told her.

"But I won't be able to see unless I'm in front."

Some people had already parked themselves in front of the table to watch, and Shuri wouldn't be able to see from the back given her height. Still, that was no reason to cut from behind.

"There's a platform over here," Teilia pointed out.

Fortunately, they had accommodations like that for the people in the back. Once we got up there, we had a great view of the table. The people in front of the slab were a man and woman dressed as adventurers. Our eyes met.

"Jade?"

"Yuna?"

"No way. Yuna?"

It was Jade and Mel, who I'd worked with during the golem-slaying stuff.

"What are you two doing here?" I asked.

"I was just about to ask you that myself," said Jade. "The students asked us to assist."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. The students handle most of it, but we're helping. What are *you* here for, Yuna?"

"I came to see the festival."

Everyone was staring at us now. After all, this random bear had started talking with Jade.

"A bear?" "A bear...?" People had noticed me, and it was all Jade's fault. Well, it'd taken them long enough.

"Let's talk later," he said.

I wholeheartedly agreed.

Jade pulled a wolf out of his item bag and the students started their harvest. After that, nobody was paying attention to me.

"Do you know those adventurers, Yuna?" asked Noa.

"I did a job with them in the past."

Still, I hadn't expected to meet Jade or Mel here. And I didn't see Toya or Senia, the two other members of their party. I guess it was just Jade and Mel here.

The students proceeded with the harvest under Jade's directions. They went slowly, but they were getting the wolf's pelt off. Fina and Shuri watched the harvesting very seriously... and Teilia and Noa got off the platform so they didn't have to watch. I felt kind of bad leaving Fina and Shuri to stand alone, but I got down from the platform too.

At which point Mel came over and hugged me.

"It's been so long, Yuna. Same bear outfit as ever, I see."

Mel was touching my bear clothes. I wish she'd stop. "Aren't you supposed to be assisting with the harvest, Mel?" I asked.

"Jade's with them. It'll be fine. So, you came to the festival with these girls?" Mel looked over at the others. She didn't seem surprised when she saw Teilia, so she probably didn't realize Teilia was a princess.

"One of the students invited us," I told her.

"Looks like you're with some cuties!" she said.

I looked over at Fina, Shuri, Noa, and Teilia. Yeah, everyone was pretty dang adorable.

"But what are you doing here of all places?" Mel continued. "Harvesting isn't something for little girls. I'm sure there are plenty of other exhibits for you to see at the festival."

"Those two really wanted to see this." I motioned at Fina and Shuri, who were still on the platform, with my eyes. Their eyes were glued to the process.

"Oh, don't put the knife there," said Shuri.

"You can't! That'll make a hole in the pelt," said Fina.

"If you're too rough, it'll..."

"The pelt..."

"You need cleaner cuts."

"Oh, no..."

They were finding a lot of problems with the students' work, but at least they were whispering so the students couldn't be able to hear. Otherwise, they'd probably assume the girls were trying to pick a fight or something.

"They seem like interesting kids," said Mel. "I can't say those students are masters at harvesting, but I've seen worse. The Adventurers' Guild would take their stuff, no problem."

"Oh, the meat..." Fina groaned.

"That's such a waste!" said Shuri.

Honestly, it was more fun watching the sister than the harvesting itself.

"They have some surprising stuff to say about this," said Mel.

"The older one's been working as a harvester at the Adventurers' Guild for a long time, so she's really good at it. Her little sister started to work recently too."

The two of them still handled most of the monsters and animals I'd slayed. In fact, I'd even gotten Shuri a mithril knife to help with the task.

"That's why they were interested in seeing this exhibit," I added.

"Yeah, but it doesn't seem like they're getting a lot out of it," said Mel.

Fina seemed like she was about to leap on them. "Oh, but if you cut it that way, it'll..."

The students kept going with the harvest, regardless, and finished their work. Fina and Shuri got down from the platform and headed over to us.

"How was it?" I asked.

"It wasn't very good," said Fina curtly.

"Uh-huh! Fina is better than them," Shuri added.

I personally couldn't judge the students' harvesting technique, but they hadn't lived up to the girls' expectations. Maybe that showed just how talented Fina was.

CHAPTER 283

THE BEAR ONCE AGAIN LEARNS HOW TALENTED FINA IS AT HARVESTING

“LOOKS LIKE THIS WASN’T that great of a learning experience for Fina.”

“No,” said Fina, “it wasn’t. My dad and everyone at the guild is so much better at it than the students.”

“Well, you can’t compare students to pros, though, you know?”

In addition to harvesting, the students had all kinds of other duties. Comparing them to people who harvested day in and day out for a living wasn’t fair. Plus, Fina had already harvested hundreds, maybe even thousands, of monsters. She had a completely different amount of experience compared to these kids. Honestly, comparing them was downright cruel.

Mel spoke up. “Um... Fina, was it? Was it really that bad...?”

“Um, well...” Fina didn’t seem to know what to say now that Mel was talking to her. Oh, I guess this was basically Fina’s first time meeting her.

Sure, they’d met when I’d taken the quest to slay the tigerwolves, but Fina wouldn’t remember her from just that. Honestly, if she remembered Mel from such a short meeting, that’d be a lot weirder.

It didn’t seem like Mel remembered Fina either. “I’m Mel. Do you work with Yuna? I suppose those kids weren’t too good at harvesting, but did you really think they were that awful?”

“It really depends on how the monster was slayed,” said Fina. “Monsters that were killed with a sword need to be harvested starting from where the sword cut into them. Making another incision means you have two holes in the fur instead of one. That lowers its value, so it’s better to cut in the same place as the sword. You technically *can* cut its stomach, but that lowers the value as well...”

Fair enough, honestly—fewer holes were better. The same was true if you had to attack a monster a lot and damaged the pelt more. I'd heard that was why my wolves were so valued—I could slay them with a single shot.

"If they were slayed with magic, then you can make a cut starting from the wound as well," Fina continued. "You just try to cut them in places that keep them in the same condition you got them in. If you don't do that, you can lose a lot of value."

Mel seemed surprised by Fina's explanation. I was surprised too, in fact. I had no idea that Fina was thinking of all that when she harvested for me. Maybe I wasn't paying her enough?

I hadn't been selling the things that Fina had been harvesting, but I hadn't realized that she'd been so thorough with her work. Maybe I'd better increase Fina's pay? Fina and Tiermina both said that things were fine as is, but...

Mel seemed impressed as she listened to Fina's explanation, and then Shuri joined in.

"And they were slow at cutting the meat," she said. "Dad says that the meat will become bad if you do it like that." Shuri didn't seem to think things had gone well either. I was amazed she could even evaluate the harvesting like that. I guess she'd spent a lot of time watching Fina harvesting?

Observation is important, after all, and craftsmen are always saying stuff like "watch and learn!" But Shuri was still just seven. I guess she'd turned out this way because of Fina, and Gentz had done a great job fostering her talent, right? I sure hadn't had anything to do with it.

...Probably.

"You're both so amazing," said Mel.

"It's because I always get to harvest the monsters Yuna slays," said Fina. "That's how I learned."

Okay, wait, maybe I *did* have something to do with it? I guess I'd just convinced myself otherwise.

"I've harvested hundreds of wolves!" said Fina. "She even let me harvest tigerwolves and a black tiger."

“Yuna, you let these kids do *that*!?”

Uh, yes. Yes. Yes, I had.

Mel blinked. “You’re not going to tell me she had you take apart that black viper too?”

“Mm, she did!”

Right, Mel *would* already know about the black viper, wouldn’t she?

“That sure is something,” she said. “Most people don’t get to experience stuff like that.”

“That’s all thanks to Yuna,” said Fina.

Good thing I hadn’t had her harvest the cockatrices yet, because they seemed just as intense as a black tiger. I guess I didn’t know that for sure, but... still, cockatrices were poisonous and I didn’t plan on asking her to harvest it anytime soon. Would Fina even *know* how to harvest a cockatrice? If I ever asked her, maybe I’d make sure to have Gentz supervise just in case.

“Well, then, Fina,” said Mel, “would you show the crowd how it’s done?”

“How it’s... done?”

“Yeah, I’m sure it’ll shake everyone up to see a little girl like you harvesting. Would you please do it for me?”

“But... I...” Fina tried to turn her down graciously.

I nodded. “Why don’t you give it a try, Fina?”

“*Yuna*?!”

“I want to see you harvesting too,” Noa agreed, after following along with our conversation.

“See?” said Mel. “They’re about to start the practical demonstration.”

They’d tidied up the table and placed a new wolf on it.

"Anyone up for trying their hand at it?" Jade called out to everyone. "Everyone is a beginner at some point, so this is a no-pressure experience." But there were no takers. Curiosity is one thing, but actually doing it yourself is something entirely different. After seeing Fina harvest, I'd considered trying it myself... but I just couldn't do it.

There are things you're good at, and things you're not. Harvesting just was not for me, thank you very much.

"C'mon, see?" said Mel. "There's no one trying it out." She gave Fina a push on the back to lead her in front of the table.

"Yuna?!" Fina stared at me like a kid getting separated from a parent, begging for me to save her. But this was all about learning opportunities, so why not take them when you got 'em?

"I think you should try it," I said.

Fina thought it over for a moment. Then she gave me a little nod.

Mel led Fina to the table. Everyone who'd been watching the demonstration earlier was now staring at Fina.

"Mel, who's the kid?" asked Jade.

"You could say she's a friend of Yuna's. She's good at harvesting, so she's going to demonstrate how it's done. I guess we're proving that even a little kid can harvest, eh?"

"You can do it, Fina," said Shuri.

"Break a leg, Fina!" Noa cheered.

"Yuna, does Fina *really* know how to harvest?" asked Teilia, nervously watching Fina. "She's so small..."

"She's young, but she's done it before. She'll do fine. I guarantee she's great at it!"

Once Fina got in front of the table, she pulled out this apron-looking thing from her item bag to keep her clothes from getting dirty.

The crowd began to murmur. “A little girl is going to try harvesting...?” “Can she really do it?” “No normal little girl could do that...” “Even I wouldn’t know the first thing about harvesting.”

They were all pretty pessimistic. I guess it really *was* unusual for a little girl like Fina to know how to harvest.

“How about you show them how it’s done?” said Jade. He tried to hand a knife to Fina, but she refused. Instead, she took out her favorite knife that she’d used for years from her item bag. It wasn’t the mithril knife I’d given her, but the harvesting knife she’d gotten from Mr. Gold. Dang, Fina was really getting into this. You didn’t see her get this focused too often.

