

NOVEL

1!

The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey ^{to} Pick Up Trash



WRITTEN BY
Honobonoru500
ILLUSTRATED BY **Nama**







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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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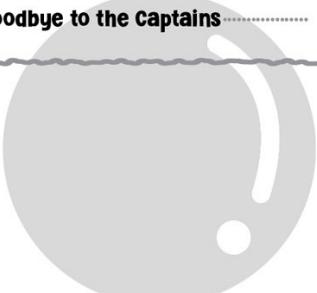
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The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash Vol. 1

Story by Honobonoru500

Illustrations by Nama

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TRANSLATION: Benjamin Daughety

ADAPTATION: M.B. Hare

COVER DESIGN: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen

PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Kelly Quinn Chiu

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Jules Valera

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

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PART 1 * A Journey Needs Prudent Preparation!



Chapter 1: Living Life on Hard Mode!

MY EYES FOLLOWED the words on the crystal.

[TAMER ###]

Huh? Is this a mistake? I looked over at Mom and Dad. They looked... amazed. Was this for real?

In the world of Oudegeuz, we have magic. I was surprised when I first awakened to it—there wasn’t any in my last world, after all. When I found out magic was real, I raised a triumphant fist to the sky. That kinda worried my parents ’cause...I was only two years old.

But I think I’ve got memories of an old life. The fortune-teller in our village said so. She said that sometimes, though it’s very rare, people could be reincarnated with memories of being somebody else. But she said I shouldn’t tell anyone, so I’ve been keeping it secret all this time.

Jumping ahead now... I was five years old, the youngest of three. Dad was strict and Mom was kind, so picking a favorite between the two was pretty easy. My bully of a big brother was pretty annoying, but my big sister was always on my side. And even my brother could be nice, too, once in a while. Whenever I’d get really mad or sulky, he’d give me candy. I loved them both! Today, when I was really worried, they stuck by me and told me everything would be okay. But...

In Oudegeuz, when you turned five, God gave you magical skills. The luckiest people got five of them, but there weren’t many people like that. They’re so few and far between that everyone called them miracles. Most kids just had two, and their job would be decided based on what they got. When it was time to find out your skill, you prayed to God and did a special ritual in front of a crystal.

Which brought us to now, the lowest point in my life. No matter how many times I read it, the words were plain and true...

[TAMER ###]

Tamer was a skill that let the user tame animals and monsters. Which was fine! The problem was the part that came after...the “###.” Skills were rated

using a number of stars. If a Tamer had one star, they could tame small animals and train them to deliver letters and stuff in town. The more stars, the stronger monsters you could tame—maybe even strong enough to succeed as an adventurer.

But I had ###. Even lower than one star.

I couldn't tame any monsters...I couldn't even tame an animal. There probably wasn't any work I could do at all. Here in Oudegeuz, your whole life was determined by your skills.

Some unconscious part of me—some past version of myself—spoke up.

“This game is too hard.”

I didn't know what it meant, but it felt true. What was I supposed to do now, though? Past Me's memories hadn't helped too much over the past three years of my life, even if they came in handy sometimes.

Still, those memories told me to take this head-on and think about my future. Yeah, I had to face reality.

Which...wasn't easy when you're five years old.

They called people with a ### rating “no-stars.” They were—no, *we were*—the ones who God abandoned. My mom had read me plenty of picture books where kids who did bad things got turned into no-stars. They said there were no-stars in Oudegeuz, but nobody official ever talked about them.

But now things were different.

God, what did I do wrong?

But wait, I was supposed to receive another skill, right? Maybe...maybe it could be better!

[TAMER ###] [###]

Never mind! Only one skill, and it was the weakest. What would happen to me now?

Chapter 2: Solo Survival

MY LIFE HAD CHANGED for the worse. The moment I got back home, I could feel it. My parents wouldn't talk to me; they wouldn't even look at me. It didn't feel real! I didn't want to believe it.

But they really were avoiding me, I was sure of it now. At dinner time, when I came to the table, there wasn't a plate for me. Mom couldn't look me in the eye. Dad just glared. My brother and sister looked on in confusion.

"Figures," someone mumbled.

With a sigh, I left my home. My past self prepared me for something like this, had warned to steel my resolve. Now I understood. There was no place for me in this house anymore. Was being a no-star really this life changing?

What was I gonna do? I was so hungry... I needed food. How could I find it? I was only five, after all.

I walked out my front door and into the woods, starting to...

I mean, my eyes got real blurry.

I'm ready for this, I thought. I'm not even sad! I'm just...frustrated. I... Maybe I'm a little sad. Lonely, too. I really thought I could trust my parents. Tears ran down my cheeks. Why am I a no-star? Why...?

But crying wouldn't help me, and it sure wouldn't fill my growling stomach. I looked for something to eat.

This was my first time in the woods alone. It was scarier than the forest I remembered. Monsters might even be lurking here...then what would I do? I wanted to go home, but...I was just too hungry.

The first thing I found worth eating was a largish fruit. It was a little sour but edible.

"Ewww!" No, it was way more than a little sour. And the last fruit I'd eaten back home was so sweet.

I sat at the base of the tree, wondering what to do tomorrow. Past Me told me it was time to leave the village, and I should prepare. But where would I go? I couldn't fight monsters. Could I even survive on the outside?

I wanted to stay in this village, but something told me I couldn't. Would everyone else turn on me like my parents had? I decided to go home to sleep...if my room would even still be there for me?

Chapter 3: The Fortune-Teller Knew!

IT WAS ALREADY MORNING, but nobody came to wake me up. It'd only been a few days since my life was turned upside down, but I'd already given up on that.

My brother and sister knew about it, too, now. They were so mean! They said I made trouble for Mom and Dad. Maybe they were right, maybe it was my fault. I didn't know anymore

Either way, I had to get stronger! If you're going to run away from home, you gotta be healthy and strong. Also, I had to find food in the forest. Nobody was going to teach me...but even if it was hard, I had to learn, and I had to get ready for whatever came at me!

Run through the forest if you want to get stronger. The words appeared in my mind. Past Me again? I decided to listen.

I spent the day looking for fruit again without luck. Slowly, I was getting used to running alone in the woods. I already felt a little stronger...but maybe that was just wishful thinking.

I blinked awake. *Huh? I must've passed out from exhaustion.* I glanced to the side and froze; a middle-aged woman sat there. When our gazes met, the crow's feet around her eyes deepened as she smiled. I knew that smile... She was the village fortune-teller! Whenever she helped out the villagers, she flashed that comforting, calm smile.

“Hello, little one,” said the fortune-teller.

“Yes, hello.” My heart skipped a beat. All the villagers knew about me by now, so I hadn’t talked to anybody in a while. It was like they didn’t even see me. “Why did this happen to me?”

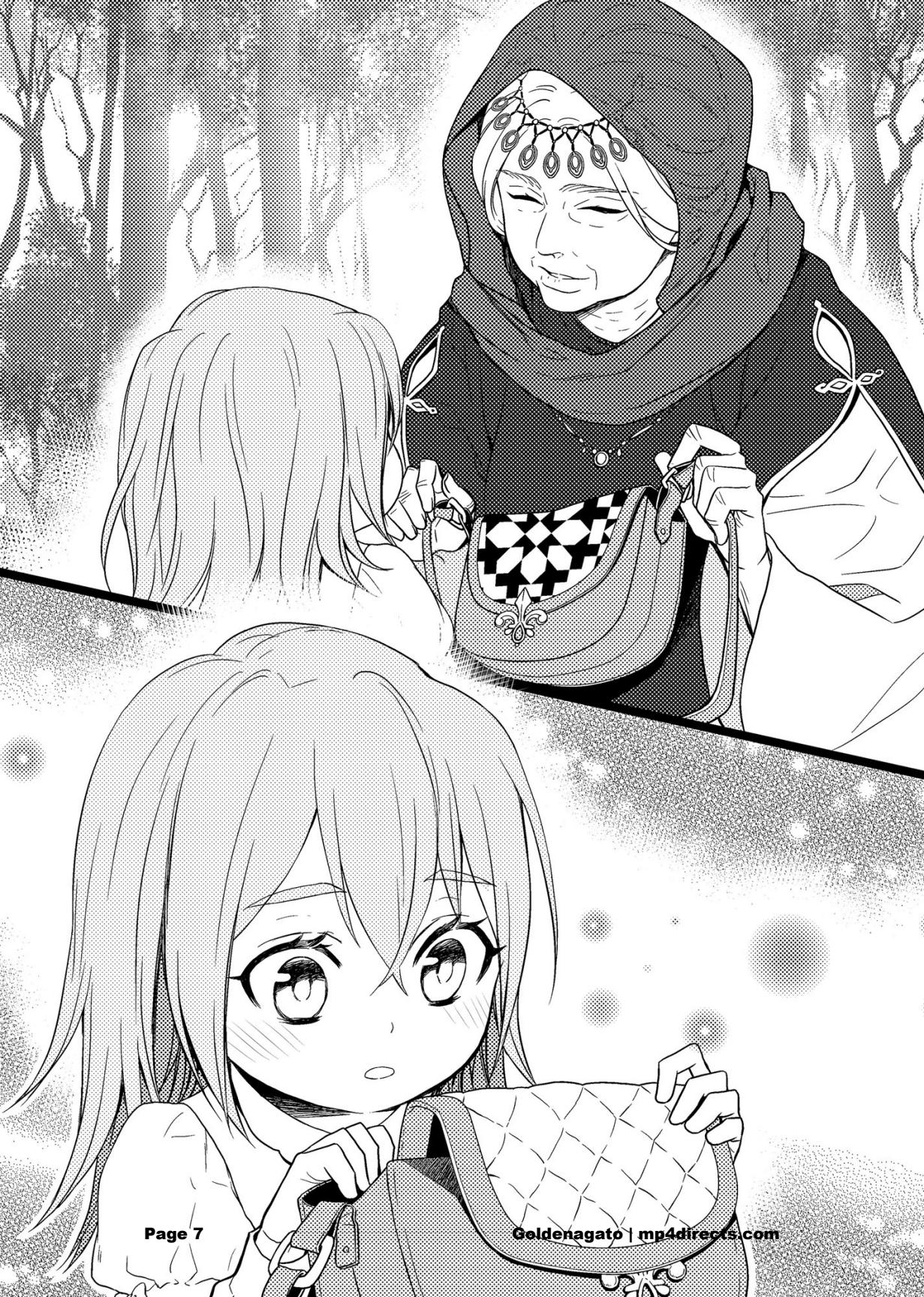
The fortune-teller looked at me for a moment. Then she spoke in a quiet, soothing voice. “My fortunes predict the future, but I possess but one star,” she said quietly. “I can only catch glimpses of what things may come. When we last met, I sensed you would end up in this situation for reasons that eluded my sight.”

“Oh.” It seemed like she wanted to help me. My current situation...there wasn’t anything I could do to change it. The past me whispered that no matter where you were, people had a way of weeding out those who didn’t get it.

But I *did* get it! I just didn’t *like* it.

“Here’s a gift.” She handed me a bag.

I was confused but took it and peered inside. Somehow, there was a lot more inside than you’d think there *could* be.



“It’s a lesser magical bag,” she explained. “I’ve packed it with things you shall need for what’s ahead.”

I turned over the bag, and a whole pile of stuff came tumbling out. Books—some about foraging for food, others about poisonous plants. Potions, too, in a rainbow of colors. Even a small knife.

I looked to the fortune-teller, confused.

“Lesser magical bags tend to get tossed,” she said, “so they are a trifle to find. Common magical bags are much better—they can freeze time for the items inside them—but such things cost money. The potions in these bags are lesser as well. They won’t be very effective, but a child like yourself won’t be able to afford common ones. I suspect that you, ah...you’ll need to make do with many lesser goods to survive.”

The fortune-teller was kind. Everyone else had washed their hands of me, but she was teaching me to survive all the same.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

Chapter 4: Three Years in the Forest

THE FORTUNE-TELLER CAME to see me many times after that. She came to chat with me and gave me lesser potions. She'd share her meals, too.

Things only got worse for me. Within a year, I couldn't go home anymore. I'd stand outside bawling and throw rocks at the windows, but then Dad would come out and beat me up. It hurt more than anything I'd ever felt before, and Mom didn't even try to stop him.

The potions helped, even if they were lesser. My body was covered in scars, but I didn't cry over them.

In a way, it was a relief to hide in the woods. I didn't want to run into anyone, so I got better at avoiding people in the trees and the brush.

I read the books from the fortune-teller's bag over and over to drill the knowledge into my head. Edible fruits, poisonous plants, medicinal herbs—I could tell them apart on sight now. My life in the forest had become more comfortable. Making myself sick from eating poisonous plants was just a bad memory.

There was also a book on trapping game. I learned what I could and found some traps I could make on my own. It took a few tries, but before long I was catching prey. I thought I could hear Past Me screaming while I gutted and cleaned my kills, but that might've been my imagination. I was just excited to have meat again!

After three grueling years in the forest, I was strong. I could run long distances through the trees. I got better at catching small game animals, too. I could treat my own wounds with medicinal herbs, but it was usually better to use a lesser potion. Life in the woods wasn't so bad!

The fortune-teller visited me every two weeks...or she was supposed to, anyway. But over a month had passed, so I decided to go to the village for the first time in years to check on her. The people I passed couldn't hide their surprised looks—maybe they'd assumed I was dead. As if I'd die that easily!

I went to the fortune-teller's house, but no one answered. Had something

happened? Now I was really worried.

I could hear whispers of the villagers behind me. When I listened closer, what I heard made my heart ache—it was as if those bystanders were squeezing it with their own hands, but...I'd gotten my answer.

I turned and ran deep into the woods. The fortune-teller was dead. She'd gotten a cold, people said, and it would've been so easy for her to be cured. If the chief had just given her a potion...

But the chief refused. The chief refused, and it was all because of me... because she'd been nice to me. She'd become hated by all in the village for showing me kindness, and I hadn't even known. It was all my fault...

I fled back to my hiding spot. I was numb; I couldn't do anything. I was sad, but...I didn't cry. Why couldn't I cry?

Chapter 5: I'm Off!

THESE DAYS, I had five lesser magic bags. One of them was folded in half and tied at my hip. Two were clutched in my left hand and two in my right. Every single one was packed to the brim.

There were lots of kinds of lesser potions in them: a blue potion to heal wounds, a red potion to cure illnesses, a green potion to suppress pain, and a purple potion to undo curses. They were all lesser, though, so I wouldn't know how well they worked until I tried them. As long as they weren't truly bottom of the barrel, I could expect them to do *something*. I knew that from experience.

I ran through the woods, collecting all the things I'd prepared for my journey and hidden throughout my home of the last several years. I didn't want to leave behind a single thing that I'd received from the fortune-teller. For food, I had dried meat. I'd "borrowed" chunks here and there as a parting gift from all those very nice villagers.

What, you got a problem with that?

I scooped up water from a fountain into my canteen and stuffed it in the bag. Honestly, I was lacking a lot of necessities for a journey, but I had to give up on those things; I was too small to carry much, after all. I had the fortune-teller's books, too.

Next I went to find the tiny, broken sword that I'd hidden in a hole at the bottom of a tree.

Why was I leaving? Call it a strange stroke of luck.

Every five days, I'd hidden in the village to gather information. I knew from experience that you always needed as much info as you could to survive. Just yesterday, I'd left the forest on one of those trips.

I'd hidden in an unused meeting place and reached for auras nearby. Normally I wouldn't feel much, but not this time. When I'd listened in, I heard voices...two men.

"Found that *thing*. There's a certain place in the forest. I'll tell you the

details later, but that's where she's made her nasty little nest."

"Good work, Tableau. That creature only brings misfortune to our village, got it?"

Tableau was Dad's name, but I didn't know the other one. I let out the breath I'd been holding and carefully peeked out from behind the meeting place to see. It was...the chief.

"Of course," said the man I'd called Dad. "We can't have no-stars living in our midst. Besides, the child will be with God; it's the best she can hope for, really."

Don't be stupid! I'll be happier if I died? I want to live! You can drag me to God kicking and screaming!

It ticked me off, but I took deep breaths to suppress it. Carefully, I crept away unseen, collected all the things I'd been hiding, and made up my mind to abandon the village. I'd been prepared to leave at anytime, I just hadn't found a reason to finally cut ties. I was scared to leave the place where I was born—who wouldn't be? But no way was I gonna let myself die here.

Far from the village, on the outskirts of the forest, there grew a great tree—it was probably the biggest in the whole forest. At the roots was a hollow big enough to hide things in. I reached in and grabbed my last item—a valuable sword that I'd used to keep myself safe in the woods. The fortune-teller had found it for me after searching for the perfect sword for my size.

It was still big for an eight-year-old, but she couldn't find a smaller one. It was sharp enough to do the trick, though. I took it and ran far, far away from the village.

Once I was far enough that I could only barely see the lights of the town, I turned and gazed back at it. The forest around that awful place had treated me well. If only I could thank the fortune-teller, I'd...

I clenched the hilt of my sword, grounding myself. *No. Can't let those emotions overflow.*

I turned from the town and saw, in the near distance, lantern light flickering in one of my old hiding places. I'd secured a few places to sleep, and they'd found the one closest to the village.

I'll need to be more careful where I stop in the future, I thought. And with that, I began to run.

Never again could I return to this village.



PART 2 * To the Town of Otolwa



Chapter 6: My First Journey Is Tough!

I WAS ON MY WAY to the town of Otolwa now.

It was the closest town to Ratomi Village. There were a bunch of villages between, sure, but they had merchants who traded with Ratomi Village. Anyway, I wasn't planning to stay in any village very long. They probably wouldn't search that far for me, but I was still worried. Just thinking of getting caught one village over after all my planning really ticked me off. There were village roads, but I didn't want people seeing me. Instead, I took nearby hunting trails.

Oh no! I heard footsteps coming up fast behind me. I got moving, desperate to escape as best as I could. There wasn't even time to turn and see what it was. All I knew was if I stopped, I was dead!

What do I do, what do I do? Oh! In these cases, you should clamber up a tree, but...there aren't any trees I can climb! Then...argh, they're gonna catch me!

Then, like fate, there it was. *Oh! Tree, tree found! Feet, don't fail me now!* I sprinted to the tree and clambered up. *I made it... I'm safe!* My whole body was drenched in sweat.

It was really lucky that I wasn't being chased by a monster that could actually climb trees. Maybe I was a little too relaxed after leaving the village. I needed to stay on guard. The forest was still dangerous, after all.

I decided to rest for the remainder of the day, since I was too tired to move. Still, what had been chasing me? *Haah...I don't even wanna know what'll happen next.*

I was so scared, I could barely sleep the night before. Nothing I could do about that in the morning, though, so I decided to climb down and get moving again.

Huh?! I'm really high up! I was shocked to see where I was. I must've climbed all the way to the top of a tall tree, and now I was so high that I was scared to get down. I managed to make it after a while with lots of scrapes and

scratches. *Phew!* From there, I used four lesser potions to heal myself, but they seemed a little *too* lesser.

I looked at the village road and considered trying it. In the end, though, I decided to keep going on the hunting trail—but more carefully this time. It would slow me down, but I’d have to keep an eye out to survive.

I chewed on dried meat as I walked. Monsters might come if they smelled it, but...nothing I could do about that. I was hungry, after all. And monsters did try to chase me, too—one after the other—but I managed to barely get away every time. I was getting hurt a lot, but I was alive. The forest had lots more violent animals and monsters than I’d thought. Yeah, I really needed to get better at sensing them...

On the eighth day, I reached a place where I could hear lots of people. *I must finally be at the next village.* But I’d decided to avoid that one—too close for comfort—so I took a detour and pressed on.

It was a long detour, too, because I wanted to make totally sure I wasn’t seen. After a while, I reached a big clearing. I took a quick look around and realized it was a dump. I looked through the trash, keeping an eye out for people and monsters as I did. There were magic bags! Lesser ones, but I still wanted them. In total, there were ten just...thrown out here like it was nothing. I wanted to take them all, but it’d be too much to carry...

As I fished around in the trash, people approached. I dove behind a large rock nearby to wait and watch.

“Hurry up!”

“I know!”

There was a clatter, and after a little while, they left. They sounded like kids. Probably here to throw something away, I guessed.

I’m glad they didn’t find me.

The new trash in the pile was...potions! I put a bunch of them in the bag on my shoulder. I went back and forth on it, but in the end I decided to put the ten magic bags in one of mine as well and got going.

Chapter 7: A Magic Bag in the Dump

ABOUT AN HOUR OUT from the dump, I took a little break.

The magic bags I'd brought were heavy. Maybe ten were too many, after all. But even if lesser bags couldn't stop time for their contents, sometimes they had different capacities or made the stuff inside lighter. You always had to check each one to see if they were good.

Six out of the ten could fit more than the ones I had been using, but one of the six didn't make the stuff inside lighter, so it was too much trouble. That still meant I'd gotten five good ones for free, though! While sorting the stuff inside, I checked my potions. Since I couldn't stop time for them, the potions could expire. They'd be useless then, and I'd have to throw them away at the next dump.

Possessions successfully reorganized, I searched the other magic bags. I'd used three of the newer potions, leaving two more. There were four old ones, too. After putting the six empty ones in another bag, I ended up with a lot of free space. Lucky me!

I'd heard that common magic bags could store magic bags with stuff in them. I envied those people... No way could I expect a lesser bag to do that.

Two bags in my right hand, two in my left, and one tied around my hip. It didn't look much different, but each one had plenty of space now. *Oops...I forgot the trash.* Finally, after stuffing the trash in the bags, I was ready.

With my bags good and sorted, I left for the next village. Thank goodness for dumps!

After a few more hours of walking, I heard a river. Hoping to refill my canteen, I followed the sound away from the hunting trail, making some markings along the way so I wouldn't get lost.

“Wooow!” The river was beautiful! There were fish in it, too, so I figured it was okay to drink. I refilled my canteen and soothed my aching feet in the cool water. *That feels nice.*

In a better mood now, I started back toward the hunting trail. But was that someone else in the woods? I hid behind a tree and looked around.

In the distance, I saw a man. He had a slime with him, which meant he was probably a two-star tamer. Slimes required at least two stars to tame, and they were really good at disposing of organic matter. People who used them were called trash cleaners, and that was a real important job. Some slimes could dispose of inorganic matter, too, but they were more rare.

What was he doing in a place like this?

Chapter 8: Unlawful Dumping

THE MAN WAS TAKING TRASH from his magic bag and giving it to the slime to dispose of it. He looked like an adventurer. I searched for other auras and found a few faint ones a little farther away... They'd been too weak to notice before. Maybe they were real high-ranking adventurers? I decided to get away from them.

Once I was back on the hunting trail, I let out a long sigh. That got really tense! The adventurers from before were still nearby, but their auras were faint and hard to read. With some effort, I checked to see if they were coming my way. *They're...not. Phew.*

They had probably sensed me, though I doubted I'd attract much attention. Still, it was my first time seeing adventurers with such well-concealed auras. Scary...

I took another deep breath and started walking to the next village.

Along the way, I stopped and searched a few times, reaching out to feel for anything dangerous. I couldn't sense anything that would hurt me, though, and the adventurer team from before was gone, too. I wouldn't be able to sense them if they hid their auras, but I was probably okay for now.

I walked on, avoiding monsters and animals. Since I didn't have an accurate map, I could only guess how far away the next village was...but for now, I kept close to the village roads.

After four days of walking toward the next village...

Weird. Here's a dump, but it's not close to any villages. What's the use of having a dump so far away? The trash heap included expired potions, broken bottles, bent swords, and torn magic bags. I could tell that this one had way more broken stuff than most village dumps did. Was it an adventurers' dump? I'd heard of those, but this was my first time seeing one.

I checked the pile, but there wasn't anything useful. I took the trash I was planning to throw away out of my magic bags, ready to leave it there...but something felt off. I kept it.

All villages had dumps, but they weren't recognized by law. Villages used slimes to dispose of the trash, but there weren't enough tamers. The best two-star tamers could tame up to five slimes, while the worst ones could handle two. Each tamed slime also varied in how much it could dispose of in a day. I heard cities and towns hired most of their tamers on a contract basis. Villages paid the towns to deal with their trash, but villages couldn't afford much. That's why they ended up with dumps, which the village officials knew about but ignored.

Deep in the forest, though...that's where you find adventurers' dumps. Adventurer teams were required by law to have a tamer with tamed slimes. They also had to throw away trash they couldn't dispose of in specific places. But this looked like an illegal dump. Since the broken stuff would just weigh them down, they'd abandoned it in the woods. Not many adventurer teams had slimes that could dispose of inorganic matter. The fortune-teller said once that only the S-rank ones did.

Nobody would find out if I threw my stuff away here, but I didn't. That off feeling...it was like Past Me had intervened.

What's "littering," anyway? Weird. Well, I can throw this stuff away at the next village's dump.

Chapter 9: Giant Ants

I SEARCHED FOR SMALL GAME along the hunting trail, but I didn't find much. I could only hunt tiny animals like field mice. If only I could hunt something a little bigger...but no, I knew from experience that greed only led to pain. My abilities weren't up to snuff yet.

"Nothing...darn!" There didn't seem to be any small animals around this village. I couldn't find a single aura when I searched. It was a good thing I'd saved up some fruit I'd foraged. Otherwise, I'd have to dig into my last bit of dried meat.

It was kind of weird. For whatever reason, it felt like there wasn't much wildlife around here, big or small. I reached out again for auras, and there was still nothing.

I searched for a while longer before giving up, deciding to eat some fruit for now. After that, it was time to find a place to rest.

No holes or caves to hide in... Guess I'm sleeping in a tree today. I managed to find one with a thick trunk. Its branches were more sturdy than what I was used to, so I went for a higher one. Though it was early, I decided to hit the hay. I was tired. When you were traveling, sleep was a luxury, let alone good sleep.

Because a long, comfortable sleep was often your very last.

A threatening aura woke me up with a jolt. It felt far off, but it was coming this way at incredible speed. *Should I move? Or should I stay here and hide?* I took deep breaths to calm my heart and reached out again.

Given its speed, I wouldn't be able to escape. I snuggled up to a hollow in the tree, held my breath, and tried to conceal my aura. I'd just wait for it to pass by.

A little while later, I heard the rustling of something stomping on fallen leaves—no, *dozens* of somethings. There were so many auras that I couldn't guess an exact number. I held my shaking body tightly, curling up in hopes of moving as little as possible.

If I move, it'll find me!

The sound of rustling passed under my tree. I cautiously looked down to the source of the noise and saw countless black bodies gleaming in the moonlight. *Those are the “huge ants” I read about in my book!*

Huge ants were monsters that formed whole armies for their attacks. I looked closer to see a bunch of black lumps wriggling under the tree. They were more than a meter long, and they were fast! Just seeing them made me shiver, so I shut my eyes and kept hiding my aura.

After what felt like ages, the huge ants marched off into the distance. But I remained frozen. What if they came back and attacked me? It took a long time for me to finally relax, and my body was exhausted.

I didn’t sense anything, but I looked around just to be sure. This forest might’ve been close to a huge ant colony. Was that why there weren’t any animals? *Haah...I didn’t realize.*

Now I understood why there hadn’t been any game around. Come to think of it, I’d also noticed scratches in the dirt. Were those the footprints of the ants? I didn’t know since it was my first time seeing them, but I’d commit them to memory just in case. When the books said that huge ants form a whole army, they weren’t kidding.

I’m so glad they didn’t find me. That was scary...

Chapter 10: The Second Village

I CUT APART THE BODY of a field mouse that had gotten stuck in my trap. I'd gotten better at it, too. Faster. The stench was tough to deal with at first... No matter how careful you were, the smell of blood was a lot. My basic strategy was to just get it done quickly and then move somewhere else.

Once I'd removed the meat, I washed it in water and wrapped it carefully in bana leaves. Bana leaves were used a lot for their disinfectant properties, and they're easy to find in the forest. Then I put it in my bag and left the bones and other stuff from the carcass behind. No matter how fast you worked, after all, monsters would come running at the smell of blood. Leaving the bones and such drew them there, giving me time to get away. I'd learned the hard way that this was the safest way to work.

I stopped and listened. There were people near, and I could barely hear them speaking. It seemed I'd arrived at the second village. My plan was to go in and gather information. I'd just butchered the meat in my bag, so maybe I could earn some money from it? I'd have to think about this village's situation.

There were a few travelers around. A whole bunch of people in exploration gear, too, so I shouldn't stand out as an outsider if I sold meat here. I'd heard that field mouse meat was popular for being nutritious, but it really had to be fresh.

I surveyed the shops in the village from the street. Of the places selling meat, I chose the one closest to the village square.

"Excuse me," I said. "Can I sell field mouse meat here?"

A well-built man peeked out of the shop. "Ooh, field mouse? Let's see what ya got, kid." He looked surprised by my appearance, but he didn't ask any prying questions.

I handed over the bana leaf-wrapped meat. He checked it and nodded. This was my first time doing this, so my heart was pounding in my ears.

"Very fresh," he mused. "I like it. For this amount, I'd give you a hundred dal."

I looked at the prices of dried meat in the shop. Five days worth of food for me would be a hundred dal, so that sounded right.

“That works for me. Thank you.”

“Here ya go.” He put a hundred dal in my hand. My first earnings! “If you catch any more, bring ‘em here. We’ve got too many folks trying to get big game these days, so we need more small game hunters like you.”

I bowed, left the store, and carefully put the money in my hip bag to avoid losing any. I fastened the bag back to my hip and slunk back into the woods.

“I did it!” My face broke into a smile at my first-ever sale. My tamer skill wouldn’t bring me work, but maybe I could make a living by hunting and selling meat. It wasn’t much, and I knew it’d be hard, but suddenly I could imagine a real future for myself. “I’ll hunt some more field mice, make a little money, and then get moving.”

In the woods, I found a perfect tree branch to serve as a bed. I surveyed my surroundings and checked the monster traces left around it to ensure it was safe. Finally, I searched for any nearby auras. Nothing nearby felt dangerous. I could rest easy today.

Chapter 11: I'm Gonna Hunt Field Mice!

CHECKING MY TRAPS, I found...two field mice! Add those to the ones I'd caught earlier, and that made five mice in a day.

I heard that tusked hogs could be hunted near this village, too. They were more profitable, so people didn't bother with field mice so much. The thing was, tusked hogs scared off field mice when they went wild. Once you knew where the mice would run, all you had to do was set traps. My initial plan was to place enough traps to get two to three mice per day, but I was more successful than I'd ever expected. In just three days, I'd caught thirty-four. This was great!

After finishing field dressing the meat, I wrapped it neatly in bana leaves. My past self insisted that appearances were important. Was that true? I couldn't say.

I went into the village and checked to see if people were acting normal. This was actually important—when villagers got frantic, I could guess something happened in the village or even that they had big monster problems on their hands. When they were weirdly suspicious of their surroundings, that usually meant there was a wanted criminal on the loose. Today, the villagers looked livelier than usual. What did that mean? Warily, I headed toward the butcher shop from before.

"Heya. More field mice for me today?" the store owner asked.

"Yes, sir. Is something going on here?"

"Oh, don't you worry. Harvest time is over, so the traveling merchants all head out at once. The demand for dried meat goes way up, but the villagers..."

"Hm?"

"Someone said the tusked hog population is booming, so everyone went a little nuts and ran off to hunt 'em."

I get it. I was only able to hunt so much because nobody else was out doing it, right?

"And I hear they found a big herd of hogs out in the woods," he added. "Guess they're putting together a hunting party now." That explained the

liveliness from before. If the hogs had formed a herd, that might make the forest dangerous. I'd have to choose tonight's "bed" carefully. "Anyway, here's your money. Threw in a bit extra, since you're my only supplier. Five hundred fifty dal, all yours."

"Thank you very much."

After all was said and done, I'd made a total of 2,550 dal. It was about time to move on to the next village. I glanced over to the dried meat on display, though, and saw that the prices were higher than before. Made sense—demand was higher now—but I wished I'd bought some before it got more expensive.

"Hm?" the owner grunted. "What, do you want some dried meat?"

"Yeah. I was about to head on to the next village, so..."

"Huh. Well, I ought to thank you for your help. Wait there a sec." The store owner brought something out from the back. "Here's a cut of dried meat. You can have it for just 100 dal."

I took it from him. It was just dried meat, but there was a lot of it. Ten days of food, even. "Thank you so much!"

I handed over the hundred dal, bowed again, and left. After some thought, I approached the crowd of people. It would be good to have information on where the tusked hogs were so I'd know which way was safest in the forest.

Chapter 12: According to the Map...

AFTER FINISHING all my other prep, I checked the traps I'd set earlier. There were two field mice in them, so I was gonna really feast tonight.

From what I'd heard in the village, it seemed like tomorrow morning was a good time to leave. They were having a large-scale hunt in the woods tonight. If that went well, there'd be way fewer tusked hogs. They were wily, dangerous animals, so I'd be in big danger if one rushed me in the woods.

As usual, I finished cleaning the meat quickly and left. Something was approaching, but the leftovers would probably draw it. Feet flying, I made for the village dump.

If I was going to leave, I needed to be prepared. As I'd expected from all the merchants and adventurers hanging around, this village had a big dump. I found a few potions, checked their color, and stuffed them in a bag. Another bag—a torn one—had some paper in it. I checked it out. Oh, it was a map! It even included the village I was born in.

This was a huge find!

I didn't know the names of any villages other than the one I'd come from, nor did I know how far they were from each other. I couldn't tell how accurate this map was, but it was so much better than nothing. Apart from the map, there were some clothes. After examining the size and cleanliness of each item, I tossed them in my bag and discarded what I didn't need from my own possessions. If I didn't clean up now and then, I'd just start to hoard.

After my dump raid, I headed back toward the village. It would be dangerous to stay in the forest on the night of a big hunt, so I'd spend the night there instead.

A huge crowd of hunters gathered in the center of the village. I looked for the plaza where the adventurers could stay the night—they'd freed up a plaza for them to sleep in, since a lot of adventurers didn't have a lot of money. There were simple cooking tools there, so that was a big help for me, too. Eventually, I found a decently sized open square dotted with tents. Yep, this seemed like the place. I'd expected it to be a little livelier, but most of the adventurers were already out pursuing the tusked hogs. It was kinda silly to expect them to be

anywhere else when there was money to be made.

There was a camp kitchen set up in the plaza, so I whipped up some dinner right away. I didn't have much mana, so I didn't want to waste magic on cooking. There were magic stones for making fire here, which was extra convenient. I sliced the dressed field mice into haphazard sizes and roasted them. Once one was cooked through, I took it off the fire and covered it in bana leaves. The other would be my dinner.

I enjoyed a luxurious meal, poring over the map I'd picked up as I ate. First, I wanted to learn the name of the place I was in now.

I was born in Ratomi Village. According to the map, it was pretty far from the city. I'd avoided the village closest to Ratomi, but that one was called Ratofu Village. The one after that was Ratone, which was probably where I was now. That left my next destination...Ratoto, was it? It looked like the shortest trip so far, but I still didn't know where this map even came from. Useful as it was, I couldn't trust it *too* much.

Reading the map reminded me of the fortune-teller. She'd known I could read simple characters but not all of them. That's why she taught me to read and write all the important ones. She even taught me simple math.

I wished I could see her kind face one more time.

Chapter 13: Heading for Ratoto

I LIKED TO TAKE THINGS SLOW when I was about to hit the road again, so I spent the morning in a leisurely way. It was my first time sleeping without my guard up in a long time, so my body felt light. Maybe it would be best for my health if I slept in plazas like this when they were open to the public. I was scared that fatigue would dull my focus.

I kept my eyes and ears open as I headed to the center of the village. It seemed the big hunt was a success—even this early in the morning, all the men still smelled like liquor. Excited voices rang out in shops where the adventurers gathered. I wasn’t sure how much they’d hunted, but it was clear enough that it’d be safer to travel now even if I needed to keep my guard up.

I left the village a little before noon. I was far from Ratomi Village now, so I probably wouldn’t be recognized if I walked on the village roads. I wasn’t worth chasing this far. Besides, I didn’t want to risk running into any tusked hogs that had escaped the hunters in the forest.

I passed a popular meeting spot on the way out, and that’s when I finally saw a dead tusked hog. I’d read about them in books, but it was a lot bigger than I’d thought. If one of those things hit me, I’d be in real trouble. Should my luck go bad, one of them might even show up on the village roads. Thinking about it made me pretty nervous as I left. Still, the road out was fairly worn from all the travelers.

Looking back, that meat seller had probably noticed that there was something off about me. Why would a child under ten years old sell meat without an adult in sight? But he hadn’t asked any questions, and the price he paid seemed fair.

I wish I’d thanked him.

Three days after leaving Ratone, I started listening carefully for the sounds of rushing water, so I could fill my canteen. I checked the trees for fruit, too, because I’d learned that edible fruit was easier to find closer to the river. That paid off a few times before I reached the water.

There, I filled up my canteen and put it in my magic bag. Just when I was about to head back, a slime burst out of the foliage. It was a normal green teardrop-shaped slime, sort of like a triangle with rounded corners. Untamed slimes were monsters.

This was terrifying!

The slimes in this world aren't very cute, Past Me piped up. Cute? What kind of idiot thinks a monster's going to be cute?

I had to get away. Slimes were considered weak, but they could still body slam or shoot sticky projectiles at you. I had no offensive or defensive magic, and my sword wouldn't do much against a slime. Running was the safest bet, so I fled to the mountain road while avoiding the slime. When I got there, I felt around for auras. Good...it wasn't chasing me. I'd been lucky enough to encounter a slow-moving slime.

People said you could beat up slimes with survival magic if you had enough mana, but that wasn't really an option, either. My mana was just too low.

Oh, right—survival magic. In this world, people could use limited magic in everyday life. It's called survival magic, and you could use it to start fires, create water, and clean. Anybody could do that stuff.

Even I could...well, sort of. Like I said, the problem was my mana. I had so little that I couldn't afford to use it. Survival magic could be used more or less by different people, all determined by how much mana somebody had.

Kids usually start using survival magic at age five, gradually honing it and increasing their mana a little at a time so that they could reasonably survive. Not me, though. No matter how I tried, I couldn't increase my mana...or at least not enough for it to matter.

In my case, using fire magic just once nearly drained my mana. If my mana reached zero in the woods, I'd lose my ability to read auras. Reading auras doesn't take mana, but hitting zero mana weakens you. In the forest, zero mana means death.

If I had to fight something and needed to use mana for it, I'd be in danger even if I won. Something else might find me, after all. So I couldn't fight anything, not even the weakest of slimes—I could only run away.

Chapter 14: A Strange Creature

I BUMPED INTO a lot of slimes on the way to Ratoto. Apparently, they spawned in large numbers along this particular village road. I hadn't heard about them during my information gathering, but maybe slimes were just too weak to bother talking about. Either way, I was tired from all the running. I was almost at the next village, though, right? I just needed to...

Oh no. I'm out of water. I'd better refill it somewhere. I could tell myself I was close to the next village, but I didn't know for sure. If it was still far, I'd need more water. I listened carefully and heard rushing water. It sounded far, but I had no other choice. I went into the woods and let my ears guide me.

Led by the sound of water, I arrived at a wide lake. "Wooow... incredible!"

