

The trek to the woods that Roza had been frequenting for her renewable supplies was a short walk, heading through one forest and getting to leisurely enjoy the nature before there was a river that separated that closer forest from the one they were heading too. At first there wasn't a huge difference, animals becoming more plentiful and plants growing thicker, but before long long they were very much in the middle of the wilderness with only their wits to help them. The bark of trees looked to shimmer when the light hit them, and plant leaves gave off a glittery look in the sunlight.

"Well, we're on the edge now." She announced, pausing to have a look around while the others did what they did best.

Elydia had taken a more peaceful route at the moment, picking fruits, flowers, leaves, and occasionally a few rocks that she wanted to try and eat but knew one of the riders would tell her that was a very dirty practice. She knew it was, but that didn't stop her all the same from wanting to forbidden snacks. Her own basket that was being carried was filled to the brim with greenery speckled with brighter colors.

Minoru was another story all together, determined to eat her fill as she ran along. Smaller birds and scurrying rodents were no match for the giant bird, gone in a few gulps before returning to the group as they moved along. Eventually she had taken to putting a few animals into her side bags for later, rabbits mainly that she knew tasted better when cooked properly by one of the riders.

Lino was content to float beside Radice as a large shadow. She would normally save her strength and tuck away underneath, but she didn't want to be caught off guard while relaxing. Radice was similarly on alert, mainly keeping an eye on Grim, but occasionally checking Curt to see that there was no mischief.

If Grim noticed their wariness, she did nothing for it. As promised, she was obediently picking up the things Curt pointed out and placing it in containers strapped to her side. The boy looked like he was having a field day as he watched the trees slowly sparkle and take on properties he had never seen before. Was it some sort of enchantment? Is that why their positioning trackers always messed up in this forest? Should he be planting cameras here, or was there more to go before they reached whatever main secret destination there was in the woods? As always, he was not without mischief.

Sensing her Rider's delight, Grim set about fixing it. Look how much Minoru is eating. She could probably take your whole arm if she was hungry enough. It's even gift-wrapped for her. He was doing his best not to be terrified and keep that all in the back of his head, but it was difficult when all the dragons around appeared to be eating. Even Lino—the one he was most accustomed to—was snapping up rabbits like snacks when the group flushed them out. Every now and then, the flash of teeth set him on edge again.

The solution? He took out his phone and started snapping pictures of everyone. This would make such a cute blog post—'Hiking with Fam' or something like that. He would have to pretend Minoru was a wild dragon of some sort, but he could take as many pictures as he wanted of the others being photogenic. Thinking up captions for his photos got him properly distracted again—not just from the ever-present terror lizards, but also his tired legs. "The forest is already lovely, I can't wait to get some macro shots when things start getting...crystalline? Is that what you said?"

"Now, now, don't forget to save room for dinner!" Roza called after the curious Minoru as she saw the other grab a bird out of midair. Putting her hands on her hips as the dragon felt those displeased feelings, finally the large bird of a dragon took notice it was at her. Turning to face the rider, bird limp in her mouth, they made eye contact for a moment before Mino came running towards the group.

Curt seemed to be the first in line, running towards him before rubbing her soft feathery crest against his face and making very sweet and happy noises while doing so. She was trying very hard to behave, even forgiving the other male for his wrong doings. Not that it mattered to Curt, Roza sighing as she called for the dragon once more. "Come here, Mino. Leave poor Curt be." Abandoning her affection to go quickly run against Radice, eventually she made it over to her rider who fluffed at her cheeks. "Why are you like this." She asked softly, getting answers from her purse that equated to croaks and ribbits, Baby Bean still sounding strange but it had become normal to Roza.

"I'm a good bird!" Well, she wasn't wrong, and Roza wasn't about to tell her differently. Even as there was a bird she was talking around.

"Yes, go eat the bird in your mouth and look for things to bring home. No more food." Tapping the dragon's beak as she spoke to her, Minoru nodded and was off once more, joining Elydia who was collecting frosted colored berries. There were plenty of bigger things that could go in her bag over here! Rabbits scattered as she snapped some up and gathered rabbit for later meals.

"Anyways, something of the sort. The leaves get more crystal like once we get deeper in. It's quite pretty." Pausing as she heard a noise that was at least to familiar to her, a small round bird came swooping down to peck at Radice and Lino. Flying off again as she was swatted at but came back down as they kept moving.

Save room for dinner? With a sudden realization, Curt realized that he might be dinner. They had forgiven him suspiciously quickly, and now they were 'letting' him hike into this remote area that messed with all of his surveillance machines. It all made sense. As the bird ran toward him, he was already drafting the will in his head, and just let out a big sigh of acceptance when Minoru started rubbing cutely on him. She was getting a feel for her food, of course, showing him the bird so he knew what was going to happen next. He was too overloaded to hear anything else, even as Roza spoke again.

