

WRITTEN BY
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O29

10
novel



KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

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– Bear Bear Bear Kuma –

- VOLUME 10 -

-AUTHOR-

Kumanano

-ILLUSTRATOR-

029

[SEVEN SEAS]



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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR Vol. 10

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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.

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.

ELF VILLAGE**SANYA**

Guild master of the capital's Adventurer Guild. A female elf. She keeps Yuna out of trouble with the other adventurers. After Luimin talks to her, she decides to travel back to the elves' village with her sister and Yuna..

**LUIMIN**

An elf girl who collapsed in front of Yuna's house in the royal capital. In order to tell her older sister, Sanya, about the plight that has befallen the elves' village, she travels to the capital.

MUMULUTE

Sanya and Luimin's grandfather. He is the head of the elves' village.

ARUTUL

Sanya and Luimin's father. A slender male elf who looks like he's in his mid-twenties.

TALIA

Sanya and Luimin's mother. No one would bat an eye if she claimed to be their older sister, based on how she looks.

LUCCA

Sanya and Luimin's little brother. Eight years old. Sanya didn't know that he had been born.

VENA

Sanya and Luimin's grandmother. Wife of Mumulute. A charming elf.

LAMILATA

Leader of a group of elves that guard the elf forest. Total hunk.

CRIMONIA**FINA**

A ten-year-old girl and the first person Yuna meets when she comes to the other world. Yuna saved her mother. She harvests the monsters that Yuna defeats. Yuna likes taking her along for rides.

SHURI

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

TIERMINA

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

MORIN

Yuna came to her rescue when she was being coerced into selling the bakery her husband had set up. After that, she starts baking bread with her daughter, Morin, at the Bear's Lounge.

ANZ

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

CAPITAL**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.

ZELEF

Head chef of the royal palace. Yuna's variety of dishes left a deep impression on him and she taught him some recipes. He's working on establishing a shop in the capital that serves Yuna's original recipes.

PRINCESS FLORA

Princess of Elfanica. She adores Yuna and calls her "bear." Yuna thinks she's cute and gifts her things like picture books.



CHAPTER 235

THE BEAR DEPARTS FOR THE ELVES' VILLAGE

AFTER LEAVING LALUZ, we—that is, Sanya, Luimin, and I—rode on Kumayuru and Kumakyu toward the elves' village. Luimin smiled so much more, now that we'd gotten her bracelet back. Until now, I hadn't realized how forced her smiles had been.

"Just a bit further now," Luimin said from atop Kumayuru.

"Wow, yeah. I didn't think we'd arrive this quickly!"

Sanya had said we'd get there sometime today. I could see a huge forest ahead of us, and I guessed the elf village was deep inside those dense woods. The trees were pretty vast, too. I mean, I'd *definitely* get lost if it wasn't for my bear map skill. But even if I did get lost, I probably would've been fine. I could still get above the trees to check the surroundings.

Those vast, dense surroundings...

Finally, Kumayuru and Kumakyu reached the forest entrance. I didn't see anything that looked like a road. Were we really going to hack our way through the undergrowth?

"There's a road we can take from here," said Sanya. She led us to a path wide enough for a single carriage to use.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu walked down the path, side by side. The trees were closely packed together, but enough light shone through for us to see. I was getting excited—an elf village! A *real-life* elf village! They'd have some cool stuff, and probably some delicious food...

"This really takes me back..." Sanya mused.

"You said it's been ten years, right?" I asked.

"I don't quite remember," Sanya admitted. "Elves don't really worry about things like that. Still, I didn't think that much time had passed."

Maybe a decade was nothing for an elf, but that seemed like a whole lot of time to me.

"It was *definitely* ten years," Luimin piped up.

I nodded. "So you've said."

"You'll understand once you get there," Luimin declared, whatever *that* meant.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu bravely waddled on. We came across a small river, but there was a bridge, so my bears didn't need to use their water walking ability. As we were crossing the bridge, I had an uncomfortable feeling; it was like my entire body was being wrapped in a thin film of magic. I looked all around, trying to figure out where it was coming from.

"Do you sense something, perhaps?" asked Sanya.

"I felt some kind of weird magic as we were crossing the bridge." And it was still there. It was hard to explain. Could magic even leave that kind of film?

"You are very perceptive, Yuna," said Sanya. "You probably felt us entering the barrier."

"There's a barrier...?"

"Normally, people can't tell when they enter the barrier. Only those who created it are able to sense it, in most cases."

"Um, I didn't notice it at all." For some reason, Luimin hadn't felt it. But wasn't she an elf? "Why can you sense it, Yuna?"

I thought it over. It was probably my bear gear, right? I wouldn't be able to sense it without the stuff, surely.

"It looks like the barrier is working properly," said Sanya.

"But occasionally, monsters still get into the village. According to Grandfather, the barrier has been weakening," said Luimin.

"I don't understand it... but if Grandfather says so, I suppose it must be true."

"Your grandfather is the head of the village?" I asked.

"Yes. He's a kind person. He'll welcome you with open arms."

Kumayuru and Kumakyu continued down the road after we entered the barrier. The road stayed wide enough for only a single carriage. How long did we have to go, anyway? I thought we'd gone pretty far after crossing the river, but we still weren't there. We'd probably get there lickety-split if Kumayuru and Kumakyu ran, but Sanya told us not to frighten the woodland creatures.

We meandered on.

I used my bear detection skill to check how far away the elves' village was. If it was nearby, I'd be able to detect people, but... wait, what? My detection showed four people surrounding us—two on our left and two on our right. They even moved when we did. Were they tailing us?

I looked where my magic had detected them, but no dice; they were probably hiding. They must've been elves, but why were they keeping tabs on us? I would understand that if it was just me, but Sanya and Luimin were here too. Why would they need to shadow us still? I didn't mind, as long as they kept their distance and didn't attack us. They probably had a reason for it, but it was still unsettling, nonetheless.

One of them moved to our rear—another moved to our front right. They had our sides, our front, and our back covered. We were surrounded.

"Sanya," I said.

"What is it?"

"There are elves surrounding us. Is that because of me?"

Both Sanya's and Luimin's eyes went wide with surprise.

"You noticed?!" Sanya exclaimed. She seemed to know already, but...

"W-wait, really?!" Luimin must've missed the memo. She was looking around, trying to search for them.

"You really are amazing, Yuna," Sanya said. "People normally don't notice them. I guess they still need to up their tailing game."

Obviously, I couldn't tell her I knew because of my detection skill—no way I would've noticed them otherwise.

"Even I only notice them if I really concentrate," said Sanya.

"Are we going to be okay?" I asked.

"It's fine," said Sanya. "We're with you."

"But do we *really* need four entire people following us?" I asked.

"You even know how many there are?!"

Oops. I'd let slip how many people I'd sensed with my skill. Sanya had thought I'd only realized we were being followed, and now I'd surprised her even more. Eh, live and learn.

"Since you know how many of them there are, do you know where they are?" Sanya asked.

I guess it'd be okay to answer her. I'd already revealed that I knew their numbers, so there wasn't a point in lying.

"There are two to the left and right, one behind us, and one to our front right."

Luimin looked to her left and right, behind her, and to our front right, but she couldn't seem to find them. "Are you *serious*, Yuna?! I had no idea."

Well, I myself wouldn't have known without my bear gear.

"They're probably here because of Kumayuru and Kumakyu," said Sanya. "I expect they're surprised to see us riding on bears."

"They're not going to suddenly attack, right?" I asked.

"It's fine, Yuna. You're such a worrywart!" Sanya looked out into the forest, took a deep breath, and..."*LABILATAAAAA!*" she shouted, straight into the trees.

After a short time, a tree to the side of us shook and leaves fluttered down. A male elf was standing on top of a branch.

"You noticed me?" the man called out. He was a really good-looking elf. I'd figured the elves would all be beautiful men and women—looks like I was right. Sanya was beautiful, Luimin was charming, and now we had this fine specimen of a hunky elven man standing in the tree.

"Labilata!" said Sanya, "it's been a long time!"

"True. I'm impressed you knew it was me!"

"Monitoring this forest is your job, isn't it?"

"I guess so. My turn for questions. Why are you all riding bears?" The elf called Labilata looked at Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

Sanya laughed. "Aren't they cute? If you're worried about them, I'll have you know, they're not dangerous at all."

Labilata looked over to me. "What about *that* bear?"

Sanya smiled wryly. "Does she *look* dangerous to you?"

"I suppose not."

"In that case, would you mind calling off your trackers?"

Labilata thought for a bit. "Understood. We'll return to the village ahead of you and let them know you're coming."

"Tell the other three as well."

Labilata paled at that. "You noticed them too, Sanya?!"

"There are two to either side of us and one behind us," Sanya said, beaming as she relayed what I'd told her. Labilata was even more surprised, but Sanya told him what was up right away. "To be fair, it was that bear girl who noticed them. Yuna's her name. She feels pretty unsettled by all this tailing, so she'd politely like you to stop." Sanya looked over at me.

“Hold on...” That was all I could get out. I’d said that we were being followed, but I hadn’t mentioned anything about being uncomfortable; I’d just been worried about being attacked.

“The *bear* noticed us?” Labilata looked at me inquisitorily.

“Yuna may look cute in that outfit, but I wouldn’t pick a fight with her if I were you,” Sanya warned him.

“I wouldn’t do such a thing,” said Labilata. “I’ll have the three others withdraw as well. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“If you could.” Sanya gave Kumayuru a pat. “We’ll be going in on these cubs, so tell them not to be surprised.”

“Understood,” said Labilata. With that, he disappeared into the forest. My detection skill sensed that he was leaving. I heard a faint sound, kind of like a flute, and the three elves tailing us began to move away too. Looked like they were keeping their promise.

Sanya nodded. “Shall we get a move on too?”

“Who were those people, Sanya?”

“The guards of the elven forest.”

“If they were the guards, why were they following us? They know who you are. Did they really have to go out of their way to tail us?”

“Well, the people who come here are mostly merchants and travelers. They must have been surprised when Kumayuru and Kumakyu arrived, especially after they saw the way you’re dressed. They know we’re not dangerous after that conversation, so I think we’ll be okay now.”

Huh. I guess things were fine now...?

We continued onward, riding Kumayuru and Kumakyu till we came out of the forest. Verdant fields spread out before us with houses nestled in the greenery—we’d finally arrived at the elves’ village.

CHAPTER 236

THE BEAR ARRIVES AT THE ELVES' VILLAGE

ELVES GREETED US as we entered the village. I wondered if they'd gathered after the trackers from before had filled them in on our arrival. You'd think that Sanya would be the main event after being gone for a decade, but my bears and I were stealing the show. The children looked at Kumayuru and Kumakyu with a twinkle in their eyes.

A male elf stepped out from the crowd. I'd say he was in his forties... but y'know: he was an elf, so who could really say how old he *actually* was?

"Sanya..." he said, "it's been much too long."

"I'm glad to be home, Grandfather," Sanya replied.

"You did well bringing Sanya back to us, Luimin," he said, and Luimin looked positively delighted.

This was apparently Sanya and Luimin's grandfather, but he only looked middle-aged, at best. If their grandfather looked this young, then Sanya's parents had to look even younger. Elves sure are nothing to scoff at.

"Sanya! Luimin!"

"Mother!"

A young female elf ran over to where Sanya and her grandfather were talking—their mother, I guess. She looked super young, though. You could've said she was their sister and I wouldn't have batted an eye.

"Is it okay if you speak with them tomorrow?" their mother said to their grandfather.
"They've only just returned after traveling so far."

"I don't mind, but I'd at least like an introduction of our guests."

The grandfather looked over at me and my bears. I guess we were going to do self-

introductions now...? I started to speak, but the grandfather beat me to it.

"I am Mumulute, the head of this village. As you have probably guessed, I am the grandfather of Luimin and Sanya."

"I'm Yuna, an adventurer. Sanya is always helping me out at the Adventurer Guild, and I asked her if she could bring me along. I don't want to be a bother, so... I'm sorry if I'm imposing on you." I made sure to be as polite as possible so I'd make a good first impression. Then again, how good can you make a first impression when you're wearing a freakin' bear onesie?

Mumulute turned to look at Kumayuru and Kumakyu. "Are those your bears, miss?"

"These are my bear summons. The black one is Kumayuru. The white one is Kumakyu."

I recalled both of them to prove it; astonished gasps sounded all around us. The kids seemed disappointed. "The bears disappeared..." one of them whined.

"All right, then," said Mumulute. "You'll give people a fright summoning those, so keep them tucked away while in the village." He was right—I'd probably scare anyone who didn't already know about my bears, so I decided to follow his instructions.

He turned to Sanya. "Make sure to take care of our guest, you hear?"

"Yes, of course," she replied.

"Your name was Yuna, yes? You've come from afar, so we will welcome you as our guest. Times may be hectic, but please make yourself at home."

"Thank you very much!" I said.

"Come to my house tomorrow morning, Sanya."

She nodded. "I will."

Mumulute made his leave, and Luimin tugged along with her mother to take his place. She looked so young. It was weird thinking that she was their mother.

"Yuna," said Luimin, "meet Mom!"

"I'm Talia. It seems you're well acquainted with my daughters." She looked so beautiful up close, and way too young to be the mother of two.

"I'm Yuna. I'm an adventurer. Sanya's helped me a lot."

"You're so polite. Does everyone in the capital dress like that?" Talia asked.

You know, honesty is always the best policy for heading off any unfortunate misunderstandings. "Yup! Everyone dresses like this in the capital."

"*Yuna!* Please don't tell my mother lies! She doesn't leave the elves' village much, so she might believe you. Mom, don't listen to her. No one was dressed like that at all except Yuna."

Well, there went my joke. Actually, plenty of people in Crimonia dressed like this because of the shop uniforms. It's not like no one dressed like this, you know?

"Oh, is that so? I thought it was adorable. That's too bad since I was going to make one for you, Luimin."

"I don't need one. It's too embarrassing!" Did she just say she doesn't want one? *And* that it'd be embarrassing? Wow. What was I, chopped liver?

"It's only cute," she added, "because Yuna is wearing it." That didn't feel like a compliment.

"Ha ha! Looks like you've brought an interesting friend home, Sanya. You must be tired from the long journey. We can chat more at the house."

Talia guided me to her house, Luimin walking happily beside her. She seemed happy to be back with her mom after not being home for a while. Sanya followed along after them. I would've figured she'd act a little more like Luimin, considering she hadn't seen her mom in a while either. But maybe she was too embarrassed to, given her age.

After walking for a while, we got to a slightly bigger house than the others. "It's a bit small," said Talia, "but please, make yourself at home."

Whew, way to throw the other houses under the bus.

Luimin opened the door and headed in first.

“I’m back!”

“Sis?” When we got in, a boy popped his head out from a back room. Or wait... *were* they a boy? It was his short hair, I guess. If he grew it out, though, he’d look rather effeminate.

“Lucca, I’m home!” said Luimin.

“Sister!” the elf called out and hustled over.

“Have you been good while you looked after the house? You didn’t give Mom any sass now, did you?”

“I’ve been very good!” Lucca happily hugged Luimin, who patted his head.

He seemed to be about seven or eight years old. I guess if he called Luimin his sister, he was Luimin and Sanya’s younger brother. He did look a lot like them.

Then Sanya said something unexpected. “Luimin, who is this?” she asked, looking at the young elf.

“This is our little brother, Lucca,” said Luimin.

Talia sighed and turned to face Sanya. “You haven’t been home since he was born, so you wouldn’t know about him.”

Sanya’s family had grown without her realizing. She definitely wouldn’t have known if she hadn’t come home a single time since Lucca was born.

“Wait a minute,” said Sanya. “You should have contacted me! Why didn’t you let me know?”

It was also kind of her fault for not coming home, though. When I really thought about it, I had to side with Talia on this one.

“I thought I could let you know once you were back,” said Talia, “but you never came home.”

Sanya sighed as if she’d given up. Lucca detached himself from Luimin and looked over at us. “There’s a bear and a stranger. Who are they?” he asked Luimin, looking a little

worried about these unfamiliar faces.

I had to be the bear... which meant that the stranger was Sanya. Sanya looked a little sad at that, but that's just what she got for not coming home for a whole entire decade.

"The girl who looks like a bear is Yuna," said Luimin. "I got to know her at the capital. And this is our older sister. Remember how I told you we have an older sister?"

"Older sister...?"

Sanya made her way over to Lucca and bent down so she was on eye level with him. "Um... hi, Lucca. Looks like this is the first time we're meeting. I'm Sanya. I'm Luimin's older sister, so that makes me your older sister too. I'd be happy if you could call me that."

Lucca looked a little worried with that explanation, but then he looked at Sanya and said, slightly embarrassed, "Big sister Sanya...?"

"Yeah!" Sanya seemed happy when she was called Lucca's big sister.

I wasn't jealous. If I went back to Crimonia, I had tons of kids who'd call me big sister. Man, I hoped Fina and the orphans were doing all right. Once night came around, I'd call up Fina on my bear phone and let her know we'd gotten to the village.

For now, I greeted Lucca too. "I'm Yuna. I know Sanya pretty well. Nice to meet you!"

"Uh-huh..." Lucca was embarrassed and hid behind Luimin. With the greetings over, Luimin showed me into a room further into the house.

"I never would've thought I'd come home to a little brother," said Sanya. "Lucca, how old are you?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Eight."

"Like I said, you haven't been back in ten years," Luimin quipped.

That was the evidence that cinched it. Nothing else could've better proven that she hadn't been home in way, way too long.

"Well, I suppose that means we've got our future head of the village. Thank goodness."

"You left because you didn't want to become the head, right?" Luimin asked.

Was that *really* why she left though?

"That wasn't the reason. I just wanted to see the outside world."

"So now that you've been away for ten years without one visit home, are you ever intending to come back?" Talia came over with a tray of drinks. Luimin went to help her and handed everyone a cup.

"Mother..." Sanya started.

"Well, what do you think? Isn't it about time you settled down to get married and have kids?"

"It's still too early for marriage. Besides, I'm quite happy with my work."

I heard that people who took that stance would lose their marriageable years, but elves live a while, so I guess that wouldn't be a problem.

"Are you going to make me wait for a few more decades, then?" Talia sighed as she held her cheek in her hand.

Decades?! Jeez, elves live for so long...

"You've got Lucca here. I don't need to have children anymore."

"That may be true, but I want to see grandchildren soon. If Lucca grows up like you, I'll have to wait *another* hundred years at this rate!"

Wow. Elves, man.

"You could marry him off earlier?" Sanya offered.

"Not a chance! I'm not handing him over to a bride for a while yet." Talia hugged Lucca. I had no idea what to even say; their perception of time was just on a completely different level.

"In that case, you've still got Luimin," Sanya said.

“Sister! Don’t pull me into this.”

“You think Luimin could get *married?*” said Talia.

“Ugh....! You’re so mean, Mom.”

“Um....! I’ll marry you, I guess?” Lucca offered.

Luimin laughed and hugged her little brother. “Thanks, Lucca, but siblings can’t get married. You’ll just have to marry Mom.”

“Parents can’t marry their children either!!!” Sanya shouted.

The whole family, Luimin included, were getting too silly, too fast. If Sanya wasn’t there, who’d rein them in? Then again, maybe their dad—wherever he was—served that role when Sanya wasn’t here.

CHAPTER 237

THE BEAR IMPOSES ON SANYA'S HOUSE

SOON ENOUGH, Sanya asked Talia about the reason why she had returned. "Is the barrier holding up?"

"Every once in a while, a monster gets through, but it should hold for now," said Tailia.

"But the barrier is weakening?"

"Yes. A few months ago, monsters started coming through the barrier. At first it was only one or two every few days, but recently, there's been more. Your grandfather determined that the barrier should be recast, and called for your return."

When I heard that the barrier was weakening, I thought that'd be a huge deal, but it didn't actually seem like an emergency. It sounded like I'd get a chance to relax and look around the village.

"No one's been hurt?" Sanya asked.

"Not so far. Arutul and the others have been patrolling the borders of the village in shifts. We've warned the children against venturing out though," Talia added, looking at Lucca.

If monsters could be about, they couldn't let the kids go out to play. Fina had been in danger when she'd wandered into the monster-filled forest for herbs too. I could understand why they'd want to keep defenseless children away from dangerous places.

"We'll have to recast the barrier quickly, then. Is there a set time for that?"

"Ask your grandfather directly tomorrow. He said we'd work out the details once you returned."

Was the barrier something they could so easily recast? In video games and manga, you usually had to gather a ton of items or do some side quests—that kind of stuff. This

seemed nothing like that.

Oh! Maybe they'd let me watch them make the barrier! Would it be a ritual? Some kind of magic? If this were a video game, there would be a *huge* magic circle and a whole dramatic scene to go with it. I'd come all the way here, so I might as well check it out. Then again, they'd kind of described it as some kind of secret elvish art... Maybe I wouldn't be allowed to see it.

"It was Yuna, wasn't it? It seems that my two daughters owe you quite a bit." Talia looked over at me.

"No, not at all," I lied.

"Yuna was such a big help," said Sanya. "If it wasn't for her, we'd never have made it back this quick, and it wouldn't have been such a comfortable trip either."

"It's true," Luimin added, "Yuna's bears are really fast."

It was true. If Kumayuru and Kumakyu weren't around, we wouldn't have been able to get here so quickly.

"Um... *bears*?" Lucca asked Luimin. Lucca was the only one who didn't know about them, after all.

"Yes, bears," said Talia. "I was confused too when my father-in-law said Labilata talked about Sanya and Luimin coming back riding on bears."

Fair enough. Hearing your own daughters had come back on top of bears would make at least one or two people second guess what they'd heard.

"But you two really *did* come in riding bears," Talia said. "With you dressed as a bear to boot, Yuna. It's been one surprise after another."

From behind her I could hear Lucca and Luimin talking: "I want to try riding them too." "Then go ask Yuna after this!"

Eh, I didn't mind if they asked. I didn't have a reason to say no, after all.

"I can't do anything big to thank you," said Talia, "but please stay at our house as long as you like."

I was happy for the offer, but I preferred setting up my own bear house. If I had a bear house, I could set up a bear transporter gate and use my bear phone to call Fina without worrying about any eavesdroppers. I wouldn't want it to stand out, so the outskirts of the village or somewhere deep in the forest would be ideal.

"Sanya, could I build a house?" I asked. "I'd like to put it somewhere it wouldn't stand out, if possible."

"Your own house, huh? I... suppose that would probably be fine, but you'd have to get permission from my grandfather."

Her grandfather—yeah, wasn't that the man I'd met earlier? Mumulute or something? Well, I suppose I *would* need permission from the head of the village for something like that.

"Well Yuna," said Sanya, "will you be coming with us to see grandfather tomorrow?"

"Is that okay? Don't you have important stuff to discuss?"

"It's fine. He's just informing us about things. Oh, and you can stay in my room for today."

"She can't!" Talia said abruptly.

"Why not?"

"...Because we turned it into a storage room."

"Why would you do that?!"

"You were gone for *ten years*. The bed is still there, though, so you'll be fine. I've put out new sheets, so you can at least sleep in it."

Talia gave her a smile... and Sanya leapt up and dashed off. From the back of the house, we heard Sanya let out a scream.

"Um, it's not that big," said Luimin, "but... you can sleep in my room?"

Sanya came back and tried to complain to Talia, but Talia responded coolly. "If you have complaints, why don't you come back at least once a year?"

"You know very well that I can't just come back like that."

"In that case, why don't you just stay put in the village? Yes, what a *splendid* idea!"

"Mother..." Sanya's shoulders drooped and she looked worn out. She probably could have made more frequent visits using my transporter gate, but that wasn't exactly a distance Sanya could travel at the drop of the hat. She was a guild master, after all.

As we were talking, I heard the door open. A slender male elf who looked like he was in his early twenties came into the room.

"Luimin, Sanya."

"Dad!" Luimin greeted him.

I knew it. If Lucca was the future head of the village, then they couldn't have had an older brother. Still, the whole family looked so weird together. They all just looked like brothers and sisters.

"Sanya!" said the father. "It's been a while."

Sanya nodded. "It's nice to be back home."

"Luimin, I'm glad you came back safely with Sanya."

"I told you I'd be fine!" Luimin answered, puffing out her chest proudly. I didn't butt in, but I sure wanted to, considering I knew what she'd been through just getting to the capital. She'd gotten lost in the capital, collapsed from hunger, had sold her precious bracelet, and a whole lot more—and that was just the stuff I knew about. She'd probably gone through even more hardships along the way.

Well, Sanya would fill him in if needed, so I stayed silent. Still, it was crazy just how proud Luimin was acting after having barely made it out fine at *all*.

"You haven't changed, Sanya."

"I'm not going to change very easily," said Sanya, "that's for sure."

“Regardless, it’s good having you back.”

Sanya leaned forward in her seat. “I heard the barrier weakened. How could I *not* come back?”

He put his hand on her head. Sanya swatted him away, embarrassed. Then he looked over at me. “This is the girl in the bear outfit who came in with you?”

“Yep. I’m Yuna, and I’m the one who accompanied Sanya,” I said, formally introducing myself.

As for him, his name was Arutul. Just like I thought, he was Sanya, Luimin, and Lucca’s father. And like everybody else, he looked so young that I would’ve been convinced that he was everyone else’s older brother.

“You really do look like a bear. When Labilata told me, I just laughed. It sounded ridiculous.” Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up at the bear. Not like I could really fight back on that, considering that I *was* dressed as a bear.

“I heard you noticed Labilata and his crew were tailing you? He was pretty annoyed,” said Arutul with a laugh. I couldn’t just tell him I did it with my detection skill.

“I noticed too, you know,” Sanya chimed in.

“Oh? You knew where they were? You knew how many of them there were?”

“Well...”

“I heard that the bear girl guessed their exact number and location, correct?”

Yeesh, I’d really dug myself into a hole with my detection skill. The more I opened my mouth, the more I wanted to stuff my foot in it.

“What can I say? Yuna’s just a brilliant adventurer.”

I wish she wouldn’t put me up on a pedestal like that. If I didn’t have my bear onesie, I wouldn’t do so well. Probably wouldn’t even hold up to the average girl.

“That was just my summons noticing stuff,” I said. “It wasn’t *me* or anything.” Back to my usual cover story, pretending that my detection skills were actually Kumayuru and

Kumakyu's skills.

"Now that you mention it," said Arutul, "someone did tell me you have bear summons."

"Oh, that's right!" said Sanya. "Your bear summons really are amazing!" She bought the... well, calling it a *lie* wasn't totally true. Kumayuru and Kumakyu could do just about the same things as me.

"Labilata has gotten a little too big for his boots lately," said Arutul, "so this will probably be good for him."

Unless he started to resent me...

"There isn't much to do around here, but I hope you can relax during your stay," Arutul said.

After that, I introduced my bears to Lucca. Lucca approached nervously at first, but he was happy when he got to stroke Kumayuru and Kumakyu's fur. He really started getting into it, even climbing up onto their backs! When Luimin saw him, she started playing with them too.

While they were doing that, I went to help Sanya clean her room. There were huge piles of stuff everywhere except on the bed. Yep, they'd totally made it into a storage room.

"I did my best to clean off the bed," Talia said proudly.

She was right—the *bed* was clean. But as for the rest of the room...

"You knew I was coming home. You should've cleaned the whole room..."

"Well, I *did* get you fresh sheets," said Talia, getting in the last word before shutting the door.

"Sorry, Yuna," said Sanya.

And so, Sanya and I ended up having to clean her room.

“Sanya, I made a small storehouse in the yard,” I told her.

“Thank you. That helps a lot.”

I started carrying the stuff in Sanya’s room to the storehouse. When Talia was there, she started bringing things from her room to store too. I guess it was fine—I’d made it for storage, after all. But it’d probably be full soon.

“Talia is... interesting,” I said.

“She’s been like that forever,” said Sanya. “I wish she had it more together. Oh, Yuna—that one’s mine, so it can stay here.”

I was putting the stuff in Sonya’s room into bear storage for the trip to the storehouse. We were steadily making progress cleaning the room. I did wonder what was in the boxes here, though. Tons and tons of stuff—even a few pots just kinda set haphazardly in one spot. I got the sense that the family had been putting all the junk they didn’t need into Sanya’s room. Eventually, I got all the junk into my bear storage and headed out for the storage room.

“I’m going to let my mother organize the storehouse, Yuna. You can leave things wherever you’d like.”

I took everything out and did just that, then returned to Sanya’s room. The room was squeaky clean.

“Thank you, Yuna. I can finally sleep in here now.” Sanya collapsed onto the bed.

I was originally going to sleep in Luimin’s room, but Lucca had claimed my spot, so I ended up bunking with Sanya.

CHAPTER 238

THE BEAR MEETS MUMULUTE, HEAD OF THE ELVES

THE NEXT MORNING, Sanya and I finished our breakfast and headed over to meet with Sanya's grandfather, the head of the village. Sanya was going to talk about the barrier; I just wanted permission to build my bear house.

The moment we went outside, people recognized Sanya and rushed over to us.

"Sanya, you're back! And this must be that girl who dresses as a bear?"

It'd be weird not to do anything if everyone was looking at me, so I gave them a slight nod.

"The black and white bears aren't around?" one of them said.

"The village head told me not to have them out and about," I said.

They seemed a little disappointed at that.

Greeting other villagers as we went, we finally reached Mumulute's house. It wasn't too far from Sanya's place and it was about as big, even though only her grandparents lived there.

Sanya opened the door and went inside without knocking. "We're here, Grandfather!"

I went in with her, but were we really supposed to barge in like that? There was no response, but Sanya just went further in. Is this how they do things in the countryside? I followed after her anyway.

Mumulute was in an inner room sitting cross-legged on a big rug. A female elf around the same age sat beside him. "Is that you, Sanya?" the other elf said. "And you're with the bear girl from yesterday?"

"I'm back, Grandmother," Sanya said.

Sanya called her "grandmother" but she didn't look old enough for that. No, she looked about the same age as Mumulute—forty-ish.

"Welcome back!" she said, looking overjoyed to see Sanya. "And I guess there wouldn't be any other bear girl here, hmm?"

"I'm Yuna." I offered a small bow in greeting.

"I am Vena. Goodness me, you really *do* look like a bear. I'll go make us some tea." The yes-really-a-grandmother-somehow grandmother stood up and headed to another inner room.

"So, why are you with the bear girl?" asked Mumulute.

I explained why I'd come to meet Mumulute.

"Ah. You're going to live in the village?" he asked.

"Yuna has travel homes," said Sanya. "It looks like she wants to build one here."

I did—temporarily, at least.

"Did you not care for Sanya's home?"

"Some things are just more convenient with my own place."

I hadn't found a good time to use my bear phone yesterday, so I hadn't been able to contact Fina. Honestly, I couldn't even really relax without my own home. "The edge of the village, or even at the outskirts within the barrier would be fine. Would you let me set one up?"

Mumulute rubbed his chin thoughtfully. I really hoped he went with the outskirts of the barrier instead of inside the village.

"Yuna looks a bit unusual, but she's a really good kid. She's helped me several times, and Luimin too. I can vouch for her," said Sanya. "I'll even take responsibility if she stirs up trouble in the village."

I was honestly glad that she trusted me. No way would I want to cause trouble for Sanya or the elves here.

“Why stay here, Miss?” Mumulute asked.

“She says she wants to know how we elves live.”

“A curious girl with even more curious tastes...”

“But... there’s one thing I should warn you about,” said Sanya.

“A warning?” The look in Mumulute’s eyes shifted.



Uh. Say what? I gave her an intense, *please-don't-say-anything-too-weird* look, but I didn't get through to her.

"Yuna is a collection of absurdities. You'll always be surprised by her," Sanya told Mumulute with a smile.

