

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash

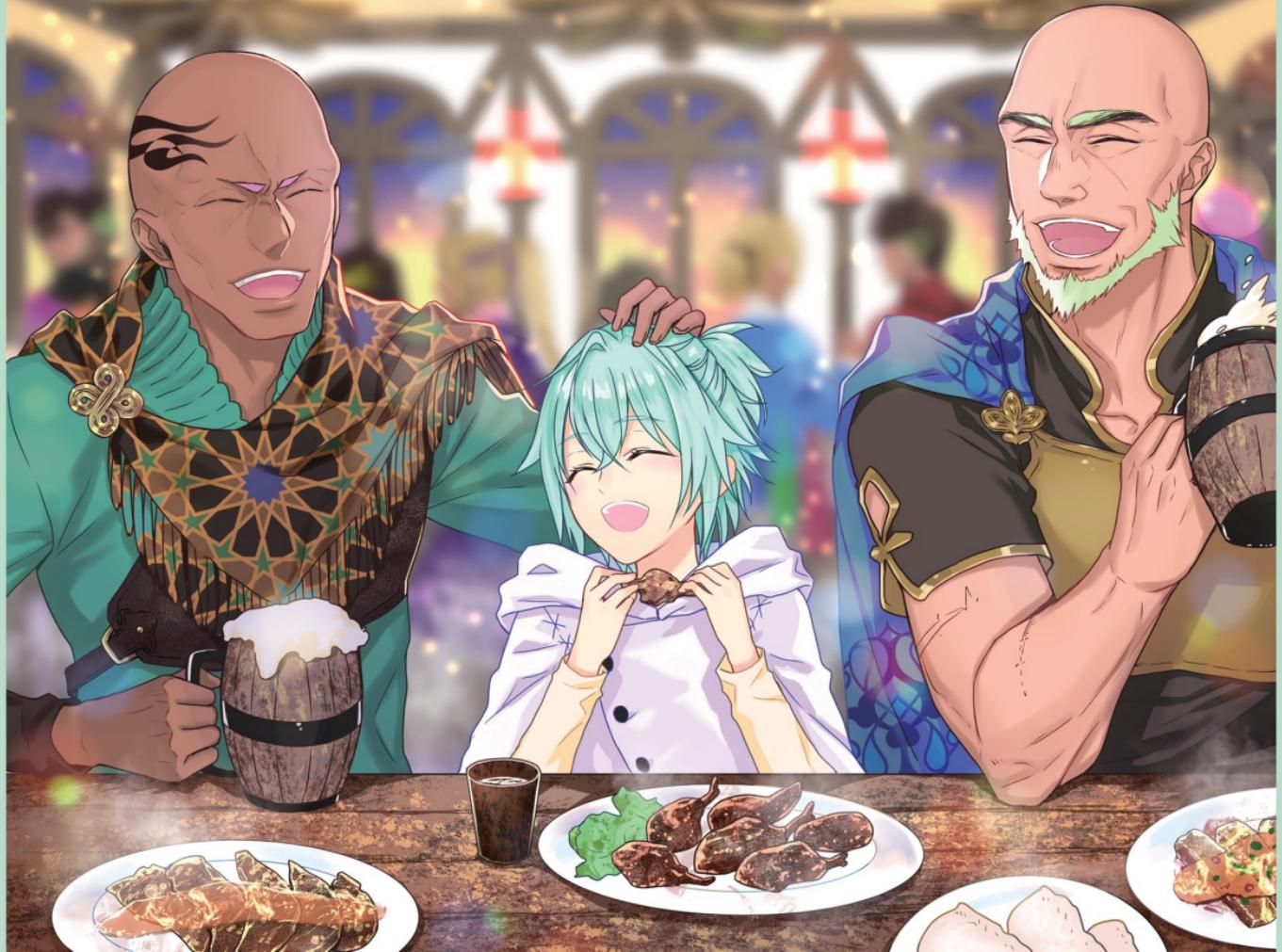


WRITTEN BY
Honobonoru500
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NOVEL

2!







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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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OUDEGEUZ



Ratosu Village

Town of Otolwa

Joined up
with Sword
of Flames!

Ratomu Village

Tamed
Sora!

Met the
Guards!

Ratome Village

My House

Encountered
the Adandara

Ratoto Village

Ratone Village

Ratofu Village

Ratomi Village

— Village Road

► Ivy's Route

CHARACTERS

Sora

A slime, and Ivy's first-ever successful taming. It's a rare collapsed slime. Often quivers and bubbles.

Ciel

An adandara (catlike monster) that Ivy keeps running into. For some reason, it's taken a liking to her. Often cuddles up to friends.

Ivy

Abandoned by her parents after being declared starless, she embarks on a journey to survive. She has memories of a past life. Often mistaken for a boy.

Sword of Flames

Seizerk

Leader of the veteran adventurer group Sword of Flames. Firm and strong, but often makes bone-headed decisions.

Sifar

Member of the veteran adventurer group Sword of Flames. He usually has a smile on his face, but when he doesn't, it's often terrifying...

Rattloore

Member of the veteran adventurer group Sword of Flames. Cares a lot about his friends, but his mood often changes on a dime.

Gnouga

Member of the veteran adventurer group Sword of Flames. Loves meat so much that he basically eats nothing else.

Verdant Wind

Mira

Tamer of the team Verdant Wind. She may be pretty, but Ivy's often terrified of her.

Marm

Member of the team Verdant Wind. He and Tort are twins, so they're often mistaken for each other.

Tort

Member of the team Verdant Wind. He and Marm are twins, so they're often mistaken for each other.



Ratome Village Residents

Ought

Captain of Ratome Village's gatekeeping and patrolling guard force. Often acts before thinking.

Velivera

Vice-Captain of Ratome Village's gatekeeping and patrolling guard force. Since he's so conscientious, he's often stuck cleaning up the captain's messes.

Lightning Royals

Bolorda

Leader of the veteran adventurer group Lightning Royals. He's a little careless, but thanks to his kind appearance, his team often comes to him for advice.

Lowcreek

Member of the veteran Lightning Royals. Often ends up struggling thanks to Bolorda's sloppy nature.

Rickbert

Member of the veteran Lightning Royals. Often ends up looking really mad thanks to the shape of his eyes.

Marcreek

Member of the veteran Lightning Royals. Since he has angry eyes, he often looks glum.

The Weakest Tamer
Began a Journey to
PICK UP TRASH

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 2

Story by Honobonoru500

Illustrations by Nama

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PART 3 * A Threatening Organization!



Chapter 70: How to Hide My Aura

AS WE WALKED to the adventurers' plaza, my new friends gave me a tour of the town.

Lowcreek went home to his family, while Sifar went home to his girlfriend. Gnouga and Marcreek were off to see friends, too. I ended up with Seizerk, Rattloore, Bolorda, and Rickbert. This town was their base, but they were going to stay with me in the plaza.

They probably have homes, though, right? Is it okay for them to stay with me? The plaza was crowded with adventurers, and I was sure I would be fine alone as long as there were plenty of eyes around. Noticing my concern, Rattloore patted me gently on the head.

"Don't worry about it, Ivy. Seizerk and Bolorda don't have anywhere to go right now, anyway," he said with a smirk. I was surprised to see such a devious look on his face...though what really confused me was why Seizerk and Bolorda didn't have a place to go home to.

"Their girlfriends both gave 'em the boot before the hunt," Rickbert chimed in. "None of us have bothered asking for the whole story, though."

Wow...so they're homeless because their girlfriends kicked them out? I wonder why. They both seem like good people.

"You guys sure don't know when to shut up, huh? Wait, why do you even know that?" Bolorda's voice was rough; he was clearly flustered. Seizerk looked uncomfortable, too.

Their reactions only made me more curious, but when I peeked over at them, they averted their eyes. Rattloore and Rickbert cackled. I felt a little sorry for them, so I decided to keep quiet. Seizerk and Bolorda seemed to be okay for now, anyway.

"What about you, Mr. Rattloore?" I asked him.

"Oh, don't worry, I don't have a family." A look of pain passed over his features, but he was back to his usual self right after. *Oops, seems like a sensitive topic.*

“Really? Well, I feel much better having you around.”

“I’m fine, too,” Rickbert added. “My family told me to stop being a bum and chased me out.”

Does that count as fine? Rickbert didn’t sound very fine to me, but something in his grin said I shouldn’t ask about it.

“Umm, thank you.” Whatever the reason, having them with me was reassuring, so I thanked them and left it at that.

We reached the plaza. Like the town, it was spacious. They didn’t seem to have a permit system, but there was a supervisor at the entrance. Seizerk and the others waved to him, I bowed, and we went in.

“Wow. It’s really huge,” I mused.

“Riiight? There are four other adventurers’ plazas here, so five in total. All of them are about the size of this one,” Rattloore explained.

Five plazas? Whoa!

Bolorda pointed at an open space. “That spot’s probably about big enough for us. All the other tents are pretty far off.”

“Looks good to me!” Seizerk agreed. We pitched our tents on the floor of the plaza. I’d expected them to use the big tents I saw during the hunt, so it was a surprise to see all four of them pull out personal-sized tents.

“No group tent this time?” I asked.

“You can’t really relax if you’re around your teammates all the time. We use one-man tents here,” Bolorda explained as he drove stakes for his tent into the dirt.

“I guess that makes sense.”

Though we all had personal tents, theirs were a lot bigger than mine. At a glance, I’d say theirs were easily big enough for three people. Four of those all pitched together was really intimidating. I got the go-ahead to put my tent up in the middle of theirs and got the inside all organized. Set-up complete, I checked my magic bags.

Ah! Sora’s going to run out of potions by tomorrow. I’d better go pick some up. But what do I do? If I want to pick up potions at the dump, I’ll have to go alone...but how can I convince them to let me go by myself when someone wants to kidnap me? Hmm... I should think up a cover story. For now, I’ll step outside and get my head on straight. Maybe I’ll think of a good plan.

When I left my tent, Bolorda was talking with other adventurers from the hunt.

“Got it. Tell everyone to get together for me.”

“Understood. Thank you, sir.”

“No prob.”

With that, the adventurers ran off in a hurry.

“Ivy!” Bolorda called out to me while I watched them dart off. When I turned to him, he had a serious look on his face. I approached him a little nervously. “We’ve gotta run an errand.” he said. “You mind being on your own for a while?”

On my own? I haven’t been alone very often lately. It made me anxious, but I couldn’t be with them forever. Besides, I had to go pick up potions!

“That’s fine,” I answered.

“Keep your eyes open, kid.” He rustled my hair.

The other three had finished setting up their tents, so they left for their meeting. On the way out, Rattloore turned around and waved to me until he was out of sight. Seeing him warmed my heart. I ducked back into my tent, closed and latched it, and took Sora out of its bag.

“Sorry I haven’t taken you out much lately.” I patted Sora as it quivered. “People are still after me, so you’ll have to put up with it a little longer.”

I was glad I’d gotten the tent up, though. I couldn’t use it when I was on the road between settlements, which meant I’d had a lot less time with Sora on our most recent trek. Inside the tent, I could take the slime out of its bag. I watched as Sora stretched. It must’ve been cramped in there.

“Sora, once you finish exercising, let’s go grab some potions!”

I planned to stock up on as many potions as I could carry, so I took the biggest bag I had. This was my first time going out alone since I found out I was being stalked. I heaved a sigh as I searched for auras outside. At least for now, I couldn’t sense anyone watching me.

“Let’s go, Sora.”

Sora bounced over to my feet, so I scooped it into its bag and slung the whole thing over my shoulder. I ducked out of my tent, shut it securely, searched for auras again, and finally exited the plaza.

As I walked, I continued to probe for any suspicious people. The bustle and crush of the main street made it harder to read auras, but walking on quiet streets alone was even riskier. Rattloore had warned me over and over not to let my guard down in town.

I showed my permit at the gate and stepped outside the town. Keeping my eyes peeled for trouble, I made a guess at where the dump would be. It couldn't be far off, and in a town this big, they must have heaps and heaps of trash. If it was too far from the town, then people wouldn't bother coming all the way out to throw things away.

"There it is!"

I was right: The big town had an incredible dump. Though size-wise, it was only about as big as Ratome Village's. Maybe they had more slime tamers here?

"Pheeew..."

Traversing the woods here while keeping my senses alert for auras was honestly exhausting—I couldn't let my guard down for even a second. I couldn't let Sora out of its bag like, either. *I'll just get the potions and get out.*

I entered the dump and tossed every useful potion I laid eyes on into my bag. I was just grabbing the blue and red ones I'd need for Sora's meals. All the other kinds I had in my bag were fine for now. I filled the lesser bag to full capacity and left the dump. I must've picked up a whole lot, because it was already getting dark.

I gotta hurry back to the plaza.

I'd barely started the walk back to town, though, when I felt something approaching. I ducked behind a tree and watched. It really was coming toward me! My hands and feet were cold with nerves. I took deep, slow breaths, trying to become one with the forest around me so they wouldn't sense my aura. Matching my breaths with the wind, I quietly...quietly...waited, until I heard someone toss something in the dump. The aura then turned and began moving back toward town.

Thank goodness. It wasn't someone trying to kidnap me.

I took another deep breath and felt around again, but nothing seemed amiss. *Actually...did I manage to conceal my aura?* Seizerk had taught me how to hide my aura on the way to town. According to him, harmonizing with nature was the best way. Bolorda also agreed that it was the most effective way to hide.

I ended up jogging back to town. I kept my senses sharp for auras along the way, but nothing felt weird or off-putting. As I showed the gatekeeper my permit and entered, exhaustion overcame me. *I'm beat...*

Chapter 71: Fear and Specialties

ON THE WAY BACK to the plaza, it suddenly came over me—that inexplicable feeling of revulsion. It was even stronger than what I'd felt at the expedition camp. I traced the feeling and felt not one but several auras. My feet froze for a moment, but there weren't enough people around me now. I rushed toward the plaza, being careful not to run flat out.



In places with too many people, your concentration will weaken. In places where there aren't enough people, you can't call for help if you need to.
Recalling Rattloore's warnings, I carefully picked my path back to the plaza.

Once there, I bowed to the supervisor and entered. People could hide in your tent and ambush you, so I made myself search for an aura before rushing in. Frightened, I stood a safe distance away from the tent and extended my senses. *Thank goodness, nobody there.* I dove inside, closed it, and fastened it tight.

“Haaah...” My hands were shaking. *Come to think of it, I was so scared I couldn't make out who they were at all.*

I took Sora out of its bag and hugged it tight. The slime seemed to sense something was wrong. It quietly cried, “Pu, pu!”—something it never did in the tent. I felt for auras outside and heard voices talking in the distance. I could also hear people moving around, but they didn’t seem to be focused on me.

“Thanks, Sora.”

I lined up some potions in front of Sora. When I was satisfied that the slime was eating, I started organizing the potions I’d just picked up. Usually, I put them in a designated bag, but there were too many this time, so some didn’t fit. I put the extras in one corner of the tent. The whole time, I never stopped checking for auras outside.

Phew... I can't calm down unless I'm busy with something. But I don't wanna leave the tent, either. I put a hand inside the bag of potions and grasped a small knife. I’d caught sight of the little thing while I was picking up potions and decided to hang on to it.

When I set out from my home village, I had a small sword with me. But I’d dropped it while I was running around the woods, and I’d never picked up another weapon—all the others I saw were too big for me. But when I came across this knife, I naturally picked it up. Could I do anything with this? Probably not. According to Seizerk, the kidnapping organization had a lot of skilled professionals. Since I didn’t have any training, I couldn’t do much with just a single knife. Still, holding it made me feel a little better.

After finishing its food, Sora bounced all around me. It was a soothing sight.

“Thanks, Sora.” I petted the slime on the head. Thank goodness I had Sora with me.

There was a noise outside the tent. I felt for auras and found two—but

these were ones I knew. Seizerk and Rattloore were back.

“Ivy, you in there?”

“I’m here!” I replied when I heard Rattloore’s voice. I stuffed Sora into its bag and opened the tent.

“All right! We brought dinner. Wanna eat?”

“Huh? Dinner?” I looked around and saw that some tents were already lit up. It had gotten dark while I was fretting.

“Yep. We brought this town’s signature dish. I really wanted you to try it, Ivy.” Rattloore hoisted up a basket to show me.

“Thank you. I really appreciate that.”

I stepped out of the tent and looked around. Bolorda and Rickbert were setting up a table close by.

I heard the *clunk* of something heavy and saw a big bottle of alcohol had been set in the middle of the table. It looked like their prohibition was over today. Rattloore rushed over to them and put the baskets on the table.

“Okay, let’s eat!” Bolorda announced, pouring alcohol into a cup and throwing it back in one long draft. “Aah. The first drink in a long time always hits the spot!”

“Thanks to us leading the hunt, we didn’t get to drink, either,” Rickbert complained to Bolorda.

“Don’t blame me! Nobody else in town was available. I wouldn’t have volunteered otherwise!”

Bolorda and Rickbert took turns gulping down full cups. *Wow! They’re drinking it like water.*

“Could you two keep it down?” Exasperated, Seizerk wrenched the bottle from them.

“Aargh, give back our drink!”

I couldn’t help but laugh as they both lunged for the confiscated bottle.

“Seizerk, give it back!” Bolorda snatched the bottle, poured some into his cup, and drank again. Seizerk looked annoyed. My impression of Bolorda was changing a lot...he was kind of a weird guy.

“Ivy, ignore them,” Rattloore said. “Look, this is our town’s signature

dish. It's moo stew!"

I looked down at the stew on my plate, where big chunks of moo meat swam in gravy. I took a bite, and it tasted...nostalgic? *Why? Is it nostalgic to Past Me?* The words *beef stew* floated up in my mind. *I guess it must taste like "beef stew"?*

"Is it bad?"

"Huh?!"

Rattloore peered into my face, worried. He must've seen my funny expression and thought I disliked it.

"No. It just tastes like something familiar." *Ack! I'd better stop.*

"Something you know?"

"...Yes. It's a little like something I had a long time ago."

I can't explain this away. The only meat in Ratomi Village was field mouse, and it was all dried meat. How do I get out of this one?

"Wooow. Do you like it?"

"Yes, it's really good!"

"Isn't it great? This is my favorite food."

"I love it, too."

"Wow! It makes me really happy to hear that." Rattloore smiled, half embarrassed and half...lonely? I'd seen this expression on his face a few times before. He hid it real quick, but seeing that brought my mood down.

Adventurers must have a lot going on, and I'm sure some of it's pretty rough.

"Drink up, Ivy!" Rickbert, eyes glazed over from intoxication, held a cup out to me.

"Huh?"

Where'd this come from? He knows I'm a kid, right?

"Cut it out!" Seizerk snatched the cup held out to me. "Good grief. Sorry, Ivy. Looks like Rickbert's a crappy drunk today."

Rickbert looked annoyed. I had never seen this side of him, but it was pretty scary how his eyes got all unfocused like that.

“Aww, man. Rickbert’s in his annoying mode, huh?”

“Annoying mode?”

“Yeah. He’s got three different drunk modes,” Rattloore explained with a wry grin. “There’s the laughing drunk, the crappy drunk, and the bragging drunk. The most annoying one is when he’s a crappy drunk. You might wanna go hide back in your tent after you finish. When he gets like that, there’s no stopping him.”

I looked over at Rickbert, who was now arguing with Seizerk.

“Look, I did my darn best this hunt,” Rickbert shouted. “Who do you think you are, acting like I hardly did anything?!”

He’s mostly just complaining nonstop. Yeah, not a fan. I’d better clean up and go back to my tent. I quietly tidied up my dirty dishes, then slipped back to my tent and out of Rickbert’s sight.

“Good night,” I whispered.

Hearing my soft voice, Seizerk waved to me.

Is everyone gonna be okay tomorrow?

Chapter 72: Mira of Verdant Wind

I OPENED MY EYES SLOWLY. There was gentle light hitting the side of the tent, so it was probably morning. I searched around for any disquieting auras, but there were none to be found. With a sigh of relief, I stretched my arms.

“Phew...”

When I sat up and looked beside me, Sora was sleeping soundly. Suppressing my urge to snuggle back down myself, I reached for a clean change of clothes.

My main reason for going to the dump yesterday was to collect potions, but I’d wanted to confirm whether people really *were* after me, too. The discomfort I’d felt in the expedition camp was absent during our two days of travel. Part of me wondered if I was just imagining things because I wasn’t used to being with adventurers on a hunt. As much as I trusted Sora, it would have been great if it was all a misunderstanding.

But the unease I’d felt yesterday was accompanied by a second feeling—it was like a gross, sticky gaze. Honestly, I hadn’t expected to encounter it so soon. But now that I knew it was real, I had to think. If people were after me, what could I do? And what about Mira? She and Rattloore seemed to be close friends. Would he believe me? I was worried, but honesty was probably the right choice...even if he hated me or abandoned me after I told him.

“All right!”

I calmed myself down by watching Sora sleeping peacefully on the blanket and then opened the tent. Once outside, I stretched again.

I looked around...and discovered Rickbert and Bolorda sleeping face-down on the table. They must’ve gotten dead drunk and passed out. *Umm, maybe I should make some light, easy-to-digest soup for breakfast. I should still have some medicinal plants left, and I want them totally awake before I discuss any of this with them.*

I kindled a fire, filled a pot with water and thinly-sliced dried meat, added some veggies the team had said I could use for cooking, and brought it all to a simmer. Once the vegetables were tender, I added the medicinal plants, and the

soup was ready.

“That smells nice.” Roused by the scent, Bolorda sat up slowly.

Rickbert woke up shortly after and looked around, confused. “Bwuh? Why am I here?”

“You argued with me all night and forgot about it, huh? Dang, you’re a pain in the neck.” Bolorda heaved a great sigh and scratched his head.

“Ahh...”

The two whispered hoarsely, making it a little hard for me to hear them. Were their throats sore?

“Ivy, good morning! Sorry, I overslept.” Rattloore called out jauntily at his usual volume. Bolorda and Rickbert both clutched their heads in pain.

“Gah... Too loud,” they groaned in unison.

“Are you okay?” I asked them.

Seizerk emerged from his tent and handed Rattloore a paper bag. “Morning, Ivy,” he greeted me. “Don’t worry about those two, they’re just hungover.”

“Yep. And we warned ’em, too.” Rattloore chuckled.

“Shhhh! Your voices are echoing in my head...” Rickbert’s agony was clear on his face. He was in a rough state.

“Anyway, sorry. I also overslept,” Seizerk apologized, but I shook my head.

I dished up the soup, and Bolorda set the bowls out on the table. Rattloore fished some black bread from the paper bag and cut a slice for everyone.

“Thanks for cooking.”

The two hungover men paused for a moment and then reached for their soup.

“Ooh, that’s just what the doctor ordered,” Bolorda sighed.

“You can say that again,” Rickbert agreed.

It seemed the flavor agreed with them. What a relief!

After we finished our meal, we had a cup of tea together.

What do I do? Should I just...spit it out? Or should I wait till things calm

down a bit?

Seizerk spoke up. “Ivy, we need to talk. Do you mind?”

“I don’t mind.” I needed to talk as well, so this was perfect.

Huh? Umm... Seizerk looks really troubled. Rattloore looks unhappy, too. Bolorda has a complicated expression on, and Rickbert is looking at his feet, so I can’t see his face at all. What’s about to happen here...?

“Uhh, well...” Seizerk began, apparently having trouble getting it out.

“Yes?”

“First off, if this is a no-go for you, you have every right to refuse. Now... we were hoping you could help us catch those kidnappers. That means...we’re asking you to act as bait.”

After a moment’s pause, I answered, “I’ll do it.”

I couldn’t keep running, so I’d been racking my brain for what to do. With things as they were, the word *bait* had already come to mind. To be honest, I was terrified—but if I wanted to get through this, it seemed like the best choice.

“Ivy, no! Don’t agree that easily!” Rattloore grabbed my shoulders. He had tears in his eyes, and I felt the guilty feelings well up. But if there were another option, then Seizerk wouldn’t have proposed this one. I doubted there was a better way.

“Actually, I was going to ask *you* the same thing,” I replied. “At this rate, I’ll never be free to travel on my own...so I wanted you to help me with it.”

“Huh?!” Everyone looked shocked.

“Also...” My heart pounded uncomfortably. *If I say this, they might not help me...but I have to get it out.* “I think Verdant Wind might be with them.”

I tried to maintain eye contact with Rattloore, but in the end, I hung my head. They might not trust me; they might think I was a liar. I was afraid, but I couldn’t hide this from them.

“We know you’re suspicious of them, Ivy. And...yesterday, we learned something. Mira’s a traitor.”

“Huh?” I glanced up at Rattloore in surprise. He looked miserable.

“You were trying really hard to hide it back at camp, right? I couldn’t tell at first, but after watching, I realized. You’re terrified of Mira.”

Back at camp? Have they known all this time? But then...what happened yesterday?

“When Rattloore asked us to eat dinner with his group,” Bolorda added, “I asked him why. And I didn’t believe it. Mira was our friend, after all. But after seeing them yesterday, we know who the traitor is.”

My mind was buzzing with questions. *Dinner? When? And does that mean they’re certain they’re traitors?*

“Back then, I was really caught off guard. As soon as I got back to camp, there Rattloore was begging me to sit down to dinner with you all,” Bolorda added cheerfully, trying to lighten the mood. Seizerk and Rattloore chuckled, too.

Dinner during the hunt... Oh! Does he mean the day Rattloore stayed behind? That was the day Mira offered to have dinner with me. I was in a tizzy over it, but Rattloore intervened and said we already had plans with the leader. But he didn’t really have plans, did he? He noticed I was uncomfortable and asked the leader after to give me an out.

“Thank you, Mr. Rattloore.”

“Well, I didn’t totally believe it at the time. But after I got to know you, I could tell you weren’t the kind of kid to trick people.”

I bowed deeply. Honestly, I hadn’t expected him to trust me, especially because he’d been through so much with Mira. Yet even though he hadn’t totally believed it, he’d still protected me.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. A gentle hand came to rest on my head.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I should’ve said something sooner. I just... wanted to trust Mira.”

I shook my head. Of course he wanted to, they were friends. But thinking about it only made me cry harder. I took deep breaths and managed to pull myself together. When I looked back up at the group, Bolorda reached over and dried my cheeks with a towel.

Chapter 73: Added Value

I TOOK THE TOWEL and dabbed at the corners of my eyes. "...Thank you."

"What tipped you off, Ivy?" Rickbert's question made sense. I was an inexperienced adventurer, so how could I tell something was amiss?

What should I say? I don't wanna lie to them. They trust me. Maybe I should just...tell them the important parts.

"Actually, I'm a tamer. And...I tamed a weird little slime. The slime told me." I was so nervous it came out kind of awkwardly. Would they believe me?

"Whoa, you're a tamer? And your slime told you?!" Rattloore was amazed.

Yeah, it's pretty unconvincing, isn't it? Though there are lots of different slimes out there that no one really knows much about.

"It must be a rare slime—one that's not well documented yet, I'd guess," Seizerk chimed in. "There're no shortage of mysteries when it comes to slimes."

Hearing that was a relief. If slimes were known for unknowns, then I could get away with people seeing Sora sometimes. Maybe I could relax a little on my future travels.

"That's gotta be an incredibly rare slime if it has abilities other than digestion." Rickbert's response made me rethink my rethinking. Maybe letting people see Sora was out of the question after all.

"So, just to get this straight...a slime you tamed told you Mira was a traitor?" Bolorda sounded puzzled. I mulled the question over for a moment. How should I answer?

"Sora—that's the slime's name—usually reacts when I talk to it. But when I mentioned Mira, it didn't react like normal. I was curious, so I said other names to see what Sora did. In the end, it only reacted like that to Mira. That's how I figured it out."

"Huh. Through the slime's reactions, eh? If so, then your slime must be able to distinguish other people. That's extremely rare."

"Distinguish?"

“Yeah. So, regular slimes can recognize the person who tamed them, but they can’t tell the difference between any other humans.”

Really? Was it just my imagination that Sora stopped and stared when I mentioned Mira? But wait, it definitely reacted differently when I told it about Captain Oght versus Vice-Captain Velivera. I don’t think that was just in my head. Maybe that means Sora really is one of a kind.

Bolorda furrowed his brow and closed his eyes. Seizerk seemed lost in thought, too. Was there a problem? Should I have kept quiet about Sora?

“Ivy...about your slime. Do you think Mira might’ve seen it?” Seizerk’s usually steady voice trembled a little.

“I don’t think so.”

“Hmm. Anyone else that you know of?”

“...I don’t think they have.”

“Then make sure you don’t let anyone else lay eyes on it until this is over. Got it?” Seizerk’s serious expression scared me a little. I nodded wordlessly, but...why was he so adamant? I wasn’t planning to let anyone see Sora either way, but it made me wonder.

“If the kidnappers find out about your slime, they’ll see you as a prize. And they’ll stop at nothing to get their hands on something so valuable.” I stiffened at Bolorda’s words. *Valuable? Does taming a rare slime add value? Why?*

I felt a soft hand on my tightly balled fist. I looked down and saw that Rattloore was holding it.

“You’ll be okay. We’re here for you.”

“...Yeah.”

Rickbert saw how nervous I was and brought a fresh mug of tea to calm me down. I sipped it and felt my heart unclench. My tense muscles slowly loosened up. *I’ll be fine. There are people here to protect me. I have Sora, too. Everything’s gonna be okay.*



“So anyway, yesterday. We came back here a little before evening.” Rattloore’s cheerful voice lifted the mood a little.

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah. When you weren’t here, I panicked. I thought you might’ve been kidnapped.”

“Sorry! I didn’t feel that chill on my neck during the journey to town, so I wanted to make sure it wasn’t just my imagination. I thought if I went out alone, I could find out.”

“Huh, really? We...” Bolorda sounded flustered.

“Yes?” I tilted my head.

“See?!” Rattloore crowed triumphantly. “I told you Ivy’s a clever kid!”

“Sorry. Aargh, so...everyone but Rattloore thought you sneaked off to play, so... Y’know?”

Bolorda’s admission took me by surprise. Was that really how they saw me? It didn’t make much sense. I’d gone out alone knowing the danger I was in, after all.

“I’m sorry for acting recklessly,” I said.

Bolorda asked with the sincerest look on his face, “Ivy, are you really eight years old?”

Um, yeah, I am? Oh...but wait, today’s the first day of August, right? If so...

“Actually, I’ve just turned nine,” I said.

“That’s...not what I’m asking, but nine? Huh. You said you were eight a few days ago, didn’t you?”

“I was eight yesterday. I think the end of July is my birthday, so I guess I’m nine now.”

“You sound so uninterested—hey, happy birthday!” Rattloore said. For some reason his smile looked a little strained.

I hadn’t heard those words in a long time. In fact, the last time might have been my fifth birthday. These past few years, my birthday had always passed before I’d realized.

“Thank you very much.”

I was surprised how good those words made my feel. Never had two words warmed my heart so much. Rattloore gently tousled my hair. He really was a kind person.

“Once this is all over, let’s have a big celebration,” he said.

“Huh?! Th-that’s not—”

“It’ll be fine! Let’s do it. And since Bolorda and Seizerk doubted you, we’ll make them pick up the check.”

“No, I’d feel bad! It’s my fault for going out without telling you, anyway.” I was a little flustered. I appreciated the thought, but there was no way I could impose on them like that.

“Sure thing, we’ll treat you. We got an important clue thanks to your efforts, after all.”

My efforts? Did I make more trouble for them? I didn’t think I did anything beyond walking around town alone...

“What did I do?”

“You’re good, Ivy,” Rattloore assured me. “We should thank you! You sensed it during your walk around town yesterday, didn’t you?”

During my walk—they mean that revulsion I felt. I nodded. Bolorda looked sad.

“Mira was on the other side of the road back then.”

“She was?”

“The person she was with is the problem. But thanks to all this, we uncovered the traitor.”

The person with her? Is that whose eyes I felt on me? If it were just Mira, I guess I would’ve felt discomfort like before.

“What’s on your mind?” Bolorda asked, a little concerned.

“Huh? Oh...yesterday, it wasn’t just that uncomfortable feeling. I felt someone’s eyes sticking to me like glue, too...”

The four gasped and looked at each other. *What? Did I say something weird?*

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Ivy, do you have the discernment skill on top of your taming skill?”

Seizerk asked.

“Discernment? I don’t think so...”

What’s discernment? I’ve never heard of that.

“That so? Then maybe you sensed danger and saw through their intentions.”

Sensed danger? Well, their gaze was creepy. It made me want to run away and hide. I don’t ever want to feel that way again.

Chapter 74: Special Wares

“**E**YES LIKE GLUE... Darn it! Why?”

I flinched at Rickbert’s sudden outburst. His voice was heavy with suppressed emotion. The other three looked at him, but he avoided their eyes. I started to tremble a little as the awkward mood permeated the group.

Suddenly, Rickbert yelled in frustration and clawed at his hair.

“Eep!” I squeaked, startled by his outburst.

“Sorry! Sorry for scaring you, Ivy. I just lost my cool for a second.”

“It’s okay... Um, is something wrong?”

Rickbert had been irritable ever since yesterday. I wasn’t sure why, but I guessed it had something to do with Mira and the others.

“Mira’s older brother Marm was with her, too,” he finally explained.

“Marm?”

“We were kids together. I owe him my life... Where did it all go wrong?” No one answered—there was no answer to give. My heart tightened at the sight of Rickbert smiling wanly, eyes filling with tears.

“Rick, you can sit this one out,” Bolorda told him.

“No, I need to see this through myself. And...part of me still wants to trust him.”

“All right.” Bolorda gave Rickbert a few hearty pats on the back.

Rattloore and Seizerk looked pained, too. They must’ve been really close with Mira, Marm, and Tort. *This is miserable.*

“Ugh, let’s get back on track.” Bolorda heaved a sigh. “Ivy, I think we’d best tell you everything. You must have questions.”

I certainly did. What happened yesterday, what they’d seen... I took a steady breath and faced Bolorda.

“First off,” he began, “remember how we told you they tried to crack down on the kidnappers but failed?”

“Yes. An information leak?”

“Exactly. Only a few people knew the details, which means one of those people is the leaker.”

Seizerk added, “The guard captain, vice-captain, and GM have been investigating everyone involved but haven’t found anything conclusive. Still, they concluded—the day before the hunt no less—that there’s definitely a rat.”

“We were the only four who knew about it, since we went drinking with the GM that day.”

They laid it all out dispassionately. It must’ve been hard on the guild to investigate their own comrades, and for these four to have been in the know. *Is this why they stayed with me?*

“We went to see the GM after the hunting party debrief yesterday. That’s when he made a new request. They uncovered evidence that a certain merchant is handling ‘special goods.’ Their case is weak though, so they asked us to investigate.”

“The ‘special goods’ are humans, of course, but...well, how do I say this, Ivy...”

What is it? Bolorda’s not making any sense. Seizerk looks really concerned, too. Is it that hard to say? I already know the merchants are trafficking people. If they’re catching people and selling them, they must be undercover slave traders. Is there something even harder to say than that? To me?

“Uhh, basically... If this makes you uncomfortable, then tell me, okay?” Bolorda urged. His seriousness only amplified my nerves.

“Yes, sir.”

“The goods they’re selling are children. Especially little boys. Basically, uh...some adults have certain...inclinations. Uhh...they love kids, but in a way you’re not supposed to. The merchants cater to people like that... Okay so far?”

That’s it. They’re pedophiles...perverts. They want to buy kids from the merchants...because they’re attracted to children?

“Ivy, are you okay?” Rattloore asked, worried. I was deep in thought. My silence must have made him think I was really rattled.

“I’m okay. Umm... Yeah, I’m okay.” *Well, I’m not that okay. My head’s spinning, and I hate this. They want me...for that? I should think about*

something else to calm down.

“Um,” I ventured, “Sword of Flames and Lightning Royals are veteran groups, right? Why would these people go after a kid under their protection? Isn’t that too risky?”

“It’s about money...and the overconfidence they’ve built up by now,” Bolorda answered.

“Money and confidence?”

“Their customers’ *inclinations* must be kept secret, so they can set exorbitant prices for the kids they sell. And since the country’s been cracking down on these sales and increasing penalties, asking prices have gone up even more.” Bolorda sighed deeply. Trying to eliminate the slave traders was a good thing, but the rise in demand made it an even more profitable business. I was starting to feel sick to my stomach.

“Also,” Seizerk chimed in, “the organization doesn’t think anyone’s on to them, so they won’t expect mere veteran adventurers to get in their way. In their mind, they’re safe to carry on business as usual.” His voice was tinged with disgust.

“If we didn’t discover they were traitors, Verdant Wind would’ve heard about the merchants, too, even though they’re not veterans. Those merchants would be long gone by now.”

Huh? Did he say they’re not veterans?

“I thought Verdant Wind was a veteran group, too?” I cocked my head.

“Not quite. Why do you think they’re veterans? Did one of them say that?”

Um, is that wrong? I thought I heard their members were veterans. They’re not?

“Umm, based on what Mira told me, I thought they were.”

“What Mira told you?” Seizerk raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’d say they’re not, but a certain noble has endorsed them to the point that they might as well be. Maybe she tried to convince you they’re veterans to make you trust them.”

I had lots of new questions. A noble endorsement? How did they know a noble? Did they have a family connection?

“Is Verdant Wind close to that noble? Or are they family?”

“Not quite. According to the noble, Verdant Wind helped him out and solved a major business problem for him. He recommended they be promoted to veteran adventurers. The GM intervened and put a stop to it, but out of deference to their patron, they’re essentially treated the same as us. People don’t really get positions like that just from having connections. Even members of the peerage can’t get away with favoring their friends or family like that.”

Recommending Verdant Wind because of their accomplishments didn’t sound out of the ordinary, but something still bothered me.

“What kind of person is the noble who recommended them?” I asked. If they had to defer to that person’s opinions, they must be a big deal, right?

“Don’t tell me, Ivy…you suspect the noble, too?” Seizerk was surprised, as were Bolorda and Rickbert.

“It just makes me wonder. By the way, why didn’t Gee-Em officially make Verdant Wind veterans?”

“I think he said he had some cause for concern about them as adventurers.”

Cause for concern? So not really something I could figure out.

“Do nobles recommend adventurers who help them often?”

“Once in a while,” Seizerk answered. “Most nobles look down on adventurers, though. The one who recommended Verdant Wind is popular among our set because he treats us as equals.”

I wonder why... Getting a recommendation on merit should be a good thing, but the more I hear, the shadier it sounds. Is it just me? I looked to Rickbert and the others, but they didn’t seem to think it was suspicious. Was I overthinking it?

“How much work did Verdant Wind take on for this noble?”

“Huh? How much?”

“Right. If he recommended them, then they couldn’t have helped him just once or twice. They’d need to do more to really show their abilities.” *Huh? Did I say something weird? Suddenly, everyone has a dark look on their face.*

“Only once that I can remember...”

Just once?! I looked at Seizerk in surprise, and he nodded. So it was true.

“Come to think of it, he hired us once before, didn’t he?” Rattloore mused.

“Yeah. How about you, Bolorda?” Seizerk asked.

“Just once here, too,” he confirmed.

“It almost sounds like he’s feeling out adventurers to see who he can win to his side, doesn’t it?” I asked. Everyone stared at me.

“He *did* ask a lot of questions, but he said it was because he ‘wanted to be friends’ or something. Are you saying...” Seizerk started.

Bolorda clicked his tongue and cut in, “Things get a whole lot stickier if we have to worry about nobles, too. And there might be other traitors.” He chuckled darkly. After Mira’s betrayal, it was hard to tell who was friend or foe.

“Whew...” I heard someone sigh, making the mood feel just a bit heavier.

I looked around for something to lighten the atmosphere a little and saw other adventurers close by. A chill ran up my spine. *They heard us talking!* *Um... They’re close enough to hear us, aren’t they? But it doesn’t seem like they’re paying attention.* I looked around; nobody else was paying attention, either. Could they not hear us?

“Erm... Are you dampening our conversation somehow?” I asked.

“Oh, did you notice? We’re using a soundproofer. It’s a magical item dropped by monsters. Cool, right?!” Rattloore pointed a little proudly at the soundproofer atop the table. I hadn’t noticed it at all.

It was dropped by monsters? That sounded like something from a video game... *A what? Oh, that must be something from Past Me.* Anyway, it seemed like the tension around the table had eased up a bit. Thank goodness—I was getting real uncomfortable.

Actually...how’d they conclude Mira’s a traitor? Was it because she was with that other person? Is that all?

Chapter 75: Sora's Test

“U_{M...}” I stammered.

“Yeah?”

“But how did you guess that Mira was a traitor?”

“Huh?” Everyone gasped and looked at me, confused.

What? Did they already tell me? No, I don't think so... They only mentioned that she was with a troublemaker and that Marm was there, too.

“We didn't actually tell you, did we? I guess, deep down, we still don't want to admit it.” Seizerk grinned weakly. Everyone but Rattloore had some version of the same expression. “Anyway, here's what happened. I couldn't get what Rattloore said about you and Mira out of my head. That's why I noticed the way the merchant, Mira, and Marm all looked at you. I realized that's exactly how slave traders eye their potential wares. That's when I started to have my doubts about them, but it was what Rickbert said about Marm that really put the nail in the coffin.”

“I didn't notice them looking at Ivy,” Rickbert added. “Heck, I didn't really believe Rattloore to begin with. Imagine doubting your own comrades like that. So to prove it, after I saw Mira and Marm talking with the merchant, I asked them, ‘Who's that guy? Friend of yours?’ I wanted them to say yes, but they answered, ‘Guy's lost, he asked us for directions.’”

“Rick here really spooked me with that stunt,” Bolorda chuckled. “If they'd guessed we were on to them, they'd could've gone

to ground. But thanks to his gamble, we learned they were hiding their relationship with that merchant. That's about when I started to have my doubts, too.”

Rattloore chimed in, “We went shopping for dinner together right after. They were definitely wary of us, though they hid it so well that you wouldn't notice unless you were already watching them closely. They were just like all the rats we'd dealt with before.”

“I see...”

The weird feeling I'd gotten from Rickbert occasionally was because he hadn't trusted me, then? That was fair. Of course you'd trust your friends more than some kid who appeared out of nowhere. It made me wonder all the more why Rattloore was so quick to protect me, though.

Seizerk sighed. "Better steel yourselves, everyone. It's not gonna be easy."

Bolorda and Rattloore agreed. Rickbert looked a little sad.

"So, Ivy, this is where you come in," Bolorda began.

"If you mean acting as bait, I'm ready."

"Well, that's part of it, but no. First, I want you to help us consider who we can safely talk to about this."

Um, I don't understand. Who's safe to talk to? Does that mean he hasn't told everyone yet? I guess it's possible that Verdant Wind might not be the only traitors, so he's keeping it between us?

"As in, consider who else might be working with the traffickers?" I asked.

"Well, to be honest, I don't wanna think about it. But Rattloore insisted we talk about it between the five of us."

"I told you, if we're gonna drag Ivy into this, we have to hear his opinion!" It seemed Rattloore was against the bait plan. But they weren't dragging me in, I was already in the middle of it—I was the one people were trying to kidnap.

"Thank you for being so considerate of me, Mr. Rattloore."

"If you're really up to it, there's nothing I can do...but be careful, okay?"

"I will."

"Let's get back to business," Seizerk cut in. "Ivy, we'll tell the GM everything, including our plan for you. The final decision will mostly fall to him. We'll have him keep this hush-hush from the nobles, too. That work, Bolorda?"

"Yeah. As long as we don't know who the rat is, we'd better keep this out of noble ears."

I tilted my head at their conversation. It seemed like Bolorda had strong feelings about nobles.

"There's only one member of the nobility Bolorda respects. He always takes care to keep that person in the loop," Rattloore explained as if he'd read

my mind.

“Why does he respect them?”

“I think they saved his life or something?”

His life? Huh? I think Rickbert mentioned that, too...

“Yeah, I do owe him my life. Man...suddenly, everyone seems suspicious.” Bolorda sighed and looked down to the ground.

Saved his life? Taking advantage of someone’s gratitude is a common method of avoiding suspicion... Hm? That must be knowledge from Past Me, too. Why does she know so much about this stuff? Did she live in a world full of treachery? That sounds scary...

While I was lost in thought, Bolorda ruffled my hair. “It’s okay, Ivy. I’m not worried about it.”

“Oh! Sorry. I’m fine.” *I’ll think about my past self later. Anyway, I appreciate the wisdom.* “By the way, is this Gee-Em person trustworthy?”

“Hm? Oh, GM—short for guild master. He’s the top brass in the adventurers’ guild. Don’t worry about him.”

Ooh, it’s an abbreviation? I feel like I’ve heard “guild master” somewhere... When though? Well, whatever.

“I trust you to share this with whomever you think is necessary,” I answered finally.

“Got it. I’ll tell the rest of the Lightning Royals, and Seizerk will tell the rest of Sword of Flames. The GM will probably only tell the captain and vice-captain. We’ll make sure they keep this under wraps in front of anyone who we’re uncertain about.”

“Your other two team members are all right, aren’t they, Bolorda? Same for mine, of course.”

“I trust them. Or I’d like to, at least.”

“I said this before, but Sora thinks they’re fine,” I chimed in.

“Really?”

“Yes. If you’re worried, though, I could ask it now?”

“If you’re gonna do that, do you mind if I come with you, Ivy?” Rattloore asked.

“Umm, I’ll ask Sora.” I went back to my tent and nudged Sora awake. The little slime never failed to surprise me with how easy it took it. “Sora, Rattloore wants to meet you. Is that okay?”

Sora quivered and stared at the tent’s entrance.

I’ll take that as a yes.

“Mr. Rattloore, you can come in.”

Rattloore carefully entered the tent. He looked at Sora...and froze? *Why? Is something wrong?*

“Huh? What’s with that coloring? A translucent slime... Wow, really?”

I’d had a hunch translucent slimes were rare, and this confirmed it. *Looks like I’ll have to keep Sora stowed away even after this is over.*

“Mr. Rattloore?”

“Oh! Er, sorry. Umm, so that’s your little Sora?”

“Yes. Is it that unusual for slimes to be see-through?”

“I’ve...only heard about them in stories and legends.”

“In legends...” *Wait! Stay on track.* “Sora, umm, do you remember Bolorda and his friends? I can’t let you make any noise right now, but if they’re okay people, can you show me by quivering?”

Sora quivered in response.

“Is it safe for me to be with the four Lightning Royals?”

Sora quivered again.

“That’s a yes,” I explained.

“Hmm...are we sure it actually knows what you’re asking though?”

“I think it does.”

“Sorry, Ivy, let me try. Hi, Sora! I’m a member of the Lightning Royals.”

Sora stared fixedly at Rattloore. It really did understand.

“It looks like Sora says you’re wrong.”

“Hmm...wait just a sec,” he said.

What? Is it so unusual for a slime to be aware of its surroundings? But...I think it’s clear that Sora really is aware.

“Coming in.” Rickbert peeked into the tent and looked at the slime in amazement. It seemed Sora was a shocking sight. “That’s Sora, right?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Sora, I’m Seizerk.”

No reaction from Sora. *Ack! It fell asleep!*

“Wake up! We’re almost done, okay?”

“Heh heh heh,” Rickbert chuckled. “Sorry, one more. Hi, I’m Rickbert.”

Sora glanced at him and started quivering. It seemed a little grumpy, though.

“I think it’s angry ’cause we tested it. Sorry, Sora. We’ve just never seen a slime like you.”



Rickbert ducked out of the tent and started shouting about something outside. I guess he thought Sora's responses were funny.

"Thanks, Sora."

Sora rubbed up against my hand, bobbing and quivering contentedly. I patted the slime, and it started bouncing around me. I guess it was in a better mood now. *Sora's pretty cute when it's mad, though.*

Chapter 76: Nine Years Old!

THE ADVENTURERS SEEMED to trust Sora for now. That was great and all, but...Rickbert wouldn't leave the slime alone. He seemed to have really taken to Sora, petting and poking it over and over until it jumped up and attacked his face. *I've never seen Sora attack before...it's very effective.* After taking one straight to the nose, Rickbert looked a little creepy—I mean...disappointed. Sora bounced off his face and rolled back to me, so I rushed to cradle it in my arms and get it away from Rickbert.

"Ha ha ha!" Rickbert laughed. "Sorry, I've never seen a slime with so much personality!"

"I-It's okay."

The more I really understood how rare Sora was, the more certain I was I needed to keep my friend out of sight. Sora's translucence, ability to distinguish individuals, and expressiveness all seemed to be unique. It could even—though I hadn't mentioned this to the adventurers yet—eat both potions *and* their glass containers. Sora was rare...way too rare.

Rickbert was still reaching out toward Sora like he wanted to snatch it from my arms. It was a small tent, but I took a step back. Trustworthy though he might be, Rickbert was still a little weird... Maybe letting him see Sora was a mistake.

Bolorda peeked inside the tent, looking annoyed. He grabbed a fistful of Rickbert's shirt and dragged him bodily out. When Rickbert protested, Bolorda raised his voice and reminded him now wasn't the time. He was right. With Sora's abilities confirmed, the heavy atmosphere had descended once again.

"Sorry, Sora. There's more to discuss, so I should go back." I ducked out of the tent and closed the entrance tight, then stood in front of the door. Seeing how guarded I was, Rickbert made a really pathetic face. *I gotta protect Sora from perv—I mean...Rickbert.*

"Uh...what were we even talking about?" Seizerk mumbled. We all laughed. His distracted question cut through all the tension at once. "Aah, okay. So...we talk to the GM, but we don't mention Sora. That thing's too conspicuous," he chuckled.

My suspicions were confirmed: Sora was way too rare. I'd thought as much after talking to everyone, but it felt more real when it came out of the veterans' mouths.

"Also, let's tell the other four today," he added. "Gather everyone up and we'll call it a party for a job well done or something."

"Sure," Bolorda agreed. "Where do we do it? It'd be weird to use the soundproofer for too long, right?"

"Let's fill everyone in one at a time inside someone's tent, then. They'll all need a moment to process it and get a hold of themselves, anyway."

"Got it. Seizerk, you gather our team members. I'll go meet with the GM. Rick... You come with me. If I leave you here, you'll just mess with Sora."

Rickbert had been staring at the tent for a while now. Why was he so obsessed with Sora?

"Huh? Nooo, I'm cool!" he protested. "I can wait here with Sora."

"*Absolutely not.*"

"Aww." It was obvious how much he wanted to see Sora again. He looked at me pleadingly, but there's no way I could—or would—help.

"Bye, then," I said. Seizerk and Bolorda laughed. Rickbert slumped over dejectedly.

"You probably wouldn't guess, but Rickbert loves cute animals. But he usually gets way too grabby and makes them hate him." Rattloore rolled his eyes.

Sora was cute. Anyone who liked cute things would love Sora. But if Rickbert touched things so much that they hated him...then could that happen with Sora, too? *No, I don't think Sora hates him quite yet.*

"Well, now that's settled, so I'm off to the guild. C'mon, Rick, get a move on!"

Rickbert turned back to look at my tent again and again as Bolorda dragged him off. My impression of him had shifted so quickly I didn't know what to think. For now, I'd just have to protect Sora.

Seizerk walked off shortly after to go see the other four party members, leaving just me and Rattloore at the camp.

"Say, Ivy? Are you really nine?" he asked. The question startled me.

Everyone was surprised when I said I was eight, huh?

“Yeah. Is...there something wrong with that?” *But why? What’s weird about it?* I looked down at my hands. I didn’t understand.

“Okay, one more question. Are you really a boy?” Rattloore asked.

I froze. That was *really* unexpected. My reaction was answer enough. I couldn’t think of any way to get out of this one.

“Whoooo, sorry!” he apologized. “Hey, you don’t have to cry!”

Before I knew it, my eyes were filled with tears. I looked up at Rattloore, but he was gazing at me worriedly. He didn’t look mad... That was a relief.

“I’m sorry for lying.”

“You’re fine! I know you’re just doing what you gotta to survive. Traveling alone as a little girl isn’t safe.”

“Thank you. Still, I didn’t tell you when I had the chance... Has everyone else guessed, too?”

“Mm... I’d say Bolorda and Seizerk have figured it out. They’ve been around the block once or twice. Rickbert probably hasn’t, though... He’s dumb as a box of rocks.” I saw something dark in his eyes when he mentioned Rickbert. *No way. Rattloore of all people is too kind to be like that.*

“So it’s easy to tell, is it?” What would I do from now on? I still had a long journey ahead...

“It’s more like...it’s easier to realize something’s off when we’ve been together for a long time. Heck, it’s more surprising that you’re actually nine.”

He asked me about that, earlier. I still don’t get it. I cocked my head in puzzlement.

“Huh? Wait, you don’t know?” He looked thoughtful for a moment and then frowned at me. *What? This is making me really nervous.* “Ivy, you really don’t look like a nine-year-old. I’d have guessed you were seven, tops.”

Huh?! I look seven?! Surely that’s... I mean, my clothes get too small, so I must be growing... Huh? Now that I think about it, I’ve only grown out of my clothes once or twice. Am I really not growing? Seriously?

“N-no need to get so down, kiddo...” he tried to console me. “If you keep growing, you won’t look like a boy anymore.”

Does that mean it’s good or bad that I haven’t grown? Good, in the sense

that it makes it harder for people to see through me, I guess? Still...it's not exactly comforting.

“We’d all guessed you were around seven until you told us your age. Gnouga was *pissed* that you were forced to travel alone. And...he was even sadder when he found out your real age.”

“Sadder?”

“When we all ate together, you didn’t look sickly or anything. But seeing as you’re so small...well, we imagined you must’ve had a real rough childhood.”

Rough? Is that...true? Was it rough? Everything changed when I was five. From then on, I was on my own...though I had the fortune-teller’s help. I guess you would call that a rough childhood?

“Maybe,” I muttered.

“When’d you start traveling?”

“I started this year, but...I’d been living in the woods for three years already.”

“Wow. I hear Ratomi’s chief and lord suck, so that makes sense. The adventurers’ guild is estimating that about half of its citizens have run away by now.”

“That many...?”

Had that many people fled? I recalled that other village with the corrupt chief. It had been so quiet. Was Ratomi like that now?

Chapter 77: Dealing with My Appearance

HONESTLY, HALF OF ME cared about Ratomi Village, and the other half didn't. I had more pressing problems though—I had to find a way to look more like a boy! I was probably fine for the moment since I looked younger than I was, but when I grew more, this was going to be a problem. *I mean...I will grow, right? I'm gonna grow eventually?*

Come to think of it, all I'd eaten while living in the forest was fruit. Even when I studied and learned to make traps, I had trouble catching even field mice for a long time. Not to mention the times I'd accidentally eaten medicinal plants and poisonous fruit. *Now that I really think about it...I kinda did live a harsh life, didn't I?* At the time, I hadn't had time to think about it like that. Well... *that's all in the past now. Prioritize looking like a boy! Maybe Rattloore has some ideas.*

“Mr. Rattloore, how I can keep people from finding out that I’m a girl?”

