

Chapter 641

“Let’s go that way!” Nora called to us. She spotted Tabitha and Laurel just climbing out of the hole. “What’s up, you two? If you’ve had a good rest, let’s move on!”

The two women nodded as they dusted the dirt and grime off their wrinkly clothes. They glanced at Tessa, who was still immersed in her prayers. Tabitha mumbled, “She’s so pious. Do you think God with really bless her?”

Nora shrugged. “Let’s go!”

The forest was rather humid in the morning. The soil had become loose. One could hear the soft crunching of the earth just by stepping on it.

“Ah!” Laurel screamed. Then, she squatted on the spot she had previously stepped on and began to scrape at the ground.

Very soon, we saw what had been hiding underneath the earth. It was a cluster of yellowish-white fungi. Some of them had been crushed under her feet.

Only a few short and stout ones were spared.

“Mushrooms!” Tessa, who had been reciting her prayers the whole time, promptly came forward and started digging up the plants from under the fertile soil. She wiped the dirt off and began to swallow them a few pieces at a time.

Laurel, looking equal parts terrified and worried, wondered, “Do we... eat them raw? Just like that?”

Tabitha turned around and, indeed, managed to find other mushrooms of the same variety under some rotten leaves.

She passed some of them to us. “Yes, this kind of mushrooms can be eaten raw. There used to be plenty at my place and we did this all the time. Sure, they won’t satisfy our hunger, but it’ll have to do for now. Let’s eat!”

They dug in. The rest of us, having barely eaten anything for a day, followed suit.

Nora helped herself to some mushrooms. A while later, she looked at Tabitha, a question on her mind. “Are you sure we won’t have any hallucinations after eating these? Once, I watched the news about poison testers in the south. They usually do that come May and June. Those who really did get poisoned are said to be able to ‘transcend reality’.”

Tabitha chuckled. “Well, if you know which ones to eat and which ones to avoid, basically you won’t have any hallucinations.”

Laurel found many other kinds of mushrooms in the soil. She turned around to ask the expert, “What about these?”

Tabitha nodded. “Sure, but we’ll need to cook them. If not, we’ll see things that aren’t there.”

“That’s a pity. None of us have a lighter, otherwise, we could have made ourselves a feast supplied by Mother Nature herself,” Nora sighed as she stuffed more mushrooms into her mouth.

“Ah!” Tessa shouted all of a sudden, prompting everyone else to look towards her, surprise hanging on our faces.

“What? Has your God decided to show Himself?” Nora spoke in annoyance.

Tessa’s face turned pale, her body stiffened, as she muttered, “B-B-Bamboo snake...”

All of us followed her gaze simultaneously. There was a tiny green snake, about fifty centimetres in length, hanging around the leaves of the tree next to her.

We would not have noticed it if we had not been paying attention. The snake spat out its forked tongue. It looked like it was preparing an attack.

“This snake is venomous. We have to be careful!” Tabitha yelled, her face pale and haggard.

I scanned the surroundings from the corner of my eyes. There was a branch that must have been snapped in half by the wind. One of its ends seemed rather sharp.

“What now! What now! I’m going crazy just looking at that ugly thing! Ah, it’s giving me goosebumps!” Nora stood close to me. Driven by anxiety and fright, she clung tightly onto me as if her life depended on it.

I wanted to comfort her, but I was scared too. The creature was inches away from us, equipped with venom!

“Is it not too late if we run now?” Nora muttered, already backing away.

“It’s too late!” Tessa said, her voice trembling. “This is a bamboo snake. It’ll come after us.”

“Damn it! But we can’t just stay here like this!”

Laurel was so scared that she was shaking uncontrollably, her face completely drained of color.

“Kill it!” Tabitha proposed. Despite being scrawny, she dared to glare at the reptile hiding among the leaves with a wicked glint in her dark eyes.

Tessa was closest to the snake. Any careless movements and the snake could latch onto her and sink its fangs on her neck.

But she was too frightened at the moment to do anything. Her body kept shaking. “Don’t provoke it, you guys. I’m scared.”

“What are you scared of? You recite your prayers all the time, right? Your God will protect you. Go on,” Nora said, with great irony.