A... collection of absurdities? I wasn't *that* weird, was I? Then I thought about it, and... uh. Well. Okay, yeah, I could see it.

"Absurdities..." Mumulute repeated. "I'll need to keep an eye on that." He looked me over. "All right. You can build your house wherever you please."

"Thank you very much." There we go! Somehow I'd managed to get permission to set up my bear house. People were probably gonna treat me like a weirdo after Sanya said that, but at least I had permission. "Where would be a good place to set it up?"

"So long as you do not disturb the neighbors, you may build it anywhere you like," said Mumulute.

"I won't bother anybody!" That was all I wanted to talk about, so I got ready to leave.

Mumulute stopped me. "We're already preparing tea for you. I'd also like to hear what Sanya has been up to in the capital. The meeting shouldn't take too long. Won't you stay?"

"You don't mind me being around for the whole barrier thing?"

"It's fine. Even if you listen to our discussion, you won't understand it."

Was he calling me stupid? Or maybe he was saying I wouldn't get it because it would all be too elf-y. Eh... if I could stay put, why not? It'd be nice to know more about the barrier or what was happening in the village, even if I didn't understand it all. Information is valuable.

Sanya's somehow-really-a-grandmother grandmother came back with tea and fruit; I snacked while listening to their talk.

"Wel thanne, Sanya, howe muche hath ye heard?"

"Juste what Luimin and thine mother hath fpoke of unto me."

Huh? They started talking, but I could barely understand what they were saying. I swear I've been cleaning my ears. I shook my head, as if it'd help at all.

"Aye, I fee, few knoweth of thif, but maniereall a monfter have entered the barrier."

"*Really?!*" Sanya exclaimed.

Okay, okay: I was starting to figure it out. (Still... maybe I'd clean my ears when I got back home.) But for real, this sounded way different compared to what Talia had said earlier...

"Yes. That's why Labilata and the others have been patrolling the village's borders. They were guarding you when you returned home as well."

Oh, so they hadn't been following us because I was suspicious...! In that case, I felt bad for telling them I was uncomfortable with them tailing us. Okay, sure—it was Sanya who'd said that, but I'd certainly *wanted* to tell them off.

"Is the situation really that dire?" Sanya asked.

"Indeed. The barrier is unraveling ever more, and the monsters are steadily increasing in their number."

Yeah, that sounded dire all right.

"So, you want to recast the barrier," Sanya said.

Mumulute shook his head. "At first, we thought we could recast the barrier, but... that is no longer the case."

"What do you mean?"

"The sacred tree that acts at the source of the barrier's magic is infected with a parasitic plant."

"A parasite?! In the *sacred tree*?!"

Sacred tree? What was that? Now *that* was a good fantasy name—perfect for a game or manga. And now a parasite had infected this sacred tree?

Actually, I remembered parasitic plant monsters from back in my game. They'd infect the trees in a forest and absorb their nutrients in order to grow. Since they wrapped around the trees like vines, it was hard to tell which trees were infected. Then, when people, animals, or monsters got too close to the parasite, it would ensnare them using its vines to prey on them.

"Lower your voice," Mumulute warned Sanya.

"Sorry... But is that true?"

"We sent Luimin to retrieve you as soon as we realized it. It's probably been infected for some time. We simply hadn't realized."

"Where did the parasite come from?"

"It could've been as simple as a bird carrying an infected seed to the wrong place. No matter the origin, it is infected regardless."

"True. So even you and Father couldn't defeat it?"

"If we had noticed earlier, Arutul and I could have dealt with it together. We were too late, though, and the parasite had grown. I had originally assumed that the barrier was merely coming apart. I hadn't realized that the sacred tree was relevant at all."

"But surely you checked on it."

"At the time, it hadn't seemed altered by any infection. I thought we had enough time to wait for your arrival. But shortly after Luimin left, the number of monsters coming into the village rose by the day. At that point, we checked on the sacred tree once more."

"And by that time, the parasitic plant..."

"We were already too late."

"I understand now. So, what do we do now? We can't recast the barrier and if we can't take out the parasite, the village will be in trouble."

"We will dispel the barrier. Then those who can fight from the village will go to kill the parasite," Mumulute said firmly.

"I had no idea things had fallen apart so completely..." Sanya said.

Neither had I. Then again, who could? "You only found out after Luimin left, so that was why she wasn't shaken up by the situation," I said. If they'd known how bad things were, they probably wouldn't have sent Luimin out in the first place...

"I thought it would prove a useful experience for Luimin at the time," Mumulute said.

"She had experiences both good and bad, without a doubt," said Sanya.

Yeah, had to agree there. Sanya hadn't mentioned the bracelet to her parents or Mumulute. She was a good sister.

But what was with this sacred tree thing? Based on the name, it seemed kind of legendary. Guess it wouldn't hurt to ask? "Hey Sanya, what's the sacred tree?"

"It's a large tree that protects the elves. It possesses an immense amount of mana that we borrow to make the barrier that protects the entire forest from monsters."

"I see." A big tree full of mana—sounded legendary all right. "But why dispel the barrier?"

"There's a separate barrier that protects the sacred tree. The barrier protecting the village and the forest keeps out monsters. The barrier around the sacred tree keeps out people. My grandfather, my father, and I are the only people who can enter that barrier around the sacred..." He trailed off.

In other words, there were two barriers, and only three people could enter the barrier that protected the sacred tree. I finally got what they were talking about.

"Wait a minute." Sanya was staring at me in shock; actually, Mumulute was too.

"Yuna, you... you understand what my grandfather and I are saying?"

"I do. Why wouldn't I, huh?" What was she trying to imply? What, did they think I was a dumb little kid who wouldn't get what they were talking about?

"Miss, you can understand Elvish?" Mumulute asked.

Elvish? As in the language of the elves?

Based on their shocked expressions, had they been... speaking *Elvish*?! I guess it had something to do with my fantasy world language skill. Now I understood Elvish, huh? Another big mistake. At this point, lying and pretending not to understand wouldn't do a thing.

"Yeah, sorry for not saying anything earlier."

"No, I just never would've thought you knew Elvish. We speak the common tongue in the village, but we use Elvish when we talk of things we don't want outsiders to hear," said Sanya.

"I apologize for assuming you wouldn't understand," Mumulute said. "Few outsiders understand Elvish, you see."

"Even so, I didn't think that you could understand Elvish," Sanya repeated.

Yup, neither did I. I hadn't even known that Elvish *existed* till now. Still, I guess this is what Mumulute had meant when he said I wouldn't understand earlier. He didn't think I was a dumb kid after all. "Should I step out for a moment?"

"No, that's all right. I just hadn't wanted to worry you after you had come from so far away. I wanted you to be able to go back to the village to enjoy yourself as Sanya's friend."

His courteousness made me feel bad. I'd ruined his kindness with my language skill.

"So can you kill the parasitic plant?" I asked.

"If the entire village comes together, I think we can. It would be best if we could destroy the mana gem at its core—that would be the fastest way."

You could also kill the parasitic plants in the game if you destroyed their core. I guess that was where the mana gem was located? In the game, you'd still get a mana gem even if you destroyed a plant's core, so I'd figured it was more like their heart.

But it was difficult to locate the core mana gem in the game. It'd be hidden within the vines, and it was even more difficult if it was located way up high. That's why the easiest way to take out a parasitic plant in the game was burning it with its host... which wasn't an option this time, unless we *wanted* to destroy the sacred tree. And that would've totally erased the point!

It'd be hard, but I was sure that the elves could band together, fight the parasite, and find that core—or rather, the mana gem.

"Well, Grandfather, when would you like the barrier to be dispelled?"

"The sooner the better, but I'd like you to take a look at it first."

Sanya nodded. "Understood."

I wanted to see the sacred tree too—even if they wouldn't let me come close, maybe I could see it from a distance...? But that was probably out of the question. I didn't want to put them on the spot, so I didn't bother to ask.

Mumulute finished his tea and slowly shifted his gaze to me.

"Now, then... girl of bears, how has Sanya fared at the royal capital? Is she working hard?"

"*Grandfather?!*" Sanya seemed surprised at that, but the whole reason he'd asked me to stay was so he could ask me how Sanya was doing at the capital.

"Do we have time for this?" Sanya asked. She was clearly trying to get out of the conversation. Admittedly, we *did* have more urgent things to discuss than Sanya's escapades at the capital.

"Arutul shall join us later. Until then, we can talk. After all, it would be far too dangerous for the two of us to go alone."

"My father? He never mentioned he would be coming."

"He had a quick errand to take care of, but he shall be along shortly."

Just as Mumulute asked, I ended up talking about Sanya and how she'd been doing at the capital until Arutul arrived. Sanya shouted for me to "stop already!" so many times that I lost track. Fair enough, to be honest—I mean, it's embarrassing to be the topic of conversation. Still, it's not like I said anything weird! I only talked about the cool stuff Sanya did.

Arutul arrived shortly after we finished lunch, and it was a *delicious* lunch—a mushroom soup paired with wild edible plants. I really would've loved to make tempura with the plants, and putting mushrooms on pizza would have been perfect to expand my cooking repertoire.

But real talk: gathering random mushrooms and plants in the wild would be dangerous for the average person, even if I really wanted them...

CHAPTER 239

THE BEAR PLAYS WITH THE VILLAGE'S ELVEN CHILDREN

YOU KNOW, I never would've expected that my fantasy world language skill could translate Elvish. I didn't know how many languages there were in this world, but that probably meant I could also understand other races' languages. Pretty convenient! I wouldn't be able to communicate if I couldn't understand the language, after all.

Still, I was glad that I couldn't understand monsters or animals. If I could, I probably couldn't make myself fight them.

After the talks were over, I left Mumulute's house.

"It makes me anxious to leave you on your own, Yuna," said Sanya, "so don't stir up any trouble." *Seriously?* A moment ago she'd just said that she trusted me in front of Mumulute!

I never cause a scene on purpose. In fact, trouble just seems to come my way, so what could I even do to stop it? Honestly, I wanted to just tell her that. Maybe *she* should do something to stop anyone from causing *me* trouble!!!

Sanya headed off with Mumulute and Arutul to check on the sacred tree. I headed my own way to look for a place to set up my bear house.

Hmm... what to do? They said I could set it up anywhere, but putting the house in the village would probably just draw crowds. Yeah, it'd be better to keep it outside the village. I could ask Luimin for suggestions for a place that wouldn't stand out.

While I paced and thought about it, I came across Luimin and Lucca, both surrounded by elven kids. The second the kids noticed me, their eyes started sparkling. The children gathered around me.

I had a bad feeling about this. “Uh, Luimin? What’s going on...?”

Luimin looked like I’d put her on the spot. “Sorry, Yuna,” she said, and explained...

Lucca was playing with the other kids.

Lucca told them about Kumayuru and Kumakyu. He told them all about how nice it was to pet them, how soft their fur was, and how gentle and cute they were.

Even Luimin joined in on the conversation.

The kids got it in their heads that they wanted to meet Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

I showed up.

The children surrounded me. (Which brings us to now.)

Jeez, what were Sanya’s siblings even doing?! I guess it was better than them telling people my bears were dangerous or scary or whatever. Still, they also weren’t doing me any favors by going in the other direction and overhyping my bears.

The children pleaded with me to show them the bears, and who could say no with those puppy-dog eyes?

Eh—the house could wait. “Mumulute told me not to summon them in the village, so I can’t do this for long. Got it?” I’d be in trouble if we caused a huge scene, so I made them agree to that first. “And don’t do anything the bears wouldn’t like.”

There was a chance some of them would pull on my bears’ fur or hit them. I’d feel bad subjecting my bears to that, so that was another thing I got them to promise.

“It’s okay!” said Luimin. “I’ll be watching them.”

I put my faith in her and summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu. We got a lot of reactions: some of the kids shouted with joy, but others were so surprised that they hid behind Luimin’s back. No matter the reaction, Luimin took care of them all.

The children happily patted Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Man... no matter where they went, my bears were always all the rage, huh?

But some of the kids were more curious about me than the bears. "Miss, why do you dress like a bear?" one of the kids asked with the purest look in her eyes. It was nothing like the adults who'd gawk at my outfit.

"I've got the divine blessing of the bears." Which wasn't a lie... though you could say it was more of a curse than a blessing.

"Can I be blessed by bears too?"

"I... don't think so. Elves are already blessed by the wind."

"I think bears are better than wind!"

This was bad. If this girl went home and told their parents, "I don't want the wind blessing, I want the bear blessing!" that could cause a real mess. Things *might* end up fine if it ended there, but what if her parents came asking how to get a bear blessing? No thanks.

"The wind blessing is important to elves," I said carefully, "so you shouldn't say that. Wouldn't it be bad if everyone else had the wind blessing and you were the only one who didn't? Plus, you'd have to dress like this if you had the bear blessing, even when you grow up. What would you think if your parents dressed like me?"

I did everything I could to persuade her. With each sentence, I felt like my HP was being chipped away bit by bit. Here I was, saying stuff that ran counter to my entire existence. What a bummer.

Still, I was so relieved when that all paid off. "Okay! I'll work really hard to get the wind blessing."

I'd almost broken myself doing it, but I'd successfully protected this girl's future.

After that, just as promised, they let me recall Kumayuru and Kumakyu before it caused problems. The kids were disappointed, but a promise was a promise.

I was about to search for a place to establish my bear house, but Luimin and the others said they wanted to show me around the village as a thank you. I couldn't just turn them down, so I accepted. The kids tagged along as we walked around the village. There were fields for crops, but...

"There aren't any shops?"

"We can manage," said Luimin. "Sometimes we buy things from the merchants who come through or we go to the town when we need something."

A small stream flowed through the village, serving as a play area for the kids. The kids practically jumped in the very moment we got to it. When I got closer to the water, they started splashing me too.

"Ah, don't do that to Yuna!" Luimin warned them. But it was fine—my bear onesie was water resistant.

After that, Luimin and the kids guided me around the village.

I didn't end up having time to set up my own house because I'd played with the kids, so I went back to Luimin's place. Luimin and Lucca headed over to Talia's. Since I was going to stay here for one more day, I went to Sanya's room.

Sanya was back from checking on the sacred tree. "Welcome back!"

"Sanya, you're done already?"

"We were only checking on it." Still, Sanya seemed off somehow...

"How does it look? Do you think it'll turn out okay?"

"It was just as my grandfather described, but the situation is worse than I expected."

"What did it look like?"

"I tried cutting off one of the parasite vines as a test, but it regenerated at once. It'd be best if we could find the mana gem, but the sacred tree is vast and the parasite has grown gigantic from its power. I'm afraid we'll need to assemble people to fight it off

just as my grandfather said.”

I guess it wouldn’t be simple after all.

“The moment I saw the parasite,” said Sanya, “I wanted to burn it to a crisp, but we can’t. The sacred tree would turn to ashes too.”

Ack. So you couldn’t just deal with it like I’d dealt with them back in the game.

“Also, we’re not that adept at fire magic,” Sanya added. “We probably couldn’t set it on fire, even if we wanted to.”

I knew that wind magic was their forte since they were elves, but I hadn’t known about them being bad at fire magic. “Do you guys need a hand, then?”

“You?”

“I can get in if you take the barrier down, right?” Admittedly, I also wanted to check out that sacred tree.

“I know you’d be a big help, but I can’t just ask you on my own though. There are probably people who wouldn’t like that. They don’t know how powerful you are, either, which complicates things even more.”

Well, I *was* an outsider... and I couldn’t blame them for not having a ton of faith in a girl wearing a bear onesie. “Still, just let me know if you need help.”

“Thank you. I’ll ask when the time comes. Oh, where did you set up your house?”

I filled her in about what had happened after we separated.

She laughed. “The kids got to you, huh? You *do* look pretty unusual to everyone.”

I mean... if there were a place where it *wouldn’t* look unusual, I’d sure like to know.

CHAPTER 240

THE BEAR BUILDS A BEAR HOUSE

THE NEXT DAY, I left to find a place for my bear house. I hadn't had an opportunity the day before since I'd been distracted by the village children. Luimin and Lucca originally wanted to go with me, but Talia needed help with something.

Sanya headed to Mumulute's house to discuss the situation with him and Arutul. Personnel, strategy, timing—there was a lot to go over, and they needed to decide just how much to tell the other villagers.

"But, my grandfather and father were already discussing things before I got here," she told me before she left, "so it hasn't been that much work so far."

I left the village, careful not to be spotted by the kids. A bear house would stand out inside the village, after all, so I was thinking of making one outside it. Even if things weren't the same as yesterday, the kids would probably gather if they saw a bear house in the village. Plus, Mumulute had given me permission to build it wherever I wanted.

For a while, I wandered the woods to find a good spot. Let's see... I wanted somewhere sunny, out of the way, and inside the barrier. If I could find somewhere that included all three of those, it'd be perfect.

Eventually I came to the river—a pretty nice river, if I do say so myself. I walked along its banks, humming a tune, listening to the babbling water as I headed upstream.

But then I had a problem on my hands. I'd wanted to make sure there weren't any monsters nearby, so I'd used my detection skill... but instead of monsters, I realized that someone was tailing me. But why? I thought they didn't think I was suspicious. Or... were they acting as a guard for me?

It would've been easy to run and shake them off, but then I'd seem *really* suspicious.

Hmm, what to do? I couldn't come up with anything, so I just kept walking upstream. There was also a waterfall on the way, so I jumped up the cliffs near it like a ninja.

Atop the waterfall, a beautiful field of flowers spread out before me—now we're talking! I could see the village from the top of the waterfall. It wouldn't take much time to get back from here if I ran. This place was a bit removed from the village, and it'd be difficult to spot from below.

The problem was that elf that was following behind me. I checked my detection skill again—they'd already climbed the cliff behind the trees.

And they'd hidden behind one of the trees up there.

Hmm, what should I do? After thinking it over, I decided to talk things out. It'd be bad for me if I just pulled out the bear house and scared them—they might end up going back to the village and report weird stuff about me.

"Excuse me, you there, behind that tree—could you come out?" I called out but I didn't get a response. I probably would've seemed weird to anyone watching. I mean, there I was: a girl in a bear onesie talking to a tree. What an image. "Excuse me?" I repeated.

After waiting a few seconds, a male elf stepped out from behind the tree. Oh, wow—it was the elf who'd been tailing us when we got to the elves' village. The name was Labilata, right?

Labilata slowly walked over. Wait, was he angry? He looked like he was scowling. "How long have you known?"

From the moment I used my detection skill—but I couldn't just say that. I was about to say that Kumayuru had sensed him, but nope—my bears weren't here. Ugh, another mistake. I'd been slipping up a lot lately.

"Speak up! Just what are you, really?" Labilata demanded.

I'd be in trouble no matter how I replied, but then I remembered there was one thing I could say. "I'm an adventurer." That was the only answer I could give.

"Then what are you doing here?" Maybe he was suspicious of me since I was wandering through the forest on my own.

"I got permission from Mumulute to build a house, so I was just searching for a good location."

"Build a *house*!?"

Well, I guess it didn't make much sense when put like that. I decided to tell him the truth. "It's a sort of special house, so it'd attract eyes around the village. That's why I'm looking for a good location for it."

I could have lied, but I'd received permission from Mumulute, so there shouldn't have been a problem. Besides, Labilata and the others would find it eventually as they patrolled the forest, so I was planning on telling Mumulute the location anyway.

"So I was thinking of building the house here," I said. "Is that okay?" I just wanted to be 100 percent sure. After all, there was a chance this place was special to the elves. It had beautiful flowers and a great view, after all.

"Right here? It's not really a problem, but are you really going to build a house *here*?"

"This area is within the barrier, right?"

"That's right. You know about the barrier already?"

"Which part? Like the fact that it's weakening?"

"Precisely. Monsters will appear even inside the barrier. I'd rather not have guests stay this far outside of town. If you were a bit closer to the village, you'd be safer since there are more people around."

I guess he was just worried about me. Now I felt bad for assuming he didn't trust me.
"It's all right. My house is special."

I pulled a bear house out of my bear storage—there it was, a two-story house shaped like a bear appearing right in front of Labilata. It was complete with a living room, kitchen, and bath. There was even a storehouse where Fina could harvest monster parts whenever she had to.

"Wh-what's *that*!?" Labilata looked absolutely confounded.

"This is my house. This would stand out in the village, right? That's why I was looking

for a place where people wouldn't spot it."

"Why is it shaped like a *bear*?!"

That was the question on everyone's minds when they saw the bear house. Most people would realize the answer as soon as they saw me, but Labilata still asked me that question point blank. I *wanted* to just say "no comment," but...

"Because I've got the bear's blessing." That was the same response I'd given the kids yesterday when they'd asked about my clothes, so I just recycled it for the bear house. Pretty convenient.

"The bear's blessing...?" Labilata looked back and forth between the house and me, then seemed to come to some understanding. He didn't press any further.

The bear's blessing—it was convenient when people would just accept that as an answer, but I still wasn't sure how I felt about that. I thought for a moment, then summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu. "Besides, you don't have to worry. I've got these guys."

Labilata looked at the bears, shocked once again. "Your bear summons? Are they strong?"

"They are! And they let me know if monsters are near, so I'm safe."

Labilata looked from the bear house to Kumayuru and Kumakyu and finally to me. Then he laughed. "I can't believe what an odd person Sanya brought to us."

It was my first time seeing him smile.

"All right," he said. "As long as you have the head's permission. But I'll just warn you, we elves cannot be responsible if anything happens to you."

I was the one setting up house far away from the village, so I was planning on taking responsibility for myself. It wasn't like I'd blame the elves if I was attacked by monsters. "I'm fine with that. I'm not going to blame you, no matter what happens."

Labilata seemed satisfied. He looked over at the village. "Come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself. I am Labilata. Right now, I patrol the confines of the barrier. Let me know if any monsters appear—I will deal with them straight away."

Seemed like he'd taken a liking to me, even after all of that. "I'm Yuna. Thank you for watching over me."

I knew his name from Sanya, but we each introduced ourselves anyway.

CHAPTER 241

THE BEAR CALLS FINA

RIGHT WHEN Labilata was headed home, Kumayuru and Kumakyu raised their heads a little. “Cwoom...”

What's up, guys? I turned my gaze to where my bears were looking. There were black dots in the sky. Were they moving? Were they birds? But if Kumayuru and Kumakyu were reacting to them... were they *monsters*?!

I used my detection skill. There were monster signals—volkrows, bird monsters larger than eagles. They were quick monsters, too—it looked like there were ten of them.

“What is it?” Labilata asked, noticing how strangely I was acting.

“Monsters are coming.” I pointed at them.

Labilata shifted his attention, looking to where I was pointing. “That’s Mt. Orval. Wait, are those volkrows?!”

So the volkrows were flying from a mountain? I guess that was where they normally roosted. “Shouldn’t the barrier help?!”

“At this range, they’re already inside of it.”

The volkrows were already close enough that I could even make out their characteristic red beaks. In the game, their beaks contained a paralyzing poison—they were a huge pain.

Labilata stared down the volkrows. “Take shelter!”

“Are you sure they’ll attack?” Maybe they’d fly in a different direction.

“Those things attack elves, so you need to get back.”

Just like Labilata said, the volkrows were gliding closer—picking up speed, even. Labilata readied himself to meet the volkrows. I moved behind him to cover his back. It wasn't like I was going to make a break for it just because monsters had shown up, but I also didn't want to get in Labilata's way.

Labilata attacked the approaching volkrows with a blade of wind, but the close-flying volkrows opened their formation and dodge. From there, they swooped down on us from all four directions.

"Don't worry about me!" I yelled, getting ready to deal with some nearby volkrows.

Labilata glanced at me. "Got it!"

I fired off some wind blades at the volkrows near me just like Labilata had. They tried to dodge, but my blades were closer and quicker than what Labilata had cast—they didn't have time to dodge *these* babies!

My wind blade sliced a volkrow's body right in half, killing it instantly. I took the other approaching volkrows down, one by one.

Labilata was taking down his fair share of volkrows, but a few had escaped. He fired off another wind blade, but it didn't reach them in time. "Damn!" Labilata snarled at the fleeing volkrows. He relaxed his stance, then, and looked over at me. "Thanks. You have my gratitude for slaying those volkrows."

"But a few of them got away."

"It's fine. There are other people patrolling," he said. "They'll be able to handle volkrows as long as they're not taken by surprise."

True—if you could hit a volkrows, you could take one down. They were a pain for anyone who couldn't use magic, but elves wouldn't have that kind of problem.

"I'll head back to the village to report on this," Labilata told me. "What will you do?"

"I'll stay here."

"Understood. But please, come to the village if anything happens." With that, Labilata nimbly headed down the waterfall, ran off toward the village, and vanished into the forest.

He'd left me and my bears behind... plus the seven volkrows on the ground. Could I sell these? Actually, was I even allowed to take these? For now, I'd put them in my bear storage. If they told me to hand them over later, I would.

I transformed Kumayuru and Kumakyu into their cub forms, then we headed into the bear house. Yep, home is where the heart is!

When I sat on the sofa, my bears hopped up to either side of me and curled up. This was their usual spot when no one else was around. I took a quick break, then pulled out my bear phone to call Fina. She'd probably be at home around now, or maybe helping Tiermina out at the orphanage.

Fina didn't pick up for a while. I told her not to answer while people were around, so maybe there was someone close to her? The moment I was about to hang up, I heard Fina's voice from the bear phone.

"Is that you, Yuna?"

I could hardly believe it—we were so far away, and I'd still managed to get through! Well, guess that made sense for an OP item gifted by a god. My original world had satellite phones, so we could pretty much take a call from anywhere... but how did the bear phone work? Very mysterious.

"Is right now a good time?"

"Uh-huh, now works perfectly! We just finished cleaning and doing laundry, so I was just about to take a break."

I guess she was helping around the house today. What a good kid. "Nothing strange going on over there?"

"No, it's been fine. Is everything okay with you, Yuna?"

"We got to the elves' village in one piece," I said.

"That's good. I'd like to go there sometime too."

"Oh, then you want to stop by?" She could come right away with the bear transporter

gate.

"Sanya would be shocked if I suddenly showed up..."

She had a point. I could bring her with me next time, though I'd need to set up a gate somewhere. "Sounds like you don't have a lot going on, then?"

"Nope... oh!" It sounded like Fina had remembered something.

"What is it? Did something happen?"

"Well, Uncle Zelef and Ellelaura came by. It was a little after you left."

"Zelef and Ellelaura?" I understood why Ellelaura would come by, seeing as how her husband governed the town, but why Zelef? "Did they need something from me?" That's the only reason I could think of for a visit.



"They wanted to meet with you as well, but I think they came to see your shops."

"My shops?"

"Yeah, they said something about an inspection...? Ah, and they ate at the Bear's Lounge and the Bear Dining Room."

Ah, right, they'd said at one point that they wanted to see my shops in Crimonia, so I guess they'd finally made the trip. "What did they say?"

"They said it was really yummy!"

Well, it was Morin's bread, after all, and Nerin had worked her butt off to learn how to make those cakes. Plus, the kids were working their hardest to help. Anz's cooking was to die for, too. As always, everything at my shops tasted *amazing*.

"Then they looked at the bear dolls decorating the shop and laughed."

Rude! The place was called the *Bear's Lounge*, so there had to be *bears*. Besides, they were popular with the guests, and I'd heard a lot of people wanted to take the decorations home with them. "Was everyone surprised when Zelef and Ellelaura showed up?"

"Yeah, mom was."

"How about everyone else?"

"Lady Ellelaura told us to not tell anyone that she's a noble, so only Mom, Shuri, and I knew. I think she wanted to see how the shops normally run."

"Were you okay?"

"I was surprised, but not as much as Mom was."

I guess Fina was slowly getting used to nobles? She used to be a nervous wreck around them. Then again, she'd been hanging out with Noa more lately, and she went to Misa's birthday party, so I guess she was toughening up. But Tiermina hadn't had much contact with nobles, so meeting one must've been a real surprise.

"So, they just showed up out of nowhere? They could have at least let us know ahead

of time."

"I think they were trying to surprise you."

Well, yeah, I'm sure I would've been surprised if they'd randomly shown up. I had mixed feelings about this. I would have liked to see them, but they didn't have to make it a *surprise*.

"They seemed disappointed."

I could imagine Elleaura looking disappointed. I wondered if she'd mention it next time we saw each other.

"Did they go home?" I asked.

"Yes, they were here for two days, but they had to go back to the capital right away."

I guess they really *had* come to just see my shops.

"They told me to say 'hi' for them!"

"And there's been nothing unusual besides that?"

Fina thought for a moment. *"Umm... nothing in particular after that."*

We chatted for a while longer, then hung up. I wish Fina had let me know about them showing up... but then again, I wouldn't have been able to do anything in the first place if she'd called me earlier. I couldn't just use my bear phone in front of Sanya and Luimin; and returning to Crimonia would be completely out of the question. Besides, even if I'd been able to use the bear phone in secret, it would have been awkward to just give instructions to Fina.

Maybe things had turned out for the best.

CHAPTER 242

THE BEAR ASSISTS WITH MONSTER SLAYING

AFTER BEING WOKEN UP by my bears' paw-pat attack, I got up and headed out to the village. I came across three volkrows on the way, and handled things quickly—I didn't want them to attack the kids or something.

If these monsters were getting inside the barrier, then I guess it really wasn't doing its job. But what exactly did it mean that the barrier was weakening?

In games and manga, stuff like this went down in a few different ways: if the barrier was like fabric, the barrier getting weaker meant the stitches were coming loose and small monsters were slipping through the seams.

Another scenario was that a section of the barrier was weakening, letting monsters through. Not that knowing would help me one way or the other, but what can I say? I was a curious earthling who wanted to know how this fantasy-ish world worked!

When I got to the village, lost in thought, I found that something was going on—but *what*? I tried listening in on conversations. What I gathered from eavesdropping was that monsters had gotten in and were near the village. I'd slain some volkrows as I was coming into town, but this seemed like something else.

This wasn't going to affect me, was it? That was another kinda fantasy trope—one where somebody arrives from out of town and all sorts of strange things start happening. Then, the blame for things gets pinned on them. I'd have a problem on my hands if they started thinking the monsters *only* started coming in when the bears arrived or that the barrier started weakening because there were bears in town.

As I tortured myself with those thoughts, the kids and adults greeted me like usual. Guess I'd been worried for nothing. While I walked around pondering over manga and novel tropes, I spotted Sanya and Labilata.

"Good morning, Sanya," I said.

"Yuna, good morning!" she replied.

"Where are you headed?"

"Monsters have gotten in and they're approaching the village. Those who can fight have been called to my grandfather's house."

"Is it okay if I come too?" I could help out with monster slaying. The people here would like that, and that'd be pretty handy

"I'm not sure we can ask a guest to assist us..." said Sanya.

Labilata shook his head. "I don't mind."

They seemed split.

"We should take Yuna's help," Labilata insisted.

"*Really*, Labilata?" Sanya looked surprised. "But what about the others?"

"I know you don't want to ask a guest for help, but now is not the time to worry about that. If the head or anyone else says something about it, I'll be the one to answer for it."

"It seems you think quite highly of Yuna..."

"I do. We fought together yesterday. Oh, and we should make use of Yuna's bears too! They can detect monsters."

Sanya didn't seem fully convinced. She looked between Labilata and me, contemplating things. "Well, Yuna," Sanya said at last, "we'd appreciate the help."

Of course, I had my response ready from the start. "Sounds like a plan."

"Thank you, Yuna," Sanya said.

After Sanya and Labilata accepted my assistance, we went together to Mumulute's house. I had no problem helping out with slaying monsters like volkrows. It'd be a disaster if Lucca or any of the kids got attacked, after all.

