



Figure 1. Part of the road toward Argestes, Tajiri.

CHAPTER X

THE GRIMM BROTHERS



n be praised!" Raiyu cheered. "Argestes is in sight!" After such a long time, the two of them could see a town with thatched roofs from the summit of the hill.

"At least no Fishman showed up this time," said Vegoia. "We can tangle with them better now, but they always gave me the creeps!"

"It has been quite some time since we left the villa," said the Genie. "Is your diaper still clean, Mistress?"

"I'm a little wet, but I don't think I'd need changing that—!"

A pair of screams grabbed the two travelers' attention. A pair of men came running up from behind the Human and Genie. Two twenty-somethings, cleanshaven in beige attire; very well-to-do-looking.

"What's the matter?" Vegoia shouted.

She got no response, but she was soon answered: a pair of Wildcats was chasing them. These weren't the type you and I normally think of. The Wildcats that



Figure 2. A Wildcat.

Vegoia knew, the very type of creature that nearly killed her years ago, were feral beasts half woman and half lynx. They also had some very weak fire magic.

"Guess it's a good time to use the magic Pampinea taught me to good use," said Veggy. Thus far, she'd only tried out her new rapier during her recent encounters. Battles went faster compared to the times she had her old knife. But now, it was time to give her new magic skills a field test. "Hydria una!"

A churning ball of water expanded and soared toward the two monsters. It one-shotted the one on Vegoia's right, while doing minor damage to the one on the left.

The remaining Wildcat attempted to pounce on Raiyu, but she landed a blow with her new staff. It didn't hurt much.

Vegoia finished off the creature with her rapier.

Vegoia fell to her knees and let out a big breath. Even though the whole thing took a little under forty seconds, she'd felt like she'd made a long dash from her mansion to Corus and back. The two men had apparently stopped running and were staring at the sight, gob smacked. "Are you fellas okay?" she asked.

It took a moment for them to get their bearings, but finally one spoke. He had on a silk stove pipe hat and had dark, stringy hair. "Er, thank you, dear girl," he said, "but how did you do that?"

"Lots of training and practice, thanks to my Dad," she told them. "You shouldn't go out on roads like this without a weapon, you've already run into monsters. Even before I got this sword, I had a knife to fight them off with."

"M-Monsters?" the other man said. He was a bit stockier than his partner and his hair was curlier.

"Wildcats like those almost tore me apart when I was younger," said Vegoia. "Dad saved me and had me learn swordsmanship. Even then, I was barely able to survive a fight with a Fishman. Then I learned magic."

"Magic, too?" said the first man. "What is going on?"

"You're not from around here, are you?" the girl asked, skeptically. "Seeing as the river's still low, you should count yourselves lucky that you didn't run into a Fishman."

"River? What river?" asked the second man.

"Come on," said Vegoia, a little flustered, "the Hipece River is right up that way you came in from. Keep on that road and you'll get to the Lower Bridge."

"Hipece? Where in the world is that?"

The first man knelt down and placed his hands on the girl's shoulders. "Child," he said, "where are we? Aren't we in Hesse-Kassel?"

Vegoia felt a mixture of confusion and worry about the man's question. "I've never heard of a place called that," she admitted. "This is Tajiri and we're trying to get to Argestes."

"Tajiri? Argestes?" said the second. "What are you talking about? We've never heard of either!"

The knot kept getting bigger.

"Gentlemen," said Raiyu, "perhaps if you were to come with us, we would be able to sort all this out."

"Is she another one of those monsters," the first man whispered to Vegoia.

"She's my Genie," the girl responded. "You fellas have been panicked since the second we'd laid eyes on you, and we've never learned your names."

"Forgive us," the man said, getting back onto his feet. "My name is Wilhelm Carl Grimm, and this is my brother, Jacob."

The group had snowballed from two members to four: two men, a girl, and a Genie. Jacob and Wilhelm, well out of their element, were utterly bewildered by the sight of Argestes.

