

WRITTEN BY
Kumanano

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029

4
novel

A large, fluffy gray bear is hugging a young girl with long teal hair. The girl has red eyes and a small red bow in her hair. She is looking up at the bear with a slightly open mouth. The bear's face is visible, showing large blue eyes and a gentle expression. The background is a soft pink color with some paw print patterns.

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

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– Bear Bear Bear Kuma –

- VOLUME 4 -

-AUTHOR-

Kumanano

-ILLUSTRATOR-

029

[SEVEN SEAS]



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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR Vol. 4
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Illustrated by 029

Originally published in Japan in 2016 by
SHUFU TO SEIKATSU SHA CO., LTD., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with
SHUFU TO SEIKATSU SHA CO., LTD., Tokyo,
through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lianne Senter at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

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sevenseasentertainment.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64505-794-9
Printed in Canada
First Printing: January 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Skills

► Yuna's Status

► 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

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

► BEAR SUMMONING

Bears can be summoned from the bear gloves.

A black bear can be summoned from the black glove.

A white bear can be summoned from the white glove.

► BEAR TRANSPORTER GATE

By setting up a gate, can move between gates.

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

This gate can only be opened with the bear hand.

► BEAR PHONE

Can have long-distance conversations with others.

Phone persists until caster dispels it. Physically indestructible.

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

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

Magic

► BEAR LIGHT

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

► BEAR PHYSICAL ENHANCEMENT

Routing mana through the bear gear allows for physical enhancement.

► BEAR FIRE MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use fire elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.

When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WATER MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use water elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.

When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WIND MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use wind elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.

When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR EARTH MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use earth elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.

When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

Equipment

► **BLACK BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

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

► **WHITE BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

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

► **BLACK BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

► **WHITE BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Increases speed based on the user's level.

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

► **BLACK AND WHITE BEAR CLOTHES (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Appears to be a onesie. Reversible.

FRONT: BLACK BEAR CLOTHES

Increases physical and magic resistance based on the user's level.

Gives heat and cold resistance.

REVERSE: WHITE BEAR CLOTHES

Automatically restores health and mana while worn.

Amount and speed based on the user's level.

Gives heat and cold resistance.

► **BEAR UNDERWEAR (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Won't get dirty no matter how much they're used.

An excellent item that won't retain sweat or smells.

Will grow with the user.

KUMA
KUMA
KUMA
BEAR

CHAPTER 75

THE BEAR BUYS A STORE

THE DAY AFTER I said my goodbyes to everybody at the capital, I used the bear transport gate to head back to Crimonia with Fina.

“Yuna, that was so much fun!”

Army of deadly necromancer-controlled monsters aside, I really enjoyed my time at the capital. Best of all, I’d gotten my hands on potatoes and cheese.

“I’m glad to hear it. If you ever wanna head on back, just hit me up and we can use the bear transport gate.”

“Yeah! I wanna go with my whole family next.”

“As long as you keep the bear transport gate secret, got me?”

“I will.”

We headed to the orphanage so I could get Fina back to Tiermina, who should’ve been busy with the kokkeko at the orphanage around then. When I got to the henhouse near the orphanage, I found the kids hard at work. One of them noticed me before I could do anything about it...

“It’s the bear girl!”

...Which meant that *all* of them noticed and ran up to me.

“You all been doing well?”

“Yeah!”

The kids were all smiles. Cool, looked like things were A-okay. “Is Tiermina around?”

“Uhuh!” said one of the boys. “She’s counting eggs over there.” He pointed at a small

shed next to the henhouse. I thanked the kids for telling me that and headed on over. I found Tiermina inside, counting the eggs with Shuri next to her.

“Mom!” The moment Fina saw Tiermina, she ran over and gave her a tight hug.

“Fina?!”

“Sis!”

Shuri dashed to Fina and gave her a big hug, beaming.

“Shuri, we’re back!”

“Good to see you, Tiermina.”

“Welcome home, you two.”

Fina was finally home, safe and sound.

“How was the capital?” asked Tiermina, and Fina practically exploded with details.

“No fair!” said Shuri, folding her arms and aiming a powerful little kid pout. “You get to do everything, sis!” If I went anywhere else, I’d need to make sure to take them both, the poor kid.

“So, Tiermina, I’ve got something to ask you about—or rather, to ask you for.”

“What would that be?”

I gave her a simple explanation about Morin and her daughter, and how I was going to start a shop.

“So on top of the eggs, you’re selling pudding and bread. *And* you’re saying that you’ve got bakers coming in from the capital?” Tiermina rubbed her temples. “What am I supposed to do then?” She seemed a little exasperated, but I guess it wasn’t a no.

“I’d like you to handle the shop’s sales, stock, and, most of all, the money.”

“All right. I don’t have to figure out the details until this Morin person comes, right?”

"And there's also the pudding stuff, so can you talk to Milaine about the eggs? That's how we'll decide how much pudding to sell."

"Understood. I'll talk to her next time I'm at the trade guild."

She wasn't the only one with questions for Milaine. There was the stuff with the eggs, but the shop was going to be bigger than I initially planned, now that we were baking bread and pizza. I needed to consult with her about that too.

That was enough bugging Tiermina at work, so I decided to swing by the headmistress before going home. She was out, though, so maybe I'd just drop in later.

Next, I headed to the adventurers' guild. "Ms. Yuna," said Helen, "back already?"

"I've got a souvenir for you."

I pulled the gift from the capital out of my bear storage and handed it over.

"An accessory? Why, thank you so much!"

What a relief. I didn't know what was in style in the fantasy world, so I just bought what the person at the store recommended. Looks like things ended up just fine.

"Is the guild master in?"

"Yes. I'll check on him right now, just a moment." She went to the back room to call the guild master and came back right away. "He will see you in his office. Please come this way."

I thanked her and headed to the back room where the guild master was.

"You sure came back fast," he said.

"You summoned me, so here I am. Thanks for the letter of introduction, by the way."

"It came in handy?"

"Oh yeah. I got in some trouble for a while, but after that the capital's guild master

helped me out a ton.”

“So long as it was useful. How’s good old Sanya?”

“She was fine. I think I might’ve left her a couple messes to clean up. Or, uh, maybe more than a couple.” The guild master burst into laughter. Sanya had dealt with the adventurers who’d given me trouble, that monster slaying mess, the promise with the king, and the whole Morin deal. I couldn’t tell him about the monster army thing, so I told him that, through Elleaura, we got to see the castle, met Lady Flora, and that I served the king and Lady Flora pudding.

“Pardon me, you... cooked for the king and princess?” He straightened a few papers, as if trying to make something, anything a little orderly.

“Yep.” Then I told him about the mother and daughter baker pair I met, the corrupt merchant, Sanya’s help, and finally the heaping serving of royal pudding.

“What do you think you were doing at the capital?”

“Look, it’s not like that’s all my fault.” I couldn’t just turn the other way when it came to Morin and her daughter, and getting a request from the king himself was the last thing I wanted.

“Yes, yes. Err. That pudding you mentioned. Is it really that good?”

“Want to try some?”

I offered him a little pudding as a thank you for his letter of introduction. The guild master sniffed it, took one bite, then another.

“Hm. Goodness, this *is* tasty.”

Even the guild master gave it high marks. Maybe my audience was a little broader than I thought, eh?

After leaving the adventurers’ guild, I headed to the trade guild to find Milaine and consult with her about the shop...

“Yuna!”...but she was the one to find me.

“Please don’t shout my name,” I complained, heading over to her usual spot at the reception desk.

“My apologies, it just came right out.”

“Here, I got a souvenir for you.” It wasn’t an accessory quite like Helen’s souvenir, but it was close.

“Thank you ever so much,” she said, beaming. “Now, Yuna, about the shop we talked about the other day—

I found a few candidates for the location. How would you like to proceed?”

“I was going to ask just that.”

After a quick explanation of what happened at the capital, I told her I was going to sell bread alongside the pudding, and that we’d have to make the shop pretty large to compensate.

Milaine nodded thoughtfully. “Now, when you say large, how large are we going?”

Well, let’s see. I needed a dine-in place for customers and, since I wanted to employ the orphans, I needed the kitchen to have a lot of space just in case. Anyway, I described my requirements for the shop as they came to mind.

“The rent will be rather expensive, in that case. Then again, I was the one who suggested that you should start a shop, so I’d be happy to offer you a discount. If you need a large place though, that’s still quite a lot of money...” Milaine looked troubled.

“Don’t worry about the price. If it’s in a good location, I’ll snap it up.”

“Yuna, a shop isn’t something you simply purchase on a whim. Not for *most* people, anyway.” Milaine seemed exasperated, but thanks to the god and his weird bear items, I didn’t have any problems with money. Still, I couldn’t share that with Milaine. I smiled and waved it off.

“Well, as long as you can afford it, the trade guild has no problem with this. The price will be high, but there is one shop that has the things you’re looking for.”

According to Milaine, the building was large and close to the orphanage. Perfect. Now all I had to do was check the price and see it for myself.

“How much would it cost?”

Milaine pulled out a file, thought over it for a bit, then wrote a sum on a piece of paper before handing it to me.

“With a discount, I suppose this is the best I can do.”

The amount she proposed really did seem on the high side. At the very least, it was more expensive than that land I bought near the orphanage. Still, it was well within my magical bear budget. I decided to look at the building and then decide.

“Of course. I’ll lead you there now.”

Just as Milaine told me, the shop was pretty close to the orphanage and, though there weren’t buildings near it, you’d get to a road with foot traffic after walking a bit. Even if a line formed in front of the shop, it wouldn’t bother anyone.

The only issue was...

“Is this a *shop*?” Because it looked an awful lot like a *mansion*. Maybe I was imagining things? I rubbed my eyes, but it didn’t become any less mansionly. “It doesn’t look like one.”

“Not yet. The mansion will need some remodeling.”

A mansion turned into a shop, huh? Well, it wasn’t like I had any problems with the location. And the price wasn’t bad, the more I looked at it. “Can I see inside?”

“Naturally.”

Milaine took out the key, opened the door, and we went inside. There was a massive staircase at the front and a vast, empty floor area around it. If I set up tables and chairs here, it might make for a good dine-in area. Going further inside, there was a hallway to the left, and down that hallway I found a kitchen. It looked more than large enough. There was enough room for Morin and Karin to work, and for the orphans to help them.

“It also has a cold storage, so you’ll have plenty of room for food.”

I peeked into the storage room. Pretty spacious. In fact, this was big enough that I’d be able to store the eggs and pudding along with the ingredients for the cheese and bread. This might’ve been even better than I was expecting.

“What about the other hallway?”

“There are rooms that way. You can even see the courtyard from them.”

When I went to check it out, I did find several rooms, each with a garden view. I could probably make these into deluxe rooms. Next, I went to check out the second story.

When I got upstairs, I found several rooms and a spacious floor area, though it wasn’t as big as downstairs. Apparently, this was an aristocrat’s mansion and the room’s beds, closets, and other furniture were left as-is. If someone wanted to live here, it was move-in ready.

I could make the first floor into the shop and have Morin and her daughter live on the second floor. It looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in a while and, on closer inspection, the walls and carpets were dirty. But hey, nothing some professional cleaners couldn’t handle.

I decided to splurge and buy this small mansion. The details I could save for tomorrow. Today I’d just handle all the formalities that came with buying the place.

CHAPTER 76

THE BEAR REMODELS THE SHOP

THE DAY AFTER I bought the shop, I headed to the orphanage in order to meet the headmistress to catch up and tell her about the shop. I saw a group of little kids playing outside of the orphanage. Wait, did I even know those kids? Surely I did, right?

I gathered the kids who approached me and passed out fruit I bought at the capital as souvenirs. When I tried the fruit out, it was sweet and tart. I told them to share. After they gave me a polite reply, they headed into the orphanage. I followed them inside to see the headmistress.

“Oh, what have you all got there?” I heard the headmistress’s voice.

“We got it from the bear girl!”

“Oh! Yuna’s here?”

“Yuna’s here,” I said, stepping into view. “I’m back.”

“So you are. You must be exhausted from the trip.”

Riiight. I *technically* went to the capital to work an escort quest, but the whole thing felt more like a vacation. “Headmistress, how’ve the kids been?”

“They are doing well, thanks to you. They eat well, sleep well, and do their best to keep the orphanage afloat.”

Good news all around, then. I told her that I was starting a bakery and asked if she could spare some orphans.

“A bakery?”

“Yep. I’d kind of like to get the kids to give me a hand.”

“We do have children who don’t work well with the birds, and there are also some who

simply love cooking. If there are children who want to volunteer, please allow them to.”

If there were kids who liked to cook, they’d definitely be an asset. Making bread was still manual labor, after all, so they’d do a lot better if they volunteered. No forced orphan labor, thank you very much.

“How many kids would you need?”

“I need people to do food prep and to serve the customers, so I’d like three kids for each of those tasks for six total. Of course, I’d have them work on rotation, so they’d learn about all the work to a certain extent.” That sounded like a decent quantity of orphans.

“I see. Then, let’s gather the children to ask them directly.”

The headmistress told the kids near her to gather everyone, and the kids split up to search for the others. They should have mainly been in the henhouse, but there were probably some in the orphanage. While I was waiting, the kids started gathering in the dining hall.

“What is it, headmistress?”

“I’ll tell you once everyone is here. Please have a seat and wait.”

The kids obediently followed the headmistress’s instructions. A few of the kids noticed me and wandered over, but the headmistress warned them off and they took their seats. By the time all of the orphans finished gathering, I was *sure* there were more of them.

“Everyone, please listen closely to what I am about to say. This may decide your futures.”

Decide your futures? That sure seemed exaggerated. I guess it wasn’t like that *didn’t* make sense in a fantasy world. If they could learn to bake, they could make a living with that. For orphans, it was like showing them a new future.

“It seems Yuna is starting a bakery, so she wants six or so of you to help her. There will be physical labor involved as well as customer service. It will likely be difficult in many ways. Any takers?”

“Are you only makin’ bread?”

“Mainly, but you’ll also make pudding.”

“Me! I’ll do it.”

“Oh! Oh, me too.”

“Count me in!”

The moment I said we’d make pudding, a bunch of kids raised their hands. “We’re going to be *selling* the pudding. You don’t get to eat it.”

“Awww.”

“C’mom, doesn’t that go without saying? Also, since you’d have to handle money, I’m going to prioritize kids who can read, write, and do math.”

“Awwwwwwwwww.”

Since they’d be doing business, I needed them to be able to memorize the merchandise, and it’d be a problem if they couldn’t count the money.

“I can read, write, *and* do math. I got this!”

“Yeah, me too!”

“I’m not so good at math, but I wanna try.”

“I wanna bake!”

They raised their hands one after another. The headmistress used her judgment to pick out a few of them for me. We ended up with four girls and two boys. We had Miru, the oldest at twelve years, act as the leader and asked her to manage everyone.

“Once I get the shop ready, I’ll come calling.”

After I wrapped things up at the orphanage, I headed over to the mansion to get the

necessary preparations in order. The place really was huge—I couldn't help but feel a little intimidated when I stood in front, even though I was envisioning something more like a fast food place. I already bought the thing, though, so there was no use in thinking myself into knots.

The location was still great. The spacious plot of land was close to the orphanage and a little off the main town's road, but not so far that we wouldn't have customers. I used the key from Milaine to open the door and headed inside.

Step one: head to the kitchen and set up the stone oven we'd need to make bread and pizza. I temporarily put anything that'd get in my way into the bear storage, then looked over the now-empty kitchen to find a place for the oven.

I set up three ovens at the edge of the kitchen. I checked out the cold storage the other day, so I didn't need to do anything about that. What else would we need? I brainstormed, but nothing came to mind. I'd check in with Morin about that stuff when she came in.

That was it for the kitchen, so I climbed up the stairs to the second floor. It was small compared to the first story, but it did have an open floor. I could probably find a use for it.

Beyond the open floor, there were halls to the right and left that led to rooms like parlors or bedrooms with their own beds and furniture. A couple would definitely go to Morin and Karin. After one last run through the second floor, I headed to the garden.

Pretty spacious! Maybe I could make it into an open-air café when the weather was good, even if it was more than a little overgrown at the moment. I'd need to ask Milaine about that.

The preparations went smoothly as the days rolled by. Thanks to Milaine, I got the interior and garden cleaned up. I also got Milaine and Tiermina's opinions on what to do about the interior design—things like the number of chairs and tables, the best use for the vacant rooms and the garden, all that good stuff—but mostly I just told them what vibe I was shooting for and left them to sort it out.

While we were still prepping the shop, Morin and her daughter arrived from the

capital, coming straight to the orphanage.

"Yuna, you're already here?"

"Yeah, uh, I went ahead a bit." I didn't want to mention the bear gate, after all.

I could tell they were tired; it was a long trip all the way from the capital. I decided to leave a detailed discussion for tomorrow and give them some time to rest. After a quick introduction to the headmistress, the three of us started right off to the shop and their rooms.

"Yuna, is the inn far away?" Karin inquired from behind me.

"You're not going to an inn. We're headed for the shop you'll work in."

"The shop?"

"There are some pretty nice empty rooms there, so I thought it could be a good place to crash. Make work more convenient and all."

I led the two along to the shop... and when they saw it, they froze.

"Yuna, you said this was a shop. This is a *mansion*." It loomed before them.

I shrugged. "Former mansion, future shop. What even *are* words, right?"

"This is going to be a *shop*? You mean we're going to sell bread out of a mansion?"

"Former! I mean, I've only finished remodeling the interior so far."

I still didn't have a sign or name for it; I was hoping to brainstorm with everyone. Maybe it was a snack bar, or perhaps a coffee lounge. Or no, a bakery, a pizzeria, a pudding place, perhaps one of those overpriced combined board-game-player-snack-bar-café-breweries?

"You want to bake bread in a place like this..."

"We'll get down to brass tacks tomorrow. Just get some rest for today."

I led the two into the mansion.

“This is amazing.”

“Mom, are we really going to sell bread here?”

The two surveyed the now-spotless open floor.

“The first floor’s a shop, so... yep. You can use the rooms on the second floor.” I showed them to their rooms momentarily.

“Wow, we really get to live here?”

“The short commute’s a real bonus, right?”

I took them to the inner rooms of the second floor. The décor wasn’t exactly stunning, but it was still dang nice. Sporting a window, the sophisticated floorplan really did seem like a noble’s home.

“Aaaaand that’s that. I’m going to take out the luggage I brought over from the capital for you, so let me know if anything doesn’t sit right with you.” Their furniture and such from the capital were in my bear storage. I started pulling the stuff out. “You can use the furniture that’s already here however you want.”

“Can we really sleep on a bed like this?” Karin touched it, marveling.

“Why not? The bedding’s new, too, so it’s pretty comfy.”

“Thank you so much for everything.” Morin bowed her head.

“Cleaned up the bath, too, so use it whenever.”

“A bath...” Morin practically gasped.

“Just the thought sends shivers down my spine,” Karin stammered.

“Neat,” I said. “If you need anything else, lemme know.”

“Nothing in particular. This is just too much.”

“Yeah...”

Eh. After living here for a while, I suppose they'd figure out what else they needed. "All right, I'll come by tomorrow, so take it easy for today." With that, I left them and headed out of the mansion-turned-shop.

The next day, I brought the six volunteer orphans to the shop. They already came by a few times. The first time they were shocked, but they still seemed pretty excited to work there.

The delicious aroma of bread wafted over us; Morin and Karin were baking bread in the kitchen. Man, if I knew they were going to bake, I wouldn't have eaten breakfast already.

"Good morning, guys!"

"Good morning, Yuna," said Karin.

"Did you get a good night's sleep?"

"Yep, I zonked right out the moment I got under the covers."

"That's good."

"Morning, Yuna," Morin piped in.

"You're already baking?"

"I wanted to get a feel for the ovens. Since I found ingredients for the bread, I prepped things in the evening."

I guess they explored the kitchen after I went home. "How are the ovens and such? Everything working okay?"

"So far, so good. It'll take a while to figure out any of the ovens' quirks, but that's to be expected."

"Ovens have quirks?"

"Oh, certainly. There are spots that will be hotter than others, and I need to know how

long it takes for the temperature to rise. Those things vary from oven to oven and affect how the bread bakes.”

She really was a pro. When I made pizza, I just winged it. No wonder Morin’s bread ended up so great.

“Yuri, who are those children?”

“Didn’t I mention ’em yesterday? These guys will help you out at the shop.”

The kids gave Morin a spirited greeting.

“Could you teach them how to bake? You don’t have to tell them your husband’s prized recipe or anything, but that’d be nice too.” If that were out of the question, I’d just keep them on pudding and pizza.

“It’s okay. Knowing that my husband’s bread will be shared with people makes me happy.”

“All right, everyone, after she teaches you, make sure to take the bread home with you to the orphanage.”

The orphans let out a spirited cheer. Aww!

CHAPTER 77

THE BEAR THINKS OF A SHOP NAME

PREP WORK FOR THE SHOP was nearly done with, but one problem still remained: we still didn't have a name. When I tried asking Morin for advice, she told me that it was my shop, and I should be the one to decide.

All well and good, but... I was devastatingly bad at naming things. I even used my own real name in the game. I named my bear summons Kumayuru and Kumakyu because they *were* kuma—kuma as in, the Japanese word for bear. The bears seemed happy with their names, but they were magical bears and probably had their own takes on stuff. No, I had no confidence in my ability to name anything, and even after thinking over a shop name for several days... no ideas, head empty. And so I decided to ask everyone for their suggestions.

I gathered the shop manager, Morin, and her daughter, Karin; the store helpers from the orphanage; Milaine from the trade guild, who had helped with the remodeling; Helen, who helped me out at the adventurers' guild; Tiermina and her daughters Fina and Shuri, who always gave me a hand; and Noa, who had returned from the capital—fourteen people in total.

Then, we went straight into it:

“The Bear’s Bakery.”

“The Bear Eatery.”

“The Bear’s Pizzeria.”

“The Bear and Pudding.”

“The Bear’s Restaurant.”

“The Bear with You.”

“The Bear’s...”

“The Bear...”

They came up with an unbearable deluge of ursine names.

“Okay, so... you all seem pretty fixated on putting bear in the name. Why?”

I pretty much *knew* why, but I asked anyway. Maybe they’d give me an unexpected answer.

“I mean...”

“Yuna...”

“Uhh...”

Everyone stared. All right, fine. It was my shop, hence the bear stuff. It still sounded a lot like a repeat of the Kumayuru and Kumakyu thing. I wasn’t going to tell them no, and I didn’t care *that* much. There were shops in my original world with “bear” in their names too. It just kinda bummed me out to hear everyone say it out loud.

“Well then,” Helen ventured, “how does ‘The Adventurer Yuna’s Shop’ sound?”

“Nope!” I cut her off. Somehow that sounded *too* bland. If we were heading in that direction, then “Morin’s Bakery” would work just as well.

When I told Morin so, she softly dismissed it saying, “This is *your* shop.”

“I think it’s got to have ‘bear’ in it,” said Karin.

Noa nodded. “Right. Because it *is* Yuna’s shop.”

Everyone nodded at Noa. It was settled that bear would be used in the name, and everyone started to contribute new ideas. Looks like I was stuck with “bear.” Maybe everyone else was just as bad at naming things as I was.

Bear? Check. But what about the rest of the name? No one could decide.

“Well, how about we decide on the store uniform first then?” Milaine blurted. “I’ve

brainstormed some ideas.”

I blinked. “A uniform?”

“You need them to wear something while serving the customers.”

Just once, I remembered seeing some employees from a large shop in the capital wearing things that looked like apron dresses. It was a pretty cute look. Maybe maid and butler clothes would work in a fantasy world? I tried imagining the kids in them. Hmm.

I nodded slowly. “That’s a good idea—the uniforms.”

“Isn’t it? So, I made a set just to try it out,” Milaine pulled out a folded uniform from her item bag and spread it out.

“Is that a *bear*?”

“If it’s going to be your shop, Yuna, then of course it has to be a bear uniform.”

As Milaine said those dreaded words, she put the bear clothes out on display. Ugh. I wasn’t cosmically, literally a bear, and I really didn’t want that to just be my whole brand forever.

Milaine pivoted around until her eyes settled on one of the orphan girls. “Miru, won’t you try this on?” she asked the girl. Come on, though—no way that’d work. Even Miru wouldn’t wear such an embarrassing outfit.

“Ooo! Can I really?!”

But Miru seemed thrilled. No disgust, no horror on her face at all. In fact, some of the kids were looking at her with *jealousy*.

“You’re so lucky.”

“No faaaaair!”

“Ooo! Me next!”

But... but...! Argh! Miru looked ecstatic when she took the bear uniform and the other kids were green with envy. Maybe *I* was the odd one out?

I rubbed my temples. “You’re not embarrassed?”

“I’m not. I get to look just like you, Yuna. I’m so happy.”

The other kids nodded. Was this because of the whole “saving the orphanage” thing? They weren’t making me out to be a hero or something, right? Miru started changing at once, tossing off her clothes to get into the uniform.

“Miru, stop!” I said. She tilted her head at me. “Find a changing room or something.”

Milaine nodded. “That’s right. You’re getting too old for that sort of thing. Come with me.” Milaine stood up and led Miru into one of the back rooms. Miru was already twelve, so she really had to get her head on straight about that stuff. The boys might’ve been younger than her, but they were still boys, and they were getting older. Guess I’d need to designate some changing rooms.

After a while, Miru came back with the uniform on. It looked a lot like my bear onesie all the way down to the hood. There was even a little tail on her bum to complete the cutesy look. I guess it wasn’t really a uniform so much as a bear parka? Were they really going to wear *that* on the job?

“What do you think?” Miru looked delighted as she slowly rotated in place to show off the uniform. Why was she *happy* about this thing?

“It really does look great.”

“Eeeee! You’re so lucky.”

“Cuuuuuute.”

She was showered in praise from all directions. It really wasn’t bad. It *was* cute. But, I mean, come on. A *bear* uniform. I wanted to put a stop to it, but I just couldn’t bring myself to say anything. It actually *was* adorable, after all.



Still, I felt like something was missing. I looked Miru up and down. Oh? Right—it looked off because Miru didn't have shoes. When Milaine noticed me staring at Miru's feet, Milaine reached into her item bag like she remembered something.

"Miru, try these on."

She pulled out shoes that looked a lot like mine from out of her bag. They were both black to match the clothes, unlike the white-and-black of mine. Miru kicked off her shoes put on the ones from Milaine. She was bear from head-to-toe.

Tiermina laughed. "Oh my goodness, you even made them shoes!" The crowd gawked.

Milaine shook her head. "I had someone else make them. Nice, though, aren't they?"

Miru's little feet were bundled up in the shoes that looked an awful lot like mine. Jeez, I knew that Milaine was a go-getter, but this seemed a little extreme.

"Honestly," Milaine continued, "I was also considering getting some gloves, but they'd probably get in the way of cooking and serving, so I just went with the shoes. Unless you'd like the gloves." She gave me a hopeful look.

"I think we're good on gloves."

Milaine managed not to look too disappointed. "How do they feel, Miru?"

"Really nice!" Miru was practically skipping around the shop in her bear shoes.

I sighed. "Are they really going to work while wearing those?"

"As long as you give your permission," Milaine said.

"Yuna, I want to wear them," Miru begged me. "Pleaaaaaaaaase?" Hmm. Well, it wasn't like I was wearing them. (Wait, I *was* wearing bear stuff, wasn't I? Dangit.)

"If *you're* all okay with it," I said, "then I guess it's fine." As long as the kids were happy, then whatever. It wasn't like anybody was making them wear the goofy things.

"I'm okay with it," one of the boys said.

"I am too," said another.

“Me too!”

Hold up, the boys too? This would be mortifying when they looked back on it later. Well, no taking it back, boys.

“Looks like we’re going with the bear uniform,” Milaine practically sang the words.

“Wait a moment,” said Karin slowly. “Does that mean I need to wear that?” She was quiet, but now she was pointing at Miru’s uniform.

Right. The kids weren’t the only workers. If Karin was also be minding the shop, she would have to wear the uniform on the job too.

“It’s cute on the kids, but I’m not sure the same would be true for me...”

Karin was seventeen, wasn’t she? If this were Japan, she’d be a second year in high school. Guess this outfit would be embarrassing at that age.

“I think it would look lovely on you, Karin.”

“But Ms. Milaine, you wouldn’t wear this yourself, would you?”

“Well, *I’m* in my twenties, so that wouldn’t do. But I think you’re the right age to pull it off. It’d look great on you—enjoy wearing these things while you can!”

“There is no way I can serve customers in that embarrassing outfit!”

Wow. I had to keep this “embarrassing outfit” on all the time because I’d lose my powers, if I didn’t. And I didn’t just have to serve customers in this—I defeated baddies, slayed monsters, gone to the capital, and even met the king all while dressed as a bear.

“Since I’ll be baking bread with my mom, in the kitchen, could I be excused from wearing that?”

“The kids couldn’t possibly serve customers without supervision,” I said. “And aren’t you supposed to be in charge of the floor, Karin?”

We discussed that already. Morin would be in charge of the kitchen, while Karin would manage the front and give instructions to the kids.

“But...” Karin glanced desperately at us.

“Pff. Heh. Bwahahahah!” And Milaine burst out laughing.

Karin blinked. “Ms. Milaine?”

“This was just for the kids. If you *did* want to wear it though, I could arrange for that.”

“Ugh, I’d rather die.”

That seemed like a bit much.

“But,” said Milaine, “I wonder if I could interest you in a bear cap?”

Anyway, Karin seemed relieved after realizing she wouldn’t have to wear the uniform and Milaine seemed delighted by the sight of Miru’s bearish appearance. “Thanks so much for modeling, Miru.”

When I asked how much the uniforms would cost, Milaine told me she was covering it, but I really couldn’t let her do that. Plus, I’d probably need some spares, so we worked out that I would pay for the extras.

“But what are you naming the shop?” Fina asked, taking us back to the main subject. After a long, extended discussion, we settled on one.

“Bear’s Lounge.” There we go. Nice, warm, and relaxing. Grab some pizza and hibernate a little, why don’t ya?

CHAPTER 78

THE BEAR OPENS SHOP

WITH OUR NAME SET, Milaine got it put on a sign from the trade guild... or she was *going* to, but then someone mentioned that a sign for a “Bear Lounge” had to have a bearish sign. Like my bear house, it had to have some immediate big bear energy.

“Am I supposed to make it that way?” (Like usual, I suppose.)

“If we asked a craftsman to do it, it’d take time. Can’t you do it, Yuna?”

Hmm. They already knew I could make a whole bear-themed abode.

“There’s already a building here, so I can’t make it exactly like my house.”

“We’ll leave the details up to you, Yuna, especially since none of us know exactly what you can do using your magic.”

And that was how I was tasked with making my own shop look more “bearish.” Which meant... what, exactly? It already had an exterior, and I wasn’t just about to pull the whole thing down and start again. What a pain.

After the day’s meeting, everyone went back to their jobs or houses—Milaine and Tiermina headed over to the trade guild to negotiate the sign and uniforms, Morin and Karin moved into the kitchen to clean up, Miru and the other orphans took the bread they practiced baking back to the orphanage. Helen went home and the maid Lala came to collect Noa. In the end, Fina and Shuri were the only two left.

“Now that you’re making the shop, you’ll be able to eat pudding any time you want!” Fina exclaimed.

“Not really. It depends on how many eggs we’ve got.”

Since I needed to sell wholesale eggs to the trade guild at fixed intervals, Tiermina and Milaine would be working that out. Fina also knew how to make pudding for herself, so she didn’t need to visit the shop.

"Hey, guys? What do you think a bear shop would look like?"

"Bears!" Shuri cried, jumping up and down.

Fina nodded. "What if you decorate it with bear ornaments?"

Bear ornaments, huh? I *had* made the bear house, so I suppose I could make something like that using magic?

First, I set up two bear statues by the entrance. I gathered mana in my bear puppets and envisioned 'em. In my home world, there are these cute pop culture kinda figures, Nendoroid, with little heads about two-fifths of their entire size.

I used clay as my medium. Some color would be nice, so I used magic to gather various hues of dirt. It wasn't exactly a pretty rainbow of colors, but it was better than Pure Dirt Color. And bearbity, bobbity, boo, we had a cutesy bear Nendoroid-y statue.

"Th-That's so cute."

"Bears!"

The two rushed over to coo at the Nendoroid-like bear.

"You think this looks all right?"

"Yeah. It's so *cute* I'm gonna implode!"

And the focus testers go wild! I set up my cute bears on the second floor and outside where they would stand out. But, hmm... yeah, the bear statues were nice and all, but when I took another look at the building from the front, I still couldn't tell what kind of establishment it was supposed to be. How were the good people supposed to know about our bear bread? I headed back over to the front of the building and made a giant bear holding a huge loaf of bread.

As you do, with bakeries.

After decorating the outside of the building, I headed to the garden. We decided on an open-air café; everyone agreed that food just tasted better in the fresh air. I got right to work on making bears for the garden, mixing it up a little for variety's sake. I made a bear that leaned against a tree, a bear throwing a punch, and a mama bear with her cub. Oh, and you just *had* to have a cute sleeping bear.