We arrived at Mumulute's house then headed to a room inside. There were several other elves visiting the head.

When Mumulute saw me, he turned to Sanya. “Why is our guest here?”

“I invited her,” said Labilata.

“Labilata?”

“I believe we should borrow Yuna’s talents. With her bears’ abilities, we’ll know when monsters are approaching the village.”

The surrounding elves were appalled at that. I could hear them murmuring: “That’s quite unnecessary...” and “Are forcing even a *guest* to help us out...?”

“This is a problem for the elves,” said Mumulute, “and the elves alone shall deal with it.”

“A fine sentiment, but could you live with those words once children fall victim to these beasts? This isn’t some childhood game. We aren’t talking about playground bruises or skinned knees. If the worst were to happen, those children would die.”

At that, Mumulute and the other elves fell silent.

“I understand what you are saying,” said Mumulute after a moment. “But... is she satisfied with this? We can’t offer you a large reward.”

“I don’t need a reward,” I told him. “Sanya’s done so much for me already. If I can help with anything at all, I’d like to.”

To be honest, I wanted *tons* of stuff—a tour of the sacred tree, a permanent bear house, and the secret to making those generational Elvish bracelets, just for starters. But for now, I had to tough it out. Also, it’d be better to ask after things were settled and I’d proven myself useful.

Look, there’s nothing unfair about it: it’s a negotiation tactic. If they said no, I wouldn’t press any further.

“I see,” said the head. “That will be of great help. After Labilata reported back to me yesterday, I had pondered over what aid your bears could be.” Wait? So they just wanted to borrow my bears and their detection ability and not *me*? Mumulute was their head, so the other elves followed his lead.

"With all of you now gathered, we shall now speak of these grim events in our village," said Mumulute, and began to explain the situation. "A parasitic plant has infected the sacred tree, weakening the barrier. Therefore, monsters are entering through the barrier."

"But there have never been so many monsters before," one of the elves responded. "Not even outside the barrier!"

"We believe they are being drawn to the sacred tree. If the parasite fully overwhelms our tree, still more monsters will gather. Should this come to pass, the village will be in even greater danger."

There was quite a commotion after Mumulute finished his explanation.

"Everyone will assist with slaying the parasite!" he shouted over the clamor, "as that is the source of our problems. To do so, we will first dismantle the barrier around the sacred tree. Prior to that, we shall eliminate the monsters that have entered the barrier around the forest."

There were no dissenting opinions. While Mumulute spoke, I could hear the sound of running footsteps.

A young elf burst into the room. "W-we're in trouble! A swarm of monsters are gathering near the forest barrier!!!" The crowd broke out into roars of shock and confusion.

"*Sanya!*" Mumulute shouted over the din. "Go check!"

Sanya nodded, rushed over to a window, and stretched out her left hand. A hawk-like bird appeared beside her bracelet and perched on her arm.

"I'm counting on you," Sanya told the bird, and it flew off.

Whoa, *what*? Had she just summoned that bird from her bracelet?! Maybe it was a secret Elvish art I didn't know about. "*Sanya, what was that?*"

"I suppose you could call it my summon, much like your bear summons."

So, Sanya had a summon too—hers was a bird. That meant she'd kept it from me until now. I wanted to quiz her about it, but I resisted. This wasn't the right time anyway.

“Sanya, what’s the situation?”

“There are a considerable number of volkrows flying from Mt. Orval. There’s also a group of wolves prowling outside the barrier,” Sanya reported, all the while keeping her eyes closed. Wait—I knew this one from games and manga! I bet she was seeing through the eyes of her summon animal! Good thing she was a woman, I guess. Any dude with that power would’ve probably been accused of spying on the baths or something like that.

“Hm... so, they haven’t entered the barrier yet,” Mumulute observed.

“Correct. They are currently skulking around outside the perimeter,” said Sanya, still gazing through her bird’s eyes. That bird sure was convenient. It would’ve been nice to see the world through my bears’ eyes.

“Wait, hold on,” said Sanya. “There are tigerwolves around the wolves as well.”

“Are they? Wolves are already enough of a problem as it is.”

“What will we do, then?” Sanya asked.

“We’ll slay them, of course,” said Mumulute. “That was why we gathered. We’ll split into the usual groups. Sanya, map their locations.”

Someone spread open a map of the village and Sanya pointed out where the monsters were located. As Mumulute watched her, he gave out instructions.

“Sir!” One of the elves spoke up. “Are you sure we shouldn’t leave more people in the village?”

“Sanya and I will remain here along with two messengers, but there are more monsters than I anticipated. We must send more people to slay them quickly.”

“And Yuna is here, so we’ll be okay.”

“You really want to leave the village in the hands of one *peculiar girl*?” Another one of the elves seemed uneasy with that.

“It’s fine. Yuna can defeat volkrows. And if you’re so worried,” said Labilata, “then maybe you better not let a single one get near the village.”

None of the other elves had anything to say. Even though I'd only slain a couple of volkrows, Labilata seemed to have a lot of faith in me. Or maybe there was something else I'd done without realizing it that had inspired his confidence?

"Inform us if anything happens. Until then, you have your orders."

The elves headed out to slay the monsters according to Mumulute's orders. Mumulute and Sanya both stayed back along with two other elves—the messengers, probably. But what was I supposed to do? I hadn't received any orders. Maybe I'd be patrolling the village?

"What about me?"

"Your bears are able to sense when monsters approach, is that right?" Mumulute asked.

"Yeah, but not as far as Sanya's can."

"In that case, Sanya will monitor the barrier line. Please let us know if monsters approach the village."

I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu. "Guys, tell us if any monsters approach the village."

"Cwoom!!!"

That seemed like enough reassurance.

Sanya kept her eyes closed, monitoring the surroundings. She updated Mumulute from time to time, and Mumulute then gave instructions to the elves remaining in the room.

"Seems to be going well," Sanya observed.

"Once we finish slaying all the monsters, we will deal with the matter of the sacred tree," said Mumulute. "Sanya, I am going to patrol the village. Inform me if you learn anything."

“Understood.”

“I apologize, Miss, but would you accompany me? Let me know of any monsters that approach the village.”

“I can’t keep track of everything,” Sanya added, “so it would be a big help if you can check nearby the village Yuna.”

Well, it’d be difficult to monitor the entire barrier. Some monsters would probably get through without Sanya and Mumulute noticing, and if they did? It was my job to slay them.

CHAPTER 243

THE BEAR PATROLS THE VILLAGE

I PATROLLED THE VILLAGE with Mumulute. Kumayuru and Kumakyu walked beside us.

“Mumulute, is it okay if I slay any monsters that come to the village?”

“I will deal with the monsters. Simply let me know if they do come here.”

He was looking out for me, but it was kind of a chore. Just like Sanya, Mumulute didn’t want to cause me any trouble, but it’d be way quicker for me if I just dealt with the monsters I detected.

Mumulute stroked his chin as he looked at my bears. “Please let me know if any monsters approach,” he said to them.

I reached out with my detection skill. No monsters around the village, at least... so wherever they were gathering was probably out of range. I was hoping to know their numbers, but that didn’t seem likely. The barrier must’ve covered a lot of ground.

Mumulute and I patrolled the village with my bears. Plenty of folks greeted us. The adults said hi to their village head, the kids caught up with Kumayuru and Kumakyu, and Mumulute warned villagers that monsters might come near the village and they’d be better off not leaving for now.

As we were walking, Luimin and Lucca came over from up ahead, holding hands. Lucca made a beeline for my bears, and Luimin rushed over the second she spotted us. “Grandfather! Yuna!”

“What’s the matter, you two?” Mumulute asked.

“We were going to go outside the village, but we got stopped,” Luimin replied.

"My apologies," said Mumulute, "but please don't go outside the village today." Mumulute gave a simple explanation of what was happening. They both nodded obediently—they already knew about the monsters, after all.

"So, why are you both together?" Luimin looked over at me, puzzled. I guess she thought that Mumulute and I were an odd pair to see.

"The young girl's bears are assisting us, and so, we are keeping an eye on the village," said Mumulute, looking over to my bears.

"Can we go with you too, Grandfather?" Luimin asked. Lucca was petting Kumayuru's head—she definitely wanted to ride Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Maybe Luimin had noticed that?

Mumulute thought a bit. "You can, but you must follow my instructions if there is an emergency."

"We will!"

I let Lucca get up on Kumayuru, Luimin rode on Kumakyu, and we resumed our patrol.

It was so peaceful inside the village. You wouldn't think monsters were gathering outside the barrier. Kumayuru and Kumakyu didn't detect anything. It seemed the village was safe.

Which meant that Labilata and the others were doing all right slaying the monsters... right?

Kids gathered as we walked with Lucca and Luimin riding my bears as we went.

At first Mumulute tried to caution them and warned them to go home, but the kids looked so jealous of Luimin and Lucca that the guy didn't have it in him for a good, solid scolding.

"Perhaps I should not have let them do this," I heard him mutter softly. "Or perhaps it is better that they come along now instead of going outside the village."

Not all of the kids were going to just head on home—you always had those kids who

liked to wander around. Kids sneak out sometimes, even if you lock them up at home. It's just what they do, so it's better to let them out and keep an eye on them to make sure they're wandering safely. I guess Mumulute understood that, since he didn't tell them off.

Luimin had even given up her seat on Kumakyu to the kids. She walked beside me now. "I guess everyone's fine."

After we finished checking on the village, we came to the center square. Even more kids were tagging along with my bears than before. Still, better this than letting them wander the village, so I let them play. Luimin kept a close eye on the kids to make sure Kumayuru and Kumakyu didn't have a bad time.

I took some oren juice out of my bear storage and had a drink; the kids stared at me enviously. I decided to serve some up for everyone.

"Thank you very much!"

"Thank you!"

Look at that: they were all very polite, too! Such well-mannered kids.

My mind started wandering as I watched my bears play with the kids... I was bored. Which was good, right? If there weren't any monsters coming in, that meant that the battles were going well.

Mumulute examined my bears and the kids around them. "Your bears are rather docile."

"If no one's hostile toward them, they don't do anything. Oh, and speaking of which, Sanya can summon a bird?" There we go, Yuna. Just try to ask *naturally*...

Sanya hadn't said anything about it up to now. Maybe she wouldn't have told me. Still, it was my first time seeing someone summon a bird, so of course I was curious.

"Unlike your bears, the bird cannot sense monsters," said Mumulute.

Still, Sanya could see through the bird summon! That was amazing!!! A bird's-eye view meant she could see all kinds of things from way up high. It made me jealous, to be honest. She'd be able to see past mountains without breaking a sweat. Being able to

scout ahead would be handy for any adventurer. My detection skill had a limited range, but if Sanya's bird summon didn't have any range, it might've been even better than my own detection skill.

"Do a lot of elves have bird summons?" I asked.

"No. Sanya and Luimin are the only two that do."

"What? You can summon a bird, Luimin?" I asked. Now *this* was a surprising development.

"Um, yeah. Kind of..." Luimin said softly.

"That's amazing."

"I-it's not like that...!" She was being kind of vague.

"Then, could you show me?" I wasn't about to give up.

She gave me a tiny nod—I guess she didn't mind showing me. Luimin stretched both hands in front of her, gathered her mana, and from her hands appeared... a chick? Or would you call it a fledgling?

"It grows with my magic, but I guess I don't have much. I have a long way to go before I'm like my sister."

But the baby bird was so small and cute. It waddled around on Luimin's palm, looked up at Luimin and let out a tiny *cheep!* I could tell it liked her a lot. "It's cute!"

"Uh-huh! It's cute, but I want it to grow up like my sister's bird fast!"

So, if the fledgling grew, it'd become more like Sanya's summon. It'd be cool if it could change size to become big or small like Kumayuru and Kumakyu, but I guess that wasn't an option.

Luimin recalled her bird. But just as I was about to ask her how she got her summon, Kumayuru and Kumakyu raised their heads, looked up at the sky, and let out a "Cwoom." The children looked where the bears were looking, up to the sky.

"Huh, what's that?" One of the kids pointed at something.

It was huge. I'd assumed it was a volkrow since it was flying, but no; a monstrously huge bird was gliding along. I used detection magic, and...

"A cockatrice..."

Mumulute and Luimin were taken aback. A cockatrice's identifying features were its rooster-like comb and long, snake-like tail. They were a *huge* monster and a *gigantic* pain. The most annoying thing about them?

They could *fly*.

"Luimin!" Mumulute yelled. "Get the children inside a nearby house and hide!"

"Kumayuru, Kumakyu," I said, "please look after everyone!"

Kumayuru and Kumakyu went on the move with the kids still riding on their backs. Luimin ushered the other kids to follow them.

"You should run and hide as well, Miss," said Mumulute. "I shall distract the cockatrice."

"Can you kill it?"

Mumulute looked at the cockatrice—then he swallowed. "I have slayed one before, though I am weaker than I was in previous times. But this is an opponent that I can face."

How many centuries old were these *previous* times, anyway? "I'll help too," I said.

The cockatrice was heading straight for us. Right now, we were the only ones in the village square; just a few tempting, tasty cockatrice treats sitting out in the open. The cockatrice flapped its wings and descended on us.

"Are we going to fight here?" It was an open space, sure, but we were still inside the village. If we fought here, there'd definitely be some collateral damage.

"I would like to lure it out of the village if we can!" said Mumulute, and then ran at the cockatrice.

Mumulute landed a first strike, blasting a wind blade at the descending cockatrice. The wind roared forward, but the cockatrice countered with a flap of its wings. That

attack still attracted its attention, though, so now the cockatrice knew Mumulute was an enemy.

“Miss, go to Sanya!!!” Mumulute roared. He began to flee the village, casting magic all the way... jeez, and the guy was fast. The cockatrice followed in hot pursuit. As for me, I already knew what I was going to do: follow right along after both of them.

CHAPTER 244

THE BEAR VERSUS THE COCKATRICE

PART ONE

MUMULUTE FLED from the cockatrice, and he fled fast. The monster shot after him through the air, and I chased behind.

From time to time, Mumulute attacked the cockatrice with a skillful blast of magic, but nothing was enough to actually hurt the monster. I wanted to attack the cockatrice's undefended back, but that was a risk too—what if it turned around to fight me, then backtracked right to the village? It would've undone all of Mumulute's work to lead it away. For now, I followed after them without interfering.

The cockatrice blasted Mumulute with gusts of wind and even with its own feathers. Mumulute defended with a barrier of wind. Farther and farther they went from the village, never slowing as they went, with Mumulute using the trees for cover from cockatrice attacks.

We came out into a clearing. Mumulute stopped. The cockatrice slowly descended.

They faced each other.

The clearing was wide-open—perfect for a battleground. Then again, no cover also meant nowhere to hide. At some point Mumulute had to stop running, so I figured he might as well do it here. All that mattered was staying in sight of the cockatrice and keeping it from coming back to the village.

The cockatrice beat its vast wings, launching a volley of feathers at the stationary Mumulute. Mumulute summoned a protective wind barrier and leapt back in a dodge, quickly getting his footing back. He launched another magic attack, a burst of wind that shaped itself into a blade. The cockatrice swooped up into a dodge and flapped its wings again, stirring up a huge zephyr. Mumulute met it with wind magic in a perfect block.

Whoa, they were an equal match! Mumulute was looking really cool too. They kept

exchanging blows, and... wait, what was I doing just watching them? If they were evenly matched, he might lose!

I was right at the edge of the forest, out of the cockatrice's vision. It was facing Mumulute with its back exposed, like it was just asking to get attacked.

I slipped away from the forest, gathered mana in my bear puppet, and created a wind blade. Then I fired it toward the cockatrice's defenseless back. It couldn't avoid it if it didn't know I was there, so my attack hit it square on. The cockatrice shrieked out in a fit of rage.

Mumulute finally noticed me. "*Miss!* Why are you here?!" I ignored him and continued to fire wind blades.

In games, you gotta get damage in while you have the chance. But the cockatrice was no birdbrain, and it wouldn't let me have an attack free-for-all forever. It immediately noticed me, turned around, gave its wings a huge flap, and launched dark red feathers at me. Those things were dangerous—a cockatrice's feathers are filled with poison. Mumulute and I both made wind barriers to defend ourselves.

"*Miss!*" Mumulute fired a wind blade at the cockatrice from behind. The monster beat its wings and flew high into the sky.

Hmm, I guess a normal attack wasn't gonna cut it. I probably should have used some bear magic instead of trying to keep the monster in pristine condition. Guess bad habits die hard.

"Why did you come?!" Mumulute rushed over, glaring at me.

"Sorry! I was just worried."

"What are you saying?! Get out of here. I'll handle the beast!"

"It's okay, I can protect myself. You don't have to worry about me while you fight."

Above, the cockatrice circled us in the air.

Mumulute looked back and forth between the cockatrice and me. "Just promise me one thing. You *must* escape if the worst should come to pass. I do not wish to see a child die."

A *child*?! Okay, maybe I was a kid to Mumulute... although I guess I wasn't exactly an adult either.

"If the worst should come," Mumulute continued, "I will give you time to escape, so you must not fail to do so."

Hold on, were we doing the whole "You run and I'll hold them off" thing? No way was I going to let Mumulute die! That'd make Sanya and Luimin super sad. For now, I nodded along and looked up at the cockatrice in the sky. It beat its wings and slowly descended again.

Its belly was starting to swell. Wait, I knew what that was!

"Mumulute, don't move!" At that moment, I fully encircled us with a wind barrier and the cockatrice spewed purple gas. Poison—I'd once been poisoned in the game from a cockatrice's breath.

There. The attack was fading now, so I expanded my wind barrier to clear the poison away.

"Thank you, Miss," said Mumulute, then immediately he started running toward the cockatrice. He fired a wind blade at point-blank, slashing some of its wing away.

Enraged, the cockatrice spit poison up close, but Mumulute produced wind magic and blew the breath in the opposite direction. Mumulute pressed his advantage, but then, the cockatrice spread its wings wide and spun, catching Mumulute with a gust and sending him flying.

"Mumulute!"

"I-I am fine..." Mumulute replied from the ground. But the cockatrice flapped his wings at Mumulute, launching a barrage of feathers.

With my left hand, I created a wind barrier in front of Mumulute. I fired wind blades and fireballs at the cockatrice, but it dodged and repelled every one of them until the monster took the sky, escaping my attacks. Hmm, I guess I really did have to use bear magic. If I messed up and hit Mumulute while he fought the cockatrice, that'd get dangerous fast.

Surprisingly, Mumulute was... kind of getting in the way. Of course, I couldn't turn to

him and tell him he was in my way and should probably scram, so...

"You saved me, Miss."

Well, what other options did I have? "What do you want to do? If you'd like, I can slay it."

"Oh ho!" A laugh slipped out as Mumulute stood up. "How bold of you to say such while faced with a cockatrice!"

I wasn't being bold; I really meant it. The cockatrice circled above, monitoring us.

"I have something to ask you after seeing your abilities," Mumulute said.

"What is it?"

"Once it comes down, could you prevent the cockatrice from escaping into the sky?"

"I suppose I could."

"I'm going to use a powerful move, understood? Take care not to get caught in it."

Mumulute moved away from me and readied himself, then gathered mana in both his arms. The bracelet on his left arm was glowing super bright now—he was collecting more and more mana.

While I was distracted by Mumulute, the cockatrice fired feathers at him from the sky. Ugh, annoying much? No matter how many times it tried attacking, the result was the same. I deflected the feathers with a wind barrier and all they did was lodge themselves into the ground. Attacking from up high was pretty low, if you ask me. Made me want to smack that bird down like a bothersome fly.

I started running, then kicked off the ground and leapt high into the sky. Higher, higher—crap, too high! Too high!!! I soared straight past the cockatrice!!!

I adjusted where I was falling by twisting around and using some wind magic to aim straight for the cockatrice. I lunged with my right leg and hit the monster's back with a bear kick. The cockatrice ate it, falling to the ground.

Whoa... looks like I did it...!

The cockatrice tried to stand up, but Mumulute had finished his magical preparations.
“Take care not to get caught in this, Miss!”

A twister gathered around Mumulute. He compressed the wind in his hands and fired it at the cockatrice as it tried to spread its wings and escape. The wind became a gigantic wind blade and, with a *thwack*, chopped off one of the cockatrice’s wings.

Amazing! That was one tough, gigantic wing, and he’d chopped it off with a single blow! But... Mumulute seemed frustrated. Maybe he’d meant to slice the monster in half?

Still, Mumulute immediately ran in to finish it off. The cockatrice couldn’t escape into the air without both wings, so Mumulute was planning on dealing the finishing blow ASAP.

The cockatrice menaced Mumulute with a whip of its long, serpentine tail, but the elf dodged the lightning-strike. A cockatrice’s tail is poisonous—even a graze can mean danger. I was at the edge of my seat just watching.

I wasn’t actually afraid for myself while fighting because of my bear gear, but seeing others risk their lives terrified me. A single blow would’ve been fatal to Mumulute, but he still fought on to protect the village.

The cockatrice’s tail twisted and assailed Mumulute. *Watch out!!!* But no sooner had I thought that than Mumulute swung his arm down and sliced off the cockatrice’s tail. He followed that up with another slash at its torso.

Something like wind coiled around his arms now. Was that a wind sword?!

The cockatrice flew into a rage, exhaling its noxious purple breath, stabbing at Mumulute with its beak. Mumulute jumped back to dodge. How was the thing still moving? It was missing a wing and a tail, and it was losing blood fast. I thought it wouldn’t be able to move by now.

The purple gas spread out around the one-winged cockatrice—definitely poison. My bear clothes would probably protect me from poison, but I wasn’t about to risk being wrong on *that* one.

Not that letting the poison spread was an option either, but Mumulute was already on top of that. He unleashed a gust that scattered the cockatrice’s poison. Then, he closed

the distance between them again and used the wind blade around his arm to slice through the cockatrice's neck.

Wow... yeah, I'd definitely have to try making a wind sword later.

Just when I thought it was over, the cockatrice came into my field of vision.

"Mumulute, watch out!"

A gust of wind battered Mumulute from the side and sent him flying.

"Mumulute!"

"I am fine...!" He'd barely managed to raise the wind barrier up in time and hadn't been too hurt. I looked over where the wind gust had come from... and saw *another* cockatrice flying there. It looked livid as it took position right in front of the cockatrice Mumulute had defeated.

A second cockatrice...

The new cockatrice spread its huge, menacing wings wide, then it fired wind blades at us. I dodged.

"Run, Miss! I'll fight."

But Mumulute was pretty exhausted. He wasn't completely wiped, but he wasn't in any condition to fight.

In my mind, I called out for my bears. "*Kumayuru, Kumakyu, come to me.*"

Skill: Bear Telepathic Communication

You can call your summoned beasts from a distance.

It was a skill I'd gotten after defeating the golems. I sent the telepathic communication to my bears, then moved over to Mumulute. "Can you move?"

"Miss... you must call for Arutul and Labilata. Ask Sanya where they are, she'll know."

Easier said than done... because now, the new cockatrice was eyeing us now. If I made a break for it, it might follow me right into the village.

The cockatrice screeched and spread its wings wide. Purple poison leaked out of its mouth. It was in a rage. Right as it beat its great wings closed, it delivered a barrage of feathers at us. I immediately raised a wind barrier, but I couldn't deflect the feathers as well as I had in the first battle.

"Do not mind me, girl. Please, go... I can at least find you time to escape."

Maybe because he had used too much magic, or maybe it was his age, but Mumulute was out of breath. It wasn't like I could leave him like this. Also, *he* should escape, not me.

No, I wouldn't let that happen.

I fought to protect Mumulute from the cockatrice's attacks until Kumayuru and Kumakyu dashed out of the forest to me. The cockatrice fired its feathers at us, so I made an earth wall to protect Mumulute and my bears.

"I'll take it from here. Please rest in the village, Mumulute."

"Girl...?" Mumulute couldn't understand what I was saying.

I lightly touched Mumulute and then gave him a little magical zap.

"G-Girl?" he repeated. "What in the world are you..." Mumulute went down on one knee. He tried to move but couldn't.

"Kumakyu!" Kumakyu came over to me and leaned down. I lifted the paralyzed Mumulute and placed him on Kumakyu's back. As usual, my bear puppets were always useful. I could lift a man with them, no sweat.

“Wh-what are you doing...?!” Mumulute tried to struggle, but that weak electricity magic I’d used kept him still for now.

“Kumakyu, please take Mumulute to the village.”

“Cwoom.” Kumakyu obeyed my order and ran off. Mumulute was saying something, but I ignored it.

Well, cockatrice... time for round two.

CHAPTER 245

THE BEAR VERSUS THE COCKATRICE

PART TWO

KUMAKYU CARRIED MUMULUTE off on his back, and I positioned myself to keep the cockatrice from following them. I took care not to take my eyes off the monster—not even once. If it went after Mumulute, I readied myself to go after it in a flash.

The new cockatrice didn't even give Mumulute a passing glance as he retreated. Instead, the monster spewed purple gas from its beak and glared at me, growling. Now I could get my revenge for Mumulute... though, uh, don't get me wrong: he *definitely* was still alive.

I ordered Kumayuru to drop back and stood before the angry cockatrice. The monster howled, spread its wings wide, beat them, and fired dark red feathers. I pulled up an earth wall and repelled the attack. The moment the feather assault stopped, I jumped out from behind the wall and pressed forward with my own attack. But then the thing soared right into the sky...

I fired a wind blade at the cockatrice. It dodged and fired its feathers from the sky; I leapt back and out of the way.

Ugh, could it stop doing that fly-away thingy?! If I had a skill or magic like "Bear flight", I'd love to have an air battle, but sadly, no dice. Then again, a flying bear sounded way too surreal, even for my imagination. My bear onesie already drew attention. If I could fly while wearing this... jeez, I didn't want *anyone* to see me like that. No flying in public for me, even if I learned how to do it.

Okay, Yuna, no more nonsense. Focus on that cockatrice flying high above you...

Mumulute wasn't here anymore, so there was nothing stopping me from slaying the

cockatrice right away. I could even use magic I didn't want to let others see. Plus, if I took too long, Arutul and Labilata might turn up.

I gathered mana in my white bear puppet. It crackled and coiled around my hand, turning yellow and more bear-shaped as it collected. But I'd have a hard time hitting the midair cockatrice with my electricity... I needed to prep a launcher.

I gathered mana into my right hand now—directly into my black pear puppet. Wind swirled around it, forming something like the barrel of a revolver. I set the lightning bears inside that rotating wind. The electric bears were now rotating around my right arm now, spinning and whirling. I carefully aimed my right hand at the flying cockatrice and blasted a bear.



The lightning crackled toward the cockatrice—followed by another, and another, and still more. I fired a ton of electric bears, just in case it dodged. The cockatrice flapped its wings to blow the electric bears off-course, but since they were spinning fast enough, they broke through the wind barrier and hit its wing.

Whoa! Maybe this attack was more powerful than I'd thought. When I'd been experimenting, I'd figured that pairing electricity with a whirlwind would be pretty strong. As more of my electric bears found their mark, the cockatrice's wings began to show some serious wear and tear. Before long, the cockatrice fell to the ground, way too damaged to fly.

Then, the cockatrice stood up, spread its wings, shrieked, and tried to intimidate me. Its massive wings were tattered and riddled with holes. No more flying—not anymore. It glared at me, putrid purple breath spewing from its beak.

Unfortunately for the cockatrice, I couldn't just leave it like this. Time to finish it off!

The cockatrice spread its tattered wings and stirred up a gust, but it didn't have any power behind it. I drew the black handle of a knife from my bear storage—my Kumayuru knife. I held it tightly in my black bear puppet, dodged the cockatrice's attacks, and came in close. Then I poured mana into the Kumayuru knife and sliced right through the cockatrice's neck.

Sorry. The cockatrice had probably just been attracted to the sacred tree, but it was a threat to the elves. Since it attacked them, I had to slay it.

The cockatrice collapsed. Wow, these mythril knives were something else! Oh, and just to say it outright: I named the knife with the black handle the Kumayuru Knife and the one with the white handle the Kumakyu Knife.

It was finally over. Kumayuru came over and supported my weight from the side. I guess I was pretty tired. Mostly, I felt mentally exhausted. Maybe my bear onesie would help me recover?

Well, I'd defeated the cockatrice. There weren't anymore, right? I checked with my detection skill and didn't get any cockatrice signals, but there were some people moving fast. Whoever they were, they'd be arriving shortly.

I looked over at where I sensed them—Sanya, Labilata, and several other elves appeared from the forest.

CHAPTER 246

THE BEAR GIVES SANYA AN EXPLANATION

THE GROUP OF ELVES, Sanya and Labilata included, stood there, shocked.

“What just...” They looked around the disastrous scene.

With Mumulute’s magic and mine, plus the cockatrice’s gusts of wind, we’d left the ground in shambles. Volleys of red cockatrice feathers stuck out, all over the ground.

Now that I was taking a second look over it, things really did look pretty bad. I mean, I hadn’t even mentioned the two cockatrice corpses and the girl in a bear onesie standing in the middle of it all. This *had* to look ridiculous from another person’s perspective.

“Why are you here, Sanya?” Had they rushed over after hearing about this from Mumulute?

“We rushed over after hearing about this from Mumulute,” she said, right on cue.

I guess she’d been worried about me, even if she knew about that wyrm and the ten thousand monsters I’d slain.

“My grandfather told me you stayed behind to fight the cockatrice on your own so that he could escape.”

It wasn’t like I stayed behind *specifically* so that Mumulute could escape. I just would have been in a tight spot if he’d stayed, and not because he’d be in the way—not even in the slightest. I just didn’t want him seeing me fight.

“Grandfather almost looked like he was about to cry. He thought you sacrificed yourself for the village, and for him.”

C’mon, don’t kill me off like *that!* Mumulute actually had believed I’d risked my own life to save him? I felt embarrassed even *thinking* I’d done that cheesy “I’ll stay, you save yourselves!” thing for real.

"So, we came running."

"You know me, Sanya," I told her. "You didn't need to worry."

"Of course I'd worry about you fighting a cockatrice! Do you know how disastrous it would've been if you made even a tiny mistake and got poisoned?"

That poison definitely had been a nuisance. I was pretty scared of anything I hadn't tested my bear gear on. Still, it seemed like Kumakyu had gotten Mumulute back to the village. Some praise was in order for a certain bear.

Sanya continued. "Then we encountered Labilata on the way and ran here together." She looked at the cockatrices again. The other elves took a gander at them too, seeming totally unsure on how they should even react.

"Did you really slay the cockatrices on your own?" Labilata asked, apparently representing the group.

Sanya knew a fair bit about me, so she believed that I'd slain the cockatrice. The other elves didn't look so sure. A girl in a bear onesie slaying a cockatrice was a little out there, after all. Still, I was glad they hadn't seen me using electricity magic. It would've been a huge pain if electricity magic didn't exist in the world and I had to explain it.

"Yep, I slayed 'em good! But you don't really have to believe me." Since I couldn't explain it, I didn't really care if they believed me.

Two elves approached the cockatrice corpses to check them out.

"It's not that we *don't* believe you, especially after seeing this..."

It was just hard to swallow, even if it was possible.

"Well, Mumulute *did* slay one of them," I said. And looked cool while doing it. A freakin' *wind sword*? Totally rad.

"But you still slayed the other one, didn't you?" Sanya asked.

I nodded. Couldn't deny that one.

"Yuna... thank you for saving my grandfather. Actually, no. Thank you for saving the

entire village."

Labilata nodded. "Yuna, you have my gratitude."

Now all the other elves were thanking me too. I almost wanted to tell them that if they *really* wanted to thank me, they could get me a permanent spot for my bear house... but I stopped myself.