“Uhh, that’s a toughie. The best way would be to hide your face, but concealing your face is forbidden in towns and villages.”

Right. I could keep my face hidden, but that’s illegal in this country, to prevent criminals from sneaking in.

“Hmm...covering your lips might help a little?” he suggested. “But that might just draw more attention to you. Here’s a thought: You talk very politely. Is there a reason for that?”

“Not really. There was an adventurer I often saw in Ratomi village who spoke that way, so I guess I’m just imitating him.”

“Really? Gotta be a merchant’s third or later son, then. Merchant families really hammer in those manners early on, but the third sons and onward can’t inherit the business, so lots of them end up as adventurers.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s just what I’ve heard here and there, but I’m pretty sure it’s true. Maybe try talking more like a boy?”

“More like a boy...”

“Mm...changing how you speak is a little tough, huh? It might be hard to keep up the act if someone catches you by surprise.”

“Right...”

“Hmmm...aargh...” Rattloore’s eyes bored into me as he turned over the problem in his mind.

Was it that tricky? My hair was already cut short, and I’d always picked boys’ clothes. What more could I do?

“Nope, I don’t think it’s gonna work,” he finally decided.

“Huh?! *He gave up that easily?!*

“Even now, you’re toeing the line, though you can cover it up with your clothes and hairstyle since you’re so young. When you grow up, it’s game over. Your face is as girly as they come. You might just wanna give up on the boy thing, Ivy.”

That’s no good. I still need to travel. Should I stop growing...somehow?

“Consider how to protect yourself through other means instead.”

Other means? I doubt I can get any stronger. I looked at my arms; they were puny. I had a little confidence in my running speed, but I couldn’t just run away all the time. What other options did I have?

“Joining an adventurer group would be the best bet, but you can’t just join *any* old group. By the way, Ivy, are you registered as an adventurer?”

“No, sir.”

“Huh. Then forming a group wouldn’t work. There’s also...slavery, I guess?”

“Slavery?” I gasped.

“Buy a slave, I mean. And have them protect you.”

“Erm, I don’t have a lot of money, so...”

“What else...?” Rattloore wondered. “Let’s ask Seizerk when he comes back. He knows a lot more than I do.”

“Sorry. Thanks for trying to help.”

“Mm, still, a slave might be a good idea.”

“A slave...”

“Slaves will guard your secrets, and if you find one who’s a former adventurer, they can be strong. Money’s a problem, though; former adventurers are pretty darn expensive. Cheap slaves are weak...”

Slaves... With my financial situation, I don’t think that’ll work. Maybe I should try training again to get stronger? Though I exercised for a year in the forest by Ratomi without much result. Even the fortune-teller told me to give up and urged me to pour my effort into something else. Was I really that hopeless?

“Maybe you could settle for weak slaves for the sake of forming an adventurer team?”

“What do you mean? An adventurer team?”

“Oh, maybe this isn’t something a lot of people know. If you own slaves, you can register them with the adventurers’ guild. All you need for the registration is their owner’s name.”

“They...don’t need to know my skills, do they?” I asked fearfully.

“Skills? Nope. The slaves are the ones who’ll be doing the fighting, so they just need to know theirs.”

Wow. So slaves can register, too.

“Aha! They’ve returned,” Rattloore exclaimed.

I looked over to the entrance of the plaza and saw Bolorda and Rickbert. Seizerk and Sifar were close behind.

“Welcome back,” I greeted them.

“Heya.” Rickbert made a beeline for my tent, but Bolorda grabbed a handful of his clothes and stopped him in his tracks.

I slipped back into my tent, put Sora in its bag, and came out with the bag hanging over my shoulder. Rickbert was busy bickering with Bolorda, so he didn’t seem to notice, but Seizerk and Rattloore chuckled when they saw me.

“Ivy, wanna make dinner together?” Rattloore beckoned me over, showing off a big paper bag. When I peered inside, I saw that it was stuffed full of all kinds of ingredients. I could think of a bunch of different dishes to make with these.

“You seem like you’re a pro with seasonings, so we bought a whole lot.” Seizerk produced yet another paper bag.

I pulled it open and saw more than ten pouches stuffed inside. Each

seemed to contain a different seasoning. Lucky me!

“Thank you. I’ll do my best to make something yummy.”

Seizerk called out to Sifar, and the two slipped into a tent together. I was scared of how everyone would do once they knew the truth, but it was too late to worry about it now. I had to keep myself busy with something I could handle.

“Time to get to work!”

The ingredients they’d bought were kind of a mishmash. Did they just pick up whatever they saw? There were several different meats, and vegetables unsuited for my usual soup. I’d never even seen some of these veggies before, so I decided to taste them first.

While I was cooking, Gnouga, Lowcreek, and Marcreek arrived. Each was called into Seizerk’s tent in turn. I glanced at them anxiously as they exited the tent. Sifar and Lowcreek looked a little mystified. As for Gnouga...he looked really frightening, but when I glanced over at him, he quickly turned away.

Marcreek left the tent with a huge smile on his face. *Um, why is he smiling?*

“Ivy, sorry for doubting you,” he said. “We’re gonna make it up to you.”

For doubting me? He means not trusting what Rattloore said, right? I can’t really blame him for that. When I looked up to say it was okay, I noticed that the grin on his face didn’t reach his eyes at all. I got cold feet but managed to nod in agreement. Marcreek was terrifying in a whole different way from Gnouga.

Seizerk came out of his tent and stretched. “Boy, I’m beat.”

“Thank you for your help,” I said to him. “It’s almost time for dinner.”

“Ooh! That’s our Ivy. It smells incredible.”

Our plates were heaped with cooked meat and vegetables, soup, bread, and...a strange white thing?

“Mr. Rattloore, what is this?” I asked.

“Eat it after the main course,” he answered. “You’ll be *amazed*.” Now I was even more curious. “For now, let’s celebrate a job well done. Gnouga and Marcreek, can you ease up a little? Seeing your faces is gonna spoil my appetite.”

Gnouga heaved a big sigh and lifted his alcohol-filled cup.

“To a job well done!” they repeated. It seemed they’d calmed down. I didn’t know what would happen tomorrow, but for now, I wanted to enjoy this meal with everyone. That would help me keep moving forward.

Chapter 78: My Job

AS WE WRAPPED UP the meal, the adventurers urged me to taste the jiggly white thing on my plate. I took a bite—it was sweet.

“That’s good. Mm, it’s really good!” The gentle sweetness of the dessert brought a smile to my face. Bolorda saw my happy expression and mussed my hair. Come to think of it, he must have been the one who bought it. “Mr. Bolorda, it was delicious. Thank you.”

“Ha ha ha! Ivy, you’re such a good kid. That’s a sweet called milkpud. It’s made with milk, if you couldn’t tell.”

A dessert made from milk? I took another mouthful. The fluffy sweetness of it made me smile again. Had Past Me eaten many sweets? For some reason, the word brought on a feeling of nostalgia. Even so, it was delicious enough on its own. The future was frightening to contemplate, but this was a small moment of joy.

Gnouga and Lowcreek collected the dirty dishes, so I made tea next to them. Everyone sat down again and leisurely enjoyed their tea.

“I think it’s about time we talk, right?” Marcreek urged. I suddenly felt tense again.

Bolorda nodded in agreement and looked to the four newcomers. “Whether or not you believe what we’ve shared tonight is up to you,” he announced. “I’m not gonna try to convince you. But even if you don’t think it’s true, I still expect you to keep it secret.”

Bolorda slowly looked at each face in our little group. I wondered what conclusions they’d come to.

“I don’t want to believe it...” Lowcreek began, then stopped. “Er, is it okay to speak?”

“We’re using a magical item, so nobody around can hear us.”

“So that’s a yes, then. My heart doesn’t want to believe it, but I trust in what my comrades have seen and experienced, and I trust the decisions they’ve made. I won’t run from the truth. Let’s fight together.”

The other three concurred. It was incredible how they'd made up their minds so quickly. If I were them, I'd be so unsure. Did this decisiveness come from being veterans? Either way, it was inspiring.

"So, what'd the GM say?" Gnouga asked. All eyes fell on Bolorda.

"He might've had it figured out already. When I confided in him about Verdant Wind, he wasn't too surprised. I also filled him in about Ivy and the bait plan. His answer was, 'Sounds dangerous, but I trust you'll do it right.' We can't meet with the GM again and risk discovery, but once it's all over, he said he wants to meet Ivy."

"Ivy, are you sure about this?" Gnouga's face got a little scarier again. Now that I was getting to know him, I knew this look meant he was worried.

"I'm sure. I'll be okay."

I was powerless, so my journey up to this point had all been about running away from trouble. I wanted to flee from the people who came after me, but from everything I'd learned, escaping on my own seemed unlikely. In that case, the only option left was to charge in. I had eight trustworthy people with me here—I'd be just fine.

"What do you mean by *bait*, though?" Rattloore demanded. "What are we gonna make Ivy do?"

"They know Ivy knows he's a target, so it would be suspicious to send him out alone," Seizerk replied. He was right; Mira and her accomplices knew these eight adventurers well, so if I went out alone, they would know something was afoot.

"Right," Bolorda agreed. "They know the kind of people we are. They'll know something's off. For now, we'll keep an eye on Verdant Wind. If they're in talks with a merchant, then they might make a move soon. They might even contact other rats. The GM said he'll take another look at all of the adventurers again."

The GM thought there were other traitors among the adventurers? I suppose after learning about Verdant Wind, they had to be extra cautious.

"Um, if I do anything, won't the organization's informants respond?" I asked. "They may be aiming for a moment when I'm alone, but they'd need to be watching me all the time to know when that is, right?"

"Ivy, are you really nine? Sometimes, you sound a lot more mature." Marcreek's question made my heart pound even harder. That must've been Past

Me's influence.

What about my remarks sounded mature, though? Would it be strange for a nine-year-old to say that? I didn't know.

"I'll stay with you, then!" Rattloore put a hand on my head and smiled. I'd be more tempting bait if I was alone, if he was with me it wouldn't tip them off.

"Perfect. You'd never leave Ivy alone, anyway," Seizerk joked. Everyone agreed; after all, Rattloore was a caring person—and a real worrywart!

When all was said and done, we decided I would stick with Rattloore for a few days. During that time, they'd try to catch whoever was watching me. They would then keep an eye on Verdant Wind's movements, especially Tort and Marm's. Apparently, those two had a habit of disappearing. In the past, they'd explained it as training or doing special requests together in the forest. Now that they were viewed as traitors, those explanations seemed a lot more fishy.

"Ivy, Rattloore's a veteran adventurer," Seizerk added. "He's strong, but he's only one man. We'll do what we can to support you from the shadows, but..."

"Yes?"

"If you do get caught, try not to provoke them. As long as you're alive, we'll come and save you."

"Okay." I'd already thought a few times about what would happen if the kidnappers succeeded. I trusted that the adventurers would save me, but as long as the organization's size and reach remained unknown, there were no guarantees. There might be a point where they couldn't save me even if they wanted to. But...I still trusted them.

"I'm counting on you," I declared.

"And I'm counting on you, too!" Rattloore hugged me tight...and quickly let go. "Sorry. You're nine, right? I can't get the idea that you're seven out of my head."

"No, it's okay."

I see. He did that because he thought I was younger? As much as being little helps sometimes, I really am growing so slowly... It sucks.

Suddenly, I heard a pained cry.

"It's not here!"

I turned toward the voice and saw Rickbert emerging from my tent. *Good thing I got Sora out of there!*

“Damn it, Rick!” Bolorda roared. “Don’t go in other people’s tents without permission!”

“Good grief,” Seizerk groaned. “Can’t you do something about Rickbert’s disease?”

“Doubt it,” Sifar said with a shrug. “Even the GM’s warnings didn’t fix him!”

“Guys, don’t be so mean. And *warnings* doesn’t do it justice. He called it ‘training,’ but he put me through hell!”

Did something like this happen before? Rickbert went pale at the mention of the GM. Was it really a disease, though? Now I felt a little bad.

“Ivy, just so you know, Rickbert’s problem isn’t a real illness,” Rattloore said to me.

“Huh? But they just said...”

Sifar shrugged again. “Might as well be. It’s unhealthy how much he loves cute things.”

Unhealthy? I sort of get it, but sort of don’t. Either way, I’ll just interpret that as “Rickbert likes cute things far too much.”

“Ivy, could I see your slime, too?” Naked curiosity was clear on Sifar’s face.

Seizerk hadn’t told the GM about Sora, but he’d still wanted to tell his team about it, so I gave him permission. I didn’t know what exactly he’d told them about my friend.

“I guess so, but...” I glanced at Rickbert. Ever since he’d left the tent, he had been staring straight at me. His eyes...hadn’t moved one bit. It was kind of terrifying.

“Oh, him? Gimme a second.” Sifar put Rickbert in a headlock and dragged him away. Their conversation was quiet, so I couldn’t hear what they were talking about. What was going on over there? Bolorda glanced toward them but quickly looked away again.

Huh? He doesn’t look like he’s doing too hot.

“Mr. Bolorda, are you okay? You look kinda pale.”

“Ha ha ha, well, y’know. Don’t mind me.” He was wincing a little. Was he really okay?

“Thanks for waiting.”

I turned toward the sound of Sifar’s voice and saw him smiling softly while Rickbert next to him looked sick. *Maybe I shouldn’t say anything. Yeah, definitely not.* Without another word, I turned back to my tent to show Sora to Sifar.

“Oooh, yeah. This is exactly Rickbert’s type,” he mused.

Sora bounced around Sifar excitedly. A few times, it bumped into him and rolled away, like it was playing. Sora seemed to be really taking to Sifar. *You don’t just like him because he dealt with Rickbert, do you?*

Chapter 79: Slaves

“**W**E’LL BE TOGETHER from today on.” Rattloore offered me his hand, and I squeezed it tight. Starting today, we’d be

walking around town together. The only question was how far the kidnapping ring would go to get me alone. “So, what should we do? Wanna tour the town?”

“First, I have some laundry to do. Can we go down to the river?”

“Huh? You do laundry...in the river?”

Ack! I heard it’s rare for people to do that because cleaning magic works just fine. What should I say?!

“Um...” I panicked.

“Ivy, can you not use cleaning or water magic?”

I can’t hide this. Time to prepare for the worst.

“...That’s right.”

“Huh. Y’know, they have washhouses in town. Wanna try there?”

Washhouses? I’ve never heard of those. “What are they like?”

“Hm? Ooh, I guess only big towns have them, huh? Washhouses are places for people who can’t use cleaning magic or water magic. Though people who can use magic use them, too.”

People who can’t use cleaning magic or water magic? Huh? I thought everyone could do that?

“Um, about those people who can’t use magic...” I began. *How should I ask? Are there lots of people like me? Or...?* It was such an unexpected revelation that I had to figure out what to ask first.

“Hmm? Oh! Right, Ratomi’s a really tiny village. You might’ve learned that anyone can use fire, water, and cleaning magic for everyday necessities, but that’s wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“Yeah. The idea that everyone can use all three is wrong. Some people can only use two or even one, and others can’t use any at all due to having low mana. Did you notice there were flints for starting fires available at the plaza? Those are there for the adventurers who can’t use fire magic.”

I did notice those! They had those in the villages, too.

“By the way, I can’t use water magic,” Rattloore added.

“Huh?!”

“You never noticed, eh?”

I had no idea. Oh, but he did bring water for me when I cooked, didn’t he? Hmm...oh! Was that from a magical item, maybe?

“How did you get water into a pot for me? Did you use a magical item?”

“Correct! Sifar came across one and bought it for me because I can’t use water magic.”

“Really? How nice of him.”

“Yeah, he’s all right. As long as you don’t tick him off.”

Yeah...he was definitely scary yesterday. Still, was what my mother taught me incorrect? Does this mean I don’t have to hide the fact that I can’t use survival magic? Oh, but how many people are there that don’t have enough mana?

“Um, are there a lot of people who have too little mana to use survival magic?”

“I don’t know how many there are, but I do know someone like that. Do you have mana problems, Ivy?”

“Yeah. I can use magic if I need to, but my mana is awful.”

“I see...and you’re traveling like that? That’s gotta be dangerous.”

“Well, yes, it is...”

“If you could use fire magic, that would help in dire circumstances. Mm, you really need a slave...”

Rattloore’s recommended slaves a few times now. I wonder why?

“How would a slave help me?” I asked. “Um, I don’t know much about them...”

“Yeeeah, I’ve seen slaves around all my life, so it seems totally normal to

me. Criminal slaves are different, though. I even knew some adventurers who became slaves. I really sympathize with them; I hope they get good masters. Still, a little bit of debt means you're only indentured for a few years, so making a contract and paying back your debt fast means you can be an adventurer again sooner, y'know?"

"Contracts last a few years? Then they go back to being adventurers?"

"Huh? You don't know about it?"

"Nope."

"It's tougher if you have a lot of debt, but if you only have a little, you're indentured as a slave for like three to five years. Almost no adventurers end up with tons of debt, so they're usually given those kinds of contracts."

"I see. I thought slavery was a life-long contract. I've heard about adventurer slaves before, but the stories were always really tragic."

"Ha ha ha! If they were life-long contracts, slaves would be seriously expensive. Besides, criminal slaves get a minimum of ten years for most minor offenses, so life would be too long for just a little bit of debt."

"That does make sense."

"When you register at the adventurers' guild, they'll have you attend some lectures. The very first thing they teach you is to make sure you have enough in savings. You gotta have money in case you fail to fulfill a request. They'll also tell you that if you can't pay off your debts, you'll be enslaved. I mean, this is all common knowledge, really..."

"Lectures at the adventure guild..."

"Yeah. They do that to keep lots of adventurers from becoming slaves right off, since it's not like it's uncommon to fail a request. Still, even if you save diligently, it's hard to be ready for anything. Sometimes, you still end up a bit in the hole and slavery's the only option. But since it's such a small amount, most of us are back to adventuring in three to five years."

"I see."

"If someone was really in despair, then they probably blew all their money," he added. "Some people are real lunkheads, even when the adventurers' guild tries to warn them."

"Wow."

"Really skilled adventurer slaves can sometimes get adventurers they

know to contract them. Though, of course, that requires having a friend with a lot of money saved up.”

This sounded way different from the kind of slavery I’d imagined. I thought that you were a slave for life, no matter what. Where had all these mistaken ideas come from? Past Me, maybe?

Hmm...“If those traitors go wild, they’ll end up slaves for life?” What sort of world did Past Me live in? It must’ve been a lot harsher than this one.

“Ivy? Still with me?” Rattloore looked concerned.

“Oh, sorry. I’m fine. So after those few years have passed, what happens to all the secrets you’ve learned?”

“No worries. Anything you’ve heard as a slave is kept tied up by magic, so even when you’re released, you’re literally unable to talk about it.”

Wow, with magic? Having a slave is a lot more appealing now...not that I could get one if they’re too expensive.

Eventually, we arrived at the washhouse.

“Here we are,” Rattloore said. “Wow, it’s packed today.” The washhouse was filled with people doing laundry. Now that I knew many of them couldn’t use magic, seeing them felt a little strange. People I’d thought were nonexistent were right before my eyes.

“Do you know how... Hey, Ivy? You there?”

“Ah!” I gasped. “There are so many more people than I expected, I was just surprised...”

“Ha ha ha! That’s fair!”

All these people probably weren’t totally unable to use magic, but there were still many more than I’d expected. I looked for an open spot and scrubbed my own clothes. The buckets here seemed to be magical items—when I dumped out the water, it automatically refilled. Rattloore laughed at how excited I was to be using a magical item for the first time. I had a whole sack of dirty clothes to wash, so it took a while. Once everything was squeaky clean, I put the wet clothes in a basket I’d brought.

“All done? Nice work.”

Ah! I was so focused on washing that I forgot he came with me. And about the bait thing, too...maybe I feel a little too relaxed when Rattloore’s around. I’d better get my head on straight.

“Sorry for making you wait,” I apologized.

“All good! We’d better find somewhere to dry those. Let’s head back to the plaza.”

“Okay.”

As we strolled along, I asked him about the shops and other businesses in town. He knew a lot—this was his home, after all. He seems extra knowledgeable about sweet shops. Now that I thought about it, he *was* really excited about that milkpud yesterday.

We passed a whole crowd of people streaming into a building with a cross on the roof. A church—one just like this had changed my life forever. I’d avoided them ever since. As we walked by, I looked away carefully. I hoped no one would notice me.

Chapter 80: From Happy to Sad

“**I**vy, sorry to change the subject, but...” Rattloore began.

“Um, yes? What’s the matter?”

Does his voice sound a little shaky? I glanced over at him, but it seemed he hadn’t noticed.

“Your plan is to travel to a town near the capital, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a time limit on that goal or anything?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then how about you stick around in this town for the time being?” he offered. “Uh, y’know, once we’ve taken care of the current problem.”

“Umm...”

“About a year ago, the guild set up a new program called the acting guardian system. The point of it is to protect kids who’ve run away from their guardians or lost their parents. Kids without guardians are the most likely to be targeted. In the previous guild system, blood-related parents always had power over their children. But if you have an acting guardian, information on you won’t go to your birth parents even if they try to find you.”

The adventurers’ guild must be even more incredible than I thought. But...

“Register at the guild,” he continued, “and if something happens, they’ll protect you. Though it’s not instant—you’re not fully registered until a year after you apply. That’s how they ensure you’re not just using someone’s name to get a fake guardian.”

Rattloore’s expression was sincere as he looked into my eyes. It was heartwarming and heartrending at the same time...because I knew I couldn’t agree to it. Before I could say anything, I felt tears welling up.

“You can choose safe jobs and earn a stable income if you work hard. You’ll be able to make a name for yourself and build up a reputation. Heck, you can even join or form your own team. Think about it, okay?”

I remained silent.

“Honestly, I’d love it if you could join our team, but Seizerk says you’d push yourself too hard for us. Still...at least consider it?”

I shook my head in refusal. Then, doing my best to stop my voice from wavering, I said, “I’d only hold you back. Besides, I don’t belong with veteran adventurers. I can’t even protect myself.”

“Aww. You could stay in town...or, I guess not. Sorry, I’m just stressing you out.” He sighed.

“I’m sorry. I appreciate the offer, though.”

“Seizerk and Bolorda both told me not to bring it up because it’d only burden you. This is just my personal wish, okay? I’m burdening you, right? Sorry.”

I smiled and shook my head again. It was tough to think about, sure, but I was happy he mentioned it. I could tell they all cared about me. But if I needed to tell them my skills to sign up, then I could never, ever register at a guild.

“Thank you for asking me, though. I’m not in a rush to complete my journey, but I don’t plan to stay anywhere for too long.”

If I didn’t have to worry about someone finding out about my skills, I might’ve jumped at the chance. But I couldn’t. When we’d passed the church just now I’d spotted someone in priest’s robes. After I saw him, a shudder ran through my whole body. The words of the priest who’d been first to see my skills echoed in my mind.

“Cursed child who dares to blaspheme against God! Who are you to enter my church? You aren’t even worth the filth that stains your soul!”

I could never forget those booming accusations. Nor could I forget the way I’d trembled, and the way my father’s face went from confusion, to despair...and finally to naked hatred.

My father took the church’s teachings very seriously. He’d seen me as a strange child before then, probably because Past Me’s memories influenced my actions even at a young age. But when the priest called me a “cursed child,” that was the last straw. That was all it took for him to abandon me.

“Ah... So it’s a firm no? Well, think about it for me, won’t you?”

Rattloore’s kindness made me happy and sad at the same time. My voice was starting to falter, so I managed a smile and nodded. I clenched the basket

that held my damp clothes. *I'll be okay*, I repeated over and over in my mind. *I'll be okay*.

When we returned to the plaza, I looked toward my tent—and I froze in place. Rattloore and I glanced at each other in shock. There was Mira next to my tent, waving us down with a grin. Next to her were two people I didn't recognize but who seemed to be adventurers. We hadn't expected her to come to us directly so soon. This kind of move didn't track with what I'd understood about the organization. Was there something going on behind the scenes? Had the failed crackdown actually hurt them more than we'd thought? *Wait, I don't have the time to think about this now! I don't know what she's up to; I have to focus.*

“You okay?” Rattloore inquired.

“Of course.”

For some reason, Rattloore seemed even more tense than me. It was kind of funny—a giggle escaped me. He chuckled as well. Together we took a deep breath and strode over to the tent where Mira and the others were waiting.

“Ivy! It’s been a while!” Mira greeted me.

I managed to flash a natural-looking smile at her. “It has.” *Phew.*

“Heya. Two whole days, right?” Rattloore chimed in.

“Yep. I told my friends here about Ivy, and they said they wanted to meet him! So they tagged along.”

“Friends?” I looked at the two people standing with Mira.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Callua.”

“Hi there! My name is Luiseria. Mira sounded so proud when she told us about you! Sorry if it’s sudden, but I just had to meet you.”

“Oh, um...so proud?”

Letting them lead the conversation was a bad idea. I needed to calm down a little before this conversation went any further so I wouldn’t mess up. *Hmm... okay.*

“Umm, I’ll make tea,” I managed to say. “Wait just a moment.”

“Great idea! Thanks, Ivy.” Rattloore promptly agreed.

“Ooh, yeah! The tea Ivy makes is delicious, y’know.” Mira gave her assent as well.

After checking that everyone had found a seat, I slipped into my tent to fetch the tea leaves. When I emerged, Rattloore had gotten the fire going and filled a pot of water for me.

“Thanks for your help.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Rattloore even brought the mugs. He sure was a fast worker. Once the water came to a boil, I dropped the leaves in and let them steep. Finally, I poured the tea into mugs for the three guests, Rattloore, and me.

“Sorry for the wait,” I said to them.

“Thanks for this.”

“Ooh, that smells great.” Luiseria seemed to enjoy the fragrance, while Callua sipped quietly from her mug.

“Right?!” Mira piped up. She turned to me, “Ivy, do you have any plans for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah! Wanna go on a sweets-tasting adventure with me tomorrow?”

“Ooh, me too!” Rattloore butted in.

“I wasn’t asking you.”

“You know I love sweets! How could you leave me out? How cruel!”

“Ugh...” Mira pouted. If I didn’t know the truth, it would have been cute because she was so pretty. But no matter what she did now, she was just terrifying.

“Why don’t we all go?” Callua suggested in a soft voice.

“I guess that could work...”

“Then it’s decided!” Rattloore interrupted loudly. “Let’s go to Puff-Puff or Sweetalicious!”

“Huh?! Why are those the only two options?!”

“Well, I was showing Ivy around town earlier, and we were already talking about checking them out.” We hadn’t talked about it at all, but he must have had a reason to lie.

“That’s right,” I lied as well.

“Aww. I’m more a fan of Mama’s Treats.”

“Mama’s Treats is *okay*, but they never have anything new—it’s always the same stuff.”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

Huh? I feel like Mira is acting strange. Is it just me?

“God, does it really matter where we go?!” Luiseria barked out suddenly. *Why’s she so angry?! That scared me.* “Let’s just do Puff-Puff or Sweetalicious. We can do Mama’s Treats the next day.”

“All right,” Mira replied. “Let’s do that.”

Something’s off... Is it my imagination? Oh! Maybe there’s something about Mama’s Treats? But why is she in such a hurry? Seizerk and Bolorda said the organization is really resourceful, but they don’t seem like it... This is making me a little nervous.

Chapter 81: Inexplicable Actions

BEFORE WE COULD WIGGLE OUT of Mira and Luiseria's plans, the two ran off, saying they had business to handle. Callua stood up to follow them, but something about her manner caught my eye. She was glaring really angrily at her friends...or maybe, not quite?

Callua seemed like a stoic person, but her brow was furrowed as she watched Mira and Luiseria flit off. When I thought about it more calmly, what had looked like angry glaring at first now seemed more like confusion. Were Mira's two friends part of the kidnapping ring? We already knew about Mira, and Luiseria gave me the same feeling. But Callua seemed different.

"You okay?" Rattloore asked as he refilled my tea.

"Thank you. Um, wasn't that a little strange?"

"Yeah, it was weird."

"I thought the organization was thorough and left no evidence behind, but Mira and Luiseria's manner didn't give that impression. Do you think they found out that we suspect them?"

"Maybe so, but if they had, I imagine they'd try a different tactic. What if this is a trap?"

Oh, right. That could be possible, too...but what kind of trap would this be? I don't think it makes sense to assume they're all in it, though. Maybe those two are just normal friends, and Mira brought them to take suspicion off her. Now that I think about it, it sounded like they were trying to get at something by suggesting Mama's Treats. Would they be that obvious, though?

"What sort of place is Mama's Treats?" I asked.

"It's a pretty established sweet shop. They have a lot of sweets that use dango."

Dango... A few things came to mind. Those must be Past Me's memories. I see some stuff that looks like it's covered in dirt, too. What is that? "Anko"? It looks crazy.

"You all right?" Rattloore sounded concerned. "That's a heck of a frown

on your face.”

“Oh! Sorry. It’s nothing.” *Whoops! He noticed me getting stuck in past memories again. I’d better be careful. Umm...* “What are Puff-Puff and Sweetalicious like?”

“Those two are run by former adventurers who I know are trustworthy. Puff-Puff has fluffy stuff like the milkpud we have, while Sweetalicious sells flaky pastries.”

That was a really vague explanation. Fluffy like milkpud? Flaky? A few images floated up, but I stifled them. Okay, take a breath.

“Well...I’m excited for tomorrow.”

“Me, too! It’s been a while since I last gorged myself on sugar.”

Rattloore had mentioned that he didn’t drink much. Were sweets his vice, then? He had sort of an adorable personality.

I hung up the laundry I’d left languishing and got ready to make dinner. Was it just me, or were there more ingredients than yesterday? *I don’t know who added to the pile... Actually, this has to be Gnouga’s work.* There was a magical item in the heap to keep the food fresh and a big pile of meat that hadn’t been there before. I saw six different kinds of meat. *He must want to eat these tonight.*

But it looks like Sifar’s been here, too. There were some vegetables that I’d heard were great in soup. And Seizerk had already given me seasonings, so I was ready to get to work on a knockout meal.

Rattloore goggled at the mountain of ingredients. “Sorry, Ivy. This is kind of insane.”

“It’s okay. I like cooking.”

While I was busy with the food, I could forget the fear of being targeted by kidnappers. Besides, remembering how everyone smiled when they ate my meals made me want to make them happy again. No way was I giving up!

Okay! First, I’ll score the meat to help the flavor penetrate... Next, soup. Bolorda bought milk, didn’t he? He said I could use all I wanted, so I’ll make it a creamy soup. We’ve got meat with lots of umami, so I’ll marinate it in the milk.

Just as I was thinking about how to cook the meat, Gnouga appeared. *Does he have some kind of meat-detector?*

“Welcome back,” I greeted him. “Thank you for bringing the meat.”

“Sure thing... You gonna use it?” he asked.

“Yep.”

I made sweet marinade and submerged the meat in it. *Why is he...staring at the meat like that? Umm, it's okay if I cook it, right?* When I turned it over in the marinade, I heard a loud growl from Gnouga's stomach.

“...Sorry. Uhh, I'll get plates and stuff.” He blushed and left. Was he that excited to eat? I hoped so.

“We're back!” Sifar announced. “And looks like just in time. Thanks as always, Ivy.”

“Oh, no. Thank you for the vegetables.”

Sifar, Lowcreek, and Marcreek had returned as well. I spotted Seizerk, Bolorda, and Rattloore talking, too far away to hear. Were they discussing Mira and the others?

“What vegetables?” Sifar asked.

“Huh? Um, the ingredients...huh?”

He gazed at the mountain of vegetables in obvious confusion. *Was I not supposed to use those?!*

“Oh, that was me!” Rickbert called out, startling me. When did he show up? I hadn't even noticed.

“Thank you, Mr. Rickbert.”

“Don't worry about it. Also...”

“He's right!” Marcreek interrupted, glaring at Rickbert. “Don't worry about it for a single second.” Sifar and Gnouga, who'd just returned, stared him down as well. *Umm, did something happen?*

“Ivy, Rickbert's using produce as a bribe to get you to let him see Sora.”

Rickbert averted his eyes, all but confirming it.

“Sora... Mr. Sifar, may I ask for your assistance?”

“Roger!”

“Aww, Ivy, c'mon! That's not necessary!” Rickbert protested.

“As a thanks for the vegetables, you may see Sora. Mr. Sifar will chaperone.”

“You can count on me, Ivy. Better watch yourself, Rickbert!”

Rickbert looked deeply shocked. I felt a *little* bad, but this was about Sora’s mental health! Rickbert wouldn’t stop until Sora actually got mad, and I wanted to stop that before it started.

Eventually, everyone gathered and we got ready to eat. We made conversation while we sat down with our plates, but soon everyone was so focused on the food that it got real quiet. I was glad that they seemed to like it, but I was worried Gnouga was about to start fighting over the meat... His eyes were getting really intense.

Bolorda was perplexed by my use of the milk. *Simmering food in milk is a thing, right? Um... It is...right?* Once the meal was done, we kicked back with our tea.

“I was gonna talk about stuff during dinner, but I just couldn’t,” Seizerk remarked.

“Right? Man, that really hit the spot,” Marcreek agreed.

“Thank you very much.” Their compliments put a grin on my face.

“Let’s get down to it then.” I tensed up again. “Rattloore told me everything. Mira and her friends came by. What were their names? Luiseria and Callua?”

“Those two are from other adventure teams,” Marcreek added. “Though I don’t remember them being really good friends with Mira.”

“But why did they come here today...”

“If it’s a trap, it’s sloppy as heck.”

Nobody had answers; we were befuddled. Mira’s actions were inexplicable.

“Inconclusive, then. Anyone else we should discuss?”

We set Mira’s strange behavior aside for now.

“Tort and Marm are off to train in the forest tomorrow, so we’re gonna check up on them,” Seizerk said. He would be going with Marcreek and Lowcreek to investigate them.

Sifar and Gnouga had tailed the merchant today. Tomorrow, they would investigate the person the merchant had met with. As for me and Rattloore, we would join Mira and her friends as planned. Rattloore would try to suss out their

intentions. He said I could just act normal, but I was already nervous.

Chapter 82: Three...Friends?

AS SOON AS MIRA'S GROUP came into view, I froze up. Rattloore patted my back. I chuckled as all the tension left my body. He really was a reliable guy to have around.

"Ivy, over here!" Mira waved, and Luiseria raised her hand in greeting. Callua glanced furtively at us.

Marcreek had said that he wasn't sure if these three were actually good friends, but Mira and Luiseria seemed pretty close. Callua, on the other hand, seemed like a third wheel.

"Thank you for waiting for us," I said.

"Yeah, sorry we're late."

We stood in front of Puff-Puff. Mira had sent Rattloore a message this morning with details about where to meet, but by the time we'd received it and set out, we were already a little late. Mira and her friends didn't seem to mind the delay. They entered the sweet shop together, and we followed close behind. The shop was pretty empty this early—a group of two women and another of three men were the only other customers.

An employee showed us to our table. Callua sat on one side of me, and Rattloore was on my other side. Mira and Luiseria sat down across from us. *Is Luiseria glaring at Callua? Am I imagining it?*

While everyone discussed the menu, I felt those eyes on me. It was one of those gazes that made my skin crawl. I looked around the restaurant, trying to act natural. A man met my searching eyes. I froze, but his gaze didn't feel like the one from before. Now he seemed more...curious? I didn't recognize him. Why was he watching me?

"What's wrong?" Callua asked.

There was no reason to hide it, so I answered truthfully, "That man over there is staring at me."

"A man?" Callua looked around and saw the man I had indicated. For some reason, she let out a sharp breath. "Sorry, that's a friend of mine. Let me

go talk to him.”

Hearing our conversation, Rattloore looked over, too.

“All good?” he whispered.

I nodded. I hadn’t felt any discomfort from the man Callua called her friend, just an odd, irrepressible sense of curiosity. If he knew Callua, maybe she’d said something to him. *What would make him so interested, though?*

Pow! I heard a bang from the other side of the restaurant and whipped around in a panic. Callua had dealt a powerful blow to the man’s head. He was apologizing profusely to her, and the other two men at his table were guffawing loudly. They were certainly an interesting group.

“Does Callua know that guy?” Mira asked.

“Uhh, I think so?” Luiseria sounded unsure.

Were these three really close friends?

“Ms. Mira, Ms. Luiseria, how long have you known Callua?”

Rattloore looked a little surprised at my questioning. Still, I thought it’d be even weirder to say nothing. Because we doubted Mira, we were being overly cautious. I thought about what I would do if we didn’t suspect her, though. If I had questions, I’d ask until I got a satisfying answer—that was how I was, after all. So this question shouldn’t be fishy. And hey, I might get a real answer.

“Umm, a little while? We hit it off while drinking...right?” Luiseria said, flustered.

“Yeah! Luiseria and I are thick as thieves. Callua introduced us.”

“Is that so? I’d thought maybe you met while adventuring.”

Mira smiled at me. “It’s hard to make friends with other adventurers unless your teams are on a joint expedition.”

“Really?” Rattloore raised an eyebrow. “It’s pretty easy to get to know people with the same skill.”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” Mira’s answer was evasive.

My weird feeling about Mira and Callua’s relationship nagged at me. When Callua returned, we ordered our desserts. We got five of their newest items, plus Rattloore’s favorite thing on the menu. In no time, fruit juice and plates piled with fluffy, jiggly sweets were placed on our table.

“It looks amazing!”

Everyone picked up their spoons and dug in. The subtle flavor spreading through my mouth lifted my mood. *Delicious!*

“Good, right?” Rattloore grinned.

I nodded and took another bite. When my plate was empty, I washed the sweets down with a refreshing glass of juice.

“That was delicious!” I said, setting down my spoon.

“Hey, Ivy?” Mira looked at me.

“Yes?”

“I was hoping to forage some of those tea leaves for myself. Do you think you could come to the forest with me to look?”

The forest? That’s obviously a trap. But how do I refuse? Think, Ivy...

“Tea leaves? You mean the kind I drink?”

“Yeah! That tea hits the spot after meals, right? I would love some leaves for myself, but I don’t know how to identify the trees they come from.”

How do I say no...

“I don’t know if they would be in the forest around here.” I finally managed. “I looked around on the way from the expedition camp to town, but I didn’t see any trees with tea leaves.”

“Huh. Maybe we need to go farther in to find them?”

“It’s hard to say.”

“Let’s go search together!” Luiseria volunteered.

Rattloore jumped in. “I’ll go with you!”

“You’ve got work, don’t you?” Mira rebutted. “I’ve got some time off, so I’m free as a bird.”

Time off?

“Ooh, yeah. You’re taking time off since Marm and Tort are away training, right?”

“Yep.” Mira turned to me. “We haven’t forgotten you’re being targeted, but don’t worry—we’ll protect you.”

“Mira filled me in on the details,” Luiseria added. “I’ll help protect you,

too, so no need to be afraid.” They’d really cornered me here.

“Oh, no worries there. Seizerk says we won’t be taking any requests for the time being,” Rattloore butted in again.

“No requests? Why’s that?”

“It’s kind of a sensitive time for Sifar right now.” Rattloore was composed, but Mira was getting a little flustered. I had no idea if what he said was true; if it was, it wasn’t something he’d told me about. I didn’t know anything about Sifar’s situation. Was there really something going on with him?

“Well, why don’t we all go?” Callua suggested. Luiseria frowned. It was clear she hadn’t expected that, though she tried to hide it when she noticed me looking.

“Callua, I didn’t know you were into tea,” Mira mused.

It seemed like they didn’t expect Callua to suggest that. Maybe Callua wasn’t part of the kidnapping ring after all?

“Drinking Ivy’s tea yesterday got me interested,” she said. “Actually, is it cool if I bring my friend?”

“Your friend?” Rattloore asked. Callua pointed toward the nearby table. The man she was pointing at visibly panicked.

“Uh, we don’t have to go today!” Mira said a little too loudly. I looked at her in surprise; she was rattled.

“Jeez, what’s gotten into Mira?” Luiseria joked.

I cocked my head at them. This didn’t seem like a formidable organization at all. They must’ve been in deep trouble...though I didn’t know what the trouble might be.

Chapter 83: Overthinking?

WE DECIDED TO LOOK for the tea leaves another time. Mira assured us it was fine, but she looked cross about it. We'd planned to go to the next sweet shop together, but Luiseria said she had stuff to take care of. *Wasn't she just about to go off into the woods, though? Maybe she changed her mind because things weren't going according to plan.*

We split up with Mira and her friends in front of Puff-Puff and returned to the plaza. The whole thing was really strange.

On our way back, Rattloore and I looked around the greenmarket. We didn't really need any produce since we had so many veggies already, but we didn't feel like going straight back to the plaza.

"What do you think of Callua?" I asked him. Her interference in the dessert shop made it seem like she was helping me out. I couldn't figure out why she would do that, though. Did she have her own suspicions about Mira and Luiseria?

"Callua's an adventurer who moved here two years ago," he answered. "Before that, she worked two towns away."

I still didn't know much about adventurers. "Do adventurers move around a lot?"

"Yeah, when they want more rewards, or...well, when they need to escape from some trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Yeeeah, uh, like trouble with a partner. Or family problems...y'know?"

"I suppose I do."

It seemed her moving wasn't strange in itself. We finished looking around and reached a quiet side road.

After glancing around to confirm we wouldn't be overheard, I asked Rattloore, "The big crackdown on the kidnappers did fail, right?"

"Huh? Yeah, why?"

“The moves Mira’s making don’t really match up to the formidable organization I was imagining. But the fact that she has more adventurers involved makes it seem like they’re very well organized. It makes me wonder if this organization is in deeper trouble than we thought.”

“You think the crackdown might’ve hit them harder than we knew?” Rattloore asked.

“I don’t know, but it seems to me like Mira and her friends are trying to rush things.”

“Yeah, they did seem like they were in a hurry. But the crackdown really did go nowhere. All they captured were some documents.”

“Documents?”

“Yeah. They couldn’t get anything useful out of them. Seizerk’s seen them, too.”

“If not documents, then how about money?” I probed.

“Money? There was a safe with a little cash, but I heard it wasn’t much.”

“Was the raid on a private home?”

“Uh... A former merchant’s residence,” he recalled. “It was a pretty big mansion.”

If it was so big, could there have been any “hidden rooms”? The term popped into my mind.

“Is it possible there’s anything still hidden in the residence?” I pressed.

“Eh, I don’t think so. They’ve scoured the place top to bottom.”

“Hmm...is it still under investigation?”

“There should still be people watching it, since the case is unresolved.”

“Watching it...how many people?”

“Uhh, less than before. Maybe five or six?”

“And the guard are the ones keeping watch?”

“Yeah. Adventurers were lending a hand, but since we learned about Mira, they’ve cut it back to just the guard.”

“The guard, you say? Hmm, you said went over the whole place. Who exactly did it?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. The only ones who went in were the guard; no adventurers were at the raid.”

“Only the guard? I wonder...”

“Ivy?”

What do I do? I have no evidence. This is all only my theory, really. I'll just...say a little more.

“Um...do we know the guard are all trustworthy?” I finally asked.

“The guard? You mean the guys who actually did the raid? Er, I think they're pretty clean...”

“How did they come to join the guard?”

“Usually, captains or vice-captains recommend new recruits. Oh, or nobles...”

“Nobles?” That word stuck out to me.

“Yeah. They can get a recommendation from a noble...”

“Erm, it's hard to say this, but...”

“It's okay,” Rattloore assured me. “I can see what you're getting at. Yeah, it's possible some members of the guard are crooked.”

Yep. A powerful organization would have moles not just among the adventurers but among the guard. Rattloore looks panicked, like he just realized it, too.

If there were traitors in the guard, then it was possible that the former merchant's mansion was still hiding something. The kidnapping ring wanted it back, but because there were eyes on the place, they couldn't make a move. If they could wait, the patrols would be gradually reduced over time. But if whatever was hidden there was so important they couldn't wait...what would they do? They'd have to get rid of the guards.

Maybe Mira was a sacrificial pawn. Not just her—anyone in their organization might be disposable. Now that we knew Mira was a rat, and considering there might be more adventurers involved, it was difficult for the guild to interfere. They'd already pulled their people out of the group watching the mansion, leaving the guard as the main force there. If Mira's group tried anything now, the guard would have to scramble to arrest them...which would leave nobody for the extra patrols in the meantime.

“Like a lizard losing its tail...” I muttered.

“Huh? What was that?”

“Umm...nothing. Sorry.” I took a deep breath and explained my thinking to Rattloore. He frowned uncomfortably as he mulled over the implications.

“What’s the matter?”

“Around a third of the guard are noble recommendations.”

That was way too many. They probably weren’t all moles, but it would take too much time to investigate and clear them all. If this was a calculated move as well, then the top of this organization was a force to be reckoned with. Still, if I could reach these conclusions, then others could, too. The GM and captain of the guard had more information at their fingertips than I did, after all.

“Um, I might be overthinking all this, though.”

“...Ivy, what sort of noble do you think would be most suspect?”

Rattloore looked down at me gravely.

Who would I suspect?

“Probably...someone squeaky clean. The last person you’d expect to commit a crime. Or someone with a reputation for being really heroic.”

“...Why?”

“People are looser with information around people they trust and respect. And if something happens, they are often above suspicion.”

“Huh... I can think of two who meet those criteria. One is a person Bolorda trusts deeply, and the other is someone this town would never suspect.”

“Never suspect... Why not?” I asked.

“Because eleven years ago, he put his life on the line to rescue an adventurer’s kid when bandits attacked.”

“He saved a child?”

Saved lives... I feel like I’ve heard those words a lot over the past few days.

“They called him a town hero after he was injured protecting that kid,” Rattloore explained.

“What happened to the bandits?”

“They’re all dead. Why?”

“Is there any possibility...that the whole thing was staged?”

Rattloore fell silent.

Ah! Rattloore's considering it. But if it was fake, that would mean he was already preparing for this eleven years ago. Wait...

“Um, when did this kidnapping ring first come to light?”

“Around seven years ago, maybe?” He scratched his head. “A woman who was abducted by them escaped before she could be sold into slavery.”

Seven years ago? Four years before that seems too early to fake the attack... But if they only learned about it seven years ago, it might've been going on for longer.

As the plaza came into view, I saw Seizerk standing by our tents. He was back early today, and I didn't see Marcreek or Lowcreek at all. Why'd he come back all alone?

Chapter 84: Total Confusion

“**W**HAT’S THE MATTER? You two look pretty serious,” Seizerk asked, puzzled by the looks on our faces.

Rattloore thought for a moment, steeled himself, and took a deep breath. He made Seizerk take a seat, which only spooked him more. Then he laid out our exchange in the restaurant and what we’d been discussing on the way back.

“Wait, but... But...” The furrows on Seizerk’s brow deepened.

Was it that painful to imagine those nobles might be involved? To my mind, nobles were people who would do anything for money and power.

Seizerk heaved a sigh.

“Ivy, I think your ideas have merit, but I don’t think it’s Count Faltoria.”

Count Faltoria? Is that the name of the noble?

“Why not?” I asked.

“He was the one who proposed the raid in the first place.”

“Oh, is he? Umm, how did that come about?”

“Huh...what was it again?” Seizerk put a hand to his chin. “I think he got a hold of information on a black-market dealer. That dealer was going in and out of the former merchant’s... No, wait. He was using a different place as his hideout... Huh? Why’d they choose that mansion for the raid, anyway?”

“Was the mansion not the original target?”

“Oh, right! It was a tip-off from someone... I don’t remember who, though.”

I couldn’t believe that Seizerk would forget something so crucial. They must have deliberately concealed information and only let a little slip. But where had the tip about the former merchant’s mansion come from?

“Huh? Why did they pick that place...?” Seizerk muttered in total confusion. Rattloore looked deep in thought, too. “Aaargh! I’m not suited for this! This is why I became an adventurer instead!” he suddenly cried, clawing at his hair until it stood on end.

Rattloore and I jumped in surprise. We stared at Seizerk while he continued to yowl incoherently. *Oops...we broke him.* Rattloore and I looked at each other and slowly sat back down. Unsure of what to do, we left Seizerk to his breakdown for about five minutes.

Finally, he fell silent. *Phew. I was starting to worry we'd have to fix him.* I was still a little nervous about the way his eyes were fixed on the ground.

“What are you guys up to?”

I turned to find Bolorda looking at Seizerk in stupefaction. Could he help us? I sure hoped so. Rattloore filled him in on everything we'd talked about. Bolorda looked increasingly alarmed as Rattloore went on but managed to hear him out to the end.

“Uh-huh...so that's how Seizerk ended up in this state. See, he started adventuring because he couldn't stand dealing with the darker side of humanity. All an adventurer needs to do is kill stuff, after all.”

Did he really? I feel bad for telling him, then. I'll just pretend I don't see Rattloore snickering... Keep me out of it.

“Still, Ivy...”

“Yes?” *What's he gonna say? Does he think I'm overthinking it, too?*

“You've gotta be lying about your age, right?” Bolorda said. “You can't be nine. Be honest.” It seemed like he was just as confused. “For the record, I'm not confused.”

He read my mind!

“Well, whatever,” he sighed. “I'm just surprised to hear all this out of your mouth. It's exactly what we were talking about before.”

“What do you mean?”

“The GM called us in earlier. The captain of the guard was there, too, and he said he thinks there are moles among his people. Apparently, he has his doubts about some of the guards watching the mansion.”

“Whoooa, Ivy was right! You're so clever, Ivy!” Rattloore was amazed.

“Right? I'm telling you, that kid can't be nine!”

You can say that all you want, but I really am nine!

“Now, if there are moles in the guard, then that changes things,” Bolorda went on. “Especially regarding Mira's next moves.”

“Yeah... Hey, is that why the adventurers were taken off the patrols?” Seizerk glanced up. He looked like he’d aged five years in the past ten minutes.

“That’s right. If members of the guard are involved, acting rashly now would be playing right into their hands.”

“Got it. And?”

“Pretty much as Ivy deduced: That former merchant’s residence is hiding something. They looked back at who ordered the raid there. We thought Count Faltoria was the one who made the call, but it turns out he proposed a different target.”

“I remember that, too! The count was honing in on some house on the outskirts of town, right?”

“Exactly. Lord Foronda was the one who changed the plans.”

Lord Foronda? The noble who governs this town?

“Lord Foronda is one of the two people I was talking about, Ivy. He’s the one who has Bolorda’s respect.”

The man Bolorda owed his life to. *Good. Maybe Lord Foronda will be on our side here? But I do wanna tread carefully. How do I know who’s friend and who’s foe?*

The bag on my thigh was twitching. I looked down. Sora was moving around inside a new bag Sifar had given me for the slime. I don’t know what it was made for originally, but the inside was lined with fur. Sora seemed to like it, so it must’ve been cozy in there. *Oh! Maybe Sora can help us?*

“Umm, what if I had Sora look into it?” I suggested.

“Huh?”

Is it that crazy of an idea? I figure Sora’s the perfect investigator here.

“Wait, Ivy. How can Sora help? Don’t you have to keep it in its bag?”

“I’ll have it tell me from inside the bag.”

“That bag... I think I’ve seen it before.” Seizerk squinted at the bag. *Is there something weird about it? Now I’m worried.*

“This? Sifar gave it to me.”

“Really?!” Rattloore was shocked, too.

Why? Was it unusual for Sifar to give it to me? It’s not a magic bag, it’s

just a normal one.

“Um, is there something special about it?”

“No no, the bag’s fine,” Seizerk answered. “We were surprised because Sifar doesn’t give gifts often.”

“More like *never*, you mean.”

How can that be? He gave me clothes you can layer on top of other clothes, too... Oh, and a really pretty mug.

Bolorda stared at Seizerk and Rattloore in obvious annoyance as they discussed Sifar’s gift-giving habits—or lack thereof. “Can we gossip later? Right now, let’s talk about Sora.”

“Sorry! So...Sora. Can it really help us?” Seizerk asked me.

“I think so. Sora, remember that lady Callua we met earlier? If she’s a friend, wiggle twice. If not, stay still.” I could feel Sora bobbing and quivering atop my leg. Callua passed muster. “Callua should be okay. What about Luiseria?”

The bag stopped moving. It seemed Luiseria was a member of the kidnapping ring. That was a shame. When the other three saw the bag go still, they all whispered to each other.

I interrupted, “Oops—it’s weird for a bag to move like that, isn’t it?”

“No worries. Some tamers keep animals inside bags, after all.”

Really? Then it’s not too out of the ordinary for a bag to move on its own? How does Sora judge people, anyway...

Chapter 85: Sora's Judgment

WE MARCHED OFF to the adventurers' guild with Sora in tow. Our objectives were twofold. The first was to have Sora pass judgment on the GM. The second was—if the GM was trustworthy—to report that Sora could identify traitors. Bolorda and Seizerk promised to keep Sora as secret as possible. I didn't know how we'd convince the GM that Sora was reliable, but Bolorda seemed to have something in mind. When I asked, he just said, "Look forward to it."

It was exciting to enter an adventurers' guild for the first time—I never thought I'd be able to come here, after all. There weren't many people inside, though. Somehow I'd expected it to be bursting with adventurers.

"There aren't many people around this time of day," Rattloore explained as I slumped in disappointment. "Wait a little while, and it'll be full of adventurers who've finished their requests."

Oh! So everyone's out working right now? Okay. Still kinda sad... As I followed Rattloore inside, a request board on the wall caught my eye. It had jobs of all kinds, from collecting medicinal grasses and cleaning up the town to mining ore in caves—even killing monsters!

"Ivy!"

I realized I'd stopped to stare at the board. Tearing myself away, I rushed to catch up to Rattloore and slipped into the room after him. Four men were already seated inside. *I thought we were just meeting the GM? Who are these people? They're all really buff...except one of them looks more refined.* The refined one looked at me and frowned.

"Why in God's name did you bring this little kid with you?" he barked.

"Didn't I tell you? This is Ivy," Bolorda answered.

"You brought him with you?!" exclaimed the scariest-looking one of the bunch. I twitched in fear.

"Keep it down, GM." Bolorda covered his ears theatrically, and the GM grunted an apology.

"The enemy's acting unpredictably, so we thought it was best to keep him

close.” Seizerk explained. “Ivy, allow me to introduce you. My noisy friend here is the GM.”

“Aw, shut it, Seizerk. Hi. I’m the guild master, Lowgriff. Call me GM.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” I replied.