Whoa. Was I an artist now? Did this count?

Shuri rushed over and clung to the sleeping bear.

"Shuri, you'll get your clothes dirty." Fina dragged Shuri back over to me.

"But *bear*," Shuri pointed out.

Shuri seemed reluctant to leave, but I was finished up with the café terrace and led the two inside.

"Are you making them for inside the shop too?" asked Fina.

"Ehh. Might as well. Where should I make them?"

The shop was filled with tables and it wasn't like I could make any in the middle of the walkways.

"You don't have to make them too big. Maybe small ones?"

Not a bad idea. I surveyed the inside of the shop and looked at the tables. Maybe there? I approached a table and summoned up a little chibi Nendoroid-like bear statue at its center.

"It's a lil' bear," Shuri marveled. She scooted forward on her chair and gave it a little poke.

"Shuri," warned Fina, "No touchy."

"But... *cute bear*."

Maybe *too* cute. I didn't want any bear-state-heists here, so I added a smidge of magic to attach the bear to the table. "It's not going to come off no matter how much you mess with it," I told Shuri. She gave it a yank and it didn't move an inch. That should prevent any bear nabbing incidents, right?

I set up a few more bears in fun poses on the other tables, including a standing bear, a fighting bear, a sleeping bear, a running bear, a big bear pile, a dancing bear, a sword-wielding bear, a fish-nomming bear, a honey-guzzling bear, and a bear hug. With the tables done, I got to work on the walls: bears swung down from walls, climbed pillars, sharpened their claws in corners. What do you call this many bears, anyway? A school of bears? A pack? An ursing?

Karin came down from upstairs. “Yuna, what are you doing?”

“Bears,” I said.



Karin looked around at the chibi bears that were decorating the shop. “Yeah, no kidding. Cute ones too. These kinds of bears wouldn’t frighten me even if I ran across them in the woods.” She poked one on a table. “Do you think we’ll get customers?”

Well, this *was* a brand-new shop in a little-known location serving unfamiliar cuisine. I guess that would be a concern. “I think they’ll come. Besides, I’ve requested a real barnstormer of an advertising campaign. And with Morin’s bread and the pizza, pudding, potato chips, and fries... I think we’re good.”

“The chips and fries *were* delicious. Oh, and the cheese went very well with the bread.”

I nodded vaguely. “I’m kind of worried about how much cheese we have in stock though. We might not have enough to meet demand.” We needed cheese for both the bread and pizza, so we ended up using piles of it. I was also worried about our potato supply for similar reasons.

“Where are you buying the cheese from?” asked Karin.

“Old cheese guy. He came to the capital to sell it.”

“Wait, he wasn’t *from* the capital? But then...”

“It’s okay. I asked where he lived, so we can go to his old cheese village if we gotta.”

“And how about the potatoes?”

“Sometime after next month they should be delivered to the orphanage, but I’ll go buy some if we need to.”

Having to go out was a pain, so I hoped the potatoes came on time. Then again, according to Fina, potato sellers sometimes came to the town. I asked Tiermina to check in on that. If all went well, maybe we’d sell out of potatoes just in time for the new batch to arrive.

We were planning on opening ten days from now. The sign and uniforms would be done before then, fortunately. I was battering the merchant and adventurers’ guilds with advertising flyers. All was set.

Now I just had to rely on the kids’ work.

Everybody went nuts for the bear figures. Milaine even asked me to make one next to the sign. I couldn't bring myself to say no, so I ended up sculpting a bear that clung onto the edge of the sign. Sometimes it felt like Milaine was the one who really ran the shop, with how much she took the initiative on handling all the annoying formalities and negotiations. She arranged for the tableware and other stuff, and she'd even gotten ingredients for us on a discount, so I really just couldn't say no to anything she asked. Not that I minded, considering how helpful she was, but I wondered how her *actual* job was going.

Whenever I asked about it, she'd say something like: "This all falls under trade guild work, so there's no problem."

The kids were ecstatic about the uniforms when they came in. We even had extras and some for Fina and Shuri, who'd be helping out.

I had the kids practice math and memorize the menu names and their prices. From there, they learned how to cook everything and we practiced how to greet customers. My army of cheerful orphans dedicated themselves to studying without a single complaint.

And all at once, it was opening day. Everyone was nervous. The kids were fidgety and kept peeking outside. I think Morin and I were the only ones not freaking out. When business hours rolled around, we opened the doors and... nobody.

"No one's coming." Karin looked at the entrance. There was no sign of anybody there.

"Well, we only *just* opened."

The kids seemed disappointed after they worked themselves up.

Maybe I hadn't advertised enough? I at least asked Milaine and Helen to put up more fliers in the merchant and adventurers' guilds, respectively. We even had friends put them up too.

A little while after the store opened, our first guest finally arrived.

"Hey, so. *Ahem*. Hello there." The adventurers' guild's master straightened his tie.

"Welcome." Normally the kids would serve the customers, but since this was the guild master, I decided to be his hostess.

"What a quirky little place you have here," he said as he looked over the store, full of bear figures and kids in bear uniforms.

"Is it too much?" I asked.

"You mean with the bears outside and in? They'd definitely make some people pause, but I think they'd draw some people in out of curiosity too."

Well, they did stand out, that's for sure. Hopefully the bread-bearing bear helped it bear more resemblance to a bakery.

"So, what can I get you?" I asked once we reached the counter.

"Any recommendations?"

"The pizza, hamburger, and breads are meals, and the potato items are meant to be snacks. The pudding is for dessert. Consult your stomach and get back to me."

We set up a system so you ordered and paid at the back counter, and you'd pick up the food there too. They'd have to wait a little for pizza, though.

"I see. In that case, I'll have the pizza since I hear it's good from Helen."

"And what'll you have to drink? The pizza is kind of oily, so I recommend something refreshing."

"The oran juice, then." He finished his order and paid. A few minutes later, Morin baked the pizza and the kids brought it over straight away.

"Is this a pizza?" The guild master gazed at the pizza like it was some kinda gluten-heavy crime scene. Then he nodded, accepted it and the oran juice, and he headed to a seat.

"It begins," he said softly, and... took a bite. Then he took another one. A third. Inertia took hold. "Oh dear, this is... what a marvel!" In the blink of an eye he consumed the entire pizza and, seconds later, drained the glass of oran juice.

“I’m glad it was to your liking.”

“Yes, yes. The other stuff. How is it? Just as good?” His eye twitched.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to decide that for yourself. Everyone has their own preferences.”

“All right, how do I add on to my order?”

“You can go back to the counter just the same as earlier to buy more.”

“Glorious.”

The guild master stood up and ordered a hamburger at the counter. He savored every bite and, when he left, he was virtually glowing.

More time passed and—thankfully—people gradually trickled in. Maybe we just opened at a bad time, but we started getting more customers as lunchtime approached.

I probably had the guild master and Helen to thank for a group of adventurers who came by. Some of them laughed at the bear statues, but they shut up after getting a glare from the Bloody Bear herself and quietly placed their orders—pizza and bread. The Bloody Bear recommended chips and fries. They obeyed. After they finished eating, they headed on out looking satisfied with their meal and mostly not terrified of me.

After that, regular customers came in following the advice of Milaine and the fliers. All in all, not a bad start, right?

...To say the least. Because instead of having fewer customers after the lunch rush, we were getting *more*. Apparently, the customers who ate here during lunch had spread word about the shop.

The bear statues invited gossip, the savory bread invited clientele, and the pudding gave our patronage a $1.75 \times$ bonus at *least*. Since I hadn’t known how much we would sell and there was the egg inventory issue, I made three hundred puddings, but the pudding was faltering. Even though eggs were a lot cheaper than before, I still priced the puddings pretty high. No matter, because the patrons (especially girls) kept buying them one after another. No one cared about the one-per-customer limit, either, and some of them snuck thirds or fourths in.

And then came the after (adventuring) work rush. The guild master and Helen completely outdid themselves with their advertising. We ran out of our pudding reserves and ended up with a ton of dejected customers walking out the door. The bread we had on hand immediately sold out, and even as the kids helped Morin bake fresh loaves, there were just too many orders coming in. Even Fina had to tag in and help.

I started to wait on the customers just in case there was trouble. Karin and the kids wouldn't be able to handle the pudding-hunger of violent adventurers.

I was hoping to let my staff eat after the lunch rush, but we didn't even have time for that. Without enough ingredients to even serve dinner, we ended up closing early.

CHAPTER 79

THE BEAR SUBMITS A QUEST TO THE ADVENTURERS' GUILD

“I'M DEAD. D-E-D. Deceased.”

“Soooo tiiiiiired...”

We sprawled out on the store chairs, completely drained. Even the ever-energetic kids seemed to be tuckered out.

“I never would have thought we would have so many customers.” Morin sipped her tea with a strained smile.

“Why were there so many?” Karin asked, slightly muffled because her face was smooshed against the table. “Does Crimonia not have a bakery?”

“We do. I don't know how long it'll last now that everybody's tasted Morin's baking.”

When I praised Morin's bread, Karin perked up.

“Your pizza and pudding were doing pretty well too,” I added. “I can't even remember how many pizzas we baked.”

Morin's bread wasn't the only thing that flew off the shelves—the pizza, pudding, and fries did too.

“But this can't keep up,” Morin moaned. “Or tomorrow we'll crumble into dust.” I agreed. Not only were customers swarming, but ingredients were dwindling.

“Morin, how did things work out in the kitchen?”

“We prep the bread the day before and bake it early in the morning. If we need to increase output, I'd really like a few more ovens. That way I could bake more loaves simultaneously.”

More ovens? That was a piece of cake.

"That way," she continued, "we can bake pizzas as we get orders for them, and bake the popular bread when we need supplements. We only managed today thanks to the kids helping out. But prep for tomorrow will be an ordeal if we end up with the same number of customers. We'd need to have a lot of things ready or we'll end up with the same situation we had today. Not having time for a break is also an issue."

True. If she prepped bread the day before, woke up to bake it at the crack of dawn, and opened right after finishing, there'd be no time to rest. Plus, the more fatigued they got, the less efficient they'd be and the more likely they'd make mistakes.

"What if we opened later?" I asked. "We had more customers coming in closer to lunch. If we used that lead time for prep work, everyone can have lunch before we open up. We won't end up with the same issues as today." I was able to make sure the kids got something to eat today, but Morin, Karin, and myself hadn't.

"That would help. I'd like to also give the orphans some downtime." Morin looked over at the kids. They were dozing off in their chairs. They'd been on edge all day and were probably exhausted.

"Also, about closing time," I said, "I think we should allot a certain amount of ingredients per day and, once those run out, we should close."

Morin baked additional bread every time we made a sale. Since we were doing things that way, there was no end to the baking in sight.

"Are you sure?"

"I mean, I'm not doing this to get rich. As long as you get to keep your bakery in business and the kids get to work, who cares? And I'm not going to *lose* money, you know? If we've got this much demand, I think we're good."

"Yes," said Tiermina—she checked up on us throughout the day and even joined in. "We're making more than enough in profits. But the shop will have some expenditures, so I think we should save up whenever possible."

"You don't have to worry about that."

"If I *didn't* worry about it, where would that leave you?"

Still in the black, Tiermina. I still had the money I earned in my original world and the money I earned from the monster slaying. As long as we weren't hemorrhaging money, things were fine. But I let her have this one.

"Besides," she continued, "ingredients are finite. It's not like we can whip them up from thin air. If we keep using the eggs, cheese, and spuds at this rate, we'll run out right away. That's why we should be deliberate about portioning out how much we're using for a day."

Hmm. If we had a fixed quantity of everything we'd use per day, that'd also make restocking easier. "True. Other than the flour, a lot of the things we're using are difficult to get ahold of. We also can't cut down on the number of eggs we're selling through the trade guild any more than this."

We reduced the amount of eggs that we were selling wholesale to the guild for the store opening, so we were already hitting the limit of our pudding production potential. We also needed to treat our potatoes and puddings preciously until the opportunity presented itself to procure supplies.

If we were going to offer more of anything, we needed to guarantee that we had enough ingredients. No way I could've even imagined we'd have this many customers on day one. "Also," I said, "every six days of work, we'll have one day off."

"A day off?"

The people in this world didn't take days off, by and large. I'd never seen the dining rooms or the inns take holidays. In exchange for that, though, they'd create pockets of free time within working hours to do other stuff. But we hadn't had any downtime. While the shop was open, we needed to engage with the customers. After that, we had to clean up, prep, and do all sorts of other stuff.

Most importantly, the kids needed breaks.

"As in, a day when we don't open the shop. You can go shopping or sleep or whatever. It'll be a day when you rest so you can come back to work energized."

"Are you sure we should take breaks? We won't be able to sell as much."

"I really would rather we take turns taking days off, but we just don't have the people for that."

Kids did work in this world, but they were still kids. They weren't slaves, and I'd just feel bad not letting them have a rest. The kids came before profits.

"Let's talk about the floor next. Did you have any issues?" I asked Karin. Though I was also working in the shop front, she was in charge of the floor.

"There were some customers who seemed like they were going to take home the bears."

I definitely had seen some diners trying to pry the bears from the tables. Tough luck, guys—the suckers were fixed in place.

"A few customers also asked us to sell them," said Karin.

"They're not for sale, so I guess I'll put up a notice about that. Was there anything else?" I asked the floor workers.

"Some customers were getting annoyed by the wait times for the counter line."

"Then I'll set up another counter for tomorrow. There were a lot of people who just wanted pudding, so maybe we could put the refrigerator with the pudding beside the counter to reduce the wait time."

We discussed the pain points we learned throughout the day. Running a business sure was difficult. If I just had experience selling stuff back in my old world, we probably wouldn't have ended up this exhausted. The only stuff a hermit fifteen-year-old like me knew came from manga, television, and the occasional whimsical light novel. It wasn't like I was studying them for business advice either, so my plans were full of holes. Still, thanks to the workers, we'd gotten through the day without many issues.

Tiermina stood up and headed out to correct the operating hours on the fliers we'd spread... but it might've been too late for that. Most people came by without realizing there even *were* hours. If they came by during the same hours they had today, we wouldn't have any issues, but there was a chance they'd try stopping by in the morning. There was also the possibility of other trouble breaking out. I was on the lookout for any rascallions today, but there would probably be things I wouldn't be able to see. Plus, all the employees were women and children. If anything happened, what if I couldn't deal with it alone?

And so I headed to the adventurers' guild.

"Yuna, what are you doing here at a time like this?" Helen asked. I found her on the way out of the guild.

"Are you headed home?"

"Yes, my shift is over. What's the matter?"

"I came to submit a quest."

"A quest?"

"Kinda. I'm hoping to prevent trouble before it happens."

I gave a simple explanation of what happened today: we had a ton more customers than we expected, we were changing business hours, and I wanted to hire an adventurer who could protect the kids.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea," she said. "It looks like I advertised too much."

"It's not your fault. I just made a lot assumptions that... didn't go the way I thought they would."

"What's that got to do with a quest?"

"I've got kids working in the shop, so I want to hire an adventurer who can keep an eye on things for me."

"Hmm. Well you do have all those orphans, so I suppose this would become a necessity."

"Yeah—I was just thinking of hiring a guard for seven days. Do you know any adventurers who would take a job like this?"

"Depends on the quest reward. Money greases the adventurer's wheels, after all."

"Money, huh? I'm not sure what market rate is." Even if it was a little expensive, if it ensured the kid's safety, it was worth it. If the kids got hurt because I skimped out, I

wouldn't be able to face the headmistress. I wanted to hire a strong guard to make sure that never happened.

"It depends on which rank you want to recruit from. You want someone to guard a shop, and the people they're going to guard it from are average townspeople, right? Then I think lower-ranking adventurers would do just fine. Then again, if you receive trouble from a high-ranking adventurer, someone from a lower rank wouldn't do."

I didn't *think* we had thugs like that around, but then again that thing with Deboranay had happened at the adventurers' guild, so I couldn't completely rule it out.

"Yuna, Helen, what are you doing here?" Rulina, the adventurer who once went goblin slaying with me, stepped out of the guild and flashed us a smile. The other members of Deboranay's party were also behind her. There was Deboranay, whom I'd clobbered; Lanz, the guy who liked to run his mouth; and that silent guy—was it, Gil? The whole squad showed up.

Why was Rulina in a party with these guys anyway? Did she have a thing for oddballs or something?

"Don't think rude thoughts, Yuna." Creepy. She couldn't, like, read minds or something... could she?

"Rude? I was just wondering why someone as pretty as you would be in a party like this, Rulina."

"I'm not an official party member—just a temp." She snorted. "Just look at this party, you can tell it's full of meatheads." They sure looked it. "We ended up teaming together temporarily, and it just kinda kept going."

"You should just officially join our party already," one of the meatheads blurted.

"No way. If I was going to officially partner with anyone, it'd be an adorable girl like Yuna." Rulina leaned in and gave me a bear hug. Ever since I carried her princess-style that one time, Rulina had become a bit cuddly with the bear outfit. "What's up, Yuna?"

"I was thinking of submitting a quest to get a guard for my shop."

"Oh, the new one? Everybody's talking about it."

"Saying good things, I hope. Well, I was thinking of asking for some security." With a quick nod at Helen, I repeated my explanation to Rulina. "So, if there are problematic guests, I was hoping to hire an adventurer who can intimidate them or, like, gently turn them away or something."

"I see. Then do you want us to do it?"

"Really? It'd sure be a big help."

"Yeah."

"Stop making decisions without consulting us, Rulina," someone groaned from behind Rulina. It was, naturally...

"Deboranay?"

"I'm not doing it."

"If Deboranay's not in, I'm not either," Lanz complained. Gil was silent as always.

"Really?" Rulina's mouth twisted. "In that case, I'm calling off the temporary party."

"Wait, you *what*?" Debornay protested.

"Are you surprised? If you're going to use me whenever you want to and never help me when I need you, then why should I bother with you layabouts?" Rulina turned away from them. "Yuna, is one adventurer enough?"

"I'll do it too," Gil mumbled.

"Really?"

"Heard the grub's good. You feed me, I'll help you out too."

"Gil, you're just gonna betray us?" Deboranay grabbed Gil's shoulder.

"She helped us out a while ago, man. Besides, I agree with Rulina."

"Thank you, Gil," Rulina said. Gil was a man of few words, but maybe he was different from Deboranay.

The two silently glared at each other. Deboranay was the first one to look away. “To hell with you! Let’s go, Lanz.”

“You got it, chief.”

They walked away, leaving Rulina and Gil behind.

“You’re sure, Rulina?” I asked.

“I’m sure. I was planning to leave weeks ago after our little adventure, but they whined and moaned. We’ve kept things going until today, but things were pretty tense.”

“When you decide to quit being an adventurer outright, let me know,” I said. “I’m in the middle of recruiting talent.”

“I’ll take you up on that when I do.” Was she just humoring me? Because if not, there were a ton of things I’d like her help with. Personality, skills, and pretty much everything about Rulina was fantastic.

“The quest, though—you free for seven days?”

“Sure am. Hell, just pay me in meals; I don’t need a quest fee.”

“Too bad, you’re still getting one. And the meals too.”

“Um, please do make sure you both go through proper guild channels when you accept this quest,” Helen, who was silently listening until then, interjected. Eh, fair enough. I ended up submitting a quest through the guild, and Rulina and Gil accepted it. The quest fee would consist of meals from Bear’s Lounge and some silver coins.

After I submitted the guard request without issue, I headed home to the bear house. Even though I was just doing stuff behind the scenes (hermit that I am), it was a tiring day. I got into the bear bath and washed away the fatigue. Ahh. That’s the stuff. I got out, changed into my white bear clothes, and slipped into bed.

CHAPTER 80

THE BEAR OPENS SHOP, DAY TWO

WHEN I WENT to the shop the next day, Rulina and Gil were already there.

“Morning, guys.”

“Good morning, Yuna,” said Rulina. (Gil just grunted.) “It looks just like the rumors said.”

“What were the rumors? You mentioned them yesterday too, didn’t you?”

“It’s nothing odd. It’s just that word spread that the ‘bear adventurer is making a shop,’ and that it was apparently a mansion, and there were weird bear ornaments, and there was a nice smell coming from inside, and that the kids who work there look exactly like you. Those types of rumors.”

All of that was true, though hearing it all out loud was... odd.

“What are we supposed to do?” she asked.

“Like I explained yesterday, if any customers come by, please tell them that we’re opening in the afternoon. And please keep an eye on things to make sure there isn’t any trouble when the store opens. I don’t think anyone would hurt children, but better safe than sorry.”

“Fair enough. We’ve got Gil here, so I don’t think anybody’s going to talk back to us. If they do, they’d settle down with just a look from our guy.” Rulina smacked Gil’s sinewy back. It looked like she hit him pretty hard, but he didn’t so much as flinch.

“Okay, but they’re still customers, so please don’t, um. Kick their butts.”

“Oh, ‘course not. Not civilians. We’ll just menace them a little.”

“If there’s something menacing can’t handle, just call me over. I’ll deal with it.”

I left the outside to the two of them and headed into the shop. The inside was overflowing with the mouth-watering scent of fresh bread. Morin and the kids bustled around the kitchen. While Morin and her daughter baked, they'd give instructions to the kids, who in turn would work their little selves as hard as they could. Some real future bakers among the little guys.

"Good morning, miss!" When one of them noticed me, the kids gave me an energetic greeting... but they still all looked pretty tired. Morin and Karin were used to this, but the kids absolutely were not. They were probably working late into the night yesterday to get things ready for today too. On top of that, they were bustling from the crack of dawn.

Well, they could rest after baking the bread till the store opened... but since their jobs involved fire and oil, it'd be dangerous to let them keep working while tired. I walked through the kitchen and placed my bear hands on the kids' heads.

"Bear girl?"

One of the girls cocked her head to the side when I placed my hand on her head.

"Heal," I said. "Hold in there for just a little longer."

I used stamina-replenishing magic on all of the orphans. That'd keep them going for a while, but they were tilting their heads to the side in puzzlement like they didn't understand what just happened. Finally, I did a once-over of the whole shop and headed back to Rulina. Right as I got outside, I walked into a conversation Rulina was having with a customer explaining the situation. The customer obediently went home after hearing what the deal was.

"Things okay?"

"Yes, once I explain things, they go right home." She nodded at her partner. "Gil helps."

"All I'm doing is standing," said Gil.

"Like a muscled mountain, my guy."

"Hrm."

Yeah, your average citizen wasn't willing to pick a fight with an adventurer.

“Are things going all right with the adventurers?” I asked.

“That’s going to be fine. I mean, whose shop do you think this is?”

“Uhh, mine?”

“Right, Bloody Bear. It’s *your* shop. You’re the one who knocked out nearly a dozen adventurers the first time you came by the guild, whacked a goblin king, and liquidated a freakin’ black viper. No idiot is going to pick a fight with you after that. If someone *is* stupid enough to try that, I think they’d be a fledgling adventurer or an outsider. At which point this here mountain,” she pointed back at Gil, “is going to get moving.”

“Mmhm.”

“Thanks, guys. You can eat anything you’d like once we open the shop.”

I went back indoors again and headed over to help everyone.

As I was helping out with kitchen prep, Rulina came in looking a little anxious. “Yuna, could I borrow you for a moment?”

“What’s up?”

“There’s a young lady who came by, and Gil and I are having a wee bit of trouble with her.” She looked a little worried. By “young lady” I guess she meant the person wasn’t an adult.

“Who is it?”

“An aristocrat girl.”

There was only one person who came to mind who fit that description. Then again, I didn’t know how many aristocrats there were in this town in the first place, so it wasn’t *necessarily* her.

“If she were a normal aristocrat,” Rulina added quickly, “we could manage.”

When I headed outside to check for myself, I found a blonde little girl lashing out at Gil. Yep. Figures.

“Please do kindly let me in. I have business with Yuna.”

“Wait. We are calling her over.” Still, Gil seemed troubled as he used his towering form to block the entrance from a child. And—unsurprisingly—this aristocrat girl was Noa. Since I couldn’t stand back and watch forever, I came out in front of the two.

“Noa, what’re you doing?”

“Yuna!” she broke out into a grin when she saw me before turning back to Gil and Rulina and fuming. “I *told* them I wanted to see you, but these ruffians wouldn’t let me inside!”

“I did ask them to guard the shop, Noa. I’m impressed that they knew you’re an aristocrat.”

“We have seen the young lady accompanying the lord many times,” said Rulina.

I see. Looks like Noa was famous around here.

“What’s up, Noa?”

“What is up? What is up is that I couldn’t stop by for a while because of Very Important Noble business, and then when I finally came by today, I see this! What is this shop!” Noa pointed at the chibi bears at the shop entrance. “These weren’t here when we were deciding on the shop name!” she said, delivering some impressive pouts.

“We talked about making the shop more ‘bearish’ before, right? So... I did.” Noa had been taken home by Lala before I made the bear ornaments. She hadn’t swung by since then.

“Ughhh. I simply cannot believe you made these while I was unaware,” she sniffled.

“Yeah, totally. Anyway, what brings you here today?”

“Pudding, naturally!” I just didn’t know what to do when she hit me with that disarming smile. “I actually wanted to come by yesterday, but I simply couldn’t. I would have come much earlier if I’d known there were these cute bears!”

Since I couldn't send Noa away in a situation like this, I let her into the shop. The moment we got inside, Noa froze.

"Wh-Wh-What is this?" she yelled when she saw the bear ornaments in the shop. Then, she sidled closer to me and clasped my bear puppet. "Please, please do this to my house too!"

"Cliff would actually, physically melt if I did that."

"I'll convince him! Please make them for every room."

"Let's chill for a sec, okay? Okay. Just... keep yourself satisfied with this for now." I took my hand back, made a tiny chibi bear statue, and handed it to Noa.

"Thank you very much. I will treasure this forever and always!"

"You don't need to do that." I really wouldn't know what to do if she actually treated a doll made of dirt like a lifelong treasure. Noa preciously cradled her bear figure as she walked from one bear ornament to the next, looking positively gleeful.

"Yes, I see," said Noa. She put her hands on her hips. "I shall be taking them all, Yuna."

Obviously, I refused. "Actually, where were you, anyway?"

"I was behind on my studies from the visit to the capital, so my father assigned me a household tutor."

Which made sense—she'd really done nothing but play at the capital. If she was an aristocrat's daughter, then she needed to study. An ignorant aristocrat is worse than a smart one.

"But my father is terrible," Noa groaned. "He won't let me go outside at all."

"Well, if you're not studying up, what else can he do?"

"He could let me have a break every once in a while."

"In that case," I said with a wink, "the pudding is my treat... as long as you study hard."

For the time being, I led Noa to a seat. If I left her alone, she'd go prowling around the

shop forever—better to have a Designated Noa Zone. Even seated, she was still turning and looking all around the store.

“It’s still early,” I continued, “but would you like anything other than pudding to eat too?”

“Can I really?”

“Sure. Most of the stuff is simple to make, so we can bring it by right away. Oh, but you can only have one pudding. I have limited supplies.” I brought Noa a pudding, a small pizza, and some juice.

“You’re not opening yet? Isn’t it past your opening time?” she asked between mouthfuls of pudding.

“Stuff happened.” I gave her the gist of what happened yesterday.

“Well, naturally! After trying your food once, even I want to go tell everyone about it.”

“Even so, there were a lot more people than we were expecting.”

“Dearest Yuna, you’re so blissfully unaware! As pure and naïve as your pudding!”

“What does that even—”

“I dearly wanted to show you the hall where they presented your puddings for the king’s birthday festival.” She pointed her heaping spoonful of pudding at me and then immediately carted that into her mouth.

“I heard a little bit about that from the king. He said there were tons of inquirers asking him to tell them who made the pudding or something.”

“Of course! When the pudding first arrived, everyone was puzzled by the novel cuisine. But at the king’s recommendation, everyone tried it. From there, the hall was in a clamor!”

Had I started some kinda pudding riot? “Am I in trouble?”

“Whyever would you be?”

"If they figure out I'm selling it here, people might turn up trying to force me to teach them the art of pudding." Which could put the orphans in danger.

"It'll be okay. The king himself told my father to protect you. If anything happens, then everyone will be told this shop was opened under His Majesty's instructions."

"Really?" First I was hearing about it.

"I heard it from my father, so I think it's true."

"No one bothered telling me."

"Out of consideration for you, I'm sure. You have a lot on your plate, Yuna. And please pretend you didn't hear anything from me. He was also saying that the adventurers' and trade guilds were given instructions too."

Was that why the adventurers' guild's master came here to eat? Then again, Cliff was doing all those things for me without my knowledge. Sure, it was an order from the king, but I still needed to be grateful for this benevolent pudding conspiracy.

"I think that if my father is involved with the shop as the lord, and the royal family is involved further behind the scenes, you don't have to worry about anyone harming you. If anything happens, you can tell my father and it should be all right."

So I had the lord and the king himself backing me. The kids couldn't be safer. I accepted the king's sentiments with gratitude... though it wasn't like I could decline them.

"Also, the pudding is delicious, but it's *all* delicious. Bread and pizza. Even the atmosphere is delicious! I think people won't be able to help but gather," Noa said. The kid was making me feel naïve.

After talking with Noa for a while, I noticed that there was a clamor outside. I went out to check and found that a crowd had formed.

"What's up?" I asked Rulina.

"When I told them that the shop would open in the afternoon, they said they'd start waiting."

Fair enough. There wasn't even half an hour until the shop would open, and it wasn't that odd for customers to start lining up. "Rulina, could you have the customers form two lines? If any of them get agitated or try to cut, make sure to give them a warning."

"Are you sure?"

"As long as they're not causing any trouble. I mean, I guess this'll cause some trouble for you."

"Not really. I just need them to form two lines, then?"

"Yep, you got it."

In the meantime, I'd have everybody working the shop eat and take a break so we wouldn't have a repeat of yesterday. When opening time rolled around, the lines grew to about thirty people, but (thanks to Rulina and Gil) it was smooth sailing.

"Rulina, Gil, thanks."

"It's our job, so don't worry about it. Make sure you treat us to lunch though."

"I've got it ready, so you're all set."

This time, after we opened, we didn't have any chaos. The customers obediently lined up and ordered as Mount Gil loomed.

Until we could mass produce the pudding, we were limiting them to one cup per customer. After talking to Noa, I thought we would have a lot of pudding orders, but many of them ordered hamburgers and pizzas. Made sense—it *was* lunchtime.

Then, at a good time for a break, I prepped the lunch I promised Rulina and Gil. "Thanks for your work," I told them. Since they finished their job, I had them sit at a couple seats I prepared just for them.

"You weren't kidding about the crowds," said Rulina.

When opening time came, both the customers we turned away and the customers who knew the new business hours came all at once, filling the shop to full capacity.

"This really is delicious, though," said Rulina. "The pizza and the hamburger..."

"Hrm." Gil ate silently in front of Rulina. He didn't seem *unhappy*.

"If you want more, just let me know. I can bring you more of anything other than the pudding."

"Ah, the infamous pudding. I heard from Helen that it's very good."

"It's sweet, though," I said, "so sometimes guys complain about it."

"It's fine," Gil rumbled. "Good. Yeah."

"Yeah, it *is* good. Getting to eat this for a whole week is a great perk."

"Well," I said, "you could take up permanent employment with me. I have tons of things you could do."

"Tempting, Yuna, but, I'd like to keep being an adventurer for a while."

"Speaking of adventurers, what're you going to do about Deboranay?"

"Ugh, him. I'm thinking of splitting from him and the rest. It was supposed to be temporary from the start, anyway. What are you going to do, Gil?"

"Unsure."

"You could come work at the shop too, Gil."

"Don't cook. I fight."

"Fine by me. I could put you in charge of security, and since there are kids who want to become adventurers, it'd be nice if you could teach them the different skills to become one."

I think the reason why some of the kids wanted to become adventurers was because of me. I saved the orphans, and I was an adventurer, and so some kids apparently wanted to emulate me. To become "strong enough to protect the orphanage!" I overhead one kid say.

According to the headmistress, the orphans didn't have a place to work even after growing up, so many of them would've taken up adventuring to begin with. She told

me not to worry about it. Still, it would be much better if they learned from Gil rather than jump in without any skills or knowledge about fighting.

If they needed a place to work, I'd make one for them. I really didn't want them to do anything dangerous.

"Also, I'd like you to protect the kids while I'm out of town. There's tons of work for you."

"I'll think about it."

I thought he'd turn me down, so I was surprised by his answer. I was convinced he'd say something dramatic like "My destiny lies with adventuring" or whatever.

"Take your time. You don't have to tell me right away." Fair enough—I wasn't in a hurry.

Our second day passed without incident. The customers who came late looked disappointed as they went home without knowing the taste of pudding. Supply chains, man. They'll always get you. If we had surplus eggs, I'd also wanna try making egg sandwiches... at least for myself.

Oh, and Lala whisked Noa away. Apparently Noa gave her the slip while studying. Noa cried and begged for help, but I couldn't do anything.

I did *not* want to mess with Lala.