The surface was scattered with flowers I'd never seen before. I didn't know what any of the plants were called, but a whole tangle of foliage floated on the surface. Delicate stems reached out through the gaps on the surface, their full white and pink blooms swaying with movement of the water. The flowers entranced me for a moment.

I caught myself, panicked, and looked around for danger. *Don't let your guard down in the forest, not ever...*

I made my way over to the river that fed the lake and filled my canteen. I wish I could've carried more water, but almost nobody used canteens, and all the discarded ones I'd come across were broken. *Maybe I ought to make one for myself if I find some bamboo?*

I searched for the green cords I'd left in the forest to mark my trail and recovered them as I returned to the village road.

Just before I reached the road, I found, uh... A weird...
Creature?

"What's this?" At a glance, it looked like a slime, but...not quite? Its body was more like a slime stretched sideways. It was a translucent blue, and its eyes were...well, *lovable*, despite belonging to a monster.

“Cute...” Here I was, thinking it was cute for a monster. I couldn’t make fun of Past Me now. But for some reason, this thing that looked like a collapsed slime was *actually really cute*.

The slime-thing stared at me. *Wait. A slime-thing that looks collapsed...I recognize this from that old monster guide!*

“You’re a collapsed slime, aren’t you?”

The book had mentioned a rare slime without any official name, a slime considered the weakest of all slimes. Its unofficial name, given its appearance, was *collapsed slime*. Most people thought that rare monsters were automatically stronger, but that’s not really how it works.

“You guys disappear when the wind blows too hard, don’t you?”

The weakest, just like me. But who wants to be called the weakest? Yeah, let’s go with collapsed slime! I felt like I’d found a friend. While I was watching, the wind blew enough to ruffle my bangs. Right before my eyes, the collapsed slime plopped over.

“You really are weak, huh...”

Chapter 15: My First Taming

I WAITED A WHILE for the collapsed slime to move, but it stayed slumped. *Does it just...not recover?* Unsure of what to do, I held back a little longer, but the situation didn't improve. It was trembling a little, and I could practically feel its misery. I felt bad for it...but it was still pretty cute.

The little thing was totally helpless, so I reached out to try to prop it up... and then I froze. *I can't touch it. They say even a poke is enough to kill the rare weakest slime.*

When I'd read that, I'd wondered if any monster could really be *that* frail. But looking at the collapsed slime now, fallen over and unable to right itself...it was hard to deny what I saw.

What do I do? Will it die if I touch it? Well...touching isn't poking, right? I'll try caaarefully, slooowly scooping up its upper body to point it forward.

I was nervous. The thing was even shuddering...

Huh?! Is it dying? It's really dying?! I watched nervously. After a while, it stopped, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ah ha ha! What am I doing?”

The collapsed slime stared at me. Honestly, I didn't want to abandon it. Maybe I could tame it? The weakest slime and a no-star...maybe we were a perfect pair.

I'd read how to tame in books, but I never thought I would actually try to do it, so I hadn't committed much of it to memory. If I failed, the collapsed slime in front of me would probably die.

So I took the book out of my magic bag and looked up how to tame. According to the book, if you offer a piece of your mana and the monster accepts it, it creates light. When you see that glow, you speak your own name, then give the monster a name. There was another method that involved forcefully asserting your authority over the monster, but that was generally recommended for people with three or more stars. A no-star like me, not so much.

In either case, if it succeeded, the book said a mark would appear.

Hand over some of your mana, the book says. Just a tiny bit is fine, right? Juuust a little. I looked at the collapsed slime. Its eyes were trained on me.

“Just a little.” I felt out for auras, but nothing was approaching. After giving myself a little pep talk, I kneeled next to the collapsed slime.

With just the tiniest bit of mana in my right index finger, I slowly reached toward the slime. My heart was thumping like mad. If it rejected me, that was that. The slime quivered and rubbed its body against my fingertip. Once I felt the mana moving from my finger to the slime, I snatched my hand back and watched.

Shake shake.

It was bathed in a faint light now, so it must’ve accepted my mana. Next, I had to speak my name and give the collapsed slime one of its own.

My name—not the name my parents had taken from me. I’d come up with something new after leaving the village: I was Ivy, one who can be trampled on yet still survive and grow strong. It was a word pulled from the memories of my past self. Apparently, it was the name of some kind of plant.

As for the collapsed slime...umm, it's blue, so...I could call it Blue? Maybe something better. I looked up and stared out at the beautiful blue sky. Ah...okay! Sky—we'll go with Sora! That'll do it!

“I’m Ivy, and you’re Sora!”

Its quivering body spasmed. I watched anxiously, wondering if it would disappear, until a pattern appeared on what I guess you’d call its head. The symbol was proof that the slime had been tamed. *Hooray! I did it!*



Chapter 16: Surprisingly Problematic

I WAS RELIEVED TO SEE Sora still quivering in front of me. While I was relieved it hadn't disappeared, I recalled something I'd read in a book once: Collapsed slimes only have a life span of one day. Would it die by tomorrow? I glanced down at it nervously.

Sora gazed back. For some reason, we just...stared at each other for a few minutes.

What are we doing...? I decided to check the book again. *The rare weakest slime is known to die in the span of a day*, it said. Which seemed straightforward, until it added: *However, many mysteries remain regarding this slime.*

In other words...they didn't know. Right? In that case, I would believe it would be okay. I'd finally made a friend, and it would be too depressing if it disappeared. *It'll be fine. It has to be fine!*

Sora started quivering, still staring at me as if to ask something. Not that I knew what it was asking. The book said that tamed monsters could communicate with you, but...

Sorry...I just don't understand. I picked Sora up gently and turned back to the village road to resume my journey. We couldn't stay here forever. As I walked, I contemplated the future. Once the heady excitement of successfully taming something subsided, I realized I had some problems.

The book claimed that the collapsed slime was too weak to be tamable. If I had tamed one, what would people think? *For now, I'll just make sure nobody can see Sora. It looks different from normal slimes, so people would figure out something was weird about me.* Wow...*my new friend is pretty problematic, huh?*

I stopped walking when I heard voices ahead. Multiple people were talking, so we were probably close to the village. It took me longer to notice this time because I was distracted by other things. *I'd better be more careful.*

I looked down at the slime in my arms. What would I do with Sora? I couldn't just leave it in the middle of the forest. As I approached the village,

worrying all the while, I noticed people approaching.

I panicked—I threw Sora in my magic bag as three adventurers popped out of the forest. They were holding a big snake that they must've hunted. For some reason, they hadn't killed it. No, they were rushing toward Ratoto with it. I walked slowly, waiting for them to leave. And just as relief started to wash over me...

"Ahhh! I threw it in my magic bag!" I stared at the bag in question. They say you're not supposed to put living things in magic bags, lesser or otherwise. The moment you try, they get repelled. I looked around, but...not a Sora in sight.

Did it die?

I ran back into the forest to get off the village road. After checking to make sure nobody was around, I put the bag on a fallen tree, took a deep breath, and put a hand inside. Immediately, something cold brushed against my hand.

Thank goodness. When I pulled my hand out, there was Sora, still quivering as usual. All the energy in my body evaporated, and I sat down heavily right there. For some reason, it seemed Sora could exist inside the bag just fine. Maybe some lesser magic bags were fine but people just didn't know?

Oh, I know! If I could put Sora in my bag, then we could travel together without anyone seeing. I'd stumbled onto the solution for all my problems. Except, uh...

"Sorry for putting you in a trash bag, Sora." In my panic, I'd kinda put my new friend in a bag full of garbage. It sat among expired potions and torn-up clothes. "My bad."

Chapter 17: Blue Potions

I CONTINUED MY TRAVELS through the forest, hoping to finally reach the village. Along the way, I found the village's dump. This was the perfect opportunity to toss the stuff I didn't need. The weather was getting warmer, so my potions had expired fast. The wound-healing and pain-soothing ones were prone to go bad especially quickly.

I left Sora on a rock I could see from the dump and walked over. I emptied the trash out of the bag I'd designated for it, but...

“Huh?” I didn't see any blue potions among the clutter that fell out. There were expired ones with big white or black clumps in them, but...even when I turned the bag upside down, nothing came out. I tried looking inside, even tried sticking my hand in, with no results. Blue potions were the ones that healed wounds, but most of mine had expired on the way here.

“That's weird.”

There wasn't a hole at the bottom, either. Which made sense, because the rest of the trash was still there. I tried turning it inside out and flapping it around, but it was totally empty. Here I thought I had thirteen potions to throw away. Where had they gone?

I gave up looking for them and rummaged in the dump for free potions. I wanted lots of blue wound-healing potions and green pain-soothing potions. Lesser ones were sensitive to heat, so those two types expired first. Still, those were the ones you wanted most in the wilderness, so I wanted to pick up a good number. I circled the dump, filling my magic bags as I went. After I'd picked up enough, I trudged back to Sora.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

Sora trembled as the wind rolled it around. *Maybe I should've found a more secure spot...*

I picked Sora up and headed toward Ratoto Village. When people approached, I shoved it in a bag again.

“Oops! That's the potion bag!” I'd stuffed Sora into the magic bag I'd just filled with potions. The other bags were just as full. The only empty one was the

one designated for trash...

This won't do. I looked at Sora. "Sorry. Try to put up with it for now, okay?"

Today, I was just here to check out the village and listen for local chatter, so I would be leaving before long. After fretting for a while, I left Sora in the potion-filled bag. I'd need to get a bag just for Sora.

I entered Ratoto Village and checked the place out, keeping an eye open for a place where adventurers gathered. At a glance, there didn't seem to be any major issues in the village at the moment.

Next, I needed info on the forest around here. Adventurers often talked about the monsters and animals that attacked people. There was a tavern in the village square, along with a bunch of shops for adventurers. Places like this were full of adventurers boasting about monsters and animals they'd hunted, so it was easy to suss out what was going on in the surrounding forest.

Most useful tidbits came in the evening—people spill the most trustworthy info when they're tipsy. When they get too drunk, though, they start exaggerating their stories, making them useless.

I strolled along the road, listening to the different voices. From their conversations, I learned that the forest around this village was comparatively safe.

Thank goodness. I can let Sora out of the bag.

Still, some of the rumors bothered me. There were signs that snake monster populations were increasing, so the village put out requests to cull their numbers. These snake monsters stalked the road leading to the next village. Maybe it'd be better to wait and watch here for a while before setting out.

Besides, I'd like to hunt and make some money. If there are lots of field mice, I could do just that.

Chapter 18: Vanished into Thin Air...Again?

BEFORE LEAVING THE VILLAGE, I looked for a butcher shop. When I found one and went inside, a strapping man greeted me with a smile. He had dried meat, but...even though he was selling them for a whole 100 dal, he didn't have much on offer.

No doubt noticing my confusion as I held the dried meat, he explained the price hike. "Sorry, kid. Thanks to those snakes, there are fewer field mice about. Lower supply, higher prices."

"Thank you. If I hunt field mice, would you buy them?"

"Heck, I'd love to. But if you hunt the mice, those snakes might just hunt you."

"Wow...really?"

"Yeah. Some of those boys who just went out hunting were going on about how snakes always come out when you go for the field mouse nests."

"I see... Thank you, sir."

"Not a problem. But if you do find some, I'll be here!"

I bought one strip of dried meat and left. I'd heard all about those snake monsters infesting the road to the next village, but had they spread out even further than that? I decided to look around the woods for myself.

I had to wonder what kind of snakes the monsters were. Did they have mana-infused venom? What if they straight-up used magic? In that case, I'd have to run for the hills.

Would I not be able to get my field mice? My tactic so far was to let them flee right into the traps I'd set, but what if snakes got trapped *with* them? The only way to find out was to give it a shot. If it failed, I'd try something else. Then again, maybe...I could sell the snakes, too? I hadn't thought to ask.

I walked through the forest for a while, but I didn't sense anything snake-y. Maybe they hadn't spread as far as I'd thought. Still wary of my surroundings, I headed for a stout, easy-to-climb tree that I'd found near the dump.

Looking down from my branch, I noticed a small animal fleeing into the

brush. When the huge ants had appeared, there hadn't been any small animals at all. Maybe the snake monsters weren't that strong? *Hmm...I'll need to get more details on the snakes tomorrow.*

I leaned back against the tree and sat Sora in my lap. "Are you okay?"

As usual, it was quivering. Watching it comforted me, but...

No, no time to rest. You still have things to do.

I took the older potions out of my bag and lined them up with the ones I'd just picked up. It was time for a color and stock check. As I pulled the bottles out, I realized...all of my blue potions were gone again.

"Seriously?" I flipped the bag over—nothing. It was the same as before at the dump, but why? I looked at Sora. The only factor in common was my slime buddy here. "Sora? No way..."

Actually, what does Sora eat? Normal slimes process organic matter, but some rare ones can do inorganic stuff.

What about a collapsed slime, then? Given my disappearing blue bottles... was it eating the wound-healing potions? But that didn't make sense! Slimes could process either organic or inorganic matter—one or the other. Potions were organic, but their containers were inorganic.

What was going on here?

I wasn't getting anywhere just thinking about it, so I popped over to the nearby dump and grabbed an expiring blue potion. I was a little worried, but I placed it in front of Sora.

How nerve-racking.

Chapter 19: Sora Snacks

TO MY SURPRISE, Sora oozed its body over the potion before it—till then, I hadn't thought it could do anything more than roll around. Soon enough, the potion was sucked inside of Sora, sizzling away. Beneath the translucent surface of the slime, the potion fizzed and bubbled out of the bottle until it disappeared, followed shortly by the container itself. It was incredible. I'd had a feeling, but it was a real shock to actually see it.

"Wow, Sora! You can process organic *and* inorganic material?"

As I watched the slime, it started to fidget jerkily. Asking for more, maybe? I headed back to the dump and hunted for a few more blue potions. Altogether, I found twenty-one of them, but they were all expiring or expired—some were so discolored that their hues weren't even listed in my book. Was it really okay for Sora to eat this stuff?

I was worried, so I put the ten that weren't outright revolting in front of Sora.

Gloop, gloop. One after another, Sora sucked the potions in. It was kind of funny to watch. After the ten potions were gone, Sora fidgeted again.

Mm...there are more, but I dunno about giving Sora those.

As I hesitated, worrying, Sora rolled over to the other potions. Did it not have any other way of moving? I watched as the slime bumped into a potion and stopped. Maybe it had a hard time stopping on its own once it got rolling. I'm sure it *could* stop, but I had no idea how.

After bonking into the potion, Sora enveloped it and started digesting. Each remaining potion disappeared into Sora, one by one. Huh. If Sora thought they were fine to snack on, then they probably were.

But, man, it sure was eating a lot, and fast! Was it hungry? Slimes could digest different amounts depending on the individual. How much could collapsed slimes digest?

After slurping up all twenty-one potions, Sora didn't quiver so much. It seemed satisfied. *Good. I wouldn't have any more potions for you if you kept on spasming like before.*

“Ah! My potions...”

Oops. Sora had eaten all the ones in my bag, but it was too late to do anything about that. Next time, I’d secure a set amount for myself and give the rest to the slime. Without blue potions, future wounds might fester. Any traveler really needed to have some on hand.

These collapsed slimes sure were mysterious. I guessed that was because nobody had ever been able to tame one.

“Sora...what other mysteries are you hiding?” I wondered.

Sora burbled peacefully in the wind. As I watched it, my eyes slowly drifted shut...and that’s when I fell asleep.

Whoops. Maybe I’m getting a little *too* relaxed these days.

Now I was a little worried about my future.

Chapter 20: Snake Monsters

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up filled with anxiety. But when I opened my eyes...Sora was still there! It hadn't disappeared! I'd never thought that I'd be so happy to see someone in the morning.

I settled Sora in a magic bag and headed to the village. Today, I was going to research the snake monsters. The general state of the village seemed no different from yesterday. But, just like yesterday, I spotted adventurers carrying whole live snakes instead of killing them. I was curious, so I followed the group.

After a short walk, they entered a building with the mark of a drugstore. I peeked inside—it looked like they were selling the snake. I guessed these were the kind of snakes that could be made into medicine. And medicine meant money, so I definitely needed to catch one!

If you're using snakes for medicinal stuff, you've gotta capture them alive. From what I'd heard, the living snake had to be submerged in something called medicine water. *I'll make a note of the snake's features and look it up in the book. And my book on traps might teach me how to catch it, too.*

I left the drugstore and looked for an adventurers' plaza. It was easy to find but way too crowded. *Guess I'll go to the woods instead.*

I sat at the base of the same tree I'd slept in yesterday and cracked open a book. First, I looked for the species of snake...but it didn't have anything on the one I wanted. It would've at least been nice to know whether they were venomous...

When I checked the book for snakes that could be made into medicine, though, it said that any snake that had a medicinal use was venomous. Which meant this one was, too, so I'd better be careful. Next, the book on traps.

"Oh, good! There it is!" Traps for snakes didn't look hard at all. I'd have to rummage for materials, but I was close to a dump, so I'd be just fine. The difficult part would be making sure the trap shut correctly so the snakes couldn't escape.

After foraging around the dump for materials, I found a few new blue

potions that weren't there yesterday. I'd need some for both myself and Sora, so I tossed them all into my bag regardless of hue.

Next, I grabbed the materials for the trap. I was lucky enough to find a broken cage, a torn bag, and a length of rope. I threw a few other useful-looking things in, too.

Finally, I went back to the tree and took stock of my materials. I tied the broken cage to the torn bag with some twine. The book said it was important to tie the twine without any openings so the snake couldn't escape, but...how much of a gap did a snake need to get out? The thought of getting bitten freaked me out, so I covered the whole thing with twine. Next, I fastened a broken metal cup over the entrance with even more twine, in order to make it easy to get inside. There! My snake-catching trap was complete.

It was a simple trap: You put snake bait inside. Once the snake slithers in, you tie up the bag to trap it. The mechanics were a little rough since it meant having to keep an eye on it the whole time, but I had to try. Constructing it so the snake couldn't exit once it entered, like in the book, was still beyond my skill level...I needed to study more.

That done, I prepared a trap for field mice. The plan was to use a trapped mouse as snake bait. I didn't know if it would work, but I was gonna give it my best shot! *That money isn't going to make itself!*

But first...Sora was staring at my magic bag, so I fed it. How did it know that I had more potions? I thought I'd picked them up while it wasn't looking...

Chapter 21: The Value of a Snake

WHEW...THREE WHOLE DAYS after setting the trap, I finally tasted success. I'd tried so, so hard, and now I was rewarded with not one but two snakes! Two field mice, too! This was a huge deal for me, since I couldn't make the automatic snake-catching trap. But now I was painfully sleep-deprived.

So tired... No! I need to skin and dress these mice and take the snakes to sell!

I'd gotten pretty skilled at butchering mice, and my work was clean, as usual. And what luck—the mice I'd gotten today were big and plump. Next up, though, I had to deal with those snakes struggling inside the cage. I was a little scared of them, but somehow I had to haul that cage back to the village.

I'll do my best...

I went back to the village and listened in on the villagers and adventurers for a while. No dramatic changes, so I was probably okay to go in. First, I went to the place where I'd bought the dried meat to sell them my mice. You always have to sell raw meat as soon as possible.

"Oh, hey!" the shopkeeper greeted me. "You're that kid from before. Got some field mice for me?"

"Yes. Will these do?"

"Oooh, these'll do just fine. Much appreciated. And those are...snakes, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah. I was going to sell them to the drugstore."

"Wow. Good work, son."

"Yeah..."

"Big field mice, eh? Delicious. How does 260 dal sound?"

"Thank you very much." It was more than I'd expected, which was nice. I accepted the money and asked which drugstore I should go to. I took his suggestion and made my way there. All the while, the snakes were going crazy

in the cage... It was pretty scary.

Better hurry...

I was relieved that the shopkeeper had thought I was a boy. The fortune-teller instructed me to dress up like a boy if I was traveling alone. Unaccompanied girls and women could wind up in a whole lot of danger. Past Me called the butcher a “sucker.” I didn’t know what a “sucker” was, but I guessed it meant Past Me was as happy as I was that nobody had figured me out.

The drugstore was the same one where I’d seen the other adventurers sell their snake. It was my first time going inside a drugstore, so I was nervous.

“Excuse me?” I called out.

A grumpy shopkeeper peered out from the back. “Yeah?”

“I would like to sell these snakes. Could you take a look at them?”

“Got a parent or a friend around?”

“No, sir. Just me.”

“Huh...all right, let’s take a look-see.” He pretended to think about it, but it was clear he was going to examine the snakes no matter what. I set the cage on the counter, undid the twine...

Then I pushed it toward the shopkeeper. I just couldn’t open the bag! It was too scary. He chuckled, unknotted the bag, and peeked inside.

“Still lively. Nice and big. Prominent colors, too.” It sounded like they would fetch a good price. My effort would be rewarded! “I’ll give you two gidal for one, four gidal for two. One of them’s a female, so I’ll throw in another gidal for that.”

Huh? Gidal? I think one silver gidal coin’s worth ten bronze 100-dal coins...and he’s giving me five gidal! Whoa...are snakes really that valuable?!

“Th-thank you very much!” I stammered.

“Nah, my boy, thank you. The females are rare, so they’re in demand.”

Trembling, I accepted the money. I’d never imagined I could make this much. All these snakes appearing at once...it was a real stroke of luck. No way could I have caught one otherwise.

Chapter 22: Actually a Big Eater

WITH MY newfound riches in hand, I raced back to the place I'd been sleeping. I had five whole gidal now! What luck!

But this was due to that explosion in the snake monster population, and I'd have to deal with that on my way to the next village. At least I could sleep contentedly tonight.

I placed Sora at the base of a tree and hemmed it in with magic bag handles. Otherwise, Sora just ended up rolling away by the time I got back. Once it had really surprised me with just how far it rolled! To keep my friend from getting blown away by a strong wind, I'd come up with this little wall of magic bag handles. Even if Sora hadn't died within a day, I still worried about it. And man, it sure did eat a lot.

Yesterday, I found a ton of potions people had tossed out. The blue ones alone had totaled fifty-eight. Some kids must have been learning to make them, churning out one after the other to polish their skills. You could tell someone was practicing because the potions were in simple bottles instead of proper containers. I'd thought of giving them to Sora, but that might've been risky. It was a different kind of container than usual, after all.

There were three types of common potion containers, from first-class to third-class. They differed in translucence and thickness. First-class containers were made from uniform glass, so light entered them in a predictable way.

How light entered was important. If the glass wasn't uniform, the potions would expire faster. If you're not a master potion-maker, though, you'd usually use third-class containers.

People who didn't consistently make quality potions were recommended first-class containers to extend the life of their products. Still, since they were going to expire faster either way, they would have to be sold as inferior goods. The cost of the containers resulted in a net loss, so most people didn't use first-class containers at all. These days, first-class containers were the mark of an expensive product.

In the training stage, people just used common bottles to see how quickly their potions would expire. If they lasted long enough, they'd move on to use

proper containers that could be sold. These kinds of discarded potions were from that training stage.

I studied the bottles. What made proper containers different, anyway, apart from the shape? Did it make them...bubble...differently? Or something? As I sat there all puzzled, Sora rolled over and devoured one of the potions.

It was a crazy sight no matter how many times I saw it. The bottles of blue potions fizzled and disappeared inside Sora.

“I guess training bottles are fine, too?” With that figured out, I decided to give Sora as many as it wanted. Soon enough, the whole pile of potions was gone! Jeez, to think it could eat fifty-eight in one sitting...

I’d read about slime ecology, but all the book said was that their standard intake “depended on the individual,” which wasn’t much help. Maybe Sora was eating a lot, or maybe Sora was just eating a normal amount. Still, the slime was only a little bigger than one of my hands, so I couldn’t help but see it as a huge eater.

Training bottles were fine, right? Hmm...what would happen if I found an empty one and put it in front of the slime? I gave it a go, but Sora didn’t react at all. I guessed it needed to have a potion inside.

What do I do? How am I supposed to get enough potions?

Chapter 23: Waiting for Potions

I GAVE UP ON snake traps. Instead, I focused on making a ton of field mouse traps. Trying to catch snakes meant missing sleep. The day I'd sold them, my fatigue had left my mind foggy for the rest of the day. And that was dangerous in the forest. I'd have to give that one up till I improved my traps.

I went around looking at the traps I'd rigged up the day before. Field mouse escape routes were scattered thanks to the snakes, so nothing was coming in. On top of that, four of my traps had been crushed—the work of snakes, maybe? Still, it seemed like making a lot was the right idea—I'd secured three field mice in my fifteen traps. I cleaned and dressed them quickly and went back to the village.

When I entered, something seemed off. The adventurers were all bustling about. Had something happened? I eavesdropped on conversations as I made my way to the butcher. It sounded like some adventurers had gotten a request from the village to defeat the snakes that had appeared, and now they were busy preparing for their assault.

Huh. Maybe culling the snakes would be more profitable than selling them to the drugstore...not that I could join in, no matter how much money I might make. I was already traveling alone as a child, so I didn't want to stand out any more than I already did.

What I really needed to know was when they'd start the hunt. If adventurers were going to flood the forest, it would be safer to stay out that day. Angry monsters might show up. I didn't want to get caught up in that.

When I went into the butcher shop, a woman was there instead of the man I'd sold to before. I'd never seen her, so it really took me by surprise. Then again, it was careless of me to think that the owner would always be there.

"Oh my, welcome!" she said.

"Umm, I'd like to sell some field mice."

"Huh? Oh, my hubby told me about you. You're the little boy who sells him field mice?" She was his wife, then. I took a steady breath before

handing her the bana leaf-wrapped meat. “Ah, they’re very well butchered. This is a huge help. Y’know, those adventurers just hack them up without a care in the world.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Three mice, 330 dal. Is that enough?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“By the way, I hear they’re finally going to deal with those snakes,” she went on. “The chief has really been taking his sweet time.”

“Looks like.”

“Are you going to join in?”

“N-no, ma’am.”

“Oh, you’re not?”

“I’m not.” *What do I do? Is she one of those people who likes to chat? I can’t escape... She just talks and talks...*

It took around ten minutes for me to finally get away, and that was only because the owner came back and saved me from more circular conversation.

Thank goodness for him. I breathed a sigh of relief as I left. I had no idea what she was going on about near the end, but at least now I knew when the snake hunt would be. For now, I just wanted to put a ton of distance between me and that shop.

If they were going to hunt the snakes, maybe leaving for the next village would be a good idea.

No, I can’t. Not without a stock of blue potions.

And the three I had on hand weren’t exactly a stock. I’d have liked ten, but I’d settle for six at the very least. And if I wanted to feed Sora, I might even need fifty! Either way, not happening. What could I do? Would Sora eat nothing but blue potions? I decided to head to the dump.

There, I was blessed with two blue potions. Add them to what I already had, and I had five. Five beautiful potions, which still wasn’t nearly enough.

Before taking Sora out of its bag, I transferred the potions I’d found into my designated potions bag. Sora would undoubtedly want them if it saw them, so I had to get them out of sight stat. Next, I took Sora out of its bag and lined up different-colored potions in front of it.

“Wanna try these?” I offered.

Nope. It wouldn’t even look at them. *Should I stay in this village until they throw away more blue potions? I’d have to change my plans, but there’s nothing else I can do without a secure source. Please, anyone...just throw away a whole heap of blue potions for me, won’t you?*

Chapter 24: Prepare to Depart

NEVER HAD I THOUGHT I'd be so grateful to see such a large pile of training potions discarded. The blue potions were expired, but there were thirty-seven in total. Maybe it wasn't enough to totally satisfy that slime's appetite, but Sora seemed to get by with two to three per day. It would just have to deal with that during our travels.

I had a few days until I was ready to leave the village, so there was always a chance I could luck into more free potions. Still, I had enough now that I could start planning to leave for Ratomu Village. I'd been lucky!

The village adventurers would begin their big snake hunt today. They'd gathered so many adventurers that it shouldn't take more than three days or so.

Before preparing for my trip, I made a bunch of field mouse traps. When the adventurers crashed through the forest, the mice would run. If I left these traps up, I might be able to catch a whole lot. This was my first time trying that technique, so it might not go as I expected, but it was worth a shot.

Altogether, I set thirty traps in the forest. I'd never made so many in one day. They might've been a little sloppy, but they should be fine. I was doing my best to nab as many field mice as possible.

Once I had set the last trap, I went out to forage fruit from the trees. I didn't know what it was called, but I'd found a deliciously sweet fruit. It hit the spot just right when I was exhausted. After I picked two, I went back to my sleeping place.

Now to pack up for the journey. I've got potions, so what else do I need? I ran out of rope making traps. Also...I kind of want clothes. These are getting too small. Oh, and canteens, too. But there isn't any bamboo growing around here...

Once I had checked for auras nearby and confirmed it was safe, I lifted Sora out of its bag. The slime stared at me and quivered. It probably knew that I'd found blue potions at the dump and was begging for them.

"No," I said, staring it square in the eye. "We need those for provisions during the trip."

Its teardrop shape stretched further to the sides than usual. Normally, it was a roundish teardrop shape, but now...Sora was starting to look really weird.

Could it be trying to complain?

Also, how far could it stretch? Sora looked like gelatin laid sideways as it quivered and bobbed. I averted my eyes from its sorry state. I didn't enjoy seeing it like this, but no meant no! If I fed it everything now, we'd never be able to leave.

I decided to look for necessities at the dump. *Maybe I'll take Sora this time. There might be more blue potions that I hadn't found before. What if Sora's reactions help me find more?*

I found a few pieces of rope at the dump but unfortunately no clothes. I'd have to hope for something at the next dump. I looked to Sora, who'd rolled over into the pile of trash. I rushed to pick it up and tossed it into my bag. *Note: Dumps are not a good place for Sora.*

After picking up what I needed, I went back to my makeshift bed. When I took Sora out of my bag again, it stretched sideways in complaint. I gave it a glance but otherwise tried to ignore it. I had preparations to make.

All the ropes I'd found were cut up, so I tied them into usable lengths. I'd also come across some fabric, so I checked where it had been torn and trimmed off the usable parts to keep. Preparations complete, I looked over to Sora...and found it asleep. Sora really was a leisurely little slime.

Chapter 25: A Happy Encounter

NINE MICE had found their way into my traps. According to the adventurers, the snakes had gone on a rampage, which I guessed scared all the mice out of hiding. Nine mice from thirty traps was a jackpot! Another lucky outlier for me.

Oh, and one snake somehow survived and ended up in one of my traps. I ran away as soon as I saw it, but I knew I just *had* to sell it.

At the dump, I found a torn but still sturdy-looking bag. I dealt with the torn bit by tying twine tight around it, then I positioned the mouth of the bag over the trap and slowly pushed the snake inside. The snake peeked its head out of the trap, but I tied the open end of the bag shut, lickety-split.

The snake thrashed and writhed in the bag. It was scary... I'd felt a little safer before when I had them in cages. *I'd better go offload this right now*, I thought.

Leaving the mice for later, I ran off to the village drugstore.

Adventurers were drinking and having fun in the village, bragging about their escapades yesterday. They were going to continue the hunt tonight, so I had to hurry. I felt bad for Sora, but it would have to spend another day in the bag.

“Excuse me?”

“Hm?” The drugstore clerk turned to me. “Oh, hey, son.”

“Are you still buying snakes?”

“Absolutely. In need of some healthy specimens now, I’d say. Those adventurers beat the ones they caught up too much for them to be useful. The population’s gonna plummet soon, I’d wager, so I wanna stock up while I can.”

The bag with the snake inside was wiggling. Too frightening for me. I took it to the owner, holding the bag as far from my body as I could. He chuckled at the sight.

Laugh all you want, but I’m scared. There’s nothing you or I can do about it.

“Another lively one, eh?” He looked inside the bag and nodded, satisfied.
“You’re a heck of a hunter, boy.”

“Huh?! Oh, not at all.”

“Really? Could’ve fooled me. Other adventurers bring me snakes with the tar beaten out of ‘em. Can’t make good medicine out of that. The lively ones you bring make for quality goods. Buddy, I just love doing business with you.”

“I appreciate it.” I was happy to be able to help.

“That’ll be two gidal.”

“Thank you very much.” I accepted the money and left with a huge smile on my face.

“I love doing business with you.” Was he exaggerating? Either way, it makes me happy.

It felt like I was walking on clouds as I returned to where I’d stashed the field mice. I took Sora out of its bag, then gave it today’s potions. Field dressing the mice took a long time since there were so many, but I was able to finish before sunset.

I looked to Sora, and...it was asleep. Relaxed as always. I’d heard that they’d hunt again today, so I needed to get back soon. After gently placing Sora in my bag, I headed to the village.

Adventurers were setting out for the forest as I walked into the village—I’d made it just in time! After seeing them off, I went to the butcher. *Hope he’s here this time.*

“Excuse me.” I opened the door and peeked inside.

“Oh! What brings you here, sonny?”

It’s him! Phew! “I have some field mice to sell. Is that okay?”

“More than okay. I need ‘em! Everyone but you relies too much on snakes these days.”

I handed him the nine field mice-worth of meat, wrapped in bana leaves.

“Heck of a haul, I tell you what,” he whistled. “Hoo, boy, you’re good at this.”

“Thank you very much.”

“The meat’s in perfect condition, too! That’ll be 1,080 dal. I haven’t gotten much game in during this snake hunt, so I’ve raised the fee.”

“Okay. That’ll do.”

“Ever since that snake population rose, I’ve been short on meat. I’m selling for more and buying for more. And still, those dang adventurers complain every time the price of dried meat goes up. I appreciate you bringing me all of this, boy. Thanks again.”

He counted out the money, and I headed to the plaza, which was still open to adventurers.

Oops. I forgot to buy dried meat for the journey. I was in too good of a mood after he thanked me.

Still...I was happy.

Chapter 26: Off to Ratomu Village

THANKS TO ALL the adventurers who showed up, the hunt ended in two days. It really must've taken that much manpower, considering how many snakes had appeared. I even saw a lot of the captured snakes before leaving the village.

Maybe the forest was more dangerous than I thought. I should be more careful.

I bought my dried meat and left the village. Since the hunt was over, the village roads should have been safer now. Today, I would start the walk to Ratomu Village. There had been a lot of surprises in Ratoto Village. Meeting Sora, taming Sora, feeding Sora, how much Sora could eat...oh, and the price of snakes, too.

Looking back, there really were a lot of good times. Sora was my friend now, after all. I peeked down at it as it quivered in my arms. A lazy slime, but a really cute one.

Speaking of good times, I remembered all the nice things the owners of the meat store and drugstore had said to me and couldn't stop myself from grinning.

Yay! Hooray for me! Just remembering their words brought a smile to my face. Still, a journey required a cool head, so I really needed to get a grip.

"Huff!" *Deep breaths, Ivy!* "Haaaah..." Now that I was calm, it was time to head to Ratomu!

Six days had passed since I departed Ratoto Village.

There were a few times where I'd nearly run into monsters, but the trip was peaceful for the most part. Sora was facing food insecurity, though... We only had five potions left. I sure hoped that I'd get to Ratomu soon.

Hm? Weird, I smell smoke. Is something burning? I stopped and looked around. Sora was fidgeting more violently than usual in my arms, too. I couldn't feel any monsters or people around, but sometimes it was easy to overlook

concealed auras like those of adventurers. Even more wary of my surroundings than usual, I walked on.

Should I get off the village road? Uncertain, I continued until I saw smoke rising in the distance. I stiffened up with nerves. What was that...?

Slowly, I got closer...and saw that a box-like object was the source of the smoke. And someone had collapsed next to it! I rushed over, though still cautious, and looked around. I couldn't sense anyone in hiding.

I looked at the fallen person and immediately clapped my hand over my mouth.

They hadn't collapsed. They were dead. A horrible gouge of a wound was plain on their body.

There were footsteps around that showed signs of a struggle, too. Several people, probably. Bandits? I stuffed Sora into a bag just in case they wanted to go after a rare slime.

Whoever the body belonged to, I felt bad for them...but there was nothing I could do. I left them there and fled, staying alert to my surroundings. Before long, I saw a carriage sitting unmoving in the forest.

I stopped and took a few deep breaths to calm down. Still didn't feel any auras. When I reached the carriage, I found several corpses, all with awful gashes.

The horses were collapsed a short distance away, obviously dead. This group must've been attacked by monsters rather than bandits. Bandits wouldn't kill horses, and these wounds sure weren't from swords. A dangerous monster might still be nearby.

The wounds of the dead were horrible. It wasn't my first time seeing people killed by monsters, but it was still a shock.

I needed to get away, so I quickly left the carriage behind. It didn't take long before I realized I was outright sprinting. I stopped myself—running scared would ruin my concentration, which might make me miss a monster aura. I took a few deep breaths and finally centered myself.

"Haah...that really frightened me." I wanted to collapse right there, but I couldn't. Instead, I walked briskly onward to Ratomu Village, focusing hard on my surroundings. Eventually, I heard something.

Voices. Nervously, I listened in. Were they adventurers? Travelers?

Merchants? I approached cautiously.

“Oh! Ratomu Village!”

The many voices were a sign that I’d finally arrived. Relief sucked all the energy out of my body. First things first, I needed to let their public office know about the people who’d died.

Chapter 27: Information Fees

RAMOTU VILLAGE seemed livelier than other villages, with lots more adventurers, too. It felt like the villages were getting bigger the closer I got to the town of Otolwa. Huh. Was it easier to build bigger if you were near Otolwa?

The office should be near the village entrance, so I started looking at the signs nearby. After checking them one by one, I spotted the mark of the office a little way down. They might not trust some child traveling alone, but I didn't have any other option—people were dead.

I entered the office, where I saw four adventurers and a lady.

“Excuse me.”

All of them looked at me at once. I froze, nervous.

“Do you need anything, honey?” The lady called out to me in a kind voice.

Phew. “On the road leading to this village, I found some people who died from a monster attack...” I explained.

“Huh?! Which road?”

“The one that connects to Ratoto Village. It’s very close, though.”

“Um, could you estimate how far, exactly? A rough estimate is fine.”

“Less than thirty minutes on foot, I’d say.”

The lady frowned. Then, without another word, she ran into the back of the building. I could hear them talking...they were really loud. The adventurers around me all looked toward the back room, too.

“Wha? Monsters have appeared nearby?” someone asked in the back.

“Yes! If we don’t investigate soon, they might attack the village.”

A tall, slightly scarred man came out of the back with the first woman. When he stepped out in front of me, he squatted down to eye level and lowered his voice a little bit.

“Now, then,” he said. “We don’t doubt you, but let’s go over it again: It really was on a village road near here?”

“Yes, sir. After I saw them, I got so scared that I ran away. So I don’t know the exact distance, but it didn’t take me long to hear noise from the village.”

He looked searchingly at me for a moment before letting out a long sigh and clawing at his hair. “Ah, jeez...seriously? Ugh. Monsters...” It sounded like this was a big deal. The man stood up and addressed the adventurers in the office. “Sorry, but I need to make an urgent request. We need the exact location of the bodies and, if possible, the species of the monster. We’ll post an official request through the guild later, but for now...”

The four adventurers understood and promptly left to get to work. They were probably a team.

“Thank you,” said the scarred man. “I’m sure you understand, but we’ll pay you the information fee after we’ve looked into it.”

“Uh...okay.” *Information fee? For telling them about the monster? All I said is they might've been attacked by one, that's all...*

I must’ve looked confused, because the lady quickly explained. When information about monster attacks or deaths near the village reached the public office, an informant fee was paid. That’s because they needed information on monsters as quickly as possible. While I hadn’t confirmed that it was a monster for sure, telling them about the deaths had earned me a fee in itself. Tomorrow, I’d have to come back.

