

Chapter 7 - Halfdead! The Trolls

The coach - the four-wheeled Hunter's Wagon pulled by one horse - carrying Shea, Elenia and me runs at full speed towards the west. The carrier, equipped with a plain canopy, is simple, but spacious, allowing for many materials to be loaded. And above all, because of its cheap make, it's possible to discard this part if it gets dangerous.

"It's a standard for hunters going on long trips. By the way, the price is uniformly set to six silver coins, including the coachman." Elenia casually explains to me.

Even an exclusive horse rental for hunters has been set up as a business, and they've set the prices so that they'd still remain profitable even if they lose the coach at a pace of once per two travels, she tells me.

"I see. Looks like hunting has completely taken root as an industry."

"Moreover, the carrier's size has been designed so that coffins would perfectly fit in if you place them sideways. So it's also convenient for transporting dead hunters." Shea adds this practical piece of information without any hesitation.

"That's definitely a nasty convenience..."

I for once don't want to take any advantage of this convenient service.

Anyway, it means there are plenty of jobs besides hunters when it comes to work related to demonic beasts.

"It's the same for the horse, but we'll also hire another person once we reach the village."

"Oh my god! Lady Shea, you're actually hiring someone? How rare! Is it possibly a tracker?"

"Yeah, I'm familiar with one over there. She'll be necessary for the troll hunt."

Tracker...a job I heard about for the first time.

"What's a tracker?"

"Just as their name suggests, they're people making a living from tracking demonic beasts. Us hunters are pros at killing demonic beasts. Trackers are like pros at detecting the whereabouts of specific demonic beasts, I'd say."

According to Elenia, it's sometimes extremely difficult to find the subjugation targets for quests. For example demonic beasts who mostly live underground, demonic beasts who dwell deep in the mountains, or water demonic beasts...

If you can't find the targeted demonic beast, the quest will end in failure. It's also possible to lose one's life if you're attacked by the demonic beasts instead. Because of that, hunters hire and then work together with tracker who are well-informed about the way of life and territories of demonic

beasts.

"An experienced trazkar is far more reliable than the likes of hunters who boast about their own skills."

For Shea to give her such a high evaluation means that her tracker friend must be quite good.

"What kind of person is she? Is she so remarkable?"

"She's got the skills, but she's also got the heart in the right place."

"Which means?"

"『When looking at a bird, close your eyes and strain your ears. When looking at a human, close your ears and closely look at their bearing』 is an ancient proverb passed down among the yughul." Shea answers slightly melodically as if reciting a poem.

It looks like yughul add unique intonations when passing on proverbs. It gives off an exotic atmosphere, and it's a melody that sounds somewhat nostalgic...

"...So, what does that mean?"

Unfortunately I completely failed to understand the meaning.

"Whether a hume is trustworthy or not. Listening to what they say when making that decision just misleads your judgment. Take a proper look at their bearing instead of their words. And, determine whether you can trust them with your own life." Shea nimbly peels an apple with her knife, and carries a piece to her mouth.

Just those hand movements already tell a tale about her being a sword master.

"When I met you for the first time, Teo, you looked frightened at a first glance, but you didn't back away. That's why I judged you to be trustworthy." Shea adds indifferently.

Even just remembering it, I have to admit that it was a terrible tragedy. I don't recall how I acted when I was absorbed in my work, so it's probably just as Shea says.

"The ability to judge a character is yet another important skill of a hunter. If this perception dulls, it'll lead to death."

Shea silently keeps peeling the apple and repeatedly brings pieces to her mouth with the knife. Her rustic behavior somehow makes me sense beauty from it. I'm sure that must be a functional beauty that lacks any wasted movements brought about by Shea's bearing. Feeling that, I have a hunch that I can somehow comprehend Shea's words.

A tracker whom Shea judged to be trustworthy. I wonder just what kind of person she is...



We arrived at the town of Edilgen after five days of being rocked about in the coach. Since it's located at the western end of the margraviate, it's also referred to as Western Edge Town.

As this name suggests, this is the furthest western town within mankind's territory. If you proceed west from here for around a week, you'll enter the outlands, the world dominated by demonic beasts.

The town is surrounded by a thick fence and a moat.