"Don't worry about it. I'm glad I could protect the village," I said instead.

Everyone seemed moved by my words. Uh... I felt majorly guilty since I had ulterior motives, but... ah well; time to look at the cockatrices.

"What will you do with them?" I asked. It wasn't like we could leave the slain cockatrices here if we were heading to the village. I didn't need cockatrice materials right now, but they still technically counted as my loot. "Can I put them in my item bag for now?"

"Mmm, you're right. We can't just leave them. Is it okay if we impose on you, Yuna?" Sanya asked.

With Sanya's permission, I went to put the cockatrices away into my bear storage.

First, I approached the one I'd killed. Maybe their feathers would be useful? The wings were filled with holes, but I'd still get a lot of materials if I plucked them. But then there was that poison to worry about on their tips. I guess I didn't need them since I wasn't an assassin. I'd think about how to use them later, so I put the cockatrice into my bear storage for the time being.

Sanya wasn't surprised, of course, and Labilata had seen me taking out my bear house before, but the other elves were straight up shocked. I didn't worry about them, though: I just put away the cockatrice Mumulute had slain. If they let me have the cockatrices, then I'd need to get Fina to harvest them. But *could* she harvest cockatrice? It seemed wrong to let a ten-year-old girl harvest a cockatrice. They were poisonous beasts and could be dangerous. Before I could ask Fina, I'd have to check in with Gentz.

After I finished up with the cockatrices, I decided to check up on the village head. "Oh, right, is Mumulute okay?" I mean, I'd paralyzed him with an electric shock after all.

I didn't know if Mumulute's age made him elderly for an elf, but I'd still basically tased a senior citizen till he stopped moving. Plus, he'd used tons of magic and was really exhausted. Was he okay? I mean, the guy was going to keep fighting and get himself killed, so I didn't have a choice, but...

"We carried him home," said Sanya. "Now that you mention it, Yuna, what did you do to him? He couldn't get off of Kumakyu."

"I think that might have been all that amazing wind he used. Maybe his body bore the brunt of that and paralyzed him?" Nice dodge, Yuna.

"But he said he couldn't move after you touched him."

Would Mumulute be mad at me when I got back? "Umm, so... I wasn't sure he'd actually go, so I might've used a *teensy* bit of magic on him."

"A *teensy* bit of magic?!" Sanya looked appalled but didn't press me further. "My grandfather was extremely worried about you, Yuna."

I guess I hadn't made him angry then. Then again, it's hard to get mad at someone for doing a "I'll stay, save yourselves" kinda thing. Whenever someone in manga or books says that, they immediately kick the bucket. No telling how many characters have been offed after saying that line. So Mumulute would've been more worried about me than angry at me, considering he didn't know how powerful I actually was.

"His poor hands were shaking as he took my hands in his and told me, 'Please go save her.'"

Just even imagining it, I could tell it must have been a whole *thing*. When I saw Mumulute again, I'd need to give him a proper apology. I'd made him worry for real.

"My grandfather will still be worried, so let's go back to the village."

I nodded. Lingered around here wouldn't do any good, after all. As we were about to head back, Kumayuru leaned down in front of me, offering to let me ride.

"Cwoom."

"Thanks, buddy," I said to Kumayuru. My bear seemed happy when I hopped on.

CHAPTER 247

THE BEAR RETURNS TO THE VILLAGE

WHEN I GOT BACK to the village, Kumakyu rushed over. I got down off Kumayuru and gave Kumakyu some head pats. “Thank you for carrying Mumulute.”

Kumakyu squinted happily and gave me a little “Cwoom~.”

Behind me Sanya was explaining that the cockatrices had been slain to the villagers. She gave them instructions to collect the wolves, tigerwolves, and volkrows Labilata’s group had slain. You can’t leave slain monsters as is, after all—that just attracts beasts and other monsters looking for food. The corpses could also be scavenged for useful materials or be sold for money. Even I longed for tigerwolf pelts.

“Labilata, Yuna. Let’s get going to report to my grandfather.”

Me too? I wanted to say, but I knew I had to go. I recalled Kumayuru and Kumakyu and headed toward Mumulute’s home.

“We’re coming in, Grandfather!” Sanya said.

As usual, we didn’t wait for a reply before going in. I guess Mumulute was okay. I hadn’t left him bedridden... right? He hadn’t lost consciousness, so... he was probably fine. Probably.

We headed to the usual room where Mumulute was lying on bedding. He sat up when he noticed us. Looked like he was fine, considering he could still move.

“Girl! You’re safe! Thank *goodness*.” The first thing he did when he saw me was fret.

“Sorry for making you worry.”

“I do not know just how strong you are, but you mustn’t do such things anymore. If you had died, I never could have forgiven myself.”

Jeez, he really *had* been worried.

"Now," he continued, "what became of the cockatrice?"

"It was slain," Sanya cut in.

"I see. I am glad it was slain without issue." Mumulute looked relieved. "Good work, both of you."

I guess Mumulute thought that Sanya and Labilata had defeated the cockatrice. Fine by me... except goody-two-shoes here couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"By the time we came running over, the cockatrice had already been slain by Yuna," said Labilata without missing a beat. "We didn't do anything."

I know I hadn't told him to keep that quiet, but I sure wish he would've read the room a little.

"She did what...?" Mumulute looked over to Sanya now. "Is this true?"

"I told you a few days ago, but Yuna is a far more powerful adventurer than her appearance would suggest... though I didn't think she would slay it before we arrived."

The comment about my appearance was uncalled for, but I couldn't deny it—I had to grin and bear it.

"It's the truth, sir," said Labilata. "There are a number of us who can confirm that the cockatrice was slain."

"I see. I thought you were strong when we were fighting together, girl, but I did not think you could slay a cockatrice on your own."

I didn't know how much he believed Sanya and Labilata's words, but he at least seemed to believe I'd slain the monster.

"If you hadn't killed the first one," I said, "I definitely couldn't have taken on the leftover."

"Mm-hmm. But how exactly did you manage to slay a cockatrice?"

Of course he'd be curious about how I did it. "I can't give you the details. It's... a secret technique."

“So, you sent me away so I wouldn’t see it?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. The magic is a little dangerous, so I didn’t want you to be close.” If an electric bear touched him, he would have been zapped to a crisp. Bear magic was just that dangerous.

“It really was a terrible scene,” Sanya said distantly, remembering the battleground.

It wasn’t like I’d done all of that now! The cockatrice and Mumulute’s attacks did their part too: it wasn’t *just* me. “Anyway, you must’ve been tired after fighting the cockatrice. I thought you’d get injured if you kept at it like that.”

“So that is why you did that?” he asked.

“Even if I told you to leave it to me, you wouldn’t have actually let me handle it. Am I wrong?”

“I... likely would not have, correct.” Mumulute had tried to let me escape. He wouldn’t have left things to me.

“That’s why I had Kumakyu carry you to safety, even by force. I was taking things into my own hands without asking, so please don’t worry about it. I should’ve explained,” I said, keeping a poker face. Couldn’t let him know that I also found him a bit of a nuisance during the fight...

“Girl...”

Maybe I’d been a little too suave when I’d said all that? But I was wearing a bear outfit, so I couldn’t have had *that* much charisma.

“In that case, I must give you my thanks.”

“I didn’t want to put the village kids in danger. I just did what I could,” I gave him my most wholesome honor student answer.

“I thank you again. You have my thanks both for slaying the cockatrice and saving the village.” Mumulute lightly bowed his head. It was embarrassing for him to thank me so directly.

After that, Labilata turned in his report on their monster slaying. They'd defeated all of the monsters Sanya had detected. There were tigerwolves too, so they must have gotten some pelts. Speaking of spoils...

"Mumulute, what will you do with the cockatrice materials?" I asked. "I brought them back."

Personally, I wanted the one I'd slain.

"You may have them if you desire them."

"Both of them?"

"We have the volkrows, wolves, and tiger wolves. Those will suffice to trade with merchants." In that case, I'd happily take the cockatrices.

"When you sell them," Sanya added, "please come to the Adventurer Guild in the capital."

To that, all I had was a big fat "I dunno if I will." I didn't need the money, so I didn't need to sell them just because. On the other hand, I would've liked to make something from them. If this was the game, I could craft armor or something, but I didn't really *need* armor. I also already had my mythril knives for weapons. For now, the cockatrices would reside in my bear storage.

I figured we wouldn't need to worry about monsters for a bit, but then an elf guy rushed into the room. "Sir, we have a problem!"

"What happened?!"

"Monsters have breached the barrier of the sacred tree!"

"Is this true?!"

"We can't get in. Sir, please hurry!"

"I understand," said Mumulute. "Sanya, we shall go to the sacred tree." Guess the fight would continue.

“But, Grandfather, you are not well enough!”

Mumulute stood. “I am fine. I have rested long enough. Labilata, prepare the horses!” he ordered. “Lavaka, contact Arutul as well.”

Labilata and the elf called Lavaka nodded and left the room.

“Are you really sure, Grandfather?”

“Yes, this is no issue. But we must hurry!”

Mumulute and Sanya left, and—of course—I followed. Horses waited for us outside, and Mumulute and Sanya mounted them at once.

“Labilata, I will leave the village to you,” Mumulute said.

“Understood.”

Mumulute urged the horse to run.

“Grandfather!” Sanya followed after him too, and—naturally—so did I. I summoned Kumakyu and chased after Mumulute and Sanya.

CHAPTER 248

THE BEAR HEADS TO THE SACRED TREE

WE HEADED FOR THE SACRED TREE. Mumulute and Sanya's horses were quick, but I could keep up with them atop Kumakyu.

Before long, we arrived. But... where were we? The horses stopped at the foot of a rocky mountain. Where was the sacred tree? I looked around, but I couldn't see anything that looked like one.

"Where's the sacred tree?"

"You followed us, Yuna?" Sanya asked. Somehow, they hadn't noticed that I was behind them.

"I thought you'd stop me if I told you I was coming."

Sanya sighed. "Yuna..."

"Either way, it's not like I can go inside the barrier around the sacred tree."

Although I knew I couldn't get in, I figured I could at least get a glimpse. But none of the trees looked particularly sacred.

"We cannot change that she followed us," Mumulute said. "She would do well helping us by guarding the entrance."

"Yeah, I can do that." Though I didn't really get what he meant by that.

Mumulute and Sanya dismounted from their horses and started to head out. After a while, we reached a cave that led into the mountain. Was this the entrance to the sacred tree?

"There don't seem to be any monsters nearby," Sanya noted, sounding relieved.

"Yes but stay focused. We mustn't be caught off-guard. According to Lavaka, monsters

have penetrated the sacred tree's barrier. There may be others."

Kumakyu looked over at the cave in the mountain. "Cwoom..."

What's that, Kumakyu? I used my detection skill and, sure enough, I detected monsters on the other side of the mountain.

"Is that what I think it is, Yuna?" Sanya asked.

"Yeah, it looks like there are monsters deeper in the mountain." Some wolves, some volkrows, and —just as we'd heard— the parasite.

Mumulute looked at the cave. "It's just as Lavaka said, then."

"But they shouldn't be able to get in," Sanya said.

"There are already tears in the barrier. It is not so strange that monsters have entered."

We approached the cave. There were three stones in front of it. So, this was the entrance? I guess I wasn't allowed to go inside, no matter how badly I wanted to. I tried peeking into the cave, but it was pitch black. Couldn't see a thing.

"Sanya, we shall go inside. Girl, I apologize for asking this of you, but we shall leave any approaching monsters to you."

"Yuna, I'm sorry," said Sanya. "All we've been doing is giving you trouble."

With both of them asking, I couldn't refuse. "Sure, leave the entrance to Kumakyu and me. We won't let any monsters in." Even if I still wanted to go inside with them...

I looked up. The mountain was pretty high up, but I could scale it with my bear gear. I might've even been able to see the sacred tree if Kumayuru and Kumakyu could fly, but they didn't have that ability. Bears can't fly, after all. That was when Kumakyu gave me a sad "Cwoom," almost like an apology. Wait, was my bear reading my mind?

"Sorry, Kumakyu. I didn't mean it like that. Don't sound so sad."

I hugged Kumakyu's neck as an apology and threw in some head pats too. Even if Kumayuru and Kumakyu couldn't fly, they did their absolute best for me. They let me ride them when we traveled, and they kept running, even when I was napping. They

even kept watch for me when we camped so I could sleep in peace and woke me up in the morning. I was very grateful to them, with no complaints. Just having them with me was enough to make me happy.

With those thoughts in mind, I pet Kumakyu's head. Kumakyu perked up, as if understanding me. I was glad that fixed things up.

"How could this happen?!" Mumulute shouted as I was petting Kumakyu's head.

I looked over at Mumulute, wondering what exactly had happened. He was touching one of the stones near the cave.

"Why will it not respond?!" Mumulute pressed his hand against it several times.

"Grandfather?"

"Sanya. Please, try using your mana."

Sanya traded places with Mumulute, placed her hand on the monument, and routed mana into it.

"...No reaction," Sanya said. "But it worked yesterday...!"

Sanya tried several more times—no dice. Mumulute started walking toward the cave like he was trying to go inside, but he was stopped mid-step as if an invisible barrier was stopping him. Sanya stretched her hand out to the cave entrance, but that was blocked as well. It looked like they were putting on a weird pantomime.

"Why is this happening...?" Mumulute said. "Sanya, try once more."

They both once again placed their hands on the stones and routed their mana into them, but nothing happened.

"We could enter just yesterday," said Sanya. "Why is this happening now of all times?"

"Perhaps the parasite has completely taken over," replied Mumulute. "It may no longer have the ability to recognize our mana."

"You must be joking..." Sanya said.

They looked panicked. I got a sense of what was happening, but still asked Sanya. “What’s wrong?”

“If we rout mana into these stones, they shine, and while they are shining, we can enter the barrier,” she told me. “Or rather... that’s what *should* happen.”

“For all the mana we pour mana into them, they will not shine,” said Mumulute. “They do not react in the slightest.”

Even though it’d been fine a day before, now they couldn’t enter the barrier. No wonder they were panicking. They kept routing mana into the stones to no reaction. I wondered what would happen if we destroyed the stones? But that’d be its own problem if it broke the barrier...

“Sanya, check on the sacred tree.”

On Mumulute’s order, Sanya summoned her bird and sent it off into the sky. Maybe the tree was visible from above? The summoned bird disappeared over the mountain. How far did that barrier reach? Or could animals get through it no problem? If the summoned bird could get into the barrier, maybe Kumayuru and Kumakyu could too?

Sanya had her eyes closed. I guess she was looking through the eyes of her summoned bird. It was a convenient ability, but it also left her defenseless.

“It’s much worse than before,” said Sanya.

“Of course...” said Mumulute.

“Grandfather, what should we do?”

Mumulute thought it over silently.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. “Should we wait for Arutul and then undo the barrier? That way, anyone could go in.” And I’d be able to get in and help.

“We cannot do that,” Mumulute replied.

“Huh? But isn’t that why you called for Sanya?” I thought they said that they could undo the seal as long as Mumulute, Sanya, and Arutul were present.

Sanya opened her eyes. “Revoking and creating seals must all be done from within the barrier. If we can’t get inside, we can’t undo the seal.”

I was curious about the barrier and what it felt like, so I headed closer to the cave. The invisible wall should’ve been right around *there*. I slowly stretched out my hand. Huh...? I thought it’d be right there, but I couldn’t feel anything with my bear puppet and I just kept heading forward. Since I’d expected an invisible wall, I lost my balance and pitched forward.

“Ah!!!” It didn’t hurt thanks to my bear onesie, but I was still embarrassed they’d seen me trip over nothing.

“Yuna?!” Sanya looked over at me. “Are you all right?” she tried rushing over to me but was stopped by the invisible wall. “How did you get inside of it?!”

I looked around. It seemed I *was* inside the cave.

“Girl...” Mumulute also stared at me in bafflement.

I left the mountain cave.

“Girl, how did you enter it?” Mumulute asked.

I had no idea. “Uh, I just went in.”

I went inside the cave again to demonstrate. The barrier wasn’t preventing me from going inside. Mumulute also tried to follow after me, but the invisible wall stopped him from reaching me.

“What in the world is going on?” said Mumulute, taking the words right out of my mouth.

It was probably my god-given bear onesie, right? That was the only thing I could think of, anyway. But I couldn’t just tell them about the bear onesie.

“I have no idea,” I lied. “Um... want me to go slay the monsters inside?”

I was the only one who could get in. There were monsters and there was the sacred tree to worry about. Now was my chance to get inside the barrier. There was no way I wouldn’t go.

Mumulute hesitated. Stood in thought for a moment. Finally...

"I am sorry to impose upon you again, girl," said Mumulute.

That was permission. Now I'd be able to see the sacred tree!

"Please be careful, Yuna."

They both saw me off as I headed into the cave. Then, just like I had, Kumakyu followed right along into the barrier. Mumulute looked shocked as he watched. To be honest, I probably could have just summoned my bears from inside if Kumakyu hadn't followed along, but this worked too.

The inside of the cave was dark, so I made a bear light (shaped like a bear's head) and lit up the place.

I headed down a path with a couple twists and turns until I saw a light up ahead. I guess that was the exit? I jogged over and out of the cave, stepping into a huge clearing surrounded by the mountains. It was sorta like a baseball stadium or maybe an arena, surrounded by craggy mountains. Sun streamed down from above.

And at the center of it all, was a huge tree.

A huge *sacred* tree.

The trunk was so big that multiple people would've needed to hold hands to form a chain around it. It was absolutely covered with lush leaves. Everything about the tree positively *screamed* legendariness.

Although it didn't look particularly mystical, what with all the parasitic vines covering it. The vines wriggled super nastily. The vines were also coiling around some wolves and volkrows. Every once in a while, the vines moved, as though they were reacting to me even though I was still some ways away. Maybe it was lying in wait, like a predator for its prey...

I tried slicing at the vines with wind magic as a test. They were easy to cut but immediately regenerated. It looked like it was absorbing the sacred tree's mana and sapping strength right from the monsters, just like I'd expected. It would be trouble if it was left to grow.

For now, I decided to slay the wolves and volkrows that had gotten in. Easy-peasy compared to the cockatrice.

CHAPTER 249

THE BEAR FIGHTS THE PARASITE

OTHER WOLVES AND VOLKROWS were drawing near the sacred tree as though they were attracted to it. Once they got close, the parasite's vines ensnared them. It wouldn't be good if they gave more nourishment to the parasite, so I fired wind blades at it and made myself known.

The wolves and volkrows moved away from the sacred tree and headed directly for me, but I quickly dispatched them. Next was the sacred tree, but would it really be okay to fight against it?

Fire was the best way to deal with parasite-infected plants, but it wasn't like I could just burn down the sacred tree. For starters, that'd mean big trouble for Mumulute and the elves, but also, I just didn't feel great about torching such a majestic tree.

If I left it alone, though, the tree would keep attracting monsters. The wolves and volkrows that'd been weakened by the parasite weren't moving now, as if they were just normal, docile animals. It was kind of terrifying.

Maybe that was how I'd turn out if I were caught.

Anyway, I left the sacred tree and headed back out of the cave to check in with Mumulute on whether I could fight the tree.

"Yuna!" Sanya and the others rushed over, looking concerned. Behind them I could see Arutul. I guessed that they'd told him about all of this already. If Arutul was here, he probably couldn't get inside either. I explained the situation to the three of them.

"I slayed the monsters," I said, "so should I also slay the parasite?"

"You make it sound so easy. Can you actually slay it?"

"It *would* be easy if I could burn it down," I said. Trees are famously fantastically

flammable.

"I'm not so sure about that..." Sanya muttered.

It was an important tree for the elves. I was definitely putting them on the spot by even suggesting that we burn it. "I understand. I won't burn it. There may be another way, so I want to give it a shot." After all, burning it down wasn't the only way of handling things.

"Yuna..." said Sanya with a sigh.

Still, the parasite was regenerating itself by using mana. If it was absorbing the sacred tree's mana, it basically had an infinite supply to snack on. The tree powered the barrier surrounding the elves' forest. That had to be enough mana to last hundreds of years. My white bear onesie couldn't hold a candle to that.

Still, I had a way of fighting it.

"Well, then," I said, turning back to the cave, "I'm off."

Mumulute called out to my back. "Girl, if you find it is impossible to fight off the parasite, you may burn down the sacred tree along with it."

"Grandfather?!"

"Father?!"

Sanya and Arutul were both shocked.

"We do not know what will become of the sacred tree at this rate," said Mumulute. "I do not know why, but the girl is presently the only one capable of entering the barrier."

Thanks, god-given bear gear.

"If, later on, even the girl can no longer enter the barrier, then there would be no one capable of dealing with the tree."

"But someone other than Yuna might be able to get inside," Sanya said.

"Would that person be able to burn down the sacred tree?" Mumulute asked. "All elves

know the importance of the sacred tree. The person would also need to be strong. Would they be able to kindle the fire while fighting the parasite?"

"Well..." Sanya didn't have an argument against that. She'd fought the parasite a few days ago, so she must've known how impossible that would be.

"Furthermore, elves do not excel in fire magic," he said. "Many cannot even use it. Even if they attempted such magic, it might not be strong enough to burn the sacred tree. We cannot even fire flaming arrows at it from a distance, as the parasite's vines would block it."

"..."

"Attempting to burn down the great tree... it is a great burden indeed."

Sanya shook her head. "If everyone found out that Yuna was the one who burned down the sacred tree, all the villagers would..."

Even if I had a good reason for doing it, the optics would be terrible. At worst, they'd hold it against me. I wouldn't be able to come to the elves' village ever again. I could forget about the bear house.

"I'll leave the village if that happens," I said. "You can tell everyone you banished me." That'd be the best resolution to things.

"Yuna..." Sanya said.

"I will take responsibility when the time comes," said Mumulute. "I will bear that blame."

"But Grandfather..."

"We are the only ones able to enter the barrier. Not a soul would know, so long as we do not speak of it."

"But if they thought you did that, as the head elf, they would..." Sanya trailed off.

"If that should come to pass, then Arutul would take my place."

"Father..."

I guess the sacred tree was just that important to the elves.

"So please, girl, do not worry," said Mumulute. "Burn down the sacred tree if you must."

After that whole conversation, there was no way I could just *burn down* the tree. If I were the one taking the blame, that'd be one thing, but I couldn't let Mumulute take the fall like that. Burning it down would have to be my absolute last resort.

Mumulute, Sanya, and Arutul's expressions brimmed with a grim resolve. I had to do everything I could, up until the very end then.

"I'll try not to burn it when I slay the parasite," I said, then headed back into the cave. Kumakyu followed after me, as always.

I stood before the sacred tree. If I were going to burn it down, bear flames would've made things real easy. My bear magic sure packed a punch. But that meant that things could go *really* wrong if I misused it.

I fired a wind blade to start and tried cutting the swaying vines at random, but they immediately regenerated. It was definitely using the sacred tree's mana to heal itself. Hmm... the next best thing would be if I could find the origin of the parasite, but that'd be difficult. What if it was inside the sacred tree?

I circled the sacred tree, far enough away that the vines couldn't reach me. The vines stretched from the trunk all the way to the branches, and I couldn't tell where its core could be because they were in the way. In times like these, you'd usually find the target by looking for a heavily guarded spot, but the whole thing was covered in coiling vines. If there were lots of places where the core could be, I'd have to check them all.

I hoped they'd overlook it if I damaged the sacred tree a little. I faced the most suspicious location where the vines were ensnaring the trunk and fired a vertical wind blade. The wind blade opened up a vertical line right in the middle of the tree. That sliced the coiled vines, but those immediately fused back together where they were cut.

Next, I fired multiple wind blades. That cut the vines just like earlier, but (of course) they regenerated. But... wait, the tree didn't look damaged at all under the vines. Maybe the sacred tree was harder than I thought? Maybe I could be a little rougher with it?

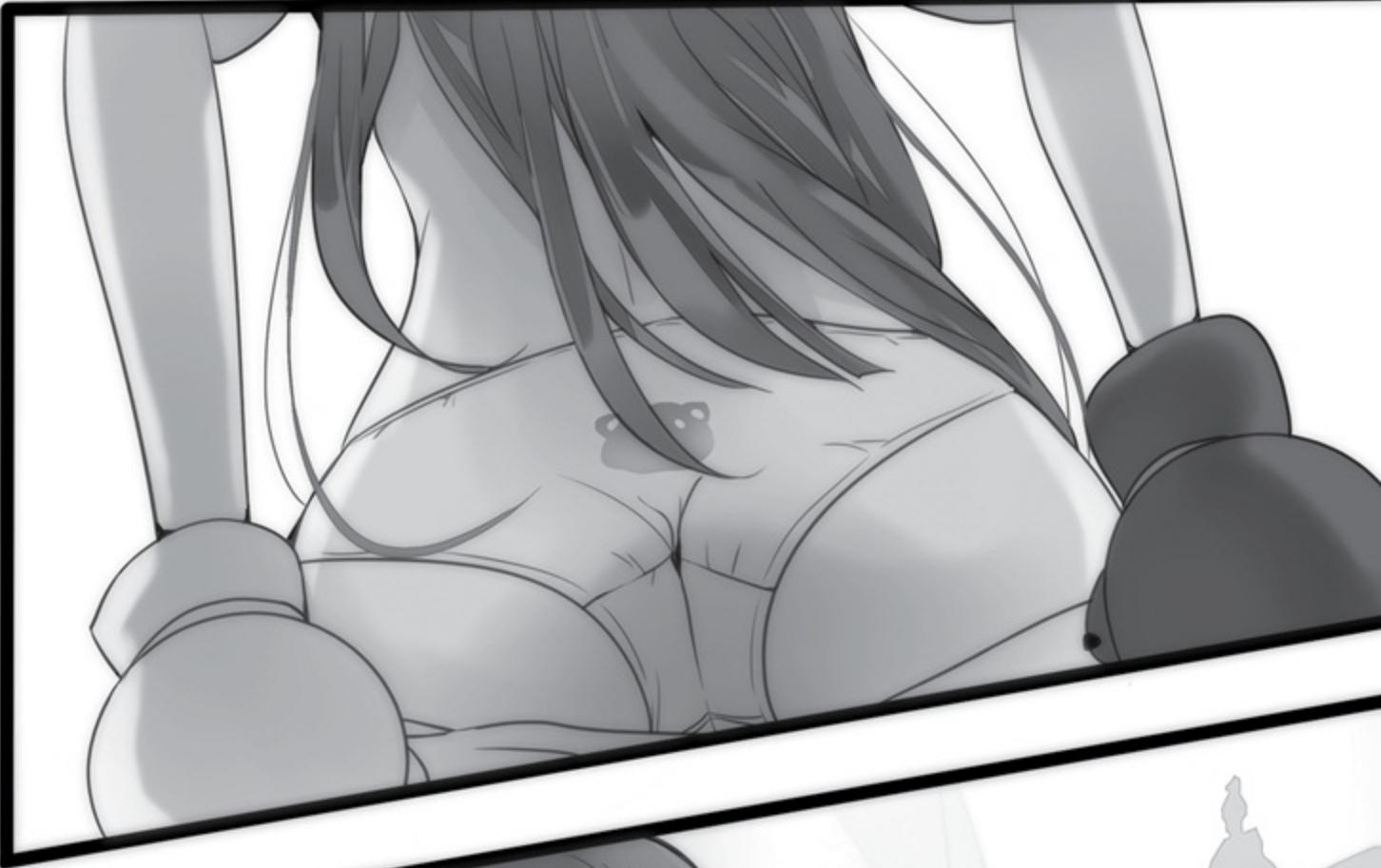
I whipped up a small whirlwind and fired it at the trunk. The whirlwind wrapped around the trunk and tore apart the vines. I still couldn't find the parasite's core around the trunk.

The level of magic I was using wasn't harmful to the sacred tree... which meant I could totally go harder. But how? I could think of a couple ways, but did I have enough mana for my plans?

I was facing a parasite that sapped mana straight from a sacred tree. Frankly, it was cheating. And if that was how it was going to be, then I'd need to play hardball.

I checked my surroundings. Kumakyu gave me a look that basically said, "*What are you doing?*"

"Don't worry about it." I went to a nook in the mountain and took off my bear onesie. No one could get in here, so I didn't need to worry about anyone seeing me change. Apart from my bear house, this was probably the safest place in the world for a change of clothes.



I changed into my white bear onesie. Kumakyu gave me a happy look that practically said “*We match!*”

Now I’d regenerate mana quicker... just like my opponent. When in Rome...

I stood in front of the sacred tree in my white bear outfit and launched tons of wind blades at it. I swung my right hand, then my left—wind blades flew from my fingertips. The blades minced the parasite’s vines, but they regenerated over and over again. I’d thought I’d be the only one attacking, until the vines turned their full attention toward me.

Wait, would they reach me?! I’d thought I was pretty far away. I leapt back, but the parasite fired the leaves right off its vines, and straight at me. Whoa, yeesh—if I’d known it could do that, I would’ve been more careful during my wardrobe change!

“Get back, Kumakyu! If anything really bad happens, cover me.”

I had Kumakyu fall back and then aimed to slice at the root of the vines, but they were regenerating quick. *C’mom, nobody likes a cheater!!!*

I made a dome-shaped earth wall to block the leaf attack. The sacred tree was fighting dirty and firing leaves at me from above. The roots stretched toward us and the leaves hurtled in our direction. They didn’t have a lot of power behind them, but the constant assault sure was annoying.

I attacked where there were opportunities, but the regeneration made every attack moot. So annoying! I needed to make sure it didn’t have *time* to regenerate. As for the annoying leaves, I’d need to get rid of ‘em. Still, if I went through with my plan, I wouldn’t just strip the parasite’s vines. I’d probably strip the leaves right off the sacred tree, probably even snap its branches.

I hoped I’d be forgiven for some *minor* sacrifices.

I had to believe that the sacred tree was stronger than the parasite. I gathered mana in my right bear puppet and swung my right hand down at a diagonal from the top right to bottom left at the sacred tree. Wind swept around the ancient tree. The wind steadily grew, widening its range. It swirled around the tree, transforming into a whirlwind.

All right, parasite, ready to start the competition? Would my mana run out? Would the parasite regenerate fast enough? Could the sacred tree stand up to the power of the whirlwind? Would the sacred tree run out of mana and take the parasite down with it? Odds were one in four. But if the parasite ran out of juice... I'd win out.

The vast whirlwind spun with the sacred tree at its center. It chopped away the parasite's vines and tore at the sacred tree's leaves. But every time the vines were cut, they regenerated.

If I made the whirlwind too strong, I'd damage the sacred tree. Hopefully, the elves wouldn't mind me sacrificing a couple of branches.

I adjusted the strength of the whirlwind and we entered into our endurance match. Cheat versus cheat. Mana regeneration skills versus mana regeneration skills. An all-out assault against an ever-growing defense.

I didn't know who would prevail.

The deadlock continued, but my whirlwind gradually chipped away at the parasite. It chopped away the vines, blast away the leaves, and snapped off the branches. The sacred tree's branches were breaking, but the trunk was fine. At this rate, I could slay the parasite.

When about half of the leaves on the sacred tree were gone, I saw something glimmering above us. At first I thought it was my imagination, but it gleamed once again... something green and shining through the gaps in the whirlwind. The moment I cut a vine, something sparkled, but then the vine would regenerate and the glimmer would vanish. A whirlwind cut and another glimmer, over and over.

I squinted—was this the parasite's mana gem? Or was it the sacred tree's mana gem? Did sacred trees even *have* mana gems? Which was it?