Grim was satisfied with this development and turned her bad nature elsewhere. "I'll carry all the meat if that little garbage disposal bag and tiny little mail bag gets full, so hunt and kill as much as you like." She certainly had the containers to carry whatever they wanted. Knowing Curt, there would be some sort of instance magic involved, too. Grim saw the chickadee get grumpy at their closeness and kept her mouth shut. She watched as it trembled, wondering about the attack, and then resolved itself to battle. She could have stopped it, but it was much too funny to watch. Lino hissed and snapped at the bird, trying to make a short meal of it.

Grim chuckled and gave a crooked grin. "Well don't you have a good friend. Being so honest, telling you what an ugly beak you have."

This was her cue to become enraged, but Lino wasn't taking the bait. She stopped her attack and let the bird peck at her without retaliating, all to spite the other dragon. Fine, they would be friends.

"Oh, mamma! It's the little birdy!" Elydia called as she pointed to the bird, though was curious why it was taking to attacking Lino and occasionally Radice. Elydia also was also not one to be attacked, but Mino had been pecked plenty of times and had learned to ignore the small bird as well.

Watching for a moment, Roza could only sigh. A black-capped chickadee was what Roza was able to identify it as, though this one was quite angry whenever more than just her came into the forest. "Don't peck them, little birdy. Come here." Reaching into her pocket to pull out little disks of seeds and other goodies that were compacted together, she repeated a nice call to grab their attention and bring them over. Some more attacks were made but eventually the small bird abandoned its fight to see what Roza had. Enough of a temptation that it ate happily while Roza used a single finger to stroke the bird. "They usually aren't this feisty, but I guess there are a lot of us..."

Making similar sounding soothing calls that the bird also made, she showed Radice the bird, still munching away on the seed and bug disks as it was examined by the riders. Minoru also wanted to join in, but knew the bird didn't like her. So snatching up some more rabbits who thought they could escape her, she watched from afar.

Radice's eyes glittered at the suddenly docile bird. He reached out with his finger to pet it on its fluffy head, but it looked up and threatened him with an open beak. "Okay, okay, no petting." Lino looked on over his shoulder, feeling the hopeful emotions of her Rider, who really wanted to take the bird home. Really, he would just raise anything with feathers, wouldn't he? The bird seemed to like Roza more, though. In fact, if anything, it hated Radice. That never stopped him from trying to pet animals before, though. She could already see him watching for the bird to lower its guard before trying to pet again.

Curt saw his chance at redemption. He just had to prove he was worth keeping around, and he knew birds were the way into someone's heart. If not Radice, then he would be very helpful to Rozaliya with his bird knowledge. "They're called chickadee because of their favorite call. They eat worms and caterpillars, and hang out at bird feeders, if you set one out. We're probably too close to its cache; They store food for the winter, and winter is coming up. They can withstand very cold temperatures by entering torpor, which is sort of like hibernation but only overnight, and they have a pretty strict hierarchy. They're very serious about their seeds and home. It's weird to see a tit by itself, though." He was satisfied with his presentation, not noticing how Lino was snickering and resisting 'tit' jokes. At the very least, her Rider was captivated by the rundown of bird trivia, and maybe Rozaliya could use the information as well. Wait, would she already know this? Was he useless after all? He put on a brave, smiling face anyways. He'd just have to be confident in his abilities.

"No, no, little bird. Radice is a very good person." Leaning over to give him a few kisses as he had his eyes on the bird, the chickadee stared at the other rider before giving in and gave his finger a small bite. When he didn't seem to react it accepted a SINGLE pet, letting out some displeased noises when he tried to go in for a second one. It was... progress.

"Hello little birdy!" Elydia called as she came over, letting the bird examine her before she got in a small head pet, an offering of a berry was happily accepted once the seed cracker treat was consumed. She still had more, but Roza always told her not to feed the birds too much, or they might get dependent on people feeding them.

"In honestly, the tits are even feistier in the spring, once winter is over. It's slightly strange this one is already so angry and ready to fight." The only one to get in as many pets as she wanted, she could see it getting ready to attack again. It's attention directed at Curt as he spoke many bird words it seemed to know were about them, and they didn't like it. Flinging itself off, it was about to get off a single attack before Roza called it back with more temptations of seed. "Come here birdy, leave the other alone." Wrapping her other arm around to keep it warm, she calmed it down as she tried to put the terrified Curt back into higher spirits. "That is all wonderful information though, Curt. You know so much great information about the birds, even if this one didn't appreciate it."

She did return to examining the bird, looking above to the trees but the chickadee seemed to be completely alone out here. There weren't even other birds around at the moment, maybe scattered after Minoru started eating them. Musing out loud to herself, she hadn't caught onto why Lino was snickering quite yet. "It's strange that you are alone, tits are meant to be in pairs at least. They need plenty of other tits to press up against to keep warm."

Getting tugged on, Roza looked down to Elydia who was staring up at her with big sweet eyes. "Momma, that sounds lewd." Blinking, Roza thought over her past words and privately agreed it did, but she didn't seem to care.

"Maybe we should take you home, I think it'll be nice to see a tit every morning. I'm sure Radice would agree."

And agree he did; His eye turned violet and he looked away, his face completely flushed, nodding. Lino started cackling, glad she held back. This was so much better than her just rapid-firing tit jokes. She felt a little bad for eating the quail and a few chickadees on the way here, but it was worth it in the end, since one hopped down closer and provided the gateway for tit jokes. Don't eat any more birds, Radice reprimanded her.

