

WRITTEN BY
Kumanano
ILLUSTRATED BY
029

14
novel

A vibrant illustration of two young women. One girl, with short brown hair and green eyes, wears a white maid's uniform with a red bow and a white ruffled collar. She has a surprised expression with her mouth open and hands near her face. The other girl, with long dark teal hair and pink eyes, wears a black bear-themed outfit with a ruffled skirt and a black choker. She is also in a surprised pose, with one hand on her hip and the other holding a small white cloth. The background is a warm orange color with several large, stylized orange paw prints.

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR.

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– Bear Bear Bear Kuma –

- VOLUME 14 -

-AUTHOR-

Kumanano

-ILLUSTRATOR-

029

[SEVEN SEAS]



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KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Illustrated by 029

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TRANSLATION: Jan Cash & Vincent Castaneda
ADAPTATION: Lorin Christie
COVER DESIGN: Kris Aubin
LOGO DESIGN: H. Qi
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Jennifer Elgabrowny
COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen
PROOFREADER: Catherine Langford
ASSISTANT EDITOR: T. Burke
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Mercedez Clewis
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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Name: Yuna
Age: 15
Gender: Female

► Yuna's Status_

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

◀ KUMAYURU (CUB FORM)
▼ KUMAKYU

Skills

► FANTASY WORLD LANGUAGE

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

► FANTASY WORLD LITERACY

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

► BEAR EXTRADIMENSIONAL STORAGE

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

However, it cannot hold (eat) living things.

Time will stop for objects that are inside of it.

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

► BEAR IDENTIFICATION

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

► BEAR DETECTION

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

► BEAR MAP 2.0

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

► BEAR SUMMONING

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

► BEAR TRANSPORTER GATE

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

► BEAR PHONE

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

► BEAR WATER WALKING

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

► BEAR TELEPATHIC COMMUNICATION

You can call your summoned beasts from a distance.

Magic

► BEAR LIGHT

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

► BEAR PHYSICAL ENHANCEMENT

Routing mana through the bear gear allows for physical enhancement.

► BEAR FIRE MAGIC

Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use fire elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WATER MAGIC

Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use water elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WIND MAGIC

Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use wind elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR EARTH MAGIC

Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use earth elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR ELECTRICITY MAGIC

Gathering mana in the bear glove gives one the ability to use electricity elemental magic.

Power is proportional to mana and the mental image. When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR HEALING MAGIC

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

CRIMONIA**FINA**

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

**SHURI**

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

**TIERMINA**

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

GENTZ

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

**NOIRE FOCHROSÉ**

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

**CLIFF FOCHROSÉ**

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

**SHERRY**

An orphan girl. Apprenticing at a tailor because she's good with her hands. Accepts a commission from Yuna to create stuffed animals of Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

BO

Headmistress of the orphanage. When funding was cut and the orphanage was struggling, she continued to devote herself to helping the children.

LIZ

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

TEMOKA

Tailor in Crimonia who takes the orphan Sherry as an apprentice.

NAR

Temoka's wife. Serves customers and assists at her husband's tailoring shop.

MORIN

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

KARIN

Yuna saves her mother Morin's bakery from loan sharks in the capital. After that, Karin and her mother bake bread at the "Bear's Lounge."

NERIN

Morin's relative. She runs into Yuna when she comes to the capital to see Morin. Later on, she takes over cake production in Morin's shop.

**ANZ**

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

NEAF

Travels from Mileela to Crimonia to work at Anz's shop but ends up working at the orphanage.

SENO

The youngest of the group who came to work at Anz's shop.

FORNE

Comes to work at Anz's shop. Is like an older sister to Anz and Seno.

BETTLE

Comes to work in Anz's shop. A hard-working girl.

RULINA

Female adventurer who was part of Deboranay's party. Becomes a guard for Yuna's shop and has a budding friendship with Yuna.

GIL

An adventurer of few words from Deboranay's party. Later leaves Deboranay and starts working with Rulina more often.

CAPITAL



ELLEAURA FOCHROSE

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



SHIA FOCHROSE

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



PRINCESS FLORA

Princess of Elfancia. She adores Yuna and calls her "bear." Yuna takes a liking to her and gifts her things like picture books.



KING FOLHAUT

Elfanica Kingdom's king. Yuna saves him from a plot to overthrow the monarchy. A somewhat candid king who goes to Yuna's house to order pudding from her and such.

SHEELIN



MISANA FAHRENGRAM

Nicknamed Misa. Ten years old. Saved from monsters on the way to the king's birthday festival by Yuna. She invites Yuna to her birthday party.

GRAN FAHRENGRAM

Misa's grandfather. Yuna saves him from monsters on the way to the capital. Feudal lord of the Eastern district of Sheelin

MARINA

An adventurer who protected Gran. Reunites with Yuna in Sheelin. Exterminates big moles with Yuna.

ELLE

A well-endowed mage from Marina's party. Yuna has forgotten her name when they reunite in Sheelin.

MILEELA

DAMON

A Mileela fisherman Yuna saves while on the way to see the ocean.

YUULA

Damon's wife. A strong woman who knows how to manage Damon.





CHAPTER 351

THE BEAR HEADS OUT TO DEZELT

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED; I'd taken the kraken mana gem I'd originally given to the king to the town of Dezelt. After that, I left Carlina and used the bear gate I'd set up in my Dezelt house. That was how I got back to my bear house in the capital. Getting there had been a whole ordeal, but getting home was easy-peasy thanks to my handy-dandy bear gate. I'd even used the gates to defeat a giant scorpion.

Handy indeed.

Now, I was back. But the king didn't know about my bear gates, so I couldn't, like, head over to make my report right away. I didn't want him to get all suspicious about how I'd made it home so soon—and I just didn't want the hassle of explaining. Best to waste a little time at my home sweet home: I'd head over to the castle the next day.

So you know what? Cleaning time! It'd been a while since I'd straightened up the house and I'd let mountains of dust pile up. I spent the rest of the day hanging up the bedding, cleaning the rooms, and doing the laundry with my bears Kumayuru and Kumakyu. Afterward, we all went to bed cuddled up together.

The next day, I woke up past noon. So many things had happened in Dezelt I'd mentally exhausted myself, and I'd asked my bears not to wake me this time. Sleep helped. It'd been forever since I'd had such a restful night of sleep. Then I had a three o'clock snack before heading off to the castle. Pretty sure no one would find me sus after I took all that time.

While I was on my way to the castle in my usual bear attire, I heard someone running to me from behind. *Now who could that be?* I turned around to find a girl flinging herself at me, arms open in a hug.

"Yuna!" the very pretty girl shouted.

I realized who it was—she was wearing her school uniform, after all.

"Teilia?"

“What are you doing here, Yuna?” she asked. “Are you headed to the castle?”

“Yeah. Are you headed home from school?”

Well, duh, self: she was in her school uniform. Kind of obvious.

“Yes, and while I was walking to the castle myself, I saw a certain someone who happened to be wearing a very memorable outfit and simply just had to run over.”

I wished she wouldn’t smile so charmingly while she was saying that.

“Are you going home then?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Aren’t you a princess though? I thought you’d go home in a carriage, protected by guards or somethin’”

“I use a carriage to get there, but I usually walk home with my friends.”

I’d thought she’d have some stern, beefy guards protecting her integrity. Guess not. She hadn’t had any during the academy festival either, but the fact that she was walking around, free and unguarded, still shocked me. Was a princess really allowed to go around all by herself? Come to think of it, Teilia’s father—the king, of course—had sauntered right over to my bear house once. I guess they were just a free-range royal family then. No point in overthinking things.

“So, are you going to see Flora, Yuna?”

I shook my head. I wish, but not today.

“I had a job His Majesty asked me to do, so I’m heading over to report back to him today,” I told her.

“Father asked you to do something for him?”

“Well, I am an adventurer, so I’ll take any kind of job—as long as they’re not weird, that is.”

Plus I was bored. I wasn’t gonna say that part out loud, though.

We chatted until we made it to the castle's front gate.

"Lady Teilia, welcome home," one of the guards greeted her.

"Thank you!" she said.

"And I see Master Yuna is with you today?"

"Only coincidentally," I said.

The guards were used to seeing me and my getup. No more shocked looks... for the most part. Occasionally I'd get someone new at the gate and we'd have to go through the whole rodeo again. Mostly, though? They knew me and didn't make a big deal of it.

"Can I come inside?" I asked. "I'd like to see His Majesty today."

"Yes, certainly," the guard said. "In fact, I have been instructed to bring you directly to His Majesty when you arrive."

Guess the guards had gotten the memo, then.

"In that case, I'll take her to Father," Teilia volunteered. "Let's go, Yuna."

Teilia grabbed my bear puppet hand, then yanked me along after her, away from the guard who'd wanted to escort me. The guard silently let us go, watching us as we left.

We walked for a while until we bumped into someone I recognized.

"Oh, Yuna and Lady Teilia."

It was Ellelaura, the woman with the most mysterious job in the world.

"Ellelaura, still skipping out on work?"

"Mm, you too, Yuna? His Majesty says that to me all the time as it is! If you must know, I'm simply out on a stroll during a break. So, what brings you and Lady Teilia together?"

"Yuna said she's going to Father, so I'm taking her to him," Teilia answered for me.

Ellelaura thought for a moment, then busted out with, “In that case, how about I accompany you two as well?”

This time, I didn’t throw a, “What about your work?” at her. These were expected shenanigans.

“I’m not going to do anything interesting,” I told her. “I’m just reporting on a job. I haven’t brought any food.”

I didn’t want her getting the wrong idea.

“Is that what you truly think of me?” she replied.

But I wasn’t wrong, was I? Whenever I went to visit Lady Flora, Ellelaura’d sniff me out and swoop in to grab a bite of whatever food I’d brought along with me.

“All right, Yuna, let’s head out.”

Teilia took one of my arms and Ellelaura took the other, almost as though they were the police hauling in a suspect. Finally, we arrived at an office I knew all too well from my visits.

“Father, I’m coming inside!” Teilia swung open the door without waiting for an answer and all three of us headed right in.

The king looked up from his paperwork at Teilia and noticed the two of us accompanying her.

“Teilia? I’m working right now—oh, Yuna? And Ellelaura?”

“You’re already back then?” he asked me.

“Just got in,” I quickly lied.

“So, what are you doing with Teilia and Ellelaura?”

“I spotted Yuna’s cute tail bobbing away on the way home. Then she informed me she was going to you, so I accompanied her here,” Teilia said.

Excuse me, my tail so wasn’t *bobbing away*. I was just walking, like a normal person

and *definitely* not like a bear.

"And I spotted an adorable bear on my stroll as well, so I simply had to tag along," Ellelaura mimicked Teilia's response in this cutesy-wootsy way.

"You've got work to do," the king replied, seeming quite fed up with her.

Ellelaura didn't miss a beat. "Which I've been doing, mind you."

Wait. Hadn't she admitted she was on a walk? Unbelievable. I was almost as exasperated as the king.

"All right then. Thank you for bringing Yuna to me. You two may take your leave now," the king said while waving his hand as though he were shooing trouble away. He was clearly trying to get them to leave. Ellelaura stepped in front of me as though to protect me.

"What's this? The two of you... *alone*? What are your intentions with her, Your Highness? Please! She's just a child!"

"Father!"

"This. Is. Work. Related," the king stated in a flat staccato.

"Just kidding!" Ellelaura said. "You don't have to be so peeved about it."

"If I'm *peeved*, it's because of the ridiculous nonsense coming out of your mouth. Please keep those silly comments to yourself. You're a bad influence on my daughter."

Too late for that. Teilia was going along with it, likely because this kind of stuff happened in front of her all the time. Pretty clear that Ellelaura already had a much stronger influence on Teilia than the easygoing queen. Total lost cause, dude.

Anyway, I didn't have the time to go along with the joke.

"I'd like to get this report done with so I can get home," I said.

"If you can do it with the two of them present, you may proceed," the king said. "If you can't, then you'll need to get the two of them out of here yourself."

Oh, so I had to do the dirty work? I looked at the two of them. They smiled back at me. Looked like they wouldn't go down without a fight...

Well, not like I had anything to hide, and shooing them away seemed like a lot more work. Just get it over with.

"I delivered it," I told the king.

"And did *it* help?"

Right. He'd want to know that.

"Well, there were some complications, but the water gem helped with the shortage. Things should be fine now."

"I see," he said, sounding relieved. Dezelt was an important town in the region near the border. Trade with the neighboring kingdom would be tough if it disappeared.

"Barlimer also gave me a document confirming the job was completed and a letter about what happened."

I held the letter out to him, sandwiched in the mouth of my bear puppet. He looked a little conflicted before he accepted it, but eventually, he did and started reading it over. The expression on his face quickly changed as he did. Once he finished, he put a hand to his temple and breathed out a sigh before focusing on me.

"I sent you along just in case, but I had no idea it would be this bad..."

"You mentioned having Yuna take a water gem to Dezelt?" Elleaura asked.

"You went all the way to Dezelt?" Teilia asked. "And then you did something there as well?"

"The townspeople were in some trouble, so I just lent them a hand," I said.

"You call this 'just' lending them a hand?" the king asked, letter still in hand.

"What does that say in it?" Elleaura asked, so the king thrust the letter at her without a word.

She took it and started reading.

Teilia went to Ellelaura's side and tried to catch a peek. "May I see as well?"

"You're letting them read it?"

"I just told you to make the report only if they were also allowed to hear what you had to say."

Well, yeah, he had said that. I guess he really was shoving all the responsibility for this onto me.

"Is all of this true, Yuna?" Ellelaura asked as she read.

"Wow... You slayed a swarm of sand wyrms, and then a giant one too."

"And then a giant scorpion while you were doing the search under the pyramid..."

The only way I'd contributed with the sand wyrms was by getting them from underground. And honestly? The giant sand wyrm wasn't really a big scary deal compared to the giant wyrm I'd slayed when I defeated those ten thousand monsters. Anyway, I already had experience from slaying the black viper and regular wyrm, so I had my method down. I knew how to defeat giant monsters now: bigger targets were easier, actually.

"But why did you have to go on a search under the pyramid? I don't see the reasoning explained here."

He'd left out the part about the crystal panel, it looked like. In that case, I'd be keeping that to myself.

"They had their reasons. It was necessary for changing out the water gem." *Technically*, that was the truth—with just a few little omissions. "And then I figured out how to defeat the giant scorpion, and we managed to swap the gem out."

"I really ought to pay you back somehow," the king said.

"The only part of the job was the delivery. Everything else I did after getting there, I did because I wanted to," I said.

"While that may be true, I picked you in case of trouble."

I knew it. If he'd just needed the gem delivered, he could've chosen anyone.

"Things would have gone smoothly if there was nothing wrong. But if a problem arose, then there was a chance we would be too late to help. I can't send knights or mages, after all," the king said.

Barlimer had also explained that to me: Elfanica couldn't exactly send troops to the border of a neighboring country. They could have sent adventurers, but there was a possibility the job would only be doable by high rank ones. It made sense why he'd send me to do it.

"I am truly grateful for what you did," he said.

He asked me to give him my guild card so he could pay me, so I did. He set the card on the crystal panel on his desk and got to work. Finished, he handed it back.

"I paid you a bit extra," he said.

"Thank you." I had no idea how much extra, but I thanked him all the same.

"It's a modest price to pay, considering you've made Dezelt indebted to us."

Hmm. I had a suspicion he'd just used me as a pawn in the political stuff happening between the countries, but it was kind of too late to do anything about that. In the end, the king had simply asked me to make a delivery for him. Though the king had tattled about me in the message he'd had me deliver, Barlimer had been the one to *actually* make a request, and I'd volunteered to do it. I didn't have the heart to turn him down and I didn't have any regrets either. So I wasn't going to moan about it to the king this time. Honestly, if I'd said no and found out later what'd befallen the town, I probably would have regretted it.

At the same time, I didn't really like being used and then paid off, no matter how much I was earning. I'm not exactly a big spender. I'm not into the flashy stuff like gemstones or stuff like that, personally. I probably wouldn't find gear better than my bear suit, either.

Well, I did have a lot of trouble with the scorpion slaying. Maybe I should get a sword?

CHAPTER 352

THE BEAR SHOWS OFF THE GIANT SCORPION

“NOW THEN, I’d like to see it for myself. Would you be kind enough to show me the giant scorpion?”

I knew this would happen.

“Barlimer did say you slayed it, but he isn’t one of my lords. I need to see it with my own eyes.”

“Yes,” Elleaura said. “I would like to see it as well.”

“I’d like to as well!” Teilia added.

Now they were in on it, too. Looks like I didn’t have a single ally here—a tactical error on my part. I should’ve ousted Elleaura and Teilia from the room if I’d wanted to get home at a reasonable time. And it wasn’t like I could just *show* them the scorpion. I couldn’t pull that massive scary thing out right here in the middle of a bustling castle.

“I don’t want to make this a whole *deal* if there are people around,” I explained. It was a weak excuse, but I tried it anyway.

There were lots of people working in the castle. The moment anybody caught wind of this, word would spread like wildfire. I was perpetually walking around in a bear onesie—people already talked.

“In that case, we can do it in the back courtyard,” Elleaura offered. “No one wanders that way, and there’s plenty of room.”

“Indeed, only those with permission are allowed in there,” the king commented.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Well, to put it in simple terms, it’s our family residence,” the king explained. “Since it’s the afternoon, I believe cleaning should be done for the day. No one should be around.”

"It's the courtyard near Lady Flora's room," Ellelaura explained. "I think you've likely seen it before."

I sure didn't remember it if I had. I usually made a straight shot for Lady Flora's room whenever I came to the castle.

I hadn't agreed to anything, but everyone had already stood up from their seats. Ellelaura and Teilia cornered me and escorted me out of the office.

Oh, *fine*.

We headed down the halls. I was pretty sure that if we kept going this direction, it would lead to Lady Flora's room. Partway there, however, we turned a corner down a different hall. I'd never actually been this way. Finally, after a long walk, we arrived at a place that looked like the courtyard in question.

"This should do."

I guess I had to agree after seeing how spacious it was.

"Only for a little bit," I warned. "I don't want anyone else to see."

"That works well enough for me. I just simply want to see it."

I produced the giant scorpion from my bear storage.

"Another giant monster you've slain," said the king.

"This is quite amazing!" Lady Ellelaura said.

"Did you take this down all on your own, Yuna?" Teilia asked.

All three of them did a lap around the scorpion. I kept hearing them murmur things as they looked at it, like "Wow" and "It's gigantic" and "Very sturdy."

"Looks like a portion of the shell is missing. What happened there?"

"I let the adventurers who helped me have that part," I said. "They apparently want to

make armor out of it.”

Jade and Uragan were probably arriving at the capital to do that right now, I pondered. Wait, actually, there was a chance they still hadn’t even made it to the capital at all yet.

“So, what do you intend to do with this thing?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I guess I’ll sell it if I ever need the money?”

I didn’t need any armor. Really, selling it was the only thing I could do with it.

“If you’re interested, I’ll buy it from you,” the king told me.

Actually, now that I thought of it, the kingdom had also bought the kraken parts, too. Cliff had told me that he hadn’t made the purchase or sold anything through his channels since there was a chance someone would start to believe in the rumors coming from Mileela. That was why the kingdom had taken the parts instead. Kraken parts probably still slumbered somewhere deep in the castle. Resting in pieces, you could say, ha ha ha. According to Cliff, they were waiting for a good opportunity to start selling them off. The idea was that if the parts were put on the market way after the slaying, people wouldn’t make the connection and the whole thing would be forgotten. Basically, it’d all stay just a rumor.

Jade was looped in on every rumor, but he was convinced the whole kraken slaying thing was made up. Guess that meant it was working. I was pretty grateful to Cliff for that, at the very least.

Maybe selling the scorpion to the kingdom—if I ever need the funds—was the right move.

“I’ll take you up on that when the time’s right,” I told the king. “Okay, I’m going to put it away now.”

Then I did exactly what I’d said. Right at that moment, I heard someone call out.

“Bear!”

I looked over to find Lady Flora and Ange.

“L-Lady Flora, it’s dangerous.” Ange quickly stopped the princess. “Where did the

monster go?"

I could practically see the question mark over Ange's head as she searched for it. Maybe she'd seen the scorpion?

"It was nothing. Don't worry about it." The king stepped in for me. "So, why is Flora here?"

"Well, I spotted Miss Yuna and informed Lady Flora. When I did that, she ran right out of her room. I'm very sorry," Ange said to the king.

So Lady Flora had come all the way over here to see me. I was surprised she knew to find me here, though.

"Bear..."

Ange loosened her grip on Lady Flora, and soon, the princess was hugging me. Seeing her happy face brought a smile to my own. She didn't look scared at all: I guess she was brave about the scorpion, then. Or maybe I'd put it away just in time and she hadn't seen it?

"Lady Flora, you're not scared of monsters?"

"Mon-stews?"

She tilted her head, quizzical and cute.

"Ah, it looks like Lady Flora didn't see the monster then."

Teilia made her way over to us and placed a hand on Lady Flora's head.

"Teiwiia?"

Lady Flora seemed to have just only noticed her sister was there. The scorpion hadn't been the only minor detail she'd missed. Teilia sure looked sad when she realized that fact.

"Looks like she loves bears more than her own sister!" the king joked as he joined the group.

“Fawther?”

Lady Flora’s voice was puzzled, like she’d just only noticed her father, too.

“It looks like you’re easy to miss too,” Teilia retorted back. The king looked like he had mixed feelings about that.

Lady Flora only had eyes for me. Thankfully, that meant she hadn’t seen the scorpion. I didn’t know whether my popularity with her was an overall win for me, but right here and now, I had my bear gear to thank for not traumatizing her.

After that, I hung out with Lady Flora for a while before heading out. Right as I thought about heading home though, Ellelaura snagged me.

“Yuna, how about coming to dinner at my house?”

“I was planning to go home,” I said, politely turning her down. I really wanted to get back to Crimonia sooner than later.

“Aw, are you going to eat all on your lonesome once you get there though?”

“K-Kumayuru and Kumakyu will keep me company,” I told her.

I summoned them both in cub form and hugged them tight, trying my best to look convincing. I wasn’t lonely when I was by myself; I was a seasoned hikikomori. I could handle a meal by myself, no sweat.

“If you go straight home, Shia will be terribly sad,” Ellelaura kept trying to convince me. “You came all the way out to the capital. Won’t you come see her?”

Well, how could I say no to *that*? I ended up heading over to Ellelaura’s place to see Shia.

“Yuna? I had no idea you were visiting the capital.”

Shia came to talk to me in her civvies rather than in her school uniform. I guess she’d changed after coming back from the academy. Unlike me, she didn’t spend every single day in the same clothes.

“I had a quick job to do,” I explained.

"And she was planning on sneaking away without seeing you, so I caught her and dragged her back with me," Ellelaura said.

It wasn't like I'd been trying to slip out of her clutches (or whatever). I'd just wanted to head home, like any normal person would.

"You had a job? What kind of job?"

Shia immediately zoomed in on that word. I guess it'd piqued her curiosity. I couldn't give her all the details though, so I mumbled about some job delivering a package to Dezelt and left it at that. Technically, it was the truth. I had to keep the whole crystal panel thing a secret, and if she asked to see the scorpion, I think I'd lose it, so I left it at that. Ellelaura wasn't supposed to talk about it either—thankfully she didn't try it.

After that, we had dinner. I had the first real conversation with Shia I'd had in a while. Since it was late, they also had me stay the night.

In the end, I never made it back to Crimonia that day. Things just seemed to never go according to plan. As I cuddled my cubified bears that night, I drifted off to sleep.

The next day, I watched as Shia headed off to the academy and Ellelaura went to the castle.

"Yuna, next time you come to the capital, tell me more about Noa!" Shia said.

"I suppose I'd like to know more about how Cliff's doing next time, as well," Ellelaura told me.

After they put in their requests, I kind of felt annoyed they were asking me to report back on their family. It was like they were giving me a job or something. At the same time, Shia and Noa lived far away from each other. I could understand why Shia wanted to hear about her sister.

Plus, it'd be kind of fun messing with Ellelaura by telling some wild half-truths about Cliff.

"I'll make sure I come back with some entertaining stories next time."

"Is that a promise?" Shia said.

"I'm quite looking forward to it!" Ellelaura replied.

The two waved and each headed off to their duties.

I was finally released. I headed back to my bear house in the capital, then went home to my bear house in Crimonia through the bear gate.

CHAPTER 353

THE BEAR GOES BACK TO CRIMONIA

THE MOMENT I got back home in Crimonia—and to my own bedroom and my own bed—I swan-dived into that thing. I summoned my bears in their cub form and we all lazed around on the bed. Even though they were both bear houses, my house in Crimonia was my *real* home. I'd spent the most time sleeping in this room, and it'd been mine for the longest. That's probably why I liked it so much.

I marinated in my downtime like a breadwinning father on his day off. I really wished everyone would let me rest after I'd just finished a job. Gone were the days I'd treat a lounging father like a nuisance in his own home.

Ugh, I was too young for dad feels. Anyway.

As I was hugging my bears and rolling around in my bed luxuriating, I heard a crooning coming from my bear puppet. I shot up in surprise.

What the what?!

But then, I realized it was just my bear phone. I wondered who it could be...? The only two people with bear phones were Fina and Luimin. In a panic, I got the phone out and poured mana into it.

"Yuna? Can you hear me?" I heard Fina's voice.

"I can."

"Oh, good. I'm glad I reached you." She sounded genuinely relieved.

"Did something happen?"

"No, nothing really. I just wanted to ask you a quick question. Um, is now good?"

"Yeah, ask away," I said.

I was just lounging around in my room, after all. My job right now was basically just relaxing with my bears. Cuddle time is the most important mission of them all, y'know.

"So, what's up?" I asked through the bear phone.

"Mom keeps asking when you're coming home. I'd like to tell her when you'll be back if I can."

Jeez, what a good kid.

"I'm surprised Tiermina would be asking about that," I replied. I'd never seen her get worried about me when I'd been late coming back in the past.

"She said she needs to talk to you about the beach trip."

Oh. That was why.

"She's not mad at me, is she?"

"No, she isn't. I think she's worried and doesn't know what to do since she can't talk to you. So, when will you be back?"

Right. Actually, I was already home.

"Yuna? Were you really busy?"

"Uh... well... you see... I'm actually already home," I told her honestly.

"You're already back?!"

Even through the bear phone, I could hear a mix of emotion: exasperation, surprise. Anger, even.

"I just got back today," I said. "Okay, well actually, I got back just now. I really did. You can even ask Kumayuru and Kumakyu. They'll vouch for me."

My bears both crooned positively in response, coming to my defense.

"I was so tired from work that I went to rest in my room for a while, since I'm finally home and all. I was just lying down with Kumayuru and Kumakyu for a little bit. Um..."

Fina? Are you still there?"

I didn't know why, but I was trying to come up with excuse after excuse.

"Um, I'm sorry. I called you while you were resting from work. Is it okay if I come see you?"

Looked like Fina believed me. She was such a good kid.

"Sure you can. I was planning on going to visit you in the afternoon, actually," I told her.

Actually... I'd planned on spending the whole day at home doing absolutely nothing. But I couldn't turn Fina down, now could I?

"Then is it okay if I go to your house with Mom right now?"

"Sure, or I could head over to you," I offered.

"Oh no, you should rest, Yuna. Dad always looks so tired when he comes home from work, too, so I understand. Don't worry, I'll head over with Mom right now."

After we hung up, I put away the bear phone.

So even Gentz looked exhausted whenever he got home from work—kinda like me right now. At the same time though, I didn't particularly like the comparison, so I put it out of mind and got things ready for Fina and Tiermina's arrival.

Cleaning? Snacks? Drinks? I'd already cleaned; I had cookies and chips to set out as snacks; and I also had juice, already chilled and ready, for drinks. This'd work, easy-peasy.

I was waiting with my bears when they came in. Shuri had tagged along with them too.

"Yuna, you got home today?"

"I just got back," I said. "And I was taking it easy at home." I was straight-to-the-point with Tiermina.

"I'm sorry for stopping by right when you're recovering. There was something small I wanted to consult with you about," she explained.

“I don’t mind. Why don’t you all have a seat?”

I set the snacks and drinks out for them. Fina and Shuri sat on the chairs and hugged my miniaturized bears on their laps as they munched on the snacks I’d prepared.

“So, what did you need to ask me?”

“I’d like to set a date sometime soon for going to the ocean. Milaine needs to find someone to watch over the birds, so it would be helpful if we had a schedule for that as soon as possible. Ah, and I need to tell the shops about the holiday as soon as possible. And...” Tiermina said the last bit a little too softly for me to hear.

“What is it?”

“Did you already hear about Gentz...?”

“I thought he was going with us, right?”

Fina had told me about that.

“Yes. So, in order to have someone cover for him when he’s away, he’s been working nonstop without taking any days off. And the person covering for him also wants to know when he’s going to fill in.”

Apparently Gentz had been working really hard to join in on the family vacation. He probably hadn’t been out anywhere since marrying Tiermina. This was their honeymoon, in a way, but it seemed like taking a long break wasn’t going to be easy. In my old world, I’d heard on the news that a lot of people couldn’t even get paid days off. There was no way a world like this would have paid leave either, so it was probably tough taking extended breaks.

“I’m fine with any day,” I said. “I’ll let you decide the schedule too, Tiermina.”

“I think you said it should be about a week’s length, correct?”

“I was thinking we’ll need two days for travel and five for fun.”

Well, once we got there, we’d see how things worked out and we could extend or shorten it as needed. We were going to stay at the bear house, so accommodations weren’t an issue.

"Right... In that case, even if we order new inventory as soon as we get back, we still wouldn't be able to open the shops right away. I think we should make the break a total of ten days to have wiggle room."

"Sounds like a good idea," I said.

I sure wouldn't enjoy going straight back to work the day after getting back from Mileela. I'd want at least a day to recover, minimum.

"Also, do we have a way of getting there?" Tiermina asked. "You said that you had an idea for that, so we haven't made plans yet. You just came back today, right? If we need to arrange for a carriage, we could ask Milaine for help."

Oh, right, I'd forgotten all about figuring out transportation. The bear gate was out of the question, of course. I'd had an idea, but Cliff had called for me, then I'd had to go to the capital, and then all the way to Dezelt. I hadn't had a minute to set anything up.

"I-it should be okay," I said. "I'll make sure to get it ready."

"Will you really...?" Tiermina eyed me dubiously.

Jeez, I'd just forgotten. I was busy is all.

"Yeah, yeah, for sure," I said, awkwardly. Instead of trying to avoid her gaze, I met it.

"All right. Then I'll leave the carriage up to you," she said.

Well, I'd really need to rush now. Ugh, and I'd just gotten home though! Bears need rest, too. I'd offered to do it, so I had no one to complain to but myself. This was my own fault.

"Also, Fina and Shuri told me we have a place to stay. Is that arranged for too?"

"It's a huge bear house!" Shuri said, flinging her arms out, letting go of Kumakyu. My bear went tumbling from her lap, but she scooped them right back up.

"There you have it," I said. "We're all set for a place to sleep."

That was the whole reason why I'd made the giant bear house in the first place.

"I'm not really sure what to think about a house shaped like a huge bear, but as long as we have a place to stay, I suppose it's fine," Tiermina said. "And we can buy food there as well?"

"Sure. But if you're worried about food, we can bring some of our own."

In a pinch, I had meat, veggies, and flour in my bear storage. And if the weather was nice, we'd also be able to get fresh fish there, too.

"In that case, maybe we can bring any leftover food from the shops."

It'd be a waste to throw it away, that was for sure. Best to use it.

"Well then, let's pick a day to leave," Tiermina said.

She'd already handled figuring out the places the shops would need to notify about deliveries, so no hitches there.

"Now we just need to figure out what time to leave. We should probably leave at sunrise."

"Do we need to go that early?"

"If we hurry, we'll be able to beat the tunnel traffic."

She reminded me that the tunnel only allowed traffic one way and that the direction would change each day. If we didn't choose the right day, we wouldn't be able to use it. Without a little planning, we'd end up losing a whole day to waiting in front of the tunnel. After we figured out the schedule on that, Tiermina and I picked a day together.

"All right, I'll let Milaine know we're leaving in ten days," Tiermina concluded. "Also, Yuna, I have something to ask you."

She seemed reluctant to talk about it, whatever it was.

"What is it?"

"The daughter of the lord, Lady Noire, is traveling with us. Is that right?"

She seemed a little worried.

“She’s a good kid. It’ll all be fine,” I told her.

“Yes, I know she is. I’ve met her a few times now.”

“Then is something wrong?”

“Um, would you be able to let Lady Noire know the date? I can talk with her just fine when Fina is there with me, but I’m not sure about going to their estate...”

Right, she didn’t want to bump into the feudal lord, Cliff. Well, from the average citizen’s perspective, Cliff was their lord, an aristocrat, and a real big shot. A normal person would likely want to avoid the estate at all costs.

“Sure, I can. I’ll let Noa know”

“Thank you.”

After that, we made fliers advertising the shop closures. Tiermina was figuring out the rest on her own. Apparently, I’d made a bunch of work for her with my impromptu work trip. Then again, she seemed to be enjoying herself, so maybe it wasn’t so bad.

“Tiermina, thank you for everything you do,” I said.

“Hm? Where’s this praise coming from?”

“Well, you’re always helping me out,” I said, very straightforwardly. Tiermina came over all serious.

“What are you talking about? You’re the one who helped our entire family, Yuna. You’re the reason we’re doing this well.” She closed down the topic of discussion with a smile. She really meant it.

I was so lucky the first person I’d bumped into in this world was Fina, her daughter.

CHAPTER 354

THE BEAR MAKES A BEAR CARRIAGE

AFTER TIERMINA CHECKED in with me about our transportation to Mileela, I headed off with Fina and Shuri to the outskirts of town.

“Where are we going, Yuna?” Fina asked from on top of Kumayuru.

“I don’t want anyone to see, so we’re taking a jaunt somewhere secluded,” I explained.

We headed out a little ways away from town. We were among the trees, so I was pretty sure we wouldn’t be visible. I got off Kumakyu and Fina and Shuri hopped off Kumayuru.

There were twenty-seven orphans to account for, then the headmistress and Liz—plus Tiermina, Fina, Shuri, and Gentz. That made for thirty-three people overall. But then I had to include Morin, Karin, Nerin, the five women from Mileela, and Noa. That made forty-two. That was kind of a lot of people, but most of them were little kids. As long as I accounted for that when I figured out the sitting room and seats, it would work out, no problem.