“Hi there, Ivy. I’m the captain of the guard. Name’s Barxby.”

“Vice-Captain Agrop, at your service. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Folmaro, the guild treasurer. Pardon my outburst earlier.”

“It’s nice to meet you all.”

The GM was tall and had a forbidding look on his face, but he spoke gently. The captain looked surprisingly mild-mannered, but the vice-captain had a jagged scar on his face and sharp eyes. Folmaro...really looked like a posh gentleman.



I nodded twice to Bolorda. That was the signal that everyone here was Sora-approved. Before coming here, I instructed Sora to assess everyone when they introduced themselves. Each time someone said their name, the slime bobbed twice inside its bag.

Sora had given them the all-clear, so I indicated as much to Bolorda. If someone in the group had been an enemy, the plan was to nod just once. Bolorda acknowledged my sign, then stared at the object in his hand. It was a big glass ball he had brought out from his tent. What was he doing?

“Looks like everyone here is clean,” he announced.

“Clean?” The GM and his three partners looked at him, befuddled. My heart jumped in my chest. He said he wouldn’t mention Sora, so...how was he planning to convince them?

“Yeah. My magical item here didn’t react, which means it’s judged you all as allies.”

Huh? Oh, I see! He’s using an item to keep Sora a secret?

“Oooh. A magical item, eh?” The GM leaned forward and eyed the ball with great interest.

“I’ve never heard of a magical item like that,” the captain said.

“Unfathomable magical items are being discovered all over the world every day,” said the vice-captain. “I guess this is another one.”

They were curious as well, but nowhere near as much as the GM.

Bolorda whisked the glass ball back into his bag. “It came into my possession recently. Thing is, it turns to stone two or three days after you activate it.”

“Goodness. Really?”

“Yeah. I had another, but I wasted it.”

He was perfectly convincing, but I felt guilty. Since I couldn’t tell people about Sora, he was lying for my sake.

I wilted a little, then I felt a warm hand on my back. I looked up. Seizerk smiled a little and shrugged, so I smiled back. *I know. Sora and I will do our best to pay Bolorda back. All I can do here is carry Sora around, but...I'll work hard to make even tastier meals, too.*

“Two or three days, huh... Bolorda, there’s something I need you to do.”

The captain stared earnestly at Bolorda. Everyone probably knew what he was going to ask.

“I know,” Bolorda replied. “You want me to find the moles among the guard, right? What about the adventurers?”

“I’ll call the people I want tested,” the GM said. “Can you come back in a few hours?”

Bolorda nodded his assent. Everyone stood up to head towards the door at once, leaving the GM alone in the room.

“Hey, are you sure about this?” I heard the vice-captain whisper to Bolorda and Seizerk as they walked out together. “Ivy here is just a kid, isn’t he?”

Despite their assurances, Agrop still seemed worried. He whipped around to look at me over and over. Why was he so concerned?

“The vice-captain has three kids around your age,” Rattloore told me. “I’m sure it hits close to home.” Hearing that, the vice-captain blushed a little. His sharp eyes made me think he was a cold person, but it seemed my first impression was wrong.

The six of us walked together until a big merchant mansion came into view, surrounded by a few people in guard uniforms. They looked surprised to see the captain and vice-captain.

“Keep up the good work, boys,” the captain greeted them. “We need to take a look inside. Oh, let me introduce you. This boy here is Ivy. Bolorda and the others here are keeping an eye on him right now due to some hairy business. Ivy, let me introduce you to the officers here.”

The captain introduced each guard, moving methodically from right to left. According to the plan, Bolorda would check the glass ball to see whether they were allies or traitors—though, of course, Sora was really the one doing the work. I had tagged along partially to stay under their protection but also because I was a stranger to the guards. The adventurers of this town already knew everyone, but with me here, they would have an excuse for introductions. At least, that was the official reason I had come.

“And finally, Margajura.”

Sora, who had been quivering the whole time, suddenly stilled. This person was the traitor. I tugged sharply on Rattloore’s shirt, which I’d been keeping a tight grip on.

“Margajura, long time no see!” Rattloore greeted him. “I thought I hadn’t seen you around lately. Been stuck here with this lot, eh?”

“Heh, managed to get myself injured,” Margajura answered. “Figured I could at least keep watch, so I asked the captain to transfer me here.”

So he was a friend of Rattloore’s. *Did Bolorda and Seizerk get the message?* Seeing Rattloore’s reaction, Bolorda whispered something in the captain’s ear. Barxby’s eyes turned sharp. *Yikes! He normally looks so nice, but now, he looks as scary as the GM. I guess you gotta be tough to keep the town’s peace...* I took deep breaths to calm my racing heart. Once I had myself under control, we made to enter the mansion.

“Er...is the kid going in, too?”

“The organization’s after him, so we’re keeping him close,” Seizerk answered. The guards went wide-eyed.

“Thrilling, isn’t it, Ivy? Think we’ll find anything?” Rattloore surveyed the inside, obviously excited. *I hope we really do find something. Maybe even a hidden door!*

Chapter 86: Two Nobles

AN OFFICER SHOWED us into the mansion. I'd lost sight of the captain, so he must have his own plans. The vice-captain had also gone off somewhere with Margajura, leaving us with just our guide.

"Place is enormous, huh?" Rattloore knocked on walls, peeking into every nook and cranny as he went.

"It is. They even have two storehouses."

"Do they?"

"I spotted them from the window."

"If there's a hidden room, maybe it'd be in one of them?" he mused.

I wonder. Where's the best place to conceal a secret room? Storehouses do seem like a typical place to hide things, so they'd probably get searched the most. Oh!

"Where did Margajura search, exactly?" I asked.

"Hm? Ooh, I get it."

"Yeah. I think the organization ordered him to transfer here to throw off the investigation."

Margajura's role would've been to give certain rooms the all-clear in his report. In other words, the rooms he'd been tasked with would be most likely to contain secrets. Maybe the captain had gone to investigate them alone? I hoped he found something—there *must* be something in this mansion that we could use against the kidnappers.

As we finished our tour of the first floor and came back toward the foyer, we heard the creak of the building's front door. Two guardsmen ushered an incongruous pair into the building: One was mild mannered, the other short-tempered. I heard Rattloore gasp. Was he unhappy they were here? Who were they, though?

"Count Faltoria, Lord Foronda. To what do we owe the pleasure?" Bolorda moved swiftly to address them.

I recognized their names. Count Faltoria was the fishy one, while Lord Foronda was the one Bolorda wanted to trust.

“We were just passing by and figured we ought to check up on the investigation,” Count Faltoria answered.

“Of course. We appreciate your vigilance.”

“I was out walking with the count, so I came along, too,” Lord Foronda said.

Count Faltoria seemed friendly and well mannered. It was hard to imagine him as a bad guy. Lord Foronda, on the other hand, was quiet and oddly unapproachable.

“Oh? Who do we have here?” Count Faltoria looked down at me and smiled. It was warm and genuine. Part of me felt guilty for doubting him at all.

“Ivy, come here.”

Bolorda beckoned me over, so I went to stand next to him. His expression hadn’t changed, but when he rested his hand on my shoulder, I noticed he was tense. My muscles locked up as well when I felt it. “This is Ivy. The organization has targeted him, so we’ve taken guardianship of him for now. We still have work to do, so we’re having him tag along.”

“Well, aren’t you adorable? Hello, young man, I’m Faltoria. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He bent down to my eye level and flashed a gentle smile. Nothing about him set off alarm bells for me, but the bag on my thigh was as still as a stone. In other words, Sora thought Count Faltoria was bad news.

Lord Foronda looked down at me with a grim expression. “That’s tough, son. Bolorda here’s the best of the best. You’re safe in his hands.” His voice was cold, too, though it warmed ever so slightly when he mentioned Bolorda. Honestly, he was intimidating. I’d be terrified of him if it wasn’t for Sora quivering against my thigh. I clenched Bolorda’s shirt as subtly as possible.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Count Faltoria.” When I spoke, I tugged once. “And it’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Lord Foronda.”

I let go. As I did, Bolorda relaxed his grip on my shoulder—that must’ve been a relief for him. I was glad the person he trusted was on our side. I managed to relax, too. Bolorda gave my back a gentle pat.

“Where’s the captain gone off to?” Count Faltoria asked, looking around the entryway.

Huh? That sounds like he knows the captain is here. How would he know that? The captain said this was his first time visiting since the raid. Did one of the guards tell him? Or...are there more people from the organization watching the property? Maybe there are lots of them hiding out there...

The captain emerged from the back of the first floor. "I'm right here. Did you need something?"

Oh! The vice-captain and Margajura are with him, too.

"No, just checking in on you!"

"I see. Would you like to come in and look around?"

My heart thudded in my chest. Oh no! The Captain doesn't know about Count Faltoria yet. I peeked at Bolorda, who noticed and grinned down at me. Hm? I've never seen that expression. It's almost like he's...plotting something? What is he up to?

"No, no, we couldn't possibly impose when you're working," Count Faltoria demurred. "I only wanted to see your cheerful face."

"Is that so? Well, thank you for making the time to see me."

Count Faltoria smiled brightly, made a few remarks to the officers who had escorted him in, and swept toward the door. Lord Foronda moved to follow him.

"Lord Foronda, may I have a moment?" Bolorda asked.

"What?"

Bolorda bowed and said, "I'd like to consult you on a sensitive topic, so perhaps we could arrange to meet elsewhere."

Lord Foronda thought for a moment, but shortly promised to pop in to the guild later.

A wave of exhaustion overcame me as the door closed behind the two nobles. My heart had been pounding at the prospect of meeting nobles for the first time. Worse, one of them was our enemy. His mild demeanor and gentle smile had alarmed me more every moment. If I'd spoken with him any longer, I might've started quaking.

The vice-captain instructed Margajura to gather the guards and investigate the storehouses again. So they hadn't found a hidden room after all. Or...wait! If he's giving the one we know is a rat orders, then...is this a diversion? Maybe he did find a hidden room!

Margajura summoned two more guards, and they headed for the storehouse together with the vice-captain. While we saw them off, the captain ordered the two officers who had shown the nobles in and the man who'd been guiding us back to their posts.

The only people near the door now were the captain, Bolorda, Seizerk, Rattloore, and me. The captain considered me thoughtfully. I cocked my head in response.

“Captain, you don’t have to worry about Ivy,” Bolorda said.

“You said that before, but...” The captain hesitated.

Bolorda was sympathetic. “I know. Normally, we’d try to keep kids out of it.”

“Right? Then...”

“But Ivy probably already knows what you’ve been up to in here, and what you found.”

“Huh?”

Ah ha ha! It’s kinda funny when a person with a scary face gets surprised. Still, why is the captain so shocked? If you think about everything that’s happened, the answer should be obvious.

“I have an inkling of what Ivy’s thinking, but they aren’t the thoughts of a normal nine-year-old,” said Rattloore.

I turned my head at his claim. Was that true? *Also, hey! I’m a totally normal nine-year-old.*

“Although he doesn’t look nine, does he?” Seizerk chuckled.

Seizerk’s slandering me!

Chapter 87: Confusion, Regret, Strategy?

“**N**INE?” The captain’s bewilderment bewildered me. *Do I really not look like a nine-year-old at all?!*

“Yes, I’m nine.”

“Oh, er, no. Age doesn’t have anything to do with it. Sorry. Umm, what was it? Right, you approve of what I’m doing here, right?”

Approve? What is he talking about...? I approve of looking for hidden rooms if that’s what he means. But who cares if I approve?

“Settle down, Captain,” Bolorda assured him. “Ivy can already tell you went off on your own to search for hidden rooms. I’d bet money he thinks you’ve found one.”

The captain gazed at me, so I nodded. “Really?” he asked in disbelief.

“Really. Ivy deduced that there was a mole in the guard, that there’s a hidden room in this residence, and that it contains valuable evidence. I’ll also add that Ivy told me all this without me saying a thing. I haven’t leaked any information.”

The captain stared fixedly at me. He looked mild mannered, but there was a sharpness in his eyes. I didn’t think he’d get mad at me, but he was still intimidating enough that I unconsciously took a few steps back.

“Captain, you’re scaring Ivy!” Rattloore patted the captain’s shoulder. The man gasped in realization and bent in an apologetic bow.

“Sorry for frightening you. Your mind really is something, though.”

“Oh, no, really. More importantly, did you find anything?” I urged.

Was there a hidden room or not? I wanted to know. And if there was one, was there damning evidence inside? The captain seemed caught off guard by my question, but his surprise was shortly replaced by a wicked grin.

“Yeah, we did. I only had a few moments to look, but I found some documents recording slave sales. There were promissory notes and assassination requests, too. We’ll be combing through them thoroughly to track down every name involved.”

He found that much from one quick search?! How much incriminating evidence did they leave in there? I can see why he sent the guards away—it'll need a much closer look.

“Was there any money?”

“Well, I haven’t uncovered everything yet.”

“I see.”

Bolorda chimed in, “What’s the plan for the documents?”

“I’ll move them to a guard station and read through them myself,” the captain answered.

“Ah. Want me to call a subordinate? Ivy, you can come with me.”

It would probably be best if I went with Bolorda to make sure the other guards weren’t moles, but there was something else bothering me. Count Faltoria’s comments made me think individuals from the organization might be lurking around this building at this very moment.

“Um, I think it would be best not to move the documents,” I said.

“I agree.” Seizerk felt the same way, too.

“Why?” the captain demanded. “Keeping them here makes them vulnerable—they could be stolen back if they catch on. We need to act fast.”

“That’s true, but it’s likely that they’re watching this building as we speak,” Seizerk answered.

“What makes you think so?”

“Did you notice what Faltoria was doing? He might’ve made the dumbest mistake of his life.”

“Seizerk, you’d better watch your mouth. If someone passes that on to him, you’ll be in hot water.”

“Ah yeah,” Bolorda cut in. “I didn’t report this yet, did I? Faltoria’s a member of the kidnapping ring.”

The captain’s eyes went wide. “What? The magical item! Bolorda, did it react?!”

“Sure did, which means Faltoria’s one of them. Probably a kingpin, too. Was his name on any of those papers?”

“I-I don’t know,” the captain stammered. “I didn’t have a chance to look

at them in detail...but him? Really?" As the idea sunk in, his look of befuddlement turned into one of anger. His eyes became so sharp that I trembled. "If Faltoria's one of them, everything makes sense. The failed raid, our man being assassinated when he infiltrated them. If he's the one directing the organization, then I..."

Deep regret overwhelmed the rage in the captain's eyes. If his friend had died because Count Faltoria tipped off the kidnapping ring...

"Damn it!" he bellowed. "I fed him all that information! I may as well have killed our man with my own hands!"

I didn't think so. Captain Barxby had trusted Count Faltoria, so he'd made the decisions he'd thought were right at the time. Unfortunately, those words would be cold comfort right now. Nobody spoke. For a long moment, the mansion's foyer was unnaturally silent.

"Haaah... Sorry. I'm okay." The captain took a few deep breaths and paced back toward the room he'd come from earlier. "The hidden room is this way. You say it's possible their people are lurking around here?"

"Yeah. Got a plan?" Bolorda strode after the captain, and the three of us trailed after them.

"There are plenty of commonfolk around here, too. It'll be hard to tell them apart."

I watched the captain and Bolorda discuss strategy as if nothing were amiss. They were strong people. Despite the pain they were going through, they stood tall. They must've been through a lot in their life. Was this what it meant to have a courageous heart?

Bolorda turned to me. "Ivy, do you have any ideas?"

"Huh? No, um..."

Taking advantage of the patrols was an option, but it would be too dangerous. We still didn't know how deep the organization's influence went.

Seizerk squinted at my face and declared, "You do, too!"

"Please tell us," the captain urged me. "I wanna put those bastards behind bars."

"Umm, it's risky..."

"That's fine. As the town guard, we are prepared to put our lives on the line."

“Understood. Well...what if we tricked them into ambushing this place?”

“Hm?”

Everyone slowed their pace. *Huh? Did I not explain well enough? Umm, how do I say this...?*

“We make a show of our patrols being short-staffed,” I explained. “If they think that they have the advantage in numbers, they’ll attack.”

“Aha. And that’s when we round ’em all up?” asked Seizerk.

The captain and Bolorda stopped and stared at me. Seizerk and Rattloore were a little surprised, too. *I don’t think I said anything shocking. Did I make a mistake?*

“Yes. What matters most is protecting our base here, followed by slowing down the organization. If we capture everyone they send in, they’ll realize we set them up. They may think twice before taking drastic action again. The problem on our side, though, is that we don’t know how much information they have.”

“You’re not *really* nine, are you?” everyone asked at once.

“I am!”

Why is the captain shaking his head? Rattloore’s laughing, too. You’re not hiding it! I can see your shoulders shaking!

“I can’t think of a convincing excuse to be short-staffed so suddenly,” Seizerk muttered. Bolorda nodded.

The captain walked a little farther down the hall and rested his hand on a particular door. Was this the one with the secret room? It was at the very back of the first floor.

“I think Mira and the others will take care of that for us,” I answered.

We entered the room and looked around. There were shelves on all the walls, so it seemed like a storage room of some sort.

“Mira and the others? Oh, yeah, they’ve been skulking around... It’s pretty clear they’re trying to instigate something. If we take advantage of that, it won’t seem strange if we leave this place unguarded.”

“Yes. But it depends on what they do...”

“It’s a backwards strategy, for sure.” Bolorda laughed. He was right. After all, it meant relying on the enemy.

“You got that right.” Seizerk had an odd look on his face.

The captain still looked severe. “Will this work? Even with Mira and the others as bait to draw off the patrol, I don’t see how this place could plausibly end up so weakly guarded.”

“Right. That’s why we’ll assign the enemy to guard it.”

The captain was right—there was a limit to how many guards we could convincingly send away. Thus, we would replace some of their numbers with traitors. It would *look* well guarded, so that ought to keep the trap from being obvious.

“Are we really relying on the enemy to make this work?” Seizerk grumbled.

Is that bad? I tilted my head.

Chapter 88: The Organization's Money

“**H**ERE IT IS.”

The captain pushed on a sturdy-looking shelf, and the wall near it slowly rolled away to reveal eight cubbies. Five were empty, but the remaining three had boxes stacked within. We could see papers though the open top of the one closest to us.

“These were hidden back here,” he explained. “The boxes are all full of organization documents.”

“Mind if we take a look?” Seizerk asked. The captain signaled his assent.

Seizerk, Bolorda, and Rattloore reached for the papers in the open box. The captain, meanwhile, opened another box and rifled through it. These weren’t for my eyes, so I examined the rest of the room.

“No way...” Someone’s troubled voice came floating out of the secret room. I heard a dull thunk as they punched the shelf.

I peeked over and saw Bolorda with a bitter expression. Seizerk laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Even him...”

Did he have a friend who was mentioned in one of these documents? How many people would be hurt when everything here came to light? My chest hurt as I watched Bolorda. I averted my eyes and took a deep breath. There was so much I couldn’t do.

For now, the best way for me to help was to tell them who we could trust.

I circled the room, checking the walls and ceiling. I’d spotted a safe when we toured the mansion, but it was small. Given the presumed scale of the organization, *too* small. I’d hoped there might be more money in a hidden room like this one. I pushed and pulled on every spot that caught my eye, but... nothing.

Drat. Had they kept their funds in another location? I’d searched the whole room, but Captain Barxby and the others were still reading. The guards outside would get suspicious if we stayed too long. As I crossed the room to warn them,

I heard a creak under my feet.

“Hm? The floor?”

It was a wooden building, so it wasn’t that strange for the floor to creak. I’d heard plenty of squeaks and groans in the foyer and the hallways. But this one stood out to me. I tried stepping in the same spot again. It creaked. *Strange. What’s different about this one?*

“I wonder if something’s there...”

Excited now, I squatted down to get a closer look at the floor. With my eyes low to the ground, I noticed a slightly uneven patch. I tried pressing down on it, but there was no change. I tried sitting to the side and pulling it, but no luck.

“Yeah. No way it’d be that easy. Shame.” I braced my hands on the floor to stand up. Without warning, the floor shifted forward.

“Ack!”

Bonk! My forehead hit something.

“Ivy!” Rattloore ran over to help me up, brushing the dust off of me.

“Hey, what’s that?”

Hm? I followed Bolorda’s gaze and saw an opening in the floor. *So it was made to move forward, not sideways? Lame.* Rattloore pushed the panel the rest of the way, uncovering a bulky wooden box under the floor. And inside...

“There it is!”

The thrill of discovery made me forget all about my sore head. My eyes were fixed on an enormous pile of money. There were two more boxes the same size down here! The organization hadn’t just left their paperwork; they’d left their funds, too. Losing this much money would be a huge blow to them. I saw why Mira was in such a hurry.

“That’s a lot of moolah—whoa! Ivy, you’re bleeding!” The captain shouted. Rattloore pressed a cloth against my forehead. The pressure made the wound hurt more. *Darn! I forgot to bring potions.*

“Use this.”

A blue potion dangled before my eyes. I turned to find that Bolorda was the one offering it to me.

“Oh, no. I’m fine.”

“Don’t be shy,” he insisted. “Consider it a reward for finding these.”

“Bolorda, that reward sucks.”

Bolorda frowned angrily at Seizerk. “I know that. It’s just for now!”

Rattloore took the potion from Bolorda and applied it to my forehead. The pain started to fade immediately. For a potion to take effect this fast, it must’ve been a common potion rather than a lesser one. I never thought I’d see the day when I’d use one of these.

“Thank you very much.” I bowed to Bolorda, who rustled my hair.

“Thank you, Ivy,” the captain said as he lifted a box out of the hidden chamber.

I was glad I could help. There was another box crammed behind the ones we’d first seen, making a total of four. Every single one was stuffed full of cash. I knew even without counting that it was a fortune. Just imagining the level of organization that could move all this money...well, it scared the heck out of me.

“Man...this is way more than I expected,” Seizerk mused.

The other three concurred. Even these men who’d been investigating the kidnapping ring for years hadn’t imagined they’d be so well funded.

The captain sighed, clearly exhausted. “This organization might be a lot bigger than we thought.”

An organization large enough to be handling so much money was formidable indeed. The adventurers all probably knew that from experience. *Oh! We’ve been here for a while.*

“Should we leave before the other guards start wondering where we are?” I suggested.

Bolorda put a hand on my head and grinned wryly. Then, he touched my forehead. Had my accident left a mark?

“No scar. That’s good.”

I’d never worried about scars before, so his comment made me feel a little weird. Potions were life-saving items, so I thought people never gave them away for free. But Bolorda had just given me one like it was nothing. That made me smile a little.

The captain’s words broke through my reverie: “Let’s go with Ivy’s plan. It’s as good as anything we’ve got.” I whipped around to face him, and he

nodded at me. *What does that mean?*

“Hold on, Captain. Have we fully considered everything?”

Bolorda was right. I nodded as well. Rattloore had his face turned away from our discussion, but his shoulders were shaking. Was he laughing at me? I punched him in the shoulder.

“Ah ha ha ha...”

He’s laughing harder! And Seizerk’s laughing, too! Why?!

“C’mon, Bolorda. Think about it. Ivy’s strategy makes good sense. Do you have any better ideas?”

“Hmm...well, guess I don’t.”

“Right?”

Huh? Why is Bolorda okay with it now? And what’s with that smug look on the captain’s face?

“Excuse me? This plan does rely on the enemy a lot, so I think you might be better off with a plan that doesn’t leave so much outside our control...” I protested.

“It’s okay. The plan’s plenty solid.”

I don’t think it’s okay, but... For now, we put the documents and the money back in their hiding spots and trudged back to the foyer.

The captain took charge. “First things first, we’ll have to transfer the evidence and the money to a safe spot. Where’s a good place?”

Why is the captain looking at me? And why’s he making eye contact like that? Weird. I’m the youngest person here...

“Maybe...the storehouse you sent Margajura to investigate?” I suggested.

“Yep. That’s definitely the best candidate.” Bolorda had reached the same conclusion. *You could have said so!*

“Then let’s get Margajura out of here.”

“Actually, Captain, let’s have Margajura lead the document transfer.”

“No, no, no. We can’t let any of their people know what we’ve found.”

“Ah, sorry, let me explain,” I said. “Um, lots of the rooms here have boxes stored in them. We’ll say we’re moving them to the storehouses. Then, we’ll slip the documents from the secret room in with the other boxes. If we make a show

of checking the contents of the others as we transfer them, Margajura will think it's all just junk in there.”

“And so will the organization,” Seizerk added.

I nodded. Margajura would run to tell the organization about anything out of the ordinary that happened here—that’s why they’d sent him.

Did the captain just say, “Let’s have Ivy write up the details of the plan”?

I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that!

Chapter 89: Task Force?

THE CAPTAIN, BOLORDA, and I went back to the guard station together.

“Do we need to bring Ivy? You’ll be leaving soon, and we can come up with some other way to make them say their names. There are a whole bunch of tough-looking officers there, so I think we’d just spook the kid.”

No matter how many times the captain asked, the magical item wasn’t going to inspect them; Sora was. Besides, if only Bolorda went, there would be no good reason to introduce people. He’d said that they’d use some other excuse, but if people got suspicious, the plan might not work. The fact was, I needed to go with them.

He was really worried about me—of course, that was partially because he didn’t know about Sora. Were there really a lot of scary guards there? In the end, we told the captain that I wanted to stay with Bolorda because I trusted him the most.

When we said that, Rattloore got a really intense look on his face that I’d never seen before. Just remembering it gave me the shivers.

“You okay?” The captain saw me shudder and got even more worried. *Oh no!*

“I’m fine. Let’s hurry.”

Our cover story this time was that we were gathering guards and adventurers for a task force to fight the organization. We selected people for the team and planned to use the merchant mansion as our base of operations. Preparations would be made today. Of course, the whole thing was a farce—part of our scheme to trap the organization. Though it was true that we would choose people today, the purpose wasn’t really to prepare the base but rather to shift the documents and money to a safe location.

“A task force, huh? I hadn’t thought of that.”

I chuckled to myself at the captain’s words. When I asked about assigning staff to work full time on the investigation, the captain was bemused. I didn’t realize until later that the idea of forming a specialized team for the sole purpose of solving one crime had come from Past Me. *I’d better start thinking before I*

speak, or it's gonna come back to bite me. It's a good thing I can trust the captain and the others.

"Me neither," said Bolorda. "It's only possible because Mira's acting so openly, though."

He was right. We were doing something totally novel, so it would've set off alarm bells if we didn't have a convincing reason. The formation of the task force made sense because the organization's people were showing their hand. I almost felt like I should thank them.

We decided to officially say this task force was the captain's idea. From there, we filled the vice-captain in on the documents, money, and strategy. When he learned about the impromptu task force, he only commented, "I'm used to this by now, Captain." It seemed like Vice-Captain Agrop was used to dealing with fallout from his captain's spur-of-the-moment decisions. Why did this sound so familiar?

We shared our new information with the vice-captain, the GM, and Sifar and the others. Officers Sora judged to be allies would receive official orders and nothing more. The more people in on the whole picture, the more likely information would be to leak. We couldn't know where the kidnapping ring had eyes, so we kept our core group to the bare minimum.

"Here we are. Ivy, you're sure you'll be fine?" the captain asked again.

"Yes, sir. I'm okay." I nodded firmly and patted my bag. I needed Sora to give this its all right now. Before coming here, I'd taken a moment to confirm that the slime was bobbing as happily as ever in the bag.

"Everyone, gather 'round!" the captain called out. "I'd like to introduce you to this boy here."

There were one hundred and twenty guards here today. Add in however many people were off at the moment, and it was clear that this big town had a large guard force. There were guards-in-training present, too, though they weren't included in this plan. Having a hundred and twenty individuals right in front of me was a lot to take in. The captain introduced me to the group, explaining that I was being targeted by the organization, that they should protect me if they saw me alone, and that they should report to him or the GM if they saw me with anyone suspicious. He wanted them to introduce themselves one at a time so I would know their faces.

"My name is Ivy. It's a pleasure to meet you all."

I gripped the hem of Bolorda's shirt and bowed politely. I was terrified to be faced with so many people, but now wasn't the time to complain. I focused all my energy on relaying Sora's reactions to Bolorda.

"So tired..." It'd ended up being a hundred twenty-six introductions altogether... I was exhausted. Splitting my attention between the guards and checking Sora's reactions had wiped me out. *I'd better give Sora lots of potions after all this.*

"That was a heck of a lot, huh? Twenty-nine traitors..." Bolorda shuddered.

I'd been so busy communicating Sora's judgments that I hadn't counted. Were there really that many? Maybe we were lucky that *all* of the guards patrolling the mansion weren't moles.

The captain approached Bolorda. "So, what's the word?"

Bolorda wavered for a moment before answering.

The captain froze, then mumbled, "I see." He looked up. "Write them all down. Can you do that?"

"Of course. We'll hop to it. Got some paper around here?"

The captain handed over a few sheets and went back to his officers to talk over their plans. He looked normal, as if nothing had happened—only just once, I saw him clench his fist so tight his knuckles turned white.

"We'd better be prepared for what we'll find among the adventurers," Bolorda muttered. His voice sounded bone-tired. So many people he'd considered friends had betrayed him. I couldn't imagine how that felt.

The captain chose eight moles and twelve clean guards, putting the task force at twenty men. One name in particular made his eyes go wide when he saw it on the paper—a man named Gabojura. He was one of the people picked for the task force.

Next, we made our way to the adventurers' guild. Rattloore should have caught the GM up on everything by now. I was starting to flag, but I had to follow through here.

"Good job out there," the GM greeted us. "It's a tough time for everyone right now."

He led us into a meeting room with fifteen adventurers. He told them the

same things the captain had told his guards. From there, we ran through the introductions. Thank goodness there were only fifteen; that meant we'd be done fast. Except...Sora had judged seven of them to be traitors. I heard Bolorda sigh next to me.

"Are you okay?" I whispered.

He chuckled dryly. "Ha ha, well... I tried to steel myself for this. It still stings that adventurers I personally trained would turn on me, though..."

When the GM heard the results, the creases on his brow grew even deeper.

A team Bolorda had trained was selected for the task force. I was worried about him, but when he spoke to the trio he'd chosen, he looked the same as ever.

I sighed—this was taking a toll on all of us. I patted the outside of my bag. We owed Sora a debt of gratitude.

We returned to the former merchant's mansion with the task force in tow. On the way, the captain outlined our plan. When he identified the mansion as our base of operations, a murmur went through the group, but nobody spoke up to complain.

"Agrop, I'm back!" The captain called at the mansion's door. The face that popped out to greet us, however, was Sifar's. "Huh? Where's Agrop?"

"He's going through all those boxes we're moving," Sifar answered. "A guard named Margajura is helping him, I believe. Ivy, aren't you tired?"

"I'm okay. Thanks for worrying about me."

Umm, did they tell Sifar about all this? Everyone has such a good poker face that I can't tell.

"Hey, Captain. Back finally?" I could feel everyone's weariness as the vice-captain came in with Margajura following close behind. "We took a look and determined these were safe to transfer to the storehouses. Let's get a move on, please. This team is going to be stationed here for a while, so let's get this place cleaned up."

"Hold your horses," the captain called out. "I drew up a roster of everyone staying here. It's not just our people; you'll have adventurers with you, too."

The captain handed the vice-captain a list on which the traitors' names has been marked with a symbol. I saw him whisper something—probably cluing him in on the code. The vice-captain glanced at the sheet, nodded a few times, and

began barking out orders.

Wow. He wasn't even fazed. And he's assigning all the moles to posts far enough apart that they can't gather without us noticing.

"That's the kind of man it takes to keep a leash on a thoughtless captain for over a decade." Bolorda observed.

Now I respected the vice-captain even more. Between him and Velivera, it seemed like incredible people were always supporting the ones on top.

Chapter 90: One of Them

ON THE VICE-CAPTAIN'S ORDERS, the team moved lots of stuff into the storehouse. This residence was large, so there was a lot more than I'd expected. The guards hardly had a moment to breathe. I felt a little sorry for them, but this was for the sake of preserving evidence and money, so we had to give it our best. It all went smoothly and thankfully nobody seemed to question it. Soon, the guards were clearing the last of the shelves. Agrop and Barxby took a careful look around the storehouse to confirm everything was in place and locked the door.

"Now, I know you're all tired, but we need to tidy this place up," the captain called out. "Let's make it quick. People are gonna be staying nights in this building, and I dunno about you guys, but I don't want to share my bed with dust bunnies."

The weary guards rolled their eyes and reached for brooms and rags. Since so many boxes and shelves had been moved, all the dust in the house had been kicked up. The adventurers and guards here would definitely end up covered in it if they didn't clean up first. Even the experienced ones didn't seem keen on that.

"Excuse me. Is anyone here?"

A voice floated in from the foyer. I got up to see who it was, but Rattloore rushed after me.

"Hey! No going off on your own, Ivy!"

"Oh! Sorry. I thought since we're in the same building and all..."

"I'm glad you feel safe, but you gotta be careful, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

In the foyer were two of the guards Sora had identified as traitors. The second I saw them, I clutched Rattloore's shirt. He was right—I needed to be more careful.

"Oh, something smells good! Brought us supplies, eh?" Rattloore asked. I realized that the whole foyer was suffused with a delicious smell.

"Bingo." One of them raised a bunch of paper bags he was holding.

“Ooh. Sorry, but we’re gonna be a little longer. Still cleaning.”

“Cleaning? You already moved all the stuff?” The empty-handed guard cocked his head and stared into the hallway.

“Yep, it’s all in the storehouse. Just gotta clean now,” Rattloore answered. I thought I caught the guards grimacing, though it passed too quickly for me to be certain. Rattloore noticed as well. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, nothing. Since it’s a merchant’s mansion, I thought we might find a little something...like, say, some valuables?”

“Tough break.” Rattloore shrugged. “If there was anything like that, Margajura’s already snatched it up.”

“Margajura?”

“Yeah. The vice-captain and Margajura looked in all the boxes already.”

“Ah ha! I’ll have to ask him about it. If he found anything, I mean.”

“If he did, let’s have him treat us to a meal or two!” the other guard joked.

“Ha ha ha!” Rattloore laughed. “Good idea. Count me in!”

It appeared these guards had come to check the boxes. They probably thought they were hiding it well, but they’d started panicking when they heard everything had been moved. The look on their faces said it all. I was glad we’d had Margajura look inside the boxes, since it seemed that had put them at ease for the moment. Still, the organization was moving fast.

“You’re Ivy, right? This must be tough on you, but don’t worry. We’re here if you need anything.”

One of the officers abruptly changed the subject and addressed me. I nearly jumped out of my skin but quickly managed a smile.

“Thank you very much,” I replied. “Bolorda and Rattloore have my back, so I’ll be just fine.”

“Really? Well, if anything comes up, don’t hesitate to ask us.”

“Okay. If I ever need something I’ll let you know.” I looked at them steadily and bowed. They smiled gently. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve said they were kind. But since I was aware of the truth, their matching smiles sent a chill down my back.

“Oh, there you are.”

I turned and found Bolorda and Seizerk approaching, with the captain close behind. The guards in the foyer furrowed their brows when they saw Barxby.

“They brought us supplies,” Rattloore explained. The two guards bowed.

“Good work,” the captain greeted them. “Agrop’s in the back. Mind taking this to him?”

“Understood. Bye for now, Ivy.”

“Okay. Bye.”

I’d prefer not to see you again...though I probably will. The captain glared sharply at the guards’ backs as they strode down the hall.

“Careful,” Bolorda said. “They’re already on the move.” The captain shrugged.

“Anyway, we’re going back to the plaza,” Seizerk told them.

I was surprised—I’d thought we were planning to stay here. I appreciated an opportunity to calm my nerves, though, and I’d be able to let Sora out, too.

“The only one missing is...Sifar, right? Where is he?” Seizerk asked.

I looked around, but I didn’t see Sifar.

“My bad,” the captain answered. “I told him to leave early, since I figured the others had already gotten there.”

Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen him since they were moving stuff.

“Oh? Guess we’ll head back, then.” Seizerk shrugged. “Captain, we’ll be checking in tomorrow morning.”

“Got it. I’ll come find you if I need anything before then. Ivy, thanks for today.”

“No problem. Thank you, too. See you tomorrow,” I replied. The captain ruffled my hair roughly.

As we stepped back onto the street, a sense of relief washed over me—probably because I’d been on edge all day.

“Tired?” Rattloore patted my back.

“A little. I guess I’ve just been tense.”

“You had a big job to do. Those rats might still be lurking around, so stay alert.”

We were still near the merchant's residence that was now our base, so people from the organization could be nearby. It was too soon to let my guard down.

"All right! Time to hit the best stalls and head home!" Seizerk, walking at the front, swerved away from the road back to the plaza.

He was making a beeline for the street with the food vendors. It looked like I wouldn't need to make dinner tonight. I was totally drained, so that was fine by me. Maybe Seizerk had picked up on it? *Actually...Bolorda and Rattloore did, too.*

"Ivy, let's grab dessert on the way back. I know a great place!"

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you." They really were lovely people.

When we arrived at the plaza after our detour, Sifar and Gnouga were already there. Come to think of it, their role was to monitor the merchant. Why did they split up? And I didn't see Marcreek and Lowcreek around. Were they okay? They were supposed to be watching Tort and Marm.

"Welcome back. Ooh, is that from that ultra-popular restaurant you were telling me about?" Sifar peeked excitedly into the paper bag. Apparently, he'd given up on going since the line was always so long.

"I'm going back to my tent for a second," I called out. Once inside, I lifted Sora out of its bag. It began *streeeetching* as far as it could. That bag must've been really cramped. "Sorry! I couldn't take you out of your bag that whole time."

Sora stretched and bounced around. Seeing it stretch so far was a little unnerving but kind of charming. While Sora exercised, I unpacked potions from my magic bag for its dinner. The slime worked hard today, so I threw in five extra. Thank goodness I'd picked up so many.

When Sora finished stretching, it started devouring potions. As I watched them sizzle away inside it, I heard more voices outside. Marcreek and Lowcreek were back—it was time to eat. I snatched up some tea leaves and ducked out of my tent.

Rattloore boiled the water, and I made tea for everyone and sat in a chair. It was the same familial dinner we'd enjoyed the past few days. Having everyone around me like this made my heart feel lighter.

Chapter 91: Too Many Dangerous People!

“RICKBERT ISN’T HERE YET, is he?” I asked. Not that I’d forgotten about him or anything...

“He’s got stuff to do. Let’s eat without him.”

I agreed and took a bite of the dish I’d been served. The tender, slow-cooked meat tasted incredible.

“That’s delicious!”

“Yeah! I can see why they’re popular.”

I nodded quietly. We savored the meal and then enjoyed a mug of after-dinner tea. When Bolorda activated his anti-eavesdropping magical item, Sifar was the first to speak.

“So, about that merchant. He met with someone in secret, but we didn’t recognize the guy. We split up to look into him.”

“Did you figure out who he was?” Seizerk asked.

“Of course. Turns out his name is Olwa, and he’s an errand runner for nobles. It took some effort to dig into him, though.”

“An errand runner, huh? Did you find out which nobles he works for?”

Sifar shook his head. Rattloore whispered an explanation to me: They had to be cautious investigating anyone tied to members of the peerage, or the nobles might start keeping an eye on them. Nobles sure sounded like a real pain.

“Hmm. All right, then.”

“As for the merchant...” Gnouga took up the story. “After Sifar and I split up, he didn’t do much beyond meeting another merchant from this town. But the man he met with, Tafdagura, is a problem.”

“That guy, huh? Whenever I hear his name, it’s always bad news.”

“There’s no proof, but rumor has it he’s mixed up in the opium trade.”

Opium? I feel like I’ve heard of that.

“Mr. Rattloore, what is opium?” I asked.

“Oh, maybe you don’t know. It’s a drug that makes you feel high. The country’s banned it.”

A drug? I’ve never seen them, so I forgot about those. Does the kidnapping ring deal in drugs, too? Actually, that merchant might be a trap. Would someone involved in the organization meet publicly with a known bad actor? Maybe they’re business rivals or something?

“Now for our report,” Lowcreek said, breaking into my thoughts. “We might be seeing some even crazier stuff. Tort and Marm are hiding a group of people in a cave out in the woods.”

Everyone’s expressions turned grave at Lowcreek’s words.

Marcreek, face lined with exhaustion, followed up. “The crowd they’ve gathered doesn’t seem like normal people, either. I mean, normal people don’t hide in a cave. Best guess is they’re sheltering criminals to use for their own ends.”

“Maybe Tort and Marm are planning to sic them on us.” Seizerk’s words elicited a nod from Marcreek and Lowcreek. “Can you estimate how many there were?”

“No way to know if it was all of them, but we counted twenty-one today.”

“That many!” Bolorda gasped.

I saw why he was shocked. You’d expect fewer people to be living in a cave. But if the organization thought they might be caught, I could see why they’d move so many people there. The criminals were bound to cause trouble—if they had to worry about them acting out, it’d be better to remove them from among the watchdogs. But what sort of criminals were they? I guessed the ones with the biggest impact would be...murderers? Surely they weren’t keeping a cave full of murderers, right?

“What’s happening on your end now, Bolorda? And what’s the next step?” Sifar asked.

Bolorda explained everything that had happened since this morning: Using the former merchant’s mansion as a base, setting a trap for the organization, how we used Sora’s judgments of the guard and the GM’s chosen adventurers to lay the trap, and how many people we’d learned were traitors. He was still angry after learning the adventurers he’d taken so much care of were rats.

“They’re with the organization?” Sifar was shocked. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Bolorda replied. “You’re certain, right, Ivy?”

I nodded, and Sifar and Gnouga both let out a long sigh.

“Hard to believe. Well, we know that the guard have just as many bad apples, so I guess it’s not impossible. Those guys are scum.” Sifar’s quiet voice sounded lonely and sad.

Huh? Where is Rickbert, anyway?

“Um, where’s Rickbert...?” I asked.

“Oh, I forgot to say. Sorry. Rickbert’s got this special ability...” Marcreek’s remark lifted the group’s mood a little.

“A special ability?”

“Yeah, he’s got a knack for remembering faces. If he sees a face once, he’s got it memorized.”

“That’s incredible. I’m envious—I’m awful at remembering faces.”

“No kidding. I’m surprised you’re bad at anything, Ivy.” Rattloore’s compliment startled me. I was bad at basically everything!

“I’m bad at lots of things,” I protested.

“Really? I never noticed.”

“You do seem like you can do anything, Ivy. Anyway, about Rickbert.” Marcreek steered the conversation back on track. “We asked him to get a look at the people staying in the cave to see if any of them are wanted by the adventurers’ guild.”

“Oh! Speak of the devil.” Seizerk waved toward the plaza entrance. Rickbert was coming our way, looking just as fatigued as the rest of us.

“I’m beat,” he groaned. “That was way too many people.”

“Good work. How’d it go?”

“Hey, can I catch my breath for a minute here? Ah, forget it. There were eleven wanted and five under investigation.”

“Eleven?! You’re certain?” Sifar gave voice to the shock that went through the group. How could there be so many wanted criminals in one place?

“It surprised me, too. I checked a few times, but I’m pretty certain. Worse, ten of those eleven are wanted for murder. And the ones under investigation are suspected of the same.”

“Whoooo. Knowing all those murderers are squatting out there in the forest is giving me the heebie-jeebies. It’s lucky we didn’t run into any already.” Seizerk rubbed his own shoulders in a dramatic shiver.

It was a chilling thought. We’d been in the forest just a few days ago, so we easily could have stumbled upon them. Though, if the organization had gathered them to spring a trap, then maybe they’d moved there more recently? Still, if they could assemble so many criminals in one place that swiftly, they’d probably been sheltering them somewhere before this.

“So, what’d I miss?” Rickbert asked. Bolorda filled him in. “Aha. A trap, huh? Should we really be getting Ivy wrapped up in this?”

“You’d think not. But Ivy basically thought up the entire strategy.”

“Yeah, fair… Ivy, if you get scared, run for it. Hell, where do you even run when the town’s like this?” Everyone laughed, but there was no humor in it. Rickbert was right. Our enemies were so numerous that there wasn’t really anywhere to run.

“I’d better get going,” Bolorda announced.

“Hm? Oh, you had plans to meet Lord Foronda, right?”

“Yeah. I got a message from him, so I’ll be going to his estate tonight.”

“You sure you wanna go alone?” Gnouga asked, worried.

Bolorda shrugged. Did that mean he would be okay, or…?

“I trust Sora’s judgment. I’ll ask about Olwa while I’m there, too.” With that, Bolorda smiled and left the plaza.

Gnouga and Sifar watched his receding back with concern. Rickbert, on the other hand, was his usual self.

“It’ll be fine. If Sora says he checks out, I’m sure that’s right!”

“Yeah, but…sorry, Ivy. I don’t doubt Sora.” Gnouga saw me looking and got a little flustered.

It didn’t bother me in the least. Heck, I expected people not to fully trust Sora, and its judgments weren’t exactly hard evidence.

“It’s okay,” I replied.

“Traitors and wanted criminals…what’s happening to this town?” Seizerk sighed.

Nobody could answer—things were much worse than we'd thought. Would Bolorda be safe? Was Count Foronda really on our side?

“Everything’s gonna be okay.” Rattloore read my mind like a book and gently patted my head. I looked up at him, and he repeated himself with a smile. He was right. I trusted Sora, so why should I worry?

“Thank you.”

Chapter 92: Lord Foronda

I SPLASHED COLD WATER on my face, but it didn't help the headache I had from lack of sleep. I stayed up late last night, so I'd brought it on myself, but it still sucked.

I'd been so worried about Bolorda and his meeting with Lord Foronda that I sat up until deep in the night waiting for his return. He was gone for so long that I worried that Sora's judgment was wrong. It was gut-wrenching. Rattloore had practically shoved me into my tent out of concern for me.

Since I couldn't remember anything after that, I must've drifted off. I jumped out of bed the second I woke up, only to find it was already morning. When I peeked nervously out of the tent, Rattloore informed me that Bolorda had returned.

"Thank goodness."

"I told you everything would be okay."

"You did. But still...thank goodness." I sighed in relief, but before I could relax, a jolt of pain stabbed through my head.

Seeing my grimace, Rattloore laughed. "Didn't get enough sleep, huh?"

Once the pain subsided, I started making breakfast. Since it was early, I went for a simple soup. There was some meat left over from last night, so I sliced it up and made sandwiches. I added a lot of veggies, so they would be extra tasty. Mayonnaise would have been nice, but come to think of it, I hadn't seen any around. *I'll look next time I get the chance.*

"Morning. I hear you waited up for me last night. Sorry." Bolorda was as mild and kind as ever. I'd heard he was back, but I could only truly settle down when I saw him for myself.

"No, it was my choice to wait. Umm...how was it?"

"Hang tight, we'll talk about that soon."

"Okay."

"By the way, what's that you're holding?"

“It’s a sandwich...of sorts.”

“Wooow, neat. Did you learn about those in another town?”

“...Something like that, yes,” I lied.

Why did I make these? Maybe it’s just because I’m at my wit’s end? I did dig the concept of sandwiches out of my memories, so...

“I’ve never seen that before,” Sifar mused. “Looks good, though.”

Ha ha ha! Sifar, you don’t have to deal the final blow! Though I guess it’s not your fault you don’t know about sandwiches. Can I...just pretend I didn’t hear that?

“Breakfast is ready,” I announced. “Shall we eat?”

“Morning! Ooh, Ivy’s made another weird meal, huh?”

Marcreek, please! Urgh, all I did was put food between bread! There must be a dish like this out there, right? There has to be! I hope there is...

“Are these...rolls? Not quite?”

If they have food called rolls, maybe I can get away with this.

“Apparently, they’re called ‘sandwich of sorts,’” Bolorda answered him.

Aargh, no! Bolorda, you got the name wrong, too!

“Huh. ‘Sandwich of sorts,’ huh?”

Oh, this is awful. Everyone heard that. I’m...really hungry, too.

“Let’s eat.” I urged, trying to move things along.

The sandwiches were well received, even if they were just meat and veggies between pieces of bread. “Rolls” were apparently bread stuffed with cheese, so I fibbed and said I was trying to imitate those. Unfortunately, the name “sandwich of sorts” stuck. I’d prefer to make it “roll of sorts,” if anything, but I was wary of digging myself into an even deeper hole.

When they asked why I’d named it that, I said it just came to me. Did they believe it? I wasn’t sure, but it was rare to eat such a thing in Otolwa, so it was probably fine. Why was it rare? Because you needed soft bread to make it. The most common bread, black bread, was hard and bad for sandwiches. But this morning, Rattloore had gone to do the shopping and found soft bread. And yes, it was expensive.

“Well, I’d say things have settled down,” Bolorda said. “Let’s talk.”

While we sipped at our after-meal tea, Bolorda activated his magical item and told us what happened last night. Lord Foronda was fine, just as Sora had said. He was the one who changed the target of the adventurers' guild's crackdown to the merchant's mansion after an adventurer ally of his had tipped him off.

Lord Foronda had found out about the organization eight years ago when he'd secretly sheltered a child who'd escaped it. That was a year earlier than Rattloore and the others had learned about it. Ever since Lord Foronda met that child, he'd investigated the kidnappers alone, struggling to bring their network down. But since he couldn't grasp the full scope of the organization, he was tormented by failure. It was then that he learned that Count Faltoria had information on a certain black market merchant.

Lord Foronda thought it was strange. He had already investigated that merchant and cleared him of any involvement with the organization. Realizing that Count Faltoria might be deceiving him, he asked an adventurer he trusted to investigate the claims. Once again, the merchant looked clean.

At first, he decided to tell Count Faltoria everything—yet he soon abandoned the idea. If Count Faltoria was close to the organization, Lord Foronda would be endangering himself. In the end, he secretly had the target of the raid changed to the former merchant's mansion. As he'd surmised, it was the organization's base in Otolwa. But the plan was leaked, and the evidence smuggled out in advance. After that, Lord Foronda knew someone had figured out he was pursuing the organization.

"Lord Foronda's pretty impressive for keeping them in the dark until the crackdown, at least," Seizerk said reverently. Bolorda was positively beaming at learning the person he trusted had been fighting the good fight, especially after so many people had been ousted as turncoats. "Did you discuss our strategy at all?"

"I told him there were moles among the town guard and the adventurers. He seemed to expect it, but he was taken aback when I gave him the numbers."

"Yeah, well... I think anyone would be shocked to hear it. There might be more adventurers, too, y'know. It's not like we investigated every single one."

Right. Sora had only inspected the adventurers introduced to us by the GM. And half of them were traitors! Were they worse than the guard? *I guess we should take one problem at a time.*

"Also," Bolorda continued, "when I told him Count Faltoria was with the

kidnappers, he was still adamant that it couldn't be true. I figured he'd say that, so I didn't take it personally, but I did tell him the yarn about our 'magical item' to get him to believe me."

"Not many people other than us would dare to tie Count Faltoria to the organization, after all," Seizerk commented.

"Yeah. He was flabbergasted. I was worried he wouldn't trust me, but he finally came around when I mentioned the magical item and said the GM was on board, too. I didn't tell him about our plan, though, because a problem came up before I could."

"A problem?"

"He discussed new plans to pursue the organization with Count Faltoria a few days ago. That's when the count offered to lend him an adventurer as a bodyguard."

"Now *that* sounds dangerous."

A noble putting his full weight behind an investigation was extremely dangerous for the organization. So what would the kidnappers do? They'd come for his life, of course. When he was out of the way, they could install someone beneficial to the organization as the new lord.

"Lord Foronda realized he's in danger but he's not sure what to do. If he refuses the guard, then the organization might speed up their plans. But we can't leave him with a hostile adventurer..."

"Is the adventurer really our enemy?" I asked. "I would expect that they would be killed alongside Lord Foronda."

"Huh? I get Lord Foronda, but why the adventurer?" Bolorda replied.

"I'd think that killing both would be more effective..."

"Hmm...effective how?"

"Umm, well...losing the adventurer he'd personally asked to protect his close friend at the same time as the lord would make people more sympathetic. He could then install a new lord, claiming they'd work together to get revenge on the organization.

Essentially, it would be easier to move public sentiment by killing more people. I think the organization would do this without batting an eye, but...what do you all think?"

Everyone fell silent.

*Huh? Did I say something strange? Why is everyone staring at me?
Hmm...Past Me says sympathy makes people do stupid things. Is that wrong?*

Chapter 93: Crush Their Schemes!

“**Y**EAH...YOU'RE RIGHT. You couldn't be more right...”

I tilted my head at Bolorda's bewildered look. Maybe I was wrong after all?

“Given the organization's methods so far, it's possible,” Sifar added.

Rattloore and the others nodded in agreement. *Wait, so I was right? Then why did they all react like that? Oh, am I not acting my age again?! Oops.*

“You've got quite a mind, Ivy.”

“Huh? Um, no, I just...”

Oh no. What do I do? I told myself to think before speaking, but I forgot the part where I'm nine years old! I need to be more careful...but I am being targeted by kidnappers right now. Should I be holding back at a time like this? Besides, I've already said a lot of stuff, so it feels a little too late to stop now. Okay, I think I'm fine. When all this is over, I'll give it some careful thought. I wouldn't want it to be my undoing.

“We can assume that Lord Foronda is in danger of being murdered. What do we do? Do we speak with the captain?” Seizerk asked.

Bolorda shook his head. “There are too many enemies around him now. Ugh, I sure would like more allies...”

“Yeah, *allies*,” Marcreek sighed. “Sure would love to bring more people in, but...y'know, information management.”

He said what everyone was thinking. The more allies we had, the easier it was to maneuver. Yet every added person was a new opportunity for information to leak.

“If only those guys weren't our enemies...” Bolorda groaned. He must've meant the turncoat adventurers. “Ugh... Okay. Let's give up on gaining allies for now.”

When would Count Faltoria act? Based on how things had gone up till now, it would probably be sooner than we expected. If so, then we could surmise he'd already finished any preparations by now.

“It would be prudent to assume Lord Faltoria is poised to act,” I said to the group. “We should be ready for them to make a move at any point.”

“The organization does move fast.” Bolorda’s brow furrowed sharply.

I wish we could foil their plans somehow, but...ugh, I can’t think of anything.

“It’s too early to despair,” Seizerk declared. “First, let’s meet with the captain. We need a plan in case the organization springs into action. We’ll head to the base. Rattloore, don’t let Ivy out of your sight for a moment.”

On Seizerk’s orders, everyone rose at once. I slipped into my tent to get Sora. The slime quivered near the bag Sifar had given me, as if it had heard the entire conversation.

“Let’s do our best. Cheer me on, okay?” I petted Sora as it stretched toward the ceiling and then put it in my bag.