CHAPTER 81

THE BEAR BUYS STOCK

SEVERAL DAYS HAD PASSED since the opening, and things were going great, except for the potato and cheese stock. We still had enough, but we were really living on the (starchy) edge with those. Before we ran out of stock, I decided I'd head out to the villages that provided them.

The potato village was closer. I rode on Kumayuru to get to the village right quick—Kumayuru was definitely faster. Were my summons becoming more powerful along with me?

I slowed down and entered the village, and... some stranger approached.

"Wh-who the heck are you?!" he asked, quivering. For a moment, I didn't know *why* he was so freaked, but then I realized he was looking at Kumayuru.

"I'm the adventurer Yuna. This is my bear, so it's safe." I gave Kumayuru's head a little pat to demonstrate.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, as long as you don't try to hurt it. I'd like to see a guy named Zamoru. Is he around?"

"Zamoru?"

"Yeah, I met him at the capital. He sold me some spuds."

The man relaxed his guard. "You're that bear girl who bought from him?"

"Unless there are any other bear girls, yep." Oh, I hope there aren't. That'd be such a pain.

"You really *are* dressed as a bear. Zamoru told everybody that, but... okay, that bear of yours really *is* harmless, right?"

“It’s fine.”

I once again gave Kumayuru a pat on the head, and the little guy let out a satisfying “Cwooom...”

“Okay. I’ll call out Zamoru, so wait here. Don’t just head in; you’ll scare everybody.”

Made sense. Any normal villager would be scared if a bear just took a stroll through the village, so I did as he said as he went to get Zamoru. Some villagers watched me from afar and I could hear the man faintly tell them: “Zamoru knows her; she’s fine.”

Soon enough, the man brought Zamoru over.

“Long time no see,” I said, offering a friendly smile.

“A bear girl and a proper bear.” He looked at me, at Kumayuru, and back. “You know, I thought he was kidding about a bear girl riding a bear, but here we are. So, what do you need? Isn’t our appointment in Crimonia slated for later? You’re not here to complain because someone became sick, are you?”

Ugh, what a nasty thing to say. He could at least ask before making assumptions.

“No. I didn’t have enough spuds, so I came to buy more.”

“You must be joking. I sold you quite a few spuds at the capital.”

“Well, er. We weren’t prepared for preposterous popularity of the meals I prepared with the purchased potatoes, and now we’re practically plum out. It can’t wait until we meet in Crimonia. Not anymore.”

“I cannot believe it...”

Since there was nothing else I could do, I pulled the potato chips and fries from my bag. “I made these from the spuds.”

Zamoru ate the potato chips, made from his own sliced spuds.

“Oh. Hrm. Delicious.”

“They’re good for snacking, right? All I did was fry them up in oil and sprinkle some

salt over them.”

“This, too, is soft and delicious.”

“Fried those in oil too.”

“Are you sure these are spuds?”

“Mhm. We even put them on pizza to eat, so we’re really working our way through them.”

“What is this... Peter-Sa you speak of?”

Oh, right. Duh. I pulled a pizza out from my bear storage too.

“Piz-za. Spuds are more of a side character in this show, but they’re still essential. Take a bite.”

Though Zamoru seemed surprised at seeing pizza for the first time, he ate it.

“Amazing! Does this really use the spuds I produced?”

“Yep. A lot. I mean, a *lot*. Please produce the potatoes?”

“Yes, of course I shall, but not immediately.”

Oh, right. He probably needed to dig them up or something. “I’m not in a rush yet, so that’s fine. But I’d like them sooner rather than later, so could you bring them to Crimonia when they’re ready?”

“All right. I’ll bring them right away.”

“Cool. In that case, have this.” I gave him an item bag I’d gotten from the robbers.

“And this is?”

“An item bag. I’ve never used it before, so I don’t know how much it can hold, but I think the spuds’ll fit.”

“An *item bag*? And you’re just going to... give this to me?”

"Eh, sure. When you're not using it, you can let the other villagers use it. It'll be easier to carry things with this, right?"

"It... really would, yes."

"Then we're golden. Just bring me the spuds."

"Yes, of course! How many should I bring?"

"The same amount as last time will do just fine. There's a shop called the Bear Lounge in Crimonia. Talk to a woman named Morin at the shop."

"Morin from the Bear Lounge, is it?"

"You've got it." I leapt onto Kumayuru's back.

"You're leaving already?"

"I have places to go, things to grab." Kumayuru and I, we rode like the wind to the village in search of that finest of meltable goodness... cheese.

Faster than you'd expect, the village came into sight. I followed the directions of the old cheese-selling man. Based on his info, this seemed right.

This time, in order to keep from frightening the villagers, I had Kumayuru slow down and only dismounted once we drew near the town. A man carrying a spear still approached us, which was fair. I made sure to keep in front of Kumayuru so my little buddy didn't get turned into a pincushion.

"You dress as a... bear?" Here we go again. "Were you possibly the girl who bought cheese at the capital?" At least he sounded chill about it.

"Yep, bought cheese, dressed as bear, all that. Can I talk to the guy? The, uh, cheese guy who sells stuff at the capital."

The man nodded in understanding. "Yes. I heard about that matter from the village chief."

“Did he tell you about me?”

“He said to allow ‘a girl in a bear outfit’ to enter the village. Since you were our mighty cheese-purchasing benefactor, he ordered the guards to treat you with the utmost respect.”

I glanced around. “You seem pretty heavily on guard. Did something happen?”

“Goblins recently turned up and started attacking the livestock. We’ve been on patrol ever since.”

Goblins, huh. So Kumayuru hadn’t been what he was afraid of...

“Well then, I’ll bring you to the village chief.”

“Um, can I bring my bear along?” Explaining the whole summoning bit seemed like a pain, but I’d also feel bad just leaving my bear.

The man furrowed his brow. “Unfortunately, I think not. I shall call the village chief, so could you wait here?”

Once again, I ended up waiting outside the village to avoid causing a stir. Eventually, the cheese guy came over.

“Oh, the bear lass! You came here after all!”

“I promised, didn’t I? You haven’t forgotten that you’d give me a discount on the cheese if I stopped by, right?”

“Why, of course not.”

The guard nodded. “Village chief, I will return to my patrol.”

“Yes, please do.”

The man bowed his head to me and went back to his post. The old man—or rather, the village chief—gave Kumayuru a long look. “So, lass, what is that bear?”

“It’s mine. Don’t worry about it.”

The village chief frowned as he looked at Kumayuru. Because it was a Large Bear.

"So," I said, hoping to change the subject, "I heard that there are goblins attacking your livestock. Are things going all right?"

"Yes, we have strengthened our patrols, so we should fare fine."

"You're not submitting a quest to the adventurers' guild?"

"We already did that, with the money you paid us in the capital, but..."

But nobody came. I guess the village was at the adventurers' whims. They'd come if the reward was high, but after a while, all the requests look the same. Why not pick the closer one? I do the same, honestly.

"We are driving the goblins back as well as we can, but their numbers keep growing, and they're decimating our cattle. At this rate, we won't even be able to make cheese."

No way. No... cheese? That was a life or death issue. This was unacceptable. There was only one thing I could do.

"I'll kill the goblins. All of them."

"What? All of the—" The village chief almost tripped over himself in surprise.

"Hey, I'm an adventurer. Don't mind the bear onesie, it'll be fine." I showed him my guild card. The village chief seemed surprised as he looked at it.

"And I got my bear." I gave Kumayuru a pat. The village chief looked at me and Kumayuru in turn. "Plus, no cheese would mean the death of pizza as we know it, y'know? And I can't just abandon this village to the goblins either."

"Are you really going?"

"For the glory of cheese."

With Kumayuru, I headed into the goblin-filled woods. Apparently, they couldn't even set foot in 'em for all the goblins. When I used my Detection skill, it pinged them all

over the place.

"Okay, buddy," I said, giving my bear a pat. "Let's do this."

I gave Kumayuru a pat and we broke out into a run at the goblins.

Needless to say, it ended quickly. Goblins eradicated, I headed back.

"Lass, did you give up then?" the cheese-selling village leader asked. He waited at the village entrance, worried.

"See for yourself. There's not a single goblin left in the woods. There was an orc in there, so I killed it, too. You're good to go."

"Very funny, girl."

At which point I pulled out all the goblin corpses, plus the orc corpse, out of my bag in front of him. Thinking of the future, I mowed down every single monster.

"Why, these are...!"

"Extremely dead, yeah."

"You really did defeat the goblins..."

The chief grew all misty eyed. It was sweet but. Come on. After a while, even the villagers noticed that the village entrance was piled high with goblin corpses and started to gather.

"Chief, what *is* this?"

"I think you won't believe me, but this lass dressed in the bear clothes just really..." He rubbed his eyes, emotional. "Absolutely wiped out these creatures. Is that what you said?"

It was. The villagers looked at me. For all their internal doubts, when they listened to the chief and saw Kumayuru, they did believe me about all the cool goblin killing that I did.

Appearances really did matter, huh?

In exchange for having the villagers dispose of the dead monsters, I gave them the mana gems. The villagers started clearing everything and I headed into the village with the chief. Of course, Kumayuru came too. No one turned us away.

Then, I was led to the place where the cheese was stored. This was an underground warehouse lined with all varieties of cheeses.

“Are you sure?”

I was getting cheese as a thank you.

“Of course. This is all we can do for you.”

We discussed the future cheese with the chief. Until now they only made enough for the villagers to eat, but that was no good—if I bought it all, they’d run out of their stock right away. We agreed to a contract where I’d periodically buy cheese and he would make it for me.

“Do you really enjoy our cheese that much...?” He began to get teary-eyed again. This old man sure had some overproductive tear glands.

“Just make me some delicious cheese, okay?”

“Yes, all right. I’ll put my body and soul into making it.”

Then, we went around the village and he showed me all kinds of livestock. When I asked him on a whim to show me how to make cheese, he obliged. Wasn’t it the village’s secret technique or something though?

When I asked him that, he whispered, “There’s no reason to hide that from you, the savior of the village.”

Neat. I just exterminated some goblins. It was... whatever. Made me feel almost guilty? Then again, it wasn’t like I was going to try making the cheese somewhere else just because I learned how to make it.

Then they had a welcome party for me, but I think I was the one who made it pop: in order to show them just how wonderful their cheese was and to thank them, I made

ovens and treated them to pizzas with their very own cheese.

CHAPTER 82

THE BEAR BECOMES BORED

SALES AT THE SHOP were going well. Morin was on the prowl for new bread, and even she was investigating how to make new kinds of sandwiches with novel ingredients. Slowly we built up our menu.

The adjustment of the opening hours also went well. The kids had gotten used to their work too, and were even into it.

When Rulina and Gil's guarding job reached its end, the kids looked disappointed. The two were well-liked by the kids. Well, guess they would end up becoming more popular, considering they saved the kids from any grumpy customers.

Since leaving us, the two adventurers broke from Deboranay and were taking on solo quests or forming temporary parties. Occasionally, they'd come into the shop as customers.

Today, I was using the bear transport gate to go to the capital so I could see Princess Flora. (Gotta love instant teleportation.) Since the bear house was in a relatively upper-class district, there weren't many people passing by. The main road, on the other hand, was packed as usual.

When I reached the castle gate, the soldiers gave me a careful look. By the time I closed in, they seemed to know who I was.

"Yo. I'd like to see the princess. That okay?"

I pulled my guild card from my bear bag. I had an entry permit for the castle registered to my card. When I presented the card, I could make the entry permit show up by pouring mana into it. Nobody could see that entry permit otherwise.

What was my business? To see Lady Flora, of course. I still couldn't just go in to see the princess unsupervised, so they told me to wait while they called Elleaura. It didn't

take long.

"Yuna, it's been ages!"

"It's nice to see you again, Ellelaura."

"Did you come to see Lady Flora?"

"Yeah, just to catch up and all." I'd like to stop and see Lady Flora more, but if I showed up *too* often, people might start asking inconvenient questions.

With Ellelaura accompanying me, I went inside, made a beeline to Lady Flora's room... and found the king waiting there.

"Your Majesty," Ellelaura said, a playful edge in her voice, "are you playing hooky again?"

"Come now, Ellelaura, I'm taking a *normal* break. Not an... Ellelaura-style break."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty, but I happen to be doing my job by leading Yuna here."

"You're currently *very* hardworking."

"*Currently*? I always take my work seriously."

"Really, now?"

"Well, Your Majesty, why are you taking a break in Lady Flora's room? Don't you usually do that in your own private chambers?"

"Because I received word that Yuna had come. I know that Yuna sees Flora whenever she visits."

While the two bickered, Lady Flora approached me.

"Hello, Lady Flora."

"Bear, you came to see me?"

"I promised, didn't I?"

Leaving the quarreling adults to their own devices, I took Lady Flora's tiny hand in my bear puppet and led her to the table, where I had her take a seat.

"I brought you some pudding," I said, "so let's eat it together."

"Uh-huh."

I put four puddings down on the table, which brought an end to the arguing right quick—Ellelaura and the king immediately sat down with us and started chowing down on the pudding.

Lady Flora's expression as she savored the pudding was the last straw in something I was debating back and forth with myself. I pulled out a piece of paper from my bear storage and placed it down in front of Ellelaura and the king.

"What is this?" asked the king, squinting down at it.

"The pudding recipe. Please use this to make some for Lady Flora."

"Are you sure?"

"As long as it makes Lady Flora happy. I don't know when I can come back here, either, so pudding duties are on you all."

"Indeed. I graciously accept your gift. Rest assured, I'll only share the instructions with my personal chef, whom I can trust."

"Don't worry too much if it gets leaked—no need to punish anybody."

"Worry not. There are no people among the royal chefs who would leak information."

"But there might be people who would steal it."

There were intel thieves no matter what world you were in. Just pick up a history book. You can approach zero leaks, but you can't reach it.

"If there is anyone who would steal a recipe from the royal family," said the king with sharp lion's smile, "I'll give them a fitting punishment. Don't you worry." Terrifying! But man, at least he was taking this seriously. "And know that I do not blame you for only visiting occasionally. We are a slight distance away from Crimonia, after all..."

though perhaps moving here could solve that issue.”

“I support what you are saying, Your Majesty,” Ellelaura butted in, “but I can’t allow that to happen in consideration of Crimonia.” Oh no. Were they about to start fighting over me or something?

“I was thinking of popping by the ocean for a bit,” I said quickly.

“The ocean?” Ellelaura repeated.

“Yep. There’s an ocean to the east of the capital, isn’t there?” I’d gotten that scoop last time I came by the capital. I heard that if you kept going east, you’d hit the ocean. I didn’t know how far that was, but I’d get there if I rode my bears long enough.

“What? You want to go to the ocean?” The king scratched his chin, puzzled.

“I want to get seafood.”

“You do so much for food,” he mused. I’m Japanese—how could I explain it to him? If I couldn’t get rice or miso, I at least wanted seafood. Grilled squid and takoyaki sounded great right about now. Or later. Or always?

“To forget the joys of food,” I declared, “is a great loss in life. Since people must eat to live.”

“Really makes you think,” said the king, popping a bite of pudding into his mouth.

“I wish there were an ocean near Crimonia,” I said, sighing.

“There is,” said Ellelaura.

“Huh?” I froze.

“Come now,” the king snapped, “can you really call that *near* Crimonia?”

“Can you two slow down for a sec and explain?”

“Yes, yes. You know about the large mountain to the northeast of Crimonia, right?” he asked.

I nodded. I could see it from the town. It was really more of a mountain range, from what I could see.

"If you climb that mountain, you reach an ocean. It's a whole ordeal, though, to climb it or to go around it."

So all along there was an ocean beyond that giant mountain. So close and yet so far!

"There's even a seaport," said Ellelaura. "Most folks don't visit on account of the mountain, but... well, I suppose you *do* have those bears of yours, eh?"

I *did* have those bears of mine! I wouldn't need to head to the ocean from the capital, and it was closer... if I could get over the mountains.

"Yuna has bears?" The king furrowed his brow.

"Yuna summons them."

"Well, well! You're simply full of surprises!"

"They are very cute and very good bears." Ellelaura almost sounded proud of them. And the more she described them, the more fascinated the king and Lady Flora became.

"It makes it easier to get to the capital," I admitted.

"You have bears?" Lady Flora asked.

"Bears, huh?" The king repeated.

Lady Flora had a sparkle in her eye and the king himself seemed fascinated. Inevitably, I prepared to summon my bears... right in the middle of the princess's room.

"Are you really sure about this?" I asked.

The king shrugged. "Ehh." Well, he was the most distinguished person of the country, and I'd gotten his permission, so I summoned Kumayuru.

"A real, actual bear. Fascinating!"

"Bear!"

Lady Flora approached Kumayuru, but the king just watched and didn't try to stop her. They seemed awfully blasé about it all.

"You have another one, don't you?" asked Elleaura.

"You have more?"

I stuck out my left hand and summoned Kumakyu.

"A white bear, I see. How rare." The king approached and touched Kumakyu. "It really is docile."

"As long as you don't do anything to the bears, they won't do anything to you."

"White bear!" Lady Flora, who was hugging Kumayuru was surprised at Kumakyu's white coat.

Showing no fear, Lady Flora started to play with Kumayuru and Kumakyu. She got on Kumayuru and rode the bear around the room.

"Yuna," said the king, watching my bears. "What *are* you?"

"I'm a D-rank adventurer."

"A D-rank adventurer who can defeat ten thousand monsters?"

What, was that a problem?

"Actually, Yuna, you're still D-rank even though you defeated those ten thousand monsters, aren't you?"

"Because—as we all know—it was an A-rank party that happened to pass through who defeated them," I said firmly.

"You should've revealed yourself."

"I'd prefer not to."

"You wear that outfit and yet you shy away from attention," said the king, looking exasperated.

Yeah, those were totally the same thing. What a brilliant analysis from His Majesty.

"If you'd acknowledged that you had defeated them," the king continued, "you might have risen to B-rank."

B-rank, huh? I could hide that, but it still led to questions, and questions could lead to the whole "defeated ten thousand monsters" thing. Nah.

"Oh, by the way, Yuna, you haven't received any reward from His Majesty yet, have you?"

"She was the one to turn them down, Elleaura. That isn't my fault."

In exchange, I asked him to promise to keep silent about me. I made that deal so I could live in peace, though I knew he also asked Cliff to support me when it came to my shop. But, since both His Majesty and Cliff were keeping silent about that, I wasn't going to bring it up.

The conversation died down soon enough. Though I tried to go home, Lady Flora wouldn't let go of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

"No. I wanna play more."

Eh, why not. I could stick around the castle till dinner.

CHAPTER 83

THE BEAR CLIMBS A MOUNTAIN

IT WAS IN THE HENHOUSE that I told Tiermina and Fina about my plan to cross over the mountain range and visit the ocean.

“Are you really going there?” Tiermina asked, worry creeping into her voice.

“I want to see the ocean,” I said firmly, “so please keep an eye on the shop for me.”

Not that I really needed to ask. The shop was already revolving around Tiermina and Morin.

“That should be fine, Yuna, but the Elezent mountain range is harsh.”

“I have my bears, so it should be fine. If it still seems dangerous, I’ll just come back.”

“Yuna...” Fina also looked worried.

“I’ll be fine. I’m always fine. I’ll contact you guys when I get there.”

I pulled out two chibi bears about the size of my palm from my bear storage and handed one to Fina.

“Is this Kumayuru?” Fina looked at the first figure I handed her, then at the second one. The bears were shaped like Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“It’s a magic device that lets you talk over long distances.”



After slaying ten thousand monsters while I was at the capital, I acquired two new skills. One was the ability to manufacture bear phones that let me talk to people by running mana through them. They were communications devices that used mana in place of radio waves. The other skill was summons cubification. It didn't seem very useful—why would I turn my bears into cubs? I'd get it if I could make them bigger. If I made them smaller, though, then they wouldn't be as powerful in a fight. I wouldn't even be able to ride them!

But then again, seeing Kumayuru and Kumakyu miniaturized was just so soothing. Their little forms as they trotted along behind me were just so cute! And they could even take a bath with me! They could sleep on the bed with me without getting in the way, I could hug 'em like little body pillows... okay, fine. It was a pretty cuddly kind of skill. I could get behind it.

"If anything happens, just run some mana through that bear phone and think really hard about wanting to call me. You'll get through to the bear phone on my end," I explained, but...

"Yuna, I'm not some kid, okay? I know there's no way you can talk to someone who's far away. Don't try to make stuff up to make me feel better." Fina pouted and fumed. Uhh, did she not believe me? Also, she was ten years old. Come on!

"Yuna," said Tiermina softly, "I'm sure that there might be magical devices like that in the capital, but this seems..." Was it really that rare of an item? In the game, it was probably kind of like the chat function.

"Then how about you try it and see? I'll talk to you through your bear phone, so let's go outside to try it."

Though I said that, it was actually my first time using it. I hadn't asked anyone else to use it, and I sure couldn't experiment with it by myself. Even I didn't know how to connect to their bear phone. Would it have a magical ringtone or something?

To check how the bear phone worked, the three of us went outside. We went a bit away from the henhouse and orphanage, to a less populated place where we could use them without any odd questions.

I ran mana through the bear phone in my hand and willed it to connect to the bear phone in Fina's hand... and it started to ring! Sort of!

“Cwoon, cwoon, cwoon, cwoon, cwoon.”

Was that a bear’s call?

Really? Seriously?

Maybe I could change it like you could with cell phones...

“Y-Yuna, what am I supposed to do!” As the bear phone crooned on top of Fina’s palm, she looked at it, clearly flustered. Oh, right.

“Run mana through it like a mana gem when you’re turning on a light.”

Fina did that and the bear phone stopped crooning.

“Okay, I’m going to move away now.”

I moved several dozen meters away from Fina.

“Fina, can you hear me?” I spoke toward the bear phone held in my bear puppet’s mouth.

“*Yuna?*”

I could hear Fina’s voice through the mouth of the bear phone.

“Can you hear me now?”

“*Uh-huh, I can hear you.*”

“Good!” Whoa, I could actually hear her. It was just like a cell phone or a walkie-talkie.
“Okay, I’m going to move farther away then, aaaaand... Fina, can you still hear me?”

“*Completely.*”

“*Yuna, is this really a magical device for long-distance conversation?*” I heard Tiermina’s voice come over the bear phone.

“I don’t know its max range, but I think that we should be able to be pretty far apart.”

Since I hadn’t used it before, I didn’t know exactly how far away I could be. But, it was

a skill I received from the gods. Gods don't have to go through crappy cell towers. Probably.

"Well then, I'm going to hang up."

"*Hang what?*"

"End the conversation, I mean. Then you try calling me. Do it how I just explained: by running mana through it and thinking you want to talk to me."

"*Okay, I'll try.*"

I hung up the bear phone and waited for Fina's call. The bear phone started to cry out.

"Cwoon, cwoon, cwoon, cwoon, cwoon."

I don't know what I expected. It *was* a little cute, but hard to describe. It'd be weird for this world to have electronic ringtones or jingles, but if it had a recording function, I would have liked to register Fina's voice for it.

"*Yuna, I'm calling. Yuna, I'm calling.*" or something like that would be nice. I'd do some research.

I ran mana through my bear phone. The crooning stopped.

"*Uhm, Yuna, can you hear me?*"

"Loud and clear."

Awesome. Our communications worked both ways. The only issue now was the distance, but I couldn't check that immediately. I *could* use the bear transport gate to go to the capital to check, but that seemed like a pain.

"Okay, I'm going back to you, so I'm hanging up." I cut off the call and headed back to Fina.

"Yuna, this bear is amazing."

She was carefully gripping the bear phone.

"Right? We can talk to each other with these no matter where we go now."

"Yes!"

"This really is amazing," said Tiermina. "I can't believe we can talk to people who are far away with this."

"If anything happens, please contact me. If I can get back, I will." I could get back immediately using the bear transport gate.

"But are you sure about letting Fina hold onto such an amazing magic device?"

"It's fine. There's no point to me having two of them."

If I carried two on me, I'd just look like some dorky kid playing with two walkie-talkies.

"But you're giving them to us? Wouldn't you want to give something so amazing to your friends or family back home?"

Oh. Yeah. I guess I would.

Huh.

Fr... iends. That sounded nice.

Fa... mily. What a concept.

"Yuna, what's wrong?" Tiermina asked me. I guess I wasn't talking, huh.

"My hometown is so far away," I said. "I can't use this with them."

"Is it really?" asked Tiermina softly. "My apologies." She didn't pry. I think she knew not to.

"It's fine. It's all fine. Don't worry about holding onto that, Fina."

"Okay. I'll keep it safe."

I gave Fina a pat on the head.

Early in the morning, I got on Kumayuru and headed out to the Elezent mountain range.

It had been a while since I'd had a solo trip, but progress was steady enough. It didn't take me long to see it. It was white around the peak, so I could tell snow had built up there. But hey, the bear clothes featured cold resistance, so it was fine. Just a girl climbing a mountain in her incredibly OP bear equipment, nothing to see here and—like always—no reason to wear anything else.

Kumayuru headed out of the town and started to run toward the mountain range. As I looked at the approaching mountain, my map updated.

"Boy, that's... mountainous."

Before long, I reached the base of the mountain. I heard that there was a path somewhere, but... they hadn't meant this narrow game trail, right? Still, the path was somehow just big enough for Kumayuru to pass through.

As long as there was a trail, it'd be easier to progress, so I'd take it. Even if I got lost, I'd be able to use my bear map skill to get back. The only inconvenience about it was I didn't know *quite* what would lie up ahead.

I returned Kumayuru, who brought me all the way here, and asked Kumakyu to take me the rest of the way. After all, if I only rode Kumayuru, Kumakyu would get sulky.

"Kumakyu, I choose you. You got this, little buddy."

Kumakyu headed out on the game trail. Though the slope gradually steepened, Kumakyu kept trudging onward. There were a lot of trees at the foot of the mountain and the vegetation was dense, but it thinned out steadily as we went up. Kumakyu didn't show any sign of fatigue, of course.

My Detection skill showed monster signals, but they were all far off and none of them showed any sign of coming closer. In time, the trees disappeared, replaced with roughly-strewn boulders. When I looked down, I could tell we climbed up a decent amount.

"You doing okay, Kumakyu?"

"Cwoom." Kumakyu looked up at me.

"Good to hear. If you get tired, let me know."

I gave Kumakyu a pat on the head. Kumakyu happily sped up and dashed up the sloping path. Snow began to fall, faintly sticking underfoot. Kumakyu ran along that thin layer of powder, leaving bear tracks in their wake.

They say that the weather is fickle on mountains, but I had no idea it'd be like this. Or maybe things were just like that in fantasy worlds?

The snow came down heavier. Thanks to Kumakyu, I'd gotten to this point without much trouble, but a normal person probably would have needed several breaks. Trying to dress for the cold would have weighed them down, but not dressing for it would have made them a popsicle. With my bear onesie, I was neither hot nor cold.

The snow came down still heavier, piling against the ground. Kumakyu didn't pay any mind to it and ran over the top of the snow. As we climbed, I could see a white wolf to the right of us through the waves of snowflakes.

A snowwolf, its pelt pure and white. Maybe that would make a good souvenir for Fina? But the snowwolf saw me and ran off at once. With Kumakyu with me, it wasn't going to attack. I wanted that white pelt, but not enough to go chasing after it.

Three types of monsters seemed to inhabit the mountain range: snowwolves, snowrabbits, and snowmin.

Snowwolves were just the same as normal wolves, but white-furred.

Snowrabbits were what they sounded like—just snowy rabbits, but bigger. Harmless if you kept to yourself.

Snowmin on the other hand... those were formed from snow gathering around ice mana gems. I think it'd probably be easiest to imagine them as snowmen with arms and legs. Their attacks were monotonous. They'd try body slamming you or would blow blizzards from their mouths, or at least that's how they acted in the game. It was so irritating, the way they'd freeze over my weapons and armor.

Also, physical attacks didn't work on them. If you tried that, they'd just crumble and immediately regenerate. The only way to beat them was by melting their snow using fire.

So, I'd lob fireballs at the snowmin. When the fireball would hit them, the snow would evaporate and they'd drop an ice mana gem. Super effective. These were the mana gems you could use for refrigerators and freezers. They were useful, so I'd pick them up.

Things were going well, but the snowfall steadily turned into a blizzard and... maybe it was time for a break?

Thanks to the bear equipment, I wasn't cold. Kumakyu seemed fine too. I *could* keep moving on like this, but the visibility was just too poor. Since I wouldn't progress well if I forced myself forward, I decided to rest until the blizzard died down.

I tried to find a place to shelter from the snow within my white vision, but...

"Uhhm, I'm not seeing anything."

I looked across the area, but I couldn't find any shelter. Maybe I could make one?

As I was faltering about what to do, Kumakyu detected something. A monster? No... I used my Detection skill. It was two people.

CHAPTER 84

THE BEAR SAVES PEOPLE

THERE WERE PEOPLE in the blizzard.

They had to be adventurers like me, right? Who else would enter a blizzard like this? Had they come all this way to slay monsters? Then again, Elleaura said that the mountain range was harsh, and the monsters weren't worth it. Why *would* adventurers climb here?

Whoever it was, it'd be an issue if they saw Kumakyu and flipped out. I decided to avoid them with the help of my handy-dandy Detection skill and turned away. Hmm. No movement from the signals.

I wondered if it was one of those things—a bivouac? Maybe there was a cave there? If so, I guess it'd be fine if I kept going on the same course, right?

I couldn't decide what to do except go forward. If they were sheltering in place, then they probably wouldn't notice me anyway. Even if they did see me, I don't think they'd pick a fight.

The blizzard grew stronger and stronger, and I followed the signals through it.

It didn't turn out to be a cave, a rock, an igloo or whatever. I didn't even find people standing there... but there *were* signals. Which had to mean... they were buried in the snow? Oh no.

I concentrated my eyes and looked it over again. The whole surface was covered in white and I didn't see anything human-like. Okay, maybe not? As I looked around, Kumakyu reacted. When I looked in that direction, I found something that looked like a backpack buried in the snow.

I jumped off of Kumakyu, sprinted toward it, and started digging down into the snow, quick as I could. Under the layers of cold I found a man and woman lying on the ground, huddled together.

“Are you all right?!”

I summoned wind magic and blew the rest of the snow away from them. I shook them. Nothing worked. They were out cold, but still breathing. I summoned Kumayuru and put them on my bears.

If there wasn’t a shelter from the snow, I’d have to make one. Quietly as I could, watching for any signs of an avalanche, I hollowed out a hole in the mountain wall. Kumayuru and Kumakyu followed me inside, and—safe for now—I pulled out the mobile bear house I used on my journey to the capital.

I brought the two of them into the bear house and put them on the sofa. A few layers of blankets could help, but it wouldn’t be enough. I raised the bear house’s heat, too—mostly I like keeping the temperature of the place moderate temperature, but this called for more. A fire gem did the trick and turned up the heat. And that was it. Now I could only wait.

I worked up a real appetite what with the mountain climbing and the blizzard hiking, and they weren’t going to be up for a while, so it was time for a meal! I whipped up something warm to eat and a refreshing beverage and headed inside to check on the others.

“Wh-Where is this place?”

“Bear house. You’re up?”

The woman gazed at the room around her foggily before finally looking at me.

“Are... are *you* a bear?”

“Yuna’s the name, adventuring’s the trade. I found you on the snow mountain. Do you remember?”

The woman frowned for a moment. Then she suddenly shouted out: “Damon!”

“That the guy’s name? He’s still sleeping.” I pointed at the sofa next to her.

The woman took a deep, relieved sigh. “Thank goodness. Did you save us?”

“I was in the neighborhood. I found you two collapsed in the snow. Lucky thing that I

did too."

"Thank you so much. My name is Yuula. This is my husband Damon." Yuula bowed her head. She had to be what, twenty-five years old or so? Then again, there were people here like Elleaura, so who could say? She looked a little cold even with the blanket, so I handed her warm milk.

"What were you two doing in a place like that?" While adventurers didn't come here often, she and Damon looked as far from adventurers as you could get.

"We came from the Mileela seaport and were heading to Crimonia."

"Oh—Mileela's the place beyond this mountain, right?" That ocean town—my destination.

"Yes, that's right. We were partway through going over the mountain to Crimonia to buy food at their markets, but we were so exhausted."

"Food? Why would you cross a mountain full of blizzards for food?"

"It seems that word hasn't reached Crimonia then," Yuula said, bowing her head.

"Huh?"

"About a month ago, a monster appeared in Mileela's sea." There were *ocean* monsters? Well, why wouldn't there be? "It's a kraken, the adventurers say. It appeared near the harbor and it's been tearing ships to pieces. You can't enter and you can't leave."

In the game, the kraken was an ocean event boss. Your standard big murder squid. It was weak against fire and lightning, but fire damage gets halved in water zones. Lightning was super effective, but remember the bit about oceans? You could really mess up your own party if you cast a lightning spell wrong surrounded by water. Ugh, I hated that boss—melee classes like mine were useless against it, so if you weren't casting, you were flailing around with your weapon in vain.

"In addition, because the kraken appeared, ships from other seaports haven't been coming in with any shipments. We were hoping to find food in Crimonia..."