In a situation like this, no one could afford to be distracted.

Tabitha turned to instruct Tessa. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll count to three. You get ready to dodge. I will throw a rock and see if I can hit it.”

What?

Tessa was on the verge of tears. "You can't possibly hit it! The chances are slim. What if you hit me instead? I'll die!"

"Do you have other ideas?" Tabitha asked a rhetorical question. Tessa shook her head in despair.

"It's a gamble then!" With that said, Tabitha slowly bent down and picked up a stone.

Tessa was really having a breakdown, but time was running out and we had no other choice. We had to take our chances.

"One, two, three... Duck!" As if on cue, Tessa promptly moved away.

Tabitha flung the stone towards the bamboo snake hiding among the leaves.

Wild animals often had faster reflexes than humans.

The bamboo snake evaded Tabitha's attack. Angered, it made its advance on Tessa, who had just barely got out of its way.

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A reactionary creature like this was even more fearful when it sprang into action.

It's going to get Tessa! I hastily picked up the branch I'd spotted earlier on the ground and jabbed its sharp side at the snake.

Thankfully, that single thrust pierced through the snake's mid-section and successfully pinned it down.

Its head and tail, however, remained wriggling furiously.

Tessa was still recovering from her fright. Anger and shock coursed through her, forming a volatile mix of emotions.

She picked up the stone that Tabitha had flung away earlier, then brought it crashing firmly down on the snake's head.

Its head thus maimed; the snake seemed to be caught in a daze. Without hesitation, Tessa vehemently crushed it with a few successive blows.

Blood splattered everywhere. Tessa only stopped, satisfied, when the snake had been utterly reduced to bits of mangled flesh.

The other girls looking on turned a sickly pale. Nora gulped, then quickly said, "Let's go. It's getting late, and we should get moving."

As we slowly forged our way forward, we managed to pick quite a lot of mushrooms. The forested mountain was ancient and teeming with rich, bountiful wildlife.

Whenever we stumbled upon the occasional spring, we'd settle down to eat and drink. No matter what else happened to us, at least we knew we wouldn't go hungry.

After half a day's journey, we spotted a red fruit, resembling an apple, growing on a tree a few steps ahead.

"Are those apples?" Nora panted. The near-constant rate of trekking had left her face flushed and dripping with perspiration.

Tabitha quickly scaled the tree and tossed a few down. "It's grown in the wild. It's not very sweet, but it's edible. We can pick them all and bring them along for something to eat."

It sounded like a good plan. We quickly ascended the tree after Tabitha. Tessa, however, sat a little way off fiddling with her own belongings. She'd eaten quite a lot of mushrooms along the way and was no longer as concerned about getting food as the rest of us were.

Laurel gave it her best shot. Being rather plump and short, however, climbing naturally posed a rather insurmountable challenge for her.

She clumsily made a few attempts but gave up after a while. Laurel was resigned to waiting on the ground below, picking up the fruits we lobbed her way.

Nora perched leisurely on the branches. She greedily ate any fruits she'd managed to pluck, blissfully indulging in the fruits of her labor.

Tabitha, however, maintained a clear head. She'd sensibly warned, "Look out for snakes!"

"Ah!" Nora shrieked, terrified at the thought of having to face another snake. She wildly surveyed her surroundings, then took another huge bite of the apple in her hand. "That made me nervous! Let me eat another apple to calm my nerves," Nora exclaimed.

Tabitha shook her head helplessly, then continued throwing fruits down. Laurel continued picking them up in her ungainly manner.

Tessa remained aloof at the side. Looking down, Nora observed, "What is that woman doing? She's been fumbling with her things ever since we got here! Did killing that snake mess with her mind?"

Tabitha merely shrugged in reply.

"What are the two of you talking about? Let's be quick! Once we're done picking the fruits, we should hurry along," I broke in.

Why are they wasting time discussing trivial matters? These girls can be so flippant about things sometimes! I fumed to myself.

To ensure that we had enough and a little more besides, we'd wiped out the entire tree. We even took the few that weren't yet ripe to be consumed later on our way.

Fortunately, that snake that we'd killed was the only aggressive one we encountered. The rest of the way, though bumpy, contained nothing as treacherous as that snake.