The bag twitched a bit, then went still. I left my tent and stepped forward to walk next to Rattloore.

“By the way, Mr. Rattloore? Didn’t we make plans with Mira and her friends today?”

“Ah! I totally forgot! Should we get a rain check? We still haven’t finished setting everything up at the base, after all.”

That is true. We need to discuss how to capture any kidnappers who assault the base, too. But can we cancel? They should know we’ve been going in and out of the mansion. If they get twitchy, Mira might abort her plans. In that case we’re out of luck, since our strategy hinges on them making the first move.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“No, sorry. They know we’re up to something in the base, don’t they?”

“Yeah, for sure.”

“I was thinking that Mira might get suspicious and change tactics if we cancel...”

“That is possible. You think we should go today? I guess she might make a move...”

“Right.”

I was unsure whether we could deal with that. *Come to think of it, what role will the criminals play? Bait? Or...? Aagh, my mind’s a mess. I need to*

slow down and consider it rationally.

“Whew...” I took a deep breath.

I was assuming the organization didn’t know we thought of Mira as an enemy. If that was the case, they would still be planning to kidnap me. And if that was true, then Mira wouldn’t let this opportunity go.

“You think Mira’s going to try something, right?” Rattloore asked.

“I do. Based on how she was acting last time, she seemed to be in a real hurry.”

Right. I’m kidnapping bait, though Mira doesn’t know that. If she did, she’d get reinforcements from the organization instead of acting weird. So even if we were to arrest Mira, that wouldn’t get us any closer to the people behind her. Even if she failed, she was just a pawn. At this rate, she and her brothers were sure to be killed by the organization...

No! I don’t have time to think about that right now. Umm, if they’re using Mira to kidnap me, then their goal must be creating chaos. Unmasking Mira would be proof that there were traitors among the adventurers. The organization’s objective was to make us distrust our own people; even if someone took orders, we couldn’t be sure they were on our side. Just by manipulating Mira and me, they could tie the hands of the guards and adventurers. *Oh yeah, if I was kidnapped and the guard heard that criminals were hiding in the forest, then would they send a bigger rescue party in case the criminals got violent on the way back?*

“Mr. Rattloore, we know there are traitors around us. But if the guard and the adventurers’ guild learned that criminals were hiding in the forest, while not knowing who among their own group might be an enemy, what would they do?”

“Hmm...in the current climate, if they received word about the criminals, they would probably connect them to the organization. And knowing that there are rats among our people here...they would probably send several groups of ten or so to the cave where they’re hiding. That way they could be ready to handle any traitors trying to make a move.”

Several groups of ten? Is that enough to handle murderers?

“But that strategy only succeeds if there are four or five moles,” he noted. “Given how many there are, the parties sent out would all be massacred.”

“I see...”

“Are we thinking about the role of the group in the forest?”

“Yes.”

“Aha. You think they’re bait to draw in the adventurers and guard?”

“That’s only my hypothesis. I honestly don’t know.”

But there had to be a reason for them to gather so many fugitives. The only reasons that made sense to me were either to attack someone or to act as bait. My guess was that the organization didn’t care if all of the criminals killed all the adventurers or vice versa—their main objective was to safely recover the documents and money from the former merchant’s mansion. Nothing else mattered to them. From the little I’d picked up when we discovered the papers, it sounded like pretty damning evidence. So the criminals must’ve been gathered to draw the guard and adventurers away from the town. Now I could see why they’d gathered so many.

“Well, if Mira doesn’t act soon, her days are probably numbered,” I added.

“Huh?!”

Yep. Mira isn’t the only mole they’ve got among the adventurers, so they have plenty of spares. The orders just came to her because I met her first, so they thought she would have the best chance of pulling it off.

“The organization likely sees people who can’t get results as useless. They have more where she came from, after all.”

Rattloore and the others frowned gravely.

“They’re pawns, huh?”

“Let’s go eat sweets today,” I urged him.

We just needed to prepare ourselves to handle whatever they threw at us and wait for them to make their move. *Huh? Wait? Do we actually need to wait?*

If we want to outwit the kidnapping ring, then wouldn’t today be the optimal day to set our trap? We just set up the base of operations yesterday, so they shouldn’t expect us to act so soon. Still, if we aren’t careful, they might realize the mansion is a trap. How can we make it look natural...? Oh! The criminals in the forest! If we use them, maybe we can confuse the organization. If all goes well, we won’t just confuse them—we’ll even be able to corner them. But how do we do it...? Mira’s our answer. Someone from the organization must be watching her in case she fails. If we feed that person the right information...

“Let’s use Mira and her friends to set the trap now!”

“Huh?”

Yeah. We gotta seize the moment! We established the base yesterday, so the organization must be thinking of countermeasures. They’ll probably have plans within a day or two. Something like...eliminating everyone except their own people at the base? Ha! I can see them doing that. We should move before they can plan. It might even save Mira and the others, too. First off, hoodwinking the organization is vital. How can we pull the wool over their eyes, though? What if...they planned to ambush the base today? Or an hour from now? I think I’ve got it!

“Let’s make them ambush the base today!”

“Wha?!”

“Mira is our key here. If we were forming a party to hunt down Marm and the others in the forest...no, *if the party were already on their way*, that would spur them into action fastest, right?”

“H-hold on a second,” Rattloore stopped me. “Let me get Seizerk and Bolorda.”

Seizerk and Bolorda? Come to think of it, they’ve always decided the direction of their teams. Well, duh—they’re the team leaders, after all. Do we need one of them here to make decisions?

“Ivy, we’ve already heard a bit of it. Er, you want to use Mira to set a trap? Today?!”

Seizerk and Bolorda stood on either side and pressed me for details. People from the organization might be anywhere, so I whispered.

“Yes, that’s right. Someone must be following and watching Mira in case she fails. So it’s less that I want to leverage Mira and more that I want to leverage the person tailing her. And it needs to be now, because I realized waiting for the organization to make the first move isn’t actually necessary. Today’s the best day to confuse them...and if we pull this off, we might be able to save Mira and her brothers.”

Seizerk’s eyes widened. Bolorda tousled my hair.

“All right. Let’s go talk to the captain, then,” Bolorda said.

“No! We don’t have time. Besides, he’s surrounded by enemies. Instead, we’ll get him wrapped up in it by necessity.”

“Uhh...what do you mean?” He was awfully confused.

“Blow the whistle about Marm and the others harboring criminals and urge the captain to send hunting parties right away. Meanwhile, Rattloore and I will meet with Mira and leak this to her. I can’t be certain, but I don’t think she’ll waste any time. After all, Rattloore says she’s close to her brothers. If she doesn’t react, then my deductions are probably off.”

“I get it. So if Mira rushes to her brothers’ rescue, then her tail will realize what we’re doing. They’ll be forced to attack the base.”

“I see. The people watching the base will receive the same information, so they shouldn’t notice anything is off. We are actually sending a hunting party.”

Hmm...the hard part is what happens next. If we want to save as many lives as possible, we'll have to act quickly. Can we pull this off?

I don't want to see everyone looking sad. I'm gonna make this work, with everyone's help! But how do we capture the traitors alive? What we need to do is get them to stop fighting. Put them to sleep? Drug them? What's a "tranquilizer dart"? Oh, that's Past Me again. Hmm, if they inhale smoke, they'll fall asleep? Good idea...how do we make that much smoke?

Chapter 94: To Destroy the Organization...

IT'S A RACE AGAINST TIME NOW," I said. "I want the captain and the others to arrest all of the moles in their group as soon as they set foot in the forest."

"Huh? But if they do that, won't the fugitives in the cave escape?"

"I'm guessing that Mira's tail will go to the mansion first to tell their allies about the hunting party. We'll detain Mira and her friends with us, so nobody will be able to go to the cave to warn them. And what matters to the organization is the evidence in the mansion."

"Makes sense." Bolorda nodded a few times and smiled at me.

"Mr. Rattloore, do you think you can keep Mira and the others in one place?"

"Mm, I'm sure I can manage," he replied. "What happens next?"

I turned to Bolorda and continued. "Once the turncoats have been removed from the hunting party, please find an excuse to shepherd the civilians around the base to somewhere Sora can

assess them one by one. Any reason is fine, as long as Sora can inspect them. Bolorda, I would appreciate having you with me when that time comes."

"You mean my fake magical item, right?"

"Exactly. Umm...is there any way of putting everyone in the building to sleep?"

"Yeah, there is..." Seizerk's answer was hesitant. "We'll need to do it to capture all the criminals hiding out in the cave. But...you're not thinking of knocking out friend and enemy alike, are you?"

"Umm, well, we don't have many people, and we need to make sure they can't run away. If we want to protect the few allies we have, then I think it would be best to put them to sleep."

"Well, I guess that makes sense..."

"The last step will be dealing with all the criminals in the cave. Umm..."

that's about it."

This plan depended on perfect timing, but if it succeeded, the organization would be cornered.

"Incredible," Seizerk said, clearly surprised. "That's such an ambitious plan."

"Huh? Is it ambitious? Sorry."

"No, don't apologize! We can handle it if it means cracking down on those kidnappers once and for all. Besides..." Seizerk chuckled.

Huh? Why's he laughing? He can't be enjoying this, can he?

"Sounds like fun to me!" Sifar crowed from behind me.

Whoa, that scared me! I didn't sense him there at all. Huh? He seems naught—I mean...lovelier than ever today. Why?

"Arresting the moles in the guard and the organization's watchers near the base..." Sifar smirked. "Is your plan to make them think their own people are leaking information back to us?"

"Precisely, Mr. Sifar. I think it would be more credible if we could detain some of the turncoat adventurers, too."

"Yeah, good idea. If we succeed there, the organization will find it hard to maneuver. They'll be so worried about information leaks that they'll be paralyzed. That's when we leverage the evidence and finish them off, right? Beautiful."

Sifar and Seizerk's smiles sent chills down my spine. Rattloore...wasn't exactly acting normal, either. He had this huge smile...er, *that is a smile on his face, right?* I quietly took a step back and looked away. The veterans' vicious grins were too much for me to handle. *Umm...I had something else I needed to say. What was it, again?*

"Oh! I'd like to leave lots of organization moles inside the base. Also, there's one thing I'd like Lord Foronda's help with."

"Lord Foronda?"

Rattloore looked at me quizzically. *Phew, he's back to normal now! I'm... just gonna forget what I saw.*

"Yes. Yesterday, Bolorda said that the names of certain nobles were found in the documents. What if those nobles try to destroy that evidence on their own?

I don't think it's likely, but just in case. Nobles tend to run roughshod over guards and adventurers from what I've heard, so having another noble with us would be helpful."

"Yeah, there were plenty of nobles listed on those papers. Pretty important ones, at that. I don't wanna believe it, but some of them can be real idiots." Seizerk smiled humorlessly.

"Um, my plan might not work out perfectly in the moment. If at any point you think it may be pushing it too much, you're free to use other methods." If we succeeded, it would be a huge blow to the kidnappers. But I was honestly scared of what would happen if it failed.

"It'll be fine," Sifar assured me. "Your strategy ought to hit the organization where it hurts. And honestly, it sounds like a good time!"

"Hey now, Sifar. You don't have to say that last part out loud, y'know." So Seizerk said, but he looked more excited than ever. Marcreek and Rickbert's eyes were bright as well. *Why are they so happy? I was ready for them to be against this plan, but they all seem to be on board!*

"Heh heh. You're the best, Ivy. We're gonna be able to avenge years of misery today." Bolorda's face frightened me. *Yikes. Where did the kind Bolorda go?* "The more I think about paying them back for all the crap they've done, the more I wanna do this. How many people have suffered while they got off scot-free? And they've even dragged our comrades into it..."

His words brought sadness to Rattloore's face especially.

"We're gonna pull this off!" Bolorda declared, changing the mood all at once. "The kidnappers know we've seen the wanted list, but given the state of things, it wouldn't be implausible to check it again. Rickbert and Lowcreek, go ask for the list at the adventurers' guild again. 'There's no doubt about it! We'd better go tell the captain to muster some hunting parties.' Make sure people hear that nice and clear, got it? Say..." he turned to Rattloore and me, "when were your plans with Mira?"

Rickbert and Lowcreek frowned when they heard Bolorda's orders, but they understood the importance of every move here. They nodded acknowledgment. *By the way, should they be speaking at a normal volume?* I looked around warily, but strangely, nobody seemed to be paying attention to us. They were being kinda loud, though...

"One hour from now, right?" Rattloore answered. "Hey, Ivy, didn't they

tell you?”

Tell me what? He fished something out of the bag that Seizerk was carrying. It was the sound-dampening magical item.

“Is that active?” I asked.

“Yeah, sorry. I did find it a little weird that you were whispering this whole time...”

I sighed. “You could’ve told me sooner...”

Here I was fretting that people might hear us! I groused mentally.

“My bad, my bad! I thought you knew.” Seizerk clenched a fist in front of his face. That was the adventurers’ symbol for apologizing when they couldn’t speak.

“It’s okay. So we can speak normally, then?”

“As long as you don’t shout, yeah.” Rattloore reached a hand out to mess up my hair. He must’ve thought my grumpy expression was funny.

“Okay, let’s continue,” Bolorda said. “Marcreek, Gnouga, and Sifar, you’ll head to the base at the mansion. Tell the captain there’s a problem and he needs to pick some people from the guard to form an expedition party. Don’t go into more detail than you have to. They’re pros, so they ought to be able to read between the lines. Actually...if you casually mention that some people ‘might not make it back,’ he ought to get that.”

The captain will understand that? Whoa. They’re not experienced for nothing.

“What about me?” Seizerk asked Bolorda.

“Seizerk, brief the GM on our strategy. Make sure the remaining turncoat adventurers are included in the party, too, while you’re at it. We’ll remove them from the playing field now; they’ll be a pain if we leave them at large. Oh, but tell him to keep this all hush-hush for now.”

“Got it.”

“I’ll stand by outside the guild. When Rickbert and the others finish their business there, we’ll head to the base together. Rattloore and Ivy, you meet Mira as planned and tell her about the criminals and the expedition. Rattloore, you can figure out how you want to drop it into the conversation. We’ll go to the base, finalize the hunting party, and set off for the woods.”

Incredible. That's Bolorda for you! I can safely leave the rest to him.

He turned to me. "So, Ivy. How's that sound?"

I don't know if it matters what I think, but it sounds fine?

"That sounds good to me."

"Ivy, how should we tell Mira?" Rattloore asked.

"Good question," I replied. *Why's he asking me? Seizerk and Bolorda are right there.* "Let's start off by probing to see if Tort and Marm have any debt or if they're having any problems with friends."

I'd heard that when people fell in with a bad crowd, it was often because of money. Other reasons might be...because people knew their secrets?

"I see. Make her feel she's in danger, right?"

"Yes. Once she realizes we're trying to dig up information on her brothers, she's going to react emotionally. If we can cloud her judgment, it'll be easier to stop her."

It was essential to make Mira panic by hinting to her that we doubted Marm. Then, we would capture every organization member around her except one. We'd let one slip the net so they could alert the watchers near that mansion that the hunting party was already on the move.

Bolorda chuckled. "I guess I don't have room to speak, but you could've figured that out yourself, Rattloore."

"Shut up, Bolorda! You keep checking with Ivy too because you're so worried."

"...It's a difference in importance, okay?"

Whoa! He doubled down!

"Pot, may I introduce kettle," Sifar cut in, making everyone laugh. He always seemed so eager to bully—I mean, *tease* his friends. Still, his glib comment cut through the tension weighing on everyone. Was that his intention? What a guy.

Chapter 95: More Allies

“UGH, I’m so nervous...”

“Ah ha ha ha! We’ve got this, don’t worry!”

Rattloore and I walked toward our meeting spot with Mira. The plan was in motion. Would it succeed or fail? I was terrified—honestly, I wanted to run away. If it failed, people might die. I clenched my fists tight, because if I relaxed, I might start trembling.

“Ivy, I really mean it. Thank you.”

“Huh?”

Rattloore had a far-off look in his eyes. A shadow seemed to pass over his face.

“Every time we thought we had the organization within our grasp, they’d slip away like mist. Over and over and over—we loathed our own weakness. But that’s not the worst of it. Bolorda and Sifar both know boys who might be suffering at this very moment. And my little brothers...well, I don’t have proof, so I can’t say for sure, but...”

I sucked in a sharp breath. Rattloore often looked at me with sadness in his eyes. I’d always suspected there was more behind it, but to hear that his own brothers might be victims...

“Those kidnappers have always cast a shadow over this town, but we were powerless against them. Thanks to you, we’ll be able to put at least some of them behind bars. And we’ve uncovered something even more valuable in the long run.”

He must mean the money and documents.

“But if not for Sora, you might’ve been abducted, too. Heck, you probably would’ve vanished before we realized it. This is all thanks to you, Ivy. You gave us the push we needed when we almost gave up. You even came up with this plan to outwit the kidnappers. The rest is up to us as people who live in and protect this town.”

I relaxed my aching fists. That’s right. They weren’t weak. They had only

lost faith because they'd been waiting and withstanding the pain for so long, looking for an opportunity to defeat the organization.

"Yeah," I finally found my voice. "Seizerk and Bolorda's men are the best of the best, so it'll all be okay."

"Of course! I am too, y'know."

"Absolutely!"

Our destination came into view. Mira, Luiseria, Callua, and an unfamiliar man waited in front of the shop. My heart thumped in my chest. *But I'll be okay. We're gonna make this work.*

"Do you know that guy?" I asked.

"Yeah. He's an adventurer like us. But..." Rattloore trailed off. Did he know something about that guy?

"Ivy, Rattloore. Good morning! Mira waved to us with a smile."

"Good morning," I greeted them politely. "Ms. Mira, Ms. Luiseria, Ms. Callua, and...umm..."

"Sorry for bringing a sixth wheel without telling you. He's a good guy, though."

"Nice to meet you. Name's Makasha. Rattloore, we've worked a few jobs together, haven't we?"

When the man said his name, I felt my bag twitch. Sora thought he was fine. I had gripped Rattloore's shirt when we first saw the man, so I gently let go.

"Hey, it's been a while," Rattloore greeted him. "How'd you get roped into this group today?"

"I ran into Callua, and she said she was on her way to eat something scrumptious. So I tagged along."

"He's got a real sweet tooth, y'know," Callua chuckled.

It seemed he was more Callua's friend than Mira's. *A sweet tooth? He and Rattloore ought to get along.*

"We're going to Mama's Treats, right?" Makasha asked. "I love their danzu."

"Danzu, huh? You've got an even sweeter tooth than me." Rattloore

wincing a little. *Oh! Callua did, too. Is this “danzu” food sickeningly sweet or something?* “Ivy, don’t you touch that danzu. It’ll give you a toothache.”

“It is a liiittle too sweet.” Mira smiled kindly. She was pretty, so that look probably charmed a lot of people.

“Ah, right. Mira, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you about,” Rattloore said.

“Oh yeah? Why not ask inside instead of out here? Let’s hurry!”

“...Okay.”

Mira hustled us into the shop, almost pushing us through the door. *There must be some trick waiting inside. But what could it be? If I wanted to set a trap here...* I tugged on Rattloore’s shirt. He glanced toward me, so I beckoned for him to squat down.

“Beware of the food and drinks here,” I whispered, careful not to let anyone else hear. He looked surprised for a second but quickly flashed a big smile.

“Hey? Everything okay?” Mira’s voice was a little lower than before. Had she heard me?!?

“Ivy says he wants to try the danzu,” Rattloore answered her.

“Oooh, no you don’t,” Callua protested before Mira could speak up. “Seriously, one bite of that, and you’ll be clutching your stomach.”

Makasha looked a little disappointed next to them. “Aww, c’mon. It’s good!”

“Your sense of taste is totally messed up.” Callua was acting a little different than before. Was it because she had a friend here? My impression of her had been quieter than this.

Mira led the way into Mama’s Treats, where a salesperson named Hagu greeted us. He seemed perfectly polite.

“Morning, Hagu.”

“And who’s this fine young man? Is it your first visit?” he said.

“Yep. His name’s Ivy.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Ivy.”

“And I’m Hagu, an employee of Mama’s Treats. Nice to meet you.”

My bag didn't move in the slightest. I'd expected that. I grabbed Rattloore's shirt and tugged once. He probably expected it, too, so this was little more than confirmation.

"Would you like to place your order?"

I ordered one of Mira's suggestions and one danzu. Rattloore and Callua's resistance to it had made me curious. Although given our mission here, now wasn't the best time for sweets. I looked around the restaurant—we were the only customers. That meant that the organization's pawns in the room were Hagu, Luiseria, and Mira. We could leave Hagu to carry the message, which meant detaining the two women. Could Rattloore handle them alone? I looked up at him, and he responded with a gentle pat on my head. These three were planning to abduct me right now. What would Rattloore do if they tried? Would he...kill them? He might. *But I won't be falling for their trap, so there's nothing to worry about!*

"Mira, can we talk?" Rattloore asked.

"What's gotten into you? You look so serious."

"It's about your brothers."

Mira's expression changed slightly. I looked around for Hagu, trying to act casual, and saw Callua making the same face. *She must know something.* Maybe she would help us? Sora had told me that she was a good person, after all. When I found Hagu, I saw him plating the food we'd ordered. I couldn't see his hands from this angle, so I wouldn't be able to see if he slipped something inside.

"My brothers? What about them? They're training in the forest right now."

"Are they really training? I heard someone saw them..."

"Huh? What are you getting at?" Mira was tense.

"Listen. Are they deep in debt to some thugs or something?"

"No, they're not! What's your deal? You're acting weird, Rattloore!"

"Word on the street is your brothers are harboring criminals. They've already sent a party to hunt them down."

They should be leaving the base right about now, if everything's gone to plan.

"What are you talking about?!"

“The guys I talked to were certain about it. Mira, you didn’t know? Or...I don’t wanna imagine this, but...did you?”

Luiseria stared at Rattloore in wide-eyed shock. She seemed so genuinely surprised that I could tell she was caught off guard. Hagu, who I’d been watching out of the corner of my eye, started to move slowly toward the back. I felt for his aura—he was trying to leave. It seemed he was Mira’s tail, or at least an organization member in the know. If he heard Rattloore, he must’ve recognized that they needed to change their plans. *Huh? Callua’s got her eyes locked on Hagu. Has she noticed something, too? What do I do...? I can’t predict what Callua might do next. If she moves carelessly, she might interfere with our strategy.* I looked to Rattloore; he was watching Mira. *I’d best not get in the middle.*

“Marm and Tort are sheltering murderers in the forest,” Rattloore repeated. “They’ve sent hunting parties out to deal with them.”

Mira sprang up, knocking her chair over. All eyes turned to her. In that instant, I saw Hagu slip out of the restaurant. Callua tried to stand up, too, so I swiftly grabbed her hand.

“Huh?”

“Leave him!” I gazed right into her eyes. In my periphery, I noticed Luiseria getting to her feet as well. “Makasha, stop Luiseria! Please!”

“Wha?!?” Luiseria was startled by my plea. Makasha and Callua stared at me in confusion.

“Please!”

“U-understood!”

Luiseria made a break for it as I cried out, but Makasha moved faster and grabbed her. Hagu had successfully fled to convey the situation to the other kidnappers. Rattloore had Mira’s arm in a vise grip, so she was unable to escape. *Does this mean the plan succeeded? Thank goodness.*

“What’s going on?!?” Mira demanded.

I looked up. Callua, Makasha, and Luiseria were all staring at me. *Yeah, figures... A nine-year-old was just barking orders. How should I play this?*

“Thanks, Ivy. You were right on the money.”

Good work, Rattloore!

“Thank you. Think this’ll do the trick?”

Rattloore smiled, and I saw a flash of understanding on Callua and Makasha's faces. *What a relief...I'm so glad this worked out.*

Chapter 96: Callua

“**L**ET ME GO! What’s your deal?! Makasha, I said let go!” Luiseria screamed, struggling to escape. Her face was warped with terror. She must’ve realized she was in deep trouble.

“Give it up, Luiseria. We know you’re conspiring with the kidnapping organization.”

“...No. No, you’re wrong! I don’t know about any kidnappers!”

“Don’t lie!” Rattloore’s shout rang through the restaurant. The force behind his voice made me shudder. “Sorry, Ivy. You okay?” He looked guilty, but that honestly scared me. I’d never heard him speak like that before.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Wanna explain what’s going on here?” Callua’s eyes darted back and forth between us.

Why are you asking a child? I looked at Rattloore.

“Uhh, well...” he began. “Callua, why’ve you been going around with Mira and Luiseria?”

“Hm? So you didn’t investigate me?”

Ah! Rattloore looks a little concerned. She’s right to ask, though. I got them involved on the fly, after all. Sorry for that.

“We know you’re not with the organization, but nothing else,” he said. “But if you’re tagging along with Mira and Luiseria, agents of the organization, then you must have something going on. At least, that’s what I figure.”

“Right. I mean, I don’t know anything about any organization. Unless... you mean that one that’s causing huge problems in this town?”

“You didn’t know? Mira’s a member. Though I’d say now that she’s an extremity they’re willing to cut her off without remorse.”

An extremity? When he puts it like that it makes sense... Someone deeply involved in the organization wouldn’t be so disposable.

“Really?” Callua went pale. “I had no idea. Actually...I’m looking for my

big sister. I thought Mira's brothers might've taken her off somewhere... Are you saying they handed her over to kidnappers?!" She glared madly at Mira and seized her by the collar. "Hey! What the hell did you do with my sister?!"

"Callua, calm down!" Rattloore urged.

"How can you tell me to calm down?!"

"We're at a critical moment in catching them! So we need you to get a hold of yourself!" Callua froze up at Rattloore's words.

Mira and Luiseria both looked shocked. The organization had likely never imagined that it would be cornered in this situation.

"No... No way!" Luiseria crumpled, as if all the strength had left her body. She shook her head, muttering something to herself.

"Shut up!" Callua roared. Without warning, she stabbed something into Luiseria's neck.

Whoa?! What...what did she just do?



“Huh?” Callua noticed my look of horror and got flustered. “Oh, Ivy, don’t worry! I didn’t kill her, I promise! I just used a sleeping potion on her. Right, Makasha?! Back me up here!”

“Ah ha ha ha, right,” Makasha laughed. “Ivy, Callua’s a loose cannon, so don’t get too close, or...geugh, cough, hack! Callua, watch that elbow!” Makasha fell to his knees, clutching his side. Callua had a super scary look on her face. Was Luiseria really unharmed? “Cough...Ivy, it’s okay. Callua’s a pharmacist, so she just put her to sleep, probably.”

You say it’s okay, but I don’t trust that “probably.” I’ll just...play along, though.

“So, is there a next step to this plan?” Callua asked. Rattloore and I both nodded. Callua looked at me, then glared at Rattloore. “Wait a second. You’re not making Ivy help, are you? He’s just a little boy!”

“He’s not!” I protested. “I forced *them* to let me help.”

“But...!”

“Callua, Ivy’s gonna be just fine. We’re protecting him around the clock.”

“I know, but this isn’t an appropriate place for a six-year-old boy!”

Six?! She thinks I’m even younger than the others do!

“I’m nine!”

“Huh?! Now that you mention it, Mira did say something like that. Sorry, you just look so...”

“Callua, sorry to interrupt,” Rattloore butted in. “Could you hit Mira with that stuff, too? We’ve taken a little too long here.” Mira frantically tried to wiggle out of Rattloore’s grip but was promptly put to sleep. By the time we’d bound their hands and feet, and had time to wonder what to do next, Rattloore said, “I’ll get a little assistance. Wait just a sec.” Then, he left the restaurant.

“You’re not seriously forcing them to bring you along, are you?” Callua asked me.

“I am. Rattloore’s been protecting me ever since we learned the kidnappers were targeting me. Since this is a problem that involves me, I wanted to help as much as I could.”

“Wow. Don’t push yourself, okay? I mean it!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Callua was a good person. I was glad she had come here with us.

“Sorry for the wait,” Rattloore called out.

I turned and saw someone who looked familiar. *That’s an employee from Puff-Puff, right? Actually, Rattloore did say that the restaurant was owned by a former adventurer he trusts.*

“I think I’ve got the gist of it,” the man said. “I just have to keep these two here, yeah?”

“Yep. We’ll try to take them off your hands as soon as possible, but I can’t give you a timeline.”

“That’s fine. If they’re kidnappers, then I won’t let them go for my life. Hey, aren’t these two gals adventurers?”

He seemed disappointed to find traitors among his guildmates. And they weren’t the only ones—so many adventurers were working with the organization. I couldn’t imagine how many people would be brokenhearted if they knew that. Why would they turn their back on their friends like that?

“Callua, Makasha. We need you to come with us,” Rattloore said.

“Of course... Do you want me to call some friends, too?” Callua offered.

“Uh, well...”

“What? I think they’re safe.”

“Sorry. It’s hard to make a call on people we haven’t investigated.”

“What do you mean? You think they’re not trustworthy?” Callua’s face turned grave.

“Let’s talk while we walk.” Rattloore turned to his friend and added, “Good luck with those two. Thanks again.”

“Yeah, leave ‘em to me.” The Puff-Puff employee hoisted them over his shoulders and left. I was shocked to see him carry two people so easily.

“Whoa.”

“Awesome, right?” Makasha said to me. “I bet he’s just as strong as some active adventurers.” He looked moved. Maybe this Puff-Puff employee was famous?

As we hurried to the base, Rattloore quickly explained what we knew about the organization and those who helped Callua and Makasha.

“Are there really that many?” Makasha asked solemnly. Callua looked grave, too.

“Yeah. So, Callua, that’s why we’re hesitant to trust the people you wanted to call.”

“Yeah, I can see that now. How do you investigate them, though?”

“Bolorda uses a magical item. So, our next order of business is to expose all the organization’s people near our base of operations and to clean up all the criminals under Mira’s brothers’ control.”

“What base of operations?”

“We think they’ve stationed several layers of watchdogs around the former merchant’s mansion that was the site of the failed raid. Bolorda’s going over to sniff them out.”

“Huh. Okay, so how do we help?”

“We need to arrest those fugitives. We could use as many people as we can get for that.”

“Fugitives?” Callua gasped. “Are they that dangerous?”

“It’s a whole nest of wanted criminals, and most of them are murderers.”

“Uargh,” Makasha groaned.

“Makasha, stop making weird noises.”

“Well, it looks like they’ve taken care of the traitors among the guard and adventurers. The expedition party’s already back.”

I followed Rattloore’s line of sight. Bewildered townsfolk had been herded into an orderly line. Near them were members of the guard we’d judged as clean, walking around with weapons in hand. People with bound hands and feet were being tossed—I mean, *carried* out of the mansion. *Oh! There’s someone with fancy clothes there.*

“That’s a noble,” the GM remarked. “Seems like we were right, not that I’m happy about it.” The GM looked like he had a headache. Were there nobles even he had trouble dealing with? Could Lord Foronda handle them? If they were too much even for him...

“Hey, who are all those people?” Callua asked.

Rattloore answered, “Oh, that’s what you get when you round up every organization member who came to remove damning evidence from the base.”

“I think I see some nobles in that big pile of people...?”

Rattloore chuckled and said, “Callua and Makasha, you come with me. Ivy, er... Oh! Bolorda’s right over there.” He gestured with his eyes to the end of the line of people, where I could see Bolorda. They must have wrapped things up inside. Were we going to probe for traitors over there?

“I’d best meet up with him, then.”

“Huh? Why?” Callua asked, confused.

“He’ll be safer with Bolorda, right?” Rattloore fibbed.

“Oh, I guess. But...there might be kidnappers hiding in that line, right? Let me go with you.”

“Thank you very much.”

Callua escorted me to Bolorda’s side. Bolorda was surprised to see her but seemed to put the pieces together quickly.

“Thanks, Callua. Sorry to trouble you.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Um...could I add a friend of mine to this line, too?”

“Yeah, go for it.”

“Thank you.”

I felt a hand come to rest on my head. When I looked up, Bolorda had a huge smile on his face. I guess he was happy that everything was going so smoothly.

Chapter 97: Somebody, Explain! SIDE: CAPTAIN BARXBY

“ANY NEWS?”

Agrop shook his head. We'd been told that there might be organization members watching the base, so I had him look into it. But he hadn't sensed a thing. If not for everything that had happened so far, I'd be convinced there was nobody to find. But that little boy said he'd sensed them, so they had to be there. What would Mira and her co-conspirators do, though?

Reducing our security at this base meant moving a lot of guards at once. Had they predicted that, too?

“What's on your mind, Captain?”

“Just wondering what they'll do next.”

“Oh, you mean Mira and them. If she's after the boy...” Deep creases formed on Agrop's forehead. He disliked including a child in this plan. I understood his discomfort; the kid might've been nine, but he looked even younger. “We rely on that child too much,” Agrop finished.

“I know.”

“As long as you're aware, I won't say anything more.”

Yeah, we did rely on that kid too much. We were deploying a strategy he'd formulated. Even worse, we were using his vulnerability as a kidnapping target for our own ends—a deplorable decision for any respectable adult. The truth was, we were at our wits' end. Every time we thought we'd had the organization cornered, they'd escaped. Each time, people had been hurt in the process. Our hearts were wrung out; we'd fallen into resignation before we knew it. We'd push aside our weariness and rally our spirits, but the exhaustion just piled up. We were far beyond what we could endure.

Then Bolorda and Seizerk introduced us to that child, Ivy. Another kid at their mercy—I wanted to make sure we protected him this time. I couldn't help feeling uneasy. Yet Ivy was so unlike all the children we'd lost before. Bolorda, a man whose despair was palpable every time he spoke of the organization, had *smiled*.

When I'd heard that the child not only knew the situation he was in but was calculating his next moves, I was shocked. Could such a child truly exist? On top of that, he was determined to take on the kidnappers himself. That had lit a fire under me. What was I, an adult, doing with myself if I couldn't measure up to a nine-year-old boy?

"Nine years old..." I mused.

Though he looks more like six or seven.

"That's right."

Agrop and I chuckled dryly. He knew that I'd been at the end of my rope, and he knew exactly why I felt different now. Just then, we heard the door of the base creak open.

"Sounds like they're here."

"Indeed, it does."

Agrop and I made our way out to the foyer, where we found Marcreek, Gnouga, and Sifar. When I saw that they were alone, I raised an eyebrow, but Sifar met us with a beaming grin. I shivered. I didn't like the look of that smile.

"Your timing couldn't be better," he said. "Captain, we need to form an expedition team to capture a band of murderers. *Immediately.*"

"Come again?" Agrop and I said at once. Despite our many disagreements, we were in sync on this. What was Sifar on about? An expedition team? Shouldn't we be holding the fort here? Or had Mira made a move without my knowing?

"Several of the fugitives are dangerous criminals on the wanted list, so we'd best send enough people. Oh right, and as these are *very dangerous criminals* we're dealing with, there's a risk that some of your people might not make it back. Perhaps that will influence who you decide to send."

Might not make it back? I could see some being wounded, but...ah, I see. That's what he's after.

"Vice-Captain, can I trust you to pick the right men for the job?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"About those people Sifar mentioned..."

"Worry not. I won't let a single man escape. I'd best be off now." The vice-captain had a new bounce in his step as he left for the guard station.

I was excited to arrest the bad apples in the guard during the expedition, but what happened to yesterday's strategy? *I would appreciate an explanation...*

A member of the guard poked his head out of the break room in the back. "Captain, you needed me? Er, where is the vice-captain?" It was Gabojura—someone I'd once thought worthy of being my successor. I still couldn't believe he'd turned his back on us. Why would a man so popular among the townsfolk be in league with kidnappers? I couldn't understand his motives.

"Some adventurers found a whole gang of miscreants hiding in the woods. Apparently, there are several wanted criminals among them. We'll be sending an expedition to round them up immediately. The vice-captain has already gone to the station to gather personnel."

When I mentioned the hunt, he betrayed a hint of surprise. A rare crack in the facade, though he recovered quickly.

"Criminals? And wanted ones? But...shouldn't we confirm the report is true before sending out a party?"

"Not to worry. We've already confirmed it." Marcreek smirked at Gabojura. Bolorda and Seizerk's adventure teams were well respected in this town. You'd need good reason to doubt their appraisal.

"I see. If that's so, I apologize for my rudeness. Captain, if we send guards out, how will we protect this base?"

"Good question." We'd have to relax security around here if we were to send guards to the forest. How would that play into the plan? *This is all because nobody tells me anything. If I just throw out something random, will they give me a hint?* I answered, "We'll have to send personnel from the base, too. I think we can get by with minimum security here for now."

"Captain, I think you should reconsider. This place may still be important to the organization. We should leave a team here. Besides, we transported the vital documents on the organization here from the station just yesterday, did we not?"

That's not what I heard yesterday! Seriously, can someone explain?

"Think so? Well, you've got a point. If something happened while we were gone, we'd have only ourselves to blame. Gabojura, choose some men to stay and protect the base. The rest will go with the expedition."

"Understood. I'll start right away, sir."

I sighed as I watched Gabojura walk back to the break room, then glared at Sifar. “It feels like everything I’m hearing contradicts what I heard yesterday.”

He shrugged. “Sorry. We had to switch up our tactics a little while ago.”

“Huh? Who suggested that?”

“Ivy, of course. He says there’s no point in waiting, so we might as well spring the trap today.”

Ivy, huh? Well, I guess it’s fine.

“Wonder why. That kid’s an oddball.” In the past, there was no strategy that I didn’t worry over. Yet now I felt totally assured, even though I didn’t know what the strategy *was*. “What’s our next move, then?”

“Ah, right. We’ll use this.” Sifar held up a sphere.

“What...hey, that looks like a sleep orb.”

“I should certainly hope so. It *is* a sleep orb.”

“And how are we meant to use this?”

“When the organization’s people breach the mansion, engulf the entire base with it right as they enter that room.”

The entire base? Is he joking? It doesn’t feel like a joke...Marcreek and Gnouga are smiling creepily, too. Do they really intend to put everyone in the mansion to sleep?

“We have allies in this base, too,” I reminded them.

“There’s not much we can do about that. We simply don’t have the personnel.”

“I see... Is this another of Ivy’s plans?”

“Ha ha ha! He’s an interesting one, right?”

I grimaced. This is a plan I’d have never come up with myself. How would we explain this to our people after they woke up? That unpleasant task would definitely fall to me.

“Are you sure there’s no other way?” I pleaded.

“I’m gonna set it up right now; there’s no time to lose. Getting the whole building is gonna be tough!”

“Hey!”

He ignored me. And what was with that smile?! Hell's bells... If it means getting our hands on the organization, maybe this is a small price to pay.

“Captain, here.” Gnouga handed me a net made from the type of tough webbing used to capture monsters.

“What’s this for?” I had a bad feeling about this.

“He says when you go into the forest, you can throw that at the turncoats to slow them down.”

“...Ivy said that?”

“No. Sifar.”

Good. So the kid didn’t come up with that. Sifar’s a real piece of work, though.

I took the net with a sigh. “This net is used for high-level monsters, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. He said that should take care of them all.”

“Ha ha ha! Another measure that catches friend and foe, huh?”

“What you catch will depend on your aim, Captain.” Gnouga smirked.

“What? There’s no way I could only hit the enemy with this!”

“Good luck.”

Dodging responsibility, huh?

“We’ll have to talk later. They’re here.”

I looked toward Gnouga and saw that the guards for the hunting party were assembled. Agrop’s work was impressive: He’d selected a good balance of traitors and people whose skill he was confident in. *If I’m using this net, it’ll have to be outside of town. I’ll get them right when we enter the forest.*

“Captain, we’ve scrounged up forty-five in total,” Agrop announced.
“Will that do?”

“Yeah. We’re only planning to have a few people from the base join in.”

“A few... Understood.”

Now, let’s put our hearts—and our righteous anger—into this.

Chapter 98: Putting the Plan into Action SIDE: CAPTAIN BARXBY

“OH, the hunting party’s ready to roll. Good stuff, Captain.”

Outside of the base, I heard Rickbert’s voice. Bolorda, Seizerk, and Lowcreek were outside with him. Behind them were the adventurers pegged as traitors.

“Of course. We’re almost ready to depart. Any problems?”

“No objections here,” Bolorda answered. “The vice-captain handpicked the personnel, right? Then I’m sure he chose only the finest.” He looked to be in an even better mood than usual. Bolorda was most dangerous when he made that face.

“All right. So, what are we dealing with?” I asked. “And where?”

“It’s a gang of murderers. They’re lying low in a cave in the middle of the forest.”

“The middle of the forest...that area was overrun with monsters before, right?”

“Exactly.”

“What can you tell me about these murderers?”

“There are at least twenty-one of them. Ten are on the wanted list for murder, and five more are under investigation for the same.”

“That’s...a heckuva lot.”

“Yeah, it is,” Bolorda sighed. “And that’s just the number our scout could see; there could be more.”

“Okay, noted. We’ll have to really be on our toes this time.”

“Yep. They’re real bad guys. Don’t let anyone die though, got it?”

I see. That’s why we’re arresting the traitors first—they might’ve been ordered to kill the criminals.

“Right,” I agreed.

“Captain, we’re taking ten from the base and leaving ten here on duty. Confirm?”

“Thanks, Gabojura.” *Fantastic. We’re leaving only organization moles in the base. I did hear these guys were hurting for money... Did they think they could embezzle it?* “Yeah, that’s correct. I don’t anticipate any problems, but if anyone shady approaches, treat them with caution.”

“Understood. When will you be departing?”

Oh! We’re all assembled, but when should we leave? I forgot to ask!

“We wouldn’t want them dispersing before we get there,” I answered. “If we’re ready, I’d like to move out immediately.”

Bolorda looked to the guard, who were waiting for orders. I noticed Sifar and Gnouga lining up with them. They looked at me and bared their teeth—was that supposed to be a smile?

“Are we all set?”

“Yes, Captain. One hundred percent,” Agrop answered.

“Got it. Everyone, listen up! There are wanted murderers among our enemy today. Everyone should be prepared for what we’re facing!” My voice echoed through the mansion. I could tell the guard was tense, but that wasn’t a bad thing; a certain level of nerves would keep them alert.

“We’ll take up the back line. They’ll be joining us.” Bolorda pointed at a traitorous adventurer team who had been added to the task force. His team would be securing them, then.

“Understood. Don’t let them get away, okay?”

“Right. Same to you, Captain.” With that, Bolorda left to greet the adventurers. I noticed a few of them were smiling.

“Bolorda!” one piped up. “Looking forward to working with you! How long has it been since our teams joined up on something?”

“Really? Heh, well, I’m happy that you’re happy.”

I left the adventurers and Bolorda to their conversation and joined Agrop at the vanguard.

“Shall we?”

“Yeah. Off we go!”

Townsfolk walking about nearby looked surprised as they cleared a path for us. It was rare for such a large group to go out on an expedition like this. When they did, it was a big deal. As we set off, I saw a few men panic and sprint off somewhere.

“So this is how it feels to take people by surprise,” I mused.

“To be fair, we’re being taken by surprise as well...though by a different group.” Agrop glanced behind us. I couldn’t see them since I was at the front, but he must’ve been referring to Bolorda.

He was right. One hour ago, I couldn’t have imagined that we’d be leading such a large-scale hunt into the forest. The organization likely couldn’t, either—I saw people whose auras I couldn’t even sense before now running off in a flurry. They say one has to deceive their allies in order to fool their enemy, but this was really something else.

“Hah! Hilarious.”

“I’m glad you’re having fun, Captain, but we can’t afford to fail today. By the way, I’ve been wondering...who in the world suggested that thing in your hand?”

“Sifar did.”

“I should’ve guessed. I suppose this will all be a great success thanks to his scheming?”

I glanced back furtively. Behind me was the vanguard group of the expedition team. It was chock-full of traitors. I shot Agrop a grin.

“Yeah. Those numbskulls...”

I quietly sneered at the turncoats behind us. It appeared the organization had ordered them to kill me and Agrop, too. Otherwise, the traitors wouldn’t have all gathered at the vanguard. They had to kill everyone to make sure there were no witnesses, but Agrop and I stood squarely between them and their goal. And we were strong, so they probably figured they’d have to deal with us first.

They would have pulled it off, too, if we hadn’t already known about their plot. Our men could have been slaughtered without so much as a chance to draw their weapons if the people they’d thought were their comrades all turned on them at once. Too bad for them, though. This wasn’t part of Ivy’s strategy, but I’d be using their own plans against them. We left the town and marched into the forest. After a short walk, we entered a clearing.

“This looks like a good spot,” I decided. The clearing was more than wide enough to spread the net. The group behind us was following awfully close, too. “Agrop, ready?”

We had two nets. I handed one over to Agrop. We stopped, and Agrop sidled over to the edge of the group. Since we were at the front, my stopping caused the whole party to grind to a halt. It only took ten seconds for Agrop to prepare.

Just as the party was starting to mutter to each other, I turned and cast the net. Everyone watched, frozen in shock. I saw the second net spread in midair and fall on the stunned adventurers.

“Nice! That’s half!”

I’d secured the traitors who had taken point at the front of the party, which was about half their total number. These nets were big enough to capture large monsters and sturdy enough to hold them. On top of that, they were magical items specially enchanted to drain the energy of whatever was within when activated. Sifar was a sly dog for thinking to use these.

I smirked as the exhausted traitors slumped down to the ground. Agrop’s side had succeeded as well. *Whoops, we got two of our allies in there... Oh. Agrop was the one who got them. Well, he can deal with the consequences.*

“Captain, what on earth—?!” Gabojura, who’d hung back from the vanguard, ran over to me. Behind him was another mole. They appeared to be the only ones left. The net had caught twenty traitors and two allies.

“What’s wrong?” I smirked.

Behind Gabojura, the other guardsmen looked confused.

“*What’s wrong?* What are you thinking?! Look...”

“Gabojura, Dalgore. You’re under arrest. Men, seize them!” I ordered.

The guards hesitated. *Well, can’t blame them. Nobody told them a thing.*

“Captain, are you out of your mind?!”

“You think so? Gabojura, take a close look at everyone inside the nets. Almost all of them are kidnapper conspirators—just like you.”

Gabojura gasped. His shock was genuine; he must not have realized he’d been caught.

“Wh-what...are you on about? Me? Conspiring with kidnappers? You

misund—”

“No, I’m quite aware that it’s true.”

I didn’t plan on listening to Gabojura’s lies. My allies were surprised by my rebuke, but after a moment, they began to look at Gabojura and Dalgore suspiciously. They probably wouldn’t believe it immediately. After all, these men had been through thick and thin together. And yet...

“What are you waiting for?! Seize them!” I repeated.

We had no time. Hearing my command, Gabojura attempted to escape. A sword raised squarely before his eyes stopped him in his tracks.



“No escape for traitors.” Agrop stood in his way. It seemed he’d already taken care of the panic in the back.

“What are you fools doing, catching flies?! Obey your captain’s orders!” Agrop barked. The astonished guard exploded into action.

Dalgore was apprehended by his former comrades, and Gabojura’s hands were tied behind his back.

“It’s over, Gabojura.”

Powerless, the traitor fell to his knees.

“Captain, Vice-Captain!” an officer called out to us. “Is it true they’re with the kidnappers?”

“It is. We investigated them with a magical item. We’re certain.”

The officers quietly absorbed the information. They probably had a lot of feelings to process.

“Um, what about us...?” the two guards we’d netted on accident ventured hesitantly.

“Oh, you two are cleared,” I assured them. “Just a minor mistake...my ba
—”

Agrop interrupted me. “It was necessary to round up as many enemies as possible. Is that a problem?” His face bore a terrifying smile. Our two allies went pale, and the people supporting them stilled.

“N-no, sir.”

“Good. I do apologize for the mistake. I hope we have your understanding.”

“Yes, sir!” everyone around the two shouted. Agrop was too intimidating.

Anyway, we’d best get back on track with the strategy.

“Boys, we’re turning around,” I called out to the party.

“Huh?! Captain, what about the murderers?”

“Yeah, we’ll deal with them later. For now, we return to base.”

“Excellent idea,” Agrop agreed. “I’m sure things are getting *very* interesting there.”

Ha ha ha... Agrop, maybe you could go back to normal soon?

“We march!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

The party split into two teams—one hauling the traitors off and one returning to the base—and began our trek back. Along the way, we happened upon a pale-faced team of adventurers. God knows what Bolorda’s team put them through.

“What’d you do to them?” I asked.

“We just had a little chat, as their elders,” Marcreek answered vaguely. The adventurers shuddered.

“...Uh-huh.”

Maybe it would be best not to ask any more questions.

Chapter 99: To Corner the Organization SIDE: CAPTAIN BARXBY

AS WE APPROACHED the town gate, the guards on duty emerged. They were astonished we'd returned in under an hour. They'd had pretty much the same expression when they saw the size of our party on the way out. I couldn't blame them. You only saw a fifty-five-man-strong expedition like that once every decade or so.

"Captain, is something wrong? And, um, what've you got behind you there...?"

Marse, the most senior member of the watchmen at the gate, frowned at the group trailing behind us. The line of turncoat guards had their hands bound and were joined at the hips by strong ropes. The other guards here were similarly shaken to see their comrades bound. They looked between us, trying to figure out what was going on.

I raised my voice to ensure everyone could hear me. "These men have betrayed our comrades and conspired with the kidnapping organization terrorizing this town. They have been apprehended. Throw them in prison and keep a good eye on them, please."

"Um—understood, sir. It's a rather...large...group, so we'll need to put three to a cell even if we use both the jail in the guard building and the cells at the station. Will that do?" Marse was stunned by my order for a moment, but he was a seasoned professional. He quickly got his mind straight.

"Actually, put them five to a cell, please," I said. Marse looked over the group of captives, counting them. I could see him doing the math in his head as he looked at me questioningly. "There are more traitors back at the base of operations we set up yesterday," I explained.

Marse stood stock-still for a moment. A mix of sorrow and fury roiled on his face. Yet that too only lasted a moment before he recovered his composure.

"Right. Will there be enough space if we put five to a cell?"

Will there? I don't know how many people are assaulting the base right now. And there's the gang of murderers to account for, too.

“No. Two jails won’t be enough. We’ll have to requisition the adventurers’ and merchant guild’s jails, so let them know for me, please. I just hope that’ll be enough...”

“God, that many? I’ll take care of it now, sir.” Marse’s eyes went wide the moment I mentioned using both guilds’ jails.

I grinned wryly. Seeing my expression, he smiled helplessly back. He’d been on the job for a long time now, but this work was truly painful. With a slight bow, he turned back to his subordinates, who were still staring aghast at the traitors.

“How long do you plan to stand there looking, boys?!?” Marse roared. “Do your job! Throw that scum into the guard post’s prison. Don’t listen to a word they say. They’re not your comrades anymore; they turned their back on us. Focus!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“Five prisoners to a cell. The rest will go to the station. We don’t have enough personnel to watch them, so call back in as many off-duty guards as you can.”

“Yes, sir!”

Seeing him rouse his men was a relieving sight. They may have been their former friends, but indecision would kill us. If their hearts faltered, they might let them escape out of sympathy. I had planned to choose people from the hunting party to prevent such a problem, but I could trust Marse to handle that. His vigor alone had changed their minds, and they stepped forward to take their former allies into custody without hesitation.

“Agrop, let Marse handle the watchmen. Let’s leave enough people to keep the prisoners in line and take the rest to the base.”

“Understood.” Agrop picked five people for jail guard duty and gave them their orders.

“Captain, are you sure we can’t spare a few more people for the base?” Marcreek asked while handing over the captured adventurers to the watchmen.

I cocked my head. The organization members attacking the base should be in dreamland by now—why would we need so many people?

“Anticipating trouble? We have more personnel to spare, but...” I hesitated.

Agrop returned just then and broke in, “If we mobilize the entire guard force, we can muster greater numbers. Why do you ask?”

He saved me there—Agrop was more familiar with our personnel than I was.

“Huh? The plan is to flush out all the conspirators hiding near the base. No one told you?”

“We’re doing *what*!?” we cried. *Whooooa. That’s the second time today we said the same thing at the same time! Wait, that’s not important right now.*

“How are you gonna do that?” I asked. “Sounds tough, right?”

“Hm?” Marcreek looked confused. “They’re just...judging everyone there with Bolorda’s magical item?”

I grimaced. If they could capture everyone in one fell swoop, then that would be the best way. But *everyone* around the base? How many people were they planning to inspect, exactly?

“Did that boy come up with this whole plan?”

“Yep. He thinks of the craziest things, right? Checking every single person...” Really, what kind of child was that Ivy boy?

“Pfft, heh heh,” Agrop chuckled. “I’d love a long chat with that kid once this is all over.”

“The GM and clean adventurers should already be on it, but I don’t think they’ll be enough.”

“Hm? They’ve already inspected the adventurers?”

“Not all of them. I hear they’ll get the rest once they’ve finished at the base. That’s why they’re hard up for help right now.”

Because they can only use the confirmed-safe ones. Right.

“Hmm. Is it wise to arrest all of them at once, though?” It felt like rushing things to me. Was there a reason it was necessary?

“Hm? I think...they said that if the organization’s people in the guards and adventurers *and* their watchers around the mansion were all captured at once, the organization would doubt its information control...or something. And that would slow them down? Sifar had the whole thing figured out.”

“The organization would suspect a leak?”

“Uhh, I was just sort of listening while Sifar was talking to Ivy. If you want more details, ask them.”

“Ha ha, okay. And we’re sure this is the best option we have?”

“All I know is that it means dealing a blow to the organization. And that’s fine with me!”

Simple, yet effective...still, I’m surprised they came up with it. It makes sense they’d suspect an info leak if all their people are caught at once. We’re using a magical item to inspect them, but that only came into play yesterday. Even if that information has made it back to them, they won’t have had time to verify it. Not to mention, only a few of us know of its existence. It’s likely that they’re completely in the dark.

“So that’s why we have to strike now?”

Once they found out about the magical item, then the specter of a leak would vanish. Was now the moment to strike, since they didn’t know how we were identifying them? If everything went to plan, the kidnappers would assume their own people gave them up. And that’s not all. Every mole they had among the guard had been identified, so they might even think that they had double agents in their midst.

Up to this point, they’d been able to watch our every move. But now that their insider eyes were all in custody, the organization was flying blind. They would once again have to tread with great caution while tracking our movements. Not knowing the severity of the leak would slow them down even further. And as long as they were paralyzed, we could take the time we needed to confirm the veracity of the documents and build up our case. If that was our aim, we should use extreme measures to arrest as many as we could now.

And a nine-year-old boy thought of all this? I’m not Agrop, but I would love to chat with him once this is all over, too.

“If that’s the plan, I’ll gather everybody who can help. We’ll mobilize the entire force. How far out from the mansion should we start our sweep for watchers? We’ll herd them to the base.”