Hmm... even if the sacred tree did have a mana gem, it would probably be inside the trunk. And it was showing up when I was cutting the parasite's vines, so no way was it part of the sacred tree. As for the sacred tree... thankfully, it was firmly rooted in place, standing strong against the whirlwind. I hadn't damaged the trunk.

Yeah... This had to be the parasite's mana gem!

I gathered mana and strengthened the whirlwind. The sacred tree shook heavily, its leaves scattering and its thinner branches snapping. There it was, the parasite's mana gem—a green mana gem resembling a large seed, right there in the center of the upper branches. If I could destroy that mana gem, the parasite would die.

"Cwoom!!!" Kumakyu cried out in concern.

It'd be okay. I took out my Kumakyu knife from my bear storage and held it firmly in the mouth of my black bear puppet. Then I dispelled the whirlwind around the sacred tree. At that instant, I threw the Kumakyu knife at the parasite's seed-like mana gem.

The whirlwind roared. The vines of the parasite and the leaves of the sacred tree caught up in the whirlwind and fell, and the Kumakyu knife glinted silver as it soared straight into the mana gem.

The moment the whirlwind vanished, the parasite regenerated around its mana gem to protect its core. So sorry, parasite, but this isn't some normal, everyday knife. It's pure mythril, forged for me by Ghazal. The top-notch edge of the Kumakyu knife dug into the parasite's core and destroyed the mana gem.

The vines wrapped around the sacred tree stopped dead—no more moving, no more regenerating. I'd won by changing the rules of the endurance match.

They say history is written by the winners, and... okay, actually, I don't know if that makes sense if you're talking about a literal plant, but. Uh... I'd won.

So, y'know, whatever.

CHAPTER 250

THE BEAR'S PANTIES ARE LAID BARE

THE LEAVES OF THE SACRED TREE fluttered down in the dying whirlwind, pulled by the wind from their branches. The tree looked awfully barren. The extra *oomph* from the whirlwind at the end must've been a little much. It looked pretty pathetic.

It'd go back to normal after a while, right? This whole thing was making me more and more anxious...

I wracked my brain while the leaves fluttered around me. Maybe I could help it recover by giving it some mana? Or maybe recovery magic would help? That kind of stuff worked in comics and stuff. I'd... I guess I'd try it out. And if it didn't work, I'd try to just tell everybody to give it some time?

I approached the nearly barren tree, put both my bear puppets on its thick trunk, and imagined its leaves growing back while I used recovery magic. Whoa, it was practically drinking up my mana... drinking *too* much. Thanks to my white bear clothes, I was continuously recovering, but the sacred tree was absorbing it faster than my clothes could regenerate.

The tree began to glow. Wow... It kind of reminded me of an in-game event. The light was so strong, I could barely look at it. I pulled my hands away from the sacred tree and used them to shield my eyes.

The light subsided, and I slowly opened my eyes. I backed away from the tree to get a better look and, thank goodness, it was back to its bushy green self. I'd done it.

I'd used a little too much mana, though. I staggered slightly and almost fell over backward. Luckily, Kumakyu was there to support me. "Thank you, Kumakyu."

"Cwoom."

Propped up by Kumakyu, I looked up at the sacred tree. It really lived up to its awe-

inspiring name. The leaves were vibrant and beautifully colored. That's what it was meant to look like.

As I stared up at it, a commotion broke out behind me. "What the heck is that?!"



I turned around to find Mumulute, Sanya, and Arutul standing there, dumbstruck. They looked at the tree, then at me.

"What are you three doing here?" I asked. "I thought you couldn't get in because of the barrier."

"The stone glowed suddenly, and then we could get in."

Hmm. So... after I beat the parasite and gave the sacred tree mana, it went back to normal? That seemed about right, I guess?

Mumulute looked up at the revived tree. "Girl, would you explain what has come to pass here?"

Well, there wasn't really much to explain. "Uh, well, I beat the parasite and saved the sacred tree, I guess..." I tilted my head uncertainly. That was really the only answer I had for them.

"Then you must have been the source of the whirlwind?"

"That thing was *amazing!*"

I looked up at the sacred tree. Yeah, that'd been a huge whirlwind all right. It'd covered the whole tree, so it must have gotten pretty tall. I guess they could even see it, even from the outside.

"That's what I used to cut away the parasite's regenerating vines."

"You did *what* to the parasite? Is that actually possible?"

"I mean, I just had to beat the thing before it could regenerate itself," I explained.

"That's absolutely absurd!"

"When I attacked the parasite, it didn't actually hurt the sacred tree. I just thought it'd work out."

"That's impressive too, but I was actually talking about *your magic*."

Well, the parasitic vines' regenerative abilities were the only interesting thing about

it. Outside of that, it was nothing special. I could easily cut through it using wind blades, and it didn't have any ability to attack. If the vines couldn't get to you, it was newbie baby nothing-to-worry-about stuff.

Mumulute and the others seemed appalled as they listened to my explanation. I guess it wasn't easy to take in, but I really had defeated the parasite and healed the sacred tree.

"I see, I see..." Mumulute muttered. "I suppose even a cockatrice would be simple work with magic like that."

"I got the sacred tree's branches and leaves caught up in it though." I looked down at the ground, and the three of them followed suit. There was a carpet of branches and green leaves on the ground, as if a tornado had come whirling through here.

"But the sacred tree's leaves are..." The three of them looked between the spread of foliage on the ground and the bright green, thriving sacred tree.

"I am sorry," said Mumulute. "I do not think I understand."

"Father, I feel the same way."

Mumulute and Arutul both looked confused. The sacred tree still had foliage despite all of its leaves being on the ground, so that made sense. Who *wouldn't* be a little uncertain?

"Yuna, what is going on here?" asked Sanya. "I understand that your magic caused the tree to shed its leaves, but that doesn't explain how the sacred tree still looks healthy." She glanced at the leaves on the ground, then up at the lush, full branches of the tree. "In fact, the foliage is even denser than it was yesterday. It didn't look nearly this lively."

"I defeated the parasite using a whirlwind, but the sacred tree still looked worse for wear because the parasite had sapped all its mana. So I gave it some of mine. When I did that, the tree glowed and started growing leaves."

"You say you gave the sacred tree your mana?"

I wasn't lying, exactly. I was just being a little ambiguous.

"So the light came from the sacred tree..."

The leaves had probably grown back because of my recovery magic, but I didn't have an explanation for that flash of light.

"You really are reckless, giving the sacred tree your mana like that!"

I couldn't agree more. I was practically running on empty. Sure, I was wearing my white bear onesie, but that didn't mean I'd replenish my mana in such a short time. I was feeling kind of drained, so I really hoped I could go home soon and take a nap.

"Do you think the mana you gave the sacred tree was what gave it back its original powers? Girl, perhaps that is why we could enter the barrier..."

How was I supposed to know? All I knew was that I'd defeated the parasite and now the barrier was back to normal.

"I more or less understand now what happened," said Sanya, "but I have to ask: Why did you change? I was so surprised when you suddenly began to strip."

"...!" Uh, hold up. Wait, what did she just say? It sounded an awful lot like she'd been watching me undress. So... *had* she? It kinda sounded like she had!!! "Umm, were you watching me with that bird summon of yours?"

"I was worried, so... yes, I've been watching since the start," Sanya blurted out ridiculously. So she'd seen my strip show from *start to finish*?! So... Sanya had seen me in way, way, way too many states of dress.

I fell to my knees and slapped my hands to the ground. At least Sanya was a lady? I guess?!

I should've remembered her bird summon. Just thinking about how she'd been watching me change made me feel embarrassed. If Mumulute or Arutul had been watching, I would've run straight out of the forest from the sheer embarrassment.

I tried to gather up the strength to force myself back up... but Sanya knocked me off my feet with her next words. "I-it's okay. I'm the only one who saw, and it was from pretty far away. But I didn't think even your *panties* would have bears on them..."

Wham! Literally knocked me back on the ground. Agh, could I just go home?! Kumakyu tried to comfort me by rubbing up against my face. Thank you, Kumakyu.

"Really? What's so embarrassing about me seeing? I saw you undress in the bath, after all. You've seen me naked too. We're even." Sanya was trying very hard to convince me we were on the same playing field, but it was totally different! She'd seen me undressing out in the open—alone. I should've made a makeshift changing room for myself.

Now whose bright idea was *that*? Who told me that *this* was the safest place to change instead of a bear house? Okay, yes; I guess it had been my idea. Stupid past me! Wish I could give her a good talking-to about the usefulness of *actual* changing rooms...

"So, why did you change, Yuna?" Sanya asked while taking a good look at my white bear clothes. She'd seen me in my white bear onesie several times since we traveled from the capital to the elven village, but I'd never explained anything to her. She'd probably assumed they were just pajamas.

"My white bear clothes have magic replenishing capabilities," I admitted. "When I knew I had to battle the parasite, I changed."

"Really? So it wasn't a fashion choice...?"

It wasn't like I dressed this way because I liked it. The god that brought me here had made me do it. I tried to recompose myself.

After I explained everything, the three of them thanked me once again. Toward the end, I could see tears welling up in Mumulute's eyes. It was probably the stress of the last few days finally ebbing away. We'd found the parasite on the sacred tree, then the cockatrice had attacked, they'd lost the ability to enter the sacred tree's barrier... Mumulute had gone through a lot.

He really had.

This kind of stuff isn't a job for a village head like him, a lord like Cliff, or even a king. The easiest way to get through problems is to do whatever you wanted while leaving other people's troubles to themselves. Sure, that was a pretty villainous way to view things, but I couldn't quite shake the thought. You can drop a shut-in gamer into another world, but you can never quite shake away that shut-in-gamer vibe.

"Now, then," said Mumulute, "we shall take one more look at the sacred tree and then return to the village."

We got ready to head out. I needed to grab my Kumakyu knife, wherever it was—it was hard to see through all the leaves, so I'd have to go up to the sacred tree.

"My knife is up there. Could I go get it?" I asked Mumulute, who was over by the sacred tree's roots. As long as he didn't forbid me from climbing up, I'd be good.

"I can go get it for you," Sanya offered. "Where is it?"

"I can get it on my own."

"You've been shaking and stumbling since we got here. You should rest."

She was right—I'd used up too much mana and it was really draining me. It felt the same as when I'd defeated the kraken. My lack of mana was making me exhausted, and the recovery magic I'd used on the sacred tree at the end had been the cincher.

I told Sanya where the Kumakyu knife was and had her get it for me. Sanya climbed up the tree and came back with it.

"Thank you."

"I can at least manage this," Sanya told me. "It's nothing compared to what you did. You should rest."

I took her up on that and got onto Kumakyu, still wearing my white bear onesie. Sanya, Mumulute, and Arutul were starting to check out the tree. Mumulute was examining the trunk, Sanya was checking out the fallen leaves, and Arutul was observing the tree's canopy. As for me, I leaned onto Kumakyu and waited for them to finish.

CHAPTER 251

THE BEAR LEARNS OF CONTRACT MAGIC

SANYA CAME OVER after she'd finished checking on the sacred tree. "Yuna, can you move?"

"Yeah, I can. I'm a little more rested. But I don't really want to go anywhere else today." I'd recovered enough to move, but I didn't really want to. I just wanted to latch onto Kumakyu and nap.

"Of course you wouldn't," said Sanya. "You battled a cockatrice and the parasite on the sacred tree all in one day."

Mumulute nodded—he'd come up with Arutul after the two of them had disposed of the immobile vines from the dead parasite. Even if it was dead, the thing was still a parasite, so you never knew. "After accomplishing so much, girl, there's little doubt you'd be tired."

"I think that's about all we can manage," said Arutul. "The village will be curious about what happened too. Let's go back for now."

"Do you think the sacred tree will be all right?" I asked.

"I think it will, but we should observe it for a while."

The tree was gigantic. It wasn't like they could examine the entire tree that quickly. I had no idea how the parasite's seeds spread... but if they didn't check the whole place out, there was a chance they could end up with more parasite problems. All we could do was hope for the best.

We headed out of the sacred tree's cavern, going back outside to the mountain. Just in case, the three of them checked to make sure they could get back in through the barrier. They poured mana into a stone, it glowed, and they could re-enter the cave—things looked fine.

"Um, Yuna," said Sanya, "could you check that it works for you as well?"

I didn't even touch the stone like the others had and just headed straight over to the cave on my own. I stretched out my hands as I went forward. If there was a barrier, there'd be something like a wall, but I didn't feel any resistance against my hands. I just headed right into the cave.

Weird. "Wonder what's going on..."

"Girl, do you think you might have an elf as a distant relative?" Mumulute asked.

There was no way, considering I'd come from another world. I shook my head in response.

"But just having elven blood wouldn't be enough for Yuna to go inside," Sanya protested.

Again, I wondered if the bear onesie I'd gotten from the god might've let me in... not that I could say anything about that.

"Pondering over the matter will not bring us to the answer," said Mumulute. "The girl means no harm to the sacred tree. Knowing that is enough."

Of course I didn't mean any harm. If I wanted the leaves and branches, I could've just asked for them.

The village was a picture of peace itself. No monsters had come by since we'd left, thank goodness.

"Well, then," I said, "I'm going home to rest."

"By yourself?" said Sanya. "You could come back to my house to rest if you want."

"I'll ride Kumakyu, so I should be fine. And I'd be a lot more comfortable relaxing in my own home."

"Yuna," said Sanya. "Truly, thank you."

"I'm so very grateful to you, girl," said Mumulute.

"Yes, thank you," Arutul said.

After they thanked me, I got onto Kumakyu and left for my bear house. Mumulute and the others would gather the people to tell them that the parasite had been slain and that the sacred tree was back to normal.

More importantly, they were going to keep any mention of *me* out of it. I mean, if it came to light that I'd been able to get into a place where only Mumulute and a few others were supposed to be able to get into, there'd be a panic. Some people would probably even wonder if I was connected to the parasite. In the end, Mumulute and the two others were officially going to be the ones who defeated the parasite. I didn't intend to become a hero, and I didn't want to cause any trouble. The smiles of the kids who'd played with me and my bears was payment enough.

Once we got home, I cubified Kumakyu, summoned Kumayuru in cub form too, scooped them up, and headed straight to bed. The mattress felt *fantastic*.

"Kumayuru... Kumakyu... good night," I said, giving them a good cuddle.

Before long, I fell asleep with Kumayuru and Kumakyu in my arms.

I woke up in the middle of the night with my bears still sleeping in my arms. I left my room, careful not to disturb them, then went to get a light meal. When I got back to my room, I headed straight back to dreamland.

Thanks to my white bear onesie, I was in tip-top shape when I woke up the next morning. But I'd overslept, so I was still drowsy. After breakfast, I left my bear house to find Labilata waiting for me. "Uh, morning?"

"Yes, good morning."

"Did you need something from me?"

"The village head would like to speak to you."

Labilata knew the location of the bear house, so I guess he'd come all the way out here. Had he been waiting for me all this time? What did they need me for? Did it have something to do with yesterday?

"Thank you for your actions."

My... actions? Oh, no, did everybody know about the parasite now?

"You defeated the cockatrice," he continued, "and spared us much grief. If anything had happened to the village head, it would have been an absolute disaster. I'd like to thank you."

Oh, right. That. "Please don't worry about it. I just did what I could."

"You're one peculiar girl, though I suppose that's why Sanya likes you." Labilata seemed to have come to some sort of conclusion on his own—after that, he went silent.

"Sir! I've brought Yuna!" Labilata shouted into the door of Mumulute's house.

For once, we actually heard a reply. "Please, come in."

"Well, then," said Labilata, turning to leave, "I'll be off!"

"Thank you for having me," I whispered, and stepped inside.

Mumulute and Sanya waited for me in the usual room. There was no one else around, including Arutul. "We were waiting for you," said Mumulute. "Please sit."

I sat right on the ground as instructed, legs folded to the side like any other run-of-the-mill girl.

Mumulute filled me in on what'd happened after I'd gone home. He'd explained that the parasite had been defeated to the others and they'd confirmed that no one else could enter the tree's barrier.

"No one else could get in, then?"

"Yes. Several people have attempted since then, but not a single one was successful."

They'd gone back to the sacred tree again after the battle too. For a sec, I was impressed with how active they were after the whole ordeal... and then I remembered that they hadn't gone through the exhausting battle with the parasite.

"The barrier is back to normal. That was your doing, girl." Mumulute lowered his head.
"I would like to thank you."

Apparently, the monsters had also disappeared from around the elves' village. They'd been attracted by the parasite most likely, but the elves were still going to be cautious for a while.

"From what we've seen," said Sanya, "it looks like things will be fine. But we're keeping it a secret that you could go through the barrier. Still... I wonder how you managed to get inside."

The bear gear, I thought for the gazillionth time: I couldn't think of any other option. At the very least, I doubted I could get in *without* the bear gear. But I couldn't tell them the truth, though, so I just pretended to be clueless.

"I have something I'd like to ask you, girl," said Mumulute.

"What is it?"

"Are you sure you want to keep your deeds secret? We could put up a statue of you next to the sacred tree. We could tell your tale for generations to come."

"Please, no!!!" I stopped Mumulute before he could continue. Elves extolling me for *generations to come*? No, thanks, I had enough of that stuff from Mileela. I'd asked for them not to spread it beyond the sea town, but who could tell how well they'd keep that secret?

"You saved us, so I think we really ought to pass this down through our kin for generations."

"If you make a statue, I'll destroy it," I said, forming my bear puppet into a fist and raising it.

"Well... if you insist," Mumulute said reluctantly. Looked like I'd made it clear just how serious I was. He looked genuinely disappointed. Sanya was snickering next to him—jeez, could she just stop?!

If the elves passed the story down to their children, it'd probably live for thousands—no, maybe even tens of thousands of years, worst case. No way was I letting that happen!

“But I would like to thank you, Yuna,” he said. “Is there anything you’d like?”

There we go. That’s *exactly* what I wanted to hear.

First of all, I wanted a permanent place for my bear house. Then I wanted to know how to make an elven bracelet. Oh, and I also wanted leaves from the sacred tree. If I could use the branches for something, I wanted some of those too. I mean, it was basically a mythical tree, so it just had to come in handy somehow. Plus, if I kept the leaves and branches in my bear storage, they wouldn’t get in the way.

The only other thing I wanted was food. The village seemed to have plenty of mushrooms. I could roast them, eat them in a meal with some meat, or maybe put them on top of a pizza? But I was no expert in mushrooms, so it’d be dangerous for me to forage for myself. If an elf who’d been eating mushrooms for years foraged them for me, they’d probably be safe.

Let’s see, what else could I ask for...? There was still the issue of my bear house... and more importantly, my bear transporter gate. Since this place was far away from the capital, I’d seem suspect if I came and went as I pleased.

But what was I supposed to do? I wavered between asking about my bear house and not. Then again, there’d be no point in having a bear house if I couldn’t use my gate.

“Ummm...” What to do?

“Yuna, why do you seem so troubled? If there’s anything we can do, please tell us.”

“There’s something I’d like to ask for, but it’s related to one of my secrets. I’m trying to think of what to do...”

“One of your secrets?”

“Yeah. I want to tell you, but it’d put me in trouble if you did know.” How could I even explain it?

“You saved our village, girl,” Mumulute said. “We will protect your secret. We could

even use contract magic, if you would like.”

“Contract magic?”

“When we elves must bind a secret of our people,” began Mumulute, “we make use of such magic.”

Sanya nodded. “When contract magic is used, one cannot break the contract.”

What? It sounded kind of scary. “What happens if you break it?”

“The gravest consequence is the death of the oathbreaker, but it rarely comes to that. You see, it becomes hard to breathe or say anything when attempting to speak of the secret. Writing the secret out has similar consequences.”

It sounded like a curse to me, and curses were bad news. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“It is merely a contract. As long as the secret is not revealed, one is fine.”

“Right. If someone goes so far as to make a contract not to leak a secret, they really shouldn’t be talking anyway,” Sanya said.

That was true, I guess. But I didn’t want anyone suffering or dying over it. It’d only happen if they tried to talk about it, and I doubted either of them would. What if they let it slip by accident, though?

I mean, look at yesterday! I doubt Sanya had *meant* to let the thing about the bear panties slip to everyone around us.

“Is it possible to change the suffering bit of the contract?”

“Change it how?”

I thought for a moment. “Like, make it so someone can’t stop laughing or something?” I blurted. Laughing would be better than having a hard time breathing.

“You’re such a little fiend, Yuna,” Sanya said.

“What?”

“You’d have us *laugh* to death?”

What was she saying? I’d just been trying to think of a way to keep them from having to *suffer*.

“It’s not outside of our power, Yuna,” Sanya continued, “but are you sure this is what you’d like?”

“Wouldn’t non-stop laughter be better than, like, actual suffering?”

“You think that laughing forever *isn’t* actual suffering?”

Maybe so, but it sure seemed better than the alternative option of death. Anyway, it seemed fitting that for someone should suffer from nonstop laughter if they were going to try talking about my bear panties or something. If she didn’t want that to happen, then she could do exactly what Mumulute had said and kept quiet.

“All right, then,” said Mumulute. “I shall have it prepared by the morrow.”

“You can do it that quickly?”

“It is a paltry matter. We already have a magic circle to base the contract on. We must merely modify the psyche element of the spell.”

“So, who are you going to tell the secret?” asked Sanya. “Me? Or would you prefer to tell him?”

If I was going to tell anyone about the bear gate, I’d want it to be Mumulute, considering he was the head of the village, and probably Sanya too, so we could get back to the capital quickly. If I was going to set up a gate, of course I’d want to use it to get home. It’d save me a ton of trouble.

I guess I’d tell Mumulute, Sanya, and maybe also Luimin about the bear house and such. If we were going to make a contract, I could give them a bear phone too.

I told them as much.

“Luimin as well?” said Sanya.

“I think Luimin would keep it secret, so it’d be better to tell her.” Plus, I could ask her

over my bear phone if I wanted mushrooms.

"In that case, I suggest you meditate on the specific secrets you wish to keep until tomorrow," said Mumulute.

"I'm curious about what you'll ask," said Sanya.

That, too, would be a secret until tomorrow.

CHAPTER 252

THE BEAR CLEANS UP THE SACRED TREE

AFTER OUR CONVERSATION, we headed to the sacred tree. We wanted to double check whether I could enter into the barrier and do a little cleaning up while we were at it.

Mumulute, Sanya, and Arutul were supposed to be the only three who could enter the barrier, but Arutul was busy checking for monsters around the woods. If I could get in, they wanted me to help.

We headed over to the base of the craggy mountain where the sacred tree stood. Mumulute and Sanya touched the stone in front of the cave. It glowed, and they headed into the cave leading to the tree—I headed in after them.

Mumulute and Sanya watched me enter once again without me doing a thing. They looked at me quizzically.

“Very curious,” said Mumulute. “It seems you are still able to enter, girl.” As always, I could thank the bear gear for that.

Once we left the cave, a beautiful scene unfurled in front of us.

“It’s so pretty...” said Sanya. The leaves on the giant tree were sprouting and green. Light shone down from above, which made it seem as though the tree was sparkling. “We have this now because you defeated the parasite, Yuna.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “But what are we doing here?”

“We’re picking up the leaves of the sacred tree. We can use its leaves for tea.”

Sacred tree tea? What a name. That kind of concoction absolutely *had* to be good for you.

"Sanya, do these leaves have any special effects?" I asked, picking up some tree leaves near my feet with my bear puppets.

"Hmm... well, if you drink the tea, it can replenish your mana a little. It also makes you less tired." So it was kinda like a replenishing potion in a game? "If you drink it after a tiring night," she added, "you'll wake up refreshed the next morning."

Ah, okay. So it wasn't quick-acting, but it could help after a tiring day. But how did it taste? If it was good, I definitely wanted some. If it tasted bad, though, I wouldn't want to drink it no matter how good it was for me.

"By the by, how's it taste?" I asked.

"I think... like normal tea?"

Well, that didn't help.

"I thought it'd taste good because it's sacred and all."

"Everyone has their own preferences. Why don't you try some once we get back to the village?"

"Are you sure?"

"You saved the village. You don't need to be so polite," said Sanya. "Plus, we can make as much as we want whenever we want." Sanya looked down at all the fallen leaves.

She had a point. If this were the fall, we could've made a ton of roasted yams. That sounded like a nice activity to do later with Fina and the others. "Could I ask for some of the tea leaves, Sanya?"

"Sure thing," said Sanya. "Grandfather! Yuna said she'd like some of the sacred tree's leaves!"

"In that case, we shall give her leaves that have already been processed."

"Thank you!"

"We have a ton of leaves," Sanya explained, "but it takes quite a while to make them suitable for tea."

Still, I bet it'd sell great if it could help with fatigue. Maybe it could even be advertised as the "Sacred Tree's Revitalizing Tea!" Not that the elves would sell anything like that, let alone advertise the existence of the sacred tree. They were probably the only ones who got to drink the stuff.

"Let's help clean up these leaves."

Sanya and the others used wind magic to gather the sacred tree's leaves from the ground. Watching the village head and his family member gather fallen leaves sure was something. I guess they were the only ones who ever got to do this kind of thing.

I stopped just watching and got to work helping. I created a small whirlwind and funneled the leaves into it like a vacuum cleaner. Then, once the whirlwind was full of leaves, I nulled it and created a pile of leaves. After a few more whirlwinds, we were making quick work of the leaves.

"You're so good at this, Yuna," said Sanya. "Maybe I'll copy you." She created her own small whirlwind. "Oh, you're right! This makes collecting the leaves really easy!"

Soon enough, Mumulute copied us too. Gotta hand it to Elvish-kind: they're quick learners. They're experts at wind magic, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

Soon enough, we had a fair number of leaves—enough for a load of tea. I picked up a branch. Looked like the thin branches had snapped right off. Hopefully, they'd forgive me for the damage, considering I'd protected the sacred tree and all. I'd even given it some of my mana, so I doubted the tree would be mad at me. I patted the tree's trunk gently.

"Yuna, what's gotten into you?"

If I told her I was apologizing to the tree for breaking its branches, she'd probably laugh at me. "Uh... it's nothing, don't worry about it."

"Since you're gathering the branches, can you use them for something?" These were the sacred tree's branches, after all. They were probably really sturdy or fire resistant or something, right? "We'll use them to make amulets. The sacred tree has protected us for years, so it's said that amulets made from it have blessings."

"Blessings?" Like one of those things in the game? What, would they increase your luck or something?

"We think so. We elves believe that amulets of the sacred tree protect us."

So it was more like a religion for the elves. To them, it didn't matter whether it worked or not.

"Could I take some of the branches?" I asked.

"You want them?"

"After hearing all that, I kinda want some."

"All right, but I can't guarantee that they'll do anything."

C'mon, this was the sacred tree we were talking about! The branches of a tree with enough mana that it could create a barrier around the elven woods. It had to be useful for something. Any game worth its salt had an item like this.

It didn't seem like my bear storage had an upper limit, so it wasn't like carrying them was a burden. Once I got permission from Mumulute, I (kinda presumptuously) started stuffing my storage full of branches big and small.

After that, we got rid of the vines from the parasite and checked every nook and cranny to make absolutely certain that the thing was completely gone. I doubted it'd regenerate, but we had to be sure.

Once we were done, we headed back to the village. They made some sacred tree tea for me to drink, just as promised.

"How does it taste?"

The liquid was brown. It didn't look like green tea. I breathed it in to get a sense of its fragrance. It didn't smell funny. I took a sip. Yeah, seemed a little bitter, but not too bad.

I couldn't tell at all whether it had rejuvenating properties. But then again, it wasn't like I was tired.

Whether or not the tea worked, I took some anyway. If it did have rejuvenating qualities, it might be something nice to bring back for my shop workers.

CHAPTER 253

THE BEAR USES CONTRACT MAGIC

THE DAY AFTER we gathered the leaves and I took the tea, I headed to Mumulute's house to cast the contract magic.

When I knocked and headed in, Vena was waiting for me inside. "My husband is in the usual room waiting for you, so please head straight in." With that, she left and I went to the usual room.

Mumulute, Sanya, and Luimin were already waiting there.

"Yuna, we've been waiting for you. We have finished the preparations and can cast the contract at any time."

A giant carpet was rolled out in front of Mumulute today, with the most beautiful pattern on it. Would it be okay for me to sit on top of it?

"Please do not stand on the carpet," said Mumulute.

"Sorry." Dang.

"This carpet functions as the magic circle that is essential for casting contract magic."

"It does...?" I looked at the carpet again. It featured a beautiful circular pattern.

"Um, I heard I'm making a contract too?" I guess Luimin hadn't been told any details, because she seemed a little anxious.

"I want you to know some of my secrets, Luimin," I said. "But I don't want others to know about them. Would you be willing to make a contract?"

"I won't tell anyone your secrets. If you want a contract, I'll make one with you."

"Thank you, Luimin," I said, and she smiled happily.

"Well, then," said Mumulute, "let us cast the contract. Sanya and I shall make the contract first, Luimin. While we make the contract, keep an eye in front of the house to ensure no one else enters."

Anyone could wander into this house without asking for permission. Luimin went to the front entrance just as Mumulute had asked. I guess Mumulute must've asked Vena to leave earlier so we could keep these things secret, now that I thought about it.

"Let us begin the contract casting," said Mumulute. He started placing mana gems onto the carpet. There was already this huge mana gem in the center, too—a green one, about as large as the kraken mana gem I had. What kind of monster could have such a massive green gem? Probably really did rival that kraken, now that I thought about it.

As I thought that over, I watched Mumulute get to work.

"The preparations are complete. Now, all you must do is pour mana into this circle while telling us the contents of your contract."

Seemed pretty simple. "So, if you try to talk about my secret after this, it'll make you laugh so hard, it hurts?"

"Yes. If we choose to violate our promise to you, we shall be plagued with insufferable laughter."

So if I had that carpet and some mana gems, could I cast contract magic too? Now I kinda wanted that stuff, but I probably couldn't just ask for it. Or... maybe they'd make me my own set if I asked?

"Yuna, what is it that you wish to be part of the contract?"

I'd been thinking of just telling them about the bear transporter gate at first but, after putting some thought into it the other evening..."I want you to keep all my secrets quiet. Do I have to tell them to you one at a time? I don't want to tell you about them right now, but I might talk about them later, and casting contract magic again would be a pain."

"You can just sum it up for now."

"Really?"

“The contract will respond to the wishes you imbue into your mana.”

“So if I told you more secrets, they would be covered by the contract?”

“If you do not know these things that you wish to keep secret at the moment of the spell’s casting, the contract will not apply to them,” said Mumulute.

So I’d need to make a new contract with them if I, say, developed a skill to fly or something. I couldn’t just futureproof my secrets through contract magic. But at least I could include the secrets I currently had in the contract.

Jeez, fantasy worlds really had everything. Then again, the girl with the magical bear stuff was one to talk about being *fantastical*, huh...

“The only secret I know about you is the thing about your bear panties, though,” said Sanya.

I shot her a look. “Yeah, and that’s *definitely* going to be a part of it.” My bear undies were top secret. “Also, what happens when people who are under the same contract magic talk to each other about the secrets?”

“It depends on how you want to cast the spell,” said Mumulute. “If you establish that we cannot speak to *anyone* of your secrets, then it will be so. If that is not your wish, we may speak to one another of them.”

Hmm, that was a tough decision. If something happened and they couldn’t talk to each other, that could lead to more trouble than it was worth.

“All right. I’ve decided.”

“Then let us begin.”

“Oh, uh...” I puppeteered my hand bears. “Can I cast it with these on?”

“As long as you are able to pour your mana into them, you may.”

I placed my bear puppets onto the green gem. Mumulute set his own hand on the opposite side of the mana gem.

“Pour mana into it as you speak the contents of your contract.”

I did just that. “I would like you not to tell others my secrets. But this doesn’t include others who have made the same contract.”