“Okay, I’m going to start,” she said, then she began off by examining the wolf. She checked where the wolf was already damaged, sliced from there, and went straight into harvesting. She stripped the pelt cleanly from the body and cut the meat into sections, not hesitating for a second as she worked quickly with her knife. The cuts were all neat and smooth.

The audience was beginning to take her seriously now... and they were praising her, too. “Wow...!” “She’s quick!” “That’s beautiful work.” “Who is this little girl?” “She’s already got the pelt off!”

Shuri seemed proud to see her sister get showered with praise. As for Noa, she was surprised to see a new side of Fina. Even though she knew that Fina could harvest, this was her first time seeing it in person.

Meanwhile, Fina kept at it, finishing in half the time it’d taken the students... and she’d done the job *perfectly*.

“That’s amazing,” said Jade. “No corrections whatsoever.”

Fina seemed happy to hear it. At once, the students who’d been harvesting before Fina started asking her questions. Fina gave them explanations, though she looked bashful.

“She might be even better at explaining things than I was,” Jade noted. He got a fresh wolf ready and asked Fina to go slowly so she could explain as she went. The students asked her for pointers on the basics.

Although she still seemed embarrassed by it all, she paced herself so they could follow

along as she explained.

"You can get a better cut if you do it in one firm motion," said Fina. "If you hesitate, you won't get a clean cut, and going slowly will ruin the meat. Don't second-guess your cuts. If you *really* want to learn, though, it's best to harvest a lot until you have muscle memory. I used to get in trouble a lot because it took me a while to get used to it."

True—it wasn't like Fina had always been this good. She'd probably practiced again and again, as small as she was, all for her sick mom and little sister. Gentz had been supporting her all the way. Even though it'd been her only choice, learning to harvest still hadn't been easy.

Fina kept harvesting as I mulled over her life. Shuri also joined in the exhibition partway, surprising everyone even more. The students who'd been watching started harvesting too, using what Fina taught them. They seemed nervous at first but seeing that a little girl could do it helped them get the courage to try.

Once they finished with the wolves, they tried horned hares next. Fina kept going, leading what had become her harvesting class.

Jade left Fina and came over to me. "That little girl sure is something. She's showing them all exactly how to harvest."

"She's probably even better at it than I am," said Mel.

"Ha! Mel always makes Toya or me do it, so I think you just don't like doing it."

"What can I say? I don't like getting messy."

Senia was good at handling a knife, so I wondered whether she was good at harvesting too. Harvesting and battling were different skills, but I could imagine her being quick and concise with a knife while harvesting.

As Jade and Mel talked, the class Fina was leading on horned hares ended. Everyone applauded, which embarrassed her something awful.

With that, the harvesting was done and the audience left. Fina started a conversation with the students who had set up the harvesting exhibition.

"Seems like that was a good learning experience for the students," said Jade. "Now that

they know a little kid can harvest, they'll work harder at their techniques to make sure they're not running behind her."

Interestingly, I found out that the harvested meat was being used by another student booth selling skewers. They'd really thought this through and made sure that nothing went to waste.

"Okay," I said, "I think we're heading out."

"Right, thanks for that," said Jade.

Mel nodded. "Thank you, Fina."

"Oh, no, please, I felt like I stole your jobs," she stammered. "I'm sorry."

"Ha! That's nothing to apologize for. We asked you to do it. I'm just sorry we couldn't do anything to pay you back."

"Please don't worry about it," said Fina. "It was fun for me."

With that, we headed out and left Jade and Mel behind.

CHAPTER 284

THE BEAR REALIZES SHE HAS NO FASHION SENSE

ONCE FINA FINISHED HER CLASS on harvesting, we headed back out to see the festival. While we were walking, someone tugged on my bear clothes.

“Yuna, I’m hungry.” Shuri held her hand to her tummy for extra emphasis.

“You have the right idea,” Teilia agreed. Fina and Noa nodded too.

I was surprised she had any appetite at all after all that harvesting... or that *any* of them had an appetite. I especially wondered about Noa—I hadn’t expected her to want to eat at all.

“Everyone ready to eat somewhere?” I asked.

“Yeaah!”

“Uh-huh!”

Everyone enthusiastically agreed.

“Then should we go back to Lady Shia?” asked Fina.

“Hmm, that’s a bit far from here,” said Teilia. “I think there was food being served somewhere around here. Let’s look around.”

We decided to head to the closest food place near us. It sure was great having someone to show us around, even if it was weird that the someone happened to be a princess.

Teilia’s directions led us to some food places, but every single one of them was jam-packed.

"I suppose everyone had the same idea," she said with a sigh.

The crowds would probably clear after a while, but Fina seemed tired after all that walking around and monster-harvesting. Wasn't there a place where we could rest for a bit and eat? I looked around but I couldn't find a place where we could get food anytime soon. Still, there were tables open where we could eat.

"If you're all fine with not buying stuff from the stalls," I said, "I have food in my item bag. What do you say?" We didn't *have* to buy stuff, after all. My time-proof bear storage had tons of food in it.

"I want a pizza!" said Shuri, raising her hand.

"Oh, me too." Fina jumped and raised her hand too.

"Are you sure you don't want something from the festival?" I asked, just to be sure.

"It's okay," said Shuri. "I like Yuna's pizzas."

"Thank you." I gave Shuri a pat on the head.

"Are you two okay with pizza too, Fina? Teilia?" asked Noa.

"Yes, of course."

"I would be fine with that as well."

We were decided, so we headed to an empty table and got ourselves a spot. I started pulling things out to set on the table: pizza, Morin's bread, Anz's warm soup, and finally, some ice-cold fruit juice.

"This is quite a feast."

"You think so?" I guess it kind of was compared to what was on the tables around us. "Well, eat as much as you want, everyone. I have seconds too, so just let me know if you want more."

"Okay! Thank you for the food," they all said at once. With that, they started reaching for the things they wanted.

"Is this your first time having pizza, Teilia?" I asked.

"Zelef made it for me, just once before." Right, I'd given Zelef a few blocks of cheese in the past. He'd probably made it with them. "But I daresay your pizza is *much* better, Yuna." She looked like she was really enjoying it.

"I'm happy to hear it," I said, "but don't tell Zelef."

The pizza disappeared in a flash, just like Morin's bread and Anz's soup.

"I feel stuffed!" Noa said.

"I do as well," Teilia agreed.

Noa and Teilia had eaten too much. They didn't have to eat so fast, either—that's never good for digestion. As for Fina, she'd been trying to be considerate while eating, and Shuri had been eating her food very slowly.

"You'll be fine after sitting for a while," I told them.

"Yuna, may I have something to drink?" Noa asked.

"Sure," I said. "But don't drink too fast, okay? You'll upset your stomach."

I poured Noa some juice. I was happy everyone had eaten everything I'd brought out.

Personally, I wanted to get moving already... but instead I drank my juice and waited until Noa and Teilia recovered. I mean, people were already starting to whisper while we were eating. "A bear?" "Oh, it's the bear from earlier." "Lady Teilia is with a bear!"

It kept going, too. "What is it that Lady Teilia is eating?" "I wonder where they're selling that." "It looks really good." "Let's go find it too." Some people even went off to find whatever stall they figured had sold us the food. It wasn't like I could just turn to them and tell them that I made and brought the food myself, so I ignored them. If they wanted to look for food and not find it, no skin off my nose. They were the ones who'd made an assumption.

After a post-lunch break, the two of them were feeling better and we could get moving.

We hightailed it out of there with Fina and Shuri in tow. Maybe it was Teilia's presence, but I was also pretty thankful that nobody had tried to pick a fight with me. Sure, I had the occasional kid trying to glomp me, but no major trouble.

As we were walking, Noa pointed at Fina's skirt. "Oh, Fina. You've got something on you." She was right—it was dirty.

"Maybe something got on me while I was harvesting." Fina had worn an apron and everything, and it had still gotten through.

"Want to change?"

"No, I think I'm fine," she said.

Hmm... I didn't think it'd be too pleasant being stuck wearing clothes with monster blood on them. But Fina hated being a burden on others, so she was probably just trying to be considerate.

Still, I wanted to do something to help her.

"Oh, right," said Teilia, after taking a look at Fina's clothes. She looked like she'd just remembered something. "I have a good idea. Let's go over there." Without another word, she grabbed Fina's hand and dashed away.

"Lady Teilia?!" Fina yelled.

"Over here," Teilia insisted. "Everyone, please follow after me."

"Lady Teilia, I'll follow you, so please don't drag me there." Fina opened and closed her mouth, confounded. But Teilia kept on dragging her with an iron grip, as if she was afraid the girl would run off. As for Fina, she seemed close to exploding from pent-up nerves—this was a princess holding hands with her, after all.

"Teilia, where are we headed?" I asked.

"It's a secret. You'll understand once we arrive."

I guess she wasn't telling us where we were going. She headed straight into an academy building. We passed a few more exhibitions in the classrooms. I wanted to see them, but Teilia single-mindedly pushed toward her destination. I didn't have a

second to stop and look.

Silently, we followed Teilia.

"It's in a classroom just ahead." A moment later, Teilia paused right in front of one of the rooms. We peeked inside to find rows and rows of clothing.

"Whoa! There are so many cute clothes in here," said Noa.

Oh, so they were selling clothes here?

"They're all student-made," said Teilia, "but I heard there are some *simply* adorable clothes here. The material is high quality, but the prices are affordable."

I wasn't so sure I could trust Teilia's idea of affordable, considering she was part of the royal family. If they were using high-quality materials, they'd have to price the clothes accordingly. But since we were already here, I felt like it'd be nice to buy Fina and Shuri some clothes.

"Since you showed us your splendid harvesting techniques," Teilia broke in suddenly, "I'm buying you clothes as a present."

Well... never mind, I guess. She'd beaten me to the chase.

But Fina was surprised to hear Teilia propose that. Then again, I guess most people would be surprised if a princess was gifting them clothes.

"I-I can wash my clothes, so..." Fina tried to turn her down, but Teilia wasn't letting her get out of it so easily.

"Hee hee hee. You don't have to be so bashful about it. I'm thanking you for showing us such a wonderful harvesting demonstration, so you can choose anything that you like. Actually... no, I think I'll choose it myself. I'll find something that will look positively perfect on you."