With our ample supply of water, fruits, and a side of mushrooms, we considered ourselves rather fortunate travelers.

After we'd crossed few peaks, daylight slowly began to fade. We still hadn't found ourselves a suitable resting spot for the night, however. Nora grew visibly anxious, insisting, "Let's keep going forward. I saw a couple of manmade paths along the trail, which means there must be a village or two nearby. If we walk on, we'll surely meet someone! We'll be able to call for help then."

That seemed to be the only viable solution for now. The other girls found Nora's proposal agreeable and continued their walk with renewed vigor.

"Come on, everyone! Let's get to the village quickly. We'll be home soon," we urged each other. Our spirits lifted at the thought.

Quickening our steps, we crossed another peak and indeed saw flares of light ahead of us in the distance.

We rejoiced. As Tabitha strode forward, she fantasized out loud, "When I get home, I'll surely take myself out for a good foie gras and a seafood buffet. Besides, I'll treat myself to some cosmetic products that I've been eyeing for the longest time."

Laurel, too, joined in. "I'll take everyone out to high tea, then. My treat!"

"I have to eat some steak. I feel as if I could eat a whole cow," Nora declared exaggeratedly, popping the rest of the stash she'd picked into her mouth. Nora was a rather lovely girl, particularly when she smiled.

Tessa, however, remarked rather evenly, "We're lucky to make it out of here alive. Let's focus on getting out first."

Her cool statement rather dampened our cheeriness. Exchanging glances, the rest of us decided to pay no heed to Tessa's comment.

Chapter 643

Nora turned to me and queried, "Scarlett, if we indeed get to go home this time around, what would you want to do most of all?"

What did I want? That question lingered in my mind as I continued trudging forward, deep in thought.

There wasn't any food I was especially craving. After a moment's pause, I concluded, "I want to see the person I miss most, give him a hug, and apologize to him face-to-face."

Nora seemed taken by surprise. Then she curiously pressed, "Is it somebody you're in love with?"

I gave her a faint smile but declined to reply.

Night had fallen when we finally reached saw signs of human life. The village we'd arrived at was located in quite a rural area of the mountains, and perhaps due to its inaccessibility, there didn't seem to be many inhabitants around.

From the number of lamps we'd counted shining in the dark, there were probably thirty to forty households scattered throughout the village.

"Let's find a place to hunker down for the night," Nora suggested, already making her way towards the door of the nearest cottage.

"Woof! Woof!" A dog suddenly rushed out into the yard and began sounding the alert at our sudden intrusion.

We clung to each other, terrified. Fortunately, the dog was leashed to a rope. It strained against its tether, barking continuously.

The owner of the cottage had evidently heard the ruckus. Out stepped a middle-aged man with tan, weathered skin.

He spoke, but none of us understood what he was trying to say. After a while, Tabitha gasped. "We might have unknowingly crossed the border into Venria!"

We all froze. The arduous journey we'd made, crossing peak after peak, hadn't brought us any closer to home. We'd even gone so far that we were in another country altogether.

The man's foreign tongue threw us all into disarray. Upon seeing our confused faces, the owner of the cottage seemed to further mistake our intentions. He waved his axe at us threateningly in a bid to chase us off his property.

Fortunately, a young woman, approximately sixteen years of age, ran out of the cottage just then. She tugged at the man's sleeve.

The young woman urgently conferred with the man for a while. He then grew noticeably calmer and lowered the axe in his hand.

The man then turned toward us and gestured. Uncomprehendingly, Tabitha made a few hesitant motions with her hands in return, trying to convey our goodwill.

We couldn't tell if he understood. He did, however, let us into his home eventually.

The cottage we entered was a dismal sight and stripped down within. Its clay walls were caked with soot, doubtless from the fire that was burning in its hearth.

A filament lamp hung from the ceiling, the sort that farming villages would have used decades ago. The lamp burned dimly at a bare fifty watts, probably to save on electricity costs. Shadows filled the entire cottage.

There were some bowls and utensils in a neat stack in a corner. The roof of the cottage was, in fact, a tent stitched together out of gunny sacks. There was dust everywhere. It turned to grime at damp spots where rainwater had seeped in.