“Thank you very much.” I thanked the nice lady and left. Things had gone in a different direction than I’d expected. *I wasn't looking for money. I just thought they needed to know...*

But if there were monsters near the village, it really would be a big problem. *If there are monsters around, it'll be dangerous in the forest. I should sleep in the adventurers' plaza tonight. Oh! But first, I need to find food for Sora. I only have five potions left between the both of us.* Come to think of it, Sora hadn’t stretched out to beg for more potions on the way here. It was, fortunately, satisfied with what I had given it.

I'll pray for lots of blue potions at the dump. You'll be able to eat your gooey heart out, Sora! Let's see, now...where's that dump?

Chapter 28: Evolution? And Monster Information Fees

I WAS SCARED TO LEAVE the village, but the dump couldn't be far. I started searching—even if it was close, they'd put it out of sight from inside the town. Based on where I'd seen other dumps, it was pretty easy to guess where it was. *I guess every village makes their dump in similar places.*

I pulled Sora out of my bag and made a little wall of stuff around the slime so it wouldn't be blown away. It watched the dump and quivered excitedly. Did it sense mealtime approaching?

“Wait there, okay?”

I went in to examine the huge pile of trash. It didn't take long to find the blue potions. I'd had great expectations after seeing all the adventurers in the village, but this was even better than I'd hoped. I found a cage, too, and threw some blue potions inside. In no time, I had thirty. When I brought the cage over to Sora, it was shaking like mad. Was it that hungry? I put down the cage and set the slime on top. It immediately started digesting the potions below, each fizzling away to nothing inside. Yep, my friend sure was ravenous.

While Sora stuffed itself, I went back to the trash and crammed as many blue potions as I could into my bag. If the monsters near the village were dangerous, I wouldn't be able to leave...or visit the dump. I needed to stock up while I still could.

When I got back to Sora, it was bobbing rhythmically inside the now-empty cage. I had never seen it move like that.

“You're just full of surprises...” Over the past few days, Sora had shown all sorts of new types of movement. Was this a kind of growth? Sora truly was a mystery.

There were clothes discarded in the dump, too. I picked a few items and made sure they weren't torn. I could sew most of them back together, but some were just too damaged—about half, actually. Still, I had gotten a big haul: two pairs of pants and four blouses.

I wanted to look for water, but the monsters scared me. With how people

had reacted to the news in the office, it'd be best to stay inside until they knew what the threat was.

“Sorry, Sora. I need you back in the bag. Is that okay?” Sora bounced out of the cage toward me. *Wait...bounced? Huh?!* For a moment, I could hardly believe what I'd just seen. “Sora, you...you bounced!”

Until now, the slime had done nothing but roll...but it bounced! I lifted it up and looked it in the eye. In response, it quivered in its usual way. *You're just too cute!* After hugging and petting it to my heart's content, I lowered it in my bag and went back to the village.

In the morning, I set out for the public office. Ever since yesterday evening, seasoned-looking adventurers had seemed tense. The investigation must've concluded that the monsters were strong.

“Excuse me,” I said as I walked in.

“Oh! You’re the child from yesterday,” said that nice lady from before.

“Yes. Am I too early?”

“Not at all. The monsters have been identified, so I’ll pay out your information fee.”

I heard conversation in the back. The voices were raised—maybe a little angry. *Those monsters must be annoyingly strong...*

“Mind confirming the amount for me?” she asked. I walked over to the desk and looked down at the money on it. It was two gold coins and one silver token. “Two radal for informing us about a high-level monster—that’s two gold coins. Five gidal for the information on the five deceased people.”

“Umm...yes, that is correct.” Still, my heart was beating like crazy! This was my first time seeing silver and gold currency. Five silver coins added up to a silver token, while ten made a gold coin... A *gold coin*?! I tried to imagine the value of it, but that just made me panic more.

Monster information fees are incredible. Money...is scary.

Chapter 29: Ogre King...and Waiting

I PUT THE FEE in my small money pouch and put that pouch in my bag. I had no idea I'd get paid. It made me downright nervous. My hands were sweating, even! I bowed my thanks to the nice lady and left.

Money...if I let anyone else see it, I could be in danger. People could deposit their money at adventurers' guilds, but that required registering...and to register, you had to let them look into your skill. They'd find out I was a no-star. And sure, the merchant guild wouldn't check your skill if you registered, but what did I have to sell?

What do I do? Oh, money...haah...

Still, I was surprised that info on monsters was worth real money. I'd overheard from the talk in the back room that the monsters were ogres, led by a fearsome Ogre King. The veteran adventurers who'd gone to search had found ogre markings, and soon afterward saw the Ogre King itself. According to a book I'd read, Ogre Kings were so strong that you needed multiple veterans to take them down. I hadn't sensed it while passing through, but I was glad I hadn't stayed out too long. I could've run into an ogre, or even the king itself. *Scary!*

I took a walk around the village, observing how people were acting. The news about the Ogre King hadn't spread, so it was pretty peaceful, but people were beginning to notice that the adventurers were bothered about something.

After that, I went back to the adventurers' plaza where I'd slept last night. There weren't many adventurers there since this village had cheap inns. Good luck for me—I didn't sleep well with people nearby. I mean, it was better than having to stay awake to keep an eye out for monsters, but the presence of strangers woke me up. During my nights sleeping in the Ratoto plaza, I'd come to realize that I just didn't like people much.

I found a spot in the plaza without any tents and took a break there. It was as far as could be from the cooking equipment, so it wasn't crowded at all. I'd claimed a similar spot back in Ratoto.

What should I do now? My initial plan had been to head to the next village if I could find potions in the dump here, but it'd be a lot safer to stay in the village if we were dealing with an Ogre King. They were putting out an urgent

request for adventurers, so the hunt would probably start tomorrow or the day after. Also, if there was an Ogre King, there was probably an ogre den nearby. *Or at least that's what one of my books said, I think, but...I only remember a bit. I'll check later.*

It would probably take...a day or two to find the den? Then they'd have to destroy it and the ogres, so...I was looking at about five days in Ratomu Village. It wasn't really a problem, though. It's not like I could sleep in the forest, after all. The trouble would be keeping Sora fed.

I'd have to find an uninhabited place in the village, which would be hard since it was pretty crowded. Worst case, the slime would have to eat inside my bag.

I sighed. The unexpected income was great, but it was a shame I couldn't go into the forest. Still, safety was most important. I felt bad for Sora, but it would just have to make do for now.

In the evening, they announced the news about the monsters and gathered the veteran adventurers. The sheer number of adventurers really got me thinking about how large this village was, with way more veterans than I'd expected. But despite their large force, the man from the office looked grave. The Ogre King must have been a really dangerous monster.

Still, to think I'm stuck here for ten whole days...

Chapter 30: Sora and My Awful Injury

I WAS THOROUGHLY RELIEVED when I caught the news that the ogre den had been destroyed and the Ogre King slain. The forest was more dangerous during the ogre hunt, so they'd closed off the entrance. I hadn't been able to take even a single step away from the village.

I'd only needed one day to recover from my long journey. As for the next three, I'd spent them reading and studying. To do any sort of work in the village, I'd have to go through the guild. That wasn't an option, so I just spent the rest of my time looking around the village. Honestly, I was bored. Ten days was just too long.

The worst part of all was that I couldn't let Sora out when I wanted. I occasionally let it out when I found a quiet place, but only for a little bit. I didn't think it would be so hard to keep my friend a secret...

Either way, it was a good thing I'd scooped up all those potions on our first day here. Otherwise, we would've run out of food fast.

Finally, the entrance to the forest was opened, and the defeated Ogre King was hauled in. They probably wanted everyone to see for themselves that the threat was neutralized, but its size and peculiar aura alarmed me. I'd glimpsed ogres before, but I'd always run away to keep them from seeing *me*, so I'd never seen one up close. And this was an *Ogre King*, the pinnacle of ogredom. Even if it was dead, it unsettled me. Ogre meat didn't taste good, so people typically took their magic stones and horns and abandoned the rest.

Paying little heed to the gathering villagers and adventurers, I left for the dump. It was time for Sora to eat and for me to prepare for our journey. I'd made most of my preparations while I was stuck in the town, so I just needed to replenish some supplies.

I stopped before I reached the dump, though, because I suddenly felt a lot of people's auras there. *They were kept out for ten days, so they probably all came at once to get rid of their trash. I should wait a little while.*

I went back into the woods to secure some food to supplement my dried meat stock. I was still nervous, but the chief had said the ogres were wiped out, so I would probably be fine.

Heart pounding, I headed for the river. Usually, there were lots of fruit trees near rivers. I refilled my water at the bank and looked around until I found a tree with red fruit. I'd picked the same fruit from another riverside tree before and it was sweet and delicious, so I definitely wanted to get my hands on more.

But when I moved toward the tree, Sora hopped up and hit me in the leg.

Huh?! I froze in surprise.

Pshew! Something shot out of the tree. I dodged instinctively, but it still hit my arm. In an instant, vicious pain shot through me.

"Whoa—gahh!" I looked at the fruit tree...and saw it dragging itself toward me. *Oh no, a tree monster!* The monster yanked its roots from the ground one by one, slamming them against the earth like gnarled wooden feet.

I shoved Sora into a bag and clutched my injured arm. "Urk..."

I felt something slick under my fingers, but I didn't have the time to think about that. I clenched my teeth in pain and fled the riverbank. After running for a while, I looked back to see if the monster was following...nothing. Even searching for an aura didn't get any results. *I shouldn't be that far. Shouldn't I be able to sense it?*

The pain made me nauseated. I held my gorge down and kept running, putting as much distance as possible between me and the monster. After a while, I looked back again.

Nothing moved.

Finally, I stumbled toward a tree and sank down. Blood dripped from my wounded arm despite all the pressure I'd put on it. I pulled my hand away. The wound...was deep. I'd lost more blood than I thought.

My thoughts were a haze. I wanted to get a potion from my bag, but I couldn't move. I tried to shake my head to clear the fog, but I failed.

"I gotta...get Sora out..."

My body lurched. Pain shot through the fog—I'd fallen onto my arm. But still I couldn't move. Sora's bag was right in front of my eyes. I wanted to release my friend...tears blotted my vision and overflowed.

"So...ra..." Something moved at the edges of my clouded vision. I couldn't see it, but it seemed like Sora had gotten out of the bag itself. *Thank goodness.*

I sensed Sora approaching me.

Sorry...

But my friend would be fine. Even if I died, Sora would be okay. Consciousness fading, I closed my eyes.

Something enveloped my arm. I could feel it through the pain and paralysis. It felt strange, but shortly after, the agony disappeared. Now that the pain was no longer resounding through my body, I was able to move a little. I opened my heavy eyelids and saw, through misty eyes...that my arm was in Sora's mouth. It was feasting on my wounded limb.

Sora eats people, huh? I guess it doesn't hurt to be eaten. That's good, I suppose. Huh. That's a heck of a last surprise.

Chapter 31: Sora's Voice

I WATCHED AS SORA devoured my arm. A sizzling sound filled the air. It was strange. Now that I was facing death, I had to laugh at how far I'd fallen.

Ha...huh? That's weird. My fuzzy consciousness was beginning to clear. My vision was less misty now, too. And though my body had been too heavy to move before, it felt as if I were getting lighter by the second. To test it out, I tried lifting the arm that wasn't inside Sora.

It went up just fine.

I tried moving my slumped body a bit. It was still heavy, but I could move now. Slowly, I managed to sit up and lean against a tree. And there I sat, my arm inside Sora. I had no idea what was going on. Before, I had thought that my friend was digesting my arm. It was making that familiar sizzling noise, after all. I tried to get a better look at my arm, but the fizzing was accompanied by a whole bunch of bubbles that made it hard to see.

“Sora?”

Sora's eyes appeared—or, rather, its eyes that had been shut shot open once again. Even though it was Sora, it still felt wrong to make eye contact with a slime that had my arm in its mouth, but...what was I supposed to do? It seemed my only choice was to wait for it to release me. We stared at each other for a while until it finally bounced off my arm.

I looked at my arm in shock. My wound, which had been so deep I could see bone, was now so minor that it would leave a faint scar at the very worst. The pain had faded, and I could move now. Had Sora healed me? Could it heal a wound of that size? I stared at the tiny cut on my arm, totally confused.

“Pu, pu!”

“Huh...?”

“Pu, pu!”

“Ha ha ha!” There I was—my wound healed, laughing and listening to my slime talk... It was so strange, but one thing was abundantly clear.

“Thanks, Sora. You saved my life.”

The gash had been bone-deep, severing major veins and arteries. I could've tried to treat it, but I'd needed to run away first. By the time I was finally safe, I'd lost too much blood. Even if I'd been able to tend to it, the potions I had might not have been enough. I could've died, or at the very least lost my arm. And now that I thought back, Sora had stopped me when I tried to approach the tree monster. If it hadn't, I would be dead now for sure.

As I gazed at Sora, deep in thought, it rolled over and bumped into my leg.

Huh?

Sora could hop and bounce to travel, so...why did it roll? What a strange slime. It could digest organic and inorganic materials, but it only went for blue potions. Its ability to heal severe injuries was just like the power of blue potions, too. Was it because the slime ate blue potions? But...wait, all the ones I'd given it were lesser, so how did it heal such a huge wound? *Mmm...there's so much I don't know.* With my arm now healed, I petted Sora gently.

"Pu, pu!" my friend babbled as he stared at a certain bag. That was the one with my blue potions in it. *It's hungry, then.* I'd gone from bleeding to death to something almost relaxed. Minutes ago, I'd been dying, but now...I couldn't help but laugh. I gave Sora the remaining potions from the bag. My friend would gobble them down.

I hope the dump is less busy now. Oh, should I tell the public office about that tree monster near the river? They won't make me stay in the village again, right...?

When I did deliver the information, I was surprised to learn that I wouldn't have to stay. Figured.

Chapter 32: To the Next Village, Ratosu!

THE INFORMATION FEE for the tree monster was five gidal—one silver token. The people at the office said that kind of monster mimicked fruit-bearing trees to draw people in. Several years ago, the monster had snuck into the forest near the village's farms and caused a lot of trouble. It was slow, so you could run away, but it would start mimicking other trees around it as soon as its prey took off. It could even fake the aura of the tree it mimicked, so it was really hard to hunt down.

The nice lady told me all of that, adding that they'd have to put a request in with the guild for veteran adventurers.

A man listening to our conversation looked confused. I cocked my head and looked back at him.

"I'm amazed you recognized that it was a monster," he said. "It takes real skill to distinguish one of those."

"I was just...lucky," I fibbed.

"Were you, now? Well, I'm glad you discovered it before anyone got hurt. Those things can kill several people before anyone knows about 'em. They look just like normal trees until you're in striking range. Villagers and newbie adventurers tend to bump right into 'em."

Just like I had. I couldn't tell him that it had almost killed me, so I just smiled and brushed it off.

I'd received an information fee since the monster was dangerous enough to hurt villagers, but it was only five gidal—after all, a couple of experienced adventurers could deal with it. Still, that was enough for me, so I thanked them and left.

Afterward, I headed to the dump. A long time had passed, so it was probably empty enough. I'd ruined a set of clothes, so I wanted new ones.

"Whoaaaa..." Thanks to the ten-day lockdown, the dump had piles and piles of trash. There were lots of potions, which was awesome for me. It seemed

this village had a kid learning how to make potions, too, as there was a whole stack of them in regular bottles.

Next to me, Sora bobbed gleefully. I picked up a few blue potions and put them in front of my buddy. After making sure it was eating its meal, I went farther into the dump to look for necessities for the journey. I stocked up on the potions I needed, found some clothes along the way, and put it all into my bags.

I found a heap of blue potions among the practice ones, and I took all thirty-eight of them. I went back to Sora, who was bubbling with anticipation, and gave it all the practice batches. It sizzled and fizzed as it ate happily. These days, the slime was a lot better at moving around. While it dined, I checked the contents of all my bags. The clothes I'd found would be wearable with a little bit of work.

Next, I looked through all my potions. When people threw them away, the containers cracked sometimes. A cracked container meant faster expiration, so you always had to check. I picked out the fresher potions without cracks—there were many more good ones here than in previous dumps. Maybe it was because of all the adventurers nearby. Whatever the reason, I was over the moon. Including the potions for Sora, I had secured a whole seventy-eight potions! A lot had happened here, but Ratomu Village was a bountiful harvest for me. When I finished cataloging everything, I put it all back into proper bags.

“Huh? What happened to my red potion?” I’d picked up three sickness-curing potions, so why did I only see two? Weird. Had I dropped one? I found a red potion lying on the ground close by, so...maybe I really *had* dropped it. I checked it for cracks and then tossed it in the bag. Now, I was ready!

I began the journey to Ratosu Village with Sora. Honestly, I was scared to go into the forest after what had happened, but I’d just have to get used to the feeling if I wanted to continue my journey.

“Sora, let me know if there’s any danger around, okay?”

My friend bobbed in my arms. I was a little relieved. It was good to have Sora on my side.

Chapter 33: Red Potions

AFTER MY RUN-IN with the tree monster, I'd gotten a lot more sensitive to sounds and auras. I couldn't really help that—I'd almost died, after all—but it made it hard to sleep. If only I could just spend a night in a village plaza. I'd feel bad for Sora, but...still.

Ratosu Village was close, though, so we made the trip in just five days. Since it was near Otolwa, I'd expected it to be another big town, but nope. To my surprise, it was about as small as Ratomi, where I was born. It seemed proximity to the city wasn't linked to size after all, to my surprise. The villagers seemed dispirited. There weren't many adventurers, either. Fewer adventurers meant it'd be harder to gather useful information. For now, I made my way to the center of the village, keeping an eye on how people were acting. There were a few taverns at the center of town, but none of them seemed very lively. I approached, ears open for local rumors.

Apparently, the chief had been arrested two days ago for embezzling taxes. Worse, the village's last chief had been arrested, too. The tavern owner was yammering on and on about it, slinging drinks to adventurers all the while. The members of his captive audience exchanged wry grins.

I feel like I've stumbled upon a really sad village. Maybe I'll hit the dump and then get going. It's a small village, so I can't expect much from its trash... but I'll still take a look.

I left the village and quickly found the dump. There was a lot more there than I'd expected. You could tell they didn't have a tamed slime—there was just so much stuff. That must've been rough for them.

As usual, I put Sora in a safe spot near the dump and surrounded it with bag handles. Despite my friend's evolution, it still rolled everywhere for some reason. *Is that just how slimes are?* I'd seen others up kind of close, but I'd always run away from them, so I didn't know what happened when the wind blew. Next time I had a chance, I'd try to see what happened.

There were a bunch of potions in the dump, so I took every single blue potion like usual. One of my red potions had expired, so I also looked for a

replacement for that. The red ones here were beginning to go bad, but I still took a few. They were in better shape than mine, after all. I also found some surprisingly not-too-stale green potions, which I swapped for the ones I'd been carrying.

Jeez, though, this village's trash was really dirty and torn up. They had a lot of stuff, but very little was usable.

I went back to Sora to grab the potions I was going to discard from my bags. None of them were blue, of course, because Sora could always eat those. I took out the expired green and red ones and set them on the ground beside me, ready to be tossed.

Next up, time to find some magic bags. When I was searching the river, one had caught on a tree and torn. I had a backup, so I was fine for the moment, but now I needed a backup for the backup. You never know what'll happen in the forest, so you always needed extras. I didn't find anything suitable, so I'd have to hope for the next village. People didn't throw away magic bags very often.

I checked my bags one more time to see if there was anything else I needed to discard. *Nope. Okay, then we're ready!* I reached out for the potions I'd left next to me to take them into the dump, but my hand bumped into Sora instead.

"Hm?" I looked over and saw Sora devouring a red potion. The expired red potion fizzled and disappeared inside.

While I blinked in confusion, it finished its meal. I rushed over and found another red potion in the dump to set in front of Sora. It quickly ate that one, too.



“You ate it? Um...how about this?” This time, I took a green potion that I was going to toss and offered it to Sora. No reaction.

I wasn’t sure what was going on, but it seemed my slime could eat red potions now. So I picked up more red potions for Sora and put them in my bag. Thinking about it too hard would be a waste of time, so I decided to just be happy that feeding my friend would be easier now. Sora was a true slime of mystery.

Chapter 34: To Ratome Village

RATOSU VILLAGE'S ADVENTURER PLAZA was quiet, so I slept soundly. That was good news for me but probably bad news for the village. The gloomy mood permeated the whole place, bringing me down, too. I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible. I'd planned on catching field mice and making some money, but maybe that could wait until the next village.

If I was reading the map correctly, it would take me seven days to reach Ratome Village. I'd found my map out of sheer luck, but it was surprisingly accurate.

I visited a butcher, but none of their meat looked very good, so I left without buying. Food poisoning during travel was the worst. Red potions could cure it, but my lesser potions would take a while to get it done. Best to avoid it entirely.

Five days after leaving depressing Ratosu Village, my fear of tree monsters settled down and I could sleep in the woods again. *Thank goodness for that.*

As I walked along the village road, I felt a few auras up ahead, so I hid Sora in a bag. Not long after, I saw a group of adventurers approaching. The group was a little too big to be one team.

I moved to the edge of the path and waited for them to pass. As I watched them go by, I noticed the group had slaves among them. This was my first time seeing slaves. Small villages almost never had any, so I'd only heard about them.

I'd heard that towns and big villages had slave traders, but it'd never really been my business so I hadn't given it much thought. I was surprised to hear from an adventurer that bandits would kidnap people and sell them as slaves.

I'd overheard that adventurer warning their child about the bandits: "Don't trust people when you're traveling. If you're in the forest, stay away from people just like you would monsters. And even if you see someone hurt and begging for help, stay away." Apparently, some bandits pretended to be injured to lure

people in.

The fortune-teller had warned me about bandits, too, but I didn't know they kidnapped people.

There were two other types of slaves: criminal slaves and debt slaves. Criminal slaves were people who had broken the law. They were treated as slaves by the state until their sentence was up. They were often put to really hard labor for private businesses.

Debt slaves were people who couldn't pay off their debts. Were these adventurers escorting debt slaves? I'd also heard in a plaza that adventurers could end up in debt, too, if they failed to complete requests. *I'd better be careful to not end up like them.*

I would soon be passing through big villages and towns, where bandits were more likely to pop up. I was alone, so they would see me as easy prey. I would have to stay sharp!

I searched for auras near the village road. Once the coast was clear, I took Sora back out of its bag.

The slime was a little bigger than before. After healing me, its shape had become much more consistent, too. Sora used to be flat as a pancake, but now it was a proper teardrop shape. It did still look a liiittle bit stretched...but at this rate, it would look just like a normal slime before long. Then I'd be able to keep it out next to me at all times.

Sora's translucent body did bother me, though. I'd seen tamed slimes before, and most of them looked murky. Some were a more uniform hue, but none of them were translucent. Sora, on the other hand, was a translucent blue. You could even see the bubbles inside when it ate.

I know! I'll go to a bookstore in the next village. They might not have anything about Sora, but maybe they have books that go in-depth about slimes. Or at least mention something about the colors.

If Sora was the only translucent slime out there, then it might have to stay in my bag forever. My blobby friend hopped down onto the village road, bouncing along with me as I walked. This was another new trick it had learned to do after healing my wound.

Reflecting on how Sora had been when we first met, I could see it was a lot stronger now. I remembered worrying that it would die overnight back then.

Chapter 35: Arrival at Ratome

I WAS PASSING a lot of adventurers on the village road now, so I must have been close to Ratome Village.

Unfortunately, Sora was stuck in my bag the whole time. Thinking back on those opaque or cloudy slimes I'd seen with other adventurers...even if there were some that were a single color, there really weren't any that were this see-through. No, not a single one was like Sora. The poor slime might end up living in my bag forever...

I saw the village entrance up ahead and stopped, surprised at the difference from previous villages. All the villages so far had simple gates, but Ratome Village's gate was much more...imposing.

Is this just a big village, or did I somehow pass Ratome and arrive at Otolwa? I wondered as I approached. Sure enough, though, the gate had a sign that said Ratome Village. There were high walls on both sides, too, something I'd never seen before. My heart pounded madly. A gatekeeper at the entrance checked each person who went through.

What do I do? Do I need papers or something? Since I'd run away from my village, I didn't have any documents. Even if I went back to find them, my parents had probably thrown them away long ago now.

I gave up on that line of thought and went up to the gate. The gatekeeper greeted me when he saw me approach, but I was nervous.

“Are you alone?” he asked.

“That’s right.”

“Where are you from?”

“Ratomi Village.”

“Ratomi! You came all this way on your own?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. I did hear that the village is struggling. One less mouth to feed, eh?” He sighed.

Hm? What does he mean? Struggling? One less mouth?

“I’m sure it’ll be tough,” he continued. “But if you become an adventurer, I think you’ll make it. Good luck, kid.”

“Um. Thank you.”

I didn’t really follow, but he seemed to be worried about me, and he wanted to cheer me on. Had something happened to Ratomi Village? I hadn’t heard about it in other villages. *Maybe I can find out here.*

Safely inside Ratome Village now, I was surprised at what I saw. Its entrance was unlike other villages, and the inside was different, too. A broad road ran through the village, lined with shops on both sides. The number of shops was surprising, but what really overwhelmed me was how many people there were. It was a little before noon, but there were plenty of drunk adventurers walking about. The shops were bustling. Some people wearing the same uniform as the gatekeeper were watching the place—the village guard, I guessed.

I decided to walk around the village. I needed to know what was going on, both with Ratome and Ratomi. Though I tried to slide into the flow of people, there were just too many. After being pushed along a short ways, the crowd spat me out into a plaza, where I decided to rest until my crowd-sickness was gone. There were chairs there, so I sat down on an empty one. The place was lively and full of smiling people. This village seemed like a nice place, even if it was way too crowded for my taste.

I heard lots of conversations, but I didn’t learn what I wanted to know. People just talked about new shops opening and new menus at restaurants. Wow, they were really...relaxed, huh? I wasn’t sure what to do in such an unusual village. For now, I decided to secure a place to sleep tonight. There were lots of merchants and adventurers around, though, so what if the plaza was already packed full? Would I be able to get more rest in the forest? I started searching for the open plaza.

“It’s huge,” I mused when I found it. The plaza set aside for adventurers’ use was bigger than any I had ever seen. I could see signs that said “LOW PRICES EVEN FOR NEWBIES,” so they clearly also had a lot of inns. I tried to go into the open square, but there was a person standing at the entrance. I was a little alarmed, but he was wearing the same uniform as the gatekeeper. Was their plaza managed by the village guard, too, then?

“Staying the night?” he asked me.

“Y-yes,” I managed to answer.

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah? Well...take your things over there. That spot should be safe.” He seemed a little concerned when I said I was alone, probably because I was obviously so young. Still, he pointed me to a safe part of the plaza. It was far from the public kitchen, but there weren’t many people there, making it ideal for me. I decided to go for it.

“That work for you?” he asked.

“Yes, sir!”

Wait, did this cost money? I was just starting to worry when he handed me something: a plate with a mark on it. “Here’s your permit.”

“Permit?”

“Yeah. First time here?”

“Yes, it is.”

“More people, more problems. That’s why we limit how many adventurers can come in. Without a permit, you’re not allowed to enter.”

“Okay, I understand. Thank you.”

There really were a whole lot of adventurers. Still, I never thought they would limit the number of people who could use the plaza. There was an empty chair near where the guard had pointed me, so I gratefully sat down.

Chapter 36: Staking My Claim at the Plaza

I PILED MY THINGS onto the chair to reserve my spot. Adventurers with tents used their tents to stake their claims, but some people like me didn't have tents. We'd have to secure the spot by putting down a blanket or mat and weighing it down with things we wouldn't miss if they got stolen. I'd learned from watching other adventurers when I first used this kind of plaza. There weren't any hard rules, but there were basic unspoken manners between adventurers. I took a mat out of my bag and placed another bag on top of it. All done.

I looked around the plaza and saw about ten big tents set up on the other side of the kitchen. Veteran adventurers used big tents, but I heard that they didn't use adventurers' plazas much, so they were probably newbies or rookie adventurer teams. They got loud pretty quick once they started drinking, so I was glad to be far from them.

The spot I'd been directed to had a lot of solo adventurers, with their one-person tents set up here and there. Others just had a mat and luggage, like me. A comparatively quiet place like this would be easy to sleep in, so I was glad the guard sent me here.

I left the plaza and went out to the woods. The same guard still stood at the entrance, so I nodded a bow as I trotted into the forest. This kind of thing was new to me, so I was nervous when I passed through.

Forests were all the same, so I could relax here. I looked around for a trash dump. Would a big village's dump be bigger as well? If they had contracts with a lot of tamers, maybe not—or so I'd thought. When I found the dump, it was in a similar place as in other villages, and it was just as big as the village's size implied.

I was amazed. "It's gigantic..."

I'd expected big, but this was something else. The trash was varied, too. I thought about leaving Sora at the edge like usual but hesitated. If I sensed people coming, the dump was so large that it might take me a while to get back to my friend. *What to do? Maybe the safest thing would be to go in together, but...*

“Sora, can you try not to bury yourself in the trash this time?”

Sora was unpredictable. When we went to dumps, it would often burrow down in the trash. It looked at me and streeeetched vertically. *Wow, another new move! I had no idea it could—hmm. Yeah, I should definitely do what I can to keep people from seeing Sora.*

My mind was made up. “Sora, let’s go in together.”

“Pu, pu!” It hopped excitedly into the piles of trash and rolled into the space between two dirty old bottles.

“I literally just said...”

I extracted Sora from the trash and held it in one hand as I fished for necessities in the garbage with the other. It was a good thing my friend was still small enough to hold with one arm. I put blue and red potions into Sora’s bag, one after another, but there always seemed to be more potions to pick up. This was looking to be a major haul.

Oh, a magic bag! But it’s really torn up. Nah. It won’t work. Any others? Oh, what’s this here? Clothes...too big, though. Because of the sheer number of adventurers passing through, there were even lots of discarded swords. Some of them weren’t sheathed, so I had to be careful where I stepped or I could hurt my feet. After picking out enough things, I left the dump.

A short distance away, I sat down and leaned against a big tree. Sora had already jumped out of my hand and was quivering in front of its bag. No doubt it was begging for potions. The slime had been shaking like heck when I was picking out potions, after all. I had to laugh—Sora never changed.

I laid out ten blue potions and ten red potions. Before I had even finished setting out dinner, it was already devouring it. The potions fizzled into bubbles and dissolved in the body of the slime. Sora really ate strangely. Come to think of it, I’d never seen other slimes eat. I sure wanted to, though... Did they eat like Sora?

Chapter 37: They Patrol the Forest, Too?

AFTER I FINISHED CHECKING the things I'd picked up, I felt someone approaching. I hid the satisfied Sora in a bag and turned toward the auras. Three men in the same uniform as the gatekeeper were coming my way.

I panicked for a moment, but it was probably fine. Sora was already in my bag, after all. Some adventurers went straight to throw away their trash when they arrived, so I shouldn't stand out or anything, but...why were they coming here? Were they going to patrol the dump? I took up my bags and walked toward the men to begin my trip back to the village. They looked at me but didn't try to stop me as I passed. *Thank goodness.*

I stopped a little farther down the road and turned around to peek. They looked at the dump for a moment, then proceeded into the forest.

"Are they patrolling the forest or something?" I wondered aloud.

If so, sleeping in the forest might be hard. I could probably do it if I went far enough from the village, but Ratome Village was well maintained. Sleeping somewhere far out and more dangerous could be a bad idea.

What do I do? Should I sleep deeper in the forest? I didn't know how far out they were patrolling, and the number of adventurers here made me nervous. Their numbers were at least double compared to previous villages. In that case, it was likely that one would stumble across me in the forest, which meant I couldn't let Sora out. Come to think of it, Sora had been popping in and out of its bag more as I approached the village.

Hmmm...they patrol, and they have way too many adventurers. Were all big villages like this? My next stop would be a full-fledged town, so I'd need to figure this one out soon.

When I reached the village entrance, there was a different gatekeeper there. I thought he'd ask me questions again, but he let me in without a word. Had I been acting suspicious the first time? I thought I was doing a good job not standing out... Yeah, I'd have to be more careful. I looked around the village, but there were a lot of people and patrolling guards, so it'd be too dangerous to let Sora out anywhere.

I stopped by a butcher's shop as I explored to get some dried meat and see if they were willing to buy from me.

When I went in, an old lady came out of the back and called out, "Welcome!"

I surveyed the shop nervously, looking for dried meat. I found it in both small and large bags, with the large bags slightly discounted. In the end, I paid 300 dal for a large bag.

"Excuse me," I said. "May I ask you something?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Is this dried meat made from field mice?"

"Field mice and wild rabbits," she answered. "This here's the wild rabbit meat. They're bigger and easier to catch than field mice, so they're cheaper. We also get pigeon meat, but pigeons are hard to catch, so they fetch a high price."

So it was true that towns and big villages had different kinds of dried meat. Wild rabbits, though? I thought I'd bought field mouse meat. I looked at the meat, but...since it was all just dried meat, it was impossible to tell the difference.

"If I hunted game, would you buy it from me?" I asked.

"Of course, dear! As long as it's fresh."

"Understood."

"Do you hunt alone?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Goodness. Just so you know, there are nasty animals called boarhogs out there. Watch out for them; those fangs hurt!"

"Thank you."

Boarhog? I've never heard of those. And she said it's an animal instead of a monster?

When I returned to the plaza, I found that a different guard was manning the entrance. I showed him the permit and headed for my spot. Along the way, I noticed a small tent.

"A tent, huh?" If I had one of those, maybe I could let Sora out of its bag. But how much would a one-person tent cost? I was curious about the weight,

too, so I'd have to go see for myself. Walking around the plaza, I noticed a sign advertising a store with "ONLY THE FINEST USED WARES!"

Could I afford a used tent, maybe? Thanks to the information fees, I had the funds. And we had plenty of traveling to do, so a tent would be nice. The sign showed the store's location. I noted it, headed back to the main street, and veered off onto the side road where the store was supposed to be. When I peeked inside, I saw several adventurers.

"You buying something?" Eep! I managed to stop myself from yelping and turned to face whoever was accosting me. "Whoops. Didn't mean to startle you."

Behind me was the gatekeeper I'd met when I first entered the village. Beside him was another unfamiliar man.

"Don't scare the kid," his companion admonished. Seeing the other man scold the guard, I took a deep breath to calm my pounding heart.

The gatekeeper laughed. "Yeah, my bad. So, you buying something?"

"Yes. I'm looking for a used one-person tent."

"A tent? They didn't give you one when they chased you out of the village? Man, Ratomi Village must be pretty poor, just like they say." Ratomi was poor? It had never been wealthy, but it had specialty products. It couldn't have been that bad. "I know!" he exclaimed, "Let me take you to the old man's shop. He's real skilled."

He grabbed my hand and started to drag me off. He was taking me to someone's shop for some reason? But since his legs were so much longer than mine, he was pulling on my wrist really, really hard...

Chapter 38: Looking for a Tent with...the Gatekeeper?

“HEY, QUIT PULLING LIKE THAT! You’ll hurt the poor kid.” The gatekeeper had gotten no more than a few steps when the other man grabbed his hand.

“Huh?” The gatekeeper, realizing his mistake, panicked and let go.
“Sorry! Are you okay? Does it hurt? Dang...look, it’s all red!”

“Yeesh. Sorry about him,” said his friend. “He’s not a bad guy, but he gets tunnel vision whenever he sets his mind to something.”

For the first time in my life, two grown men bowed their heads in apology to me. My wrist was a little red, but I felt uncomfortable letting them apologize like this.

“I-I’m okay!” I stammered.

“Really? I did just kinda yank your hand there, didn’t I?”

“I’m really fine.”

“You mean it? Well, as an apology, I’ll find you a real nice tent.”

He still hadn’t given up on the tent hunt. It felt like things were being decided for me. Still, I couldn’t just leave the gatekeeper behind, even if he’d ignored my protests, so I followed. The other man was behind us. *Is this going to be okay...?*

After a short walk, we stopped at a shop that would certainly take some courage just to stroll into.

“Here it is,” my busybody guide gestured. “He takes good care of used items before selling them, so you should get a whole lot of use out of it. Though the old man can be a little, ah...a little bit of a character.”

I peered inside. It was a wall-to-wall mess—I could barely tell *what* was being sold. It was about as organized as a town dump. I eventually saw a figure standing behind a few piles of stuff. I hesitated, but the gatekeeper charged straight in.

“I’m here, old man!”

“Huh? Why? Not like you’ve got any reason to be here.”

“I’ve got a customer for you.”

“A customer?” The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow.

They both looked to the entrance, so I bowed politely.

“A tiny customer at that,” he said. “Where are your parents?”

“Don’t ask,” said the gatekeeper. “This is the kid from Ratomi.”

“Ratomi...? Dang, you weren’t kidding at all. They really kicked a kid out, did they? Good grief.”

What do I do? Should I tell them I didn’t get kicked out? But if I did, they would probably ask why a child like me was traveling alone. I dunno...

“What does the kid want?” the old man asked.

“A single-person tent,” the gatekeeper answered for me.

“A tent, huh?” The shopkeeper expertly navigated in between piles of used items and unearthed a few tents for me. The gatekeeper checked each one’s features and fabric.

Um...? They’re acting like I’ve already decided to buy one. I mean, I do want to, but it depends on the price. Oh, I hope they don’t pick one that costs too much...

“Umm...” I mumbled.

“What’s up? If you’ve got a request, speak up.”

“Oh, no. I mean, I don’t know what kinds there are, anyway. Um, about how much will it cost?”

“Cost? Depends on what you pick. What’s your budget?”

My budget. Five gidal, maybe? I didn’t want to dip into my gold coins. If five gidal wasn’t enough, then I’d have to give up.

“Five gidal,” I answered finally.

“Huh?! Five gidal?” The gatekeeper looked surprised. *Oh, no. Is that way too little?*

The man who’d been with the gatekeeper turned to me. “Did Ratomi Village give you five gidal?”

“No. I got it from Ratomu Village. It was a monster informant fee.”

“Monster informant fee, eh? For five gidal, it must’ve been one hell of a monster.”

“Yeah. It was a tree monster that could mimic other trees.”

“Eesh, that one?” he shuddered. “And you made it out without getting hurt? Those things are dangerous, y’know.”

“Yes. I got lucky.”

“I see. And you got the informant fee from that, eh?”

Was five gidal a lot or a little? I didn’t feel like I could ask.

“Five gidal is enough for a good tent,” the shopkeeper informed me. I turned to look at him—he’d picked up a tent that he’d found for me. “A light one would be better for a little boy like you.”

The gatekeeper took it and spread it out to check the state of the cloth. “Ooh! Yeah, this is a good one.”

“Of course it is. It’s the best and newest one I’ve got,” said the shopkeeper. “I fixed it up a bit, too.”

I listened to their conversation and picked up the tent myself to check its weight and feel. When I lifted it up, I was surprised by just how light it was. I’d wanted to bring a tent when I left Ratomi Village, but it had made my luggage too heavy. I’d wanted to travel light in case they chased me.