“Yuna, can you really make something to ride in with magic?”

“Yeah, I can,” I answered. “I don’t know how comfortable it’ll be though, so I brought you two here.”

My comfy bear gear would make it hard to tell if it was uncomfortable to ride in. So Fina and Shuri were the guinea pigs I’d be experimenting on... no wait, that’s a bit much. I just wanted them to try it out and to tell me whether everything was comfortable.

First, I used earth magic and made the carriage portion everyone would ride in. It was pretty wide and about as large as two carriages. I was pretty sure this would fit forty.

“It’s huge.”

“Yuna, are you sure it’s not too big?” Fina asked.

“But we don’t have any horsies,” Shuri said. “Are Kumayuru and Kumakyu going to pull the carriage for us?”

Now *that* was a frightening suggestion. My bears looked at me with wet, pleading eyes. They did not want to pull that carriage—not one bit.

“They’re not,” I said. My bears crooned gratefully at me.

Next, I created bear golems, just like the ones I’d made the first time I’d gone to the capital.

“Bears!” Shuri said.

“These are just like before,” Fina said. She’d remembered. I’d used these bears to pull the cage I’d put the bandits in.

Anyway, next I connected the bears to the giant carriage.

“Yuna, are you sure it’s not too big?”

“Hmm. Maybe?”

I looked to see what Shuri thought only to find her trying to clamber into the carriage.

“Do they move too?” Fina asked.

“Want me to make them move a teensy bit?”

“Yes please!” Shuri shouted, joyfully throwing her hands in the air.

Fina, on the other hand, looked nervous as she got into the carriage. I leapt on myself. Then my bears followed on after us. Once we were all inside, I routed mana into the bears and ordered them to move. The bears slowly started to walk.

“Whoa! They’re really moving.”

Well, yes, that was the idea.

Klack. Klack.

I tried making them go faster.

Klat klat klat klat.

“It’s rocking.”

That might have just been because we weren’t on real roads. I used my Detection skill real quick to make sure no one was around, then had my bears head over to the road.

“Yuna, are you really sure it’s not too big?”

It sure did feel like the carriage was wider than the road itself. Maybe I needed to make it narrower then?

The tunnel was one way, so there wouldn’t be any cross traffic to worry about. The carriage could be on the slightly bigger side, though it wouldn’t be allowed in the tunnel if it took up the entire width of the road.

I let the two out of the carriage and then deconstructed it.

“It’s gone?” Shuri seemed disappointed.

“I messed it up a little,” I told her. “Gimme a moment.”

I started making a second version. I needed that part to be like this, and then this part needed to be like that, and this part like this...

By the time I was done, I’d made a bear bus—Just like that famous cat bus from a certain famous anime movie. The face was shaped like a bear’s, and I’d also given it legs, ears, and a tail. It was super sturdy thanks to the bear magic, so that was two birds with one stone. It wasn’t a long trip, and the monsters in the area had been slain by adventurers, but it was better to be safe than sorry with kids onboard.

“It’s a long bear!”

Shuri approached the bear bus, thrilled. Since there were so many people, I’d had to make it pretty long. I decided to figure out how to set up the seats after checking how comfortable the ride would be.

“Yuna, can we get on?”

“Sure you can,” I said. That was the whole reason why I’d brought them, after all.

Shuri got onto the bus and Fina followed behind. Kumayuru tried to squeeze in behind, but couldn’t stuff himself through the narrow entrance, so I miniaturized my bears. They clambered onto the bus; I followed at the end. Then I headed to the front where the driver’s seat was but found Shuri already there.

“Shuri, scoot over, will you?” I said, then took the seat for myself.

Instead of setting the driver’s seat up on one side, I’d placed it right at the center. Well, this was totally normal for a carriage. I’d never driven a car before, considering I was only fifteen. Plus I figured it’d be easier to drive if I was at the center rather than on one side or the other. I’d ridden in a carriage before, after all.

Once I got into the driver’s seat, Shuri and Fina sat down on either side of me. I grabbed the steering wheel.

“What is that, Yuna?” Fina asked me as she looked at the wheel. I figured she wouldn’t understand if I told her what it was.

“It’s the reins,” I answered.

“Those are reins...?”

I ran mana into the bus and the bear started to walk. *Thump, thump*, the bear made the whole thing rock as it took steps. Next, I had it run.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.

It was starting to rock way more now.

“Y-Yuna, th-this h-h-hurts!” Fina said.

Thanks to my bear gear, I was fine, but the other two were having a rough time. The way things clattered and bumped she couldn’t even get a whole, non-vibrated word out. Kumayuru and Kumakyu ran on all fours, but this was a whole different experience than riding them. I guess they were just special. Also, the bear bus was really long—it even had eight feet.

I sped the bus up and then had it jump.

“Yuna!”

“Yuna!”

Both Fina and Shuri were shouting as they clung to me. We landed in one piece, but Fina and Shuri bounced a little.

“Ugh, that hurt...”

“Ow, my bum...”

The two of them were rubbing their butts.

“Sorry. I just wanted to see if it’d work,” I said.

Looked like my bus couldn’t run through the mountains or jump like the cat bus from my memory. Not without giving the passengers a real bad time, anyway. Maybe giving the bus legs instead of wheels was the wrong call?

This would’ve worked if I were the only one riding in it. But if it were just me, riding Kumayuru and Kumakyu was preferable anyway. It would’ve been the ride of my dreams if it worked, but I supposed it just wasn’t meant to be.

So, poof, I changed the legs into normal old wheels. Magic sure came in handy.

The finished product looked a whole lot like a kindergarten bus—like it’d been designed in the shape of a character. It was kind of one of those blue steam engines with a face on it, or like one of those buses you’d see in Japan with a yellow mouse on them.

“It’ll be better this time, so hop on,” I urged them.

The two gave me dubious looks.

“You won’t make it jump again?”

“I promise I won’t. See, there aren’t even any legs on it this time. It has wheels, like a normal coach.”

After confirming it had wheels, the two of them got back onto the bear bus.



I sat in the driver's seat and grabbed the steering wheel. Then I let my mana flow again. The bus slowly started to move. The ride wasn't too bad now that we were on a maintained roadway.

When I drove more mana into the bus, the wheels started to spin faster, and we built up speed. We weren't driving on concrete, though, so the faster we went, the rockier the ride was.

"Are you two all right?"

"Better than last time. But..."

Fina seemed very concerned about her butt.

"I like riding on Kumakyu and Kumayuru better," Shuri proclaimed, which earned happy croons from said bears.

No argument from me, especially since I had to steer the bear bus. With my bears, I could take a nap and they'd get me right to my destination. When it came down to it, the bear bus just had a lot of down sides: I couldn't sleep in it and worse, it wasn't even comfortable. It was still faster than any carriage and didn't rock as much as one either. Plus it was safer. It was also the best way to transport the number of adults we had with us.

We'd had to go through a lot to get to this point, but in the end, we settled on riding on the bear bus to our destination. The next problem was fitting everyone inside, but I had Fina and Shuri sit on the seats and we figured out exact spacing. Finally, once we got back to town, I bought some cushions to protect everyone's bums from pain.

And with that, the bear bus was ready for action.

CHAPTER 355

THE BEAR GOES TO THE ADVENTURERS' GUILD

THE DAY AFTER I made the bear bus, I headed off to the Adventurers' Guild.

Making the bus the day before got me thinking about who I was taking. We were basically all women and children, plus Gentz, who was the only adult man. We'd need guards. Plus I figured Gentz would stick to hanging out with his own family rather than spend his time looking out for the women and orphans. Ans, Nerin, Karin, and Liz were all super young. I didn't want them to have to deal with creepy men making any kind of moves. My precious little employees were being entrusted in my care by their parents. When I thought of it that way, it seemed I'd better get enough guards to look after both the kids and the women.

I couldn't keep an eye on everyone every second of the day either. There were just too many people, and they'd all probably split up, ergo: hiring guards.

The first person I thought of was Gil. Gil was a pretty burly dude with a frightening face. As long as he was around the women and children, the creepy men would probably be too scared to approach anyone, let alone anything else. And then Gil already knew the kids. He visited the shops pretty often, so he knew Karin and the rest of them. They wouldn't be scared of him.

I was really hoping I could get Rulina to come, too. There was a little girl who was still scared of Gil, so I figured she could hang out with Rulina instead. She was an adventurer in her own right and could handle protecting a little girl.

I headed into the guild and checked out who was there. Several groups of adventurers were sitting and chatting away, but I didn't see Gil or Rulina around. Gil was huge so he was hard to miss. You could basically tell right away whether he was in or not. Maybe he was already doing a job?

I'd come by at a time when I could avoid the rush, so the adventurers who were around seemed sleepy, like they'd already written off working the rest of the day. Generally

the guild was busiest in the mornings when they'd get quests and in the evenings when they'd return after they finished their work. Any adventurers hanging out in the guild outside of those times were generally there to collect information or were waiting for new quests to drop.

"Miss Yuna, is something the matter?"

As I was looking around, Helen called out to me from the reception desk where she was sitting. That was perfect timing as far as I was concerned.

"I'm looking for Rulina and Gil," I explained.

"Rulina and Gil, you say? I believe they're out for a little while."

"Really?"

I guess they won't be able to come to the beach with us, then.

"Did you have business with them?"

"I had something I wanted to ask them," I explained.

"Would you like me to inform them once they've come back?"

I had no idea when that'd be, so I considered it.

"Hmm," I said. "Well, if you wouldn't mind?"

I told her I was planning on going to Mileela with the orphans and wanted to ask Rulina and Gil to be their guards.

"Now that you mention it, I do think I heard about that trip," Helen said.

"I'm also bringing everyone from the shops too. But how did you know about that?"

I wondered if she'd seen the notices in the shops. Tiermina had said she'd put up the fliers right away, after all.

"Gentz asked for time off to go and has been working even on his days off, so all the guild employees are aware."

Ah, so they'd found out through Gentz.

"Is Gentz, uh, doing okay, physically?" If he was tired from all that working, I'd need to give him some of the sacred tree tea. It'd be a big deal if he collapsed right before the big trip, after all.

"I think he should be fine," Helen said. "He seems to be looking forward to going out with his family. He's always so upbeat while he's working."

Well, that sounded fine then.

"I'm somewhat jealous though," Helen continued. "I wish I could go to the beach too."

"In that case, would you like to come along?"

I heard something behind me. When I turned to look, some male adventurer's heads snapped to look away. One of them was even whistling. Even I could read what was what, as dense as I was. The adventurers liked Helen. She was pretty. Helen herself was oblivious, though.

"You're welcome to join us, Helen."

Adding one more person wouldn't be an issue.

"Ha, thank you, but I'll have to decline, though I'm very grateful for the sentiment. I hope that all of you enjoy yourselves."

Too bad. Helen was always helping me out, so I'd been hoping to pay her back.

I left Helen with the message for Rulina and Gil and headed out.

Next, I went to the Bear's Lounge. Since I wasn't going as a customer, I headed in through the back door. Morin and the kids worked in the kitchen. It was past the noon rush so they wouldn't be slammed.

I headed into the kitchen and the kids noticed me and ran over.

"Yuna!"

"Are we really going to the ocean?"

"Yeah, we really are."

When I told them that, the kids in the kitchen started to make a commotion. They were all grins and chattering: "Yay!" "So it was real...!"

Their smiles were infectious.

"Yuna, can I go, too?" Nerin asked as she was baking cookies.

"Yeah, we're all going," I told her.

"Oh, but I've only been working here a few months..." she said. "You're really taking me on the trip, too?" She seemed worried she hadn't earned it.

"You've already put in the work," I told her. "You did a ton of hard work trying to perfect the cakes and you even came up with some new ones."

"But I could only do that because you showed me it. I couldn't have made one by myself."

"Well, anyway, don't worry too much about it. I just want to thank everyone for all their work."

"Are you sure?" she asked. She didn't seem comfortable with the idea the trip came without some price to pay.

While we were really getting into talking about the trip, Morin, the head of the shop, came in.

"Look, I know you're all happy that Yuna's come to visit, but you need to get some work done, too. Nerin, you can't just start chatting away with the children."

"Auntie Morin, I'm so sorry."

The kids and Nerin headed back to work.

"I'm sorry for interrupting work, Morin." I made sure to apologize, too.

"I'm not upset or anything. I know everyone's looking forward to going to the ocean. They have to use knives and work the fires though, so I need them to concentrate on

the work or it becomes a little dangerous.”

Morin was completely right: there were a lot of dangers in the kitchen. If they made even the tiniest mistake, it could result in a terrible injury.

“So, Yuna, are we really going on a ten-day break like Tiermina said? If we take that many days off, we won’t be able to make any sales...” Morin seemed to be worried about the same exact thing as Tiermina.

I was only planning on going to Mileela itself for a week, but after talking with Tiermina we’d decided to take the days off before and after too. They needed time to prep for the trip, and then time to recuperate after.

“It should be fine. You’ll still be paid as usual,” I said.

“That’s not what I’m worried about though...”

Then what could she have been worrying about?

“If the shop is closed for our holiday, we won’t make any money during that time. And you even want to pay us while we’re not working? I just don’t understand,” Morin said.

Was that how normal people thought? In my old world, it was called a paid vacation—emphasis on the paid. I personally hadn’t ever had one, seeing as how I was just fifteen, but I knew they existed. It was a system that let you take days off without losing any income.

“Can we really enjoy ourselves when we know the shop is closed?”

“Think of it as a thank you for working so hard all the time,” I said.

“I’m just grateful to have work to do, Yuna.”

“Also, I don’t want you to get headhunted, Morin. Make sure to tell me if anyone approaches you. I’ll give you a better offer than them for sure.”

“Ha ha ha! I don’t think I’ll ever find a place better than this,” Morin said with a hearty laugh.

Since she’d worked all this time without taking days off, the prospect of a long break

might actually be making her anxious. Personally, I thought she was due for a nice summer holiday.

Well, it was kind of odd for me to say this since I'd lived my life up to now like every day was Sunday. I stayed at home, played games, and read manga. But sometimes? People just need a vacation. I understood that deep in my bones: after all, I'd been working nonstop since coming back from Dezelt.

Everyone needs a break sometimes.

If I hadn't had my bear gear, I probably would've been bedridden for days, but a break was good for me, nonetheless. This whole thing had been my big idea, actually, so it'd be kinda ridiculous of me to complain about it. Once I got back to Mileela, I'd be able to have the actual break I'd been wanting.

Yes. In due time, the bear would lounge!

CHAPTER 356

THE BEAR HEADS TO THE BEAR DINING ROOM

SINCE I NEEDED to get out from underfoot, I only did a quick check-in with Karin and the kids on the shop floor before leaving the bakery. After that, I headed to Anz's shop, the Bear Dining Room. Since the shops were near each other, it was easy enough to get there. When I'd gotten to the Bear Dining Room, it was already past the rush, so unlike the bakery, there weren't any customers around. But the Bear's Lounge served cakes, and they seemed to have an endless stream of customers.

"Yuna?"

"Oh, it really is her."

Inside, Seno and Forne noticed me as they were wiping down tables.

"Are you here for a meal, Yuna?"

"No, I stopped by to check in with you all," I said.

"To check in?"

"Are you all free right now?"

"We're about to prep for dinnertime, but we have a moment right now."

I called over Anz and Bettie too, and we all convened at a nearby table.

"So, Miss Yuna, what did you want to talk to us about?"

I looked at Anz, then at each of the three other women helping run the restaurant.

"I'm checking in to make sure you really want to go back to Mileela," I said. "I wanted to let you know that if you don't want to go back there and would rather stay in Crimonia, you can."

“Yuna...”

Once they realized what I was trying to say, the three helping Anz looked back at me, serious. I didn’t know all the details, but Anz had told me enough about their situation. When Mileela had been attacked by the kraken and bandits had blocked their only route of escape, all of them had lost someone important to them, whether it was their family, a lover, or friends.

Since they hadn’t wanted to stay in Mileela, Anz asked the three of them if they could work at my shop. Mileela was their home, but they still had traumatic memories of the place. It was all just only a few months behind them too. There was a chance they just weren’t mentally prepared to go back there. It’d be downright barbaric to just send them back without their previous circumstances even crossing my mind.

“You probably have bad memories in Mileela,” I explained. “So you don’t have to force yourselves to go back.”

“Thank you for thinking about us, Yuna. Truly.”

“All of us talked this over with Neaf. We’ll be fine,” Forne said with a smile.

Neaf worked in the orphanage, so they’d gone out of their way to include her in the conversation.

“We’re going to Mileela, too.”

They all looked at each other and nodded.

“We may have terrible memories there, but it’s still the town we were born and raised in.”

“And we have friends there, so we want to make sure they can see we’re alive and well.”

They didn’t seem like they were struggling with the decision. It looked like they really were going to be fine.

“You sure you’re not forcing yourselves to go?”

All three of them replied back that they weren’t.

"Neaf even said that she didn't have an excuse to bow out if all the children were going."

"I'm so glad she's doing better."

"Oh, she said that she's had her hands full with those energetic kids."

"But she also said they all listen to what she says and that they're good kids."

"That's all probably thanks to the headmistress of the orphanage."

The headmistress had done all she could to look after the kids, never abandoning them. She was really something.

"Though, Yuna, you're rather kind. No normal person would go to such lengths."

"And you saved Mileela too!"

"You even gave us new jobs."

"Thank you so much, Yuna."

I kind of felt embarrassed when they started thanking me again. I tried changing the subject so they wouldn't notice it bugged me.

"So, you're all ready to go then?" I asked.

"Are we really going to leave the restaurant unattended for ten entire days? Is that really what we're prepping for?"

That was what Morin had said too. Anz had come from an inn, so she might've worked year-round without breaks, come to think of it.

"I think it's very unusual to take everyone. And to close down the shops!"

"But you need to go home every once in a while," I said. If they worked all the time, they'd never be able to visit home.

"Normally, we'd take breaks one at a time for trips home."

"Well, I want to take everyone who works for me on this vacation," I said. "Though I guess it's not exactly a vacation if you're going back to your hometown, is it? Also, I promised Deigha you'd be able to visit. You've never requested a day off, Anz."

"Miss Yuna, it's only been a few months since I came to Crimonia. I don't think it'd be normal at all for someone to head home in just that amount of time. Actually, I think anyone who'd leave in that short time would be doing it to *run* back home."

"You really think so?"

"Some people don't go home for years while they're training," Anz continued. "And I could never ask you for a vacation when you've entrusted me with a whole restaurant."

"Especially since we already have one day off a week."

"That's so you can get some rest," I explained. "I mean, you might go on dates with a guy at some point, right, Anz?"

"D-dates?!" Anz seemed genuinely shocked I'd said that.

"Deigha asked me to find him a son-in-law," I said. "But I'm not going to be able to play matchmaker, so I figured I'd give you days off so you could go and do that on your own."

"That's completely uncalled for!"

"Wait, do you already have a boyfriend then?"

If she did, I'd need to tell Deigha right away. Then again, there was also a chance Deigha might kill the guy, so... maybe hold off on that.

"No! No way, no!"

Well, too bad. I'd been planning to give the lovebirds a quaint, possibly bear-shaped house if they married.

"So, what about you three?"

I eyed Seno, Forne, and Bettle next. All three of them turned away.

“I’ll consider it if Anz gets married.”

“Yes, if Anzy married someone, I might think about it.”

“I’m of the same thought.”

“Why does this all hinge on me getting married?! You’re all older! If anyone’s getting married first, it should be one of *you*!” Anz shot back.

“As your elder, I consider it my job to protect you, Anz.”

“We need to size up those boys in Deigha’s place, after all.”

“Your husband would more or less be our younger brother. Someone needs to scope him out.”

So if Anz were to date a guy, he’d have a set of three people to get through first—actually, make that four. Neaf would for sure get in on this. After he defeated our goldfish poop gang of four mini-bosses and got their permission, he’d get to face the final boss: Deigha.

Would Anz ever manage to get married...?

“Good luck, Anz,” I said. “I’m rooting for you.”

“Ugh, even you, Miss Yuna? The only thing on my mind is cooking.”

Maybe that was why Deigha had told me to find him a son-in-law. He’d been worried Anz wasn’t thinking about it. In any case, all I could do was watch from afar. I had no talents as a matchmaker. Though I did have one thing I could contribute to the effort...

“I’ll make sure to size him up too, so make sure to let me know when you start dating anyone.”

“*Miss Yuna!*”

Anz’s yell filled the whole restaurant.

Hey, Deigha had entrusted this with me—I kind of had to.

CHAPTER 357

THE BEAR GOES TO THE ORPHANAGE

AFTER I LEFT Anz's restaurant, I headed off to the orphanage next. I hadn't popped by since returning to town.

When I got close, I saw a bunch of kids energetically running around outside. They were playing tag or something like that. When one of them noticed me, they stopped and came running over to me.

"Yuna!"

As soon as one kid had spotted me, the rest gathered too. They were all smiles.

"Where's the headmistress?"

"She's here!" one of the kids said, latching on to my bear puppet. Some other kids grabbed onto my other hand, and when I ran out of hands to grab, they grabbed at my onesie. They were so happy that I didn't have the heart to bat them away. It was a little difficult to walk like that, but I decided I'd grin and bear it and headed off toward the building.

Inside, the kids led me to the headmistress. Well, I pretty much knew where she normally was, but I let the kids sweep me along, for fun.

We headed to the playroom, where the headmistress spent a lot of time with the kids. There she was with a few more children, just as expected.

"Miss Yuna?"

She noticed us as we came in. The kids who'd escorted me unlatched themselves and headed over to the headmistress instead. She seemed glad to see them. Guess like they liked her more than me, but that was to be expected. There are some people I can't compete with, bear gear or not, and I just couldn't compare to the headmistress or Liz. They'd spent years watching over the kids. That just about made them family. A cute bear's no match for that.

I headed over to where the headmistress was seated on the floor.

"Welcome back, Miss Yuna. I heard from Tiermina that you made it back from your job. Are you feeling well?"

"I'm fine," I answered.

I pretty much never got injured since I was wearing my bear gear. Actually, the only thing that could hurt me at this point was like a dragon or something. And if one did show up, I'd vamoose anyway. I did wanna try fighting one, but I also enjoyed *being alive*.

"Miss Yuna, I know you're an adventurer, but please don't push yourself too hard. If anything were to happen to you, the kids would be beside themselves," the head-mistress said as she stroked the hair of the child on her lap.

She had no clue how powerful I was, so she was genuinely concerned. What an incredibly kind lady.

I sat down next to her.

"Did anything happen while I was gone?"

"I think you make a guess from the looks on their faces."

The headmistress smiled as her gaze swept across the children in the room. They were spread out in the room reading books, clutching their bear stuffed animals, and generally having a nice time. And despite the activity of a room full of excited children, there were even a couple kids napping while clutching their Kumayuru and Kumakyu plushies.

Still, despite it, I didn't know the right answer for sure. If she'd ever had a bad day, the headmistress was the kind of person who would never show that to the kids. They probably only ever saw her smile. Because of that, I couldn't fully accept what she said at face value.

"That's all just because you make sure they have nothing to worry about," I said.

"That's not true. We're all quite happy, especially me since I can live with the children like this."

I guess it was all well and good as long as she was actually happy.

“Please let me know if you do run into any trouble though,” I told her.

If they ever did, I was sure I could help out. I was strong and absolutely loaded. I had powerful friends with real political power who’d do my bidding—both the guild masters in the town, and even Cliff, the feudal lord. Even the king himself wouldn’t refuse me.

Wait, does putting it that way make me sound like the villain?

“Ha ha ha. If that time comes, we’ll be counting on you,” the headmistress said, giving me a smile. I smiled in return.

“So, are Liz and Neaf around?”

They were usually done feeding the birds by now. I hoped Liz would be around. Neaf usually stuck near the headmistress.

“Tiermina tasked them with preparing everything we need to go to the beach, so they’ve taken some of the children shopping.”

So they were both out, then. I guess there would be a lot to prepare for this trip. I could get food together and a place for them to stay, but they’d need to buy clothes on their own. I didn’t even know what else they’d need, so there were probably other things too.

Since most things I needed were in my bear storage, I wouldn’t be caught unprepared. Most importantly, I didn’t need to pack a change of clothes.

“Are you really going to take all the children?”

“I want to reward them for working so hard all the time,” I said.

“We’re already grateful enough as it is that you’ve provided us with work. You have no idea how you’ve saved us, Yuna.”

All I’d done was point them in a direction that would let them make a livelihood. The kids handled the rest through sheer hard work and grit. That was how they’d gotten to where they were now. If they’d told me they didn’t want to take care of the birds, I

might've just walked away. That was why I wanted to take them to Mileela and to show how much I appreciated all their work.

"Don't worry about that. You should just enjoy yourself," I said.

While the headmistress and I kept talking about the beach, a little girl holding a Kumakyu plushie came over.

"Yuna, can we bring our bears with us, too?" the girl asked while clutching the Kumakyu plushie. Right as I'd been about to tell her yes, the headmistress got there ahead of me.

"You cannot. We promised not to bring too much luggage with us, remember?" the headmistress kindly warned the girl.

"But the bears need to come too...!"

"Headmistress, I wanna bring mine, too!"

"Me too!"

The kids all came by holding their stuffed animals and begging her to take them on the trip. With all those kids surrounding her, the headmistress seemed at a loss.

"We must limit the luggage we bring. And we will come back right away, so you only need to wait to see them a little while."

"Awww..."

They hugged the little faces of the bear plushies, squishing them into sad expressions.

"Um, headmistress," I said. "I think they could bring some stuffed animals. It wouldn't be too much."

"If I allow one of them to, they will *all* try to bring them. We have other luggage we need to carry, so the stuffed animals will be in the way."

She had a point—I guess there were a lot of them in the orphanage. I didn't think each orphan had one, but the girls all did, and so did the little kids. I suppose if they all did bring their stuffed animals, that'd be a lot of luggage.

I looked at the kids' faces. They were going to the beach for the express purpose of having a good time. If leaving behind their stuffed animals made them sad, I supposed they just had to bring them along. In a way, I was happy about it: that was proof of how much they liked the gift.

"In that case," I said, "try using this. It should fit the stuffed animals easily."

I handed the headmistress an item bag. It'd be able to fit about ten to twenty stuffed animals with room to spare.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm just glad they're enjoying my presents," I said. "And after seeing their faces, how could I possibly say no?"

Once I'd given my permission, the kids all looked ecstatic. I felt the same seeing them with the presents I gave them. It'd be super sad if the plushies had been collecting dust in a drawer somewhere.

CHAPTER 358

THE BEAR GOES TO SEE NOA

I TALKED WITH THE HEADMISTRESS, played with the kids, and then left the orphanage for Noa's house. If I didn't tell Noa I was back, she'd lay into me, I was sure of it. There were other reasons, too. I needed to let Cliff know I'd made it back from the capital. Plus I had that promise I'd made with Tiermina. But when I got there, Noa asked me for something she hadn't in a long while.

"Yuna, please give me my dose of bear energy!" she said as soon as I got there.

"Have you been doing all your studies?"

"I have," she insisted. "All so I can go to the beach. But I needed my dose of bear, and when I went to your house to get it, you weren't there."

"Didn't Cliff tell you that I was in the capital?" I'd asked him to tell her when he'd asked me to go.

"I thought you would hurry back on Kumayuru and Kumakyu," she said. It's true, my bears were faster than any horses. And of course, I had access to instant travel through the bear gate.

I summoned my bears so that she could get her "dose" of bear energy. Noa latched onto them happily.

"Mmm, comfy," she said.

I was surprised that something that was practically free could make a well-to-do daughter of an aristocrat so happy, but it was only natural. Hugging my bears had universal appeal.

"So, what business brings you to us today?" Noa asked. "Not that you need to have business to be welcome here, of course."

"We decided on the day we'd go to Mileela, so I guess I'm here to tell you about that."

“You’ve decided on a date?”

I nodded and told her the plan.

“We’re heading out at sunrise, so don’t be late,” I added.

“I’ll be sure to avoid sleeping in,” Noa squeezed her tiny hand into a determined fist.

It was sweet, but Noa’s very punctual maid, Lala, would probably be the one responsible for making it happen.

“If you were to allow me to borrow Kumayuru and Kumakyu, I would never be late...” she offered.

“They’re not up for borrowing,” I flatly rejected her.

“Oh. What a shame!”

As we were talking, Cliff came into the room.

“Pardon the interruption,” Cliff said upon entering.

“Father, is something the matter?”

“I heard Yuna’s voice, so I’m here to thank her personally.”

“For what she did at the capital?”

“Yes, that’s right. So, were you able to deliver *it* to His Majesty without incident?”

“Yeah, I managed it,” I said. “But then His Majesty had another job for me right after, so it took a while to get back.”

The king had asked me to go to Dezelt for another job, and it’d taken a while because I didn’t have a bear gate for instant travel.

“I see. I’m sorry for all the trouble,” Cliff said, unusually apologetic for once.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I told him. “And besides, I would’ve just said no if I didn’t want to do it. I’m glad I went through with it though, so don’t worry about it.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Oh. I guess he’d been feeling guilty for sending me to see the king.

“So, what brings you here today?”

“We have a date set for going to Mileela,” I told him, “So I’m here to tell you and Noa.”

Of course telling Cliff I was back from the capital had also been on the agenda, but I’d forgotten all about it after seeing Noa.

“Father, I’ve studied ever so much, so may I go too?”

“Yes, I did promise, after all,” Cliff answered. “But you’ll need to study hard until the day of departure.”

“Naturally,” Noa answered cheerfully.

“Yuna, if Noa behaves badly at all, feel free to scold her,” Cliff said. “I’m sure she would listen to you.”

“I would never,” Noa quipped.

“So you won’t complain even if the other children take the bears from you?”

Cliff actually pulled Kumayuru right from Noa’s embrace. She reached out and Cliff backed out of grabbing range. Meanwhile, Kumayuru crooned.

“Father! That’s terribly mean. Please give my bear back!”

“Is that what you plan to say to the other children?”

“Well...”

“You need to be aware of your own station and what you say to others,” Cliff told her. “If there’s only one thing you remember, make sure it’s that.”

Cliff returned Kumayuru to Noa’s arms.

“As lords of this fief, the townspeople are our assets. You mustn’t make them dislike

you," Cliff explained. "If that happens, you'll reap what you've sown. After all, a lord is only as good as the citizen's goodwill for them."

"I understand," Noa said.

"Good, though I know you wouldn't behave foolishly. But you're unusually stubborn on the subject of bears." Cliff patted Kumayuru on the head as Noa clutched my bear.

He was right. Noa was a good kid at heart, but she was a bit of a beast when it came to bears.

"Ugh..."

Noa was silent. Probably because the same thing had just occurred to her.

"If you don't want that other young girl, Fina, to grow to dislike you, you really should be much more patient about bear things."

"I-I understand..." she said.

I was surprised how well Cliff knew Noa though. I remembered the first time Noa and Fina had met. She kept telling Fina she wouldn't let the girl have my bears and insisted on sitting at the front. Ah, now that's what I call nostalgia.

But was Noa's fixation on bears my fault? When I saw her euphorically petting them, I realized the truth: I was responsible for her getting hooked on bears. I could only pray that one day she'd shake off the bear dependence.

Cliff told us he had work to do and excused himself.

"Oh, right. I had something to ask," Noa told me.

Noa looked up from the important task of grabbing Kumayuru and Kumakyu's front paws, feeling their ears, patting their tails, and petting them on the head to ask a question.

"Hm? What's that?" I asked. "You can't have Kumayuru and Kumakyu though."

"I'd love to have your bears, of course, but it isn't that," she told me. "Please don't assume bears are my *only* interest."

Wait, it's not about bears? I almost said, but that would have blown this whole conversation sky-high, so I held out.

"So, what was it you needed?"

"May I invite Misa to the beach trip as well?" she asked. "I don't think she's seen the ocean before either and I really would like to bring her with us."

Now, I hadn't been expecting that, but I would feel bad if we ended up leaving Misa out of the trip. We'd all gotten along really well in the capital, and she'd even invited me to her birthday party. Wasn't like adding one or two people to the roster changed much.

"I'm fine with it."

"Are you sure?" Noa asked. "Thank you. Then I'll write her a letter right now since we have so little time." She happily released my bears, sat down at her desk, and started drafting up a letter.

So, Misa then... She couldn't possibly come alone, so Gran was probably going to come with her. Not her parents too, right? Oh, and if Misa was coming, I could probably assume Marina's party would come as her guards. In that case, we'd have a lot more women around. If Gil tagged along, it'd be like a manga or light novel harem situation.

But now that it'd occurred to me, I considered things more deeply. If the situation were reversed and just one girl was with a bunch of guys, we'd be in danger of having a reverse harem on our hands. Maybe not the *fun* kind of dangerous. But then again, perhaps being around the opposite gender was fun all by itself? I was pretty sure none of the men going on the trip were the type to hit on girls.

Unless...?

Nah... Right?

It's not like wishing would change anything, but I prayed that the men were better behaved than that as I watched Noa write her letter.

"I've finished," she told me. "I'll ask Lala to send it."

She marched right out of the room as though she couldn't let a moment go to waste.

While she was off doing that, I just had a little lay about with my bears in the room.

Relaxing really was the best pleasure in life.

CHAPTER 359

THE BEAR MAKES ICE CREAM

AS THE WEATHER started getting toastier, our preparations for the trip to Mileela chugged along nicely. I couldn't feel the summer coming in because the bear gear spared me from the heat, but I could tell the seasons had changed from just looking around. Everyone (at least the people who were outside their houses) had switched to lighter clothes. They eyed me like they thought I must be cooking in my onesie.

It was only getting warmer. And on hot days like these, I always got one sweet, serious craving.

"I think I should be able to make *it*."

I tried to remember the process as I hugged my bears. As I was doing that, Fina and Shuri stopped by to deliver some eggs.

Perfect timing. I caught the two of them and ushered them inside.

"It's so hot today! Aren't you boiling, Yuna?" Fina asked as she wiped the stream of sweat off her forehead.

I was wearing my usual bear onesie, which of course looked sweltering. Fina and Shuri, on the other hand, were wearing light, adorable, refreshing clothes.

"I think I mentioned before it's special," I said.

"Huh, I see. Well, at least your house is nice and cool though, Yuna."

My bear house basically always stayed at a nice, comfortable temperature as long as I didn't open any windows. That was why it was handy in any climate where I set it up, whether that was a snowy mountaintop or a blistering desert.

"Here. Have some nice, cool water," I said, offering two cups to them. Gotta be nice after they'd been walking around in the outside heat. They both eagerly gulped it down.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks.”