Fina looked at me for help as Teilia tugged her by the arm and into the classroom. I understood how Fina felt, but I also didn't want the poor girl to be stuck wandering the festival in dirty clothes. This seemed like a good cure for that.

"Then how about I buy them for you?" I asked.

“Yuna?!” If she didn’t want Teilia to buy them, I could do it instead.

“No,” said Teilia, hugging Fina close so I couldn’t take her. “I will be buying Fina’s present.”

Fina looked at Teilia, then me. She didn’t seem to know what to do.

“No fair,” said Shuri. “Why only Fina? I want clothes too...”

Teilia laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ll buy you a present too, Shuri.”

Shuri smiled gleefully at that.

“And perhaps I’ll buy myself something,” Noa said.

“Then let’s go inside,” I said. “If we stay out here, we’ll be in each other’s way.”

Teilia took Fina and Shuri’s hands and headed into the classroom. Noa and I followed.

When we got inside, some girls from the academy noticed Teilia and ran right over.
“Lady Teilia, you chose our humble shop?”

They looked curious about me, but they greeted Teilia first.

“I’d like to visit for a short time,” said Teilia.

The students seemed happy to hear it. “Please take a look around if our humble shop appeals to you.”

“Thank you.”

There were all kinds of clothes in the room, probably handmade by the students. Teilia kept hold of Fina’s hand as she headed over to a spot that had clothes that would look good on Fina. “Hee hee hee. I wonder which of these would look good on Fina.”

Trapped in the iron grip of Teilia, Fina looked over at me like an abandoned dog... but alas, there was nothing I could do.

Also, I really wanted to see Fina in cute clothes too.

"If you try anything on, make sure to show us," I said.

"Then you should try things on too, Yuna," Fina shot back.

"What a wonderful idea!" said Teilia. "You look darling in those bear clothes, but I'd like to see you in a regular outfit too."

Oh, no. Nope, no thanks. I mean, even if I were to buy something, I'd never have a chance to wear it. It'd be a waste. I'd buy clothes when I needed them.

Plus, even if I was having fun at the festival, I was technically supposed to be guarding everyone right now. I couldn't take off my bear gear.

"I was so looking forward to seeing Yuna in normal clothes," Teilia said, looking disappointed. Still, she gave up after that.

Fina and the others started picking out outfits, helped by the students working at the shop. They had all sorts of advice—

"This would look great on you." "I think this would work too." "This one would be cute." "She should wear *this* one."

Stuff like that. I felt a little out of place in this conversation, as a former recluse. They were all super good at this "being a girl" thing, which... wasn't exactly something my bear gear could help me with. There was no Bear Fashion Skill, after all. The only thing I could really do was watch them and hope I didn't get pulled into the fray.

Fina was begging me for help with her eyes, but I had no way of stopping Teilia now. If she'd been surrounded by monsters, I would've rushed in to save her, but I was no match for all these girls.

Hopefully she'd forgive me someday, considering I was powerless in this situation and all. Deep within my beary deep heart, I whispered an apology to Fina...

With the clothes picked up, they started trying them on. It basically turned into a three-person fashion show. Once any of the three girls came out of the changing room

with their new outfit, Teilia and the students would rate them. This happened a few times, and they got all kinds of comments—

“Cute.” “*What?* I liked the earlier one better.” “I think this one would work for her.” “This hair ornament would work better with this.” “Not that accessory.” “You know what would look good with that hair...?” “A long, blonde style would look fabulous with this.”

Amazingly, Teilia and the other students were even considering the accessories they’d won at the festival games. They were discussing what would look good with what, talking about alternate options—they were really thinking about how the outfits would coordinate together. I’d never be able to do that.

What kind of advice would I have given? Uh... well, the outfits were pretty different, apparently. That’s what they were saying, anyway. Was I really that bad at this? A few times, I pitched in with a quick “I think this looks great, though!”

At which point the others would simply shake their heads.

“Yuna, which do you think would look good on them?” They kept asking me for my opinion, but I thought everything looked great. All I could say was stuff like “All three of them look cute.” Beyond that, I was at a loss.

Man, I wish I was better at this whole “being a girl” thing. Sure, I could cook and I was pretty good at cleaning, but fashion was completely out of my wheelhouse.

After going through a bajillion more outfits, Teilia decided on the clothes she wanted to get Fina and Shuri. Noa took Teilia’s advice too when she chose her clothes.

“All three of you look cute,” I said, for the bajillion-and-first time. They say that words lose their meaning the more you say them, and I was starting to agree. Is this how guys feel when people ask them to comment on a girl’s clothes?

“Uh...” Fina looked at herself. “Are you really sure about buying such cute clothes for us?”

They were so different from her usual clothes. It was a fresh new look.

"Lady Teilia, are you sure about buying clothes for me too...?" asked Noa.

"Well, I'd feel bad buying the two of them clothes and not getting you anything. And Shia has helped me out so much."

Noa had tried to buy her own clothes, but Teilia had paid for them too. The kids each thanked Teilia, then we left the shop.

I was glad the fashion show had gone without a hitch. Still... even if I hadn't been picking out clothes myself, I felt more exhausted than I usually did after battling monsters.

CHAPTER 285

THE BEAR FINISHES DAY ONE AT THE FESTIVAL

FINA LOOKED EMBARRASSED wearing the clothes Teilia had bought her. No matter how many times I told her that it looked great on her and she shouldn't worry about it, that just didn't sink in.

Still, now she didn't have to wear those clothes she'd gotten dirty while harvesting, so at least she'd be able to enjoy the festival without feeling self-conscious.

Because Teilia had bought clothes, I figured I might as well get something too—I got the three of them handkerchiefs from the same shop. I'd tried to get them to make their own choices about which to get, but Noa had asked me to choose for her, and the other two had felt the same. I didn't feel super comfortable with it, considering how little I know about fashion, but I did my best to pick three handkerchiefs that'd look good on them.

They all looked really happy about those gifts, but... I don't know, I wasn't so sure they were being genuine after what happened with those clothes. But Shuri looked happy, and she was the worst of them when it came to hiding her emotions. Maybe things were fine?

After that, we went around looking at the exhibits in the school building.

"Looks like they'll draw you something here," I said. There was a sign out front that read *We Draw Face Portraits!* The sample drawings on the wall looked pretty good, too. "How about we have them draw us?"

"That sounds like a good idea," said Teilia. "Especially with all of us wearing such nice clothes. I'll ask around inside—one moment." She went in for a moment before coming right back out. "Yes, they said they'll draw us."

When we got inside, there were a ton of students already there. I guess they were the art club or something? Fortunately, they weren't in the middle of drawing anyone right

then—we'd had good timing.

"Would you like one portrait each?" a student asked.

Fina and the others looked at each other.

"I'd like it if everyone were drawn together," Fina said.

"Good idea. Let's have them draw all of us!" Noa said.

Fina, Shuri, and Noa sat down on chairs they prepared. I just watched from afar until Teilia started tugging me by the arm.

"We're joining in," she told me.

"I'd... rather not."

"But we want you to be in it too!" Fina told me.

"Yes, I would like you to join us as well," Noa said.

"You too, Yuna!" said Shuri.

All three of the younger girls came over to me, grabbed me by the arms and hands, and dragged me over. There was no escape, so I ended up being in the portrait with them.

Fina, Shuri, and Noa sat on the chairs, with Teilia and I standing behind them. Even if I was a bit embarrassed, I guess it wasn't so bad having a drawing to commemorate the occasion.

Then the students got to draw a portrait for us to remember this day. They'd asked me to take off my bear hood too, but I'd told them no.

"Are you sure you want me to keep it?" I looked down at the drawing—we were all smiles in that picture.

"Yes," said Noa. "We can visit your house anytime we'd like, after all. I would be ever-so-happy if you put it up somewhere."

Fina and Shuri nodded, and Teilia smiled approvingly.

I felt kind of embarrassed being the only one in bear clothes while everyone else was dressed up but looking at the drawing did make me pretty happy. Yeah... it felt like this was going to become a cherished memory. It made me cringe a little, but you know what? I was glad we'd had it drawn nonetheless.

The art students were totally on the ball, too—they even had a frame we could buy to put the drawing in. Sweet!

Soon enough, they announced that the first day of the festival was ending. All of the shops started cleaning up, and the people from outside the academy started heading home.

We thought about heading back to Shia's booth, but we'd just end up in the way. Instead, we headed home ahead of her.

"I'll let her know," said Teilia. She was staying behind at the academy.

"Thanks for everything today, Teilia," I told her.

"Thank you for the clothes, Lady Teilia," said Fina.

"Thank you, Princess," said Shuri.

"Thank you very much, Lady Teilia," Noa said.

Teilia smiled at the three of them.

"I had fun as well, so please pay it no mind."



Wait, that reminded me. “Hey—did you really want a bear stuffed animal?” I had no idea when I’d next see Teilia. I could have handed them off to Princess Flora later, but it’d be faster to give them to her here.

“Of course I would,” she replied.

I pulled out stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu, then handed them to Teilia. “Take good care of them. Every once in a while, I’ll ask the queen how they look.”

If she used them for knife-throwing target practice or something, I’d cry.

“Why, of course I will cherish them. In fact, shall I put them in the safekeeping of the palace’s treasure room?”

“Please don’t. I’d feel bad for the bears.” Treasuring them was one thing but locking them up in a treasure room would be a different kind of tragic.

She laughed. “I’m kidding. I will keep them safely stored in my room.” With that, Teilia walked in the opposite direction, holding her teddy bears in either arm.

Once we left Teilia, we headed back to Ellelaura’s manor. Surilina was surprised to see the girls wearing different clothes than the ones they’d left in, but she understood after we explained.

“You really do never change, Miss Yuna.” Surilina looked a little disappointed. I wondered why.

When Fina tried to wash her dirty clothes herself, Surilina took them from her.

“I will clean these.”

“But...”

“This is my job,” Surilina reminded her. “As long as you are in this manor, you are a guest.”

That seemed to bug Fina, so I stepped in. “Fina, why don’t you let her? You’d hate it if someone took your work too.”

As for me, I was happy to have someone else do stuff for me. But Fina was just so diligent that she wanted to do everything herself. That was the nice thing about Fina, but it also meant that she could be kinda inflexible.

Fina sighed. "Yuna... all right. If you could please clean them, Surilina. They have blood on them, so in order to clean them, you—"

"Miss Fina, I can do this. I will make sure they are tidied right up. Please leave it to me."