"You don't have an adventurers' guild back home? Couldn't they all join forces and kill the squid?"

Yuula shook her head. “We have no adventurers who could defeat a kraken.”

Even if the kraken was an event monster, it still counted as a boss. What kind of power would that translate to here? Who could defeat something like that?

“Couldn’t you just eat fish,” I asked, “instead of risking going over the mountain to get to Crimonia?”

Yuula shook her head. “We can’t send out any ships, even into the shallows. They get attacked no matter where they are, and the kraken gets closer every time it attacks. Since then, we’ve been restricted from sending out ships or even going near the ocean.”

Yeah, if the kraken came to port, food would be the least of their worries.

“Couldn’t you fish without sending out ships? Use fishing rods and such?”

Again, Yuula shook her head. “We fish, but we catch so little. And only certain people are allowed to fish.”

“Why?”

“When too many people gather along the waterfront, the kraken shows up. We can’t let too many people go. The fish they *do* catch are managed and distributed by the trade guild. Since there isn’t much to go around, we don’t get any of it.”

As I listened to Yuula talk about the seaport, the man on the sofa started to stir and opened his eyes.

Yuula almost ran right up to him. “Damon, are you all right?”

“Yuula? We’re... we’re okay?” The man sat up and gripped Yuula’s hand.

“The adventurer here, Ms. Yuna, helped us.”

“A bear?”

Aaaaand here we go again.

“Damon, that’s rude. She helped us when she found us collapsed in the snow.”

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, I'm Damon. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. But... where is this place?"

"This is my house." Well, the mobile one.

"So we were saved..."

They embraced. Sappy stuff, but they earned it. To make him feel more at home, I went to the kitchen, warmed up some milk, and brought it to Damon.

"Thank you. You're a lifesaver." He started slurping it down immediately. They started to settle in and calm down.

"But why're you on the mountain range?" I asked. "It'd be scenic, but isn't there a coastal road?" That's what I heard, at least. Why risk their lives on the mountain?

"Well..." Damon began, and trailed off into a weary sigh.

Yuula picked it up from there. "A little while after the kraken turned up, bandits started appearing on the coastal road. Anyone who left town or went to buy food was attacked. The roads aren't safe."

"Even if they can't handle the kraken, why couldn't adventurers handle a couple bandits? Couldn't you have submitted a quest at the town?" Famines affect everybody, including adventurers.

The two shook their heads. "We can't. The high-ranking adventurers were hired by people fleeing the seaport. They're all gone."

"Only low-ranking adventurers are left now..."

The adventurers couldn't defeat the kraken, and they couldn't defeat the bandits. The high-ranking adventurers left without doing their jobs.

What a nightmare. They couldn't fish, couldn't send ships to sea, couldn't get food from other towns, and couldn't get past all the bandits on the roads. *And* the adventurers were useless. *And* there weren't enough fish in the shallows.

"What about the mountains?" There had to be something. This was ridiculous! "Why not hunt in the mountains?" If there were wolves here, there had to be something for

them to eat.

"We can hunt a little on the mountains, but not much. What we've managed to hunt has been gouged by our own merchants!"

"Do the other harbors know that Mileela's sea is being attacked by the kraken? Is the country not doing anything?" Sure, this wasn't the capital, but couldn't soldiers help?

"Oh, we aren't under the king... under *any* king. But that means no one will help us."

"Really?"

Yuula nodded. "I hear that the seaport was created long ago by refugees from a war-torn era."

No adventurers, no food, and no country. They were completely cornered. No one could do a thing, except... maybe me? But how could I fight? Even my bears can't fight in an ocean.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked.

"If possible, we'd head to Crimonia."

"Could you really get back to the seaport from Crimonia? You got lucky this time." They hadn't even reached their goal.

"If we don't, our children and parents will have nothing to eat..."

They sounded so defeated; they were probably remembering their journey so far. Sure, they were going to keep going for their goal... and maybe end up completely buried.

I could just let them head out after this, but I couldn't just leave them to die. I had nearly five thousand wolves for food and tons of flour to make bread and pizza. I had enough food to rot... not that it could, in my storage.

"Um, so where are we now?" asked Damon.

"We're in the mountains."

"Huh?" "What?"

The two were surprised. I guess anyone would be after hearing that there's a house in the middle of the mountains.

"We're in a cave near where you two collapsed."

"You're serious?"

"If you think I'm lying, you can check for yourself."

The two of them looked outside the bear house from the window. Even from within the cave, we could see the blizzard howling outside.

"There's a *house* in this cave?"

"Yep. It's magic."

"That's amazing!"

"That's how I got this far." Without my bear stuff, I never would've come up this mountain. Bear suit, bear summons, bear house, and bear storage... what would I do without them? "Also, about the food thing from earlier—I've got some food, so I'll share."

"Really? If you'd spare us some, that would be wonderful, but... how much would you charge us?" Damon produced a leather bag and spilled silver and copper coins across the table. They likely gathered together all the money they had in their household. It wasn't a lot by my standards.

"This is everything we have. The more you'd be willing to part with, the more it would help." Damon bowed his head, going pretty low and humble for a girl my age. Then again, if he'd been arrogant and demanded the food, I would've turned him down.

"I don't need money. Just let me ask you for a favor." I had wolf stock to spare.

"What's that?"

"Show me around the town when we get there."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"That's it. I'm not going to ask for anything unreasonable."

Though if the kraken weren't around, I would've asked them to introduce me to their most recommended fishmonger. For now, I guess I just needed to make it into town.

"Thank you." More deep bowing. Man, they were being so polite to a girl in such strange clothes. This really was dire. "More importantly, you must be tired after today, right? I'll prep food, so just rest after eating. Once the blizzard dies down, we'll head out bright and early."

I prepared some warm meals for them. They cried softly as they ate. I guess they hadn't been eating much at the seaport. Half-starved and trying to climb a mountain... jeez. Once they were done eating, I led them to the bedroom upstairs.

As for me, I snuggled under the covers in my room, hoping to wipe away one exhausting day.

CHAPTER 85

THE BEAR REACHES MILEELA SEAPORT

WITH A LITTLE HELP from wind magic, I cleared the snow piled up in front of the cave and stepped out to see clear skies. It was so sunny that yesterday's blizzard could've been a bad dream. Such bright skies were a pretty rare sight for a former recluse like me.

The couple left the cave first as I put the bear house away in my bear storage. When I headed outside, I found them stumbling a little through the fresh snow.

"Yuna, dearest, what are you going to do about your house?" asked Yuula.

Ever since they opened their hearts to me yesterday, they moved from calling me "Ms." Yuna to getting positively sappy. I still liked it better than "Ms."

"I used magic to bring it out, so I can put it away too."

"Yuna, you really must be an amazing adventurer," said Damon.

"I'm just an ordinary one."

Which was a little weird to say, and a kinda obvious lie. If there was another adventurer who wore a bear outfit like this, climbed a mountain solo, and could pull out and put away an entire house whenever she felt like it, I'd like to see it.

"All right, guys, I'm going to call the summons I told you about yesterday night. Pre-bear yourselves." I thrust out both my hands and, just like that, Kumayuru and Kumakyu appeared.

"Whoa, you weren't kidding about those bears."

"Oh dear, are we riding these?"

I guess it's one thing to know about something and another to see it. "You two can ride on my black bear, Kumayuru."

"It won't attack us, right?" They cautiously approached Kumayuru.

"Sure, as long as you don't do anything to hurt or insult them."

Damon blinked. "As long as we don't... I'm sorry, are you saying they can understand us?!"

"Yep. Kumayuru, could you please crouch down and let them get on you?" Kumayuru squatted in response.

"Uh... Kumayuru..." Damon sputtered. "I'm just so, so excited about traveling with you."

"Cwoooooom."

"Wow!" Damon looked like a kid in a toy store. "It really understands what we're saying!" Damon hopped onto Kumayuru's back.

"Please get on too, Yuula. We're about to head out."

Yuula nodded and climbed on behind her husband. Kumayuru slowly stood up—I think when it comes to adults, two is probably the max for Kumayuru.

"I don't think you'll fall off," I said, "but make sure you hold on tightly."

I hopped on Kumakyu and we headed off for the seaport. Progress was slow, starting at a walk, only speeding up as the two got used to riding giant magical bears. We couldn't go that fast in mountainous terrain, but it was better than walking.

Mountain weather was fickle. There was a chance it'd storm again, so I sped us up a bit on our way up the mountain. I fought off some snowmin along the way with fire magic. Since Kumayuru was there, things would probably be fine, but even any monster attacks would be a complication I didn't need.

"You're so *calm* about it all, Yuna dear."

"Yeah, whoa..."

Until they met me, the two hid when they found monsters or changed paths. It wasn't like you could beat snowmin by just whacking them upside the head or whatever, so I guess normal people *had* to run.

Eventually we reached the other side of the mountain, and the limitless blue ocean spread out before us like the sparkling waters of a dream. The sea waited for me. The kraken too, I guess, which was... less great, if you ask me.

Anyway, just because I could see the ocean didn't mean it was actually close. The ocean was just big. It felt kind of like the same distance as going down from the top of Mount Fuji, I think?

(Not that a hermit like me had ever climbed Mount Fuji. I only experienced it through TV. If my hermit body tried to heave itself up Mount Fuji, things would get pretty dire pretty fast. I really needed to be more grateful for my bear summons.)

The ocean spread out before us, far away and sunlight-dappled, and we headed for it.

The bears started to run down around the peak of the mountain range. The couple on Kumayuru was making a commotion since earlier. All kinds of annoying stuff. "Please stop," "This is too fast," and "We're gonna die." Totally ungrateful!

Admittedly, we *were* going downhill pretty quickly, but why couldn't they enjoy it? Pretend it was a roller coaster or something. This was... probably what a roller coaster was like, right? For people who go outside?

A few hours and a short break later, we'd gotten to the base.

"You two doing okay?"

"Yes, I'm managing."

"I-I'm fine."

Their yelling died down partway, and they just resorted to holding Kumayuru for dear life.

Damon sighed. "It's just that... well, it took us so long to get up that mountain, and we came so far. You took us back down just like that."

All *three* of us had traveled for a while now, hadn't we? But it was thanks to my bear summons that we managed it, in the end.

We dismounted from my bears partway after getting down from the mountain and headed to the seaport on foot. Damon and Yuula told me that we'd give the seaport a scare if we headed in on the bears after all. I guess bears really were generally seen as fuzzy brutes.

"We really did end up back here in a day," they sighed. It was twilight, and we finally reached the town. The sea breeze moaned. Here we were at last—the ocean!

When we got close to the seaport, we ran into a guy. "Damon, you've come back!"

"Yeah, we had to turn back. We were on the verge of dying, and this girl saved us."

The guy looked at me. "A... bear?"

"I'm the adventurer Yuna."

I showed him my guild card.

"An adventurer...?" the guy repeated. Yeah, yeah. Surprised that a girl in a bear suit was calling herself an adventurer, etc. He looked from me to the guild card several times. I tried not to blame him too harshly for it.

"You're sure?"

"I am."

Damon nodded. "She fought off any monsters that tried anything on our way here. Yuna's much stronger than she looks."

The man looked at me curiously. "So, Damon, you didn't reach Crimonia after all?"

Damon shook his head. "Gave up halfway. That's when she saved us."

"Gotcha. Bear lass, thanks for saving Damon and Yuula."

"I just found 'em and did what anybody would've done. Don't worry about it."

"I see. Damon must've told you about the state of the village, but we still welcome you

with open arms.”

With that, the guy let us in.

“What are you going to do now, Yuna?”

“Sleep. It’s late, and tomorrow’s going to be a nightmare. If you could show me an inn, that’d be a big help.”

“An inn?” Damon sighed. “There’s a chance they won’t serve food though.”

“That’s fine. I’ve got food, so all I need right now is sleep.” If I couldn’t find a place, I could still look for somewhere deserted and set up the bear house.

“In that case, Yuna, why don’t you come stay at our house rather than an inn?” asked Yuula.

“Nah. You’re finally getting to see your family again, aren’t you? I’ll be fine.”

“But you gave us so much food...”

I put wolf meat, flour, and veggies in an item bag I gave them yesterday. They hadn’t even had an item bag, but they were still on their way to Crimonia in order to buy stuff and then carry all of that back over the mountain. They were reckless, to say the least... but I guess that’s what hunger does.

“Just show me around the town if you want to thank me.”

The two tried to give me money for the food, but I turned them down. I didn’t even want them to walk me to an inn, but they practically begged me to at least let them do *that*. As much as they wanted to bring food to their family, they wanted to give me that small gift first.

We walked through town for a bit, but there was no liveliness there—not many people out and about. It was desolate even for sundown, and the plaza was dead. At least there weren’t many people around to gawk at the bear girl this time.

“Normally this would be filled with tons of food carts,” Yuula said sadly.

“But because we can’t catch fish due to the kraken, no one’s been doing business.”

“And since ships can’t come in, people haven’t been coming in from nearby either.”

“Right,” I said. “Now, you said the fish are being managed by the trade guild or something?”

“Yes. All they’re thinking about is money.”

They were supposedly distributing the fish, but apparently they were flush with bribes from the rich and the desperate. But then, what else did you expect from merchants? In the end, everything came down to their bottom line. I could practically see them looking over their pocketbooks, wondering how much they could afford to gouge without causing too much unrest. Even Crimonia’s trade guild could get ruthless about profits. I preferred it when they were helping me make pizza.

“Damon!”

As we were walking toward the inn, someone called out to Damon from behind. A man about Damon’s age raced toward us.

“Jeremo?”

“When did you come back?”

“Just now.”

“I see. When I heard you went over the mountain, I could barely believe it.”

“We were almost out of food, Jeremo. We didn’t have a choice.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. What’s with that girl in the strange getup over there?” He looked from Damon to me.

“That’s Yuna. She’s an adventurer. She saved us when we collapsed in the snow, gave us food, and got us back to the seaport.”

Jeremo raised an eyebrow. “She’s an adventurer? I mean, the, uh—we’re both talking about the girl here... in the bear outfit, right?”

“Yuna, this is Jeremo. He works at the trade guild.”

“The corrupt price gougers?” I said, staring right at Jeremo.

“Jeremo’s not *quite* like the rest,” said Damon.

Jeremo winced. “An interesting way to put it.”

“Better than saying you’re in with them, right?”

“Fair enough. Nice to meet you, Yuna. I’m Jeremo, and yes, I really do work at the trade guild.” He kept ogling the bear outfit.

“I’m Yuna, and yes, I really am an adventurer. And no, I’m not going to answer any questions about the bear clothes. Don’t even ask.”

Jeremo immediately cut off whatever question he was about to ask. Even if he asked me questions, I couldn’t answer most of them, and I really didn’t feel like it anyway.
“I’m just thankful you saved Damon. What did you go up the mountain for?”

“To see the ocean.” But mostly to get seafood, but I left that part out.

“That’s it? You... climbed a mountain for that?” He looked exasperated. “I really can’t believe a little maiden could’ve climbed that mountain.”

“We couldn’t believe she saved us either, but then we saw her wipe out some monsters without breaking a sweat.”

“If you’re that strong, miss,” said Jeremo thoughtfully, “then maybe you could help out the adventurers that came in the other day and beat up the bandits?”

“There are other adventurers?” I thought they’d all left.

He nodded. “A C-Rank party came by the high road the other day.”

“Huh. Really?”

“Yes, and the guild master at my work reached out to them immediately. There’s a chance they might be pulled into the trade guild. There’s also lots of people who want to leave the seaport, so they may take a job guarding them and get out of town.”

“That’s true. Hopefully they’re a good party of adventurers.”

A short silence flowed between us.

“Well then,” said Jeremo, “err. I better be getting back to work. Damon, Yuula—I’m glad you’re safe. Young miss, I... wouldn’t stick around this seaport too long.”

And so we went our separate ways.

CHAPTER 86

THE BEAR GOES TO THE ADVENTURERS' GUILD

"YUNA, DEAR, this is the inn." And it was a lot bigger than I expected. "There are usually people who come from other seaports to buy fish. Right now, though, there are... vacancies." The two of them went inside first, then I tagged along.

"Is Deigha in?"

"That you, Damon?"

A tan machoman sat behind the counter, buffly. Our eyes met.

"Muscles?" I blurted.

"Bear?" he blurted back.

He *did* have pretty ridiculous muscles. Like some kind of sea god, right out of the waves.

"Damon," he grunted, "who's that cute girl in the bear clothes?"

"The girl who saved our lives. We nearly died in the snow on the way to Crimonia."

"That's overstating it a little," I said.

"And she's too modest to boot. We collapsed in a blizzard, and she found us. Then she protected us and got us all the way back to the seaport."

"This little bear girl did that..."

"She wants to stay at the inn. Do you have any open rooms?"

"Mm. We pretty much just have the adventurers who came in earlier. Tons of vacancies."

"So you could you let her stay here?"

"Yeah, of course. Can't serve meals, though. I bet Damon's told you this, but we're short on food in this seaport. Sorry to be rude, but I don't have the reserves to go feeding a stranger."

Ehh. I had the bread Morin made me and tons of other stuff, so I didn't have any issues when it came to food.

"If you happen to have ingredients," he added, "I could whip something up, though."

Since he offered, I decided I'd take him up on it. Too bad I couldn't get any seafood, though. I pulled meat, veggies, flour, and other stuff from my bear storage and set them in front of the machoman.

"If you could make something with this..." I said.

"Whoa, whoa—how've you got this much food on you?!"

I shrugged. "I don't know how long I'll be staying, but just whip up something tasty, if you could. If you need more ingredients, just let me know."

"All right, I got it. I'll get something ready right away. Wish I could serve up some seafood, though. The name's Deigha."

"I'm Yuna."

"Well, nice to meet you, Miss Bear."

Why couldn't he just use my name like a normal person? Why couldn't *anyone*?

Damon and Yuula headed home and I got my prepped meal, which was surprisingly delicious. The guy could cook. With a full stomach, I was shown to my room. Since there were tons of open rooms, he let me have the biggest single room on a deferred payment plan. There was even enough room to summon my bears.

I sat down on the bed and pulled out my bear phone. Fina might be worried about me, so I called her.

"Yuna?!"

After a few bear calls, Fina picked up.

“Fina,” I said in my best secret agent voice, “I’m in.”

“Really? Thank goodness.” I could hear how relieved she was. It was touching that she was that concerned for me. “So is the ocean pretty?”

“Yep. Pretty, big, blue.” Though I still hadn’t seen it up close.

“That’s so nice. I wish I could see it.”

“If Tiermina says it’s okay, do you want to come with me sometime?”

“Do you really mean it?!”

Well, I couldn’t really bring her until after the bandits and the kraken were gone, but why not? Speaking of which, I didn’t want to worry Fina, so I didn’t tell her about the bandits, kraken, or famine. I just told her I was going to take in the chill ocean vibes for a while and might take a little time to come back to Crimonia.

“Well then, if anything happens, don’t hesitate to call.” It was late, so I wanted to keep the conversation short.

“I won’t. But Yuna, please don’t do anything reckless either.”

I awoke the next morning to two huge black-and-white buns resting on my bed. I inspected them more closely and saw that Kumayuru and Kumakyu were curled up and sleeping on the bed in cub form. Right, I’d summoned them as a security measure the night before. There was a fifteen-year-old maiden sleeping here, after all, so I needed at least a little security.

My bears were sleeping so peacefully, though. They *were* going to wake me if anybody came, right? When I petted them, they looked at me, gave small matching yawns, and... immediately curled up again. I recalled my little guys, climbed out of bed, and changed from my white bear clothes to my black bear clothes. Then I headed on to the dining hall downstairs.

“You’re early. I’ve got food ready if you want it.” Macho muscleman Deigha served me breakfast, and it was delicious as before.

The workers at the inn included Deigha, his wife, and their kids, who took more after their mother. They were all older than me, and the son helped out with the inn while also working as a fisherman. Though they'd been cooking at the inn with the fish the son caught, he was stuck on land like most of the fisherman and so was helping out back at the inn itself.

I think the sister was a few years older than me. She would help with cleaning, laundry, cooking, and anything her mom needed. I was relieved to find that they weren't macho like their father. Would've been way too much macho for one building.

"How's it taste?" Deigha grunted. But he grunted everything.

"Great!"

"Well that's good to hear. And you're sure we can have a share to eat too?"

"You're letting me have a nice room. It's the least I can do."

According to Deigha, some households were close to running out of food. Though they were splitting among people they knew, even they were almost out. "At the very least," I added, "the trade guild is distributing food, right?"

"Hmph! They're pretending to, that's for sure, but they're actually just lining the pockets of the rich."

Just as Yuula and Damon said. In that case, I guess it'd be better to avoid the trade guild as a place to hand out food. "You can't get food either, then?"

Deigha shook his head. "The adventurers' guild is hunting wolves and other animals in the woods to distribute those, but that only goes so far."

"The adventurers' guild is doing that?"

"Aye, they're helping a lot of people, too."

So the trade guild was trash, but the adventurers' guild might be decent. Interesting.

When I left the inn, I headed to the adventurers' guild with the help of Deigha's

directions. I found it right away; it was smaller than Crimonia's. I prepared myself for another fight with rowdy adventurers as I went in, but...

“No one’s... around?”

“How rude. I’m right here, aren’t I?”

I looked in the direction of that voice to find... an exhibitionist. She wore a short skirt, a shirt that emphasized her abundant cleavage, and was drinking even though it was morning.

“All right, cute cub, what’re you doing in an adventurers’ guild?”



“This is the adventurers’ guild, right?” I hadn’t accidentally walked into an adult shop, then?

“Yeah. What of it?”

“What’s with that outfit?”

“Rude. These are my clothes. Drives the boys wild,” she said, bending forward to emphasize her chest. Okay, way to rub it in on the bear girl with the washboard chest. I’d catch up with her in a few years... right?

“Okay,” I said slowly, “but there aren’t any men here? Or... anyone?”

“Course not. You haven’t heard what’s going on in this town, bear?”

“Kraken, bandits, famine... I get the gist of it. And a few high-ranking adventurers ran off with some of the townspeople, leaving only the low-ranking adventurers left.” And nobody else.

“You’ve got it mostly right, kiddo. But the adventurers who stayed are hanging out at the trade guild.”

“Really? Why the trade guild?”

“They’re low-ranking, but they can still hunt lesser monsters. The trade guild buys those at a steep price, so most of ‘em have gone over there.”

I see. So they were making their money off selling to the trade guild rather than here. The adventurers were choosing the big bucks over the big bust... not that I was going to say that out loud though.

“The adventurers’ guild can’t buy stuff for higher prices?”

“Hmph. I’ve heard that one before.” The woman glared at me. I couldn’t help but flinch —her gaze was so *sharp*. “Ha ha, I’m joking. You’re a jumpy one. What’re you here for, cutie bear?”

“I heard you haven’t got enough food, so I came to help. I’m an adventurer.”

“You? An adventurer? Pfft. Heh. Ahahahaha! Been a while since I had a good laugh,

thanks. You're supposed to be an adventurer, little bear girl? Aha ha ha!"

She kept breaking out into new peals of laughter.

"Yeah, I *am* an adventurer. Okay?"

The woman sipped at her drink and nearly snorted it out in another cackle. "S-sorry, sorry, I—pfffeeeahhahahaha! I really just, ah, (*snort*) can't imagine a girl wearing such a cute bear outfit being an adventurer. Just to make sure, would you show me your guild card?"

"What about yours?"

"Oh, right. My bad. I'm the guild master of this town. Atola's the name."

I never would've guessed. Guess they just didn't have enough talent around. I handed my guild card to Atola.

"Aren't there any other staff here?" I asked.

"Nah, we don't have time to dillydally while the town is in this state," she said, and immediately took a massive swig of booze. "Whew. No dillydallying. Now, those who know how to fight are in the mountain gathering food and the stronger ones are negotiating a dispatch of adventurers. Everyone else is butchering the monsters and animals or distributing the food."

Deigha said something like that too, that the adventurers' guild was distributing food.

"Now, I don't know if you've noticed from the 'absolutely everything around this place,' but we've got a food shortage right now. Giant squid troubles and such. Tons of townspeople without enough to eat. I can't just stand by and let them starve. I'm going to do everything in my power for them."

Huh. I guess I shouldn't have judged her by looks; she was working hard for her townspeople.

Atola went behind the guild counter and set my guild card on a crystal panel, which she started to operate.

“D-Rank Adventurer... Name: Yuna,” Atola read out loud. “This is...” She narrowed her eyes as she read aloud. I wish I could’ve seen it too. “Monster... slayings... tiger... black viper... bandits... quest success rate... one hundred percent?”

She was muttering in a voice so low I could barely catch it. Based on the snippets I heard, it seemed like she was reading up on the monsters I’d slayed. Atola finished reading my info and... froze up.

“Okay, joke’s over. This is...” She took a deep breath “...this is unbelievable. Who are you, really?”

“Just an adventurer.” What else could I say?

“Just an—excuse me, but you singlehandedly slayed a goblin horde and their goblin *king*. You slayed tigerwolves and a black viper. You’ve taken down bandits, and there’s not a single black mark on your record. No failures. This is unbelievable.”

But it was true.

“And you did it all—every single thing—alone? Come on.” Atola narrowed her eyes as she looked at me. “I just don’t see it.”

What, was it the bear suit?

“This is already too much, and on top of that... this? *Really?*”

“What do you mean?” There shouldn’t be anything recorded about the ten thousand monsters I’d slayed, right? Sanya made sure of that.

“There’s a note here that only a guild master can view.” She looked me over again, as if watching my reaction. “Kiddo, you’ve got the Kingdom of Elfanica’s seal on here.”

“Elfanica’s seal?” First I was hearing about it. “What’s that supposed to be?”

“It’s given to adventurers and merchants who have the kingdom’s utmost trust. It’s conferred to those who worked for the sake of the country and achieve great things. You’re not faking your age, are you? Some kinda weird aging backward disease?”

“I’m a fifteen-year-old girl.” And one with no idea about that thing stamped onto my guild card. It had to have been the king who did it. They must’ve done it while they

were entering the entry permit into my guild card. If they were going to do that, I wish they'd at least let me know about it.

"What did you do in Elfanica Kingdom?"

"Just, uh, helped somebody out a little. You know?" I mean, I couldn't tell her that I killed an army of monsters hell-bent on destroying the kingdom in a quest of mad vengeance. It had to have been the whole thing with the ten thousand monsters.

Atola narrowed her eyes and looked at me dubiously. "You're not involved any with the royal family, are you?"

"No. I'm just your everyday adventurer." As if I'd be running around in a bear outfit if I was royalty. But this did raise the question: if I went to guilds in other towns, would this always cause such a commotion? "Is it possible to erase that info or something?"

"Wh-What're you saying?! You're talking about erasing *the seal of Elfanica Kingdom*."

"Yeah, but it's really inconvenient when it makes people flip out like you just did."

"Look, it's fine. The only ones who can see the seal are guild masters. When you use your card normally, no one'll know. But if you're having trouble at a guild, you can show it to the guild master and probably get pretty good treatment."

Guess it was like how they used identification seals back in feudal Japan. Still, though... "But what if the guild master goes around spreading it?"

"They better not. Seals meant only for a guild master's eyes are considered top secret. Disclosing it to anyone would be a real violation of privacy."

Great. But Atola did seem like a humongous lush, so that wasn't *super* encouraging.

"You're dressed oddly," she said, "but you're powerful. We're honored to welcome you to our guild."

She offered her hand, and I grabbed it with my bear puppet. Just like that, she slipped into her role as the guild master.

"Let's get down to brass tacks," she said, folding her hands. "What brought you to the

adventurers' guild, Yuna? You wouldn't happen to be here to take care of our bandit problem, by any chance?"

"I could do that, too, if you'd like, but mostly I came to offer food for anybody who needs it. It sounds like coming to the adventurers' guild would be a better idea than the trade guild."

"No kidding. I'm glad to hear it, Yuna."

"Would wolves work?"

"They're meat, aren't they? Hell, even one or two would help right now."

Oh, good. I had five thousand dead wolves.

"Sei! Are you here, Sei?" Atola turned to a back room and called out.

"What do you need?" A male staff member appeared from the back room.

"Sei, how's our food supply looking?"

"Not especially good. We are prioritizing the distribution to the elderly and children, but we don't even have enough for them."

"I see. This girl will apparently give us wolves, so if you could please handle them...?"

This male staffer, Sei, gave me a look. "Guild master, who is this adorable child?"

"She's Yuna, an adventurer. Came in yesterday, she says."

"An adventurer? I see. I am Sei, a worker at the adventurers' guild. Nice to meet you." He didn't make any fuss about my appearance and just gave me a polite greeting. Didn't even ask about the bear outfit! "Is it true that you are giving us wolves?"

"Yeah. I have other stuff, but mostly wolves. I mean, a *lot* of wolves."

"That would be very helpful." He bowed his head and thanked me.

"Cool. Uh. Now, I *do* have about one thousand five hundred and seventy eight (maybe seventy-nine?) dead wolves for you all, so I'm *probably* going to need a place to just,

like. Stack 'em, I guess. A wolf... stacking... zone."

That wasn't the real number, but it sounded like enough to cover the town here. Wish I had some veggies and bread, though.

"What did you just say?"

Their jaws were on the floor.

"Oh, I'm looking for a dead wolf zone. For all the dead wolves I got."

"No, that's not what I meant. Did you just say a thousand and a half?!"

Maybe a thousand wasn't enough for a food-starved seaport? "I could part with two thousand, if you want"

"That isn't the—hm. You have a lot of wolves. Where are you even *keeping* them?"

"Look, I killed the wolves and I just *have* them, okay? I've got an item bag that holds a ton of stuff," I answered. I wasn't lying.

Atola nodded slowly. "That seal of yours. I think I may understand why you have it."

"A seal?" Sei repeated her.

"Don't worry about it, Sei," said Atola. "Yuna, if you really have that many, just a hundred will do us fine. We couldn't butcher a thousand of them even if you gave them to us."

Made sense. I didn't know how many staff she had, but butchering a hundred wolves would take time. But man, just a hundred wolves wouldn't help me clear out my inventory.

"Sei, please lead her to the storehouse. Then, please have all the staffers butcher and distribute them."

"Oh, and guys? Please don't tell anyone I gave you the wolves."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to draw attention."

Atola and Sei looked at my outfit again. I knew what they really, *really* wanted to say. But there was a pretty big difference between standing out for my looks and standing out because I just fed a village. People might end up getting in my face because they wanted more food. I couldn't deal with that.

"Got it. Sei, please keep this secret."

"Understood. Ms. Yuna, this way please," Sei answered, and he led me to the storehouse.

"This is our, ah, 'dead wolf zone,' as you so colorfully put it."

I pulled out the wolves from the bear storage and piled them into a heap on the floor of the storehouse.

"Thank you very much, truly. This will be of help."

It was too bad I couldn't get rid of as many wolves as I hoped, but Sei told me that they tell me if they needed more. It looked like I had another chance to get rid of my stock.

For now I headed to the ocean—finally.

I mean, if they would've had a market, I would have bought seafood practically first thing. It didn't seem like that'd be possible, though. And if I went ahead and fished without asking, I'd definitely get in trouble, wouldn't I?

When I started walking toward the ocean, I saw Yuula ahead of me.

"Hey Yuula, where are you headed to?"

"To *you*, of course. Didn't I promise you yesterday? I'm here to show you around the seaport. But when I headed to the inn earlier today, I heard you already left. I was looking for you."

"Sorry. I went to the adventurers' guild." I hadn't forgotten—I was just so worried about the seaport's food issue.

"Are you free now, though? I can show you around, if you'd like."

“Sounds good to me,” I said, with a grateful smile.

“Great! Where are you trying to go, Yuna?”

“For now, I was thinking of heading to the ocean.”

“In that case, I’ll lead you there. What would you like to do after that? Is there anywhere you want to go? There’s not much going on right now, admittedly.”

“If there’s a place selling fish, I’d like to check it out.” Not that I expected there to be one right now.

“The trade guild is managing the fish, so you’d probably need to go there to buy some. You might be able to buy some if you paid, but the pricing’s ridiculous.”

Supply and demand, I guess. I had money, so I *could* buy some, but it felt messed up to buy the seaport’s limited food resources just because I had a hankering for fish. “Oh, and where’s Damon?”

“He’s giving out the food you gave us to the people we know.”

“Are you sure about doing that? Is there enough?”

“We’ll be okay. We’re trading our limited food with each other.”

“If you don’t have enough, please let me know. Like, uh, wolves for instance.”

After we walked for a while, the coast came into view. The vast expanse of the ocean spread out before us. Blue and endless ocean, white-speckled skies. The sea was so placid that it seemed ridiculous to think a kraken might be lurking. To the left, I saw a ton of fishing boats moored in the harbor. I bet they’d be out to sea without the threat of the kraken.

“Is your ship out there too?” I asked.

“Yes, we have one there. Not that it gets much use these days.”

“Where does the kraken appear?”

I pointed out at the ocean that spread out before my eyes. I just couldn't believe that a kraken existed in such a calm place.