We enter the town by passing through the gate that has a watch tower on top. Completely changing from the imposing display of defense capability, the town's interior is brimming with liveliness. A market is being held on the central plaza where fresh vegetables are being lined up in heaps.

"The area from here on is just dotted with small settlements. The market will be our last chance to do some decent shopping."

Elemia assiduously buys up foodstuff. Meat, vegetables, and bread - all of them in huge quantities. After all, we don't know how much time this job will take us. Thus we must procure enough food to have some leeway. I carry that food which piles up like a mountain, loading it on our coach.

It's just when I reach a point where I can take a break with that work.

"Tracker Nao. She's a beastman of the Zurla tribe." Shea shows up, the rumored tracker in tow.

She's a catgirl with erectly standing triangular ears, a long tail gently swaying left and right, and big, round eyes. Her pretty, cat-like eyes are pinned on me, full of keen curiosity.

"I'm Nao ~nya." The catgirl says and directly holds out a hand towards me.

It's a small and cute hand.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Teo."

Once I grab her hand, her big pupils suddenly narrow down, and her tail stands on end. A reaction among felines indicating their interest.

"Teo, you're a person doing what?" Nao stares at me with the sparkling, pure eyes characteristic of beastmen.

"I'm a magic blacksmith."

"Magic blacksmith!? Those people making amazing weapons?"

"Well, you could say so."

"Eehh!? Wooww! What kind of stuff do you make? Show me!"

"Even if you tell me to show you all of a sudden..."

Hmm, what would be good to show her...?

I show her my hammer, crucible, the chisel for seals...and the materials that seem usable for enchantments I collected on the way.

"Tell me, tell me, what's this?"

What drew Nao's interest is an ear of red wheat. It's twice as big as the wheat ears used for eating.

"This is the ear of Explosive Wheat. If you crush the seeds, you can use them as material for fire enchantments." I hold up the ear in front of Nao's eyes.

"Hoho, it's so bushy. Ei, ei!" Nao chops away at the ear.

The wheat's ear sways lightly as if shaking its head. This causes Nao's ears to stand on end.



"Uhoh, nice thickness...ei. Ohhh, ei, ei, ei. Oh, I see, I see...ei, ei, ei, ei, ei, ei." Nao continues to pommel the wheat's ear to the right and left.

She looks somewhat excited about all this. After repeating the cat hooks for around fifty times, she finally looks satisfied, and stops with the ei's.

"...Nao is a pro when it comes to tracking mountainous areas. She's especially the best when it comes to tailing larger demonic beasts."

"Nya, nya." Nao adequately and exaggeratedly agrees.

"...To be honest, I don't really understand how Lady Shea judged her to be steadfast." Elemia whispers into my ear.

"She must have something to her, no? Something only a high level pro would understand..."

Although I try answering her like that, I don't understand what it might be myself either.

"Maybe Lady Shea is simply a cat lover." Elemia whispers further.

She's right, I feel like that possibility is totally there, but...I've got no choice but to trust Shea's words here.

And then after adding plenty of foodstuff and a new party member with the tracker Nao, we leave the town. At last it's going to be the beginning of the troll subjugation, our real job.

Advancing north from the town, we enter a small settlement that got attacked by the trolls. Abandoned houses with no hints of life. On top of many residents having been kidnapped, those who stayed safe have evacuated to Edilgen. We investigate the uninhabited settlement, looking for traces left behind by the trolls.

"Mmh, this way ~nya. They entered the mountains further north from here, I think ~nya." Nao senses those traces very easily, and begins the pursuit.

"Nothing less of a tracker trusted by Lady Shea. Looks like she's already found something."

"Uohhh! Here, here, take a close look! It's unmistakably the poop of a young, male troll."

"It's nothing I want to take a close look at, though..."

Nao proudly points with her boot, causing Elemia to wince back. Either way, it's a fact that she found the traces of a young troll.

While following those traces, we head into the mountains on foot. According to Nao, swamp trolls act in groups, and build nesting places. Their nesting places are mostly built in wetland belt areas deep in the mountains, making it difficult to spot them.

Accordingly, you first look for young males that leave the colony and descend the mountains to search for food, Nao explains.

By the way, she's leading our little party as we proceed into a dense conifer forest. The ground is slushy and clammy, littered with moss-covered fallen trees. A wetland belt no hume would usually enter.

"Come, come, come, look! There's other poop ahead! These ones are bigger ~nya."