“Any plans today?”

“No, we don’t have anything specific to do. Do you need me to do any harvesting?”

“Yeah, a little, but I wanna talk about something else.” I did want to ask her to help me with the scorpion, but that could be saved for next time.

“Something else?”

Hot summer weather meant cold food. In other words, ice cream. I could serve it to the kids in the bear bus or even on the sweltering beachside.

“I’m going to make a cold treat today and I want you two to help me,” I explained.

I’d need to make tons if I wanted enough for everyone going to Mileela, so I needed help. And ideally, each person would need two or three frozen treats each—well, the math started making me dizzy. I’d feel desperately lonely, shut in my house making treats without anyone to talk to. I remembered that time in the capital when I’d made all that pudding on my own.

This time we weren’t making it for the royal family, so I was pretty sure they’d help me out.

“A cold treat? Like shaved ice?”

“No, it’s something called ice cream.”

When I was looking into it, it seemed (within Crimonia at least) that shaved ice existed, but not ice cream.

“I want shaved ice though,” Shuri said in the teensiest voice.

“You do, Shuri?”

“Uh-huh...”

I could make her as much of that as she wanted. All you had to do was shave the ice and dribble some syrup on top. So before we made ice cream, I decided to make the two some shaved ice. I got a plate ready, used ice magic, and shaved the ice using some wind magic. There was a smooth scraping sound as ice shavings piled up on the plate.

Finally, I drizzled the top of the pile with fruit jam, honey, and sweet syrup. The flavored syrups we used in my old world—lemon, melon, strawberry, or Blue Hawaii—were obviously not available in this world. In Crimonia, they just used jam and sweet fruits.

Once I was done, the two dug right in. They seemed to like it.

“It’s so cold.”

“Yum.”

“So, this is what shaved ice is,” Fina said.

“Wait, you haven’t tried it before?”

“No, it’s our first time. We... um, until last year, Mom was...”

Right: I remembered when I’d first met Fina. Fina and Shuri hadn’t had a father, and their mother had been bedridden at the time. Fina spent all her time gathering herbs in the forest for her mom, harvesting with Gentz. She hadn’t had the money to spare for anything like this. They only had the time and money to survive.

If shaved ice made those kids this happy, I’d make it whenever they wanted.

“Have as much as you want,” I said.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks, Yuna,” Shuri said too.

They both kept shoveling it down, satisfied looks on their faces.

After a while...

“Yuna, I’m *cold*.”

“My tummy is starting to hurt a little.”

Well, there was such a thing as overdoing it.

“Careful to not overeat,” I warned them. “Here, have some hot tea.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks.”

Maybe it was my fault for serving them so much, but you know, they shouldn’t have overindulged. But seeing them enjoying it, though, I just had to give them more and more and... more. It was a bad habit of mine. That was probably why Tiermina accused me of being too soft on Fina and Shuri. Come to think of it, the headmistress and Cliff also accused me of spoiling the orphans and Noa.

I guess I was so rusty with my people skills that I automatically defaulted to that when people liked me. Maybe I couldn’t stand the thought of being disliked. But even if I wanted to fix it, I just couldn’t: and I couldn’t turn cold on them all of a sudden. Also—why would I do that? But, you know, I could probably stand to ease up on it a little.

After a little break, the two of them perked right back up. And, you know, the healing magic I secretly used on them probably helped. Now! Back to business.

“So, we’re making a frozen snack?” Fina asked.

“Yuna, is it a yummy snack?”

“If we do a good job making it, it should be downright delicious,” I answered. It’d be soooooo good if we did it right.

The steps to making ice cream were easy. The real issue was how to do everything in a large batch. I also was pretty hazy on the ingredient measurements. Couldn’t remember how much egg, milk, or sugar to use. If I had a computer, I would’ve just looked it up really quick. Ah well, no point in wishing for something I couldn’t have. I’d need to use my incomplete memories as a starting point. From there, I’d have to reach deep inside myself and trust my beary good instincts.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, I want to try too.”

Kind of a changed story for two girls who’d just been complaining of tummy aches. That seemed just like something Shuri would do though.

First I got egg yolks, milk, and sugar ready. I was pretty sure there were a few ways to make ice cream. You could use the whole egg or just only the yolk. Since it’d be a waste just to throw out the whites, I decided we’d use them as well.

I mixed the whites and sugar together to make a meringue. The next issue was how much sugar I needed—that I didn’t know at all. I decided the three of us would make three batches with different ingredient measurements, then we’d compare notes. Next, I added the yolks to the milk and whipped them together. I knew there was another technique that involved cooling the mixture as the milk was added, but I decided to stick to this method for now. Finally, in went the meringue I’d made at the beginning, and I gave everything a mix. All that done, I put everything into a container and put it in the freezer.

“Yuna, is this enough?”

“Mm. It should be done after we freeze it,” I said. “We need to watch the time and mix it every once in a while, I think.”

I didn’t really remember that part very well though. And when did the milk go in, again? Well, we could just experiment making it.

“Okay, how about we make the next batch,” I said.

I tried making a second batch using more or less the same process.

“Hey! Shuri, don’t lick that,” Fina said. Shuri had tried to get a taste of the meringue.

“Sorry...”

“It’s all over your mouth,” Fina said, bringing out a handkerchief and wiping Shuri’s face. What good sisters, helping each other out!

As I kept an eye on them, I kept going with the -ice-cream making. We tried all kinds of ratios and ingredients for the experiment. We’d have a lot of time before the ice cream would harden up, so no way to tell which batch tasted the best until they were

ready for eating. For now, I just focused on cranking out variations.

“Yuna, should I mix it?”

“Just a little,” I answered.

We were adding oran and other fruit, and in an effort to replicate matcha ice cream, we tested out adding tea, too. Really, though, I had no idea which batches would turn out the best. The biggest problem was still the proportions of the ingredients. Which was right?

“Shuri, that’s too much sugar!”

When I’d looked away for just a moment, I caught Shuri trying to pour a mountain of sugar in. I know kids just really like their sugar, but that much wasn’t going to work.

“Also, don’t forget to write notes about the measurements for the ice cream you’ve made,” I reminded them.



As we were making the second round of mixtures, our first batch had finished hardening.

“Okay, let’s try a quick little taste test,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Yay!” Shuri shouted.

We started our ice cream tasting. I took a bite—yeah, pretty good. It tasted like ice cream.

“It’s melting in my mouth,” Fina said. “It feels so interesting...!”

“Yum.”

I think they liked it.

Next, we tried out a batch Shuri had made. It was kinda cloying...

“Shuri, you must have dumped a lot of sugar in here.”

“But I thought it would taste better if it was sweeter!” she defended herself.

Well, okay, Shuri’s was a little on the sweet side, but it was ice cream nonetheless, which meant it was still pretty good. We finished up the day of ice cream making and taste testing. Some of the batches still weren’t done, so trying those would have to wait until tomorrow. I was gonna take the best-tasting ice cream and make a bunch of it. *Here’s hoping it’ll work.*

CHAPTER 360

THE BEAR TRIES ICE CREAM

WE'D SPENT YESTERDAY experimenting with making a ton of different batches of ice cream. Since we hadn't been able to try all of them, we'd set aside today to taste the rest of the mixes. But when Fina and Shuri arrived, invited, to my bear house, I found Tiermina had tagged along, too.

"Uh, Tiermina, what brings you here today?"

"I heard that you made another strange food, so I simply had to investigate," she answered.

Strange? It was just a little ice cream, nothing strange about it.

"Don't start new projects when there's already so much to do, please," Tiermina begged me. There was a note of sternness. She completely misunderstood what I was doing.

"I'm not," I told her. "This isn't for the restaurant or the bakery. I just wanted to make a frozen treat for the beach."

"You really mean that?" She looked at me dubiously.

What did I do to deserve that?

"Really. I wouldn't create any trouble for you, Tiermina."

At least not right now... I said internally.

"Well, all right then," she finally said. "Fina asked for a lot of eggs, so I was wondering what you were up to."

It's true. I had asked Fina yesterday to tell Tiermina to give me any extra eggs. Apparently that'd alarmed Tiermina, then she'd asked Fina why I needed them, and they'd all come together to my house to deliver the eggs.

What did she think of me then if she just assumed I was up to no good? I wasn't sowing trouble everywhere I went... Well. Not every time.

"So, I heard it's tasty and cold. What are you making?"

"Yeah, it's a cold treat," I said. "If you have the time, you could try a little and tell me what you think."

"Oh, you'd let me do that?"

Well, yeah, it was a taste test. The more the merrier. Plus, a second opinion from an adult would be handy.

"Let me know what you think. Like, if it's good or bad, or if you think it needs more or less sugar. You can even tell me if it's bland. Whatever comes to mind. Shuri always says that the sweetest ice cream needs to be even sweeter, so."

She'd done the same when we'd made pudding too. I was pretty sure figuring out how sweet to go would be the biggest issue.

"Ha! Got it. I know exactly what to do," Tiermina replied.

I heard Shuri mumble, "It's better sweeter..."

"Moderation is important, especially when it comes to sweet things," Tiermina said, placing a hand on Shuri's head.

And with that, we started up our taste testing again. I pulled out a cup of ice cream that said "Fina 1" and started to divide it up into small portions for tasting. The labels helped us keep track of the ingredients in each mixture, as well as who made them.

"So here's the frozen treat Fina and Shuri were talking about then."

"It's called ice cream," Shuri said.

Tiermina brought a spoonful to her mouth. Fina and Shuri did the same.

"My... it's very good," she said.

"Yes, it's good."

“Yuna, it’s yummy!”

“It melts right away, though, unlike ice,” Tiermina observed. “What an odd sensation...”

Apparently, it’d turned out even better than expected. It wasn’t too sweet, so the sugar ratio must have been perfect.

Just as I’d expect from Fina.

We kept plowing ahead, trying out the ice creams. Some had frozen solid and had a mouthfeel like frozen candy. Those batches were good in their own way though. We hadn’t come across any that were inedible yet, which I thought was overall a win.

We’d made ice cream.

I got the result I’d been expecting. Based on the feedback (what they were saying and the delighted looks on their faces) it seemed like they liked the softer ice creams the best. They enjoyed the creamy sensation in their mouths. “Ice candy” wasn’t bad, but nothing beats real ice cream, especially when it’s homemade.

“There were some that needed more flavor or that were too sweet, but they were all pretty good,” Tiermina said.

“Shuri made the super sweet ones,” Fina said.

We picked out the versions we liked best to bring on the trip.

“Okay, so we’ll need a ton of eggs to make this ice cream,” I said.

I had a ton already in my bear storage. I mean, I’d used a ton of them for the ice cream yesterday, though, so having more couldn’t hurt. We were gonna use a lot again today. It wasn’t a bad idea to keep my stock full, for my own personal use.

“All right. I’ll send any leftover eggs to you before anyone else,” Tiermina promised.

Usually, any leftover wholesale eggs not sold to the guild would be used as ingredients at the Bear’s Lounge, for Morin’s new breads, Nerin’s new cakes—that sort of thing. Any eggs left over after that, I’d take them. When I wasn’t around, the guild would buy them wholesale for dirt cheap.

Tiermina also lent a hand with making the ice cream, which I was happy to accept. Many hands make light work and all that.

“So then if we add it to the mold, it should be done?”

“You just need to pour it right in,” I told her.

“Maybe we could even make bear-shaped ones,” Tiermina said.

“*Why* are we talking about bears during ice-cream making?” I said.

“It’s just... I think that we could sell bear-shaped ice cream. They’d do well at one of the businesses.”

“I thought you just asked me not to add another thing for you to take care of, Tiermina...”

“Well, I did, but I’m also in charge of finances, so my mind ends up gravitating toward sales,” Tiermina said.

Wait, was Tiermina always like this? Maybe I’d been leaving her to manage things for so long that it’d started consuming her life?

I put a temporary halt on the ice cream business talk.

“Mm, it is very tiring making so much of it,” Tiermina said, rubbing her lower back. I could’ve quipped back, “Are you already that old?” but I held my tongue. Fina and Shuri were also wilting from fatigue.

“Ugh, my arms are tired,” Fina said.

“So tired...” Shuri echoed.

Yesterday, we’d just made little samples, but today we made enough for everyone going to the beach. I wanted to make sure to have one per day for each person, so that meant making three servings per trip attendee.

I didn’t need to do the exact math to know that was a *lot* of ice cream.

“Fina, how’s it going?”

"Um, they look like this," she said, and turned around. She had a little cream on her nose.

Like sister, like... other sister, I suppose.

"Gorgeous. It suits you."

I wiped the dollop on her nose off with a handkerchief while I checked on the whipped cream she'd been mixing. Finally, we moved the finished ice cream to a big freezer at the end of the room.

"What a large freezer! You're certainly prepared," Tiermina commented.

The one I normally used was waaay too small, of course, so I'd gotten this one specially for the purpose.

"But why is it bear shaped?"

I didn't dignify the question with an answer.

CHAPTER 361

THE BEAR ASKS FOR THE SCORPION TO BE HARVESTED

THANKS TO EVERYONE'S COOPERATION, we'd made an absolute ton of ice cream.

"Fina, Shuri, Tiermina, thank you so much," I told them.

"I'm exhausted after that big batch we made."

"I want to try it soon." Shuri eyed the freezer.

"Not until the beach," I warned. We'd already had plenty while taste testing.

"Well, I'll head out to buy groceries for dinner," Tiermina said.

"Me too!" Shuri raised her hand.

Fina tried to tag along, but I stopped her.

"I had something I wanted to talk with you about, Fina, so could you stay behind? Could I borrow her for a little longer?"

"Yes, of course," Tiermina said. "But make sure she comes home before dinner."

Tiermina smiled as she led Shuri out of the bear house.

"Um, so what did you want to ask me, Yuna?"

"Fina, do you know what a scorpion monster is?"

"A scorpion? I've seen it in the monster encyclopedia at the guild, but I don't know much about them."

There weren't any scorpions in these parts—made sense.

“Why do you ask?”

“You know how I headed off on a job for the king a few days ago, right?”

“Yes.”

“I slayed a scorpion on that job, so I was hoping you could harvest the parts.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not sure. I’ve never tried before,” Fina said, apologetically.

“Well, I don’t wanna twist your arm or anything. You don’t have to feel bad,” I said.

“But I promised to harvest all your monsters for you, Yuna...”

Oh, right: she had. When I’d first met Fina, Gentz had asked me to make Fina my personal monster harvester. Technically, we had a deal.

“It’s okay if you make mistakes. Do you want to try practicing?”

“Practicing...?”

“I’ve slayed a ton of ‘em, so I have extras. It’s okay if you make a mistake,” I told her.

“No. That would be a waste of materials.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” I told her. I had a ton of scorpions in my bear storage, so losing a few parts for educational purposes wasn’t going to be so bad. Fina didn’t seem to agree though.

“Oh, I can’t. It’s so dangerous slaying monsters and you risk your life to do it. I couldn’t make a mistake when you had to go through all that to get them.”

This wasn’t entirely silly of her. Most people would be pretty bummed out if a monster they’d struggled to defeat ended up mangled because of a botched harvest job.

“But I think anyone’s going to make mistakes on their first harvest of a new monster. Making mistakes is how you learn. It’s natural.”

“But...” Fina just wasn’t convinced. “Oh, can I ask Dad to do it?”

“You mean Gentz?”

“Yes, Dad used to be an adventurer, so he’s been all sorts of places. I’m sure he knows how to harvest a scorpion, no problem.”

Gentz was Fina’s harvesting teacher. He’d also done the harvesting work on the black viper. He probably would know how to do it, then. I hadn’t wanted to treat the scorpions like they were precious to me or something, but if I had Gentz harvest the scorpions, Fina could learn how to do it properly herself. Someone to teach you these things made a huge difference.

“You’re right. Let’s ask him then,” I concluded.

“Okay!”

Fina and I made off to the guild to find Gentz right away. We headed straight to the slain-monster handling area. After a quick search, we found him talking to the guild master near the wall.

“Looks like they’re busy. Let’s wait for a little bit,” I said.

“Yes.”

While we were keeping an eye on their conversation to see when it’d end, the two of them noticed us.

“Fina and Yuna? What’re you two doing here?”

“We had something to ask you, Gentz,” I said.

“Me?”

I glanced at the guild master. I really didn’t want too many people in on the scorpion news, if I could manage it.

“What? Am I in the way?” the guild master asked.

I wanted to say yes, that he definitely was very in the way, but I couldn’t say something quite that blunt to his face.

"You're not, but don't you have work to get back to?"

"My instincts tell me you've brought trouble in with you," the guild master said as he smirked at me.

He could keep his *instincts* to himself, thank you very much.

"It's not trouble that I'm bringing in," I said. "I just had something I needed to ask Gentz."

"Ask away."

This thick as a brick guild master seriously wasn't taking the hint. Ugh.

"..."

Dead silence spread between us.

"Well, uh, if you don't have any business with me, then I'll just head back to work," Gentz said and tried to flee from the tension between me and the guild master. I took advantage of the situation he'd presented.

"You're right. Then let's talk after work. Fina, that works for you, right?"

"I don't mind it either way," Fina looked between me and the guild master as she responded.

"I mind. If it's a secret from me, I'm going to hear it."

He blocked my escape.

Okay, well, as long as I didn't tell him about the boss scorpion, I guess this wouldn't balloon into a whole thing.

"Okay, okay. You just want me to talk about it, I got it. But you better not make a big deal about it."

"I'll decide after I hear what's going on."

Strongman or headstrong? Why not both? I sighed and gave in.

"Gentz, do you know how to harvest a scorpion?"

"A scorpion? Well, I have, so sure. Do you have one?"

"Well, yeah. I wanted Fina to do it, but she says she's never done it before, so we came here to ask you instead."

"They don't really turn up here, after all," Gentz said. "Can't help that Fina's never handled one before."

They mostly lived in the sand—or so I'm told.

"Out of all things, it's just scorpion harvesting? I thought it'd be a way bigger piece of trouble," the guild master burst out as he listened. Well, his fault for assuming. It wasn't like I'd lied to him.

"There aren't many in these parts," I said. "I didn't want people thinking it was weird I had them on me."

"I suppose you're right. Granted, you and your item bag are never normal."

Congrats on identifying the point and blurting it out. Good job. Are ya happy?

"So, you came here to let Gentz handle the scorpion?"

"Fina's still learning about harvesting, so I wanted him to teach her while doing it."

"In that case, the parts will be the property of the guild. There are other employees who don't have experience with them either, so it'll be good for them to learn with."

"But I thought scorpions don't ever pop up in this town?"

"It might cause a small commotion, but we'll just keep guild business within the guild. That should work fine. You're good with that, aren't you, Gentz?"

"As long as my daughter can join," Gentz said.

"Obviously, she can. So, how many you got on ya, Yuna?" The guild master switched gears. "They're in that bear item bag you've got?"

Was it really okay to tell him the truth? How many would start making people freak out? Context: I had about a hundred of them. Had to be on par with a hundred wolves, right?

"Well, this is you we're talking about, so there must be about ten of them. Come on, you can spare them."

Uh, more like ten times that and the boss scorpion to complete the entire set. I decided to go with the guild master's expectations instead.

"Yeah, I have ten, just like you said," I told him.

"Called it! We can't get those parts here easily and they're good for making armor from the shells. The other guild will be thrilled too."

The boss scorpion's shell was hard, but the normal scorpions didn't seem like they were all that hard. I guess they could be strengthened with some sort of processing or something. Were they boiled? I thought of crabs and shrimp in a big bubbling pot. Mmmmm, that sounds heavenly. Maybe I'd have some hot pot when it got colder. If I headed back to the elven homeland, I could even source mushrooms for the hot pot, too. Did I really have to wait for the seasons to turn? Mmm, probably, though summer hot pot didn't sound too bad either.

"Do they taste good?" I asked.

"Yeah, pretty good."

"Then could I have a little bit of the meat?"

"How much do you need?"

"Just a little so I can get a taste." If I wanted more, I could just ask Fina to harvest the rest of the scorpions.

"Looks like we've struck a deal, then. So, when do you want to deliver them? Since you didn't want me knowing about them, you probably don't want anybody knowing you brought them in either."

"Yeah, but if you keep this within the guild, we don't need to bother with that."

"Hmm, we got some loose tongues around here, so... How about tomorrow morning then? There won't be as many people around."

The guild was open all hours of the day, but that didn't mean that they had a full staff of guild employees constantly on standby. They just had a few staff members stationed at night for emergencies. There wouldn't be a ton of people around in the morning before real guild work began.

The issue now was that I'd need to wake up super early to make this happen. Looked like I'd need a little assistance from my bears.

I agreed with the plan to come early tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER 362

THE BEAR GOES TO THE GUILD TO HAND OVER THE SCORPIONS

THE NEXT DAY Kumayuru and Kumakyu—my bear alarms—woke me up. I was glad I got up before they really got creative trying to wake me. If I didn't wake up for something gentle, they'd have resorted to something a little scary for sure. It'd start with the gentle butterfly taps. If that didn't work, they'd swat me harder and harder. If that failed, they'd put their full weight on my stomach. Their last resort was lying on my face. That one actually suffocated me, so I wish they wouldn't do that.

Thankfully, today, the gentler swatting worked fine.

"Good morning, you two," I said.

I rubbed my eyes and got up. Ugh, still tired. It was gloomy out too. I hadn't been awake this early in a while, but I needed to get to the guild before the workers came in today to deliver the scorpions as agreed.

Okay, so what was I going to do about breakfast? I kind of felt like it was a little too early to eat, so I consulted my stomach and we mutually agreed we'd have something once I got back from the guild. I changed from my white bear onesie to my black one, then told my bears, "Okay, I'm off." They both crooned in response.

On the way, my bears plodded along behind me in their miniature form. I'd sometimes bring them with me on walks like this when we were up early. Since the town was empty at this hour, there was no one to be shocked by them and nobody would bother us.

As I walked toward the guild, an older guy I recognized but didn't know by name greeted me. I gave him a good morning back. My bears also crooned their greetings. The neighborhood knew about my bears, so they usually weren't surprised to see us having a stroll.

I stifled a yawn. The morning air was nice, but I couldn't shake off my fatigue. I was

sorely tempted to turn Kumayuru to full size so I could ride there instead. As I was thinking that though, I caught sight of the guild. Gentz and Fina were already there waiting.

“Good morning, you two,” I said.

“Good morning!”

“I’m surprised you’re here on time.”

“I’ve got two bears here to wake me up at the right time,” I said, crouching down to pat my bears on their heads. They were the best alarm clocks ever.

“Kumayuru, Kumakyu, good morning,” Fina said and joined me in giving bear pats.

“Sorry for doing this now, but we should move. We met at this time because you don’t want anyone finding out, right?”

Right. I couldn’t have anyone seeing me. We headed behind the guild to the warehouse where the harvesting was done.

“Okay, take them out whenever you’d like.”

I produced ten scorpions, ready for harvesting as per our negotiations yesterday.

“Now these things take me back,” Gentz said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, back when I was an adventurer, I used to harvest them plenty, but I haven’t since joining the guild.”

“So there aren’t a lot of them around?”

“You see them sometimes. A wandering adventurer might bring them in, even. You might get some people talking, but they probably won’t suspect it was you.”

I didn’t mind talking as long as my name wasn’t the subject.

“So, we can take the shells then?”

“Yeah. I just want a little bit of the meat.”

I wanted to try it. I hoped it’d taste like shrimp or crab. Maybe Anz and Morin knew how to cook it. I’d have to ask.

“Got it. I’ll bring it over to you after work today.”

“I could come to pick it up,” I said.

“Then there’d be no point being sneaky to hide this,” he pointed out. “Do you want people to know or not?”

He had a point. People would start suspecting me if I swung by for a pickup.

“So, can I leave this to you?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

It was settled. He was going to come by my house to drop off the scorpion meat.

“Well then, Fina. I’ll teach you the basics before the other workers come in, so watch carefully.”

Gentz pulled out a harvesting knife and approached the scorpions.

“Okay, Dad,” Fina said. The word came easily to her now, though I kind of missed when he used to be Uncle Gentz to her.

Fina also brought out her knife, which wasn’t the mithril knife I’d gifted her.

“You’re not using the mithril one?”

“I told her not to,” Gentz explained. “If she gets too used to it, it’ll get too easy to harvest and she’ll start forgetting the basics. That’s why I teach her how to use a regular knife for anything that doesn’t require mithril.”

I suppose I understood. But I’d gone to all that trouble buying her the knife and now that I knew she wasn’t using it, I was kind of sad.

“Then I’ll bring a monster that needs to be harvested with a mithril knife next,” I said.

"Just what are you planning on making my daughter harvest...?" Gentz said, looking at me with exasperation. "Fina, you will need to get the mithril knife ready. There are some things you won't be able to harvest without more physical strength. I think you'll be able to manage with the mithril though."

"Yes."

"Once the other workers come in, make sure to put it away. They'll get jealous if they know you have that."

Gentz was right. Maybe it wasn't so good for word to spread that Fina had a mithril knife. The knife was considered a high-class item, after all: someone might try to pilfer it, so Gentz was right. Fina gave a nod to Gentz and with that, he got to work.

That was perfect timing for my stomach to growl. The two were so focused on their work, they didn't even react.

"Well, I'm headed home," I said.

"If you slay any other uncommon monsters, make sure to bring them by," Gentz told me.

Let's see, I had the scorpion boss, the sand wyrm boss, and a few normal sand wyrms as well. I really wanted to see how Gentz would react if I just whipped those out of storage, but I didn't want to cause a commotion, so I was content with just my imagination.

I left Gentz and Fina for home and breakfast.

CHAPTER 363

THE BEAR CHECKS OUT THE SWIMSUIT

I YAWNED AS I FINISHED my breakfast. I'd woken up early today so I was tired, but I had nothing going on the rest of the day. I'd been booked solid since returning to Crimonia, but today, there wasn't anyone who would've gotten mad at me if I went back to sleep.

I took my bears back to my bedroom and collapsed straight into bed. I didn't even change into my white bear suit.

"I'm just shutting my eyes for a few minutes, so keep it down," I said.

My bears joined me on the bed and curled up into balls. Apparently they thought a nap sounded pretty good, too.

I snuggled up to Kumayuru and drifted right off to sleep.

"...na..."

Something was shaking me.

"...wake up."

Another shake.

"Yuna, wake up."

"Kumayuru?" I asked.

"Not Kumayuru!"

"Kumakyu...?" I tried again.

"No! It's Shuri."

Shuri? I opened my eyes to find Shuri had climbed on top of me.

"You're finally awake!" she said.

When I started to shift to prop myself up, she tipped off of me.

"What are you doing here, Shuri?"

"I'm done helping Mom with work, so I went to see Fina at the guild. Then Dad and Fina were harvesting a scowpun monster. I told them I wanted to help, but they said I wasn't ready for a scowpun, and Dad wouldn't let me. So I came to ask you if I could harvest it, but you were sleeping."

They were right though—scorpions were way too advanced for her.

"I think you're not quite ready for them either," I told her.

"You too? But I can do, I know I can," Shuri pouted slightly.

"You might be able to manage it, but this is the first time even Fina is handling one. You could wait until you're ten and it'd still be advanced."

Even ten was already really young for harvesting work. I was fifteen and an adventurer, but I couldn't manage a harvest. I guess now that I thought of it, Shuri was already super impressive.

"I wanna grow up faster!" she declared.

"It'll happen fast enough, so don't wish for it any sooner," I told her, placing a hand on her head. "I'm impressed you got inside my house."

I decided it was best to redirect her a little.

"Kumayuru let me in," she said.

"Kumayuru did?"

"Cwoom," Kumayuru replied.

So my bear had somehow realized we had a visitor and welcomed them for me. What

skilled bears. Though, then again, they shouldn't have been letting people in at random. I guess it was okay since it was Shuri.

"So, what time is it?" I asked.

"It's past noon," she said.

Wait, come again?

"It sounded like you said noon," I said. "I must've misheard."

"It's past noon," Shuri repeated, definitively.

I guess I'd slept in a lot since getting home. Not like I was skipping out on some plans, but still. I hadn't known I was out that long.

"Kumayuru, Kumakyu, why didn't you wake me?"

My bears were currently horsing around on top of the bed. Sure, I'd explicitly told them not to wake me up and they did exactly what I said, but they should've ignored me and done what I secretly wanted. Now noon had come and gone without me noticing. I gave my bears a little glare.

They didn't seem to understand what I meant by it and both crooned at me like usual.

Then I headed down to the first floor with Shuri.

"You're sweating, Shuri?" I asked.

"Uh-huh, I ran over really fast!"

"I can't offer you ice cream, but how about I make you shaved ice?"

"Really? I want some!"

"But only one bowl. We don't want another tummy ache situation."

I got a bowl ready and used my wind magic technique to shave the ice. Next, I drizzled some honey on top and set the bowl down in front of Shuri where she sat on a chair.

“Thank you!”

I also took a seat and sipped at some cold tea as I idled away the time. We had a nice chat until I heard someone calling me from outside. Who could that be?

I opened the door to find Sherry.

“Welcome, Sherry,” I said. “What brings you here?”

“I heard you were back, so I wanted to show you the swimsuits I made.”

Right, I’d gone to the orphanage. That must have been how she heard.

“And you came all the way out here?”

I invited her in.

“Sherry?” Shuri said.

“Shuri?”

They both stared at each other.

“Shuri came by to visit too,” I explained.

“No, I came to ask for help,” Shuri insisted.

Right, right, she had.

“Anyway, it must’ve been hot out,” I said. “How does a cold drink and a seat to rest on sound?”

“S-sure,” Sherry said.

She took a seat and looked at the table. She was eyeing Shuri’s bowl of shaved ice.

“You want one too?”

“It’s good,” Shuri said while taking another bite.

"No, I'm okay. I shouldn't be the only one to get one," Shuri said.

Ah, I see. She didn't want special treatment compared to the rest of the orphans.

"Well, it can just be our little secret," I told her.

I made another bowl and gave it to her.

"Thank you."

She picked up the spoon and started to eat.

"It's so cold and good!" she commented.

Hearing that warmed my heart.

"So, you wanted me to look at the swimsuits? Does that mean they're all done?"

"Yes, all of them." Sherry smiled.

"It must've been hard making one for everyone," I said. "Thank you so much."

"Not at all. It wasn't too hard. I didn't have to make many embellishments, unlike normal clothes. All I had to do was sew the fabric together."

"That's still a lot of work as it is," I said.

I'd never made clothes before so I had no idea how much labor it must have taken, but I did understand it was a lot. She'd made one for me, too, but I had no memory of picking a design out. If she'd just made it from one of the illustrations, I guess it was fine. I just didn't want a school swimsuit.

"So I just need to take a look at the swimsuits?"

"Yes, to make sure they look fine," she said.

Sherry finished up her shaved ice and pulled a fabric bag out of her item bag. From out of that bag, she pulled two swimsuits. She held them up to me to see for a moment—it was black and white—then she placed them on the table.

"This is the one the orphans will wear."

The swimsuits she'd laid on the table looked... very much like a school swimsuit. There was even a nametag on the front. Wait, why? Why was there a *name* on it?

"You drew lots of swimsuits, but the orphans all chose this one," Sherry told me.

"Uh, can I ask why?"

"I would've asked everyone their individual preferences, but I asked everyone during a meal. There was a huge commotion and they started fighting over the drawings. In the end, it was a whole mess, so the head-mistress got mad at us. She said since it'd make a lot of work for me, that we should choose just one, so she settled on this one. Then she also said to add our names so we can tell which suit is whose. It seemed pretty well decided, so I went with her preferences."

Well, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea for the orphans to have the same suits. The school suits had a spot for a nametag, so they couldn't mix their suits up.

"I'm sorry we chose only one when you drew so many designs..." Sherry said.

"Please don't worry about it. I understand why the headmistress decided this. But why black and white...?"

I could get the black design. That was what had been in the illustration. But why *white*? I hadn't drawn a white school swimsuit. And I really doubted this world had the concept of school swimsuits like Japan, so it was strange they'd reinvented it.

"The colors are based on Kumayuru and Kumakyu. She said we could choose that at least."

So they'd just used my bears as a reference point for the color choices. Okay, made sense.

I thought the black looked fine. The school swimsuits from my old world were navy blue—almost black—as well. The white one looked weird though. Japanese schools just didn't have white swimsuits for classes as far as I was aware. Seeing the white suit made me feel weird and embarrassed for some reason. Maybe I was just the weird one for thinking it looked too much like underwear since the kids just associated the color with Kumakyu.

“So, what about the boys?”

I wouldn’t tell the girls they weren’t allowed to have a white school swimsuit. Even in my world, white suits did exist. In theory. I sure hoped none of the boys picked white though...

Sherry brought out another swimsuit. This time, she only had a pair of black shorts. I felt relieved. If I saw tighty-whities come out of there, I would’ve been forced to slap them out of her hands.

“So they’re black,” I said, feeling anxious.

“Yes, all of the boys picked black.”

Really, thank goodness. Relief flooded me: no under-wear swimsuits this time. I’d added a spot for the nametag on the right side in my illustrations, and this was mirrored in the final swimsuits.

“Sherry,” Shuri said, “where’s mine?”

“I brought yours too,” Sherry said as she pulled another cloth bag from her item bag and produced another swimsuit.

“Can I try it on?”

“Right now? You could wait until we’re at the beach.”

“So I can’t try it...?”

I guess little kids didn’t feel like swimsuits were embarrassing. Even though Sherry had taken measurements while making them, it’d be important to try on the swimsuit to make sure of the fit. I told her it was okay and Shuri started trying to undress on the spot. I stepped in *real* fast to stop her, but she seemed confused. We were all girls: there wasn’t anything wrong with it technically. And she was right, I mean, group changing rooms at pools and beaches were totally a thing. I was just worried about what’d happen later if I didn’t teach her there was a time and a place for changing.

“Shuri, you should use that room to change,” I told her, pointing at the dressing room of my bath.

She obediently followed my instructions and headed over with her swimsuit. I felt weirdly tired. I glanced at the door of the room Shuri had gone into while waiting. I had no idea which suit design she chose, so I was pretty curious.

"And these are yours, Yuna," Sherry produced yet another cloth bag from her item bag. She pulled out my swimsuit—which, actually, wasn't just one. She laid out a second on the table, then a third. A whole array of swimsuits was lined up for me.

"Uh... are all of these for me?"

"Yes," Sherry beamed as she nodded. I guess I shouldn't read anything bad into this. "I forgot to ask which design you wanted."