After leaving Surilina with the wash, we headed to the bedrooms. In the end, Elleaura had really gone the extra mile to take care of us in her manor.

Once we got to the room, we played with cards until dinnertime. The three of them seemed to have taken a liking to it.

"Hee hee! The ten of water!"

"Well, here's the four of flame."

"Yay! Three of flame!"

They were having a grand old time playing Sevens. I collapsed right onto the bed instead of playing. I wasn't physically tired, but all those crowds and all those stares had really tuckered me out mentally.

While I was resting in the room, Shia came in. "Welcome home!"

"Welcome back, Shia," said Noa.

"It's good to be home. I mean—wait, no, that's not it! What I *meant* to say is... what in the world did you do at the festival, Yuna?!" Shia stormed over to the bed I was lying on.

Huh...? Why was she upset? "I just had fun at the festival, same as everyone else." I sat up and looked at everyone else, waiting for them to back me up. I didn't know what else to say.

"Yes, Yuna was enjoying the festival with us," said Noa.

"She was with us," Fina said.

Shuri nodded. "Yeah."

They all agreed. I had no idea what Shia was upset about, but surely this proved my innocence...

Shia looked at the girls and sighed. "Where did you all get those clothes and accessories? They're really pretty..."

"Lady Teilia bought us the clothes."

That alone shocked Shia. But the girls kept talking.

"Yuna got the hair ornament for me," said Shuri.

"Yuna got this broach for me in a game," added Noa.

"Yuna got me this bracelet," Fina said.

Shuri spread out her spoils from today's festival. Noa and Fina did the same.

"I got this one on my own. Yuna got me this one."

"And she also gave me flowers."

They proudly showed off their winnings and their gifts from me. Finally, as though they'd just remembered it at the end, they took out the handkerchiefs I'd bought them. Seeing it all laid out there, they'd really gotten a lot of stuff. We'd worked really hard.

Shia sighed again when she saw all the booty Noa, Fina, and Shuri happily displayed.

"Shia, is something the matter?" asked Noa.

"That's the wrong question. Think for a second, okay? A girl dressed as a bear won a ton of *top prizes*—what do you think will happen after that?"

The three of them went into thought.

"People were making a big deal about it," said Shia.

"But everyone always looks at us when we're with Yuna," Fina said.

"Everyone was *staring*," said Shia.

Well, yeah—that's just what happens when you wear a bear onesie. Everyone always made a big deal about me being dressed as a bear. People had even thought I might be one of the attractions, so I hadn't thought it'd cause much trouble.

"Yuna's outfit factors into things, of course," said Shia, "but she won all the most expensive, hardest-to-get prizes. Easily, too! All while dressed in a *bear costume*."

Wait, so that was the issue? It wasn't my bear outfit—the issue was that I'd stuck out too much because I'd gotten the best prizes?

"You hit the farthest targets during knife throwing," Shia continued, "and you hit the students playing monsters in the very back when you did the ball toss. When you bowled, they said that the balls moved like they had a life of their own. And that's just the start of all the stories."

"How do you know so much about everything?" It was like she'd seen it herself.

"Some of my classmates saw you guys. Then they started talking about you and more students said they'd seen you. Since you were with Lady Teilia, you drew even more attention."

So it wasn't just my fault, right? Teilia was a princess, so she had to take half the blame.

Still... Shia was kinda right. I'd gotten a little carried away at my first festival. But when Shuri and Noa gave me the puppy-dog eyes, said my name all sweet and begged me for something, how could I not give it my all? I couldn't say no to that.

Sure, Fina had never said she wanted anything, but when I gave her presents, she'd look so excited. And when I saw the three of them happy, it just made me want to work even harder to get them more stuff.

Maybe I needed to learn how to hold back a little more, though. I promised Shia that I wouldn't do anything tomorrow that'd attract so much attention.

"So, how'd your stall go?" I asked. We hadn't visited it after we left, so I was a little curious about how it'd turned out.

"Thanks to the bear statue you made, we had a lot of people come by. We sold even more than we expected."

So the bear had served its purpose. I was glad to hear it'd been worth making.

"Since the people who bought the cotton candy ate it while they were walking," Shia continued, "they kind of became walking advertisement for us and brought even more people in."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Yes, but there was one problem."

"What was that?"

"The bear statue meant that everyone started calling it 'the bear's shop.' When they ordered, they'd even ask for a 'bear candy' instead of *cotton* candy. We'd even written the right name on the sign, but no one used it."

I had no idea what to say.

"I can't complain, though. It brought in the customers."

"If it's causing you trouble, we can destroy it," I told her.

"No...! It really has helped, so I wouldn't want to do that. We did get a lot of people in the afternoon, though, so it started getting pretty hectic. Once lines formed, we had to worry about people getting into fights about what order they were in, our arms got tired, and there was a ton of other little stuff that made it difficult."

"Did you really sell that much cotton candy?"

"We only had one machine, so there was no way we were going to keep up no matter what we did. By the end, we had a pretty long line."

"Do you want to borrow another machine, then? You all learned how to make it, after all." With two people on the machines, the line wouldn't be nearly as long.

"Do you really mean it? That would help so much."

I handed over the cotton candy machine I'd used at the orphanage. Things would be easier on her now, hopefully. After that, Shia and I joined in on the card games until dinner.

The day ended uneventfully, and the festival continued onto its second day.

EXTRA STORY

TEILIA WANTS TO MEET THE BEAR PART ONE

AFTER CLASS ENDED AT THE ACADEMY, I went home and headed to the room of my little sister, Flora. She may have been a few years younger than me, but she was good company—and adorable to boot.

“I’m home, Flora,” I said.

“Welcome home, Tei-wia!” She greeted me with a great, big smile. Normally she’d fling herself at me the moment I walked through the door, but today, she stayed put in her chair and looked over something spread across her table.

Curious, I approached Flora and peeked over her shoulder at... whatever it was.

A bear? Yes, it was a drawing of a rather round, adorable bear.

“What are you looking at, Flora?”

“A bear pik-ture book,” she said.

A bear picture book...? The book was rather different from my own conception of picture books, as it was festooned with drawings of bears on pristine white paper. “May I take a look?”

“Yeah.”

Flora had bequeathed me with her permission, and so I picked up the possibly-a-picture-picture book.

Let’s see here... When I looked over the first page that served as the front cover, I saw a drawing of the adorable bear with a little girl. And there was the title: *The Bear and the Girl*.

The main character was a hard-working little girl who was doing her best as her mother suffered from an illness. It seemed that the bear was here to save the girl,

which flew against common sense. Bears are, after all, as dangerous as any wolf. However, I'm not opposed to such flights of fancy in a picture book such as this.

"Where did you get this book from?" I asked.

It wasn't the book one would typically find for sale, as it lacked any of the copywriting that books on the market possessed.

"The bear drew it for me," Flora answered.

"The bear?" I didn't follow. A bear had drawn the bear picture book...?

"Uh-huh, the bear! The bear!" Flora repeated with a smile.

"What kind of bear was it?"

"A vewy soft bear."

That... didn't narrow it down in the least.

On another day, I asked Ange, who looked after Fina, more about the bear. Her answer was even more confounding. "She's a girl in a cute bear outfit."

How could a bear be *cute*? Weren't bears creatures to be feared and avoided? I imagined a girl wearing a bear pelt. Perhaps I had the wrong impression?

It seemed Flora had taken quite a liking to this bear book, as she would be reading it whenever I came to her room. At some point, I found that the book's binding had been altered—enough people had wanted copies of the book that it was to be reprinted and, during that process, they had bound her copy as well.

Ange, too, had received a copy.

"Are you reading the bear book again today?"

"It's a new one!" said Flora.

A new picture book? I looked at the tabletop and found more loose-leaf paper—just like the first time. “The bear came to visit again, did she?”

“Yeah.” Flora showed me the picture book, just as before.

It was a sequel to the prior book, and it showed the girl’s mother being cured. In the book, the bear goes to retrieve the droplet of the rainbow-colored flower. In the end, the beleaguered bear appears before the girl.

The story brought tears to my eyes. What a truly lovely tale this was. But who was this girl that drew picture books and dressed as a bear...?

More importantly, why would a girl dress like that? And why was she paying visits to my younger sister?

Though Flora was young, she was still part of the royal family. It would not be easy to meet her, yet it seemed that the girl dressed as a bear was still regularly coming all the way up to Flora’s chambers.

I asked Ange about it and she informed me that Father had given the bear permission to visit. Stranger yet, the girl even had permission to freely roam the castle. That only added to the mystery surrounding her.

I asked Father about it during mealtime.

“As long as we don’t hurt her,” said Father, “she’s harmless, so don’t worry about her.”

So long as we didn’t hurt her? He spoke of this girl almost as though she were a real bear.

“Indeed,” said Mother. “There’s no risk of danger.” Even *Mother* knew of the bear girl?

I was even more curious, now, to find out what she was like. I couldn’t gather such things from what Flora and Ange had told me.

When I asked my mother about it, all she would say was that “she’s a charming bear.” As for father, he left it at a terse “she’s a bear, all right.”

I pressed for more details, but they would only tell me that she came bearing food, pardon the pun. I was surprised that Mother and Father would eat anything that had

come from a girl whose origin was unknown, but I suppose that just attested to how much they trusted this mystery girl in the bear outfit.

"You remember the dessert you ate from the birthday festival?" Father asked me.

"I believe it was called pudding. It was delicious." The head chef, Zelef, occasionally made it for us. It was positively divine.

"The bear made that."

I could hardly believe the words that had come from Father's mouth. "Is that really true?"

I had always thought that Chef Zelef had made the pudding, but it was the bear girl—the same one who drew picture books.

"Yes, I had the opportunity to sample it prior to the festival, so I came up with the idea of having it at the banquet."

"You're telling me that you had someone outside of the palace kitchens make food for the birthday festival?" That itself was a shocking revelation.

"You don't need to worry too much about it. The bear is an acquaintance of Ellelaura's."

"She *is*?" Ellelaura was a noblewoman who often helped Father with his work. Father trusted her, and she did things for me as well.

Hmm. I suppose if she was a friend of Ellelaura, she was likely trustworthy.

"Father... if I ask Ellelaura to introduce me to the bear girl, would she?" I simply had to meet her now. She dressed as a bear, drew splendid picture books, and even made marvelous pudding.

"She lives in Crimonia, apparently, so I doubt it."