"I told you, I don't want to look at it, sheesh!"

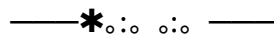
According to Nao, it's at least two male trolls. Moreover, quite the big specimen.

"The poop is still fresh, we're quickly closing in on them. See, we're making good progress ~nya!"

"Yep, it's a nice pace. Alright, let's take a moment to grab a bite?"

"Lady Shea! As always, your timing for the food breaks is way too messed up!"

You can't really expect any tact from a beastman and a cursed tool user. We continue the pursuit with only Elemia taking light, mental damage.



We track the trolls for two full days.

"Everyone, come here for a moment ~nya!" Nao calls us over with big gestures from slightly ahead, beckoning while hopping up and down.

It seems like she's discovered something she eagerly wants to show us...

"I don't want to take another look anymore..." Elemia is completely dejected before we've actually walked up to Nao.

"Hurry! Over here ~nya!"

"I've already told you to stop telling us how fresh the poop is and what kind of shape it has, god damn it..."

"No, that's not it! It's no poop ~nya! It's a troll! The guy who shat the poop!"

"Eehh!?"

"Hurry! Quick! There's a big one and a small one! Whoa, they look strong!"

There's certainly two trolls where Nao is pointing at. Two beasts walking on two legs. Even the smaller one has a size several that of a hume, I'd say. A thick layer of moss is growing on its back that's round and oddly protruding.

The trolls appear to have noticed our presence as well. They lower their bodies, taking a stance of

wary readiness.

"Nao, fall back! I'll go." Shea advances, passing Nao without any hesitation.

This part belongs to the work of hunters. Drawing <Corpse Eater>, she begins to smoothly draw closer to the trolls at a fast pace. Elemia and I chase after her in a hurry.

And then, just at the moment I catch up to Shea,

"Guuaaaaaaa!"

The huge troll in front of Shea is already collapsing.

"Teo, it's awesomely sharp."

The troll's thick leg has been cleanly lopped off. Obviously, the troll wouldn't be able to keep its balance anymore. It trashes around after having its right foot sent flying at the ankle. It's completely lost any fighting spirit while groaning in pain and agony.

It's struggling, trying to somehow grab Shea, but she nimbly evades its hand.

Shea seems to be curious about the sensation of <Corpse Eater>.

"Well, I did tell you that I've sharpened it. ...Wait, now's not the time for that!"

"Such a thick leg with a light swing...I see...this much just by sharpening it..." Shea fixedly stares at the blade.

Those legs are covered with a deep black bristle. That troll fur is tough and resilient enough to be prized highly as armor material thanks to its high stab-proof nature.

"I haven't just honed and sharpened the blade, but also got rid of any unnecessary elemental residue sticking to it. If you use a weapon for a long time, small, invisible magic elements cling to it, worsening the efficiency of enchantments...ah, watch out! Shea, behind you, troll, the troll is attacking from behind!"

The troll has stood up even while staggering. Baring its teeth, its body trembles all over with hostility. It's raised its fist overhead, and is now trying to slam it down on Shea.

But, Shea dodges it with ease, and swings <Corpse Eater> at its wounded ankle once more.

"Ooooooaaaaaahh!" Its scream, as low and dull as that of an orc, rumbles through the mountains.

The blade is driven into the leg just a tiny bit above the wound, neatly slicing through the leg. Her returning slash precisely cuts above the wound once more.

"Guuuuaaaaaagooooooooo!"

Completely reading the moves of the troll as it violently rolls around on the ground, she cuts in yet

another wound!

"Although a troll's fur repels blades...the blade's edge penetrates it well. Yep, yep." She nods repeatedly in satisfaction each time she slashes away at the troll.

Although she'd be able to kill it in one stroke, she repeatedly adds further attacks. The troll tries to somehow escape, but only earns itself a slash on its back.

Her Breaking Bone Mask is dyed deep blue by the blood spurts hurled into the air each time she cuts. Shea chops the troll apart as if slicing a ham. Of course, she's doing this for the sake of making <Corpse Eater> absorb curses. The cursed machete handed down within her family lusts for blood after all.

Even though I understand the reason, it's still a cruel spectacle. And, its cruelty has apparently been fully transmitted to the other, smaller troll, a demonic beast...it starts to run away.

