

Adventures in Growth Part 1

Lira's cat ears twitched as she and her companion stood outside the cave entrance. Thrust into the side of a mountain, the opening was overgrown with brush. It would have been impossible to find had Agnys not led the way.

"So... How did you hear about this place again?" she asked. A furry black tail flicked and she shifted her lithe weight between her feet.

Agnys hefted a battle axe over a shoulder. The tallest of her adventuring group, the barbarian woman nearly doubled some of the others' height and dwarfed their muscle mass. Most human men would perish trying to accept her weight. "I heard someone talkin' about it in the pub! They said only a *man* could make it through. *HA!*" A scoff scared several birds from a nearby tree. "We'll show them!"

The other two from their party came up on their heels, dripping sweat from the trek up the mountain. Summer's heat bore down from a sky clear and blue.

"*Slow doooowwwnnnn...*" Hephie groaned. She removed her wide-brimmed hat to fan herself. Long brown hair fluttered at the breeze and she leaned on her staff for support. "*We're not all made of pure muscle or skinny cat people!*"

"Hephie should put on more muscle then!" Agnys laughed and delivered a pat on the back that almost sent the sorceress to the ground. "More time lifting weights instead of books!"

"*Goddess, take it easy!*" she snapped.

"Sorry..."

A short blonde woman wearing a white robe brought up the rear. A calm demeanor concealed her fatigue. Placing her hand on Hephie's shoulder where she was already rubbing a bruise, she released a small flow of blue energy. The pain subsided and Hephie sighed in relief.

"Thanks, Ghala."

A soft smile passed and she opened her robe to catch the mountain breeze. Below its heavy fabric she wore a plain form-fitting tunic and skirt of white. "Think nothing of it. Now, what were you saying, Agnys?"

"They said only guys can finish this dungeon!"

Hephie snorted. "Right, as if there's anything men can do that women can't do better."

Lira purred into a giggle. "Like knitting a sweater?"

"I'll knit one *and* fill it better." The sorceress looked to the tallest. "Agnys, what's at the end of this thing?"

The axe bounced on her shoulder when she shrugged. "Dunno. Treasure?"

"*Good enough reason for me!*" Lira cheered. Prancing to the entrance, she poked her head inside and sniffed the air. A petite rear protruded out behind her, stretching a pair of tight black pants. "*Come on!*" she urged, looking over her shoulder.

"*I'm comin'!*" Agnys declared, bounding after the catgirl and into the cave.

"Wait! Not so-- *Guys!*" Hephie yelled. "*We should stay together!*"

Ghala gave an amused laugh and followed at a gentle pace. "Hard to control eagerness, isn't it? For some people there truly is no time like the present."

Hephi ducked and maneuvered her taller frame into the hole. Wood thunked from her staff striking the wall and casting a helpful illuminating glow several meters around her. “Well they would do well to spend a little time in the future.”

“Woaaaaahhhhhh... *This place is huuuuge!*” Lira’s voice echoed through the cave. After the entrance, the interior opened to a spacious tunnel multiple times taller and wider than even Agnys. There was room for the group to walk abreast with plenty of space to spare. Giddy with adventuring energy, she jumped onto Agnys’s arm and clung like a monkey. “How deep do you think it goes??”

“To the hells, I hope!” she roared with laughter.

Ghala observed the various rock formations and small crystals dotting the ceiling. “Hard to know... Could go clear to the base of the mountain.”

“Then it better exit there too. I’m not climbing back up this thing from the inside,” Hephi insisted.

Agnys snorted and flexed her muscles, making Lira squeal as she was flung off like a snapping bracelet. She puffed her massive chest out in confidence until cleavage bulged over her armor. “Cave don’t seem so hard to me. Those guys at the pub were wimps.”

“We’ve only just started, Agnys.” Ghala looked over the ground. “There *are* signs of struggles... Particularly from other women.”

“Oh yea? Like what?”

Clatter

Lira’s foot struck something metallic. “*Oops! What’s--*” Her heart pounded when she saw Hephi’s magical light play over a leather breastplate fitted for a woman. It was split down the middle as well as had the metal clasps broken down the back. “I wonder how this happened...”

“There are more,” Ghala indicated with a sweeping finger. “Look around.”

Paying more attention to the sides of the tunnel, the group saw what she meant. The boulders and debris lining the walls were mixed with breastplates and armor of all sizes. Some were steel and still shined bright as the day they were forced. Others were dull and weathered, made of leather or wood.

“*OH!!*” Agnys gasped and stooped down. “*Pants!*” She held up a tattered piece of fabric. The rear was shredded and the front split down the front and over the crotch. Tears opened the thighs in a dozen places. “*Someone had a good time here!*”

Ghala softly said, “Don’t be crude, Agnys.”

The barbarian ignored her. “They look like that time I got drunk and tried to wear Lira’s clothes!”