"Anywhere it wants. It attacks any ships that go out too far. Since some of the people who were fishing nearby got attacked too, we know it doesn't *have* a main hunting ground. I've mentioned before—it's even come close to the seaport. It could appear anywhere."

Right now, I had no way of fighting a kraken. I couldn't fight on top of the ocean. I couldn't fly and I couldn't dive into the water. The game had an item you could use to breathe underwater, and some players had a Mermaid skill for these things. But I didn't have an item to help me breathe or swim underwater. I couldn't fly either, obviously. I couldn't defeat the kraken with my current abilities at all.

If we could only fight on the ground, I could've served the whole town roasted squid. But there was no point in whining about the things I didn't have. Even with the bear equipment, I couldn't fight in the ocean. All I could do was hope for a high-ranking adventurer or the troops to make a move.

I looked over the ocean as I walked along the coast. There were little things around the beach—clams, maybe? If I just had miso, I could have served them up with some miso soup.

I put out the money for the job, so I wondered if I could get a high-ranking adventurer to come out to slay that kraken. Walking along the beach, I could see a cliff ahead of where we walked.

"Yuna, the bandits appear ahead of that cliff," Yuula warned. If I walked alone, I wondered if they'd attack me?

Yuula and I ended up wandering around town until sunset. When we stopped by the adventurers' guild partway, I saw them distributing the wolves and some other food I gave them.

CHAPTER 87

THE BEAR IS UNKNOWINGLY RESENTED

IMBECILES! Insufferable imbeciles all around! “What’s the meaning of this!” I snarled at my direct reports in the room. “Why does the adventurers’ guild have all this...” I winced as I even spoke to the fools “...wolf meat?!”

“I think it’s because someone killed the beasts?” one of my reports said.

“What an *illuminating* answer from the new biggest idiot in town. Have you got your head screwed on right? A hundred wolves in a day or two? Don’t be absurd!” Surrounded by fools, I swear.

“Sir, maybe it was the adventurers who came the other day that did it?”

There actually *had* been a party of adventurers who came into town a few days ago. A four-person group. Two swordsmen and two mages. They were high ranking, but they had the absolute gall to turn me down. Worse yet, the leader of the party took the other three pretty ladies off somewhere.

There was a chance they were the ones to hand off the wolves to the adventurers’ guild, but I’d gotten reports that they left town a couple of days ago. Who could prepare so much wolf meat?

“If the adventurers come back,” said one of the idiots around me, “would you like us to grab them for you?”

“And which one of you is capable of grabbing a whole C-Rank party, huh? Think before you speak!”

They really were fools, the whole lot of them. If *that* were possible, I would’ve had them steal me a party from the start. We were in this mess because none of them could do it. But they couldn’t even get something so simple through their thick heads.

“Just... go look into how the adventurers’ guild ended up with that much wolf meat! Get out of my hair!” I roared, and they fled.

What did I do to deserve such slobbering nincompoops? "Curses," I muttered. "This miserable backwater. I was only going to stay for one more month."

Five years ago, I was an employee at the trade guild in a big town. When they offered me a position as a guild master, I was foolish enough to accept, and ended up stuck in this fish-reeking backwater. I kept up my work for five years despite that. And yes, I was embezzling funds right under the townspeople's noses, but what were *they* going to do with it?

And then the overgrown squid showed up.

I couldn't send out any ships, couldn't catch any fish, and that bumbling mayor packed his bags and moved away. On top of that, the wealthier residents began to leave. How was I supposed to make any money without my cash cows?

I hired some strapped-for-cash adventurers to play as bandits and keep any more residents from skipping town. Even if some of the townspeople hired adventurers to help them get out, word of the bandits would spread, so there weren't as many people trying anymore. The only road they could take was blocked off by the bandits and the kraken was in the ocean, so nobody could set out by ship. The only option left was the grueling mountain range, and who would be stupid enough to try *that*?

I let a select group of fishermen catch the fish they could off the coast and managed all of them. I'd pretend to divide those equally and crank up the price. Hungry? Then come to me and pay up! The poor wastrels of the town got to have little morsels, but only to prevent any rioting.

Even if they tried making a break for it, the bandits would attack them and steal their property. Run and lose your stuff, or stay and lose it all the same. I just needed one more month, and then I could blow this miserable hovel.

Until the adventurers' guild started handing out free wolf meat.

If I didn't do something, my cash flow was going to dry up completely. Not to mention that the townspeople might turn on me. I just had to locate the wolf meat supplier, first...

That night, my cronies brought me the info I was waiting for.

"The bear's weird, man."

Oh, a *bear* was weird? What was he yammering on about? "You take me for a fool?"

"No, I'm—listen, there's a girl in a bear outfit." He had to be kidding me. "I looked into her and it seems she came in alone the other day."

"She got here without being attacked by the bandits?" Did she have a guard, then? I was sure those guys would've attacked a girl walking on her lonesome, but maybe traveling alone had let her slip by?

"Word is that she came over the mountains on her own."

"Ha! A little bear girl climbing over a mountain? Are you drunk?"

"No, I heard it from the gatekeeper himself! According to him, she helped some townspeople who were trying to get over the mountain. The next day, several residents saw a bear on the coast. There were also people who saw her head over to the adventurers' guild."

According to his report, that girl in the bear outfit had gotten to the adventurers' guild and just dumped tons and tons of wolf carcasses into their storage. Which... hmm. If she really were powerful enough to get over that mountain alone, she'd be able to easily defeat wolves, even if she was just a girl. And if she had so much wolf meat on her, that meant she had to have a first-class item bag too.

Did that mean she was a pretty high-ranking adventurer? If so... yes, surely she was B-Rank, or maybe C-Rank at the very least.

What an asset someone like that could be! And perhaps I could secure more wolf meat from her, too. Now, what move to take?

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "Tell me more about this girl."

"She's thirteen and wears a super cute bear costume."

Ah, he misspoke. "Once more, but smarter."

"She's... about thirteen?"

“You mock me? You’re saying that some... some *little kid* came over the mountain on her own with a gigantic stack of dead wolves?”

“No?”

“No?”

“I mean, yes...”

A thirteen-year-old brat? What did he take me for? How could a kid like that get over the mountain? How hard was it to fact check intel?

But as time passed, I received still more reports about... bears.

According to my lookout at the adventurers’ guild, there was still tons of wolf meat around. He said he saw them butchering carcasses in the storehouse and carrying the meat out. Even if the bear girl was a fiction, the wolf meat was a fact.

I needed clarity. I needed *good* intel.

“Have you looked into where this, ah. This ‘bear girl’ is supposed to be?”

“Yes, she’s staying at Deigha’s inn.”

“Oh, the macho idiot.” That meant a little trouble, but it wasn’t like I could let this matter rest. “Then we’ll gather four or five adventurers and launch an assault.”

We’d attack this bear girl in the middle of the night. If she had more wolves on her, they were ours for the taking. If not, I’d hand her off to the bandits and... well, from there it wasn’t really my problem anymore, was it? They could do what they wanted with her.

All very well then, eh? But... none of the adventurers who went to the inn came back.

CHAPTER 88

THE BEAR IS ATTACKED AT THE INN

AFTER PARTING WAYS with Yuula after her town tour, I headed back to the inn. Machoman served up a good dinner and man, I was stuffed. The food was great, but—I admit it—I was still kinda bummed that I couldn't have seafood when the ocean was lurking right there. Maybe I could fish a little ways from the town? Not that I knew *how*, but there was a chance I could reel something up using magic.

I really would've rather defeated the kraken myself, though. But how?

From my walk around the seaport, the situation seemed dire. Everyone was exhausted, and they couldn't go out into the sea at all. Bandits lined their only road and there wasn't much food. Anything that could be caught along the coast was being managed by the greedy trade guild. Maybe I could go to the adventurers' guild tomorrow and ask Atola about the bandits?

If I could defeat those bandits, that might help out with the food issue a little, right?

Eh, whatever. I'd go to bed for now and think about it tomorrow. Kumayuru and Kumakyu were snoozing, curled up beside me in cub form. Summoning them in inns as cubs came pretty handy after all—they could sleep right on my bed like that.

“Wake me up if anything happens, all right?”

I gave them pats on their heads and went to sleep while sandwiched between them.

Pat pat pat pat.

Something soft hit my face.

Pat pat pat pat.

I brushed it aside.

Felt a soft blanket.

A blanket?

I grabbed it and hugged it close.

Mmm, so warm. So soft!

But... something covered my face?

That I couldn't brush aside.

Felt like I was suffocating, until I finally woke up.

“What!?”

When I got up, Kumayuru was clinging to my face. Kumakyu was in my arms.

“What? Could you not get to sleep?”

When I complained to them, they cooed softly and looked at the door.

“What? Is someone here?”

They cooed again.

Deigha wouldn't have woken them. I glanced around uncertainly and, finally, decided to use detection.

There were people moving within the inn. Four of them.

Awful late to be moving around in the middle of the night, right? And wasn't this place mostly empty? The signal slowly crept up the stairs. Could it be the C-Rank adventurers we talked about the other day?

Weren't they gone?

The signals stopped at the front of the room. *My* room. I didn't think I'd done anything to make people want to kill me. If anybody was gonna cloak-and-dagger anybody, why not that guild master? I felt like I was just a little too young for targeted assassinations.

I got out of bed to deal with them and enlarged my bears.

The door was locked. I wondered what they intended on doing.

Rattle.

And they unlocked it, no problem. Maybe they had a spare key or something? Or was it magic?

The door slowly opened, and guess what? You do not need to go easy on anyone breaking into a fifteen-year-old girl's room. I bounded to the door and gave the people who came through a bear punch right to the face. The guy I hit crashed into the wall of the hallway and—wham—just out cold, like that. I flew into the hallway from the momentum of my punch and saw three of them there, just standing around, begging to get their faces wrecked.

I emitted light magic. I wanted to see those faces.

"What was that?!"

The three of them were shocked by the light. They were carrying knives. No way this wasn't a robbery, right?

"Hey! Is this room service? Pretty late for that, isn't it?"

"Did you hand over those wolves to the adventurers' guild, lassie?"

They knew about that? "And if I did?"

"Just come along with us." His teeth were bright yellow. It was almost impressive. "Real nice and obedient-like. We wouldn't wanna get rough with you." One of the goons laughed.

"And if I say no?"

"What makes you think you could?" The man pulled his knife. He was definitely thinking about licking it and that was a little too much, even for them.

More importantly, their aim didn't seem to be me, but the wolves. Looks like the info had gotten out there, somehow. What a pain. It was late, and I was sleepy.

I decided to make quick work of them and go back to bed.

"Okay, let's just... let's just make this quick."

"Bring it on, girly!" The men gripped their knives and attacked.

Bear punch, bear punch, bear punch. Behold, the power of my secret technique: the bear punch (which was a regular punch courtesy of my bear puppets). The men collapsed into the hallway with loud consecutive thumps. Maybe *too* loud? I didn't want to wake up Mr. Macho and family.

Before I knocked them the rest of the way out, I asked them who they were working for. "And where were you going to take me?"

"Not like we'd ever tell you."

See what I'm talking about? Boring. I called for my bears. Kumayuru and Kumakyu, back to their regular size, just barely squeezed through the door and into the hallway.

"B-Bears!" the men shrieked, clawing the floor.

"Yeah, I know," I said to Kumayuru. "It's really sad, they just won't talk. I guess you'll just have to eat them."

Kumayuru and Kumakyu slowly approached the collapsed men.

"W-Wait!"

"I don't think you *should* wait," I said. Kumayuru pressed down on top of the man and gave him a big lick.

"I'll talk! I'll talk, so don't eat me!"

"Really? There are four of you, so..." I counted on my fingers, frowning. "I don't see what the trouble is if they ate *one*. What do you guys think?"

"Cwooom?" Kumakyu was doing its best, too, leaning onto two of them and keeping them from running.

What a lucky guy, the one I knocked out. Hope he was having sweet dreams.

“Please!”

“Please? What, you’ll answer my questions?”

The man started bawling as Kumayuru held him down. “The one who gave us the order was... it was the trade guild’s master.”

“The trade guild? I didn’t do anything to them.”

“Nah, you didn’t, but ya handed off a ton of wolves to the adventurers’ guild!”

“How do you know it was me?” I made the guild keep quiet about it.

“We’re not a bunch of idiots! We looked into it, and found out that you came around to the adventurers’ guild at the same time they got in a ton of wolf meat.”

Oops. It wasn’t like I went to the guild in secret. It was just a matter of time until it got out.

“When we asked the owner of the inn, we found out that you’ve split ingredients with them too. Also, we know that you gave that couple who climbed the mountain food too!”

I hadn’t even considered that I’d need to cover my tracks like that. Ugh.

“So what,” I said, “you were going to steal the wolves I had?”

“That too, but we were also gonna get our hands on that powerful item bag of yours...”

The wolves and the item bag, then.

“That’s enough, right? We told you stuff! We’re cool, eh?! You can let us go?”

“What’re you talking about? All I said was that they wouldn’t eat you. I’m not letting you get away after you tried to attack me. Kumayuru, Kumakyu, sit on them till tomorrow morning. If they try making a break for it, you can eat them.” Mr. Macho and family didn’t seem to have woken and I didn’t see the point in telling them till morning.

“*Cwoooooom.*”

“You’re leaving us like this all night?”

"Oh, and guys? Do you think you can keep quiet? If you do, I'll hand you off to the guards alive. If you don't...?"

The men shut their mouths and went silent and finally—*finally*—I could get some dang sleep.

"Eeiiiiiiii, bears?"

I woke up to a commotion in the hallway.

"Is the bear girl okay? Bear girl!" I heard someone calling for me and, groggily, recalled the events of the last evening. Oh, right.

I rubbed my sleepy eyes and left the room.

"Miss, are you all right?! What're bears doing in my inn?" Macho raised his fists, ready to... do what? He wasn't planning on fighting my bears, was he?

"Those bears are my summons. They're friendly."

"Your summons? You can do that? What're these guys crushed under 'em?"

The men's faces were wet from bear drool.

"Oh, they're bad guys. They assaulted me in the middle of the night, so I caught them."

"Assaulted you?"

"Apparently, the trade guild master ordered them to."

"The trade guild master did *what*?"

"Anyway, I'd like to hand off these men to the guards."

"I'm not so sure you should."

"Why's that?"

"Since the mayor of the town made a break for it, the trade guild has been managing the guards. If you're going to hand them over to anyone, it should be the adventurers' guild."

I ended up asking Mr. Macho's son to send word to the adventurers' guild. While that was happening, I sent the bears back and had Mr. Macho tie up the men. After a while, the son came back with guild employees.

"What are you doing here, Atola?"

Atola showed up alongside the guild employees. Instead of the revealing outfit from yesterday, she was wearing a light coat. Guess she couldn't go out and about in those clothes. That *had* to get a little chilly, right?

"Of course I'd come after hearing you were attacked. Now... who're these people?" A half smile. "Who'd be stupid enough to attack Yuna?"

I pointed at the miserable lot of prisoners. "Them."

"Them?"

"Them."

"You're kidding me." She squinted at one of them. "Droi? You're an adventurer. *Really?*"

"Guild master..."

"What a miserable disappointment you are."

"I..."

"I'll hear the rest from you at the adventurers' guild."

Atola instructed the employee that she brought to take him away. "You're not hurt, are you, Yuna?"

"I'm fine. I've got guards."

“Guards?”

“But the situation there is kinda... hairy. I’ll introduce them to you next time.”

She nodded. “Fine. Do you know why they attacked you?”

“Looks like it was for all my wolf meat. They were saying something about how the trade guild asked them to do it.”

“Ha.” It wasn’t a laugh. “Looks like your charity touched a nerve. I never would’ve thought they’d attack you this soon, though. For now, I’ll look into the men you’ve caught.”

Fine by me. “Atola, I was thinking of apprehending the bandits, so could you tell me more about them?”

“Apprehending the bandits? As in, *all* of the bandits?”

“Yeah. I can’t defeat the kraken, but I can do bandits. Once they’re gone, you’ll be able to travel on the roads, right?”

“Yuna, it’s dangerous to go alone.”

“You saw my guild card, didn’t you?”

Atola took a deep breath. She thought about it. “The four adventurers who came to town the other day headed over to get the bandits,” she said finally. “I tried to stop them, but they said they would go check it out.”

Maybe these were the adventurers who were supposed to be staying at this inn? I was told they weren’t around right now, after all. This sounded urgent.

I asked Atola as much as I could about the robbers.

There were over twenty of them. Their faces were obscured, so no one knew who they were. They wouldn’t attack anyone with guards, but they’d go after anyone defenseless. Since no one had fought them, she didn’t have info on how powerful they were. They’d watch people from the mountains. For all of that, she didn’t know where their hideout was... but I had resources that she didn’t.

“Do they have any hostages?”

"Women, maybe. They've only left behind dead men."

Ah. Okay, great. I could absolutely annihilate them, then. It would be one thing if they were just robbing people, but murderers and kidnappers got no mercy.

"I'll head out right away," I said.

"Yuna, don't be reckless." Atola seemed worried for me. Good for her, I guess, but I had work to do. But you know, as she left the inn, she did turn back and say: "You look pretty cute in that white bear outfit too."

I forgot that I hadn't gotten changed, since I'd been woken by Deigha yelling. For some reason, I couldn't help feel embarrassed when people saw me in my white outfit, even if it was mostly the same. I guess it was like being seen in my pajamas.

Before I headed out, I asked Deigha to prep a breakfast that'd keep my energy up for a whole day. I'd need it.

CHAPTER 89

THE BEAR HEADS OUT TO ELIMINATE THE BANDITS

I LEFT THE GOONS in Atola's hands and got ready to go bandit hunting. And by "got ready" I mean "ate a lot."

"Miss," Deigha said with a worried sigh, "are you really going out to apprehend those bandits?"

"I'm going to eat all this delicious food, first."

"Err, thanks, but it's pretty dangerous, girl like you."

"I'll be all right. I'm an adventurer, and didn't you see my bears? Big burly bears?"

"Hrm. Then when you come back, I'll make you the best meal I can." He flexed his bicep at me. I didn't think muscle really mattered to the culinary arts, but whatever made him happy.

I summoned Kumayuru, and headed over to the place where bandits had last been seen, running along the coast at a decent speed. The sea breeze felt nice. If things warmed up a little more, maybe I'd be able to go for a dip in the water?

Fina probably hadn't seen the ocean before and it'd be nice to come here with everyone. But I never swam before, except during gym class in elementary school. Still, playing in the sand would be fun too, and there were a ton of other things to do out at the beach.

Since I didn't know when the bandits might appear, I left my Detection skill engaged. I'd never been to this place, so my map was just black in the target area. As I headed down the road, four human signals popped up ahead of me.

Were these the bandits?

Was it an ambush?

Hmm. That was a lot less of them than I was expecting. If they were going to attack normal people, maybe that was all they needed? If they were going to attack me anyway, it'd be the most convenient for me if they did it all at once. But there were probably captives and I needed to get to their hideout, so I guess it was all the same?

I spotted human figures in the distance. If they weren't hiding, maybe they weren't the bandits? Still, it was suspicious that anyone at all was on this road. There was a chance they'd pretend to be normal people and attack me, so I plunged ahead on Kumayuru to seem threatening.

I got close to them, and...

Hold on.

Were these the four adventurers Atola told me about?

Yep, four adventurers walked on toward me. One guy and three women, like the setup for a harem anime. When they noticed me riding on top of Kumayuru, they got their swords and staffs ready. I wasn't going to have to fight them, was I?

"Stop right there." The man blocked the road. He didn't try to attack me right off the bat, but he did give me a suspicious look.

"What?" I stopped and asked from on top of Kumayuru.

"What's with that outfit? And that bear?"

"I'm an adventurer and this is *my* bear." I gave Kumayuru a pat on the head.

"You're an adventurer, miss?"

Would he believe me if I said so?

"Is that bear really yours?" a woman in mage-y robes asked from behind him.

"Yeah, it is."

"Would you let us take a look at your guild card?"

"You're asking me to show mine, but you're all not going to show yours?"

"Sorry. I'm Rosa. C-Rank." She showed me her card. Seemed legit.

"I'm Yuna. I'm a D-Rank adventurer." I showed my card, too.

"You really are an adventurer, then. I'm sorry for doubting you." She told the other party members to lower their weapons.

"Is that bear really safe to be around?" the man demanded.

"It is unless you act hostile."

"Understood."

The man sheathed his sword. When the other members saw that, they lowered their weapons.

"Where are you headed to, young miss? There's bandits hereabouts; it's dangerous."

"I know that. I was on my way to apprehend them."

"Um. Hold on, let's just... it was Yuna, right? You're serious about that? They're not the kind of people a little girl like you could defeat on her own," the mage said gently.

"And," added one of the other women, "we've been on the lookout for the bandits the past few days, but haven't caught sight of them."

Well, it wasn't like it'd be easy to find their hideout. And it wasn't like they'd come out in the open with adventurers out and about, either. What changed things was my Detection skill. I could literally just run around at random with Kumayuru in places where they might be and search for their signal.

"That's not an issue." I gave Kumayuru's head a pat. "My bear will find them." Kumayuru turned to me as though saying "leave it to me" and let out a tiny coo.

"Aaa! What a cute bear!"

"Even if that bear roots them out, you can't take them all on alone."

"Ehh." I shrugged. I'd be fine as long as the bandits weren't secretly controlling the kraken, or something.

"There's no way a kid could defeat those guys on her own. It's too dangerous," the male adventurer said loudly.

"In that case, we can just go with her, right?"

"Rosa?!"

"Our goals are the same. As long as we've got that bear, we can figure out where they are, but we can't let this girl in a bear outfit waltz on over to the bandits' hideout alone. Can't we go with her?"

"Hrm," the man said. "I guess?"

"Definitely."

"I'm fine with that."

"But, she's so—" The guy gave me a helpless look, leaned in and whispered a little too loudly—"she's so tiny!"

It seemed that they weren't belittling me so much as worried for me. Either way, it was *annoying*.

"We can protect her," the swordswoman answered.

"All right... if you're good with that, I'm on board."

If they were going to have this conversation, couldn't they at least include me?

I couldn't refuse them, so they ended up coming along. We introduced ourselves properly. The guy was named Blitz, twenty-five and light-skinned. He seemed like their leader, technically, but I think the mage Rosa was the one who really called the shots. The other mage was a girl, about eighteen, named Ran. Finally, there was a swordswoman who was about as tall as Blitz, dark-skinned, carrying a largish sword. Her name was Glimos.

"Can I ask something?" said Rosa suddenly.

"What's that?" Sigh.

"Why are you wearing that outfit, Yuna?" She looked me over, fascinated.

I knew it. I *knew* they'd ask.

"I'm blessed by the bears."

"Blessed by the bears?"

Sure, why not? If people were going to keep asking, I might as well come up with a cooler backstory. I wasn't lying, either. I was so blessed by the bears that it was almost a curse.

"I've never heard of such a thing," Rosa marveled.

"Well, you've heard of it now." I gave Kumayuru a gentle pat on the head. The party looked a little unsure. Bear blessings might've been a bit of a stretch. I've consumed my fair share of fantasy from manga, anime, novels, games, and movies, but I'd never come across that concept before.

"Your bear really *is* quite docile, though," admitted Rosa. "What was its name?"

"Kumayuru."

"What a cute name. Can I touch it?"

"Gently."

Rosa came up to walk beside me and gently stroked Kumayuru. "It's so soft."

"Could I touch it too?" the other mage, Ran, asked, so I gave her the okay. "It really is soft. What is this? This coat. So smooth, so fluffy! So *nice!*"

Ran rubbed her cheek against Kumayuru, smiling.

"Are you sure it's not dangerous?" Blitz asked, frowning at the two others.

"As long as we don't hurt it, it won't do anything to us."

Disregarding Blitz, the two mages continued to enjoy Kumayuru's fur as we traveled on. This seemed like an area where the bandits might appear and, sure enough, human signals blipped up from my detection. They were based partway up the mountain.

But there were only two signals. Wasn't that a bit too few? Or were they guards? Maybe they were even normal people. Hmm...

"What's wrong?" Rosa caught me brooding about it.

"My bear found people up the mountain, and I don't know what to do about it."

"You think it's the bandits?!"

I shrugged. "Or normal people. My bear can't make a call like that."

"I think bandits are a safe assumption if they're hanging out in the mountains."

"It does make sense, I guess."

"Where are they?"

"Don't move your heads. Pretend like you don't know, but... they're to the right, where you can see the bare rock."

Everyone turned only their eyes to the mountain.

"I can't see them."

"Neither can I."

"What should we do?"

We moved forward, pretending we hadn't noticed them. The signals stayed in place.

Slowly, we closed the distance. Could we find them in the forest? Maybe. I mean, it wasn't like we could ignore them if the opportunity presented itself. But if we messed up, there was a chance they'd get away... if they could somehow outrun Kumayuru in the mountains. If all else failed, I could go after them with my Detection skill, but that

sounded *so* annoying.

"Once we get to that tree, I'll be able to confirm if they're bandits. You guys keep walking ahead."

"Hold on, now." At that, Rosa paused. "Are you using us as decoys?"

"No, it's just good strategy. You don't know exactly where the people are. I do, because bear powers. What if you scare them off and they escape?"

"But they might just run from you, too."

"Outrun my bear?" I gave Kumayuru a pat. "I don't think so."

"Are you sure you're fine alone?"

"Always am." If push came to shove, I had Kumakyu too.

"All right. We can count on you, right? After we walk for a while, we'll head over too. That's the one thing we won't yield on."

"That's fine."

We were closer to the tree now. Closer, closer... and there.

We passed under, and I had Kumayuru turn in the direction of the signals and bolt at them. We dashed between the trees, no terrain too steep to slow us down, and closed on our targets.

"What was that!?" one of them yelled. The two men attempted to immediately draw their swords, but they were too slow. Kumayuru attacked them, sent their swords flying, and held them down.

"You're bandits, aren't you?" I asked. They had to be.

"What're you talking about?"

"Are you *really* going to play dumb? Well, I guess I only need one of you to question. Kumayuru, eat the tastier of the two."

Kumayuru opened its mouth wide.

"W-Wait a sec! I-I taste terrible!"

"I taste even worse!"

"Let's find out who tastes better. Kumayuru, eat each of their arms and then pick your meal." Kumayuru went along with the act. The bear's gaping maw dripped drool over the men's faces.

"No, wait!"

"Please! We'll talk, so just stop!"

The men surrendered.

"All right, then I'm going to ask you again. If you tell me another lie, I'm going to feed you to the bear. You *are* the bandits that have been attacking the people who pass by here, aren't you?"

"Yeah... we are," one man answered, sounding resigned.

"Then point me to the hideout. Just giving me the general direction will do."

"If we tell you, will you let us go?"

"Of course not... but that *also* means I won't let my bear eat you. And my bear is famished, so you better choose quick."

Kumayuru's drool ran down their horrified faces. I made a mental note to never let Fina and the others see Kumayuru like this. They'd have nightmares.

"A-all right. We'll talk, so just don't eat us."

CHAPTER 90

THE BEAR ELIMINATES THE BANDITS

THANKS TO KUMAYURU'S "murderbear" act, we got the location of the hideout from the two lookouts. Now, what to do about them?

As I thought it over, Blitz and the others came into view. They seemed to be having a lot of trouble getting up the steep slopes. Glimos had the worst of it, with her giant sword. Relief washed over them at the sight of me.

"Yuna, are you all right?" asked Rosa.

"I'm fine."

"How did it go?!"

"They were bandits." The party looked over the men pinned under Kumayuru. "I got the location of the hideout from them, so I was planning on heading over there now. What should we do with these two?"

"It's not as though we could bring them along," Rosa mused, "and we can't just leave them here either."

"In that case, how about we dig a hole and bury them?" We could just dig them out later.

"Wh—please no!"

"W-we t-told you the l-l-location, didn't we! Didn't we?!"

"Ehh, you'll be all right. We'll make sure your heads are above ground and everything." Though if we forgot about them, they'd be stuck there for the rest of their incredibly short lives.

"I'll stay behind," Glimos spoke after finally catching her breath. "This sword makes me dead weight. I'll take these two and wait down there." She pulled a rope from her

item bag and started to tie up the robbers.

I nodded. "Right. If they're lying, we'd have to question them again, after all."

"In that case," said Rosa, "we're counting on you, Glimos. If we don't come back, please tell the guild."

Glimos obediently nodded at Rosa's instruction, and I wondered when I last heard Blitz bother to give an order himself.

We left the two captives in Glimos' hands and headed to the bandits' hideout.

It looked like they were using the path heavily; the thing looked almost like an animal trail now. Once we were headed in the general direction, I'd be able to use my Detection skill and Kumayuru to narrow it down.

"Still, you know," said Rosa, "I was pretty surprised there actually were guys there."

"All thanks to my bear!" I wasn't going to tell them about the Detection skill, after all. Well, Kumayuru *had* helped, so it wasn't exactly a lie.

"I want a bear too..." Ran enviously hugged Kumayuru.

Hm. Good luck with that.

After traveling a while longer, several dozen human signals appeared, unexpectedly close. This was it.

"We're just plowing forward right now," said Blitz, looking anxious. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"It's fine. We have my bear. Now all we need to do is get close." I already pinpointed them, after all.

"But there's a chance the bandits you caught were lying," said Blitz.

Sheesh, this was such a pain. *Kumayuru, please*—and then, as if hearing my thoughts, Kumayuru reacted.

“Looks like my bear found them.”

“Really?”

“Yep. And they’re close. Do you need a break?” I didn’t—I rode on Kumayuru the whole time.

“I’m fine.”

“I’m also good.”

“I can keep going too.”

Cool. I decided to keep heading forward. Kumayuru flattened the vegetation and the three of them followed in its wake. The signals were getting closer.

“I think we’re almost there. Keep quiet.” The three behind me nodded silently. We brushed aside the vegetation and saw an open space with, farther on, the mouth of a cave. About ten guys layed in front of the cave, with a bunch of women serving them drinks in the middle of the day. It was exactly as our two prisoners had told me.

The women were probably the bandits’ captives. Ugh. When I used my Detection skill to check, there were signals inside the cave too. Wish I could just magically know if this meant more prisoners or more problems.

“This really was the place, then.”

“Looks like they’ve got some hostages too.”

“What should we do?”

“I can take them all,” I said.

“Yuna, this isn’t the time to be playing around.”

“Hostages spell trouble, Yuna.”

“I think our only option is to take them by surprise.”

The three of them spoke in quick, hushed voices. The biggest problem was the women

they captured. On top of that, the signals in the cave. Sooner or later, they'd notice their lookouts hadn't returned. We didn't have much time.

"Should we call Glimos?"

"It'll take her a while to get here."

"Then what should we do?"

This was useless. No mattered how much the three of them chattered, they weren't going to come up with anything.

"If this is too much for you, I really can just go in by myself. That wasn't a joke." I wanted to hurry and get back. Didn't I have a meal waiting for me? I ordered Kumayuru to start moving...

"Wait, Yuna. Let's talk this over."

Nah.

Kumayuru and I leapt into the clearing. It was about then that it occurred to me that, just maybe, this kind of thing was why I was always terrible at playing with a party rather than going solo. Much to think about.

"What was that!"

"A bear!"

"It's a bear!"

Points for accuracy, guys. I jumped down from Kumayuru and, the moment my feet touched ground, created a deep pit under four of the robbers that stood farther away from the women. Down they went. They were probably going to be hurt once they hit the bottom, but they were lucky I hadn't killed them.

"Kumayuru! Don't let anyone escape!" I would've preferred Kumayuru protect the imprisoned women, but I didn't want it to scare them.

"Who the heck are you?" The rest of the men wobbled together as they stood up, slow from all that idiotic day drinking. The moment they picked themselves up and stepped

away from the women, I hurled air shots at them and blasted them back before dropping them in pits.

“Yuna, behind you!”

I turned around. A fireball hurtled towards me. At once I held my left, white bear hand up to the fireball and... the fire disappeared. Three men stood before me, staves in hand. They tried to lob magic at me again, but I deflected it to the side and fired an air shot at their heads. Wasn’t hard, considering I had target correction, and the air shot was invisible to boot. Dodging was almost out of the question.

“Kumayuru, could you?” If they could use magic, they could probably get out of the hole.

That left three men. “Who are you supposed to be?!” They gathered in one place and called out to me, holding a hostage in their clutches.

Probably best to just go for it. If I let them monologue, the other bandits might recoup. And then there was the cave... The cave worried me.

So I didn’t answer, but just launched air shots at the two men who turned their swords at me, sending them flying. Now there was just one guy left.

“Wha—” The man with the sword held close to the woman just... blinked for a moment. Now... strengthening magic! I closed the distance between us and grabbed the man’s sword with my white bear puppet. I could have just punched him, but didn’t want to risk knocking the sword into the woman.

“Let go!” The man tried straining, but the sword didn’t budge. “You monster!”

No quips. Just a punch to the face with my black bear puppet now that I had the sword more securely in my grip. He went flying.