Turning its back on us, it leaps into the thicket and darts away at full speed.

"Dream on!" Elemia nocks an arrow and aims at the fleeing troll's back.

"No, it's fine. Let it go." Shea holds her back with a hand.

The troll, which is a head smaller than the one she brought down just now, disappears into the forest while mowing down the trees in its way. Shea calmly sees it off.

"Are you telling me to not kill pointlessly?"

The swordswoman with her dark brown skin and animal bone mask stained by demonic beast blood looks as if she just crawled out of a nightmare. However, because that slaughtering was done for the sake of curse power, it's not like she likes butchering living beings more than necessary...maybe.

"If we had killed both of them here, we wouldn't have been able to look for their nest anymore ~nya."

That's an awfully pragmatic reason! Completely devoid of any emotions.

"So it's not that you're pitying it because it's still small..."

"No matter what I might think about it, it's still a fact that trolls regard humes as nothing but food. They're likely considering small humes to be especially tender and delicious." Shea answers indifferently.

Without even looking in our direction, she points a stabbing glare at the new animal trail created by the troll's flight.

"Nao, how is it?"

"Way too easy. A troll's scent won't disappear for ten days ~nya."

Nao picks up a twig that got broken off a tree by the troll, sniffs at it, and tosses it away with a bored look.

"That means we're going to chase after it at once, right? Let's find their den."

Elemia is about to walk ahead, but Nao quickly stops her from doing that with a hand.

"Not yet ~nya. The fleeing troll won't return straight to its nest ~nya. It'll wander around this area until it's certain that no one is following it, wary of not leading anyone to their nest. It's a prime example of their wild instincts ~nya."

"I see...they're surprisingly clever. The trolls, and you as well, Nao."

"Gnnya!?"

Nao seems to have been triggered by the term 'surprisingly'. She's likely pretty proud of her skill as a tracker.

"So, what are we going to do next?"

Nao immediately answers my question, "We're going to camp ~nya! We'll eat plenty of food and sleep lots ~nya!"

"Are we?"

"If Nao says so, then we do just that. Trust a professional tracker." Shea nods lightly.

As a result, we decide to interrupt our chase at this point, and pitch a camp until morning.





"Nya munyamunya mu~"

The professional tracker was abnormally fast asleep. As soon as we set up the tents and finished dinner, she dozed off.

—Not that much time has passed since her energetic, "We're going to camp ~nya!"

"The period of time between her saying, "Good appetite!" and falling asleep is way too short, no matter how you look at it." Elemia has just started drinking her after-meal tea in front of the campfire.

"Beastmen generally like sleeping. Especially catmen spend a lot of time asleep. It'd be best for you guys to go to sleep early, too. We'll likely leave here before sunrise tomorrow."

With those words, Shea leaves the fire, and wraps herself up in her cloak underneath the tarp we erected by using a tree.

—Before sunrise, huh?

It's probably better for me to turn in early as well, but it's not like I can sleep on command.

"Sir Teo, want some tea? It'll calm you, making it easier to fall asleep." Elemia puts some tea leaves into my cup, and pours some hot water into it for me.

It's tea using dried Abra chrysanthemum leaves. You don't see them often in the capital, but they seem to have an effect of soothing one's nerves. The people in this area drink it everyday. I've finally gotten used to its peculiar aroma as well.

"...Elemia, why have you become a huntress?" I ask her to get a conversation going as it feels somewhat awkward to just drink tea in silence.

"Of course for the sake of money, status, and honor - in short, to rise in the world."

"Really?"

"Why do you doubt me? Is it wrong for me to not have some nobler reason?"

"That's not it. Just, I wondered whether your village got burned down, or if you got attacked by a demonic beast, or something like that."

"No, not at all. In the first place, it's no village, and it doesn't have anything of value to be burned down either! Rather, I think I'd feel refreshed if that place actually burned down for good."

"We're talking about your birthplace here, you know...?"

"Sir Teo, you see, it's not like us elves all live in clearly defined environments. Just like there exist rich and civilized elves, there also exist elves living in places similar to trash dumps."

Many of the elves in the capital belong to the social strata of nobility and relatively wealthy citizens. The woodland elves give one the impression of leading structured, traditional lives of protecting their land since ancient times.

"What's your birthplace like, Elemia?"