Situated at the portion where the Stony Mountains were the thinnest, it was a modest little hamlet of grey daub-and-wattle cottages. Many had yards, with wooden fences separating the public road from the villagers' garden. The sound of a man splitting wood gave the place a very rustic ambiance.

"This place isn't as impressive as Aeolus," said Vegoia, "but I feel like we've finally got something accomplished now that we've gotten here."

While the young Limbourg was quite pleased by her progress, the Grimms were confused to that same extent.

"Does something trouble you?" Raiyu asked.

"This town looks so..." Wilhelm had a bit of difficulty trying to find the right adjective, but he eventually did. "So old."

"Not really," said Vegoia. "The original town was burned down some time before I was born and they're pretty much back on their feet. My Dad had a hand in helping them out, you know." She stopped and looked down for a moment. "Uh, Raiyu, could you come with me for a moment? I think we can—!" she glanced at the two brothers, who were just as perplexed as ever. She wasn't really prepared to tell them. "Could you wait right here for minute, fellas? A quick, uh, girl thing!"

Raiyu quickly pulled the threads together. "Yes, a girl thing. We will not take long."

Both girls scurried off into the wooded area just off the path. Agreeing not to follow, the Grimms stood there.

"This place looks like an old illustration from a book on 17th Century New England!" Jacob remarked.

"Or on the Jamestown colony," Wilhelm added. "Something doesn't make sense. It hasn't even been an hour, going by the sun, and everything keeps getting stranger."

"But how did we even wind up here?" asked Jacob. "We were just going for a short walk in the woods and all of a sudden, we're near a village that shouldn't logically be there." He took notice of a man in one of the yards nearby, using a froe to make firewood, the source of the noise. "Excuse me, sir!"

The villager eyed the two men and removed his hat as he greeted them. "How are you, gentlemen?"

"Can you tell us a little about this village? This land?" Jacob asked "That little girl we were with says this place was burned time ago, is it true?"

"Yes," said the villager. "During the Two Years of Storm, the demon Alazhad leveled Aeolus and several surrounding towns. That was before Count Limbourg slew him."

"Is it June 22?" Wilhelm asked.

"Yes."

"1808?"

"Eighteen?" the man said, surprised. "It's 1164."

"W-WHAT!?" said the Grimms in disbelief. How did they wind up almost seven hundred years in the past? Where were they in relation to central Europe?

"We're back!" Vegoia called from behind. Their business in the woods, whatever it was, had been resolved.



Figure 3. Argestes, Tajiri.

"Lady Vegoia!" the peasant exclaimed. "You've grown! I was just talking to these good men here. Fine chaps, though their attire is somewhat strange."

"Yes," said the girl. "We bumped into them a little while ago and they're coming with us for a bit."

"The tunnel caved in recently, if you're trying to get to Eurus," the man said. "I'm afraid the only other way across the mountain is through Veros' Cave."

"Thanks!" She faced the two men. "You feeling hungry? We'll get something to eat at the town tavern. We'll be able to chat a bit more there."

The Old Stone Well Tavern was located near its namesake, a well which was all that remained from the time before Alazhad torched the place.

Within the building, two perplexed men stared as the tween in their party was chugging away on some odd container holding the drink they were served. She's poured it into there and added some kind of rubber cap to it, which she was sucking on. Like a baby at its mother's breast.

"So," said Wilhelm, trying to maintain a sense of civility in the face of his unusual host, "where are you heading?"

"Bremen," said Vegoia. "It's a day's voyage across the Eurus, right on the shore of Itoi."

"Bremen?" asked Jacob. "The only Bremen we know isn't on the shore, but it's on the Weser River."

"More strange geography," said the young countess. "The Court Sorceress of Aeolus gave me this." She produced a sealed envelope, with Pampinea's own stamp upon it. "A letter of recommendation to the Angrevain Academy, for assistance with my quest."

"Angrevain?" asked Wilhelm, raising an eyebrow.