What? I'm not a vegetarian.

But look at how cute they are. It seemed Radice was now projecting his overprotectiveness onto birds now that Kindle was resting at home. Hopefully this was just a phase, since ducks tasted very good. She nodded and agreed for the moment.

"Well, of course. Just let me know if you need to know anything else. I know all sorts of things; I memorized a few encyclopedias when I was a bored kid." Curt felt heartbroken under his sparkling demeanor. Even the bird was conspiring against him, pecking at him as he made desperate attempts to be useful. Was it summoned to distract him while they made preparations for the final blow? He hoped it would be fast. Grim huffed, getting a bit bored of this. Just hurry up and pick out your wood, let's keep moving and plant the cameras and go home.

"Maybe you can help me set up the garage with the snaketails once we get back, I think I'll keep the little birdy in there until it feels like not attacking people." Rubbing her soft cheek on the bird, it peeped a little, but was a nice round shape in her hand. Its feet tucked away as Roza carried it for now. "The snaketails might be due for an upgrade too... they've been getting quite big..." Though the last was meant to be for only herself, any help would of course be accepted. Though she didn't plan to take care of that until Curt left. An extra day wouldn't hurt them, as long as they had all the things they need they seemed to be fine snuggled together in their space.

"Uncle Curt! Let's go this way! There are gold trees over here!" Seeing a glimmer in the distance, Elydia took his hand and started leading towards the almost metallic like trees with crystal leaves that clinked nicely for a calming song from nature.

Roza was soon to follow, calling for Minoru who had seemed to manage to get a fawn in her grasp, and was running after Elydia and Curt with it still in her mouth. Well, they did all seem to enjoy deer on occasions so it could be a nice filling treat for at least one of the dragons. They were getting closer to Ometeotl's cave, and Roza hoped Curt was ready for that if she came out to greet them once they were close enough...

What was that? Was he in heaven? Rozaliya did want something from him! And now Elydia was guiding him to something beautiful--a shimmering grove of golden trees. Curt ran up to the nearest trunk and used his good hand to start messing with the bark. Was it metal? How good

was it at conducting? Could it be shaped and molded, or was it stuck like this? What kind of wood was underneath? The soft chimes of the crystal leaves were also exciting to him. Maybe there wasn't anything weird in this grove after all. Maybe they just went here to enjoy the beautiful scenery and camp and such. But no, he was getting distracted by all the shiny things and niceties. There was definitely something weird about these woods, and he would find out the secret. They had pulled half a dozen eggs out of this place. What on earth was in here?

Grim started carving the trees indiscriminately while her Rider was all over the place. Even if her Rider wasn't paying attention, she sensed something odd in the woods, and they were getting closer to it. Lino was keeping an eye on both of them now, gauging their intentions, and Grim could feel it. They weren't being sneakier than usual, so something else was probably causing Lino's vigilance. It would be another dragon, then? A surprise dragon would certainly scare her Rider and be cause to watch Grim carefully. Not that she would pop out to defend her Rider, of course, but the other dragon must be very weak and defenseless. Even Radice was more vigilant than usual, though he also seemed grumpy and broody at the moment. He just did that sometimes.

They rounded the river bend with the little ones still gathering crystalline fruits and prey. Lino seemed more excited as they went along, which made Curt more nervous in turn. At last, they reached a pond with glistening and smooth water. It shimmered as if it was full of glitter; Perhaps there was something interesting about the sand he could research. While he was busy pondering about fluid motion and saturation and all sorts of boring physics, Ometeotl emerged from the thickest part of the thicket.

"Lino!" they both exclaimed happily, hobbling closer to the dark dragon, who was just as eager to see them. Curt's body locked up as soon as he saw them, but did his best not to faint. They looked gross, that was all. They seemed nice. It was fine and they wouldn't notice him as long as he didn't move. Then their heads swiveled over to him. "Oh? I get to meet Curt finally?" Their eyes slowly opened one by one until finally Curt couldn't take it anymore. He fainted off into heaven.

Running ahead to grab at any wild creatures that DARED run by them, Minoru was also in her own version of heaven. The side bags and baskets were filling up fast, and soon she had to go as Grim could she place some of the meat with her. Though told yes, Mino would run off after each time as if not wanting to anger the thunder dragon. The farther the went though, the more Roza could tell they were getting closer to the cave.

Soon enough, the drippy dragon came to greet them as cheerful as ever. "Hello Ometeotl." Roza greeted, giving her a nice pat. The interaction not even lasting more then a few moments before Elydia called for Roza, turning to see Curt flop into the glass. Well, she couldn't say she didn't expect otherwise. So with a sigh, she called for Minoru. "Come here, darling. I need you to carry Curt." She was soft and already learning how to be a riding dragon, so it was the best option aside from maybe Radice or Grim. Well, it was a nice trip, but it seemed they should start

heading back now, before Curt woke up again. Or at least they should move things along more quickly, having a feeling he might just go back to sleep if he woke again.