"It's a slum at the western edge of Meltart. The Trash Ear District."

"...What a terrible name."

"Lawless elves around here are called Trash Ears. And there I lived with Mama and five siblings in a shabby hut as the oldest daughter."

"...Just listening to it sounds hard."

"Mama was always drunk, and regularly brought new men over. A mother making out with a man right next to her small children is definitely weird, right?"

"Oof, that sounds quite harsh..."

I know that hackneyed pity isn't any kind of help whatsoever, but still...I'm so vexed that no other words leave my mouth.

"No kidding. That's why I'll absolutely rise in the world, absolutely! I'll become a certified hunter like Lady Shea, and build a huge house with my younger sisters and brothers."

Elemia slowly slurps her tea while fixedly staring into the empty twilight sky on the other side of the campfire.

"So that's the reason for your idolization of Shea, huh?"

"Yeah! Lady Shea is the best! Calling her a goddess would be an understatement!" Elemia's words are full of passion. "Lady Shea is also being looked down upon with eyes full of contempt and prejudice. But, she doesn't give a damn about something like that, right? It feels like she's rising in the world while fully relying on her own strength. That rocks! I also want to become like her. I'm going to become a bigshot with my archery skills, and then look back down on all those people who treated me like a fool!"

Elemia rattles on in one breath, looking quite excited. The soothing effect of the tea leaves doesn't seem to show any effect on her.

"Though I do believe that Shea has no interest looking back down on others or some such, heh."

"Yep. That part of hers is also cool and dreamy, isn't it? But, I'm different, I'll make a name for myself to show those people what I'm capable of. I'll show them how I obtain land, buy a huge house, and then flashily drive around in an awesome carriage!"

A dazzling flame burns within her emerald green eyes. I can feel her strong will and firm determination.

"Somehow it's actually fresh to be told something like this with such a decisive verve."

"That's why I'll stick to Lady Shea. Black Dog Huntress Shea and Morning Mist Shooter Elemia; I'll cling to her all the time until those names are mentioned in one breath!"

"I think Shea won't be overly happy about that, though."

"I believe that you might be unexpectedly wrong there. Lady Shea usually acts as a loner, so having someone like me persistently stick to her should make her happy as a fresh experience instead—!"

"Hey, if you're going to talk about me, get away from me a bit!"

We got scolded by Shea!

Elemia the Morning Mist Shooter was told to get away immediately after declaring that she'd always stick to Shea. She fell asleep soon while feeling somewhat downhearted over being hated by the person she admires.



On the next day we smear pine resin and mud on our bodies.

"A troll's nose is sensitive ~nya. They'll immediately notice the scent of a hume ~nya."

Not to mention the clothes, we thickly and elaborately spread the mixture of mud and resin on our

faces, arms, necks, and especially behind our ears. It's a gross stickiness I've never experienced so far, and a smelly, stuffy scent of pines. To be honest, I feel like puking.

"This is still nothing ~nya. A professional troll hunter covers their whole body with troll poop ~nya."

"I'm fine with staying an amateur for life..."

Nao pastes the resin on my back while providing some completely pointless trivia. According to Nao, the pine resin in the borderlands has a strong aroma. Moreover, since it doesn't get off readily, she calls it the best deodorant for humes. ...In other words, it absolutely sucks for doing the laundry.

"Don't be careless. Although it's said that trolls have a good nose, it's not like they have bad eyesight. Even if we deceive their sense of smell, it'll be meaningless if they spot us by sight."

Shea is already covered in resin and mud. But, she cautions us what to watch out for, looking as if everything is just as usual as she doesn't seem to care about the smell at all. As expected of a small ethnic group who's grown up in the mountains. This much seems to not even be worth mentioning for her.

And then, after having our bodies covered by mud and resin, we begin to climb the mountains.

Nao is walking in the lead. Every once in a while she stops, thrusts out her small nose, and sniffs around all over.

"Nya!"

She nods with her ears standing on end. It looks like she's found the trail. We advance on a trackless path, forcing our way through the thickets while following Nao.

Sniff, and advance. Sniff, and advance. This repeats itself for half a day. Then we arrive at a swampland. The troll nest appears to be on the other side of the swamp with its murky, stagnant water.

"Ugh..."