The small heaps of blackened dirt that covered the tent looked sure to be full of pests.

The man took out two bowls from a cabinet and placed them before us.

Due to the language barrier, the man continued to gesture furiously. He seemed to be inviting us to eat.

We peered at the bowls in front of us. The food was steeped in chili. Nora recoiled ever so slightly, asking, "What dish is this?"

"It's pickled onions. I think it's supposed to be a starting dish. Shall we try it?" Tabitha exclaimed rather adventurously. She had more of an appetite than the rest of us for more exotic and unusual delicacies.

Having endured hunger for a whole day, we dug in rather gratefully. The flavor of the pickled onions, spicy with a hint of sourness, was quite refreshing.

It had been a few days since we'd really tasted anything. The pickled onions thus thoroughly satisfied our tastebuds.

As we ate, the man and his daughter squatted in a corner. They gazed at us with curiosity and awe, mixed with a tinge of fear.

Sensing their uneasiness, Nora persisted in her attempts to communicate with them. Along with her hand signals, she deliberately spoke a few basic words, emphasizing each syllable slowly.

It worked. Somehow, both father and daughter came to understand that we were here to borrow a device to contact home.

They were stumped, however, by what exactly a phone was.

We'd run into another roadblock. We could only wait until the next day for the man to seek help from his fellow villagers. Until then, we'd have to take shelter in this battered cottage. Compared to spending a night out in the open mountains, however, this was considered a win.

When we blearily woke the next morning, the man was already up in the tree in his yard plucking fruits.

His daughter stood beneath the tree with a basket, picking up the soft fruits he'd accidentally let tumble onto the ground.

Every time she bent over to pick up some fruit, she'd beam a smile in our direction. It was as if she was eagerly trying to transmit her simple joy to us.

"Really makes you rethink the link between happiness and wealth, doesn't it?" Tabitha mused, looking rather wistful. She looked almost like a child with her slender frame.

Nora crossed her arms, leaning against the door frame. "Why? Are you thinking of something sad?" she quizzed, raising an eyebrow.

Tabitha shrugged. "Not really. I was reflecting on this whole turn of events, and I feel as if I've been enlightened. How we live our lives should be entirely up to us. It doesn't matter what other people think."

"It's all been destined!" Tessa quipped. This discussion aligned with the philosophical tendencies she'd been harboring all this way. We'd finally managed to pique her interest.

Nora massaged her temple, groaning, "Can we take a break from philosophy for once?"

Tessa ignored Nora. She marched straight out into the yard and began picking up fruits with the young girl.

They still couldn't communicate with words but smiles and gestures seemed to suffice for now.

Chapter 644

In our desperation to head home, Nora hauled me along into the village in our hunt for a phone.

It's the twenty-first century! Surely someone must have a phone around here! we thought. When we knocked on the door of the next cottage, however, Nora's hand signals asking for a phone only met with baffled looks.

Our best efforts at miming remained futile. We departed after a good while, empty-handed.

Tabitha and Laurel hadn't fared much better. We returned to find them sitting side by side, disconsolate. Laurel was the first to speak. "If we can't get any results here, we should try moving further in. Perhaps we'll get to the city. We may even meet some fellow countrymen!"

“The probability of that will be really low though. We don’t know how much longer the road up ahead is. If we aren’t careful, we may be mistaken for thieves and locked up,” Nora countered. She plopped down onto the floor with a sigh, looking defeated.

“What’s so bad about getting locked up?” Tessa asked thoughtfully. “Surely, the local policeman knows a little more than the average villager. If we manage to explain our situation to them, it might be our ticket home.”

“That’s right!” Laurel leaped to her feet in excitement. “If we get in touch with the local police, they may be able to send us home. We won’t have to wander around so aimlessly either.”

We all agreed that this was the most promising idea we’d had. We cheered up instantly at the thought and launching into a feverish discussion of what we should do to capture the attention of the local police.

We were in a village on the mountain. Who knows if there’s even a functional police station around here? I wondered to myself.

Tessa remained steadfast in her conviction that she shouldn’t participate in any criminal act, regardless of its motive. She slipped off before our discussion even began.

Nora and Tabitha, however, were enthusiastic. “Leave it to us!” they cried delightedly.