“You okay?” I called out to the captive woman. Quivering, teary-eyed, she just nodded. Quivering because of the bad guys, right? Not that it mattered much either way—it was over. I was the only one left standing. All the women seemed fine, and Blitz and the others were running to the women and reassuring them.

“Yuna, you’re not hurt, are you?!” Rosa ran over to me.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you really? It looked like you got hit by magic.”

But I deflected it with my white bear puppet. It’s fine. “That’s not going to hurt me. So... could you take care of the bandits and the women?”

That was the point at which they emerged from within the cave. Several of them, all big, fierce-looking warriors. The man standing in the center gave off these weird vibes. He wielded a massive sword and a spiderweb scar ran across his face.

“What’s going on here?!” the scarred man looked at the situation around him and howled. “Are you the one who’s responsible for this?!” He wasn’t looking at me, but at Blitz and the others. “Are you... Blitz? And Rosa.”

Did they know each other?

“Omos, is that you?” asked Blitz. “What are you doing here, you scoundrel?!”

“I’m working.”

“Working?!”

“Did I stutter? I attack travelers on this road, steal their money, and take their women —easy.”

“Who’s that?” I whispered to Rosa.

“An adventurer we met a few towns ago. He’s powerful, but he’s a selfish, sexist old brute. No one could stand him enough to work with him, so he disappeared from the town. Even so, I never would have thought he’d turn to banditry.”

“Banditry? How dare you. This is adventuring work!” He flashed his teeth. “I got a formal request from the trade guild master.”

“From the trade guild?” Now that I hadn’t expected.

“You’re really going to tell us that?” Blitz sneered, standing tall before him.

“What does it matter? You’re going to die, boy, and your women will serve me drinks

in the sun." He burst into cruel, hacking laughter.

"You revolting beast!" Rosa screamed.

"You comely lass," said Omos, with a thin, lopsided smile. "To think that fate would bring us to meet again." He licked his lips. "How fortunate for me."

Blitz drew his blade, and... the scarred man named Omos went flying.

Because I punched him. He just had a really punchable face, and besides, his yammering was getting on my nerves. I hopped onto him and punched him again. And again. I whaled on his black-and-blue face for a while, though I stopped short of sending him unconscious, of course.

"You bastard!"

Bear punch, bear punch, bear punch, bear punch!

"G-Get away!" he moaned. He reached his hand out to me.

Taking his criticism under consideration...

Bear punch, bear punch, bear punch, bear punch!

"St-Stop..."

Nah.

Bear punch, bear punch, bear punch, bear punch!

His face looked like something an amateur ceramics class would throw away. He tried to extend his hand out to me again... and I knocked it away and kept punching. The man's hand limply fell to the ground.

"Ahh, now that felt good." I cracked my knuckles and stood up. Oh. Huh. Blitz, the robbers who came out of the cave, and the captive women were all looking at me.
"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" someone stammered.

"Did you want a go at him too? You can't really get his face anymore, but there are other bits. Go for it. I mean, don't *kill* him, but go for it. We'll question him later."

"You held back..." Rosa seemed appalled at the sight of the man's mess of a face. Looks like he might have gotten a few more scars? Good for him. Something to keep the bigger scar company.

Plus, something he said stuck with me—that he was asked to do this by the trade guild master. The adventurers who attacked me at the inn also said the same thing. At this point, I was starting to wonder if the man had even dredged up the kraken.

"So, are you going to come in quietly?" I asked the rest of the goons who came out of the cave with Omos. "Or do you wanna end up like him?"

The bandits looked at Omos' face. The bandits looked at me. The bandits looked at the ground and then threw their weapons there.

"The cave," I said. "You got any other friends in there?"

"No. Just got more women."

We rescued the women from the cave, and recovered a bunch of stolen property while we were at it. It seemed they had horses and carriages at the foot of the mountain, so we made use of them. We tied up all the bandits, tossed them into a carriage, and headed back to the seaport.

"We really didn't do anything," said Ran.

"Yeah, and I can't believe Omos went down that easily," said Rosa.

Omos was conscious, but unable to move. He tried to make a commotion once when he woke up, so I used wind magic to toss him into the sky and let him hit the ground several dozen times—with an air cushion over the ground so he wouldn't die, of course. When he fainted, I'd spray water on him and wake him up. He *did* beg for death a little, which was fun, but I wasn't going to let him take the easy way out. There were a ton of things I needed to get out of him, and he needed to ultimately answer for his crimes... but not to me. To the women he captured and enslaved, the families of the people he butchered, and the starving townspeople.

We collected Glimos on our way back. When we got back to the town, the man

guarding the gate ran over to us.

"This is..." He looked surprised to see us. And the kidnapped women. And the tied-up bandits.

"We caught all the bandits," said Blitz. "We came to report that to the adventurers' guild master." And there he was, acting like the leader again. Ah well.

"I'll report that immediately!"

The guard ran to the adventurers' guild. While he was doing that, we helped the captured women off the carriage. They cried together. Hugged each other. I could imagine what they'd been through, but I didn't really know what I could say to them. On top of the bandits' treatment, there should have been the other people they left the seaport with—husbands, parents, kids.

And there weren't any. Not anymore. So I said nothing, even as they went on thanking me.

This wasn't Japan or a game world, but a fantasy world. A *world*. I couldn't forget that.

After a while, Atola and a guild employee came by.

"Yuna! You really did apprehend them then?!"

"With Rosa and the others' help."

"We really didn't do anything though," Rosa said, but that's not true—they had tied up the bandits, taken care of the kidnapped women, and driven the carriage. It wasn't like I could do all of that.

"You're kidding me. *These* are the bandits you captured?" Atola stared at the ones in the carriage.

"You recognize them?"

"They're adventurers from our seaport. I was certain they ran because of the kraken, but..." She spat on the ground. "Bandits. Disgraceful."

The former adventurers stared blankly at the ground, away from Atola's gaze.

"We did hear something interesting from these guys we caught," I said.

"Something interesting?"

I told her about the trade guild master.

"That *is* very interesting. I found out quite a bit myself too." Atola smiled, and the smile was sharp and wrathful.

CHAPTER 91

TROUBLE OCCURS WHILE THE BEAR IS UNAWARE, PART TWO

WHAT WAS THE meaning of this?

None of the adventurers I sent to attack that little brat girl at the inn had come back. Bring the girl over to secure the item bag—that was all! How hard could that be? If it really could store a ton of wolves, I'd be able to rake in even more from this place and maybe—fates willing—leave this hovel.

I woke bright and early looking forward to it, and... nothing! Even though I paid them in advance! Had they cut and run?

A crony of mine checked out the inn. Maybe he'd figure something out.

“Guild master!” he whined when he came back, and I nearly threw something at him. Guild master this, guild master that.

Deep breaths. It's fine. It's *fine*. “What's wrong?”

“They caught 'em! They got the guys who went to attack the bear girl at the inn yesterday!”

“*Excuse me?*”

“I saw several guys, all tied up, being taken to the adventurers' guild.”

“To the adventurers' guild?”

This was bad. If they'd been handed off to the guards, I could've figured something out. But the adventurers' guild, of all places?

And how had they been caught? The C-Rank adventurers from the other day shouldn't have been at the inn. Did that buff geezer from the inn catch them?

All I felt was rage. Utter schmucks! Complete wastrels!

Things had gone so perfectly sideways. If the captured guys gave my name, they'd easily be able to figure out it was my command.

"What should we do?"

"Leave 'em."

"Are you sure?"

"Even if they say it was me, they have no proof. I can just say it's groundless."

I wouldn't try attacking Missy Wolf Meat anymore. Perhaps it would be best to abandon this venture and split town.

Knock knock.

There was a tap at the door.

"We are *busy*, you numb-skulled nincompoop!"

A staff member came in. "But, err, sir? The adventurers' guild master is here."

Of course she was. I shooed my cronies from the room. "Then bring her in, man!"

That woman with her... *chesty* outfits came into the room. The adventurers' guild master Atola. "Long time no see, Zallad."

"And a good thing, too. Spit out your business and get out."

"A girl was attacked at the inn last night. Happen to know anything about that?"

Last night? But I heard they were caught this morning. "How dreadful. I know nothing."

"The ones that attacked her were adventurers. We saw them coming and going from *your* trade guild though."

“A shame. I will avoid associating with such fiends in the future.”

“The adventurers claimed to be working under your orders.”

“Did they, now? What reason would I have to attack a girl I don’t even know?”
Whimpering little turncoats!

“In order to steal the wolves, of course.”

“You mean that girl has something to do with the tons of wolves being distributed by the adventurers’ guild?” I let out a rather convincing gasp, if I do say so myself.

“Yes. She’s a charming and generous girl, and I’m positively furious that anyone would attack someone like her”

“Indeed. Dreadful business. I would execute such monsters, the whole lot.” Dead men tell no tales, after all.

“So you insist you weren’t involved?”

“Of course not. And the longer those—those *fiends*—live, the more likely they might escape and come after me. Execute them. For justice, and to keep us all safe.”

“All right. I’ll be back.”

Oh, I hoped not. Atola went home, but I doubted it was over. I had no idea what that guild master was up to. Maybe the time was ripe for me to split? I thought I needed another month, but ah well. Idiot cronies. Meddling bear girl!

I called and gathered the three cronies who knew I were connected to the bandits. There weren’t many who had that information. Had to control for info leaks, after all. It was a little ahead of schedule, but I told the three of them that I was skipping town. We’d leave tonight and rendezvous with Omos.

Unbeknownst to them, my real plan was to steal all the trade guild’s money and frame the three of them for the theft. Then Omos and his bandits would kill them and leave their corpses to be found on the road, making people assume that the money was stolen by the bandits. Everything was accounted for, so to speak.

“I’m stopping by my house,” I said. “I’ll be right back. Head out soon.”

I went home and packed away anything useful into an item bag. There were even things I'd stolen from residents who tried to leave the seaport. Omos, that giant fool, only cared about money and women, and I granted him plenty of both. The fool didn't even know how to fence his takes, and telling him how much a jewel cost was useless.

My valuables and supplies were packed. All I needed now was my take from the trade guild.

But when I came back to the trade guild, there was some commotion. Odd. And why were staff members smiling?

"What happened here?" I asked a particularly delighted looking dolt.

"The bandits on the high road were apprehended!"

What? The one thing Omos was good at was being strong. Had he failed even at that?

The man prattled on: "We'll be able to use the roads now. If we can do that, then we can get food in, too. We're saved!"

No. No, no, no, no! The bandits? Apprehended? Then how would I deal with those three cronies? And what happened to Omos and the others? "Did all the bandits die?"

"It seems they were caught. And get this: apparently most of the bandits were actually adventurers from town. The adventurers' guild master's interrogating them as we speak."

Alive? Alive? How was I supposed to deal with these idiots if they were *alive*? And of course they'd all start whining about "just following Zallad's orders."

"And—it's so crazy—the one who defeated them was a girl dressed up as a bear! A tiny, cute little girl!"

Bears again? What was with that? What kind of bear could carry around a ton of wolf meat, have an item bag that could *contain* all that meat, capture adventurers who attacked her, and defeat a horde of bandits?

"Guild master, we'll finally be able to make all your plans come true!"

Right. My... plans. All fake, of course—perfectly concocted to get the fools listening to me long enough for my real plan to come together. Oh, we were selling the food at high prices? Why, that was only to lay in capital so we could restock supplies for the town once the bandits were gone. The rest of the money would (naturally!) go to a quest fee in order to have the kraken killed.

The staff of the trade guild believed every word I said. They followed my instructions and focused on selling food to the rich in order to save up funds. Naturally, we had to be careful that the remaining staff and townspeople didn't end up rebelling, so I just gave them reduced rations to keep things calm.

"Guild master?" The staff member gave me an odd look.

"It's nothing, my dear boy. Anyway, we're on standby for more info from the adventurers' guild. There might be bandits left around." It was still possible Omos had made it out.

"You're right. We shouldn't risk the roads yet," he said and left.

I headed to my own office in the trade guild. Think, think! Argh! At minimum, even if Omos hadn't been captured, I would have to go to the rendezvous. Maybe I'd have to kill my three cronies myself. How frustrating.

I didn't have enough info to make a move. The more time passed, the fewer escape routes I'd have. Maybe I should give up on the money and just make a run for it?

Someone knocked.

"What is it, you?"

"The adventurers' guild master is here."

She already arrived. "Then lead her in."

"She said she would like you to come out."

"Why?"

"That's because..." said the man, and began to stammer.

"All right, hush. Fine!"

I walked outside, and there they were: the bandits I hired, gathered in one long lineup, their limbs tied and their mouths were gagged. Had they called me out to show me this? I looked them over, one by one, and... was that Omos? No. But... was it?

His build and everything about him just screamed Omos, but his face was a mess. That egotistical, selfish brute was sitting obediently on the ground like the dog he was, deep down. The Omos I knew would've been writhing, practically snapping at their hands. He was the kind of man who'd choose death over something like this. It was an unbelievable scene.

Atola stood at the head of the group, and... huh? Behind her was something small and black and... bearish? It was a small girl in a bear outfit. Could this possibly be the rumored bear? Omos got done in by a little brat like this?

All I could do was laugh. My entire scheme, my months of planning and plotting... blown apart by a girl in a weird bear outfit?

I stifled my laughter, deciding to pretend to be surprised. "Are these the bandits?" I asked.

"That's right. Every single one of them says you hired them."

"I have no recollection of such a transaction."

"Are you really still going to feign ignorance?"

"I don't know what I don't know."

The bandits glared at me. Not only had they gotten caught, but not one of them possessed the decency to die for me. For men who valued life so little, they sure were reluctant to leave it.

"In that case, I suppose we can cut their bonds." Atola pulled out a knife and motioned cutting the ropes holding the men. The restrained men were already glaring daggers at me now. I could imagine what would happen if she freed them.

"Surely you aren't suggesting we let these bandits run off."

"Of course not. I was simply curious about what *would* happen. To you. Hypothetically."

Everyone looked so suspicious of me. They were all convinced, eh? I needed some escape route, any escape route.

"I wonder," said Atola, "if you'll be able to talk your way out of this after this?"

Her staff pulled three trussed-up men from the group... *those* three. My cronies and would-be-fall guys, who I'd been planning to skip town with tonight.

"They seemed to be doing something suspicious, so I put tails on them. Since they were trying to leave the seaport, I kindly listened to their stories. It turns out they had many, many tales to share."

The three sputtered through their gagged mouths. A pathetic display.

"They must be trying to pin the blame on me for whatever they did," I said. "I have no idea who they are."

"All right, then. Will you let us take a look at that item bag you're cradling so preciously?"

Oh. Ha. I was holding it this whole time, wasn't I? Gripping it tightly...

"This is," I began. "I mean, it's..." I tried hiding it behind me, but it was too late. They'd see everything. All the stolen money, jewels, and everything else. "Nothing *important*. You don't need to worry about it."

"Could you let me see the inside of it? These three were so happy to show me theirs."

The three in question groaned and shook their heads.

"I'll have to pass, dear Atola. Why must I show you anything?"

She knew. And if she saw what was in this bag, that would really be it. I wouldn't be able to talk my way out. I held my item bag behind me, gripping it tight.

"I will bear," she roared, "full responsibility! Check the contents of Zallad's item bag!"

And the guild staff pounced. I tried to make a break for it, but it was no use; the staff of the adventurers' guild were all former adventurers. They seized me and snatched the bag from my hands in the blink of an eye.

“Stop!”

“What a nice item bag,” said Atola. “I wonder if the insides are as pretty as the outside?”
And she upended it all.

CHAPTER 92

THE BEAR GETS A REASON TO DEFEAT THE KRAKEN

ATOLA TOOK ME, the one who rounded up the bandits once and for all, to the trade guild. She insisted I come, no matter what I said, though I don't think she really *needed* me there. Still, according to Atola, the bandits would behave themselves if they knew I was around.

When I asked her why she was going out of her way to bring the captured bandits to the trade guild, she said it was because she wanted to see a certain someone's reaction. And the reaction *was* something to remember, I'll admit. The moment the trade guild master saw the leader of the bandits, his expression became... a lot.

Maybe I punched the guy too much?

"What a nice item bag," Atola said. "I wonder if the insides are as pretty as the outside?" And she upended it all.

A staff member gaped down at the contents of the bag. "Hey, what is this? How much did he have in here?!"

"Huh? I'm sure I saw this at Dormin's house," said another.

"That's Douje's," someone else added.

The townspeople began to stir, recognizing their belongings among the heap of items on the ground.

"That's mine," a woman whispered. "The bandits stole that when they caught me."

She was one of the bandit's captives. She ran over to pluck a small, red gemstone ring from the pile and held it close, tears flowing from her eyes.

"Alam..." she said. Then she stood up and shouted, "Give Alam back to me!"

She ran to the trade guild master and slapped him.

"Give back the man you ordered the bandits to kill! Give Alam back..."

The woman collapsed, sobbing, and the townspeople exploded with rage. They threw rocks at the man, covering him in bleeding gashes. Some of the rocks hit the adventurers' guild staff member who was holding him, but the people didn't let up. The trade guild's staff stood stock-still and watched, dazed.

"Stop that!" Atola yelled. At the sound of her voice, the townspeople quieted down. "I will deal with this man. I swear upon my name as the master of the adventurers' guild."

The stones dropped to the ground. It was over.

We caught the ringleader, and everyone who conspired with him. Atola was true to her word, and everything was wrapped up by sunset. Finally... it was dinnertime.

"You're back." Deigha was there to welcome me. "I didn't think you'd actually apprehend the bandits! Now I can go do business with neighboring towns again. You have no idea how grateful I am. Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. I actually would have liked to do something about the kraken though."

"Aha ha ha! Thanks, but that's impossible. Any kid knows how strong the kraken is. All we can do is pray that it leaves the waters."

"Sorry."

"No need to be sorry! We're already just happy that you took out those bandits. And now we've got wolf meat and flour to boot thanks to you, right?"

Hadn't I asked the adventurers' guild to keep that a secret?

"Only some of us know, and the adventurers' guild master sworn us to secrecy—you'd be embarrassed, she said, and we didn't need to thank you."

"It's just a pain, is all." I really meant what I said, okay? It wasn't a big deal. Honestly.

But Deigha just smiled.

I scarfed down the dinner Deigha cooked. As I headed to my room, he called out, "I still owe ya the best meal ever, so make sure you come to the dining hall tomorrow at lunch. I'll have something real good for you."

"You sure? You haven't got many ingredients though, right?"

"Don't worry yourself about that. It's the least I can do."

"Okay, got it. I'm looking forward to it."

I went back to my room, changed into the white bear clothes to wipe away the exhaustion from the day, and summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu in their cub forms as guards. Kumakyu seemed to be acting a little weird, though. It was stooped over and wouldn't look at me, as if it was sulking.

Ohh. I was with Kumayuru all day and hadn't even summoned Kumakyu once. Oops. I needed to do something about this, but so many things had happened today that I was exhausted and sleepy. Kumakyu would have to settle for a sleep cuddle as an apology.

"Sorry. C'mere, buddy." I wrapped Kumakyu in my arms. Mm, so soft. Exhausted and warm next to my soft bear, I fell asleep right away.

The next morning, when I woke up, Kumakyu's mood was better and there was no sign of Kumayuru sulking. Whew. I dismissed the bears, changed into the black bear clothes, and went downstairs.

Blitz and the others were in the dining hall, apparently getting ready to leave.

"Are you leaving town?"

"Yeah, but not for long," said Blitz.

"The bandits are gone," said Rosa, "and the people in the seaport are heading to the hamlet nearby to buy provisions. We've been hired to guard them."

"Mmhm. The trip there and back will probably be about ten days. If all goes well, we'll be able to shorten it and come back sooner."

"Ah, gotcha. I don't know if I'll be here by then, so I'm just going to say it now: thanks for everything, guys."

Blitz snorted. "You've got it all wrong. We're the ones who're thankful to you. If you hadn't been there, we wouldn't have been able to take down those bandits. I don't know *what* would have happened to us if we'd lost to Omos. Thank you so much, really."

Maybe they didn't see it, but these party members *had* helped me. As someone without much life experience, I hadn't been able to think of anything to say to the captured women. Sure, I was the one to defeat the bandits, but Blitz and the others dealt with all of the aftermath. I hadn't done any of that.

"Well then, we're off."

"See you again, Yuna."

"Give my regards to Kumayuru."

"Let's meet again."

"Take care, guys."

Blitz raised his hand in response as he left the inn. I ate my breakfast, then headed out to get some fresh air too.

All around the seaport, the townspeople's faces seemed to brighten as they caught sight of me. Kids would come running up to me and cheerfully greet "the bear." I guess word spread all over town that we eliminated the bandits.

Down by the adventurers' guild, Atola and her staff were swamped. They inherited the responsibility of handling the trade guild's fish and food monopoly, and Atola seemed downright frazzled. Made me nostalgic for just a few days ago, when she was day drinking in the guild and looking bored. She looked like she could use a treat, so I handed her some pudding.

After leaving the adventurers' guild, I bumped into Jeremo from the trade guild—you know, that guy I met when I first arrived.

“Oh, it’s you, miss. Thanks for what you did the other day.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Work for the trade guild. The guild master and the other members were taken in, and, well... as a lower rung on the ladder, I ended up with a ton of work.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Being low in the pecking order spared me getting pulled into the guild master’s schemes, at least.”

The trade guild master was refusing to talk, even after all of this. There was no mistaking that he hired the bandits, and the townspeople wanted to see him punished. I did too, especially after what the bandits had done to their hostages. But with seaport’s mayor gone and no replacement in sight, Atola was holding off on figuring out how to try and sentence Zallad. She knew it couldn’t last, but she had a mountain of pressing work to do. It could wait a little while.

There were a ton more places where they could fish now that the bandits were gone, and the adventurers’ guild needed to equally distribute it all. Atola also had to secure the fortunes stolen from the people killed by the bandits. Normally, the party and I would claim the loot for ourselves, but Blitz and I weren’t doing that. We wanted the captured women and families of those killed to get their stuff back, but there were a number of cases where the whole family was killed, leaving no one to inherit.

“You’re the one who defeated them, Yuna. As for us, we won’t take a single coin.” Blitz said, irritably. The women didn’t argue—I guess they respected Blitz’s opinion, when all was said and done.

When I got back to the inn that afternoon, a delicious smell wafted over me.

“Oh, so you’re back. It’s almost done, so sit and wait.”

As I waited, an even more mouth-watering smell drifted in from the kitchen. Just a few minutes later, the meal came. It was the first time I’d ever seen this food... in this world. It was a food I knew well.

“Rice...”

“What? You already knew about it? It pairs great with fish.”

Before me was a heaping helping of pure, white rice. Beside it, roasted ocean-caught fish, and... no way, was that really miso soup? I took a sip, and... oh *man*. Definitely miso. My favorite veggies soaked in it, and it was just... what can I say but delicious? One sip, another sip, and now I was downright slurping. So nostalgic, so good! I wolfed down the fish and the rice too.

I was downright brimming with nostalgia.

Rice! And the perfect miso soup to go with the rest of it!

I became curious about the liquid in the bottle next to the fish? There was no way it could be... but maybe, right? I could just pour the liquid over the fish and pray. It was slightly reddish-black. I closed my eyes and took a liquid-dabbed bite of the fish.

There was no mistake—this was it. This was soy sauce.

White rice and miso soup. Roasted fish and soy sauce. I was done for. It was so good. I hadn't thought I was this starved for a Japanese meal.

“Miss, are you crying? I thought the fish would go well with these sides, but I guess not? Or is it the fish you don’t like?”

I was crying? “No, that’s not it. It’s really great. Your food is so good that I just started crying.” Ugh, how embarrassing. I smiled through the tears.

“You mean it?”

“Yeah, it’s (*sniffle*) super good.” As proof, I got to work putting the rest of the rice and fish away.

“I’m happy to hear that, but... you aren’t just forcing yourself to eat it, are you?”

Maybe he thought I was just forcing it down my throat even though it tasted bad? “No, this is the flavor of my home. I thought I’d never be able to have it again. I’m so happy.”

“This is your hometown’s flavor? You’re not from the Land of Wa, are you?”

“The Land of Wa?”

“Are you not?”

“No. I’m from a lot farther away. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get back there, either.”

“You’ve traveled that far, huh? Don’t you feel lonely?”

“Sometimes. But this place is fun too. And now I get to taste some flavors of home, to boot.”

“I see. You know, I’d love to make more for you. I wish I had more supplies for it on hand, but there’s the kraken to worry about. Before that beast came, they would’ve brought this by once a month from the Land of Wa by boat.”

So, a country a little like Japan existed in this world. Maybe I could go there someday. But in order to do that, I needed to either slay the kraken or wait until it went away.

There had to be a way to defeat it somehow...

Lost in thought now, I polished off the rest of Deigha’s food. “It was really delicious.” I thanked Deigha profusely and left the inn. I had to think.

I went straight for the coast. The ocean spread before me. Somewhere beyond it lay a land of rice and soy sauce, and who-knew-how-many-more similarities to Japan. But that big, stupid kraken was in the way.

There weren’t many ways I could fight it, either.

First idea: I *could* use a large ship to go out to sea to defeat it. But this town didn’t have a ship like that, and it wasn’t like I knew how to command one.

Second idea: I could fly through the air and battle it from above. Except I couldn’t, because bears can’t fly and that’s stupid.

Third idea: freeze the ocean and... turn it into something solid I could fight on? As a test, I went to the beach and tried it. The water froze, but fresh waves quickly swallowed it. I’d need to freeze a vast area to make this work, and the ice would have to be thick too. I had no idea how much magic it’d take. If the kraken went on a rampage, the waves would come up high, the ice would shatter, and I’d be done for.

Fourth idea: get into a sphere of air and dive into the ocean? As a test I made one and went into the water. There I was, underwater and fine for now, but... would I even be able to attack from inside this sphere? If it popped, so did I. And what happened when my oxygen ran out?

What was left? Maybe I could try riding the bears to fight?

I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

"Can you two swim?"

The bears went into the water and started swimming like normal. Hmm. Well, some bears could swim, after all. The problem here was that *I* never swam in the ocean before. How many years ago had it been since I last swam at all, actually? Oof. If I fell off my bears, I'd definitely end up a goner. But then again, I couldn't fall off them even while sleeping, so maybe I'd be fine?

Still, if the kraken dove to the bottom of the ocean, it wasn't like I could dive right after it. Not a great idea, but maybe something for the backburner.

It really would be best if I could find a way to breathe and move freely underwater, but asking for the impossible wasn't going to get me anywhere. Could I, uh... part the sea like Moses? Nah, impossible. Even if I could do something like that, how could I follow it if the thing ran?

...I couldn't do *that*.

...Nu-uh, that wouldn't work either.

...Rejected.

...No thanks.

...Not interested.

...Impossible.

...Oh, but *that*. That's interesting. Yeah, maybe I'd try it. If I failed, it wouldn't hurt me or anything. If I were successful, I'd be able to fight. If it didn't work, I could go back to the drawing board.

CHAPTER 93

THE BEAR GOES TO SLAY THE KRAKEN

THE DAY AFTER my little brainstorm session, I went to the adventurers' guild to get permission to act. The guild workers bustled around just as they had yesterday. It was so strange that half of the work being done was for a completely different guild, though the trade guild staff were following Atola's instructions to a "T." I caught sight of Atola, busy as she was, and struck up a conversation.

"Yuna, what's wrong?"

"Could I ask you about something quick? Please? There's a favor I need to ask."

"For you? Anything."

Oh, *anything*? If I was a guy, I guess I would've reacted to that differently. Err. Okay, that was a weird thing to think, right? It was enough that I wanted to scream, *Please get those melons out of my face*. It's not like I'm jealous or anything, okay?

"Could we do this away from other people?" I asked, glancing around. She nodded and led me to a back room.

"It's a little messy, but please have a seat." There were piles and piles of documents. Were all of these for work? Man, they piled up fast over the course of what, one day? Had Atola even slept? "What did you want to ask?"

"It's about the kraken. Slaying it and all."

Atola pursed her lips. "Uh. Sorry. It's been a long few days. I think I misheard you. It sounded like you just said you want to battle the kraken. Which would be crazy and stupid."

"No, that's what I said."

"That's what you—okay, no, you cannot be serious."

“I finally have a reason to, though.”

“What reason? Is it something worth risking your life over?”

“It’s... personal.” Which sounded a lot cooler than “I would like to fight it for rice, soy sauce, and miso.”

“Did you want to ask me to lend you some people to help because you’re going to defeat the kraken? Because I can’t afford to, Yuna. There’s not a single adventurer who can battle a kraken. Blitz and the others might be able to give you a hand, but I ended up asking them to do something else already.”

I knew that. I saw them off as they left yesterday.

“I know—I saw them off when they left. Don’t worry about that. I’m gonna solo it.”

Atola came up to me and put her hand on my forehead. “Looks like you haven’t got a fever. Yuna, the kraken isn’t a monster anyone can defeat on your own—not even you, and I don’t care how many bandits you’ve apprehended.”

Admittedly, it wasn’t the type of monster you could solo in the game, either. “Guess I can’t just ask you to trust me, huh?”

“Well, how likely do you think you’ll win?”

“If the kraken appears in a certain place, then I’ll be able to defeat it for sure.”

Atola stared into my eyes for a moment... and finally let out a small sigh, “Ugh, all right. What am I supposed to do?”

“On the road where the bandits were prowling, there’s a giant cliff that faces the ocean, right?”

“Yes.”

“I want to battle it there. I need you to make sure no one comes near it. It’s going to be dangerous that day, so I want you to make sure no one even goes near the ocean.”

“How do you intend to bring the kraken there?”

I told her I was going to prep some bait. “But I’m not sure if I’ll be able to fish it out.”

“Yuna, no one has ever *thought* of fishing for a kraken, let alone attempted it. And even if you can draw it to you, it might get away, right?”

“I won’t let that happen.” Once it got close to the cliff, it’d be in my domain.

“Hmm. If you’re sure. Just give me some time. I’ll do some convincing.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. You’re doing this for us all, after all.”

(I was doing it for my stomach, actually, but she didn’t need to know that.)

“Also,” she continued, “I was wondering if I could ask you for additional wolves? That would definitely help persuade me.”

Oh, easy. I told her I could produce a thousand, even two thousand—but she just asked me for two hundred. Ah well.

The next day, Atola came by the inn. “As promised, the residents will be restricted from leaving the town two days from now.”

“Uhh, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m impressed you managed that.” I mean, I only asked her just yesterday. I thought it’d take more time.

“All I really needed to do was convince the most senior fisherman. We’ll deal with the rest through the adventurers’ guild. It’s no problem.”

“I can’t believe the fisherman would give the okay on that though.” Weren’t fishermen supposed to be grizzled, stubborn old sea dogs?

“The senior fisherman would agree to just about anything if you were the one asking. You provided food, eliminated the bandits, and also saved the prisoners. You stopped the trade guild’s tyranny.”

“The trade guild has got nothing to do with me.”

"Not true. You provided food and eliminated the bandits, which was how their crimes were revealed. That's why the old man's willing to hear you out. He gave me a message to pass along, too. *Ahem.* 'Please don't push yourself. I'm grateful to ya, bear girl. I have no idea how you'll defeat that monstrosity, but just tell me when ya need help.' Never would've thought that old grump would say something like *that*."

Wow. Now I *really* hoped nobody found out that I was fighting for rice. "You didn't tell him that I'm battling the kraken, did you?"

"I had to, in order to persuade him. I asked him not to mention it to anyone else, though, so it'll be fine. It'd start a huge commotion if the townspeople found out."

Jeez, no kidding.

On the day of the fight, I woke up bright and early and looked outside from my room's window. It was sunny; fine weather for a battle. When I went downstairs, I found Deigha.

"Miss, where are you off to today?"

"I'm going for a walk. What about it?" I couldn't just tell him I was off to fight the kraken.

"A walk, huh. Well then, I'll prep you a delicious breakfast, so make sure you fill up."

"Your food is always delicious, Deigha." Now *that* was no lie. All of Deigha's meals were great, and his rice was just the best.

"You're gonna make me cry, kid!" He sniffled and rubbed his eyes with his huge muscled hands. "I'm going to have a meal ready for you, so you better come home."

"I'll be sure to get back before dinner." That was what he meant, right? Or was he worried about me paying my inn fees? I suppose I was his only customer, after all.

When I headed to the exit of the seaport, Atola and several other adventurers' guild staff were there.

"Morning," I said. And every single one of them greeted me in return. She hadn't told

her staff, had she?

"Well then," said Atola, "I'm headed out. No matter what happens, you can't let anyone come down here." She was going? Going where, exactly?

"You're not planning on coming with me, are you, Atola?"

"Yes, of course. It's not like I could let you go alone."

"It's dangerous."

"If things get dicey, I'll grab you and run. It'll be fine."

"I'll be fine. You can run away on your own when things get dangerous, okay?"

Once we were out of the town, I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

"These are your summons?"

Since I couldn't hide them, I told Atola about my bears. "Please ride on that black one."

"Are you sure this is okay?"

"Yeah. I just want to defeat this thing quick and head back."

"How reassuring."