I wouldn’t use the word “herd.” Still, Agrop’s thinking what I’m thinking; he’s just way more excited about it. We were always the ones getting outmaneuvered, but suddenly, we had a chance to come out on top. It was exhilarating.

“Agrop, don’t get carried away and blow it,” I warned him.

“Of course. That boy arranged all of this for us—we can hardly fail now.”
He was right. If we messed up now, how could I ever face Ivy?

Chapter 100: Noble Ambush? SIDE: CAPTAIN BARXBY

MARCREEK TOLD AGROP to start his sweep “about three blocks” from the mansion base. Three blocks could fit nearly 120 buildings. Guiding everybody in that radius to the base sounded like a huge pain in the rear.

“It should be pretty quick since they’re using a magical item to assess them, but I expect some will still refuse to cooperate.”

Some people would definitely try to get away with some excuse like “I don’t have time right now.” Persuading them all would be a nightmare. *If only there were some other way...*

“Why not tell the truth?” Agrop suggested. “We know that citizens in their area are conspiring with criminals. If they refuse, that will be taken as an admission of guilt, and they’ll be taken in for questioning.”

“Do you think that’ll make them cooperate?”

“I wonder...oh. If they refuse, make it clear that it’s a kidnapping organization. If it gets about that they could be conspiring with kidnappers, they’ll have a hard time living in this town. People might throw rocks at them, right? Anyone who isn’t a real blockhead would be glad to comply.”

“Yeah, true...fine,” I surrendered. “Let’s try it your way.” Agrop’s method seemed certain to get the townspeople’s cooperation. The majority of people here loathed the kidnappers. If anyone was rumored to be one of them, they could be killed or worse. We’d tread carefully because of that, but this time, we had numbers. I wasn’t going to let a single criminal slip through my fingers. “Agrop, make sure you get the trainees in line to be checked, too.”

Marcreek gasped at that, but a chilling grin crept onto Agrop’s face. He was probably thinking about how he would put these trainees through their paces. It was true that even if they were trainees, they were still part of the town guard. We were going to make these boys work.

“Understood,” Agrop replied. “I’ll make certain that every single one is examined.”

If any of them were traitors, it would be a blow to the others. Still, they

would need to overcome that if they were to be guardsmen.

“Ah, right. Captain, they were hoping to have you go to the base yourself,” Marcreek added.

“Aren’t they all conked out in there? Why does it matter who goes?”

“Well, Ivy was worried there might be some *problematic* folk among them.”

“Problematic? Problematic how?”

“Hmm...nobles, maybe?”

“Ah...” That reminded me. “Yeah, there was at least one noble listed in those documents, wasn’t there? But...what kind of idiotic noble would try to ambush a guard base?”

“Who knows? Not me.”

“I’ll leave that to you, Captain,” Agrop said. “As for me, I’ll gather personnel at the station and begin combing those three blocks to push people toward the base. Oh, and I’ll be sending the trainees straight to Bolorda. I’d best be off now.”

Agrop strode jauntily off toward the station, indifferent to my confusion.
He ran away because he hates nobles, didn’t he?

I heaved a big sigh, and Marcreek put a hand on my shoulder. “We adventurers don’t like ‘em, either. Good luck! Hey, maybe there won’t be any nobility there after all.”

I sighed again. “You don’t actually think that. Hey, didn’t Agrop forget to give orders to the guard here?”

“Why don’t you do it, Captain?”

Yeah, I could. But I hate explaining things...

“I know, it’s no picnic. Do your best, Captain! It’s almost over!”

I raised a hand to acknowledge Marcreek’s meager support and headed over to the remaining guardsmen. They had finished transferring all the prisoners into the jail.

They all tensed up when they saw me. I always hated when the mood was like this. It happened every time we had to arrest people. I told myself to buck up; this was no time to get soppy.

Bolorda waved to me. “Keep up the good work, Captain!” he called out.

That made me feel a little better. Sensing Bolorda’s good mood, the other guards visibly relaxed. I chuckled to myself—if there was one thing they were good at, it was reading the room.

“You too, Bolorda. Are you about ready?”

“Yeah, all good. What’s the plan for the guards left here?”

All eyes gathered on me again, but the uneasy mood from before didn’t return. Bolorda had really done me a solid. I locked eyes with Marse, and he laughed.

“Have them stand by until Agrop returns,” I commanded. “After that, send them to the base. Marse, I’ve got a job for you.”

“Sir.”

“Divide the guard into groups of three. We’ll be scouring for every individual within three blocks of the base and guiding them back there.”

“Hmm? Er, every single one? That’ll be a huge group...”

“I’m aware, Marse. Don’t miss a single person—I want *everyone*. Agrop will fill you in on the details when he returns.”

“Understood.”

I had explained the basics, so the rest was up to Agrop. He’d foisted all the problems at the base on to me, so I was just returning the favor.

“All right, let’s go... Ah.” I stopped on my way out. “Rosay and Clidaro, you two come with me. And...Marse, choose three people who can stand up to nobles for me, got it?”

“Will do, sir.”

My two and Marse’s three would be able to deal with any members of the peerage who might be at the base.

On our way, I asked Bolorda to fill me in on our next steps.

“They’ll change depending on how things are going at the mansion,” he replied. “For now, adventurers are staying out...just in case any specific people might be inside. If so, that’s all yours.”

“I figured.” Nobles would reluctantly listen to the orders of the guard, but they were defiant when it came to adventurers. Plenty of those idiots would

brandish their authority to try to weasel out of anything they didn't like.

"We'll meet up with Seizerk. Once everything is ready, we'll start checking people."

"Do you have enough personnel?"

"The GM ought to have gathered some people for us. Though we'll have to start by assessing those guys first."

"Right. Rosay, you'd better go with Bolorda."

Bolorda and Rosay looked at me in confusion. You could say that Rosay had...resting scary face. I'm not one to talk, but he was *terrifying*. He ought to make an effective threat just by standing next to Bolorda.

"If anyone causes trouble, stare them down," I explained. "If that doesn't work, you have my permission to use force."

Bolorda's magical item was vital for this strategy. To keep things moving smoothly, he'd need someone to have his back.

"Great!" Bolorda smiled. "Rosay, right? Good to work with you!"

"Likewise, sir."

When we arrived at the base, all was quiet. I peeked in from the entrance and saw a staggering number of people on the floor. *Lord, how many are there?*

Bolorda smiled grimly next to me. I followed his gaze and saw a man clearly dressed in much finer attire than the others around him. He was face-down, so I couldn't identify him, but that was definitely a style favored by nobles. And he wasn't the only one—I saw two others like him at a single glance.

"Wow. How stupid are these guys?"

"I doubt they expected our base would be enchanted to make everyone fall asleep," Bolorda commented. "They figured they were safe to join the ambush, I guess."

I grinned. Indeed, this was the result of us taking them entirely unawares...nobles and all.

"Captain, what's going on here?" Rosay asked.

"These are agents of the organization. They came to steal our evidence. Some of our allies are mixed in, but don't worry about them."

The five guardsmen who had come with us were shocked.

“Now, let’s not bring any adventurers in here. We can deal with this ourselves. Rosay, stay with us until Bolorda’s ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

“First off, let’s get some fresh air in here. I don’t wanna walk in and get knocked out right away.”

I placed a cloth over my mouth and opened the front door wide. I couldn’t wait to see how many of the organization’s people we had caught. The little problem of the nobles could be left for later.

Chapter 101: The Kids' Safety Comes First SIDE: BOLORDA

I LET THE CAPTAIN get to work and left the base behind. Certain members of the nobility looked down on adventurers, so it'd be best for me to stay clear of their business.

Outside, I ran into Seizerk.

"We've got a message from the GM," he said with a shrug. "Says he'll come over here with a few teams of adventurers." The GM probably had some adventurers he wanted inspected.

"Hmm."

The strategy was a success so far. The guard had apprehended all their traitors in one fell swoop, and since the base had been attacked as predicted, Ivy's side must have gone smoothly. But had they succeeded in arresting Mira and her co-conspirator? If those two escaped, then the murderers in the forest might be set loose.

"Should we go meet them?" I mumbled to myself.

"I think Ivy will be just fine," Seizerk answered. He looked like he was genuinely enjoying himself. It was rare to see him like this these days. Maybe I had the same look on my face.

"You're right. Ivy knows how to survive."

"Yeah."

If anyone can make it, it's that kid. He's got Rattloore with him, too... Hm? I glanced around and saw people congregating around the mansion. That was fast. Also, why do so many of them look like they've seen a ghost? Heh...I guess it's not worth my worrying about it.

"For now, let's find a place where we can sit and have them inspected."

If I were actually the one doing it, I'd be fine with staying outside. But Ivy was still a kid, so I wanted to make it as easy on him as possible. Heck, even if he wasn't, we had a lot of people to judge. It'd take a long time, so he'd need a place to sit. But we had to consider what might happen if a kidnapper got

violent, too. *Hmm...should we commandeer one of these houses?* I looked at the residences around us for a suitable place.

“What’s that building on the corner?” I spotted a small building at the intersection near the base. It didn’t look like a residential building. More like...a storehouse, maybe? No, it was nicer than that. When I approached, I noticed a sign that said MEETING PLACE. “Well, there you have it. Hey, anyone here?” I called into the building. I searched for auras but didn’t feel anyone here.

“Looks like it’s empty,” Seizerk said. “Little small for a meeting place, though, isn’t it?”

Sifar and Gnouga agreed. While we examined the entrance, Marcreek and Lowcreek left to check the area around the building. Rickbert put a hand on the building’s door, which promptly opened with a click. *The door wasn’t locked? That’s pretty careless.*

Shortly after, Marcreek and Lowcreek returned.

“No problems around the building.”

“Same here.”

“There’s a back door,” Sifar noted. “If we use that, we can lead people in one side and out the other, which should make it more orderly. We can also limit how many people come in, and that’ll make it easier to protect Ivy.”

“True,” Seizerk agreed. “The door isn’t that big, either. Perfect for protecting a child.”

Sifar and Seizerk checked the doors thoroughly, offering their opinions on what would happen if attackers came and whether they could be effectively defended. I performed my own investigation while I listened to their talk. I could tell from their conversation that they were approaching this from the angle of keeping Ivy and other civilians safe. That brought a smile to my face.

“Is this really a meeting place, though?” I wondered aloud. “It feels way too cramped. I’d call it a storehouse if not for the kitchen.” It was simple on the outside, but there was an incongruent garishness to the inside. I raised an eyebrow at the contrast.

“It’s a strange building.”

The building was set up in such a way that when you opened the front door it led directly into the kitchen. A door off from there then led to another room. Sifar opened the inner door and checked behind it. Seizerk also looked in.

For some reason, he sighed. Why the long face? He beckoned me to come and check. When I did, I saw an expensive-looking chair with several decorated bags on it.

“I’ll go tell the captain,” Seizerk said, clearly exasperated.

Our comrades raised their hands slightly in acknowledgment, all of them looking grim. A short time later, the captain came, similarly vexed. When he saw the bags, he, too, sighed deeply. He knew what we did—these bags were undoubtedly the gaudy kind carried by royalty.

“Hey there, Captain,” I greeted him. “How’s it going on your end?”

“There were five nobles in there. One of them is quite famous and influential with the royal family.”

We’d reeled in a big fish. Would this put us in danger?

“Don’t worry your pretty little head,” he assured me. “Maybe you forgot, but I’ve been the captain of the guard for a while. I’ve got a few noble friends of my own, so I’ll have them pull some strings. Oh, and you’re the one who called Lord Foronda here, yeah? Thanks. He’s got connections with someone close to the royal family, so I’m having them do what they can as well.”

“Really? I had no idea.” Lord Foronda was a man of mystery.

“I’ll take these bags. You haven’t touched them, have you?”

“Nope,” Seizerk answered. “Eyes only.” He had a deep frown on his face. He hated the nobility about as much as anyone.

“We want to borrow this building for a bit,” I added. “Anything we need to make official before we settle in here?”

“You’re good. Consider this permission from the guard. I’ll draw up the documents, so I’ll just need your signature later.”

“Roger that.”

The captain gathered up the bags and headed back to the base. As I watched from the window, I glimpsed the anxious faces of townspeople—and a hell of a lot of them at that. What’d the guard say to make them so uncomfortable?

“Let’s hurry,” I called to the others. “We’ve got a chair and a desk here, so we’ll use those. Set it up so Ivy can sit next to me.”

On my orders, Seizerk and the others rearranged the furniture. How long

would Ivy and the others take to get here? Were they okay? Had Mira pulled something?

“Excuse me,” someone called from outside. “The vice-captain asked me to find Bolorda.”

Marcreek went out to speak to them while I looked in the direction of the sweet shop Ivy had set off to.

“And would you look at that? They’re right on time.”

Ivy and Rattloore were accompanied by...Callua and Makasha? I didn’t know why Makasha was there, but he was already peeking inside the base. *I’m just glad they’re safe. Hm? Is that the GM, too? Oh, he saw the captured nobles. Poor guy.*

I stepped out of the building and waved to Ivy’s group. The kid looked relieved to see me. Callua and Ivy came over, but for some reason, Callua was glaring at me. Ivy, on the other hand, wore a nervous grin. *What? Is she mad that we got a kid mixed up in this? Uhh...yeah, any normal person would be, I guess.*

“Sorry, Callua. And thanks. I know we shouldn’t rely on children.” But if I told her it was Ivy who came up with the plan...well, she’d probably be even more steamed. Still, I was glad there were people who cared about Ivy.

“As long as you understand. I’m gonna go help take down those criminals.”

Ivy thanked Callua, and the woman ruffled his hair with a smile before leaving to join the expedition team. Just then, Lord Foronda’s carriage stopped outside the base. Guards hauled the five unconscious nobles into the carriage, and Lord Foronda promptly drove off. Ivy watched, worried.

“We can leave those nobles to him,” I reassured Ivy.

“Good.”

I smiled. Without the kid’s help, Lord Foronda probably wouldn’t have gotten involved. You’d never expect nobles to participate in such foolhardy business, after all. When I patted Ivy’s head, he looked up at me questioningly. What a strange kid. I had no idea if he knew the true scope of what he had accomplished today.

Ivy and I headed to the room that the team had set up for us. As we got settled, I asked him a question I’d been pondering about Sora.

“Say—can we reverse Sora’s method of communication?”

“Huh? How do you mean?”

“We’ll be inspecting a huge number of people. If that slime has to shake every time someone’s in the clear, it’ll get tired, right?”

“Oh, you’re right!” Ivy frantically looked to his bag and made his request. “Sora, don’t quiver when good people come up, okay? Only do it if they’re bad.”

Does the slime understand that? Let’s test it.

“Wanna check with my name to see if it works?” I offered.

“Sure. Bolorda,” Ivy said out loud. Sora seemed to stay perfectly still inside the bag. “I think it worked.”

I smiled. The little slime made this a piece of cake.

“Sorry, are you about ready? The line’s getting long,” Marcreek asked. Ivy nodded.

Hoo, boy. Time to see just how many people we catch.

“Ivy, Sora. If you get tired, we can take breaks when you need it.”

Ivy peeked inside the bag and nodded. “We’re good to go. Let’s do our best!”

“All right!” Lowcreek called outside. “Come in one at a time and state your name. As long as you’re innocent, you’ll be out of here in no time. If you leave the line, we’ll see you!”

Shortly after, the first person came in. The vice-captain stood at the door —it looked like we were starting with the guard trainees. I grasped my so-called magical item under the table.

“My name is Tabarida.”

I felt Ivy tugging my shirt. “Huh?!” I gasped in surprise.

Tugging on my clothes meant they were guilty. This felt a little too soon. *Man, I already don’t like this...*

“Traitor,” I declared.

Tabarida’s face went pale. He tried to run away, but the vice-captain seized him.

“Conspiring with them, are you?” the vice-captain demanded. “You’re coming with me... Oh, Rosay is here. Thank you for your assistance. I leave the rest to you.”

Thus the vice-captain left, dragging his trainee behind him.

“Er, Bolorda? You’ve already found one?”

“Hm? Yeah, guess so. Can’t believe our very first one was a rat.” I mussed Ivy’s hair. Having this kid nearby was good for the soul.

Chapter 102: I Did My Best!

So TIRED... We'd been at it for three hours now. Sora had been doing so much heavy lifting recently. I was on edge from having to communicate its judgments, too, so I was almost at my limit. I looked out the window. There were lots of people still in line, but it was markedly shorter now. We just had to keep it up a little longer...

"My name is Adaliculi." When the man in front of us said his name, my bag shook. I tugged on Bolorda's shirt.

"Get him," Bolorda said.

"Huh?! Wait a second. I'm not with the kidnappers, I mean it!" The man started to panic.

Huh? His reaction was a little strange. I tilted my head. We had arrested twenty-two people by this point. Twenty-two people in three hours...it was honestly too many. Were that many people actually in league with the organization?

The way this guy reacted was also different from the other twenty-two. Some had tried to make a run for it, and some had feigned calm to try to talk their way out. One person had screamed at Bolorda, but Gounga had punched him in the stomach, making him go pale. *I wonder if he's okay.* It was kind of his fault, though, so I let it go and focused on the person before us: He was pale and panicking. Nobody else had done that yet, right? Bolorda noticed as well and waited a moment to see what would happen.

"I mean it!" Adaliculi insisted. "I'm not involved with them. You can investigate me... I mean, umm..."

"Got a guilty conscience?"

"No! I just, um, it shouldn't be that...but he did get arrested, too, so..." This man seemed so timid. Could someone like him aid and abet kidnappers?

"Excuse me..." a woman who seemed to be the man's wife piped up.

"Keep quiet!" the man screamed.

"But if we don't explain now..."

"If you don't explain now, you'll be taken in for questioning—" Bolorda started to remind them before the man's wife interrupted.

"My husband just let them use it for a while!" the woman cried, ignoring her husband's pleading.

"Use what?" Bolorda demanded.

"My husband had an unused house, and they asked if they could leave some items there. He's renting it out to them on the condition that he doesn't breathe a word about it."

"Shut up!"

"Give it up! That guy was just arrested! And if you don't stop protecting him, we'll be next!"

"But...my debt..."

"Forget the debt! If people think we're in league with kidnappers, we'll have to leave this town forever!"

Is that true? I looked furtively up at Bolorda. He shrugged back. It must've been as she said. That makes sense. They said there were a lot of victims in this town, so it would be hard for the townspeople to forgive one of their own neighbors who helped the culprits.

"Where is the house?"

"It's a two-story building five houses down from ours. On the day of that raid a while back, a friend of my husband's came by. He seemed shady, but my husband agreed to it because he wanted to pay off his debt. Please forgive us."

On the day of the raid...were the items documents?! I glanced at Bolorda again; shock was all over his face. He'd reached the same conclusion. I get it. They caught wind of the crackdown in advance, but since they were in a hurry, they couldn't get the incriminating material to a safe place. So they had to hide it near the mansion. The captain did mention that he'd mobilized the entire guard force to patrol the town and that they'd strengthened patrols around the merchant's mansion specifically. That means they never had a chance to move it again.

"Interesting," Bolorda mused. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Huh? Um...Milea."

I felt bobbing in my bag. That surprised me, but I tugged on Bolorda's shirt. He froze up for a second, then chuckled. "Uh-huh. So you've cut ties with

the organization, have you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about..." The woman became visibly flustered.

"Don't lie. You knew exactly who you were helping. Isn't that right?"

"Wha—absolutely not! I swear I knew nothing. Maybe my husband did __"

"What the hell?!" her husband screamed. "You're the one who told me to take the deal!"

"Sh-shut up!"

"Don't tell me to shut up! This whole thing was your idea! I was against it from the start!"

"This never would've happened if you hadn't driven us into debt in the first place!"

"What?! When it comes down to it, *you're* the real reason we're in debt!"

Whoa, this is like a battlefield. I can't believe they can argue like this in front of the guard and Bolorda. He almost tricked us, too... Sora sure is incredible. I petted Sora's bag and felt it bobbing a little bit inside. How soothing.

"Argh...I feel like I'm twice as beat now." Bolorda sighed and buried his face in his hands. "Sorry, Rosay. Mind taking them away for us?"

"Will do."

On Rosay's orders, the guard trainees escorted the happy couple out. I could hear them even when they went outside—they were still going at it. *What interesting individuals they are.*

"Good work, Ivy." Rattloore placed a mug of hot tea on the desk in front of me and patted my head. "That was unexpected, huh? You okay?"

"Yes. They were very strange people."

As I drank the tea, the warmth spread through my body and relaxed me. I was even more worn out than I'd realized, but there were more people waiting. I looked to Bolorda and nodded once.

"All right!" he shouted. "Let's keep going!"

"Right. Next in line, please step this way!" Marcreek, standing at the door,

called to the people waiting outside.

Just a little longer!

Just under an hour later, I watched as the final person left. We still had adventurers to inspect later, but we'd cleared everyone in the area around the base, which was the largest group by far. I stood up and stretched. That felt nice.

"Well done, everyone. I'm not sure what to say..." Rosay said, staring at the mansion through the window.

The arrested guardsmen had already been taken away, so only the civilian conspirators were being held in the base for the moment. In total, we'd found thirty-four people working with the organization: twenty-three men and eleven women.

"That was a doozy," Bolorda agreed. "I'd expected around ten, not thirty."

So it had exceeded Bolorda's predictions, too. *Yeah. It really was too many.*

"It's gutting. We even lost five of our trainees." Rosay sounded sad. It wasn't easy to process the loss of his coworkers.

"Officer Rosay..."

"I'm fine. Ivy, I know today's been a long day for you. Good work."

"Same to you, Officer Rosay. Ah, it looks like the captain is back."

I spotted the captain outside. He had reformed the expedition party and was setting off to deal with the fugitives in the forest. I was worried—there were murderers among them—but the guard and adventurers seemed unconcerned. We exited the building and went to speak to the captain. He waved when he saw us, but when he got a good look at the base, he froze. He was probably gobsmacked by the sheer number of arrested townsfolk. The vice-captain next to him was just as astonished.

"Hey! Are you kidding me?" the captain asked, a little agitated.

"Awesome, right?" Bolorda replied. "We were just as surprised."

"Well, I wouldn't say *awesome*...though, yes, it is." The captain was all mixed up.

"Captain, take a deep breath," the vice-captain cut in. "Thank you for handling this, Rosay. Were there any issues?"

"My pleasure, sir. No issues...oh!" Rosay seemed to remember something

and looked to Bolorda.

Bolorda cocked his head in question, but he quickly caught on and scanned the area. When he spotted Lowcreek and Rickbert, he beckoned them over.

“We checked the house. They had more documents.”

Documents? Oh, the papers they snuck out of the merchant’s mansion during the crackdown? So that couple was telling the truth.

“Documents? What documents?”

“We found materials they snuck out of the mansion before the raid.”

“...Really?” The captain gazed at Bolorda.

“Yeah. A couple of birdbrains sang for us.”

The captain and vice-captain both raised an eyebrow. Rosay grinned. *So they had the documents after all. That’s one more nail in the organization’s coffin. And one more reward for our efforts!*

Chapter 103: Kind of a Big Deal

THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD and the GM discussed what to do with the people who had been taken into custody. Since we apprehended so many more than expected, they didn't have enough cells in which to keep them all. We'd already found way too many guards and civilians working with the organization, and there were plans to add more adventurers to that count. Just imagining the final total was terrifying. *And anyway, why were thirty-four of their people so close to the base? Is there some reason for such a large number? Hmm...I wouldn't know.*

And there were nobles, too, right? Lord Foronda took them. Where did they go? I feel bad for making him work. I'll have to thank him later...but can I even meet him? I watched the guards and adventurers bustle about as I put my feet up for a moment and drank some tea. The captain and the others had urged me to rest. I must've looked real tired.

But what's going on here? I glanced at the guard and adventurers again. They all should've been dog-tired by now, too. Why did they all seem so...cheerful?

"Good work today." While I absently watched the guard, Seizerk came up next to me.

Oops! My concentration is all messed up. It's not over yet, so I need to stay alert.

"You, too," I replied. "Is everything okay?" He'd been racing around since morning, so he must've been running on fumes, too.

"All good. Today, we beat the kidnappers. Everyone's high on that victory, so they don't feel tired at all."

Is that it? Everyone looks carefree because they dealt a major blow to the organization that's been troubling them for so long?

"How about you, Ivy? It must've been tough judging so many people, right?"

It was definitely harder than I'd expected...but all I did was sit there and pass on Sora's judgments.

“It was more difficult than I thought, but I was sitting, so it wasn’t too hard on me. Sora’s doing fine, too.”

“Huh. Well, don’t push yourself, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

Seizerk mussed my hair happily until someone called for him. He frowned in annoyance. “Ugh. Sorry to do this right after I told you not to push yourself, but we could use a little more help from you.”

“What’s wrong?”

“The remaining adventurers will be gathered here soon. Can we ask you to inspect them?”

I looked inside Sora’s bag in my lap. I’d put potions in there for it to eat not too long ago. Sora looked a little sleepy after its meal.

“Sorry, Sora. Can we ask you for a little more?” Sora quivered and began stretching. *Is that like a warm-up stretch?* Since it was trying to avoid falling out of my bag, it was stretching in a weird way. Once this trouble was all over, I’d let it stretch all it wanted out in the woods. I wouldn’t be stingy with the potions, either. “Sora says okay.”

“Oh? Wonderful.”

“Um, what will you do with the townsfolk you arrested?” I looked over at the culprits who had been gathered in front of the base. They had their hands tied behind their backs, and they were all tied to each other at the hip to ensure they couldn’t flee.

“This mansion has decently sized rooms, so the plan is to, uh, redecorate a bit and use them as cells. Former guards and the thugs from the forest will need more secure cells, but a simple locked door will do just fine for civilians.”

That made sense. Guardsmen and wanted criminals could probably escape simple cells, but civilians would be fine as long as they were monitored. From my vantage point, everyone looked resigned. Even those who’d resisted and claimed they had nothing to do with the organization gave up when we revealed Bolorda’s magical item. Every one of the conspirators had fallen silent by now.

Bolorda and Seizerk’s teams were veterans in this town. Their word was so ironclad that it could be used in sentencing. Thanks to that, nobody doubted Bolorda’s magical item. I’d thought all veterans were trusted like that, but apparently not. It depended on the town or village. In this town, that level of

respect was reserved for veteran teams who were both exclusively loyal to this town and recognized by the GM. I'd heard they were veterans, of course, but I had no idea Bolorda and the others were such a big deal.

And so was the GM! It'd been hard for me to believe it when I saw how he reacted to the revelation that his adventurers were traitors or when he'd slumped over upon catching sight of the nobles. His face and his actions didn't match others' description of him, so my first impression of him was more that he was...pitiful? Either way, I'd suddenly found myself surrounded by really important people. That was what shocked me the most.

"Oh, looks like they're here," Seizerk said. "We called some adventurers here to watch the base. I'll have the captain say their names individually, so can you have Sora inspect them?"

"Understood. Sora, let's do our best," I whispered to the slime in my bag. I felt it fidget a little. Comforted by Sora's response, I walked with Seizerk to meet the adventurers.

The group summoned by the GM wasn't very large. That was a relief—we could check them all pretty quickly.

"There you are," Bolorda said when he saw me.

From my place between Bolorda and Seizerk, I could see the adventurers were all staring at them. They must've admired these two. I looked up at them. Yeah, they were pretty cool when they stood up tall like that. When the captain explained that this group would be keeping watch on civilians who'd aided kidnappers, the adventurers all started clamoring at once.

"Silence," the GM commanded. The adventurers' mouths snapped shut. He hadn't even raised his voice... Was he just that important?

Adventurers were introduced one after another, and I had Sora inspect them. There were forty-one all together, from twelve teams. Each time Sora quivered, I tugged lightly on Bolorda's shirt hem. By the end, I'd tugged three times—three of the forty-one were traitors. And they each belonged to different teams, which went to show how deeply-rooted the organization was. Bolorda went back to the GM and broke the news. The GM's eyes drooped slightly. Seeing that downcast expression on someone who usually looked so scary made me sad. It was rare for him to look so vulnerable.

"The GM's a pretty tender guy. He must be taking it hard," Seizerk explained as I observed the GM.

I certainly couldn't tell him I found it a little funny that his face had changed so much. Never, ever. ...Maybe I was getting a little *too* tired.

"Yeah, maybe so," I muttered.

Sora quivered in my bag. It seemed like the slime was laughing at me—like it had read my mind. *I'm imagining it, right?*

"That brings our strategy to a close, doesn't it?" I asked Seizerk.

He looked down at me, amused. "It's been one heck of a day, hasn't it?"

I agreed. My strategy had required speed above all else. The guard and adventurers had been pretty incredible to execute it so quickly. Just then, I saw someone sprinting away from the group of adventurers.

"Ah!" I gasped. The next moment, I saw the GM chase after them incredibly fast...and nail them with a flying jump kick. "Ouch...that had to hurt."

The target of the jump kick was out cold. *He did have a lot of momentum there... That must've felt like a sledgehammer.*

"Ha ha ha! The GM's a frightening guy when he gets mad."

I can see that. I'd better be careful...especially not to laugh when I see his face!

Chapter 104: The Incredible Captain

THE NEWLY CAPTURED conspirators were hauled into makeshift cells inside the base. All of them were looking down in an attempt to hide their faces from view. Some of them were even weeping openly.

“Too late to regret it now. Why didn’t you think of the consequences before?” The captain’s words were harsh. I couldn’t blame him—they’d chosen this path of their own volition. Now they would have to spend a good long while taking responsibility for their actions.

I let out a long sigh. I was glad this strategy succeeded in landing a blow on the organization. They were sure to give up on kidnapping me as well, which meant I could continue my travels. Still, my mood wasn’t exactly jubilant. Maybe it was because this was my first time witnessing the anguish of people whose freedom had been lost.

“Don’t let them get you down,” Sifar said. When I looked up, I saw him and Rattloore. I must’ve looked pretty miserable.

“I know, but this is my first time seeing something like this...”

“Is it really?” Rattloore asked. “To be fair, we brooded over it a bit our first time, too.”

“Man, we were young. You used to be so cute back then, Rattloore!”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“Aww, you want me to tell Ivy about that? You’re brave.”

“No! Hey, don’t you dare say a word!”

What had happened back then? Rattloore was flustered, and his face was beet-red. *I’m really curious. Maybe later, I’ll just...*

“Ivy, you’re not planning to ask someone later, right? Right?! *He read my mind! And his expression is freaking me out!* I shook my head frantically. “Of course you’re not, right?”

That smile on his face is pure evil! I’m seriously curious, but I’d better mind my business. Once Rattloore’s smile returned to normal, he ruffled my hair a little. That was a relief.

Phew...oh! Those gloomy feelings from before are gone. Did Sifar bring up Rattloore's past just to make me feel better? These guys are all so nice... though Rattloore's agitation seemed real. Sifar knew he'd get mad, and he still brought it up, right? That one's definitely a schemer.

At that moment, I heard a scream from somewhere around the base. My whole body went tense at the sound.

"Don't worry." Sifar put a gentle hand on my shoulder. I responded with a grateful smile. "I do wonder what that was, though. I'll go check."

We moved from the courtyard to a spot where we could peer through the gate. Things had gotten a little wild around the former merchant's mansion.

"Seems like word that the conspirators were arrested has spread." Sifar looked serious now.

He turned his attention to a large crowd of townsfolk. People out there were demanding names of those arrested and clamoring for revenge. The guard was trying to calm the public, but there were too many people. Would they be okay?

"I don't like the size of that crowd." Rattloore looked grave as well.

What would they do?

"Will everything be okay?" I asked.

"Hm? I'm sure the captain and the GM can handle it. Oh, see?" Rattloore pointed. Following his line of sight, I saw the captain, vice-captain, and GM standing before the crowd.

"Quiet down!" The captain's voice reverberated through the area. The mass of townsfolk went silent at once. "The rumors you've heard are true. We've arrested a number of individuals found to be conspiring with the kidnapping organization that's been the source of so much suffering in this town."

Cheers erupted from the crowd. However, the vice-captain clapped once to stop them. As soon as the hubbub died down again, the captain continued.

"We've unmasked many traitors among the guard and adventurers. For that, I offer my humble apologies." The captain bowed, and the vice-captain and GM followed suit. The townspeople watched quietly. When the captain lifted his head again, he continued his explanation, speaking slowly.

"I am sorry to say we cannot release the names of those in custody at this

point, as we don't yet have conclusive evidence of each individual's crimes. Although we are confident in our information, we ask you to wait for the conclusion of our investigation before we make any public announcements."

All we had so far was Sora's assessment of character. We didn't know what each person had done for the organization. From here on, they would comb through the evidence and confirm each individual's criminal involvement. With all the people they had arrested today, they had their work cut out for them.

"To the people of this town, I have one request. Keep away from the accused."

The crowd booed and jeered. Some people were crying. The captain raised a hand for silence.

"I'm sure you're all aware that criminals are put to slavery, but how many of you know the extent of it? I certainly do. I know just how dreadful the place they're made to go can be."

At that, the disgruntled voices of the crowd faded. Everyone knew that criminals became slaves. As far as I knew, they were forced into labor somewhere. But I didn't know anything about that place, and it seemed the townspeople didn't, either.

"Once you're sent there, you can't meet death on your own terms. Every day you are tormented for the betterment of the world. Every day is agonizing beyond what words can express. It's a living hell that only ends the day you're finally forgiven for your crimes."

The townspeople seemed to calm down. The victims wanted their abusers to suffer. That was their one undeniable desire.

"If their lives end, then so too will the suffering. But will they be forgiven then? Can they be released from the pain they've caused that easily? I certainly won't let it happen. I'll make sure these criminals serve their sentence. That's why I'm asking you, here and now, to stay away from them."

Nobody booed the captain anymore. The vice-captain and GM relaxed their severe expressions.

"That was incredible," I said, watching in amazement. The captain had taken so much on his own shoulders.

"Hey, Ivy? About that..." Rattloore looked at me nervously. I tilted my head. What was wrong?

“Rattloore, I think Ivy gets it,” Sifar told him.

“Huh?” *What do I get?*

“Ivy, do you know why the captain said that?”

“Umm, he didn’t want the townspeople to commit crimes for the sake of revenge, so he took on the burden himself, yes? He’s very inspiring.”

If not for the captain’s powerful words, the enraged civilians might’ve overrun the base. They would’ve very likely killed the accused conspirators imprisoned inside. In that case, the victims would, even if for justifiable reasons, become criminals. That would be a tragedy. So the captain stepped up to tell them that he would make sure the criminals suffered for their whole lives. The captain had told that whole crowd—a sea of sadness, bitterness, and rage—that they needed to back off. All to calm their anger, even if just a little, so that it wouldn’t be directed toward those who had wronged them.

“See?” Sifar smirked at Rattloore a little proudly. Rattloore tousled my hair until it was a mess.

“Whoa! What?” I yelled.

“Sorry. I just can’t believe you understand the captain so well.”

“Understand? That he’s incredible, you mean?” I’d known that for a while now. His flexibility in adapting to any situation, his leadership, and his mental fortitude were all amazing. “I want to be just like the captain.”

“Huh?!”

For some reason, both Sifar and Rattloore sounded really surprised. *Is it that shocking?*

“Ivy, it’s too early for you to give up on life!” Sifar protested.

“Huh?”

“He’s right, Ivy. You don’t wanna be like the captain. You still have a bright future ahead of you!”

I thought we were talking about how great he is...?

“Guys...”

I heard a low voice behind us. It was the captain. For some reason he looked really unhappy. I hadn’t even noticed he’d already finished his speech.

“Thanks for all your hard work.” I greeted him with a smile. The captain

looked bewildered for a second, but soon after, his face became serene. I had to say, compared to how tense he'd looked before, this was way better.

Chapter 105: Lazy Morning

I SLOWLY REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS. I yawned and checked the entrance of my tent...and chuckled a little. I'd gotten so used to being on high alert lately. But caution wasn't a bad thing, so I figured I might as well keep it up. I'd learned a lot of things through this ordeal.

"Aaah...good morning," I said to Sora as I sat up.

Sora glanced at me and started stretching as hard as it could. The slime had been stuck inside that cramped bag the whole time yesterday.

After that tempestuous day, I didn't need to worry about anyone targeting me. The unease that had become part of my daily life was finally gone. Of course, I would need to stay wary during my travels, but at least for today, I wanted to relax. No sooner had I decided that, I heard a noise outside. My ears pricked up immediately.

"I'm hypersensitive now..."

Sora bounced into my lap and started quivering. Its rhythmical bobbing was its way of demanding food. Sora's different movements were subtle, but I'd started to figure out their meanings. Though...it was still difficult to be certain.

"Wait just a second."

I got out the bag where I kept Sora's potions and peered inside. *Huh? That's not many... Well, that makes sense. I gave Sora all the potions I had except for the ones it needed for this morning's breakfast since it worked so hard. I'll have to go to the dump to get more today.*

"Sora, let's go out and gather potions later. I'm worried about the adandara, too."

I'd been wondering about the adandara for a while. Ever since I started traveling with Seizerk's team, I hadn't seen hide nor hair of the catlike monster. My book said it was really strong, so I wasn't too worried, but it was a bit like a spoiled child in some ways. Sora stopped eating and started bouncing up and down in front of me. It seemed it wanted to see the adandara, too.

"Do you think the adandara's nearby? I'm concerned since we haven't

seen it in so long. I know! If it's still waiting, we should see if it would be okay to give it a name."

When you tame a creature, you give it a name. That was one of the few things I'd learned about my profession. But I didn't have enough mana, so I hadn't tamed the adandara. Would it be okay to name a monster I hadn't tamed? I could probably ask somebody, but I didn't want them getting too curious. Still, names were important. Maybe I'd ask the adandara directly if I saw it today.

Rattloore's voice filtered in from outside the tent.

"Ivy, you awake?"

"Yes. Just a moment, sorry. I'll come out soon."

I rushed to get dressed. Before leaving the tent, I checked to see if Sora was finished eating. The adventurers didn't know that Sora was eating lesser potions, container and all. If they did, they'd probably be really surprised to see it eating both organic and inorganic matter. I had a feeling Rattloore wouldn't cause any trouble for me even if it did surprise him, though.

"Good morning. Sorry I'm late."

When I emerged from my tent, Seizerk and Bolorda's teams were already awake. Wow. *They drank a whole lot last night to celebrate the success of our strategy, so I'm surprised they're up.* Marcreek and Seizerk were holding their heads, probably hungover, but the others were the same as ever. Sifar, who drank the most, was nonchalantly munching on last night's leftover meat for breakfast. *But Gnouga's still eating way more right next to him...*

"Morning. Not still pooped out from yesterday, are you?"

"I'm okay. Are you all doing well?"

"We're just fine, except for those two."

As he finished his meal, Sifar wiped his mouth with a cloth and beckoned me over. I approached curiously, and he pulled a chair out for me. I took a seat while Rattloore brought me soup and bread. It was soft white bread again—they must've gone shopping this morning.

"Thank you very much."

Rattloore seemed to be in a good mood. Had they received some good news?

"Ivy, the captain sent us a message."

“The captain?” Last night, the captain looked morose when he saw all the documents bring brought into the base. Reading over all of those would be an enormous amount of work. Still, the captain would be the last eyes on them, so we were counting on him. What sort of message would he have for us? “Erm... Right. What is it?”

“You don’t have to be so stiff. He only asked for a small favor, so it can wait until after you eat.”

“Oh...understood.” I tucked into my breakfast. Gnouga brought over a basket and set it in front of me. I stared up at him uncertainly.

“A friend of mine gave this to me as a thank you. It’s for you,” he said.

I swallowed my mouthful of bread and asked, “For me?” Soft bread was truly delicious.

“Yeah. It’s from one of the victims who lost a family member to the organization. He’s a former adventurer, sort of like a teacher to me and Sifar. Since you were with us, he guessed you were part of the plan. I thought I’d hid the truth well enough, but I guess not. He just came by with this.”

“Sorry the secret got out, Ivy,” Sifar apologized. “He may be retired, but he’s sharp as a tack still.”

Gnouga and Sifar’s teacher? I could only imagine he must be a very *unique* person.

“If he’s your teacher, then I’m not worried.”

“Thanks for saying that.” Sifar smiled at me. Gnouga looked happy, too.

Still, what could this be? I put my bread down and reached for the basket. When I opened it up, I smelled something sweet.

“Sweets?”

“Looks like it. I can’t imagine him buying pastries...eugh, what a horrifying thought.” Sifar seemed deeply bothered. So did Gnouga. What sort of man was their teacher if just buying sweets was enough to make everyone so... perturbed?

I ate the food they’d served me and cleaned up after myself. Then I made tea for everyone, and we relaxed together. It looked like Seizerk and the others were eager to take the day off, too.

“So what did the captain say?” I asked Bolorda. For some reason, he looked at me oddly. *Huh? I was just told that he’d sent a message...*

“Ah, right. My bad.” He shook his head. Perhaps the fatigue made him forget. “The captain says, ‘Wait a little while for your gratuity and reward. Two weeks, probably.’ He’s got a mountain of documents to review. The whole force of the town guard will be working on those, but I doubt they’ll get around to that soon.”

Gratuity? Reward? What’s he talking about?

“Sorry, can you explain? Is this related to the kidnappers?”

“Hmm. You hadn’t considered that at all, huh?” Bolorda chuckled.

For some reason, Rattloore had a big smile on his face. *What’s going on here? Everyone’s acting funny.*

“Yes, it is related to the kidnappers,” Bolorda answered. “You’ll be getting a gratuity for formulating and assisting with the strategy, and you’ll be getting information rewards, too.”

“Umm...”

It was less that I’d come up with a strategy and more that I’d just spurred everyone into action. And of course I’d helped—they were targeting *me*, after all. Could I really accept a reward?

“You look confused. Just accept it with pride, okay, Ivy? You’re the biggest contributor to our success. Alongside Sora, of course.” Rattloore patted my head merrily.

Oh, I see. The strategy was reliant on Sora’s judgments. They’re not really paying me, then; they’re paying Sora.

“I understand the gratuity, but why the information reward?”

“They pay out rewards for information on the organization. That system was set up to gather as much info as possible. Specifically, you provided information on Count Faltoria and Mira.”

I see. I suppose I did tell them about Mira and her brothers. And they’re counting what I told them about Faltoria, too? I’d have thought that one would fall under the gratuities paid to Sora.

“Don’t overthink it! There’s a lot of complex details that go into the whole thing.”

“Is it?” I cocked my head at Rattloore. What made it complex?

“Normally, the guard receives information, performs an investigation, and

then takes action. It's rare for information and action to be so muddled like they were this time."

Bolorda then chimed in, "Oh, also, you've got gratuities from other towns' and villages' adventurers' guilds coming your way."

"That would be related to the wanted criminals, right? I doubt that has anything to do with me..." That should've been the guard's doing. I'd understand them paying the adventurers who joined in the hunt, at least.

"Technically, yeah, but their capture was part of your strategy. So they consider you to have assisted in it."

Is that how it works?

"No such thing as too much money," Sifar said with a shrug. "Just take it."

He wasn't wrong. When summer passed, winter would come. Maybe it would be best to save up what lodging funds I could until then.

"You're right. I'll do that."

"Hooray!" Rattloore cheered. "Ivy, now you can buy a slave."

"Huh? Um, what do you mean?"

"Hm? Well, you're coming into money. And it's gonna be a whole lot of it. You could probably buy an expensive one."

Huh? That's scary...I was kind of just expecting it to be enough for room and board.

Chapter 106: Run!

I STROLLED THROUGH THE FOREST for the first time in a while. I was alert for any nearby auras, but it was still fun. It felt like my senses were more honed now. I could naturally sense problems before they arose. Had I grown thanks to all that had happened? It had been really stressful, but maybe a few good things had come of it.

“Doesn’t it feel nice out, Sora?”

Sora hopped and bounced all around me. It had only been able to move around in my tent for a while, so it seemed delighted to be out. Watching Sora bound around made me realize—it was really all over now.

“I hope there are lots of potions.”

We were on our way to the dump since I’d run out of potions for Sora to eat. But when we arrived, I was a little confused. There were lots of household goods thrown away, and they were all very badly broken. Had these belonged to the people we arrested? Witnessing the darkness within people cast a shadow over my buoyant mood.

“Phew... Okay. Let’s search for some potions.”

I refocused on my task and entered the dump. Since Otolwa was so big, there were plenty of potions. I didn’t really have to search. People here also tended to discard them as soon as they degraded a little, so from my perspective, they were in great shape. I was elated. Come to think of it, there were caves around this town. I’d heard that the magic stones dropped by the monsters within caves could fetch really high prices. Were there lots of rich adventurers around here?

Money, huh? Gratuities, rewards...I’ll be hugely relieved if I don’t have to worry about winter. I didn’t think I’d earn enough for an expensive slave, though.

“Oh, but I don’t know how much a slave costs.”

I was so stunned back then that I’d forgotten to ask. Though I’d probably have fainted on the spot if they told me. Come to think of it, Rattloore seemed really happy about it. He was the one who told me to buy a slave for protection if

I planned to continue traveling, right? I could understand it, but...slaves? Something about it bothered me...like there was a wall in my heart. It was as if I innately recoiled at it. Why, though? *Okay, I'll just set this aside for now. I've got two weeks until it's even on the table, after all.*

I'd asked Bolorda to pass on to the captain that I was okay with waiting. I was in no hurry, and I was looking forward to taking things slow and hunting again. And the adventurers would probably be just as busy as the captain right now, since the guard had made a formal request for their services.

They wanted Bolorda, Seizerk, Lowcreek, and Marcreek to sort through the papers they'd found. Sifar, Rickbert, and Rattloore would help get testimony from the convicts. Gnouga's job was to keep Sifar from doing anything at all. What did they think Sifar would do, though? Rattloore had laughed uproariously when that request came. *Maybe I'll ask Sifar... Well, no. A lot has happened.*

"Ugh. My hips..." I stood up from where I'd been bent over collecting potions and stretched. I had stuffed as many as I could into the magic bag. "Sora, let's explore a little deeper into the forest."

We'd walked all this way without seeing the adandara. Could it have gone off somewhere? I couldn't blame it, even if it made me sad. Sora bounced over to my side. Surprisingly, the slime hadn't gotten itself lodged in garbage today. Had Sora matured, too?

We left the dump and walked deeper into the woods. Going too far could mean running into strong monsters, so we were cautious. I looked around the brush and up trees as I went, but I didn't see the adandara.

"Did it decide to leave?"

"Pu, pu?"

Hm? Something about Sora's sounds seem off.

"What's the matter?" I picked up Sora and sensed something approaching. It felt like an adventurer, since its aura was faint. Before all this, I wouldn't have noticed until it was much closer. "Sora, hide."

I stashed Sora in a bag. Something about that aura felt...dangerous. Sweat trickled down my back.

"What do I do...?"

Oh! They're not alone. There's someone at the front, and then there's one...no, three people behind them! Four all together. I wanted to run, but they

were coming up on me so fast that there was nowhere to go. *They're really close now!*

"Huh? What's a little guy doing in a place like this? Oh, you're that kid Ivy, aren't you?"

Calm down! I managed to stop myself from stiffening with panic and turned toward the source of the voice. It was a man with a gentle smile. But the other three hadn't shown themselves. I took slow breaths so my voice wouldn't falter.

"Yes. As I recall, you were the adventurer who came to the plaza to summon Seizerk's team?" I remembered. He was sent to get them the day after we came to town.

"Aww, you remember me? That's right! The name's Harrell. I'm an experienced adventurer. Nice to meetcha."

When Harrell introduced himself, the bag hanging from my shoulder quivered slightly. *Oh no! I'm all alone, and he's got three friends with him.* I sensed them circling left and right to surround me. I couldn't escape. How could I create an opening to slip through?

"It's my pleasure," I responded. "What brings you out here today?"

"Hm? Ah, y'know, business."

"Business?"

"Yeah. We got some info on a dangerous monster, so I came to check it out."

You're lying. If that's the reason, why are your friends hiding? I wanted to ask. Urgh, what do I do? Should I play along until there's an opportunity to run? Mira's strategy was to drug me... If they do that, I won't be able to do anything at all. Should I chance it...?

"You're lying, aren't you?"

"Huh?"

"You're with the kidnappers, aren't you? I know your three friends are here, too."

Harrell's eyes went wide. I felt the other three's surprise as well. *Now, where do we go from here?*

"What are you—" he began, but I stopped him.

“The captain and the GM already know about your dirty business.”

God, I wish they did. Harrell was visibly flustered.

Now!

I rammed into Harrell and ran like mad.

“Ah, hold up! What are you doing? Get him! He’s worth good money!”

The other three had hidden in the forest behind me in case I slipped away from Harrell. Because of that, I figured it’d be best to take him by surprise and run toward him. I’d succeeded in getting past him, but adult legs were longer and faster than mine.

“Don’t think you can get away!”

I heard the men’s voices and footsteps close behind. Had my strategy failed? No matter what, I couldn’t give up now!

“You little...!” A rough hand grabbed my arm and slammed me against a tree. The impact knocked the wind out of me.

“Ow!”

“Hey! Don’t damage the goods!”

What goods?! Wanna say that to my face?!

“Hah! Hey, a few scratches are no biggie, right? We’re taking him to that pervert, anyway.”

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, guess so.”

He was squeezing my arm so tight it hurt from shoulder to wrist. *I’m so mad. How can I...*

Just then, I heard a terrified shout.

I wanted to look, but I was too focused on the pain in my chest and my arm.

“Huh? Why...”

“Wha—the hell are you doing?!”

Gggrrrrr...

I heard a low-pitched rumble. The man squeezing my arm trembled and relaxed his grip. I swiftly swung my arm out and broke away. For some reason, his hand fell away easily.

“Hm?” Puzzled, I looked back at the man. He had gone pale, and his eyes were fixed on something over my shoulder.

“Huh? What?”

Hissss! A fearsome sound came from behind me. Instantly, the man fell back.

I glanced around and saw the other men had all fainted dead away. Harrell sat on his backside, shaking like a leaf. I finally mustered strength in my own quaking body and turned around.

“Oh!” I immediately relaxed. Behind me was the adandara, fangs bared, glaring daggers at Harrell. Its eyes flicked to me as it stalked up to Harrell. Then, it opened its enormous jaws wide...and Harrell fainted. *I’ve never seen someone’s eyes roll back like that!*

All my strength left me as I slumped down on the spot. My bag started wriggling, and Sora peeked out.

“The adandara saved me,” I told the slime. Sora started bouncing around gleefully. The adandara padded over to me and rubbed its face against my head. The familiar sensation instantly lifted my mood—I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed it. I hugged the adandara’s neck tight.

Purrrr.

Adandara, it’s you! I finally get to see you again!

Chapter 107: My Friend

THE ADANDARA SMELLED like sunlight. Just sniffing its fur was enough to ease the fearful tension in my body and mind.

“Thank you. I was so scared.”

Before I knew it, tears were falling. When I’d rushed the man, when he’d grabbed my arm, the pain of my injuries...all of it was terrifying. So, so scary. As I clung to the adandara’s neck and cried, I heard its gentle purring. Its body heat warmed me through.

Then came Sora’s silly cries. “Pu, pu!”

“Ha ha ha, thank you. I’m okay now.”

I let go of the adandara and smiled at my companions. Sora bounced around with its usual energy, and the adandara purred. I surveyed my surroundings. What would I do about the four men on the ground here? *Well, I guess I’ll have to tell the captain...but I’ll have to explain why they all fainted, right? What should I say? Oh! Someone’s hurrying this way. Who is it? More of them, maybe?* I wasn’t as worried as before—this time, I had the adandara with me.

“Huh? What are those auras?” I sensed the adventurers who had been my companions these past few days. A few minutes later, Bolorda appeared looking panicked. Sifar and Gnouga already had their swords drawn. Rickbert and Rattloore looked ready to fight.

“Ivy! Thank God!” Rattloore was relieved to see me but soon went goggle-eyed. What was wrong? “Ivy, come this way...slowly...”

Rattloore spoke in a low voice and reached out to me. He was tense with fear. He wasn’t the only one—everyone was plainly terrified. I was a little perplexed. Weren’t we all safe, since the adandara was here? The ruffians who’d fainted weren’t getting up. Did they have more friends around? I searched for more auras, but I didn’t sense anything that felt like them.

The purring adandara rubbed its nose against me over and over. I cocked my head as I stroked the fur between its eyes. What had them so scared?

“Huh?”

I heard their surprised gasps and looked over at them. They were all staring back at me. *What? What do you see?* I patted the adandara to get it to settle down a little. It seemed really happy to see me after so long, but I was curious about how the guys were acting.

“Umm...” *What should I say?*

As I hesitated, Rattloore edged a little closer. “Er, Ivy? That monster behind you...”

Monster?! I turned around. The adandara and I locked eyes. Its tail swished from side to side really fast... Did that mean it was pleased? It was also batting at the ground, scattering some dirt around. It seemed like the adandara was getting stronger by the day. Wait a second...monster?

“Oh!”

I totally forgot! Adandaras are high-level monsters. It takes several teams of veteran adventurers to hunt just one. The book said you shouldn't even go near one if it hasn't hurt anyone yet. Hmm...what do I do here? We locked eyes again. The adandara purred contentedly and rubbed up against me.

“Umm, it's a travel buddy,” I said. I didn't want to hide the truth from my companions. Besides, I wanted to introduce my precious friend. It had saved me more than once by now, after all.

“I-I think I get it...? Is that mark on its forehead the same as Sora's?”

Mark? I looked at the adandara and caught sight of the mark. Huh?! My mind went blank. That was the symbol that was supposed to appear when it was tamed!

“Ivy, you're one heck of a tamer! Um, Ivy? You okay?” Bolorda asked.

That's strange. I didn't tame it because I don't have enough mana. So why...?

“Beh... Sorry. I'm fine.” I'd made a weird noise. *Calm down. I can think about this later.*

“Is it okay if I come closer?” Sifar asked, approaching timidly. I nodded; the adandara wasn't scary to me, after all. Bolorda and the others looked amazed. “It's like a miracle to see an adandara so close-up! What's its name?”

Name? Oh, if I've tamed it, then it should have a name. Except...I haven't tamed it. But the mark shouldn't appear unless it's tamed. What is that mark,

then? I'd considered giving it a name after asking its permission, but it'd be weird if I didn't answer now.

"It's Ciel," I answered. That was another word Past Me knew. Apparently it meant "sky," just like Sora. I thought it was perfect.

Would it get mad at me for naming it? I looked at the adandara. Its tail was swishing like crazy, so it must've been happy. *Well, that's good. But...*

"Ciel, could you stop batting your tail around, please? You're gonna bury that guy there."