"Tis a magic school on the Fontus River," Raiyu explained. "Madame Pampinea studied there. She had taught Mistress Vegoia some magic to help her out until we can attain a specialist."

The Grimms were nowhere close to understanding what was going on. Monsters and now magic schools.

"That guy over there's kinda cute," said Vegoia. Amid all the talk about geographical differences



Figure 4. Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, left and right, respectively.

between what the Grimms knew and what Vegoia knew, they were taking the tavern's entertainment for granted. A young man sat on a stool, playing some kind of stringed instrument by the currently-dead fireplace. Greenish hair, a red hat with a feather in it, he seemed to be about five or six years older than Vegoia. A small bowl lay at his feet, for tips, obviously.

"Looks like some kind of dulcimer, or mandolin," said Wilhelm.

Vegoia walked over and dropped a few Archmae in the bowl. "You're terrific," she said.

"I really appreciate the tip," said the musician. "I was really just warming up for tonight's performance. Nothing very special."

"I wish we could be around for it," said Vegoia. "We just stopped to eat; we're going to be leaving for Eurus shortly."

"The only way through the mountains right now is Veros' Cave," he said. "It's dangerous."

"We can handle it," she told him. "I fought off a Giant Slime, plus I know a bit of magic."

"Well be careful on the road ahead," said the bard, "Veros' Cave is full of monsters, as with the desert beyond. You might think you can handle it, but I just pray you don't run into a Sandwalker."

"Sandwalker?"

"A large crustacean native to deserts," Raiyu explained. "Imagine a cross between a crab and a scorpion, but big enough to eat a horse in one bite."

"Really? Keep your fingers crossed the closest one's a hundred miles away, I'm not itching to fight one based on description alone." Vegoia turned to the musician. "Thanks for your concern, Mr..."

"Solovev," said the boy, "Emelyan Solovev."

"Vegoia Limb—!" The exchange was interrupted by the announcement of the arrival of the meal, but awkwardly continued: "...Limbourg. I hope see each other again."

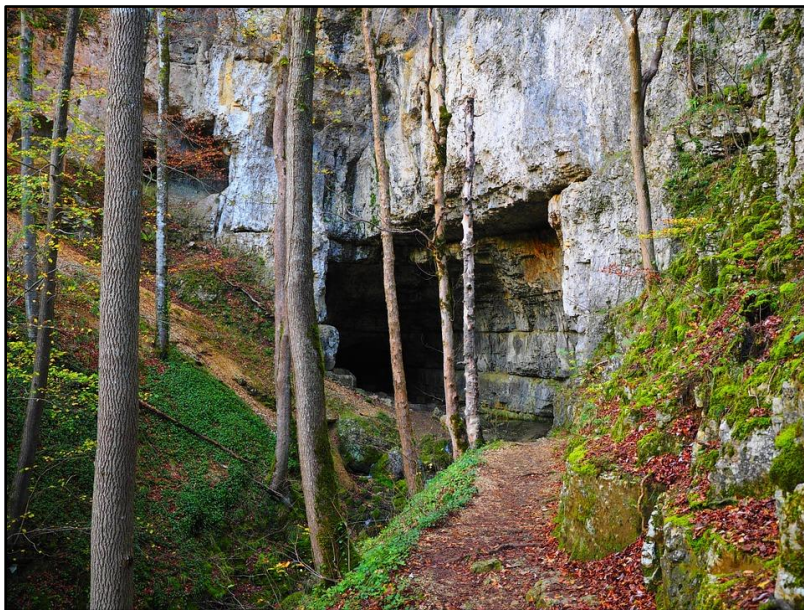


Figure 5. Veros' Cave, northern entrance.

Veros was the name of an ancient Vei settler who discovered the cave bearing his name. Originally, it had been two separate ones, but he had them connected to allow quick passage between Argestes and Eurus. Unfortunately, as time passed, dangerous creatures began to make the cave their home and fewer and fewer people risked going down there. A separate tunnel had to be dug out a few centuries later, the one currently out of commission. Veros' Cave had always been open, for the adventurous and the crazy.