That was because I'd never told her I wanted one.

"But then you left for work."

I'd been called to the capital and had gotten yet another job to head to Dezelt.

"So I made the swimsuits that I thought would look good on you."

"..."

Until then, I thought maybe I'd just misheard. But I couldn't disbelieve my eyes and all the swimsuits here in front of me. These were all for me?

"I think all of them would look good on you, so I made all of them!"

Sherry gave me a carefree smile. I felt kind of out of sorts because it was so pure. She really had made all of these just for me.

"Uh, thank you," I said.

I felt myself scowling, but Sherry still seemed happy when I said that. And hey, maybe I'd lucked out? This meant I could pick out a swimsuit from a ton of designs. I mean, what if she'd stuck me with a white school suit or an itsy bitsy teeny weeny bikini? I probably would've been bawling my eyes out by now.

Anyway, I looked over the swimsuits lined up on the tabletop. Most of them were black, but there was a one-piece with some white elements in it. Some of them were frilly or

even two-pieces. There were even bikinis whose tops and bottoms were contrasting in color. Those came in different color combinations of black and white.

A bikini wouldn't work well if I was flat-chested, though. Maybe I could pad it out with magic? My bust size was well-hidden, after all. Sherry knew because she'd taken measurements and the people who had bathed with me before would too, but that was all who knew my secrets. Thanks to my bear gear, no one could see what my chest size was.

Maybe some people even thought I was well endowed.

It looked like Sherry had actually made every design she thought would look nice on me. No mini-bikinis, but I did spot both the black and the white school swimsuit. *Phew*. If those had been my main options, I'd have had a little cry sesh.

I was really glad that I had others to choose from.

“Why are they all black and white?”

All of them were. I didn't see any other colors whatsoever.

“I thought you liked black and white,” Sherry told me. “Since Kumayuru and Kumakyu are also black and white.”

Well, I could see why she assumed that. These were better than pink or a flashy red: plus, a lot of work had gone into making all of them.

“Did I cause trouble for you by not choosing a design?”

“Not at all,” Sherry said. “I had a lot of fun thinking of which ones would look good on you while making them.”

“But I can't wear all of them, y'know?” I said.

“I know. But I'll be happy as long as you like one of them.”

Something about Sherry's expression seemed hungry for praise.

“You don't like *any* of them...?”

When I remained silent, worry crossed her face.

“Of course I do. There are so many to choose from and they’re all such good options, I’m not sure which to choose.”

The worry disappeared. *Phew.* Sherry had made all of these for me, after all, and actually, all of them were actually cute. The issue wasn’t the suits, it was the person wearing them.

“I won’t be able to make a decision right away, so could I have some time to think it over?”

“In that case, I’d be really happy if you wore more than one.”

“Right. Maybe I will choose a couple to wear.”

Now I didn’t need to narrow it down so much. For the time being, I put away all the swimsuits—from the ones I’d never wear to the super cute ones—and piled them into the cloth bag before putting that into my bear storage. I was just relieved I wouldn’t have to wear a school swimsuit.

After I put the swimsuits away, the door opened and Shuri came out. She was wearing a frilly white swimsuit.

“Yuna, what do you think?”

“That one looks nice. I think it’s cute.”

“Really?”

Shuri seemed happy about that. She twirled on the spot.

Wait, what? I thought I’d just seen something strange, but I had to be imagining things.

“Uh, Shuri, could you twirl again, but slowly?” I asked to double check.

“Okay!”

Shuri slowly turned around.

"Stop right there!" the moment Shuri was turned around, I shouted.

"What is it?"

Shuri moved again even though I asked her to stop. I already knew that I really had seen it though. I went up to Shuri, went around to her back, and checked again.

"Uh. What is this?"

There was a round white tail on her backside.

"It's a Kumakyu tail."

"Why do you have that..."

"Oh, right. Sherry, what about the hat?"

"Oh, sorry. I forgot it."

Sherry stuffed her hand in the cloth bag and took something out. What was she handing over to Shuri? Shuri pulled whatever it was over her head.

"..."

Now this was a jaw dropper. I actually couldn't close my mouth as I stared at Shuri. She was wearing a swim cap with a *bear face* on it.

"Now I match you, Yuna!" she said.

With both the white tail and the bear swim cap, Shuri really looked like she'd dressed up as a white bear.

"Sherry..." I said. "What is this?"

"Well..."

Sherry seemed hesitant to tell me as she pulled out the illustrations I'd drawn from her item bag. She handed one of the sketches to me. The paper was crumpled, but it did contain a drawing I'd made.

When I saw it, I remembered what had happened. When we'd all been picking out swimsuits, Noa had asked if there was a bear one, so I'd doodled an idea right on the spot.

"I remember balling it up and throwing it away though," I said.

"Well... Shuri found it and took it to me."

"Shuri?!"

"It was just so cute!" was her reply.

Like... she was right: it absolutely was. I mean, it was a bear swimsuit.

"Were we not supposed to make that one?"

"It's not that you're not supposed to, but it's embarrassing for me."

"Um, the younger kids from the orphanage are wearing the bear swimsuits," Sherry said as she flipped around one of the school swimsuits. There was a round tail on that one, just like on Shuri's.

The orphans had only picked out the school swimsuits and they'd had only the two colors to choose from. I couldn't deny them the tails they'd wanted.

"I imagined it would be like the bear clothes at the bakery," Sherry explained.

Well, the uniforms there did have tails and bear hoods.

"Then I remembered the paper Shuri found and added the tail and the caps."

So in other words, she'd used my designs as a jumping--off point. I wanted to hit myself for drawing this just because Noa happened to ask about it. There'd be tons of kids with bear swimsuits just like Shuri's at the beach, then. Suddenly, this beach trip wasn't sounding so great. Everyone was looking forward to it though, so I couldn't cancel it or have the swimsuits redone.

Maybe if I'd passed on the job at the capital, I could've kept a tighter watch on Crimonia? Stopped all this bear swimsuit nonsense? Had I done that, who knows what would've happened to Carlina. Whichever way I chose, I'd always be haunted by the

road not traveled.

By the time Shuri had to leave, she'd forgotten all about the scorpions. She'd cheered right up.

CHAPTER 364

MISA COMES TO THE BEAR HOUSE

SHERRY AND SHURI had both gone home, so I was sprawled out on my bed again.

“I’m beat...”

I was mentally exhausted. The white school swimsuits and the bear tails had been a real shock. The one little spot of hope was that the little kids were the ones mostly wearing the bear swimsuits. I really didn’t love it, though. But once I saw how happy Shuri was, I couldn’t say anything about it.

I sighed and hugged my miniaturized bears to me as I tried to recover from the psychic damage. They were so fluffy and soft...

I was mostly healed after cuddling with my bears for a while, so I decided to take a look at the swimsuits Sherry had made again while still sitting on my bed. I slowly picked out the school swimsuits and put them to the side. It wasn’t right for me to wear one of those at my advanced and wizened age. I looked over the rest: they were bikinis and one-pieces.

Hmm. I still couldn’t decide which ones I liked.

“Kumayuru and Kumakyu, what do you think?”

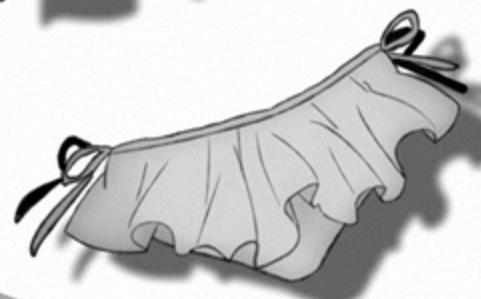
I asked my bears since they were still on the bed with me but they didn’t seem very interested in the swimsuits. Instead, they crooned and then curled back up for another nap.

Okay, point taken.

I really didn’t know what to do (yet again). I was a little sad they didn’t care. I felt abandoned to decide everything by myself since they wouldn’t even humor me with helping just a little. I sighed and looked over the swimsuits and picked up a black and white bikini. I pulled off my bear gear and tried it on.

What the heck... It felt like the swimsuit fit me perfectly: like, seriously, *perfectly*. I stood in front of the mirror I hardly ever used. Did this look good on me? I wasn't too crazy about a certain body part, but I tried to ignore it. I posed in front of the mirror, but that didn't offer up any additional clues.

I silently tried on the next one. Then, I tried on separates and one-pieces, but I didn't like my legs wearing any of them. I tried on a wrap skirt. Okay, progress. Now I felt like my shoulders were cold. I needed a little more coverage up top. I wrapped a giant towel around me. There we go, right at home. I upgraded to an even bigger towel and felt proportionally even better.



Hold on, this wasn't working.

Trying to go out to the beach after being a shut-in and only swimming at the school pool was a big ol' leap for me. But it wasn't like I could back out now. I just felt out of sorts because I was missing a certain something.

My bears were asleep on my bed right now. I paused my one-woman fashion show and got back into my bear onesie. The moment I did that, I was safe again, clad in my warm 'n cozy onesie. My stint as someone feminine was over, quick as it started: I hadn't been able to pick a single swimsuit and felt right at home in my bear onesie.

I silently put the swimsuits away in the cloth bag, tucked that away into my bear storage, and sank onto the bed with my bears. We still had a little time until we left for the trip. I could just take a breath and think about it without committing to anything. One way of dealing with things you didn't want to do was putting them off, after all. Plus, time heals all wounds, etcetera, etcetera. Or would it? I hoped so. I'd entrust the decision with the older, wiser Yuna of like, three days from now.

In the evening, Fina and Gentz came by with the scorpion meat.

Completely slipped my mind. I'd been battered so intensely by my mental anguish that I'd forgotten all about the scorpions. Anyway, I thanked them and took the meat. It kind of looked similar to shrimp.

When I boiled it that night to try it, it honestly wasn't bad. With soy sauce? Even better.

The next day, I forgot about the swimsuits—or more accurately, I decided not to think about them—and I just hung out at home doing nothing.

I wondered whether there was anything else I needed to get in Mileela. Even if I forgot something, though, I had my gate, or I could buy whatever I needed there. Tiermina had handled most of that kind of prep, so I hadn't needed to do much at all.

We'd made the ice cream and we had the swimsuits; Tiermina was arranging for the food; and we were using the bear bus to get there. Oh! Right. I still hadn't checked in about Rulina and Gil. Helen had said she'd let me know once Rulina and Gil were back, but I still hadn't heard anything. Maybe they wouldn't be back in time? If they couldn't do it, then I wouldn't have enough people looking after the kids.

Maybe I could head back to the Adventurers' Guild to check in...

Just as I was thinking that, someone knocked and called for me at the door.

"Yuna, are you in?"

I could tell who it was from her voice. When I opened the front door, I found Noa standing there, as expected. What I didn't expect was the person standing behind her.

"It's been so long since I last saw you, Yuna," she said.

"Misa, you stopped by too?" I replied.

Misana was right behind Noa.

"Thank you so much for inviting me," Misa said.

"You don't have to be so formal," I told her. "I'd just be glad if you enjoyed yourself while you're here."

"Yes, I am looking forward to this," Misa said with a smile. Then she looked up. "Noa and Fina told me about your house, but I didn't think you really lived inside a bear...!" she said, looking past me, awestruck, at the house. "It's very cute. Um, Yuna, may we come in?"

Her eyes glittered as she stepped toward me. That was a look of someone who really wanted to see what was inside.

"I don't really mind. But the inside is normal, so, temper your expectations," I warned her.

"That's quite all right," she said.

Misa and Noa happily filed into the house. My bears raised their heads to peer at them from where they had been curled up on the sofa.

"It's Kumayuru and Kumakyu," Misa said as she sat next to them and hugged them close. "Awww! They're so cute. Have you both been doing well?"

They both crooned at us.

"I'm so envious of you, Noa. You can see them anytime."

"I can't go see them whenever I like," Noa replied. "Just when I have the time."

"I'm still envious of you."

Noa would stop by when she wasn't studying or when she had some free time. Lala would come by to retrieve her, usually.

"Anyway, it must've been hot out," I said. "I'll bring you some cold tea, so you can just sit here while you wait."

Noa had Kumayuru on her lap and Misa had Kumakyu as they sat on the sofa.

I prepped and laid out snacks for my guests.

"Thank you."

"It really is normal on the inside..."

It wasn't much different from any other house, really. I had some bear ornaments and furniture around, then there were my bear summons, the bear stuffed animals in my room, and the bear fixtures in the bath. Other than that, perfectly normal—but another way to put it was that we were in the only room in the house without bear paraphernalia.

As Misa looked around the room, her eyes stopped on something.

"That picture," she said. She stood up and headed over closer to the wall.

"Oh yeah, that's one we had commissioned at the academy festival," I said.

"There's you, Noa, Fina, Shuri, and Lady Teilia?"

"On the first day of the festival, Teilia bought us clothes. We had it commissioned then."

Everyone else was wearing the new clothes she'd bought: I was in my usual bear suit. It captured pretty well how embarrassed I was.

"Aww, I wish I'd have gone on the first day."

We hadn't met up with Misa until the second day.

"Then we can go next year, and you can join in next time," Noa suggested.

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes. You would be fine with that too, wouldn't you, Yuna?"

Next year, huh. Would they even remember me a year from now?

When I'd gone to the festival, I'd had a match with a knight to defend Shia. That had drawn way too much attention. I'd been in my disguise (which was a school uniform), so I didn't think anyone knew who I was. If I tried it again, though, that was another chance for figuring out it was really me.

"Yuna, can we?" Misa asked since I'd been silent and thinking it over.

"Of course we can. Let's go next year and get a new one made."

"Yes."

Next year, huh? Well, no point in thinking about it yet. Future, next-year-me could handle that one! I felt an odd sense of *déjà vu* but didn't stop to think about it.

"Aren't you hot, Yuna?" Misa asked, sipping her cold tea.

"It's made from a special cloth, so I'm fine," I told her.

"I see. I wish I had something made from the same cloth."

"I'm not sure you'd be able to find it," I told her.

After all, I'd gotten my onesie from a god, so it'd be a little hard for normies to get ahold of something like it. I just wished the god had just given me a summer set of bear clothes, too. And it felt kinda sus that the god had even attached the OP powers to a full outfit of *bear* gear, of all things. Why, it could've even been a dainty bear necklace or ring, or maybe a dainty little bear-shaped accessory.

"I'm surprised your parents let you go on short notice," I said.

"Yes, they said they felt I was safe with you."

Well, I was happy they trusted me so much, but suddenly I felt the weight of responsibility.

"Also, Grandfather accompanied me here."

"Oh, Gran is here?"

"Yes, so I'm very thankful to him as well."

Right, of course Gran would be with her. After giving up his title and work as the feudal lord to Misa's father, he didn't have much to do, leaving him free to travel with her.

If he was here, maybe I'd go say hi. We had his grandchild in common, after all.

"Is Marina's party here to guard you then?"

"Yes, we asked them to escort us again."

"Ah. So will Gran and their party come to the beach with us?"

"No, I'm afraid Grandfather still has work and must stay in Crimonia. Marina and Elle are guarding me and Masrika and Itia are staying with Grandfather. That means two more people. Is that all right?"

"Totally fine," I told her.

So just Marina and Elle were with her. In that case, they'd both need swimsuits. I couldn't let them go out there in their usual getups when it'd be so hot and sunny out.

"We're going with the children from the orphanage and Fina's family, too? You're sure I may come as well?"

"I know Noa would be happy if you did, and I'm sure Fina and Shuri would thrilled as well. The kids from the orphanage won't mind at all. Just don't say anything unreasonable like Noa does."

"That's so mean, Yuna!" Noa said. "I'm not unreasonable."

"I was joking. I doubt either of you would do anything, but if you go around acting up because you come from nobility, I'll need to ask you to go home."

Noa and Misa were the ones tagging along in this case. If they did anything to the orphans, I'd need to steel myself and boot them back home.

"I won't."

"Yes. I promise I wouldn't either."

"Then it looks like we don't have any problems. It'll be fun with all of us going together."

"Yes, it will!" Misa responded enthusiastically.

"We're going to the beach though, so we'll need to make a swimsuit for you before we go," I said.

"Yes, I was hoping I could ask you for help with that. Do you think it'll be done in time?"

"We've already finished with everyone else's suits, so I think we'd make it in time if we started now."

It'd work out as long as she didn't demand a lot of customization. I couldn't bring Noa and Misa directly to the tailoring shop, of course, since that'd just cause problems for Nar and Temoka. Like last time, we'd need to get it all done in my house.

CHAPTER 365

THE BEAR BRINGS MISA TO THE BEAR'S LOUNGE

“SO, I HAD A QUESTION for you, Yuna. If I visited Fina and Shuri, would they be home?”

Shuri was with Tiermina or Fina most of the time. Tiermina would work at the orphanage or make her rounds with the businesses. Fina would help at the orphanage and at home too, but sometimes, she'd pop in at the bakery and restaurant when Tiermina asked her to do something. She also did harvest work for me at home. There was a possibility that if the scorpion harvesting wasn't finished at the guild that she was there today.

Fina was working or on errands an awful lot. I was embarrassed just thinking about what I was like compared to her when I was ten. Still, I had a way of figuring out where she was, even though she was always on the move.

I excused myself for a bit and headed upstairs to my room. I checked to confirm I was alone, then pulled out my bear phone and imbued it with my mana.

Call Fina, call Fina, I thought at my phone. After a while, I heard Fina's voice.

“Yuna?”

“Fina, where are you right now?”

At the orphanage. But why are you...?

Cool, now I knew where she was. The bear phone came in really handy. Though if it just had a GPS function, I could have found her without having to ask or make a call. Obviously, it didn't have that functionality, though, and I wouldn't have wanted to use it much anyway. It didn't feel right to track someone's movements. Asking her over the bear phone worked well enough for me.

“Did you finish harvesting the scorpions?”

"Yes, we finished yesterday. Everyone at the guild was really excited about them!"

Couldn't expect any less from the guild workers. They'd also harvested an entire black viper in a day.

"Fina, do you have time right now? Misa is here and she wants to see you and Shuri."

"Lady Misa is here? Uh, yes. Now should be fine. I'm almost done with work."

"Have you had lunch yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then let's eat at the Bear's Lounge together."

"Okay. Then I'll bring Shuri over with me."

I put away my bear phone and headed back to the first floor. I pretended to my guests that I'd been planning to eat lunch with Fina at the Bear's Lounge. It was just easier to lie about it since the bear phone was top secret.

"Is that your shop, Yuna? I heard there are bear decorations all over it."

Ah, yeah. Really took me back. We'd gone a little overboard with making all those bear decorations back then.

"And they dress up in the same clothes that we did at the event after my birthday party when we tried to show everyone your bears aren't scary." Misa's energy climbed as she talked about it. "I'm looking forward to it."

Did she mean going to the bear bakery? Or to seeing Fina?

Putting those questions aside, we headed off toward the Bear's Lounge to see Fina.

They tried to walk out of the house with my bears, but I rushed to stop them.

"You can't bring Kumayuru and Kumakyu with you!"

"Aww, really?"

“We can’t?”

If we brought them out during the daytime, the kids in town would start gathering around us and it’d turn into a huge scene. I recalled my bears. Noa and Misa’s faces fell, but what else could I have done?

“Okay, we’re going. Fina and Shuri are waiting for us.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

We headed over and caught sight of the giant bear statue on the way. The bear, which held a loaf of bread, was just as big and conspicuous as ever.

“Bear!” Misa chirped as she looked at the statue.

Fina and Shuri were standing in front of the statue waiting for us. When I saw them waiting there, it kind of reminded me of a certain dog statue that’s used in Tokyo as a meeting location.

Misa ran over to them as soon as she saw the two, and they ran to meet us in the middle.

“It’s been so long, Fina.” Misa took Fina’s hand.

“Yes, Lady Misa, it’s been so long.”

“What a very long time it’s been, Shuri,” Misa also said.

“Uh-huh, it has, Misa,” Shuri agreed.

Then Noa barged in on the reunion too. Seeing them so happy about seeing each other made me happy too. I was so glad we’d invited Misa over.

We couldn’t just hang around talking outside all day, so I ushered them into the bakery.

“There are so many bears inside, too!”

Misa’s face was all lit up when she saw inside. The walls and pillars, as well as the

tables, were all decorated by cartoon-ish bears in various poses. There were bears crawling up the walls, and there were bears latched onto the pillars. The ones printed on the table were running, hanging out with their family, eating honey, fighting, sleeping, fishing. Basically, all sorts of bear business.

Misa was looking all around like a kid at an amusement park. Then her eyes stopped on the tiny servers working in the bakery.

"They really are dressed as bears...! I can't believe kids even younger than me are already working."

I felt kind of bad now that she said that, but the kids had also all volunteered for the work. I hadn't forced them to work for me or anything. They just needed to work in order to survive.

"Their little outfits are so precious. There are so many bears here."

Misa was still excitedly looking around.

"We'll be in the way if we stand in the hall, so let's buy some bread and find a table," I told her.

"Yes."

"Misa, this way" Noa tugged on Misa's hand, leading her to the counter of bread. Fina, Shuri, and I followed after her.

"Welcome, Yuna," Karin said from the counter where they sold the bread.

When Misa saw Karin, her first reaction was to mutter under her breath, "She's not dressed as a bear." I could hear it and it seemed that Karin could too, since her smile seemed forced.

"Looks like you have a new friend with you today," Karin said while looking at Misa.

"My name is Misana. Yuna and Noa invited me. I'm going with them to Mileela. It's nice to meet you."

"Yuna, how do you know her?" Karin asked me in a whisper. It seemed like she'd sensed something.

"She's friends with Noa, if you get my drift," I said, which seemed to be enough for Karin to get the picture. Her face froze.

"But don't worry about it. You can treat her the same as Fina and Shuri."

She gave me a look that told me my advice was not helpful.

"What do you call Noa?" Misa asked Karin.

"I call her Noire," Karin replied with the politest tone she could manage.

"Then you may call me Misana."

"Um, so Misana, is it?"

"Correct."

"All right, then, Misana, which bread would you like today?"

"They all look so tasty, I'm not sure which to choose." Misa was eyeing the many loaves and pastries in the cases.

"Misa," Shuri said. "There's bear bread over here." Shuri pointed them out to her in the case.

"You're right! There is!" Misa's eyes went wide as she looked at the bear bread. They were in the shape of round, adorable little bear faces.

"I wanted to tell her," Noa said, looking disappointed that Shuri had beat her to the chase.

"They're all very cute."

"And delicious too."

"I like the other breads, but I think you should get the bear bread," Shuri suggested.

"They're very popular. Those are also freshly baked, so they're especially delicious."

"I'll have a bear bread then." Misa didn't allow herself to be distracted by the other

breads.

Karin plated up one of them.

“And for the rest of you?”

“Why, the bear bread, of course,” Noa said.

“Me too!”

“If you’re all having bear bread, then I will too,” Fina said.

Once Misa spoke up, everyone joined in getting the same order.

I’d come up with the bear bread with Mil, who worked in the bakery. We’d made the bread because the little kids at the orphanage wanted it. But Mil had trouble making the bread. When I saw that and realized she was making a treat for the orphans, I’d joined in to help. I didn’t regret doing that, but then I also remembered the sinking feeling of when I saw the bread being displayed for sale in the bakery.

When I’d asked Mil what had happened, she told me Karin wanted to sell the bread. Then it’d gone up the chain to Morin and Tiermina, and soon, it was a product. Why hadn’t they at least asked my opinion first? Was it just me, or did it feel like they were out to get me? Well, that was the origin story, and the bear bread was one of their top sellers.

As my tiny act of rebellion, I ordered a completely different bread. Karin smiled. While I was at it, I also bought some potato chips and fries to share with everyone.

“Here, I think that’s exact,” I said, handing Karin my payment.

“Thank you.”

Karin put her service face back on as she took the money.

“You still pay for things even though this is your bakery?” Misa asked.

“Well, I’m just here as a customer today,” I told her. If strangers saw and assumed I was a dine-and-dasher, who knows what trouble I’d find myself in.

We took our plates of bread and headed to some open seats.

"There's a sleeping bear here."

Misa stroked the bear decoration on the table. Then she tried to pry it up.

"Ahhh, it won't budge," she said.

"There's no point. It won't come off," I told her.

"Everyone seems to always try it at least once."

"Uh-huh, I did, too."

Noa and Shuri were both smiling as they recounted their failed bearnappings. Then it was Fina's turn.

"I haven't tried to before," she said. Fina was the only one who hadn't made a larceny attempt.

"You're a traitor, Fina."

We all laughed.

Well, everyone who came in for their first time would try to go home with a bear-shaped piece of the Bear Lounge. I'd made sure to take preventative measures, so everyone gave up eventually. If they could be taken, I was sure that the bears all would have walked off on opening day.

"Anyway, let's hurry up and eat," I said.

The bread was fresh from the oven, and I wanted to eat it while it was still warm.

When I said that, Fina and Noa tore the ears off their bread and chowed down. Shuri chomped directly into her bear head. Only Misa hesitated as she watched everyone around her.

"You're not going to eat it?"

"It feels like such a waste to eat it," she said.

"I know how you feel. I felt sorry for it when I first ate one," Noa said.

"You did? Really?"

"But after eating it more times, it's the same as regular bread."

Hearing she'd just gotten used to tearing apart the poor little bear faces was a little scary.

"As I remember it, Shuri almost cried when we tore off an ear to eat."

"Nuh-uh!" Shuri pouted. She took another chomp out of the bear bread.

Uh, yeah she had.

"Anyway, you should eat too. It has the face of a bear, but I swear it's just really yummy bread."

"Okay."

Misa tore off a piece of ear.

"It's delicious...!"

Once she'd had just one piece, the mental block was removed. She dug in.

Just as an aside, I personally didn't feel like they were eating *my* face or anything. If you think about it, my face is the only thing about me that isn't shaped like a bear.

CHAPTER 366

THE BEAR ORDERS NEW SWIMSUITS

AFTER THEY ATE the bear bread, I parted ways with them and headed to the tailor. When I got inside, I found Nar and Sherry cleaning up.

“Welcome? Oh! Yuna?” Sherry initially greeted me thinking I was a new customer.

“I’m sorry for coming in while you’re cleaning,” I said.

“Oh, no, it’s okay.”

“Nar, may I borrow Sherry for a bit?”

“There’s time right now, so sure.”

“Did the swimsuits from yesterday not work out?” Sherry asked, seeming disappointed.

“No, they were all great. I had another thing I wanted to ask you about.”

“Something you wanted to ask me?”

“There are more people coming with us to Mileela, so I’d like you to make them swimsuits too. Could you stop by my house tomorrow?”

“Um.” Sherry looked over at Nar for permission. She smiled in response.

“Yes, you can go,” Nar said.

“Thank you.”

I was so glad Nar was so nice.

Everything was all set with Sherry, so I started heading back to my bear house. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard someone call my name and wrap their arms around me.

“What the?!” I realized who it was. “Shia? What are you doing here, Shia?”

It was actually her. Rulina was even next to her. I didn’t understand what was happening. Why were the two of them in Crimonia? And why had they been behind me?

“Uh, what are you doing in Crimonia? And you’re with Rulina? And why were you behind me?” It was a lot of work to come up with something slightly different just for style’s sake, so I just said what I’d already thought.

“It’s because we spotted you while you were walking.”

“Then what are you doing in Crimonia?”

“We came from the capital.”

“Then why did you come from the capital?”

“So I can go with you to Mileela,” Shia finally answered.

“...”

Shia hadn’t even faltered when she replied. I hadn’t talked to Cliff about taking Shia to Mileela though.

“Did I promise to take you?”

“You didn’t.”

Okay, so I hadn’t. At least my memory wasn’t going.

After I’d finished my report on delivering the water gem, Ellelaura had whisked me away. Then I remembered talking about taking Noa to the beach. I didn’t recall Shia being jealous, though, or asking to come too.

“But you’re a student,” I said. “What about the academy?”

“We have a long break right now. That’s why I couldn’t make it until the last minute. I knew I wouldn’t make it in time on a carriage, so I rushed over by horse. It looks like I made it just before you left.”

I mean, she had.

"We didn't talk about this the last time we saw each other, did we?" I asked.

"Once you left, I got a letter from Noa. She wrote about how excited she was to see Mileela's ocean. And then I had a break, so I came back to Crimonia."

"Wait, is Ellelaura here too?" I glanced around.

"Mother is at work and hasn't come back with me."

So she wasn't here. I was a little relieved. If Ellelaura had come, then this trip would now be an ordeal. Well, now I knew what Shia was doing here, at least.

"So, why are you two here together?"

"While I happened to be in the capital, I took an escort quest for Shia," Rulina explained.

According to her, she and Gil had gone to the capital together on a job. Then after she finished, she was looking for work that'd take her back to Crimonia when she ran into Shia. Then they'd made the trip together.

I hadn't realized that Rulina and Gil were in the capital. That was why they'd taken so long to get back, then.

"Then Rulina and I started talking only to find out we were both friends with you. I was so shocked."

"There aren't many adventurers in Crimonia who are friends with you, after all."

W-Wait, that couldn't be true... could it? I had tons of adventurer friends... didn't I?

Though Jade's party mostly hung out in the capital, Blitz's party tended to wander all around. Marina focused around Sheerin. I guess Rulina and Gil were the only local adventurers I was friends with. And other than that, I could only count the four rookies I knew.

When I really thought it over, I hadn't been joining parties or taking on many quests with new adventurers. I'd paired with Rulina once and asked her to guard my

businesses. She was probably closest to being a friend of mine.

"I had so much fun hearing all about you from Rulina on the way here."

Wait, why were they talking about me? I didn't really like my personal business being discussed by other people. I got the feeling that anything Rulina knew, Cliff probably knew it too. And that could only mean Elleaura also knew it all.

"So I heard you beat up one of Rulina's former party mates?" Shia said.

Former party mate? Oh, right: they had broken up. The memory of it sure took me back.

"And it was fun hearing the stories from the guild too."

Maybe she was talking about the black viper? I felt like they might've talked about things I wasn't aware of, too. I'd need to question Rulina about it later.

Right now I needed to figure something else out, so I set it aside for now.

"I'm glad you made it," I said.

"Me too. It's all thanks to Rulina and Gil. Thank you very much."

"Oh, the beach sounds great," Rulina said. "Maybe I'll plan a trip as well. I was going to take a break from working."

"Then want to come with us?"

"Oh, could I?"

"I was going to invite you and Gil and asked the guild to tell me when you were back in Crimonia. But you were taking forever to get back."

"I'm quite sorry," she gave me an apology even though I hadn't been digging for one. I was just getting her up to speed.

"But it's just a trip for people who are associated with you, isn't it?"

"It's for the orphans and people working at my businesses, yeah," I told her. "You know

them, so it should be fine.”

They'd guarded the Bear's Lounge on opening day. The kids seemed to trust them a lot too.

“And the kids will love it if you come,” I added.

“Ha ha ha. Right, right. The boys seem to look up to Gil well enough. He doesn't talk much, but he keeps an eye out for the kids.”

Gil was always playing with the kids. He never let any feelings show on his face, but you could tell, somehow, that he didn't mind. Sometimes he'd even stop by the orphanage even when no one had asked him to check on them.

“So, Gil's not with you right now?”

“He was until just earlier. We saw you passing by, so when we told him we were going after you, he said he didn't want to get punched and ran off.”

I wouldn't have punched him. What does he even think of me?

Then again, if Gil had been with them, I probably would have noticed they were following me right away. A big lug with some heavy footsteps.

“So, what do you say about going? I'm not putting in a request, but I can give you a place to eat and sleep.”

“You mean in that huge bear house?”

“You know about that?”

“It kind of stands out in Mileela, so I think we *all* know about it. But sure, I'll join in. I'll let Gil know too.”

Well, it looked like I had some guards now.

“This was great timing too. I'm getting swimsuits made for some people who are joining in, so do you want to come by my house tomorrow to get yours made too?”

“I have one, but I'd be interested in a new one.”

“You have one?”

“I bought it in Yufaria last year. I think I’m about in the same physical shape as back then.”

Rulina swept a hand over her figure. I have to admit, she did look grown up. I was sure I’d look like that once I was her age.

Yeah. That’s the spirit.

I’d been curious about her swimsuit, but she’d also mentioned a name I hadn’t heard of before.

“What is Yufaria?”

“Oh, you don’t know?”

I’m from a whole other world, so nope.

“It’s also called the city of water because there’s a large lake there.”

“It’s very pretty. Nobles and the wealthy tend to go there when it gets warm.”

They told me the town had been built around the lake itself.

“I just happened to go there for a job last year,” Rulina told me. “And I bought the swimsuit then.”

Hadn’t even heard of the place, but now that I had, I hoped I’d get the chance to go.

Rulina also wanted a new swimsuit, so she’d join us too.

CHAPTER 367

THE BEAR CHOOSES SWIMSUITS WITH MISA AND SHIA

MY BEAR HOUSE was insanely packed at the moment. First came Misa, who had Noa in tow. Then, there were Marina and Elle, who were coming along to guard Misa in Mileela. And now, we also had Shia coming in from the capital, along with Rulina. And then Sherry, who was in charge of making all the swimsuits. Gil happened to not need a swimsuit since he was using the one he'd gotten in Yufaria, so he wasn't here at least. Still, I hadn't had this many people in my house in forever.

"How did this end up happening...?"

"Oh, come on, Marina," Elle said. "This is all part of being a bodyguard."

"You shouldn't need a swimsuit to guard anyone."

"Yuna told us we should have our own. The kids are going to be playing on the seashore, so if we hang around them looking like this, they'll never feel safe."

"I suppose..." Marina replied.

"Lady Misana also told us we have to, so just hang tight."

"Okay, okay. We'll get swimsuits, then."

Misa had asked Marina and Elle to join us. It seemed Marina was just as embarrassed about wearing swimsuits as I was.

"Ha. It really is difficult being an adventurer sometimes," Rulina said, commenting on the convo between the two other women.

"Oh, aren't you—what was it again..."

"I'm Rulina. I'm also an adventurer and one of Yuna's friends, I suppose. She's letting

me tag along in exchange for protecting the kids.”

“Right. I’m Marina. This is Elle.”

“Nice to meet you.”

It was good they were getting to know each other. It was handy to know other adventurers.

When I looked over at Noa, Misa, and Shia, they were studying the illustrations I’d made and were picking out swimsuits.

“They’re all very cute.”

“Don’t you already have a swimsuit for school, Shia?” Noa asked. “Do you really need one?”

“The one I have for school is simple and isn’t nearly as cute. You all had yours made by Sherry, right? Don’t leave me out of all the fun.”