I got on Kumakyu and headed to the cliff where I planned to battle the kraken. All the while I watched the sea. It was such a *calm* sea. I couldn't believe a kraken was out there, but they'd seen the kraken far out in the ocean just yesterday.

"Hey, Yuna, why are you doing so much for us? You don't have any connection to this place. You don't have friends here. I just can't figure why you'd want to battle the kraken." She looked at me so seriously. Yeah, I *really* couldn't tell her that it was for rice, soy sauce, and miso.

"I have tons of friends here. I've got you, Deigha, Yuula, and Damon." Which was true, wasn't it? Even Atola, whom I found ridiculous when we first met, turned out to be really kind. Deigha sure seemed concerned about me, too. Rice and all aside, I really did want to help out.

"Thank you. I'm happy to hear that, but please, don't do anything reckless."

At last we reached the seaside cliff.

"Are you fighting here?" she asked.

"Only if the kraken will come out here." I pulled out the bait that I'd use to bring out the kraken: the body of the wyrm from back when I fought the ten thousand monsters at the capital. Since time was stalled in my storage, it was still freshly slaughtered.

"Wai—what is that?!" Atola nearly lost it at the sight of the wyrm.

"It's a wyrm."

"Okay, yes, it... it sure is. But *how*? The wolves were weird enough, but what is *with* your item bag?"

"It's a high-grade bag."

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you? I can understand why you had Elfanica's seal. But what are you going to do with this wyrm?"

"It's kraken bait."

"And you're going to waste it like this? Wyrm meat is a delicacy, and you can sell the parts for a *lot* of money."

Ugh, I knew it—people *did* eat this thing. It was fine. I didn't need money.

"If this wyrm can save the village, then it's a cheap price to pay." It sounded cooler in my head. Honestly, I just didn't want to eat it, and selling it would just draw attention.

"Yuna, you're just so..."

All right, here we go. I used ice magic to encase the bottom half of the wyrm in ice and hung it over the edge of the cliff. Half of the creature was submerged in the ocean.

I'd seen people using grubs when fishing on TV. Wyrms are kind of like grubs, aren't they? Practically speaking, krakens ate humans, so wouldn't they eat wyrms? The wyrm was big, too, and freshly dead, so the scent should easily spread through the

water.

If things went well, the kraken might come right to us. If they didn't, then all I could do was ride on my bears and battle it on top of the water. But that would put me on real thin ice.

"It still hasn't come." Some time passed since I'd hung the wyrm up in the ocean. I sat sandwiched in between Kumayuru and Kumakyu, looking out at the peaceful ocean. Maybe I really couldn't catch a kraken with a wyrm.

"You have to be patient when it comes to fishing," said Atola. "Keep watching."

Ugh, I guess? I was a shut-in, so how could I know? I never fished before. Waiting for it to take the bait was boring, and I was getting sleepy just chilling between my bears.

But then again... were the waves rising or was it just me? My bears started to make little noises at the sight of it. I stood up and kept watching, just as Atola said.

"Yuna?"

What was that in the distance? I used my Detection skill and... there it was. The kraken, practically flying through the ocean toward our cliff. And there it was rising out of the water! Its lanky feelers leapt out of the ocean and entwined around the wyrm. The icicle snapped as it dragged the wyrm into the sea.

"Yuna!"

"Atola, stand back!"

I activated my earth magic and created a mental image. A gigantic bear—one as tall as the cliff.

Emerged from the sea floor, several gigantic bears made of earth rose to form a semi-circular barrier flush to the cliff wall. First time in a while I used that much mana all at once. Oof. Suddenly, I was exhausted.

The bears weren't just big—I also fortified them so the kraken couldn't bust through. My mana took a giant hit, but it was worth it: I trapped the kraken against the cliff. The

creature chewed mindlessly on the wyrm, oblivious to the fact that it was trapped by what I was calling my “bearrier.” It looked like a gigantic cephalopod, more squid than octopus.

I created a countless number of giant fire bears and just let ’em loose on the feasting kraken. The flame bears soared and seared the kraken, and the sweet smell of singeing squid wafted over us. The kraken dove into the ocean at once, shaking off the bear fire. It noticed me and stretched a long feeler out, grasping for me. Could it reach me up here?



I wasn't about to find out—I let a wind blade fly, slicing the tentacle clean off right as it reached the clifftop. Another tentacle shot up. I dodged it and launched flames. Though the tentacle lit right up, the kraken immediately retreated into the ocean and extinguished them.

I chucked flame bear after flame bear into the enclosed wall of huge bears. The kraken extended its tentacle to me where I was on top of the cliff. I retreated back. More flame bears. No, even more. Being on the ground really, really helped, huh?

I didn't let up. The kraken gave up on offense in time, and tried to make a break back into the ocean, but the Great Wall of Bears barred its way. It tried to climb over the wall, but a few rounds of magic dropped it right back into the ocean. When it tried to dive, I'd shoot flame bears at it.

The temperature was rising higher and higher from my flame bears, turning the semicircle of ocean trapped by the giant bear wall into a hot pot. The kraken writhed. It hurled itself against the bear wall over and over, but I poured a ton of mana into that wall. It wouldn't break so easily.

The water started to bubble and boil. The kraken extended its tentacles and tried to climb up the bear wall, but I didn't let it. I sent a bear cutter to sever the tip of its tentacle, but it immediately regenerated and stretched out again—or no, that wasn't it. The cut ends reattached themselves.

Cutting it was futile, then. As long as it had mana to regenerate using that method, we'd end up repeating this pattern. Maybe this would become a mana battle of attrition? The battle would be decided based on whether the kraken ran out of stamina before my mana ran out or I ran out of mana and it made a break for it.

The kraken reached its tentacles out to the bear wall over and over again. Cut, cut, cut. Ugh, I should've made the bear wall even taller. Since this wasn't physical combat, I would've been better off fighting in the white bear outfit, but I hadn't thought of that. If I *did* almost run out of mana, I'd end up having to strip down right in front of Atola to change into my white bear outfit, and... nope. No thanks.

The kraken rampaged in the steaming water. A part of the cliff broke off and collapsed, changing the very landscape. I kept up. Couldn't let it run, couldn't stop. Though it was too late to do anything of the sort, I wished I'd made a giant lid or something.

The offense and defense (if you could call it that?) of spamming flame bears dragged on. The kraken stretched out its tentacles and tried its hardest to escape, but I didn't let it. This *had* to end soon. I was feeling wearier and wearier. I really was running out of mana...

And then, thankfully, the kraken's movements started to dull. It could no longer lift its tentacles. It stopped even trying to bash itself against the bear wall. I eased up on the offense and watched its behavior until—finally, *finally*, the kraken stopped moving.

I used my Detection skill. No signal from the kraken.

...It was over.

I sat down on the ground and collapsed onto my back, completely beat. That had consumed so much mana. I felt sluggish, but the kraken was dead and nobody had needed to run around buck naked in another world.

“Yuna!” Atola came running over, dripping with sweat. This place had to be *miserable* right now. “Is it over?”

“It’s over.”

“You’re sure?” Atola looked at the kraken that was floating in the boiling water. Not a single one of its tentacles moved.

“Yep,” I said. “Atola, can I leave the rest to you? I think I used a tad too much mana and, uh. I can’t... move anymore. Sleeeeeepy.” I didn’t even have the strength to walk anymore.

“Yes, of course—I’ll take care of it. And... thank you.”

My *real* thanks would be all the rice, soy sauce, and miso, but I couldn’t say that. I called my bears. Kumakyu approached, crouching to make it easier for me to get on. “Thanks, little guy.”

When we rode back to the seaport, a ton of people gathered on the town outskirts.

“Guild master!” The guild staff ran over. “What’s going on?”

"There was a report that the kraken was seen where you headed, guild master, so the townspeople were starting to stir."

Atola seemed to hesitate a bit before answering, "This girl, Yuna, defeated the kraken." She pointed at me.

Oh, I forgot to ask her not to tell anyone I did that. Whatever. I wanted to hurry up, get to the inn and lie in bed for the next thousand years.

"Guild master, is it true?"

"Yes, it is. If you don't believe it, you can go check yourself. The kraken's corpse is there."

"Isn't it dangerous?" one of the staff members said.

Atola shook her head. "What's dangerous about it? There are no bandits. The kraken is gone too."

"Well..."

"More importantly, could you open the road for us? I'd like to let the hero who saved the seaport get back to the inn to rest."

"But guild master, do you really want those bears in town?" They were looking at Kumakyu and Kumayuru.

"I'll guarantee they're not dangerous. And are you *really* going to tell the person we owe everything to—right after battling the kraken until she was too exhausted to move—to get off of her bear?" She was glaring now. "Are you *really* going to ask that *in front of me?*"

Well, that shut 'em up. The guild staff and residents opened up a path, and Kumakyu trudged on through to the inn.

"Miss!" Deigha shouted that at the top of his lungs when I got back to the inn.

"I'm fine. Need sleep. Lemme sleep. Thanks."

Kumakyu, big body and all, squeezed up the narrow stairs. Kumayuru followed right behind. Once we got in front of the room, I managed to get off of Kumakyu and opened

the door.

"Thanks, big guy." I turned the bears into cubs and headed into my room. "Even if the king—or the president or prime minister, or any other VIP shows up—don't wake me."

I somehow managed to climb out of the onesie, reverse it, and change into the white bear outfit. The room whirled, and my mini bears cuddled close beside me. I thanked them, and then I was out.

CHAPTER 94

THE BEAR WAKES UP

I WOKE UP TO two extremely cuddly sleeping bears. What time was it, anyway?

I got out of bed and opened the curtain, then the window. The sun rose over the ocean. If I'd gone to bed in the afternoon... How long had I been out?

Of course, all my exhaustion was gone and my stamina and mana were back up to full. It was a little early, but I changed into my black bear clothes and thanked my bears for being my bodyguards before dismissing them.

I went downstairs, and Deigha rushed out of the back room.

“Miss, you’re awake! Are you all right?!”

He sounded so worried. I rubbed my eyes.

“I’m good. I was just dead tired from using too much magic.”

“You were? Nothing was wrong, then?” I could tell he was relieved. “For such a tiny, cute little lass, you really turned out to be an amazing adventurer.” He gave my head a couple light pats. I decided to allow it.

“You know about what happened with the kraken?” I asked.

“I heard it from Atola when you came back to the inn.” Made sense that she’d tell him, considering the shape I came back in. “So, are you still hungry? You haven’t had anything to eat, right?”

I touched my torso. My stomach was flat as a board. “Looks like I am.”

“Then I’ll prep something right away, just you wait.” Deigha flexed his arm at me and headed to the kitchen.

“You can take your time,” I called after him. As I waited absentmindedly for the breakfast

Deigha was getting ready, slowly waking up, Atola came into the inn.

"Yuna, you're awake?!"

"Barely."

"There's nothing wrong with you?" She worriedly patted down my hands and body. Terrible invasion of personal space on her part.

"I'm fine. I got plenty of sleep, so my mana's recharged and I'm back to normal."

"I was worried, since you hadn't woken up by night." She really was concerned about me, just the same as Deigha. "But I'm glad you're fine."

As I was talking with Atola, Deigha brought over breakfast. I looked at it and was shocked. "Rice? I thought you didn't have..."

"Townspeople brought it over."

"Why's that?"

"Yuna," said Deigha slowly. "You killed the kraken. The *kraken*."

Atola nodded. "That really was an ordeal, wasn't it? As soon as you came back, word spread around town about what you did. Once they figured out that you did it and that you were staying here, everyone came barging in."

How many people had gathered? And all for *me*?

"But you were tired and asleep," she continued, "and it wasn't like I was going to wake you. I convinced them to keep it down and had them go home. There were so many of them, though. They wanted to thank you. Every single one of them wanted to thank you." She shook her head. "It was a stampede, I swear."

Man, a lot happened while I was out, huh.

"When I told them you love rice," she continued, "they gathered all they had and brought it over. When we pooled all the contributions, it was quite a bit."

Whoa. I couldn't believe it. Even though I defeated the kraken, I had no idea where the

Land of Wa was, let alone when another shipment would make it in. I thought I wouldn't get any rice for a while.

"That makes me so happy to hear. But are you sure I can have this? These are your precious supplies, right?"

"What're you talking about? You defeated the kraken. Our food shortage is over! The ocean is a treasure trove of food; we've got tons to eat."

Guilt-free rice—I'd take it. Though... now that I thought about it, I asked Blitz and the others to buy supplies in the neighboring hamlet for nothing. I guess they wouldn't *only* buy food, at least? "If everybody's coming by to thank me, I guess word's spread pretty far about the kraken slaying, huh?"

"Yeah. Some of them even saw it."

Other people had been there? I hadn't noticed. More importantly, I really hadn't wanted to make a big deal out of this, but there was nothing to be done. It was too late to use the "passing A-rank adventurer" ruse again.

"Hey, I told everyone not to give you any trouble. What are you worried about?"

"It'll just be a real pain if word gets around that I defeated the kraken. I'll have even more people getting in my face all the time..."

Atola and Deigha looked at me. I knew what they wanted to say.

"I know I'm only saying this now," I added, "but I wanted to keep it between us if possible."

"Word has already spread quite a bit," said Atola.

Deigha just shook his head. "After seeing what you did yesterday, there's no covering this up."

"Could you at least get the townspeople to not spread it abroad?"

"No need to worry about that. This seaport keeps to itself for the most part. And even if we said that the kraken was defeated by a bear girl, it's not as though anyone would believe that. A badass little bear girl? Come on."

They had a point. Practically speaking, were there even people who could defeat a kraken single-handedly? I'd never met anyone that powerful, so I didn't know.

At any rate, what was done was done. I'd just pray that the rumor mill wouldn't go too strong.

Stuffed with the townspeople's rice, I headed out of the inn along with Atola to go on a walk. Even though it was early in the morning, there were tons of people around. Everyone was smiling and conversation was bustling.

Several older women saw me and ran up immediately.

"Atola, is this the bear girl who defeated the kraken?"

"Yes, she did it!"

"But she's so *cute*!"

"Thank you very much, little girl! I've never seen my husband go to work so happy. This is all thanks to you, miss."

"My husband too—he's been so gloomy, but once he came back from seeing the defeated kraken, he was crying tears of joy."

Words of gratitude and bright smiles all around. What was rice, soy sauce, or miso compared to all of this?

"In celebration of the kraken's defeat, we're treating everyone to fish! Please, join us."

"Oh, dearie, I'm making a delicious meal! Please do eat some."

The grannies said their piece and left, but that wasn't the end of it. Every step brought more gratitude, more joyful tears, more elated laughter.

"Everyone wants to thank you, Yuna," said Atola. "In fact, I think they're holding back."

It seemed like we'd end up stuck here for ages at this rate, so Atola and I ducked out and headed together to the cliff where I defeated the kraken. As we approached the

cliff atop Kumayuru and Kumakyu, I saw steam rising from the ocean.

"Hm. It looks like the effects of your magic are still working, Yuna."

Wow. The flame bears did all that?

By the time we reached the cliff, we found an older man looking over the sea.

"Old man Kuro?!"

"That you, Ms. Atola?"

"You know it. What brings you here?"

"I thought that if I stuck around here, I'd be able to see the person who defeated the monster."

"You're not going to go fishing with the rest?"

"I can leave that to the young'uns. No, I need to thank the person who defeated this monster. You, girl—in the bear clothes over there—did you do this?"

"Yeah, it was me."

Old man Kuro nodded slowly as he came over to me. "I heard about it, but I never imagined you were going to be so *small*. Well, I'm the one who's been tasked with managing the sea here. You saved our seaport and the ocean herself, and I'll be grateful for the rest of my years." The old man bowed his head deeply. Then, after lowering his head, he stood ahead on the cliff and looked out at a ship floating far off on the sea.

"Do you see that ship floating out at sea over there?" he said softly. "Watch her. Noble, isn't it? You did this, young woman. You opened the ocean to us once more." Faint tears welled up in the old guy's eyes.

Here he was, crying over what I'd done... for rice, miso, and soy sauce. Ack.

"I thought no one could defeat a monster like this. I'm not sure anyone knows for sure whether any adventurers, any armies *anywhere* could defeat it. The townspeople don't understand that part. They don't know how amazing you are, lass."

"Don't worry about it. I just happened to figure out a trick to take it out. I don't want the townspeople making a big deal out of it, so just..." I shrugged feebly. "Don't worry about it." What could I say?

"Hm. Well, if you end up having any trouble in this seaport, just let me know. I vow that I will lend you my strength if you ever need it."

I thanked him. It felt more natural than him thanking me.

"So, Yuna, what're you planning to do with the kraken?" Atola gazed out at the boiled kraken bobbing in the sea.

"Can I sell it?"

"Of course. It's a luxury food item, and the hide and such are very useful. Since it's also rare, you'll be able to sell it for a lot."

"Cool. It's yours—the whole seaport's, I mean."

"Are you sure?! You could make a small fortune!"

"So could the town. I'm sure there are people whose ships were destroyed by the kraken."

"Are you really sure? It would help a lot, I admit."

"If you really want to pay me back, then just show me a good plot of land in this seaport. That's all I want." I wanted to set up a bear transport gate.

"Oh, are you going to live here?"

I shook my head. "I'm just going to make it a holiday home. When it gets warm, I'll bring my friends over to hang out."

I'd bring Fina and the others, and we'd go swimming. Come to think of it, what did people in this world wear to swim? Did they have bathing suits? They wouldn't go out there naked, right? I really hoped they had bathing suits.

"In that case, why don't you just stay at the inn? Deigha would love to have you stay, I'm sure."

Nah. If I did that, I wouldn't be able to make a bear transport gate. Climbing that mountain was a pain.

"In any case, I'm happy you're giving us the kraken, but..." The kraken floated on in the ocean. "...we can't do anything with it right now. Even if we wanted to butcher it, we'd need to bring it to land first."

Hmm, yeah. And even bringing it up to the beach would be a ton of work.

"Just give me a sec." Using earth magic, I created a stairway from the cliff to the kraken. I went down the stairs and touched a part of the kraken protruding from the water. Just like that, it was in my bear storage. I put away the boiled wyrm too, and went back to where the other two were.

"Yuna," said Atola breathlessly, "I can't believe this."

"I'd rather people not know much about this item bag, so I'd appreciate it if you keep quiet."

"That's fine, that's fine. Seeing that bear wall you left behind really is a spectacle, though."

The earthen bears in the ocean towered over us.

"I'll clear them up now."

"Please wait a second," said the old man suddenly. "Could you just leave it like this?"

"Why?"

"So that we don't forget what happened. As time goes on, people's memories fade. They forget. I'd like to leave it. You saved us and slayed the kraken, though we lost so much. We must remember it all—the heroism and the tragedy." I really didn't want to leave it there, but was I really about to say no when he put it like *that*?

"Where should we butcher these?" Atola asked.

"Well," said old man Kuro, "if we're going to butcher them, I think the beach near the seaport would be a good place. We can call others over and make it easier."

"True. If they ask how we carried it, we'll just say you used your magic, Yuna." Would they really just believe that? Was that really the best method to go with? Guess so.

"Gotcha. I'll gather up any fishermen I can find and head over there." Kuro said.

"I'll fetch guild staff who have butchering skills."

The old man and Atola headed off on a boat that was moored nearby. I got onto Kumayuru and headed over to the beach where we were planning to do the butchering. There I pulled out the kraken and wyrm and placed their gargantuan bodies on the sand. They both smelled delicious.

CHAPTER 95

THE BEAR ATTENDS A FEAST

I WATCHED THE OCEAN as I waited. It really was so peaceful. To think a kraken, of all things, lived there... And now that very kraken was stretched out on the beach. Just a big, deadly squid. I wasn't really sure whether it was *actually* edible, with how different this world was. Probably? The wyrm, on the other hand... nope.

I heard human voices. There they were—old man Kuro was leading several men to the beach. “Apologies for the wait, lass.”

“There are more of them than I expected.”

“They want to butcher it for a seafood feast as soon as possible.”

Old man Kuro called out to the men, instructing them to start prepping, and the men answered with gusto. The old man was a bigwig, huh? Every single one of the men thanked me as they walked past where I stood, which was embarrassing.

As I watched the kraken butchering commence, Atola arrived with some guild staff members. “Oh, you’ve already started? Then we’ll leave that to the experts and work on butchering the wyrm.”

Atola gave instructions to her people and got right to work, leaving the old man in charge of the kraken and the guild in charge of the wyrm. “But Yuna,” she said. “Are you really sure we can have the wyrm carcass?”

“Sell it or eat it. Do whatever with it. Just don’t try to make me eat it, okay?”

“You really think I’d do such a thing to you, Yuna?”

“I mean,” I continued, “this bizarre thing can’t be that delicious, right?”

“No idea. I’ve just heard rumors.”

“Don’t tell me you’re considering trying it, Atola...”

"Eh. I could take it or leave it."

I guess this was a difference in cultural tastes? I wondered which side Fina would be on. (Hopefully mine, right?)

Meanwhile, the guild staff were hard at work taking the wyrm apart. I sat a little distance away and watched both teams. A few minutes in, Yuula came by with a group of women.

"I saw it yesterday, too," said Yuula, "but I'm never used to how *big* it is."

"Yuula, are you going to help with the butchering too?"

"I'm no specialist, but it's a kraken, isn't it? Just a big squid! Anyone who's been raised in this seaport can butcher one of those. That wyrm, on the other hand..." She just shook her head.

The women split up, too, now, and joined in on both types of butchering work. Well... the more the merrier?

"Lass, could I have a minute?" old man Kuro called out to me. "We can't take this, of course, so please have it." He held out a massive, gorgeous blue gem—a mana gem. A *kraken's* mana gem. "Heh. For all my years, I've never seen such a grand mana gem. Figures that a kraken would have one."

"Are you sure I can have it?"

"What use is it to a seaport? I'm sure an adventurer like you could find a good use for it. And you slayed the thing, too—it's yours by right."

Well, who could say? Maybe it could be useful.

"While we're handing out gifts," said Atola, "why don't you take this?" She held out a brown gem—the wyrm's mana gem. I guess it was an earth mana gem?

"You could just sell it though," I said, knowing that they wouldn't.

"You've done more than enough. Besides, a mana gem is proof that an adventurer slayed something. This is the proof that you defeated the kraken and the wyrm. We can't just sell that—I mean, we can't even legally sell that, even if you ended up giving

us the funds in the end.”

Eh, fair enough. It would be a hassle *not* to accept the gems.

The butchering progressed well. The meaty results were piled on a carriage and taken to the town. They were going to put some of it in cold storage, just to be safe.

“Right, lass, leave this to us and go back to the town so you can enjoy the feast.”

“The feast?”

“It’s a celebration. The kraken is dead!”

The old man nodded. “Aye. The fish we caught this morning should be cooking about now. We’d like you to enjoy yourself.”

“You’d better,” said Atola with a laugh. “You’re the guest of honor, after all! I’ll head back to the town, too, so let’s go back together. They should be whipping the kraken and wyrm meat into a meal in the central plaza as we speak.”

I accepted old man Kuro’s courtesy and went back to the town with Atola.

A delicious smell filled the central plaza. Fish and squid were being grilled. And no way, were those clams? I wondered if they had shrimp and crab as well.

The fragrant aroma of soy sauce filled the air too. The cooks grilled and handed their meals off to the waiting people as they did. Kids or grown-ups, everybody was just going to town on the food. It was probably the first time in forever that they were able to eat until they were full.

A crowd formed in the plaza to watch the kraken roast. One of the kraken’s arms was on display, as if to show just how massive the monster was.

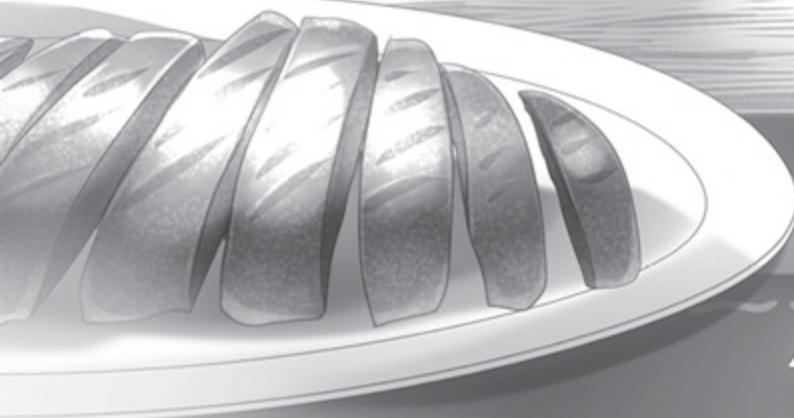
Seeing it so close... wow, it really *was* gigantic.

As I stared at the kraken’s arm, I realized that everyone was looking at me.

“It’s the bear girl who defeated the kraken. Go on, then—have a piece! It’s delicious.” A woman handed me a small dish of some kind of mixed seafood. There was shellfish and shrimp and stuff, and just one bite got me hankering for white rice to go with it.

"Lass, this is delicious too." A man wearing a headband handed me a roasted fish. They even put soy sauce on it. I mean, soy sauce was a must-have with grilled fish. It would've been perfect if we had some ponzu sauce, too, but maybe that was a little too much to ask of a fantasy world.

"Thank you!" I headed over to the tables and dug right in. The townspeople thanked me and brought dishes, one after another. Soon enough, the tabletop was positively lined with seafood dishes. The residents were being kind, so I accepted them, but no way could I eat this much.



"Everyone, slow down a bit, okay?" Atola put a stop to it. Well, if I couldn't eat it, I'd just put it away in the bear storage—it was fine. But, then again, maybe I'd eat before the food got cold. Everything was so delicious, after all.

Atola beamed. "You sure are popular."

"I'm happy to eat all this delicious food, but I wish they wouldn't make such a big deal out of it."

"Then why don't you change out of those bear clothes? If you do that, no one will notice you." She was right about that, but... what if something bad happened, and I wasn't in the suit? No, it wasn't worth it.

"This is a cursed item," I said solemnly, "so I can't."

"Is it really? Oh wow, do you smell bad?" Atola leaned in and actually *sniffed* me.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"If you can never take it off, that means you never bathe or shower."

"Okay, okay! I'm lying, jeez."

Thankfully, a bunch of little kids came over to interrupt that dumb conversation.

"Miss Bear, thank you for defeating the monster," a boy said, and bowed his head.

Another kid piped up: "My mom said that we get to eat food thanks to you."

The first kid nodded. "Thank you, Miss Bear!"

The two of them turned full smiles to me. I bent on my knee and got on the kids' level.

"You guys getting tons to eat?"

"Yeah."

They nodded, smiling. I gave them pats on the head.

"Good. Eat lots and make sure to help your mom."

The kids nodded vigorously and ran off.

"You're a good girl, Yuna."

"Tch. They were thanking me. Of course I was going to be nice."

The feast ran late. Partway through, old man Kuro came by to give a long, drunk speech about how amazing the ocean was. Atola got wasted, too, and made a real commotion. Man, some adults get really into that stuff. Weird. When the sun started to sink, I headed to the inn to get away from all that junk.

"Yuna, welcome back," said Deigha's daughter, Anz. She looked so healthy, and even a little tanned. I was kinda scrawny and pallid in comparison.

"Things are getting pretty wild out there," I said. "And here, too, huh?" A bunch of guys in the inn were slamming back drinks; the place reeked of alcohol.

"Well, everyone's happy that they can go out to sea. My older brother was overjoyed."

"Yeah. Where's Deigha?"

"My dad's so drunk, he went to the back to sleep."

"And so you took over from him, Anz?"

"Yeah! Would you like something to eat, Yuna? I can whip something up."

"I ate tons outside, so I'm good." I couldn't eat another bite without exploding.

"Makes sense. There's food everywhere, after all."

"What about you, Anz? What're you up to?"

"Watching the shop and prepping my own dinner, that's all."

"You didn't go eat with the others?"

"My dad got too drunk too early, and I had to cook for everyone else, so I ended up

needing to eat late.”

“Oooo, what are you making?”

“Sashimi. You probably haven’t heard of it; it’s a delicious cuisine from the Land of Wa. You prepare the fish raw and put soy sauce on it!”

Sa... shi... mi. I *needed* to have some with soy sauce. I consulted my stomach. She gave me permission. Maybe I... wouldn’t explode? “Is there enough for me?”

“We have tons of fish.”

“Do you have white rice?”

“Of course!”

Okay, I needed it.

Anz prepared the fish beautifully. There was even octopus and squid in there! “You’re pretty good at this.”

“My dad taught me. Someday I’ll even have my own shop!”

Oh, interesting... I was thinking of bringing fish back to Crimonia, but there was a chance no one would know how to cut or prepare it. Anz’s skills were exactly what I needed. She lined the sashimi up over the rice and offered it to me. I added just the right amount of soy sauce, aaaaand... delicious.

“I’ve got my own place in Crimonia, and we might be looking for a worker like you,” I said.

“You have your own shop?”

“I’m the owner, but I don’t really do any of the cooking. I’d like to eat seafood more often in Crimonia. Would you come join us?”

“I would if I could, but it’s far... It would make me sad to be separated from my family.”

In other words, she’d consider it if it was nearer? I finished off the rest of the seafood bowl and found myself smiling.

Anz and I ended up talking late into the night, laughing, enjoying ourselves, and downing more delicious seafood.

EXTRA STORY

THE BEAR REBUILDS THE ORPHANAGE

THE ORPHANAGE KIDS were working their hardest, taking good care of the kokekko and doing a great job at Bear's Lounge. I wanted to do something for them. Let's see... I repaired the old orphanage building, but it was still old and worn down. None of the kids uttered even a word of complaint about it, but...

"Hey, you mind if I rebuild the orphanage?" I asked Cliff one day.

"What? You show up out of the blue and that's what you ask for?"

"I mean, it's your town, right? I was thinking I'd consult you before I did anything."

Cliff sighed. "Do you really think I'm that petty of a person?"

"Ehh."

"I'll have you know, young lady—"

"I'm joking. I really did just come to get your permission. The building *is* owned by the city, isn't it?"

"Hm. All right, you have my permission. Do anything you'd like with it."

"Thank you."

"No need for that." I tried to leave, but he stopped me and called his butler. "Rondo, please prepare some funds."

"Yes, my lord," Rondo replied, and immediately left the room.

"I don't really need money."

"We can't have that. I don't think money can make up for my negligence, but I'm still going to help if you're going to rebuild the place."

“But...”

“The orphanage can sustain itself even without the town’s aid because of you. I know that. Please accept the money. Consider it an apology from me.”

Even if I did accept it, I didn’t need it in order to build the house. I was going to make it with magic after all, but...”Can I use it for anything?”

“Use it however you please.”

In that case, maybe I’d use it to buy furniture and stuff they needed for their daily lives. They needed new bedding, and I wanted to get them matching plates and cutlery, too. I’d need to consult the headmistress and Tiermina first, though.

The door opened just as our conversation wound down; the butler Rondo came back.

“Lord Cliff, here you are.”

“Please give it to Yuna.”

Rondo offered me a bag that was almost bursting with money. “Your funds, miss.”

I thanked him and accepted it. Jeez, it was *heavy*. He gave me a lot more than I expected. “If there’s leftover, can I come back to return it?”

“No need. As I said, this includes my apology. If there’s any leftover, use it when you need it.”

After receiving permission from Cliff to rebuild the orphanage, I headed back there and asked the headmistress, Liz, and Tiermina to gather in a room.

“Rebuilding the orphanage, you say?” Tiermina raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve already made so many repairs,” said the headmistress. “I think we’re doing very well as we are. The draft is gone and we have a warm place to sleep.”

Liz nodded. “The children are so happy.”

"Also," added Tiermina, "Rebuilding it will be a lot of work."

"I'll just use my magic."

The three of them looked even more exasperated, but...

"Come to think of it, you made your own house yourself, didn't you, Yuna?"

"And you made that henhouse, too."

At least they were coming around?

"Are you sure you can just rebuild it? We're running the orphanage with your money, Yuna, but isn't the building owned by the lord?"

"Oh, that. I already got permission from Cliff."

"From Lord Cliff himself?"

"Really, Yuna?"

"Oh, goodness..."

What was with that look? I gave them a quick summary of my conversation with Cliff and, at the end, put his funds on the table.

"Money from the lord..."

"You've done something unbelievable."

"Something terrifying."

Were they afraid of Cliff? Well, I remembered that Fina had also been like that for a while. She was even nervous around Noa, though they got along these days. Cliff was a little sassy for my tastes, but he listened, and heard me out. The guy was different from what I imagined an aristocrat to be. Maybe if the three met him, they'd see that.

In the end, exasperated or not, the three agreed to allow the orphanage to be rebuilt

and we started planning.

First, we'd figure out how to separate the boys and girls' rooms, where the bath would be, where to put the dining hall, and all that stuff. Planning was a lot more fun than I thought it would be, just like with the bear house. The headmistress explained things to the kids and told them to steer clear of the build site while the new orphanage was being constructed. They looked pretty excited!

"You absolutely cannot bother Yuna, though," she insisted.

"Yes, miss!" they shouted energetically.