It was slapping the ground with its tail pretty hard, to the point that it was digging a hole. The dirt flying around showered the fallen kidnapper, burying him a little. At my request, its tail stopped on a dime. Ciel turned around, looked at the man on the ground, and brushed the dirt off him with its tail. It used such force that the man was thrown to the side. It then looked at me expectantly, as if waiting to be congratulated on a job well done. My attacker wasn't buried anymore, sure, but it hadn't exactly done a "good" job. The man groaned—had he hit something when he fell?

"Whoa. It threw him with its tail..." Gnouga was amazed. Bolorda cheered, and Sifar looked at Ciel's tail curiously. Rickbert tried to get closer to Sora, but Rattloore held out a hand. Nobody seemed very worried.



“Will he be okay?” I asked.

“He deserved it,” Sifar replied with a big grin.

“He’s still alive...”

I can’t deny that he deserved it, but I’m not quite sure he’s still alive...not that I can say much when Sifar’s smiling so evilly.

“I suppose. By the way, what are you all doing out in the forest?”

Why did Bolorda and the others come here, anyway?

“We were interrogating the captured adventurers and learned that they still had more allies at large,” Sifar explained breathlessly. Gnouga looked a little fed up next to him.

Bolorda added, “The guard got to work immediately when they heard the news from Sifar, but a few of the implicated people were still missing. The gatekeeper happened to see one of them had followed you into the forest, too.” He punctuated that with a shrug.

Rattloore continued, “So we rushed out to search for you, but it’s a big forest, so we didn’t know where to look. That was real stressful... We wandered around until we heard a monster growling. When we followed the sound, we found you here.” He looked at the adandara.

Monster growling? I was so focused on running away that I didn’t notice. Did Ciel call them over to help save me?

“I wonder if that was Ciel growling?” Rattloore mused. I couldn’t be sure.

“I was pretty desperate to escape, so I didn’t hear anything.”

Rattloore grabbed my shoulders. “Wait, you were trying to escape? What’d they do to you?” he demanded.

I explained everything that had happened.

“Darn...” Sifar shook his head. “You’ve been through a lot, huh? And it sounds like they’ve got a perverted friend, too. I think we’ll need to have a nice, looong chat with them. Don’t you think, Gnouga?” Now he had a really wide smile on his face.

Bolorda and Rickbert promptly looked away. Rattloore was wearing a vicious grin, too. *It’s okay. If Gnouga is with him, I’m sure he can stop anyone from committing another crime.*

“Right,” Gnouga answered. “I’ll get things ready.”

Huh? Isn’t he supposed to keep Sifar in line?

As I watched Gnouga, he added with a smile, “Don’t worry. They’ll try to keep mum about their pervert friend, but we have ways to make them talk.”

No...I think they’ll be very willing to talk if they just see your faces. Not that I’m certain you’ll give them the chance... And if you’re just trying to persuade them to talk, then what do you need to prepare? I looked at Bolorda, but he was facing a different direction altogether.

“Mr. Bolorda?”

“Ha ha ha! Don’t ask me for help.”

Ciel rubbed Sifar’s shoulder dotingly with its nose. He smiled. “Leave them to me, little adandara.”

Purrrr. It seemed Ciel was in full agreement.

Chapter 108: Oddly...Relaxed?

I HAD TO ASK CIEL to hide for a little longer. Adandaras were incredibly rare monsters, and nobody had ever heard of one being tamed. If rumors spread, I would probably be targeted again. They wouldn't be able to use force to get me if I had Ciel, but I had plenty of other weaknesses to take advantage of. Humans are truly ruthless creatures.

"Ciel, I'll be back as soon as we take this group into custody. Can you wait for me?"

It purred at my words and bounded off into the woods. Its speed was always a sight to behold.

"Wow... By the way, Ciel looks like a young one, huh?" Rattloore mused.

"Does it? I wouldn't know how to tell."

"Hmm, I think? Adandaras aren't very well-known monsters." Rattloore shook his head, trying to remember something.

There wasn't much information about them in my book, either, at least compared to other monsters. It had info on their shape and size, fur color, and favored foods, but it didn't have anything about their growth.

"Young adandaras are rare," Sifar added. "It's said that juveniles stay with their parents for ten years."

They spend ten years with their parents? That's rare for monsters. Apparently Ciel is young, but is it more than ten years old?

"That one looks younger, though. Maybe two or three years old? I'd guess it got kicked out." Sifar gazed in the direction Ciel ran off in with a thoughtful look.

"Kicked out?" I didn't like the sound of that.

"Adandaras only raise strong offspring. If they decide a cub is weak, it gets kicked out of the pride. A lot of the rejected cubs are killed by their own parents."

I gasped at Sifar's words as I recalled the state Ciel was in when I'd first met it. Back then, the adandara was dying. I'd always wondered what had

attacked such a strong monster, but...was it Ciel's own parents all along?

"It's awful," Rattloore said. I had to agree.

"Maybe it seems callous from a human perspective, but the world of monsters is kill or be killed. If you don't have strong offspring, your bloodline just might end there." Sifar shrugged.

Strong offspring... That was true of humans, too. At the end of the day, I was abandoned as a starless weakling. Were Ciel and I kindred spirits?

"Pu, pu!"

"Hm?"

"Huh?"

Hearing Sora's cries, Rattloore and Sifar turned to stare at the slime. I tilted my head.

"Ah!" *Come to think of it, I miight not have mentioned that Sora talks. I mean, I thought all slimes did. Maybe most slimes don't make noise? Based on their reaction, other slimes don't talk.*

"Sora really is special, huh?" Sifar nodded in apparent understanding. Rattloore did the same.

Sora bounced around excitedly.

"All ready," Bolorda said. "Hide Sora for a little... What's the matter?" He'd noticed the atmosphere was off and was worried. *Should I tell him Sora makes noises?*

"It's nothing," Sifar promptly answered. "Are the kidnappers conscious yet?" It seemed he wanted to keep it quiet. As I hid Sora in my bag, I wondered why. They had suggested before that Sora's unusual appearance alone was enough to make it worth hiding, after all.

"Gnouga's waking them up. Bit of a pain to drag 'em off while they're out cold."

I heard a few pained groans in the distance. It seemed Gnouga's way of waking them up was a little heavy-handed. Was the guy who Ciel smacked with its tail okay? He'd taken quite the beating by now.

A short while later, the four apprehended men all tottered toward us. Their arms were tied behind their backs, but they weren't tied at the waist... Maybe the adventurers decided that their prisoners had no chance of escape. The four

looked terrified, their eyes darting in all directions. What had them so spooked?

“Get a move on,” Gnouga ordered them. One flinched in surprise. The jumpy one stood out a little among the group of adventurers.

“I didn’t think you would be with them,” Sifar said to the man.

The stranger tried desperately to turn his head away from Sifar. *Does he know that guy?*

“He’s the eldest son of a slave trader,” Rattloore explained.

“Slave trader?”

“Hm? Oh, a legal trader. Not a black market one.”

I see. He’s the son of a legal slave trader. That’s why he doesn’t look like an adventurer. Why would an eldest child take such a risk, though? Normally, he would inherit the family business. Is the whole family in league with the organization? If so, it wouldn’t be weird that the eldest son is, too. And if the organization goes under, well, that would just be more business for his family. While I looked searchingly at the man, I heard Sifar chuckle quietly.

“Umm, what’s wrong?”

“Heh, I was just wondering if you’re thinking what I’m thinking.”

“...That his whole family might be involved with the kidnappers, you mean?”

“So you do think so! But why?”

“I’ve heard that eldest sons and daughters are special to families.”

“Heh heh,” Sifar laughed again. “So we’re zeroing in on the same issue. I think you have a similar thought process to mine.” Similar to Sifar? That made me a little happy, and I couldn’t help but smile. “I’ve never seen someone pleased to hear we were alike. It’s kind of refreshing.”

“Like minds with Sifar, huh? That’s a chilling thought.” Rickbert shuddered.

Why does he say stuff like that? Don’t be mean.

“Rickbert, let’s have a niiice, long chat later.”

“Eep!”

I think he deserved that. Hey, why are the captives shaking, too?

Bolorda sighed. “That’s enough, Sifar. C’mon, let’s get moving.”

That's enough? Enough of what? Was he sending malice at him or something? I'd heard that veteran adventurers were able to freely point malice around. I'd always thought that was awesome, if it was true. Sifar was incredible.

"You sure like Sifar, don't you, Ivy?" Rattloore commented, a little confused.

Do I? I tilted my head in thought...but I *did* like him, so I nodded. I agreed with what he said and did most of the time.

"Hooray!" Sifar mussed my hair gently. I smiled.

"It's rare for kids to take to you." Gnouga looked back and forth between us uncomfortably.

"Yeah. Most kids are terrified of me."

"Terrified? I think you're very nice, Mr. Sifar."

Bolorda and Rickbert winced at my words. Gnouga and Rattloore chuckled grimly.

The captured men had more trouble walking than expected, so it took us a long time to get back to town. The gatekeepers looked flustered when they spotted us. One of them ran over. Had something happened?

"Hey there!" Rattloore greeted them. "Ivy's safe and sound."

"Thank goodness. The vice-captain keeps coming by to 'check up' on us."

The vice-captain? We haven't spoken much. Does he need something from me?

"Ivy, you sure do attract some characters. Sifar would be the biggest example." Rickbert made another unnecessary remark.

As expected, Sifar smiled at him in a way that made him blanch. Bolorda looked fed up with both of them.

"Does Rickbert want Sifar to bully him?" I wondered.

"Pfft!" Rattloore guffawed next to me.

I glanced up at him, and he looked away, suppressing laughter. *Oh no. Did I say that out loud?*

"I'm not saying Rickbert has any weird fetishes, okay?!" I tried to explain, but I ended up shouting.

“Huh? Uh, what, Ivy? What was that about my *fetishes*?” Rickbert called out frantically after handing over the criminals to the guardsmen.

Rattloore and Sifar were cackling. Gnouga’s shoulders shook with laughter, too. *I’m glad you’re all having fun at my expense! And I’m sorry, Rickbert. I wasn’t trying to be mean!*

Chapter 109: Ciel

RICKBERT WANTED TO KEEP questioning me about fetishes, but after we handed over the captives, I decided to return to the forest. Bolorda and the others were worried, but they agreed when I reminded them Ciel could protect me.

While I trekked back, I thought about the mark on Ciel's forehead. I hadn't had a chance to get a good look, but it was definitely like Sora's. I kept an eye out for any nearby auras as I took Sora out of its bag and examined its mark.

"Hmm, looks the same..."

But with my level of mana, I shouldn't have been able to tame Ciel at all. I'd only just named it, too...yet it already had the mark. What was going on? Would I be able to figure anything out if I saw the adandara again?

As I delved deeper into the woods, I felt Ciel's presence on the wind. It was nearby. I scanned for a spot with trees thick enough to hide the adandara. Adandaras were rare monsters, so there might be a huge commotion if Ciel was found. I wouldn't want people seeing it and hunting it down, so I'd have to be careful from now on. I stopped walking, and Ciel jumped down from a nearby tree.

"Thanks for before, really. I'm sorry I haven't been able to come visit."

Purrrrrrr. Purrrrrrr.

It purred and swished its tail, rubbing its head against me. I stroked its neck. Sora was bouncing and bumping into Ciel again. It bounced off each time...but it was probably fine? Sora looked like it was having a ball.

"Oh yeah. Ciel, may I see your forehead?" The adandara stopped nuzzling me and went still. "Thank you."

I felt the small mark on Ciel's forehead. My fingertips brushed the familiar bumpy feeling of that symbol. There was no doubt—it was the exact same pattern as Sora's. Yet it wasn't connected to me. I touched Sora's mark and felt that we were connected, yet I didn't feel that when I touched Ciel's.

"Ciel, I haven't tamed you, right? What is this mark?" I asked. The adandara tilted its head. Moments later, its forehead began to glow. "Huh? It's

gone!"

The mark had disappeared before my eyes. When I touched the adandara's forehead, I felt nothing. What was going on? As I watched on quizzically, it glowed again. The mark reappeared. Now when I touched it, I felt the bumpiness from before.

I gazed into Ciel's eyes. "Are you...making this mark yourself, Ciel?" It purred and looked back at me. It seemed to be saying yes.

The taming symbol was something that appeared as a manifestation of the tamer's mana; it wasn't a thing you could just make because you felt like it. The form of mana differed from person to person, so no two people had the same mark. Since the marks appeared naturally, fake ones could quickly be found out...or so the book had said. Was that wrong? Or was Ciel special? Either way, the books represented accepted knowledge on the subject, so this could be a big deal if people found out. It would be best if no one saw the mark at all, but if they *did* see Ciel, the mark would show them it shouldn't be hunted.

"Hmm... This is tricky."

And even if I truly could tame Ciel, I couldn't bring it into town. According to Bolorda, adandaras were among the ten rarest monsters and the three most dangerous. Bringing it into town would cause a huge uproar, so I'd best not. I already knew adandaras were strong and rare, but I had no idea they were *that* special.

"Ciel, we can travel together, but you can't go into the town. I'm sorry." Ciel continued to purr. Apparently, that didn't bother it in the least.

What should we do about the mark, though? Should I ask someone? It would probably be safe to ask Rattloore and Sifar. Urgh...they were okay with Sora, but what about Ciel? They were only so calm because they thought I tamed it. If they knew I hadn't...would they hunt it? I'm just not sure...

"What should I do?"

I hugged Ciel tight. The catlike monster was warm. Sora bounced vigorously enough to leap onto the adandara's back. *Wow, Sora's a high jumper! It's gotten a lot stronger without me realizing. I need to get stronger, too. But first, I need to put my faith in the people I've decided to trust.*

"It'll be fine, right?"

Purrrr.

“Pu pu, pu pu!”

Ha ha ha! It always calms me down when Sora makes that noise. Yeah, I'm gonna believe in the adventurers. They've protected us thus far, after all.

“Okay. With that decided...oh! They did say they'd get back late today.”

The adventurers had a lot of loose ends to tie up with regard to the organization. The papers we found contained the names of nobles and other high-ranking citizens from surrounding villages and towns, too. They were contacting each guard force and guild, but since the information was so explosive, it was causing a bit of a ruckus...or something. Bolorda and the others were astonished at how widespread the operations were, too.

Not even a day had passed and all the prisoners were pointing fingers at each other. As a result, the interrogators were getting a whole lot of tips on crimes they didn't even know about. Sifar was especially good at inspiring them to speak, apparently. *That's Sifar for you.*

“I should make a meal that'll be delicious whatever time they come home. Stews and braises do tend to taste better when you've warmed them back up...”

I'll do what I can. Also, I need to hunt.

“Let's see if we can find some materials for traps in the dump.”

Purrrr. Purrrr. Purrrrr... Mrrrow.

Hm? I heard a strange noise, so I looked at Ciel. The adandara stared back at me.

“Did you just meow?”

Mrrrow.

That's cute. It doesn't look like it should be able to make a noise that cute. The book hadn't mentioned anything about adandaras meowing. It had only mentioned them making that throaty growl noise to intimidate things. *Hmm...no matter how hard I think about it, that book definitely didn't mention anything about cuteness.*

Sora bounced back and forth on Ciel's back. It seemed like the slime was glad to hear our friend's voice. I didn't mind the bouncing, but I was a little nervous it would tumble off and get hurt.

“Sora, you're gonna fall.” At my warning, Sora bounced up onto Ciel's head. The adandara didn't look especially bothered. “Ciel, if you don't like that, make sure you tell Sora. I don't know if I like Sora being on your head, either.

How about we get you down?"

I cradled Sora in my arms and petted it.

"Pulupulu!"

This is fun. I wasn't at all confident that I could shake off the kidnappers until yesterday, so... Okay, let's do this!

"Let's head to the dump and then back to the town."

The dump was my first stop because I needed to get parts for traps. I had rope left but not much. I wanted baskets, too, but I'd be better off learning to make them myself. What would I need? Tree bark...? *Maybe I should ask someone how to make them first. Next...*

Tug.

Hmm? Something pulled on me, so I looked back. Ciel was tugging on my clothes with its mouth.

"What's the matter? You're gonna stretch my clothes."

Ciel released me, and its purring changed tone. It had made this particular noise before... I think it was when I suggested going to the dump? Did Ciel dislike dumps?

"Do you hate dumps, Ciel? But I don't remember you acting like that around them..." We'd been to forest dumps before, and it didn't seem mad then. *Hmm... Oh!*

"Are you going hunting?"

Purrrr. Purrrr.

Is it telling me to let it take care of the hunting? I'd never wanted for meat since Ciel started traveling with me. In fact, I ended up with too much sometimes. It would always bring back so much prey along the way—far more than I could bag on my own. Still, relying on Ciel was a disadvantage for me in the long term, since hunting was a good way to learn about monsters and animals. It had also helped me be more sensitive to the environment of the forest.

"Hey, Ciel? I need to hunt to learn, so you don't need to... Actually, how about we do it together?"

Mrrrow. Ciel meowed happily at my suggestion.

Good. I didn't think it would look so sad just because I didn't want it to

hunt for me... How can I say no to those eyes?

Chapter 110: This Again?!

THE DAY FLEW BY WHILE I was fishing around in the dump.

“See you tomorrow, Ciel.” I left my friend in the woods and trudged back to town. I wished we could go together, but it sounded like it was impossible, so I had to give up on that idea. It was really too bad.

As I said hello to the gatekeeper and went through the town gate, a man approached.

What does he want?

He bowed deeply. “Excuse me,” he said, “my name is Alivus, and I assist the vice-captain. That oaf...excuse me, *the vice-captain* says he wishes to see you. He is fine with any time tomorrow onward. Does that suit your schedule?”

I felt some kind of darkness emanating from Alivus. And he did call the vice-captain an oaf...

“Any time is fine, but...” I didn’t have a lot to do, so I was free whenever. “Isn’t the vice-captain busy?”

“Hah! I’m sure he’s fine. You can trust me on that.”

What does that mean? It sounds like he’s trying really hard to imply something. And he looks like he’s about to keel over.

“Are you okay, sir? You seem tired.”

He sighed. “Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“Huh?! Umm...hear what?”

“The captain, the vice-captain...” Alivus began to expound at length. His complaints turned into reproach. He went on about the unfairness of it all, then he started whining... He had a lot to get through.

Alivus carried on until a passing guard frantically stopped him. *I didn’t think I’d end up listening for almost thirty minutes...*

“Sorry! I’m really very sorry,” he apologized profusely. “I guess all that was really just building up...truly sorry.” When Alivus was in his right mind, he was really humble. Was that why he’d stored up so many complaints?

“It’s okay. I know you’re all working hard on the investigation. Tomorrow, I’ll come to the station myself. When would be a good time?”

“Are you certain? He’ll probably be free at lunch. You’re absolutely sure, though?”

“That’s fine. Would you tell the vice-captain that I’ll stop by around lunch, please?”

“Understood. That’s a big help. Thank you very much.” Alivus bowed over and over apologetically.

I can see why he gets so stressed, he’s way too considerate.

After leaving Alivus, I thought about what to make for dinner as I walked back to the plaza. For reasons I didn’t understand, we always had plenty of meat. Gnouga kept replenishing it despite all his complaints about how busy he was. There were lots of people in the group who liked it, so maybe I’d stew a nice cut of meat? I could season it with herbs—*medicinal plants*—and use a sweet-and-slightly-sour vegetable called toma. It was usually eaten raw, but it was good cooked, too.

As I added the meat and toma to the pot, a delicious smell wafted out. Every so often, nearby adventurers would look over with interest, but they gave up when they saw the tent. Bolorda’s tent was apparently special-ordered, so it was easy to see whose it was at a glance. When the other adventurers saw I was cooking for Bolorda and his friends, they waved and kept their distance. Nobody complained, so I could relax and focus on cooking.

I looked toward the plaza entrance, but nobody seemed to be returning yet.

“Maybe I shouldn’t wait up for them. They sure are busy.”

It looked like I’d be eating dinner alone for the first time in a while. I checked on the pot and dished out a single serving for myself. The meat had simmered a long time, so it was falling-apart tender. The flavor of the potatoes that had cooked with it complemented the meat well. The potatoes weren’t very sweet, so it was a good pairing. I especially liked how soft and flaky they were.

“That smells mighty good,” someone said. I turned.

“Huh? Vice-Captain...?”

That’s strange. I was supposed to meet him tomorrow, but here he is now.
Next to him were Sifar, Gnouga, and a very tired-looking Marcreek.

“Thank you for all your hard work today. Shall we eat together? Um,

Bolorda and the others bought the ingredients, but..."

"May I join you if I brought something to contribute? Here you go." He handed me a hot loaf of bread.

Hm? That doesn't make much sense. He can eat if he gives me something? When did that become a rule? He can eat as much as he wants even if he doesn't give me anything. Er, though the ingredients do belong to the adventurers...

"Smells good. See, Marcreek? Aren't you glad you decided to come?"

"Decided to? You forced me...ah, who cares? It does smell wonderful. And even you tagged along, Vice-Captain, so it's fine. Alivus seemed pretty cranky, though..."

Alivus? As I dished the stew onto four new plates, my ears perked up at the familiar name.

"Don't worry. He knows how to keep it together while he's working."

Is Alivus gonna be okay...?

"Please don't push him too much!" I warned the vice-captain as I set a plate in front of him at the table.

"Huh? Do you know Alivus, Ivy?"

"Yes. You asked him to deliver a message to me today, right?"

"Oh! Yeah, I did. Thanks for getting back to me, by the way." I looked at the vice-captain with clear exasperation. He chuckled back. "Sorry. I'll be careful."

Marcreek made a curious face next to him. He looked...flummoxed? Flabbergasted? It was hard to explain.

"What's the matter, Mr. Marcreek?"

"Huh? I mean, the vice-captain, of all people...he just apologized to you!"

You can say "of all people," but I've barely spoken to him. I don't really know what he's like usually, so that doesn't mean much...

"Ummm...I don't understand," I replied.

"Ivy, have you never talked with the vice-captain?"

"No. We only said hello, I think."

"Huh. Well, the vice-captain is famous for never apologizing," Marcreek said.

That didn't sound like a very nice thing to say about him.

"How rude!" the vice-captain protested. "I always apologize if I think I'm in the wrong."

The vice-captain and Marcreek started squabbling. To me, it seemed like these two were actually good friends. Unconcerned, Sifar watched me as I finished preparing the salad. I sprinkled shredded cheese atop the big plate of raw vegetables, though I wasn't sure what instinct led me to do it. All that was left was to eat it—with everyone's choice of dressing, of course. I set the platter in the center of the table, prepared enough clean plates for everyone, and sat. The bread vice-captain brought got its own plate.

"Thank you for waiting," I called out. "Time to eat!"

"Thanks for cooking." Gnouga wasted no time chowing down on the meat. He looked kind of creepy, smiling while eating in silence. Gnouga was a little weird...okay, scary when he got like this.

Marcreek heaved a big sigh and tucked in. He was a little pale, as if his argument with the vice-captain had worn him out. Was he okay? The vice-captain seemed to be in a good mood, though. I served myself some salad and was about to take a bite when...

"That's an interesting dish you've made there," Sifar said, amused, as he examined his salad.

Huh? Did I do it again?

"Is it?"

Which part is unusual? He's eating salad, so...the salad? But we eat vegetables raw in this world, so that can't be it. I've had braised meat and vegetables at food stalls before, too. I looked at all the food I'd made, but I couldn't figure it out. Which one?!

"It's my first time seeing toma cooked in stew, too."

The vice-captain took an experimental bite of the toma, which was tender from being simmered in the broth. *That's it? Huh? I remember eating this somewhere... Maybe Past Me's memories are mixed in there? That's it! I don't remember eating toma like this as I am now. Or making it, either!*

"I had it once in the past," I said sheepishly. *I'm not lying. The past is the past, though it might've been reeeeallly far in the past.*

"And how about the cheese?" Sifar added. "I've never seen someone

shred it and put it on raw vegetables.”

That, too?! I stopped myself from screaming.

“I tried that one time. It turned out good, so I kept it in mind.”

“I’m a fan! It’s tasty,” the vice-captain said. Marcreek and Gnouga nodded their agreement. It seemed they liked the flavor, at least. Sifar even asked for seconds.

I needed to organize my memories soon. Maybe I’d start tomorrow—I wanted to keep any future mistakes from happening. *Y’know...it’s my first time making this, but it does taste good.*

Chapter 111: More than Three Wild Rabbits

THE VICE-CAPTAIN hadn't seemed to have any particular business here. He'd eaten his dinner, chatted a little, and left. On his way out, he smiled and said, "I like my meat grilled rather than braised. Maybe next time!" Did that mean he'd be coming for dinner again? I didn't especially mind, but I'd prefer a little warning. I didn't get a chance to tell him, so I asked Sifar to pass on the message.

While I cleaned up after breakfast the next morning, I saw everyone off. Most of them looked awfully tired, though Sifar and Gnouga were chipper as ever. Gnouga seemed pretty capable; I guess that's what it took to suppress—I mean support—Sifar.

All the food I'd made last night was gone by morning. I thought I'd made a lot, so I didn't expect it to go so quick. Seizerk must have really enjoyed it, since this was the first time anyone had asked me to make the same thing again. That made me really happy. Rattloore just liked sprinkling cheese on salad. He shredded a whole pile of it in the morning for us to eat on more salad greens. Did he just like cheese? *Maybe I should make something cheesy soon.* It was a wonderful feeling knowing people enjoyed my food.

Once everyone was off, I went back to my tent. Sora was bouncing all around inside. Today, we would set up the traps I prepared in the forest. After that, I might just hang out with Ciel for a while.

I know. How about I buy something before I leave? I took out my small magic bag and checked the money inside. I had nearly three thousand dal, so money wouldn't be an issue. Staying with Bolorda and the others meant they were covering the food, so I had plenty of cash.

"That's good for me, but is it okay for me to let them pay for all that?"

Whenever I cooked, the food I used was restocked in no time. And I was using lots of different ingredients. I was really surprised to find some pricey items in there. There were tons of medicinal plants, too. As fun as it was to get my hands on medicinal plants I'd never seen before, I couldn't use them all.

"Let's go, Sora." I placed the little slime in its bag and hoisted it and the bag of traps over my shoulder. Then, I dropped my money pouch into the magic

bag at my hip. I was ready!

I exited the tent and latched the front securely. After taking a good look around to make sure nothing felt strange, I set off toward the forest.

The atmosphere of the town felt slightly different than it had the day before. There were many clusters of confused-looking civilians out and about. I could overhear snatches of their conversation here and there, so I listened in as I walked.

“Huh? Them, too?”

“Seems so. Who knows how many more they’ll uncover?”

It sounded like the guard had arrested more conspirators. How were there so many? *I hope things settle down soon.*

I made my way to the street with all the food stalls. I used to skip lunch, but these days, I ate a small midday meal. Why the change? Well...I wanted to get bigger! It bothered me that people thought I was six or seven years old. Plus, it painted an even bigger target on my back. I was still getting used to the extra meal, so I wasn’t that hungry.

I filled up on heavy meat every day at dinner, so I went for something light at lunchtime. I eyed something that looked like a small bun. It was about enough to eat in two bites, but I had no idea what it was.

“Excuse me. What is this one?” I asked the stall owner.

“Welcome! Those are sweet pastries called donuks.”

Pastries? Well, they do look yummy.

“I’d like some of these,” I said. “Umm, can I have a hundred dal-worth?”

“Of course. One hundred will get you five. Is that okay?”

“Yes, please!”

I selected a copper token from my magic bag and handed it over. The owner handed me a bag of donuks, and I thanked him and left. The little pastries were just the right size for my appetite. I was glad I’d found something so perfect.

I passed through the gate and strode into the forest. Once I was surrounded by trees, I checked around and took Sora out of its bag. It quivered and began its usual calisthenics routine.

When Sora was ready, we continued deeper into the woods. It wasn’t long

before I felt Ciel's aura. I checked again for humans nearby and found a few a little too close for comfort, so I put some distance between us and checked again. They seemed to be heading in the opposite direction from us. I remembered that there were a few caves over there. Were they adventurers on their way to work?

"It's okay now!" I called. Ciel leapt down from a tree it had been waiting in. What a clever monster it was. "Good morning, Ciel. I'll be counting on your help today."

I'd asked Ciel to show me the best spots to set traps. Ciel was an excellent hunter, and I figured it probably knew our prey's habits. If we took advantage of the prey's natural instincts, my success rate *should* go up. This made Ciel an ideal hunting instructor.

We searched for the tracks of small animals in the forest, staying alert to any human presences along the way. After we'd walked for a time, I found a place that looked promising.

"Ciel, is this a good spot?"

I scanned the ground and made sure there were no footprints of large monsters or animals. If I placed my traps in their path, they'd only be crushed. I spotted some small tracks and made triple-sure they were the prints of wild rabbits. Now to set the trap...but first, I asked Ciel to check the spot. The adandara looked around and surveyed the trees.

Purrrr.

Er, is that yes or no? Oops, I don't think we figured out how Ciel would answer. I can't read its expression, either.

"Sorry, Ciel. Umm, if this is a good spot, can you make a sound for me?"

Mrrrow.

That meant this spot was fine. It was working!

"Umm, is this an okay spot for me to place a trap?"

Mrrrow.

It looks like Ciel approves. It was pretty much the perfect spot from my perspective, so I'd prefer to end my search. I set the ten traps I'd prepared all around the area. I wanted to nab at least three wild rabbits.

There were several caves in the area around Otolwa, so lots of adventurers passed through. That meant that demand for dried meat was high, according to a butcher I visited. Usually lots of adventurers meant lots of game coming in, but

here, they were more interested in the caves than in hunting. The butcher asked me to bring anything I caught. They even offered to throw in an extra bonus if I sold to them, so I wanted to do my best.

Once I'd set all ten traps, I stretched. Sora bounced over and stretched alongside me. As I watched the slime, I noticed its colors had changed a little. Sora was half translucent blue and half translucent red. Before, those colors touched each other even when the slime was fully elongated. But now, there

was clearly some space between them. It was a minor change, but I had no idea what it meant, so I was a little worried. Still, Sora wasn't acting like anything was wrong, so I set it aside for now and decided to keep an eye on it.

Purrrr.

Ciel rumbled in its chest and rubbed its face against me. I gave it an extra-firm pet around its throat. The adandara closed its eyes happily. *Too cute. You're like a big kitty, even if you kinda look more like a leopard.*

"Hm? Big kitty? Leopard? Err, what..."

I puzzled over the words that surfaced in my mind. *Oh, is this more of Past Me's knowledge? Did she know cute adandaras like Ciel? Hm, but she did say the word "big," so maybe she had small "kitties"? A smaller version of Ciel...I really wanna see that!*

Chapter 112: Hiding the Truth

“**T**IME FOR LUNCH!”

The last trap was set, so my work for the day was done. All that remained was spending the day with Ciel and dealing with the past memories, which I’d been putting off. I needed to get a handle on what was what. Herbs weren’t the only thing—the memories were influencing how I cooked in a big way. Rattloore was considerate enough not to probe too much, but that might not hold true of people I’d meet in the future. If I didn’t at least think up some plausible excuses now, I could end up digging my own grave.

“Which way is the river?” I wondered aloud.

If we were going to take a break, then I wanted to find a place where I could relax. Riverbanks typically had good visibility in all directions, so I liked them. I wanted to search for a river now, but I’d forgotten to look for one on the map. *Shoot*.

Just then, Ciel purred again. When I looked over, it started padding into the forest. Was it going to show me the way to the river?

“Is it that way?”

Mrrrow.

Ciel is so clever! We walked through the forest with Ciel at the lead. I searched for human auras, but the forest around here was empty. There were animals around, but since Ciel was with me, they kept their distance.

“I feel safe in the forest with you, Ciel.”

“Pu, pu pu!” Sora piped up. I guessed it agreed. It bounced all around, though it put a little too much oomph into its hops and ended up slamming into a tree. It didn’t seem to mind. *Sora’s in a really good mood.*

“Oh, a river!” Sunlight reflected off the glistening water. When we reached the riverbank, I saw fruit-bearing trees. Based on the shapes of the leaves and fruit, it looked like the sweet-sour fruit I really liked. “Sora, is that tree okay?”

“Pu!”

I approached the tree. Since we'd decided on a way for Ciel to communicate, I asked Sora to do the same. When something was safe, Sora could "pu!" once. However, it would only work when there were no people around—so, for right now, only in the woods. Still, it was convenient to have a simple system.

I shimmied up the tree and managed to pick a few fruits, which I deposited in my magic bag. When I climbed down, I scanned the area and spotted another fruit tree in the distance. I hadn't seen that kind before. Was that fruit safe to eat? Sora was bouncing around the tree, so I guessed that was my answer. When I got closer, I saw the branches were full of fruit. The tree's limbs hung low under the weight of the fruit, so it was easy to reach up and pluck one. I sniffed it. It smelled sweet. I took a bite...and spat it right out.

"Too sour!"

It had some sweetness, but it was way overpowered by sourness. It was inedible like this. *I think you can make sour fruit more palatable by drying it out? I can't remember the details, but...ah, well. I'll think about it later. There are lots of other fruit trees here, so I'll just grab what I can eat now.* I climbed another tree and picked more fruit. Before long, my bag was full.

"Phew, that's all we can carry. Okay, let's eat. Sorry for the wait, Sora."

Picking fruit was fun, but it was time-consuming. I clambered back down from the tree and found a place in the shade. There, I took potions out of Sora's bag and lined them up for the slime. It gleefully began absorbing them. Ciel lay down next to Sora and took a nap. Come to think of it, I hadn't brought any food for Ciel. *Should I carry meat for it? How much does it even eat?*

"Sorry, Ciel. I didn't bring you anything..."

Purrrr.

Ciel glanced my way, purred, and closed its eyes again. *Is it saying it's fine right now? It would be really hard to bring food for it all the time... Maybe I'll just leave that to Ciel.* I produced the bag of donuks I'd bought and took a bite. The delicate sweetness of the pastry and the moist yet cakey texture were superb. It wasn't as hard as black bread, but it wasn't as soft as white bread. It was filling, too! I was glad I happened to pick a winner.

"Aaah...that was delicious."

After five donuks, I was comfortably full. It was just the right amount. If I saw donuks again next time I went shopping, maybe I'd buy them again. I sipped

water from my canteen and kicked back.

Okay, I should start organizing my memories. Let's start with herbs and cooking, since that area seems the most problematic. It's not like I'll be battling kidnapping organizations all the time. At least, I hope not! And next time, I can honestly say, "I've been through something like this, so I learned from experience." It was true—I had learned a lot of things from Seizerk, the captain, and the others.

The half-remembered herbs and cooking methods, however, had already infiltrated my daily life, so it was easy to mix up what I'd learned where. I'd been trying to use the term "medicinal plants," but there were times I'd accidentally say "herbs." All I could really do was be extra careful.

Next were my cooking methods. Unfortunately, it was hard to know if I'd messed up unless someone said something. I wouldn't have noticed that the cheese or braising toma were weird if the adventurers hadn't pointed it out. *Huh? I actually can't remember ever being taught to cook at all... Is it all Past Me's memories? I'll have to think of a backstory... I can't say my parents taught me. And I can't say it's common in my home village, either, because there are more refugees from Ratomi out there. It can't be related to my hometown at all, then. What's left? I could say that I learned it from adventurers I met while traveling? And I could fib a little and say I experimented because I like cooking so much. Ugh...it'd be so easy to say I learned it from the fortune-teller, but I don't wanna lie about her. Her memory is too important to me.*

"Just saying I like cooking would work here, wouldn't it? Adventurers and experimentation...will those do?"

Thinking about Past Me made things so confusing. All I saw in her memories were scenes of lots of people talking. And a place full of books, I think? Books stuffed into bookshelves. That was why I'd gotten confused when I went into a bookstore. The books that the fortune-teller had given me were a lot like Past Me's books, but books here were mainly bound with a simple stitched thread. Where had the fortune-teller gotten these? Also, where did Past Me learn to fight...?

"It's no good. My mind turns to mush when I think about this."

"Pu, pu!" Sora bounced over and landed on my foot. Ciel purred as well and rubbed its head against me. *I'm making them worry.* "I'm okay, guys."

It didn't matter who Past Me was; without her, I wouldn't be where I was now. I wouldn't even be *alive*—she was the one who had helped me survive as a

little child.

Nuzzle, nuzzle.

Boing, boing.

“I’m glad I have more friends now. Sora and Ciel, you’re both so precious to me.”

I’d had this feeling before, but it seemed I couldn’t think seriously about my past life. Something was getting in my way. But maybe that was for the best. Maybe I didn’t need to think that hard about it. She told me everything I needed to know, so whatever she left out must not be important.

“Well, I learned one thing today: Everything I know about cooking comes from Past Me. That’s not much, but since I’m aware of it, I can respond calmly if someone says something. I’m glad I did this.”

Mrrrow. Ciel meowed.

“Hm?” *What is it?* I felt around for auras. Somebody was coming this way. I was so focused on looking inward that I’d forgotten to keep an eye out. I was about to call out to Sora, but strangely, neither Sora nor Ciel seemed to be in a hurry. Did they know this aura? I checked again. “Oh, that’s Rattloore!”

That was why they weren’t in a hurry. What did he want? Did he need something here? I’d thought he was still busy dealing with the organization.

“Hey, there you are!” he called out. “Sorry, Ivy. Got a minute?”

“Sure. What do you need? And I’m amazed that you knew I was here.”

“You said you were going out to set traps. This is the first place I thought of where big monsters and animals don’t come out much.”

Aha. He found me because he knows this forest so well. That’s Rattloore for you.

Chapter 113: Rattloore's Complaints

“**M**R. RATTLOORE, is anything wrong? What brings you all the way out here?”

“Huh?! Oh, no, sorry. Everything’s fine, so don’t worry. I just came to take a little break.”

A break? All the way out here? When I stared at him curiously, he looked a little guilty. Had something happened? He looked pretty drained.

“I see. Oh, right. Would you like something to eat?” I offered him one of the sweet-sour fruits I’d just picked. It was perfectly ripe, so it ought to be delicious. The only problem with this fruit was occasionally you’d get a really awful dud.

“Pru fruit, huh?”

“Yes. Sometimes they taste bad, but I think this one should be fine.”

“Ha ha ha! Pru duds are about as sour as they get, huh?”

“Yeah...have you ever had a dud?”

“Oh, plenty of ’em. It’s always a shock to the system when you’re expecting them to be sweet. Sure, I’ll take one.”

“Ah! Just so you know, I haven’t washed them.”

“Hm? That’s fine. I’ll just give it a wipe.” Rattloore cleaned it quickly and took a bite.

I watched, worried it might really be a dud. One glance at his face told me it was fine. *Good. I’d feel terrible if it was bad!*

“Delicious and sweet,” he mused. “Must’ve had plenty of time to ripen on the tree.”

“I have more. Take some.”

“Thanks.”

I took three more out of my bag. They all had that lovely, sweet-sour smell. Watching Rattloore eat made me want one, so I wiped one off and took a bite. Sweet juice erupted in my mouth. *Mmm, delicious.*

“This is a nice spot. It feels like time moves slower here.” Rattloore looked over at the snoozing Ciel and Sora with a gentle smile. Sora had plopped down right on the adandara’s belly and fallen asleep. I’d seen them sleeping like that several times during our travels.

With a sigh, Rattloore finally explained the reason he came out here. “Some very aggravating people stopped by this morning. The captain and vice-captain dealt with them, but they’re so darn nitpicky, and it just ticks me off.” He seemed weary. A cloud loomed over the relaxed atmosphere from before.

“I can’t imagine this work is easy.”

“Yeah, it’s really tough. Things calmed down after Lord Foronda came, though. Ugh...”

The annoying person must’ve been a noble. I’d heard nobility looked down on adventurers, but were they so self-absorbed that they’d interrupt important work? I recalled how the captain had yelled in a drunken rage, “Their help isn’t worth anything! They just whine and complain if you don’t go through them first! But if you tell them sensitive info, they leak like a sieve! Why don’t they think before they act?!”

“What good would it do if we told them in advance?” Rattloore ranted, clearly frustrated. “They wouldn’t help, but they’d sure as hell get in our way!” What did someone have to do to make Rattloore of all people so mad? He was such a kind person. “Not gonna lie, it felt good to watch the blood drain from his face when we gave Lord Foronda the list of nobles who’d worked with the kidnappers, though. Serves him right.”

He sighed at the end of his tirade. Talking it out must’ve made him feel a little better. I didn’t understand any of the details, but I was happy he’d calmed down.

“Sorry I came and started ranting about stuff, Ivy.” Rattloore scratched his head apologetically.

“I’m just happy if I can help at all.”

His usual kind smile returned to his face. It warmed me to see it.

“By the way, Ivy, we’ll be making a big move against the organization tomorrow afternoon.”

A big move? Does it have to do with Count Faltoria?

“Did you find the evidence you needed?” I asked.

“Yeah. The names are all there in black and white. We’ve also got testimony from the nobles thanks to Lord Foronda, so that’s more evidence for the pile. Sifar’s got statements from the merchants he was interrogating, too.”

“I see.”

Count Faltoria was probably at the top of the organization. If he was arrested, then many others would go down with him.

“The town’s gonna be total chaos from tomorrow onward, so be careful,” Rattloore warned me.

“Will it be dangerous?”

“I don’t think so, but the count’s a popular guy, so you never know what could happen. The guard have been ordered to stand by just in case.”

If a noble popular with the common people of Otolwa was revealed to have betrayed the whole town, how would the townsfolk react? They’d already seemed uneasy when they saw more people being taken into custody today. Count Faltoria’s arrest would be a major turning point, but the shock of it would weigh heavily on this town.

“Will the townspeople be okay?” I asked him.

“It’ll be a blow, but it’s inevitable.”

“Right...” I hoped things would be peaceful again soon.

“Mm...now I’m sleepy, but Seizerk might get mad at me if I don’t go back soon.”

“Do your best. I’ll make a delicious meal for you all later.”

“Yes, please! Dinner is all I have to look forward to lately.”

“Understood. Leave it to me!” I would use Past Me’s knowledge to the fullest to make scrumptious meals. It was the least they all deserved for their hard work.

“All right! I’m gonna get this job done so we can be back by dinner time!” Rattloore was reinvigorated.

He was sure to be back in time for dinner. Maybe all of them would. *What should I make today? He likes cheese. I could try putting some in toma stew? They think the stuff I make is weird no matter what, so there’s no point in hiding it now. Besides, it doesn’t really scare me anymore. I’m not hiding anything from them. If I’m totally open and normal, they probably won’t question it.*

Maybe. I hope.

“Tomorrow, huh? I’m a little worried.”

Purrrr. I startled at a sound from Ciel. I looked over, and the adandara was gazing at me. Was it worried?

“It’s okay. These are the people of the town Rattloore protects, after all.” The arrest of a popular noble would cause a panic. And panic and sadness might lead to violence, even if I wished it were otherwise. The guard was standing by just in case. “Oh, I hope things settle down!”

Mrrrow.

“Yeah! You agree, don’t you, Ciel?”

Purrrrr. How much did Ciel understand? What a strange creature.

“Ha ha ha, thank you.”

Lazing around here really did make me drowsy. How long had it been since I’d had a chance to take things slow? *Since before I met Seizerk and the others, huh? Way before.*

“I hope we find prey in the traps tomorrow.” I wanted to get back to my daily life from before the kidnapping ring, when my biggest worry was butchering and selling meat. “Mm, I’m really sleepy. But I can’t nod off here.” I was so relaxed with Ciel around that I was really letting my guard down. I had to be more careful.

“I should head back and start cooking something delicious for dinner soon.”

If I went back now, I would have time to make something elaborate. Yesterday, I’d just made a stew, so I was thinking of grilled meat today. For seasoning...come to think of it, Seizerk had brought some unusual medicinal plants. I’d tasted one, and it was kinda salty. It might go well with grilled meat.

“Actually, steaming is another method...” Maybe that plant would be good steamed with veggies? Sifar would definitely have something to say about it. *Heh heh heh. That sounds fun.*

“Sora, wake up! Thanks for today, Ciel. I can’t wait to see what we get from the traps tomorrow.”

Purrrrr.

“Pu, pu pu!”

Ciel's purring was one thing, but Sora's sleepy cries made me want to lie down and nap. I got ready to leave and started back, accompanied most of the way by Ciel. Even when I said it was fine, the adandara continued to follow.

"There'll be lots of adventurers around here, so don't worry about me. Careful you don't get caught, okay?"

"Purrrrr." Ciel rubbed its head against me, whipped around, and sprang off into the woods. What a reliable friend it was.

I felt for auras and sensed several people nearby. Based on the direction they were moving, they might be adventurers on their way back to town.

"Sora, there are people. Get in your bag, please," I whispered.

Sora hopped into my arms. I gasped in surprise. When the

slime had tried to jump into my arms before, I'd dropped it and made it sad. Sora was extremely cute when it was pouting, but I still didn't want to make it sad, so I absolutely couldn't drop it. When I caught it and hugged it tight, the relief made my whole body relax. I'd succeeded today.

"Sora, don't jump out of nowhere, or I might drop you!"

The slime quivered in my arms. It seemed like it was having fun. Was it... laughing at me for panicking? *Surely not...*

Chapter 114: Eating Well

“I CAN’T BELIEVE EVERYONE actually made it.”

Everyone was at the table this evening. They had been spread out in all directions today attending to the investigation, but every single one came back at about the same time, as if they’d planned it. Rattloore had a sly smile on his face, so maybe he had something to do with it? I rolled my eyes and put the final touches on tonight’s dinner. Today, we were going to have toma and meat stew with lots of cheese on top. Seizerk and Rattloore were practically drooling.

I’d lined a basket with leafy greens and arranged some slightly-larger-than-bite-sized chunks of meat inside to steam. I had the perfect salty sauce to accompany this.

Gnouga watched the steaming process with great interest. Then I spread out a bed of boiled and smashed potatoes on a platter and topped it with heavily seasoned and baked cuts of

meat, as well as a sort of salad made with boiled eggs. Finally, I scattered the fresh vegetable salad with broken bits of toasted black bread and drizzled dressing over it.

“Little accident in the kitchen?” Sifar was looking at the black bread. It seemed he’d mistaken toasted bread for burned bread.

“Nope. Just wanted to try some contrasting textures.”

“Wooow. I guess you worked through whatever was on your mind?”

I laughed. Sifar saw right through me. He patted my head lightly, ate some of his fresh vegetable salad, and nodded in satisfaction.

“Now this is interesting,” he mused. It seemed he liked it.

“Hey, Gnouga! No hogging the food!” Bolorda shouted.

I looked at Gnouga, who was holding the entire steamer basket in his arms as he ate. Bolorda was trying to snatch it away from him.

“Um, actually, I have another one steaming,” I told Bolorda.

“Hm? There’s more?”

“Yes.”

Gnouga loved meat, and he loved sharp flavors. I was well aware that any combination of those would double his appetite, so I made twice as much of the steamed dishes. The second serving was just about finished. I went to the kitchen to check on the meat.

While I prodded it to see if it was done, Lowcreek poked his head in and said, “Smells amazing.” He was sitting next to Gnouga before, so he probably hadn’t gotten a single bite yet.

“Looks ready.”

“Mind if I take it over?”

“Sure. It’s hot, so be careful! I’ll bring the sauce.”

Lowcreek cheerfully transferred the basket to a large plate and took it to the table, where he sat as far from Gnouga as possible. When I came with the sauce, everyone thanked me. Getting meat away from Gnouga was basically impossible. When I looked over at him, I noticed Sifar stealing bits of meat here and there from the basket he still cradled. *Only Sifar could do that.*

When I took a seat, Rattloore passed me the potato salad with meat. “Are you getting enough, Ivy?”

“Thank you very much. I’m getting plenty.” Between my filling lunch of pastries and the taste-tests I’d been doing for dinner along the way, I was already pretty full. It didn’t feel like I’d tasted *that* much, though. *Maybe eating three whole fruits was overdoing it.*

I dug into my own salad and watched the big platter of it gradually empty. *Whoops. I thought I’d made a lot. I was planning to have it for breakfast if there were leftovers...*

“Were you hungry?” I asked Sifar, the only person who had already started drinking a mug of after-dinner tea. He’d eaten about as much as Rattloore and Seizerk but finished much faster. I’d heard somewhere that eating fast was bad for digestion, but he seemed fine to me.

“Did you hear what’s going down tomorrow?” he replied.

Tomorrow? He must mean Count Faltoria.

“Yes.”

“Good. We’ve been so busy nailing down our evidence and planning for tomorrow that we didn’t eat lunch. I was *starving.*”

“I had no idea.”

“Hey, who missed lunch?” Bolorda protested. “You and Gnouga ate plenty.” If Bolorda said it, I believed it. Sifar and Gnouga were cunning, for sure.

“Aww, c’mon. We had less time than usual, so we couldn’t *really* eat.”

Bolorda was clearly exasperated by Sifar’s whining. He *had* eaten, even if it might’ve been less than usual. Sifar and Gnouga were pretty big eaters, huh?

Bolorda heaved a sigh and gave up on the argument. That was undoubtedly the best move. It would take real courage to argue with Sifar and win. And...resolve, maybe. Either way, not worth it when you’re tired.

“Thanks for the food. It was delicious, Ivy.”

“Mm, what a meal... Thanks, Ivy.”

People thanked me as they finished eating. They all looked fatigued yet satisfied. *At least that’s something!*

While I made tea, Marcreek and Rickbert helped me wash up.

“Thank you very much.”

They looked surprised. Had I said something out of line?

“Ivy, you’re such a good kid. What we’re doing is basically nothing.”

“Yeah. Making food for everyone was a huge effort, right?”

It did take a long time to cook for so many, but I was happy that they polished it all off...even if I did feel a twinge at losing tomorrow’s breakfast. Still, it was no big deal. We had plenty of ingredients left. Maybe I’d make a simple soup for breakfast.

“It’s not a problem. Cooking is fun.”

“We definitely appreciate it,” Bolorda chimed in as he brought his dirty dishes over. I thanked him and took the plates off his hands. “You’ve got a unique way with food. Think you’ll ever open a restaurant?”

“...Huh?”

It was a shocking question. *A restaurant? Whose? Why?*

“Oh? Guess not? I just figured, since you like cooking and you’ve been experimenting, you might’ve thought about opening one.”

“Oooh, no, I couldn’t. I just like cooking.”

“Really? What a waste of talent.”

I appreciated the compliment, but Past Me had taught me everything I knew about cooking. Opening a restaurant would feel like cheating, and I didn’t want that mental burden.

“Hey...sorry, Ivy.” For some reason, Rattloore apologized to me out of nowhere.

My hands, currently busy preparing soup for breakfast, stopped moving. I cocked my head in confusion. Had he done anything worth apologizing for? I couldn’t think of anything.

“Umm, for what?” I asked.

“I tried asking around about slave traders.”

Huh?! Did he think I already agreed to buy a slave? I’d better stop him before this goes any further.

“It turns out...every slave trader in this town was working with the kidnapping organization. They’re all dirty!”

Wow...I still don’t feel great that he did that, but I’m glad he didn’t bring me a slave out of nowhere. Phew...but whoa, every one of the traders here was a bad guy, huh? That’s kind of...impressive.

Chapter 115: More Dangerous than Expected

“**E**RN, MR. RATTLOORE? I still haven’t decided to buy a slave.”

I tossed vegetables and bite-sized pieces of meat into the soup. A simple seasoning of salt ought to do just fine, especially since tonight’s dinner was so rich.

“Hm? I know, but I wanted to be able to take you to someone good!”

I sighed.

“When I asked the captain, he said we couldn’t make any contracts until we knew just how deep their ties were with the organization. And he’s even moving all the slaves here to other towns and villages!” Rattloore was a little worked up. “I really wanted to get you a helper for your travels...”

So he had totally made up his own plans. I was taken aback by that, but more shockingly, didn’t he say they were moving *all* of the slaves? I was confused, so I thought it over for a second. He really was the type to promise not to do anything wild, only to bring me a slave out of the blue and say, “Picked one for you!” I peeked up at him. *Hmm, I should really stop him now. But how can I say it tactfully?*

“Umm...”

“Cut it out, Rattloore!” Seizerk scolded him on my behalf. “Don’t go doing crazy things without at least hearing Ivy out first!”

Thank you! I know he’s just worried about me, so it’s hard to know what to say. Still, slaves are a little...I dunno. Part of me is against the idea entirely. How can I get him to understand? This is tricky.

“But! Ivy’s trip is gonna be really dangerous if he’s all alone. Seizerk, we have to think about his future!”

Hm? Will I really need one in the future?

“Well, sure it’s safer, but that doesn’t mean you can just force your opinions on him.” *Huh? Seizerk agrees?*

“Umm...why do you act like I’ll definitely need one?” I asked them.

“Huh?!” everyone gasped at once.

What? Now everyone's looking at me like I just said something ridiculous. What's going on?

“Ivy, err, this is a little hard to say...” Rattloore hesitated. “Do you remember what I said before, about how you won’t be able to hide it when you grow up?”

I won't be able to hide what when I grow up...oh. He means how I won't be able to stay disguised as a boy.

“Yes.”

Rattloore lowered his voice slightly and answered, “That’s why. A young girl traveling alone is a huge target.”

Oh, I see. People are more likely to target a girl? But they all looked at me like that... Do they all know I'm a girl after all? Maybe it is impossible to keep hiding it. I might fool them if I only talk to them a few times, but people will figure it out if I'm with them for too long. And actually, Rattloore did say that I have a girly face...

“Maybe it’s impossible to hide it after all?”

“I’d give up on it right now,” Sifar replied.

I sighed. *Right. It's impossible. Well, I guess that's fine. I want to look my age, anyway.*

“Ciel is a good bodyguard, but having it around will draw even more unwanted attention. Can’t take it into towns or villages, either.” Rattloore’s assessment made sense. Ciel was a strong monster, so it would be an excellent bodyguard. But since adandaras were so rare, it would cause a commotion. And I wanted to avoid attention—if anyone got too close, they might find out I hadn’t tamed it.

“Some people might try to get rid of you to get their hands on Ciel, too,” Rattloore continued.

Urk...that's a scary thought. But Ciel's my friend, so I wanna keep it by my side.

“I’ll be extra careful so no one finds me in the woods,” I replied.

“Good,” Sifar said. “I think that’s the best way until you can protect yourself.”

The others agreed with him. *Until I can protect myself... How, though? I don't have any fighting skills. I did go to the trouble of learning how to handle a small knife, but...it's for butchering game.*

“See? That’s why I suggested you get a slave.”

Rattloore’s logic wasn’t wrong at all. Maybe I was in real danger if I stayed like this, but did I even have the money to hire someone? *Oh, but he did say that would be easy after all that’s happened, right? I forgot about that.*

“I’ll give it some thought,” I finally answered.