That evening, Nora and Tabitha walked boldly up to one of the villager’s yards under the pretense of borrowing something. They then grabbed a bundle of items and sprinted off.

Both of them returned with their arms laden with fruit, fully expecting the police to be hot on their heels.

However, neither Nora nor Tabitha had counted on the kindness of the villager. The owner of the house had been enraged at the two girls' theft. However, on account of Nora and Tabitha being foreigners, the villager had assumed that both girls were foraging for food and ultimately sympathized.

He thus hadn't reported the incident to anyone, least of all the police. Nora and Tabitha were rather taken aback by this outcome and returned the stolen goods rather sheepishly.

A short while later, the villager returned bearing the same fruits that Nora and Tabitha had returned. Embarrassed and slightly frustrated, Nora and Tabitha decided to turn to other means of crime.

However, they repeated this at several other homes only to be met with the same result. Some villagers even gave us additional food items from their own hoard out of pity.

Rice was a staple in the diets of these villagers. All they knew of the world was confined to the boundaries of their farm. They remained largely oblivious to the wider modern society beyond their fences.

The villagers thus viewed Nora and Tabitha's acts with almost naive simplicity, assuming that the two girls had been starving or poor. They'd done what they did selflessly, out of pity.

When we realized this, we were resolved not to pursue our thoughtless ways any further. However, news of our presence here in the village had already spread amongst its people.

Over the next couple of days, practically the whole village came to visit us bearing gifts of food.

Through the most rudimentary of phrases and lots of guessing, we discovered that our host was named Troy Laander. His daughter was Yvette.

Among all of us, Tabitha was the quickest to pick up the villagers' language, having been exposed to other similar foreign tongues before.

Gradually, she was able to converse with the Laanders.

When Troy finally comprehended the rationale behind our rather peculiar acts of theft, he said ruefully, "There was no need for you to behave this way! We could have found someone for you to borrow a phone from."

Tabitha cradled her head in both hands. She'd long ago realized the foolishness of our plan. It was our utter hopelessness that had compelled and continued it.

Trying to comfort her, Troy promised to seek out a phone for us the following morning.

It was late, and it was apparently a taboo to present oneself uninvited at another person's house at that timing.

We saw no reason not to but acquiesced as the dutiful guests that we were.

The thought that home was very possibly within reach made us almost delirious with joy. We thus played delightedly with Yvette the whole night.

Tabitha was now our communications expert. She spent the entire night translating for us. Among the many promises we made Yvette; one was that we'd definitely return to the village to visit her. We also assured her that we'd bring dolls and lots of good food back with us.

We chatted until the first rays of dawn streaked across the sky. Troy, true to his word, had already set off in search of a phone for us.

He returned empty-handed in the afternoon appearing rather dejected. He did, however, bring this offering, "I think I saw some policemen in the village. Do you want to head over and take a look?"

We were elated at this news. Nora, however, looked rather suspicious. She asked cynically, "Why did those policemen come here all of a sudden, though?"

Troy halted. "They're looking for someone. I don't know the specifics, but you can go and take a look."

Looking for someone?

We exchanged glances amongst each other. We were equally bewildered. There was no discernible reason for policemen to be looking for someone in such a remote location.

Chapter 645

It had taken the four of us days to get here across the rugged terrain, scaling numerous peaks. It was a tremendous distance. Why would these policemen have made the same, if not more, perilous journey? Besides, weren't they worried about appearing conspicuous?

"What's wrong?" Troy asked doubtfully, noting our troubled faces with concern.

Out of consideration for Troy, we chorused in tandem, a little too brightly, "Nothing! It's fine!"

Nora was the most street smart among us. She was closely guarded, refusing to trust others unless they've proven themselves. She now paused, then remarked wisely, "No matter what, let's be careful. If it's really impossible, we can continue to the city. We'll definitely meet fellow countrymen there. If we're indeed that close to the border, there'll definitely be an embassy we can seek refuge at."

Upon hearing Nora's tempered reasoning, we nodded in agreement. Besides, it didn't seem like there were any other alternatives.

Having made up our minds, we regretfully bade farewell to Troy and Yvette and hurriedly set off.