Besides, you didn’t tend to use tents much when you traveled solo. It was dangerous if you couldn’t see your surroundings in the forest. That was especially true when it rained, as monster auras would be dampened. When that happened, I had to hide in caves or a hole under a tree and wait for the downpour to end. But if I was going to use the open plazas at big villages and towns from now on, I would need a tent. While I stood there hesitating, the gatekeeper walked out of the shop with the tent.

“Boy, see if you can set that one up alone,” the shopkeeper said.

Flustered, I rushed out after the gatekeeper. He gave me the tent, and I tried to set it up while listening to his explanations. It was the kind that was easy to set up, so even a little kid like me could do it by themselves. I ducked inside the tent. The bottom was thick and warm. Once the entrance was shut, it actually had more space than I’d expected.

I liked it.

Chapter 39: Ratomi's Specialty Goods

“**A**NY PROBLEMS, BOY?” the shopkeeper asked.

“No, sir. I never knew tents could be this light.”

“It’s a popular new one. People like it for its lightness and durability.”

“New? But...it’s used, isn’t it?” I was confused.

“Yeah. The guy who bought it found a girl he was sweet on, so he gave up adventuring. He sold it right away.”

“I see. Well, I’d be happy to take this one.”

“Absolutely. Make sure you mark it, okay?”

“Mark it?”

“Yeah. It can get a little confusing when you run into a few tents of the same type,” he explained. “You gotta mark it somewhere only you know. A name or a symbol works.”

“A mark...” I looked at the tent I was about to buy. Where would be the best place to mark it?

“Wanna put it...let’s see, here?”

“Um, yes. Go ahead.”

“Nuh-uh. You gotta think of your own mark.”

“O-okay.”

He spread out the tent for me. When I tried to write “Sora” on the inside ceiling, I realized that I had written “空.” *Huh? Is that...something from Past Me’s memories? I guess it means Sora.*

“Oh, good symbol,” the shopkeeper said. “I doubt anyone else will be able to replicate that one.” I guessed it was...probably a word, right? He seemed to think it was a symbol, though. Whatever it was, I couldn’t explain it, so I decided not to worry about it. “You’ll have a rough time out there, but good luck, kid.”

My heart ached. All this talk about Ratomi Village was starting to get me

worried... Had something happened?

The gatekeeper and his friend, who had been chatting with someone outside, came back in.

“Oh! Did you buy it?” the gatekeeper asked.

“Yes, thank you. I’m really glad I found something so high quality.” The gatekeeper had scared me at first, but thanks to him, I had a wonderful tent. He was a good guy.

“Ha ha ha! Don’t worry about it.”

“Hey, shouldn’t you get back to patrolling soon?” his friend warned.

“Whoops! Right. Later, little guy.”

“Thanks again.” I bowed. The two waved and ran off.

“Kid’s as busy as ever. All right, that’ll be five gidal,” said the shopkeeper.

“Yes, sir.” I took the money from my magic bag, handed it to the man, and the tent was mine.

After looking carefully at me, he brought out a bag from the back of the store. “Take this.”

“Huh?”

“It’s small, but it’s a common magic bag. Yours is lesser, right?”

“Y-yes, sir. It is.”

“It’s easy to see how much money you’ve got if you use a lesser one. It’s dangerous.”

“Thank you very much.” I accepted the magic bag, bowed, and left.

As I made my way back to the plaza, I smiled as I thought about the gatekeeper and the old man. They were good people, as was the guy who’d accompanied the gatekeeper—we’d dragged him around with us, and he hadn’t complained at all.

I saw something familiar in a shop facing the main street: Ratomi Village’s specialty product. It was a fruit called zaro. I’d heard it was nutritious and sold for a lot in the big town, but the price still surprised me: It was a full four times the usual amount.

“Expensive...” I muttered.

“Hm? The zaro?” An employee overheard my puzzlement.

Flustered, I turned to the voice. It was an older man. Another employee, probably his wife, looked out from the back.

“Yes. Is this zaro from Ratomi Village?”

“Ha ha ha! Zaro doesn’t grow anywhere else, kid. Are you...from Ratomi Village?”

“Yes.”

“Where are your parents?” he asked. Everyone seems to ask that...

I wanted info on Ratomi, so I answered honestly. “I’m traveling alone, sorry.”

“Alone!” he gasped. “Well, I know this year’s been a tough one. Eugh... it’s all thanks to that stupid chief.”

“The chief?” That was the man who told my dad to kill me. Honestly, I wanted to forget him.

“You came all this way without knowing anything? Ahhh...I understand. They chased you out, huh?”

“I...ran away.”

“Ran away! Good grief, is it that bad out there?” The older man sighed and shook his head. “Did you know their fortune-teller, Ruba?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

“She was the one who oversaw Ratomi Village’s zaro fruit harvest. It’s extremely difficult to know the right time to pick this fruit. If you’re off by even a little, it can’t be sold. So she used her fortune-telling skill to divine the right time.”

“And the chief had a problem with that!” someone broke in—the man’s wife was approaching. “Ratomi’s the kind of village that can’t survive without the revenue from its zaro crop. A lot of villagers loved Ruba for protecting their livelihood, but that idiot chief despised her. When Ruba was sick, he refused to give her medicine.”

“He lied to other villagers,” her husband added. “Told everyone he’d given her the medicine. The only people who knew were the chief and his little crony.”

“Rubu knew just how important the zaro fruit were to the village. She

would've contacted another fortune-teller if she knew she was going to die. People only learned about this because the villagers knew something was off and interrogated his accomplice. Even worse, they tried to blame a child at first. The last chief was great, but the new one is horrible. The village is dying because of him."

"We heard the chief chases out anyone who opposes him, too," he said.

"I heard they chased out a child without parents!" The woman looked at me carefully. "Hon...you said you ran away, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why did you run?"

"It was more because of my parents than the chief. Um, you see..."

"Your parents? Oh, that's awful."

"Huh?! Oh, no—"

It sounded like the chief was worse than even I knew. And since my parents followed him...well, whatever. They were all strangers to me now.

Chapter 40: The Perfect Tent

THE NEWS ABOUT RATOMI'S CHIEF honestly surprised me. He took over the year I was born. I think...it was because the last chief had suddenly fallen ill and passed away?

"Um...thank you for telling me all this," I said.

"Don't worry about it! Are you an adventurer now, hon?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That must be rough for a kid your age," the man chimed in. "Here, take these." He brought two zaro fruit out from the back. "They're overripe, so we can't sell them anyway."

"Thank you."

When I took the zaro, I got a whiff of their sweet-sour scent. I didn't have good memories of anything from back home except the fortune-teller, but it was still a nostalgic smell. I bowed my thanks to the couple and left for the plaza.

Come to think of it, the village where two chiefs had been arrested for embezzlement was declining now, too. Would Ratomi end up like that? I doubted the village would hold up without the zaro crop. I'd thought the chief who stole money and hurt his own people was bad enough, but it was strange to think that my own village's chief was even worse. I was glad I found out what happened in Ratomi, at least. From now on, I'd tell people that I had run away. It was the truth, wasn't it?

When I got back to the plaza, I showed the guard my permit and went in. The person at the gate had changed again. How big was the guard force in this village, anyway? I was amazed.

I cleaned up the stuff I'd left to claim my spot and cleared a space to pitch my tent. For some reason, I couldn't stop grinning as I took it out. This was something I could never have imagined buying—with money I earned, at that!—when I first ran away. It was a dream come true!

I patted the tent and took a moment to ground myself. It really was nice how I could set it up by myself with ease. And once I drove stakes into the

ground and secured it, it was complete.

I kicked off my shoes, crawled inside, put my stuff down, and closed the entrance. Then I took Sora out of its bag. It looked around and started bouncing up and down. My friend seemed happy, too.

“Sora, you have to be quiet in here, okay?”

It stretched upward and quivered a little. That was probably a yes?

“It’s a nice tent, isn’t it?” I mused.

I put the mat on the bottom of the tent and sat down. Combined with the thick floor of the tent, it was the comfiest place I’d ever sat. I didn’t even have to worry about eyes on me now. Since I had no work to do, I decided to have an early dinner, get ready for tomorrow, and go to bed. *Yep, time to enjoy my new tent! Oooh, and I’d love to make some traps. Yeah, let’s do that, too!*

I took out twenty potions and put them in front of Sora. As it digested each one in a sea of bubbles, I bit down on some dried meat. It was wild rabbit meat, thicker than that of field mice. The field mouse might have been more savory, though? Not that the rabbit meat was bad. Once I was finished with the dried meat, the zaro was next. I ended up eating them both, savoring the nostalgic scent all throughout.

“Mmm...that was delicious! Let’s go hunting tomorrow, okay, Sora?”

Sora glanced at me, bobbed a bit, and then resumed its meal. I took a book from my bag and looked up how to make wild rabbit traps. They looked like something I could manage, and since they were the set-and-forget type, I could hunt safely. I didn’t need any more materials for traps right now, either—I had everything I needed. If I could put together a few today, I could set them tomorrow. I’d spent all that money on a tent, so it was time to start making it back. Catching a few rabbits would be a good start.

When Sora finished its dinner, it sat on top of its bag, bobbed, and closed its eyes. *Huh. Why is its body still bubbling even after it finished eating?* I looked on curiously, but after a while, it stopped. What was that about? Usually, the bubbles only happened while it was eating. I poked Sora. It opened its eyes and stared at me.

“Are you okay?”

Sora stretched up and shrunk back down repeatedly, apparently showing off how energetic it was. Seeing it do something new surprised me, but my friend seemed fine. *Maybe I fed it too much?*

Chapter 41: Wannabe Tent Thieves

THE TENT WAS COZIER than I'd expected, so I slept soundly. Still, I felt like I was getting a little *too* comfortable...I'd have to be more careful.

I put Sora in its bag and went over to the open kitchen. There, I boiled water and made tea using leaves I'd picked in the forest. I liked having something hot to drink in the morning. In the forest, you have to get moving as soon as you wake up to avoid danger. I was used to it by now, but it still sucked.

When I returned to the tent to take a breather, I saw a group of adventurers approaching. They seemed threatening—I was scared.

“Hey, you there, thief!”

“Huh?”

I saw a team of two men and two women. One of them was yelling at me. Their voices rang out across the plaza, which went quiet all at once.

“You swear it’s this one?” someone asked him.

“Yeah, I know it!” the man shouted, so loud that it echoed across the plaza. “That tent is mine! They stole it!”

What was he talking about? I bought this tent just yesterday. I didn’t know much about the old shopkeeper, but he didn’t seem like a thief at all.

“Tell the truth!” he snarled, “You stole it!”

I shuddered in the face of his anger, but...no, I didn’t steal this tent!

“I didn’t steal it,” I managed to say. “I bought this tent.”

“A kid like you can’t afford a tent like this! Liar!” The man who’d screamed at me grabbed me by the collar and lifted me bodily off the ground.

This is scary, this is scary, this is scary!

“Damn,” he cursed. “Who raised you to be such a little sneak?”

“Honestly!” one of the women sneered at me. “What a naughty little child.”

All the other adventurers were dead silent. I was trembling nonstop now. I

hadn't done anything wrong, but I wanted to cry. Tears obscured my vision.

"What the hell are you doing?!" A man batted the guy's hand away and stepped between us. I looked up and saw the supervisor who had given me the permit before.

"Arrest this kid!" the attacker roared.

"He stole our buddy's tent. We're gonna sue, so arrest him!"

I never! What do I do?

"Is it marked?" the supervisor asked.

"It was stolen right after I bought it, so I didn't get a chance. But it's this one, I know it!"

"Oh? How do you know?"

As they argued above me, I panicked. What would I do if the supervisor believed them?

"A snot-nosed brat can't afford a tent like that," he snapped. "Use your brain!"

"That's all your evidence?" asked the supervisor.

"That's all your—? It's more than enough!" the mean guy spat.

"Yeah!" his friend butted in. "Like, do your job!"

"For real!"

Now they were being mean to the supervisor, too. I hated this. *Should I just give up on the tent?*

"The tent belongs to the little boy," a voice said.

Huh?

The adventurers were furious. "Excuse me?!" the mean adventurer's friend snarled.

"Yeah, excuse me?! I just *said* this brat stole it!"

"Where'd you buy this tent?" the supervisor demanded...but he wasn't asking me.

"At Baki's store," the adventurer lied.

"Baki only sells new items, correct?"

"Sure, I guess. What of it?"

“This tent is used,” the supervisor said firmly. “It’s clearly not what you’re looking for.”

“No way! This tent is brand new! Don’t treat me like an idiot!”

“This is a used item from old man Lag’s store. I guarantee it.”

Old man Lag? Does he mean that old shopkeeper? But how does the supervisor know that?

“By the way,” the supervisor continued, “I’ll have you know that Captain Oght and Vice-Captain Velivera themselves were the ones who took this boy there.”

The gang was floored. “Huh?!”

A captain and vice-captain? Looking back, I totally forgot introductions. I was just so surprised...

“I’ll ask you again,” said the supervisor firmly. “Is it true that this tent was stolen?”

“Err, uh...no. um...I might be wrong?”

“You *might be* wrong. I would quite like to hear more about that. Why don’t you four come with me?”

“N-no, it was a simple misunderstanding! No problems here, sir!”

“Oh, but I have quite a few questions about this ‘simple misunderstanding.’ And I do *not* have mercy for those who try to run.” The supervisor’s comrades appeared and surrounded the adventurers. They tried to escape, but they were quickly arrested and hauled off.

Once things had calmed down, I squeaked out, “Um, thank you.”

“Sorry about that. I got here a little late.”

“No, it’s okay! You saved me. Um... How did you know the tent was mine?”

“I saw you entering the old man’s shop. Then I ran into the captain after, and he told me about you.”

“Hm?”

“Heh heh. He was worried about you. Wanted to make sure you could set up that tent on your own.”

He was worried about me? I was a little embarrassed. I’d better thank him

again if I ever see him.

“Are you hurt at all?” the supervisor asked me.

“No, sir. I’m fine.”

“Glad to hear it.”

After watching him leave to go back to work, I took another break. I was still shaking after everything that had just happened, so I slowly drank my tea and forced myself to take deep breaths.

Phew. I’m glad the supervisor was there.

Chapter 42: Wild Rabbit Traps and Monsters

AFTER A LONG BREAK, I finally calmed down. That team was really awful, trying to steal a tent from a child. They'd looked like veteran adventurers, too.

But...looking back on it, they had a slightly different aura from the others. Appearances can be deceiving, I guess...

Now that I had recovered from my ordeal, it was time to go set up my rabbit traps.

The book said that wild rabbits were most active in the morning but didn't move much during midday or nighttime. So I wouldn't get my results until early tomorrow. I'd made four traps last night. Now I put them into my bag and hauled them to the forest.

I looked into Sora's bag. It was sleeping comfortably. Seeing my pal relax always made me feel warm and fuzzy.

Once I was deep enough into the woods, I searched for auras nearby. There didn't seem to be any people around, so I let Sora out. The slime began stretching and exercising in my arms. It had been moving like this often recently, so I figured it enjoyed that. If I didn't carry Sora carefully, I'd drop it.

Cradling my slime friend, I looked for traces of wild rabbits around the bases of trees and holes in the ground. After an hour of searching, I was able to find a small animal den. I looked around and saw footprints and scrapes on the tree bark. When I examined the footprints, I was certain that they were from rabbits, so I set a trap nearby. I found another trail, too, and I put a trap there. After setting them all, I continued on my way to the dump.

I was off to find materials to make field mouse traps. When I was almost there, Sora surprised me by jumping out of my arms. It bounced away in the opposite direction from the dump.

“Sora?”

As I chased after Sora, I felt for nearby auras again and sensed something faint a short distance away. There didn't seem to be anything else around, and Sora was heading straight for it. *Did it feel something?* I wondered as I followed.

“Huh?!”

Sora had led me to a huge animal lying on the ground, its fur covered in blood. At first I thought it was dead, but then I noticed its chest heaving up and down. When I approached, it noticed me and bared its fangs—pretty terrifying. Still, it looked like it was in pain. And though I’d thought it was an animal, I could feel magic coming from it. That meant it was a monster, right? Its magic was just so weakened that I hadn’t noticed till I was up close.

Sora wasn’t intimidated, though—it wasted no time enveloping the injured monster’s whole body.

Wait...huh?! I stammered madly, “Sora! This is, um, uh, no! Phew, okay! How can you fit around something that big?”

The injured monster looked more than two meters long, so I couldn’t believe that Sora actually fit around it. Still, now the monster was entirely inside of the slime! Honestly, there was probably nothing I could do, but panicking out loud always made me feel a little better anyway.

The monster seemed surprised by Sora’s actions, too, but it calmed down pretty quick. The pain had probably faded, so...had it realized that it was being healed? Or had it given up, thinking that it was about to be slime food, like I once had?

A sizzling noise came from Sora. I didn’t know if he was healing or eating the monster. Either way, I could only wait. Did Sora like fatal wounds or something...? I’d rather not think about it, thank you very much.

I had literally no idea how to explain this to anyone, so I stayed vigilant for anybody approaching—not that I could run away if someone came. Still, what was this monster?

After a while, Sora bounced up high and landed at my feet.

“Are you done?”

“Pu, pu pu!”

The slime’s sounds were getting a little more melodic these days, though they were still weak. I looked at the monster after Sora released it...and froze up.

From my reading, I knew this was probably an adandara. If you ran into these monsters in the woods, it meant certain death. The adandara got up and stretched. *Can I escape this?* I stepped back, and it shot a glare at me.

Urk, what do I do? Sora!

The adandara growled and padded closer. I screwed my eyes up tight out of sheer terror. It sniffed me carefully then...rubbed its cheek against my head?

“Huh?” I opened my eyes. It kept rubbing its face on me, purring all the while. Did it think I was the one who had saved it? Or that I’d ordered Sora to do it? Was that why it hadn’t attacked me? Either way, it seemed I’d live to see another day.

Thank goodness! My hips buckled from relief, and I sat down on the spot. Sora bounced over and stretched up and down gleefully.

“Thanks, Sora!”



Chapter 43: Dangerous Monsters

THE ADANDARA LEANED closer to me, so I reached out and stroked its neck. Its fur felt silky under my fingers. Sora had healed it, so I figured it was fine, but I still reached my hand out to check it for injuries. The adandara never got mad, either, no matter where I touched. When I scratched under its chin, it even narrowed its eyes happily.

Is this...not an adandara?

According to my book, they were rare monsters that were so fierce that nobody could approach them. You needed more than five teams of veterans to defeat just one! Was there anything else written about it?

Oh! It said that if you locked eyes with one, it was sure to kill you. But I'd made eye contact with this purring, adandara-like monster a few times now. I looked at the monster, and our eyes met again. Its behavior definitely didn't match what was in the book. Was it just similar in appearance and not behavior? I decided I should read the book again later and memorize the real adandara's features.

Still, it was so fluffy and sweet! It had long black fur, with a strangely dignified bearing. I'd have loved to be able to tame it, but that wouldn't work with my magic. If only I had more mana... What a shame.

I looked to Sora, who was still bobbing up and down happily. *Huh? There it goes again. It's not eating, but there are bubbles forming inside. What does it mean?* I was curious, but it wasn't like I could ask Sora. I could only wait and watch. While I was focused on the slime, I felt a few people coming this way. They were moving fast, like they were in a hurry.

"Someone's coming. Get out of here!" I pushed on the adandara-like monster's flank and pointed into the woods. It rubbed its head against me and purred one more time before leaping gallantly into the forest. "It's so fast! Isn't that cool, Sora?!"

Wait—Sora! I need to hide Sora!

I frantically shoved it into a bag and tried to stand up, but...my legs were like jelly. I'd have to rest a while before I could head back to the village.

Three people were running this way. They seemed to be guards on patrol. When they saw me, they looked around warily and approached.

“Are you okay?” one asked.

“Yes. I’m just a little, uh...tired! Yep, I’m taking a break.”

Resting in a random place in the woods...nothing suspicious about that. *Aah, I’m so nervous.* I waited for them to accuse me of something, but they seemed a little distracted as they investigated the woods around me. Had something happened?

“No problems here,” said another.

“Is something going on?” I asked.

“We heard there was an unidentified monster around here, so we came to check.”

“Have you seen anything?”

An unidentified monster? Was it that adandara-like one?

“Nope! Everything is very normal here,” I lied.

“I see. We were told that it was rampaging around here, but...”

Rampaging? Maybe there’s another monster. The adandara was dying before Sora healed it... Is the monster that hurt it still around here? Panicking now, I looked around.

“Ha ha ha, no worries!” one of them reassured me. “Our info told us it was around here, but it must have moved.”

“Yeah. It’s clearly not here anymore.”

“Wait! Look, bloodstains!” another officer pointed out.

Right, that’s the adandara’s blood. What do I do?

“Did you see any wounded animals or monsters on your way here?”

“No,” I lied yet again. *Gulp...sorry! This is bad for my heart.*

“Did it take its prey to a safe place?” one suggested.

“Seems likely.”

“But that’s a lot of blood. It must’ve been a large animal or monster. Did it drag something that big away?”

“It has to be a high-level monster.”

“I hope it was only in this area because it was chasing prey...”

I was confused by their conversation. All I had seen was the adandara-like monster. *Did it run this way because it thought it would get eaten? Or was it here for revenge?* I tried to stand up. My legs were only mostly jelly now.

“Thank you,” I said, standing and bowing. “I’ll be heading back to the village.”

My heart had started to ache as I listened. The guards on patrol would probably be searching here for a while, but that monster was long gone by now. I started the trek back.

Still, why had Sora saved that monster? Sora had warned me of danger just like it had with the tree monster... Did it save the adandara because he knew it wouldn’t attack? *It’s not that...he likes wounds or something, does he?* I gazed at Sora’s bag. Even if I didn’t understand it, I figured I should let my friend do as it pleased. Maybe this meant something, or...maybe not.

Chapter 44: Under Investigation?

WHEN I GOT BACK to the village, the gatekeeper I'd been hoping to see was letting people in and out. *I think his name was Captain Oght? Uh...or is this one Vice-Captain Velivera? I actually don't know who's who.*

"Welcome back. This morning was rough, huh? You okay?" he asked.

"Yes, sir! Captain Oght, right?"

"Hm? Ah, we didn't introduce ourselves, did we?"

"No, sir. Um, my name is Ivy. The tent is very comfortable. Thank you for helping me get it."

"Ha ha ha! Good to know! Yeah, I'm Captain Oght," he confirmed.

Phew, I was right. I would've looked really rude if I had it wrong.

"Remember those adventurers from earlier?" he asked. "Turns out they were being investigated in other villages and towns."

"Investigated?"

"Yeah. They pull that same con all over. Find a young adventurer and pick on them till they can steal whatever they like. The guild's gotten a bunch of complaints about them, but it can be hard to prove that things belong to you. They were having a hard time catching those guys."

"And that's why they were being investigated?"

"Yep. They're clever—it's hard to prove what belongs to who sometimes, and they take advantage of that. But this time, the tent was from a place I'd shown you to myself. From the old man's store, no less! Evidence and testimony line up, so those losers are toast."

"I see."

"Sorry for putting you through such a scary experience, Ivy."

"I-It's okay! Really."

"Just...don't push yourself, kid, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

“It’s crazy, though,” Captain Oght continued. “Velivera’s been investigating for a while, and yet complaint after complaint keeps rolling in. They’re going through every single one with the guild now, but there are crimes that haven’t been reported, too. It’s a mess.”

I’d always known there were bad adventurers out there, but the ones who tried to steal from me must’ve been really rotten. I was glad that I’d bought my tent at the shop Captain Oght had shown me.

“Since you helped make an arrest, you’ll be getting a small gratuity,” he said with a smile. “It won’t be as much as a monster informant fee, though.”

“Huh? But I didn’t do anything.”

“Not so! If it weren’t for you, little guy, they would’ve had a hard time proving it. Besides...you can never have too much money, right?” Captain Oght winked.

“Well, I suppose...”

“Good! The sum will vary a little depending on their sentence, so you’ll want to stick around here for a while.”

A gratuity. There are so many things I don’t know. But I could certainly use the money. I’m sure I’ll need a lot, going forward.

I thanked Captain Oght again and headed back to the plaza. *Oops, I forgot to tell him that I ran away instead of getting kicked out to save food. When are you supposed to bring that kind of thing up, though?*

When I went to the plaza, the supervisor who’d helped me this morning was there.

“Thanks again for your help,” I said after greeting him.

“Welcome back. Did you hear?”

“Yes, th-thank you!” My heart skipped a beat. I’d felt like that when Captain Oght greeted me, too. I guessed I just wasn’t used to those words. “I mean, um...Captain Oght told me about the arrested adventurers. And by the way, my name is Ivy.”

“Mm? Ah, I’m Roygult. I manage the plaza and patrol inside the village. The captain was gatekeeping when you got here, right?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

After my chat with Roygult, I returned to my tent. There, I closed the entrance and took Sora out of its bag.

Oops! I forgot to go to the dump to pick up what I need for traps! Should I go now? Honestly, I was too tired from everything that happened today. I looked to Sora and saw that the slime was already fast asleep. Early to bed, huh?

“Maybe I’ve done enough for one day...”

First, I checked the contents of my bags. I could make two field mouse traps with what I had on hand, but I’d need to go to the dump tomorrow. We didn’t have enough potions for Sora. But for now, I’d sleep a little.

Sooo tired...

Chapter 45: Bags of Money

THANKS TO A RESTFUL SLEEP, I woke up refreshed. I'd finished the field mouse traps last night. Today, I would start by checking my wild rabbit traps. If I had meat, I would come back to sell it. After that, I'd set up the mouse traps.

While I munched on fruit from the forest, I made my plans for the day. This was the last of my fruit, actually, so I wanted to pick some more from the trees near the river. I also wanted to wash my clothes, so I added the river to my itinerary. After that...well, then I just had to visit the dump for Sora food and trap materials.

I looked over at Sora; it was digesting potion after potion. It seemed...a little different?

Oh! Sora's usually translucent blue, but parts of it look red right now. Does its body change color? Hm... I dunno what's going on, but it sure has an appetite. It's bouncing around vigorously, too, so I don't think it's doing too bad.

With the meal finished, Sora was stretching up and down with great energy. The slime could stretch really high these days. Was that bad? While I drank tea and rested after my meal, Sora finally calmed down.

Before opening the tent, I put Sora in its bag. There was also a chance that I hadn't caught any rabbits, so I put the mouse traps and my dirty clothes in a bag as well so I didn't have to come all the way back if the rabbit traps were empty.

The sun had just come up, so it was still a little dark out. When I approached the plaza entrance, I noticed people were getting kinda rowdy. Apparently, a group of adventurers had just come back from the tavern. They were saying something to the supervisor.

Oh no, they're getting violent! While I fretted over what to do, the problem solved itself. The supervisor was pretty strong, it turned out, and he had them tied up in no time. I rushed out of the plaza and offered a quick bow before scurrying away. I got a glance at the supervisor's face... I hadn't seen this one before, now that I thought about it. He smiled, but he was still a little scary. What had those adventurers said to him, anyway?

I said good morning to the village gatekeeper and continued into the forest. I was getting used to greeting people, but it still made me nervous.

As I walked toward the traps I'd set, I felt a strange aura. I stopped and searched around, but nothing stood out.

What was that? I took a deep breath and probed deeper, but the aura had vanished. Was it my imagination?

For now, I checked the traps I'd set. Two of them had been crushed. *Did I mess them up?*

But the third one had caught a rabbit! "Hooray!"

Sora had jumped out of my bag and was bouncing happily around the rabbit. I put the wild rabbit in a cage and continued toward the final trap. I'd set it near the river so I could quickly clean and dress what I'd caught, but that last one remained unsprung.

"Only one rabbit, huh?"

Would I be able to catch more if I set more traps? I took the single rabbit to the river and prepared to butcher it, looking around for fruit trees while I was at it. Not far from the river, I found several different varieties. I'd pick fruit after the rabbit was dealt with, so I got down to business. While I was working, I felt something behind me.

I whirled around. The monster from yesterday was padding up with something in its mouth. I'd committed the adandara's features to memory again, so I looked the monster up and down. Yep, it was definitely an adandara. Big claws, eye color, the pattern on its tail...it was one-hundred percent for sure that creature of death, the adandara. When it approached, I heard it purring. I quickly washed my hands and patted it on the head, prompting it to close its eyes happily.

Was everything in the book wrong? This guy wasn't scary at all! It backed away a few steps and dropped what it carried in its mouth. I didn't believe my eyes at first—it had actually dropped a whole bunch of wild rabbits! They were moving a little, so they were probably still alive. While I stared at them, the adandara pushed them forward with its paw. Wait...

"Are those for me?" I asked.

It purred louder. I watched uncertainly, so it nudged them again with its

nose. *I guess I'll accept them. Seems like it wants to give them to me, so...*

“Thank you.” I really appreciated the rabbits (eight whole rabbits!) it had given me. Strangely, all eight of them were unconscious but unwounded. How had it caught them? “Okay, back to butchering!”

I looked over to Sora. The adandara was batting my friend with its front paw, rolling it around. I considered stopping them, but Sora looked like it was having fun, so I decided to watch and wait. Whenever Sora got pushed away, it would roll back to the adandara and quiver in place. When it did, the adandara would poke and roll him again. They repeated this several times. *Is that fun for them?*

Uh! Anyway, I'd better skin and dress these. If I want to sell the meat, it has to be fresh.

Soon enough, I'd wrapped the butchered meat in bana leaves, four to each bundle. I was beat. Sora was already sleeping nestled against the adandara's belly.

I...guess that's fine.

Chapter 46: Selling Wild Rabbits

I WOKE SORA UP so we could go back to the village. It barely reacted. I guessed it was sleeping pretty heavily. We were in the forest, though, so I'd rather my friend be a little more careful.

“Sora, I want to go sell these rabbits. Let’s head back.”

“Pu, pu!” Sora finally awakened and bounced away from the adandara. The adandara stretched its long body, loosening up its muscles.

I felt bad for Sora.

“Umm, thank you for all the meat,” I said to the adandara, waving as it looked into my eyes. It purred and bounded off with the same speed as yesterday. It really was fast.

I was worried about the meat’s freshness, so I rushed back to the village, Sora bouncing happily beside me. It had gotten a lot faster recently. It could even bounce higher. The moment I thought that, Sora tripped and fell smack-dab over a tree root.

Guess it hasn’t gotten any smarter, though.

Now that I was close to the village, I put Sora in its bag. I needed to learn more about slimes, and fast. When I greeted the gatekeeper, for some reason, he flashed me a big smile. I wondered why...but I wanted to sell this meat fast, so I went straight to the butcher.

“Excuse me,” I called as I entered the shop.

“My, is that the child from yesterday?” The lady who told me about the wild rabbits came up from the back. Behind her was a stern-looking man. He was a little intimidating, so I shrunk back. “Ah ha ha! Don’t worry. This here’s my husband.”

“Oh, sorry. I’d like to sell some wild rabbit meat.”

“Of course, dear! Mind showing me how it looks?”

“Here it is.” I lined up all the rabbits on the counter.

"Goodness gracious, you caught all these?" she asked, amazed. Almost all of it had come from the adandara, so I had to laugh at myself a little. "All in good shape. Nice and hefty, too, so it should be perfect for dried meat."

Lucky me! It was my first time breaking down wild rabbits, so I was a little worried. They were really similar to field mice, but it ended up taking longer since the meat was thicker.

"No issues here, seems like. Nine rabbits in total. At 95 dal each, that'll be 855 dal total. Will that do for you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

Field mice were 100 dal each, while wild rabbits were 95 dal each. They were easier to catch because of their size, apparently...but field mice were easier for me. I'd only gotten so many rabbits because of the adandara, after all. Maybe hunting field mice would be more profitable? After taking the money and leaving, I went straight back to the forest to set my field mouse traps.

I'd found a few good spots while I was setting up wild rabbit traps, so it wouldn't take long. Finding good places took a lot longer than just setting the traps.

Near the gate, I encountered guards who had just finished patrolling the forest.

"Good luck out there. Be careful, kid." For some reason, one of them spoke to me.

"Oh! Okay."

The gatekeeper waved, too. What was going on with these people?

I found it strange, but I kept going. Once I'd set my traps, I would go down to the river to forage fruit and do laundry. There had been a lot to butcher, so I was a little behind schedule.

After washing my clothes a safe distance from where I'd handled the meat, I searched for fruit while I gave them time to dry. These days, I always watched Sora carefully when I approached trees. Getting hurt just once was already one time too many. Eventually, I found the sweet-and-sour fruit I liked so much, along with a few more nutritious fruits.

I bundled my damp clothes into a basket. They'd have to finish drying in the plaza later.

Next, I rushed to the dump. When I got there, there was even more trash

than the last time. They'd have to pay someone to dispose of all of this soon.
That's rough.

I looked for potions for Sora, but there were so many that I hardly needed to search. I threw as many as I could find into Sora's food bag. Next, I looked for trap materials. How much would I need for wild rabbit traps? Maybe I could set ten of each like I'd been doing for field mouse traps?

Next...oh! Someone's coming. I snatched up Sora, who'd been stretching up and down, and stuffed it in its bag.

When I left the dump, the person patrolling noticed me. "Heya! You that Ivy kid? The one the captain mentioned?"

Huh? Who's this guy? "Yes. Um, and you are?"

"Name's Gunsvel. I'm pretty sure we met when I was watching the gate?"

I looked at his face, but I didn't recognize him. "Sorry."

"All good! There are a lot of us."

"Gunsvel, why are you bullying this poor child?" his companion asked him.

"Aw, don't be mean. I'm hardly bullying you, right?"

"Um, right..." I squeaked out.

"Sorry. Anyway, I should get back to patrolling. Be careful out there, Ivy."

"Oh, yes. Thank you."

They were patrolling together, so they checked the dump and went off into the forest. *Why do people know my name, anyway? He said the captain mentioned me... Did Captain Oght tell people about me? For now, I should just grab what I need and go back to the village.*

Chapter 47: Huh?! Captain Oght!

“**W**ELCOME BACK, IVY,” Vice-Captain Velivera greeted me.

“Oh! Thank you.” My mind was so caught up in other things that I was a little flustered. “Excuse me. Do you know where Captain Oght is?”

“What, do you need something from him?”

“Not quite, but I met someone named Gunsvel at the dump who asked me if I was ‘that kid Ivy that the captain mentioned.’ I thought maybe he was referring to Captain Oght.”

“Oooh, sorry,” said Vice-Captain Velivera. “Has your name spread that much already? The captain’s been telling officers to help out a young adventurer named Ivy if he’s ever in trouble.”

“Huh?!”

“I think he’s keeping an eye out for you, since you’re trying so hard all by yourself.”

“Whaaat?!” *Oh no, that’s so embarrassing.* My cheeks were hot.

Vice-Captain Velivera suppressed his laughter, though not well enough, when he saw me blush. “Sorry, I tried to stop him! Heh heh, word had spread before I even knew it. Ha ha ha, the captain’s not a bad guy! He just gets his mind set on something and you can’t stop him. Ah ha ha ha...” He couldn’t help but continue to laugh.

So all those gatekeepers and patrolling guards are keeping an eye on me because of Captain Oght? I know he’s not a bad person, but...!

“I’m really sorry,” he apologized.

“No, it’s okay.” I bowed my head to Vice-Captain Velivera and went into the village.

On my way to the plaza, several people greeted me by name. Every time, my face heated up. Would things be like this the entire time I was in this village?

Urgh... So embarrassing.

When I arrived, the supervisor greeted me by name. *How many people did Captain Ought tell?!* When I got inside my tent, I instantly collapsed. I'd had no idea something like this would be so exhausting.

I took Sora out of its bag and gave it ten red and ten blue potions. After making sure my friend was eating, I left the tent. Outside, I took the liberty of tying rope to a nearby tree and hung my wet clothes on it. When I came back in, Sora was happily bobbing away as it dined, and the bobbing intensified when it noticed me walk in.

I took my pickings out of my bag to check and sort them. By the time I finished putting everything in its proper bag, Sora had finished scarfing down its meal. I watched the little slime for a moment. It was still bubbling. *Hmm... It seems like there are more red bits than last time. I know! I'll go to a bookstore. Even if they don't know about Sora, I might be able to learn something from a book about slimes.*

“Let’s go to the bookstore, Sora!”

Sora stopped its crazy vertical stretching—some after-meal exercise?—looked at me, and sprang up... The slime bounced so hard that he hit the ceiling of the tent and crashed into the floor.

“Are you okay?!?” There were tears in its eyes. I’d never seen it express itself like that, but I wasn’t exactly happy to see it. “That must’ve hurt.”

I stroked Sora and put it in its bag. I’d never heard of a slime crying. What would I do if it started to become even more unlike other slimes? I looked down into the bag.

Ha ha ha...that...that won’t happen, right?

I left the plaza and walked toward the main street, where more strangers spoke to me. One even asked where I was going. When I answered that I was off to find a bookstore, they led me to a famous one with tons of books.

I went in, but...it was way different from what I’d imagined a bookstore would look like. I’d thought that they would have shelves full of books. They did, but each shelf had a few books laid on their sides. *That’s weird. Why did I imagine the books standing up on the shelves?* I picked up a book on a nearby shelf and peeked inside. It was a book about weapon types. I put it back on the shelf and checked the other books. When I finally found an introduction to taming, I flipped through it.

Hmm...it looked like it was for one-star tamers, but it only listed names of tamable monsters and their strength rankings. Didn't they have books that went into more detail? I searched for a book on slimes, but I couldn't find one. They didn't even have any like the one the fortune-teller had given me.

There was a book with instructions for making traps, but it only explained ones that would stop high-level monsters in their tracks. It was really unclear, too—for example, it would tell you a hole needed to be “big” but not the exact size. While I was searching, other customers came in, bought stuff, and left. In the end, I had picked up every book, but they were all way too vague. Was everyone else satisfied with info like this? I gave up and left.

“There you are!” someone yelled.

I was startled, but it turned out to be Captain Oght. He seemed a little flustered.

“Huh? Oh, hi, Captain Oght. Is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry!”

Huh? Huuuh?! Right in front of the bookstore, he bowed in apology. What’s going on? Somebody, please explain!

Vice-Captain Velivera ran after him and pulled his head back up. “Aaargh! This is why I keep telling you to pay attention to your surroundings!” I still had no idea what was going on, but we were totally making a scene.

“But you said he was mad!” Captain Oght protested.

“Mad?” I repeated. What did he mean? Was I mad at Captain Oght?

“No!” said the vice-captain. “I said he’s uncomfortable because you keep telling all the guards about him!”

Captain Oght blinked. “Huh? You’re not mad?”

I see. Captain Oght is kinda reckless, isn’t he?

Chapter 48: Boarhog Skewers

VICE-CAPTAIN VELIVERA looked tired. He was breathing heavily, too. Had he been searching for Captain Oght to stop him? If so, I felt a little bad.

Noticing my expression, he smiled grimly. “Don’t worry. I always have to hold this guy back when he goes overboard. Somebody’s got to do it, and nobody else wants to.”

“Why do you make it sound like I’m always going crazy?” Captain Oght furrowed his brow at Vice-Captain Velivera’s words.

“Someday, Captain, you’re going to develop a smidgen of self-awareness.”

These two seemed close.

“Hey, I know,” said Captain Oght, baldly ignoring the previous remark. “How about I treat you to a meal as an apology, Ivy?”