“*Those were my favorite pair!*” Lira screamed and batted her hands against Agnys’s hip. “*Do you even know how good they made my butt look?! My tail looked amazing in those pants!*”

“And my butt looked good blowing them open!”

“Shhh, you two,” Hephi shushed. “Look around...” She picked up a piece of leather armor cropped to show the midsection. The top where it was molded to a woman’s bust was warped and stretched, leaving pale cracks in the aged material. One shoulder strap was snapped

in half and dangled to the side. “All of these armor pieces have something in common. First, they’re all made for women. And second--”

“They all like like they’ve been destroyed,” Ghala finished.

“*By a monster??*” Agnys hoped.

“No...” She inspected the leather. “Almost like they were all destroyed from the inside out. By great pressure or stress.”

Agnys snickered. “Like when I flex and break my armor. Muscles too big sometimes.”

Ghala frowned along with Hephi. Both had the same thought. “That’s...almost exactly what it looks like. But everything is centered around the curves. Strange...”

A shiver passed through Hephi. She shuddered, gripping her staff tight as they walked deeper into the tunnel.

“What is it?” Ghala asked.

“Nothing, yet... But there’s something here... This place has strong magic to it. We should tread more carefully.” She motioned to the giggling catgirl and barbarian ahead. “That means you two!”

Lira looked over her shoulder with tail twitching. “Hm?”

“Don’t touch *anything* unless--”

“*Lira, look at this rock!*” Dirt shifted and fell when Agnys hefted a boulder from the ground and held it overhead like a trophy. “*It has a face!*”

“*Ahhhhh look at that!*” Lira howled with laughter, holding her belly and doubling over.

Agnys nodded with a giant grin. “*Doesn’t it look like Hephi when she’s angry or--*”

Blooommp!

A familiar sound of thick, bubbling fluid drew their attention. Where Agnys had pulled the boulder was a small blob of green slime oozing from between the rocks. It gathered to form a sphere roughly the size of a melon.

“Goddess, slimes,” Hephi groaned. “This place already isn’t worth the trouble. I’m not getting anywhere near those things for whatever is at the end of this dungeon! They--”

Bloommp!

It rolled toward Hephi, pushing the sorceress back. Several more slipped from crevices in the walls and came from under rocks to pursue the lanky woman.

“*H-Hey! Stop!*”

“Awww, they like you!” Lira giggled.

“*They don’t like me!*” She flung the bottom of her staff out and struck one, sending it splatting against the wall only for it to reform and resume its quest. “*They smell my mana! Damn things absorb it to no end! They’re like mana sponges!*”

One brushed her foot and oozed over an ankle, engulfing her lower calf in a transparent green mass.

“*EEEEKKK GET IT AWAY FROM MEEEE!*”

Ghala moved to offer advice but maintained a fair distance. She’d seen first-hand what too many slimes can do to a magic user. “If you just calm down and--”

"It just wants a hug!" Agnys roared with laughter. *"Give it a kiss!"*

"Get it off get it off get it offfff!" Hephi flailed her leg to shake the creature but it held firm, slowly creeping up her shin and passing her knee. She pulled her dress up to a daring height to catch it halfway up her thigh. *"THAT'S IT!"*

KZZZPP!!

Light flashed from her staff. A blast of chilled air rushed through the tunnel to make even Agnys shiver and her nipple harden into tiny rocks. Frost hung in the air around Hephi but the sounds of creeping slime had stopped. As the air cleared, they saw each ball of ooze frozen solid around her.

"Hmph!"

Tap!

Her staff clinked against the solidified goo around her thigh. It cracked before shattering into a mess of green chunks and pelted the ground around her feet. She lowered her dress and moved to compose herself.

"There." Fixing hair from her face, she glared at her companions. *"Thanks for all the help!"*

Gloooooorrrmmpp...

Ghala's eyes turned wide now. She backed away from Hephi and moved behind Agnys like a shield.

"What? What's wrong? They're dead, no thanks to you lot." Hephi said.

Gllloooooorrrmmmp!!!

"H-Hephi--" Ghala whispered. *"Come here very slowly and--"*

"Why?? Can we slow down and figure out a game plan instead of wandering aimlessly first??"

Lira's face paled and her tail drooped along with her ears. *"Shh! You're gonna make it angrier!"*

"Make what angrier?! Why are you three so--"

"GIANT SLIME!" Agnys bellowed, pointing her axe toward the ceiling.

GLOOOMMP!!!!

RRMMMBLLL!!!

It fell behind Hephi like the foot of a giant, slapping the rock with gelatinous wet ooze and sending shockwaves through the cave. The force knocked the sorceress off balance and sent her to the ground, the staff flying out of her grasp and clattering against the wall. Looking back, her eyes dilated at the monstrous mound of slime quivering over her like a small house. Rage quaked its form at the death of its children. Hunger for mana rumbled through its mass.

Hephi squeaked. *"O-O-Oh dear Goddess..."*

To be continued