I couldn’t rule it out purely because of my own aversion toward it. They were honestly worried about me, so I needed to give it serious thought. When I grew up, people would see me as a woman. If I couldn’t hide that, then what would I do? Ciel would draw too much attention, and I couldn’t let people see Sora, either. *Is it just me, or am I constantly gaining more problems?*

“Well, you’ll be stuck here for a while since you gotta wait for your money,” Bolorda chimed in. “Take your time.” He offered me a mug of tea, so I thanked him and took a sip. The warmth of it spread all through me. *He’s right. A rushed decision isn’t necessarily a good one. I’ll take my time thinking about this.*

“More importantly,” Seizerk cut in, “let’s talk about tomorrow. Ivy, what will you do? Do you have plans to be anywhere?” Once he’d finished his question, he took a big sip of tomorrow’s breakfast soup.

“That’s a rather large taste... Anyway, I’ll be checking my traps tomorrow.”

“Mm, that’s good. Traps? Oh, you were making wild rabbit traps, yeah? That’s an unusual way of hunting.”

So it really was rare to hunt with traps? Someone had mentioned that once before.

“If I’ve caught anything, I’ll clean it and go sell it,” I added.

“You’ll sell it? Not eat it?” Gnouga asked, a little disappointed. “Your grilled wild rabbit was so good...” Rickbert looked at him a little incredulously.

“Umm, if I catch a lot, I could cook some for dinner.”

“I can’t wait.”

Why does it feel like his expectations are too high? Maybe I should cook them instead of selling them even if I only get a little?

“Ivy, sell all you want. Don’t worry about Gnouga,” Bolorda said as he gave Gnouga a light smack. Sifar glared at Gnouga, too.

“Understood.” *It looks like I can prioritize selling. Gnouga’s sulking now, though. Ha ha...it’s kind of cute.*

“Ivy, keep an eye on the mood of the town tomorrow,” Bolorda cautioned me. “If you feel like you might be in danger, go straight to a guard station.”

“The adventurers’ guild should be a safe spot, too. I’ll tell the GM,” Seizerk added.

They were making me a little nervous. Tomorrow would definitely be an upsetting day for the townsfolk. How would it impact the town?

“Understood. If things get risky, I’ll go right away.”

“Good. I wanna believe things will be fine, but y’know...” Bolorda shrugged. It seemed even he couldn’t predict how Count Faltoria’s arrest would affect the townspeople.

“Seems like the veteran adventurers have already noticed something’s off,” Lowcreek said.

I looked around at the adventurers gathered in the plaza. They must’ve felt the tension among the guard. And more adventurers than usual were gathering here early in the evening, as if they knew something big was coming tomorrow. Very few had gone out drinking.

“Well, people are gonna notice something’s up when we and the guard are running around. Anyone who missed it isn’t cut out for the job.” Seizerk grinned wryly and looked at a rowdy group who had just stumbled back from a trip to the pub.

Bolorda looked irked as well. That group would probably get passed over for next big hunting party. Noticing when things were off was essential for survival as an adventurer. Those who didn’t have the instinct couldn’t be trusted with work.

“Well, we’d better hit the hay. Tomorrow’s a big day,” Bolorda announced. Everyone got up to return to their tents.

I fetched hot water to clean myself up and returned to my own tent. Inside, Sora was already fast asleep. I wrung out the towel and wiped myself all over before putting on my sleepwear. *Tomorrow...I hope everything’s okay.* When I lay down next to Sora, the slime nestled in close.

“Aw. Good night, Sora.”

Chapter 116: Hunting?

AFTER BREAKFAST, Seizerk and the others left the plaza in a hurry. They had their work cut out for them today. I sent all my good wishes to them and then prepared for my trip into the forest. I was curious about what would happen in town, but I also wanted to see how my traps were doing. For now, I wanted to check those traps, butcher my winnings, and sell them!

“Let’s go, Sora.”

Sora bounced into my arms. *Again?* I rolled my eyes as I desperately tried to catch it. *Phew, thank goodness.* Sora quivered in my arms. I felt like this slime was toying with me. Was it always this mischievous? I knew it marched to the beat of its own drum, at least.

“Sora, don’t tease me!”

Even when I got mad, the slime continued quivering without a care in the world. I sighed and put Sora in its special bag. I slung the bag with my knife and other stuff over one shoulder and hoisted Sora’s bag onto the other. Now I was ready.

I looked around the plaza as I emerged from my tent. I saw veteran adventurers here and there—normally, they’d have left by now. They knew something was going on today. Their faces were grim with anticipation.

I took some deep breaths and left the plaza. As I walked through the town, I could tell the atmosphere was tense. Even if the townspeople didn’t know what was about to happen, they could tell the guard were up to something. I quickened my pace and made for the gate.

“Oh, going out?” a gatekeeper greeted me. He was the one who had stopped Alivus from talking my ears off the other day.

“Yes, sir. I was planning to go into the woods.”

“Got it. Be safe out there.”

“I will. Thank you very much.”

He waved to me, so I bowed before turning toward the forest. If not for him, I might’ve been listening to Alivus’s rants forever. I’d thought of stopping

him at the time, but it was hard to get a word in edgewise. Remembering Alivus made me laugh. He looked so fed up.

“Sorry to Alivus, but it was really funny to see someone’s face turn so many colors,” I chuckled.

After a short walk, I felt Ciel’s presence. It was probably watching things from atop a tree again. I strode into the woods and felt no people around. There weren’t many adventurers in the forest today. When I stopped, Ciel jumped down from its perch and landed gracefully.

“Good morning, Ciel.”

Oh! I forgot to take Sora out! I rushed to get the slime out of its bag.

“Pu, pu!” Sora seemed cross with me.

“Sorry.”

When I apologized, Sora stared at me and quivered. It was acting friendly again, so I guess it had forgiven me. I was getting better at noticing minor changes in Sora’s mood, though I still couldn’t read it perfectly.

“Now, let’s go see what we caught!” I told Sora, and it began bouncing deeper into the trees. I ran after it. *Huh? Is it this way...?* “Sora, were the traps this way?”

The slime stopped as if frozen and stayed perfectly still. *Did it actually get it wrong? Ha ha ha...that’s so cute!*

“Um, Ciel? Where did we put the traps, again?”

Ciel purred, picked Sora up in its mouth, and started padding in a different direction. Sora didn’t move a muscle as it was carried between its teeth. I had to stop myself from bursting into laughter.

“Oh, here they are. Thanks, Ciel.”

I followed Ciel until we arrived at the clearing where I’d set the traps. I glanced around and was relieved to find no large monster or animal footprints. The traps were all intact, too. Ciel had finally released Sora, so it was happily bouncing around me as if nothing had happened. I wanted to say something, but I felt too bad. Sora would definitely pout if I did.

“Now, have we had any success?” I had set ten traps. How many had caught prey? I checked them one after another.

“...Why?”

None of the traps had caught anything. That was weird. This area was full of wild rabbit and field mouse tracks, so I should've managed *at least* one. Had I put the traps in the wrong places? I checked the ground again.

“That’s odd. No new tracks... Did something happen?”

Mm, that’s a shame. I don’t have any to sell, let alone cook for dinner.

I sighed. “Why though...Ciel, do you know?”

Ciel was looking back and forth. Had it found something? I tried following its eyes but didn’t see anything. Could it see things I couldn’t?

“Ciel, what’s wrong?” I asked, but it just walked forward carefully. Now I was really curious...

Grr... Hissss!

“Whoa!”

Without warning, Ciel made a threatening sound, scaring me into yelling. The brush exploded with wild rabbits and field mice scampering out in a panic.

“Huh?! What?!”

The animals ran around for a little while before finally going to ground. *There were so many...hm?* One of the traps caught my eye. When I approached, I saw that it contained two wild rabbits. *Wait a second. Could it be?* I checked all the traps again. Eight of the ten now held field mice or wild rabbits.

“I get it! Surround and then hunt, right?”

I glanced at Ciel—the adandara looked proud. I was amazed one hiss could produce such a result. It showed just how scared small animals were of the adandara. Their panic was real. *Huh? Did they hunker down after I set the traps because they were scared of Ciel’s aura? I guess you would hide and watch if something so much stronger than you was wandering around.* When I glanced at Ciel again, it was staring at the trapped wild rabbits, its tail swishing happily back and forth.

“Not that I need to tell you that, I guess.”

Still, if things were too scared to move when Ciel was around, how long would they stay hidden? Would they move after two days? Three? If so, I could just wait longer after setting my traps in the future. If that still wasn’t long enough...well, I’d cross that bridge when I came to it. For now, it was time to clean all this game.

“Ciel, thank you. I’ll get to butchering them!”

Mrrrow.

“Pu, pu pu!”

Wow, if it’s not one new problem, it’s another! I’ll figure it out, though. Hopefully we don’t have to hunt like this every single day.

I collected the traps and went down to the riverside. Once there, I got ready to clean and dress my kills. Knife, check. Bana leaves, check.

“Okay, I gotta get to work. Ciel and Sora, you two can take it easy.”

Ciel lay down in the shade of a tree, and Sora plopped right down against its belly. Their friendship was as cute as ever.

I’d had plenty of experience butchering wild rabbits and field mice by now, so it didn’t take me long to finish. I wiped the blood away and wrapped the meat up in bana leaves. Then, I washed the knife, dried it with a cloth, and I was done. Now we had to book it before the scent of blood drew monsters or animals. *Though since Ciel is here, I probably don’t have to rush.*

“Thanks for waiting. And sorry, Ciel—now that I’m done, I have to go back to town.”

Mrrrow.

Sora was...fast asleep. I picked up the slime gently, but it showed no signs of waking up. *Are you okay, little slime?* It worried me a little, but Sora was probably just relaxed since Ciel was nearby. I put the slime in its bag and hung it off my shoulder.

“Thanks again, Ciel. Today...” I didn’t know how things were back in town. I didn’t want to make a promise I couldn’t keep. “Well, I’ll come and see you tomorrow.”

Mrrrow. When I stroked the adandara, it narrowed its eyes in bliss. Too adorable.

“Now, let’s go.”

Once again, Ciel escorted me most of the way back to town.

It was such a sweet creature. *Now, how’re things going in town? I’m a little anxious.*

Chapter 117: Question It

“**T**HANKS FOR YOUR hard work,” I called to the gatekeeper. It was a different man from this morning.

I noticed things were off the moment I entered the town. The usually bustling main street was almost empty. I looked around and saw some shop owners huddled together discussing something. Now I was even more anxious. I went straight to the butcher since I’d chatted with him a little before.

“Excuse me.”

“Hm? Hey, little boy. What’s up?” The butcher shop’s owner looked tired, but he greeted me with a smile.

“I have some wild rabbit and field mouse meat to sell. May I?”

“Yeah, of course. Thank you.”

I stepped inside and placed the bana leaf-wrapped meat atop the counter. I was planning to sell six wild rabbits and four field mice. I’d kept two wild rabbits for our dinner tonight.

“Ooh! You butchered this nice and neat. I appreciate that. It means I won’t have any waste.”

I was confident in my butchering skills, so his praise brought a big smile to my face. “Thank you very much.”

“Not a problem. A hundred dal per field mouse, a hundred dal per wild rabbit. Will that do?”

They’re both 100 dal? Normally, the wild rabbits sell for less. That’s lucky... Oh, right! This must be the bonus he promised.

“Yes, sir. That will do.”

“One thousand dal altogether. Fine with copper tokens?”

“Yes, sir.” I received ten copper tokens and tucked them away in my small magic bag. These were my first earnings from hunting in a long time...even if the hunting method was a little unorthodox. Still, it totally counted as hunting!

“Here ya go.” He handed me a small pouch full of scraps of dried meat. I

accepted it, but...why? "Consider that a little thanks for doing business with me."

Huh? Is that not why he bought the wild rabbit off me for 100 dal?

"Something wrong?"

"Oh! Thank you. I thought that the bonus you'd mentioned was just offering to buy the wild rabbits for the same price as field mice."

"Ah ha ha ha! That all? Actually, they both fetch around the same price in these parts."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Like I said before, wild rabbits are popular among the adventurers who go in and out of those caves all day. Beginners especially like them since you can get a lot for cheap. Wish I could convince 'em to hunt me more rabbits, but they can make several times that from spelunking if they know what they're doing." *So they don't have time to hunt since they're trying to get rich from going in the caves?* "Anyway, we're always short on them, so we raised the price of wild rabbits to match field mice."

"That makes sense."

While I chatted with the butcher, the shop door opened with a creak. Two men came in, flustered. They were a fair bit younger than the butcher.

"The rumors are true!"

"Count Faltoria was just hauled away by knights led by Lord Foronda himself."

"There's no way Count Faltoria's a traitor! That's *insane!*"

The two were speaking so loudly that I could hear every word. It was easy to see they were furious. Since they were blocking the door, I couldn't leave right now. I'd have to go further into the shop if I wanted to put some distance between us. *I'll just move slowly and quietly so they don't notice...*

"Bite your tongue!" the shopkeeper admonished them. "The knights wouldn't act unless they had an ironclad case. They've got evidence! You must know that."

They looked at him with clear frustration.

"But..."

"But what? You think this town's guard force and the GM's veteran

adventurers are all worthless?”

“I...”

“Of course not. You’ve seen them work. Besides, think about it. How did they kidnap so many people without getting caught? If Count Faltoria was aiding them, then it all makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“But Count Faltoria saved my life!” one of them protested.

“And he’s ruined the lives of countless others. I hear the captain’s got enough on him to put him away.”

“...He’s betrayed us, hasn’t he? To think we even worked so hard to help him before!”

“Go home, lads. Don’t use alcohol to escape your problems, either, or you might do something you’ll regret.”

The two looked each other in the eyes and heaved a big sigh.

“Yeah. Guess we shouldn’t drink, huh?”

“Yeah...”

“Seriously, don’t do it,” the butcher repeated. “I’m gonna come and check up on you at home later. If you’re drunk, I’ll knock you right out.”

“Ha ha ha! Okay, okay. Sorry to bother you.”

The two looked glum but also a little relieved. Maybe they felt better now that they’d aired their feelings out in the open. Finally noticing me, they apologized and left.

“Sorry, son,” the butcher said. “You okay there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you know Count Faltoria?”

“Sort of. I spoke with him once.”

“Wow. He’s a popular guy around town, so everyone’s a little unsure how to feel.”

“...I see.”

There was sadness on his face, too. He must’ve trusted Count Faltoria, like so many others. “I know I talked big to them, but it doesn’t feel real to me, either. As much as I trust the guard, part of me doesn’t wanna believe it.”

“Maybe that’s okay?”

“Hm?”

“You can question it until it feels real to you. Skepticism isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

Right. If something doesn’t feel right to you, you can question it! Figure out whether the guard’s evidence is true until you feel sure-footed.

“You think so?” He perked up slightly.

“I do. Question it and investigate the truth until you’re sure.”

“Yeah...yeah, you’re right.” The butcher looked surprised at first, but then he chuckled. Had I said something funny? “Ha ha ha! You’re an interesting kid, son. Yeah, until I’m sure, right? I still gotta apologize for those two causing such a ruckus in here, though.”

“It’s no problem.”

“If you nab any more game, bring it here. Putting requests through the guild costs real money, so I appreciate your business.”

“Understood. I’ll do my best to bring good meat.”

“Ooh, how reliable!” He grinned at me, his mood already brighter. Our conversation must have cleared up his feelings a little. *I’m glad I could help.*

“I’ll be back again soon.” I bowed and left.

On my way to the plaza, I got a good look at the town. Sadness and confusion were plain on every face I passed. Some people were drinking at the pub and crying.

“Ah!”

A crowd of people had formed outside a shop along my path. As I got closer, I could see men screaming at each other. I stopped and watched from a safe distance. Seizerk and the others had instructed me to run to a safe place if anything happened. As I watched, the guard rushed over to them. *I hope they can keep things peaceful.*

“Ivy! Are you okay?” Someone suddenly accosted me from behind—I jumped and trembled. I whipped around...to see a frowning Rickbert. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you, there.”

“Ah, no, I’m fine! What are you doing here?”

“I’m on my way back from running an errand for the GM.” *An errand?*
“Oh, looks like they took care of that trouble.”

I followed Rickbert’s line of sight to the place where the townsfolk had been arguing. The guardsmen had successfully calmed the dispute.

“We’ve hit a small snag, but I don’t think it’s anything you need to worry about,” he added. That was a relief. “The knights have already taken him away.”

Does he mean Count Faltoria?

“Thank you for working so hard.”

“It’s been rough, but I think things will settle down now. There’s light at the end of the tunnel.” He sounded weary, yet relieved. Everyone involved in this incident was probably feeling the same. “All right, back to work!”

“Okay. Do your best.”

“Yeah! By the way, how’d your hunting go?”

“We’ll be having wild rabbit grilled with medicinal plants for dinner tonight.”

“Oh...Gnouga’s gonna hog all of it, isn’t he?”

I giggled at Rickbert’s annoyed expression. It seemed he was used to being a victim of Gnouga’s insatiable appetite.

“I have two rabbits, actually.” One was for Gnouga and Sifar, and the other was for everyone else. It wasn’t much, but it wasn’t *all* we were eating, so it was fine.

“You’re a sharp kid, Ivy. You know exactly how they think. I’ll look forward to it!”

I told Rickbert to leave it to me, and he smiled. We went our separate ways. Everyone would probably turn up again for dinner tonight. *Let’s do our best and make it a feast!*

Chapter 118: Dried Meat Is a Big Seller

“**W**HOA. Quite a haul again today, huh? You’re pretty good out there, son.”

“Not really...”

I looked at fourteen animals’ worth of meat on the counter. It *was* a lot, but it was all thanks to Ciel. The adandara had been giving its all ever since I got back to hunting. Every time I set a trap, it would spook the field mice and wild rabbits. I’d tried to stop it once, but the next day, it just brought me prey in its mouth like it had before. It was like it had decided it needed to bring me food no matter what. Did Ciel think I was a bad hunter? *I wanted to do it myself...*

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, sorry. Is it okay for me to bring meat so many days in a row?”

“Ha ha ha! Don’t you worry. A little birdie told me the beginner adventurers are spreading rumors about my shop.”

“Rumors?”

“Yeah. They say this here is the spot with all the dried meat.”

“Ah! I heard that in the plaza, too.”

“Oh ho! So it’s true word’s getting around, eh?”

“Yes. I thought I heard someone mention this shop, so I asked them to be sure. They were definitely talking about this one.”

More specifically, what I’d heard was, “That place on the main street is the one where you can get tons of dried meat. No doubt about it.”

Before entering the caves, beginner adventurers had a lot to prepare. They needed weapons to hunt the monsters inside, tents that could be used in caves, and rations. Their staple was dried meat. However, dried meat was in short supply at the butcher shops in this town. As such, people had to go from store to store all around town to meet their needs, which took a lot of time. Recently, however, this shop had an abundant stock of dried meat. Gossip about it was spreading in the plaza. I was surprised when I heard it—was the meat I was selling enough to cause all this?

“Thanks to the scuttlebutt, business is booming,” the butcher said. “Which means I’m gonna need more meat!” Yeah. *If word is really getting around, then he’ll need more supply.* “Say, son...”

“Yes?”

“Anything you could do to pump up those numbers for me?”

“Huh?!” I had brought fourteen carcasses today. If he wanted more, then I’d have to bring around twenty. I’d also brought fifteen yesterday and eighteen the day before. Was that still not enough?

“If you can’t, you can’t, but I’m selling out fast.” The butcher looked pointedly at the dried meat shelf. I followed his line of sight and saw just six bags left. He’d had twenty-five there just the day before. “People keep buying ‘em in sets of five. That’s all I have in stock right there.”

Five?! The big bags sold by this store should feed a single person for five days. Adventurer teams going into the caves should only be composed of three or four people... I feel like they’re going overboard, but maybe they need it for how long they stay in there. Either way, he was selling out fast. The place was practically cleaned out.

“I’ll do my best!”

“Thanks.”

Or, more accurately, Ciel will do its best...no! I want to hunt properly, too. I’ll have Ciel hunt for itself while I set my traps. Maybe then I can contribute, too.

“Fine with the usual bronze tokens?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.” I accepted the money and left.

Eight days had passed since Count Faltoria’s arrest, and Otolwa was finally back to normal. It was clear that the townspeople had loved him. For the first two or three days, the atmosphere had been gloomy throughout the town. But the pall cast over the town had gradually cleared, and laughter could be heard on the main street again.

Seizerk and the others were relieved, too. Lowcreek and Sifar had left the plaza to go back to their families two days ago, and Gnouga had taken his leave earlier today to stay with a friend. Everyone else would probably get back to their usual work soon, which meant I wouldn’t be in charge of meals anymore. *Wow...that’s a little sad. Nobody’s ever eaten my food so happily before.*

When I got back to the plaza, Rattloore was already there. It was still a few hours until dinner. Why was he here?

“Mr. Rattloore, you’re back early.”

“Hey, good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

He looked a little worn out, but he was as warm and kind as ever. I wondered if something good had happened.

“I’ve got a message from the captain and the GM,” he said.

From those two? What could it be?

“What is it?” I wasn’t involved in the investigation anymore, so I couldn’t think of anything they’d want to tell me about. *There shouldn’t be any problems...right?*

“They said they’d like to chat with you about it over dinner.”

“Ah! Umm...” I was glad that some new headache hadn’t come up out of nowhere, but...dinner? With us?

“Will they be coming to eat here?”

“Huh? Oh, no, no, no. They’ll treat you.”

“Treat me... Is that okay, though?”

“Absolutely. They’ll be treating us, too.” Rattloore winked.

So Rattloore and the others will be there? Maybe it’s fine, then.

“Okay. I’d be glad to!” I agreed.

“Awesome! Where should we go?”

“I’m okay with anything...”

“Huh. Okay, I’ll come up with something myself, then.”

He will? He has a really mischievous look. I don’t think that’s the face of an innocent person...

“Hm?” Rattloore tilted his head inquisitively as I stared.

“Er, you look like you’re up to something.”

“...Ha ha ha, don’t worry. I’m sure I can come up with something.”

He was scheming! Can I really leave this up to him?

“Really! Don’t worry!” Rattloore saw the look on my face and grinned back. I must’ve looked worried. If I did, it was his fault!

“I trust you! I’ll leave it to you, then.” I didn’t know much about the restaurants in this town, so I had to rely on him. *Good luck, Captain and GM.*

“Cool. There’s this place I wanna go. It’s reeeeally classy—”

“Somewhere I won’t have to be nervous, please.”

“Aww...”

I wouldn’t be able to focus on my meal if the place was too swanky. Somewhere more middle of the road was best.

“Mr. Rattloore, I’d like to go somewhere I can eat without feeling self-conscious.” I wanted to make that much clear. When I insisted, he looked a little disappointed. *It’s a good thing I said it.*

“That’s a shame. A crying shame. But I’ll tell them that’s what you want.”

No matter how much of a shame it was, I couldn’t budge on this. If I didn’t stand my ground, it was sure to get out of hand. Still, I was excited to eat at a restaurant!

“Mr. Rattloore, did they send you here just to tell me about dinner?”

“Er, not really. I was getting tired, so I just stepped out for a bit.” *He’s slacking off, then. Rattloore sure is a free spirit. Won’t they get mad at him? I’m...sure he wouldn’t make a mistake like that. Surely.* Rattloore continued, “Uh, Seizerk will probably mention this later, but...”

“Oh?”

“Count Faltoria confessed to everything.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. The evidence we had was already pretty strong, but the stuff we got from their hidden base was really the nail in the coffin.”

Their hidden base... That definitely sounds like nobility. He finally confessed, though. I heard that he was claiming it was all a setup every time they showed him evidence, so I was getting worried. Everyone thought he was a good person, but in the end, he showed his true colors. How dreadful.

“That’s the end of all of this, then?” I asked.

“For us, yeah.”

For us? That sounds like there's more.

Rattloore continued, “I dunno if he just got tired of holding it in, or if he’s desperate, or what. He went on and on and on about how this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the crimes of the nobility.”

“That’s rather, er...”

“Because of that, things are getting pretty hectic in the capital. An underground organization causing trouble in the capital reared its head just as his confessions came to light, so the knights are investigating it now.”

Are there underground criminals in every town? I would have to be more circumspect in my travels. It might really be time for me to consider whether I wanted to travel alone.

“By the way, the capital’s GM sends both his thanks and his complaints,” Rattloore added.

“Thanks and...complaints?”

“Yeah. His thanks for helping him get closer to the kidnappers he’s been after, and complaints that he’s so busy with this flood of new information.”

“That’s a lot like how it is here.”

Rattloore and the others had been busy running around for days, after all.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I guess it is. That’s rough for him, since it’s all happening in the capital. Poor guy.”

You could at least try to look sympathetic. Otherwise it's hard to believe you.

“Mr. Rattloore, that doesn’t sound like something you should say with a smile.”

“Whoops, my bad! Gotta hide my feelings better.” He jokingly covered his face with his hands, but he looked as happy as could be. Rattloore was a good guy, but he was a schemer—that much was clear. Maybe he was a good match for Sifar.

Chapter 119: Everyone's Favorite Dried Meat Shop

I STOWED SORA in its bag and headed to the forest.

"Morning," the gatekeeper greeted me.

"Good morning," I replied. Since I'd been out to the forest several days running, the gatekeepers remembered my face by now. They'd often give me tips as they greeted me. I especially appreciated their info on what animals and monsters were up to.

"Out hunting again?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nice. Oh, right—there are reports of a mid-level monster prowling along the path to the caves. Keep an eye out!"

"Thank you very much."

If it was mid-level, then it wasn't Ciel. I didn't know what it could be, so I shouldn't let my guard down. I walked through the woods for a while, checked to be sure nobody was nearby, and took Sora out of its bag.

"Pu, pu!" The slime hopped around me and then took off into the woods.

"Sora, you're going the wrong way."

"...Pu."

It had become clear recently that Sora had no sense of direction. I hadn't realized before, since the slime usually traveled right next to me in case I needed to hide it quickly. As soon as I began to let it bounce around freely, it would go in random directions. Sora itself seemed aware of its habit, making sulky noises whenever I brought attention to it. I set off toward my traps and felt Ciel's aura. When I stood still and waited a minute, it leaped down from a nearby tree.

"Good morning, Ciel. You brought a lot today!"

Hanging from the proud adandara's mouth was a big basket. It was a gift from me to Ciel, since it must've been really hard to carry all that prey in its mouth. The basket was full of wild rabbits and field mice. I had decided to divide the labor between us just yesterday, but Ciel was still putting in so much

work.

“Great job! Let’s go check on the traps now.”

With the basket hanging from its mouth, Ciel walked with me to where I’d set the traps. The sight of it carrying the basket brought a smile to my face...as long as I didn’t think too hard about what was inside.

“Now, how did we do today?”

I had set sixteen traps—now it was time to cross my fingers that they’d succeeded. I checked them one by one. *Oh! Got one!* I put the game in my own basket. Altogether, twelve of the sixteen had caught a rabbit or field mouse. *That’s strange... Why’d they catch so many? Normally, I’m lucky if half of them catch something. But today I’ve got twelve. That’s just as many as when Ciel flushed them out back then...wait. Did Ciel help?*

“Ciel, did you scare them for me again?”

Mrrrow. It was as if it was saying, “Yes, I did!”

Huh? Didn’t I just say it didn’t need to do that yesterday? Ciel really looked like it understood me...did it not? And how many animals do we have all together, anyway? I’d better hurry up and clean them. I took one basket of game and hurried down to the river. Ciel brought the other along for me.

“Thank you.”

I counted everything up. Ciel had caught four wild rabbits and seven field mice. It was incredible that it could hunt this many. My traps contained eight wild rabbits and four field mice...and a pigeon? Somehow a pigeon had gotten stuck in one of the traps. How lucky do you have to be to catch a pigeon with a trap placed on the ground?

“Okay, time to get to work!”

Twelve wild rabbits, eleven field mice. I was used to butchering small animals, but this was just too many. This was only my second time breaking down a pigeon, too. I had my work cut out for me.

“Aaah...I’m beat.”

A pile of meat wrapped in bana leaves sat before my eyes. *I think...I hope...that I butchered the pigeon cleanly this time. I kept the bones, too.* When I stretched, I heard my own bones creak. It was kind of incredible that my body could make a noise like that.

“All right. Let’s get back to town and sell this meat!”

Ciel and Sora lay at the base of a nearby tree. Sora was fast asleep. How I envied that slime. *Gah! I gotta go while this is still fresh!*

“Thanks, Ciel. Next time I set up traps, don’t help, please!”

Meow!

Is that a no? Normally, it says “mrrrow.” But I don’t have time right now, so we can talk it over later.

“Okay... Sora, you’re a heavy sleeper, huh?”

I placed the dozing slime in its bag and picked up the bag full of meat. Come to think of it, Sora had been sleeping a whole lot these past few days. Was it my imagination? It had plenty of energy and ate well, it just...happened to spend a lot of time sleeping. *Hmm...now isn’t the time. I can think about it later, or maybe I’ll ask Rattloore if he knows anything about slimes.*

“See you later, Ciel.”

I would be back to set more traps, so we could talk then. As grateful as I was to take home this much meat, this wouldn’t help me master trapping. How could I get Ciel to understand?

I greeted the gatekeeper and reentered the town. After walking along the main street for a time, I arrived at the butcher I’d been selling to lately.

“Good afternoon.”

“Ooh, I’ve been waiting for you!”

Waiting? Why’s that?

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Look over there.” He pointed to a shelf. It was completely empty. Had he sold out of meat?

“You sold all of it?”

“Yeah. It was gone less than an hour after I finished drying and put it out for sale.”

“That’s amazing.” It was only midday. How could they sell out so fast? Maybe that rumor had spread pretty far by now.

“How was the hunting today?”

“I did my best.” Or rather, Ciel did. I took the bana leaf-wrapped meat out of my bag. “Um, are pigeons okay, too?”

“You caught a pigeon? Nice work!”

“Ha ha, yeah. Oh, and the bones...”

“I’ll absolutely take those, too. Don’t see pigeons often, so they sell for a good price.”

I’m glad he accepted it.

“The pigeon will be 180 dal,” he said. “Is five hundred good for the bones?”

When I’d last sold pigeon, I’d earned only 150 dal. It was a lot more lucrative here.

“Yes, please.”

“And you’re fine with copper tokens?”

“Yes, sir. They’re easy to use.”

“Gotcha. That’s 2,300 dal for the rabbits and mice with 680 dal for the pigeon on top. In total, 2,980 dal. Thanks for your business.”

I accepted the copper tokens and coins and put them safely away in my small magic bag.

“No problem. Just so you know, I’m planning to continue on to the next town soon.”

“Aw, really?” He looked crestfallen.

“I’m sorry.”

The kidnappers were dealt with, and I’d be receiving my rewards soon enough. It was time for me to head out, even though I felt bad for the butcher.

“Well, I knew you wouldn’t stay forever. You’ve helped me come to a decision, too.” He smirked at me.

“What is it?”

“Ha ha ha! Nothing major, but I decided to send an official request to the guild.”

“For supplying meat? Didn’t you say it costs too much?”

“Yeah, but I realized the sales more than make up for it.”

“Oh?”

“Those adventurers always come here for fresh meat when their trips to

the caves go well. They buy the expensive stuff, too, because they wanna celebrate. Dried meat is a great way to expand the business.”

I get it. After purchasing so much dried meat here, they'll remember him fondly and come back. Is this what they call “building customer loyalty”? Argh, that's probably from Past Me...

“I'm glad to hear it,” I replied.

“Yeah! I never would've realized if you hadn't brought me all this meat. Thanks, son.”

“It's my pleasure. Now I can continue my travels with peace of mind.”

“It's gonna be lonely without you...” His words surprised me. I didn't realize he cared about me.

“I'll still be counting on you for a little while longer,” I assured him.

“That's my line! Glad to have your business.”

“As am I. See you tomorrow.”

“See ya. Don't push yourself, okay?”

“Yes, sir!”

I left the butcher and trekked back to the plaza to pick up my new traps. *Gah, look at me. I've got a big smile on my face! I really didn't expect him to say that...and dried meat boosts his shop's reputation? That's funny.*

Now, how do I get Ciel to stop scaring the animals into my traps? But if I stop Ciel, I'll probably get way fewer catches. Given how high

the demand has been at the butcher, even his request probably won't get him a stable supply for a while...

“He has done a lot for me. Maybe I'll have Ciel help me out just until I leave Otolwa.”

Let's do that. It's just a little longer, anyway.

Chapter 120: Celebration

“**I**vy, OVER HERE!” Rattloore waved to me in front of the restaurant.

Today, we were celebrating the destruction of the kidnapping organization. The GM and the captain were only supposed to treat us, but somehow, they ended up renting out the entire restaurant for a party. Rattloore let slip that the vice-captain had secretly masterminded this.

“Sorry I’m late,” I apologized.

“No worries. You were out setting traps, right?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, everyone, it’s Ivy, the star hunter of the famous butcher shop! Ain’t that right?” Rattloore said.

“The star what...?”

“That’s what I head from the GM. He got a request from that butcher, and when he looked into it, he found out you were involved.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. They say you’re the one turning that butcher into a hot spot for adventurers. Everyone’s talking about you!”

“Huh?! Why are they doing that?!” How did I miss all this? The butcher said that rumors about his shop were spreading because of me, but I had no idea they’d reached the guild master. This was too embarrassing.

“Oh! Ivy’s here!” Bolorda poked his head out of the restaurant. His cheeks were a little flushed; he must’ve already been drinking.

“Mr. Bolorda, please don’t drink too much. Be more careful.”

“Ha ha ha, I’m just fine! I know when to stop!”

Things looked pretty lively inside the restaurant. There were other tipsy people, too. Bolorda guided me inside, where I spotted the GM and the rest of Bolorda’s people. Seizerk’s team was there as well.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said to the group.

“Hey, no problem,” Seizerk replied. “We heard about the butcher. Everyone says you bring home half the rabbits in the forest every day.”

I had to chuckle. It sounded like *everyone* had heard by now. Maybe I’d gone a little too far. When I told Ciel we had to do our best for the kind butcher, we ended up bringing in more than thirty animals each day. I’d been a little leery at first, but in the end I thought it’d be okay to sell it all to him. Maybe that was a mistake. More than thirty game animals a day, every day... Yeah, that’s a little too much.

“Ha ha ha...thank you.” I didn’t know what to say, so I left it at that.

“All right! The hero’s here, so let’s have a toast!” the GM called out.

The hero? I tilted my head to the side, but nobody seemed to question it as they topped up their cups.

“Um, what star?”

“Sorry, Ivy. I couldn’t keep it away from the GM.” Bolorda looked apologetic.

Couldn’t keep it away? Does he mean...Sora?

“Are you talking about Sora?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

I looked at the GM, who shrugged. He didn’t look mad, at least.

“I apologize for deceiving you,” I said to him. I felt bad for hiding the truth.

“You don’t have to apologize! Lots of people hide their rare skills and items,” the vice-captain exclaimed. The captain and GM nodded in agreement.

“Thank you very much.” *Phew. I’m glad it turned out okay.*

“Ivy, would you come by the guild when you have time?” the GM asked me eagerly.

“The guild?”

“Here comes the GM’s love of rare things...” Bolorda groaned, frowning at him.

Rare things?

“C’mon. I just wanna meet that Sora of yours.”

“Ivy, you’re free to refuse,” Marcreek cut in, clearly exasperated.

Sora was a rare slime, after all. Maybe someone who loved rare things would like to see it.

“Are you free tomorrow evening?” I asked. The GM had been a tremendous help, so if he just wanted to *see* Sora, then I was sure the slime would cooperate.

“I’ll go with you,” Rattloore said. “Not that I distrust the big fella, but...”

I would feel a lot better if Rattloore came, so I thanked him. He ruffled my hair.

“Ooh, here it comes! This is the restaurant’s specialty! Ivy, eat up, okay? Ah, but first, a toast!” The captain stood with cup in hand. “Attention, everyone! You’ve all done fantastic work. Thank you all. Today, eat and drink to your hearts’ content! Cheers!”

At the captain’s toast, everyone raised their cups and cheered. I had never been in such a lively place, so I was a little nervous. But everyone was smiling and having fun, so it was exciting, too.

“That was a heck of a strategy, though. The kidnappers were caught completely flat-footed.” The captain was happy.

“Wooow, really? Guess you don’t see tactics like that every day,” Rickbert added. The others heartily agreed.

I guess it was a reckless strategy. I can’t believe it worked.

“Since those scoundrels didn’t know what was happening,” the captain continued, “they couldn’t even make a break for it. Sure made it easy for us, since we had to arrest them!”

The house specialty on my plate was...what was it, exactly? I picked up a piece of the well-browned meat and took a bite. *Mmm...it’s a bit salty. Does this go well with booze or something? It is good, though. What is this meat?*

“Do you like it?” the captain asked me.

“Yes. What kind of meat is this?”

“That’s pigeon. It’s this restaurant’s claim to fame, but pigeons are hard to come by. Today’s our lucky day.”

Pigeon... I’ve caught some with Ciel these past three days. Did I catch this meat?

“Hey, doesn’t this restaurant source its meat from the butcher Ivy’s been

selling to?” Seizerk asked.

Bolorda cocked his head. “Oh, yeah! You’re right, Seizerk.”

So it was true: This was Ciel’s prey.

“Ivy, did you hunt any pigeons?” Rattloore asked.

“Uhh, a friend of mine...” I answered, a little vague. The adventurers who knew about Ciel nodded knowingly. They must’ve realized that the adandara had caught it.

“Ivy, about your gratuity and rewards,” the captain addressed me again. “We’ve got a full picture of the organization now, so we just have to calculate it out. When can you come and receive it?”

Gratuity and rewards. Right—I thought it was about time for those.

“I can come anytime,” I answered. Once I had the money, I’d need to prepare for my journey.

“You sure? Then I’ll let you know once it’s ready for you. Is that all right?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Maybe it’s because I’ve never been surrounded by so many people since I started traveling, but...I feel a little—no, a lot—sad at the thought of leaving.

“Let’s forget about business and get to drinking!” Lowcreek suddenly stood up and shouted, his face bright red.

“Hey, you’re spilling your drink!”

“Ah ha ha ha! It’s fine, it’s fine!” He was really drunk. Though he didn’t slur his words, he was stumbling.

“You’re too drunk!” Bolorda tried to take the cup from him, but Lowcreek deftly evaded. Wow. I can’t believe he can move like that while drunk. Is it okay for him to be that sloshed, though?

“Gack!” Lowcreek made a weird noise.

“Ah!” we all gasped.

No one was surprised when Marcreek frantically dragged Lowcreek off somewhere. We all sighed as we saw them off.

“Sorry about that,” Bolorda apologized. He was a little drunk before, but he seemed more sober now.

The captain sighed. “Anyway, let’s drink *in moderation* and enjoy the meal. This restaurant’s food is top notch, too. Ivy, don’t be shy.”

“Make sure you don’t drink too much, either, Captain.”

“Ha ha ha! I’ll be careful!”

I’d only get to enjoy times like this for a little longer. It was my decision to continue traveling, but that didn’t stop me from feeling a bit regretful. No matter what, though, I didn’t want to give up on my journey. I felt someone put a hand on my head. When I looked up in surprise, it was Sifar, grinning ear to ear.

“Come back someday, all right?” Sifar really was good at reading people’s moods. He knew just what to say, too.

“Yes! Of course.”

First Ratome Village, then Otolwa... I’d really run into some good people.

Chapter 121: Why I Keep Traveling

THE GM STARED at Sora with great curiosity. Was there something about Sora that interested him? “Whooooa, that’s a really rare one. I’ve never seen a translucent slime.”

The slime stared right back at him.

“Quite a sight, isn’t it?” Rattloore chuckled.

I agreed. A burly, intimidating man having a staring contest with a slime was certainly a strange sight to any eyes. *Or maybe...creepy?*

“Um, Sora? This is the guild master, Mr. umm... Uhh...” As I stammered, I could feel Rattloore and the GM’s eyes boring into me. *Um? What was the GM’s name, again?*

“Don’t worry about it, Ivy. Hardly anybody knows the GM’s real name.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Ha ha ha!” the GM laughed. “No problem. Rattloore’s right. Even adventurers don’t know my name.” He smiled at me kindly, but I felt rude. *Err, his name...* “Lowgriff,” he supplied. “Nice to meetcha, Sora.”

Lowgriff? No, I really don’t remember... I give up.

“Pu! Pu, pu, pu!”

“Ivy, what is it saying?” the GM asked.

“I don’t know.”

I honestly had no idea. It kind of sounded like Sora was making fun of him, but I chose to believe that was just my imagination.

“Weird, isn’t it?” Rattloore poked Sora a couple times.

“Puuu!”

Ah! That’s the noise it makes when it’s mad.

“Mr. Rattloore, Sora didn’t like that.”

“Ha ha ha, sorry! Sorry.” Rattloore petted Sora gently.

The slime’s eyes narrowed. It liked being petted, so that improved its

mood quite a bit. *You're too easy, Sora.*

"By the way, I hear you're getting ready to travel?" the GM asked as he retrieved a cookie from his desk.

"Yes. Once the money is all settled, I plan to set off."

"I see. You don't want to settle down here?"

"Umm, I'd prefer to continue my journey."

"Ah well. We hate to lose you. Don't you agree, Rattloore?"

"Well, y'know." Rattloore shrugged his shoulders.

"Hey, look," the GM said, changing the subject. "This cookie here is what we plan to make our town's specialty."

Hm? Are they going to start selling those? I looked at the confection curiously; it seemed to be a butter cookie. It was baked to just the right color, so it looked delicious. After asking for permission, I took one and tasted it. I liked how it was just the right size to eat in one bite.

"How is it?" he asked.

"Very tasty. It's crispy and just sweet enough. I like the snackable size, too."

"Really? Phew, that's good to hear."

Why? Is there something special about this cookie?

"The GM's wife made that," Rattloore explained. *Oh, I see! Huh? Why's the GM blushing?* "He always gets shy about his wife. Funny, right?"

"Hey, don't tease!"

Rattloore laughed and took a cookie. "They are good, though."

"Yeah. We're doing our best to get them on store shelves."

"That's wonderful."

"Ooh, thank you!" The GM blushed again. He was really softhearted when it came to his wife. I had no idea when I came today that I'd learn one of his weaknesses. "Anyway, you're free to come back anytime."

"Okay. Thank you for the invitation."

Everyone I'd met in this town was so kind. Despite everything that happened, I was glad I came here.

The GM loaded me down with cookies for souvenirs before I left his office. We strolled slowly through the town. Soon, I'd have to say goodbye to it.

When we reached a less trafficked road, Rattloore stopped and turned to me. "So you're sure you don't want to settle down here?"

"...The whole reason I started this journey was to run away."

"Hm?"

I wanted to share this with Rattloore. He'd been so considerate toward me. Because of his kindness, for the first time, I wanted to tell someone the truth about myself. So I did.

"When I was five years old, they checked my skills at a church. I'm a tamer." My heart pounded. Was it safe to tell him? "But they said I was starless."

"Starless..."

I was torn between the desire to look up and see his face and the fear of what I might see there.

"Everything changed. Everyone around me, even my parents, became hostile. All except for one..."

My only ally back then was the fortune-teller.

"When I was eight, my father tried to kill me. So I fled the village. Back then, I was so sad and angry, but I ran away with one desire—to survive."

"...I see." Rattloore didn't *sound* disgusted. That gave me the courage to finally look up at him. He looked serious, but his eyes were gentle. I felt my own eyes get hot.

"I've always wondered whether I can really keep running forever. Where can I go to escape this?"

"Yeah."

"I thought people might kill me if they knew I was starless."

That was how it had been in the village. My parents had abandoned me the moment they knew, so the fear of being murdered for it always followed me.

"When I met Captain Oght and Vice-Captain Velivera in Ratome Village, they knew there was something wrong with me. Yet they helped me without

asking any questions. Captain Oght even became my guarantor.”

“Yeah.”

“When I met you all, you helped me out as soon as you knew I was a target. You even adopted my reckless strategy without complaint.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re different from the people I knew before. I think I understand now why the fortune-teller told me to learn about the wide world.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I understand why she pushed me to become stronger, too.”

At first, I thought she was just urging me to train myself so I could survive in the woods. Then, after meeting Captain Oght, I thought that perhaps she wanted me to be strong enough to believe in others. But now, I wondered if the strength she was talking about was actually the strength to be sure of who you are. The strength to face the reality that I’m starless. I thought I wasn’t running away from it, but I was. I didn’t want to accept it. But now I could say...even with no stars, I was fine. There was nothing wrong with me.

“You’ve met some good people, haven’t you?” Rattloore mused. Those words made me happy.

“Rattloore, my journey from now on isn’t about running away. It’s a journey to find something.”

“To find something?”

“Yes. I want to figure out what I really want to do.”

“Hey, that’s great. If that’s what you want, then seeing the world is a wonderful thing to do. Lots of adventurers go on to open inns, taverns, and of course, sweet shops.”

“Yeah!” I thought he might say something like that. He was always thinking about what was best for me.

“When we first met, I was worried about you because you seemed so... skittish,” he said.

Skittish? Maybe that’s because I was scared of everything!

“But I think you’re doing okay now. I can tell you’re looking ahead to your future.”

“Thank you. I know you’ve got my best interests at heart. That’s given me courage.”

“Ha ha ha! C’mon, you’re embarrassing me.” The sight of him blushing and covering his face with his hands was a relief. I was glad that I’d told him, glad that I’d met him.

“Thank you again.”

“I haven’t done a thing. You found your answer on your own, Ivy. Honestly, I was surprised to hear about your past, but that doesn’t change anything—you’re still Ivy.”

Yeah. I’m me, and part of me is being starless. What’s wrong with that, though?

“I’m still Ivy...”

“Darn right.”

I was so grateful to him.

“My goal may be ahead of me, but I do still have a mountain of problems to solve.”

“Ha ha ha! First, you’ll have to figure out a way to protect yourself.”

He’s right. Ciel, Sora, and I...we’re not ready for the journey ahead. If I wanna keep traveling until I find something I love, then I have to find a way to keep us all safe!

Chapter 122: The More You Know

RATTLOORE BECKONED ME to start walking toward the plaza again. Come to think of it, even if there wasn't much traffic, we were still in the middle of a road. Maybe I should've found a better place to talk.

"Ivy, can I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Having no stars means you don't have enough power for anything, right? Which means you can't tame. I've been wondering about the mana you would've needed to tame Ciel for a while now, but have you tamed Sora?"

Not enough power? Is that how people describe it? That's the first I've heard it put like that.

"I haven't tamed Ciel since I don't have enough mana, but I have tamed Sora."

"What if the church's appraisal of you was wrong?"

"I don't think so. Sora's actually a collapsed slime."

"Whaaat?! Oh, er, sorry. That was loud. Huh? You mean *that kind of* collapsed slime?" He was more surprised now than when I'd said I was starless! Was Sora's true identity that shocking?

"It's true. The weakest kind of slime that can be pushed around by a slight breeze. Sora's a little steadier now, though."

"Wow. So even a starless tamer could tame it since it's way weaker than a regular slime?"

"I think that would explain it, yes." That was all that I could think of, at least. Rattloore gazed at Sora's bag. Curious, I asked, "Are collapsed slimes especially rare?"

"Yeah, they're almost unheard of even among rare slimes. But they die quickly, and nobody ever seeks them out since they can't do much. But...this one's not exactly dying, huh?"

"Nope. It's very lively."

“Huh...oh, maybe collapsed slimes can only be tamed by starless tamers?”

“I wondered about that, too.”

“Right? One-star tamers are too strong for them—they kill the collapsed slimes by accident if they even try. So I’ve never heard of one being tamed before. Wow. A slime just for starless tamers, huh? Mind if I ask what they can do?”

“Umm...”

What do I do? I’ve said so much already, there’s not really any reason to hide it.

“If you don’t want to tell me...”

“That’s not it. I just think Sora is extra special.”

“Ha ha ha! The ability to read people like a book is already plenty special.”

Right. I’ve already poured my heart out, so why not go all the way?

I steeled myself and told Rattloore all about how Sora ate and how we met the adandara. As I spoke, Rattloore began to look increasingly severe—he was kind of scaring me.

“Ivy.” He looked at me sternly. Now I was nervous!

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you trust me enough to tell me, but in the future, you need to keep this to yourself. Really think about who you want to share this with.”

So Sora was special. I’d thought so, since it could eat both lesser potions and their containers.

“I can’t believe it can heal fatal wounds,” he muttered. “I thought only people with five stars in the light skill could do that.”

Huh? That’s what caught his attention? But...

“What is the light skill?” I asked.

“You don’t know? Okay, so you’ve heard of the healing skill, right?”

“Yes. That’s a rare skill that allows the holder to treat wounds and illnesses.”

“Exactly. You can think of the light skill as an even better version of that.”

The healing skill was already incredible, but there was a *better* version? And Sora had five stars in it? *Umm...*

“When I think of five-star light skills...” Rattloore continued, “there are two who serve the king who are famous for it. I can’t think of anyone else who has that kind of skill.”

Someone who serves the king? Suddenly, Sora feels way out of my league. Maybe ignorance really is bliss. Now that I’d accepted who I was, I had gotten better at seeing the things around me clearly. But the more I knew...

“I’m not sure what to say.”

“Ha ha ha! I’m at a loss, too. It’s incredible that Sora has that power...oh, and you said that you haven’t tamed Ciel, right?”

“Right.”

“This is a little hard to ask right after hearing all that about Sora, but what’s the deal with the mark on Ciel’s forehead?”

Hesitantly, I replied, “Ciel made it itself to mimic the one on Sora’s.”

When he heard my answer, Rattloore groaned and held his head like it was aching. People passing by looked over curiously, but I couldn’t afford to pay them any attention. I was really nervous waiting for what he’d say next.

“Um, is that unusual?” I recalled what my book had said: *As they appear naturally, fake ones can quickly be found out.*

“Not just unusual. It’s unthinkable.”

Unthinkable? Ha ha ha... I can feel my mountain of problems getting a little higher.

“Even really strong people can’t imitate tamer markings easily. When they do succeed, the marks fall apart right away. It’s also said that the monster with the fake mark can get burned pretty badly when it happens.”

Burned?! I didn’t know that.

“I haven’t seen Ciel’s marking fall apart, and it doesn’t seem to be injured.”

“Ivy, you need to keep Ciel a secret, too.”

“I figured...” Rattloore locked eyes with me, and we sighed in unison. There were so many headaches now that I didn’t even know where to begin.

“At this point, we might want to get Sifar involved. Maybe he can think of a way to solve this,” Rattloore said.

That sounded like a good idea. I trusted Sifar, too, after all.

“Ivy, what do you wanna do?” he asked.

“Let’s ask him.”

“All right. Then let’s get going now. The sooner the better, I say.”

“Where are we going?”

“Sifar’s house. It’s a bit of a walk... Do you mind?”

Sifar’s house? I’d like to see that! I’m imagining something really off the wall, but who knows?

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Heh, he’ll be really surprised when he gets a load of all this. I can’t wait to see his face.”

I followed Rattloore, who was now in a buoyant mood, to Sifar’s house. Several streets past the plaza, I saw a house that was clearly rather *unique* judging from the gate alone. *Yep, that’s Sifar’s place. Just what I expected.*

“Rattloore...and Ivy?” Sifar looked surprised when he opened door. He furrowed his brow at Rattloore. Maybe he realized that we’d brought a heap of trouble with us.

“We need to talk,” Rattloore said. “Is your girlfriend home right now?”

“Her? We broke up.”

“Oh, you broke up...huh? You broke up?! Again? Why?”

“She was getting on my case about a whole bunch of stuff. Seriously, I can’t deal with someone whining about how I do my job.” Sifar shook his head and sighed. I clearly didn’t know anything about relationships.

“Well, you chose the perfect day to break it off! As you might have guessed, we need to talk about Ivy.”

“Figured. Come on in.” At Sifar’s invitation, we stepped into his home. Everything, from the shelves to the chairs, was perfectly coordinated, but it was tasteful rather than overdone. “Sit anywhere. I’ll bring tea.”

I took a seat and peered curiously around the room. It was a very Sifar-ish space.

“Thanks for waiting,” he said, returning with the tea.

“Sorry to ask you to host us on short notice.” I bowed to Sifar. He patted my head lightly.

“Wanna let Sora out?” he offered.

“Okay.” I released Sora from its bag and explained we were at Sifar’s house. The slime looked around and bounced a little lap around the room before returned to me. It seemed satisfied.

“So?”

While Sifar listened, I laid out everything I’d confessed to Rattloore. Telling him about Sora made me even more nervous than talking about myself. Now I worried that a monster with a five-star light skill would be targeted even more relentlessly than a starless tamer.

“So...” he started but didn’t seem to know what to say next.

Wait...why did we need to bring Sifar into this, anyway? To keep my travels safe? I haven’t changed my intention to keep Sora or Ciel from being seen.

“Umm?” I looked back at him inquisitively.

“Oof. Looks like we’ve scrambled his brain. Though I guess we sort of did it on purpose, huh?”

“We did?”

I turned to Rattloore. He grinned guiltily.

“Phew, that sure is a lot to digest,” Sifar sighed. “Sora’s *definitely* got a five-star light skill. And Ciel may be stronger at magic than the Grandmaster of Magic.”

What’s a Grandmaster of Magic? I’m kinda afraid to ask.

“The grandmaster stands at the top of the royal family’s magic research facility. They say there’s nobody better at magical technology than the grandmaster.”

I heaved a sigh. *I would be better off not knowing that...*

Chapter 123: Beauty?

“**W**ow. You’ve got some incredible friends, don’t you, Ivy?”

“You sure do,” Rattloore laughed. “It was too much for me to handle by myself. Thanks for your help, Sifar.”

Sifar sighed. “Well, I suppose I had no choice.”

I felt a little bad for him. I knew Ciel was a big deal, but I hadn’t expected that Sora was, too. But thinking back, maybe

I had known deep down ever since the slime had saved both me and the adandara from fatal wounds. All this time, I’d been so preoccupied with fleeing what was behind me that I’d overlooked a lot of important things. *I guess it’s better to know now, but...*

“By the way, Rattloore. You wanted Ivy to hire an adventurer slave, right?”

“Yeah. If Ivy continues traveling, she’s sure to run into trouble again. I thought—well, I know—an adventurer slave could help keep her safe.”

Is he saying I could become a target again? He warned me about that even before he knew about Sora and Ciel, but...somehow this feels like it’s about more than me being a girl.

“Are people that likely to come after me because I’m a girl?”

Is that the only reason?