“Which one are you choosing, Misa? I chose this one.”

“Which one did Fina choose?”

“I think this one.”

“That one’s cute too. I’m not sure which to choose...”

They seemed to be having fun, only... There was just one person fidgeting alone at the edge of the action: Sherry. When she realized a few of these swimsuits were for nobles, she’d started to get nervous all over again.

“You were okay with Noa,” I reminded her.

“That’s only because I talked to Lady Noire before.”

Anyway, we couldn’t get anywhere without taking measurements, so we started with that.

“Misa, can you go to that room to have Sherry take your measurements?” I asked.

"Yes, I can do that. It's nice to meet you, Sherry."

"Oh it's very nice to meet you too." Sherry was still nervous.

"It'll be fine. Misa is a good person," I told her.

"Yuna, could you come too?" Sherry asked me.

Sherry looked at Misa, then at Marina and Rulina. It seemed like nobles and adventurers each worried her in their own way. I went in with her.

I led Misa and Sherry over to the adjoining room, which was the bath's changing room. I even had baskets to hold clothes, so it seemed like a great place for taking measurements.

"Okay, Lady Misana, could you undress? I'd like to take your measurements."

"I'm a little embarrassed to take my clothes off outside of my home," Misa said.

"Come on, there are still other people who need to go after you," I reminded her.

"Okay..."

Bashfully, she undressed and put her clothes in the basket.

"Okay, I'm going to start," Sherry said. She pulled out a tape measure and started taking measurements, just like she had with me.

Even though Misa had just turned ten, she was still a lot smaller than Fina or Noa. She was still growing though.

"Okay, that's it!"

"Thank you." Misa started getting dressed.

"After you go out, could you call in Shia?"

"I've got it!"

Then Shia came in next.

"Sorry that we're doing this in the changing room," I said.

"That's okay," Shia replied. "So, I need to undress?"

She started to get undressed. We really didn't seem like we were the same age. Unlike me, she had boobs. She also lacked my pudge around her stomach. I took off my bear puppet and prodded her stomach and upper arms with my bare hand—no pun intended, okay?

"What do you think you're doing, Yuna?!"

"Oh, I just thought you looked really toned," I told her. In contrast I was what you'd describe as, well, soft.

"Mother told me to be careful of what I eat, and I have to work out at the academy."

"Elleaura is really pretty, so you've got a bright future ahead of you," I said. I was almost jealous.

Once we finished with Shia, Elle came in next. Marina's bust seemed average, but Elle was much bigger. Like... almost inhumanly large. I wish she'd share some of that with people who hadn't been so lucky. I almost wanted a skill that'd let me steal a pinch or two for myself.

"Yuna, do you mind?" Elle seemed embarrassed and tried to hide behind her arms, but she was spilling over. I just couldn't help myself.

"Could I just have those if I grabbed them off of you?" I puppeteered my hand bears. Actually, my puppets probably could have managed it.

"Of course not!"

Personally, I thought Elle could wear a micro bikini. This was my competition. I wish those things would just fall off of her.

Finally, it was Rulina's turn.

Her figure seemed well-balanced. She had a normal bust size, and her curves nipped in at all the right places.

“You’re so pretty, Rulina...”

“What? Flattery will get you nowhere,” she said.

Maybe the secret to a hot bod was being an adventurer and moving around a lot? Marina seemed pretty burly, which might’ve been because she always carried a sword. Elle didn’t get much action since she was a mage, but she had certain... *endowments*. Rulina was the same.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to pay, Yuna? Normally, it’d cost quite a bit for someone to make something like this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

I’d just happened to have the fabric in my bear storage stash. I’d tried to pay Sherry, but she and Nar had insisted it would be good practice and that Sherry was going on the free trip too, so they’d rejected payment of any kind.

Well, I guess the fabric was worth something, but I didn’t mind that.

“If you could keep an eye on the kids, though, that’d be good payback,” I said.

“Absolutely, I’ll make sure to watch over them.”

Once we’d recorded everyone’s sizes, Sherry asked everyone what kind of suit they wanted, and that was all she needed to start her work.

“Think you can make it?”

We were leaving in two days after all.

“Yes, it should be fine,” she said. “If I don’t think it will be, I’ll ask Temoka for help.”

Sherry quickly left for the tailor’s shop in order to start sewing. She was really going to a lot of trouble for my sake. I really wanted to thank her, but I didn’t know how.

Since Shia had missed the last trip there, we went to the Bear’s Lounge two days in a row. When Shia, Marina, and Elle saw the bear statue out in front of the bakery, they seemed pretty taken aback. Of course, everyone wanted bear bread again, while I alone bought a simple variety as my tiny act of rebellion.

CHAPTER 368

THE BEAR SEES GRAN

AFTER I ATE with everyone at the Bear's Lounge and we finished talking, I headed off alone to Noa's house. I needed to talk to Gran. Once there, I told Lala who I was there to meet, and she led me to him. I happened to walk in on Gran and Cliff deep in conversation.

"Am I interrupting?"

"It's fine. We were just talking business. We wouldn't have called you in otherwise," Cliff replied.

"It's nice to see you, Gran," I said.

"I'm sorry, miss. Normally I would go to see you, but Cliff simply couldn't spare me."

"Don't pin this on me. You brought me work, Gran, not the other way around."

The story was that Gran had come to ask Cliff if it'd be possible to set up trading from Mileela with Sheerin. This had all just been a flimsy excuse to bring Misa, though.

"I'll keep a good eye on Misa, so don't worry," I told him.

"I believe you've already heard Marina and Elle will be joining, so please make use of their skills as needed."

"Sure, I'm thinking of asking them to watch over the other kids too."

Rulina and Gil were also coming, but it'd just be better to have more adults.

"I'm afraid I owe you an apology as well," Cliff said.

"You do?"

"It seems my silly daughter made up her mind to invite herself along. I'm sorry about

that," Cliff said.

"You mean Shia?"

"Yes, she arrived without even informing me. Then she told me that she would be going to the beach as well. I can't believe she would impose on you like that."

"Adding one more person isn't such a big deal," I said.

One extra wasn't going to make a huge difference.

"If she does anything unreasonable, feel free to scold her, just like I said with Noa."

"Yes, quite right," Gran agreed. "If my Misa misbehaves, you can give her a talking to as well, though I believe she'll behave for you."

Now even Gran was saying these things. Sheesh...

"I'm not their governess or whatever," I said.

"True, but you're the only person going to Mileela who's capable of telling off any of them, so that's what we have to work with right now. If they don't heed you, you can send them back to Crimonia. Then I'll deal with them."

"I really doubt they'd act up for me, though. If that happens, I'll send them back."

"Sure, that would be fine."

After that we chatted for a few more minutes, then I headed out and went to see Lufaa. She had apparently come by too, so I wanted to make sure I at least popped in. I'd been wondering whether she would be coming with us, but she had to stick with Gran since she'd come with him.

She'd been through a lot, but she smiled every once in a while, so I knew she'd eventually be okay. That might have been thanks to Gran.

Once I was done doing the rounds, I headed to the outskirts of town alone.

Since there were more people going to Mileela, the bear bus I'd made was too small now. It probably wouldn't be a great ride in such a cramped space. And if the trip over

tuckered everyone out, we wouldn't be able to enjoy the ocean. So, I decided to make a Bear Bus Mach 2.

But actually, now that I considered it, I didn't want to undo all my work since I'd installed cushions and a fridge inside. So, instead I came up with a new idea: miniature bear buses. They'd be golems, and as long as they weren't too far away, I could still move them. I'd found that out fighting the scorpion.

Also, I'd wanted Tiermina's family to feel like they were going together on a family vacation. So, I decided to make a more intimate bus just for them. Then, there was Noa and their group to consider. The orphans would probably have a fright if they were suddenly mixed in with a ton of people they didn't know.

So, just in case we got even more people or needed them, I made Kumayuru- and Kumakyu-themed mini-buses. The only real difference between the two was the color. I thought about nine people would fit in each one. I also added fridges and stocked those up with drinks.

The finished product turned out a lot cuter than I expected. I'd gotten faster at making things, likely because I was so used to conjuring up bear images in my mind. I did *like* using magic, especially as it was handy, but it did make me feel like my brain had been hijacked—infected, maybe—by bears. That thought by itself went a little too much in a horror direction, so I decided not to think too hard about it.

Anyway! Even if more people joined us, we'd have plenty of room thanks to my new creations. I put the new buses away into my bear storage.

The next day, I went around gathering last minute things before the trip.

Since the bakery and restaurant were going on break starting today, I needed to go and get the leftover ingredients. I didn't want them to go to waste, so we'd be using them in Mileela. When I got to the Bear's Lounge, Morin was already getting breakfast and lunch ready for tomorrow.

"I'm sorry you're working even though it's your day off, Morin," I told her.

"This is nothing compared to a normal day."

So she said, but she didn't have the kids helping her this time. Karin was lending her a hand, at least. Nerin was there, baking cakes for Elena, since the inn was the only other

place that sold them outside of the Bear's Lounge. We were leaving tomorrow, so Nerin was slaving away to make extra cakes to leave behind.

I told them all not to overwork themselves and took the extra ingredients before leaving.

Next, I went to Anz's restaurant, the Bear Dining Room. Everyone seemed to be having a good time there when I got in.

"Welcome, Yuna."

"What brings you here today?"

"Did you want lunch?"

"No, I'm here for the ingredients," I said.

"We gathered them up here, if you could take them, please."

They'd already collected everything in a box, so I just tucked that right into my bear storage.

"What are you all doing?" I asked.

"We're prepping for tomorrow," Anz replied. They were all packing bags.

"We bought souvenirs. We haven't forgotten anything, have we?"

"We haven't."

"Be careful not to forget to put anything into the luggage though."

It looked like going back to Mileela was going to be a big event for them. I hoped they weren't going to get there, look around, and tell me that they wanted to stay there, though. When it came down to it, there's no place like home. I'd be sad when it eventually happens, but I wouldn't stop them. Where they wanted to live was their choice, not mine.

But selfishly, I did want them to stay in Crimonia.

Since I'd finished gathering the ingredients, I headed off to see the kids at the orphanage and found people from the Merchants' Guild were already there, helping the kids out with the birds. I was glad that had worked out. I could head to Mileela without it weighing on me. I was grateful to Tiermina making the arrangements and to Milaine for lending us help.

Milaine had wanted to go with us, but she couldn't leave the guild unattended for so many days in a row. Being a guild master didn't come without its difficulties. Well... if she told me she wanted to go, I would have taken her, since she was always helping me out.

It really was too bad. Yeah, a total shaaaaame. For sure, just *suuuuuuuch* a disappointment.

I checked to make sure the headmistress, Liz, and Neaf were ready for the trip. At first, the headmistress had said she would stay to keep watch over the orphanage, but Tiermina, Liz, and the kids had all convinced her to go. What had pushed her over the edge was that several kids had said they wouldn't go unless she did. She couldn't turn that down, now, could she?

It was just a fact—in her life, in the kids' lives—that they needed her, and she needed them.

Finally, Sherry. I'd really run her ragged asking her to make the swimsuits. When I arrived at the tailor shop, I found her toiling away over the swimsuits with Temoka.

"Think you'll make it, Sherry?"

"Yes, it should be okay," she said. "We'll be able to finish today."

"You really mean it? Make sure you don't pull an all-nighter," I warned.

They'd already finished Misa, Marina, and Elle's swimsuits, so that just left Shia and Rulina.

Even Shia and Rulina's were half put together, so it seemed like Sherry had it well in hand.

"We're okay, Yuna. I'll help finish this and then we'll send Sherry over to the orphanage," Temoka promised.

Anyway, I didn't want to be in the way, so I left the shop.

Finally, I popped in over at Fina's to make sure Gentz could still make it. He'd been working nonstop, so I was glad he was coming. I left a little of the sacred tree tea as a refresher for him.

Everyone was looking forward to the trip, and that warmed my heart. Sherry probably had the rawest deal of all of them though. I'd really need to make it up to her.

Up early tomorrow: I set up my bear alarm clocks and made an equally early night of it.

CHAPTER 369

THE BEAR HEADS TO THE MEETING POINT (DAY ONE)

A LITTLE BEFORE SUNRISE, my bears roused me.

“Good morning, you two,” I said.

After thanking them for waking me, I rolled out of bed. I was still sleepy. I went to bed early and slept fine but sleep just calls for me at this time of day. Well, no helping it: I was off to Mileela today. I washed my face to wake myself up and headed out in my white bear onesie, my bears plodding along after me.

I hadn’t forgotten to change or whatever; the bear buses ran on my mana. If we were getting there super slowly, I could’ve kept them going in my black bear onesie, but for this faster trip, I needed the mana regenerative abilities of my white suit so I wouldn’t run out of juice. The white bear suit was the tool for the job. I didn’t want to change on the way, so I just went out like this. My bears would watch for threats on our way there. I didn’t want the distraction (or honestly, the extra effort) of using my detection skill all the time.

Once I got to the gate where we were meeting, I found Noa, Misa, Shia, Marina, and Elle already waiting—the nobility gang.

“Good morning, Yuna. And good morning, Kuma-yuru, Kumakyu.”

Noa hugged Kumayuru in cub form. Misa also said a perfunctory good morning and then grabbed Kumakyu.

“So, Yuna, what’s with the new clothes?”

“You look so cute in white!”

“Are you dressed like Kumakyu?”

“...”

They were all staring at my clothes. They'd only ever seen me dressed in black, so of course they were surprised by the color change.

“Well, I have my reasons. I'd appreciate it if you didn't worry about it.”

“Your Kumayuru clothes are cute, but I think your Kumakyu version is nice too.”

“Um... thank you,” I said.

I guess they strongly associated my bears with their colors. As we were talking, I heard someone behind me.

“Oh, Yuna, you're wearing white,” Shuri said.

“Oh, she is.”

I turned around to find both Fina and Shuri running toward us. Shuri leaped onto me to hug me.

“Good morning, Shuri, Fina.”

“Good morning.”

“Why are you white, Yuna?”

“I felt like I was in a Kumakyu kinda mood today,” I answered, which earned me a croon from Kumakyu, who was in Misa's arms. I guess Kumakyu was happy for the attention.

“Kumayuru, Kumakyu, morning.”

Shuri had immediately gone to my bears, who were both still prisoners in Noa and Misa's arms. Shuri really seemed to be doing well, despite it being morning. I assumed she'd be more tired. Actually, Tiermina and Gentz, standing behind Fina, seemed the sleepiest.

“Tiermina, Gentz, you seem tired,” I said.

“It's a natural time to be asleep, after all. The odd thing is how chipper the girls are.”

Gentz nodded and yawned. He looked at my clothes and almost seemed to want to say something before he seemed to think better of it.

I was glad adults politely let it go.

“Looks like we’re still waiting for the others.”

We still needed the orphanage and the employees from my businesses. Then there were also Rulina and Gil, who were guarding us.

For the time being, I had us move to a more out-of-the-way location.

“I think this might work.”

I brought out the bear bus and the two miniature bear buses. Everyone except Fina and Shuri blinked in shock.

“Wh-what? What are those?!”

“They’re bears!”

“Bears?”

Noa, Misa, and Shia all ran toward a bus.

“I’m awake now!”

“Yes, absolutely!”

That knocked the sleep out of Marina and Elle. Seems Tiermina and Gentz felt the same way as they stared at the buses, flabbergasted.

“Yuna, what are the smaller bears behind it?” Fina looked at the miniature bear buses.

Since I’d whipped up the mini-buses yesterday, even Fina and Shuri hadn’t known about those.

“I made them because we have more people coming along.”

“Yuna, how do you make them move? You’re not going to make Kumayuru and

Kumakyu pull them, are you?" Noa asked.

I guess that was the natural assumption. Both my bears crooned their refusals.

"No, I'm using my mana to power them. You've seen it before. When we went to the capital and caught those bandits, I used the same method to transport them."

"Oh, yes. You put them into a cage and used mana to make bears carry them."

"It'll be the same thing."

Noa and Misa got it right away, since they had a point of reference.

"Can you really use mana to power these?"

Shia was the only one who hadn't seen anything similar, so she didn't seem to understand.

"Shia, it'll work. Yuna can carry dozens of people around." Noa seemed proud that she had something up on Shia. "So, Yuna, which bear should we ride?" Noa eyed the large bus and the smaller buses.

"You can ride any of them," I said. "But I'd like the big one to mainly be for the orphans."

"I want to ride in the big one, but I also really want to try the small one. Oh, I can't choose! And the little ones even have a Kumakyu and a Kumayuru."

The mini-buses came in off-white and off-black versions.

"Misa, Fina, which are you riding in?"

"I'm fine riding any of them as long as I'm with Noa," Misa said.

"I can ride any as long as I'm with Shuri," Fina also said.

As for Shuri herself, she was running circles around all the buses.

"Well, we can swap seats part of the way there. And there's also the return trip, so you can get a chance riding all of them."

"Right. Okay, then let's look inside before everyone else gets here."

Noa brought Misa along with her to poke inside all of the buses. They seemed to be having fun. I was surprised they had the energy this early.

As I watched them, Tiermina came up to me to talk.

"My girls told me about the bus, but I didn't expect it to really look so bear-like."

"When I heard about it from Fina and Shuri, I expected a wooden carriage in the shape of a bear. You're always full of surprises," Gentz said, still working through his shock at the buses.

"How will you move the smaller ones though? And are you going to ride the bigger bus, Yuna?"

The buses weren't connected at all, so it made sense why Tiermina would ask that question.

"I can use my mana even if I'm a little separated from them, so it should be okay."

I didn't have much of a range though, as far as my mana was concerned. If I was too far away, my mana wouldn't reach, and the buses wouldn't move. I wasn't going to let the buses separate too much, so it would be fine.

"You always talk about unbelievable things like they're nothing, Yuna."

Since I hadn't talked to many adventurers (I was kind of avoiding them), I didn't really know what was normal.

"So, which one should we ride in?" Gentz asked.

"I was thinking you could ride as a family in one of the small ones," I replied.

That was why I'd made small buses. The mini-bus could fit nine at most. We'd still be fine if only four people were in one bus.

"So you should check in with Fina and Shuri," I concluded.

"All right. Thank you for being so considerate, Yuna," Tiermina said as she and Gentz

headed over to Fina and Shuri, where they were still taking a look at the buses.

In time, the orphans, Liz, the headmistress, and Neaf showed up. There were a variety of sleepyheads and little ones in the crowd of children who needed their hands held to make sure they wouldn't get separated.

"Oh, Yuna, you turned white!"

"She did. She's a white bear!"

I knew they'd react to my clothes. The kids ran over to me.

"Morning, everyone," I greeted them.

"Good morning."

I really didn't like being in front of a crowd in my bear onesie because people made such a big deal out of it. I recalled the first time I'd walked around town in my onesie and the embarrassment of that day flooded back to me. I guess if I only felt that in my white getup, that must've meant I'd gotten used to the black bear onesie.

That was a frightening thought.

"What's that bear?"

A few curious kids were looking at the bear buses.

"We're using that instead of a carriage. We'll ride in it to Mileela," I said, and their attention fully moved from me to the bear bus.

"Whoa! It's a giant bear!"

"It's huge...!"

They all started making a ruckus as they experienced the buses for the first time. Some kids were smacking the side of the big bus, and even the drowsy kids seemed to have woken up upon seeing it. The kids started chasing one another in circles around them.

"Can you all hop aboard the big bus? You can choose any seat you want, just the front one's off limits. Also, make sure you don't mess around too much. Be nice."

"Okaaay," they replied in unison.

"Can't we go on the small one?"

"I'd like the headmistress, Liz, and Neaf to be with you, so it'd be better if you were on the big one."

I wanted to keep the orphans together if I could. They couldn't all fit on one of the smaller buses, so that meant they had to ride the large one.

"Um, Yuna, are we also riding on this?"

Liz looked at the bear bus. Her face betrayed some complicated feelings about it.

"It looks odd, but it'll be faster than a carriage and it's pretty roomy," I told her. "Please sit in the very back with the headmistress and Neaf."

I'd made the last seat a little more comfortable and bigger for the adults.

"All right. Everyone, we're boarding."

"Okaaay!" they all said again.

"I'll sit in the very front, so please stay behind me."

The kids each greeted me as they boarded. The headmistress led along the sleepy kids into the bus.

"I want this spot."

"I'll be here."

"Awww, I wanted to sit there."

I could hear them fighting over the seats in the bus.

"Oh, come now. You promised not to cause trouble for Yuna. Please be quiet as you board."

The kids settled down when the headmistress was firm with them. She was good with

them. I was grateful to have her along.

CHAPTER 370

THE BEAR DRIVES THE BEAR BUS

(DAY ONE)

AS THE HEADMISTRESS and kids were boarding the bus, Rulina and Gil approached me.

“Yuna, morning.”

“Thanks for coming, you two,” I said.

“We’re happy to be here. So, what’s all this?”

“They’re bear golem carriages,” I said.

I figured it was faster to explain that way.

“Golem carriages? You’re driving them with your mana?”

“I am. Why?”

“You make it sound simple, but I’ve heard even making a golem is difficult. And you want to move one as large as this?”

Rulina looked over the bear buses in disbelief. Come to think of it, Marina’s party had seen me make big golems before, but Rulina still hadn’t.

“I suppose you could probably manage it. You did defeat a black viper and a goblin king.”

“It’ll be all right.”

I had experience transporting those bandits already. The issue was how fast I could move us.

"You always make things bears, huh" Rulina commented.

Well, I kind of had to. I'd had extensive practice visualizing bears, and if I made something that was close to my imagination, it held mana better. And it made the bear buses nearly as sturdy as my bear house. I couldn't just pass on that kind of upside, you know? It was to the point that I had to have a good reason to make things any other way. It was better for protecting the kids. I just had to put up with all the bear stuff.

"So, which should we ride?"

"I'd like you to keep an eye on the kids, so if you could get on the larger one, that'd be great," I said. I could already hear some of the kids calling them over.

"See, they're asking for you."

Rulina and Gil headed over to the big bus like I'd asked. The kids' excited cheers rang out as soon as they boarded. I'd also had them guard my bakery on the opening day, so the kids who worked there knew them and adored them.

"So, did you figure out where you're riding, Noa?" I asked Noa's group since they weren't on a bus yet. "If you don't pick one, I'll pick for you."

"That's all right. We chose one. Since we want to keep Fina's family together, we're going to take turns switching seats."

Noa's group was riding on the Kumayuru bus and Fina's family would be on the large bus. Then they would switch on the way.

"Fina, Shuri, you can have the bears, but then we're trading later," Noa said as she whipped out her finger and pointed at them.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu had made their way from Noa and Shia's arms into Fina and Shuri's at some point. They'd worked out a custody arrangement for my bears for the duration of the trip.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu, like something like this had happened sometime earlier. I think last time Noa had fought to keep my bears the whole time, so maybe she'd matured a little? Or maybe she was just obeying Cliff? Anyway, it looked like my bears wouldn't be in the middle of a tug-of-war, so that was a relief.

Noa's contingent boarded the Kumayuru bus. Noa, Misa, and Shia sat down in one of the rows.

"Yuna, no one's riding in the back, so can we set our luggage here?"

"Sure, I don't mind."

Marina and Elle deposited their small pieces of luggage in the back as they filed into the second row. Now it was just Anz and Morin's group that were left. Right as I was worrying about the time, I spotted Anz.

"Ugh, I'm so sleepy," Seno said with a big yawn.

"I am too," Anz agreed.

"You're dressed in white, Yuna. Am I dreaming?"

I thought seeing me had woken her up. Instead she was so drowsy she thought I was part of her dream.

"I'm wearing white today," I said. "But I'm not taking any questions about it."

The very idea of explaining my white onesie exhausted me.

"So, what are these? What happened to the carriages?" She peered at the bear buses and then, I guess rejecting them as carriages, around the surrounding area.

Actually, the whole group was scoping out the busses. This was also the umpteenth time I'd had to explain them. Since I was already sick of repeating myself, I just went with the simplest explanation I could.

"We're riding these to Mileela. Get in the white bear, over there." I pointed at the Kumakyu bus.

Anz, Seno, Forne, and Bettle all looked uncertain.

"Can these actually move, Yuna?"

"Yes. Mana."

I kept the explanation short as I ushered the group into the miniature bear bus. After they got on, the last three people showed up.

“I’m sorry we’re late. I lost track of the time as I was baking.”

I knew Morin was bringing breakfast, but I hadn’t expected her to be up baking it this early.

“Thank you.”

“Yuna, it’s my first time seeing the ocean. I’m so looking forward to it”

“I haven’t been before either.”

Karin and Nerin were excitedly talking next to Morin. They were around the same age and were also family, so this cute little scene is one I’d seen played out a few times.

“So, Yuna, what are these adorable bears? Looks like everyone’s riding on them.”

“They’re kind of like carriages,” I said.

“Where are the horses?”

Looks like everyone was stuck on the horses (or lack of horses, I guess). It was a pain, but I gave them the same spiel and then had Morin’s group get on with Anz.

“So we’re splitting up then. In that case, we should probably split up the breakfast too.”

Morin brought out boxes of bread and placed them in the Kumayuru and Kumakyu buses, then she handed off the rest to the main bus.

“Here’s the rest of them,” she said.

“Thank you.”

I accepted the main bus’s bread and then started giving everyone a little tour.

First, I told them about the fridges in the buses. They could take however many drinks they wanted. Then I warned them we’d be going really fast, but not to panic. We were eating Morin’s bread in the buses on the way there, I told them. There were a few other

details, but I tried to keep it short and sweet. I let them know they could flash the lights of the mini-buses' bear eyes if they needed to tell me something urgently.

I'd just installed light gems in the bear eyes just for that. It'd probably be dark in the tunnel, and I wanted to make sure we could move at night if we ran into any trouble. I preferred having every safety feature I could think of, and hoped we'd need none of them.

As I was in the middle of my explanation, Noa flashed the eyes of the bus.

"Noa, if you mess around, I'm going to leave you behind," I warned.

"I-I wasn't. I was just testing it out. If it didn't work during an emergency, then what would we do?"

That sounded like an excuse, but she also wasn't wrong.

"If you do that while we're on the road and nothing's wrong, I'm going to give you an earful," I warned.

"I understand," Noa said.

Noa was the type of person to keep her promises, so it seemed like things would be fine.

"Okay, we're heading out," I said.

All the orphans, Rulina and Gil, plus Fina's family were on the big bear bus. Noa, Shia, Misa, and their guards were on the Kumayuru bus while the last bus—the Kumakyu bus—contained the seven baker and restaurant staff members. After giving everyone the last of my safety warnings, I got on the big bus and sat down in the driver's seat. Fina and Shuri sat next to me, one bear per lap.

I grabbed the steering wheel and routed mana through it, forcing the bus into motion. Once the buses got going, the kids started fussing.

"Some of the kids are sleeping, so don't get too rowdy," I warned them behind me and got scattered affirmations back before they quieted down. At heart, they were good kids.

Every once in a while, I'd hear a "Wow!" or "It's really going!" in hushed voices. I couldn't help but smile at that. There were kids here who had never even ridden on a carriage before. You couldn't blame them if they couldn't contain their excitement. The mini-buses followed without any problems, so I was pleased with that.

I could hear Noa's group on her mini-bus making a ton of noise even from here.

I started the buses off slow. Well, I say "slow," but we were actually going a little faster than a normal carriage. Shuri wasn't a fan.

"Yuna, it's slow. Can we go faster like before?"

"We're just starting off slow," I told her.

That'd been the experimental phase, and this was now. Plus there were way more people in the buses, so I didn't want to do anything reckless. I was, however, planning on going faster, depending on whether we were making good time and how the kids were handling it.

The sun steadily climbed as we made our way across the countryside. I brought out the bread Morin made us and handed it off to Fina.

"Morin made us breakfast, so pass these out, please."

"I've got it."

"I'll help!"

"Okay, then, Shuri, there's a fridge there, so could you hand out the drinks to everyone?"

I pointed at the fridge behind me. I'd stocked it up with orange juice, milk, and water; plus a few other things. Anything you could want, really.

"Careful. We're still moving."

Fina and Shuri set my bears down on their seats and started distributing breakfast. I made sure to devote my attention to the road while they handled that. I got some of my own bread and ate it. This did feel slow, like Shuri had said. I was used to my bears' speed. I had plenty of mana, so I decided to try speeding up once everyone was done

eating.

Once the kids were finished, they actually fell asleep. It was still super early, after all. Even Shuri was dozing off with Kumakyu in her arms. Maybe they weren't cut out to be awake at this time of morning. I glanced at Shuri and noticed that she was threatening to drool on the unsuspecting Kumakyu, who was fast asleep and had no idea what dire fate awaited them.

Doom. Absolute and utter doom.



I started to try wiping Shuri's mouth, but Fina stopped me.

"Yuna, you can focus on where we're going," she said. She reached over me and took care of Shuri from the other side of the seat. Looked like Kumakyu was saved from the drool worse than death... this time.

Fina sure had a caretaker's touch. Shuri hadn't so much as stirred.

Since everyone was asleep, I gave a surge of mana to the buses and we picked up speed. Even the two mini-buses were still keeping up. Everything was going perfectly. Thanks to the white bear suit, I hardly even noticed the mana drain.

We were faster than a carriage. There was no reason we couldn't make it (with time to spare) before the tunnel closed. There was one minor, teeny, little hitch, though: I was sleepy. I was surrounded by the sound of others sleeping peacefully and that made it so much worse. Normally I'd nap on my bear's back while traveling, but I couldn't do that. The bus wasn't going to drive itself. It wasn't like Kumayuru or Kumakyu could take the wheel either.

I am too young to sympathize with long-haul drivers.

We drove along as I battled the urge to sleep. I'd asked my bears to watch out for monsters, so since they weren't reacting at all, I could assume there weren't any close by.

I didn't exactly want a monster to show up just to jolt me awake, though.

"Fina, I'm getting sleepy. Talk to me about something."

"Something? Like what?"

"Anything. Just anything." It was way harder to doze off if I was in the middle of a conversation. Fina started talking about her parents after thinking for a while.

"Um, Mom and Dad are really grateful. We wouldn't have opportunities like this often, so they're really excited."

She told me all about the trouble Gentz had gone to, in order to get a break, and how Tiermina had said that I always make "plans go sideways."

Was I really that big of a disruption to her plans? I didn't do it on purpose, at least.

"But Mom seems to like doing all the things you ask her to."

Then she told me about how she'd played with Noa and Misa and that the orphans were really excited too. And it made me so glad to hear the headmistress had wanted to come on this trip for herself as well as the kids. Everyone's expectations were so high. I needed to make sure everyone had fun, then. I couldn't let them down.

Thanks to Fina talking with me, the drive was passing quickly. Before long, we'd be taking our break and having lunch.

"Time for a break, everyone. Let's get off the bear carriages and eat. Could you wake up the sleeping kids?"

I had the kids who were awake help out with getting the sleepier kids up. I made sure to stretch my sore legs as I exited the bus. I had Fina and Shuri let the mini-buses know what we were all doing.

The orphans started running off their pent-up energy the moment they got off. Liz was there to tell them to stop.

What's the word? Idyllic.

As I was resting up and relaxing, Elle and Rulina came over to me.

"Yuna, are you doing all right?"

"In what way?"

"Your mana. Since you've been making the golems move this entire time with mana. Normal people would have run out right away."

Ah, they knew a bit about it because they were mages.

"It'll be fine. I have more mana than the average person."

I'd been blessed by a god, though. Actually, it'd be kind of funny if that meant I had mana in my old world.

"You really aren't overextending yourself?"

"I'm not," I assured them.

"Well, all right, then," she finally said. "As long as you're really not."

They seemed to know how bad it was to exhaust all your mana since they were both mages. I remembered how I'd been so drained I couldn't even move when I'd fought the kraken.

After that, we ate and finished our break.

Before we headed out, I told everyone, "I'm going to go a little faster, so don't panic about it."

Noa, Misa, and Shia took Fina and Shuri's spot next to me this time. Marina and Elle had taken up Tiermina and Gentz's spots too.

Looks like they'd swapped spots. Fina's family was now on the Kumayuru bus.

"Ha. We're at the front."

"If you're too noisy, I'll make you sit in the back."

"We'll be quiet!"

"I bet you will."

Noa pouted and hugged Kumayuru as Misa patted Kumakyu on the head.

I grabbed the steering wheel and once again poured mana into the buses. So far, so good. The kids were hav-ing fun.

"We're so fast!"

"Wow!"

A few little exclamations of amazement broke though over the general low level kiddy chatter. They didn't seem scared. Noa and Misa were also having a blast sitting beside me.

Cliff and Milaine had gotten the roads paved, so the ride was very smooth. I accelerated as we headed to Mileela. At one point, I started going too fast and got warning flashes from the mini-buses. Other than that, it was an uneventful trip so far, free of monsters, worries, and rain.

CHAPTER 371

THE BEAR REACHES THE BEAR TUNNEL

(DAY ONE)

AS WE PASSED through some trees, I realized we were approaching the tunnel. I caught sight of a huge wall between the trunks.

A wall, though?

I slowed us down as I spotted the gate ahead. Ah, so they'd built a wall all around the tunnel. News to me. As we approached the gate, I noticed the surprise in the guard's face at the entrance.

I popped my head out of the bear bus and asked, "Um, I'd like to get in. Would that be okay?"

"White...? Is that you, Miss Bear?"

Looks like he knew me. He looked a little puzzled. Maybe I was unrecognizable in my white onesie.

"It is you, isn't it?" he asked.

Was this strictly necessary?

"Gosh, there are so many Miss Bears you could be talking about. Are you sure you mean me?" I said.

"I think there's only one person who goes around dressed as a bear," Noa murmured beside me, but I pretended not to hear. There might be another bear girl in the world that neither Noa nor I had heard of.

She didn't know.

"You're the bear girl who always dresses in black and runs the bakery and restaurant,

and goes around with children wherever you go, right?" the guard asked.

Hm, no, didn't ring a bell. I had no memory of going around with children wherever I went out. Ergo, different bear. QED, indubitably.

"But there are kids right next to you and behind you."

My logic! Shattered to dust. This guard was an iron fortress. I just couldn't win.

"I heard you always dress in a black bear suit, so you had me for a second. Didn't know you had a white one, too."

"And you don't have any horses, so how are those carriages moving?"

The guard gave the bear bus a curious look. Everyone's stuck on the horse thing.

"I'm using mana," I said.

"Mana? Ah, right, you were the adventurer who took down the black viper, after all. Makes sense."