The mana gem started to glitter then, and the room was engulfed in a green light so bright I couldn’t keep my eyes open. All the while, I kept my hands on the mana gem. Slowly, the light subsided and disappeared. I’d come this close to letting go when that light surprised me—I wish they’d told me. Still, it seemed like the contract was complete.

“That sure was bright,” said Sanya.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Mumulute. “It is said that the light is as intense as the contract. That was stronger than any other contract light I have seen. You seem to be burdened with rather heavy secrets, girl.”

Even they hadn’t expected the light to be so bright, then... or that my contract would be so heavy. I guess my secrets did include stuff about how I was from another world, that there was a god involved, and all the stuff about my bear onesie. Plus, the contract included stuff I wasn’t going to tell them about yet. No wonder it half-blinded us all.

“Looks like I’m up next,” said Sanya. She took Mumulute’s place, and right as she touched the mana gem, we heard footsteps rushing into the room.

“Grandfather! Sister!! What was that light?!” It was Luimin. She looked around, concerned. “I saw a terrific burst of light through the window!” Wow, the light had even made its way outside?

“It is all right,” said Mumulute. “She simply cast some contract magic. The mana gem responded to her mana and lit up.”

“Sorry, Luimin,” said Sanya, “but I need to make a contract next. Could you guard for a little longer?”

“Yeah.” Luimin headed back to the front door.

“Let’s get this over with quickly now.” Sanya touched the mana gem again. I touched the mana gem on the other side and cast the contract with Sanya. The light was as strong as when I’d made the contract with Mumulute.

“I suppose Luimin is the only one left.”

"Let us see if it worked prior to that," Mumulute said.

"See if it worked?"

"You wouldn't simply believe it worked without checking, would you?" Mumulute replied. "Besides, I would like to see what form this laughing takes as well."

True, we *did* need to see if all the casting had actually done something. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"It should be fine as long as we do not finish telling your secrets. Luimin! Please come here!" Mumulute shouted over.

"Is it my turn for the contract?"

"Before that, we must confirm that the contract worked in the first place."

Huh? "But I haven't told you my secrets yet."

"That should be fine. There are already some that we know."

"Right."

"Grandfather, please try it out," Sanya said.

"No, I do believe this is something best left to a grandchild."

They glared at each other.

"All right, all right..." said Sanya. "I'll check first, but then it's *your* turn."

"I... Well, I suppose," he relented.

"Luimin, come over here." Luimin approached, Sanya looked down at her,

and..."Well, then, let's try this one: Yuna's pa-pa-pa-pan..."

"Wait, you—" Hold on, Sanya was going in with *that*!?

"Her what...?" Luimin tilted her head slightly.

At least she hadn't realized what Sanya had been about to say, but I knew. Sanya had started to say the word "panties" but hadn't been able to finish—she was trying to talk about my underwear! She grinned and laughed loudly. When she tried to speak again, she laughed so hard, she had a coughing fit, cried, and started rolling around on the floor. She kept starting again, stopping after hitting "pan," and breaking out into laughter. If I didn't know about the contract magic, I would've thought she was laughing at me and my bear panties...

She seemed to be having a terrible time with the laughing fit. Actually, maybe this was worse than the kind of suffering normal contract magic caused? It took a few minutes until she was done.

"Haaaaah! A-ah, G-Grandfather! It's even worse than a normal contract," Sanya complained, out of breath.

"How would I have known that?" Mumulute seemed grim at the sight of Sanya's condition. I guess he hadn't expected it to be this bad either.

"But now, Grandfather," said Sanya, "it's your turn." She handed Mumulute a pen and paper, grinning diabolically.

Mumulute tried to escape his fate. "I do not think that is necessary. We already have confirmation that it worked, after all."

"You can't be the only one who gets out of it, Grandfather. Let's make sure that you can't write it out either." Sanya thrust the pen and paper in his face. "We need to check."

"I..." Mumulute took the writing utensil and paper with a defeated air. Then he started to write. He was probably trying to write about my bear underwear too.

After a few letters, his hand started to shake and instead of writing, he ended up flinging his pen away and balling up the paper before falling into the exact same bout of hysterics Sanya had fallen into earlier. Sanya allowed herself a small smile this time. Luimin just looked worried.

Hmm. This was... pretty bad. I guess going with laughter hadn't been such a good idea after all. Sanya might've been serious when she'd said the normal contract would have been better than this...

After a few minutes, Mumulute sat down wordlessly as though nothing at all had

happened. "Ahem." He looked over at me. "I suppose you know how contract magic works now."

"I'll never talk about any of your secrets," Sanya vowed. It seemed like seeing the absolute state of Mumulute during his fit had made her realize what a spectacle she'd been too. Who wouldn't want to keep themselves from laughing like that in front of other people? I just about would've died of embarrassment.

"You're last, Luimin."

"Um, do I really need to make a contract?" After seeing the other two, Luimin looked rather reluctant. Given what she saw, I couldn't blame her. "I'll never tell anyone your secrets, Yuna. I promise!"

"Luimin, we promised this to Yuna," said Sanya. "She saved our village. And she has something she wants to ask for, but she also doesn't want us to tell anyone else. Even so, she still trusted you to know about it. Are you going to go against her wishes, even after all of that?"

Sanya looked very sad. Yep, she really knew how to lay a lie on thick. She was just putting on an act so Luimin couldn't get out of it... and it was absolutely working.

"All right," said Luimin. "I just need to never tell anyone. But... I don't want to test out whether it works."

Luimin wouldn't budge on that. If I were in her place, I'd straight out say no, so I'd take what I could get.

As Luimin set up her contract, Sanya guarded us out front.

CHAPTER 254

THE BEAR TELLS HER SECRETS

WE'D FINISHED CASTING contract magic on the three of them.

"Now, then... what is this oh-so-guarded secret you wish to share?"

"I want to build a house," I said.

"That is no issue, but what will you *do* with a house?" asked Mumulute. "You told me days ago that you do not intend to live here."

"Yeah. Well, I want to put one of *these* in the house." I pulled out a bear transporter gate in front of them.

"Yuna! What is this thing?!" Sanya cried. The three of them were shaken by the sudden appearance of the door.

"It's a transporter gate. If I open this, I can get to my house in the capital. If I set up a house, it'll be easier for me to come and go as I please in your village."

"That's impossible..." muttered Mumulute.

Sure, it was impossible... but not for me. I took my pupeted hand and opened the door to demonstrate. They expected to see the inside of Mumulute's room, but instead they got a glimpse of a room in my capital-location bear house.

The three of them gazed through the door at the impossible scene.

"What is going on here?"

"That door, it's..."

"Hrm..."

Wide-eyed, they stared through the open bear door. Sanya looked behind the

transporter gate and circled around it, looking confounded. Luimin peeked in through the door but didn't try to enter.

"Does this really lead to the capital?" she whispered.

"It's connected to my home in the capital, yeah."

I headed through the door first into my room. After I demonstrated how to go through it, Sanya gingerly stepped inside, followed by Luimin and Mumulute. The three of them stared all around the room—*my* room, the place where I'd put the bear gate. I hadn't really decorated, so it was kind of dreary.

"Is this really your room in the capital?" asked Sanya.

I nodded. "I think you'll recognize it if you go outside."

Since they couldn't know for sure that this was the capital yet, I led them outside. The capital spread out before us. Sanya and Luimin recognized it immediately—the former from her years there, the latter from collapsing right in front of my place all that time ago.

It was as if they couldn't believe their eyes. They stared looking at two identical buildings ahead, the tallest structures in the capital.

"The castle..." started Sanya. "Is this really the capital?"

"I can't believe it," said Luimin.

"In but a fleeting moment, we..." Mumulute trailed off.

Sanya was flabbergasted by the familiar scenery and Luimin couldn't stop turning her head to look at our surroundings. Mumulute just stared in surprise at the castle.

Suddenly, Sanya tried to start walking, but I grabbed her arm with my bear puppet.

"Sanya, where are you going?!"

"To check..."

"I'm pretty sure you don't need to check anything to know this is the capital."

"You have a point, but..." She knew this was the capital on some level, but I guess it was hard to fully accept.

"If someone you know sees you, that's going to cause problems. You're not supposed to be here, remember? So let's go back."

It'd be such a pain if someone spotted her because we were standing around gawking outside of the bear house. I pulled on Sanya's arm, patted Luimin on the back, and called Mumulute back.

Before long, the whole bunch was back in the bear house. From there, we went back through the bear gate to Mumulute's place and I closed the gate behind us.

"I cannot believe it," Mumulute said as he sat cross-legged on the ground.

"Yuna, what is this?" Sanya asked. She reached out and touched the transporter gate.

"It's one of my magical devices." I couldn't tell them it was a skill some god had given me, but this was close enough.

"A magical device?"

"It's a device that lets me connect two gates so I can travel between them."

"Where did you get something like this?"

"Sorry, but that's as much as I can tell you. I'm really pushing it as it is." That was about as much as I could say about the transporter gates.

"But—" Sanya started.

"Sanya!" Mumulute barked. "She said that she cannot tell us more. There are things that we cannot speak of either, as you well know. And she has already revealed so much about her secrets. That is enough. Regardless of how she acquired the device, she is the same girl as before."

"Grandfather..." Sanya bit back her words and went silent.

It felt like she was holding back a *lot* of questions. But however she felt, I couldn't tell her more than this.

Sanya gave a resigned look to Mumulute and me, then sighed. "All right. I won't ask anything else. Anyway, I bet any answer you gave about *this* would keep me up at night. But... why did you tell us about such a great secret? Wouldn't it have been better to keep it from us?"

That was a great question. "Like I said, I'd like to be able to come and go through the elves' village as I please. Luimin and Mumulute both know I've come from the capital, and Luimin knows exactly how far away it is. If I kept returning to the village, she'd notice something was up."

"Yes, I would!" Luimin nodded enthusiastically. If anyone knew how arduous it could be to reach the capital, it was her.

"But I want to be able to visit the village whenever I want, so I wanted Luimin and Mumulute to know. I'd like you to get people off my trail if there are any villagers who think there's something going on."

"Why tell me?" Sanya asked.

"We're going home together, aren't we? If I don't tell you, getting back to the capital would be a slog. Plus, if there's anything up at the elves' village, you'll be able to use the transporter gate to come right back. It'll benefit you too." Although I really hoped there wouldn't be trouble like this at the elves' village again any time soon...

"I suppose you have a point. If I can instantly get home, I wouldn't need to go on such a long journey to get here. And it would be so much easier," Sanya admitted.

We could take the long trip home to the capital in a second. Who wouldn't love something like instant travel?

Sanya put a hand on the transporter gate and tried to open it.

"It won't open for anyone but me," I said.

"Really?" Sanya tried testing it out for herself, but the door wouldn't budge. Luimin even tried to help, but no dice. "It really won't open..."

"Yeah. You won't be able to travel through it by yourself."

"That's a shame. I was hoping I could borrow it every once in a while."

If just anyone could use these things, that'd be a big problem for a ton of reasons. I had to admit, the god had done a good job keeping these things secure.

They gave up and moved away from the gate.

"We can go to the capital just by opening this doorway," said Luimin, deflated. "But I went through so much just getting there..." It looked like she thought her trip had been for nothing.

"You can only travel between established gates, so we would've had to travel no matter what."

"That's true, but..." Luimin didn't seem very convinced.

She'd gone through some harrowing, tear-jerking stuff on the way over. I mean, when I'd first met her, she'd been a miserable, starving wreck collapsed in front of my house. Apparently finding out that there was a way to get to and from the capital easily had made Luimin feel like her arduous journey to the capital had been for nothing. I figured the experience traveling solo had probably been good for her, though, so it wasn't all a waste.

"If we'd used the transporter gate," I said, "you never would've met Miranda. You might've never met me, either. Don't take those meetings for granted by wishing you'd never gone on the journey."

"You're right," she said. "I met you and Miranda because of all the things that happened on my trip."

"I feel like I've just figured out why you sometimes pop up out of nowhere in the capital," said Sanya.

"You keep that to yourself."

"I know well enough to do that. I'd never imagine telling anyone, and I wouldn't betray you after you saved the village. And to endure *that* ordeal? Again? No thanks." Sanya hugged herself and shivered a little. I guess she was remembering that hellish laughing fit she'd suffered. "I was wondering what your secret could be, but I never expected it to be this ridiculous." She sighed, exasperated. "Now I understand why the light from the contract was so bright."

Since they understood now, I put away the bear transporter gate.

"So... is that door your only secret, Yuna?" asked Sanya. "If that's all, maybe it would have been better to just cast the spell on that instead of basically everything."

"A young lady has many secrets," I said.

"Like your bear underwear?"

"Sanya, would you like to make the trek back to the capital on your own?"

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding!" Sanya clasped her hands together. "Sorry."

"So, do you have other secrets?" Luimin asked.

I looked at her. "Luimin, could you show me your hand?"

Luimin held it out. "What is it?" She wasn't even suspicious. I placed a cartoonified bear ornament on top of her palm. "It's so adorable! Is this for me? I'll put it somewhere in my room!" Luimin happily inspected the bear phone.

"That's no ordinary bear decoration."

"It's not?" Luimin tilted her head curiously.

"It's a magical device that lets you talk to me from long distances."

"From... long distances?" Luimin cocked her head to the side again like she wasn't getting it.

"Could you explain further?" Sanya asked.

"It's just what I said. No matter how far away we are, we can use the bear dolls to talk to each other." I pulled out the other bear phone.

"So Luimin and I can talk even if I'm in the capital and she's in the village?"

"You and Luimin couldn't, so no."

"Why?"

"This device won't work unless I'm using one of them."

Sanya seemed bummed out by that part. "I do think it sounds amazing, but is it really possible to talk to each other over long distances?"

How was *this* unbelievable after seeing the transporter gate? "Um... well, Luimin, I'll show you how it works. Let's practice."

"Sure..." Luimin gripped the bear phone, looking nervous.

"It's not that hard. All you do is hold it and pour mana into it while thinking about who you want to talk to. This time, you'll think about me." I demonstrated just that, and the bear phone in Luimin's hands started to coo out: "Cwoom, cwoom."

"The bear is crooning!"

"When the bear calls out, it's a signal that I want to talk, so you'll be able to talk to me by pouring some mana into it."

Luimin poured in some of her mana like I said, and the bear phone stopped crooning.

"Next, you'll want to talk into the bear phone. You'll hear my voice coming from the bear's mouth. You try now, Luimin."

"O-Okay." Luimin closed her eyes and grasped the bear phone. This time, my phone was the one to start crooning. Luimin beamed at the bear phone going off in my hand. "The bear is calling out."

"Now if I pour mana into this, no matter how far away we are, we'll be able to talk with each other."

"Yuna," said Luimin hesitantly, "you're sure we can *really* talk with these?"

"Okay. Luimin, you go over there a little way," I told her. Once I showed her that it worked, she'd probably believe me.

"Um, how far?"

"Into another room where you can't hear my voice, maybe?"

“Then I’ll go up to the second floor.”

“Once you’re up there, pour that mana into the phone.”

“Okay.”

Luimin pitter-pattered out of the room. After a while, a “Cwoom, cwoom” came over the phone I was holding. I poured some mana into it to get it to stop.

“Um, Yuna? Can you hear me?”

“I can.”

“I really can hear you, Yuna!”

“By the way—Sanya, if I’m holding the phone, you can talk into it too.” I held the bear phone in front of her.

“Luimin, can you hear me?”

“Yeah, I can, Sister.”

“Can you hear me too?” Mumulute spoke into the phone too.

“Yeah, I can!”

Test successful! “Okay, now you can come back.”

“Okay!” After she replied, I heard Luimin coming down the stairs.

“That was amazing, Yuna!” she said, rushing back into the room like it was Christmas morning. “I really could hear all of your voices.”

“Can we really talk no matter how far away you are?” Sanya asked.

“We can.” I’d already tried it out to talk to Fina in Crimonia.

“Are you sure I can have this?”

“Yeah. If I’m coming to the elves’ village, I’ll give you a heads-up, and you can let me

know if anything happens too.”

“All right. But it’s too bad I can’t speak directly to my sister with it.”

“If anything happens,” said Sanya, “I’ll send you a message, at the very least.”

“Please do.”

“But be careful when you try using the phone,” I told Luimin. “If anyone finds out about it, you’re in for a hell of a lot of laughter.”

“Uh... it can start calling very suddenly, right?”

“Well, yes, when I’m the one calling.”

“All right. If you’re calling, I’ll run over somewhere where no one is around.” Luimin squeezed the bear phone in her hands.

“Does this have a name?” Sanya asked.

“I call it a bear phone.”

“A bear...” Sanya trailed off for a moment.

“A bear *fone*. What a cute name!” said Luimin. She had the right idea, calling it cute. What a good girl.

“And that door from earlier,” said Sanya, “is called... what?”

“A bear transporter gate.”

“A bear...” Okay, Sanya, jeez. Look, I wasn’t the one to come up with the names...

CHAPTER 255

THE BEAR GOES BACK TO THE CAPITAL

WITH THE BEAR transporter gate and the bear phone out of the way, that was two secrets down.

"As the head of this village, I will keep our promise and guard your secrets. I welcome your return to this village at any time with open arms," said Mumulute. "Now, then... you would like a place to put a bear house in order to set up a gate?"

"Somewhere inconspicuous would be great, if possible."

"You currently have it upstream of the river, yes? That would make it easy for the children to spot since they play in the river." I could only imagine how big of a deal this could all get if someone found it.

"After thinking on it, I was wondering... would over by the sacred tree work?" I could put it on the mountain, safely protected by the sacred tree's barrier. Only a few people could enter the place, let alone see it, but... it was a sacred spot to elven kind. Still, I had to ask.

"You're right that we're the only ones who can enter that place," said Sanya, but that's where her answer faltered. She looked over at Mumulute.

"There is something I wanted to tell you, Sanya," said Mumulute.

"What is it?"

"After much consideration after these incidents, I am planning to reconstruct the barrier. You do not plan to return for a time, is that right?"

"That's right. I'm planning to live outside the village for a while."

"You, Arutul, and I must be available to dissolve the barrier. However, the future is always uncertain. Who knows when we'll need your help? I believe we should put our trust in Luimin, considering she is living in the village."

“In me?!” Luimin was incredulous.

“Luimin, you have grown. I am sure you are capable of creating a barrier now.” I remembered Sanya mentioning that Luimin had been too small to put up a barrier before, but that’d been ten years ago. It *had* been a whole decade, so she must’ve grown.

“We cannot be certain that something similar won’t happen again in the future,” he continued. “Think of yourself as Sanya’s substitute until she returns to the village.”

“You’re right,” said Sanya. “That would let me rest easy too.”

Mumulute turned to me. “We are remaking the barrier. It is possible that you might not be able to enter it anymore. But if you can, I would not mind if you were to put your house there.”

Okay, so Mumulute was just worried about whether I’d still be able to access the inside of the barrier. Call me a cynic, but some part of me had been sure that they were remaking the barrier *because* I could get into it.

“If I can’t get back into the barrier, what should I do with the house?”

“Why, you can put it anywhere you would like, of course.”

If the sacred tree’s barrier wouldn’t work, I guess I’d keep it upstream of the river. I’d think about it after we figured out the barrier situation.

“Are you sure all you’d like is a place to put your house?” Mumulute asked. “I do not yet feel that we have paid you back. While your gate that travels to the capital is beneficial to you—just as Luimin’s magical device of *long* distance benefits you—those benefit us as well. Being able to quickly reach Sanya helps us greatly. You did not simply get rid of the parasite, Yuna. You slew the cockatrice for us as well. Please let us know if there is anything else you would like.”

“As long as I’ve got your permission to come to the village, that’s good enough for me. It’ll be a lot of work shaking everyone off my trail whenever I come in, after all.”

“That will not be an issue. We can simply say you came from a nearby town... though we likely should let Arutul know, in that case.”

"You're right. If you're setting up the house in the barrier, we should let Father know as well. It'll become an issue if you run into him within the barrier at some point."

I guess a bear house suddenly popping up near the sacred tree would take anyone by surprise. If he were to see me leaving the house, I wouldn't even know what to say.

"Quite right," Mumulute said. "May we tell Arutul about this? Even if you were to build your house somewhere else other than by the sacred tree, letting Arutul know would resolve issues before they can arise. He is to become the next village head. It will be easier to convince the other elves to help if he knows the details."

"As long as he's willing to make a contract." Would he do it? He'd be in for some painful laughter...

"Luimin, please call in Arutul."

"I will." Luimin left the room.

"I do suspect that Labilata will be difficult to convince," said Mumulute.

"It should be fine. He's taking a liking for Yuna, after all," Sanya said. "He'll follow any directions you give him, Grandfather."

If they were right, great. I didn't see any reason not to believe them. "Oh, and would it be possible for me to get an elven bracelet? You know, like the ones Sanya and Luimin have?"

"You desire power over the wind that greatly?" Mumulute asked.

"I was hoping to give one to a girl I know as a present." I thought it'd make Fina happy to have one.

"Unfortunately, those cannot be made." (Yep. Knew it.) "They are a gift from parent to child. I am sorry, but we cannot make one for you." He bowed his head.

"Nah, it's fine. Sorry for putting you on the spot there." I only wanted to give one to Fina if it was easy to get a hold of. But a feast of mushrooms and wild plants from the elves' village would do just as well for her.

Some time after they finished hearing me out, Luimin brought back Arutul.

"Grandfather, I've brought father."

"Father, what is it?" Arutul asked.

"Please form a magical contract with the girl, Arutul," said Mumulute. "The contract would be to keep her secrets."

Arutul looked flabbergasted, of course. Who wouldn't be perplexed when someone was demanding for them to make a magical contract with me the moment he walked in the door?

"We have already made our contracts with her," he continued. "However, now that we know her secrets, we believe it would be best for you to know them as well."

"Did Luimin make a contract too?" Arutul looked at Sanya.

"Yes," said Sanya with a nod. "She did."

"All right."

"Are you sure?" I asked him. No one had even told him what the contract was for.

"My father, the head of the village, has made this decision. Besides, I couldn't break my word to the girl who saved our whole village."

And so Arutul ended up making a contract with me too. We told him about the bear transporter gate and putting the bear house within the sacred tree's barrier. Of course, that all hinged on whether I could get back into the barrier after it was remade. If I couldn't, I'd need to set up my bear house and bear gate somewhere else.

We needed Arutul to keep the story straight. As the son of the village head, he had a lot of clout. Now that I had contracts with the reigning Elvish family itself, I'd be able to come to the elves' village without anyone learning the real story.

Also, when I took Arutul over to the capital, he was just as surprised as Mumulute and the others.

After that, we headed out to give the sacred tree a new barrier.

Mumulute, Arutul, and Luimin made the barrier together. I didn't see when it actually happened, but Luimin sure looked tired when she came back. It uses up a lot of mana, I guess, but it looked like it had worked.

Even after they'd replaced the barrier, I was still able to go in and out of it as I pleased. All of them gave me weird looks when I did that.

"I thought that you wouldn't be able to get in anymore after the new barrier was put up. Looks like I was wrong." Sanya touched the invisible wall that now prevented her from going into the cave leading to the sacred tree. "Oh, but you're putting the doorway up in your house, aren't you? Then I won't be able to get back to the capital since I can't get into the barrier."

"That's fine," I said as I pulled out my gate. "It'll be more of a pain, but I can set up the gate outside the barrier in order to let you go to the capital first. Then I can head into the barrier and follow after."

"Just one question: what happens if I arrive at Yuna's house inside the barrier?"

Well, that *was* a question. "Why are you looking at me? I don't know either."

"Grandfather?"

"There is no way to know. We have never had this happen before."

"Then how about we test it out?"

"Uh, isn't that dangerous?" I asked.

"A barrier is just meant to keep people out," Mumulute explained. "It won't kill you."

We decided to try it out. I set up my bear house inside the barrier, then came back where Sanya waited outside.

"Okay, I'm going to connect it to where the sacred tree is inside the barrier." I connected the gates and passed through the doorway. Sanya tried to head in too, but an invisible force field kept her out.

"I can't get in. It's like an invisible wall, just like with the cave."

She touched the invisible obstacle in front of her. That barrier was pretty strong. I'd need to set up a bear gate outside the barrier if I wanted to bring Fina along. Still, I couldn't do much about that. Mumulute and the others probably wouldn't feel great about having strangers wandering willy-nilly around their sacred tree.

A few days after I defeated the parasite, Sanya and I decided to head home to the capital. While I waited for Sanya at the entrance of the village, the villagers stopped by.

"Please come again, bear girl!" the kids pleaded. Some of them looked sad, but that was just how things were.

"I'll be back," I told them.

"Will you really?"

I wasn't lying. I was planning on coming back, so I nodded.

As I said bye to the kids, Labilata came by too. "Yuna, I will never forget our debt to you. If you ever need my help, I will lend a hand."

"I'll come by the village again sometime," I said, "so you better mean that."

"I will. I'll welcome you with open arms anytime."

"Thank you."

As I talked to Labilata, Sanya finally made an appearance. "Thanks for waiting, Yuna. Oh, Labilata—you're here too?"

"Yes. I was thanking her."

"We can't really thank her enough, can we? Yuna... thank you so much for everything you did."

"Please don't worry about it. I'm the one who insisted on coming along, after all."

"All the more reason to thank you. If you hadn't come, we might've needed to abandon the village. You did so much for us."

Labilata was nodding next to her.

"You already thanked me," I said, "so you really don't need to mention it." I felt kind of bad, getting so many thank-you's.

Sanya started saying her goodbyes to Labilata, but then the conversation took an unexpected twist. "Labilata, I told you yesterday. You really don't need to wait for me."

"Don't worry about it," he said.

"I don't know how long I'll be."

"If I wait another decade and you don't come back, I'll come by to get you."

Whoa. It sounded like there was something seriously deep going on between them.
"Sanya?"

"Oh, right. Labilata is my fiancé," she said without batting an eye, as if it wasn't momentous.

"Your *fiancé*?!" I repeated.

"Well, he's supposed to be, at least."

I looked at Sanya, then Labilata. "Should you really be working at the capital's Adventurer Guild when you've got someone like *that* at home?!"

"I enjoy being the guild master."

She enjoyed it? Well, I guess I got what she meant. I was the type to choose fun over love too. And I was really one to talk, considering I'd never dated anybody. "But don't you feel bad for Labilata?"

"That's why I told him not to wait. I'm not sure when I'll come back to the village."

"It's fine. I can wait for a decade," he said.

So Sanya wasn't planning on getting hitched to some other guy or something?

"If I've forgotten," said Sanya with a wry smile, "you can come and get me."

"Oh, I shall..."

They really were hopelessly in love with each other. Then again... if elves were fine not seeing each other a whole ten years, I guess it made sense another decade was a drop in the bucket.



Elves, man.

I let the two silly lovebirds be and decided to leave, just in time for Mumulute and Luimin to come by.

"You did so much for us, truly," said Mumulute. "I'd like to thank you."

"Thank you so much, Yuna. Please come back!" said Luimin.

"I will." I mean, I wanted their wild plants and mushrooms for eating, so I'd definitely be back.

After we said our goodbyes, I headed to the mountain with Sanya and went to the sacred tree. Luimin and Mumulute came with us. I pulled out the transporter gate and opened the doorway to the capital bear house.

"Sister, please make sure to come home again."

"Yes, this time I'll come sooner rather than later. It'll be a much easier journey, after all." Sanya looked over at me.

"I'll have to start charging a toll."

"Ha ha! Any price would be cheap." I guess compared to that long road, a little fee was nothing. And as the capital's guild master, Sanya was probably loaded.

"Please take good care of my sister," Luimin told me.

"Hey! I'm the older sister here!" Sanya objected.

I didn't really want to get into an age competition with any elves.

"But Yuna's got her life together way more than you."

"You can't be serious. You do realize I'm the Adventurer Guild's master, right?" Sanya turned away. When I'd first met her, she'd seemed dignified, but now, she really didn't. I guess that just went to show how well I'd gotten to know her.

Smiling at the thought, I looked back to Luimin. "Let me know when you've got new sacred tree tea leaves, okay? I'll come back right away."

"Yes, I will. Yuna, thank you for everything. Really. I was so lucky to have met you in the capital."

"It makes me happy to hear that."

"I'll be back, Grandfather," said Sanya.

"Mm-hmm. Don't you go making Labilata wait too long now, you hear?"

Sanya smiled as she went through the transporter gate. I put away the gate, then headed to the cave. The barrier didn't stop me as I passed through and used the gate in my bear house to get to the capital.

CHAPTER 256

THE BEAR RETURNS TO CRIMONIA

ONCE WE GOT to the bear house in the capital, Sanya and I headed outside.

“I still can’t believe it,” she said, looking out at the capital scenery with wonder. “We were in the village just a second ago, and now...”

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

“Oh, I know. I don’t plan on laughing to death any time soon, thank you very much. And I certainly don’t intend to give you any reason to hold a grudge... not when I owe you for saving the village. If you run into any trouble in the capital, don’t hesitate to come to the Adventurer Guild. Got it?”

As the capital’s Adventurer Guild guild master, Sanya’s word meant a lot. Being on the right side of the authorities always came in handy too, when push came to shove.

“All right, Sanya, I’m heading home too. If anything happens, let me know.”

“Oh, right! Yuna, would you take this?” She stopped me in my tracks and thrust a... key holder? Thing? With *feathers on it*?

“And this is?”

“It’s made from Folg’s—ah, I mean, my bird summon’s feathers,” she said, then summoned her bird. It perched on Sanya’s arm, noble and eagle-like.

“I see. So the bird that watched me change was called Folg.” That was kind of a cool name. It put up some competition against Kumayuru and Kumakyu, that’s for sure.

“Are you still not over that?” Sanya said. “That’s your own fault for undressing so suddenly.”

True, but I wasn’t about to admit that. “Okay, so what’s this thing?” I asked about the keyholder. It had a few brown feathers on it.

"You can keep that on you or put it up in a window at your house. Folg will use it as a guide to fly to you. If anything happens, I'll let you know."

Okay, so I guess that made Folg a little like a carrier pigeon? I had no idea that Sanya's summon could do that. But then, pigeons could fly long distances, so I guess a summoned bird could too.

"I actually would have much preferred one of those bear-shaped magic devices, like the one you gave Luimin," said Sanya.

"I don't have more of them," I lied. I felt like she'd use it to give me work if I let her have one.

"I know that. I wasn't assuming you had multiples."

I mean, I could just make more if I wanted to, though I was the only one people could call on them. Sorry, Sanya. "So, I can put this up in my room?"

"That should work, since Folg will fly to his own feathers."

Guess that meant I couldn't leave this in my bear storage. I had no idea how the bear storage system worked, but I doubted even a summoned bird could fly to it. It'd be better for me to put it up in my house like Sanya had asked.

"I'll put it up, but you better not contact me about work with it."

"Aww, that's just too bad," she said, not looking disappointed in the slightest.

Well, this was the capital, and there were tons of adventurers around. It wasn't like she had to go out of her way to get me. "If you could do something like this, then couldn't you have had him fly to the village?"

Everyone I'd talked to had said they hadn't heard from her in ten years. If she had a summon, she could've had it deliver a letter, at the very least.

"At the time, I'd never had him fly that far. I hadn't even dreamed of it. I'm not sure if he could make it to the village. I'm planning to send a letter to Labilata to find out. If not, then I'll ask you to take it instead."

"If you just want me to hand him a letter, sure." As long as it wasn't one letter a day or

something like that. But knowing Sanya, it was more likely to end up being one letter a year.