Ah. Yes, I knew Crimonia to be quite far from here, not nearly close enough for me to go alone. If I could not travel there, it would be difficult for her to visit here as well.

Such a far distance, though...

"You mean to tell me that she came all the way here simply to deliver picture books?" It would take time, traveling by carriage, but it seemed she came here often.

But Father took me by surprise again. "I'm sure she's been able to manage. She has her bears, after all."

"You're right," said Mother, "they would make things quite a bit simpler."

"They're cute!!!" Flora added.

I didn't understand how having bears made it easy to travel to the capital. I pressed for more details and, from what I gathered, the girl dressed as a bear could also *summon* bears. She rode these bears to the capital.

It boggled the mind. A girl dressed as a bear that rode bareback on bears? The more I learned, the less I understood about her.

She dressed as a bear, she was cute, she was good at cooking, she could summon bears, and Mother and Father trusted her.

When I ran into my brother, I asked him about it.

"That bear distracts from our work," he said, and left it at that. The whole subject seemed to put him in a rather sour mood. I pressed for more and he told me that Father would cast all his work aside upon learning the bear girl had arrived, heading straight to Flora's chambers in order to see her.

At the academy, I found myself pondering the bear girl... and that's when I heard my classmates talking.

"But Yuna was so strong."

"Yeah. If Yuna hadn't been there, we probably would've been *goners*."

Whatever they were talking about—Maricks and a few others, it sounded like—was quite disturbing. "Did something happen?" I asked.

"Lady Teilia?!" Maricks looked surprised.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help but overhear. You almost died, you say?" I asked for more information, and they told me it was from the practical training several days ago.

Practical training involves traveling to a moderately distant village. You had to think and act for yourself. In order to avoid endangering the students, they were given a guard. The guard in question wasn't supposed to get involved unless the students were truly in danger.

Since I was royalty, I wasn't allowed to participate this time.

"I got everyone into a dangerous situation," said Maricks, "and Yuna—the adventurer protecting us, I mean—totally saved our bacon." So that was how they'd survived.

"You mean that girl in the bear outfit?" Jiguldo asked—he was nearby as well, and—

Wait. Hold on. Had he just said...?

"You better not make fun of Yuna!" said Maricks. "I won't tolerate it, Jiguldo, even from *you*."

"I got that. I just don't believe it, y'know? A girl dressed like a bear slayed a black tiger? Even though Jade said so too, I just don't know."

There it was again: "a girl dressed like a bear."

"Don't spread it around," said.

"I know, I know. But c'mon, who'd believe me even if I told people?"

I cleared my throat. "Um... did you just say there's a girl who dresses as a bear?" The last thing I'd expected was to hear people mentioning her at the academy too. I just had to know more.

Maricks and Timol exchanged a look and then started talking.

"Um, okay! So when we were on our practical training, there was this girl in a bear outfit who protected us."

"Was she dressed as a cute bear?" I cut in.

“Do you know Yuna, Lady Teilia?”

Well, I hadn't known her by name until now. Perhaps I should have asked about it earlier, just to make sure we were talking about the same girl.

“No, I don't know much about her,” I said. “All I know is that a girl dressed as a bear occasionally visits the castle, and that sparked my curiosity.”

“It's difficult to describe her,” said Maricks. “I suppose that she is kind of a cute bear. She's fluffy and very soft.”

“My little sister said the same.” I thought she had been wearing a bear pelt, but it seemed like I had completely missed the mark.

According to Maricks and the others, her name was Yuna. And as an adventurer, she had single-handedly slayed a pack of wolves and a black tiger.

Which confused me even more! Was this adventurer really the same person who made picture books and pudding?

The mystery of the bear girl only deepened.

EXTRA STORY

TEILIA WANTS TO MEET THE BEAR PART TWO

WHEN I ARRIVED HOME from the academy, it became clear to me that the bear girl had visited the castle.

However, I still had yet to meet with this bear. It seemed she really did come and go as she pleased, and that she'd met with Flora today.

"What did you do today?" I asked her. I didn't see a new picture book.

"She brought me something to eat." So, it was food this time.

I asked what she had eaten.

Flora smiled and answered, "It was sweet and yummy." But what in the world had the food been? It seemed Mother and Father had tried it as well.

Several days later, Zelef made shortcake, which the bear girl had taught him how to make. It was delicious.

Another day, when I went to Flora's room, she was talking with something black and white on top of her bed.

"Flora, what is that?"

"Bears!"

Flora held them aloft for me: two bear stuffed animals.

"What are you doing with those?" I asked.

"The bear gave them to me."

I picked up the white bear. That was a rarity. Most bears were, from what I understood, black. The other stuffed bear was, at least, black like the ones I knew.

Picture books, food, and now stuffed animals. What kind of girl was she? And just how much could one person love bears? I found myself more impatient to meet her than ever.

And what cute faces the bear stuffed animals had!

"Flora, would you let me have this one?" I asked Flora. "You have two, don't you?"

But she began to tear up. "The black and white bears are different bears!"

Flora reached out and snatched the white bear from my hands, then hugged it so I couldn't take it. She was still looking at me with tears in her eyes, as though she could burst out crying at any moment.

"I'm sorry. I won't take them, so don't cry." I patted the bears on the head as Flora cradled them and apologized to all three of them. "I'm sorry, bears."

"You weally won't take them...?"

"I won't," I promised.

Flora looked between me and the stuffed animals. "You can bowwow them," she said, handing me the white bear.

"Thank you."

"The white one is Kumakyu," she said as I took the stuffed animal. "The black one is Kumayuru."

So the bears had names. Kumakyu the white bear and Kumayuru the black bear. What adorable names.

Flora held the black stuffed animal and happily told me all about the bear girl. I was a little jealous. The more my little sister met with the bear girl, the more infatuated she'd become with bears.

The bear girl was a chef, a book artist, and an adventurer? Quite the jack of all trades.

When she made food, Zelef praised her. When she drew picture books, Flora was absolutely delighted. When she accomplished her adventuring work, she was strong enough to slay a black tiger.

At first, I had thought that the adventurer and Flora's bear were definitely different people, but Maricks and the others had described her in the exact same way as my own family... not that I could really believe that there would be so many girls in the kingdom dressed as a bear.

My desire to meet her—to find out what sort of girl she was—grew. Nevertheless, my wish went ungranted.

The bear girl visited the castle many more times. She brought new picture books, and even a new type of cloud-like candy.

Was the candy like the clouds high up in the sky? It had apparently been soft and sweet, or so Flora and Mother had said.

But she hadn't taught Zelef how to make it this time, so there was none for me.

We grew busier in preparation for the academy festival, but I still had yet to meet the bear girl. We were to gather with friends or into groups based on our electives to set up shops and exhibits.

As that bubbled in the background, I listened in on Shia's conversation with her other friends.

Shia, Cattleya, Maricks, and Timol had decided to put together a shop.

"So, where should we practice today?" asked Shia.

"We've already forced our families to eat it," said Cattleya. "I don't think we can make them eat more of it."

"Then the only people who are left are our classmates and friends," said Timol.

Maricks groaned. "But I was hoping to make it a surprise for the festival!"

"Then I guess that means we need to eat it," said Shia.

Cattleya nodded. "We really ought to not throw away food, after all."

"Yeah," said Maricks, "but I'm so tired of eating the stuff..."

They all looked rather troubled.

"What are the four of you discussing?" I asked.

"Lady Teilia?!"

"Shia, didn't you mention you were serving food at the festival?" I asked. "Is that what you're talking about?"

"Yes, we're practicing how to make the candy," she said, "but we're sick of taste testing it. We had our families eat it too, but now they can't stand to have another bite."

So they wanted to make more candy, but they also didn't want to have to throw it away.

"In that case, shall I eat some?" I asked. "Though I suppose I wouldn't be able to help all that much." Still, I was interested in knowing more about the candy, so I made the offer. After all, Flora and my parents were always eating delicious food without me. Why couldn't I do the same once in a while?

The four of them thought it over, then accepted my offer.

Since I was the only one trying it, we decided that Shia would make it at her house.

"So, Shia... what are you having me eat?"

"It's a delicious sort of candy. It's very sweet. We'll prepare it, so please just wait a moment." Shia produced a curious gadget from her item bag and set it on the table.

"What is that?"

"We use it to make the candy," she said.

"You can make candy with that thing?" I'd never seen such a thing before. Could one really make candy with such a contraption?

Shia set a jar and a thin twig next to it.

"Is that sugar?" I asked. One would indeed use sugar when making candy.

"Yes, this is the only ingredient."

Shia filled the center of the device with sugar. Then she pressed a button, and the center began to turn. Thin floss began to come out of the little holes on the center tube. Shia picked up the thin twig and put it into the contraption. She twirled her hand in a circular motion, gathering floss around the twig. By the end, the texture looked almost exactly like cotton.

Once she had made it about the size of a human head, Shia turned off the machine.

"All done, Lady Teilia!" Shia offered it to me, so I took it from her.

"What is this candy called?"

"It's called cotton candy, apparently. It's just as soft as the name would suggest, and it melts in your mouth."

Hmm. That sounded like what Flora had said. "Candy shaped like a cloud..." Shia's candy seemed very similar. "How do I eat this?"

"You can take a direct bite, but it'll make your face sticky. I think it's better to tear off a little with your fingers."

I tore a piece of the cotton candy off of the twig—it was so soft—and took a bite. My mouth flooded with sweetness as it melted in my mouth. It really was just sugar but eating it this way was indescribable. I couldn't believe that such a curious candy could be created with only sugar.

"I think you'll become sick of it if you eat it alone," said Shia, "so please try this too." She gave me something to drink, along with a salty snack.

She was certainly right. The cotton candy was so sweet that I didn't think I could have another serving.

"Do they sell this type of candy outside the castle?" I had traveled outside before, but I had never seen a candy like this before.

"No, I believe it's not sold anywhere."

"Then in that case, this candy..."

"Someone taught us how to make it."

I knew a certain someone who could make cloud-like candy, and it happened to be someone Shia knew. "Was it, perhaps, that girl who dresses like a bear?"

Shia seemed surprised to hear that. "You know her?"

"My little sister told me about a sweet, cloud-like sort of candy. I thought it might be the same as this."

"Yes, it's Yuna. She does visit Lady Flora often."

"You knew about that?"

"Mother sometimes talks about it."

"Have you met her before?" I asked. "Have you met her since your practical training?"

"I don't see her very often, but she does occasionally come to visit the house."