If he knew about the black viper, he must have been from Crimonia. I'd be in trouble if he'd mentioned the kraken instead. I really doubted anyone knew about the kraken. I doubted Anz's group would talk about it, but Cliff might've told Noa. Well, Milaine might have told Tiermina too. But aside from that, nobody knew, I bet.

"So, you built a wall?" I said.

"Cliff directed us to, as the tunnel is an important location."

The wall was about three meters high all around the tunnel. That would keep the monsters and the bandits out, for sure. Everyone else, too, if they didn't have permission.

"Hi. I heard people pay a toll?"

"Yes, at the entrance of the tunnel. At this checkpoint, we just need to check your identity via your guild card."

According to him, there were some businesses between the wall and the tunnel so

people could buy seafood without going through the tunnel itself.

"So, I already know who you are, but if you could please still let us see just your guild card, for formality," the guard said while looking at the kids.

"Just mine?"

"That should work."

I obliged.

"Thank you. You may pass."

I routed mana through the steering wheel again and the bus lurched forward past the wall. There were a lot more people inside than I expected. What surprised me most were all the buildings.

"What's that, sir?"

"That's where they sell the seafood. It's also the inn."

Now that I thought of it, Cliff *had* mentioned making an inn and guard post here. So, he'd actually gone through with it. Maybe they'd adapted the temporary housing for the tunnel workers into an inn, then. I hadn't expected it to change so much in the time between my visits.

As I looked around, I kept driving the bus forward. Everyone was staring, I guess because a huge bear-like carriage moving without horses was a little conspicuous. I was thinking of letting us have a short break, but the attention made me anxious. Would it be better to enter straight into the tunnel?

"Yuna, are we going straight into the tunnel?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. What do you think?"

I checked in with the orphans and headmistress. They wanted a break, so that was that. Once I parked the buses in an out-of-the-way spot, I told the people riding the mini-buses about the break too.

The kids had started filing out as soon as I stopped the bus. Some of them needed to

use the bathroom. Liz and Neaf herded a few of the kids off when they exited the bus.

"Yuna, may we explore a bit?" Noa fidgeted as she looked outside.

"Sure, but don't cause trouble for others," I warned her.

"I won't. Misa, Shia, shall we go?"

"But leave Kumayuru and Kumakyu behind," I added.

I didn't want Noa and Misa to walk around with them. The two looked pretty disappointed, but they let go of my bears and headed off the bus. Marina and Elle filed after them. Only the sleeping kids, the headmistress and Rulina and Gil were left in the bus.

Maybe I'd wander around too? I didn't know what to do.

"I can stay here, so you can go out if you'd like," the headmistress offered.

"I'll keep an eye on the buses," Gil also said. Well, now I didn't need to worry.

"Then I'll leave you two in charge," I said, and headed off the bus too.

I was tired from driving all the way over. I was getting the full experience of being a tired dad and driving everyone everywhere. Wait, no, I was fifteen. Also, not a dad.

When I got out of the bus, I saw Fina and Shuri hurry-ing off too. Looked like Shuri really needed to use the bathroom.

Tiermina and Anz's group had left the bus too, and Morin's group was also heading off.

I stretched as I walked. All the strangers had stares for me and the buses, but I ignored them.

As I looked around, I saw kids running all over the place. It seemed like they were blowing off the stored energy they'd built up by sitting still all that time.

I got the lay of the land. In addition to the inn and guard house, we had a stable and storage house and traders around. They were selling frozen fish here.

“I wonder who buys the fish here?”

“Apparently, merchants from Crimonia and chefs.” Tiermina answered the question I’d asked myself out loud.

“Really?”

I found Anz’s group and Morin’s in a small cabin with Tiermina. I guess they took a professional interest, as chefs and cooks themselves.

“They don’t have to pay the toll to get in the tunnel by buying it out here.”

Made sense. It’d save them the time they’d need making a trip out to Mileela, too. Looked like people had thought this through.

I left Tiermina and the cabin to head closer to the tunnel. The kids had gathered by it. I spotted Noa’s group there too. I realized that they’d been drawn to the bear statue by the tunnel.

“It looks the same as the bear in front of the shop!”

“But this one has a sword instead of bread.”

They were cartoony, just like the bear statues in Crimonia.

“Did you make this, Yuna?”

I found Noa had joined me while I was contemplating the statue. Misa and Shia were with her, too.

“Cliff had me make it.”

“Father did?”

“I didn’t want to, but he forced me to...”

I tried my best to look as sad as I could. I wasn’t lying—Cliff had twisted my arm.

“Father is so heartless...”

"You agree with me then, Noa?"

"Completely. I asked him to make a bear statue in front of our house and he refused. And yet he has you make one in a place like this. It's so unfair...!"

Oh, *that* was her problem with it? No, couldn't be right. She had to be saying that he was mean for making me make it. Right?

"I'll ask Father for the statue again once I'm home. If he says yes, will you make it for us?"

"You don't need to ask. The answer's no, no question."

A bear statue right in front of his residence would be undignified for a guy like Cliff. Well, I didn't actually care about Cliff's dignity really, but people might mistake his house for mine if it had bear statues out front. And even if Cliff didn't say no, I sure would.

"Then maybe in the garden?" Noa tested her luck.

"In that case, I would like one as well." Now even Misa was joining in.

Sure, people who hang out together pick up on one another's habits a little, but Noa had such a strong, bad influence on Misa I was starting to worry for her future now, too.

"I'm not making any statues," I told them.

"Aww, but Yuna, make one, won't you? Shia, let's ask Father together."

"Yes, and if Father refuses us, then we could simply put one in the garden of the capital estate. I'm sure Mother would agree to that," Shia said with a smile.

She had to be needling me.

"That's so unfair, Shia," Noa said.

No way would Cliff go for it, but Elleaura might just for mischief's sake. This could get out of hand. I had to put an end to this here.

"Neither of you are getting any bear statues for any estates," I said, and that was that.

CHAPTER 372

THE BEAR ARRIVES IN MILEELA

(DAY ONE)

THERE WAS A SMALL CABIN near the bear statue, which seemed to be the tollbooth. The man in there had been staring at us for a while. Cliff had given me a toll pass, so I'd be able to enter for free with it. It didn't have any limits in how many times I could come or go or for how many people I could take with me. But I didn't want there to be any hitches when the time came, so I headed over to the man.

"Just to make sure, I have a pass for the tunnel, so I can enter using that, right?"

"I've been informed that's the case, but I would still need to check it, nonetheless."

I showed him the pass.

"This looks right. Yes, you're free to pass through the tunnel."

The guard gave my ID card back right away after checking.

"And I can take everyone in with me?" I asked just in case.

"Yes, as long as they're with you, you can bring as many people as you wish. The only condition is that you have to accompany them."

"Then how about those three carriages? Would that be considered accompanying me?" I glanced at the bear buses.

The man looked conflicted, but then gave me an "All right" in response.

I called everyone back into the buses and had the adults help me gather up the kids. It'd be an absolute disaster if we left anyone behind, so I made sure we did a roll call before we headed off.

"Liz, all present and accounted for?"

“Yes, they are.”

I double-checked that each person was present (even Gil, though he was so big, he was hard to miss), then checked on the Kumayuru bus where the seven bakery and restaurant staff were. For some reason, Marina and Elle had joined Tiermina and Gentz in the Kumakyu bus. They’d played musical chairs with Fina and Shuri.

Once we knew everyone was lined up, I had everyone board the buses.

“Okay, we’re heading out,” I said. I felt like the lead teacher on a school trip or something.

I started the buses up and headed for the tunnel. Since I’d already shown the toll pass, I just headed right inside. The tunnel itself was well lit by light gems, so we didn’t need to use the bear bus lights at all. Better yet, I could save some mana. There weren’t any carriages coming or going around us, so it was an easy drive.

“I had no idea the tunnel looked like this.”

Noa was looking around in wonder.

“It’s so long! It’s a little creepy.”

We couldn’t see the exit from here.

“It was even scarier before because the light gems were still being installed,” Fina agreed with Noa.

Come to think of it, when I came through here before, it was with Fina and Shuri. We were looking for bamboo shoots. Only half the mana lights had been set up back then.

“But Yuna’s light spell worked so well that we were okay in the end.”

“So, you and Shuri have already been to Mileela before? I’m jealous.”

The bear buses kept driving on so long that even the kids who had been excited about the tunnel at the beginning settled down. It really lost its charm.

“Yuna, is it a lot further?”

"Hmm, maybe, I guess. I've only been through on Kumayuru and Kumakyu, so I'm not sure how long it actually is."

When I'd entered the tunnel, the rapid flashing as we passed the mana lights had scared the kids, so the headmistress had asked me to go slower.

"I see."

"You two can nap if you'd like," I said. "I'll wake you up once we're there."

Shuri was already fast asleep. Fina was holding onto her sister so Shuri wouldn't fall.

"It's all right. I'll talk with you, Yuna," Noa said.

"I'd like to talk too," Fina agreed.

"Then would you tell me about something?" I said. "I get sleepy, seeing the same thing for so long."

At first the tunnel was exciting, but it got old pretty quick. Unlike outside, the scenery never changed, and it just seemed to go on and on. It was a real sleeping pill of a view, so I was pretty happy to have someone to talk to.

Noa and Misa both told me about their little adventures. Things that had happened a while ago and things that had happened more recently. They'd been close since they were young. I really enjoyed hearing about it.

As we continued, I caught sight of the tunnel exit ahead.

"Everyone! We're almost through the tunnel."

"Really?!"

"The ocean...?"

Even the kids who had been dozing off perked up. Well, of course they would—it was a lot of excitement compared to a dark, unchanging tunnel.

"Yuna, is it the ocean?"

“I think you’ll see once we get out,” I said.

Noa and Misa were both leaning forward and some of the kids were sticking their heads out the side windows. Fina had even woken up Shuri, so they were both looking out ahead.

“Don’t stick your faces too far out. It’s dangerous.”

We emerged from the tunnel and there was the ocean, all blue and spread out before us. There was nothing blocking the view, and it was a bright, clear day, so there was nothing between us and the water. I was glad it hadn’t rained. The view and weather were just as nice as when I’d brought Fina and Shuri here. Maybe the god had blessed us with clear skies.

“That’s the ocean. The real ocean!”

“It’s huge!”

“Wow...!”

“Wow!”

The kids were getting rowdier. The headmistress, Liz, and Neaf told them to quiet down, but the kids were too excited to listen.

“If you don’t listen to the adults, I’m going to turn this bus around,” I said.

“Huh?”

“You haven’t forgotten your promises, right? Don’t just do what you want. You have to listen to the adults. The ocean isn’t going anywhere, you know.”

I tried to get the kids to settle. I’d been talking to the kids behind me, but Noa and Misa at the front slowly sat back down too.

Their bright eyes still gazed out over the ocean. Well, even if the ocean wasn’t going anywhere, this clear weather might disappear. Who knows what tomorrow would be like? Can’t make promises for the weather.

I wondered if we really needed another break here or if I could just keep going. There

wasn't anything once we left the tunnel's exit like there was on the other side of the tunnel. The walls here had been made around the right and left sides of the road instead. Well, there were some bear statues behind us. No one had noticed since they hadn't looked back.

I could see a building up ahead, so I kept going down the road. The building was right at the juncture where the tunnel's road joined the highway. I'd heard the town was expanding toward the tunnel. It would soon be the entrance to Mileela.

Once we got to the building, I saw a familiar face. I didn't know his name, but he'd been guarding when I'd come to Mileela the first time. He yawned like he hadn't noticed the bear buses passing by his side. The moment his vacant eyes drifted in my direction, I saw the surprise register on his face. If he hadn't noticed until I was right up on him, was he really doing his job?

I stopped the buses and greeted the man.

"Been a while."

"A white bear... is that *you*, Miss Bear? It really has been a while."

Was there some other 'me' around? All I'd done was change the color of my suit. Even with the color change, my outfit was super distinctive. So why ask if it was me?

"This is the entrance to the town then?"

"Aye. It's a good spot to check on the people coming from the tunnel and travelers on the road."

"You look like you haven't got much to do."

"You've just come right at a quiet time. We're busiest in the morning and right before the tunnel closes. Most people don't travel here at the other times of day, so it's a little slow."

"So that's why you were yawning."

"You saw that?" The man scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "So, why the white outfit today? And what is this strange contraption? It seems to move without horses."

“It’s not strange. It’s a bear carriage.”

“That’s right. It’s not strange at all,” Noa and Misa replied for me. I could hear the kids in the back chiming in: “It’s a bear.” “It’s not strange.” “It’s cute.”

I was happy for the backup. Though at the same time, it worried me that they were starting to think the bear buses weren’t out of place. I might be warping their sense of normal. I didn’t know whether it would be better to correct them or to let them keep thinking that.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply it was bad or anything. Just thought it seemed very much like you. And the white outfit looks good on you. It seems like something you’d dress in.”

When confronted with my regiment of children, the man backed down. I wasn’t really happy to hear him say he thought the bear outfit looked good on me, though I wouldn’t have loved it if he told me I looked bad.

“So, are you traveling straight into the seaport in this bear... carriage? That’s going to draw a crowd. Well, you’re probably used to fame.”

Ugh, he was right. I remembered what went down. The day after I defeated the kraken, there’d been a serious party. Everyone was talking to me, and people kept bringing me food. They hadn’t gawked too much when I brought Fina and Shuri to dig up bamboo shoots though. People thanked me, sure, but it wasn’t a big deal.

“We’ve all agreed not to bother you too much, but I’m not sure all the townspeople will remember to do that.”

Maybe it would be better not to roll into town on the bear buses, then. It wasn’t too far of a walk to the bear house. The kids also seemed tired of being cooped up.

“Would you all be okay with walking?”

“Can we?”

“Sure, just don’t wander off. You have to follow the headmistress’s instructions, no matter what. I know you all want to get to the beach as soon as possible, but we need to get to my house first.”

"I'll go first!" Noa said, and the kids followed her.

"Don't push as you get off."

"Go in order starting with the front."

"Don't run, it's dangerous."

Lina, Rulina, and Neaf were giving the kids warnings. Then, when Gil just gave a gruff, "Go slowly," that was enough to get the kids back in line.

"Fina, could you tell Tiermina too?" I said. I had Fina go talk to the other buses.

We were finally all off.

"What will you do with these buses, miss?"

"I'll put them away in my item bag, don't worry."

Once everyone was off, I did exactly that.

"You really are full of surprises, miss."

After I had permission to enter from the guard, I headed back to everyone.

"So, we're walking from here, Yuna?" Tiermina came by with a drowsy Gentz accompanying her.

"Yeah. The carriages will be too conspicuous," I explained.

"I think bringing along this many kids and walking might have the same effect," Tiermina said while looking around.

She was right, actually. I really hoped we'd stand out less than three bear buses though.

When I looked at the kids, they were staring excitedly at the water.

"It's huge!"

"Is that all water?"

“It’s supposed to be salty, you know.”

They were all chattering away. I thought it’d be nice to walk and let them look out at the ocean.

As I led the kids out, I felt like a teacher leading a contingent of kindergarteners and elementary students. If I just had a stroller for the smallest kids, I’d definitely look like I was running a daycare instead. The older kids would probably be mad though if I said that. The older kids were holding the hands of the younger ones and making sure they didn’t wander off. They seemed to be doing their jobs. I bet they’d rather be running to the beach themselves, though.

“Yuna, when are we going to the beach?”

“Hmm, let’s figure that out after getting to my house.”

It wasn’t *quite* the right time. The sun hadn’t set yet, but I didn’t think there would be a lot of time for playing. Once we got to my house, I wanted to go over some things. The sun would probably set by the time all that was done.

“How about we go out there tomorrow?”

“Aww,” the kids all whined in unison as they pouted.

“You can’t give Yuna any lip, now.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

The kids apologized as soon as the headmistress corrected them.

I left the kids with the orphanage adults and Rulina, then headed to Anz’s group.

“What do you want to do?” I asked them. “Do you want to head to your houses? Or would you like to come too?”

“Do you have rooms for us to stay in?”

“Not individual rooms, but I’d love to have you. You’d need to be in the same room as

Seno and the others.”

“That works for me,” Anz said without hesitating.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I need to help with dinner and it’d be busy if I go home right now anyway. I’ll see Father and everyone else tomorrow.”

Seno and the others agreed.

“Is your house the that’s one shaped like a bear?”

“Oh, you’ve heard of it?” I asked Anz.

“Well, everyone was talking about it.”

“That’s right.”

“Anyone living in Mileela knows about that house!”

“I’m looking forward to staying in the famous bear house.”

“Maybe I can brag about this when we get back.”

They were all looking forward to going back to Crimonia. I’d been worried about what they would decide after coming back to Mileela, but I had nothing to worry about.

We walked down the path that bordered the beach and took a slight turn onto a path leading into the mountain next. The giant bear house was ahead. The kids had all been staring at the ocean, so they hadn’t noticed it yet.

“Stop, everyone. We’re turning here.”

They all stopped in their tracks. Their eyes turned toward me. When they saw where I was going, they were all taken aback. I hadn’t noticed the last time I was here, but the path had been paved neatly with stones. I’d been sneaking through the trees and over the wall to avoid getting spotted by a deadly scorpion, so I’d been busy. There was also a *No Trespassing* sign. Well, I didn’t want anyone just barging in, of course. Didn’t remember that sign, though.

While I was busy being surprised by the stone paving, the kids and adults were taken aback by something completely different.

“A bear?”

“It’s a bear face.”

“There are two of them.”

Since there was a wall to keep people out, the only thing visible from here were the bear heads.

“Yuna, are we going to that bear house?”

“That’s right,” I said. When I told them that, the kids all took off running.

“If you get lost, make sure to come back here.”

If they got lost and asked for the bear house, someone was sure to bring them to the right place. Everyone in Mileela knew where the bear house was.

I didn’t know whether the kids had heard me, but they were already running. They seemed more interested in the house than the ocean now. I was happy they were so excited, but I felt a little weird that the house had won out over the ocean. I hoped they hadn’t forgotten we’d come here to enjoy the beach.

“Don’t run, it’s dangerous. No running! Absolutely NO running!” Liz yelled and followed after them with Rulina and Gil close behind. Neaf was holding a little kid’s hand, so she couldn’t follow.

I noticed a certain someone was getting fired up after seeing everyone else so excited.

“I’m going too! I can’t let anyone beat me as the bear fan club president.”

“Yes, Noa,” Misa agreed.

“Okay!”

Noa, Misa, and Shuri all took off sprinting, so Marina and Elle had no choice but to follow. Had Noa said something weird about a fan club? I was probably just imagining

things. Best not to overthink it. This helped push it out of mind: I was distracted by how much Elle's boobs were jiggling as she ran.

"Lady Noa looks so happy," Fina said when she caught up to my side.

"Well, I'm just happy she's having fun. You're not going with them?"

"I've already been here, so it's okay," she replied.

The only people who'd known about this bear house were Fina, Shuri, and the people from Mileela.

"What about you, Shia?" Shia hadn't taken off either.

"I'm not sure I want to run like a little kid," she said.

She was right. I felt a little too old to run with a pack of little kids myself.

"And I think I'll take a look around once we're up there."

There wasn't really much to look at though.

Once we got to the house, I found the kids waiting outside the wall. The whole house was surrounded by the wall, so the only entrance was the gate. I hadn't wanted trespassers.

"Yuna, hurry."

"Hurry, Yuna," Noa said.

"Okay, okay, I'm opening it."

I pressed the gate and the door swung open. The double bear house was there to greet us.

CHAPTER 373

THE BEAR DIVVIES UP THE ROOMS

(DAY ONE)

WHEN WE GOT PAST THE GATE, the entire house was revealed. Unlike my house in Crimonia and the traveling bear house, which were both made in the shape of sitting bears, this house was shaped like standing bears. It had four floors total as well.

“Two bears.”

The bears were connected and similar looking. The right side, when facing the houses, was made to be the girls’ side—the left was for the boys. The floors were linked though, so it’s not like they kept the kids apart.

“The girls told me about this. Yet another bear house...” Tiermina looked at the house, exasperated.

Okay, so they had a specific look, but my bear houses were flawlessly secure. They couldn’t easily be destroyed, and I didn’t have to worry about people forcing their way into them. My bear houses were super impenetrable.

“You hate making bear things for other people, but anything you make for yourself is always bear-themed.”

“Well...”

Thanks for the direct hit, Tiermina. Talk about critical damage...

Sure, I never liked making bear statues and I’d been pretty against the bear uniforms, but yeah, my own stuff was all bears. I didn’t wanna make excuses, but it was because they were just easy to make. I didn’t have many options. Things were sturdier—along with a whole host of other benefits—if I just stuck to bear shapes. Obviously, I’d always go with the best quality in any scenario. Maybe this was all a trick from the god who gave me my bear powers, but what else was I supposed to do?

The kids were staring up at the bear building.

“Yuna, are we really staying here?”

“That’s right,” I said.

The kids looked excited. The adults not so much.

“Yuna, are we staying here too?”

“It’s so cutesy. I think I’d clash with the décor.”

Nerin and Karin seemed a little resistant to the idea.

“In that case, would you prefer camping out in the garden?”

“Yuna, we’re kidding. Wow. I have dreamed my entire life of staying in a house shaped like a bear.” Her flat monotone made me think she might be sarcastic.

Maybe.

Probably.

At the same time, I knew how she felt. If I’d just been a normal girl without bear powers, I would’ve had the same thought. At this point, though, my bears were a part of me. I couldn’t give them up even if I wanted to.

But not everyone was put off.

“Wow! Yuna, what is this place? The house is so cute. I want a bear house too! Please make me one!”

“Yuna, you have to give me one too if you make her one. Please! Oh, please!”

Noa and Misa had immediately started begging me for their own houses. Cliff would probably (definitely) be furious with me if I reshaped his house into the image of a bear. Gran would faint from the shock.

So, I ended up telling the two this: “Sure... If Cliff and Gran say it’s okay, then I will.”

I was heading off the begging by handing them a Sisyphean task. There was no way either nobleman would ever say yes to that. I didn't say to ask Elleaura though, because she probably (*definitely*) would have said yes as a joke. Cliff would brook no nonsense about this stuff, though.

I called over all the gawkers to the entrance of the bear house and told them we were heading inside. The front door was between the bears' legs. There were two of them (one per bear), so I chose to go through the right one. It was all connected anyway. You could use either door.

The first floor was the kitchen and the dining room. Since it was two bears wide, it was pretty spacious.

"This is the dining room, so come here for mealtimes."

I showed them around the first floor, then headed up to the next level. The second floor was divided into one room in each bear, with a hallway that connected them. Since each room took up the whole floor, they were bigger than a school classroom. Twenty could fit in each room comfortably.

"So that on the left is the boys' room and this one on the right is the girls' room. Headmistress, Liz, would you be okay staying with the children?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

Neaf also wanted to stay with the kids, so she'd be bedding down on that floor as well.

"Gil, would you be okay staying with the boys?"

"Sure."

The boys got pretty excited to hear that and dragged him along into their room.

"Yuna, what about me?" Rulina asked.

"Would you be fine in the girls room?"

"Yes, that's fine by me," she said.

She really did seem cool with it. Then the little girls grabbed Rulina and headed off. I

popped my head in to explain which closet the bedding was in.

“You can use anything that’s in the room.”

“Are we sleeping here too, Yuna?”

“Your room is on the third floor,” I told Noa.

I’d decided that since Noa’s group was made up of aristocrats, I didn’t want the orphans or the headmistress and the other adults to feel intimidated and unable to sleep. I made sure they had a separate room.

“Tiermina’s family and Morin’s family are going to be on the third floor too.”

I took all of them up to the third floor. I had a few private rooms there. One of them was for Fina’s family.

“Are you sure we can have a whole room for our family?”

“You have Gentz with you this trip, so I want this to feel like a family outing,” I said.

“Thank you so much, Yuna.”

“Thank you, miss,” Gentz also said.

The four headed over to their room.

“Noa, your group can use the next room over.”

Noa, Misa, Shia, and their guards were staying in the same room together.

Finally, I roomed the workers from the bakery and restaurant all together.

“Yuna, once we drop off our things, could we start meal prep? I’d like to take a look at the kitchen.”

“Yeah, sure you can.”

“Mom, I’ll help out, too!”

“Same here.”

Karin and Nerin both spoke up.

“We’ll help too, of course,” Anz said for her group.

Once they set their things down, they headed back downstairs. I was the one carrying the food ingredients, so I headed down with them.

Morin took a look at the oven. “You have an amazing new oven. Have you ever used it?”

Since I could make do from my bear storage and didn’t stop by Mileela that often, I hadn’t stayed here much. Even when I did cook, I never did anything too fancy, so I’d never bothered with the oven.

“You don’t have any plates here, Yuna.”

“I brought some,” I said.

I produced all the kitchen supplies and cutlery I’d bought in Crimonia and placed them on the table. Anz and the others started to put them away into the various drawers and racks. I’d bought more than I thought we needed, so I thought we had enough. Sure hope we did.

“Okay, so let’s divide up the work and get cooking.”

Morin and Anz led the team and divvied up all the prep work. Looked like I could leave things up to them.

Once I left the kitchen, the kids started approaching me.

“Yuna, can we go to the beach?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah!”

Dinner was still being made and we definitely had time to kill until then. On the other hand, the sun was just about to set.

"Are we not allowed to?" The kids gave me puppy-dog eyes.

We were in town so monsters weren't a concern. But I didn't want to send the kids out alone. As I was hemming and hawing about it, Rulina came by.

"Yuna, I can go with them," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'll ask who wants to go with me and Gil. The kids won't settle down until they see it, I think. We might as well go."

She was right. I didn't want any of them sneaking out. In that case, letting them at least set foot on the beach made sense. Plus, I knew they'd be safe with Rulina and Gil.

"Then I'll take you up on it," I said.

"Yes, just leave it to us. Okay, everyone! Tell anyone who wants to go to the beach to meet outside," Rulina said. The kids sprinted away.

The kids at the beach had supervision from the adventurers while the ones who felt like staying back were being watched by the orphanage staff.

As the kids left, Noa's group came by. They looked around.

"What's going on?"

"We're exploring."

"With Shia?"

"I was hoping to have a story to tell my friends at the academy," Shia replied.

Uh, I didn't think she needed to explore to manufacture one. Also, I wasn't living in the bear house, so it wasn't like I had any deep, dark secrets stowed away in here. It was basically empty—secrets included.

"So, you're not going to the beach then?"

I'd thought they'd prefer to see that than stay here.

"We wanted to, but we'll wait until tomorrow. We've already decided today will be for exploration. Misa, Shia, let's check the yard first."

They all headed outside. Marina and Elle weren't with them, so they were probably still in the room. I later learned that Misa had asked them to stay in the room, so the three girls could explore together. I wish I could've seen Marina's face when that happened.

After I saw them off, I headed to the fourth floor to prep the baths. The last time, I'd been too slow to start prepping, so it'd taken too long for the water to fill up. I'd learned from my mistakes. I started with the girls' bath. Both genders got their own. I pushed aside the red cloth curtain hanging in front of the girls' bath and headed through the changing room, then to the bath itself. To my surprise, Fina and Shuri were already there.

"Fina, I'm turning on the water," Shuri said.

"Okay," Fina replied to her sister.

"What are you two doing here?"

I bet I could guess. Fina had cleaning supplies and Shuri was turning on the water. They were getting the bath ready. The real mystery was *why*, since I hadn't asked them to do that.

"Last time we were here, we didn't start the bath in time, so we decided to get it set up early. We tried to ask you about it first, but we didn't want to interrupt you when you were talking with Morin. So we just took the initiative. I'm sorry."

Apparently, Fina and I'd had a psychic moment.

"You don't need to apologize," I said. "I came here to do the same thing, so thank you. Did you already set up the boys' bath, then?"

"We'll get to it after finishing this one."

"Then I'll help out, so let's do this together."

"Okay!"

"I'll help too!" Shuri said.

All three of us got to work.

"Come to think of it, where are Tiermina and Gentz?"

"They went to walk and take a look outside. Mom and Dad were really grateful to you, Yuna."

It really was gorgeous here. This was basically their honeymoon, so I hoped they were enjoying themselves.

I asked the two to help out cleaning the boys' bath a little, and then I set up towels and hair dryers on the shelves of the changing room. Fina and Shuri finished up cleaning, and I set the water flowing to get the bathwater ready. We'd have enough for everyone to get in right away.

When I was about to leave, someone came into the bath.

"This must be the bathroom then," they said.

"Noa?"

"Yuna?"

Noa, Shia, and Misa had just come in. It guessed they'd been exploring from the ground up and had finished checking out the lower floors.

"What were you doing?" she asked.

I told her what we'd been up to.

"Oh! If you had informed us, we could have helped, too."

I couldn't really imagine the daughters of nobles cleaning out a bath, though.

"You brought us all the way here, so please let us help with cleaning at least."

"Yes, I want to help too," Misa also agreed.

Well, in that case, I decided to stop treating them as pampered guests and to make use of their eagerness starting tomorrow.

CHAPTER 374

THE BEAR TAKES A BATH

(DAY ONE)

ONCE WE WERE DONE with prepping the baths, the six of us decided to reward ourselves with a bath before dinner. There were a lot of girls, so it'd take a while, even taking turns. Morin and Anz's groups were cooking, and the kids were out at the beach. Rulina and Gil were out, too. Tiermina and Gentz were on their walk. I didn't know what Marina and Elle were doing, but they were probably relaxing somewhere.

So, since I had nothing in particular to do, why not get in the bath?

I went back to my room first to get something to change into. I had all my stuff in my bear storage, but I headed over to my room to fetch Kumayuru and Kumakyu. They were both curled up and sleeping soundly.

“Kumakyu, Kumayuru, want to take a bath?”

When I asked them that, they started to stir and crooned at me before hopping off the bed and waddling over to my feet. Looked like they wanted to join me then.

Once I got back to the bath, I found that the others had already gotten back themselves.

“Are Kumayuru and Kumakyu joining us?”

“They were watching out for monsters on the way here, so I want to give them a good scrub to show them I’m grateful for their work,” I said.

“I had no idea! Kumayuru, Kumakyu, thank you so very much,” Noa crouched down and gave my bears head pats.

“Yuna, could I also help wash them?” Misa asked.

“I’d like to thank them too for before, so let me as well,” Shia joined in too now. By “before,” did she mean when I’d been escorting her a while ago?

“Me too. I’d like to help wash them too.”

“Aw! I wanna wash them too!”

Now Noa and Shuri were volunteering. Only one person was sitting out of the fight to scrub my bears.

“You’re so mature, Fina,” I said.

“Um... actually, I’d like to also help since they let me ride them.”

“...”

Okay, so Fina was still Fina.

Since I only had one Kumayuru and Kumakyu each, I assigned Fina and Shuri to Kumayuru. Kumakyu got Noa, Misa, and Shia. I kinda wanted to be the one to bathe them, though.

We all got to the dressing room and then onward to the bath area once we were ready.

I left Kumayuru and Kumakyu to their handlers and started washing up before entering the water. Since I’d been driving all day, I was dead on my feet—super-duper exhausted. All I’d been doing was sitting and feeding mana into the steering wheel, but that’d still tuckered me out somehow. I got into the tub and sunk into the water and glanced at my bears, still being soaped up. They were covered in suds.

“Hee hee hee. Does it feel nice?”

“Cwoon.”

“They’re all flat to the ground!”

“Kumayuru, I’m going to pour water over you.”

I was glad they were enjoying themselves.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu headed into the bath with me once they were cleaned up. Their faces poked just above the water, all blissed out.

Fina and the others finished washing up and slipped themselves into the tub.

“It’s so nice...”

“It really is...”

“Maricks and the rest of the gang would be so jealous,” Shia said.

I had wondered why she was so into taking a bath right now. Mystery solved.

Still, I kept quiet.

“Of course I’d like a bear house, but I also envy the bear fountains.” Noa was looking at the bear statues that produced the water.

“I’m not making any statues,” I told her.

“You’re so mean, Yuna...”

I wasn’t trying to be mean, though. If I made one of those for Cliff’s house, I knew what he’d say to me. I didn’t want any trouble.

“The scenery from up here is very pretty”

We had a huge window and a gorgeous view of the ocean from here. It was almost sunset. We lounged in the bath, letting it wash away the fatigue from the day.

As we got out of the bath, dinner was done and all the orphans at the beach had come back with Rulina and Gil. They were gushing about how big and salty the ocean was as we ate. Generally enjoying themselves. The kids who hadn’t joined them seemed jealous.

“We’ll all go together tomorrow.”

That was when the real fun would start.

Then, once our meal was done, I explained the bath to all the adults. I had Gentz and Gil on the men’s side and Tiermina, Liz, Seno, Karin, Rulina, and Marina on the women’s side. Then, because no one was in the boys’ bath yet, I asked Fina to explain how to use it to Gentz and Gil. I didn’t really want to invite Gentz or Gil into the

women's bath, so I just had them get the explanation and the tour, just the two of them.

I headed over to the girls' side and flipped aside the curtain to show them the changing room.

"It's so big," Seno said, surprised a little.

"This is the changing room. You can put your clothes in the baskets here and then head in."

When we headed into the bath, everyone's eyes trained on one spot.

"Oh... Bears."

"Of course there are bears."

"...And they spout water from their mouths."

Tiermina and Liz didn't seem impressed since they'd already seen these before.

"They're quite large, though."

Well, yeah. The whole fourth floor was a bath, after all. Now, I was self-conscious that I'd made it too big, but it was already too late to remake it. I mean, a bath that was too big could do everything a small bath could do, but not vice versa. Bigger was better in that sense.

"I don't think we can all get in together, but we can take turns," I said. I let them decide who would go in first.

I did ask them not to shout and horse around. There weren't other buildings near us though, so the noise wouldn't be a big deal, but I didn't want anyone running around and slipping. It seemed like everyone understood that. They all agreed.

Finally, I opened up the window and showed them the view. They all seemed surprised at the idea of a window in the bath. The scenery outside was indescribably beautiful from the fourth floor. The sunset view had been pretty spectacular when I'd been taking a bath, but the ocean was just as pretty in the moonlight and with the stars overhead.

“I feel like this whole trip was already worth it for this.”

With that, my explanation of bath protocol was done and dusted.

“Make sure to turn off the lights and close the doors after you,” I said.

After that, I decided to turn in early. I told everyone that I was tired from using mana, but really, the bear suit had saved me from that kind of fatigue. I was just sleepy. We woke up early and I’d been driving the bus on my own all day, so I was already really drowsy.