Before we could even step out of the door, however, we heard the sound of rapid footsteps coming from outside, beyond it.

"What shall we do?" Laurel shrieked. She clung tightly to the hem of my shirt, petrified.

“Let’s wait and see,” I declared firmly, trying to keep my voice from quaking. Together, Nora and I watched the door in trepidation.

Troy’s house was rather cramped. There was absolutely nowhere to hide.

Besides, even if we managed to, we’d be leaving Troy and Yvette to fend for themselves. If these were indeed assailants coming for us, they might even torment Troy and Yvette for helping us.

We decided that we had to confront them head-on. As we peered out of the crack of the door, what greeted us was the sight of a few dark-skinned men attired in police uniforms. They stood haughtily in the yard with their chests puffed out.

“Venrian policemen!” Nora muttered; her brow furrowed. She squared her shoulders and walked out into the yard somewhat defiantly.

When the policemen saw us, looks of astonishment flitted briefly across their faces. Troy, who’d followed us out, began rattling off a string of explanations. Unable to follow the conversations, we fixed our gazes on Troy in complete trust.

After a brief exchange, the apparent leader of the policemen turned towards us and uttered a command. Naturally, we made no response and merely looked at him, mystified.

The policeman looked equally confused. His arrogance seemed to have taken a blow. He turned towards a sallow-looking man standing just behind him and gave another order.

His chosen interpreter stared at us with piercing eyes and asked, “Are you illegal Chanaean immigrants?”

Nora pursed her lips. "Good sirs, can we discuss this civilly? We weren't trespassing. We were running for our lives!"

The interpreter frowned slightly, then reported back to his leader. The policeman looked at us for a moment, then directed his reply to us through his interpreter again.

In this way, we achieved a semblance of understanding. The Venrian policemen were here on border patrol, having heard rumors of missing people.

From what information we'd managed to piece together, they didn't sound like terrible people. In fact, we managed to glean the fact that some of our family members were searching for us.

Nora's eyes roved across each of our faces. At last, she said lightly, "Which of you has such influential family members? How did they manage to mobilize even the Venrian policemen?"

We had all been equally confounded by the revelation. Tabitha volunteered rather uncertainly, "I'm not too sure either, but my Dad's job involves border surveillance. I don't think he's important enough a figure to get me out here, though, much less know where I am!"

Laurel shrugged as well. "Don't look at me! My parents are ordinary people. They live along the coast. If I was ever kidnapped, all they would do would be to call the police. It isn't likely that Chanaean policemen would cast their net this far."

We all looked simultaneously in Tessa's direction. She had been standing aside calmly and was startled to see us gazing questioningly at her. "It must be fate!" she blurted out.

Speechless, we turned back. It was evident that we couldn't count on Tessa for answers now, either.

Nora squinted at me. "Scarlett, now that I think about it, you've never told us about your past or your family, have you?"

I bit my lip, then replied ruefully, "I grew up an orphan in R Province. My Grandma was the one who took care of me as a child growing up, but she passed away. I've been working at A City alone ever since. I'm not close to my colleagues and I don't think any of them would notice if I went missing."

My reply was evidently not what Nora was expecting to hear. She awkwardly patted my arm and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring that up."

I smiled faintly at her. "It's nothing. I'm used to it."

Tabitha seemed the most likely cause now. Her parents must have gotten hold of some thread of connection that had led them all the way here to Venria.

We thus said our goodbyes for real to the Laanders. Together with the policemen, we traipsed out of the village towards what we hoped was home.

The long ride eventually sobered us up from the initial rush of joy. A sudden hush descended on our group. Then Nora spoke, "I hope we can truly return home this time around. If we all survive this, let's be sure to keep in touch."

Laurel forced a chuckle. "Of course we'll survive!"

It was a five or six-hour drive to the city. We were supposed to be headed towards Marsingfill, but the route took us instead to Ocean City. It was located, as its name suggested, close to the sea.

An uneasy feeling stirred among us. Nora turned towards the sallow-skinned man and demanded, "Why did you take a detour around Norham to bring us here to Ocean City?"

The man smirked aggravatingly. "Well, well, it seems like someone knows her way around Venria pretty well!" he said.