So the acquaintance wasn't simply limited to the practical. The bear girl was Elleaura's acquaintance, so I supposed it was a possibility that Elleaura's daughter would know the bear girl too.

She had first met the bear girl at Father's birthday festival, apparently, and had since then met her several times. The girl really did come to and from Crimonia, and quite easily at that.

Shia must've noticed my disappointment. "Did you want to meet Yuna?"

I nodded. "She does so much for my sister, and I would like to meet the bears everyone speaks so much of. But I haven't been able to find a chance to meet her."

Shia started to think. "Um... I think Yuna will come to the academy festival."

"Will she?!"

"We invited her along with my sister, so I think she will."

The girl who dressed as a bear would be coming to the academy festival? Finally, I had an opportunity to meet her!

"Shia! Would you please introduce us?" If I let this opportunity escape me, who could say when I'd have another chance to meet her?

"I can introduce you, but you need to promise you won't laugh or make fun of her. If you can't promise that then I can't introduce you to her, even with your station." Shia looked straight into my eyes.

"I promise. I won't laugh or tease her at all."

Shia thought about it for a moment. "It's a promise," she said finally, and I had her word now... she would introduce me to the bear girl.

I thanked her and told her I would help with the shop. Shia told me that wouldn't be necessary, but I still needed to thank her.

Not only was I finally meeting the bear girl, but I had an exciting festival to go to.

EXTRA STORY

HORN AND THE ROOKIE ADVENTURERS HEAD TO THE OCEAN PART ONE

SINCE SHIN AND THE OTHER MEMBERS of my party were training with Gil today, I went to the Bear Dining Room alone. It was another one of Yuna's shops and it served seafood.

There was so much more variety in the seafood compared to the fish from rivers, though I didn't recognize most of them. I was so surprised when I first saw clams, but they were quite tasty and had a nice texture.

"Welcome, Horn," said Seno. She worked at the dining room.

I ordered the fish special. "You came from Mileela, right?"

"That's right. What about it?"

"I was actually thinking of going there with everyone," I told her.

We had plans to go soon, actually. Yuna, Milaine, and Gil had taught us how to fight, so we'd become a lot stronger and hadn't had as much trouble making a living. We were hoping to visit Mileela with our recent savings.

"They say that Yuna called you here." I began. "Are the rumors true?"

"I guess that's half right."

"Oh?"

"Yuna invited Anzy to Crimonia to open a shop, so they let us tag along in order to help."

"My, I had no idea," I said.

"We really just came with Anzy, so we were expecting a low wage, but Yuna offered us a lot more than expected. She even gave us a place to stay for free, and we're allowed to use any of the ingredients at the shop for our meals, so we don't have food expenses either. We also get every seventh day off. Why, I've never heard of such a wonderful workplace."

Just hearing about it, I had to agree. "Um, what kind of person is Yuna?" I had to ask. "She's helped me so much, but I know almost nothing about her."

"Hmm... we don't know the first thing about her either. We don't even know whether she has family or why she wears that bear outfit."

"You really don't know?" I asked.

"What I know is that Yuna is a nice girl, and a strong one to boot. That's enough for me. If she ever runs into trouble, I'd help her in a second."

"I think you're right. I would too."

"Then again, could she ever run into trouble at all? She's a first-rate adventurer with enough money to set up a shop without a second thought."

Now that she mentioned it, it really did feel like Yuna didn't need help.

"Oh, I know!" said Seno. "If you go to Mileela, you should stay at Anzy's family's inn."

"Anz has a place there?"

"Anzy!" Seno shouted toward the kitchen.

Anz stepped out from the back. "What are you shouting about, Seno?"

"Horn here says she's going to Mileela. I was thinking you could give her an intro to your inn."

"You're off to Mileela?" Anz asked me.

"Yes."

"In that case," said Anz with a nod, "I'm sure my dad would give you a lower rate. I'll

write a letter for you, even!"

"Oh, would you really?"

"Sure! You're always coming to eat here. As a fledgling adventurer, I'm sure you need to be careful with your money."

"I suppose that's true, but..." We did have some savings.

"Let me do this for you," she said. "You're going to my hometown, after all."

I thought about it, then I decided to accept Anz's kindness. "That would be such a help, Anz. I would be so thankful if you could."

Anz wrote me a letter, and I really was grateful. Even the littlest bit of saved money could make a *huge* difference.

Several days later, we headed off on a shared carriage to Mileela.

Carriages make travel so wonderfully easy. We wanted to get one of our own, but the maintenance and horses were just too expensive for us.

The carriage slowly moved forward. The consistent clop of the carriage made me drowsy. We'd woken up early and I was tired, and so I drifted off.

"Hey, Horn. Get up!" said Shin. "We got to the cave. We're taking a break here."

I blinked sleep from my eyes and looked out the carriage—there was the cave, just as Shin said. We were letting the horses have a break, so we were going to make a rest stop as well. I got off the carriage and stretched my stiff limbs.

"Heeeeey!" La called us over. "Shin, Horn, there's a *bear* over here!"

When I headed over to La and Bru, I did see a giant bear statue in front of the cave.

"Wait, I've seen that before..." It had been a while, back when we'd slayed monsters

around the cave.

"It's exactly the same as the ones in front of Yuna's shops," said La.

"Rumor has it that Yuna discovered this cave," said Bru.

Apparently, no one had found it until recently. Had she really gone into the cave all alone? Now it was lit with mana gems now, but it must have been pitch-black when she first found it. If I'd found it, I would have been too scared to go inside all alone.

Shin looked ahead at the cave. "We'll be at the ocean soon."

"I never would have guessed I'd ever get a chance to see the ocean," said Bru.

We couldn't hold back our excitement—not any of us, and certainly not me.

Once the horses finished their break, we headed off again.

The carriage entered the cave. It was a lot wider than expected and, thanks to the light of the mana gems, it wasn't dark in the slightest. I'd been so excited to see the inside of the cave at first, but it got monotonous after a while. Soon Shin closed his eyes and stopped looking too, along with La and Bru. I wished I could have slept through it with them, but I'd just had a nap.

The carriage rolled through the vast cave in utter silence.

I wondered how much time had passed. And what would we do to pass the time when we actually got there?

The coachman spoke up, interrupting my thoughts. "We're about to leave the cave. Please don't shift within the carriage."

Though he'd warned us not to, some people were already moving around—probably more people who hadn't been to Mileela before.

I shifted slightly so I could see ahead—there, a small light! It was the exit, and the light steadily grew as the carriage plodded along.

Once we were through, I saw a vast ocean spread out ahead of us, just as I'd heard. It was so vast that I could hardly believe it was even real. How far did the ocean reach?

"Shin, La, Bru, it's the ocean!" I shouted them awake. "Look, the ocean!"

"The ocean?!" They all got up.

"Whoa! It's so big!"

They were making an even bigger commotion than I had, which drew smiles from the other passengers. I was a little embarrassed, but how else were we supposed to react seeing the ocean for the first time? I was just as overwhelmed and excited as they were.

Before long, the carriage arrived at the entrance to Mileela. Once they checked all of our guild cards and residency cards, they allowed the carriage into the seaport.

The sun was already sinking when we arrived, creating the most beautiful sunset.

"Everyone is awed by that the first time they see it," said the coachman, and the carriage rolled onward to the center of town.

"We need to get to an inn first," said Shin.

We looked at the map Anz had drawn for us. "We should go to the one Anz's father manages," I suggested, and soon enough we'd made our way there.

"Looks like this is it," said Shin.

"I'm starving," said Bru. "Let's grab a bite to eat already."

We headed right inside. The place was packed—it was dinnertime, after all.

"Do you think we'll really have a place to stay?" It hadn't occurred to me till now, but what if they had no vacancies?

I found someone who worked there, a busy-looking woman. She looked about the right age to be Anz's mother. "Excuse me."

“Welcome. Are you here for a meal?”

“No, we came to stay here. Do you have any rooms available?”

“Rooms?” She looked a little worried when I asked. “We only have one three-person room at the moment.”

“We don’t need to all stay together,” I said.

The woman seemed to think it over for a moment.

“Um...” I pulled out the letter from Anz. “Anz told us to hand you this.”

“A letter from Anz?!” Surprised, she started reading it then and there.

With a sigh, the woman finished the letter. “She asks for the most ridiculous things.”

“You really don’t need to go out of your way to give us a discount,” I said.

Even if I was disappointed, this was just the way things are. Anz had proposed this without consulting anyone, after all, and we couldn’t insist that they honored her promise. Shin seemed to understand that too, though he didn’t say anything.

“Well, my girl made you a promise,” said the woman—so she *was* Anz’s mother. “I have to see it through. Are you friends of the bear girl, by any chance?”

“Oh, yes. Yuna is my magic instructor. In fact, she taught me how to use magic in the first place.”

“In that case, I suppose you can use that room. In fact,” she said, her eyes lighting up like she’d just thought of something brilliant, “you can stay in it for free.”

“Oh, but we really wouldn’t mind the three-person room.”

“No, no. I couldn’t let such a charming girl stay in the same room as boys.”

But we were still renting a small house and living together, weren’t we? Although our rooms were separate...

"I would prefer to show you to the rooms immediately," she said, "but it's busy now. What would you say to having dinner while you wait?"

We were famished, so we certainly had no complaints about that. "Okay, we will. Thank you very much."

We headed for some empty seats.

"I'm so glad that we have a place to stay," I said.

"But you'll be all alone in your own room, Horn," said Shin.

"Oh. Is it okay that I'm the only one who gets a separate room?" I asked.

Shin shrugged. "I don't see why not. She's being nice to us, after all. I say we take her up on it."

I really envied how optimistic Shin could be.

"Anyway, let's order something," said Shin. "I'm starving, man! I can't go on any longer!"

We gave him the money and had him order. After a short wait, we were served the most delicious food. It not only looked like Anz's food, but it tasted like Anz's food too. I really enjoyed it.

Once we finished eating, a man with the same kind of spectacular muscles as Crimonia's guild master appeared in front of us.

"Are you friends with Anz and the bear girl?" he asked. "I'm Anz's father, Deigha. I'm also the innkeeper and the cook."

Since Deigha introduced himself, we introduced ourselves too.

He nodded sharply. "Good, good! How was the food?"

"It was delicious. It tasted a lot like Anz's cooking."

"Course it would. I'm the one who taught Anz how to cook. I read the letter—is Anz

running a tight ship over there?"