It's a stench so strong that even my nose can pick it up from here. The wind crossing the swamp carries an indescribably stink which blends the putrid smell of death and beastly stench.

The swamp trolls have built simple dwellings out of grass and mud, and live in this wetland belt in communities. In many cases they seem to form settlements consisting of several hundred trolls. And naturally, the bigger the number of trolls, the stronger their bad stench...

"Uuuhh...it's really packing a punch ~nya." Nao's face is distorted in anguish.

It looks like sniffing this stench must take a heavy toll on her.

"How is it? What are their numbers?" Shea asks Nao.

It appears that Nao can tell numbers by smell, but...

"Ngh ~nyaaaaa...? This is...weird ~nya."

She sniffs many times over while taking obvious damage from the intense stench each time, but then Nao inclines her head to the side.

"What's wrong?"

"The smell of blood is strong ~nya..."

"Trolls eat stuff raw, that's why. It's just normal for the smell of blood to hang in the air, right?" Elemia interjects with a slightly surprised tone.

"That's true, but for some reason I sense it as being odd ~nya. You see, it's kinda like the smell is suuun. It bothers me somewhat." She sniffs the air once again, and tilts her head exaggeratedly with a slump.

"Somehow, I don't get what we should do... Is this tracker alright?" Elemia looks at Shea with a slightly troubled expression.

"Don't worry, it's a problem with Nao's vocabulary. She grasps the situation. She just can't put it into words."

"Right, right, that's why I'm telling you, it's weird for it to go suuun! Over there it's going even more suuun ~nya!"

Nao points several times towards the other side of the swamp with big gestures. Rather, it looks like she's getting irritated about Elemia not understanding what she's trying to tell her.

"I don't get what you're saying at all! Lady Shea, what are we going to do?"

"For the time being, we've got no choice but to head over. To that suuun-doing place or whatever it is." Shea shoulders her beloved sword, <Corpse Eater>, and begins to trudge ahead with a stride as if she's going on a stroll, aiming for the troll settlement on the other side of the swamp.



The trolls' dwellings are constructions where it's hard to tell whether you can call them plain dugouts or something worse. They're built by overlapping the plants growing around the swamp, such as reeds. Dozens of those are lined up at the shore of the swamp.

We step into the 'nesting ground' (colony) of the trolls. Usually that would be an extremely dangerous endeavor, but...

"See, no one's here ~nya. That's the reason why the smell is so suuun ~nya."

"I've got no idea what that suuun of yours means, but they're not here for real!"

A mountain of damp straw. Even an amateur can sense the rich and dangerous signs from it. Countless trolls must have lived here until just recently.

"They've even left some food over..."

What Shea has picked up is...the finger of a hume. It's not just one either. Several fingers are strewn all over the ground at Shea's feet.

Apparently thrown away as difficult to eat despite having tried to chew on them, the finger bones are laying on the ground after having the flesh cleaned off to some extent.

"Teo, look. They're still fresh." Shea shows me the cut section of the finger she picked up, but I skilfully avoid looking at the finger, and instead scan the scenery slightly above it.

Just the few glances moments ago were already more than enough for me.

"...Indeed, you're right."

"Look, the blood hasn't dried yet. There are teeth prints on the bone, but..."

"...Indeed, you're right."

"Hey, are you watching properly? Here, look here." Shea is so overly kind to go out of her way, thrusting the finger in front of my eyes.

"Oh, I see!"

I quickly avert my eyes!

"Are you truly looking at it? Leftover food is packed full of information. We're going to the next."

"I know. Let's go."

Even while nodding, I make sure that my visual field stays clear of Shea's hands. As I deliberately keep my focus elsewhere, I follow Shea and Nao around as they tour the other nests. But, no matter where we go, no trolls are to be found.

"It's weird ~nya. It's not the season for trolls to relocate their colonies."

"Yeah, certainly. Hmm, this is——"

Lured by her words, I reflexively look in Shea's direction. Just to observe Shea picking up a hume head. It's the head of a woman who had just the cheek on the right half of the face bitten off!

"Oeeee! Shit! And here I did my best to not look at stuff like that!"

"What's wrong all of a sudden?" Shea is actually startled by my reaction.

"No...it's nothing...so, you discovered something, right?"

"Don't you think that it's strange how they left their food half-eaten? I can only think that all the trolls vanished from here all of a sudden after encountering some kind of trouble."