Now that I'd actually finished all the important things I needed to do, I finally headed to Crimonia with my transporter gate. Before I could forget, I put the keyholder up in a window in my room. I guess that was it? Well, I doubted Sanya would have anything to tell me. If she did try to call me nonstop for some cruddy jobs, I'd smack the thing down.

After I'd done that, I headed out of my house. Hmm, it'd been a while since I'd been back in Crimonia... or at least it felt like it, though I guess it was more like ten days. The scene in front of my eyes felt nostalgic. It really felt like I was home... like this was my hometown now instead of just another place to sleep.

I headed to the orphanage to let Tiermina and the others know I was back, since that was the most likely place they'd be around this time. When I got to the front of the building, I found the little kid gang running around energetically outside. It almost looked like they were playing tag, which I'd taught them a while back.

Before long, the kids noticed me watching them. "Bear girl!" "Big sis!"

The kids ran over to me, all smiles.

"Have you all been doing well?" I asked. "You haven't been causing any problems for the headmistress, right? Or fighting?"

"Nuh-huh, we've been doing good!"

"We work like we're 'sposed to!"

"We're not fighting!"

The kids gave me enthusiastic responses.

"Looks like you've all been good." I gave each and every one of them a pat on the head—if I left even one of them out, some of them would complain. "Are Tiermina and Fina here?"

"Yeah, they're with the headmistress right now."

I guess they were done with the eggs, then. I opened the door to the orphanage and headed in. When I got to the dining room, I found Tiermina and the headmistress talking over tea.

"Y-Yuna, you're home?"

"Welcome back, Yuna."

"Thank you. I just got in." I took a seat nearby. "Anything unusual happen while I was out?"

"Unusual... yes! It was so hectic without you around!" Tiermina stood up almost like she'd just remembered something.

Wait, what?!

"Lady Elleaura, the wife of the lord, came by with someone claiming to be the palace's head chef! It was such an ordeal."

Fina had mentioned something like that too, hadn't she? Tons of stuff had happened since then, so I'd just plain forgot.

According to Tiermina, Milaine had suddenly summoned her to the Merchant Guild. When she'd arrived, she'd been introduced to a woman and a man—Elleaura and Zelef. Once she'd found out who Elleaura and Zelef were, she'd apparently lost the ability to speak.

But it wasn't like all of that was my fault. It wasn't any reason for her to be mad at me. It was *Elleaura's* fault for not setting it up ahead of time. Then again, I'd barge into the castle without warning, so it wasn't like I could really tell others off for that.

"Just thinking about what would've happened if Fina wasn't there gives me a knot in my stomach..." Tiermina continued.

"Fina?"

"Yes, Fina talked to them both. If Fina hadn't been there, I'm not sure we would have been able to receive them properly."

"But Ellelaura really should've warned us she was coming," I said. I would've still wanted to go to the elves' village, though, so I might not have been here even if she had. But there probably would have been a way to make it work. We could have asked her to come on a different day, maybe?

"Based on how Lady Ellelaura was conducting herself, Yuna, I think she wanted to surprise you."

Fina had said something like that too. They'd been pretty dead set on surprising me and ended up disappointed when I hadn't been there to surprise. "What did they come here for?"

Fina had told me, but I wanted to make sure.

"They want to build one of your restaurants in the capital, so they came to look at your shops for ideas."

"But that place isn't supposed to be one of mine. Like, sure, they're selling pudding and my recipes, but in the end, the people from the castle are managing it. I'm not involved."

"Really?"

"I just taught him how to make the recipes."

It wasn't like I'd invested money into the place, and I didn't know the people who would actually work there. It wasn't one of my shops. But Tiermina had taken Ellelaura and Zelef over to the Bear's Lounge.

"We took them to the shops. They caused such a commotion, and it was so hectic!"

They'd made a fuss while standing in front of the bear statues in front of the shops. And when they'd actually gone inside, they just walked wherever they wanted. They'd even ogled every bear ornament on every table! I could totally see Ellelaura walking around a shop like she owned the place.

"Did Zelef really do that too?"

"Zelef was staring at the customers' food as they were eating."

Ah, so that's what he'd zeroed in on. But what were they thinking? Hopefully, they hadn't gotten in the other customers' way. "Did everything turn out all right?"

"Yes, Fina got them to settle down." *Fina* had? "She talked to Lady Ellelaura as they wandered the building and had everyone sit down. I was so surprised to see Lady Ellelaura and Fina having a normal conversation."

I'd brought Fina along to all kinds of places with me where she had to interact with nobles and royal family members—this was the result. I'd heard that she'd started going out to places with Noa, and she'd even met Ellelaura a few times now. She'd gone to Misa's birthday party earlier, so she'd grown immune to their noble-ness. Fina had finally grown out of her tendency to freeze up in front of them. I was happy to see her growing up, but it also made me kinda sad.

After that, they'd apparently ate as much as they could at the shop before coming back to the orphanage. Tiermina took them on a tour of the place and they'd even watched the kids take care of the birds.

From there, they visited the Bear Dining Room that Anz ran. On the third day, they'd charged into the Bear's Lounge's at opening time, ate there, then bought a ton of bread to take home. They'd supposedly been in a hurry since they needed to get back to the capital the same day.

"The days went by like a whirlwind. I know they don't mean any harm, but it was a trying time." Tiermina sighed, exhausted by the memory. "If Fina hadn't been there, I'm not sure what I would have done. She's grown so much while I wasn't looking. I suppose it's true that kids grow up whether or not their parents are there to see it."

"Maybe, but she grew up to be a good kid because of you, Tiermina."

"She couldn't be selfish because of me, after all. But sometimes, I wish she'd be a little more disobedient."

Fina was a super good kid. And speaking of Fina, she came into the room in the middle of our conversation.

CHAPTER 257

FINA FINDS THE BEAR'S PICTURE BOOK

FINA STOOD BY THE DOOR, pouting, with Shuri standing behind her. Had something happened? I decided to greet them now that I was home before getting to whatever the problem was.

"Fina, Shuri, I'm home!" I said.

"Welcome back, Yuna," said Fina, her pout momentarily changing into a smile. "No—wait, I mean, I can't believe you, Yuna! What is this?!"

From behind her, Shuri gave me a regular greeting, but it was drowned out by Fina's yell.

Fina marched over to me and placed a picture book in front of me. It was a copy of the book I'd drawn for Princess Flora—a duplicate I'd given to the orphans.

"What about this?" I asked.

"What about—don't give me that!!! This little girl is me, isn't it?!" She pointed accusingly at the cartoony little girl in the book.

The girl was riding on the back of the bear. Sure, I'd used Fina as the model for the girl and myself for the bear, but why was she bringing it up now? I was surprised Fina *didn't* know about the picture book 'till now.

"The kids wanted me to read to them, so I did... and then I noticed the girl looked a lot like me..." Fina still seemed a little upset.

If she hadn't known about the picture books, how had she figured out that I'd drawn them? I asked her, but...

"Yuna, the picture book is literally about stuff that we did together."

Oh, uh. Well. True. The first volume was about the bear and Fina meeting, and how the

two searched for medicinal herbs to help Fina's sick mother. It got to the part where Fina brought the herbs home. I'd put together the book to chronicle the events, but with a picture-book twist.

The second volume was about the girl's mother getting sicker. The girl has the bear look for a rainbow flower droplet that's rumored to cure illnesses. Once the bear hears about that, she searches for the flower and helps the girl cure the mother. As far as the casting went, the little girl was Fina, the sickly mother was Tiermina, and the bear was me.

I'd based it all, of course, on the time I'd cured Tiermina for Fina. Since I couldn't actually write about my magic, I'd substituted a healing flower, but that's what you get for writing a roman à clef... people in the know *immediately* could see that it was me and Fina.

Of course, Fina would realize it too. Still, I had a secret plan for getting Fina off my trail about the books. "This book isn't actually about anyone real. Look, it says so right here."

I opened up the book to the final page using my bear puppets and pointed to a certain line.

This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.

It was all nice and squared away. I could claim that the girl in the book and Fina had nothing to do with each other.

"But this is exactly the same ribbon as the one I wear...!"

(Well, I *had* modeled the character after Fina.)

"Plus, there are all these details about my life...!"

(I mean, the book really *was* about something that Fina and I had experienced.)

"There's no way this isn't me!!!"

That classic disclaimer wasn't going to work with Fina, huh? I mean, the book *was* modeled off of her, so I didn't really have a way to talk myself out of this.

Fina sighed. “Why did you draw a book like this in the first place?!”

“I did it for Princess Flora.”

“For Princess Flora...?” When I mentioned the princess, Fina’s tone softened. “If you wrote it for her, then what’s this book doing in the orphanage?”

I told her the whole story, starting with how I’d drawn it for Princess Flora. From there, I talked about how the book had become all the rage in the castle because the princess had been carrying it around, and how enough people clamored for it that they did a print run.

“The king and Ellelaura asked for it, so I couldn’t say no.” If all else fails, just blame it on the royals. Sure, I’d drawn the thing, but I wasn’t exaggerating by saying that it was really the king and Ellelaura who had distributed it (in the castle) by making copies.

Of course, Fina went silent when I mentioned the king and Ellelaura. *Sorry for being so mean, Fina.*

“I had them print out more copies,” I said, “so I could bring them back to the orphans.”

“A lot of people have this book?” she asked anxiously.

A lot? That seemed like a stretch. “It’s just some of the people in the castle who have it.”

Maybe the books were spreading around, but they’d only go to people with kids. That wasn’t as many as Fina thought.

She didn’t seem to agree. “I won’t be able to go to the castle anymore,” she said, bowing her head.

I bit back a kinda mean barb—*“What, were you planning a trip there?”*—and thought it over. In the past, Fina would’ve probably never thought a commoner like her would go to the castle, but now she had an expectation she’d be going there in the future. I mean, if she went to the capital with me again, she was probably right about that.

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “No one will realize it’s you.”

There weren’t a lot of people who’d even read the book and I’d cartoonified her. Plus,

no one would know the plot had to do with her unless they *were* her family.

"But the kids were all 'This looks like you, Fina!'"

There wasn't much anyone could do about the kids closest to her noticing.

Tiermina, who had been listening in, came to my aid. "She drew you so cutely, dear. Won't you forgive her?"

"Mom...?"

"What a cute book this is!" Tiermina flipped through the pages. "So if this little girl is Fina, I suppose that the mom is me?"

She stopped flipping on the last page, where the girl and her mom were smiling together. The mom looked so happy after drinking the medicine the little girl had brought. "You drew me so cutely too! And my, Fina, just look at this picture of you!"

"It's nice, Mom, but aren't you embarrassed?"

"Maybe if she'd drawn me badly, but how could I be mad at such cute drawings?"

"But... she turned our story into a book."

"It is a little embarrassing, but not enough to be upset about."

Fina's anger steadily subsided as her mom talked to her. But still...

"The little girl looks just like me. Why did you make yourself into a real bear, Yuna? If you're drawing me, it's unfair that you're not drawing yourself."

I couldn't tell her I'd done that because I hated drawing myself, so I tried to sweep it under the rug. "That's because Princess Flora thinks bears are, uh... ever-so-interesting! Don't you remember, Fina? She was just bonkers for bears!"

"Okay..."

"So, I made myself one."

Fina seemed convinced when I brought Princess Flora into it—no comments there.

"Um... okay. But tell me next time you draw another one, okay?"

"Are you okay with me drawing more?"

"Not really, but the kids seem to like it. But please, don't let more people have it."

"All right. I won't. If the king or Ellelaura try to spread it around, I'll use magic on them to stop them if I have to." They were the most likely to distribute the book further.

"Uh, Yuna. Please *try* not to spread it around," Fina rephrased.

"I'm kidding! But I'll tell them not to." After that, Fina seemed satisfied.

Cool, I'd gotten Fina's permission to draw the third volume. I figured that'd be the end of it, but someone else came on the attack next.

"It's unfair that only Fina and Mom get to be in the books," Shuri piped up. She'd been silent until now. "I wanna be a drawing too!"

Fina seemed thrown off by Shuri saying that it was unfair. I never would've thought Shuri would be upset because she wasn't in a book... although she seemed more upset that she was the only one left out. "Did you want me to draw you, Shuri?"

Shuri nodded slightly. Her sister and mother were both in it, so she *was* being left out. Plus, Shuri was still young, so it probably hurt a lot more.

"Sorry. I didn't leave you out on purpose. I was writing about how I met Fina. That's why the story went like that. Next time, I'll draw you too."

"Really?!" she said, beaming.

"Yeah, you'll be in it for sure," I promised, and Shuri brightened up even more.

If I were going to draw a third volume, it'd probably be about heading to the capital with Fina and Noa, but I'd have to rethink that if I wanted to put Shuri in. Maybe I'd write about the sisters playing with the bear. Or maybe I could introduce Gentz and make it about a wedding? But how would I rope the bear into that story?

Hmm... maybe I'd take Shuri along to the capital? But could three people really fit on the bear in the book? Maybe I'd add more bears? Seemed like I had some thinking to

do.

After we finished talking about the book, I asked Fina to tell me more about what had happened with Ellelaura and Zelef.

CHAPTER 258

THE BEAR DRAWS A PICTURE BOOK

IT'D BEEN A FEW DAYS since I'd come back from the elves' village, and the only exciting thing that had happened was a call from Luimin over the bear phone—otherwise, things were peaceful. Luimin had called because she was worried about whether she could actually get through to me.

"I'm glad I can talk to you." Relief filled Luimin's voice the moment she heard me.

I asked about the village. Not a single monster had wandered into the barrier since I'd left, and they hadn't spotted any monsters outside the barrier either. It seemed like the parasite really had been attracting all the monsters.

"Please stop by whenever you'd like, okay?"

"Sure thing. I want to get more mushrooms and wild plants, so I'll be sure to come by soon."

"Okay, I'll be waiting."

After she finished updating me about the village, I had her promise she'd let me know when the sacred tree tea leaves were done. Of course, I let her know she could contact me for other reasons too.

My plans that day consisted of drawing the next installment of my picture book with Fina and Shuri... though they weren't drawing it so much as reviewing it. Fina was going to look over the content and Shuri was checking on the little sister sidekick.

While I was drinking tea and eating potato chips, Fina and Shuri came by the house.

"Are you really drawing it?" Fina said as soon as she got to the house.

"I think Princess Flora is waiting for the next one," I said, *"and I promised Shuri I'd*

make it.”

“You’re really drawing me too, Yuna?”

“That’s the plan.” Fina seemed reluctant, but Shuri was jazzed.

As I drew, I made sure to check in with Fina on the storyline, and Shuri examined every drawing of her as the little sister. I didn’t want her to cry about not looking cute after the drawings were finished, after all.

“I was thinking of making the book about the three characters traveling to a neighboring town. What do you think?”

“Who are the three?”

“You two, and your mom.”

“But I haven’t gone with Mom to another town...”

“It doesn’t have to be about something real. You draw picture books from your imagination!”

CHAPTER 259

PICTURE BOOK:

THE BEAR AND THE GIRL, VOLUME 3

THE GIRL'S MOTHER recovered from her sickness and was well again.

The girl had an energetic young sister. She told her little sister about the bear. Then the sister blurted out that she wanted to see the bear too.

The little girl took her sister into the woods to introduce them. They stood in front of the woods, and when the girl called for the bear, it appeared from the trees.

The girl introduced the bear to her little sister. The bear slowly approached the sister, who was very surprised, until she gave the bear a gentle pat. The bear's fur was so soft and nice!

The sister declared she wanted to ride on the bear's back. The bear knelt down to let the little sister and the little girl get on. The bear ran through the woods and the meadows, and took the two to places they'd never been.

But their happy days didn't last for long.

Thanks to the rainbow flower droplet the bear had found, the mother got better. The mother asked for help from a friend to find a job at the town next to them. The girl's family was going to the neighboring town.

The girl cried as she said goodbye to the bear. The bear gave the girl a gentle pat on the head. The girl cried because she wouldn't see the bear anymore.

"Thank you, bear. I'm sorry."

The bear stayed with the girl until she stopped crying.

A few days later, the girl and her family got on a carriage to head to the nearby town. The bear watched from afar. The carriage started moving. It kept going and going and going until the bear couldn't see it anymore.

The girl stopped herself from crying.

"Goodbye, bear..."

The carriage kept going and left the forest the bear lived in far, far behind. They wouldn't be able to come back to it.

The mother and sister hugged the girl.

"I'm sorry," the mother apologized.

The bear was important to the little girl, but so were her mother and sister. The little girl held her mother and her sister's hands.

"You'll see each other again," her mother said, and she smiled gently.

Once the girl grew up, she vowed to see the bear again.

The carriage slowly moved forward. There were other people on the carriage, not just the girl and her family. The girl was still sad because she wasn't with the bear anymore.

Then, the carriage stopped suddenly.

"What's that?"

The people on the carriage were making a commotion.

"Monsters!" someone yelled.

"Mom!"

The mother hugged her two daughters. There was quite the commotion outside the carriage. The carriage wasn't moving.

"The horses have been attacked!" they heard a shout in front of them.

One of the people on the carriage went outside.

"There are a bunch of monsters approaching!" shouted the person outside. "Everyone, run!"

The people still in the carriage started running away. The little girl's family tried to run too, but they were pushed over by the people trying to get out ahead of them. Only the girl and her family were left behind in the carriage.

"Mom..."

"It'll be all right."

The mother held her daughters in her shaking hands. They could hear the monsters outside. They couldn't run away. The carriage rocked. The howls from the monsters frightened them and they shuddered.

Right when they were about to lose hope, they stopped hearing the monsters. But they were too scared to look outside.

They were still shaking in the carriage when they heard someone speak from outside.
"Are you okay?"

The girl knew that voice. She thought she'd never hear it again. The girl pushed away her mother's arms and went outside. "Bear!"

Sure enough, she found the bear outside.

"Bear, oh, bear!" she cried and hugged the bear. The mother and little sister also got out of the carriage.

"It'll be fine. The bear saved us!"

The monsters were collapsed outside the carriage. They didn't see anyone else around. They didn't know what had happened. The horses were gone, and the carriage was broken. All they could do now was walk.

That was when the bear crooned loudly—"Cwoom!"

Then, from far away, a black bear and a white bear appeared.

The mother and little sister were surprised, but the little girl was not. She knew that the bear had called them.

“Hop on!” The three bears knelt down and showed the family their backs.

“Mom, the bears are going to take us to the town,” the little girl told her mom. At first, the mother didn’t believe her, but then the little girl got on the bear’s back, and the mom believed.

The family headed to the next town on the bears. When the bears got closer to the town, they let the family down.

“Thank you, bear,” the girl said. But the little sister wouldn’t let go of the white bear. She didn’t want to leave the bear. Of course, the little girl didn’t want to leave, either.

“The bears can’t come into town because they’re too big,” said the mother, shaking her head and giving the little sister a comforting hug. “If only the bears were smaller...”

“We can be!” said the bear, and shrunk! The white bear in the little sister’s arms also shrunk, and so did the black bear next to the mother. They shrunk smaller and smaller until they were just big enough for the little girl to hold in her arms.

Now they could go into the town in the family’s arms. The gatekeepers were surprised, but they let the family go inside with the bears.

And so, the little girl got to stay with the bear.

CHAPTER 260

THE BEAR FINISHES DRAWING A PICTURE BOOK

I PREPPED PAPER to draw on. Fina and Shuri sat to my left and right, waiting for me to start drawing.

First, I introduced the little girl's sister. I drew a cartoon version of her.

"Wow, that's so cute. Is it me?" asked Shuri.

"That's right. That's the girl's little sister."

Shuri seemed pretty happy to see herself being drawn. Then I drew the scene of the girl and the sister playing with the bear. But the good times wouldn't last. The girl's family had to move to the neighboring town.

"They're moving to a different town?"

The little girl's mother needed work, and she had to ask a friend from a neighboring town for help.

"No one in the town could help the little girl's family," I explained to Fina.

There wasn't anyone like Gentz in this book, and it'd be weird to stick him in there without any explanation. This made more sense for the story.

"Since the little girl didn't have anyone to rely on, she had to work really hard all on her own." I looked at Fina.

"But I had Gentz—I mean, Dad—to help me."

"You did."

"So then is the friend going to be Dad?"

"I don't know yet." If I was going to write a continuation, I'd think about it. For now, I left it undecided.

I went back to drawing the rest of the book. Next was the scene where the bear and the little girl would have to part.

"She had to leave the bear?"

"That's so sad for the girl!"

Shuri and Fina both seemed distressed.

"It'll be fine. The bear comes back." It wouldn't help to lie to them, so I gave them a spoiler.

After I drew the scene of the bear and the girls leaving each other, I drew a scene of the girls getting on a carriage heading for the next town over.

"I thought the bear would appear and they'd ride on it," said Fina. Apparently, this wasn't going the way she'd expected.

But I couldn't let the bear show up here, of course. "They just said their goodbyes. And I think the mother wouldn't get on the bear to travel."

After getting on the carriage, the girls looked sad. The bear was watching the girls leave from a distance.

"This is a sad story. I feel bad for the bear and the girls..."

"It'll be fine. They'll be happy in the end." I preferred happy endings over tragedies.

I drew a scene of the carriage being attacked by monsters. I was mimicking what had happened when Misa's carriage had been attacked. Everyone in the scene was escaping, but the girls were left behind.

The carriage was shaking, and they could hear the monsters. That was when the bear made a gallant appearance and rushed in. I'd made a few adjustments, but this was basically what had happened when I'd saved Misa. The bear fought off the monsters

and saved the girls.

“I’m so glad!”

“The bear is so strong!”

The carriage was too broken down to move, so the bear took the three of them on her back. That was when the bear crooned out for her fellow bears. A cartoonified black bear and white bear appeared. “That’s Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

“So cute!”

The two of them liked seeing the two bears.

“Shuri, which one do you want to ride?”

Shuri didn’t hesitate. “On Kumakyu!”

“Why Kumakyu?”

“Because Kumakyu is pretty and white.”

She had that right. Kumakyu’s fur really was white and beautiful, but that didn’t make Kumayuru’s black fur dirty or anything.

“In that case, I’ll put the little sister on the white bear.”

I had the little girl (Fina) get on the bear representing me. The mother (Tiermina) got onto the black bear (Kumayuru). Then, the three rode off to the next town on their bears.

“What about the people who ran away?”

“They don’t need bears, since they ran away and left the little girls on their own.”

At least I hadn’t drawn their bodies. I’d let the kids reading the book imagine where the people went for themselves. Picture books were meant to foster children’s imaginations, after all.

The kids and their parents could imagine for themselves whether the people who had

been attacked were saved or not. It was a parent's job to explain whether the people got to town after an arduous escape or were killed by the monsters. How they explained the scenario would shape the children's minds... or that's how I handwaved it to Fina and Shuri. Honestly, I just didn't want to put corpses in my book.

"What do you two think happened?"

"I hope they survived."

"I dunno..." Shuri seemed undecided, but Fina was being kind.

"What do you think happened?" Fina asked me.

"That's a hard question. I think it depends on who was riding on the carriage. If they were strong, I'd want them to fight instead of run. If they aren't fighters, I think they'd have to run. I'd hope they survive, but... well, I hope anyone who kicked those girls aside don't do quite so well."

"Uhh... Yuna, you're scaring me..." Fina said.

"Well that's just my take," I said. "And I'm not necessarily right, y'know. If you two can read this and have kinder thoughts... then I'd like you to do that. I'd like you to stay like that."

I didn't want their hearts tarnished like mine.

To be honest, the main reason why there weren't any casualties or injuries depicted in the book was personal reasons. I couldn't tell them that the *real* reason was that having other people appear in the scene would get in the way of the bear's fabulous entrance.

People don't always say what they actually think.

Then the family headed out to the town on the bears. They got to the next town safely. Once they arrived, they say goodbye to the bear. Bears can't go into towns, after all.

When the girl tries to say bye to the bear, the little sister says she doesn't want to. Of course, the little girl doesn't want to say bye either.

“Is this where they have to say bye...?”

“They have to leave the bear? That’s so sad...”

“It’ll be all right.” I made the bear smaller. Then, I drew the little girl hugging the small bear happily. They looked very happy.

“Um, I feel kind of embarrassed. This means that I’m hugging you, doesn’t it, Yuna?”

“Not necessarily. You can think of her as Kumayuru or Kumakyu instead of me.”

The girls headed into the town with the little bear in their arms. Then, with one last sentence—“The little girl got to stay with the bear.” —I finished the third volume of *The Bear and the Girl*.

“Yuna, that was amazing!”

“You’re so good at drawing. It was sad at first, but they got to be with the bear in the end!”

Little kids would be reading the book, so I needed to end it on a happy note. There were sad picture books in my original world, but I wanted good kids to have a happy ending.

“But won’t Lady Noa be upset?” asked Fina.

“Noa?” Why was she mentioning Noa, of all people?

“Because you used the story about us going to the capital as the base idea.”

“Well, I threw together a lot of things.” There was that scene of Misa being attacked in her carriage and the scene where she was saved.

“If Lady Noa sees this, she might realize she hasn’t shown up in the story.”

Oooooh, so that was what she meant. “It’ll be fine. You didn’t want to show up in the story because you were embarrassed, right?”

“Yes, but...”

"Noa would be embarrassed too, so it's fine. I don't think she even knows I'm using our story as a basis for drawing these. In fact, Noa wouldn't see the books in the first place."

Noa still hadn't learned the books even existed and I doubted she ever would. Only a few people in the capital knew about them, and some of the orphans in Crimonia. Noa wouldn't see it.

"If you say so," said Fina.

"You're such a worrywart," I said with a smile, hoping to dispel Fina's worries.

EXTRA STORY

LADY ELLELAURA AND ZELEF STOP BY

PART ONE

TWO WHOLE DAYS had passed since Yuna left with Sanya to go to the elves' village. I wonder what the village would be like... Maybe someday, I'll go there too.

But for now, I was taking care of the Kokekko and counting the eggs. We'd gotten a lot of eggs, which was always good.

Every day, we sell the eggs at the Merchant Guild. Cassadore from the Merchant Guild comes to pick them up—it's nice that we don't have to go sell them ourselves. Mom says that the eggs make a lot of money. That money helps the orphans live and also pays my Mom's salary.

Since Shuri and I were Mom's helpers, we weren't being paid for helping at the orphanage or the shops. Instead, I got money from harvesting monsters. I tried to tell Yuna I didn't want money, but she gave it to me anyway.

Cassadore was acting very strange today. Normally, he smiled and asked us how the eggs were, but instead, he rushed over to my mom and told her to come to the Merchant Guild quickly. Mom usually went to the Merchant Guild to talk to Milaine, but today seemed a little different.

"We'd like Fina to come as well," Cassadore said, looking at me.

"Me?"

"Yes, if you could."

"Um... is there a reason why?" I would go with Mom a lot, but no one ever *asked* for me to go before.

"The guild master requested both of you. Once you have the eggs ready, please board the carriage."

I didn't understand what was going on, but I was going to the guild too. If they were calling me, I guess it had to do with Yuna maybe? That was the only reason I could think of that explained why Milaine would ask for me.

"I don't know why this is happening," said Mom, "but let's hurry and get the eggs ready. Fina, could you help me?"

I got the eggs ready for the Merchant Guild really fast. My mom took care of the orphans and told Liz, who took care of the birds, that we were going to the guild.

"I think we should be back right away, but if we're late, could you please look after Shuri?" Shuri was playing with the little kids near the orphanage and studying with them. Neaf from Mileela was helping teach them letters and numbers.

"If I'm not back by the afternoon, please feed her with the others," Mom added. She normally would eat at the orphanage when Mom and I were out. "Also, please prep the eggs for the shops."

"I can handle what's left," said Liz, "rest assured."

We left everything else to her, got onto the carriage with the eggs, and headed to the Merchant Guild. Cassadore was delivering the eggs, so we parted ways at the Merchant Guild.

My mom saw Milaine, greeted her, and we followed her inside.

Then I stopped in my tracks. I hadn't expected these people at all!

"Fina, it's been too long," said Elleaura. "Well... not *that* long. We saw each other at Misa's birthday party, after all."

"Why, yes, Master Fina," said Zelef, "we haven't seen each other since the party!"

What were *they* doing here?

"Fina, do you know them?" Mom asked me. I did, though Mom didn't.

"Um... this is Lady Noa's mother, Lady Elleaura. And that's Uncle Zelef, who cooks at the castle."

I called him Uncle Zelef because when I'd tried to call him *Lord* Zelef, he'd shake his head and smile. "I would prefer it if friends of Master Yuna were to refrain from calling me that and instead just called me Zelef."

He was the top chef in the castle, so that didn't seem quite right, but Uncle Zelef said that was what he wanted. So we compromised.

Mom was shocked. "What? Lord Cliff's wife? And a *palace* chef?"

"I am Ellelaura Fochrosé. I hear Fina is always playing with my daughter Noa. Thank you so much for that."

"I am Zelef, the head chef at the castle. I've met your daughter and Yuna several times."

My mom seemed flustered as she introduced herself. "I am Fina's mother, Tiermina. Thank you for always looking after my daughter. Thank you so much for allowing Lady Noire to come to the shop so often!"

My mom looked at me and Milaine for some kind of explanation, but I didn't know why they were here or why they wanted me and mom.

"What did you call us here for?" asked Mom. "Did my daughter do something...?" My mom gave me a worried look. If I *had* done something wrong, I sure didn't remember it...

"You don't need to be so nervous. Fina didn't do anything. Zelef and I simply came here to see Yuna's shop. When I spoke to my husband, he recommended going through Milaine," said Ellelaura.

They explained that they were starting a restaurant at the capital to sell pudding and cakes using Yuna's recipes. They'd traveled all the way to Crimonia to see Yuna's shop.

"Milaine told me that you were managing the shops and that you're Fina's mother," said Ellelaura. "You're always looking after my daughter Tiermina, so I wanted to meet you." So that's why she'd called us over. "By the way, could we see Yuna too?"

So, they didn't know. "Yuna isn't in town right now," I said.

"She's not?!" Lady Ellelaura exclaimed.

“I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize for something like that,” said Ellelaura. “I came here without letting you know in advance.”

“Is Yuna coming back soon?” asked Uncle Zelef.

I shook my head. “She said she was going very far away, so she doesn’t know when she’ll be back.” I didn’t know where the elves’ village was, but Yuna told me it was a long journey.

“But I was so hoping to surprise her...” Lady Ellelaura looked disappointed. She’d sure surprised me, though! “It’s unfortunate, but there’s nothing to do about it. In that case, would you both be kind enough to show us around. That is, if we wouldn’t be in the way, that is.”

“Us?”

Ellelaura nodded. “Yes, as long as we’re not in the way.”

I glanced at my mom. Mom looked nervous and didn’t seem to know what to do.

“I hope I may come as well,” Uncle Zelef chimed in.

Mom looked like she really had no idea what to do. She looked at Milaine as if asking for help. Milaine shook her head very slightly—*just go with it*, she seemed to say.

That was just how Lady Ellelaura was. She was very kind, but a little pushy. And she also acted like I was a dress-up doll once.

My mom looked at everyone. “If you’re fine with us doing it.” She couldn’t say no to a noble like Lady Ellelaura.

“Would you really? Thank you!” said Ellelaura.

“Thank you very much,” said Uncle Zelef.

“I’d also like to ask that the two of you refrain from telling anyone that I’m the lord’s wife,” Ellelaura added. “I wouldn’t want to cause any trouble for the shops, and I’d like to see them in their usual state. So please pretend that Zelef and I are your

acquaintances, Tiermina." Lady Ellelaura smiled.

Uncle Zelef bowed his head. "If you would be so kind."

"Let's head right over," Lady Ellelaura said and stood up.