I collapsed into bed with Kumayuru and Kumakyu, who’d beaten me to bed, and went straight to sleep.

CHAPTER 375

THE BEAR GOES TO THE OCEAN

(DAY TWO)

THE NEXT DAY, my bears woke me up. The weather outside was beautiful. Perfect for swimming in the ocean. I headed for the dining room where Morin and Anz were cooking away with the others. After we exchanged greetings, I sought out a place to sit for breakfast. It was nice not having to cook for myself.

As I sat and waited, the kids trickled into the dining room. Soon, breakfast arrived and we all tucked into the morning meal.

After the kids finished, we immediately started getting ready for the beach. Everyone retreated to their rooms to change. The path from the bear house would take us straight to the beach, and since it was pretty much deserted, we could head straight there in our swimsuits. I warned everyone to carry a beach towel just so they'd have a cover-up handy, though.

It was my turn to get ready. From my window, I spotted kids running along the path and Rulina, Liz, and Gil chasing after them. Behind them, Noa, Misa, and Shia broke into a run toward the beach. Following them was Marina and Elle. Even from here, I could see Elle's boobs bouncing. Then, taking up the rear, the headmistress took her time heading over.

Since Anz's group was from Mileela, they'd gone into town to visit with people they knew. Neaf had been about to go to the beach with the kids, but I heard the headmistress tell her that things would be fine without her and that there were probably people who missed her.

Neaf had seemed relieved that Rulina and Gil were there to look after everything, so she'd taken the headmistress's advice and had headed with Anz and the others into Mileela. Tiermina went with Gentz to meet Anz's parents. I guess they wanted to do that since they were looking after Anz. After that, they'd go shopping in town. Sounded nice.

When I offered to join them, they asked me to keep an eye on Fina and Shuri. I was there in the bear house with just the two of them.

“Are you still changing, Yuna?”

“Th-that’s right,” I said to Shuri, who was waiting outside my door. I’d been staring out the window, trying to escape my impending reality.

Yes. Right now, at this very moment, I was wearing... a swimsuit! A real-deal swimsuit! The one I’d ended up in was a black-and-white bikini. In the end, I hadn’t been able to make a decision, so I had Fina and Shuri choose for me (after pocket vetoing the school swimsuits by removing them from the choices).

I wasn’t used to wearing swimsuits. Didn’t feel great in one.

I didn’t tend to gain weight, so I didn’t really have a belly. I wasn’t toned either. Basically, my stomach and arms were soft like jelly. When I looked in the mirror, it made me even *more* embarrassed. Swimsuits were just too much for a hikikomori like me.

I grabbed my bear onesie. I didn’t have the courage to go outside in the swimsuit, but I could manage in *that* suit. As I was stepping my foot into the onesie, Shuri impatiently burst into the room.

“Yuna, hurry!” Our eyes met. “Wait, why are you putting on your bear outfit?”

“Because I’m mortified?” I ventured.

“Yuna... You’re so pretty. It really looks good on you.”

“Uh-huh, you look so nice in it,” Fina said, following Shuri into my room. She didn’t stop there. “You’re so thin! And your long hair is pretty, too.”

Wow, hearing that was worse than I thought it’d be. I wanted to die.

“Let’s go, Yuna. Everyone’s already gone,” Shia pressured me.

“Lady Noa also just left,” Fina added.

I knew that. I’d been up here half-disassociating for so long that of course everyone

was already gone. Shuri and Fina marched over to me, grabbed my arms, and blocked me from putting on my bear onesie.

“Yuna. It’s okay, so let’s go.”

Uh, how was any of this cool? Shuri pulled on my arm. Unfortunately, I wasn’t wearing my bear gear right now, not even my bear footwear, so I was too weak to resist anything. Since when had Shuri been this strong? I’d always been in my bear onesie, so I had no idea.

“Got it, fine, don’t pull on me like that,” I said.

I gave up. They both let go of my arms. I slipped on my bear shoes and put on my bear gloves, then popped my bear suit in my storage.

In other words, I had equipped one swimsuit, plus my usual bear shoes and puppets. I *had* to wear the puppets since they had my bear storage. I also needed something to wear on my feet to get to the beachside. Yeah, I looked super normal.

The normalest.

I didn’t even own another pair of shoes anyway.

“Aren’t you embarrassed, Fina?” I said.

“A little bit. But I’m thinking about playing in the ocean,” she replied.

She was wearing a frilly bikini—white to match Shuri’s suit. Kumakyu’s color sure was popular.

“Can’t I swim in my normal clothes?” I tried again.

“They’d cling to you and might drag you down into the water,” Fina said.

“So we have to wear these swimsuits.”

“That’s right.”

Wait, they’d turned my own logic against me... Yeah, I’d designed the swimsuits, but they were still embarrassing. I was an indoor bear—a house bear—so I spent my time

far from the pool or beachside. The ocean was literally and figuratively uncharted waters for me.

I threw a large towel over my shoulders to cover myself up. Okay, a little better. Fina and Shuri followed my lead and grabbed towels themselves, then they pulled me by the arms out of the room, hurrying me along. My bears followed behind us silently.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu would tag along in case of emergency. Chances of another kraken appearance were slim, but it couldn't hurt to stay vigilant. That was the way this world worked, after all, and I wasn't exactly dressed to fight.

"Yuna. Hurry, hurry."

Shuri was threatening to break out into a run, Fina was watching her happily, and I was exhausted just looking at them. As we came to the sandy beach, Shuri and Fina finally took off running.

"Make sure you do your stretches!" I called out, even though I didn't know if this world had a concept of stretching.

The beach was occupied by our group from Crimonia. We had it all to ourselves, when it came down to it. Were technically within town limits, but this was pretty far out of the way. No one would bother us here.

I thought about what to do and looked around. There were kids playing at the edge of the water. They were all in school-style swimsuits, and the girls had their tags sewn into the front. Some of the kids were dressed like bears and wore bear swim caps like Shuri's. I spotted round tails. So, Sherry really *had* done it. The bear suits weren't the most popular style, but there were quite a few of them.

I caught Fina watching the kids playing in the ocean.

"Are you going to go play, Fina?" I asked.



"Um... can you swim, Yuna?" Fina asked sheepishly.

"Me? I think so. I only swam when I was little. I haven't done it in a few years."

The last time was probably in elementary school. Maybe it was like a bike, and I'd remember right away. Was that how swimming worked?

"Um," Fina said again. "I can't swim, so could you teach me?"

"Can you teach me too, Yuna?" Shuri also joined in.

Thought so. There was a small river near Crimonia, but they probably hadn't ever been to it because Tiermina had been sick.

"I think you'd be better off asking Rulina..." I looked over at Rulina, but she was already heading to a very full swimming lesson. Liz was similarly tied up, and the boys were all gathered around Gil. I guess I was the only one who could teach them?

"I can teach you. If I remember how, that is." If I couldn't swim, I didn't want them learning from my example.

Fina responded with a cheerful "Okay!" Was she listening at all? If I couldn't do this, I couldn't teach her.

I took off the towel over my shoulders and was immediately assaulted by the slow, relentless baking heat. Wow, was it hot. I had to take off the rest of my bear gear too, which meant the sand started to roast me from below. Even though I was in a swimsuit, it was way hotter than my nice, cool onesie. I pined for that bear onesie.

Before I went in the water, I assigned Kumayuru and Kumakyu to look after my shoes and puppets. The bear gear was nontransferable, so even if I left them on the beach, they couldn't be stolen or moved. But maybe, since they were my summons, picking up my own gear wouldn't be a transfer. Maybe that meant they could pick up my nontransferable bear equipment. That way, if something went wrong, they could bring me the gear.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu were truly brilliant summons. If I ever returned to my original world, I wanted to take them with me.

I walked barefoot on the beach after handing over my equipment. The soles of my feet

burned, but it didn't seem to bother the kids. Maybe it was because they walked around everywhere? I could see just how much more fit they were compared to me, a shut-in.

I did some light stretches before getting in the ocean. If I didn't and went in the water, I knew I'd get a leg cramp. Without my bear gear I was weaker than even an average person.

After properly limbering up, I dipped my feet in the water. Small waves lapped at my legs. Slowly, I eased into the ocean.

"Brrr."

"Are you okay, Yuna?"

The seawater was just colder than I thought is all.

"I'm fine," I replied, and went in up to my belly. This seemed like a good depth to test if I could swim.

I flattened out and attempted a breaststroke. Oh, I *could* swim! It seemed like my body remembered even though it'd been so long. From there, I tried freestyle and backstroke. I couldn't do the butterfly, but I'd never been able to do that.

"You're amazing, Yuna," Shuri praised me, which was too much. All I could do was swim a little. I definitely didn't have the stamina for distance.

Since I had more or less proved to myself my ability to swim, I decided I could teach Fina and Shuri. I headed over to where my bears were, put on my bear puppets, and pulled some kickboards out of bear storage. Now, I know what you're asking: where did I get kickboards? Well, they were just planks of wood. This world obviously didn't have anything like the ones I'd had at home, so this was the closest alternative. On the other hand, I'd made sure to choose a more buoyant kind of wood. I'd consulted with Tiermina the other day about that.

I handed the kickboards to the kids and taught them how to use them.

First, a basic flutter kick. Fina and Shuri started practicing with the boards.

But... after we started the lesson, we pretty much had to call it quits right away. I was

fully drained. I could swim, but I had zero stamina.

"Are you okay, Yuna?" Fina called out to me as I flopped over onto Kumayuru's back.

"I'm fine," I said. I didn't think I was this out of shape though. "I think it's best if I rest a bit. You should go play, Fina."

Fina was a quick study, so she figured out the rest herself and went off to play.

CHAPTER 376

THE BEAR CONSTRUCTS A BARRIER (DAY TWO)

AFTER TEACHING FINA AND SHURI how to swim, I was really worn out. I wanted a place to relax, but the sun was bearing down on us. There was no escape. That's when I noticed the headmistress on the beach. She seemed to be sweltering herself.

I had completely forgotten—I'd planned for this! I looked for a clear spot and pulled out a beachside stall (bear version, of course). Basically, it looked like a beach stall from TV, but more bearlike. I invited the head-mistress in. I kicked myself for forgetting. She thanked me, popped into the beach hut, and got to lounging.

"If the kids come over here, there are drinks in that fridge," I told her. "You can give them something to drink and rehydrate and let them rest."

I pulled out drinks for the both of us from the refrigerator and handed one to her.

"Thank you very much. I was a bit worried since I forgot about bringing something to drink."

"There's a bunch, so drink all you want."

As I talked to the headmistress, the kids noticed the beach hut and wandered over. Then they looked at me, puzzled. I overheard them talking: "Who's that?" "I dunno..." "Is it Yuna?" "Really?" "Now that you mention it, maybe...?"

They really didn't recognize me. I held up my bear puppets, opening and closing their puppet-y mouths. Maybe that'd jostle the kids' memories.

"Yuna?"

"I knew it was Yuna."

The kids smiled and crowded around me. I knew it; the kids only recognized me by

my bear stuff.

The headmistress started laughing.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said. “That was a little funny.”

It wasn’t like I was going to start ranting about it. Was it really that funny though? After that, the kids showed the headmistress their haul of beach stuff.

“I found pretty shells!”

“Mine are prettier!”

“They’re both lovely,” she said.

“I’ll give ‘em to you!”

“Me too!”

“Hee hee hee, thank you. I’ll treasure them.”

Then, after that, the kids kept coming back to show her other things they found. They found teeny crabs, hermit crabs, and even a starfish. I panicked and had them put the starfish back when I saw that monstrosity. I didn’t want them bringing gross stuff over.

When the kids stopped by, we’d give them water to keep them hydrated. I occasionally caught glimpses of little bear tails as they turned to head back to the water. That always got a sigh out of me.

Why, oh why, had it come to *this*?

A short time later, Rulina came over with some kids in tow.

“Yuna, you’re full of surprises. Even this thing is shaped like a bear.”

Of course. Bear-shaped stuff was sturdier. My pride took a backseat when it came to the safety of the kids.

“Anyway,” I said, “if you’re tired, you can rest up here.”

"Are you already worn out then?" she asked.

Yes, both mentally and physically...

"Well," she said, changing the subject, "I didn't realize your hair was so long. And you're so dainty!"

Rulina was totally scrutinizing my figure, so I quickly covered up with a towel.

"I understand why the kids were so confused. If I hadn't seen your conversation, I would have wondered who the pretty girl was."

"You're pretty too, Rulina," I said.

"Ha, thanks."

Squish, squish.

I paid no attention to her flattery and dished some of my own back at her. Rulina actually was pretty, though, for real. I didn't get why she'd give Deboranay her time.

Squish, squish.

Unlike me, she looked good in her bikini. It was made out of simple white fabric but decorated with flower embroidery. It seemed like, instead of using patterned fabric, that was how they'd customized their suits. I hoped Sherry wouldn't see it and start embroidering bears on new swimsuits. Well, there shouldn't be another reason to make a bunch, so maybe it would be all right.

Squish, squish. Squish, squish.

"I think you're cute, Yuna, but I didn't think a girl with such thin arms and legs would be inside that bear."

Squish, squish. Squish, squish. Squish, squish.

Rulina had latched onto my bicep and was squeezing the heck out of it.

"Such thin arms knocked out Deboranay. I can't believe it."

Squish, squish. Squish, squish. Squish, squish. Squish, squish.

"Um, could you not?" I said.

"But they're soft and feel nice..."

"How about you just squeeze your own boobs instead?" I said.

They were definitely larger than mine.

"I can do that any time," she said.

I shook myself free from Rulina's hands, which made her boobs jiggle a bit.

My own boobs? Definitely *not* jigglers.

"Well, the waves aren't rough here, but I can't help but worry that the kids might still get swept away," Rulina said as she looked out over the ocean.

The waves at this beach were relatively calm, which meant they were good for playing, but if we took our eyes off some of the small kids for a moment, they might fall under a rip current and get pulled out to sea. Right now, they were playing at the edge of the water and Liz was with them holding their hands. But it wasn't like we could keep an eye on everyone. Then again, there were also kids who couldn't swim, so maybe it would be better to make a safe place where they could play.

I raised my weary body and went out into the rays of the blazing, bright sun.

"Where are you going, Yuna?" Rulina asked when I left the beach hut.

"I was thinking I'd make a place where the kids could swim safely."

Kumayuru and Kumakyu followed me as I walked to the beach. Some kids followed me like ducklings, along with a smiling Rulina. It was a strange procession.

I looked around, searching for a good place to make a kiddie pool. I guess it was all the same. Sandy beach extended to my left and right between some rocky outcroppings. I moved over to a spot where there were no kids. I guess here would be good?

I headed to where the water met the sand and held out my bear puppets. Then I

remembered to give the kids behind me a warning.

"Stay behind me while I do this, okay?"

I reached out with my bear puppets, preparing to use magic. A bunch of poles rose from the surface of the ocean, and with that, I'd made a barrier about twenty-five meters wide. With this even if they were swept away, they'd hit the barrier. That would be as far as they could go. The kids could play in the shallows without us worrying.

"Rulina, have the kids play here," I said. "I can make it wider if it feels cramped."

"Gosh, you use magic like it's nothing, Yuna. Anyway, I'll invite Liz and Gil over and we can play here."

Rulina shouted out to Liz's group from where we were. When she did, the other playing kids gathered around. Fina and Shuri were among them. Liz came to see what the commotion was and was shocked with the swim barrier at first, but she thanked me right away and started to play with the kids again. Gil carried two kids with him on his back when he came over. He didn't show any signs on his face that he felt them at all, but weren't they heavy? The guy was just super beefy.

As I was looking at him, our eyes locked.

"...?"

But the moment passed. He sat down on the beach and started to watch over the kids. What was *that*?

"He didn't know who you were or why a stranger would be here, and decided it was too hard to figure out," Rulina interpreted Gil's thought process for me.

Wait, maybe he didn't recognize me since I wasn't a bear?

That was too disturbing to think about too hard, so I pulled out something to play with instead. It was a large board, similar to the ones from Fina and Shuri's swim lessons but larger. It'd be a great floatation device on the water—perfect for the kids to play with. I pulled out toy rafts, too. Bear shaped, not that anyone was surprised about it. They were all made of wood, and I'd brought three of them to avoid too much fighting over them. When I pulled them out, the kids hopped on them happily.

With this, my job here was complete. I headed back to the beach hut to actually get some R&R.

“I’m parched,” I said.

“Here you go, Yuna.”

Before I knew it, Fina had poured me some water inside the hut.

“Thank you.”

I gulped down the cool water. Delicious. Out in the ocean, I saw Shuri playing with the orphans.

“Having fun, Fina?” I asked.

“Uh-huh, this is fun. This is the first time I’ve played with so many people. Ever since I met you, we’ve been able to do so many fun things.” Fina turned toward me with a smile.

Well, if she just blurted it out that plainly, it was kinda embarrassing. I changed the subject to save a little face.

“That reminds me,” I said. “Noa’s group isn’t around. Do you know what happened to them?”

I hadn’t seen them a single time since coming to the beach.

“Lady Noa? I saw them heading toward those rocks when I came.” Fina pointed at a rock a ways away.

“Marina and Elle were with them, right?”

“Yeah, they were there.”

In that case I shouldn’t have to worry. I watched kids playing in the ocean from the beach hut. The ones playing with Rulina and Liz in the ocean looked like they were enjoying themselves. Gil was surrounded by boys, and he was tossing them into the water whenever they got near him. They loved it, so he was in high demand.

Shuri eventually called Fina over from the hut and they went off together. Everyone was having such a good time. I was glad we came. As I was half-lounging and half keeping an eye out for trouble, I heard a commotion.

“What’s this?!”

That sounded like Noa. I guess they’d come back. Noa and Shia entered the beach hut.

“Um, Yuna?”

“Yuna?”

They both looked at me with obvious confusion over why this stranger was using Kumayuru as a pillow.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I said. “You’ve both seen me outside of my bear clothes, so you should’ve recognized me.”

“I thought I was seeing a vision of a beautiful maiden collapsed on the ground, so for a moment, I didn’t recognize you.”

“Yuna, you looked good in my school uniform, but that swimsuit looks really good on you, too!”

“Literally, you’re being too nice,” I said. I felt like they were just trying to cover up that they hadn’t recognized me, but I let it go and thanked them anyway. It felt weird getting compliments from them considering how cute they were.

Noa was wearing a frilly swimsuit like Fina’s, but hers was blue. Shia was also wearing a cute swimsuit. She was bigger than me as well. She was also giving me the once-over.

“So, this is how you actually look, Yuna? I can’t believe someone that tiny slays monsters and even defeated Lutum.” She sounded just like Rulina. “You would be really popular if you went to the academy.”

She was laying it on kinda thick.

“I don’t have any reason to go to academy, so I’m afraid popularity’s not in the cards for me.”

"That's too bad," she said.

Since I didn't really want to keep talking about my out-of-shape body, I changed the subject.

"Where were you, Noa? I didn't see you around."

"Oh, yes! There was someone fishing over there by those rocks, so we went to go see them. Shia taught me to swim. We were on the other side of the rocks, so we didn't realize this hut was here."

So Fina was right then.

"You made this bear hut, Yuna?"

"I was thinking it would be a good rest spot," I answered Shia. Well, pretty much only the headmistress and I had been using it. Everyone else rested for a bit before immediately heading out to play again. I didn't know if they had bottomless energy or if the ocean was that fun. It was probably both.

"You guys should rest if you're tired. It's not good to play too long in the strong sun. There are some drinks in the fridge, so take some water to rehydrate."

"Sure. I was thinking about heading back to the house since I was thirsty, so this is great."

Noa and Shia pulled some drinks out of the refrigerator and drank them happily.

"It's so crisp and refreshing."

They sat down next to me and cuddled my bears, settling down to rest.

"I guess Misa isn't here?" I asked.

I had seen them leave the bear house with her, but only the two of them came back.

"Misa is taking a swim lesson with Marina. Since I learned how to swim, she's trying her best since she wants to too," Noa told me.

"Though they teach you how at the academy as well. If you can swim before you enroll,

the classes will be easier, so I think it's helpful to practice," Shia added.

It was better to be able to swim than not. There was a big difference in survivability if you could swim if there was a flood, you fell off a boat, or you got swept up by a river. Knowing was better than ignorance. I think that really applied to everything—studying, sports, computer skills, bikes, and cars. Experience was always worth having. I wasn't old enough to have a driver's license, but I guess this applied to that, too. It'd be better to learn than not. In this world I had Kumayuru and Kumakyu instead of a car, though.

Although, come to think of it, since I rode on them instead of in them—maybe they were more like motorcycles?

CHAPTER 377

THE BEAR GOES UNNOTICED

(DAY TWO)

MISA STOPPED BY after a while, expressed her shock over the bear beach stall and complimented my swimsuit. We had a conversation that went pretty much the same as the one I had with Noa, then I told her to take a break if she was tired.

"If you get tired, make sure to drink water and rest," I advised her.

Gotta stay hydrated.

"Thank you, I was feeling a bit thirsty."

Misa took some water out of the fridge and gulped it down.

"Did you swim?" I asked.

"Yes," Misa answered. "I can't go very far, but thanks to Marina and Elle, I can swim a little."



"Even if you can't swim, surely the academy would teach you."

"It was frustrating not being able to swim when Noa can," Misa explained.

"I'm a whole year older than you. You should wait until next year to learn," Noa said.

Noa was being Noa—I guess she wanted to feel like the older one.

After they rested a bit, Noa and Misa noticed the toys the kids were playing with and decided to go check them out. Shia, Marina, and Elle followed after. Thanks to Elle and Marina, I didn't have to watch them so closely. They were the daughters of nobles and while I didn't want to give them special treatment, Cliff and Gran had entrusted me with them specifically. I didn't want them doing anything dangerous.

I watched the kids playing for a while with the headmistress until Fina came back.

"Yuna, Shuri and the kids are hungry, but what will we do for lunch? Morin and Anz aren't here, are they?"

I guess it was already that time.

Just as Fina said, our cooking brigade wasn't around. I'd told Morin's group to enjoy their vacation and go have a walk around town and I'd told Anz's group to catch up with their friends. That meant this meal fell on my shoulders.

"Okay. Let's get lunch rolling," I said, even though I just needed to pull stuff out of my bear storage.

Just as I was winding up to pull some lunch bread out of bear storage, I heard a commotion come from the beach.

"What's that?"

"What's going on?" The headmistress seemed a bit uneasy.

"I'll go check it out."

It might have been dangerous, so I put on my bear shoes and puppets before leaving the beach hut. Fina and my bears followed me out.

I spotted a bunch of men and women carrying supplies and headed this way. What was happening? Judging by their clothes, they were... fishermen? Maybe? They looked familiar, like I'd seen them before at the harbor.

"Heeey, you kids, we're gonna be making y'all some delicious grub!" one of the men yelled to the kids, who noticed the commotion and started to gather.

Uh, stranger danger much? They shouldn't have just walked up to these guys, but Gil and Rulina were with them. I supposed it was okay. I was a little worried by how innocent the kids could be, but I didn't want them to distrust people. The world was full of nice people too, after all, so I kept my scolding to myself.

"Is that food?"

"There's so many fish!"

"That's right, we're gonna make something tasty with this catch," a man said, lightly tousling a kid's hair before prepping to cook. The kids seemed engrossed by all this meal prep activity. Just what was going on?

I headed over to a guy nearby to check what was happening.

"Um, excuse me, what is this?" I asked.

"Well, young lady, you're friends with the bear girl, right?"

I guess by "bear girl," he meant me. Uh, it's rude to talk about someone right in front of you like they're not here? I didn't want to tell him it was me though, so I just nodded.

"Anyway, we heard the bear girl was bringing a bunch of kids to the ocean, so we came to treat them to a feast."

"Who told you that?"

"Anz did."

Now I knew the source of the leak.

"Also, is the bear girl around? I wanted to make sure she'd be okay with this."

Right in front of ya, bud.

But if I told him, it'd be a whole *thing*. I also played out a whole scenario in my head where I told him it was me and he acted all shocked and just refused to believe me, so I stayed quiet to avoid that trainwreck. Next to me, Fina was trying to hold back a laugh.

"I'll let her know," I said.

"Oh, really? Mighty kind of you. But could you pass on that we'd like to see her too?"

I left the man after that.

I looked around, wondering what I should do next, when I spotted the very traitors who'd outed our operation: Anz and Seno. Anz was restlessly looking for something as we closed the distance between ourselves. I opened my mouth to ask what the deal was with telling strangers where we were, but she walked right past me and started talking to Fina, who was next to me.

"Fina, do you know where Yuna is?" she asked.

"You're looking for Yuna?" Fina parroted back.

Oh, for—! I was standing right *next* to Fina!!! She'd had the same reaction as an absolute stranger had just had a minute ago. Fina threw a concerned glance over in my direction.

"The fishermen wanted to make us lunch, so I just wanted to let Yuna know."

Yeah, sure, fishermen, got it. If it looks like a fisherman, smells like a fisherman, then it's a *fisherman*, and they did look like fishermen. But I already knew about lunch after hearing it from them—the fishermen, that is.

"I know, even though Yuna dresses in a way that stands out, she doesn't actually like the attention. The fishermen all said that they wanted to meet her, so I was wondering what to do."

Little late for that, seeing as how the fishermen were already here and cooking.

"So, I wanted to check in with Yuna, but where is she?" Anz asked Fina again. She'd

glanced at me a few times during her convo with Fina, but she didn't have a clue it was me. Since Fina was constantly throwing me concerned glances, I decided to just speak up.

"Anz," I said.

"...Um, can I help you?"

Anz tilted her head. Yep, no recognition whatsoever. I showed her my bear puppets and picked up Kumakyu.

"Wait, is that you, Yuna?" Looks like she finally realized who I was. "For a moment there, I didn't recognize you."

That wasn't just a moment. If I hadn't shown her my bear gear, she wouldn't have connected the dots. That wasn't gonna cut it.

"I think I get the gist, but explain this to me further?" I said.

"Well, after I went home, we went to the market to buy food. I mentioned you were here, and everyone started saying that we didn't have to pay for anything. I just couldn't accept that."

Okay, so Anz handled that correctly.

"Then why is this happening?"

"Well, after that they ended up deciding to treat us to a feast. We tried to tell them there were too many kids, but then other fishermen started to get involved... and, well, we ended up with *this* situation."

Anz indicated the fishermen, who were setting up the fires and cleaning fish, with her eyes. There were more than ten of them by the shore.

"Um. Sorry." She looked disappointed in herself.

Okay, well, at least I was up to speed. It wasn't Anz's fault at all, so it wasn't like I could get angry at her. This situation was bound to happen once word got out in Mileela. Maybe I should have gone to the guild first so I could have headed all of this off.

The fishermen were already cooking on the sandy beach and the kids were stoked, so I guess it was too late to turn them down. I didn't want them to do this every time, though, so I decided to ask them to keep it to just this once.

When I checked in on them a little later, there were new people bringing more supplies. I recognized a few of them. I spotted Damon, who I'd rescued on the mountain. He spotted my group and came over.

"Anz, is the bear girl around? Haven't seen her for a while, so I wanted to welcome her."

I. Was. Right. Here. He'd come over to talk to Anz.

I was losing track of how many times this had happened today. No one knew what I looked like and that was kinda... sad. I didn't like standing out and I felt sad when I wasn't noticed. I guess it was kinda two-faced of me to hate it no matter what happened, huh?

This time, Anz gave me the same uncomfortable look Fina had given me before.

"Umm, this is Yuna right in front of you." Anz exposed my secret identity.

"Bear girl...?"

He looked at me in shock. It was like he couldn't believe it. What, was I ugly? Was the swimsuit ugly?

"I didn't recognize you without your bear outfit. Whoa. To think there was such a cute girl under all that bear stuff..."

Well, this was awkward.

I didn't love him staring at me in my swimsuit, so I took a step back.

"Anyway, it's been a while. You built a house here, so couldn't you visit more often? Yuula wanted to see you too."

"Well, I've been busy with stuff," I answered.

A lot had happened since I slain the kraken. I'd worked as a guard for Shia's school group, made Anz's shop, slayed some golems, made some stuffed animals, went to the

capital, visited the elf village, went to the school festival, and traveled to the desert. Come to think of it, it hadn't even been that long, and I'd fit all that in there.

Maybe I was overworking? Just a touch?

"Yuula will be coming later, so you should talk with her," he said.

"Sure, I wanted to see her too."

"In that case, I'll get lunch ready, so you eat as much as you want."

Damon headed off.

The folks who had come to make lunch still had their heads on a swivel while they were cooking. They were definitely looking for me. First it was that one guy, then it was Anz, then Damon, and now that I think about it, the kids and Gil before that. No one recognized me out of my onesie. When I'd worn the school uniform at the capital, the king himself didn't know who the heck I was. It was like I had no identity outside the bear gear.

The girl known as Yuna—and just Yuna—didn't even exist.

I silently returned to my beach hut, went into the changing room, and put on my bear onesie from my bear storage. Then I headed out in my bear form. All eyes locked on me as I emerged.

"You were over there, Miss Bear?"

"We've been looking for ya."

"Ha, you never change!"

"Where were you?"

"Oh, Yuna!"

"It's the bear!"

All of the kids and fishermen's reactions changed instantly. I'd been in front of them this whole time. All I'd done was wear a swimsuit instead of my usual outfit—I'd only

put my bear suit on because they hadn't recognized me without it.

Was it my imagination, or did the kids look happier to see me than before?

It must have been my imagination.

"Anz filled me in," I said. "Thank you."

"Oh, don't mind it. We're making you some delicious food, so help yourself!"

Everyone nodded along with the man who said that.

I thought they'd be all over me saying *thank you* for slaying the kraken, but that wasn't the case. They'd say hi to me from a distance, but they weren't approaching me directly.

"I think that's because Old Man Kuro told everyone not to inconvenience you," Anz told me with a wry smile.

That guy must have some insane clout. Like, definitely. He was supposed to be one of the most influential people in town, if I remembered right. Maybe I should thank him later?

"You're popular, Yuna. What did you do here?" Shia turned up with Noa's group.

"I just found the tunnel that goes to Crimonia," I answered.

I didn't know how much Shia and Noa had heard from their parents, and Marina and Elle were around, so I couldn't talk about it.

"So that's why there's a bear in front of the tunnel."

Shia was acting like she knew something. Wait, *had* they told her? With this many people around, I couldn't ask her. She wasn't digging any farther, so I wasn't gonna share any more.

"You're back to your usual clothes? The swimsuit was nice, but I think this is more of a 'you' look," Noa said.

"I think so too," even Misa agreed.

In everyone's minds, me—Yuna—automatically equals bear. But if that were true, how could I take the onesie off ever again?

CHAPTER 378

THE BEAR AVOIDS A SUNBURN

THE FISHERMEN TREATED us to a luncheon feast of grilled fish and shellfish, fresh out of the sea and even fresher off of iron griddles. It smelled incredible. The kids were waiting eagerly as the fishermen passed out the meals.

“Be careful, it’s hot,” the man warned as he ferried the food over.

“It looks delicious.”

“Are you getting some too, Fina? Shuri’s having some.”

Shuri had immediately lined up amongst the orphans to get some food. I spotted Noa’s group near her.

“I’ll go last,” Fina said.

“It might all run out if you hold back.”

“Don’t worry. We brought more than anyone could eat,” Yuula said as she came over. She was carrying plates loaded with grub.

“Here’s yours, Yuna, Fina.”

She handed the plates to us. I guess she’d made them up specially. We thanked her and took them. Lining up was a bother, so I was grateful. I dug right into the freshly cooked seafood.

“How is it?” Yuula asked.

“It’s *so* good.”

Yuula seemed pleased with my reaction.

After that I tried the octopus, squid, and shellfish. All kinds of things, and all delicious.

I wasn't the only one in heaven. All around me, Fina, the other kids, Noa's group, Rulina, and the other adults were all eating voraciously. I was thankful to the fishermen who'd done this for us, especially since we were imposing on them again tomorrow.

"Yuula, are you sure about tomorrow?" I asked Yuula as she fetched fresh food.

"You mean the boats?"

The fishermen were going to take the kids out on the sea in their boats tomorrow.

It'd all started out with one of the fishermen asking a kid who was watching him cook, "Wanna boat ride?" Then that kid had said yes (a little hesitantly) and then the fisherman had said, "We'll letcha!" After that, all the kids around them started saying they wanted a ride too, then other fishermen started joining in.

It became a whole thing.

I thought we would be an inconvenience, so I stepped in to tell them it wasn't necessary, but then the kids looked so disappointed. The fishermen sided with them. Liz and Rulina seemed like they'd started getting psyched about going out on the water themselves, so all I'd done by butting in was looking like the bad guy.

I was completely overruled, so we took them up on the offer. I didn't want the kids learning they could wheedle their way into getting everything they wanted, though. At home, I told the headmistress and Tiermina what'd happened, but then they scolded me instead. Said I should think about my own actions.

But I wasn't a softie. My style was all about give and take. The kids were doing their best, so I was just rewarding them, but it didn't seem like the headmistress and Tiermina agreed with my perspective.

Huh.

So, I decided to steel my heart to prove them wrong. I told the kids that I wouldn't let them ride if they didn't behave properly. It was going to be the first time the kids would ride on boats, and boats could be really dangerous for little ones who didn't know how to contain themselves. With a minor misstep, there was a chance they could fall into the water, so they absolutely had to listen to the adults—which I made sure to tell them.

Gil, Rulina, and Anz would be going with them, but anything could happen on the ocean. Maybe we needed to think about what to do if someone fell overboard. We didn't have life jackets, but maybe we could tie the kickboards to them or something?

Well, it was settled in any case. Boat rides tomorrow.

"It's fine, you don't need to worry so much. Everyone wants to do something for you, Yuna. If anyone does anything too directly, Old Man Kuro gets angry at them, so we thought we could do something for the kids. Besides, we know you enjoy seeing the kids have fun. Everyone was thinking if we let kids have fun, you'd have fun as well. Easy way to get around Kuro."

"Men are so simple, sometimes," Yuula whispered. In other words, the kids were taking my place for them. They must have been really scared of Kuro, then. I really had to thank him.

"But is it okay for you to tell me this, Yuula?" I asked. "You won't get in trouble for talking to me, will you?"

"It's okay. After all, we were the ones who brought you here, so we get a little special treatment."

Maybe the townspeople were actually grateful to Yuula and Damon too?

"Oh, we're not like heroes or anything. They know we met you by chance, but they won't complain about us since we already know you. We just gotta be subtle," Yuula said while smiling.