"Hmm, maybe this is a good thing ~nya."

According to Nao, the trolls move only after eating up all their food when relocating their colony. But, she says that they might have left the food because it'd clearly create leftover food...and, of course, the food left behind means the villagers.

"It'd be great if they set them aside without sampling. However, even a small snacking would be tough on humes. Nao, please look for humes instead of trolls for now." Shea requests from Nao to follow the scent of humes.

Nao shows her willingness by letting her tail stand on end, and immediately sniffs the air by making her nose twitch.

"This way ~nya..." Nao moves ahead without any hesitation.

Exiting the swampland, we push on deeper into the mountains. The rocks look rugged with many steep slopes. Nao keeps climbing by nimbly jumping from one rock to another.

"Trolls preserve their food in high, dry places so that it doesn't rot ~nya."

For several minutes we frantically climbed the rocky mountains, following Nao. Then we arrived halfway-up the mountain.

"Here it is. The food storage ~nya."

Although she calls it food storage, it's just a natural cavity created by rocks and tree roots which has been suitably covered with plants. It's an extremely crude structure...

Nao pushes aside the dry wood serving as roof, and checks the inside.

"Oh ~nya! They're alive!" Nao cries out cheerfully.

Once we also run up to her...we spot bound humes there. A young woman, an old person, and a small child. Three in total. They've very likely set the humes aside that didn't resist their capture.

"Are you okay?" I ask the young woman who's closest to me.

Despite me asking, it's obvious on a glance that she isn't alright at all. She's been abandoned here while injured. Dry blood is clinging to her body. Her cheeks are hollow, and her eyes are empty. Above all, her arms, which had been punctured for vines to pass through them, look very painful.

I cut the vines in a hurry, and free her from the binding. But, her reactions are dull.

"Umm, we've come to rescue you. Are you okay?" I address her as gently as possible, but the woman only stares at me in a daze.

"Here's some water. Can you drink?"

I quickly offer her some water from my flask. The woman somehow places her mouth on its opening and drinks some. It looks like she's calmed down a bit.

"What happened?"

"Umm...uuhh..."

"Explain the situation. Why did the trolls disappear?"

"You don't need to hound her for answers like this. Let her rest a bit longer."

"Checking the situation takes top priority. All the more now that something very strange is afoot." Shea says to me, and talks to the woman with an even more forceful tone, "Let me ask once more: What happened?"

"I don't know. I couldn't look outside. ...Just the sounds...in the night several days ago, the trolls suddenly became all noisy..." The woman begins to explain intermittently, after getting overpowered by Shea.

"What followed?"

"I have no idea...it became silent afterwards... Even though they came here every day to eat someone...afterwards, no one...pardon, what about Ann? Did you see Ann? She was taken to this place by trolls a week ago..." The woman gazes at us with pleading eyes.

"I wonder? You see, we just got here ourselves a little while ago, so..."

"There were no surviving humes in the nests. ...Though we found a half-eaten head of a woman." Shea interrupts my words, and indifferently tells the woman the facts.

The woman breaks out in loud crying due to Shea's words.

I don't know whether that head belongs to Ms. Ann. And I don't know whether it'd be better for that to be Ms. Ann's corpse or for her to have been taken away by the trolls. But, we have no way to make sure of that from our side.

We take the three survivors with us and return to the place where we left the hunter's wagon. Fortunately it was possible for all of us to somehow get on by squeezing up.

Once the driver swings his whip, the hunter's wagon begins to advance through the mountain road with its wheels rattling. Even on the bench of the wagon, the woman weeps all the time. All you can hear from her is wailing and fits of crying.

Due to the overwhelming situation, I can't call out to her either. All I can do is to sit next to her

while watching over her.

Several hours pass like that, and then the woman finally tires from crying, and falls asleep.

"Did she fall asleep?"

"Yep..."

"I'm sorry, but once we return to the base of the mountains, I'd like you to arrange for one more hunter's wagon." Shea speaks to the coachman after waiting for the woman to fall asleep.

"Oh, has someone else been left behind?"

"No, there's no one left there anymore. At least no one who's still alive."

A hunter's wagon allows for hunters to get around, and it's also the perfect tool to transport coffins. In the end, I ended up experiencing that part of its usefulness faster than I had wished for.