"I'll prepare a carriage," Milaine declared, but Lady Ellelaura said no.

"It's been a while since I've seen the town, so I'd like to walk."

Uncle Zelef nodded. "I believe this is a good opportunity for me to take a walk as well."

And so we walked to the shop with Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef.

EXTRA STORY

LADY ELLELAURA AND ZELEF STOP BY

PART TWO

WE WALKED AROUND TOWN with Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef. I was a little nervous, but Mom was even *more* nervous. I knew how she felt. I wished Milaine had been there too, but she was busy with Mileela.

I decided to talk to Lady Ellelaura in place of my mom. “Um, Lady Ellelaura.”

“What is it?”

“Is Lady Noa not with you?” I’d seen her at Lady Misa’s birthday party, but I’d barely got to talk to her then because of all the commotion. It was too bad.

“I left her at home. She’s already gone to Yuna’s shop plenty of times, hasn’t she?”

I’d seen Lady Noa at the shop a lot. Recently, she’d had some bear bread and really liked it.

“I’m going in undercover, so I left her,” Ellelaura continued. “If she was around, everyone would realize that I’m her mother. And this is business, after all.”

I understood why she was doing that, but I felt bad for Lady Noa. She’d finally had a chance to see her mom.

“Don’t look so down,” she said. “I still intend to make time for Noa. I cherish the time I’m with my own daughter.” Okay, that was good. “And please, continue to stick around Noa,” she said.

“I will!”

We caught sight of the Bear’s Lounge as I chatted with Lady Ellelaura.

“Is it that building, by any chance?”

“Yes.” You could tell that with a single glance. There was a bear statue out front, after all.

Lady Ellelaura started running to it, and we followed behind. Uncle Zelef was a little heavyset, so he took a little longer to catch up.

“Why, that’s a bear decoration! *She* must have made this then.” Lady Ellelaura touched the bear statue and grinned. Yuna had made it with magic, of course, so it wouldn’t break easily. She said it would be okay even if kids were rough with it.

Uncle Zelef caught up, a little out of breath, and gazed at the statue. “It’s... *huff...* holding... *huuuff...* bread.”

“Did Yuna do this too?”

“Yes, so it would be a bear shop.”

“Shall we place one at the restaurant in the capital...?” Ellelaura mused.

Uncle Zelef Nodded. “That sounds like a splendid idea! I’m sure Master Yuna will be very pleased.”

Umm, I wasn’t sure Yuna would truly like that. She didn’t even seem happy to make *this* bear statue—even if they were so cute and nice.

“Master Ellelaura, let us go into the shop. I am quite hungry,” said Uncle Zelef, putting his hands on his big stomach. He looked like he could eat a lot.

“You’re right. Let’s head in. I’ve been smelling the most *delicious* aroma.”

The smell of fresh bread was the strongest of the scents, but there were a whole lot of others too.

“My, my! More bears!” exclaimed Ellelaura. There were all kinds of them all over the inside of the shop, from the tabletops to the pillars, and even the walls. “The Bear’s Lounge is quite the appropriate name!”

Mm-hmm, they were all cute and heartwarming. They were so popular that some

customers wanted to take them home.

"It seems they're all unique," said Ellelaura.

Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef walked around the shop, even going to the tables where customers sat without permission. Uncle Zelef wasn't just looking at the bears. He also started looking at the food the customers were eating. If he kept doing that, he'd be a nuisance to the other guests.

"What should we do?" Mom looked worried.

I understood what Mom meant. Lady Ellelaura was a noble and Uncle Zelef said he was the most important chef at the castle. She couldn't just tell them off.

"Intriguing. This bear is holding a fish in its mouth. And this one here is running...!"

"This bread looks scrumptious. That seems to be the cake, and there's pudding as well...!"

Karin and the others working at the shop were starting to notice them.

"They're my guests," my mom told Karin, "so it's all right."

Karin went back to work, but she still kept an eye on the two of them.

No one noticed that Ellelaura was Lady Noa's mom. Even Karin, who'd lived in the capital, didn't seem to know. Still... if we didn't stop Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef, it would be a catastrophe.



They wandered and wandered around the shop.

I was the only one who could stop them. “Lady Ellelaura, Uncle Zelef. We’re in the way of the other guests. Please don’t walk around too much.”

“I’m sorry. All of the bears were different, so I wanted to see them all.”

“I’m terribly sorry as well. I was so taken in by the dishes, I didn’t notice anything around me.”

They stopped their bothersome wandering.

I was relieved, but my mom looked surprised. “Mom?”

“I-It’s nothing! Thank you,” Mom said. “You saved us.”

I wanted to be useful to my mom, so I was happy.

“The employees are dressed so adorably as well.” Lady Ellelaura was looking at the kids who were fast at work. “I do believe those were the bear outfits Noa and the others wore when they were playing with Kumayuru and Kumakyu.”

During Lady Misa’s birthday party, there had been a really big mess. The townspeople had been scared of Kumayuru and Kumakyu because of that. So in order to show the townspeople that the bears weren’t scary, Lady Noa, Lady Misa, and I dressed up as bears and played with Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“They really are adorable,” said Ellelaura. “Maybe we should do this at the capital’s restaurant too?”

I thought it wouldn’t be such a good idea. It seemed like something that would upset Yuna.

“That’s a good idea.” Uncle Zelef seemed interested too. I prayed that Yuna wouldn’t be too mad at them.

They’d be in the way if they stood in the middle of the shop, so we went to the counter to order. Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef looked at the rows of bread.

"They all look delicious," said Lady Ellelaura.

"There are cakes over here. I don't even recognize some of them."

"Oh? Did Yuna come up with this cake too?"

"No," I said. "That's Nerin. She's in charge of the cakes, and she comes up with all kinds of stuff." She made so many different kinds of cakes, some of them with fruit, and she always had new ideas for a recipe. But the most popular cake was the strawberry one.

"There are even bear-shaped breads here," said Ellelaura.

"Master Yuna really can make anything. I'm sure the children are very much enjoying these. Master Yuna is quite something. She makes products that tickle the myriad fancies of the customers. I must learn from her example, as a fellow chef."

Yuna really put in the elbow grease when it came to food. It was easy to see with the cakes, but she'd even gone to the ocean to get fish. She'd gone through the trouble to bring Anz all the way to this town.

"Ahh, this is such a dilemma..."

"Yes, it really is..."

The two of them looked at the breads and cakes, but they looked worried.

My mom looked just as worried too when they said that. "Is there some sort of problem?"

"Why, they all look wonderfully delicious!" said Uncle Zelef. "We have no idea what to eat!!!"

"Yes, we only have so many days to spend here," said Lady Ellelaura, "and we can only eat so much. Now what shall we try?"

I guess they really could only eat a certain amount. I can't eat a lot either.

"Oh, come to think of it," said Lady Ellelaura, "do you have that—what was it again—*pizza*?"

"We do!" I raised my hand and pointed behind the girl standing at the counter. There were lots of drawings of pizza there.

"Marvelous," said Lady Ellelaura. "You really do!"

"There are many types," said Uncle Zelef, staring at the pizza drawings. He pointed to one of them. "Is this the pizza Master Yuna treated me to?"

"I'm so impressed that Yuna has created so many more varieties."

"Let's see... so this is a pizza made from seafood ingredients. And here we have taters, and several types of meat-based pizzas," said Uncle Zelef. The ingredients were written under the drawings of pizza.

"I really have no idea what to do with so many varieties of pizza available!" Lady Ellelaura said.

"We have four-sliced pizzas for just those types of people." They could pick out four types of pizzas from the drawings and try *four* different kinds of pizzas. Everybody loves having four different choices.

"Did Yuna think this up as well?"

"Yes. She said, 'This'll be a good idea. People can try lots of flavors.'" The two of them really thought it over, then they ordered bread, pizza, and cake. My mom and I also ordered too.

When mom tried to pay for everyone, Lady Ellelaura stopped her. "Allow me to pay."

Mom looked worried for a second, but she decided to accept Lady Ellelaura's kindness.

We took our food to a table.

"Everything really does look delicious," said Ellelaura.

"That it does. I will learn much from this. Now, Master Tiermina, I apologize for being so sudden, but I must ask! Would you be kind enough to show me the kitchen?"

“The kitchen?”

“Indubitably! I would like to observe as the employees work in the kitchen.”

“Well...”

“As I said earlier, Master Yuna has already taught me the recipes. I am aware that these are original proprietary recipes, and we shall be most assuredly sure to ask Master Yuna for permission before selling anything similar in the capital,” Uncle Zelef said, bowing his head.

“Then I suppose... I’ll take you there after we finish eating.”

“Thank you.”

“My!” said Lady Elleaura, looking around. “The children are such energetic and devoted workers.”

“I think that’s because Yuna cares so much for everyone who works at the shop. Every six days, they get one day off. When it’s time for the day off, they close up shop. And Yuna’s becoming more and more famous, so no one will try to mess with the shop while it’s closed.”

If anyone did try to do anything bad to the shop or to the kids, Yuna took care of it. There was a kid who’d caused trouble for the customers, and one of those customers complained... and even tried to *hit* the kid! But then adventurers eating at the shop helped.

More people found out that this was Yuna’s shop, so adventurers wouldn’t cause trouble. Even when people who weren’t adventurers and who didn’t know Yuna caused trouble, adventurers always protected the shop.

I also think that my dad helped a lot because he worked at the Adventurer Guild. The guild master told adventurers to never cause trouble at Yuna’s shop. I think that the Merchant Guild guild master had something to do with it too, since the employees there also protected the shop.

And the biggest thing was that Lord Cliff came to eat here. That’s why this shop was safe. The kids could work with smiles on their faces without anything bad happening to them.

"This is quite amazing," Lady Ellelaura said.

Yeah, I really thought so too!

"I never would have guessed it," added Lady Ellelaura, "especially from how that girl dresses."

Yuna *did* dress like a very cute bear.

Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef finished eating, so we took them to the kitchen. Everyone in the kitchen was working hard, and Morin worked right in the middle of it.

"Excuse us, Morin," said Mom.

"Tiermina? Who are these people?" Morin looked at the strangers, surprised.

"They're friends of Yuna and myself," said Mom.

"We asked for Tiermina to show us how you work," Lady Ellelaura said. "We won't cause you any trouble."

"I am Zelef, and I also work as a chef. Master Yuna taught me the basics of how to make bread, pizza, and cake. You can rest assured that the secrets of the recipes are safe with me. I do hope that you will show me your workplace today."

"If you're acquaintances of Yuna and Tiermina, I suppose that's fine... but don't get in the way of our work."

"Why, of course!"

That was all Morin said before going back to work.

Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef watched everyone working in the kitchen. Morin and the kids were racing to bake bread as it nearly sold out, along with piles of pizzas. Fries, chips, and even more treats came hot out of the ovens.

Yuna made something called a "ventilation fan" that blew all the air outside. The

ventilation's delicious smells would bring in more customers, so it was two birds with one stone.

When it was *really* hot, a magical device would turn on. It used an ice mana gem and a wind mana gem to blow in cold air, making the room very cool. Yuna said it would be very tiring to work in a hot room, and that it wasn't good. She was so nice, always thinking about other people.

The two guests watched Morin bake bread and Nerin bake cakes while the kids helped out. Lady Elleaura and Uncle Zelef looked very impressed.

Tomorrow we'd take them to the orphanage.

EXTRA STORY

LADY ELLELAURA AND ZELEF STOP BY

PART THREE

WE'D TAKEN LADY ELLELAURA and Uncle Zelef to the Bear's Lounge when they came to Crimonia. They walked around in the shop and caused a lot of trouble. My mom didn't know what to do about Lady Ellelaura, especially since she was a noble.

"Thank you, Fina. You're such a lifesaver," said Mom as she made dinner. I was kind of happy I could help my mom! "Although I was rather frightened when I saw you speaking to Lady Ellelaura and Mr. Zelef as though they were normal people."

"That's because I've talked to them lots." I'd talked to Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef at the castle before and at Lady Misa's party too. I'd even lived with Lady Ellelaura for a few days. She'd made me try on a whole bunch of clothes, though, nonstop. I shivered.

Shuri pouted a little while she helped with dinner. "I wanna see them too!" Since we'd left Shuri behind at the orphanage, she didn't get to see Lady Ellelaura or Uncle Zelef.

"They're coming to the orphanage tomorrow, so you'll see them then."

"Shuri, they're very important people. Don't do anything... unfitting."

"I wooo'n't!"

Shuri had realized that it was Lady Ellelaura right away. I'd told her about Lady Ellelaura, so I guess she remembered.

"And you can't tell others that she's Lady Noa's mother, all right?"

If anyone found out who Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef were, terrible things could happen.

The next day, Mom and Shuri and I waited for Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef on the path to the orphanage. We were going to meet them at Lady Noa's house, but then they told us no. Finally, we saw them walking over.

"I'm so sorry we're late," said Lady Ellelaura.

"I'm terribly slow at walking," added Uncle Zelef.

"It's quite all right, ma'am," my mom said, but she was nervous.

"Tiermina," said Lady Ellelaura, "no need to be so formal."

"Oh yes... i-it's fine," my mom rephrased herself, looking really un-fine.

Lady Ellelaura watched my mom and smiled. "And who is this little one?" She looked at Shuri, who was standing behind me, grabbing my clothes to hide.

"This is my little sister, Shuri."

"Yeah. I'm... Shuri..." she said in a little voice.

"Hee hee! What a cute girl, just like Fina. I'm Ellelaura. Um... I'm Yuna and Fina's friend."

"I know. You're Noa's mommy!"

Lady Ellelaura looked so surprised at that.

I guess I had to explain. "Um, I've talked about you at home before, Lady Ellelaura."

"I see. I wonder how you might have described me?" Lady Ellelaura smiled at me.

Ahh, I didn't think I said anything strange? "I said you're a very kind person."

"Did you really? Why, that makes me so happy."

I said that before so my mom wouldn't be worried before. I was glad Shuri didn't say anything strange.

"She said you took her to the castle," said Shuri. "I wanna go to the castle!"

"Ha ha! Well then, next time you come to the capital, I'll show you around."

"Really?!"

She was just saying that to be nice. Lady Ellelaura didn't really think Shuri would ever go to the capital. Still, Shuri thought Lady Ellelaura was serious.

"Yes," said Lady Ellelaura, "it's a promise."

"Indeed, Master Shuri! And when you do, I will treat you to a feast." Now Uncle Zelef was getting into it.

My mom looked a little worried.

"Shuri," I said warningly, "you can't demand things from other people, okay?"

Shuri pouted and nodded reluctantly. She probably thought it was unfair that I got to go. I did want to bring her to the capital, but I couldn't just let somebody else know about Yuna's travel door.

We started walking toward the orphanage. Shuri and Lady Ellelaura were talking, so I decided to talk to Uncle Zelef. Mom seemed really nervous while she listened to us. I needed to work really hard to help my mom.

As we went along, we spotted a walled-off area.

"That's where you take care of the birds then?" asked Lady Ellelaura. "There's a building to the side. Is that the orphanage?"

Yuna had remade the orphanage, so it was a very nice building.

We took Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef to the inside of the walled-in area, where we kept the Kokekko. There was a shed inside for the Kokekko and another one where my mom worked.

"This is where you take care of the Kokekko and collect their eggs, correct?"

"There are quite a lot of them."

Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef looked around. The Kokekko waddled out of the shed, clucking and bustling energetically. Since Kokekko can't fly very high, they couldn't get over the wall Yuna had made. They were docile too, so they wouldn't fly from the coop. But when we tried to put them into the shed, a few of them always tried to run away—it would be such a disaster. Now it's easier to close in on them and catch them so we can bring them back.

Some kids were going into and out of the Kokekko pen.

"What are they doing?"

"They're cleaning the pen and taking the eggs they've collected next door to the shed," Mom explained.

The kids were going around working their butts off.

"All of these children, smiling like this because of Yuna... Cliff is full of disappointments. I suppose, though, that I must also carry some blame for not noticing how dire things had become," Lady Ellelaura said quietly.

Before Yuna came, the orphanage was a disaster. I remembered what it was like back then too. The building used to be old, they didn't have money, and they didn't have enough to eat.

One of Lord Cliff's people had stolen the orphanage's money. Lord Cliff was so sorry that he decided to rebuild the orphanage. Yuna actually made the building, but I heard the beds, the drawers, and everything else they needed came from Lord Cliff's money.

Lady Ellelaura didn't say anything else about it. Instead, she talked to Mom.

"Would you be kind enough to give me a tour of the shed?"

After we finished watching the kids clean and collect eggs, we went to the shed where the eggs were being managed.

Liz was working in Mom's place.

Liz was the person who took care of the kids—she was like everyone's big sister. She was so good at taking care of everyone, and so nice! She could be really *scary* when she was angry, though, so the kids tried their best not to get in trouble with her.

“I’m sorry for leaving everything up to you, Liz...”

Whenever Mom had something to do, Liz did Mom’s work for her. “It’s all right. You have guests, after all. And I can assume these are the guests in question?” Liz looked at Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef.

“The two of them are my acquaintances, and Yuna’s as well.”

“I am Ellelaura.”

“I am Zelef.”

“My name is Liz. I’m so sorry for how messy it is in here.”

“We will assuredly not get in your way, so would you kindly allow us to observe for a bit? I came here today to see the birds and the eggs, you see,” said Uncle Zelef politely.

“If you’re friends of Tiermina and Yuna, by all means, welcome.” Liz glanced over to Mom like she was looking for a little more information.

“I really wish Yuna was here,” said Mom. She looked troubled.

“She’s gone out somewhere, right?” asked Liz.

Whenever Yuna went really far away, she only mentioned it briefly to me or my mom.

“If we have your permission, Tiermina, it’s fine by me.”

“Thank you.”

The two of them took another look around the shed where my mom worked. There was a table to work at and a water trough. The boxes holding the eggs were at the far end by the wall.

“Is there a reason why those eggs are separated?” Lady Ellelaura asked.

They were in three different boxes.

“Those are for the Merchant Guild,” said Mom, “and these we take to the shops. And the cracked eggs are ones we eat.”

There was a basket near Liz of eggs the kids had brought in. She checked each one and gave the best eggs to the Merchant Guild. The rest would go to the shops—the eggs could be used at the shop as long as they weren't spoiled. The slightly cracked ones were used for the orphanage's meals.

"Master Tiermina, may I have some eggs? I will pay for them, of course."

"You don't have to pay for them. Please, take some." Mom didn't seem sure how to react. Uncle Zelef had asked so suddenly.

"I cannot do that. The children toiled away, taking care of the birds to have them lay these eggs. I cannot just take these."

Lady Ellelaura nodded. "Ah, yes... Perhaps I'll purchase some as well."

Mom looked really worried when Lady Ellelaura said that... but then her eyes lit up like she had an idea. "You're my friend, aren't you? In that case, I'll gift them to you."

Uncle Zelef and Lady Ellelaura looked surprised by that. Then they both started laughing.

"Yes, that's right. But it's important for us to pay because we are friends. Since we've known each other since childhood, of course."

And now, Mom was back to looking troubled.

In the end, Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef bought the eggs for the same amount the Merchant Guild would buy them.

"Are they really so inexpensive?" Uncle Zelef was very surprised by the price.

"Yuna doesn't have profit in mind," Mom said. "She's set the price of the eggs so low, they're almost free. She wants them to be enjoyed as widely as possible."

"That seems very much like Master Yuna. Her heart is so big!"

"But not her stature!" Lady Ellelaura said, and everyone laughed.

If Yuna were here, she would have been mad. I could never tell Yuna about this...

After we left the henhouse, we went to the Bear Dining Room—Anz's restaurant.

"Looks like we've got a bear here too," Lady Ellelaura said.

"And it's even holding a fish!"

"Well, this place does serve seafood," said Mom.

The restaurant was very close to the Bear's Lounge. Since we left after eating at the Bear's Lounge yesterday, we hadn't led them here. We went inside.

"Welcome! Well, now, if it isn't Tiermina, Fina, and Shuri! What brings you here today?"

It was Seno. She worked at the Bear Dining Room. Seno was from Mileela, the same place as Anz. She was always energetic and bright. Forne, who also was from Mileela, came by too.

"I've brought some friends today," said Mom, "so I was thinking of having a meal here," Mom said. Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef bobbed their heads.

"In that case, please have a seat. What would you like to order?"

"Ah... whatever you would recommend."

"I would like something I can't eat in any other town."

"I'd like the three-color rice ball set and grilled fish," Mom said.

"Me too!" Shuri wanted to order like Mom, but Mom just decided to share her order instead.

"I would like bamboo shoot rice and fish tempura," I said.

"Coming right up. Anz, one three-color rice ball set and one bamboo shoot and fish tempura set. And two chef's choice sets."

"Seno, we don't have a chef's choice set!" Anz called in from the back as Seno left. "If you're going to take someone's order, make sure it's on the menu." Anz walked in from the kitchen.

"I'm sorry," said Lady Ellelaura. "I'm not sure what would be good, so I wanted to leave it up to you."

"Oh, uh... no problem," said Anz. She didn't seem to know how to reply to Lady Ellelaura's apology.

"This is Lady... I mean, this lady is Ellelaura and this is Zelef. They're my friends and they wanted to eat something they can only get at this restaurant. Would that be all right with you?"

Mom... did you almost call her Lady Ellelaura? That was close!

"In that case, I will happily whip something up." Anz went back to the kitchen.

After a while, the food was ready and lined up on the table. There were all kinds of rice balls in a row. Normally, there'd only be three rice balls, but there were fifteen for all five of us.

"Looks like rice," Uncle Zelef said.

"Yes. There are fillings inside of them, so you can enjoy all kinds of favors."

The three-color rice ball flavors changed every day. Sometimes there would be little marinated fish bits in them or seaweed from the ocean, or really sour red things called umeboshi. Sometimes they put chicken and pork in them too. There was also something called a grilled rice ball; those were really good, so I liked them.

There was also seafood and things like squid and octopus on the table. Some of the food had shellfish in it too.

"We also have meat-based dishes. But since you requested unusual foods, I cooked things with seafood from Mileela."

"They all look very good," said Lady Ellelaura.

“Yes, indeed.”

“But let’s see how it tastes.”

We all started to eat together.

“I’ve had seafood at other places before, but this restaurant’s dishes all seem delicious,” said Lady Ellelaura.

Uncle Zelef. “They are. The chef was the woman from earlier then?”

“She’s a chef who Yuna discovered in Mileela,” Mom told them.

“That woman who was baking the bread—I recall that she was brought here from the capital too, correct?” asked Ellelaura. “By Yuna?”

She meant Morin. I remembered how delicious Morin’s bread was when we ate it at the capital. Her bread was still delicious, even now.

“Master Yuna is very good at sizing people up.”

“Although the capital lost a fine baker that day,” said Lady Ellelaura.

“I almost want to take the two of them back with us,” Uncle Zelef said.

“You can’t!!!” I shouted.

Lady Ellelaura blinked. “Fina, dear?”

“We need both of them at the shops. If you take them, none of us will know what to do!”

And neither would Yuna...

“I’m very sorry, Master Fina. I really do wish I could take them, but I never would actually do that! If I did... well, I’d say Master Yuna would surely begin to greatly dislike me quite a bit!!!”

Lady Ellelaura nodded. “If I got on Yuna’s bad side, even Noa and Shia would turn against me.”

"And if Master Yuna stops coming to the castle, His Majesty and Lady Flora would *resent* me!" Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef broke into laughter then, but Mom and I didn't. They mentioned His Majesty and the princess, which made everything such a big deal.

After that, we ate the roasted fish and the stir-fried squid and octopus. There were all kinds of other things to eat too, but I really liked the taste of the tempura. They were good with a little salt or even some soy sauce.

Morin's bread from yesterday was good, and so was Anz's food.

We left the Bear Dining Room behind.

"Thank you so much for today." Lady Ellelaura was going to spend time with Lady Noa after this, because they were leaving tomorrow.

As for Uncle Zelef, he was going to go eat at another restaurant. I could barely believe he could eat more, but... looking at his belly, I guess I could see it!

The next day, at the Bear's Lounge, Lady Ellelaura and Uncle Zelef were buying a lot of bread.

EXTRA STORY

NOA SPENDS TIME WITH HER MOM

MOTHER CAME BACK from the capital with Chef Zelef. It seems she's come to see Yuna's shop. I told her I could show her around, but she said everyone would get nervous if they learned she was a noble, so she would be going without letting anyone know who she was.

Even Fina, who can now speak normally to me, used to be so nervous when we first met. When I went to another shop with my father, it felt as though we were being treated differently from the other guests.

I understood what Mother felt, and I also understood that I couldn't go with her since everyone at Yuna's shop knew I was the lord's daughter. So... even though Mother had come home, I couldn't spend time with her.

Once I finished eating, I collapsed onto my bed.

Was Mother eating at Yuna's shop right now? Or had she finished her business there?

I do *so* wish I could have gone with her.

I reached out my hand toward the bear stuffed animals on my bed and clutched one. They were the ones Yuna had given me—I had two of them on my bed. The black one was Kumayuru, and the white one was Kumakyu.

I hugged Kumayuru and rolled around on my bed thinking about my mother when there was a knock at the door. It opened, and...

“Noa, I’m home.” My mother stepped into my room.

I righted myself and sat on my bed. “Did you finish seeing Yuna’s shop?”

“Yes, I had quite a bit to eat,” said Mother. “They were so marvelously delicious that I

overate. I'm quite uncomfortable."

So she said, but she looked very pleased with herself. Mother came closer to me and sat down next to me. "Yuna's shop is very interesting," said Mother. "There were bear ornaments. Even the children working there were dressed as bears. I was right to come to see it."

The bear ornaments were cute—so were the bear clothes. The food was very good too.

"I'm sure His Majesty would have a good laugh at the sight of it," she said. "I should bring him along next time."

His Majesty? In Crimonia? It was a terrifying thought because it was very possible that my mother would *really* bring him. If that were to happen, my father might very well collapse!

"I am so very full and uncomfortable," Mother said and collapsed onto the bed.

"Mother, that's rather improper."

"Oh, how could you scold your poor mother when she's in such *pain*?" Mother brought her hand to her eyes and pretended to cry.

"You simply ate too much," I said.

Mother was usually so prim and proper, but sometimes, she could be quite slovenly. I loved my mother regardless, but she could be ever-so-strange when she got into one of these moods. I didn't know what to do most of the time.

"Oh, looks like you've got something cute there, huh?" Mother eyed the Kumayuru stuffed animal in my arms.

"Th-This is—" I tried to hide the bear, but it was already too late.

"You don't need to hide it. It's the one you wanted at Misana's birthday party, isn't it?"

"It is, but it's a little embarrassing."

"Yuna made good on her promise to gift you one, then. Good for you! Did you thank her?"

"Yes, I did. But when I told her that I wanted more and would pay for them, she said no." I wanted at least five more, if possible.

"Ha ha! This one is important to you, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's exactly why I require more."

"That's not the right way to think of it. If you have multiples, then they won't be important to you anymore. They're important because they're irreplaceable. If you have backups, you might abuse them. Or you might let them get dirty."

"But I wouldn't..."

"Now, don't give me that! The more of them you have, the more likely the unused ones will collect dust. Make sure you care for the present Yuna gave you, you understand?" Mother patted my Kumayuru on the head.

"Yes, I will." Of course I would! I took my Kumayuru stuffed animal back in my arms.

"It really is well made," Mother said as she picked up my Kumakyu on my bed.

I thought the same. That was why I didn't want a stuffed animal like this one next time, but instead one as big as Kumakyu.

Then Mother spoke of many things. She told me about my sister and herself. I so wish I could see my sister again.

While we were talking, Mother suddenly stood up. "Oh, now what is that?"

Mother started walking toward my shelf—she'd spotted something. She reached out and picked up the bear ornament that Yuna had given me. When I'd said I wanted the big bear statue in front of the shop, Yuna had instead given me a bear ornament the same size as the bears that decorated the shop tables.

"Noa, let me have this."

"N-no, you can't. Yuna gave it to me. It's important—like treasure to me. I can't, even if you ask me, Mother." I got closer to Mother and tried to take it back, but she held it up high in the air so I couldn't reach it. "Mother, please give it back."

“Just let me look at it a bit longer.”

“Um! Just for a little!” I relented.

“It is such a cute bear. I saw these at the shop as well.”

“I begged Yuna to make a big bear for the garden, so she told me to make do with this. I really wanted a big one though,” I explained.

Mother gave my bear back. “Hee hee! If you put such a large bear in the garden, Cliff would tear his hair out!” Mother grinned. I suppose Father likely would scold me if that were to happen. But then again, I still wanted a bear large enough to decorate my room. “So, Noa...”

“What is it?” That was the face she made when she wanted something. “No matter how many times you ask, I won’t give it to you.”

“I won’t ask for it anymore, but won’t you let me *borrow* it for a bit?”

“Borrow?”

“I just thought of something interesting. I’m hoping to place similar decorations in the capital restaurant.”

Mother was wearing her mischievous look. Saying no to her when she was like this was impossible.

“Even if we ask craftsmen to make them,” she said, “it won’t work out unless we have the original, right? But it’s not as though we can bring the *real* originals here, and Yuna likely wouldn’t make them for us if I asked. So, I’d like to use this bear as a reference to make others.”

A restaurant in the capital with bear ornamentation? “That’s a lovely idea. But...” But then I would have to let her have one of my treasured bears...

I looked at the bear I was clutching in my hands.

“I won’t break it,” she promised. “Won’t you please let me have it, Noa?” Mother begged, clasping her hands together.

"Umm... you have to promise you won't ever lose it or break it."

She nodded, and I handed the ornament to Mother. "Thank you. I promise I won't lose it or hurt it."

I was a little worried, but... having more bears in the capital was a good thing, wasn't it?

Mother went home a few days later after she finished her inspection. I was so happy to talk to her after not being able to for such a long time.

AFTERWORD

IT'S BEEN A WHILE. I'm Kumanano. Thank you for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear's* tenth volume.

This volume was about Yuna and the others getting to the elves' village after successfully getting Luimin's bracelet back. Trouble awaits them in the elves' village, though. The elves' precious sacred tree is in a terrible state because of an infection from a parasitic plant. The parasite attracts monsters all around the village. Yuna has to fight in order to save both the village and the sacred tree.

After Yuna gets back from the village, she draws a picture book with Fina and returns to her everyday life. The little girl in the picture book is also slowly finding her happily-ever-after, thanks to the bear. It'd be nice if the girl and Fina are both happy.

In the new stories, Ellelaura and Zelef have come to Crimonia. Tiermina has no idea what to do with them, but Fina does. This story shows just how much Fina has grown. It reminds me of the days when Fina was nervous around the nobles.

The manga version started up this year too, and it's on sale now. Lots of characters make an appearance, including Deboraney, who gets a pummeling from Yuna; Lanz, who looks up to Deboraney; the practical Rulina; and the muscle, Gil. The guild master and the receptionist Helen show up too. I'm enjoying seeing the characters being fleshed out as drawings with plenty of expressive faces and sides that can't be shown through writing. The Yuna and Fina that Sergei has drawn are adorable, so I'd be so happy if you were to pick up the manga as well.

I also wrote a new short story just for the manga about Yuna right before she got to the other world. I hope that you enjoy that too.

The first volume of the manga is coming out with the tenth volume of the novel, so I hope you'll take a look.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who strived to get this book out.

Thank you for drawing such wonderful illustrations, 029.

I'm always causing trouble for my editor because of my typos and omissions. And to the many people who were involved in the publishing of Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear Volume 10, thank you.

I'm grateful for the readers who have read along thus far.

Well, I hope we can meet again in the eleventh volume.

KUMANANO — ON A DAY IN JULY, 2018



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