“Huh?! You don’t have to do that. Just don’t tell too many people about me, please.”

“Er, well...” He looked away guiltily. “About that...”

“Hm?” I cocked my head.

“Hurry up and spill it,” Vice-Captain Velivera groaned.

“Sorry! I told all of my coworkers about you.”

“So it’s too late?”

“Ah ha ha ha...sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” the vice-captain added. “I didn’t think he had already told *everyone*.”

“I’m...really, extremely, absolutely sorry.” Captain Oght scratched his head and bowed in apology.

Still, he hadn’t been trying to do anything malicious. In fact, he’d been trying to help me. So I thought, at least...but my legs were getting jellified again. “It’s okay. You were worried about me.”

“Which is why I should make it up to you with a meal.”

“But—” I tried to protest.

“This village has a signature dish,” Captain Oght interrupted. “Have you had it?”

“A signature dish? No...?”

“It’s skewer-grilled boarhog, and I’ll treat you to all you can eat!”

“Huh?” Had he decided without me? He took my wrist and led me through the plaza. Compared to last time, he was gentler and slower, but no less pushy about treating me. I looked to Vice-Captain Velivera, who walked behind us.

“I’d go along with it,” advised the Vice-Captain. “Boarhog is great.”

So he wasn’t going to stop him this time. I was curious, though. After all, the only meat I’d had during my journey were dried meat and field mouse with salt.

“I look forward to it then,” I said.

Captain Oght broke out into a smile and patted my head. I was a little startled. How long had it been since someone touched me like that? I...couldn’t even remember.

“Something wrong?” Vice-Captain Velivera asked when he saw my facial expression.

“No. I’m just, um...I’m hungry...” I was getting too sentimental. That past was no longer mine.

We reached a street lined by stalls emitting delicious scents. My stomach growled. I hadn’t been to this area yet.

Captain Oght beelined for a specific stall. “Yooo!”

“Captain Oght, eh? And who’s that, your illegitimate child?”

“Ha ha ha! Cute, ain’t he?”

“Huh? Wha? Bwuh?” I sputtered. *An illegitimate child? What? Me?*

Vice-Captain Velivera groaned again. “Didn’t I just tell you not to make more trouble for him?”

“Oh, my bad! This here’s an adventurer named Ivy.”

“Um, nice to meet you,” I said sheepishly.

“Let me introduce you to Tegra. She’s the proprietress of this fine boarhog skewer joint.”

Tegra smiled. “Aren’t you an adorable little adventurer?”

“Ten please, madam,” Captain Oght ordered.

“Coming right up!” The woman, Tegra, placed sticks of skewered boarhog on a mesh grill, where they began to sizzle immediately. The portions were huge!

“Those are really big,” I commented.

“Think so? I bet you could eat ten of them.”

“Me?! I couldn’t. No way!”

“No way? Hmm... How many could you eat, then?”

“Umm...” I looked at the boarhog on the grill. The chunks of skewered meat were the size of my fists. “Two or three, maybe?” That would be my absolute limit, I was sure.

“Seriously?!” The captain seemed shocked. “That’s, like...nothing!”

“But the pieces are so big.” I *definitely* couldn’t eat more than three, and that would be too much already.

As the meat cooked, the proprietress brushed it with a black sauce. A delicious smell wafted about. It smelled so good! I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the glistening meat.

“He may be an adventurer, but he’s still small,” Vice-Captain Velivera backed me up. “Ten is out of the question.”

“Think so? The last one ate more than ten.”

“Consider how much bigger he was than Ivy.”

“What do you think, Captain?” Tegra asked. “I’ve already cooked them.”

“Ha ha ha! Madam, mind splitting them seven and three?”

“Understood!” She wrapped the cooked meat in leaves that I’d never seen before—I wonder what they were? Tegra handed two packages to Captain Oght: one with three skewers and one with seven.

“Here you go.” Captain Oght handed me the package with three inside.

“Thank you very much.”

“No worries. It’s technically all my fault, anyway.”

“You can say that again,” said Vice-Captain Velivera with a laugh.

Chairs and tables were set up near the stalls. As we were on our way there, an officer called the captain and vice-captain over. It seemed there was some trouble.

“Sorry, Ivy,” Captain Oght said. “Duty calls.”

“It’s okay.”

“Agh, but I hate to leave you alone out here.”

“I’ll just go back to the plaza and eat there,” I assured him.

“You sure?”

“Yes. Good luck at work.”

“You’re a good kid.” He ruffled my hair. It was probably really messy by now. “Sorry again. We gotta go.”

“Catch you later.”

“Okay. Goodbye.”

Vice-Captain Velivera seemed like the real superior, given how he just listened to us talk. As I walked back toward the plaza, I smelled the meat in my hands...and couldn’t help running back to enjoy it as soon as I could!

Chapter 49: Yet Again

I WOKE UP AND STRETCHED as Sora bobbed up and down next to me. After prepping my friend's morning potions, I went to the outdoor kitchen to boil water. I brought the steaming water back inside the tent, made tea, and poured the rest into a big pail. I dipped a towel inside, wrung it out, and scrubbed myself all over.

It was nice to be able to get hot water in these plazas. You couldn't really bathe often when you were on a journey. I had to scrub myself with a towel instead, but that got hard to bear when it was cold. We were just getting into summer, so I was fine for now, but I'd have to save money for winter. It would be harder to hunt wild rabbits and field mice then, too. The monster information fees gave me more money than I'd expected to have by now, but it still wasn't enough.

"Ooh, that's refreshing." I put on new clothes and put the dirty outfit in the bag with the rest of the laundry I needed to do—I'd get to that soon enough.

I munched on some fruit and planned my day. *Let's see...I should check my field mouse traps. Ooh, right, I ate so much yesterday that I didn't even make traps. I'd never eaten so much that I couldn't even move before! I should've stopped at two and saved the last one for dinner tonight.* I sipped some tea and relaxed for a bit, and then it was time to head out.

"Okay! Sora, let's do our best today."

After tossing my laundry bag into yet another bag, I called Sora over and held up its bag in invitation. The slime bounced over to my feet, I put it inside, and we left the tent to check those traps. I discarded the rest of the water I'd used in a drainage gutter, put the pail back in the tent, and closed the tent. After one last check to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything, I headed for the forest.

The supervisor, guards on patrol, and gatekeeper all greeted me as I passed by. It still made me nervous, but at least I wasn't shrinking back so much like I had. It was still embarrassing, though.

When I reached the forest, I felt that strange aura again. I searched around

but found nothing.

“What was that? Sora, do you know?”

“Pu, pu pu!”

Does it know? Does this reaction mean everything is okay? I wondered, but the aura was gone and I had no way of searching for it. For now, it was time to check my field mouse traps.

“Aww, shoot. The trap’s broken.” Had an animal messed it up? I went to check the other trap I had set.

A whole lot of my traps had been getting broken in this forest. Which reminded me...hadn’t somebody mentioned another kind of animal that lived here? Boarhogs, right? *Yeah, that’s the delicious meat I ate yesterday! If it’s this village’s specialty, does that mean they’re common in this forest?*

“Aww...these, too?” Another field mouse trap was broken, on top of a wild rabbit trap I’d left.

Disappointing. I decided to do my laundry, go back to the plaza, and make more traps. Maybe I could succeed through sheer numbers.

I went to the river and started getting my laundry out when I sensed something behind me. I turned around and there it was, just like yesterday: the adandara, holding something in its mouth. It came closer and purred, so I stroked its fur. What did it want? Did it just really like me?

Once it was satisfied by the pets, it dropped what it had in its mouth. *Huh?* There were five rabbits, but this time there were three field mice too and...a bird?

“Is this a pigeon?” I’d only seen them in books until now. The adandara pushed the animals toward me with its front paw. *Mm, fine. I guess I’ll take it.* “Thank you.”

It purred and rubbed its head against me. Sure, it had a scary face, but it was pretty cute! I gave it a big hug. The monster was really warm. *Hey, cut it out, Ivy! You need to start breaking down these animals.*

I left the adandara and got to work. When the rabbit and mouse meat was ready, I wrapped it all in bana leaves and put it in a bag. Next was the pigeon. I had never butchered a bird, so I was really nervous throughout.

“There we go!” My first pigeon-butcherering went pretty well! I’d messed up a little, but...even if I couldn’t sell it, I could just eat it myself. I wrapped the

pigeon meat separately and tossed it in the same bag. “Now...”

I looked back for Sora and found it sleeping with the adandara again. That looked so cozy, but... *Gah! I need to hurry!*

“Sora, wake uuup! We need to go sell this meat.” The adandara opened its eyes and rolled Sora over. Sora quivered, annoyed. “Thanks for yesterday and today,” I said to the adandara. “Don’t do anything crazy for my sake, okay?”

The adandara purred and ran off. I still loved watching it bound away. I looked at Sora and saw that it was doing those up-and-down stretching exercises again.

“I still don’t know what you’re doing,” I mused.

“Pu, pu pu!”

That’s no explanation, Sora! Anyway, I’d better go back and sell this meat.

Chapter 50: Sopuna Fruit

I RETURNED TO THE VILLAGE and went to the butcher, a little nervous about whether they'd actually buy the pigeon meat.

“Excuse me?” I called out.

“Yeees?” It was the usual lady. “Oh, good morning to you!”

“Good morning. May I sell again today?”

“Absolutely, dear.”

I pulled the bana leaf-wrapped meat out for the lady to see.

“Goodness,” she exclaimed. “Another big haul, I see.”

I had to chuckle to myself again, since this was all the adandara’s doing—especially the pigeon. I had no idea what I’d even say if she asked how I’d caught it. After examining each chunk of meat, she picked up the last one.

“This is pigeon meat, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes. But I did make a few mistakes while butchering it.”

“Hm? Oh, don’t worry. This is fine. Hmm...where are the bones, though?”

“The bones?” I asked.

“Oh, did you not know? You can sell pigeon bones, too.”

“Huh? Really? I discarded them...”

“Oh well! There’s nothing you can do about that now. But next time you catch a pigeon, feel free to bring us the bones.”

What did they use bones for? Did they eat them? They’d seemed pretty tough when I was removing the meat. Maybe...they were used as materials?

I decided to just ask. “Sorry, what are the bones used for?”

“We process the bones here and sell them to the drugstore.”

“The drugstore?”

“Yep. If you boil it with other medicines and ingredients, it can be sold as

a soup that restores stamina.”

“I had no idea.” They were used for medicine, huh? I didn’t know that. I felt a little bad for wasting the bones.

“Now you know!” she smiled. “So, about your money. Three mice, 300 dal. Five rabbits, 475 dal. One pigeon, 150 dal. Your total is...925 dal. Does that sound all right?”

“That’s fine. Thank you.” I took the money, thanked her again, and left. A pigeon was 150 dal... That was a lot! But my book didn’t include information on how to trap birds, so I wouldn’t be able to make much use of that.

Now, today...yeah, I should do my laundry. I’d also like to search the forest a little to gather fruit. Sopuna fruit would be nice—it’d help clean my hair a bit better when I’m washing it.

I also needed to find food...soon I’d have to prepare for the trip to Otolwa.

I checked the trees along the way to the river. It was hard to find any sopuna, but I was able to secure food along the way. Finally, when I was closer to the river, I found a sopuna tree...and this one was bursting with fruit.

“Hooray!” I threw fruit into my bag. Once I had enough, I went down to the river and washed my clothes, hanging my laundry on a nearby tree as I went. “Urgh...my hips sure hurt.”

I searched for auras nearby and didn’t sense any monsters or animals around. Feeling safe, I wet my hair and crushed a sopuna in my hand. Then I rubbed my hands together until bubbles formed and washed my body. After rinsing the bubbles off in the river a few times, I dried my hair with a towel.

“My hair’s gotten pretty long,” I mused. “I should cut it later.”

“Pu, pu!” Sora looked rather happy as it did its usual stretching. These days, it seemed more prone to stretching than bouncing. It surely meant something...but what?

Whew...my hair’s pretty dry, so I should take my clothes and go back. Once I’m there, I’ll make some traps!

I bowed to the gatekeeper and tried to continue into the village.

“Hey, wait a second,” he stopped me. “You’re Ivy, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Would you mind coming with me?”

“Is something wrong?”

“They’ve calculated your gratuity, so the captain told me to take you to the station if I saw you. No rush if you’re busy, though. What do you say?”

I had forgotten all about the gratuity. “Now is fine.”

I followed the gatekeeper into a pretty big building. I was curious about it when I looked around the village... It had several entrances, it wasn’t a house, and it wasn’t a store. It didn’t look like a guild, either, so what was it there for?

When I went inside, lots of people were going in and out. Were the people leaving in teams patrolling guards?

“Here we are,” said the gatekeeper. “Heya, Captain! Keep up the good work.”

“Ivy, good morning! Sorry for calling you out here.”

“Good morning, Captain Ought. It’s okay.” Still, I didn’t like all the eyes on me. They made me fidgety and uncomfortable.

“This way,” said Captain Ought.

“Okay.” If it meant getting out of here, I was happy to follow him! I ran after Captain Ought into another room, which had a simple desk and shelf. The shelf was stuffed full of...something. He urged me to sit and brought me tea.

“Thank you very much,” I said. The hot tea was soothing.

“So, about your gratuity,” he began.

“Yes?”

“It comes out to two radal and three gidal.”

“Wh—huh?!” *He said it would be less than a monster informant fee, but radal are gold coins, right? What’s going on?*

Chapter 51: Bounties

“**A**RE YOU SURPRISED?” Captain Ought asked.

“Yes. I’d heard that it would be less than a monster information fee.”

“Normally, yes. But two of the four people we arrested this time are wanted for murder.”

“For *murder*?!”

“We had to turn them against each other, but we managed to squeeze something out of one guy. ‘One of my buddies killed somebody,’ he told me. Threatened the man into silence, too. You can imagine how shocked I was!”

“Seriously...”

“We looked into him, and we found that his face and build matched those of a man wanted for murder. His name was different, though, so we dug into that as well. Turned out his family had put out a search request for him. Remember the tallest guy in the group?”

“Yes. He was the scariest one.”

“I bet. We looked into him, and it turned out that the real guy with his name had died. He killed the guy and took his identity—trying to hide in plain sight, I guess. When we questioned *him*, he told us one of the women was a murderer, too.”

“I...see.”

The captain sighed. “Those interrogations were a heck of a lot of work.”

“Thank you for your hard work, sir. Is the gratuity so high because they were wanted murderers?”

“Hm? Yeah, that’s partially why, but the two radal came from the guild. The murderers had bounties on their heads, one radal each. Gratuities are normally 5,000 dal per person, but murderers fetch two gidal each. The other two are the usual 5,000 dal, making a total of three gidal.”

“Umm, I’m not registered with the guild. Does that matter?”

“You’re not?” Captain Oght was surprised. “Well, that’s fine—you get bounties whether you’re registered or not.”

“I see. Still, I can’t believe murderers were after me! I’m lucky they got arrested.”

“The two murderers will be permanently enslaved,” he reassured me. “The other two will be in long-term slavery, too. You don’t have to worry.”

“Okay.”

“Unfortunately, our fortune-teller Altra wasn’t available, so it took a while to get things straight. Sorry we took so long.”

“No, it’s fine.” I hesitated. “Umm...”

“Yeah?”

“It would’ve been faster with Altra around? Why?”

“Ah. People with fortune-telling skills can judge other people,” Captain Oght explained. “At one star, you can tell if others are lying or not. At two stars, you’re a pretty big deal—you can tell whether people have committed crimes or not. At three stars, you can even find out what they’ve done...or so I’ve heard.”

“I see.”

“Our Altra has two stars, so she can tell if you’re lying. She’s fantastic... She can even make a broad judgment regarding what crimes you’ve committed. We rely on her so much that I honestly feel a little guilty about it.”

“That is incredible.” To think that fortune-tellers did stuff like that, too. I’d talked with our fortune-teller a lot, but she never told me much about her work. She’d never even mentioned how she cared for our village’s main crop.

“By the way, you said you’re not with the guild?” Captain Oght asked.

Oh. I’d best explain myself now. “Right. Um...you see, I ran away from Ratomi Village.”

“Ran away? So they didn’t kick you out to save food?”

“Yes, I’m sorry for not being honest. My parents were close to the chief, and the chief...believed I didn’t belong, so...”

“Really? What the hell is the lord out there doing if a child has no choice but to run away?!?” Lords, as I recalled, governed villages, but ours had had a close relationship with the chief. I’d seen them from afar, but I’d never wanted to get too close. “If you ran away, then it might be best to hold off on registering

with the guild until you're officially an adult."

"Until I'm an adult?"

"When a child registers with the guild, their home village is notified. We can explain the situation and ask that they don't report it, but you never know where info might leak. If Ratomi has changed for the better, then it wouldn't be an issue, but I've gotten no such news."

They'll notify them? Even if I'm an adult, I won't be able to register...

"Ivy, how old are you?" Captain Oght asked.

"Eight years old. I'll be nine next month."

"Eight! Wow. You look...well, you do look young, but you're doing very well for yourself, Ivy."

"Oh, not at all, I—" I tried to deflect the compliment.

"Whoops. We've digressed, haven't we? Umm, what was I doing? Right! I have your money here."

There were two gold and three silver coins atop the desk. This was the second time I'd ever even seen gold coins. I took out the small magic bag that the old man had given me, put the money inside, and dropped it into the bigger bag at my hip. I'd decided to save money for winter, but I was getting a lot more than I'd expected, so I was worried. I'd have to be careful during my travels.

"Don't you have a bank account with the guild?" he asked me.

"Huh?"

"You're worried about walking around with that much money, aren't you?"

"Um, I thought you couldn't bank with the guild if you weren't registered?"

"Huh? That's not the case at all."

What is he talking about? Is everything I know wrong?

"That may be true of the adventurer guild," he added quickly, "but you don't need to be registered at the merchant guild."

"An account at the merchant guild?" *Can you make bank accounts there?*

"Look, it's dangerous to carry that much money around on your person. Let's go deposit it now."

“I can really deposit money at the merchant guild without registering?”

“You’d need to register if you were planning to do business, but that doesn’t seem to be the plan.”

“No, it’s not.”

“You’ll need a drop of blood to prove your identity and make an account, but that’s all.”

“Really?” It was all such a surprise. “I had no idea you could do that.”

“Well, the merchant guild was just founded around ten years ago,” the captain explained. “It only has a presence in the capital, towns, and big villages so far. A lot of people don’t know the details.”

That made sense—it only existed in places with large populations. Still, I was really excited to have my own bank account!

Chapter 52: The Merchant Guild

AS WE HEADED for the merchant guild, Captain Oght taught me a few things. The merchant guild was built to protect merchants from thieves and scammers, so it was pretty different from the adventurers' guild. Over time, it had gained so much power that you couldn't do business as a merchant in the capital, towns, or large villages unless you registered with them first. They were even beginning to spread to smaller villages. There were still so many things I didn't know, so I listened carefully.

The building next to the adventurers' guild, which looked very similar, was the merchant guild. I'd just assumed they were both adventurers' guild buildings, but nope—sure enough, their signs were different. I just hadn't bothered to look closely before, since I hadn't ever planned to visit.

I followed Captain Oght into the bustling merchant guild. I looked around and saw somebody spreading cloth atop a counter and showing it to somebody else.

"They're probably describing their wares," he explained. "When you register with the guild, you have to show them what you're selling."

"I see..."

There were doors at the corner of the foyer, probably leading to a bunch of smaller rooms. *It seems so complicated...*

"This way, Ivy," said Captain Oght. I was so occupied by my surroundings that I'd strayed away from him. I rushed over. "Lugrette," he said when I was standing beside him, "we'd like to open a bank account."

"Captain Oght, thank you for your service. An account for yourself?"

"Ah, it's not for me. It's for this kid here." He introduced me to the woman at the counter.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "Thank you for your help."

Lugrette smiled. "Aww, aren't you a cutie pie?" She was pretty, and she seemed levelheaded and kind. Lugrette slid a sheet of paper across the counter. "First, I'll need to explain how our accounts work."

“Yes, please.”

“When you make an account with us, we’ll give you a plate. There’s no fee for creating the account, but it will cost you 500 dal to issue a replacement plate, so take care not to lose it, okay? Also, we will withdraw 100 dal per year as a management fee. Any questions so far?”

A hundred dal per year? I was a little hesitant, but I had four gold coins now. I was too anxious about carrying that much money around, so I needed the account.

“Do I pay 100 dal for the first year?” I asked.

“Whoops, I skipped that part. Sorry!” said Lugrette. “Umm, your first year is exempt from the fee. The first payment is next year. Would you like to create the account?”

“Yes, please.”

“Then could I get you to fill in the required fields on this document? If you can’t write, then I could take it down for you.”

“I can do it, thank you.”

She gave me the paper, and I looked around and saw desks with chairs nearby. I sat at one and read the application. It had columns for birthplace, name, and age, with nothing else. *Phew. So I really can make an account.*

“Just don’t write a birthplace,” Captain Oght said.

“Are you sure?”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” After writing down my name and age, I took it to Lugrette at the counter. She looked at the paper and gave Captain Oght a puzzled look.

“Problems with the village chief,” he said shortly. “The kid ran away, so the column’s empty.”

“Understood. I’ll process it as such.”

He got her to skip it. Would that cause any problems? Worried, I looked at Captain Oght. When he noticed my gaze, he patted me on the head.

“When lords and chiefs cause problems, villagers are the ones who suffer. Around the time the merchant guild was formed, a law was passed to protect refugee villagers. It allows accounts to be made with name and age alone. It wasn’t unheard of for people to make accounts at the adventurers’ guild, only for

their former lord to track them down and claim their money. This is meant to protect you from that, though it does require a guarantor present when you make the account.”

“A guarantor?”

“Yep. Someone who knows the state of the village you came from, or someone like me who’s able to figure it out with ease.”

Wow. Captain Oght really is helping me out a lot. Still, is Ratomi Village really suffering that much? I wasn’t close to anyone there, so it’s difficult to care, but...still.

“All right, that takes care of the set up,” Lugrette declared. “Are you willing to provide us with a drop of your blood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

There was a round, transparent object on top of a white plate. *What am I supposed to do with this?*

“Please place your finger in the hollow,” she said. “There is a small needle there, so it will sting a little. Please bear with it for a moment so we can record your blood.”

I looked closer at the transparent part and saw the hollow. After gently placing my finger there, I pressed down. It didn’t hurt much. Immediately after, the white plate glowed, and my name and age appeared on it.

“Thank you very much,” she said. “Here is your plate. Would you like me to explain how to make deposits?”

“I’ll take care of that,” Captain Oght replied. “Don’t worry.”

“Are you sure? Well, thank you for your help, Captain. And thank you for choosing us, Ivy.”

As I marveled at the text appearing on the plate, they finished their conversation. I accepted my new plate and bowed.

Chapter 53: My First Deposit

I FOLLOWED CAPTAIN OUGHT until he stopped in front of the corner doors. He opened one and we went inside, but...the little booth wasn't really big enough for multiple people, so it was more like he ushered me inside while he stood outside holding the door.

"This is where you deposit and withdraw money," he said. "There's a small window there. Knock on it a few times, and it'll open. Tell the person behind it whether you're depositing or withdrawing. Everything clear so far?"

"Yeah...yeah, I get it."

"Good. If you're depositing, give them the money and your plate. If you're withdrawing, tell them the amount and give them the plate. When they give you the plate back...you see that white tray in front of the window there?"

"Yeah, I see it."

"Put your plate on top of it, and it'll display the dates and amounts of both deposits and withdrawals. Go ahead and try it."

"Okay." I put the plate I'd just received on top of the white tray in front of the window. When I did, the tray displayed today's date and the word *Opened*.

It's got the date I opened the account on it... That's so cool!

While I stared at it, I heard laughter behind me. I turned around and saw Captain Ought's shoulders shaking from laughter.

"Sorry. You look so serious! Ha ha ha!"

My cheeks felt hot. I must have been blushing, so I turned back toward the menu to hide it.

"Sorry, sorry." He ruffled my hair. *Ugh, so embarrassing.*



“Wanna make a deposit now?” he asked.

“Yes. Is that okay?”

“Sure. If there’s anything you don’t understand, ask the staff member inside. If you don’t want to ask them, ask me. I’ll be right out here.”

“Thank you.”

After making sure Captain Ought had closed the door, I rapped on the window twice. *I’m really nervous. I hope it works out.*

The window slid open, and a man greeted me. “Yes?”

“I-I would like to make a deposit,” I stammered.

“Put your plate and the money here, please.”

I took four gold coins, one silver token, and five silver coins from the bag I’d been putting my money in. Then I put the money and my plate on the tray in the window and handed it to the man. My heart was beating so hard that I wondered if he could hear it.

“Okay, deposit complete,” he said. “Confirm the amount here, please.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

That was fast! It startled me. I put my plate on top of the white tray. Below the account open date, it now showed today’s date and amount of my deposit.

Gold coins: 4

Silver tokens: 1

Silver coins: 5

“Oh?” I hadn’t expected it to display like this. Actually, I don’t know what I’d expected.

“Is anything wrong?” the man asked.

“No, nothing’s wrong. Thank you very much.”

“Thank you for choosing us.”

The window closed as I stowed my plate safely in my bag. When I left the booth, Captain Ought looked concerned, so I smiled and thanked him.

“Thank you. You’ve been a huge help.”

“Ha ha ha, don’t worry about it!”

As we exited the merchant guild, a very scary-looking Vice-Captain Velivera suddenly blocked Captain Oght's way. *What's wrong? Did something happen?*

"Captain!" he shouted. "You need to tell people if you're going somewhere."

"Huh? Did I not?"

The vice-captain just heaved a long sigh.

"I'm sorry," I apologized in Captain Oght's place. "It's my fault."

"No, it isn't," said Vice-Captain Velivera, practically in unison with another voice. It threw me off for a second, but then I noticed a supervisor I'd seen a few times standing behind him. I bowed in recognition, and he waved at me.

The vice-captain sighed again. "Anyway, Captain, you can't push your work off on your subordinates and run away."

"I didn't run away! I had more important business."

It really was my fault, wasn't it? I made him abandon his work.

"Captain! I know you hate dealing with nobles, but you can't keep dumping your work on me, you jerk! Those empty-headed pigs do nothing but grumble and complain unless they're dealing with *you*."

"Velivera, would you like to say that a little more...tactfully?" Captain Oght asked.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, I wasn't thinking. Let's just...go, okay?"

"Whaaat?" Captain Oght groaned. "You're not finished with him?"

"No, I'm *not*. He whined for an hour straight until I got tired of it and had him *take a little nap*."

"A little—what did you do to him?!"

"Nothing at all. Why, we all know he just got a little tired."

"Hold it, now. We're dealing with nobility, even if it's *him*."

"It's perfectly fine," Vice-Captain Velivera said with a shrug. "It's *him*, after all."

Is this something I should be witnessing? What do I do? Should I just...sneak away?

“Sirs?” the supervisor cut in. “I think Ivy’s gotten tired of your bickering.”

“Huh?” I gasped.

“Oh, sorry, Ivy,” Captain Oght apologized. “Looks like there’s work to be done.”

“I-It’s okay. Thanks for everything today.” I played along. *I didn’t hear a word you said! I swear!*

“My apologies,” Vice-Captain Velivera said. “Dealing with bullheaded nobles can really...test my limits, let’s say.”

He looks really scary! “Good luck with your work, Vice-Captain,” I replied.

Vice-Captain Velivera patted my head. *Ah, he looks softer now. Thank goodness.*

I thanked them once more and took my leave to head to the plaza. The captain and vice-captain sure had a lot on their plates.

Chapter 54: We'd Better Get Going...

I HUDDLED UP IN MY TENT and looked at the bank plate. My name was engraved on it. I was strangely giddy... It was like my existence had been validated, somehow.

It was about time to start preparing for the journey to Otolwa. Part of me didn't want to leave Ratome Village, but I did want to see more villages and towns. Besides, the fortune-teller who'd saved me in Ratomi had asked me to go to the town next to the capital. I didn't know what I'd find there, but she'd said that I absolutely had to go. Though I asked why several times, she'd always evaded the question. Still, she was serious about it, so I wanted to keep my promise.

Okay. Let's get to preparing. But—oops! I almost forgot. I had collected sopuna fruit, so I needed to dry the skin and grind it into powder. It'd be better to do it before I left. While it dried, I could set traps and earn some money. First, though, I had to peel the sopuna skin...

“I’m sooo tired...”

I had done my best to forage a lot, so I ended up with more fruit to peel than I’d expected. It took a ton of effort to peel every single one. I stretched my taut shoulders and spread a cloth outside of the tent, lining up the sopuna skins on it. It would take two or three days for them to dry. We’d probably have clear skies for a few more days, but I’d have to watch out for rain.

Next up, traps! I went back into the tent and found Sora rolling around.

“Something wrong, little slime?”

Sora looked pointedly toward the bag. Was it hungry? I took out some potions and lined them up. It quickly rolled over one and began eating—yep, Sora was hungry.

“I’m gonna make traps now, okay?”

I focused on constructing traps for field mice and wild rabbits. If the adandara came again, I would do my best to tell it I was leaving soon. It had really helped me out a lot. Sora might’ve saved its life, but it ended up helping me more than it did Sora.

What would I need to prepare for my journey? I was good on clothes, and I wouldn't need traps during my travel, but I did need rope. I also wanted more edible fruit...my supplies were running low. As for Sora's potions, I'd take as many as I could cram in a bag.

After completing ten of both types of traps, I put them in my bag. "All done!"

As always, I found Sora sleeping. I checked on how the sopuna were drying and looked to the sky. I wasn't so sure now about whether this good weather would hold up—might break tonight, I thought—so I moved them inside the tent.

After that, I boiled water and made tea. My meal was dried meat, tea, and fruit...same as it ever was, but so comforting.

I boiled some fresh water then and scrubbed myself in the tent for an early bedtime. I was planning to set a whole lot of traps tomorrow, which meant I wanted to be rested for all that walking. *I just hope I can find some good spots.*

"Good night, Sora." With that, we went to bed.

I slowly opened my eyes—I could see the sky growing light through the fabric of the tent. It was a little early to get up, but I stretched my arms out to loosen up. If I was going to leave this village, then I needed to start being cautious again. I'd been getting too lax since I started sleeping in the tent.

"Good morning, Sora." I ate breakfast with my slime and gathered myself for the day with some tea.

With one bag full of traps and another bag full of Sora, I left the tent. After saying good morning to the plaza supervisor, I greeted patrollers with a quick bow when I ran into them. I'd done this plenty of times now, so it wasn't even embarrassing anymore. Maybe...maybe that was a good thing?

"Oh, Ivy! Early day, huh? Good morning." Vice-Captain Velivera greeted me.

"Good morning. Did things turn out okay yesterday?" I was a little curious. I wouldn't get in trouble if I asked, right?

"Yep. I made the captain clean up his mess."

And he looks awfully happy about it. I hope Captain Oght is okay. "Um, I see...err, I should go!"

“Yeah? Careful out there.”

Maybe I shouldn't have asked. I'm worried about Captain Oght now.

I walked around the woods, searching for wild rabbit and field mouse tracks. But when I found them, I also found those of larger animals nearby. If I set traps here, they'd probably just get smashed again. Finding a decent spot was such a pain.

Ah! There's that aura again. Is that...? I stopped and looked around, waiting. Nothing happened. Was I wrong? Or...

Purr.

I knew it! I looked toward the sound and saw the adandara with something in its mouth. The adandara always came after I felt that aura, so I'd figured I was going to see it now.

“Morning, adandara.”

Purrrr. When it saw me, though, it turned and padded away. As I watched it curiously, Sora chased after it. I rushed to catch up. After a short walk, we arrived at the river.

“What's wrong?” I asked. It put down what it had in its mouth and nudged it forward with a paw. It was a bunch of wild rabbits and field mice. “Adandara, isn't this your food? You've already thanked me enough. Don't worry about me anymore, okay?”

I looked it in the eyes as I spoke, but it just nudged the assortment of animals toward me again. *What do I do? It's already done more than enough for me.*

I looked to the adandara. Its ears folded down sadly. “Okay, I'll take it, but this is the last time! Thank you.”

The adandara's ears perked up, and it began to purr again. I stroked it, and it narrowed its eyes contentedly. *Too cute.*

Okay, let's get to butchering. The adandara brought me a lot today. Oh, and my traps...I'd better hurry.

Chapter 55: I Set Traps, But...

SEVEN WILD RABBITS, five field mice. The adandara was a really excellent hunter. It had even brought the animals to me *alive*, somehow. When I took it all to the usual butcher, they were shocked. It seemed to them like I was getting a ton of game every day. I received 1,165 dal in total and left. *Maybe I should sell somewhere else next time?*

I rushed back to the forest to search for places to set traps. Not far from me, Sora and the adandara played together...or rather, the adandara just batted the slime around.

Mm, this won't do. I searched for a while, but I couldn't find any good spots.

Suddenly, a voice spoke up from behind me. "Ivy, what are you doing out here?"

"Whoa!" I was so focused on finding ideal places for traps that I'd lost track of my surroundings. I glanced around for Sora and the adandara, but they were nowhere in sight. "Um! Huh?"

"Something wrong?" the man asked.

"What? No, I'm fine! Umm, you're...Gun...Gun..."

"Ah ha ha ha! It's Gunsvel."

"My apologies."

"All good! So, what brings you here? It's dangerous out in the forest." He must've seen me during his patrol and came to check on me.

"I was thinking of setting some traps," I explained.

"Traps? Oooh, like animal traps? Not many people hunt like that."

They don't? I suppose not...but I like being able to hunt safely.

"Boarhogs come through here a lot," he said. "Why don't you try a little downstream?"

"Is that so? Thank you for the suggestion."

As I bowed my head and thanked him, I heard one of Gunsvel's

coworkers call his name.

“Oops!” he gasped. “I’d better get going. And remember, don’t let your guard down.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Once I couldn’t see the patrolling guards anymore, I looked around...but there was no sign of Sora and the adandara. *Oh no. What do I do?*

As I fretted, something dropped from the sky right in front of me. I went stiff as a board.

“Pu, pu!”

“Huh...?” Oh! It was the adandara, with Sora on its back. They must’ve been hiding in a tree.

Thank goodness. The tension drained from my body, and I slumped to the ground. The adandara walked over and rubbed against me.

“Thanks for looking out for Sora,” I mumbled. Who knows what would’ve happened if it hadn’t hidden the slime for me? Heck, the guards might’ve killed the adandara if they saw it. I really *had* gotten too soft...even Gunsvel had warned me about it. I needed to keep my head on a swivel.

Following Gunsvel’s suggestion, I went downstream and set up traps, checking for nearby auras the whole time. It had already started to get dark by the time I finished, so I said my farewells to the adandara and rushed back to the village.

From what I’d heard, boarhogs became active around evening. They attacked by charging into things with their huge bodies, so I really didn’t want to run into one. I stuffed Sora into its bag and started running in earnest.

Fortunately, I managed to get back to the village before dark. I was so spent that I was taking huge, whole-body breaths. The gatekeeper was a little concerned, so I told him I just wanted to get back before night.

“Fair,” he said. “Boarhogs aren’t the only things that come out to play at night. Monsters tend to appear more, too. Good work out there.”

I bowed and headed for the plaza. I’d run so hard that I was really hungry now.

As the sky gradually brightened the next morning, I left my tent and stretched. It was time to check on my traps. First, though, I looked up at the clouds. It looked clear enough, so I put the sopuna skins back out to dry. They were drying at a good rate, so I could probably start grinding them into powder tomorrow.

I went to the forest and checked my traps. Along the way, the adandara joined me. As requested, it hadn't brought anything today.

That's the spirit.

But...was it okay for this monster to approach a person so often? I hadn't heard anything about adandara sightings in the village so far, but I was worried about how close it was coming to the village.

"Adandara, they might try to kill you if anyone sees you. Be careful, okay?"

Purrrr. It rubbed its head against me joyfully. *Why is it so happy?*

We arrived at the place where I'd set the traps. I just hoped I'd caught some game today.

"Mm, this is hard..." I mumbled. "More than half of them are broken."

Three wild rabbits and one field mouse. Not much, but better than nothing. I cleaned and dressed them, though it didn't take long since it was just four animals. Next up, I had to take them to the butcher, so I left the adandara and went back to the village.

"Should I go to the usual place? Or do they think I'm suspicious?" I hesitated, but in the end, I didn't want to find somewhere new. Still, I was a little nervous.

"I'd like to sell these," I called out when I arrived.

"Of course," said the usual woman. "Oh? You didn't bring as much today."

"Um...right."

"That's 385 dal. You know, I think it's about time for boarhog mating season."

"Mating season?"

"Yep. During mating season, they go crazy. They can even come close to the village during the day. You'd best be careful out there."

“Thank you for telling me.”

Mating season, huh? I've heard adventurers talk about how most animals are dangerous when they're rutting. I hope they don't come near village roads in the daytime...that could make my journey a little more dangerous.

I needed a new map. The one I'd found didn't have anything beyond Otolwa, and it had some mistakes here and there that had gotten me turned around in the woods. I needed an accurate map. There weren't any in the bookstore I had visited, but maybe I could find one in a different shop?

Chapter 56: Prepping for the Journey

I VISITED ANOTHER BOOKSTORE in search of a map, but no luck. Maybe I was looking in the wrong place?

“Oh? Ivy, is that you?”

“Huh?” Wait, I recognized this guy. “Ah, you sold me my tent, right?”

“Yep. What brings you here? Looking for something?”

“Yes, I’m searching for a map.”

“A map? Are you leaving the village?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “My plan is to go to Otolwa.”

“Huh. Well, the guild ought to have maps.”

“The adventurers’ guild? Or the merchant guild?” I still wasn’t sure.

“Hm? Uh, either one, I’d say.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Adventurers and merchants both need maps, after all.”

So they were at the guilds instead of the bookstore? If so, the merchant guild would be more convenient, because I had more money to deposit before I headed out.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll try there right away.”

“Ah, by the way,” he said, “how’s the tent working out for you? Is there anything you need?”

“The tent is wonderful. I have no problems with it. As for what I need...”

“Did you think of something? C’mon, spit it out.”

“I’ve been searching for canteens to keep water in...” I said hesitantly.

“Canteens? Heck, I’ve got a few.”

“Oh? May I buy them?”

“Pssh, they’re all yours,” he answered with a smile. “I can’t seem to sell the things at all.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. Wanna come with me and get ‘em now?”

“Yes, I do! Thank you!”

I was going to get the canteens I’d been hoping for! That way, I’d be able to carry more water. Keeping close to rivers as I traveled meant that I’d needed to take pretty big detours sometimes. When we reached the store, he gave me seven canteens. They were all clean and looked much sturdier than the one I had.

“If you need ‘em, take ‘em all,” he offered.

“Huh? But—”

“Don’t worry about it. Call it a parting gift.”

“Thank you!”

He answered with a jolly laugh. I thanked him several more times and left in a buoyant mood. *Okay, now let’s go to the dump and get that done. Oh, but first, I should go to the tent and grab my trash.*

The dump was as awesome as ever. First, I discarded my old canteen. The thing was falling apart. Next came the clothes that were too small for me now. They’d treated me well, but it was time.

Then, I grabbed the potions for me. The people of Ratome Village threw a surprising number of unexpired potions away. I’d never seen anything like it in the other villages, but I definitely appreciated it.