"Her dining room is very popular," I said. "Other places are serving seafood now, but hers is the best."

Anz's mother popped in and gave Deigha a slap on the back. "I told you she was doing fine! But you always have to ask whenever you find someone new who knows about Anz's dining room."

"Ah, I'm just worried for my little girl!"

"She's holding her own. She even told you so in her letter."

"I suppose..."

"Just believe in your own daughter for once."

"Hmph! No matter how good she gets at cooking, I'm gonna worry about her. That's what a parent does."

Anz's mother sighed. "Overbearing as usual, I see..."

"All right, all right. Let's show you kids to your rooms."

The rooms were on the second floor, so we headed up the stairs.

"You three can use this room," he said. "Miss, you'll be over here."

Shin headed into the room they were told to take.

"And you can use this room here, dear," said Anz's mother.

I headed inside to find a somewhat large single bed, and also...

"A bear?" A bear decoration stood about thirty centimeters tall, dead center in the middle of the room.

"This is where the bear girl stayed," she said.

"Oh, golly..." So Yuna was here...

"I'm not sure how well you know her," she said, "but the girl saved our family. That's why we've been taking good care of the room she stayed in. My husband even put a bear figurine in here to make it special."

"Are you sure you're okay with me staying in this room?" I asked.

"I don't mind," she said. "It's special, but we only lend it out last when we have nothing else. Since you know Anz and the girl, we don't mind having you stay here."

"And you really don't need *any* payment?"

"Anz made a promise to you, so it's fine. So don't worry about staying here," Anz's mother said, then she left.

Thinking about how Yuna had stayed here made me feel so giddy. Had she slept on this same bed?

On that night, I slept in that very same bed.

EXTRA STORY

HORN AND THE ROOKIE ADVENTURERS HEAD TO THE OCEAN PART TWO

ON THE DAY AFTER WE'D ARRIVED at Mileela, we headed over to see the ocean at once. We took the same road the carriage had taken here.

Oh—and once Deigha knew that we knew Yuna, he told us about a whole bunch of other places we could go besides the ocean.

I caught sight of the beach, and Shin started running at once. La and Bru took off after him.

“Wait for me!” I cried, running after the rest.

Shin tripped ahead of us and fell face-first into the sand. When La and Bru saw that, they laughed as they sped past him.

“Are you all right, Shin?” I asked.

“I just fell on the sand, so I’m fine. C’mon, let’s go!”

“Okay!”

Shin stood up and ran toward the ocean. Once we were close enough to touch the water, we paused and just... stared out into the endless expanse of the sea.

“It’s just as big as they said it would be...” I said. “I wonder how far it goes?”

“I bet you it’s at least as wide as a couple of lakes!” said Shin confidently.

The ocean was even bigger than that—or probably any number of lakes we could count... and apparently it’s all salt water.

I headed closer to the water to see for myself. The water had been rising to meet us and drawing back for a while now—waves, they call them. Once I approached the waves, I dipped my hand in them and licked my finger.

So salty... it really was salt water. I could hardly believe it. It was amazing.

Shin and the others mimicked me and licked the water. All three of them puckered up at the taste. We all looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Once we were done with the ocean, we headed to another place Deigha had told us about. We had to leave the seaport and travel a little ways to get to it.

“Deigha said that since we know Yuna, we need to see something amazing. I wonder what it is?”

We watched the ocean as we walked.

“You think it’s that thing?” Shin, walking in the lead, pointed at something... something with a very specific, very recognizable shape.

We started running at once.

“They’re huge.”

“They’re *bears!*”

There were gigantic rock bears in the ocean.

“Did Yuna make these?”

“No, no. No way... right?”

The bears were super gigantic. There were even multiples of them.

“There’s no way anyone could make these with magic,” I said. I mean, I had trouble even creating an earth wall. Making such large bear stones was out of the question.

“But Deigha told us about this place specifically because we know her.”

The three of them seemed to be remembering stories about Yuna. The adventurers we knew had told us all kinds of stories about her.

The day she'd registered at the Adventurers' Guild adventurer, she nearly killed an adventurer who'd made fun of her bear outfit. The next day, she beat forty wolves on her own. And then there was the story about how she'd slayed a hundred goblins, and a goblin *king* to boot.

The story that shocked me the most was how she'd defeated a black viper on her own.

"If Yuna did make this thing," said Shin, "that's just... amazing!"

"Sure wouldn't expect it from how she looks," said Bru.

"I can barely believe it though..." said La.

When we'd first met Yuna and Shin had made fun of her, I'd felt a shiver of fear. But when I actually got to talk to her, she turned out to be a really nice girl. She taught me how to use magic, and I'd really improved. She looked like a girl in a cute bear outfit on the outside, but she was genuinely amazing.

After we saw the gigantic bears in the ocean, we headed back to the inn. We asked Deigha about the bears.

"Did Yuna really make those?"

"I can't go into specifics," he said, "but she saved us. Those bears in the ocean are proof of that."

Deigha left it at that. All we knew for sure was that Yuna had done something for this town.

After we finished eating lunch, we headed to the Adventurers' Guild—it was standard for adventurers to go to visit the local branch in order to get information about the towns they stopped in.

It seemed there weren't many adventurers at the Mileela guild. Apparently, a lot of them had moved on to other towns... but he wouldn't tell us why they'd moved away.

All we knew was that a strong monster had appeared, and that Mileela's guild master was... a beautiful woman? Looking at her, she didn't seem afraid to bare her tanned skin or her prominent cleavage. And Shin and the others sure didn't hide that they were staring at that cleavage, either.

I quietly pinched Shin's thigh through his pants. He looked at me but ignored me all the same. I suppose it's true that boys prefer women with more cleavage.

From there, we headed to the harbor. They said they would let us on the ships, something that they'd only recently started doing for visitors. It cost money, of course, but Deigha had put in a word for us and they were going to give us a discount.

"Excuse me!" I said to a man near the ships. "Is someone named Damon here?"

"Aye, he would be the man near that ship there."

"Thank you." We headed to the ship he'd pointed out and spoke to the man in question.
"Pardon me. Deigha said that we could ride a ship?"

"Aye, I heard. So, you're the adventurers Deigha was talking about."

"Yes, it's nice to meet you."

The man nodded. "I'm about to finish up, so hold on for a while."

This was that Damon we'd been told about. He was normally a fisherman, but he apparently took visitors from other towns out to sea when he had time.

Once he was done prepping, he let us onboard. It was my first time on a ship. When we got on, my legs quivered. I struggled to keep my feet planted to the ground, and the side-to-side jostling of the ship made it even harder to keep my balance.

"Hold tight unless you want to get yourself into trouble," said Damon. "And if you start feeling queasy, you let me know."

"Is it normal to get queasy?" I asked.

"Depends on the person. Most first-timers do. It's the way the waves toss ya back and forth."

The boat was rocking, just as he'd said. "And all you sailors are okay?"

"Ah, we mariners have been on boats since we were tots. Still, sometimes even I get sick when the waves get rough."

Rocking against the waves, the boat drifted farther and farther from the shore.

"I heard you're friends with Anzy," he said. "Deigha said so. How's she doing?"

"Oh, she's always busy with cooking."

"I see. Anzy got herself a man yet?"

I didn't know how to answer such an abrupt question. "Do you mean a boyfriend? I don't know much about that, but I haven't heard of anything like that?" Maybe she had one, but I wasn't sure.

"Huh," the man said.

"Wait, Damon, are you and Anz..." They weren't quite the same age, but they seemed pretty close.

"Nah, I got a wife and kid! But Anzy is popular with the young fishermen. Lots of them want her to cook for them, and tons of them were shocked when she headed out to Crimonia."

Anz was very feminine in a way that boys probably liked. She was cute, too, and good with cooking. And I already knew she was really popular.

"But if they liked her so much," I said, "why didn't anyone stop her from going?"

"Well, the bear girl asked her to go. No one was going to argue with that."

He must have meant Yuna. "Why didn't ask her out before Yuna got her to move?"

"They were too scared of her dad."

That was all he needed to say. Deigha was awfully muscular, after all, so he was probably so frightening that nobody would dare to ask Anz on a date.

"I'm relieved to hear she doesn't have similar pests to deal with in Crimonia," said Damon. "Still, makes me wonder if the men in Crimonia are blind or somethin'. Can't believe no one's tried their hand with Anzy."

Actually, he had a point. I would've thought that Anz would be popular with the boys too.

"Right, I know what's up," said Shin.

"Yeah, it's gotta be because of that," said La.

"For sure," Bru grunted.

I had no idea what they were talking about, but I guess the boys knew the reason why.

"I think it's 'cause of Yuna," said La.

"There's a thing that's been going around with the guys," said Shin. "They say if anyone tries anything with the women working at Yuna's shops, she really brings her wrath down on them."

"Really?" I'd never heard about that.

"We're allowed to talk to them," said Shin, "but we're not allowed to invite them out anywhere or to drink with them. That's why none of the adventurers try anything at Yuna's shops, and the ones who do get told off. We've been told to report back on any men who are like that."

"I had no idea."

"It's us guys that usually talk about it. So, y'know, don't go spreading that around, Horn. We'll end up in trouble."

It seemed silly to me, but I nodded along anyway. It wouldn't do us any good if Shin and the others got in trouble with other adventurers.

The ship sailed on, drifting still further and further from the shore. I was frightened to think of what would happen if we fell into the water here.

"How far does the ocean go?" I asked.

“It goes on forever,” said Damon. “You can travel for days out into the open ocean.”

“What’s beyond it?”

“A country. But apparently it takes days to get there. A boat like this couldn’t make it.”

“A whole country...”

“It’s far away,” Damon added.

“The world must be so big...”

I’d come from a village, so even Crimonia seemed giant to me. There were so many things there, and so many people. It made me feel like my own world had expanded. And beyond Crimonia, there was the royal capital. There were so many places I’d never been to before.

The more I learned about it, the larger the world seemed to become.

The four of us started to feel seasick shortly after that, so we had to go back to land.

“I still feel like I’m rocking...” Shin groaned.

“Are you all okay?” I asked.

The three boys had fallen over the moment we’d stepped onto dry land.

Damon looked at the boys and laughed. “It’s a mighty poor sight to see the lads falling over while the lass is fine.”

“You can say that, but—*hurk!*” Shin held his mouth.

“Heh. At this rate, you lot will never become distinguished fishermen.”

“We’re adventurers, though.”

“Ah, but some adventurers fight in the water.”