"But don't you all need to fish?"

"We'll get our work done in the morning tomorrow before we all head out. We just have to sell what we caught today. You don't have to worry about us."

I guess it was fine then. Getting to ride on a boat was a valuable experience. Maybe there would be a few kids who would even want to grow up to be fishermen, so it would be good for them to see how the actual work was. I heard fishermen have a tough job.

Lunch was finished and the fishermen were cleaning up and heading home. I was surprised they had suddenly turned up out of nowhere, and it was a surprise for the

kids.

In the afternoon the kids swam in the ocean, played on the beach, and rode around on Kumayuru and Kumakyu with full bellies. Noa couldn't restrain herself any longer and asked if she could play with my bears. I told her it was fine as long as she played with the orphans and shared.

I put on my swimsuit one more time to go swim and play with Fina and Shuri, but immediately burned through my stamina and ended up, once again, retiring to my beach hut. Without the bear gear, I really was weaker than a little kid.

Maybe I should work out a bit? But even if I did work out, I'd probably get bored with it and quit.

There's a lot of stuff that happened after that—it was a full day at the beach—but the headline was that no one got hurt. The sun began to set. The kids seemed to really enjoy the sunset since they slowed down a little bit just to watch it.

Time to head back to the house.

I was at my limit, so I asked to take a bath first. I was okay now that I had my bear shoes, but if I didn't have them, I wouldn't have been able to take another step. I was gonna be sore tomorrow. I wondered if I could fix my aches and pains with magic?

Curing exercise soreness with magic. This was probably the first time anyone who'd been reborn in another world had thought of using healing magic on their gains instead of their pains.

Anyway, I needed to relax in the bath, so I headed in with Fina and the others.

"Thank you, everyone," I said.

Fina and Shuri had prepared the bath, and Noa's group had too, keeping their promise from yesterday. I'd tried to lend a hand, but everyone kindly told me to rest in my room. Once it was ready, we all went to the changing room on the fourth floor. I creakily undressed, while Noa and the others stripped super fast and headed right in.

Just as I finished peeling off my bear onesie and into the bathing room, I heard yelping.

"What?! What happened?"

“It hurts. Ouuuuuch. It stings.”

“Ow, everywhere hurts.”

That was Noa and Misa. The two were gingerly touching their skin.

“Yuna, it really, really stings...!”

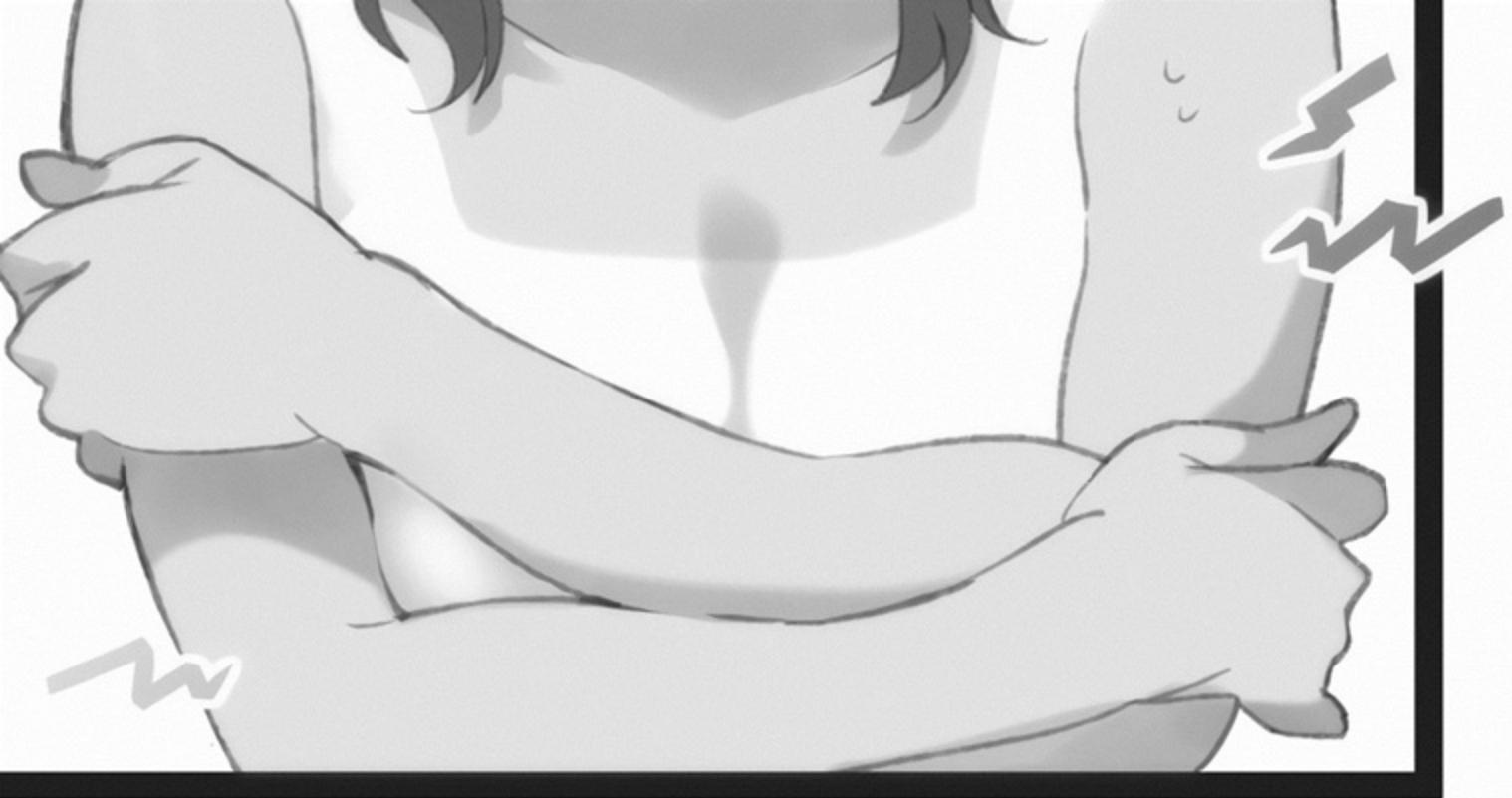
“Everything hurts...!”

Shuri and Fina were doing the same thing. It looked like they’d gotten sunburns.

I hadn’t noticed when we were at the ocean, but now I noticed the outline of their swimsuits on their skin. I could clearly see the contrast between the burns and the untouched areas, which, like, of course.

They’d been playing outside all day.

I checked out my own arms and body, but I looked pale as ever. Well, I guess I wouldn’t get burned after hanging out in the beach hut. I was also wearing the bear onesie during lunch. I just hadn’t spent that much time in direct sunlight. Thanks to that, I’d avoided getting a sunburn.



"You all got sunburns. That's just how it goes," I said.

"It's a sunburn?" Noa was looking at her own burnt skin.

"Wait, is this your first sunburn, Noa?"

"It's never been this bad. Now I know why Lala is always telling me to cover up and wear a hat."

I could picture Lala warning Noa. Misa was also nodding along in agreement. Well, I guess noble girls really didn't get sunburns then. Maybe they walked around with a parasol in the summer?

I tried imagining Noa as a European aristocrat, but she didn't really seem the type. Maybe she would if she wore some dainty white gloves and matured a little.

"Yuna, are you thinking something rude about me?"

Noa was glaring directly at me.

"T-Totally not," I said, then I pried my eyes off of her and looked over at Fina and Shuri.

"Are you both okay?"

"It hurts a little," Fina said.

"More than a little."

Wow, they were both completely fried—they were *lobster* red. That had to hurt.

Shia was the only one who seemed fine as she slipped into the hot bathwater. Actually, she didn't even have a sunburn. I was sure she'd played with everyone else. What was going on?

"Are you okay, Shia?" Noa asked.

"I'm fine. I put on an ointment I bought at the capital."

"Wait, what ointment?!" Noa asked in shock.

"It's a cream that makes it so the sun doesn't hurt you," Shia answered proudly.

Oh, she had sunscreen? They had that in this world?

"If you had something like that then why didn't you tell us?!" Noa blurted out what I had been thinking.

"Well, you won't know unless you experience it yourself. You should experience getting burned at least once so you know better, and if you want to stay pretty in the future, you'll need to remember to use ointment." Shia showed Noa her white arm.

"You're so mean," Noa sulked.

"It's good to have all kinds of experiences while you're young. I kept the ointment to myself is all."

Shia splashed a pail of hot water on Noa and Misa. They both yelled and hollered to get Shia to stop.

I was tired, so I wasn't really up for this horsing around.

Since all the kids would be burned, I adjusted the bath so it'd be lukewarm by the time they got in. For me, now, I sank down and relaxed in the warm water.

"Yuna, were you also spared because of ointment?" Shia asked while she looked at my unburnt body.

In my case, I'd just collapsed back at my beach hut when I was tuckered out. I guess I had my weak constitution to thank for saving me?

Wait, could I heal sunburns with my healing magic? I guess they were a kind of burn. Didn't see why not.

After that, as expected, I heard the kids and adults yelling in pain after us as they went in the bath. After the kids got out of the bath, the Mileela group applied an ointment on them with some sort of painkiller in it.

"I definitely knew this would happen."

"We've all been there before."

Anz, Seno, and the others were chuckling as they applied medicine to the kids. Well, they did grow up in a seaport, so they must have been through this themselves a few times.

Should I use healing magic? Well, sunburns were a life experience, like Shia said. They'd fade in a few days. Those sunburns and riding the boats tomorrow would turn, someday, into memories of Mileela.

The kids poked at one another's burns and shrieked and laughed in turns. I felt this gratitude, almost, that we'd made it here and I got to be a part of it. Tomorrow was another day for making happy memories.

I couldn't wait.

EXTRA STORY

MAKING THE SWIMSUITS: SHERRY'S CHRONICLES

YUNA ASKED ME to make clothes for swimming in the ocean. She showed me a page filled with a bunch of drawings of clothes that looked a lot like underwear. Personally, I thought it'd be kind of embarrassing to be in public dressed like that. But supposedly, these garments were only to be used for swimming. Yuna said that everyone would go swimming in these in the town where she used to live.

For the time being, I took measurements for everyone there, which included Fina, Shuri, and Lady Noire. If the clothes were too big or small, they would fall off, which would cause a commotion! So I made sure to be very careful about measurements. I was surprised to see Lady Noire there, but she was a perfect lady and let me measure her. Actually, Yuna was the one who gave me a hard time. We all ganged up on her, though, and I somehow managed to get the measurements I needed.

That's when I got to work making the bathing suits everyone had picked out.

I took the drawings of the designs and went back to the tailoring shop to have a discussion with Temoka.

"And you say these are swimsuits? I've heard about them. These *are* cute ones."

She told me some towns that were near lakes or beaches had clothes just for swimming. Yuna wasn't just making it up.

"If you're just playing in the water, they should be fine. You need fabric and clothes that help with swimming. Swimming in regular clothes can be dangerous because they get heavy."

Swim in the water? On purpose? I couldn't imagine such a thing. I'd heard that the ocean was a whole bunch of water. It was bigger than a lake and bigger than Crimonia's whole town— even the biggest capital ever.

If you had that much water, at least you'd never get thirsty, or so I thought. It turns out it's all salt water, which you're not supposed to drink. I couldn't believe that there was a whole body of water bigger than a lake and filled with useless salt water, for whatever reason. But maybe if you lived by the ocean, you'd never have to buy salt again. I was jealous of that.

I asked the headmistress and Temoka whether the ocean was really all salty, but they didn't seem to know. That was really odd.

Anyway, the ocean was bigger than a lake, it was all salt water, and you needed a swimsuit to swim in it. So that's why I was doing all this work.

It was a lot to think about considering I didn't know any of it for sure, so I just focused on my work.

I went back to the orphanage, and over dinner, I got everyone together to talk about the swimsuits. Then every-one was super-duper excited.

One of the things they were excited about was that I was making them clothes. Everyone looked at the designs I set on the table and gathered around me. Some of them wanted to look at them, but really, they meant they wanted to hold the drawing.

"You might rip them, so don't pick them up unless you need to," I warned.

Yuna made these and I had to work off of them as my templates, so it would be really bad if anyone tore them. I yelled, so the headmistress also yelled.

"Everyone, take your seats!"

The headmistress barely ever got angry, so everyone quieted down and sat back in their seats.

"You're tugging on Sherry too much," she said.

They all looked at me. Then the headmistress came to me and looked through the drawings of the suits.

"Sherry, are you really making all the suits needed for everyone?"

"Yes, Yuna asked me to."

If I had trouble with them, Temoka was going to help me, but I really wanted to do as much as I could by myself.

The headmistress looked at all of them.

"I think it will be difficult making many different kinds of clothing," she said. "Why don't we all pick this one."

She picked up one sheet of paper. It wasn't very complicated and had frilly bits that would be easy to make. Maybe the headmistress knew and chose it because of that? There were quite a few kids who weren't happy with that though.

"You could change the colors if you'd like. Then only the fabric would need to be changed."

Then after we all talked about it, we decided to base the colors off Kumayuru and Kumakyu—black and white. But if we chose those two colors, there was still a problem.

When one girl saw the paper with the design, she said, "I want a bear tail and a bear hat."

We saw that was one of the options Yuna had drawn. She'd thrown the design away, but Shuri had picked it up and given it to me. Other kids heard that someone wanted it, so they said they wanted it too.

The headmistress looked worried, but checked in with me, "Sherry, would that be all right?"

"It would just be tails and bear hats," I said. I told her it would be easy for me, so she approved of it.

Then the headmistress finally pointed at the front of the swimsuit drawing and said, "And please add names here. That way we'll be able to tell whose swimsuit each one is."

She was right. If we cleaned them together, then we wouldn't be able to tell whose suit was whose. That would be really tough, and we'd run into the problem before with other clothes. Everyone seemed okay with adding their names.

Then after we ate, I took everyone's measurements and asked about their color preferences and whether they wanted a tail. The girls wanted either color, but the boys preferred the Kumayuru color. I guess boys thought black was tough. The little kids mostly wanted the tail.

So that was how we decided on the swimsuits.

Then the next day, I started working on making them all.

A lot of the kids were the same size, so I could make a lot of the same shapes in the fabric. That wasn't too hard.

On normal days, I sewed the swimsuits, but I did have to take a break and go to the Bear's Lounge and the Bear Dining Room to get some measurements. First I went to the Bear's Lounge.

"Sherry, welcome," Morin greeted me.

"Are Karin and Nerin here?"

"They are," she replied.

I went upstairs to see them.

"What is it, Sherry?"

"I'd like to take your measurements," I told them.

"What? Whatever for?" They both looked surprised.

It seemed like they didn't understand. I had asked them too suddenly without an explanation.

"I need them in order to make swimsuits, so you have proper clothes to wear to swim in the ocean," I told them, then I explained how Yuna had asked me to make swimsuits for everyone.

"So, I'd like to take your measurements," I said again.

"Oh, I see, so clothes for the water. I've heard of those. I've never had many

opportunities to swim in the capital, so I haven't worn one myself before."

"You've already heard of swimsuits?"

"Well, the capital does sell anything and everything. When the season starts to get warm, some of the shops start selling them, but I wasn't interested because I never needed one."

"Karin, Nerin, can you choose from these swimsuits?"

I started setting up the illustrations that Yuna had given me on the table.

"Yes, I think I remember things like this being sold."

"Are we really wearing one of these?"

"Yes, Yuna asked us to," I said.

"But everyone will be able to see." Nerin placed a hand on her tummy. "I think I've gained a little weight recently."

"Me too," Karin said. She imitated Nerin, hand on her own tummy.

I couldn't tell because of their clothes, but they didn't seem like they had gained weight to me. Karin and Nerin seemed worried anyway. A lot of the customers who went to the bakery often were worried about gaining weight, so I had a way of handling that. If it was their tummies they were worried about, then they just needed to hide them.

"Then how about this one?" I said. I pointed it out as well.

"Even if it covers us up, it's still just one piece of fabric. It'll show that we've gained weight nonetheless."

They didn't believe it.

She was right. Looser clothes could hide things, but a swimsuit needed to fit very closely, so it was very difficult to hide your body lines and shape.

"Um, do we really need to wear one?" Nerin asked.

"Yuna said that I should make one for everyone, so if I don't..." I trailed off. I wouldn't be able to keep my promise to Yuna, then.

"Uh, please don't cry."

"Which one are you picking, Mom?"

"I don't need one," Morin said.

"You're the only one who isn't wearing one? That's no fair. Sherry, wouldn't Yuna be mad at you if Mom doesn't get one too?"

"Um. She said that aunties Morin and Tiermina can choose whether they want to wear one," I said. "But she said that I have to make one for you and one for Nerin."

"Oh, Yuna knows what she's doing, all right," Auntie Morin said, pleased.

"If I don't make your swimsuits, Yuna will..." I really wanted to make sure I fulfilled my promise.

"Okay, but no more cake tastings for you for a while."

"The cake tastings only happen because you want them to, Nerin."

"Well, you ask me to try your bread, Karin."

They were both self-consciously holding their bellies.

"I wish we'd known we were going to the beach earlier..."

"We really need to lose some of this flab before we head there..."

Both of them sighed heavily.

I didn't think they looked any heavier, personally. I guess that was something grown-ups worried about. There were a lot of customers who were worried about such things. Personally, I thought they were making a big deal out of nothing. I suppose just didn't understand. I thought eating all the yummy things they wanted would make them happier than this.

The two of them chose their swimsuits and I measured them. I was so tired afterward from all the sewing and measuring, but I headed out for the Bear Dining Room so I could get their measurements, too.

EXTRA STORY

DIETING: NERIN'S CHRONICLES

MY TRAINING was supposed to be under Auntie Morin at the capital, but now I was making cakes in Crimonia instead.

The strawberry shortcake that Yuna taught me to make was delicious and oh-so very popular. I'd even started experimenting with seasonal fruit. According to Yuna, she had plenty of strawberries, so I could make the shortcake even outside of season. I wasn't so sure that was a good idea, though.

"Karin, what do you think of this?" I asked, having her taste test a new trial cake I'd made. At first, I asked Auntie Morin to try them too, but after a while, she started passing. According to her, when you get older, you're not supposed to eat before bedtime, but Auntie Morin didn't seem so very old to me.

I considered asking the kids who worked at the bakery to try it too, but it spoiled their dinners when I did, so the headmistress asked me not to.

So, I normally just asked Karin. The inn where we also served our cakes had Elena, the innkeeper's daughter, who'd also help out.

"This one is good, too!" Karin said, looking like she was enjoying the piece she was eating.

"I'm so glad."

"But I'm not sure about this one," she added.

According to Yuna, some cakes contained alcohol, so the taste would appeal more to adults. I'd never had a full drink before, though. The one time I'd tried a sip, it had tasted *awful*. I was really skeptical that adults actually enjoyed drinking the stuff.

Karin seemed to agree. She also didn't like the alcoholic cake. Plus, we had kids working here, so I didn't want to be a bad influence on their habits.

I was cleaning while I was closing for the day when Tiermina came into the bakery. That was when she told us about the trip we would take to Mileela. According to her, it was Yuna's plan. I was surprised it was such a big trip. Apparently, she wanted to also bring the orphans and everyone working at her businesses. According to Tiermina, it was an employee trip.

I didn't really understand what an employee trip meant, though. Tiermina didn't seem to know much either, but supposedly Yuna claimed it was a trip to thank everyone for their hard work.

From what I understood, Yuna wasn't going to let us pay a single cent. We wouldn't even pay for the carriage to Mileela or for the inn. Yuna had a home in Mileela, so she was going to even let us all stay there. I wondered how many people were going and how we'd all fit in her home.

But that wasn't all! She was also paying us for the days we had off from work. Even Auntie Morin and Karin were flabbergasted by that. I really was as well. I couldn't believe she was letting the bakery close for so long or that we would be getting paid and we also didn't have to pay for anything while we were gone. I guess this is what you would call a jaw-dropping moment.

We didn't know the exact date, but it would be when the weather was getting warmer. Tiermina asked me to let Elena at the inn know we wouldn't be supplying her with cakes while we're on the trip.

I guess it would cause a lot of issues for her if we surprised her with it.

The next day, Elena came to get the cakes she would sell at the inn.

"Karin, the new cakes were delicious. My mom and dad also enjoyed them," Elena told me.

"I'm so relieved. In that case, maybe I'll have Tiermina and Yuna try it. We can see if they're worth offering at the bakery too."

"I'm sure it'll sell really well."

But I supposed that would have to wait. I remembered that Tiermina had asked me to relay a message.

"What? You're headed to Mileela?" Elena asked.

"We don't have a date set, but it looks like it. I won't be able to make cakes for you during that time though."

"Well, there's no helping it if you're gone. So, Mileela. That sounds so nice. I'd love to join you."

"Would you like to?" I asked. "I can ask Yuna if you can join in." Yuna already knew Elena and might let her come too. Elena shook her head though.

"It's okay. I don't think I can. There are always people coming and going from Mileela. Innkeeper's daughters don't get days off."

Elena's house itself was the inn. I'd even stayed at it when I'd first arrived in Crimonia. She'd been nice to me back then and we'd ended up becoming close. We'd visit each other on our days off, even. But ever since the tunnel between Mileela and Crimonia had been set up, the inn was nonstop busy. It was good for business, but they seemed to really have their hands full.

"Well, before I go, I'll make a few more cakes than usual," I offered.

"Yes, thank you."

Then Elena headed home with the cakes in hand.

We had a day off today, so I was talking with Karin about Mileela when Sherry came into the bakery. She was the one who made all our bear uniforms. She'd even made the uniform that I was wearing.

It turned out she was going to make us swimsuits. That was when she told me and Karin she wanted to get our measurements.

I'd never seen them before in Crimonia, but I did know what swimsuits were. They were garments that were often sold near lakes or by the oceanside. There was even a shop in the capital that sold them. Sherry showed me a paper with drawings of the designs. There were tons of them, but the moment Karin and I looked at them, we both started self-consciously poking and prodding at our own bodies—especially in the stomach region. We'd both been tasting so many cakes recently...

I even saw some swimsuits that had exposed bellies. The ones that hid them weren't much better, since the cloth was skintight. There was nowhere to hide in them: everything would be visible. Karin and I tried to say we didn't need our own, but Sherry insisted that Yuna had wanted everyone to have them, us included. She looked so forlorn to let Yuna down. The orphans really loved her.

I wasn't surprised after everything she'd done for them. The kids usually minded Yuna because of it, never told her "no" when she asked them to do anything. Yuna never forced them to do anything weird, though, and respected their views too. That was why they loved her.

Sherry probably just couldn't stand the idea of doing anything other than what she'd been asked. Yuna had personally told her to make them. I was in Yuna's debt myself, so I understood, and so did Karin. So, no one had the heart to go against Yuna's wishes. Most importantly, we were being taken to Mileela for free, so it'd be rude to refuse this one request.

For the time being, Sherry took our measurements, but we also decided that we needed to slim down—that especially went for the waist area.

Starting tomorrow, Karin and I would be going on a diet.

First, I stopped inventing new cakes. That had definitely been the number one issue. I was pretty sure my new weight and hanging stomach came after I started experimenting with the cakes. We also were going to eat less during meals and exercise.

"We have to mind the bakery, so how will we exercise?" I asked Karin.

"We'll wake up early because we'll need to do it before the bakery opens."

We also had to make the cakes and bread, so that would burn some weight for sure. We decided that starting the next day, we'd get up early and exercise near the orphanage.

"One, two, one, two!"

When I asked an in-shape adventurer what her secret was, she told me to run and work out the problem area in question (i.e., my belly).

First, we jogged lightly around the orphanage. I probably hadn't run this long since I

was a kid. Back then, I'd never gotten tired and could run around everywhere. Now I just didn't have that energy. Where had all of it gone?

I learned it was the same for Karin when she collapsed with me when we were done with running.

"Ugh! I'm beat. Do you remember running taking it out of you like this? All I've done is stand in the shop for the last two years. I didn't even think I could run this much."

"Same here."

I didn't want to move anymore. If I wanted abs, though, I'd need to keep exercising.

"After we take a short break, let's try doing the exercises the adventurer taught us."

Karin and I flopped on our backs and looked at the sky. After a while, we tried sit-ups.

"Uhhh, I can't do it," I said. My legs kept lifting instead of my torso.

"Can you hold my legs, Karin?"

"Let's trade then," she said back.

We traded holding each other's legs as we did the exercise with our torsos. I was having trouble even doing ten of them.

"And we have to do this how many times every day?"

Just thinking about days and days of this made me feel like giving up. The adventurer had told us it'd take time to get in shape though. Of course it would. They needed the stamina to walk deep into the woods, and then to fight or chase after monsters they encountered there. If they came across an enemy that was too much for them, they'd need to be able to run. Any ounce of flab could be life-threatening, in fact. That was why all adventurers who used swords, including women, were all really buff. I felt myself gaining a new appreciation for them.

Yuna had to be really fit too, considering she was one of them. She had to be so pretty and slender under that bear suit.

I needed to keep at it then too.

I'm glad I did. Once we got to the beach, my hard work paid off. I wasn't embarrassed to be seen at all.

EXTRA STORY

THE BEAR FAN CLUB: NOA'S CHRONICLES

FINA AND SHERRY came to my house today.

"Fina, Sherry, please do come in," I told them. "You can go into this room."

"Pardon me," Fina said.

"Y-Yes, pardon me," Sherry also copied Fina.

"Thank you so much for bringing Sherry here, Fina," I said.

She had told me that the swimsuits were done. We were originally planning to try them on at Yuna's house, but Father had sent her to the capital for a job and she hadn't come home yet.

Personally, I didn't think Father needed to ask for her help now of all times, but apparently it was a request from His Majesty, so I couldn't say anything untoward.

I felt bad for asking Sherry to do this, but I invited her to my home. I asked Fina and Sherry to sit, but Sherry was so very nervous that she was curling up in her chair. She reminded me very much of Fina when we first met.

Yuna was with us the other days, so she must have put Sherry at ease, but now that she was here on her own, Sherry seemed rather uncomfortable. Maybe I shouldn't have asked her to come over. I had wanted to become better acquainted with Sherry, but it seemed our difference in social status was simply insurmountable. It also took a very long time to become friends with Fina, however, so I resolved not to be too hasty.

"So, may we see the swimsuits?" I asked as kindly as I could.

"Y-yes, here they are," Sherry said, seeming very nervous as she produced the suits from a cloth bag and laid them on the table.

"So, these are the clothes used for swimming."

I knew what they would look like from the drawings, but I was also a little scandalized by how little cloth they were constructed from. Apparently, swimming in regular clothing would be difficult and could be dangerous, so these garments would be used to swim in the ocean and in lakes.

Still, wearing one would be utterly *embarrassing*.

“Sherry, Fina, do you have your swimsuits too?”

“Um, yes, I do.”

“Then would you like to try them on too?” I asked.

“Me as well?!” Fina asked.

“?!” Sherry was so surprised she didn’t even utter a word.

“I couldn’t possibly wear mine in front of you both alone. I would be so bashful. Now, let’s all change into them together, shall we?”

If we all tried them on, we could all be a little more comfortable. Also, wearing them together would be a pretense for conversation.

“Wouldn’t you like to?” I asked to make sure. Fina and Sherry looked at each other and then nodded very slightly.

“All right.” They both agreed to try on theirs along with me.

Sherry pulled out another swimsuit from the bag to hand to Fina and set out her own on the table.

“Shall we?” I said.

I started to undress, so Fina and Sherry started to do the same too. They looked forlorn, as if defeated.

I set my clothes on the table and changed into the swimsuit. There really was so little fabric. I headed to the floor-length mirror to inspect myself. I must admit, the swimsuit looked very cute, even though it wasn’t as modest as normal clothes.

I did a turn and the short skirt fluttered. It was adorable, although that didn't dampen my embarrassment.

I looked over at Fina and Shuri to see they had finished changing. Fina's suit was based on the same design as mine. She looked as if she was faring no better than me. But as difficult as it was to wear one, on her the swimsuit looked charming. I rather thought that we wouldn't struggle as long as all of us were wearing them.

I was right. I would have felt very self-conscious wearing one on my own, but seeing others in the same attire made those feelings begin to subside.

Sherry's swimsuit was the odd one out. It was mostly black without any embellishment, and there was a piece of white fabric sewn to the front that said, "Sherry."

"Is that yours, Sherry?"

I recalled that Yuna had drawn one like that.

"Um, all of the orphans are wearing the same suits," she explained.

"What is your name there for?"

"Yuna wrote names on the drawings, so I added them to the swimsuits too. Everyone has the same one, so the headmistress said that this would make it easier to tell them apart."

Ah, naturally. There were quite a lot of orphans: there was a chance they wouldn't be able to tell whose suit was whose.

"So, we have a black version and a white one to correspond with Kumayuru and Kumakyu's colors," Sherry said, then showed me a white suit.

"The white one is cuter," I said. I felt bad for Kumayuru, but I really did think it was true.

I felt strange wearing different suits from everyone else, but if the headmistress made the decision, it was not my place to comment.

"So, Lady Noire, how is the swimsuit?" Sherry asked, seeming worried.

“Your deft hands made it, so it looks very cute.”

“Thank you.” Sherry seemed happy about that. “Does it fit well? You don’t think it will fall off or slip?”

I tried moving around slightly. It fit very well and did neither. I tried hopping up and down to give it a good test, but the swimsuit held in place.

“This will do,” I said.

Sherry seemed very relieved at that.

“How is yours, Fina?”

Fina did all the same things as me, and her swimsuit was also fine.

“Yes, it looks good,” she said.

It was time for a final check.

“All right. Next let’s see how they are in the bath,” I proposed.

“The bath?”

“Yes, I thought we ought to check what happens when they’re wet, so I’ve already had one drawn.”

Since we were already going to all this trouble to try on the suits, I thought it was best to be thorough. Fina and Sherry’s objections weren’t firm enough to register as true disagreement, so we went to the bath.

“Are we really going in there?”

“Neither of you have tested these in water yet, have you?”

“Not yet.”

“I haven’t.”

“Then here is our opportunity. If something is wrong, best to find out now than on the

trip."

Sherry nodded when I explained that.

"Then I shall go first."

I went into the bath.

"It does feel much easier to move in the water," I said.

It wasn't the same as taking a normal bath, but it was similar. Wearing normal clothes in the water would have soaked them and made movement difficult, but the swimsuit didn't have that issue. It was easy to move around in.

"You should both come in too," I said. I took their hands since they weren't moving and pulled them into the bath.

"It really is easy to move in this."

"When I wore clothes in the water once before, they clung to me and felt awful. The swimsuit feels fine though."

"Yes, that happened to me in the rain. It felt terrible."

I'd never experienced wet clothes before, but they made it sound downright ghastly.

"See, aren't you glad you tried the swimsuits out first?"

"Yes, I feel like I've learned so much from this."

After that, we played tag in the water until Lala scolded us.

We had finished testing out the swimsuits. We were going to let them dry in the garden, so I brought the girls back to my room.

"Sherry, the swimsuit was perfect! Thank you very much."

"Um, oh, you don't need to thank me. I'm glad you liked it."

Then I asked Sherry a question. The swimsuits hadn't been my only motive for inviting

her.

"Sherry, do you like bears and Yuna?"

"Bears and Yuna? Yes, I do," she answered. "Kumayuru and Kumakyu are so adorable and Yuna saved us. Yuna also got me my job."

She answered with a smile. She seemed to be telling the truth.

"And you made the Kumayuru and Kumakyu stuffed animals?" I showed her my own set that I had set on the bed.

"Y-yes, Yuna asked me to."

I knew it. I thought I had heard her name before.

"I treasure them, truly," I told her.

"Th-thank you."

"So, because I can see that you do like bears, I would like to give you this."

I offered a card to Sherry.

"This is...?"

"A bear fan club member card," I told her.

"A bear what?"

"It's a society for people who love bears," I explained to her.

Sherry's membership number was 0005.

"Zero zero zero five...?" she read off.

"I happen to be member number one, and Fina is member number two."

As the president, I had to be the first member; Fina followed after me as the vice president.

“Who are three and four, then?”

“A dear friend of my acquaintance is number three. Four is Fina’s sister, Shuri.”

“Shuri is the fourth member?” Sherry repeated.

During the academy festival, I had conferred her membership. Shuri loved bears about as much as I did. I thought it was only fitting to give number five to Sherry, to reward her for the superb work on the bear stuffed animals. I also thought she would fit into the fan club splendidly.

“What does the fan club do?”

“We talk about Yuna and bears.”

Sherry was checking over the membership card.

“Can I really have this?”

“If you were unworthy of the honor after making such adorable bear stuffed animals, who would be? Absolutely, take it.”

“Th-thank you.”

“If you hear anything about the bears or Yuna, you should let us know.”

“I-I will.”

Hee hee. And with that, we had five members. It was my project to do outreach and expand our number. We had our bear club meeting (our topic mostly being Yuna) as our suits dried.

AFTERWORD

I'M KUMANANO. Thank you for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear's* fourteenth volume.

With the manga version, the *Kuma Bear* series has already reached eighteen total volumes.

I have another big announcement. You're likely already aware from the advertisement on the novel's cover, but *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear* has been picked up as an anime! This was all thanks to you and your support. Any time I had a prep meeting with my publisher, we'd always talk about how great it would be to have an anime. I was half-joking about it, but I really did hope it'd happen.

Then one day during one of those prep meetings, my publisher actually brought up the idea of turning the books into an anime. There are many people behind the scenes already working toward making it happen. I've also asked to help in the limited ways I can. I just can't help but be excited for it. I can't give any specifics yet, but I hope that you'll look forward to when it airs too.

Now, about the books themselves. In this volume, Yuna wears a swimsuit. First a school uniform, and now we've got a swimsuit. I'd wanted to have a swimsuit story ever since I wrote about Mileela, but before I knew it, we were already on the fourteenth volume. Since Mileela is from the fifth volume, it's been a long time coming.

This time, Yuna and her friends get to enjoy their trip without any trouble cropping up. Our story doesn't just end there, of course, so I hope you're looking forward to the fifteenth volume.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who strived to get this book out.

Thank you for drawing such wonderful illustrations, 029. Yuna and Fina look adorable in their swimsuits.

I'm always relying on my editor as well. So, to the many people who were involved in the publishing of *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear Volume 14*, thank you.

And thank you to the readers who have read along thus far. Let's meet again in the

fifteenth volume.

KUMANANO — ON A DAY IN JANUARY, 2020



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