Next up: potions for Sora. I picked things up one after another and tossed them into its bag. I also found a small purse and two magic bags, which I was happy to take as backups. I picked up a few other things that I’d need for travel, and then I was set.

“Pu, pu!” As for Sora, it was digging through potions in the dump looking for a few extra snacks. When it ate one, it burbled happily. Once in a while I had to save Sora when it got stuck, but otherwise, it was doing just fine.

Now that I had what I needed, I left the dump. I felt around for auras—nobody seemed to be coming, but someone might show up if I took my time hunting for the best stuff. Maybe it would be better to do that after I was back at my tent.

“Sora, let’s go.”

“Pu pu, pu pu!”

I picked Sora up and gave it a big squeeze. My friend was just too cute! Smiling, I headed back to the village.

“Keep up the good work,” said the gatekeeper as I entered.

“Thank you!”

After reaching the village, I headed to the merchant guild. As usual, it was bustling. I needed to deposit money today, so I went into one of the booths and knocked twice on the window.

This time, I was greeted by a woman. “Hi. Would you like to make a deposit or a withdrawal?”

“Deposit, please.”

She held out a small tray, on which I placed six silver coins and thirty bronze tokens, along with my account plate.

“Just a moment, please,” she said. Shortly after, she returned. “Thank you for waiting. Please confirm the amount.”

They really were fast! I put my plate on the white tray in front of the window. Under the last deposit amount, today’s date and deposit were displayed.

Silver coins: 6

Bronze tokens: 30

Below those, a new section had been added:

Gold coins: 4

Silver tokens: 1

Silver coins: 11

Bronze tokens: 30

“Is this information correct?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

“Thank you for choosing us.”

Once the window slid shut again, I checked the remaining money in my wallet. Two silver coins—two gidal. Ten bronze tokens—1,000 dal. One hundred ninety-seven bronze coins—1,970 dal. Fifteen copper bills—fifteen dal. I put my money back into my wallet and left the booth.

“Now, where are those maps?” I surveyed the merchant guild. There was a bookshelf near the counter, but I saw five different kinds of maps. What was the difference?

I opened the biggest one and looked inside. It seemed to include the capital, towns, and even small villages. I then checked the smallest one, which only recorded the area around this village. The plan was to go to the capital, so...I'd need the biggest one, right?

I checked the big map again. It included details of the various ores and the like available nearby, but none of that was useful to me. So I opened the second-biggest map; it was like the biggest one, but the main difference was that it included rivers and lakes. It also listed distances and travel times from village to village.

Was this the one I needed?

Just in case, I checked the other maps. One listed the capital's, towns', and villages' products and exports, which seemed useful for merchants. The last one showed places around the village where monsters and animals were common. *I had no idea there were maps like this.*

The one I wanted cost 500 dal, which was a tad expensive, but I couldn't do without it. Moved by necessity, I reluctantly paid with fifty copper coins.

Chapter 57: I Wanna Be Stronger

BACK AT MY CAMPSITE, I placed wide, smooth rocks on the ground outside the tent. Then I put the sopuna skins on them and used fist-sized rocks to mash and grind the skins into bits. It was a simple job, but I didn't have a grown-up's strength, so it took a while. I'd started in the morning, and it took me until after noon to finish the job. I swept the sopuna powder into a bottle I had picked up earlier, then secured the top with cloth and thread.

"So tired..." My arms were quaking. I didn't want to lift anything else today. *Whew...I'm beat.* My arms had been straining the whole time, so everything down to my fingertips hurt. Still, at least I was done. The only errand I needed to take care of was grabbing Sora's potions, which I could do before I left tomorrow. *Oh, but I better stock up on dried meat, too! I wouldn't want to run out...*

I went into the tent and called to Sora. "Ready? We're going to pick up some dried meat!"

At that, Sora bounced high up and landed next to me. It didn't hit the ceiling like it had the first time, either—Sora was figuring out how to adjust the force of its movements now. I picked it up and put it gently in its bag.

I was planning to leave tomorrow, so I wanted to go see Captain Oght and Vice-Captain Velivera. But...where did they usually stay? Would I have to go to their posts to see them? I searched as I headed for the butcher. Maybe I would get lucky.

"Welcome back," said the woman at the butcher's.

"Hi there."

"Oh dear, did your hunt go badly today?" she asked, noticing that I was empty-handed.

"Huh? Oh, actually, I came to purchase dried meat. I'll be leaving this village tomorrow."

"Aww, really? That's a shame. You butcher meat so neatly that there's hardly any waste when I use it for dried meat. I appreciate your business."

“Thank you.” I was happy to hear that. My cheeks were probably pink, so I hurried to the dried meat shelf and hid my face. It took me a while to decide between buying the big or the small bags, but eventually I went with the big ones. I’d normally buy just one, but I was eating more these days. Two was better. “I’ll take these, please.”

“Sure. That’s 600 dal. And here’s a little extra, as a thanks for your business.” She put another small bag next to the two big ones I had bought. It was full of scraps and edges of dried meat chunks.

“Th-thank you!”

“Be careful out there,” the nice woman warned me. “Stay away from boarhogs and monsters.”

“Okay. Thank you so much.” I bowed deeply and left, patting the extra bag happily as I headed back toward the plaza.

“There you are, Ivy!”

“Hm?” I turned to see a familiar face. “Hello, Captain Oght.”

He called out to me from across the whole street. It was embarrassing to hear someone yell my name like that, but it was Captain Oght. There’s no stopping that guy.

“Ivy, I hear you’re heading to Otolwa.”

Right, I wanted to thank him. It’s a good thing he saw me.

“Yes. Thank you for all your help.” I bowed deeply to express my gratitude.

“Aww, c’mon. I did what I did because I felt like it, that’s all. But...you do know you can stay in this village if you want, right?”

“This is a really nice village, but...the fortune-teller who saved my life told me to see the world and broaden my horizons. I made a promise to her. And I want to keep on seeing and learning what’s out there.”

“Is that so? Well, it’s always good to see the world. I was an adventurer myself back in the day, so I get where you’re coming from. But what’s this about a fortune-teller?”

“She was the one who taught me how to survive. She said she wanted me to go to a town near the royal capital, so I plan to do just that.”

“That’s really somethin’. She saved your life, huh? That’s the sort of thing

you gotta follow through on.”

“Definitely. I wanted to thank Vice-Captain Velivera, too—do you know where he is?”

“Uhh...he’s a little busy right now.”

“Hm?”

“I kinda gave him some, uh...work...” He grinned uncomfortably.

Huh? Wait a second. He doesn’t mean... “He’s going to be really cross with you again.”

“Don’t worry! It’s not *that* bad.”

“Then why did you...”

“Look, it’s my job to raise my subordinates up, y’know?”

Good luck, Vice-Captain Velivera. “Then could you at least thank him for me?” I asked.

“Yeah. Leave it to me!”

“Thank you.”

When I tried to continue on my way, though, he dragged me back to the food stalls and gave me another three boarhog skewers for some reason. After ruffling my hair one last time, Captain Ought walked off—or ran off, really.

I took a long look around the village as I walked back to the plaza. The fortune-teller had taught me how to communicate with people, where to gather information, and how to read between the lines of strangers’ actions to guess who might be dangerous.

But that wasn’t all she taught me.

“I do want you to go to the town near the capital,” she’d said to me once, “but if you find somewhere you’d like to spend the rest of your life, then let that go. What matters is that you find someone you can trust. When you do, tell them everything.” I didn’t understand—if I could keep my secrets secret, why shouldn’t I? “Ah, but secrets will always come to light in time. When that day comes, you’ll need someone who will fight alongside you. After all, keeping a secret from one that you trust can shatter that trust to pieces.”

Could I tell Captain Ought everything? I...didn’t really think so. He worried about me, sure. He was reliable, yeah. But I was just too scared.

I couldn't forget the way my parents and the other villagers looked at me. No, I couldn't trust people. In time, perhaps that might change, but...what if I was found out? If others had fled Ratomi Village, they might eventually come here. When they did, I would be exposed.

I really am weak.

I remembered the last time I'd seen the fortune-teller. "Take a long look around the world and expand your horizons," she'd said. "And grow stronger, too, however long it takes. You will find the happiness you deserve, but you mustn't hurry. Haste may take you in the wrong direction. Human connections can't be rushed. The world is full of people with different views—take your time learning about them all. And always believe in your own strength, young one."

Me? Strong? Could I be strong? If only I could see the fortune-teller again...

Chapter 58: Saying Goodbye to the Captains

AS THE FIRST LIGHT of morning crept over the sky, I started up—I'd sensed someone moving around the plaza. *Good. My senses are sharp again for the journey ahead.*

I devoured my breakfast of fruit and dried meat, watching Sora digest one potion after another.

"Sora, we're saying goodbye to Ratome Village today," I said. "Next stop, Otolwa."

Sora quivered in response. Once the meal was over, I relaxed with my tea while Sora began its usual up-and-down morning stretches. My friend used to be translucent blue, but now it had a second color. The lower half of its teardrop shape was blue, while the upper half was red. It looked pretty since its body was so clear, but it was still a total mystery why the little slime had changed colors. With its exercise finished, the slime looked at me and wiggled. *Cute.*

"Phew...okay. Let's get going."

I'd already prepared for the walk ahead; all that was left was to take down the tent. I placed Sora in its bag and exited the tent. After packing it up and slinging it over my back, I hung my other bags over my shoulders. Ready!

At the plaza entrance, I bowed to today's supervisor.

"You leaving?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you for everything."

"Be careful. Best of luck on your journey, now."

I bowed again, even deeper, and headed for the village gate. When it came into view, I saw Vice-Captain Velivera was leaning against it. Was he the gatekeeper today?

"Morning, Ivy," he called.

"Good morning." I'd asked Captain Oght to tell him I was leaving, but it was nice that I'd get to say my goodbyes face-to-face. "Vice-Captain Velivera, you've helped me a lot. Thank you for everything." I bowed deeply. He patted my head, which I had to admit felt nice.

“No worries. We’re both victims of the captain.”

“Huh? Oh, well, er...how was work yesterday?”

“Uhh...ha ha ha! Well, I’ve never been a fan of office work. Did he say something?”

“Something...about raising his subordinates?”

Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. The vice-captain’s smile is making me shiver all of a sudden... That’s scary!

Vice-Captain Velivera grinned wryly. “Ooh, he calls it *raising* us, huh? I see.”

I’m really sorry, Captain Ought. I’m...not exactly sure what I’m sorry for, but I am sorry.

“Um...th-that’s—” I stammered.

“Ah, no worries. Forget about it. And hey, you be careful out there. The forest has dangerous animals, monsters, and worst of all...*people*.”

“Right.”

“You’re going to Otolwa, aren’t you? They’ve got some bad stuff going on down there. Organizations that kidnap people. I hear they’ve been cracking down on them, but they haven’t all been caught yet. If anyone seems off, stay the heck away.”

“Kidnappers...I’ll be careful.”

“Good,” he said with a smile. “And you make sure to come back here sometime, you hear? We’ll be waiting.”

“Huh? Oh...okay! I’ll definitely come back one day.” I bowed quickly and left.

By the time I reached the mountain road, I wanted to cry a little.

One day. For the first time, I realized just how good it felt to know that someone wants to see you again. Vice-Captain Velivera may not have been the most respectful with his boss, but he was kindhearted. Captain Ought got carried away, but he was reliable. I had met two very good people. One day, I really did want to return to this village.

“One day,” I repeated.

Side: Captain Oght

ABUNDLE OF PAPERS slammed down onto my desk. I had a bad feeling about this. I glanced to my side, and there he was. The guy was always smiling, but boy, this was an especially chilling grin.

“Uhh...Velivera, what is this?” I asked.

“This is all that work you’ve been saving up, Captain.”

“Ha! Ha ha! Ha ha ha...whoops, would you look at the time? I’d best be patrolling.”

“Heh. Don’t worry. I’ve changed the schedule around so you can spend your entire day in here.”

“Ha...ha...hahhh...” It was getting harder to fake-laugh.

“Oh, and here’s an idea: Why don’t I stay here with you, too, all day long?”

“Huh.” I shivered... Those eyes were serious. Yeah, I was in big trouble. Come to think of it, I hadn’t done *any* paperwork lately. I glanced at the bundle of documents. *Fair’s fair. Good times can’t last forever, I guess.*

“Allow me to take care of it,” I said.

“That was the plan, yes.”

“Right.” I reached for the documents. *Aagh, reading them all is gonna be a pain. Why does paperwork have to be like this?*

“Also,” he said, “there’s this.”

“Hmm?”

Velivera handed me a single document. I read it at once...and immediately felt my brow furrow more tightly than ever before. It was a copy of a request issued by Ratomi Village’s adventurers’ guild. Specifically, it was a search warrant for villagers who had absconded with village assets. The list of names extended all the way to the third page.

“The chief there sure is a knucklehead, isn’t he?” I mused.

“Yeah. Both guilds have already spread the word about the state of Ratomi

Village. There's no reason to bother with this one."

Merchants' livelihoods depended on good information, so their network was naturally fast and accurate. The merchant guild took info gathering seriously enough that it promptly looked into even minor rumors spreading among merchants. As a result, the situation in Ratomi Village was already well known. The merchant guild had set its valuation of the chief and lord of Ratomi Village at the lowest possible level.

The valuation of the merchant guild was a measure of trustworthiness. When it was low, that meant that productive negotiations were essentially impossible. Nobody dealt with a village whose chief had a poor valuation.

It was astonishing that their adventurers' guild would put out a request like this now. Did the chief not realize this would be tying his own noose? The adventurers' guild knew about the state of the village, too, which was why they'd appended a note to the front page: "Protect the assets of the listed villagers." Not *return the assets* to the village chief but *protect the villagers*. In other words, the adventurers' guild wasn't helping the chief on this one.

"What an idiot," I said.

Velivera nodded. "Through and through."

Ivy's name wasn't on the list...but there was an odd listing for a little girl. All of the people who'd fled were in families, save that one single child. Velivera must have realized as well.

"That kid has a secret," I said. "And not just that she's a girl."

"I think you're right. I'm sure it has something to do with why she couldn't stay in her village."

I sighed. "She really didn't trust me, huh?"

"That probably has less to do with you and more to do with how Ratomi Village treated her," Velivera assured me. "I'm sure she'll tell you someday."

"You're right. We might as well wait. You saw her on the way out, right?"

"Yeah. I had some information to share with her."

"By the way, how *did* you convince the gatekeeper to trade shifts with you?"

Velivera raised an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

"You traded shifts before, didn't you? Last time, the guy you traded with

came over to me crying and begging. ‘Please never make the vice-captain angry again, please!’ That sort of thing.”

“How rude. All I did was ask with a smile.”

“They’re more scared of you than they are of me!” I said, a little indignant.

“Captain, I hope you know you’re not leaving this room until your work is done.”

“Ack! Okay, okay, I’ll do it!”

Extra: Chief of Ratomi Village

BEFORE MY EYES sat rotting zaro fruit.

“What is the meaning of this?!” I glared at the people around me and watched them shudder and avert their eyes. Their reactions only amplified my rage. “Answer me! Why are they rotting?!”

The group went quiet. I was enraged, but before I could shout again, a man stepped forward.

“The fortune-teller Ruba was the one who told us when to harvest the zaro. You should be aware of this, Chief.”

“What does that matter?! Should a village fall apart due to the death of one hag?!”

“The zaro harvesting window is extremely narrow,” the man insisted. “Even for people who have watched over the crop for a long time, it’s very difficult to ascertain. That’s why we needed Ruba! And yet you...!”

“Silence! Do you know to whom you are speaking?!” I gave the man a good kick. People screamed all around...and some men with farm tools stepped forth. “The nerve! Surely you wouldn’t threaten your chief?!”

I didn’t like this. Not one bit.

They wouldn’t dare! “All of you, stop letting the zaro fruit rot!” I roared. “When the merchants come, you sell it for a high price! Got it?!”

Who do these cretins think they are? I’ve half a mind to raise their taxes. Let them learn the consequences of opposing me! And what does that dead old witch matter? She got uppity just because my father took a liking to her. I never wanted her opinions! Who did she think she was?!

Still, the zaro were in bad shape. *Tch. Here I thought I could take things easy once I became chief, but people never stop disturbing my peace and quiet.*

It was clear that the zaro harvest was pathetically small, so I was forced to go back to the fields for the first time in a while.

“What is this?!” I snarled. “Where did the other laborers go?!” There were clearly fewer people harvesting than before—half, at most. These slobs were slacking! Making light of me! “Hurry up and bring me those shirkers!”

“Um...Chief?” A man spoke up. “We informed you two days ago...”

Two days ago? What? I was with my mistress then, so how could I possibly know?

“Informed me of what? Speak!”

The man, his face pale, slowly explained. “A large number of people have left the village. We requested that your wife ask you what we should do, but...”

“They left? They...left?! In the middle of the harvest?!” Those rats, receiving the bounty of our village and disappearing when it became inconvenient for them. They would suffer for this! “Damn them! Who was it? Write their names down!”

One woman frantically began writing. Each and every name she scratched out fanned the flames of my rage. For some reason, she paused a moment before adding one last name. I felt as though I’d heard that name before...a child, was it? Alone? Well, what did I care. Even if she didn’t have parents, she still could’ve made herself useful. Perhaps I could’ve sold her as a slave.

“Umm...we don’t have enough people for the harvest,” one of the villagers said. “What should we do?”

“What you should do is *figure it out*. And don’t you dare rest until every single fruit is harvested!”

How dare they make a mockery of me? They won’t get away with this! I seized the list of names and mounted my horse. *Tch. How inconvenient that there’s no guild close by.*

After riding down the road from the village for hours, I finally spotted the carriage of a merchant that the people of Ratomi knew well. “You there! Merchant!”

A man emerged from the carriage and approached. “Hm? You’re Ratomi’s chief, aren’t you? Do you need something?” He must’ve been the merchant himself. Behind him were two burly men—likely bodyguards. Though they were surely paid guards, they hung back near the carriage; only the merchant approached. A little strange, but...perhaps he had skimped on their pay.

“I have a request for the guild. Give this to them!”

“The guild? You mean the adventurers’ guild or the merchant guild?” he asked me.

“The adventurers’ guild. They’re going to recover the funds stolen by my villagers.”

“I...think that may be unwise—”

“Silence!” I roared. “Don’t presume to meddle in my village’s affairs, merchant!”

“Hmph. Fine. Your request is to recover assets stolen by fleeing villagers?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll need five gidal.”

“Huh? Five gidal?”

“That’s the request fee.”

“Is it really that expensive? You’d better not be lying to me.”

“I’m not. Ask any merchant, and they’ll say the same.”

“Tch, fine,” I sighed. “I’m sure we can squeeze those gidal right back out of the people they catch.”

“...”

I handed the merchant his fee.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked.

“Hm? Of course,” I answered. “Those vermin think they can make a fool of me.”

“All right, then. But it’ll be some time before I can put in the request. Like Ratomi, Ratofu doesn’t have an easy avenue to communicate with the guild.”

“Mm, yes.” After leaving the request with the merchant, I spurred my horse back to Ratomi Village.

Back home, I thrust the door open. I waited and waited for that woman to come greet me from the back of the house, but...she didn’t.

“Damn it!” I shouted. “Your husband is home! Come out here, what are you doing?!?”

Refusing to receive her husband, failing to pass on messages—she was

useless. Who would she be if not for my father's introduction? Furious, I stomped inside the house without even removing my shoes—but there was no sign of anyone.

“Come, now! I’ve had enough of this!”

There was no sign of her nor any of the household staff. Where had they gone?! Out messing around at such an important time, were they?! They’d best have their fun now, because it would be a different story when they came home!

Side: Merchant

“**P**HEW,” I sighed. “I was starting to panic a little.”

“Are you really going to submit that request to the guild?”

“Hm? Well, I did take his money, so...”

“Ha ha ha! What an imbecile.”

“I heard about Ratomi from other merchants,” I said, “but I didn’t think it was *this* bad. The lord’s failed as a ruler, too.”

“Is that where the root of the problem lies? I feel bad for the ones that stayed.”

“Hmm...I’d say the people who stayed are probably on the chief’s side. Given what’s happened so far, they’re getting their just deserts.”

As I finished talking, I felt movement next to me and turned to look. The old woman beside me opened her eyes and looked at me in alarm. “Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Oh dear, where am I? And the chief’s wife?” Her voice was raspy and dry. I poured water into a cup and handed it to her.

“Calm down. You’re in a merchant carriage, and she’s right here with you. The pain has abated, so she’s sleeping now.”

The old woman’s eyes came to focus on the person behind her.

She reached out and grasped the hand of the chief’s wife, whose body was covered in wounds, and repeated “thank goodness, thank goodness” to herself as tears ran down her face.

We’d found these two collapsed on the road leading away from Ratomi Village. I was surprised when I’d recognized their faces, but I was even more horrified to see how those faces and bodies were disfigured by beatings. It was common knowledge that Ratomi had changed after the installation of its new chief, but it was hard to imagine it could turn into such a nightmare after only a few years.

When the chief himself had come to accost us, I was afraid he was

pursuing them—that he knew I had them aboard. Given his demeanor, he didn't seem to notice, but...

I pulled a document from my magic bag. The merchant guild had put out an information request to look into the state of Ratomi and its villagers, and to figure out what the local lord was doing about it. I had taken on the request, since I was already traveling this way.

In no time, I'd appended my own document explaining the situation in the village as well as the sheet of names given to me by the chief to the formal information request. I put them all in my bag. I had to head for the guild anyway, so this was convenient. If I submitted everything to the guild together, they would get to work right away. Unfortunately for the chief, this probably wouldn't go the way he hoped.

Chapter 59: The Unexpected, and Sword of Flames

I SEARCHED FOR AURAS while I filled my canteens with water. Since it was so hot, I was going through water fast, though it was better now that I had more canteens.

“Pu, pu pu!” Sora bounced around me especially energetically. It seemed like my friend was in a good mood today. Had it eaten something weird?

Actually...Sora's acting like it did when we first found that injured adandara. Huh?! Does Sora like wounds, after all? Is it always going to be happy when we find something half-dead? Okay, calm down...we haven't proven it yet. I'm probably just misunderstanding...right? Maybe Sora's just randomly in a good mood today! Right?

There was one thing I hadn't expected, though.

Purrrr.

It was the adandara. Today was our fourth day out from Ratome Village, and the adandara had followed us ever since we left. I'd heard that animals and monsters had their own territory... Was it okay for it to travel this far?

I looked at the adandara. It flicked its tail about and rubbed its head against me. *Daww. It's a shame I can't tame you.*

Since the adandara was with us, I'd taken a route through the forest instead of using the village road. We couldn't just drag a monster along on a civilized road like that, after all. And because I had a good map now, we could keep from getting lost.

“Let's go,” I called out to Sora and the adandara, checking the map as I pressed on.

When I checked for auras again, I found it kind of strange: In the past four days, monsters and animals had felt really far off. The forest was thick here, so you'd expect to run into a few monsters. I glanced at the adandara—my book said it was a pretty high-level monster. Were they staying away because they were scared? Noticing my eyes on it, the adandara purred.

Too cute! It didn't look like something animals or monsters should be

scared of at all. Still, I couldn't imagine my book was wrong. Maybe it really wasn't an adandara? Even if its features were all exactly right...

As we walked through the forest, I felt auras a short distance away and stopped. I called Sora over and put it in its bag. The adandara looked out in the direction of the auras, but it didn't seem wary.

"I think I sense adventurers. Hide so they don't kill you, okay?"

Purr. With that, it bounded gallantly off into the woods. I was worried, but I decided to trust it would be safe.

I checked my map for a route to the village road and headed for it. I'd thought the source of the auras were adventurers, but there were a whole lot of them. The auras were moving, too, so I had to keep a close watch. When I reached the road, I searched again—they seemed to have gone into the woods.

Thank goodness.

Not long after, though, I felt more auras. They were faint, so I figured they were adventurers again. The last set had too many people to be just one group of adventurers, and here we had more adventurers...which must've meant that they were all working together to hunt a specific animal or monster. That, or a wanted criminal had fled into the forest.

I slowly breathed in and out, searching in a wide range for auras. I found another one that felt like an adventurer. So many faint auras...if they really were all adventurers, then maybe there was a problem in the forest, after all. *What do I do? Should I ask them? What if they aren't adventurers at all? And if they aren't...*

Again, more auras. They were walking this way slowly along the village road. There were only four people this time, so I decided to get closer until I could see them. It wouldn't be too late to make the call once they came into sight, but I wanted to be ready to run at any moment.

After a while, I saw four men dressed like adventurers. They could probably see me, too. Their auras were faint, like those adventurers from Ratome's plaza. Nothing felt off about them, either, so they were probably fine. I approached them nervously.

While I was still worrying about how they'd speak to me, one of them piped up. "Hey, boy! Are you alone?" Warily, I nodded.

"Ha ha ha... C'mon, don't be so scared."

The four men stopped at a distance, probably to avoid spooking me.



“Kid can’t help it,” another one said. “You look so hideous he must be terrified. Don’t worry, kid! Beneath that mean mug of his, he’s a nice guy!”

“No doubt about it,” another agreed.

“Guys...” their leader groaned.

They don’t look bad. Should I ask them what’s going on?

“Um...is something happening in the forest?” I finally ventured.

“Whoa, you noticed? You’re really perceptive, kid,” the scary one said.

Noticed what? Did he mean the adventurers? I cocked my head a little in puzzlement.

“You’ve gotta be if you noticed things were off,” he continued. “Though I guess we do have a lot of adventurers out today.”

I didn’t know if things were “off” since I had never been here before, but I could tell that there were many more adventurers than I expected. The forest was big; unless it had a famous cave or something, it was rare to run into so many in such a short time. Adventurers actively try to stay out of each other’s way in the forest. If they’re gathering in one place, it’s because there’s trouble afoot.

“It’s monsters,” said the leader. “We got info about pretty dangerous ones, so they put out a request to cull them.”

It’s not the adandara, is it? “What kind of monsters?”

“Bunch of ogres,” said one of them. “They say maybe more than ten.”

Ogres? Thank goodness...

“It’s gonna be dark soon, too,” their quietest member finally spoke up. “There’s a gathering place for adventurers nearby. It’s risky at night. You should come with us.”

Yeah, it was almost sunset. Ogres were terrible monsters that liked to eat people, so it might really be best for me to tag along with this group. Would the adandara be okay, though? All I could do was hope for the best.

“It wouldn’t be a problem if I came along, would it?” I asked uncertainly.

“Not at all!” their leader assured me. “It’s our job to protect young adventurers and merchants when we get requests to take out monsters.”

Actually, I have heard something like that.

When I asked where they were headed, they offered to lead me there. I’d

be fine tagging along, right?

“By the way,” the considerate one looked at me, “our group is called Sword of Flames. Ever heard of us?”

“Sorry. I don’t know much about adventurer groups.”

“Dang. We’re pretty famous over in Otolwa.”

“This is my first time traveling there,” I explained.

“Ah, well, no wonder you don’t know us. My bad!”

“It’s okay!”

I was surprised when we reached a clearing after a short walk. There were fifteen big tents there... This must’ve been a really enormous hunt.

Chapter 60: Nobody Else Knows This?

THE LEADER OF Sword of Flames was named Seizerk. The others were Sifar and Gnouga. Finally, there was the nice one who'd spoken to me before—Rattloore.

"Do you have a tent?" Seizerk asked.

"Yes."

"The spot next to ours should still be open. You can set up there."

I checked out the spot, and it looked good. With my one-person tent, I could pitch it here with room to spare. While I was setting up, the members of Sword of Flames told the others about me. They were sharing tips about the ogres, too. Once I'd finished with the tent and gotten my things organized inside, I found Rattloore waiting for me outside for some reason.

"It's my turn to cook," he said. "Do you have food with you, Ivy?"

A lot of people around us were stoking fires and cooking. If we could cook here, I'd probably eat a wild rabbit I'd dressed earlier.

"Umm, I was going to cook rabbit."

"Huh?! Have you been hunting while you travel? That's incredible for a solo traveler. Oh, but don't rabbits kind of stink?"

I hadn't *hunted* it, actually. The adandara had given it to me. I felt a little ashamed to be praised for it.

"It was luck, really," I lied. "As for the smell, it doesn't stink if I prepare it correctly."

"Prepare it? You have a way to get rid of the smell?"

"Huh? Um...yes, I do?"

"Wow! I had no idea you could do that. Okay, let's make dinner together!"

"Huh?!"

"See, I'm kind of a crappy cook," explained Rattloore. "I taste as I go, but people always say my food turns out weird. Why do you think that is?"

How should I know?

I didn't have a chance to say anything more before he grabbed my arm.
“Okay, let's go cook!”

Wow, his eyes were desperate. Well...I didn't really mind cooking together that much. Besides, the way he was looking at me made it impossible to refuse. “What have we got?”

“Uhh...meat, potatoes, cabbage, salt and pepper...”

“Does that count as cooking...? If you want to use a leafy green like cabbage, I recommend making it into a soup. If all you're doing is heating it up and adding salt and pepper, why do you need me?”

“Can you cook, Ivy?” he asked.

“Simple soups, yes.”

“Soup! Incredible. My buddies told me never to make soup again.”

What kind of soup did he make? How do you ruin a soup?

“That's it!” he prattled on. “Ivy, we'll make soup! Soup is the best on a chilly night. Really warms the old body right up.” It wasn't that cold out, but he was right. It was nice to have something warm at night, and soup was good for that. “Can we? Please? You can use any seasonings and ingredients you need!”

Am I imagining it, or is he really, really desperate?

“Like I said, I can only make simple soup. Are you sure?”

“Absolutely!”

I went to my tent and brought out a bag with the wild rabbit meat and some herbs I'd found in the forest. Rattloore also brought a big pot from his group's tent, along with some water. I poured the water in the pot and set it over the fire to warm up. The rabbit meat was next—I sprinkle it with herbs and salt to mask the smell, then rubbed it all in.

While I seared bite-sized pieces of rabbit meat on a hot frying pan, I got the vegetables simmering in the pot next to it. Once the meat's surface was browned, I moved it to the pot, then added some fruit with a unique fragrance and more salt for flavor. The key thing was simmering the odor-removing herbs with the meat. Once it had bubbled for a while, it was ready!

“That smells amazing,” said Rattloore. “I've never smelled anything like that before.”

He's never smelled something like this? Did I mess up? I tasted it. The gamey smell was gone thanks to the herbs, so I figured it was fine...right?

Rattloore brought me hunk of raw meat. It was my first time seeing this kind of meat, but he said it was from an animal called a moo. I sniffed. It didn't stink. I rubbed in a mixture of pungent dried herbs and salt, left it for a short time, and then tossed it in a frying pan. The savory smell of sizzling meat wafted forth. *Oh, no. Are monsters gonna smell this and find us?*

"Excuse me? Will the smell of food attract monsters?" I asked.

"The smell? Oh, we've got monster repellant all around here. Don't worry."

Monster repellant? I heard people use it to keep the scent of food from attracting monsters, but it's super expensive. Did they have veteran adventurers here, then?

They did say that Sword of Flames was famous in Otolwa, now that I thought about it. I looked at the guy in front of me. He gazed longingly at the meat as it cooked... Was that drool? Maybe they were famous for something besides adventuring?

While the meat browned, I checked on the soup. It wouldn't take long.

"Rattloore, did you make Ivy cook for you?" Seizerk came up to the fire.

"Huh?! No, we did it together—err. Okay, actually, yeah. I didn't do anything." Seizerk smacked him on the head.

Gnouga sighed. "Sorry about Rattloore."

"No, it's okay. It was easy."

"Did you make this, Ivy?" Sifar's eyes were fixed on the soup. "I bet this is going to be delicious. Soup, eh? Sounds amazing. I'd given up on today, really."

Everyone was clearly hungry. While I served up our soup and meat, Seizerk cut slices of black bread for everyone. There was some for me, too! I had only eaten black bread twice in my life.

"That looks so good..." Sifar took a mouthful of soup and froze in place.

Huh? Is it that bad? Oh no...

"What is this? It's delicious!" Oh! He liked it! I'd prepared it in kind of a rush, so I was worried.

“It’s really good,” Gnouga agreed. “Is this meat...wild rabbit?”

“That’s right,” I answered.

“They usually smoke wild rabbit to make dried meat so it’s not noticeable, but I always thought rabbit meat was supposed to stink,” said Seizerk. “This doesn’t smell bad at all.”

“Ivy’s incredible!” said Rattloore. “He does these, uh, *preparations* that unstinkify it!”

Doesn’t everyone do that? You...definitely prepare food before you start cooking it, right?

“There’s a faint scent of medicinal plants,” Sifar noted. “Are you using them to cover up the odor?”

Medicinal plants? Does he mean...herbs?

“Yes,” I finally answered. “I had some dried leaves I foraged in the forest, so I used those.”

“Incredible, right?!”

“Why do you sound so proud, Rattloore? Mm...the meat has a nice strong taste, too.”

“Yeah, this is good. I was worried when I heard Rattloore was cooking tonight, but thanks to Ivy, we’re eating like kings! Thanks, Ivy.”

“It’s no problem. I’m just glad you all like it.” I swallowed a mouthful of soup. I’d simmered potatoes and cabbage in it, and every bite was fragrant and delicious. Another successful meal!

Medicinal plants, though? Are those different from herbs? Actually...why did I think about them as “herbs” at all? Are those memories from Past Me? Surely not...right?

Chapter 61: “Medicinal Plants”

RATTLOORE TOOK CARE of the after-dinner cleanup. But...

“Ivy, herbs? Preparations? You could turn me into a master cook, too! Teach me more, Chef!”

“Umm, er...” I hadn’t fed Sora yet, so I wanted to go back to my tent. I wasn’t really in the mood to talk about cooking right now. *What do I do?*

“Give him a break, Rattloore!” Gnouga called out. “Sorry, Ivy. You can just ignore him.”

“Sorry, Mr. Rattloore. Good night.” I took the water I’d boiled and went to my tent. “Whew...so tired.”

I listened to what was going on outside. Gnouga was saying something, and Rattloore was sulking. After a while, they quieted down. *We’re probably good now.*

I pulled Sora out of its bag. “Sorry for the late dinner,” I whispered. “We’re close to other tents, so be quiet, okay? I’ll get your food now.”

Sora looked at me and quivered. Once I’d lined up the potions, it began devouring them.

As Sora munched, I submerged a towel in hot water, wrung it out, and started scrubbing my body. As I did, I thought about the medicinal plants. I had learned about them from a book the fortune-teller gave me. They were raw materials for potions that could be found in the forest. But a medicinal plant alone wasn’t very helpful, as it was weaker than a lesser potion. As such, I’d only memorized the poisonous ones. Some could make you swell up from a single touch, so you had to be careful around them.

I changed into fresh clothes and looked over at Sora, who was stretching and quivering. When it stretched, its colors were cleanly divided in half. But when Sora was in its teardrop shape, they mixed in some places. The slime must’ve still been changing—every day, the number of mixed spots was going down. Would Sora get more colorful? If it did, what else could happen? I watched Sora as it continued its stretches. *Well, I’m sure it’s fine.*

I took the books about medicinal plants from my magic bag. I'd found those herbs while I was hunting field mice. I'd smelled something nostalgic, so I searched around until I found them.

Wait...huh? Nostalgic? Why was an herb—or medicinal plant, or whatever—nostalgic if it was my first time seeing it? The memories from Past Me really were popping up more and more these days. Nothing had felt off about it at all back then, so I hadn't even noticed. Heck, I'd even dried the herbs without a second thought. Looking back now, it was pretty weird.

I took out all the herbs I'd dried to compare them with the entries in my book. Four of them weren't there, but the others were listed as medicinal plants. *Got to remember to call them medicinal plants, not herbs.*

I let out a long yawn. After all the surprises today, I was dead tired.

"Let's go to bed," I whispered to Sora, lying down and drawing the blanket over us. How would I explain everything to Rattloore tomorrow? I had no idea, but I was too sleepy to figure it out. Time for bed. "Good night, Sora."

I was awakened by an aura outside. *What's going on? That aura...I don't like it.* I slowly opened my eyes and confirmed that my tent was still shut. The aura was dampened, but I could feel that it was focused in my direction. It wasn't like anyone in the Sword of Flames... No, this was unpleasant. It made me shiver. *Scary.*

"Who's there?" I called. Whoever it was backed off at once.

What was that? Had they found out Sora was here? I checked the entrance of the tent again, but it was still closed up tight. It couldn't be opened from the outside as it was now. I clung to Sora, feeling deeply uncomfortable.

Once it got a little brighter out, I slung the bag with Sora in it over my shoulder and stepped outside. The adventurers were already busy running around. Was it just me, or were there even more people now?

While I watched the adventurers, I heard Rattloore's voice behind me.
"Morning, Ivy!"

I jumped in surprise.

"Ivy? Hey, you okay?"

"Phew! I'm fine. Good morning." Realizing I was hyperventilating a little, I took deep breaths to calm down.

Rattloore peeked at my face, worried. That surprised me a little, so I took a step back.

“Why are you harassing that poor kid?!” Gnouga shouted.

“Harassing? Aww, I’m not hurting him. Right, Ivy?”

“Yeah,” I backed him up. “It’s okay, Mr. Gnouga.”

“Really? If he bothers you, just tell me. I’ll sock him good.”

“Whoa, Gnouga! I’m innocent!”

“Morning,” Seizerk called out. “Rattloore’s causing trouble early today, is he?”

“Morning, Ivy,” their fourth member greeted me.

“Good morning, Mr. Seizerk and...Mr. Sifar.” I’d almost forgotten Sifar’s name. That was a close one.

“Ivy, did you forget my name?!”

“Urk! I apologize.”

“Too cute! I want a little brother like you!” Suddenly, Rattloore scooped me up in a hug from the side. I was shocked speechless.

There was a sudden cracking sound, and he finally let go. When I glanced over, he had a pained look on his face.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about him,” Gnouga answered for some reason. “He’s fine.”

Was he actually? He really looked like he was hurt.

“Ivy, how about we have breakfast together? What do you usually eat?”

“Umm, dried meat and fruit. And tea.”

“Wooow, tea?” Sifar asked. “That’s rare. Isn’t tea expensive?”

Tea is rare? And expensive? Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t noticed many others drinking tea. How could I explain without seeming like a weirdo?

“I forage my tea leaves in the forest, so it doesn’t cost money.” There, that worked.

“The forest?” Sifar repeated. “I thought you could only get tea from special plantations.”

What? Was I wrong there, too? I decided to make my tea and let them see

for themselves. While I prepared tea for five, Gnouga brought black bread and four cups.

“Have a piece of this,” he said. “Thanks for the tea.”

I was taken aback by the gift, but I accepted the bread and thanked him. Next, I poured tea into the four adventurers’ cups and my own personal cup. Just smelling it soothed my nerves.

“Mm, that smells good. It’s calming,” said Seizerk.

“It’s...different from tea I’ve had before,” said Sifar, “but not bad at all.”