“Really...?”

“Aye. Monsters exist on both land and sea,” Damon said as though he were implying something, then he went silent.

How strange... what was that about?

Damon looked us over for another moment and went back to the original subject, as if nothing had happened. “How’re you gonna be able to eat like that? I’ll have you know, my Yuula went to all kinds of trouble making a meal for you.”

Damon’s wife was going to cook for us after the boat ride.

“We should be fine after a breather,” I said.

We rested for a while after that, and then we tried the seafood that Yuula had made for us. Anz’s cooking was delicious, but Yuula’s food was fierce competition.

After a few days, we’d had our fill of Mileela and headed back to Crimonia.

I’m looking forward to going again.

EXTRA STORY

A CERTAIN NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST

I'M LELAINA, a journalist for the academy's paper. I'm hoping to write an interesting article about the academy festival.

At first, I asked Lady Teilia (of the royal family, of course!) if I could cover her, but she politely declined. I'd really thought that an article about someone as beautiful and smart as Lady Teilia was sure to be a hit, but... too bad. Writing about royalty without their permission might draw her ire too, so I decided to give up on that idea—it wouldn't do to lose my head over an article in the school paper.

The day of the festival, I set about exploring all sorts of places. Everyone looked like they were having the time of their lives, but unfortunately... none of it was newsworthy.

While I was walking around looking for anything that could be remotely interesting, I caught word that people had seen a girl in a bear outfit around. A bear outfit...? Did that mean she was wearing a bear pelt? That could be quite the scoop!

I started gathering information about the girl in the bear outfit.

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: SMALL GIRL

“That bear? She was *really* soft and puffy.”

“Soft, you say?” I’d interviewed a little girl who said she knew about the bear girl, but I couldn’t follow. How was the bear girl *soft*...?

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: FEMALE STUDENT DOING THE KNIFE THROWING PRESENTATION

"You mean that girl in the bear outfit? She sure was something."

"Something? Could you elaborate?"

"This stays between you and me..." she insisted, and then she got right down to it. "Handling knives is difficult, and the three knives we're using at the festival are different weights. That's on purpose, you see. Makes it so that people throwing them the same way each time will more easily miss their targets."

"That sounds terrible."

"It's a festival game, y'know? And this made it harder to hit the targets. There are people at the academy with killer knife-throwing skills, after all. But the bear girl threw all three of them at the furthest target. I was totally surprised. Our special prize ended up gone early on in the first day. Normally, we balance the weight of the knives and bring the target closer over the course of the day—that way someone eventually gets the prize. But I never would've imagined she could use all three knives with different weights to get the farthest target."

The girl dressed as a bear was good at knife-throwing, then. My intuitions had paid off. "What was this girl like?"

"She had a hood that looked like a bear on, so I couldn't see, but she was with Lady Teilia and some small girls."

I still couldn't get to the bottom of who this bear girl was, but now I knew she associated with Lady Teilia and some small girls... and that she could really throw a knife.

This was turning out to be a heck of an article. Next, I headed the same direction the bear girl had been seen going.

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: MALE STUDENT WITH MONSTER TARGET EXHIBITION

"A bear girl? She came by with Lady Teilia. And I think there were three little girls with her too."

We were at a game where you could throw balls at students dressed as monsters now,

and here was a guy describing the group just like my other tip had. She really was hanging around Lady Teilia. Whether she was a friend or a mere acquaintance of Lady Teilia, this was juicy stuff.

“What was this girl like?”

“In a word? Amazing. We dress up as monsters to act as the targets, so it’s pretty difficult to hit us since we’re moving around... but it was like she could predict where we’d be. She’d throw the balls where we were headed. On top of that, whenever we thought we dodged her, she’d already be throwing the next ball. Then, wham! She’d get us. The girls with her seemed normal, though. We couldn’t really talk to the bear girl, though, because Lady Teilia was with her.”

Maybe throwing knives was just part of it, and she was just generally good at throwing stuff. Either way, this article was really coming along.

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: STUDENT WHO WATCHED THE OBSTACLE RACE

“She didn’t move like any human being I’ve seen!” said the student. Since I heard she’d taken part of the obstacle race, I’d gone to gather more info on that. “That outfit looked like it should’ve made it hard to move in, but she was quick. Girl hopped right over the obstacles like they were *nothing!* She walked on a *reeeally* thin pole without breaking a sweat, ran up a slope in one go, and beat out all the records we’d practiced multiple times to get. It was really awkward, to be honest.”

Apparently, when they made the obstacle course, they’d used their own highest scores as the standard for the prizes... and the bear girl had promptly broken them all with ease, taking another first place prize.

Needless to say, she was clearly agile on top of everything else I’d gathered about her.

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: MALE STUDENT WHO PARTICIPATED IN MONSTER-HARVESTING EXHIBIT

“A bear girl? She did come here, but what really impressed me were the little girls she was with! They were so small, but they still managed to harvest those monsters

perfectly. I sure was surprised. Feels like I've got more learning to do."

While I was going after the bear girl, I got my hands on some other scoops.

"So you're saying that the bear girl didn't do any harvesting? It was the little girls' doing?"

"Sure was! There was a bear girl with them, but she didn't do anything. That little ten-year-old sure was something, though. She had that wolf's pelt off before I knew it. Watching her slice up the cuts of meat from it was also fascinating."

So the ten-year-old girl accompanying the bear girl was good at monster-harvesting. Whether it was the same story or a different one, it was shaping up to be one heck of a scoop!

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: FEMALE STUDENT WHO SAW THE BEAR EATING LUNCH

"Mm, I saw her. See, I was going to find something for lunch, right? And I saw her with Lady Teilia. She had all kinds of things I'd never seen before on her table, and she was eating them with Lady Teilia and some small kids. Lady Teilia looked like she was having fun. I do wonder who those little girls were, though. The food looked so good! I wanted to find some for myself, but they weren't selling it anywhere."

It appeared that the bear girl had been partaking in a meal of foods as of yet unknown to us. I wish I could've included more specifics on the grub, but no one knew any details about it.

This bear girl, though... she and those little girls were eating with Lady Teilia herself. Who on earth were they?

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: FEMALE STUDENT WHO SOLD CLOTHES

"There were some girls who came by with Lady Teilia. I remember them. I've never seen clothes with that kind of design before. I really wanted to take a closer look, but it seemed like she was Lady Teilia's friend, so I couldn't ask for that. But... I really wish I'd been able to get an up-close look at her bear clothes. I so wanted to touch the fabric!"

Oh, her face? She wore a hood the whole time, so I never saw it.”

She hadn’t taken her bear clothes off, even in the clothing store of all places. What did it mean?

Even after hearing so many stories about her, I still had no idea what the girl was actually like. I didn’t even know if she was a student at the academy.

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT: FEMALE STUDENT WHO DREW ART

If she’d come here, I was sure that I could get a drawing of the bear girl.

“I remember her because Lady Teilia was here,” said the student. “I was so nervous. The bear girl? She was very cute. But she seemed embarrassed since she hid her face, so I didn’t get a good look at her.”

“Could you draw her for me?”

“Um... I think she looked something like this.” The student sketched the bear girl from memory. “See? Isn’t she a cute bear?”

The bear girl drawn on the paper was really a bear, but not like any bear I’d imagined. She really was cute, though. I’d been convinced she was wearing a bear pelt, but my nose for news had led me astray! And while I could see some of her face, I couldn’t see it clearly. Still, this story was getting *massive*.

If I included the drawing with my article, it would really make some waves.

After that, I went around to other places and gathered more information, but I must have missed her—I never saw the bear girl. The bell rang, signaling it was the end of the first day of the festival.

However, I did find out where Lady Teilia had gone. Apparently it was to a shop with a bear statue. I decided to go have a look, and...

“A bear?” I said aloud. A cute bear was in the shop along with Lady Teilia. I worked up

the courage to talk to the princess. “Lady Teilia, I heard that you were with a girl dressed as a bear. Is that true?”

I showed her the drawing of the bear girl.

“Oh, you were the person from a few days ago,” she said.

“I’m Lelaina, from the academy newspaper, here for a scoop. I’m looking into the bear girl who appeared at the festival.”

“What are you looking into?” I told her about everything I’d unearthed.

Lady Teilia plucked the drawing of the bear girl from my hand, folded it up, and put it in her pocket. “Please don’t write that in the newspaper”

“But that’s...” I reached out to it in vain.

“Don’t write it, all right?” Lady Teilia smiled. It was a terrifying grin...

I gave up and withdrew my outstretched hands. “Wh-Why not?”

“She’s a very important friend of mine and being featured in the newspaper would cause her some problems. If you *do* write about her, my *father* might become involved.”

His Majesty...? Was the bear girl that important of a person?

With Lady Teilia telling me that, I really couldn’t write about her. Still, now I had an article to write and no material for it.

As I fretted over the deadline, Lady Teilia pointed at the shop. “If you don’t have anything to write about, how about you cover this stall?” She looked to Shia, one of the workers in the stall. “I know you’re cleaning Shia, and I’m sorry, but could you make one last one?”

Shia made me some candy that looked like cotton. I took a bite and, curiously, it was incredibly sweet.

There we go—now *that’s* a story!

AFTERWORD

IT'S BEEN A WHILE. I'm Kumanano. Thank you for picking up the eleventh volume of *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*.

We're at volume eleven already, and Yuna is still having a blast in the fantasy world. Yuna had to go through all sorts of trials at the beginning, but she's saved people, been saved herself, and been accepted for the bear she is.

In this volume, the usual group—Fina, Shuri, and Noa included—headed to the academy Shia attends in order to see the school festival and its festivities. She sees some things that you'd expect in a school festival, and other things that she could really only enjoy in another world.

The first day of the festival goes without a hitch and they get along to the next day.

Now, I have an announcement to make. Next year in January, a volume 11.5 will go on sale. It includes short stories sold as special extras in-store. I apologize for the trouble I've caused anyone who wasn't near one of the stores and couldn't get the special stories. I hope that you'll be able to use this as an opportunity to get them. No words can express how grateful I am to the publisher for making this all possible.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who strived to get this book out.

Thank you for drawing such beautiful illustrations, 029.

I'm always relying on my editor as well. And to the many people who were involved in the publishing of *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* Volume 11, thank you.

I'm grateful for the readers who have read along thus far.

Well, I hope we can meet again in the twelfth volume.

KUMANANO — ON A DAY IN NOVEMBER, 2018



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