“Hmm, maybe you haven’t noticed. Ivy, you’ve got really nice features. When you grow up, you’ll probably be a knockout.”

A knockout? I held my face with both hands. Huh?! Am I going to be beautiful?

“So she hadn’t noticed,” Rattloore noted.

“Guess that’s why she was so confused when we told her she’d be a target, right?” There was a look of understanding on Sifar’s face. *Did I look confused? And...really? Me, a beauty? Argh, my cheeks are getting hot!*

“Ha ha ha! Ivy’s embarrassed!”

“Nobody’s ever said that to me...” I was embarrassed. I could tell my cheeks were red.

“Ha ha ha! And you’re sweet, too,” Sifar added.



I suddenly wanted to run away. Honestly, I appreciated the compliment. I was embarrassed but happy—even if I didn’t like that it would mean people might bother me.

“Urgh, so hot...” I fanned myself with my hands, but I couldn’t calm down. For some reason, Sifar and Rattloore tousled my hair.

“Now you *really* need to think of how to protect yourself,” Rattloore said. “Dangerous folk are gonna have their eyes on you.”

Sifar nodded in agreement.

“Would a slave truly be best?”

“I...think so.” Rattloore mulled it over for a moment but didn’t change his mind.

Sifar was frowning, though. Was he against getting a slave?

“Mm, I don’t think an adventurer slave is the right move.”

Rattloore looked surprised. “Why not?”

“If protection was all she needed, then an adventurer would do the trick. But Ivy also needs to keep a low profile.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

Right. If I stood out too much, people might find out about Sora and Ciel, too. That was something I desperately wanted to avoid.

Sifar explained, “Adventurer slaves make good bodyguards, but they’re a little conspicuous.”

“Yeah, I guess they are...” Rattloore winced slightly. He must’ve thought of something, too. Did adventurer slaves stand out that much? Now that I thought about it, I’d seen a few during my travels...

Wow, maybe they do stand out. I’ve definitely stared at them a few times.

“Besides, an adventurer who’s fit to be a bodyguard will probably know a lot of other adventurers.”

“Argh, I didn’t think of that! You’re right. Having a lot of connections is good for protecting her, but it’s bad if it means coming to more people’s attention.”

So you had to be a skilled adventurer to be a bodyguard? Those slaves probably cost a lot—way too much for my budget. Or were they cheaper than I

thought?

“Um, how much does an adventurer slave cost?” I asked.

“Rattloore would be able to answer that,” Sifar replied. Did Sifar not know much about slaves? I turned to Rattloore.

“Usually, a five-year contract with a veteran adventurer slave would start around twenty-five gold coins. That’s the kind of adventurer I’d recommend for you.”

Twenty-five gold coins?! I don’t have that much money! Oh, but...the gratuity and rewards? Umm, don’t tell me...

“Um, that’s a whole lot of money, isn’t it?”

“I’m telling you, it’s covered by what you’re owed,” Rattloore answered with a smile.

My expression was frozen. *Umm, am I going to get twenty-five gold coins? Is it that much?*

Worse, he added, “You’ll have *more* than enough for a single slave. Heck, you’ll have lots to spare. Maybe you could afford two!”

“...Huh?”

Er, did I just hear something terrifying? More than enough? Then I’m about to be paid more than twenty-five gold coins? I’ll have money left over after buying a slave...or two?!

“Ack...” I made a strange noise.

Sifar laughed, “Whoa, we broke Ivy!”

But how could I help it? I’d expected ten gold coins at most, so this news far exceeded my expectations. *But...it’s not decided yet, right? Rattloore doesn’t know how much I’ll actually get from them, right?*

“Ivy, Rattloore’s giving you a reasonable figure.” Sifar killed any doubts I had.

Reasonable... Is it?

“Taking down such a widespread organization is a major feat. You even helped us handle those wanted murderers. Heck, fifty gold coins wouldn’t be out of the question.”

Fifty gold coins...

“Uh, errr...I think I’m getting a headache.” I didn’t want to think anymore. But I *had* to think about it so we could solve my biggest problem.

“Let’s get back to the main topic,” Sifar said.

I muttered in agreement. They were doing their best to help me, so I had get it together. Still, the thought of that gratuity and reward was terrifying!

“If not an adventurer slave, how about a merchant?” Rattloore suggested.

Are there merchant slaves, too? I’ve only ever noticed the adventurer ones.

“Hmm...a merchant, huh?” Sifar thought aloud. “I bet Ivy would make a great saleswoman.”

“Right? She’s an outstanding cook, too. Can’t you see her running a popular restaurant?”

“Why would she do that? It’d make her stand out.”

“Whoops! Yeah, you’re right.”

Sifar and Rattloore went back and forth for a while. What kind of person did they think I was, exactly? I’d never traded for goods in my life, so running a business would be kinda hard to pull off. I couldn’t cook without Past Me’s help, either.

“Hmm...so that’s a no to the adventurer slave, huh?” Rattloore racked his brain.

“Is it hard to find slaves who aren’t adventurers?” I asked.

“There are plenty out there,” Sifar said, sounding a little disgusted. “The problem is how they became slaves.”

“Umm, problem?”

“Most adventurers are enslaved because they’ve messed up their work and taken on debt, but when it comes to other professions, they’re often in debt because of alcoholism or gambling. Some people let it happen over and over—they’re bad apples.”

“The worst are the alcoholics,” Rattloore added. “Some of them transform when they get a little drink in them, and not for the better.”

Is that a reason to go into slavery? Alcoholism is pretty serious—I’d rather stay away from those people. I’ve heard gambling can be addictive, too.

“Are there other reasons?”

“Hmm... Sometimes merchants sell their kids to cover business losses or medical fees when the family business is in the red. But those kinds of slaves are both scarce and popular, so you’d be lucky to find one.”

I see. Those are people who’ve become slaves through no fault of their own. I wouldn’t mind a slave like that.

“You said you were heading for a town near the capital, right?” Rattloore asked.

“Yes.”

“Does that mean you’ll be passing through the town of Oll?”

“I think so.”

“There are some famous slave traders there. You might have a better chance of finding a good fit.” Rattloore really knew a lot about slaves. But why?

“Y’know, Ivy, Rattloore was a slave for a little while,” Sifar said.

“Huh?!” I stared at Rattloore dubiously.

“A reeeeally long time ago, I took a sort of stupid request. A friend bought me though, and I repaid my debt in just four years.”

I see. That explains why he knows so much.

“It’s lucky to get bought by a good owner. Whoever you choose will be in good hands, Ivy.”

It would be better for me and better for the slave, too? I’m glad Rattloore said that.

Chapter 124: No Compromise

“FOR NOW, I recommend you go to a slave trader in the next town. Look for a middle-aged man with a clean record.”

After talking it over, we decided I should buy one slave. According to Rattloore, the closer I got to the capital, the more dangerous people I would encounter. One problem was that, in places like plazas where people gathered, being all alone would make me stand out. I still resisted the idea, but if I became a target again I would need protection.

We'd settled on a middle-aged man because he would be old enough to look like my father. If we looked like family at a glance, then we wouldn't be too conspicuous. A man would also be better for protection than a woman.

“I know one of the traders in Oll, so I'll write a letter introducing you,” Sifar offered. That would be a huge help. Come to think of it, he'd known that eldest son of the slave trader in this town as well. He had a lot of strange acquaintances. “I'll give him a quick idea of what you're looking for, too.”

“Thank you.”

It seemed like we had a good plan for me to travel safely from here on. *I'm really going to buy a slave... I hope they're a good person.*

“Ivy, don't you compromise one bit when it comes to choosing someone,” Rattloore said. “They'll be traveling with you for a long time.”

“Right.”

According to Sifar and Rattloore, if someone didn't match my requirements, or if they matched but something felt off, I shouldn't choose them. They would be an important partner for my journey, so I had to choose wisely.

“Heh,” Sifar chuckled. “Little Sora fell asleep.”

I followed his gaze to the slime next to me. It was in a deep slumber again. *Sora sure does sleep a lot...*

“Um, how much sleep do slimes typically need?” I asked them.

“Sleep?” Rattloore raised an eyebrow.

“Lately, Sora’s been sleeping for longer and longer. I was worried that something might be wrong.” I petted Sora gently. Normally it would’ve woken up when I did that, but lately, it had slept right through it. Was it relaxed around me, or was there some other reason?

“Honestly, Sora’s the first slime I’ve ever seen sleeping,” Rattloore said. Sifar agreed as well. *Is sleeping a weird thing to do, too?* “Usually, only their tamers see it.”

Oh, okay. Slimes are monsters, after all, so you wouldn’t see them sleeping unless they were tamed.

“But I’ve never heard of a slime getting sick, so it’s probably fine, right?” Sifar mused.

“Yeah. I’ve never heard of them getting sick, either. They do the important job of disposing of trash, so you’d hear if they could get sick.”

Good. I guess everything’s okay, then.

“Now, how about we get back to the plaza?” Rattloore lifted his arms above his head and stretched. I stretched, too—it felt good after sitting tense and still for so long.

“I may as well go with you so I can eat some of Ivy’s dinner,” Sifar said with a shrug. I appreciated his company.

“Let’s buy some dessert on the way back. All this thinking is making me tired!”

Sifar and Rattloore were in full agreement. *They’re right about that. My head hurts from worrying about Ciel and Sora.*

“Thank you both.”

“No problem. We’re the type who prefer to be doing rather than worrying.”

“Yeah, Sifar’s right! Although it’s not like you’ve picked a slave, so we can’t rest easy yet.”

We left Sifar’s house and headed for the plaza. Along the way, we stopped to buy desserts...but it seemed like an awful lot.

“Isn’t this a little too much?” I ask.

“Whaaat? I don’t think so,” Rattloore replied.

I looked at the pile of sweets we were carrying. This had to be enough for

twenty-five people. Bolorda wasn't planning to return to the plaza today, and we didn't have Gnouga or Rickbert around, either.

"Listen, Ivy, Rattloore could polish all of these off himself if we let him."

"Huh?! All of these?"

"Yeah. He'd even say he could eat it after eating a full dinner. That guy's got a second stomach just for sweets."

A stomach just for sweets? Why do I feel like I've heard those words before? Well, anyway... I considered the desserts we'd bought. Some of them were really sugary.

"That's amazing. I almost respect...well, no, I don't." I retracted my compliment. *I don't respect it. Actually it's kinda gross.*

"Oh, hold on a sec. I love that place!" Rattloore stopped us and dashed into another shop.

Is he buying more? I grimaced as I watched him go.

"That place is his favorite."

"Is it?"

We finally made it to the plaza. We'd bought so many sweets that all three of us had both hands full.

Seizerk looked at us, amazed. "What's with all the desserts? Was someone giving them away?" He was surprised and a little concerned. That was Seizerk for you.

"Mr. Rattloore and Mr. Sifar helped me plan out my future travels," I informed him.

"Oh, really? Everything okay?"

"Yes, sir." I thanked Seizerk for his concern and set about preparing dinner.

What should I make? Nothing that needs time to simmer since it's already this late. Come to think of it, I haven't done anything fried. Maybe fried food would be good...? Yeah, that'll do.

"Okay! Time to deep fry."

Seasoning meat and deep-frying it was simple. *Ah, since Sifar's here, I'll have to make extra. Let's get cooking!*

The deep-fried meat was a huge success. The adventurers didn't encounter fried foods often, so they were very curious to try it. *Looking back, I haven't seen much fried food at stalls. I only ever see deep-fried foods at places that sell pastries. Why would that be? Deep-fried meats aren't... Okay, forget it. It was good, so who cares?*

Speaking of sweets, I was horrified by the sheer volume of dessert Rattloore had consumed last night. That was just...too much. Even remembering it gave me heartburn. *Oh, deep-fried meat and pastries...maybe that was a bad combination.*

"Oh, morning, Ivy." Rattloore greeted me with his usual energy. Was he immune to heartburn?

"Good morning."

"I bought bread." And he was having a proper breakfast, too? Maybe Rattloore's stomach was even stronger than Gnouga's.

"...Thank you. I'll get breakfast ready." I'd prepped it last night, so all I had to do was warm it up. Last night's dinner was tough meat, so I went for a light, veg-heavy soup this morning.

"Morning..." Seizerk emerged from his tent, holding his stomach. *Your stomach should hurt after eating so much meat followed by so much sugar!*

"Good morning," I greeted him. "How about just soup for now?"

"Ha ha ha, I ate a little too much. Soup is fine, thanks."

Everyone woke up and we had breakfast, though Rattloore and I were the only ones who ate bread with it. Sifar had gone home last night. Hopefully he was doing okay.

"Oh, I got a message for you, Ivy," Seizerk piped up. "Did I tell you yesterday?" I shook my head no. "Sorry. They've got the money ready for you, so they want you to go pick it up."

The time had come.

"Um, okay. I'll go around noon."

"Got it. I've got a meeting with the captain this morning, so I'll let him know to expect you."

"Okay. Thank you." I had to mentally prepare. Maybe it was fortunate that

Rattloore and Sifar had set my expectations in advance. If I'd suddenly learned it was fifty gold coins, I might've panicked and acted weird.

“Can I have some more soup?”

I was seriously thinking about what would happen this afternoon, so I was a little annoyed by Rattloore’s energy. I stared at him, but he just looked confused.

Jeez, how much is it gonna be? Now I’m really sweating. Yeah, it’s gonna be a lot of money. Are they gonna just hand me a big pile of cash at the station? Eugh, that’s a terrifying thought. I’ll have to go deposit it immediately. If I ask the captain, maybe he’ll escort me to the adventurers’ guild. I’d hate to carry so much money all alone. Oh man, I’m scared! I’m gonna ask him.

Chapter 125: Gratuity and Rewards

THANK GOODNESS! I won't have to carry all that money by myself.

Because of the amount, the captain explained that they would deposit it directly for me.

"Check these, please." The captain handed me a few sheets of paper.

I was looking at a list of people who had contributed to the destruction of the kidnapping organization. Apart from myself, I saw the names of Seizerk and the others. It felt weird to see my name alongside theirs. I checked the second page. It contained information about the organization. On a list of nobles who had worked with the criminals, I saw some unfamiliar symbols.

"Um, what does this mean?" I asked.

"Those symbols mean they're relatives of the royal family."

The royal family's relatives... I see five of those symbols here. There were also names of nobles in Otolwa who had worked with the kidnappers, along with nobles of other towns and villages. I didn't know much about this, but the captain explained that the kidnapping ring had been much larger than we thought. There were so many names there.

The third page was a report from the adventurers' guild. I read, "fifty-eight wanted criminals, forty-five under investigation." That was far more than the number of people who had been arrested in this town. So there were criminals hiding elsewhere, too. A lot of them were wanted for murder, but there were also burglars, bandits, and even marriage fraudsters. They were really an incredible bunch. Recalling that I'd been targeted by an organization of people like this sent a chill down my spine.

"You okay?" the captain asked. Could he tell I was on edge?

"I'm fine. It's just, seeing how big the organization was frightened me a little."

"Heh, yeah. I had no idea it was that widespread, so I was stunned every time we got another lead."

"Really?" It was a good thing that they'd put an end to them once and for

all.

“And I never got the chance to thank you. Thanks for everything, Ivy.”

“Oh, no! I haven’t done anything. This is all because you all never gave up.”

“Ha ha ha! Well, thanks.”

Getting thanked outright was a little embarrassing. I was probably blushing, so I ducked my head down and read the last page.

“Huh?” I gasped at what was written there. *Uhh, let me blink a few times...maybe I’m hallucinating. Nope—it’s still there. Not a hallucination.* The gratuity and reward figures were written neatly on the paper. Below the total was a breakdown.

AS A GRATUITY, TEN GOLD TOKENS FOR 100 RADAL.

AS REWARD, FIVE GOLD TOKENS FOR 50 RADAL.

Fifty gold coins was 50 radal, which was equal to five gold tokens. This number was three times what Rattloore and Sifar had guessed. *I tried to steel myself before, but...oh! There’s an extra gratuity from the royal family. That’s why it’s so high.*

“What an incredible amount,” I squeaked out.

“It looks like there were some really dangerous people among the royal family members involved in the organization.”

“Dangerous people?”

“People who have influence with the king. We’ve prevented disaster there, so they added a gratuity for that.”

I see. Still, that’s...amazing. Terrifying. Ugh, just imagining all this money in my account is freaking me out!

“What’s wrong? Any issue with the reward?” the captain asked as I furrowed my brow and glared at the paper. This amount of money didn’t even faze him. Same for Seizerk and the others. We just had a different sense of value.

“No, sir.”

“Good. Once you’ve looked over everything to your satisfaction, sign there, please.”

“Okay.” There was a line to sign my name at the bottom of the last page.

“Nobody else has seen this, have they?”

“You’re the first, Ivy. After all, you were the biggest contributor to our success.”

Well, I don’t think that’s right, but he’ll probably ignore it if I say anything. I signed my name and handed the forms back to him.

“Okay, that’s the official confirmation,” he said. “Would you like a direct deposit?”

“Yes, sir. Is that okay?”

“Absolutely. You won’t receive it until tomorrow, though. Is that fine?”

“Yes.”

“Got it. Oh, and I’ll need to take your account plate.” I took out my account management plate and handed it to the captain. He checked it, brought out a sheet of paper that he’d written his name on, and handed the sheet to me. This document was apparently proof that he had possession of my plate. “Are you planning on leaving as soon as you have the money?”

“I’ve finished my preparations, though the butcher has one more request for me.”

“A request?”

“Yes. He wants me to hunt pigeons.”

“Pigeons? Aaah, his wedding anniversary is coming up...”

Huh? Wedding anniversary? When I cocked my head, the captain laughed and explained that the butcher’s wife loved pigeon meat. Their wedding anniversary was four days from now, so he wanted to get his hands on some pigeon for her.

“I see...”

Was that why he’d looked a little bashful when he asked for it? I was worried he was sick or something, but when I asked, it only made him blush harder. Gosh, that had really confused me. *Now that I know he was embarrassed, I feel really bad for saying that.*

“He’s buying pigeon for his wife, though, huh?” The captain chuckled.

“Do you know him?”

“Kinda, yeah. When I was new on the force, I arrested him for a minor

crime.”

Really? He seems like such a nice guy, though. He even talked those young adventurers down before.

“He’s settled down these days. He looks after troubled youth, too. I guess he knows from experience what it’s like.”

Wow. I’d better have Ciel try its hardest to get us some pigeons. I only wish I could hunt them myself...

“Here.” The captain held out a basket. I took it, though I didn’t know why he was giving it to me. I opened the lid and looked inside. “I hear you like sweets. Go on.”

The basket was filled with tempting pastries. I hadn’t eaten much last night since I was a little put off by Rattloore’s gluttony, so this was a nice surprise. It was just hard to eat while watching someone shovel twenty-plus sweets into their mouth.

“Thank you very much. Are you sure it’s all right for me to take these?” It seemed like a present, but I wasn’t sure.

“Yeah, no problem.” Well, if he was sure.

I accepted it graciously. *Oh, those pastries Rattloore was eating last night are in here, too. Nice! They looked good.*

“Ah, ha ha ha!” Suddenly, the captain erupted with laughter. I looked up at him, confused. “Sorry. You really act your age when faced with sugar, huh?”

I must have dropped my guard when I saw the sweets. Maybe I was even smiling? I reached up and massaged my cheeks. *How embarrassing.*

“Sorry, sorry,” he apologized.

My face was hot. Lately, I’d been getting embarrassed more often. *Okay, calm down. Deep breaths.*

“Umm, thank you. I appreciate the gift.”

“No prob. As for your plate...hmm...can you come and pick it up tomorrow afternoon?”

“Sure. Thank you.” I bowed and left his office with the basket over my arm. *Ooh, my face is red, isn’t it? A hundred and fifty radal, though... Fifteen gold tokens. That’s huge.* The thought of all that money made me tremble a little. Faced with the prospect of buying a slave and surviving the winter, I was glad to

have it, but it was still too much.

“Only a little longer in this town... It makes me kinda sad.”

After taking my leave at the station, I went to the forest to ask Ciel to hunt for pigeons. As I strode through the town, I looked around. It was no wonder the captain, Seizerk, and everyone else wanted to protect such a lovely place. *I'll definitely come back some day.*

Chapter 126: Pigeon Soup

AT THE BUTCHER, I laid out the meat and bones of three pigeons. Ciel had gone all out and nabbed four pigeons for me, so I took three to the butcher and kept one for our dinner tonight.

“Thank you. Oooh, man, thank you so much!”

“It’s nothing! I hope your wife likes it.”

“Huh?! Ack, hey...”

Oops! The captain was the one who told me about the wedding anniversary. I looked at the butcher. He was blushing and making a bunch of choked sounds. I didn’t think he’d be this flustered over it.

“Ahem. Uhh, here’s your money.” He changed the subject. *Phew. I wasn’t sure what to say, and I’d feel awful if I made things worse.* “By the way,” he asked, “when are you planning to head out?”

“I’m thinking three days from now.”

My money problem was solved, and I’d already gotten my account plate back. Rattloore and Sifar received the same amount of money. They said I could easily afford a slave now. Veteran explorers like them really didn’t bat an eye at fifteen gold tokens. It took me two whole days to drum up the courage to check my bank account. Even knowing they’d deposited the money, I still blinked over and over at the balance.

“That so? Things are gonna be lonely around here without you.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Aw, c’mon. You’re the one helping me out, especially with this!” He lifted the pigeon meat. I could see a flush creeping over his cheeks again. When I giggled, he blushed harder. *Now I feel guilty.*

“Oh, I was hoping to buy some dried meat...” I looked at the shelf, but it was picked clean. Adventurers were still coming in constantly to buy out his stock. This place really was a hot spot these days.

“Yeah? Here you go.”

“Huh?” I looked back to him. He was holding five big bags of dried meat.

“They’re just crappy scraps, but, y’know.” It was clear he’d put these aside just for me.

“That’s fine. Thank you! How much will it be?”

“Call it a parting gift. After all, they’re just scraps.”

My money and five bags of dried meat sat atop the counter.

“Thank you so much. Oh, right...” I took out a paper parcel of medicinal plants. It was a mix of seasonings that, when cooked into meat, removed the gamey odor and made it more tender. “Take this. Rub it into the meat, leave it for a while, and then cook it. It’ll remove the smell and make it taste better.”

“Oooh...” He opened the paper and sniffed, then put some on his tongue to taste and nodded in satisfaction. “Are these medicinal plants? You’ve got all kinds in here, too.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you a pharmacist as well, son?”

“No, sir. Not at all; I just use them for seasoning.”

“Still incredible that you know enough about these to cook with them. Thanks!”

“I don’t know if it’ll suit your tastes, so just try a little at first.”

“Ha ha ha, got it. I’ll do that.”

I stowed the money and dried meat in their respective bags and said goodbye. The butcher was a good guy. I couldn’t believe he was more easily embarrassed than the GM!

As I walked back to the plaza, I planned tonight’s dinner. I wouldn’t get to cook many more meals like this, so I’d better make the most of it. *Pigeon, huh? I hear pharmacies sell pigeon soup. It’s still midday, so maybe I could make some rich broth if I start simmering it now?*

“I’d better do my best!”

All that remained was to get everything ready for my trip. Or so I said, but Rattloore had already made repairs to my tent, and Bolorda gifted me three common magic bags. He had plenty, so he was happy to give me ones he didn’t need. That lightened my load considerably, which helped a lot. Sifar also gave me a small pot his ex-girlfriend had bought him. It was enchanted with water

magic, so it could fill itself, which was extra-convenient. *Wow, I'm all set.*

The plaza came into view. *All right, time to make some delicious dinner!*

The scent coming from the simmering pot wafted around the tents. The broth I'd thrown together from the pigeon bones was rich and savory. Using the pigeon broth as a base, I whipped up a veggie-filled soup that turned out spectacular. Putting in meat was a good idea, too. I added plenty of generous chunks and let it simmer for as long as I could. Past Me called it *braised pork*, but I'd never heard of an animal called a "pork." I tried a spoonful. The sauce clung to the meat and tasted wonderful.

Next up was a vegetable side dish. Usually I made salad, but since the sauce was so good on its own, I went for simple boiled potatoes to sop it up. As for the pigeon meat, I deep-fried that. Past Me had insisted that birds had to be deep-fried.

"Looks good," Sifar mused. I'd felt his aura as he approached, so his comment didn't startle me this time—but why was he here? I thought he'd gone home.

"Shouldn't you be working right now?" I asked.

"I just had a nice windfall, so I'll be taking a little time off."

"Really?"

"Or so I'd like to say, but Seizerk's working me like a dog," he complained.

"Oh, is that so? Sorry to hear it."

"Yeah. Well, if I just laze around all day I'll get weak! So you'd better make some dinner for me, too, 'kay?"

I didn't really see the connection, but food tasted better with everyone gathered around, so I didn't mind. Besides, today's soup was a masterpiece. Sifar liked soup, so I was glad he came.

"So, what kind of soup is this?" Sifar asked. "It smells amazing. The scent is familiar, but I can't put my finger on it..."

"The broth is made from pigeon bones."

Sifar yelped. *What? That was a not-very-Sifar sound.*

"Um, what's wrong? You don't like pigeon?" As far as I was concerned, the taste-tests had been delicious so far.

“Pigeon soup’s supposed to be really bitter, isn’t it?”

Bitter? What is he talking about? The broth isn’t bitter...oh! Pharmacies sell pigeon soup, don’t they? I think they mix medicinal plants in to give it restorative properties. Maybe that’s why it’s bitter.

“This isn’t like the soup at pharmacies, don’t worry,” I assured him.
“Would you like to try it?”

“Uhh, sure.” Sifar ladled some soup in a small bowl and timidly sipped at it. Was the pigeon soup sold at pharmacies really that disgusting? “Huh? It’s good... Is this really pigeon soup?”

He looked so befuddled that I couldn’t help but laugh. Still, I was even more curious about that medicinal soup now. *Maybe I should give it a try.*

“Don’t you dare go near that pharmacy soup,” he warned. *Huh? It’s like he’s reading my mind.* “That stuff’s awful. I can only force it down when I’m so sick I can’t taste anything.”

“Is it that gross?”

“Yeah. That’s why I frankly find it hard to believe this is really pigeon soup.”

They must’ve been selling some nasty stuff. But maybe they weren’t worried about taste—it wasn’t meant to be palatable, it was meant to be medicine.

I tended to dinner and chatted with Sifar until Seizerk and the others returned. For some reason, they all brought gifts.

“We don’t have much time left together,” Seizerk said gloomily. His words made me choke up a little. I still had a few days, but...I was already getting so soppy.

“Thank you.”

Just as we had our spoons poised to dig in, Sifar shouted, “Hey, everyone! It’s pigeon soup today.” Everyone froze, horror on their faces. Marcreek and Bolorda were millimeters away from sipping their soup, so they were especially startled. “Ivy put his blood, sweat, and tears into this meal, so clean your plates, got it? Okay, let’s eat!”

Incredible, Sifar. I did my best to stifle my laughter.

“What’s the matter? Aren’t you gonna eat, *Bolorda?*” he teased.

“Uh, yeah, er...of course I’ll eat it, but...” Bolorda’s distress made me really want to laugh hard. He must’ve *hated* the stuff.

Sifar grinned gleefully. If Bolorda had looked up at Sifar, he’d have been able to tell something was up, but he was totally panicking. He timidly brought his spoon to his lips. Everyone except Sifar and me watched with bated breath as Bolorda swallowed a mouthful.

“Hm? Wha?” The moment he took a bite, everyone had gasped. Now they all looked on in confusion. “It’s good! Huh. Why is it good?”

“Duh. Ivy would never cook anything gross for us,” Sifar said before sitting back to devour his own soup. Following his lead, the others sampled theirs and went wide-eyed in surprise.

“Pfft, ah ha ha ha!” I couldn’t help but laugh. Now I *really* had to know about the medicinal soup, but this was funny.

“Sifar! Even you, Ivy...” Bolorda sighed as we doubled over with laughter. *Sorry! It was funny.*



EXTRA * I'm Glad We Met



“CIEL, I’d better go soon.”

Mrrrow. The adandara rubbed its face against me, so I stroked its fur. Ciel narrowed its eyes and purred.

“Too cute!”

Twelve days had passed since the kidnapping ring had been foiled, and the town had regained its usual vitality. I was amazed by the townspeople’s resilience. Rattloore and the others were busy every day, too. Apparently, they had uncovered so many new crimes that investigating them all was taking forever. Nevertheless, peace was gradually returning to Otolwa.

“I hope they finish their work quickly so we can all spend time together. Right, Sora?”

“Pu, pu pu!” The slime bounced around me with its usual enthusiasm.

“What should I make for dinner today? Something more challenging, maybe...”

Mrrrow.

“Pu, pu pu!”

The GM, captain, and vice-captain had been joining us for dinner more often lately. I really liked having them. The more friends we had around us, the better the food was. But for some reason, they never came empty-handed. It seemed like they were competing over who could bring the most gifts. *I should probably*

ask them to stop next time I see them. I don’t need that many desserts...

“If I eat all that, I’ll get fat in no time.”

I chatted with my monster friends on the way to town. Once we were close to the town gates, I said goodbye to Ciel.

“Ciel, thanks for escorting me back again. See you tomorrow.”

Mrrrow.

I watched Ciel bound off and then looked over at Sora. “Ready to go in?”

“Pu, pu pu!”

I picked up Sora and lowered it into its bag. A short walk later, the gate had come into view.

“Welcome back,” the gatekeeper greeted me with his usual smile. All of them were really nice. Some even gave me sweets recently! Was it because I was friends with the GM?

“Thank you.”

“Oh! By the way, Ivy.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“When you have desserts, do you like them extra-sugary or not too sweet?”

“Huh?”

Where's this coming from? Why is he asking me?

“C'mon, which?” He leaned in, pressing me for an answer. I withdrew, overwhelmed by his eagerness.

“Umm, I don't like things that are too sweet...so less sugary is good!”

“Got it. Thank you.”

“N-no problem?” After getting his answer, he returned to normal. *What the heck?* I gazed at him curiously, but he cocked his head back at me with a smile. “Umm, see you tomorrow.”

“Yep, see you tomorrow. Be careful on your way back to the plaza.”

Still shaking my head, I made my way to the plaza. *Seriously, what was that?* As I walked along the main street, members of the guard waved to me. I waved back and continued on my way. The people in this town were so friendly.

“Yo, Ivy!” someone greeted me. I turned; it was the former adventurer from Puff-Puff who I'd met when he helped catch Mira.

“Hello there.”

“Hello, Ivy.”

“Yes...?”

“Could you show me your wrist, please?”

My wrist? I looked at my wrists, but they were just...well, wrists. Nothing special about them.

“Is that a no?” he asked.

“No, it's okay. Here.” I held my arms out in front of me. What did he

want?

The former adventurer held my wrists gently in his hands and nodded. After a moment, he let go and said, “Thanks.”

“Um, is something the matter?” I had no idea what was going on.

“Hm? Oh, well, y’know. Later!”

“Bwuh?”

Ignoring me and my dumbfounded sputter, the former adventurer walked out of sight.

“Really, what in the world?” I tilted my head in thought and returned to the plaza. *I don’t know what anyone’s deal is today.*

When I arrived at my tent, I took Sora out of its bag. *Might as well start dinner.*

“I’m gonna go and prep food for tonight. Oh, but I’ll take out some potions. Eat whenever you like.”

I watched Sora quiver as I lined up potions for it, then I stepped out of my tent. I filled a big pot with water and added lots of medicinal plants and a hunk of meat before bringing the whole thing to a low simmer to parboil the meat. After removing the scum forming on the meat, I added it back into the soup. There were three kinds of monster meat today. All of them were a little tough when roasted. When parboiled with medicinal plants before cooking, though, one of them melted in your mouth, the second became soft and tender, and the third became plush yet firm. It was fun to compare their different textures.

“Ivy!” Lowcreek called out to me.

“Huh? Oh, Lowcreek, hello there. Are you already done for the day?”

“Uh, I’m on break. I’m kinda beat.” He did look a little tired.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve been running interrogations with Sifar today. It’s crazy how the guy next to me is scarier than the guy across from us. He’s a real demon, y’know? I didn’t want to do the job, but the GM said we *have* to have someone with Sifar, or the people he’s interrogating come out the other side as living corpses. So I went with him to be a team player, y’know? But it’s too much. A mere mortal wasn’t meant to hold back a demon!”

He’s still talking about Sifar, right? And what’s this about living corpses?

Does that really happen if Sifar interrogates people alone? Hmm...I guess that kinda does seem Sifar-ish. Is it bad that I think that?

“Oh, that reminds me. Ivy.”

“Yes?” I scooped veggies into the pot. *Mm, it smells yummy!*

“That smells wonderful. Oh, crap! Ivy, can you show me the soap you use?” I froze. *Soap? The soap I use? Umm, how should I respond to that?*

“I’m not planning anything weird, promise. I’m just curious.”

“Umm, you mean the soap I use to wash myself, yes?”

Ever since coming to Otolwa, I’d used soap when I washed myself at night. Dissolving a bit of soap in hot water made me feel a lot cleaner. Before, I’d used fruit I’d foraged in the forest, but Sifar got mad at me when I mentioned it. He said little girls shouldn’t be doing that. He’d actually frightened me so much that I went out and bought soap the next morning to show him. Sifar was a little disappointed I’d bought the cheapest one, but he let it slide. I was just glad it wasn’t too expensive, since I wanted to save up money for lodgings in the winter.

“You can say no if you want,” he said, but I found it hard to turn him down flat.

“It’s okay. Wait just a second.” After tending to the fire under the pot, I went back to my tent. Inside, Sora was sound asleep. The potions I’d set out were gone, so it must’ve already eaten. I plucked the soap out of the toiletries I’d set in the corner of the tent and went back out to show Lowcreek. “Here it is.”

“This one? Isn’t this the cheapest kind they sell?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Huh. Okay, got it. Awesome! Thanks.”

“No problem. But why...?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’d better get back to work now. Can’t wait for dinner!”

What is with everyone today? They’re all acting off. Is something going on?

I sliced raw veggies and arranged them on a plate. *Now, how should I garnish this today?*

“Hey, Ivy!”

“Huh? Oh, Mr. Sifar. Did you happen to pass Lowcreek on your way here?”

“Er? Why do you ask?”

“He just left.”

Sifar fell silent. *Huh? Should I not have told him that? He said he was on break, though...*

“...Mr. Sifar?”

“Heh heh heh. So this is where he’s been slacking off.” *Sorry, Lowcreek! Um...good luck.* “That smells good.” Sifar smiled as he glanced over at the simmering pot. Would he be eating with us again today? As expected, he asked, “Mind if I intrude again tonight?”

“Of course not!”

“I was thinking we should all go out to eat together tomorrow. Are you busy, Ivy?”

“Tomorrow?” My plans were to go to the forest, check my traps, and play with Ciel. That was what I did every day, though, so they weren’t exactly *plans*. “I’m free.”

“Cool. I’ll come and get you tomorrow.”

“Huh? I can get there on my own if you tell me where to go.” Was it the tavern from before?

“It’s a different place. I’ll just pick you up, okay?”

“Understood. I’ll be waiting.”

Sifar gently tousled my hair. He was neither too soft or too rough, so it felt nice.

“Now, I gotta get back to it,” he said. “I wonder where Lowcreek’s hiding from me this time?”

“Huh? Lowcreek said he was going back to work.”

“Really? Hmm... My intuition tells me I’ll need to catch him.” Sifar did have uncanny instincts. “If he’s not at the guild, I’ll just have to chase him down. Off I go!”

Chase him... Lowcreek, do your best! Don’t run away!

“Don’t be too hard on him,” I pleaded. “And don’t push yourself too hard,

either.”

“Thanks, I won’t.”

I hope Lowcreek will be okay. That smile on Sifar’s face was pretty terrifying. Okay, so what do we put on this salad? Hmm... How about I slice some strips of meat and crisp them up in a pan? Yeah, that’s perfect!

Yesterday ended up being quite an event. A big capture operation took place right on the plaza—except the one being captured was Lowcreek. As Sifar expected, Lowcreek tried to make a break for it. Sifar made good on his promise and chased Lowcreek all around the town. Or rather, aspiring guard candidates were the ones who chased him. Sifar told them he’d recommend them to the captain if they caught Lowcreek. I was impressed... Sifar was a master manipulator. And this time he’d started an impromptu game of hide-and-seek.

At first, the townspeople were confused to see Lowcreek running for his life. But it wasn’t long before they saw aspiring guardsmen shouting, “I’m gonna be a guuuaaaaard!” Apparently this was a common sight, so the townsfolk started rooting for them. People on the street even cheered when they finally nabbed Lowcreek at the plaza. *I guess I do feel a little bad for him.*

“What’s the matter?” Sifar asked me.

“I was just thinking about what happened yesterday. It must be the stuff of legend by now.”

As we strolled along the main street on our way to the restaurant, I listened to the conversations of passersby. Almost everyone was discussing yesterday’s hide-and-seek game. Some were upset that they’d missed it.

“Yeah, it was hilarious how everyone got so into it. Lowcreek helped, of course.”

“Ah ha ha ha!”

“Right over there.” Sifar pointed at a restaurant that looked like a slightly fancier tavern. It seemed classier than the places I’d been to before. Was this really the spot? “C’mon. Let’s go in.” He opened the door and gently pushed me though.

I peeked inside and looked around. *Huh? I know everyone here.*

“Ivy!” I saw Rattloore stand up excitedly. What was going on?

“Mr. Rattloore?”

“Happy birthday!”

“Huh?!”

“Happy birthday, Ivy!” everyone shouted at once.

“Ah!” I was thunderstruck. I’d mentioned to Rattloore and the others that my birthday had passed, and I was nine now. They did say they’d celebrate my birthday once all this was over, but I totally forgot! I’d never celebrated or had anyone else even acknowledge my birthday these past few years, after all.

“Ivy? You okay?”

I noticed my vision blurring, so I scrubbed at my eyes. “Thank you all. It really means a lot to me.” My voice trembled a bit. I was just so overjoyed.

“Good for you!” Someone put a hand on my head. I looked up, and Sifar smiled sweetly down at me.

“Happy birthday! C’mon, over here!” Rattloore took me by the hand and guided me over to Seizerk and the others, who greeted me with more happy birthdays. “Here, sit down. We’ll go first, okay?”

First? I plopped down in the chair, and Seizerk handed me a wooden box. I took it, but...what was it?

“That’s a birthday present from us.”

“A present... May I look inside?”

Everyone nodded eagerly. I opened the box, a little nervous. Inside was a set of pots. The box must have been a magical item, as it even contained a cauldron.

“A cauldron!” I was stunned. I’d always wanted one of these for cooking.

“Here ya go. This one’s from us.” Bolorda handed me a wooden box as well.

Was this box another magical item? I opened it to find a set of cute cooking utensils. *Oh? I saw these at a store before. It’s the whole set, too. Aren’t these really pricey?*

“These utensils and the pots were expensive, weren’t they? Are you sure I can have these?”

“It didn’t set any of us back that much since we all pitched in. Don’t you worry about a thing. Besides, we’d be really bummed if you didn’t accept our feelings here.”

“I’ll take good care of them!”

“Okay, next up!” Lowcreek held out a cloth pouch.

“Huh? You already gave me something, though.”

“This one’s from the guard and adventurers,” he said.

Both of them? I accepted the pouch and peeked inside. The scent of flowers tickled my nose.

It contained ten bars of soap!

“They had a lot of fun picking those out,” Lowcreek told me. “There’s all kinds of scents in there, so go wild.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Yo, we got you this, too.” The former adventurer from Puff-Puff took my arm and pushed something onto it. I looked down at a bracelet with a pretty stone. “That’s an amulet stone. I hear you’ve got a journey ahead.” He patted my head. So he was measuring my wrists yesterday.

“Thank you. But who is *we*? ”

“All the retired adventurers, along with these oafs’ old mentor.”

The owner of Puff-Puff pointed at Seizerk and the others. *Umm, I don’t feel like any of them were involved in this, though?*

“Consider us representatives of the townsfolk,” he added.

I dunno...

“Go on and take it,” Rattloore urged. “But hey, if it’s got our mentor’s feelings in it, I’d be careful with it.” Everyone laughed.

“Can you tell them thank you for me, please?” I asked.

“Yeah, for sure.”

Everyone was so wonderful.

“Okay, here’s the last one!” One of the gatekeepers I’d always waved to at the gate came over with something white and fluffy.

“This is called kiffon cake. It’s the perfect dessert for celebrations.”

“We got it at just the right sweetness level for you. It’s all for you!”

The kiffon cake placed atop the table was snow white. It looked lighter than air.

“I can’t wait. Thank you so much.”

Even if it was exactly as sweet as I liked it, it was bigger than my face. There was no way I could eat it all alone. We sliced it up to share and hooted and hollered as we enjoyed the kiffon cake. I’d never had so many people gather just for me, so I cried over and over. Each time, Rattloore and Sifar gave me a big hug.

“Thank you, everyone. I’m so glad I met all of you.”



BONUS * Lord Foronda's Got It Hard



WHEN THE UPPER ECHELONS of the criminal organization were arrested, the town of Otolwa was thrown into confusion. Count Faltoria himself, a popular figure among the townspeople, had been arrested. Citizens had run into the guard station demanding to know if the news was true.

Many days later, I reviewed my notes as I walked through the now-peaceful town of Otolwa.

“I can get rope and baskets at the dump, and I got some magic bags. Er, as for the rest...”

Today, I wasn’t going to the woods. I was going shopping to get the last things I needed for my journey. When I couldn’t get things at the dump, I had to buy them. I checked lots of stores to find the cheapest options, so shopping was really tiring.

I stopped and looked down at my feet.

“Shoes... I thought these would last a little longer.”

My shoes were really worn down. Of course they were, since I had to walk through the forest so much, but I wished they would last longer. Shoes from the dump could never be trusted, so I had to buy them new. I always picked the cheapest ones, but shoes were expensive no matter what. But if I was going to continue my journey, I had to have them, so I sighed and began the trek to the shoe store.

“Huh? Those people...” I spotted three men who had a different aura about them from the townsfolk. They were well dressed, so they might’ve been nobles. But if so, what were they doing here? “Well, I don’t wanna find out. Rattloore told me not to go near them.”

I turned my attention to the shop sign right next to them. It had a shoe emblem and the shop’s name, Baggud’s Shoes. That was the place I was looking for. The adventurers told me they sold nice, affordable shoes, so I came to find it.

“Maybe I’ll come back a little later...”

Gnouga told me that dealing with nobles was a pain in the rear, so it might be worth it to make another trip just to avoid them. As I turned to leave, I overheard their conversation.

“Oh, Lord Foronda! Is this where you’ve been?”

Lord Foronda? I turned back around and saw Lord Foronda emerging from a building two doors down from the shoe store. I'd only just met Lord Foronda at the thank-you party he'd held two days ago, but he looked even more worn down now.

"Is everything okay?" I wondered aloud.

The documents the organization had hidden made it clear that nobles were involved in crime. Because of that, Lord Foronda had been swamped lately. I'd heard that things had finally calmed down, but his complexion was still wan from overwork.

"Chi, Nem, Kushi. Why are you here?"

Huh? He's acting a little different. Really...cold? Kind of like when Sifar's looking at trash...umm, I mean insects... Umm. Well, anyway, he's not his usual kind self.

A portly man in expensive clothes spoke first. "We found something uncommon at the capital, and we thought you might fancy it."

I looked at Lord Foronda. His brow was deeply furrowed—he didn't look very happy to see them. Either oblivious or ignoring his displeasure, the three carried on.

A man to the right of the portly fellow spoke up, "This is a lovely town, but it's rather...piddly, isn't it? We could have a word with a friend of mine, see about getting you a bigger one. This town's too small for you, Lord Foronda. But with my influence, I'm sure we can rectify that." His clothes weren't as gaudy as the others, and he was very...plump. There was an unsettling smirk on his face. I averted my eyes. This was the first time I'd ever been annoyed by someone smiling.

The one on the left, who was practically skin and bones compared to the others, was last to speak. "We procured this quite exclusive liquor in the capital. Why don't we enjoy it together? I've brought a lovely young woman from my territory who would be delighted to meet you, Lord Foronda." His clothes were flashy, but his face was so plain that it was oddly discordant. Did he think those clothes looked good on him?

While I surveyed the three, Lord Foronda clapped his hands once.

"I see. You two came all this way just to bribe me, is that it?" Lord Foronda finally declared, clearly annoyed.

Bribe? That's when you give people money or gifts so they do what you

want, right? Huh? They're bribing Lord Foronda?! Wait, they wanna bribe the person who just brought the law down on that criminal organization? That's crazy!

“Oh, no, not a bribe! Just call it a little token of friendship.”

That's literally a bribe...

“Why are you giving me any ‘tokens’?” he demanded, unamused.

“We believe you misunderstand us, we just wanted a chance to speak with you. It’s merely a thank you gift for making time for us. By no means a bribe.”

No, it's definitely a bribe.

“I misunderstand you?”

“Yes, dear sir. I think we’d like to have a nice, leisurely chat to set the record straight.”

“Set the record straight, hm?” Lord Foronda rolled his eyes. Still incognizant of his clear irritation, the three doubled down in hopes of getting through to him.

“Indeed! Listen to us, Lord Foronda. We only cooperated with that organization because they threatened us!”

“He speaks the truth! We honestly wanted to refuse, but we didn’t know what would happen if we did.”

“You know how terrifying they were, don’t you? We’d be victims too if we refused!”

So their claims were “the organization threatened us, so we’re victims, not criminals.” Lord Foronda’s eyes got even chillier. I’d realized during the thank-you party that Lord Foronda had a darkness inside that was a lot like Sifar’s—maybe worse, since he had so much more authority.

As I watched Lord Foronda with the three nobles, I made eye contact with a nearby bodyguard. *Oh, that's Dada! I didn't notice him since I was watching those four.* Lord Foronda had introduced Dada as his most trusted bodyguard. I bowed a little, and he smiled back.

“What a pretty smile...” I said.

Dada had a similar build to Rattloore, but he had a really pretty face. Since I’d just seen a creepy grin, his pleasant smile was like a breath of fresh air. According to Lord Foronda, women in the capital were always hitting on him.

While I basked in Dada's smile, Lord Foronda spoke again.

"God, you're annoying. Can you quit pestering me about this? My ears grow tired of your sniveling." The total lack of warmth in his voice made me shudder.

"Bwuh? Excuse me?"

"I'm telling you to shut your mouths."

"Wha?!" The three noblemen gaped at him in shock. Had they not noticed how annoyed he was? Surely they had, right?

"I get it. You want me to 'understand,' yes?"

"Yes, Lord Foronda. Understand that we were victimized—"

"Rest easy. I've already probed deep into your past dealings, so I understand everything—even the crimes you committed long before aiding the kidnapping organization."

Ah! Lord Foronda interrupted him! I guess the noble would just go on blustering if he didn't, though.

"Th-that's Lord Foronda for you!"

"What a great man!"

Huh? Why were they acting relieved? I thought that would really scare those guys...and he knows about their past crimes, too!

"Thank goodness. You understand that I suffered from their schemes as well!"

No, no. Lord Foronda didn't say that at all. What made you think he meant that? Are these three, like...stupid?

Lord Foronda sighed and shook his head. "I didn't think you were this dense. Goes to show that my research can't tell me everything."

"Dense?"

"Ah, my apologies. My language was too advanced for you idiots, so you didn't comprehend me. My fact-finding didn't tell me that you were idiots, so I had no idea. That's my mistake. Maybe you don't even recognize that you're hopeless. Personally, I've gone through the minimum effort necessary to carry myself like a decent human being, so it's hard for me to bring myself down to your level. Basically, you are so stupid that it's not worth bothering with. There. Does that make sense, or do you need it dumbed down more?"

Ah ha ha! I can't believe he just said all that! He's smiling while spitting venom! I looked at Dada, who was hiding a grin.

“Excuse me? What was that?”

“Stupid? Idiotic? Huh?”

The three men were dumbfounded. It seemed they'd finally come to understand Lord Foronda's feelings about them, even if it took them way too long.

“Oh? What's the matter? You're all making such ridiculous faces. By the way, are you sure you should be dawdling here? I believe the royal capital's investigators ought to be arriving at your mansions any moment.”

“Investigators?! Why?!”

“Why? Because I've looked into your business to get a better ‘understanding’ of you. As a result, I've found embezzlement, fraud, forgery, assault, threats, blackmail, and more. Of course, I've reported it all in detail to the king. I imagine he sent those investigators to secure evidence. Oh dear, was that too many big words again? Do you understand? It's hard to explain to adults like they're five-year-olds. Hmm...let's make it short and sweet: enjoy a life of slavery.”

Wow. The way he's smiling, if you couldn't make out his words, you'd think they were just having a pleasant chat.

“How can this be?! Aren't we on the same side?!”

The gaudily dressed man screamed desperately. *Huh? Since when were they on Lord Foronda's side?*

“The same side?” Even Lord Foronda was taken aback by that.

“Yes! We're nobility! We have to help each other at times like this.”

The slender one reached out to grasp Lord Foronda's arm, but Dada immediately intervened. The noble glared at Dada, but when the bodyguard returned the favor, the man hastily averted his eyes. What a dummy.

“I choose my side very carefully, and I would *never* side with the lowest of human trash. You offend my eyes.” Lord Foronda's expression was really terrifying when he was mad.

“Eep! Umm, no, er...”

“Um, aah... Excuse us!”

Finally seeing Lord Foronda's fury clearly, the men scampered off. *Took you long enough...*

While I watched them flee, Lord Foronda noticed me and called out, "Ivy, hello there."

"Hello, Lord Foronda." I looked up as he approached. Yeah, he looked *exhausted*. "You seem fatigued. Is everything okay?"

Lord Foronda smiled down at me, but something about it was a little different from usual. "You're such a good kid, Ivy. A real sight for sore eyes after looking at that trash...er, garbage."

Doesn't that mean the same thing? Dada was covering his mouth, but I could see he was laughing.

"Good grief," Lord Foronda complained. "They think they're victims? How ludicrous, especially after they specifically sought out orphans to sell to the organization."

Huh?

"Everybody thinks they can get away with it when the evidence is already there," he went on ranting. "They bring money, they try to bribe me with women. Damned refuse." He was *really* fed up. And did he say there were more people trying to bribe him than those three? I could see why he was so weary. "Honestly, you have no idea what I've gone through to dispose of—sorry, *arrest* them."

Ah ha ha, I didn't hear a thing. Should I be trying to stop him? Maybe, but it's not good to bottle up your anger. I'm happy to listen, anyway. Still...I dunno.

"Just yesterday, I heard that a certain noble hired assassins to have me killed," Lord Foronda added.

Huh?! I looked at Dada for confirmation, who nodded with a grimace. So it was true.

"Did you arrest them?" I asked.

"Huh? ...Oh!" Lord Foronda gasped. His mind had finally caught up with his mouth. "Er, Ivy?"

"I don't think anyone could fault you if you were forced to resort to underhanded means."

"Huh? Ivy?"

Both Lord Foronda and Dada seemed surprised, as if they hadn't expected me to say that. Hiring assassins was going way too far! I didn't want anyone to hurt Lord Foronda, given how hard he was working. He'd already suffered under the burden of having to conceal Count Faltoria's involvement with the organization, since he knew that adventurers and guardsmen might die if he spoke up. Captain Barxby had endured the same. I couldn't forgive anyone who'd hurt these people after they'd been through so much.

"Arresting them would of course be best, but if you can't do that..."

Lord Foronda chuckled. His smile was a relief to me—that was the first real smile I'd seen from him today. His expression before had been too stiff to be a smile.

"Thank you, Ivy," he said.

"I haven't done anything. More importantly, you look tired. Are you making sure to take breaks?"

"Not at all," Dada piped up. "I keep telling him to rest, but he ignores me and goes on working."

Lord Foronda looked away sheepishly.

"That's not good. You need to give your body a break!"

"I know, I know..."

"You work too hard, Lord Foronda. I know you're busy, but rest is vital."

"Okay, Ivy. Why don't you and I take a break together?" he suggested. I cocked my head at his words, but he nudged my back slightly, so I started walking in the direction he was leading me. "There's this restaurant that makes incredible sweets. Let's eat together."

After that, we ate delicious pastries. For some reason, he also bought me the most comfortable shoes. Dada even thanked me and said that it was a good change of pace. The shoes Lord Foronda had bought me must have been really expensive. Even after a long walk, my feet weren't as tired as before. *Next time, I'll pick shoes like these.*

Afterword

HI, EVERYONE. It's been a while. I'm Honobonoru500. Thank you very much for picking up *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash* Volume 2. Just like the last volume, illustrator Nama has provided us with some beautiful illustrations. I'm also overjoyed that so many people have been reading the recently released manga.

Here in Volume 2, my goal was to illustrate Ivy's growth through her relationships with the adventurers. After being betrayed and hurt by her parents and siblings, how can she begin to trust others and look toward the future again? Even though I encountered many setbacks along the way, I think I've painted a picture of Ivy's growth here.

When I started writing Part 3, it was originally about an adventurer coming after Ivy wrongly thinking she'd seen him stealing. In that version, the adventurers protected her from him. In the end, I changed it to a criminal organization. That much was fine. My mistake was, when thinking about how to write the organization, I had so much fun with it that I made it bigger and bigger in scale. Before I knew it, they'd become a huge kidnapping organization based in Otolwa. Even I was surprised when, suddenly, the organization had its sights set on Ivy! I wondered, "How did that happen?" But I'd already uploaded the web novel update, so it was too late to take it back. So I had to have Ivy put in some work! But thanks to all that, I think I successfully showed Ivy's bond with the adventurers and her growth as a person. I'm glad I was able to land where where I meant to.

The manga serialization begins February 2020! I'd never imagined having one of my stories adapted as a manga, so it still feels bizarre to see it with my own eyes. Thank you, Tou Fukino, for drawing it.

I offer my utmost thanks to everyone at TO Books. Special thanks to my editor Shinjo, who's done so much for me. Thanks to all their work, we've successfully released Volume 2. You all have my heartfelt gratitude, and I would be delighted to continue working with you.

Finally, I must express more heartfelt gratitude to all of those who purchased this book. Since sales have gone so well, I can get excited for us to meet again in Volume 3! See you then.

Honobonoru500

February 2020

About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

This is the second volume of a web novel that began in August 2018. It's the story of Ivy's warm and fuzzy journey, but things turn a lot less warm and fuzzy when kidnappers target Ivy!

The adventurers she meets protect her, and she learns to trust them and grows stronger in the process. Please enjoy watching as Sora, Ivy's rare slime, helps them fight against this powerful organization.

Nama

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I've been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

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