Seizerk and Sifar seemed to like the tea. Rattloore drank it with a confused look on his face. Gnouga didn’t say anything, but his first sip was timid. I could tell from their reactions that they really hadn’t had tea like this before. *First herbs are surprising, and now tea? What should I make of this?*

Chapter 62: Discomfort

WHILE I CLEANED UP BREAKFAST, I wondered how I could explain the tea. What if I fibbed and said everyone in Ratomi Village drank it? Oh, but that wouldn't work... If any of them knew anything about the village, they'd see through it right away. What if I said someone taught me about it? Except...who would it be? The fortune-teller? I...didn't want to use someone I cared about for a lie. Besides, I didn't really want to lie in the first place. You never knew when people would find out the truth.

Oh! What if I said I happened to notice the smell in the forest and picked the leaves? The scent had seemed familiar, so that was accurate. It wasn't a lie, just an omission. *Okay! If anyone asks me, I'll go with that.*

All the adventurers were gathered in one spot having some sort of meeting. They were probably about to begin the hunt in earnest. What would I do? Should I wait in this camp? Or would it be fine to continue my journey?

Once their meeting was finished, I called out to Seizerk. "Excuse me, Mr. Seizerk?"

"What's up?"

"Is it okay if I set off again?"

"I wouldn't, if I were you," he warned. "According to the reports we received last night, there are a lot more ogres out there than we thought."

"More than ten, you mean?"

"Think bigger. According to the leader's prediction, we could be dealing with over thirty."

"That..." I frowned. "That's a whole lot..."

"Right. So I think it'd be best for you to stay here with us."

"Okay. I'll wait until the hunt is over before I go anywhere."

"Sorry, kid," said Seizerk. "We'll try to hunt them down quick."

"Don't get hurt, though," I said. "Be careful."

"Ooh, I like the sound of that."

The sound of what? “Be careful”? I wasn’t sure why he liked it, but good for him?

“Ivy, could you help me out?” Gnouga beckoned me over.

As I approached, I saw a pile of trash in front of their tent. “Sure,” I said. “Glad to help with anything I can.”

“We process trash near the center of camp. Can you help me carry it?”

Processing trash? Did that mean I would get to meet a slime? I’d wanted to see one eating trash for a while, so I was glad of the opportunity.
“Understood.”

“Sorry, but could I ask you to collect the other adventurers’ trash as well?”

“Sure, that’s fine.”

“Thanks. Sorry again.”

Strangers called out to me. I looked over—it was a group of female adventurers. Other groups were waving and calling out to me, too. They all must’ve been busy getting ready for the hunt.

After seeing the adventurers off, I gathered all their trash and headed to the center of the camp. I squeezed between two tents and arrived at the clearing where slimes handled all the trash. There were fourteen slimes in all and four adventurers—three men and one woman. Were they all tamers?

“Excuse me,” I said. “Where can I leave this?”

“Are you the boy Sword of Flames brought in?” The man nearby was surprised to see me before he figured out who I was.

“Yes. Thank you for letting me stay here.”

“Ha ha ha! You’ve got good manners, lad. Leave the trash right there.”

I set down the trash, and a slime slid over. Among the trash I’d brought were dirty clothes, empty potion containers, a broken sword, and more. How was I supposed to give them to the slime?

“Huh? Is there a sword in there?” the woman asked.

“Yes, but it’s broken.”

“My slime here will take care of that. Could you bring it over?”

“Okay.” I took the broken sword and placed it in front of the woman’s slime. Sword-eating slimes were incredibly rare. I watched as it hopped on top

of the sword and stood still for a moment. Nothing was happening, so I just watched, confused.

She giggled. “I don’t think there’ll be much to see.”

“Huh?”

“Swords take a really long time to eat.”

“Wow. I had no idea...”

I returned to where I’d left the trash. Several slimes were processing it. It looked like they had a slime that could eat empty bottles, too. When I watched it with the bottles, I noticed something strange: It was taking a really long time to eat a bottle that Sora would’ve devoured in seconds.

As I watched the slime slowly digest the bottle, a shiver ran up my back. I looked around frantically, but there was nobody there. *What was that? It was just like this morning. Creepy...*

“You okay?” the woman asked, startling me again. “You look a little pale.”

“Huh? Oh, I’m...fine. Thank you for asking.”

She looked surprised, but then smiled softly and held out a hand. “I’m a tamer in Verdant Wind, the name’s Mira. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh! I’m just a traveler. My name is Ivy.”

“Are you alone? But you look so young.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“If you have any troubles, let me know, okay? I’m a senior adventurer; I’ll help you out!”

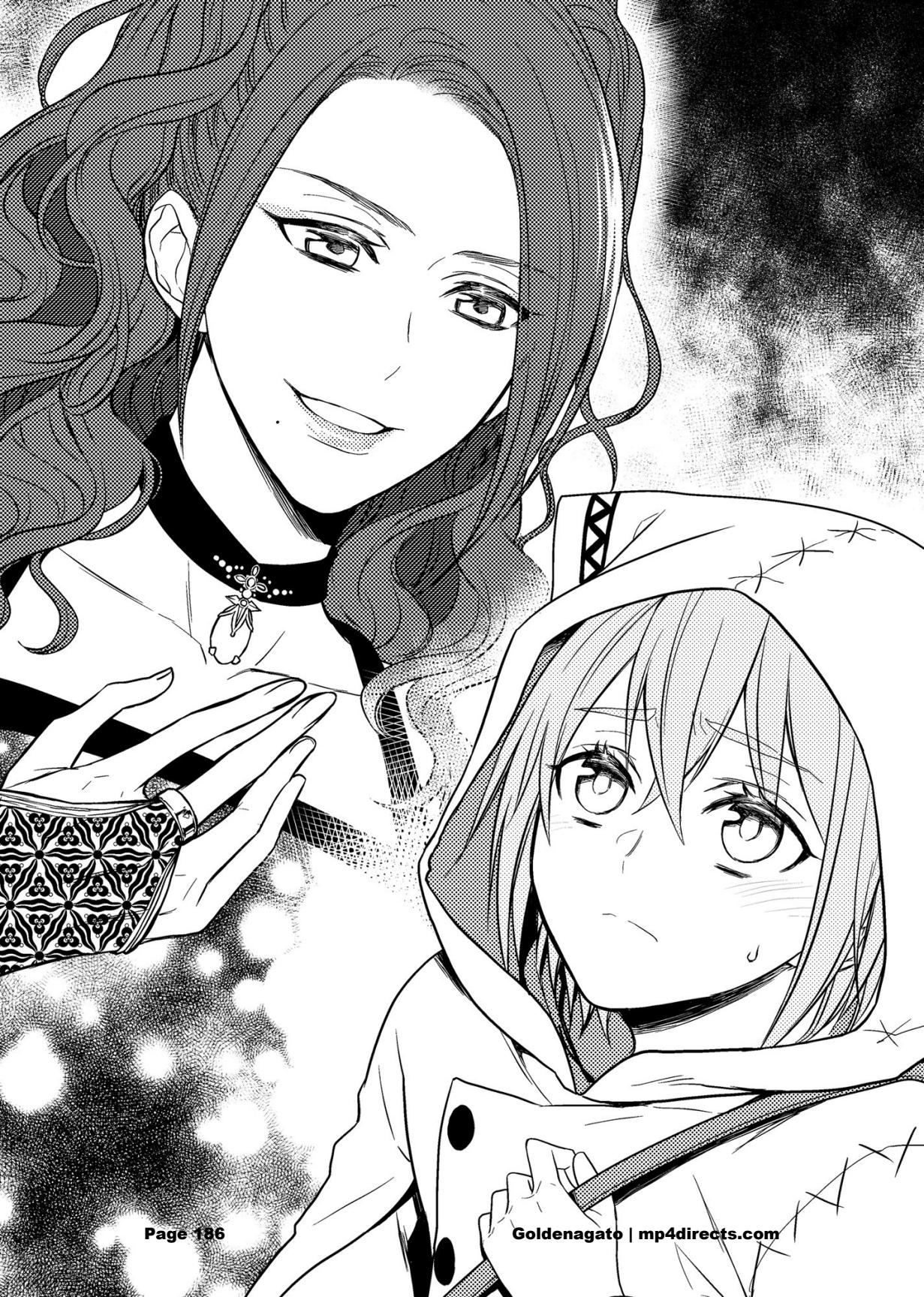
“Thank you very much.” Another unpleasant chill, this time on my neck. I quickly searched around, but I couldn’t figure it out. Seriously, what was going on? It was freaking me out.

“Do you feel something?” Mira whispered.

“I, uh. Um...ah!” I was so preoccupied with that weird feeling that I’d forgotten I was in the middle of talking to her. I shook my head silently, but she put a gentle hand on my head.

“I might not look like it, but I *am* a member of a veteran group,” she said. “Wanna talk about it?”

Talk about it? What could I even say?
“You can tell me anything, okay?” Mira urged.



“Umm...something feels weird. Like a chill on the back of my neck...”

That probably didn’t make sense to her, right? But I didn’t know how else to explain it. Mira’s expression turned grave.

“It’s important that you can feel that. That’s an instinct that’ll help keep you safe.”

“Keep me safe?”

“Yep. I think what you feel is menace in someone’s gaze. How long have you been feeling it?”

“Since this morning,” I admitted.

“Then a member of this hunt may be a problem.” She believed me? “Let me go consult with some people I trust. Ivy, make sure you’re never alone, okay?”

“O-okay. But if I’m wrong—”

“If you’re wrong, then we can all look back on it and laugh.

But if you’re right, someone might be after you. Discomfort and disgust can help you stay safe. Trust your gut”

That was a frightening thought. I was sure about the discomfort I was feeling, but did it really mean that someone was after me? I shivered.

“It’s okay,” she assured me. “I’ll talk to Sword of Flames. They’re veterans like me.”

“Huh?!”

They were veterans... That was a real shock.

Chapter 63: An Evil Organization

“**I**vy! Ivy! IVYY!” Rattloore’s calls echoed through the camp.

As the sound of his voice drew closer, I felt more eyes on me. My face was hot, so I must’ve been blushing. Somehow, I felt like Mira was looking on with pity.

She said Rattloore was a veteran, but he certainly didn’t seem like one. I’d always thought that veterans, with all their experience, would be calm and dignified. I guessed everyone *but* Rattloore was like that... What made him different?

When he caught up with me, he grabbed my shoulders. “Are you okay? Nobody’s hurt you, right? Which degenerate is laying eyes on you?!”

What’s a degenerate? What did they say to him? It feels like things are going in a really strange direction...

Mira smacked his hands away from my shoulders and said exactly what I was thinking. “Rattloore, stop yelling! You’re embarrassing Ivy.” *Thank you, Ms. Mira.*

“Hm? How?” He looked genuinely confused by Mira. She heaved a sigh and shook her head. I felt a little guilty, as if I were the one who was being exhausting right now.

Seizerk strolled up shortly after. “Thanks, Mira.”

Gnouga had come up, too. Where was Sifar? I glanced around and saw him some distance away, talking to other adventurers.

“Don’t mention it!” she replied. “Ivy’s cute, like a little brother.”

“Isn’t he?” Rattloore agreed. “Say, Ivy, why don’t you be my little brother?”

I shook my head a little, unsure how to respond.

“Aww, not even just a little teensy bit?”

How can you be someone’s little brother “just a little teensy bit”? I shook my head again, and out of nowhere, Gnouga punched Rattloore in the head.

There was a loud *bonk*. He held his head in pain as he glared at Gnouga with tears in his eyes.

“Good grief,” Mira rolled her eyes. “Do you ever calm down, Rattloore?”

“Shut up, Mira!”

“You two never change,” Seizerk muttered, giving Rattloore and Mira a look.

“Oh? I’ll have you know that we’re a lot better than we used to be,” she said, “I’ve matured a lot.”

“Really? You don’t seem any more mature when you’re with him.”

Mira sulked at Seizerk’s words. She and Rattloore must be old acquaintances. Now that he’d mentioned it, they did seem short-tempered with each other. Did they always bicker like this?

“Ivy.” Seizerk stooped down to meet me at eye level. For some reason, he looked very serious.

“Sir?”

“I heard about your problem. It started when you came to this camp, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m sorry. You’re in this situation because we brought you here.”

“Huh? Not at all!” I said frantically. “I really appreciate that you took me to a safe place.”

“But...”

“If I had stayed the night in the forest, I might’ve run into those ogres. So I really do appreciate it.”

“That’s right, Seizerk,” said Mira. “As long as we have the ogres out there, bringing him here was the only choice. We need to talk about what comes next.”

Seizerk grinned weakly at her words. “Fair enough. Mind giving me the details?” he asked me.

“Not at all.”

Sifar was back now, so I made tea for everyone. Mira watched with great

interest as I steeped the leaves in hot water. *I guess tea is rare, after all.*

I explained what had happened this morning, telling them all about that weird discomfort that had woken me up and the sense that someone was outside of my tent. At midday, I'd felt it several more times. Each time I looked around, but I couldn't see anybody. By the time I'd finished telling them everything, Seizerk and Gnouga both looked concerned. Sifar was more stoic, but he seemed deep in thought. Rattloore was glaring suspiciously all around. I wished he'd stop...he would probably scare people if he glared at them for no reason.

"Is it them?" Seizerk seemed to have an idea.

Them?

"That's all that comes to mind, really." Mira did, too.

What were they thinking? Gnouga was starting to look really scary.

"Gnouga, if faces could kill..." Mira joked. Rattloore nodded agreement. *Faces? Not looks? That's a weird way of putting it.*

Gnouga cleared his throat and drank tea. "Listen up, Ivy. There's an organization causing trouble in Otolwa."

"An organization?" Was it the one Vice Captain Velivera had warned me about? He'd said that they were cracking down on them, but...

"They kidnap people and sell them into slavery. The town police were planning to crack down on them, but someone leaked that info to them. The crackdown failed, and many of them escaped arrest."

Seizerk looked really mad about it, too.

"They were only able to arrest the low-level thugs who knew nothing about the organization's inner workings," Gnouga continued. "Chances are, they were cut off by the higher-ups to buy time for themselves to run." His remarks sounded oddly careless. *I wonder why?*

Seizerk sighed. "They're out there snatching people off the streets, but we're getting a suspiciously low number of eyewitness reports."

"Do you think...that organization is after me?" I asked.

"There's no way to be certain, but it's possible. So make darn sure you're never all alone, you hear?" Seizerk sounded serious, so I looked him in the eye and agreed. He put a hand on my head, and I could feel some of the tension leave my body.

“Ivy, let me introduce you to some of my comrades...hee hee.” For some reason, the moment Mira glanced at the group of adventurers a few meters away, her smile turned wicked. I looked in the same direction and saw lots of adventurers, so I couldn’t tell who she was looking at. “Wait here just a moment, okay?” Her kind voice sounded a little scary.

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

Seizerk and Gnouga chuckled dryly. I watched Mira as she stood in front of two men in the group...then grabbed their heads and knocked them into each other.

“Oof, that’s gotta hurt. Ivy, those are Mira’s comrades. They’re a group made up of siblings. She’s the younger sister.”

They were siblings? Still, that looked painful...despite being pretty far away, I’d heard their skulls crack against each other. *I’d better not make Mira mad.*

Chapter 64: Twins and the Expedition Leader

“**N**ICE TO MEET YOU. I’m Tort of Verdant Wind, Mira’s older brother. This is my little brother, Marm.”

Huh? But they looked exactly the same. Were they...?

“Surprised, Ivy?” Mira asked. “My brothers are twins. Don’t see those every day.”

I guessed twins were rare. It seemed like a lot of my knowledge was influenced by Past Me, so I had to avoid saying anything careless. Looking back, I hadn’t seen any twins in other villages. If they weren’t common, I’d need to remember that.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I said. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Ivy.”

“Aww. What a polite kid,” said Tort. He and Marm were all smiles. But the younger brother, Marm, did seem a little...off. Or maybe I was just imagining it.

“Right?!” Mira squealed. “He’s such a good boy.”

“Gang’s all here, eh?”

I turned to the source of that calm yet imposing voice. A well-built, kinda intimidating-looking man was walking toward us. He seemed to exude an air of reliability. I’d never seen someone who had so much presence at first glance. Mysterious...

“Boss, this is Ivy. We were just telling you about him.”

Hearing my name snapped me out of my trance.

“Umm, uhh, hi! I’m Ivy. It’s nice to meet you.” I’d managed to introduce myself, but my words felt inadequate. This guy was the boss of the whole expedition party? I could see why.

“Likewise. I’m Bolorda, leader of this hunt.” He gave me a light pat on the head. Strangely, despite having just met him, I felt more steady. He really was mysterious. “Mira. You won’t be leaving this camp, right?”

“Yep, that’s the plan. Slime tamers don’t usually join hunts anyway.”

“Ha ha ha, true. We can’t risk losing our valuable tamers. Make sure you stay with Ivy, got it?”

“Of course. Leave it to me!” Mira winked at me, so I smiled sheepishly back.

What did he mean by valuable tamers? Were tamers not common? *I’d like to ask, but...maybe later.*

While I was deep in thought, Rattloore pulled me into a tight hug from behind. “I’ll stay with you when I can, too! You can rely on me!”

“Okay. Thank you.” I didn’t want to rely on him *too* much, but stubbornly refusing others’ kindness could be just as cruel as taking advantage of them. *Avail yourself of others’ kindness when necessary and try to return the favor.* That was the most important rule for dealing with people, or so the fortune-teller had taught me. I didn’t know when restraint became too much, so I decided to accept it for now. And honestly, that creeping feeling of discomfort from earlier had me terrified.

The three members of Verdant Wind promised to meet me tomorrow and then left. The leader of the hunt, Bolorda, seemed to have something to talk about with Seizerk, so the two walked off together.

“Excuse me, Mr. Rattloore?” I asked him. “Do you have more ingredients we could use? I’d like to make dinner.”

“You mean it? Yesterday’s soup and meat were delicious, so I was thinking of asking for your help again.”

“Thank you. I’ll do my best.” Rattloore’s smile was infectious. I went back to my tent and whispered to Sora, currently inside its bag. “Sorry, Sora. It’s gonna be a little cramped for a while.”

Sora stretched up and down twice but showed no signs of leaving its bag. Normally, it would jump right out. Did it understand the situation we were in? I petted Sora, and it bobbed happily.

“I’m glad they’re all good people here.”

As I uttered those words, Sora stopped bobbing and just...stared. Just stared straight at me. *What’s going on? That’s not how it normally reacts.*

Before I could say another word, there was a loud noise outside. I was curious, but it could wait a second. I scooped potions into Sora’s bag. It would

be hours until the hunt was over, and Sora's potion situation was getting dire.

"I'm gonna go try my best to make dinner, okay?" After giving Sora another pet while he stretched, I closed the bag and put it on top of the blanket. Then I took my stash of seasonings from another bag and went back out to the camp. Rattloore had already started a fire and prepared pots and water.

"Sorry for taking so long," I said.

"Not a problem. Is this enough to make food for tonight? We'll have fresh meat tomorrow, by the way—they said they'd divvy up the moo we hunted yesterday."

Fresh moo meat? How exciting!

I cut the meat Rattloore brought into bite-sized chunks and threw it in the pot. Today we had salted cluck meat. *Cluck...that sounds familiar, but why?* Anyway, since it was salted, I had to be careful with the seasoning or I'd oversalt it. I put a few of the medicinal plants I'd brought out into the pot with the meat and brought it all to a simmer.

Out of nowhere, that chill crept back onto my neck. I whipped around. There were a lot of adventurers about, so I couldn't tell who it was coming from. The discomfort always seemed to disappear when I looked around...but why? And who could it be?

Suddenly, there was a hand on my head.

"Don't worry. We're here for you." Rattloore smiled and patted me.

"Thank you. The soup is almost ready. I just need to roast the cluck meat."

After washing some of the salt off the meat, I covered it in medicinal plants and roasted it. *It has a peculiar smell... I hope it turns out okay.*

Gnouga left his tent and sat next to me as I cooked. Even Sifar, who had left for a while, eventually returned and crouched next to the pot. *I didn't notice him at all. That's a veteran for you, huh?* But...something felt a little off.

"Hm? What's the matter?" Sifar asked.

"We should wait a little longer. Mr. Seizerk isn't back yet."

"Aw, just forget Seizerk."

"Huh?"

"Wanna say that again, Sifar?" That was Seizerk's voice. I looked his way—he was shooting an exhausted glare at Sifar.

“Ah, welcome back,” said Sifar, unaffected.

“The scariest thing about you is that you weren’t even trying to be a jerk on purpose.”

“Me? Scary? C’mon!”

“Easy for you to say,” Seizerk chuckled. “You were about to eat my share.”

“You’re worse than me. *I* wasn’t late for dinner. Besides, leaving food uneaten is a waste!”

“Please. You weren’t planning to leave any for me at all, were you?”

“I mean...what if it gets cold?” Sifar shrugged. “Like I said, it’s a waste.”

Sifar seemed like a gentle soul, but now he seems pretty different. What do you call it? Self-centered? Does that fit? Well, maybe not exactly.

“Let’s eat, everyone,” I called out to stop Seizerk and Sifar’s spiraling argument.

Gnouga was starting to look a little impatient as he stared at the meat, so he probably wanted to eat right away. Turns out Rattloore wasn’t the only odd personality in Sword of Flames—everyone was.

Chapter 65: Sora's Reactions

ONCE THE MEAL WAS OVER, I took hot water back to my tent. After shutting the entrance up nice and tight, I fastened it so it couldn't be opened from the outside.

"Okay, it's safe now." I opened Sora's magic bag and peeked in.

Sora looked up at me and leaped out of the bag. If it could tell that now was a good time, then it really did understand the situation. I'd always known Sora was a reliable little slime.

Speaking of, I wondered how the adandara was doing. I hoped it had distanced itself from the forest around here. I hadn't heard about anyone seeing it, so it probably hadn't been found, but I still fretted.

As usual, Sora was stretching up and down. Lately, I couldn't really relax unless I saw it do this at least once a day. *Maybe it's just become part of my routine.*

While I scrubbed my body, I recalled my discussion with Seizerk. Honestly, I was really frightened. When I'd first learned I was in danger, I was more frustrated than scared. When they'd first come to my tent, I was anxious, sure, but mostly I was just confused. Now...I was terrified.

"Oh, Sora, what do we do? I think someone's after me." Saying it out loud only frightened me more. As I shuddered, Sora stopped exercising and rubbed up against my foot. My friend was worried about me. "It's okay. I've got Sword of Flames here to protect me."

That thought managed to calm me down. Sora bounced around and started quivering. I had to laugh a little—it was normal for Sora to act like this, but it still cheered me up.

"Besides," I said, "that tamer lady, Ms. Mira, said she'd stay with me, too."

Maybe I could ask her about slimes—she might be able to teach me something about Sora. I looked at the slime...and saw that it had stopped moving. Just like earlier this evening, it was...*staring*.

“Huh?”

This wasn’t normal. Was it begging for something? Earlier, I’d said something like...what was it?

I’m glad they’re all good people here.

Had it reacted to the word “all”? When I’d spoken about Sword of Flames, Sora had a normal reaction.

This time...had it reacted to me mentioning Mira? Did Sora not think Mira was a good person? No way. I mean, she seemed really worried about me! But...Sora had always protected me from danger. Even when I almost touched poison plants by accident, it would alert me with a light headbutt. It had warned me about the tree monster, too. Was it...really Mira?

“Sora, is Sword of Flames good?” I asked.

Sora bounced and bobbed.

“How about the expedition leader, Mr. Bolorda?”

Sora bounced and bobbed again. It bounced a little higher this time, but that probably didn’t mean anything bad.

“What about...Ms. Mira of Verdant Wind?”

Sora froze and stared.

Did it sense something about Mira? If so, what? Based on the slime’s reaction, it couldn’t be anything good. I clenched my fists tight. I’d thought she was a good person. Was I wrong? But I hadn’t felt any uneasiness around her. Or...wait. Maybe it was someone else.

Wait! Marm. When I saw his smile, I’d felt a little off. I couldn’t put my finger on it at the time, but suddenly I understood exactly how he’d looked at me: His eyes were those of someone sizing up some goods. The same look I’d seen in the eyes of the chief of Ratomi Village, the look of someone measuring the usefulness of someone else. I’d thought I was mistaken, since it was only for an instant, but I was right. I knew I was right.

But what about the rest of Verdant Wind? Were they in on it? Was Mira?

What should I do? Talk about it with Seizerk? How would I even bring it up? What do I say, “Mira might be with the kidnappers?” Without evidence, why would he trust me? I can’t just say it’s Sora’s intuition. I trust Sora after everything we’ve been through, but Sora isn’t evidence...and I can’t risk letting anyone see it. Will anyone trust me? I don’t know.

I felt a weight on my thigh. Sora had climbed up onto my crossed legs as I sat. It stared at me and quivered.

“Thanks, Sora.”

Tomorrow, we had planned for me to meet with Mira’s team. I’d even told Seizerk that I would be fine since I’d be with them. I petted Sora gently.

Should we run away? The ogre hunt isn’t over... If I run into one of those monsters in the woods, it’ll kill me for sure. Besides, this place has people watching out for monsters at all times. I can’t leave without being seen. There are adventurers in the woods during the day, too, and I don’t have the skills to hide from them. I don’t think I can escape without someone finding out...

What could I do, then? Let’s see...the main thing was to play it cool. They couldn’t know that I was suspicious of them, or they might do something. But was it really Mira? Ugh...*I’ll have to be careful tomorrow. Can I keep them from thinking I’m suspicious? I have to try...*

Hot tears began to well up in my eyes. I swallowed and gritted my teeth. I tried not to cry. *Here I was, all happy that they were worried about me and nice to me. Happy I’d met them.*

“Don’t you cry!” I hissed to myself. “Never give them the satisfaction of making you cry!”

I still couldn’t be certain that Mira was a member of that organization. Sora might be wrong. But it seemed to explain the way Marm had looked at me back then, and I trusted Sora.

As I took deep breaths, Sora stared up at me from atop my thigh. Right... if anything happened to me, it would affect Sora, too. Survival was my only option. If there was an organization of kidnappers, was kidnapping me their goal right now? All I could do was try to act natural around Mira.

I pulled Sora into a hug. I was scared, but I had to do my best for his sake. *It’ll be okay. It has to be.*

The clamor of voices and shifting auras woke me up. I must’ve fallen asleep holding Sora. I put it on the blanket and reached my arm out, but my joints were all sore. I’d slept, but I was still really tired. I took a deep breath and refocused myself.

“It’s okay,” I told myself. “It’s okay.”

Sora stared at me.

“It’ll be okay.”

I stroked Sora and gave it some potions. Sounds were coming from the tent right next to mine, so I guessed someone from Sword of Flames had woken up. Once Sora finished eating, it began its usual stretching. I watched it for a bit, then put the slime in its bag.

“Sorry. I’ll be back.” I sighed, centered myself again, unlocked the tent, and stepped outside. *It’ll be okay.*

Chapter 66: Rattloore

OUTSIDE, Gnouga was preparing breakfast.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Morning,” he replied. “Thanks for the soup.”

“No problem.”

Yesterday, I’d prepped soup for today’s breakfast on top of last night’s dinner. Gnouga was warming up the pot over the fire and dividing up dried meat.

“Good mooorning!” Rattloore called out and patted me gently on the head. He was way too energetic this early in the morning.

Rattloore had started patting my head and hugging me more ever since he’d heard that someone was after me. He was probably worried, though I sensed something else, too—nothing bad, but I couldn’t quite figure it out.

“Good morning, Rattloore.”

Seizerk and Sifar emerged from their tent soon after, and we all ate breakfast together. I accepted the black bread they offered me, but it seemed so strange. Everyone in Sword of Flames accepted me, an outsider, without issue. They ate with me like it was normal, broke bread with me like it was just...fine. I looked down at the black bread in my hand. The kidnappers worried me, but being around friends was a relief.

“Heeey, Seizerk?” said Rattloore. “I’m taking the day off.”

Seizerk sighed. “Ah, yeah. Guess I can’t exactly stop you.”

What’s going on? Rattloore’s taking the day off? Can you do that during hunts like this? I’ve never heard of it, but...it’s my first time dealing with veterans, so who knows?

“Hooray! I get to spend the day with Ivy.”

Was he doing this for me? If he was, I was grateful. Otherwise, I’d have to be alone with Mira, but...really, was he allowed to do this?

“Umm, I’ll be okay...”

“Don’t worry about it!” said Rattloore. “You heard Seizerk. I’ve got

permission!"

I looked at Seizerk. He shrugged, but he didn't take it back. *Is it fine? Really?*

"It's not a problem," said Gnouga. "But Rattloore, we'll need permission from the leader."

Rattloore beamed. "Understood!"

I bowed my thanks at Seizerk. He just grinned wryly and raised his hands in surrender. I was honestly pretty afraid of Mira at this point, so it was comforting to have Rattloore with me. All of my tension evaporated at once. I must've been more nervous than I'd thought.

After we ate breakfast, Gnouga and Rattloore left to talk to the leader of the hunt. *Is this really, seriously, genuinely okay?* I wondered to myself as they left.

"Sorry about him, Ivy," Seizerk apologized again.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. I didn't mean to make Mr. Rattloore take the day off."

"Don't get the wrong idea. He's taking off for his own sake. He's got his reasons, y'know."

"Huh?" *He's got reasons?*

There was a pain now beneath Seizerk's standard calm facade. I stared for a moment, surprised. He noticed and forced a smile. The pain was gone like it had never been there.

"Uh, how do I say this?" he wondered aloud. "When Rattloore learned that *they* were after you, he got a little unstable. Sorry, but I gotta ask that you spend the day with him."

"Is that true? Well, it is a relief to have him with me, so I certainly appreciate it."

Based on the look on Seizerk's face, there seemed to be more to the story. But we'd just met, and I was a kid, so I couldn't expect him to tell me more. ...I didn't know if Rattloore was *unstable*, but he really was patting my head a lot more often. Maybe it was about making *himself* feel better?

"But if he gets annoying," Seizerk added, "feel free to slug him a few times."

“Slug him?”

“Yeah! Don’t worry, he can take a couple punches.” He looked serious. Could I hit someone who he’d just called unstable?

“Ivy!” Rattloore called out. “You two talking about me?”

“What’d the leader say?” Seizerk asked him.

“He sighed harder than I’ve ever seen, but it’s a yes! Ivy, we’re hanging out today!”

“Yeah! I’m excited,” I said, though I was surprised he got permission so easily.

After seeing Seizerk and the others off on the hunt, I tidied up breakfast. Like yesterday, I gathered trash and took it to the slimes. Along the way, I got trash from other adventurers, too. That awful chill came back as I worked. This time, I didn’t just look around for it but tried to feel what direction it was coming from. It was hard to tell, though... Every time I thought I had it, the feeling slipped away.

Someone grabbed my hand. Surprised, I looked over and saw Rattloore smiling down at me.

“You’re safe,” he said. His smile and words were a comfort. I smiled back, and Rattloore turned away to look forward again.

I gasped. It had only been for a second, but...he’d looked like he was about to cry. Or had I just imagined it? He wasn’t acting any different, so...why?

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. I’m glad to have your help.”

“No prob! I’ve got nothing else to do, anyway.”

“Mr. Seizerk would be mad if he heard you say that,” I said, and he laughed.

Nearby, I could see Mira waving at us with a smile. I couldn’t stop myself from squeezing Rattloore’s hand harder. He gave me a confused look, but I wasn’t sure how to explain. I sped up and pulled him along behind me.

“Let’s ask them to dispose of the trash,” I said, hoping to cover up my panic.

“Ahh...right, yeah. Mira’s slime is a little special, y’know. Have you seen it?”

Just hearing the name Mira made me shudder now. “If you mean the sword-processing slime,” I said, managing to keep my voice steady, “yes. She let me see it.”

“Really? Yeah, that’s the one. It’s crazy, right? Slimes like that are pretty rare.”

“Are they? That’s...um, incredible.” I looked down a little and took deep breaths. Just seeing her face and hearing her name had me shaken.

Calm down. They’ll figure out something’s up at this rate. Calm down. It’ll be okay, I repeated to myself over and over.

After a long breath, I looked up to Mira again.

“It’ll be okay,” I said, out loud this time. My mental repetitions had leaked out of my mouth.

“Hm? You okay?” Rattloore asked me.

I shook my head and walked over to Mira. *It’ll be okay.*

“Ivy, good morning,” she greeted me. “Why is Rattloore here, exactly?”

“I’m off today!” he answered.

“What the heck? They don’t let people do that, do they?”

“Ha ha! I’m serious, I got permission from the leader and everything.”

“Really? Well, that’s...fine,” she said. “Anyway, put the trash in front of the right slimes, please.”

“Will do!”

We placed trash before the slimes. None of them digested anywhere near as fast as Sora. Were they all full, maybe?

“What’s the matter?” Rattloore asked when he saw me staring intently at them.

“It seems to be eating really slowly?”

“Hm? But that’s about their normal speed.”

Huh? Do most slimes eat so slowly? The slimes ate empty potion bottles at about a fifth of Sora’s speed. Maybe Sora was just a little too special...

Chapter 67: Anxiety

“**S**OMETHING WRONG?” Mira asked.

I stifled another shudder, barely maintaining my outward calm. I took deep, quiet breaths to keep myself steady as I looked her way. Had to make sure not to stand out.

Mira smiled softly. The same smile that had given me strength yesterday now terrified me, but I managed to smile back. I kept trying to remind myself that we weren’t positive she was a kidnapper.

“Slimes are weird,” I finally said. I was so nervous that I could barely squeak out a sentence. *What now?*

“Slimes?” Mira raised an eyebrow.

“Ivy mentioned that they digest really slowly,” said Rattloore beside me. *Right. I’m not alone, so I’ll be fine.* I looked up to him, and he added, with a wink, “Right?”

“They digest slowly? Actually, the slimes I’ve tamed digest the slowest,” Mira mused.

“The slowest?”

“Yep. I’ve got a rare one who can digest swords, but it takes him a whole day to do it.”

Rattloore had mentioned that sword-processing slimes weren’t seen often. I was surprised they could take so long.

“If you’re interested in slimes, Ivy, you can come get a closer look.” Mira picked one up and showed it to me.

She wouldn’t be suspicious if I did look, right? But...

“Sorry, Mira,” Rattloore cut in. “The hunt is almost over, so they asked us to clean up.”

“Clean up?”

“Yeah. Orders from the big man. He said, ‘If you’re not hunting, you’re cleaning.’ A real piece of work, huh? Anyway, Ivy and I heard him loud and

clear, and that's what we're going to do."

Huh? He didn't mention that to me before. Did he forget?

"Uh-huh. Yeah, I do hear we only have one more day," Mira replied.
"They said we're feasting on moo meat today, too, right?"

"Yep! We hunted some good ones while we were out killing ogres.
Enough for everyone, in fact."

"Wanna eat with us tonight?" she offered.

"I meeean..." Rattloore shrugged. "We can, but we'll have the leader with us. Your brothers don't like him, right?"

"Huh? Oh, right. They might not be into that. Shame."

"Ha ha ha! That is a real shame. Well, we better stop chit-chatting and start cleaning."

"You two have fun. See you later, Ivy."

"Okay."

What's going on? I feel like I missed a lot of stuff. I heard everyone was getting fresh moo meat, but we're eating with the leader? I guess that means I have to cook for one more tonight... Okay, I'll just do my best. And Rattloore kept me from being alone with Mira, thank goodness.

"Phew..." When I realized I had sighed, I frantically turned to Rattloore.

"Mm? Something wrong?" He ruffled my hair.

So...he didn't notice. I shook my head.

"Ah, sorry," he apologized. "I shouldn't have dragged you into cleaning without asking first."

"It's okay. You all have helped me a lot, so I want to return the favor."

"Yeah? Glad to hear it, considering neither of us really have a choice."

We laughed and began cleaning up camp. First, we gathered all the litter scattered in the spaces between the tents. I'd picked up trash every day, but it was easy to overlook some here and there. Once we'd combed the entire camp, we had a sizable pile, though it wasn't as big as I'd expected. Maybe a lot of these adventurers were pretty neat. Honestly, the adventurer plazas in villages were normally filthy.

"Nice and clean, right?" said Rattloore.

“It really is. I had expected it to be like an adventurer plaza, so I was surprised.”

“One of the boss’s friends is a neat freak. If you make a mess, he can get pretty terrifying. It’s this kind of, uh...quiet intimidation?”

“Quiet intimidation?”

“Yeah. He hides his aura, stands behind you, and mutters, ‘Filthy.’ Then, for just a moment, you feel this wave of bloodlust from him. Whew! It’s spooky stuff.” Rattloore began to look just a little bit scared.

“Has that...happened to you?”

“Yep, way back when I started out as an adventurer. I still jump every time I run into that guy!” Someone out there could intimidate Rattloore that easily? I wasn’t sure if I wanted to see this guy or avoid him at all costs. *The leader’s friend...is he going to be eating with us, too?*

I decided to ask outright. “Will he be eating with us tonight?”

“Uhh...maybe?”

A vague answer. But if I was going to meet him today...

I’d better clean the area around our tents really well before everyone gets back.

“Don’t worry!” Rattloore reassured me, looking a little flustered. “He’s not actually that scary. He’s just strict when it comes to idiots making a mess.”

Is that all? Then I’ll be fine, right? It’s not like I’m a slob. But...I’ll still clean a little more thoroughly.

“Oh, they’re back!” Rattloore called out. I followed his eyes and saw the adventurers returning to camp. They looked to be in high spirits. “Seems to me like they’ve finished off the last of those ogres.”

Is that why everyone’s smiling? Finishing the hunt meant being able to go back to town, so I could see why. What about me, though? If people were stalking me, maybe it would be a mistake to go to Otolwa.

“Good work, fellas,” Rattloore greeted them.

“Good work out there.” As did I.

“You can say that again,” Sifar grumbled. “We’re exhausted. But the

camp looks neat as a pin, eh?” He lowered a magic bag from his shoulder, put it next to his tent, and looked around.

I had tidied outside our tents thoroughly. The tent itself had looked a little grimy, too, so I’d cleaned that as well. I was happy he’d noticed.

“Right? Ivy did a great job,” Rattloore boasted. “Hey, I’m gonna go talk with the leader for a minute. Watch Ivy for me!”

“Will do,” said Sifar. “Say, Ivy, did you clean the tent, too?”

“Yes. I asked Mr. Rattloore for permission first...”

“Thank you! We’ve never really been the neatest, so I’ve been meaning to get that over with for a while now. I’m glad to see it spick and span for once.”

Yay! I’m glad he likes it. Also...Rattloore seemed like he was in a real rush. Is everything okay? He’s been twitchy ever since they got back from the hunt.

“What’s the matter?” Sifar asked.

“Nothing. Is the hunt over now?”

“Yep! We managed to track down all the ogres that were reported! We’ll go take a look one last time tomorrow, just in case.”

“I see. It’s amazing how hard you all worked,” I said.

“Aww! You’ve got a way of making people feel better, kid.” Sifar rustled my hair. He was stronger than he looked, so it hurt my neck a little.

“Sifar, don’t be too rough.” Gnouga grabbed Sifar’s wrist and stopped him.

I appreciated that. “Mr. Gnouga, good work out there.”

“Thanks. Oh, here.” He handed me something wrapped in a big leaf. I opened it and saw a big chunk of meat—probably the moo meat they had mentioned. “Give it some flavor for us, would you?” He left me with that and went into their tent.

I see...so they want it flavored with herbs—umm, medicinal plants? With this much meat, it’ll take a while. I’ll have to portion it into smaller pieces and rub it in. Maybe I could use it in soup as well? Okay! Time to make dinner.