Vegoia just happened to be so daring, but she was also aware of the two tagalongs

without magic or combat skill. Time for the buddy system: Veggy would lead, holding Raiyu's hand; the Genie would hold Jacob's, too, and Jacob would hold Wilhelm. A chain of people that would be hard to separate.

As soon as things began to grow dark, the globe of light that lit up the Slime Cave reappeared.

Jacob was a little nervous about the place. It seemed like a road less travelled. "Are you sure we won't get lost in here?" he asked.

"The townsmen said it was pretty straight forward," said Vegoia, "as long as we stick to the signs. There will be some minor caverns along the way, though."

The deeper in they went, the air became a bit colder. The random battles weren't anything epic. Vegoia had become so strong that the Green Slimes would run away if they got lucky enough.

"I'm wishing for a challenge," said Vegoia.

"I don't understand why animals and such just act so violently and attack at a moment's notice," said Jacob.

"They always do that," said Veggy. "Most people stay in one spot for the most part and don't have to deal with it. Adventurous types like me and Dad, though..."

The Grimms almost wanted to give each other the same confused look, but by now, it was already becoming redundant.

Finally, the party came to the first fork in the cave. The arrow pointing to the tunnel on the right indicated the way to go. Everything came to a halt, though, on account of Vegoia.

Uh-oh! was the one thing to hit Veggy's mind in that moment. It hadn't been two hours since Raiyu put her in her current diaper and now it was about to be on the receiving end of a bowel movement. A big one.

The sight of their bodyguard slipping to her knees, brought great concern to the Grimms who rushed to help her, but Raiyu came between them.

"Do not worry about her," said the Genie, "she will be alright. Tis time for another, er, 'girl break'."

"We'll go in the cavern on the left," said Veggy, breathing a bit heavily. "You fellas wait right here."

"Wait here'?" asked Wilhelm, gobsmacked. "You have light magic! We won't be able to see any of those beasts if they show up! We can't stand around in the dark."

"Here," said Veggy, as she brought up the inventory. She gave the two men a candle and a book of matches. "We'll only be gone a few minutes. If something happens, give a holler."

Another temporary separation, occurring just as Veggy was prairie-dogging. The Grimms didn't know exactly what was happening, but did notice she was walking funny.

The human and the Genie soon got to the end of the tunnel, to a small cavern with a pool of water and a treasure box, of all things. By that point, Vegoia was able to crouch low and let out her latest poop. Changing time!

It took Raiyu a little longer than expected to get her mistress cleaned up, based on the size of the mess, but she got that one off and a new one on Vegoia.

Vegoia, from her position, could only take in the scenery while waiting on the changing to finish. A bunch of short, stubby, stalagmites populated the other side of the cavern, looking like a bunch of melted-down candles. "Will, Jake, you all okay?" she called out.

"We're okay!"

"Good, we're just about finished." Veggy faced Raiyu, who was eyeing the pooped-up diaper she'd taken off of her. "Gotta get rid of that one."

"Where would you suggest we put it?" asked Raiyu.

Vegoia took sight of the box right next to her and opened it, revealing its contents: an Old Helmet — a Vei iron ridge helmet, partially rusted with a mohawk-like crest atop; miraculously, it fit. She equipped the helmet, put her dirty diaper in the box, and closed the lid. If another adventurer just happened to come into this cavern and find the box, it would suck to be him. "It's okay, you can come now!" she called.

The Grimms approached the cavern and looked about. "About the size of a mountain cottage," Wilhelm remarked.

"Looks like an old Roman helmet," said Jacob, noting Veggy's new armament. "Where did you find it?"

"In this chest right here," said Vegoia.



Figure 6. A restored 700s Vei hoplite helmet. Vegoia discovered a degraded one in Veros' Cave during her journey.

The two men looked at the box. "People... actually leave chests like that out in the open?" asked Jacob.

Vegoia nodded.

Wilhelm took a deep breath. "I'm not surprised anymore."