I was going to make the orphanage while the kids were working, Liz was going to be on the lookout to make sure none of them played hooky, and the headmistress was going to watch the group of small kids who couldn't work.

I used magic to create the orphanage more or less in the same way I made the bear house. I envisioned... let's see, maybe an old rural schoolhouse? The entrance was in the center, and when you went in, corridors would extend to the right and left with a door at the front. When you went through that door, there was a room where everyone would eat. Beyond that we'd have the kitchen.

The right corridor would have the girls' rooms, and the left the boys' rooms. The ends of the right and left halls would be the bathing rooms. Of course, I couldn't forget to set up bear stone statues from which the hot water would come out.

The second floor was similarly split into boys and girl's rooms. The central room right above the dining hall was a play area. Each room could fit four kids with four desks and two bunk beds set up toward the windows.

Tiermina ordered household supplies with Cliff's money. We even bought new bedding.

Though the kids were making a happy commotion, they listened to the headmistress and stayed away from the construction site. Occasionally, one of the little ones would try to approach, but one of the older kids would stop them.

"Yuna, can we *pleaaaaase* go in?"

"It's not done yet, so nope. It'd be dangerous." That was a lie; it'd more just be a nuisance.

The kids looked dissatisfied, but an older boy stepped in. "Don't give Yuna any trouble, guys. We promised that we'd listen to her, didn't we? Who was it that saved us? Who was it that gave us food? Gave us a warm place to sleep? Yuna is making this new orphanage for *us*. Don't be all selfish and cause her trouble!"

The little kids looked pretty saddened by that, but at least they were convinced.

"Aww. Okay."

"We're sorry."

Just straightforward apologies all around, but...

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to," said the boy. "You should say that to Yuna."

I appreciated the help, but really, the kids were working pretty hard themselves. They took care of the kokekko and were busy toiling at Morin's shop.

The orphanage building progressed pretty well after that. Tiermina ordered the bedding, dressers, tables, and chairs. We also picked up new tableware to replace what the orphanage lacked. I suggested that before, since there was income from the eggs, but the headmistress turned me down. This time she finally agreed.

Finally, we moved the things we needed from the old orphanage to the new one. We had the kids help out with that, and they were overjoyed at the possibility of going into the new orphanage.

"Everyone, please ask the headmistress and Liz about how your rooms are split up. Once you know where yours is, ask them what you need to bring over."

The kids were vibrating with excitement. "Headmistress, where's my room?!"

"Ooo, where's mine!"

The kids swarmed the headmistress.

"All right, let's all calm down! I'll take you to your rooms. Boys, come with me. Girls, go with Liz."

I trailed them to make sure that nothing was amiss.

"This is the room for the four of you."

"Whoa, there's a bed and sheets and everything." The boys tried to leap onto the new bed, but I stopped them.

"If you get into it while you're still dirty, the bed will get dirty too. Make sure you go take a bath and change into pajamas first." They were taking care of the kokekko, after all, and that business could get messy.

"There's a *bath*?"

"It's the room at the very end of the first floor. There's one for boys and one for girls, so make sure you each clean up after yourselves." And the boys broke into a run.

After we were done assigning rooms, the headmistress instructed them to move their things—clothes and all. Eventually—not just yet—we were going to demolish the old orphanage.

Finally, the kids also asked me to make a bear like the one in front of the shop.

I blinked. "For what?" I made one for the shop to draw customers, since it was named Bear's Lounge and all. The orphanage shouldn't need one.

But the kids begged me, and they were too cute to refuse. So there it was—a brand new orphanage with a gigantic, inexplicable stone bear out front.

EXTRA STORY

THE BEAR TEACHES MAGIC

THE SHOP WAS going great. Since I didn't have any plans for the day—for the first time in a long while—I decided to drop by Brandaugh's place. Last time I went was before going to the capital, after all.

Since I was curious about village news, I asked Helen about it. Apparently, the new adventurers who went over there successfully defeated the wolves. They seemed a *little* unreliable, but it looks like they really went for it.

When they came to report their quest completion, they even talked about me! They all were really excited as they said stuff like, "That bear was amazing," "The bear was so strong," "It was exactly like you said, Helen," and "Even the bear's *bears* were strong!"

My first impression of them was that ridiculous boy who'd bop people in the head. Once the kid found out how strong I really was, though, he gave me a meek apology so I knew they couldn't be all that bad... though if they tried that again, I wouldn't be so forgiving.

When I got close, the wall I created was standing there looking great as usual, protecting the village and all that good stuff. There wasn't even anybody guarding the entrance—no need, I guess? When I went in, still riding Kumayuru, some villagers came over.

"Are the chief and Brandaugh around?" I asked. They both were in, so I headed over to see them. The chief and Brandaugh were expecting me by the time I got to them, so they came right over.

"Yuna, you came at a good time."

"Miss, it's been so long."

"Yeah, I popped by the capital and was away for a bit," I hopped off Kumayuru and greeted them. The village kids were looking at Kumayuru since earlier, so I told my

bear to play with them.

"The capital! You traveled that far?"

"It doesn't take long on my bear." I pointed at Kumayuru, who was running around with the kids now.

"Mm. What brings you here today?"

"I've got something for Yuuk— or rather, for Marie. Gotta make sure they get their nutrition and such." I brought something healthy for Marie in my bear storage. I heard raising a kid took a lot out of you.

"Thanks to you, miss, the baby has been growing up healthy. He just loves the tigerwolf's fur. He barely ever lets it go!"

"Glad I gave it to you, then."

"He even cries while we wash it!" Brandaugh laughed.

Well, they needed to keep it clean if they were using it for the baby, so I guess they couldn't help that. "So no changes since then?"

"Things have been fine. The tigerwolf is gone, and there are fewer wolves, too. Those rookie adventurers really gave it their all."

"Oh, really?"

"I thought they weren't all that reliable at first, but they really worked their butts off to defeat those wolves."

And again, I remembered how those rookie adventurers bopped me on the head. I *had* gotten an apology, but if they did it again... *vengeance*. They were scared of me, so I don't *think* they'd do it again. Right?

I handed off a gift to the chief, told him to prioritize the houses with babies when handing it out, then went to go see Yuuk and Marie.

Over at Brandaugh's house, I found Marie carrying Yuuk.

"Yuna, welcome!"

"Heya, Marie. How's Yuuk been?"

"Thanks to you, he's been growing up nice and healthy." Again, this 'thanks to you' stuff. All I did was fight a giant boar and tigerwolves. Normal adventurer stuff! It made me feel weird when they talked like I was the reason they were able to raise their baby.

Little Yuuk really was the picture of health, though. When I flapped the mouth of the bear puppets in front of him, he burst into giggles.

It was contagious; now Marie was giggling. "Maybe he's happy to see you, Yuna."

Nah, he was just happy to see the bear puppet. I doubted that I had anything to do with it. Still watching the little guy, I handed Marie my gifts.

"Thank you, but I don't have anything to give you in return."

"I don't really want anything. I just want Yuuk to grow up healthy."

"Ha! You're a lot, Yuna. But thank you."

Brandaugh gave me a little more info about the rookie adventurers before I left the village behind: It seemed that the rookie adventurers were able to defeat the wolves thanks to Brandaugh himself. Brandaugh found the small group of wolves and took some out, though the rookie adventurers were the ones to defeat them.

Well, it was a basic principle of fighting to defeat enemies in small numbers to shave 'em down over time.

The day after I visited Brandaugh's village was a nice one, so I washed the sheets and aired the bedding—all of it, even the sheets at my bear house in the capital. My morning passed by like that and, since I was hungry, I decided to go to the Bear's Lounge to have a bite. Sure, I had the bread Morin made in my bear storage, but eating alone seemed sad. I'd rather look around and see if I could share a meal with someone.

When I got to the shop, there was a girl looking at the bear ornament out front. I couldn't remember her name, but I did remember her face. She was one of the rookie adventurers who was at Brandaugh's village.

"What's up? What're you doing here?"

"Miss Bear?"

"It's Yuna," I said.

"Sorry, Yuna." The girl bowed her head several times.

"Um, and you were...?"

"I'm Horn. Thank you so much for your help, earlier."

Right, Horn. The only girl in their four-person party.

"What's up, Horn? Did you come to see the shop or something?"

"Yes, Helen said that this place was really good and I should go at least once. When I got here, I couldn't stop looking at that weird big bear..."

"I knew it was too much."

"No, it's cute, just like you are."

Hmm. Was that really a compliment?

"What happened to the other three adventurers? Are they looking for other girls to bop in the head?"

"Oh, we're all doing our own thing today. I came here to eat on my own."

"You did? In that case, do you want to eat together? I was just on my way here to eat too." If I went inside, it was likely there'd be people in there, but there was also a chance I wouldn't find anyone. Also, I was a little curious about what happened after I defeated the tigerwolf.

Horn looked surprised at my suggestion, though. It was a little sudden, I suppose. “If you don’t want to eat with me, no worries.”

“No, it’s not that. Do you really want to hang out with someone like me?”

I folded my arms. “You just said you were thankful to me. Did you mean that?”

“Of course. I’m very grateful to you, Yuna.”

“Then will you have a meal with me?”

“Yes...”

I won the friendship conversation. Awesome.

Horn and I went into the shop together and found the kids bustling around the floor. They were taking plates up and wiping the tables down. There were even some taking orders at the counter.

“Yuna!” A kid cleaning up the plates on the tables noticed me.

“Keep up the hard work, kiddo.”

“Okay!” The girl nodded, took the plates, and headed to the back room.

Horn watched her go. “Wow, it really *is* your shop.”

“Technically, sure. But they’re the ones doing the work.” All I did was kick things off. Morin and Tiermina were the real heart of the place. “Horn, is there anything you don’t like to eat?”

“No, not really.”

“I’m going to grab some stuff, then. Wait here.” I sat her at the table that the girl had just thoroughly cleaned off, then headed to the back kitchen to grab a few loaves of bread. I had them bake a pizza, too. We were low on pudding, so I pulled some from my bear storage. When the pizza was done, I thanked Morin and went back to Horn.

“Sorry for the wait,” I said.

“Not at all, I wasn’t waiting long.”

“You don’t have to be so nervous.” Her shoulders looked so stiff. “Anyway, you can eat whatever you feel like.” I lined the tablet with the pizza and some of my favorite breads.

“Thank you,” she responded. But she didn’t try reaching for anything.

“What’s wrong?”

“They all look so good... I don’t know which to choose.”

“That’s pizza, and this is the bread I recommend. Oh, and I thought you’d want to try pudding.”

“Pudding?” She looked at the dessert uncertainly.

“You might want to save that for last,” I added.

Horn nodded. Stared holes into the bread, wavered, and didn’t reach for a single one of them.

“Um. Do you want to split them all?”

“Split them?”

“If we do that, you’d be able to try each one, right? Or do you not want to split with me?”

“Of course not! That means... I won’t need to choose?”

Yep. I pulled out a knife and cut all the breads in half. Finally—*finally*—I started to eat with Horn.

“Ohmigosh,” she whispered, “it’s delicious.” She really was savoring it. It was Morin-made bread, so of course it was delicious! I even brought out my favorite kinds. “This pete-sa is good too.”

“There we go.”

The food seemed to melt her nerves away. The conversation began to flow at last.

"Have you been friends with those three since you were kids?" I asked.

"Yes. We've been together since we were born. We were always together. Since the three of them wanted to become adventurers, I became one along with them."

I wondered if it had turned into some kinda macho thing where they competed for Horn. Horn was pretty meek, after all, but she was still pretty cute. A little indecisive, sure, but she seemed like the kind of girl boys wanted to protect.

"I'm surprised that your parents would let you become an adventurer." It was dangerous work. If Fina wanted to become an adventurer, I think I'd definitely stop her, and she wasn't even my daughter.

"They said it was fine as long as the other three were with me. I didn't want to cause them trouble and I can use magic, but... I'm weak. I can't use a sword or bow. Sometimes I think I just slow them down..." and with every word, her voice grew smaller and smaller.

"You *can* use magic, though, right?"

"Yes, but it's not very strong."

Hmm, what did that even mean? Did people just naturally have different amount of mana? Was it a lack of imagination? Willpower? I had no idea.

"Yuna, how is your magic so strong?"

I couldn't tell her it was because I'd been given overpowered items by a god, so I changed the subject. "Who did you learn magic from, Horn?"

"Another magic-user from the village taught me. But they can't use large amounts of magic either."

Maybe she just had a bad teacher? "In that case, how about we check out your skills?" I wanted to see whether my knowledge was useful too.

"D-Do you mean it?"

“Yeah. Just because I teach you stuff, though, doesn’t mean it’ll actually work.”

“Yes! Yes, of course!”

“In that case, let’s practice after eating.”

“Okay!”

Horn broke into a wide smile and dug into her bread. She saved her pudding for last, and if anything, seemed even more satisfied once she’d eaten it too.

We left the shop behind and came to a point on the outskirts of the town. There weren’t people around, so using some magic shouldn’t cause any issues.

“This area okay?” I used earth magic to create a wall.

“That’s amazing.” Wow, she sure was easily impressed.

“Okay, try a little magic. Something you’re good at.”

“Yeah, I’m on it!”

Horn picked up the short staff she had at her hip, gathered wind around it, and sent wind blades flying at the wall. But when they hit the wall, they vanished.

“You’re good at wind magic, then?”

“It’s more or less easy to use, but it’s weak.”

“Can you cast anything else?”

“A little,” Horn said, then gathered magic in her staff and summoned flames. She waved her staff, but the fire disappeared before they even hit the wall. Next, she tried water magic. A glob of water about the size of a baseball hovered over her staff. When she waved the staff, it splashed onto the wall and broke apart. Her earth magic was about as powerful—or, uh, not.

Maybe this was an issue of how concentrated it was? Her water and earth weren’t hard

enough. They were just the same as normal, nonmagical water and earth. As for fire, maybe she just didn't have a good mental image to work with? Perhaps wind was easier for her to visualize.

At this rate, all she was doing was converting her mana into stuff and hoping that was enough.

"You think it's really no good?"

"Hmm, it's not really that, so much as..." I pulled the beginner magic book from my bear storage. I only read it once and hadn't touched it since. "Visualizing stuff is important when casting magic."

"Visualizing it?"

"When you use magic, you have a mental image of what you're trying to do, right?"

"Mmhm."

"I'm going to use earth magic to explain, since that'll be the easiest to understand." I invoked earth magic, creating a baseball-sized clump the same size as Horn's. "Try picking it up."

"Okay. Oh, i-it's heavy..."

"No, it's more that it's... compressed? I've made it by pressing the earth together tightly. That's why it's heavy and hard. By throwing this at a monster, I can do some damage. If I juice it up with extra mana and throw it, I can amplify that damage."

She returned the earth lump to me, and I used mana to hurl it at the earth wall... and knock a hole through it. "That's amazing, Yuna!"

"Figure this trick out and you can change its shape and put it to practical use for tons of stuff. You can make walls, defend against attacks from opponents, or even manipulate your opponent's actions. If you do that, you can force them to head toward a spot where your allies are waiting."

"Whoa..."

"Also, if you change its shape like *this*, you can give it even more attack power." I shaped

earth into a spear and sent it flying. It went through the wall like the ball from earlier. “If it has a sharp point, it’ll stab into your opponent more easily. Make sure to harden it, though, or you won’t do much damage.”

“I’ve got it. I’ll try it out.”

Horn took a deep breath, gathered mana in her staff, made a clod of dirt, and hurled it at the wall. This time the clod made a massive thump as it hit the wall before thwacking into the dirt.

“Yuna, I did it!”

“Looking good. If you also make it go faster, it’ll be even more powerful.”

“Okay!”

Emboldened, Horn tried it again and again. When it hit the wall, over and over, it would make a massive *thump*. The clumps were getting harder.

I really wanted to teach her more stuff, but she used too much mana and was out of breath. “Now you just need to practice.”

“Th-Thank you so much. I feel more... more confident!”

“Yeah, but I wanted to show you more than this.”

“No, no! For now, I’ll try to learn the earth magic you taught me. Even if you teach me all kinds of things, it would be a waste with what little I can do.”

“Gotcha. Now, magic can be used to attack and protect, so make sure you check what’s going on behind you before you use it.” I puffed up my chest as I tried parroting some half-remembered dialogue from the old game. “By creating a wall, you can let your allies escape or fortify your position. If you increase your accuracy, you’ll be able to attack even while your allies are fighting. Even if you learn some magic, you have to be careful since it might not be as useful in a given situation.”

“Okay!” So enthusiastic!

“Also, be careful of how you distribute your mana. When a mage runs out of mana, they’re dead weight.” If you didn’t have a mana recovery item, you were in trouble.

“Okay!” Even more enthusiastic!

“So! Make sure to take a nice break today and recover your mana. When you practice next, make sure to memorize how many magic attacks you can use. It’ll come in handy to know when you’re in a battle.”

“All right. Thank you very much for today. I feel like I can really make my way as an adventurer.”

“Just don’t push yourself too hard. You’ve only got one life.”

“Okay!” And after her answer, she gave me a long, careful look.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um. Could you teach me again sometime?”

“Hmm. Sometimes I’m not in town, but I guess we could do it occasionally.”

“Okay, thank you so much.” She bowed her head low. “Also, can I call you my master?”

“Err. Master?”

“If you don’t like that, then it’s fine! But you taught me so much.”

“Know what? Sure.”

“Yes, Master Yuna!”

...That felt weird.

As I headed to the orphanage several days after our special training, I spotted Horn walking a little way ahead of me. Maybe that’s where she was headed too? I didn’t think there was anything other than the orphanage out here.

When I followed her, though, she didn’t go to the orphanage at all. She went to the place we practiced magic at earlier.

Horn looked around, stood in front of a rock and started practicing.

She invoked earth magic and—crack!—hit the rock. Good sound, but the rock itself didn't break. Maybe it didn't have enough speed? It definitely didn't have enough power.

"Horn."

"Yuna?!" She jumped halfway to the sky. Why was she so shocked?

"Practicing magic?"

"Yes! Thanks to you, my magic has gotten stronger. I can cover everyone now! But it's still not quite strong enough for me to finish someone off. Shin drew some baddies over, but I couldn't defeat them with magic. Sure, I did some damage and I'm making progress, but I keep thinking of how things could've gone if I did just a little better."

So that was why she was practicing. "I got time. I can teach you a little." She was really working hard, which always made me want to cheer someone on.

"You mean it?"

"Mmhmm. It looks like it needs more... *oomph*, I think." She had more attack power than before, but she was still pitching the magic about as hard as a decent baseball player. If she aimed well, she could defeat monsters, but otherwise she'd just bruise them. "Let's practice making it spin."

"Spin?"

I created a clod about as big as a baseball using earth magic and set it spinning so fast that you could feel the air coming off of it. "You get it?"

"Whoa, it's like a little round tornado!"

"See that branch over there? Try touching the clod with it."

Horn plucked it off the ground and gingerly—half-covering her eyes—touched the branch to the orb spinning atop of my bear puppet. The moment she did that—"Ahh!"—the branch snapped.

I lightly tossed the orb to the ground, and it bored into the earth.

“That’s amazing.”

“Everything’s cooler with spinning. Try it out.”

“Okay!” Horn created an earth sphere and made it spin... gently. Like a kid’s globe.

“Too slow. Spin it faster.”

“Um, it’s really hard...”

“Then you can practice when you’ve got extra time. The faster you spin it, the stronger it’ll be.”

“Yes, Mas—I mean, Yuna!”

Was this the “right” way to teach magic in this world? Maybe not, but who cares? I had empirical proof that this worked.

“Yuna,” said Horn suddenly, in the middle of a drill, “why are you being so nice to me? All I’ve done is cause you trouble, I haven’t been any help to you at all!”

“I dunno. You’re a girl and you’re trying hard. Maybe that’s why.”

“I’m trying hard?”

“What, did you not notice? Yeah, you’re really putting the work in. I admire that. And I like you. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt or die. I don’t know why you became an adventurer, but it’s dangerous work. If you’re going to keep it up, I’d like you to become strong enough that you won’t die, even if you end up injured.”

“Yuna, I don’t know what to say...”

“Plus, there are tons of men in adventuring, right? Totally unfair. Let’s lift each other up when we can, yeah? Give it your all and get as strong as you can. Promise me that.”

“I will...”

“Oh, but not so much that you get reckless.”

"You got it!" Horn shouted, seeming downright gleeful. I stayed with her until she ran out of mana.

And you know what? I could hear it in her voice: maybe she really did have what it took.

EXTRA STORY

DEIGHA'S CHRONICLES WORRYING ABOUT THE BEAR

I'M DEIGHA. I manage an inn at the seaport of Mileela, and if ya get hungry there? Don't worry, I'm a fine cook too.

Up until about a month ago, ship passengers, adventurers, merchants and all sorts would sail their way to us, but right now? We didn't have a soul at the inn. See, a real nasty monster called a kraken appeared in our ocean. Even the coastal road didn't bring any visitors, what with the bandits that showed up there.

All we could do now was pray for the kraken to disappear, but there was so much more to worry about than that. We couldn't get food—no going out to sea for fishin' and no traveling to get food from neighboring hamlets. The mayor ran out on us, and what food we got is in the hands of the trade guild. And oh, they're happy to give you a crumb or two... for an arm and a leg.

If the kraken remained in our sea, we'd need to abandon the whole seaport... and no matter how hard we prayed, that kraken wasn't going away.

As I sat at the counter with nothing to do, my acquaintances Damon and Yuula came in. Something black came in behind them.

"Muscles?" she blurted.

"Bear?" I blurted back.

A girl in a bear outfit came in behind the two. Come on, what? A... bear outfit?

Apparently, the girl in the bear outfit saved Damon and Yuula when they almost died on the Elezent mountain range. I simply couldn't believe that girl crossed over such a steep mountain, but I didn't think the two of them would lie about it, either. Besides,

how else were you gonna get to the seaport these days?

It really was the only route. So strange.

The two asked me to let the girl in the bear clothes stay at the inn. I didn't have any issues with that, but the only food I had was for my family. I told her I couldn't feed her. But get this—when I told her I'd cook if she gave me the ingredients, she pulled out *mountains* of stuff. On top of that, she told me that since she had so much to spare, my family could eat it too. Maybe this girl really *was* something special?

If she was going to bring the ingredients, then I'd make her a feast to die for. I cooked up something spectacular with what she had, and she said (rightly, I'd say) that it was delicious. She seemed to want to eat seafood, though. In fact, that's why she crossed the mountain! I wanted to feed her some, but the kraken made that slightly difficult. Guess I'd try asking old man Kuro.

The next morning, the girl said she'd head to the adventurers' guild and left the inn. Before long, Yuula came in to see her.

"That little miss? She's headed to the adventurers' guild." Yuula promised to show the girl around town, she said, but looks like the little scamp ran out on her own. "You want to wait here?" I offered.

"No, I'll head over to the adventurers' guild. I might be able to catch her there."

"If she comes back, I'll let her know you came by."

"If you could."

I decided to split the food I'd gotten from her with my friends and neighbors. You gotta help each other when things get rough like this, after all. Me and my daughter Anz butchered the wolf bodies, and my wife and son took it to the neighbors.

"Dad, did you really get all this food for free?" Anz asked me as we worked. And yeah, it shocked me too. It wasn't just wolves, but also vegetables and flour and all kinds of other stuff. It was mostly wolves, the girl said, because she mostly *had* wolves. If that's

not the sign of an adventurer, I don't know what is.

While I was prepping dinner for the girl, rumors of still more food being distributed filtered in. The adventurers' guild passed it out to the townspeople. More wolf meat, and a whole lot of it too. Who could it be but our weird little bear girl?

Just as I was finishing up dinner prep, the bear girl came back to the inn. She'd met up with Yuula after all, and worked up a real hunger to boot. She enjoyed the dinner I made her, which was well and good, but I just wished I could do something more.

The next morning, when I started prepping the inn, I heard a groan from upstairs. Not particularly girlish, either. Strange. Worrisome? Well, when I went up to check it out, I found a bear—no, a *real* bear, and two of them—a black one and a white one. In my inn! How on earth had they gotten here, of all places?

"Is the girl bear okay? Bear girl!" I yelled through the room of her door. I was a little worried about spooking the *real* bears beside me, but they didn't seem interested. Damn it, was the girl all right?! She had to be alive... right?

For all my fretting, the girl came out of her room looking just a little groggy in a white bear outfit. The bears were her summons—my first time seeing such a thing. When I asked her about the men who were groaning under the bears, she told me she was attacked.

Unbelievable. Unforgivable! They'd sneak into *my* inn and, on top of that, attack a little girl? Oh, I was furious.

I had my son head over to the adventurers' guild to relay the message and tied up the attackers with a rope. Tightly, with an especially rough rope. Since they weren't necessary anymore according to her, the girl made the bears just... disappear for now. Incredible.

Before long, the adventurers' guild's staff came by and took away the men. Good riddance.

As if things weren't preposterous enough, the girl then promised the guild master Atola that she was going to defeat the bandits. C'mon now, that was far too dangerous. Although Atola seemed worried at first, she still agreed.

"Miss, are you really going out to apprehend those bandits?" after eavesdropping on them, I asked the girl. But she just smiled.

"C'mon man, I'll be all right. I'm an adventurer, and didn't you see my bears? Big burly bears?"

I promised her I'd make her a delicious meal once she came back. I hoped she would.

But, wonder of wonders, she did come right back. And not only that, but she *did* manage to capture the bandits. The townspeople thought that the four adventurers with her had done it at first, but nope. The bear girl herself had singlehandedly defeated them.

Who would believe something like that? I'd seen tons of adventurers in my time, strong ones and weak ones. Calling this kid adventurer strong seemed... well, if it was true, it hardly covered it.

To fulfill my promise, I decided to go all out with my meal that day. I headed to the harbor and implored old man Kuro, who watched over the ocean: "I'd like to make a meal for the bear girl who took out the bandits. Would you please let me have some fish?" I knew it was no use, but I still bowed my head. I had to try.

"Take as much as you want."

"Hold on, are you sure?" I could hardly believe it.

"Of course I'm sure, and not a soul in town would disagree. She got rid of the bandits. She even exposed the foul deeds of the trade guild. We can afford to give her fish. That's the least of what she deserves, I'd say."

Gods, though, the old man was decent. I thanked old man Kuro profusely and took some delicious-looking fish that was caught just that morning for a nice fish dinner. Though I didn't have much left in stock, I prepared rice. It normally came in from the

Land of Wa, and they knew how to prepare a good fish dish. Personally, I like rice even more than bread, and only the best would do for our little hero.

I also made a nice, hot miso soup for the girl. Fresh vegetables, the works! If I had more ingredients, I could've made it even better, but that kraken was still in the way.

When she saw the meal I made, the girl looked surprised, even as she ate it.

And she started to cry.

Had I done something wrong? Was it bad? No, she told me. It was the flavor of her home, and she cried as she savored it. She cleaned her entire plate. My cooking was good enough to make her cry? What could I even say to that? What could I do but smile and try not to cry myself?

Damn that kraken! If it weren't around, I'd be able to make an even more delicious meal for her.

The next day, my son told me that we weren't supposed to go near the sea the day after tomorrow. Why? Well, old man Kuro told him so.

Something about the way the girl was acting lately made me feel uneasy. I went to old man Kuro. "Old man Kuro, about the day after tomorrow and the sea. This hasn't got to do with the bear girl, has it?"

"Hmph." He spoke slowly. Carefully. "Now don't you go telling anyone, you hear? If you can't make that promise, I can't tell you a thing."

I agreed, but the things old man Kuro told me were absurd. The bear girl was going to fight the kraken? "Do you really believe that, old man Kuro?"

"Atola herself asked me about this, and there was nothing funny about the way she asked. And it's that same bear girl who defeated those bandits, isn't it?" He almost smiled. "Or are there other bear girls I haven't been told about?"

Hmm. But even if she could defeat bandits, that didn't mean she could defeat a kraken. "Old man Kuro! Are you really planning to let a little girl fight the kraken by herself?!"

"Yes, yes, it's very frightening. Now the girl claimed she could defeat the kraken, but she said that she can't do it if we're too close to the ocean."

"So the bear girl is..."

"You hear me? While she fights, she asked that we not go near the ocean so none of us are put into danger."

So the bear girl was..."I understand."

But I didn't have to like it. Why did the bear girl have to fight the kraken? Why couldn't there be anyone in our little town who was strong enough to help? Made me furious, that I couldn't do anything. That none of us could.

It was the day she'd fight the kraken. I asked her what her plans were for the day.

"I'm going for a walk. What about it?" she answered, like she was just gonna go for a nice, peaceful stroll instead of going out to slay a kraken.

Was it really all right to leave fighting the kraken to such a tiny thing? And damn it, the only thing I could do was basically make food.

"I'm going to have a meal ready for you, so you better come home."

And a delicious one. So she better come back alive.

She ate the breakfast I made, and just... left the inn, like it really was nothing more than a walk.

I don't know how much time passed after that. I paced the inn. My wife and daughter asked me about that, but I just couldn't stop. I was just too worried. I didn't need her to kill the kraken. I just wanted the kid to come back safe!

Then there was a commotion at the entrance. Atola came in, and behind her trudged a bear... with the girl lying on its back.

“Miss!”

When I ran over to her, she looked exhausted. I was relieved she wasn’t injured.

“I’m cool. I’m fine. Need sleep. Lemme sleep. Thanks.”

At least she answered back, even if she was slumped on top of the bear. But at that, her bear squeezed itself up the stairs with the girl still slumped over.

“Atola, is she all right?! If she’s hurt, I—”

“Calm down, she’s fine. She just used too much magic.”

“She did?” What a relief. “What about the kraken?” I wouldn’t blame her if she failed. Just seeing her state, I could tell she worked hard at it.

“You knew about that?”

“Yeah, old man Kuro told me.”

“I see. Yuna defeated it.”

Ah, must’ve misheard her. I dug a little earwax outta my ear. “Repeat that?”

“Yuna defeated it?”

“She... did?”

“Yes, she defeated it for us.”

“And you’re serious?”

“She put her all into it too. It’s no wonder she’s so tired. She’s the town’s savior, so make sure she gets lots of rest.”

Of course I would! It was my job as innkeeper to make sure that the girl got all the rest she needed, especially after all she went through. I wouldn’t let anyone bother her rest.

Word spread around town about the kraken, and before long I was dealing with townspeople trying to barge into my inn and make a fuss about it. They filled the inn's entrance and overflowed outside.

"Be quiet!" I roared. "She's exhausted and asleep!"

"Dad, *you* be quiet," my daughter warned. "Yuna is sleeping."

"But..."

"I know, I know. But Dad, what are you going to do if *you're* the one who wakes her?" She had me there.

"I understand where you're all coming from," I said, lowering my voice a little, "but could you let the girl rest? She fought with a kraken—you know, that *kraken* we had for a while?—and she's tired. You would be too."

"But, Deigha, we want to see her and thank her."

"Yeah! She saved the town."

I understood how they felt. I wanted to do something for her too. What was the thing that made her happiest?

"Hrm. All right, then. If any of you have leftover rice, could you lend me some? Every little bit helps. She likes the rice from the Land of Wa. I'll make it for her when she wakes up."

"You sure that's enough?"

"Yeah." I thought of that joyful smile and those tears. "That'll make her the happiest."

"All right."

They finally left, but new people came in. We ended up having the same conversation.

Everyone who stopped by was all smiles. The lucky folks who actually saw the defeated kraken were excited as they talked. When I heard their stories, the fact that the girl

defeated the monster started to finally feel real.

Some people even started to pray toward the inn room, which was nice, but... maybe *a little* much. I got it, though. Even my son was overwhelmed with joy: he'd be able to go out to sea again.

Before long, we had enough rice to fill a big barrel I'd prepared.

It was going to be exactly the feast a hero like her deserved, and I couldn't wait to see her face.

AFTERWORD

HELLO, EVERYONE. Kumanano here.

Thank you for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*'s fourth volume! Here, Yuna has finally gotten her own shop and bakers. Just as you might expect, the décor is all bear-themed and even the orphans employed there wear bear uniforms.

After getting her hands on some bread, Yuna heads to the ocean seeking seafood. Although she arrives there, she can't get what she wants *that* easily. The monster of the sea, the kraken, appears! Though Yuna cheats a little by fighting on dry land because she can't fight on the ocean or fly in the sky, she ends up slaying the beast.

In this extra story, I wrote about the rookie adventurer Horn, who made an appearance in the second volume. She's a new adventurer, and since she doesn't know much about magic because she grew up in a small village, she can only use weak magic. Under Yuna's instruction, she's gotten a little stronger. I hope to write about Horn once she's grown more.

I also had the opportunity to write about the orphanage being rebuilt. Finally, the kids have a warm place to sleep! Even if they get dirty from their work and play, they can take a nice, comfy bath. It's always nice seeing an orphan end up happy.

Thank you to my managing editor, who took care to help me identify everything that needed correction. Thank you for your spectacular illustrations, 029. The mini Kumayuru and Kumakyu are adorable. Thank you to everyone at the publisher, who worked so hard to get this book out there.

Let's see each other again soon.

KUMANANO – ON A DAY IN JULY, 2016



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