Rattloore returned and handed me another hunk of moo meat. “Prep this one, too, Ivy.”

I looked at him, confused.

“That one’s for the leader’s team,” he explained. “They’ve got four people.”

I’d better get to work right away. Food for nine...that’ll be a big job.

Chapter 68: Quirky Adventurers

WORKING WITH RATTLOORE, I managed to finish dinner for everyone. We'd made fifteen servings of soup to have enough for seconds, but it took three whole pots. I ran out of medicinal plants while I was seasoning the meat, so I had to improvise a little on the last three cuts. I hoped it turned out okay.

"I don't think I've smelled anything like that before. It's nice."

"Smells tasty, doesn't it?"

"I'll vouch for the taste," Rattloore said. "Ivy's a great cook. Right?!"

Even though Rattloore was vouching for me, I wasn't so sure about the results. Today's meal was a lot harder than the past two days, especially when it came to the medicinal plants.

"Hey there, Ivy," the expedition leader called. "Let me introduce you to my comrades: Rick, Low, and Mar."

Huh? Are those their real names? When the leader introduced them, all three sighed at once.

"Who introduces people with nicknames? I'm Rickbert. Nice to meet you, Ivy."

"Does it matter that much?" the leader butted in.

"Have some basic manners. It's rude."

"Is it...?"

"Good grief," Mar grumbled. "Earlier, you even called me Lowcreek by accident!"

"Ah, come on. Are you ever gonna let that go?"

I wanted to introduce myself, but I couldn't get a word in edgewise. The leader seemed different from how he was when we'd first met. Before he'd seemed much more...tense?

"You've been absentminded all day," the third man, Low, interjected. "You even forgot your backup sword."

Absentminded? He'd seemed so reliable when we'd first met. Maybe he

felt safe enough around his friends that he could let his guard down? *Still, forgetting your backup sword...*

“Name’s Lowcreek Good to meet you. Just Low is fine, though; I’m used to it.”

“Nice to meet you, too. I’m Ivy.”

“I’m Marcreek.”

“Um. Nice to meet you.”

Why did both of their names end in “creek?” Were they siblings? I compared Lowcreek and Marcreek’s faces, but...they were totally different.

Rattloore must’ve noticed my searching look. “They’re not siblings. They just happen to have similar names.”

“We gonna eat or what?” Gnouga grumbled, staring at the meat. It looked like it was just about done.

I quickly ladled out soup and had Rattloore divide the meat. The leader brought bread with fruit in it, too, so we shared that as well.

“Thanks for the food,” I said, digging in.

With the first gulp of soup, the richness of the meat spread through my mouth. The medicinal plants brought out the flavor of the cluck meat, too. *Thank goodness! It’s actually great.*

But...um, everyone’s really quiet. Do they not like it? Everyone was eating in total silence. *Aah, scary!*

“Umm... Is it okay?” I asked.

“Hm? Yeah, it’s real good. It’s so delicious that we’re all surprised,” Rattloore said with a smile. *Phew.*

“I think you might have a knack for this cooking thing,” Marcreek said as he picked up his empty bowl and stood up.

That was fast! He’s already finished. Maybe I should’ve made more? Ah, Sifar’s going for seconds, too! Uh oh...I might not have made enough food.

“Will we have enough?” I asked, worried.

“Don’t worry about it, Ivy. You made more than we usually do, so it’s plenty.” The leader’s words were a relief.

But...maybe I should worry about it. Marcreek and Sifar were staring

each other down in front of the pot of soup. Wait...now they're fighting over the meat in it.

"Whoa, this meat is delicious! Did you use medicinal plants?" Low asked, taking another bite. Since I'd been worried about the flavor, that was another relief.

"Yes, I pre-seasoned the meat by using them as a rub."

"Pre-seasoned? Rub?"

Is that not a common cooking method? I thought rubbing herbs in was normal, but maybe not? Well, I probably shouldn't think too hard about it right now.

"That's right," I answered. "It allows the flavor of the plants to penetrate the meat more."

"Wooow...huh? This one tastes different. Ooh, but it's good, too!"

I had made some on-the-fly changes to the flavor on a few of them since I ran out of medicinal plants. Thank goodness it worked out. Also, I couldn't help but notice that Gnouga was really chowing down on the meat. *Is there gonna be any left...?*

"Gnouga, hey! Aren't you eating too much?!" Rickbert yelled at him.

"Nothing to see here."

"No way! C'mon, don't hog all the food!"

"I gotta!"

"Why?!"

Ahh! Now Rickbert and Gnouga are fighting over the soup, too. Maybe we don't have enough, after all. Despite my worries, everyone managed to get enough in the end. Even if these people were hungrier than I'd expected!

"Sorry, Ivy," said Seizerk, looking concerned. "This must've taken ages, right?"

"No, it's okay. I like cooking."

"Really? That's great. By the way, Ivy, you were planning to head to Otolwa once the hunt is over?"

"Well..."

"Change of plans? As long as someone's after you, I'd avoid traveling

anywhere by yourself. They might be waiting for a chance to catch you alone.”

So I'm in danger even if I give up on going to Otolwa? Then what should I do?

“Why don't you come with us to Otolwa?” he offered.

“With you?”

“Yeah. It's about two days from here. How about it?”

“Will I be a bother at all?”

“Absolutely not. Especially if you keep cooking us delicious food.” Seizerk winked.

I still had medicinal plants for soup, if not for meat. If I could help out... maybe this was the best option? Honestly, I was really scared of being alone now.

“If you don't mind my intruding...” I paused. “Then yes, please.”

“You're such a polite kid!” He patted me on the head.

“Hey, hey! What's going on here?” Marcreek cut in. He was suddenly in a bubbly mood. The scent of alcohol on him confirmed why.

“Agh, it's too early to drink!” Seizerk shouted. “We've got to go out tomorrow, too!”

“C'maaawn! Ya gotta have drink wiff a good meal!”

“Argh... Boss, Marcreek's already drunk!”

“Say what?” the boss replied. “We didn't even bring alcohol!”

“Aaaargh!” Sifar's voice echoed from the tent. Immediately after, he lunged out with fury plain on his face. It startled me so bad that I grabbed Seizerk and Rattloore's arms.

Sifar looked around, spotted Marcreek, and grinned madly. Marcreek's expression turned from joy to pale-faced terror; his smile was gone.

“So it was you, eh?” As soon as Sifar opened his mouth, Marcreek sprinted off. Naturally, Sifar gave chase.

I wonder what happened? Also, should he be running like that when he's drunk?

“Sorry about my idiot team member,” Bolorda sighed. “Someone's pilfered Sifar's drink. Sorry to you, too, Ivy. That must have been alarming.” I

followed the leader's eyes to my hands, which were still clinging to Seizerk and Rattloore's arms.

"Ah! Sorry." I let go.

"No worries," Seizerk said with a chuckle and a shrug. "Sifar can be a scary guy."

I couldn't help but agree. It was then that I heard a scream in the distance. Was it just me, or did that sound like Marcreek's voice...?

"Oof. Sounds like that's settled."

So it was Marcreek after all. That was a heck of a shriek... Is he okay? A short while later, Sifar returned. His smile wasn't terrifying anymore. He looked...satisfied.

Was Marcreek dead?

Chapter 69: Sword of Flames and Lightning Royals

WHEN THE END OF THE HUNT was announced, the tents scattered over the clearing were put away one by one. I struck my own tent as I watched the camp break down, and beside me, Gnouga and Sifar packed up their group's tent. Here and there, I heard people talking about how glad they were to be going back to town and how thankful they were that nobody got hurt. Group after group finished their preparations and headed back for town.

Mira came over to where I was packing. Having her so close made me nervous.

“We never got a chance to talk, did we? That’s a shame.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.” I bowed and thanked her, trying to keep cool. Sifar and Gnouga were nearby, so I was safe.

“Let me show you around town when we get to Otolwa,” she insisted.

“If we have the time, that would be...lovely.”

What do I do? When we get to Otolwa, I’ll be alone again. Should I leave the town immediately? But they said someone might be stalking me, so...what do I do!?

Gnouga cut in. “Ivy’s going to stay with us for a while.”

Hm? A while? I looked at him, but he was still busy packing.

“Aww, really?” Mira sighed. “Well, let me know if you’re ever free. You can contact me through the guild.”

“Okay.”

I heard someone call for Mira. Her brothers were waving a short distance away.

“Later, Ivy,” she said.

“Yeah. See you later.”

Mira waved to me and smiled, so I waved back. I was relieved to see her go, of course. I’d somehow managed to avoid being alone with her all this time. Ever since that dinner, someone from Sword of Flames had always been with

me. Low and Marcreek had helped, too.

“Sorry for the wait!” Rattloore returned after being pressed into the day’s expedition team. Behind him were Seizerk and, for some reason, four other adventurers I knew.

“Good work out there,” I said.

“Boss, you’re a real pain in the butt, you know that?!” he shouted at the expedition leader.

“You seem energetic. We have *plenty more* work where that came from.”

“No, thanks!”

“Ha ha ha! Ivy, I hear we’ll be heading back to town with you. Good to have you aboard.”

“Thank you for having me.”

It was comforting to have the expedition team with me. Wondering if they’d made that decision for my sake, I bowed my head. For some reason, everyone always patted me and ruffled my hair. Right when I realized my hair was already messy even though I’d brushed it this morning, Low fixed it for me. He seemed used to doing others’ hair, for some reason.

“You’re good at fixing hair, Low,” I said.

“Think so? I’m always tidying up my sons’ hair.”

“You have kids?” I wasn’t aware that he had a family.

“Two of ’em! They’re adorable.” His voice grew warmer when he talked about his family. I liked that.

“We ought to get going.”

I sprang up at the leader’s voice. Everyone else was a grown up, so I’d have to move fast to keep up. I felt bad for Sora, but it would be stuck in its bag a while longer. I rubbed my hand on the bag in an attempt to pet the slime through the fabric. *Sorry, little guy...*

Our two-day journey to town was uneventful. We were almost there now.

“See that, Ivy?” Rattloore said. “That’s our home, Otolwa.”

Following his pointing finger, I looked toward the town. Gazing at it from atop the tall hill we stood on, I realized that it was far bigger than I imagined.

“Wow...it’s huge!”

“Right?! Home sweet home.”

I rushed to keep up as Rattloore pulled me by the hand toward town.

“Don’t hurry Ivy too much,” Seizerk called from behind us, “he might fall!”

“Ack! Sorry, was I too fast?” Rattloore asked.

“A little. I’m fine, though.”

It felt like we had gotten closer over these past two days. I’d learned the name of the leader’s group, too—it was called the Lightning Royals. The leader got really sulky when I’d told him that I just thought they were called “the expedition team.” I felt a little bad about that. He must’ve really been into that name.

There was another huge gate at Otolwa, with a gatekeeper. He waved when he saw Rattloore. “Good work on your hunt. Uh...where’d you abduct the kid from?”

Abduct?

“I would never do such a thing! Anyway, we need to do some paperwork. This way!”

Paperwork? For what? Before I could wonder, Rattloore dragged me off to a small room, where I was handed a piece of paper. On the paper were columns labeled NAME, HOMETOWN, and PURPOSE. What would I write for hometown? Also, I hadn’t told him that I’d run away from Ratomi Village. Should I write that?

“Oh, can you not read?” he asked. “Sorry!”

“It’s okay, I can,” I assured him. “Do I have to write something for hometown, though?”

“Hm? Oh...I never asked, did I? Where are you from?”

“Um...I’m from Ratomi Village.”

“*Ratomi?*” I whipped around to face the source of the new voice, a man wearing the same uniform as the gatekeeper. Thinking he was probably a guard, I looked at him and nodded. “Huh,” he grunted. “Do you have a guarantor?”

Guarantor... Is Captain Oght my guarantor? I guess so, but how do I explain that?

“Umm, yes. Captain Oght, of Ratome Village.”

“Did you conduct any official business there?”

“I opened a bank account at the merchant guild.”

“May I see proof?”

“Sure.” I took the bag I’d been using as a wallet from my hip and removed the white plate from within.

“Can you bring it over to this stone?” the officer asked me.

Should I do that? Will it tell them what’s in the account?

“Yeah, go for it,” said Rattloore. “It’ll just confirm whether it’s genuine.”

“Okay.” As I put the plate near the stone, the stone glowed and faded.

“No issues,” the man announced.

“Whoa...” gasped Rattloore.

What was happening? Totally confused, I glanced at my companion. He looked pretty surprised. “Um...?”

“Ivy, you got Captain Oght to be your guarantor? That’s incredible.”

“It is?”

“You don’t know? He used to be an incredible adventurer!”

“I’d heard he was an adventurer, but that’s all. Wow...”

“Yeah. Lots of people still look up to him.”

“Apologies,” the officer cut in. “Just your name and the purpose of your travels are fine. Write those, please.”

“Oh, okay.”

My name and the objective of my trip. What is my purpose, anyway? The dump? I can’t just write that... Maybe “passing through”? When I passed the paper back, the man laughed. I wonder why?

“I’ve never seen someone write that they’re *passing through*,” he said with a chuckle. “Here you go.” He handed me something. It looked to be...a rod-shaped permit? “You’ll need this when you enter and exit the town. When you leave for good, please return it.”

“Okay. Thank you.” A big town meant a lot of people going in and out, so I guessed permits would be necessary, now that I thought about it. This was new.

“Done?” someone called out. The expedition leader was standing at the room’s entrance now.

“All done,” said Rattloore. “Ivy, let’s go.”

“Okay. Thanks for your help.”

“Yeah...” For some reason, the man who gave me the permit was gazing at the leader in awe. Did they know each other? I couldn’t be sure, but Rattloore was hurrying me on, so I bowed and left.

Outside, everyone was waiting for me. “I’m sorry for the wait,” I said.

“Hey, guess what?” Rattloore called out. “Ivy knows Captain Oght from the next village!”

“Really?”

“Yes. He acted as my guarantor.”

“Your guarantor?”

“Because I ran away from Ratomi Village.”

“Ratomi, huh?” The leader sighed and gave my head a gentle pat. “I heard the news about what’s going on there. That’s rough.”

When they heard the name Ratomi Village, everyone looked at me with pity. Whatever was happening there must’ve been pretty bad now...



EXTRA * Sora and the Adandara Are Incredible?



“ADANDARA, SORA...we really should find somewhere to sleep, you guys.”

Two days after leaving Ratome Village, I looked up to see a cloudless blue sky. It was tough camping outdoors when it rained, but tonight looked like another comfortable night's sleep for me.

“Pu, pu pu! Pu pu pu!” Sora bounced all over the place.

I searched for a place to stay the night, making sure to occasionally check on the slime. I just wanted to lie down and rest, but I had to make sure it was a place we could flee at a moment's notice.

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen any animals or monsters the past couple days. This place wasn't empty, right? I mean, I could see footprints here and there, and yet...hmm. Weird.

Purrrr.

“Adandara, we're looking for a place to sleep tonight. By the way, you've been with us the last couple of days. Aren't you hungry? If you get hungry, you should go and hunt.”

I'd noticed a lack of animals and monsters shortly after the adandara joined up with us. Were they staying away because of the adandara? If my book wasn't wrong, it should be a pretty strong monster.

Purrrr.

It was cute when it rubbed up against me, even if it was apparently *really* deadly. I petted it carefully but with a firm hand—if I was too gentle, it wouldn't be enough for the adandara. It narrowed its eyes adorably. It definitely didn't look like a monster that even scared other monsters.

“Pu, pu!” Sora rolled around us.

“You're cute, too, Sora.”

“Pu!”

Oops! We can't just hang around here! We need a place to sleep. I walked through the trees, checking the branches of the thicker ones, still searching.

“Pu, pu!” Sora's cries got a little louder.

Finding it strange, I searched for the slime and found it bouncing a short

distance away. Ack! I was so focused on looking for a campsite that I forgot to keep an eye on Sora.

“Sora, what’s gotten into you?” When I approached, it bounced away toward a big tree. I frantically followed. “Hey, that’s dangerous!”

What was it doing? Normally, it would stop if I called to it. Was something there? I followed my friend to the big tree and found a cavernous hollow at its base.

“Pu, pu!”

Hm? Was Sora trying to tell me about this spot? “Sora, did you want to show me this?”

“Pu, pu pu!”

But how did it know about this spot? I cocked my head, but I couldn’t think of an answer. What mattered was that Sora had found us a place to sleep.

“Thanks, Sora.”

The slime leapt up at my thanks. I was surprised by the height of its jump. Sora had gotten really...elastic?

Purrrr. The adandara rubbed its cheek against me.

“What’s wrong?”

What did it want? I couldn’t tell, but eventually it seemed satisfied and slipped off into the woods.

“Huh? Umm...” Well, that was sudden...and confusing. *Umm, so the adandara is gone? Is this as far as it goes? Or did it just get hungry?*

“Let’s...just get ready for bed,” I said. “I’ll make space for you and the adandara, Sora.”

It might’ve gone back to its home forest, but I’ll set aside some space for it just in case. The hollow at the bottom of the tree was pretty big. I searched for clues that other animals or monsters might be using it but found nothing. Next, I felt the forest floor—I couldn’t lie down if it was wet, so this was important.

“Should be safe. Thank goodness.” I folded up my mat and set it in the hollow, creating a makeshift bed. “All done.”

Now, what should I eat tonight? Over the past two days with the adandara, it had shown me plenty of spots with fruit, so I had lots on hand. I was pretty stocked up when it came to provisions.

“Pu!”

“You must be hungry, Sora. Wait just a second.”

While I took out potions, I noticed the adandara’s aura approaching again. *Oh good. We can spend more time together, then.* I left the hollow, and before long, the adandara was by my side.

“Huh? What are you holding?”

The catlike monster set four unconscious rabbits on the ground in front of me. *Is it going to eat them?* I wondered, but it pushed them toward me with a paw.

“Did you hunt that for me?”

Purr.

“Thank you. Adandara, what about your food? Have you eaten?”

Purr.

I pet the adandara as it rumbled and snuggled against me. I couldn’t believe it had caught four rabbits that quick. What an incredible monster...



“Well, I’d better get to dressing these rabbits. Hm...I think there was a stream around here.”

It wouldn’t be a problem if I left this spot for the stream, right? I took my bag of butchering tools from the hollow and headed out.

“Sorry, Sora. Wait just a little longer to eat.”

“Pu, pu pu!” Sora didn’t look mad. In fact, it seemed to be in a good mood.

I walked around the stream for a moment and began breaking down the rabbits far away from our camp. Butchering rabbits was second nature to me now. “Okay, all done! This is some nice game.”

Next, I massaged herbs into the meat to remove the odor and make it tastier. *Okay, all done! Now what? If I cook them here, the smell might spread and draw monsters. Would soup have less of a scent, maybe? Still, this is a lot of meat. It might be too much for one pot of soup...*

Hmm...I’m a little nervous, but I should cook it. If a monster comes, we can run away. If it’s cooked, we’ll take it. If it’s still raw, we’ll leave it. Kind of risky, but we’re way out in the forest, so there isn’t really another option. I really, really hope monsters don’t attack us before it’s done...

Decision made, I gathered twigs for the fire. *Phew! That should do it.*

I used a flint to light dead leaves and then heaped on some twigs. Once the fire was big enough, it started licking through the gaps between sticks. It was ready.

I really wanted to put all the meat on top of my mesh grill to cook, but four rabbits were just too much to cook at once. *Should I get a pot and make soup after all?* I glanced around—the scent was pretty strong, so I was sure it was spreading through the woods. Were we safe?

“I’m worried monsters will be drawn by the smell...”

Grr.

Huh? The adandara is making a different sound. “What’s wrong?”

Purrrr.

And it’s back to normal now. What was that before...? Oh! The meat’s burning! I rushed to turn the meat over atop the mesh.

“Whew! You went to the trouble of hunting this for me, so it would’ve

been a real shame if I'd burned it."

Purrrr.

I felt around for auras again. With the smell of cooking spreading, I was worried our situation could change at a moment's notice. *Hm? What's that I'm sensing? It's far, but it isn't getting any closer for some reason.*

"Adandara, will you tell me if any monsters or animals come near?"

Purrrrr. It almost seemed like an answer. But even if it had understood me, I couldn't understand it.

"Sorry." The adandara rubbed its face against me, as if trying to comfort me. *Er...that's probably what it's doing, at least?*

"Pu, pu pu!"

"Sora?" I turned toward Sora just in time to see the slime spring up. I braced myself to catch it but too late—it hit my arm and bounced off.

"Oh, Sora! Sorry!"

"Pu!" Sora seemed like it was pouting, but what was I supposed to do when it jumped at me out of nowhere? *No, I shouldn't make excuses. I flubbed it.*

"Sorry I couldn't catch you. Give me a little warning before you jump on me, okay?"

"Pu!"

It sure is hard to understand Sora, too. Ah! The meat!

"It's a little charred..." But it still looked tasty. I glanced around one more time. Some monsters or animals were out there, but they still kept their distance. I wondered why.

Could I make soup, too? Hmm...why not. I filled a pot with water and simmered cut vegetables, meat, and herbs together. Soup was a great match for the richness of the meat.

"There! All done. The meat is cooked, and the soup is ready."

Purrrr.

"Pu, pu pu!"

This was my first time cooking under so much pressure. Still, no monsters or animals came anywhere near me. I was worried that something might be close by, though. It'd be best to clean things up and go back to where we'd sleep.

“Umm, let’s eat once we’re back at the tree, okay? I wanna get away from here.”

I set to it at once, washing the dishes and putting them in the basket I had brought. As for the cooked meat, I wrapped it in bana leaves and put it in another basket. Finally, I doused the fire and made sure it was out.

“That should do it. Let’s see...got the pot, the baskets, and my bags.”

A quick look around, and all that I had left behind were ashes and burned twigs. Good.

“Let’s go.”

“Pu, pu pu, pu pu!”

Purrrrrr.

I went back to the tree where we’d made camp, feeling for auras the whole way. The smell of cooked meat had spread so far, and yet nothing had tried to come close. Was there a problem in that spot, or was it thanks to the adandara? I’d definitely run into fewer monsters and animals since it started traveling with me, but my book hadn’t said anything about it warding off other creatures.

Once I could see the tree, I stopped and surveyed the area to ensure nothing had come while we were gone. It seemed fine.

“Phew...I’m famished. Sorry for making you wait, Sora.”

It had gotten a little dark out. The hollow in the tree where I was planning to sleep would be too dim inside to see our food. We’d have to have supper outside.

I set the baskets atop a protruding root and went into the hollow to get Sora’s potions. No problems inside, either. When I started lining up Sora’s potions, it got right to devouring them. Its dinner had come later than usual, so it must’ve been hungry.

Now it was my turn! I ladled the soup into a cup and grabbed one of the leaf-wrapped slabs of meat. I lifted the wrapping away and took a bite. The meat was a little firm but very filling. Tasty, too, now that it wasn’t so gamey.

“Yum! Thanks, Adandara.”

The soup was delicious and warming as well. All the stress I’d suffered while cooking seemed worthwhile now that I got to experience this flavor.

Would the adandara eat cooked meat? Or would it refuse since it had

herbs on it?

“Adandara, do you wanna share? We have plenty.” *It might not be much compared to its usual diet.*

Purrrr.

Hm? It will? I pulled another bana leaf from the basket and offered some cooked rabbit meat to the adandara. It slowly leaned in, sniffed the food, and opened its jaws. *Ooh! All in one bite!*

“Tasty, right?”

Purrrr.

“Pu!”

Having finished its potions, Sora bounced over and sat atop my outstretched legs. The leaf-wrapped meat was balanced on my thighs, so the slime had to sit on my shins. It was a pretty unstable perch.

“Sora, I don’t think that’s a good spot for you.”

“Pu!”

Aw, it’s pouting! “I’m not saying you can’t be there. Just be careful. It’s wobbly.”

“Pu, pu!” it cried happily, quivered...and promptly tumbled off my outstretched legs.

I just told you to be careful... “Are you okay? Um...you’re getting back on?”

Sora clambered unsteadily back onto my shins. This time, it tried desperately to balance.

“Ha ha ha, good luck with that! Adandara, do you want more?”

I’d started with five chunks of meat wrapped in bana leaves. The adandara and I had had one each, so we were down to three.

Purrrrrr. It rubbed its head against my face. *Oh, I just know this is gonna mess up my hair.*

“Want this?” I took another slab of meat from my bag, but the adandara didn’t react. Guess it was full. I resumed my meal, stuffing my face with more meat and finishing off my soup.

“I ate too much...” My belly was bursting. It was a delicious meal,

though, especially because there was no bunny-meat stink. “Adandara, thank you for the food. Sora...I’m surprised you can sleep in a position like that.”

Sora had fallen asleep on my lower legs while I ate. Occasionally, it bobbed and quivered a little bit to keep its balance. Could it sleep restfully like that?

“Sora, wanna go to bed?”

“Pu, pu!” Sora cried helplessly. *Fine... I'll carry you gently.*

I let out a yawn. “Now that I’m full, I’m sleepy! Let’s hit the hay.”

I cradled Sora in my arms and lowered it into the bed I’d made for it. From there, I got water from the stream, towed off, rinsed my mouth, and brushed my teeth with a stick. I was ready for bed! When I ducked back into the tree’s hollow, I found Sora fast asleep.

“Yaaawn... Good night, Sora and Adandara.”



BONUS * Let Us Watch Over You



ON THE FIRST DAY of our trip back to Otolwa, as the setting sun dyed the sky orange, we happened upon a reasonably sized clearing. It was a perfect spot, so the Sword of Flames members and I pitched our tents to stay the night. While they set up their tents, I set up my own one-person tent. Fortunately, inside my tent, I could let Sora out to breathe.

“Heeey! Someone go and grab some firewood, okay?” On Bolorda’s command, I got up to go into the woods, but Rattloore and Sifar stopped me.

“No, no,” said Sifar. “Not you, Ivy. It’s dangerous in the woods at night. Gnouga, Lowcreek, and Marcreek can handle it.”

The three patted my head and went off into the woods. *Umm...so what do I do? Oh, I could cook... Except Rickbert and Seizerk are already cooking. Mm...there's nothing for me...*

“What should I do?” I said aloud.

“Rest,” both Rattloore and Sifar said at once.

But how?! Everyone was walking so slowly that I've still got so much energy left!

“I’d be happy to help...” I pleaded.

“Then how about we have a nice, long chat?” Sifar offered.

Huh? A chat? Oh, do they need to talk about something? I guess that makes sense.

“Okay.” We sat near where we’d start the fire, and Sifar poured us tea. What would we talk about? I drank my tea and waited, but they only chatted about trips and silly stories.

Didn't they need to talk with me? I’d been worried about what they were going to say, so this was a relief. Still, I felt weird just sitting around doing nothing but talking.

I sighed.

“Are you tired after all?” Rattloore asked.

“No, I’m really fine.”

“But you must’ve had trouble keeping up with our walking speed, right?”

He was awfully worried about me, but we hadn’t really walked that fast

today. Everyone had watched me and adjusted their speed to match.

“I usually walk faster,” I said, “so it wasn’t a problem.”

“Do you really?” Sifar looked surprised by that. Was it that strange?

“Yes. The pace today wasn’t an issue for me at all. You could walk faster if you’d like.”

“Nah, we’re not in that much of a hurry to get home,” said Sifar. “Let’s take it slow.”

“For sure!” Rattloore agreed. “We stroll home and rest our weary bodies. There’ll be more work waiting for us at home, anyway. Might as well take our time while we can.”

Umm...so we're taking it slow because they might be busy when they reach town? Seizerk and Bolorda's teams are veterans, so I bet they're popular.

“That must be hard,” I said. “Good luck with all that work.”

“Wow! You know how to make me feel better!” Rattloore squealed, pulled me into a hug, and started ruffling the heck out of my hair. Shocked, I froze up in his arms.

Crack! Pow!

“Ouch!”

Huh? I turned toward Rattloore’s pained yelp—for some reason, he was holding his head again. Near him were Rickbert and Seizerk. Had they finished cooking?

“Good grief,” Rickbert said. “Stop bothering Ivy.”

“Huh? Was I bothering you? You’re okay, right?” Rattloore brought his face right up close to mine, so I leaned away and nodded frantically.

“Argh, see? You’re bothering him!” Rickbert’s fist fell on Rattloore’s head. There was a loud *pow*, and Rattloore frowned in pain. I winced—that must’ve really hurt.

“When’s dinner?” Sifar demanded. It was hard to tell whether he was unperturbed by the chaos or just uninterested in anything beyond the food.

“It just needs to simmer,” Seizerk answered.

“Did you taste it?”

“Obviously.”

“Say, Ivy!” Sifar lit up, as if he’d thought of something. “Mind helping me out?”

“Okay!” I was glad to be of service. Sitting here doing nothing had gotten me all antsy.

“C’mere!” said Sifar.

I followed him over to the big pot where the soup was simmering. He lifted the lid, ladled some soup into a bowl, and handed it to me. I took it right away, but I wasn’t sure what to do with it. I looked at him, uncertain, and he scooped more soup into another bowl.

Oh, should I drink it? I blew on it to cool and then sipped some.

“It’s missing something,” he mused.

“Really, Sifar?” Seizerk groaned, annoyed, from behind us.

“C’mon. I just had Ivy’s delicious soup. I gotta know what the difference is!”

After swallowing it, I tilted my head. Sifar was right, something was missing. I went to the pot and started stirring the soup. What did it need?

“Sorry, Ivy. Would you mind helping us with the seasoning?” Seizerk, apparently tired of Sifar’s complaints, asked me.

“Hmm...what should I add?” Nothing came to mind.

It’s like...it’s missing some sweetness but not a sweet ingredient. I stirred the soup again and then it hit me: It had no root vegetables. *Aha! It’s missing the sweetness of root vegetables.* I looked around the makeshift kitchen and found the perfect one.

“May I use this?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Seizerk. “I didn’t use it since it takes longer.”

It’s true—root vegetables took a longer time to cook. Still, we could probably speed it up by cutting it into small pieces.

“I’ll chop it into bits before putting it in, so I think it’ll be fine.”

Adding veggie sweetness to the soup was my goal, so texture didn’t matter as much. I peeled the skin from the vegetable, cut it as small as possible, and put it in the soup. After simmering for a while, I checked the doneness of the vegetable. *There! It’s just right.* Finally, I put some in a bowl and tasted it. Perfect.

“Gimme some, too,” Sifar demanded. I gave him some to taste. “Whooooa. One little veggie changes that much, huh?”

Seizerk tasted it as well and agreed that it was incredible. *Thank goodness. I'm glad I could help out.*

“Hey, the meat's done!” Gnouga called out. I turned toward his voice. The fire had been lit, and the meat had cooked in no time. *Huh? When did everyone get back? Was I that focused on cooking?*

“Okay, I'll bring the soup,” said Seizerk. “Ivy, go sit and hang tight. Thanks for helping with the flavor.”

“I'm just happy to be useful.”

I looked at Sifar—he'd already taken a bowl of soup and was on his way to eat it. I followed him to join everyone else and saw a big chunk of meat sizzling deliciously. It seemed...oddly fresh.

“Where did this meat come from?” I asked.

Rattloore pointed at Gnouga. “He hunted it.” Wow, how had he done it in so little time? Based on the size of the cut, it seemed like a medium-sized animal or monster, but it was still incredible. Gnouga must be really strong.

“Let's eat!” Seizerk called and started divvying up soup for everyone. Gnouga carved the cooked meat and Marcreek passed it out. It looked like Marcreek was giving out equal amounts of meat to everyone, so I tried to stop him before he got to me.

“Eat more, or you won't grow big and strong,” Gnouga said, looking concerned.

I appreciated the thought, but...no matter how I tried, it didn't make sense for me to take the same portion as everyone else. When I said as much, Gnouga looked disappointed. *I just can't, I'm sorry!*

“Ha ha ha! All right, everybody, it's time to eat! Let's dig in.”

“Let's dig in!” everyone echoed...except one person.

“Already on it.” All eyes gathered on Sifar, who had already devoured half of his soup.

“Why, you little...” Seizerk sighed, exasperated, as Sifar calmly continued his meal.

Sifar stopped eating to note that the meat was good and smiled at me. As

for me, I went on eating my own meal. I didn't want to be dragged into this, thank you very much.

I took a bite of the meat. "Ooh! That's good!"

"Oh? Glad to hear it." Gnouga smiled at my words.

That's better. He looked a little sad before, but it looks like he's fine now. Once the feast had begun, people talked even more excitedly than they had last night. Everyone was laughing the whole time. I ended up eating too much again, since I was listening to them instead of focusing on my food.

"Thanks for the meal," I said when I finished.

"Had enough already?" Marcreek asked, also a little worried. "You haven't eaten half as much as the rest of us. Don't hold back on our account, kid."

Don't you see the difference in our body size? I've eaten more than enough for me today.

"I'm fine. My stomach feels like it could burst open."

"You sure? Well, as long as you're not being modest." Marcreek patted me on the head slowly.

Urgh...being full and getting head-pats is making me really sleepy. But I wanted to help clean up, so I had to stay awake. Soon enough, everyone finished eating and we started to put everything away. Bolorda and Rattloore helped me out as I washed the pile of dishes.

"Sorry to make you clean up after us," said Bolorda. He was really nice.

"Not at all. I wanted to help out."

"That so?" Rattloore chimed in. "We're always glad to count on you."

"Sure. Leave it to me."

After cleaning up, I said good night to everyone and went back to my tent. Inside, Sora was already snoozing. I towed off and lay down, and Sora rolled over to me. It gazed at me with barely open eyes.

"Sorry. Did I wake you up? You can go back to bed. Good night, Sora."

Sora quivered and closed its eyes. Dinner tonight was a lot of fun. I would only have a few more days with them, so...maybe taking it slow on the way to town was a good idea, after all.

Side: Sifar

IWATCHED AS IVY went back to his tent. *There you go. Here's hoping you can get a nice, restful sleep tonight.*

"Think he'll be okay?" Seizerk asked, worried.

"Yeah. He looked a lot more calm, so I think he'll be just fine."

Ivy was obviously nervous about the kidnappers. He put on a bold front, but fear can't be quelled that easily. Then again, maybe he was just hiding his feelings so we wouldn't notice. Starting today, though, I saw composure returning to the kid's face. Getting him away from those other adventurers was a good move.

"Such a little guy," said Marcreek, "but he tries so hard." Everyone agreed.

"He looks like he's about five years old, doesn't he?" Rickbert added. "But it's weird for a kid so young to travel all alone."

He was right...traveling alone at such a young age was unusual, though not entirely unheard of. Some children ran away when they thought their parents might sell them, or for any number of reasons. Ivy had avoided talking about parents or siblings. That must've been where the problem lay.

"No matter how old he is, the kid's too scrawny," Seizerk piped up. "It's like he's not eating enough."

"Yeah," Bolorda agreed. "We'd better get some nutrients in him while he's with us."

So they said, but Ivy was a better cook than any of us, so it felt like he was the one helping us get fed. *Man, that kid's soup is something else.*

Still, the kid was too considerate. Maybe it had something to do with the environment he grew up in. I saw how uneasy he looked when we told him he didn't have to do anything. Rattloore and I were both surprised by that. That was why we'd asked him to clean up, but neither of us had expected he'd be so happy about it. Maybe he was scared he'd be abandoned if he wasn't useful. Unfortunately, we'd just met the kid. We couldn't undo years of suffering that

easily.

“But maybe there’s still time,” I grumbled.

“Hm? What’s the matter?” asked Gnouga.

I just shook my head. “Don’t mind me. I was just thinking of having Ivy make breakfast.”

Gnouga chuckled at that. Nobody protested the idea—they must’ve realized the sad truth that Ivy fretted most when he had nothing to do. If only he could let go of some of that during his time with us...but seeds planted long ago have a way of digging their roots deep.

“Well, there’s no need to rush it,” I muttered.

Let us watch over you so you don’t fall, you little go-getter. You’re a valued member of the team now.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. Call me Honobonoru500. I would like to express my utmost thanks to you for buying *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*.

When I first wrote this, I had no earthly idea that my own writing would ever be published. Thank you to Nama, who was kind enough to provide the illustrations for this volume. I couldn't have come this far without the people who supported my web novel, cheered me on through direct messages, and followed and reported typos in the comments. Thank you all so much. I hope you will continue on this journey with me!

You know, I struggled over what to say in this afterword. When I looked at other authors' first afterwords, I saw they introduced their process in choosing a protagonist, a perspective, and the like. I thought about imitating them, but I honestly can't remember! How did I choose this protagonist? How did I decide to make it a journey? I checked the notes I made at the time to help me remember the setting, but all I wrote was "Tamer, no-star." Seriously! That was it! I was furious at my own lack of notes. I spent an entire day trying to remember. Unfortunately, what's forgotten is forgotten.

But I do remember why I made the catlike adandara one of Ivy's friends. This series, *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*, is my second web novel series. In the first one, the main character couldn't be friends with a catlike monster, so I wanted to right that wrong this time around. Sorry...I know it's a pretty simple reason. But this is the warm and fuzzy story of a girl and her tamed monsters traveling about together. It may not have been so warm and fuzzy at the start, but that's what the story is at its heart.

First announcement! *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash* has been confirmed for a manga adaptation! The moment I heard, I had to wonder, "Are the people at TO Books okay?" It hadn't even received a physical publication at the time, but I was over the moon. After the initial shock, I was all smiles. I hope you'll all continue to support me from now on.

Second announcement! My first series, *Isekai ni Otosareta...* ("Dropped into Another World..."), will receive a physical release as well! It's another

warm, fuzzy, and misunderstanding-filled story following the adventures of a main character who jumps to wrong conclusions, along with their many friends. I hope you'll give it a try, too.

I offer my utmost thanks to everyone at TO Books. Special thanks to my editor, Shinjo, who's surely been through a lot because of me by now. Thanks to everyone, this book has finally made its way onto store shelves. You all have my heartfelt gratitude, and I would be delighted to continue working with you.

Finally, I must express more heartfelt gratitude to all those who purchased this book. I can't wait for us to meet again in Volume 2!

Honobonoru 500
September 2019



**BONUS
CONTENT *** **The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey
to Pick Up Trash Manga Preview**

MANGA BY
Tou Fukino

ORIGINAL BY
Honobonoru500

CHARACTER DESIGN BY
Nama





WAS A
SLIME SO
WEAK A
STRONG
WIND
COULD'VE
KILLED IT.



THE ONLY
MONSTER
THAT I, THE
WEAKEST
TAMER, WAS
ABLE TO
TAME...



MY
NAME'S
IVY.

AND
YOU'RE
SORA!

U-UHM,
I KNOW!
YOU NEED
A NAME.

JUST
ONE
WEAK
LITTLE
SLIME.



Ivy
(8 Years Old)
&
Sora



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About the Creators

HONOBONORU500

I began publishing this on a web novel site in August 2018. The basic desire was to write a warm and fuzzy story about a journey, but for some reason, I had to give the protagonist a sad backstory.

“Uh, hey? Isn’t that weird?” I always asked myself, but so many people have supported me since then that it got a physical publication!

I’ll keep on working to update this story with more warm and fuzzy tales of travel.

Nama

Blood type A, born April 2nd. I’ve been watching nothing but foreign dramas lately.

TWITTER: @nama3v3

<http://nama3v3.jugem.jp/>



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